
An Alternative Image of Women Developed by a New Religion in Early Modern Japan

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In early modern Japan, during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), women were regarded as being dull, passive, and inferior to men in many aspects. Confucian ethics, which was orthodox at the time, taught that women should be subject to men. In addition, Buddhist and Shinto notions fostered an image of women as being polluted and sinful.

People of our time tend to think that it was modern science and thought that liberated women from such a negative image. It is true that modernists viewed the notion of women's innate pollution to be superstitious and that the concept of "good wife, wise mother" which became the key objective of women's education in modern Japan, supplanted the traditional concept that women were naturally dull.¹ Yet, we should not overlook the fact that not all Japanese people before modernization agreed with such a negative image of women. In fact, arguments against the notion of women's sin and pollution and inferiority to men had emerged decades or more before modernization started. Yet, most of these arguments are unnoticed and almost forgotten in modern times.²

Among those who contradicted the negative image of women in the premodern period, this paper sheds light on a religious organization called Fujidō 不二道, which was organized in the early nineteenth century.³ Although it was not legitimized by the political ruler of the time, over several decades this religious group grew to have more than ten thousand believers, most of whom were commoners. Fujidō not only denied women's sin and pollution but also promoted a positive image of women as able and active as men. Its believers expected such women to work together with their male counterparts to realize an ideal world on the earth, which was the ultimate aim of this religious group. This paper examines how Fujidō developed the new image of women and what activities its believers undertook in hopes of realizing the ideal world, which would be characterized by a well-balanced relationship between the sexes, harmony among people, and equilibrium between yin and yang.

1. For the objectives of women's education in modern Japan, see Ambros 2015, pp. 116-19.

2. An image of women different from the conventional one presented by a female thinker, Tadano Makuzu (1763-1825) has been relatively well studied. For her life and thoughts, see Oka 2006; Seki 2008.

3. Although this religious association changed its name more than once, I will refer to it as Fujidō throughout this paper.

1. Conventional image of women of the Tokugawa period

What was the image of women prevalent in Tokugawa Japan like? What social, cultural, and religious developments accounted for its formation?

The Tokugawa period was marked by political stability, which continued for more than two centuries and a half under the rule of the Tokugawa warrior government. The political system was based on a hierarchical social structure combined with a rigid class system. A patrilineal household structure, which had been widely established by the seventeenth century, served as the foundation for the class system. The establishment of such a household structure was accompanied by the spread of patriarchal values, in which power and importance were given only to males. These developments helped root Confucian ethics, which originated in ancient China, in the upper and middle social classes. A popularized version of these ethics further infiltrated into almost all sectors of society. Its influence served to consolidate the assumption that a woman should concentrate on the inner, domestic sphere and be subject to her husband and the other senior members of his household.⁴

Religious discourses based on a combination of Buddhist and Shinto theories reinforced the idea that women should be subordinate to men.⁵ The Buddhist premise that a woman cannot attain enlightenment became intertwined with teachings that a woman should obey her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife, and her son as a widow. At the same time, the idea that women were naturally polluted, which is assumed to have originated from the taboo against menstrual blood and intrapartum blood, spread widely across classes and regions by the seventeenth century.⁶ This idea not only limited women's activity in religious areas but also functioned as the basis for another prejudicial idea that all women are sinful by nature. Women were condemned for contaminating sacred places and objects with their pollution and, as the retribution for this sin, were supposed to be destined to fall into a special hell, a lake filled with blood.

In this period, the ancient Chinese cosmological paradigm of yin and yang, as well as the Chinese correlative theory of five elements (*wuxing*), spread from the elite to the common people. Under the influence of these paradigms, women were compared to yin, earth, and water, while men were linked to yang, heaven, and fire. Such comparisons gave rise to the assumption that women had a dull and passive nature, and that women should be subordinate to men in both society and family. The famous saying, "the Way of the woman is to obey man," plainly expresses the conventional notion of the period regarding women.⁷

4. Ambros 2015, pp.97-102.

5. For Buddhist prejudicial discourses about women, see Caroline Hirasawa, 2013, pp.108-26.

6. Wakita 2004, pp.6-10.

7. *Onna daigaku takara bako*, in Ishikawa 1977, p.40.

2. Brief history of Fujidō

Fujidō emerged out of the tradition of a folk religion devoted to Mt. Fuji. Mt. Fuji has been regarded as a sacred mountain since the ancient period. Many shrines dedicated to the deity of the mountain, called Sengen, were founded in both its vicinity and distant places. They served as a base for widespread worship of the mountain. Believing that its peaks, caves, and waterfalls belonged to the realm of Buddhas and deities, religious practitioners went to the mountain to engage in asceticism.

Fujidō had its origin in a lineage of lay ascetics founded by a practitioner called Kakugyō (?-1646). Based on oracles that he believed had been received from the Sengen deity, he preached new teachings and conducted religious rites that were different from those of the established religious schools. Such activities were illegal from the viewpoint of the Tokugawa government, which prohibited the propagation of religious teachings that differed from those of the recognized religious schools and restricted the religious activities of laypersons in public.⁸ Despite this prohibition, however, the government tacitly allowed laypersons' religious activities so far as they were moderate and inconspicuous. This tacit toleration enabled lay believers belonging to this lineage to develop unique teachings.

Jikigyō Miroku 食行身祿 (1671-1733) was the first person in the Fujidō tradition to criticize the notion of women's sin and pollution. I will look more closely later at this aspect of his teachings. First let me introduce his teachings about the ideal world, which had a large influence over the formation of Fujidō's ideas about women's nature, their roles in the family and society, and their relationship with men. Making his living by selling vegetable oil in Edo, the present-day Tokyo, he engaged in ascetic practices both at home and at Mt. Fuji. He believed that Sengen gave him oracles about realization of the ideal world and entrusted him with the task of overseeing it.⁹ He called the ideal world the "world of *miroku*." *Miroku* means Maitreya. Beliefs that Maitreya Buddha would bring about a blissful world on earth can be found in most East Asian countries, including China, Korea, and Japan.¹⁰ Yet, Jikigyō developed a new version of Maitreya belief. He preached that the blissful world should be realized by human beings and that human beings could achieve it by correcting their mode of living, or, to be more concrete, by keeping themselves honest, sincere, and compassionate, as well as diligently conducting their family occupation.¹¹ Thereby they could overcome the moral deterioration that he saw as tarnishing almost all the people of his day. He set out his teachings in two volumes and entrusted them to his followers in the hope that people in

8. For government policies concerning religious associations in early modern Japan, see Tamamuro 1987, pp.2-26; Hardacre 2002, pp.36-56.

9. For the life of Jikigyō Miroku, see Iwashina 1983, pp.128-97; Earhart 2011, pp.47-55.

10. The concept of the world of *miroku* can be traced back to the Buddhist cult of Miroku Buddha, or Maitreya. For the Miroku beliefs in Japanese folk religions, see Miyata 1970. Jikigyō gave a new meaning to the term of *miroku*, a mode of living in which one makes himself/herself (*mi*) righteous (*roku*), when he developed the concept of the ideal world.

11. *Ichiji fusetsu no maki* in Iwashina 1983, p.502.

the future would use his teachings as guidelines for realizing the ideal world. He conducted a fast until death on Mt. Fuji in 1733. While he engaged in this final act of asceticism, he transmitted his teachings to a disciple attending him. The man later compiled the teachings into another volume. Jikigyō's ideas written in these volumes later became the basis for Fujidō teachings.

Jikigyō became famous after his death. His immediate disciples and daughters obtained many followers. Each of them organized the followers into religious groups called Fujikō 富士講, which means confraternities devoted to Mt. Fuji.¹² Fujikō soon became very popular in and around Edo. Many believers made pilgrimages to Mt. Fuji. Some Fujikō leaders attracted still more believers by performing faith-healing rites. Yet, most of the Fujikō leaders kept the volumes of Jikigyō's teachings secret, something like treasures, rather than studying them.

Unlike them, a lay ascetic called Sangyō Rokuō 参行六王 (1745-1809), who succeeded Jikigyō's youngest daughter as the leader of one lineage of Fujikō, elaborated Jikigyō's teachings. He further developed Jikigyō's teachings about the ideal world by adopting the paradigm of yin and yang and that of five elements. The year before his death, 1809, he transmitted Jikigyō's teachings with his annotations of them to his successor, Rokugyō Sanshi 禄行三志 (1765-1841).

Sanshi and his close disciples studied the teachings and developed them further.¹³ On the one hand, they further emphasized industriousness, filial piety, harmony with others, and the spirit of mutual help. On the other, they emphasized the necessity to create a well-balanced relationship between women and men as the means to restore equilibrium between yin and yang, which they believed to be a necessary condition for realization of the ideal world. To carry out in practice what they learned from the teachings, they founded a religious association, which was later called Fujidō. The name carried the dual sense of "the way to Fuji" and "non-dual way."

While making their living by either trading or farming, Sanshi and his disciples energetically propagated the Fujidō faith in their home region, the eastern provinces, as well as more distant places that they visited on their tours of pilgrimage to Mt. Fuji and Jikigyō's home in Ise province in the middle part of the country. Those converted by them in turn spread the faith to other regions. With their efforts, Fujidō grew into the largest of the new religions of the early and mid-nineteenth century Japan, in both size and geographical extent.¹⁴ Most of believers were men and women belonging to the commoner class, although some belonged to higher classes. Fujidō had neither clerics nor permanent institutions. The Fujidō organization was basically a network of lay believers that spread across classes, occupations, sexes, and regions. Believers living in the same local area made a small local group and held prayer meetings at the house of one of the members.

12. For religious activities of Fujikō, see Iwashina 1983, pp.223-317; Earhart 2011, pp.71-88.

13. For the life of Sanshi and those of his major disciples, see Watanabe 1942; Hatogayashi Bunkazai Hogoinkai 2007.

14. We can guess the rough number of Fujidō believers and their geographical distribution from lists of participants in a project planned and carried out by the entire Fujidō association in 1863. 9,619 believers from 20 provinces of Kantō, Chūbu, Kinki, and Kyushu regions donated either money or goods to contribute to it. Presumably there were many other believers in addition to those recorded as donors. Another document indicates the existence of groups of believers in western part of Chūgoku region. Matsushita-ke Monjo, Sai, 4-18-6-1.

Local groups of the same area developed ties with each other to form a regional network. Regional networks gathered together to form a nationwide network. Hundreds of pious and able believers volunteered to manage local, regional, and national networks of believers. They were called coordinators (*sewanin*). Coordinators also acted as promoters of various projects that believers conducted in the spirit of mutual help, including charity campaigns and public works such as repairing roads and bridges. After the death of Sanshi, major coordinators from various regions collectively exercised leadership over the entire Fujidō organization.¹⁵

Fujidō had been exempted from suppression by the Tokugawa government until the mid-1840s although it was not a recognized religious association.¹⁶ The government, however, took a stricter stance when a junior believer petitioned it to officially adopt Jikigyō's teachings as guidelines to reform the world. After two years' investigation, the government banned Fujidō in 1849.¹⁷ Although few believers in fact abandoned the faith, Fujidō had to keep a low profile for several years until the government loosened its control over the group.

After the Meiji restoration in 1868, Fujidō believers faced another difficulty. Some crucial elements in Fujidō teachings conflicted with the policies of the newly founded Meiji government. Seeking for the way to survive, Fujidō had to change its name, teachings, rites, even the name of the main deity, throughout the 1870s and 80s.¹⁸

3. Formation of a Positive Image of Women

A positive image of women and teachings about a well-balanced relationship between the sexes were formed by several generations of lay ascetics belonging to Kakugyō's lineage from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century. The nature of the deities they venerated exercised a favorable influence over the formation of a positive image of women and teachings about a well-balanced relationship between the sexes. The deity of Mt. Fuji, Sengen, has been regarded as female by not only Kakugyō and his followers but also all devotees of the mountain both in the past and present.¹⁹ In addition to Sengen, Kakugyō and his followers venerated paired male and female deities. Based on a mythical belief that the two deities created the world out of their symbolic

15. Although Sanshi designated Rishōin Gyōga (1806-1883), a son of a high-ranking courtier and the current abbot of a prestigious temple, as his successor, Gyōga could not fully act as the leader of Fujidō believers because of various restrictions accompanying his social position.

16. The shogunal government banned Fujidō activities several times, when they became too conspicuous, and punished some Fujidō leaders for practicing magical rites despite of their lay status. *Shichū torishimari ruishū*, vol. 16, pp. 193-222.

17. Miyazaki 2017, pp. 163-170. For records of the investigation, see Okada 2011, pp.11-294.

18. For the changes in Fujidō teachings, rites, and organization, see Miyazaki 1993. The changes caused discord among believers, which resulted in a split of Fujidō organization into two factions. One of them developed into present day's Jikkō-kyō 実行教.

19. During the medieval and the early modern period, Sengen was regarded as the manifestation of a bodhisattva appearing in the form of a goddess. In addition to Sengen, medieval Japanese believed Kaguya-hime as the deity of Mt. Fuji. Since the mid-Tokugawa period, Konohanasakuya-hime has been regarded as the deity of the mountain. The three deities are all female.

sexual relationship, the devotees called them the Original Father and Original Mother (*moto no chichi* and *moto no haha*).²⁰

Based on the belief that the Original Father and Original Mother gave birth to human beings, Jikigyō was convinced that each human being was invaluable and good by nature.²¹ This image of human beings led him to the conclusion that all human beings are essentially equal. His criticism of notions about women's sin and pollution reflected his image of human beings and his veneration of Sengen. Criticizing the conventional notion of women's pollution, he said that menstrual blood was pure because it had something to do with the birth of human beings, which had utmost value.²² To rebut the Buddhist notion of the innate sinfulness of women, he said, "A woman cannot be sinful if she does nothing wrong. She is good when she does what she ought to do. A man is sinful if he does something wrong."²³ In other words, whether one is good or evil had nothing to do with one's sex but depended on one's behavior. Displeased with another Buddhist notion that women could hardly attain salvation, he said that Sengen, a female deity, would certainly save woman.

Sangyō adopted the paradigm of yin and yang to elaborate Jikigyō's teachings about the ideal world. He believed that the balance between yin and yang had a decisive influence over the weather, harvest, childbirth, and human society. He stated that the equilibrium between the two forces would bring about the orderly round of seasons, good harvests, harmonious human relations, a productive conjugal life, and the birth of good children, while an imbalance between the two forces would result in the opposite. According to his observation, yang forces had been excessively elevated in his day, which resulted in the suppression of yin. He was afraid that the extreme imbalance between the two forces would result in catastrophes and, in the worst case, the extinction of human beings. He concluded that the equilibrium between yin and yang should be restored to avoid catastrophes and to realize the ideal world.²⁴ He also developed the egalitarianism inherent in Jikigyō's image of human beings. He wrote that people belonging to the major four classes in Japanese society of the time, the warrior class, farmer class, artisan class, and merchant class, were equal since each of them played an indispensable role to maintain the world although in fact there was a hierarchical social order among them.²⁵

Sanshi further developed the points that Sangyō made. Taking the egalitarian tendency further, he stated that there would be no difference between superior and inferior in the ideal world.²⁶ Based

20. Although Kakugyō did not explain the relations between Sengen and the paired creators, Jikigyō thought that Sengen was essentially the same as the paired creators, who were united into one. *Ichiji fusetsu no maki* in Iwashina 1983, p.500-502.

21. *Ichiji fusetsu no maki* in Iwashina 1983, p.502.

22. *Sanjūichinichi no otsutae* in Iwashina 1983, p.538.

23. *Sanjūichinichi no otsutae* in Iwashina 1983, p.542.

24. Based on the paradigm of five elements, Sangyō stated that, in the ideal world, yin and yang would be represented by metal and wood, rather than water and fire. He expected that this change would make the contrast between yin and yang milder, and that it would make two forces easily harmonize themselves. For Sangyō's teachings about the yin-yang equilibrium and the world renewal, see Miyazaki 1994, pp.325-27; Sawada 2006, pp. 348-49, 353-55.

25. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.4, pp.74-76.

26. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.15. p.99.

on this notion, he mentioned that yin and yang, as well as women and men, were equal. As for the equilibrium between yin and yang, Sanshi thought that human beings could play an active role in restoring and keeping the equilibrium by creating a well-balanced relationship between men and women, since men were endowed with a yang nature, while women had a yin nature. Like Sangyō, he thought that yang power was excessively elevated. As evidence for it, he pointed out that people of the time attached great importance to their sons, while slighting their daughters.²⁷ To correct this imbalance, he argued that women should be given precedence over men. Thus, Fujidō adopted the mottoes of “The woman should be above, the man below” and “Women go first.” Nevertheless, what he really wanted was not to have women take over the positions previously occupied by men but to restore a harmonious relationship between the sexes, which he believed would contribute to the equilibrium between yin and yang.

Sanshi advocated not only spiritual equality between men and women but the revision of gender roles in family and society. He argued that women had the ability to do whatever men could. To support this argument, he pointed out that in his day a considerable number of women were engaging in occupations that had been traditionally pursued by men: they were teachers, painters, hairdressers, yin-yang diviners, and agricultural laborers.²⁸ He hoped that in the ideal world women would engage in many more kinds of work from which they were commonly barred because of their alleged impurity, including iron manufacturing, rice-wine brewing, rice-malt fermenting, and dying cloth.²⁹ As for men’s role, he wrote that not only mothers but also fathers should nurse their young children.³⁰

Changes in the positions and roles of the husband and the wife in their sexual life was another important issue. Sanshi wrote, “The woman has the nature of water, which tends to stream down. The man has the nature of fire, which tends to flame up. Water and fire join each other when the woman is on the top of the man. ...When they change roles and positions, they can embrace each other, realize harmony, and generate good offspring.”³¹ Encouraging women to be more active in their sexual life with their husbands, Sanshi wrote that it was all right for a wife to suggest to her husband to go to bed together.³²

Sanshi recognized that such an image of active and able women deviated from the image of women widely-accepted in the society of his time. To counter the conventional notions about the role of women, which were fostered under the influence of Confucian ethics and Buddhist theories, he argued that ethics and teachings developed in China and India were not appropriate for regulating the behavior of Japanese people since the Japanese cultural tradition was different

27. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.14, p71.

28. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.16, pp.92-97.

29. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.16, p. 114.

30. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.16, p. 113.

31. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.16, pp.115; Sawada 2006, pp.356-64.

32. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.16, pp.113-14. To elder people, who might be shocked by the image of a wife exercising leadership in the couple’s sexual life, Sanshi pointed out that such a woman would give birth to good children and thereby fulfill the earnest wish of her parents-in-law to have grandchildren.

from those of China and India. To support this argument, he pointed to notable women appearing in Japanese history, including female emperors, a female warrior, a female novelist, and female saints. From this he drew the conclusion that, unlike China and India, Japan was a country where women had won respect by achieving great deeds.³³

4. Female Fujidō believers

There were a considerable number of female believers in Fujidō since it did not discriminate against women.³⁴ In principle, no distinction was made between male roles and female roles within the group. Male and female believers attended religious meetings side by side. Believers of both sexes participated in charity campaigns and volunteered to engage in public works, such as repairing roads and bridges, in the spirit of mutual help. Further, some female believers gave sermons at religious meetings, engaged in proselytization, and acted as coordinators.

Matsushita Chiyo 松下千代 (1799-1872) serves as a good example of a Fujidō female believer who exemplified the image of a woman as able and active as a man.³⁵ She was born the daughter of a rich merchant in the city of Iida, a busy commercial center in Shinano province. Although most women of the time had to live in their husbands' houses after marriage, she founded her own house together with her husband as a branch of her father's house. She and her husband started a new business of producing and trading soy sauce and succeeded in it.³⁶ Thanks to this favorable social and economic background, she had a high-level of literacy, experience in running a business, a considerable amount of money at her disposal, and freedom from various restrictions that most women of her day were subject to in their husbands' houses.

Chiyo became affiliated with Fujidō in 1828 at the age of 30, and the following year she became one of Sanshi's earliest disciples in her province. She learnt teachings mainly from copied volumes of teachings, records of sermons, letters exchanged between Sanshi and the believers, etc., since there were no senior believers in her province who could instruct her. Based on what she learned from the copied documents, she propagated the Fujidō faith in and around her home region, converted several hundred people there, and organized them into many local groups.³⁷ The converts,

33. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.15, p.88. As another piece of evidence for the cultural difference between Japan and China, Sanshi refers to the difference between Japanese and Chinese languages in the way of making idioms made of two words with correlated meanings such as "day and night". He wrote that words with yin meaning, such as "night," were placed before those with yang meaning in Japanese language, while Chinese language gave precedence to words with yang meaning. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.14, p.101. Sanshi could be acquainted with some of nativist ideas through his friendship with a nativist literatus, Takada Tokomiyo (1783-1847). Sawada 2006, p.362.

34. Although there is no statistical record of the number of male and female believers, we can guess that about 30 to 40 percent of believers were women depending on remaining records about believers' activities. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol. 6, vol.22, vol.23; Matsushita-ke Monjo, Na, 3-1-1.

35. For the outline of Chiyo's life, see Matsushita-ke Monjo, Na 8.

36. The shop founded by Chiyo and her husband appears in the list of major one hundred odd commercial enterprises in Iida in 1841. *Iida-shi Rekishi Kenkyūjo* 2012, p.329.

37. For the spread of Fujidō in Chiyo's home region, Ina Valley, see Ichimura 1929, pp.425-35.

in turn, further spread the faith into other areas of the province.³⁸

Contrary to the conventional image of women, who concentrated on the domestic sphere, Chiyo acted in the public sphere as a leading coordinator. For example, when a group of believers planned to carry out work on an embankment in an area of her province in 1869, she acted as the chief promoter of the project and took charge of the formal procedures necessary to carry it out. She requested the office of the local government in charge of water control in the area to sanction the project, and when the project was completed, she submitted a written report about it to the office.³⁹ When the Tokugawa government investigated Fujidō, she was the only woman among thirteen leading coordinators summoned to the court. Without being intimidated, she gave the investigators a detailed explanation of the teachings about the ideal world.⁴⁰ When the government nevertheless banned Fujidō, she was one of the major believers whom the government made officially pledge to abandon the faith.⁴¹ Of course, she only pretended to do so.

After the government loosened its control over Fujidō believers, Chiyo actively worked not only to manage local groups of her home region and the regional network of her province but also to support Sanshi's successor in Kyoto as one of his confidants.⁴² While she was staying in Kyoto, she engaged in the propagation of Fujidō teachings among women from some aristocratic houses as well as commoners.

After she experienced the prohibition of Fujidō by the Tokugawa government, Chiyo wanted to have the religion officially recognized by the political authority. Attentively watching political changes in the 1860s, she was convinced that the fall of the Tokugawa government and the establishment of the Meiji government would give Fujidō a good chance to become a recognized religion. Yet, she soon recognized that some elements in its teachings and rites did not conform with the policies of the government. During the last several years of her life, she energetically worked to revise Fujidō's rites and teachings so that it could not only avoid persecution but also win official recognition as a proper religion by the government. Although she succeeded in persuading believers belonging to more than half of the regional networks, some senior believers, who did not want to change teachings and rites taught by Sanshi, fiercely opposed her plan.⁴³

Chiyo's activities tell us that a female believer could play the same role as male believers did. Although there were not many women who were as active as Chiyo, almost all female believers participated in various Fujidō activities side by side with their male fellows. They shared an image of women as not only free from sin and pollution but also able enough to do whatever men could.

38. Among 9,610 participants in the Fujidō project in 1862, 1474 were from Shinano province. Matsushita-ke Monjo, Na, 4-34. Thus, the regional network of believers from the province had grown into the second or third largest among all regional Fujidō networks.

39. Matsushita-ke Monjo, Na, 6-18.

40. Matsushita-ke Monjo, Sai, 2-2-13.

41. Ichimura 1929, pp.421-22.

42. She visited Kyoto twenty-one times in her lifetime. Matsushita-ke Monjo, Na, 8.

43. For Chiyo's efforts to reform of the teachings and rites, see *Kokiroku*.

5. In the Hopes of Restoring Yin-Yang Equilibrium

The challenge to the customary rule of excluding women from sacred mountains was one of the most conspicuous activities that Fujidō believers undertook in the hopes of redressing the imbalance between men and women and thereby restoring equilibrium between yin and yang.⁴⁴

In pre-modern Japan, women were excluded from the sanctuaries of Buddhist temples, the inner precincts of Shinto shrines, and most sacred mountains, including Mt. Fuji, because of their alleged pollution.⁴⁵ Jikigyō Miroku, who objected to the notion of women's pollution, criticized this custom.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, few of his direct followers openly challenged it.⁴⁷ But, the later Fujidō believers defied it actively and persistently. Their first targets were village shrines dedicated to Sengen that were built on mountains off-limits to women. Both male and female Fujidō believers climbed these mountains in the presence of villagers who had previously observed the taboo against female ascent. When they saw that Fujidō female believers' ascent did not cause any catastrophe, the villagers abandoned the taboo.⁴⁸

Fujidō's ultimate target was Mt. Fuji. It was not easy to change the customary rule there since it was one of the most popular pilgrimage sites of Japan and was under the control of some prestigious shrines and several groups of professional religious figures. The religious figures made it a rule that female ascent should be blocked at a certain point on the lower stages of each climbing route. Residents of villages in and around the mountain, who believed that female ascent would result in bad weather, poor harvests, and famine, demanded that the religious figures strictly check women's intrusion into the higher parts of the mountain.

Despite these restrictions, a female Fujidō believer secretly reached the summit in 1832. Disguised as a man, she started climbing the mountain with Sanshi, four other male believers, and two luggage carriers in the late 9th month of the lunar calendar, equivalent to mid-October. They intentionally chose a season when snow and strong winds would discourage other climbers so that the woman could reach the higher part of the mountain without being discovered. Despite the danger and hardships, they reached the summit, offered prayer rites there, and safely came back.⁴⁹ Fujidō believers interpreted the woman's successful ascent as a sign that Sengen allowed women to climb the mountain. With this conviction, Fujidō female believers tried to climb the mountain to as high a point as they could.⁵⁰

The persistent efforts of the Fujidō believers exercised influence over a group of religious

44. For more detailed information about the Fujidō believers' challenge to it, see Miyazaki 2005.

45. For the custom of excluding women from sacred places, see Miyazaki 2005; Suzuki 2002.

46. *Osoegaki*, in Iwashina 1983, p. 527.

47. Instead, some Fujidō confraternities constructed small hills with the shape of Mt. Fuji near their residential areas, enshrined Sengen there, and allowed female believers to climb the hills. Iwashina 1983, pp.268-73.

48. *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol. 18, pp.27, 109-12.

49. Kotani-ke Monjo, ken1-i26; *Hatogaya-shi no komonjo*, vol.14, pp.56-50.

50. For example, a group of female and male believers performed asceticism, walking around Mt. Fuji at height of between 2,300 to 2,500 meters, in the area off-limit to women. Kotani-ke Monjo, ken1-ro13.

professionals managing an entrance to the northern climbing route. Expecting that lenient policies toward female ascent would attract many more pilgrims to their entrance and thereby contribute to their prosperity, they suspended the rule of excluding women from the higher parts of the mountain during the summer climbing season of 1860. As a result, women became able to climb up to the eighth stage, about 3,100 meters high, along the northern climbing route. Fujidō believers welcomed it. On the most auspicious day of the year, a little over one thousand male and female believers climbed the mountain together.⁵¹ Groups of women with Fujidō banners in their hands led the huge climbing party at its head, middle, and the rear. In line with the motto of “women go first,” male believers followed their female fellows softly singing lullabies in the spirit of harmony.⁵²

Conclusion

From the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, generations of ascetics and believers dedicated to the cult of Mt. Fuji developed teachings about realizing the ideal world, which was characterized by people adopting a righteous mode of living, productive married couples, and cosmological equilibrium between the forces of yin and yang. They also fostered an alternative image of women as not just free from sin and pollution but as able and active as men. Fujidō expected such women to work with their male counterparts together on equal terms so that they would realize the ideal world. Fujidō also advised believers to change the roles and positions of the husband and the wife in their sexual life and encouraged women to exercise leadership there.

Both the alternative image of women and the image of married couples that Fujidō fostered were opposite to the conventional image of women and that of married couples. Therefore, at a first glance, Fujidō teachings seem radical. Nevertheless, Fujidō obtained many believers in many regions of the country. How was it possible?

It was probably because patriarchal values and Confucian ethics did not apply to everyone in every class equally. It was not easy for most commoners in pre-modern Japan to adopt a life style in accordance with Confucian ethics. Even if Fujidō teachings that both men and women should engage in the same work conflicted with Confucian ethics, those ideas might not have sounded so strange, to most commoners at least, since most commoner women either participated in their house occupation or worked as hired laborers to contribute to their household economy. It also was not very strange for men to take care of their young children. Fujidō teachings about the production of good offspring through a balanced relationship between the husband and the wife was attractive in the eyes of the people of the period since good offspring were indispensable for the continuation the household, which was one of their prime concerns.⁵³ So far as it should result in the birth of

51. The record about the climbing party tells us that 1,034 members stayed overnight at the eighth stage to conduct a prayer rite at the dawn there. Kotani-ke Monjo, Shi, 35.

52. *Kyōkun kayōshū*, pp.263-65.

53. Matsushita Chiyo wrote in her written statement submitted to the court that many believers in her region brought into practice Fujidō teachings about the relationship between the husband, and that many of them reported her that they

good children, they likely agreed with Fujidō's advice that the wife should play an active role in her sexual life with her husband, even if it was at odd with the conventional notion of women. Sanshi depicted a man and a woman in the ideal world with the phrase, "Working side by side and smiling at each other from morning till night, the husband and the wife live in perfect union in the world of *miroku*." Such an image of a married couple must have been appealing in the eyes of the common people, at least, even if it deviated from the orthodox ethics of the period.

In short, Fujidō's alternative image of women won support from many believers because it was rooted in the sense of values shared by commoners of the time. The same is true for the image of women presented by some other new religions. For example, the founder of Nyoraikyō preached that women were precious since the creator intentionally had made them and both men and women were indispensable for reproduction of the world. Why were most of the alternative images of women of the period developed by new religions? It is probably because lay commoners needed confidence that their perspective was endorsed by divine authority in order to raise objections to the notions of human beings and human relations fostered and supported by the political and religious elite.

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succeeded in having offspring. Okada 2011, pp.250-51. Not only commoners but also court nobles listened to Fujidō's advice about the issue. Watanabe 1943, pp.144-45.

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