Introduction

It was a crisp morning in the southern outskirts of Tokyo. The cheerful voices of a group of young women broke the quiet of the sleepy neighbourhood. Their uniform—black pencil skirt, white shirt, black vest—marked them as students of the same institution, a nearby female vocational school. They were making their daily trip from the dorm to the school. A bell echoed in the distance, calling the pupils to the morning assembly. The girls rushed to the main entrance, ready to start another day of lessons and activities. This scene captured a moment in the life of Hōju Josei Gakuin Johō Kokusai Senmon Gakkō (Women International Vocational School Hōju, hereafter Hōju), a college for high school graduates (18–20 years) specialising in secretarial work and “international education” centred on the study of English language. At first glance, nothing marked Hōju’s facilities or its students as different from those of other female vocational schools. What made this college distinctive, however, was its religious connotation. Hōju was instituted by Risshō Kōseikai, a lay Buddhist organisation founded in 1938, primarily rooted in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and ancestor veneration. From the late 1950s, founder Niwano Nikkyō promoted a progressive expansion of Kōseikai’s social engagement in the domains of interfaith dialogue, peace work, social welfare and education (Di Febo 2016; Kisala 1999; Mukhopadhyāya 2005). Kōseikai’s involvement in this field began with the institution of a kindergarten (Kōsei Ikujien) in 1949 and continued to grow during the following decades, with the inauguration of a secondary school complex (Kōsei Gakuen), a vocational school for nurses (Kōsei Kango Senmon Gakkō), and day-care centres for children. Hōju was created in 1994 on initiative of Niwano Nichikō, who had succeeded his father Nikkyō as Kōseikai’s president. As declared by its director, the purpose of Hōju was to train “women that could contribute to contemporary society” (genzai shakai ni kōken dekiru josei), by equipping young female practitioners with the skills required in the workplace, and help them achieve “a sense of purpose as women” (josei toshite no ikigai).

This chapter provides an analysis of Hōju’s pedagogy to illuminate the role played by religious education in shaping gender roles. Drawing from textual sources and ethnographic data, I will...
discuss how Hōju’s educational practices seek to nurture the fundamental values of compassion and docility through a combination of Buddhist doctrinal teaching, vocational training and experiential learning. Hōju’s approach contributes to reinforce conservative ideals of femininity centred on the notion of women as carers and nurturers. Rather than helping students carve out new roles for themselves, education at Hōju seems to reproduce gendered norms rooted on a division of labour between the private sphere of family and the public sphere of Japan’s workplace and society. These considerations resonate with existing studies on religion and gender, which have often highlighted the role of religion in perpetrating patriarchal structures (Gross et al. 2013, 1–2). It would be limiting, however, to read these dynamics as mere reproduction and interiorisation of structures of subordination. Drawing from the experiences of current and former students, I argue that acceptance of conservative gender norms allows these women also to gain some agency over their personal development, interpersonal relationships and social participation. This chapter adds to a burgeoning debate on the intersections of religion, gender and education (ibid.) by bringing new insights into the role played by religious education in shaping complex and at times contradictory gendered identities (Shah and Khurshid 2019). In particular, it contributes to unpack the ambiguities of Buddhist vocational education as both potential resource for female empowerment (Starkey and Tomalin 2013) and site for the reproduction of conservative social norms (Bryant 2006).

**Religion and gender roles in Japan**

In the Japanese context, religion has often been interpreted as a tool of patriarchy that serves to oppress women and deprive them of the opportunity for self-determination (Ogoshi 1997; Juschka 2001). This widespread assumption may be one of the motivations behind feminist scholarship’s aversion to religion and the limited interest paid to the gender dimension in religious studies (Kawahashi et al. 2013). Some scholars, however, have discussed Japanese religions’ tendency toward social and political conservatism. Helen Hardacre (1984), for example, discussed the highly conservative vision of family and gender roles promoted by the lay Buddhist organisation Reiyūkai, stressing how the group perpetrated a gendered division of labour and moral responsibility across the public/private divide, relegating women to the domestic sphere. As discussed by Paola Cavaliere in her contribution to this volume, many religious institutions advanced similar configurations, which echoed hegemonic ideals of normative femininity embedded in Japanese society (Ambros 2015, 142–149).

Femininity in Japan has been traditionally associated with women’s position within the family (Takeda 2011). Emphasis on reproductive aspects and family obligations were central to the “good wife and wise mother” ideology coined in Imperial Japan (Cavaliere 2015). In the post-war period, this narrative laid the foundation for the feminine ideal of full-time housewife, instrumental in supporting a political economy rooted on the functional differentiation between male breadwinner and a female caretaker (Estevez-Abe 2008). The economic downturn of the 1990s fostered a rise in female participation in the workforce. This shift, however, did not completely undermine traditional gender norms: for decades women had constituted an important source of inexpensive labour, primarily in the capacity of “office ladies” (often called OL). Women’s position within Japan’s workforce continued to be modelled on their domestic roles as wives and mothers; they were expected to operate as low-wage temporary workers performing “womanly duties” (i.e. secretarial, hostess and housekeeping tasks). Female education, and most notably junior colleges, played a crucial role in constructing gendered subjectivities rooted on the ideology of “good wives, wise mothers” (McVeigh 1997, 147). At present, women continue to be mainly directed to part-time and irregular jobs, based on the
assumption that, even when they chose to work, caring for their family remains their main priority and raison d’être.

Japan’s demographic shift toward a rapidly aging society fostered other changes. Government policies addressing the rising demand for social services, such as the introduction of nursing care insurance schemes, created new opportunities for women to work and take on active roles in their communities (Cavaliere 2015, 23–26). Extended social participation, however, continued to be subordinated to acceptance of traditional gendered roles, as new practices were modelled on women’s caring duties towards the elderly and the children (ibid.). The promotion of traditional ideals of femininity remained the main trend also among Japanese religious organisations (Ambros 2015, 154–164). As the case of Hōju demonstrates, this also applies to Risshō Kōsei-kai. The perpetration of conservative gender norms, however, should not be equated to a complete denial of women’s agency. Recent scholarly contributions challenged narratives of female practitioners as passive victims of oppressive religious organisations (Murayama and Baffelli 2019). Paola Cavaliere, for example, contested the established view that Japanese religions merely reproduce gender normativity, arguing that these assumptions “focused on what religion makes women do and be, while neglecting what women do with religion” (Cavaliere 2015, 16). Religious affiliation, Cavaliere suggested, provided women with opportunities for social participation through which they could “explore alternative trajectories of social self,” as well as a moral space to discuss and articulate their womanhood and motherhood (ibid., 9–10; see also Cavaliere’s chapter in this volume). Inose Yuri (2017) also noted that, for some women, adherence to cultural expectations of caring and nurturing within religious institutions offered personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose. This did not stem from a rejection of patriarchal structures, but rather a “sacralisation” of gendered division of labour and of women’s role within the family.

More broadly, scholars have begun to question simplistic representations of religion as a tool for women’s subordination, highlighting how the experience of religious agency within patriarchal groups can open channels of empowerment (Holtmann and Nason-Clark 2012, 64). In her work on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2011) noted how the universalised assumption of patriarchal domination has often led feminist scholars to interpret women’s presence in male-dominated religious spheres as a mere internalisation of norms. Women’s active participation in Islamist movements, however, presented a dilemma: while these movements granted women access to previously male-dominated spaces (e.g. the mosque), their engagement was structured by and upheld a discursive tradition predicting their subordination (Mahmood 2011, 2–3). One way to tackle these conceptual challenges, then, would be to overcome analytical perspectives rooted on a binary between resistance and subordination. Mahmood questioned the tendency, widespread in feminist scholarship, to conceptualise agency primarily in terms of resistance to patriarchal norms. Without undermining the relevance of acts of subversion or resignification for feminist theory and feminism as a political project, Mahmood noted how this approach closed analytical questions on modalities of agency that escape the logic of resistance. Agentival capacity, she argued, is not only entailed in those acts that resist norms, but also in the multiple ways in which these are performed and experienced. Moving beyond the dichotomy between subversion and enactment allows to explore the different modalities of agency located in the ways women inhabit norms (ibid., 25–29). For this purpose, Mahmood proposed an alternative conception of agency as centred on ethical self-transformation. She drew from Michel Foucault’s (1997) definition of ethics as “practices, techniques and discourses through which a subject transforms itself in order to achieve a particular state of being” (Mahmood 2011, 28). This was intertwined with the “paradox of subjectivation” identified by Foucault (1990), namely the idea that, while the subject is constructed
through historically and culturally specific arrangements of power, the same relationship of subordination creates also the capacity of action. Based on these premises, Mahmood (2011, 32–34) suggested that adherence to norms can enable agency in the form of an opportunity for self-realisation, which can also enhance the individual’s capacity to act upon social reality. This conceptual framework enabled her to explore the modalities of agency entailed by women’s perfection of Islamic virtues such as modesty and shyness. Other scholars followed suit, disclosing new perspectives on women’s agency embedded within patriarchal religious groups (Holtmann and Nason-Clark 2012, 64).

Building on the aforementioned considerations, this chapter seeks to illuminate the ways in which Japanese women inhabit social norms beyond the binary resistance/submission. I will highlight how Hōju’s Buddhist-inspired educational practices contribute to shape gendered subjectivities informed by ideals of compassion and docility. Students’ acceptance of norms, however, does not imply a complete denial of agency on their part. At Hōju, religiously connoted gendered roles encourage pupils to adopt caring and accommodating attitudes. While perpetrating gender normativity, religious education could also open spaces of agency; adherence to norms provide students with opportunities for self-transformation and extended social participation. More importantly, I will illustrate how religious values serve as a tool of resignification through which students could reassert their self-value and access alternative pathways of identity construction which escape a mere logic of subordination. Beyond mothers, carers and docile workers, young women can access a more satisfying image of themselves: that of bodhisattvas.4

**Hōju’s pedagogy: values, processes and roles**

In an interview Mr. Hayashi,5 the school principal, defined Hōju’s mission as transmitting to young women the necessary knowledge and moral principles needed to play an active social role in contemporary Japan. As a vocational school, their goal is to equip pupils with the specialist skills they need to find employment and become active members of society. However, as Hayashi pointed out, “there is more in life than that.” Another key purpose of the institution, he explained, is to help students carve out social roles that would bring them fulfilment as women. The meaningful life that Hōju’s staff wish for pupils is tightly related to the gendered roles envisioned for them, grounded in Kōseikai’s teachings.

It is possible to identify two core dimensions within Hōju’s pedagogy, which inform also the gender norms transmitted at the school. Firstly, the virtue of compassion is attributed high relevance as the distinctive attribute of the bodhisattva, the fundamental role model that all Kōseikai members are encouraged to follow, and thus also the ideal that Hōju students should aspire to. Teachers at the school and missionary leaders within local churches alike defined compassion as a “spirit of sacrifice” (hōshi no seishin) fuelling a caring attitude toward others and a commitment to help those in need. These ideas are tightly related to the notion of social contribution, which is primarily understood as “doing something for the benefit of others,” that is, as a practice of compassion. While these principles apply to Kōseikai members in general, at Hōju they acquired a distinctively gendered connotation. That emerged also in relation to another core feature of Hōju’s pedagogy, namely a propensity for “docility” (sunaosa). I use this expression to encompass the range of personality traits, including kindness, empathy and compliance, which were generally associated with the ability to accept others, understand their feelings and meet their needs. This attitude is rooted in two basic assumptions—that responsibility for all problems resided (at least in part) within the individual, and that by changing oneself one can change others—stemming from the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, discussed later. On
The humanist education: doctrinal learning, secular knowledge and bodily practices

Hōju relies on a two-tiered pedagogical system combining class-based formal training with experiential learning through communal living and personal interaction at the school and the dorm. As explained by principal Hayashi, as an educational institution founded by Kōseikai, Hōju is rooted in a “Buddhist spirit” (bukkyō no seishin). Secular and religious courses alike are meant to nurture the fundamental virtues of compassion and altruism, helping students craft a lifestyle modelled on the ideal of the bodhisattva. The school offers professional training focused on secretarial skills, which include English language, computer science, business culture and etiquette. These courses are commonly taught by external instructors, often professionals of vocational training. Despite their inherently secular content, students are still encouraged to approach these modules from a religious perspective, nurtured by Buddhist-inspired doctrinal learning and moral education.

The doctrinal component is apparent in Hōju’s curricula, which integrates secular vocational training with religious education rooted in Mahāyāna Buddhism and the teachings of Niwano Nikkyō. The writings of the founder represent the main pedagogical tool used for doctrinal training, as shown by the ubiquitous presence on students’ desks of his voluminous commentary of the Lotus Sutra (Niwano 1976). Rather than textual study, however, it is a practical implementation of Buddhist teachings that lies at the core of Hōju’s pedagogy. The course “Humanistic Education” (ningen kyōiku), in particular, aims to teach students how to translate the doctrinal principles learnt in class into daily practice. Compassion predictably stands out as the value most strongly emphasised across the module, commonly linked to a desire to be of help to others and offer a contribution to society. These ideas echoed in students’ assessments. In one of the classes I observed, the instructor asked pupils to write an essay discussing the notion of compassion preached in the Lotus and offering concrete examples of their daily practice. They generally highlighted how attending Hōju had strengthened their willingness to “put their life at the service of others.” Similar ideas emerged in interviews with former students, many of whom also stressed how Hōju taught them the importance of helping people.

While the “Humanistic Education” course focuses on moral values, the module “Manners” (manā) is more decisively oriented toward practical matters. The “Hōju manners,” listed next, can be said to condense the essence of the course. These consist of a set of good habits that students are invited to cultivate as a code of good conduct and a means to implement Buddhist teachings.

1. Correct your posture (straighten your spine).
2. Greet people with a smile.
3. Answer clearly with a “yes” [when spoken to].
4. Make “thank you” your keyword.
5. Be punctual.
7 When you take off your shoes, arrange them neatly, when you stand up, put the chair under the table.
8 Align your hips.

These manners were also visually present in the physical space of the school, in the form of framed pictures hung in the classrooms or colourful plaques decorating the halls (Figure 19.1).

Here as well, speeches and publications of the founder constitute the reference point for instructors. A representative example is offered by the three habits that Niwano Nikkyō identified as fundamental ways to practice Buddhism in daily life (points 2, 3 and 7). The founder strongly emphasised the importance of always greeting others, replying clearly and energetically when spoken to, and arranging your shoes and clothes neatly. Although these common gestures may appear unrelated to Buddhism, in Kōseikai they are conceived as forms of veneration of the Buddha-nature within others and oneself. This idea is indicative of a general trend to transpose Buddhist teachings into the matter of everyday life and apply them to mundane habits and personal interaction.

Another important function fulfilled by courses in “Humanistic Education” and “Manners” is to mediate between the religious and secular dimensions of Hōju’s curricula. The school principal offered the rigidly codified classroom etiquette imposed on students as a representative example. Practices such as escorting the teacher to the room carrying his or her bag, serving tea and tidying up the classroom, Hayashi explained, aim to nurture students’ spirit of service. The ethical values and behavioural norms learnt through the doctrine not only lay the foundation...
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for students’ daily practice of Buddhism, but are also meant to help their career by fostering values likely to be appreciated in a professional setting (as seen later).

These practices echo a relevant feature characterising the “Manners” course, namely a marked emphasis on embodiment. Bodily practices such as straightening the spine and aligning the hips were not only presented as norms of proper behaviour, but also as a form of religious practice. The basic assumption underlying these norms was the existence of a direct connection between outward behaviour and inner spirituality. This resonated with a pedagogical principle well rooted in Japanese education, the idea that one can “learn through the body” (karada de oboeru): bodily management is commonly used as a technique to nurture moral principles, based on the belief that the reiterated performance of a set routine can shape cognitive processes of formation of the self (McVeigh 1997, 158–160). In the case of Hōju, however, the use of bodily practices as a tool of self-cultivation is attributed a religious connotation. The belief that changing one’s attitude toward the world and others would naturally foster an inner transformation is central to Kōsei kai practice, and Buddhism more generally. Members spoke of “entering through the form” (katachi kara hairu) to convey the idea that repeatedly performing a gesture shapes one’s feelings, mental attitude and religious beliefs. Missionary leaders often stress the importance of performing ritual practice, for example chanting the sutra, even when lacking in intention. They believe that, through assiduous repetition, the originally “empty” gesture would eventually acquire meaning. In the “Manners” course, the idea that outward attitude influenced one’s inner disposition extended beyond ritual practice to apply to any form of action. During a lesson the teacher, Prof. Ōmiya, reminded the students of the importance of keeping a straight back, explaining that maintaining a good posture was not only physically beneficial, but also instrumental to their personal development. Their posture, Ōmiya added, serves to nurture patience, perseverance and ability to focus, while also affecting their attitude toward people, and therefore the way others perceive them.

The recurrent emphasis on personal development is grounded in another fundamental concept underlying Kōsei kai’s teachings and Hōju’s pedagogy, that is, the notion that all change starts within oneself, rooted in the doctrine of dependent origination (engikan), another concept extensively discussed in class. The doctrine of dependent origination is among the fundamental tenets of Buddhism; it preaches that all phenomena are conditionally originated in dependence upon other phenomena. When applied to everyday life, the concept works in both directions of cause and effect: firstly, based on the belief that individual action affects overall reality, the cause of any event can be traced to oneself; secondly, the same principle invested individuals with the power to affect their surroundings, including others’ behaviour. These intertwined concepts constitute the ideological foundation for the attitude of “docility” listed as one of the two pillars of Hōju’s ethics. Within Kōsei kai, the notion of dependent origination is often used to encourage members to acknowledge their responsibility over personal problems. Regarding issues with interpersonal relationships, for example, practitioners are expected not only to share the blame, but also to take the initiative in solving the situation by changing their attitude. This usually implies assuming a compliant approach and adjusting oneself to better meet the needs of others. The importance of learning to accept others was constantly reiterated in Hōju. This emerged also in interviews with former students, who often mentioned how attending the school made them kinder and more understanding. Kawada, a graduate working as caregiver in an elderly care facility in Tokyo, felt that she became more tolerant during her time at Hōju. The school, she observed, increased her capacity to get along with people and broadened the scope of those she was able to accept.
Learning compassion and docility through everyday experiences of communal living

Alongside formal training, experimental learning represents the second pillar of Hōju’s pedagogy. The everyday experiences of students, divided between school, ritual practices and dorm life, are meant to reinforce the values and norms taught in class. In particular, communal living and social interaction are expected to foster the “spirit of sacrifice” at the core of Kōseikai practice. This idea was particularly emphasised by Takeyama, the staff member who gave me a tour of the facility on a muggy morning of July 2017. Takeyama—who like most Hōju employees was herself a former student—illustrated the various commitments punctuating life at the dorm. These include ritual tasks, as well as household chores, and are collectively referred to as *oyaku*. This term is more broadly used within Kōseikai to refer to the range of duties marking the daily life of churches, which include ritual activities (e.g. striking the bell during the service), administrative positions, missionary undertakings, housekeeping and reception tasks. Similarly, at the dorm Hōju’s students share ritual commitments and household chores, such as cleaning the common areas and cooking meals for all residents, based on a system of group shifts. Daily duties are meant to help students develop a spirit of service and a caring attitude toward others. Other tasks that students perform at school, related to class management or teaching assistance, fulfil a similar pedagogical function. While it is not uncommon for Japanese students to perform such duties in school, at Hōju they acquire particular significance due to their integration within a broader ideological framework centred on the notion of service as a practice of compassion.

Social interaction is another crucial component of dorm life and, in the opinion of Hōju’s staff, a fundamental resource for students’ personal development. Pupils are divided into groups of three or four, combining older (senpai) and younger students (kohai). Each group shares a living unit consisting of individual rooms, a bathroom and a common area furnished with a table, chairs, a kitchenette. Although there are larger shared spaces within the dorm where residents can hang out, according to Takeyama they prefer to spend time with their roommates. Social interaction among students and especially *senpai-kohai* relationships play an important role in Hōju’s pedagogy. Older students are expected to set an example for the younger to follow and care for them “as sisters would.” This includes providing emotional support and spiritual guidance within the intimacy of their shared living space. Takeyama explained that students are encouraged to engage in “heart talk” (*haato tooku*), an activity combining group discussion and counselling modelled after *hōza*, one of Kōseikai’s core religious practices.

Despite the ideal image portrayed by staff members, relationships among students are not always idyllic. For example Kawada, the young caregiver mentioned earlier, remembered going through a rough patch during her years at Hōju. She lived with an abusive *senpai* who often mistreated her. “It was hell,” Kawada recounted. Even these experiences, however, turned into a learning opportunity. One day, Kawada came across a testimonial written by her *senpai*, where she spoke of the dramatic issues faced during childhood and how these affected her mental health. Not only did this episode change Kawada’s view of the girl, it also taught her to be more empathetic and understanding. More generally, both former students and staff stressed how dorm life, by putting pupils in close contact with each other over an extended period of time, was instrumental in enhancing their ability to “accept others as they are.” Communal living exacerbates tensions and personal dislikes and forces students to deal with them. These experiences thus offer a chance to improve
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one’s capacity to manage interpersonal relationships, which usually means becoming more accommodating.

So far, I illustrated how formal education and experiential learning contribute to a nurturing of the basic values of compassion, service and docility lying at the core of Hōju’s ethics. These teachings, however, reflect certain fundamental principles which apply to Kōseikai members more generally. The next section looks at how these notions acquire a more specific gendered connotation and the role that religion plays in this respect.

Implementing Buddhist teachings as a gendered practice

At Hōju, positionality represents an important component of religious practice. When implementing the Buddhist virtues learnt in class, students are exhorted to take into account their identity as Hōju students, that is, young women and Kōseikai members. Prof. Ōmiya once praised a student for how clearly she articulated what it meant for her to help others and contribute to society “in the capacity of a Hōju student.” Ōmiya noted that everyone performs several roles (yakuwari) within one’s family and society. Offering herself as an example, she wrote the words “mother,” “instructor,” “PTA member” on the blackboard, explaining that those were all roles she fulfilled in her life. The key message was that, although the fundamental tenets of Buddhism apply to all living beings, their implementation changes depending on one’s position.

Regarding compassion, caring for others is constructed as a distinctively feminine attribute primarily through its connection with motherhood. In Principal Hayashi’s view, motherhood constitutes an essential facet of the women’s identity and the prime source for that “sense of purpose” that the school wants students to achieve. These ideas inform the “Women Theory” (josei-ron) course, probably the one with the most evident gendered connotation. “Women Theory” aims to provide students with ideals to follow in their capacity as young women and Buddhist practitioners. The instructors combined examples of Buddhist femininity drawn from the Lotus Sutra with excerpts from the writings of Niwano Nikkyō or other Buddhist thinkers. In speeches and publications discussing women’s lifestyle and feminine virtues, the founder commonly offered his mother as a role model. He shared memories of his humble childhood in a remote rural village to emphasise his mother’s compassion, her ability to care for a large family and foster mutual support among its members. Romanticised accounts of Niwano’s childhood circulate widely within Kōseikai, contributing to foster a nostalgic image of the traditional household as a locus of harmony and filial piety. The crucial importance of the family—as the basic unit of both religious organisation and society—reflects on Hōju’s pedagogy and management. For example, living arrangements based on small groups combining older and younger students aim to reproduce a “family-like” environment.

The high relevance attributed to family values influence also the conception of women’s role in society. While it was accepted that women could occupy a range of positions, encompassing domestic, professional and public spheres, in Hōju’s view it was within the family that they found their most meaningful role. Family duties were also intertwined with women’s social participation. Rather than seeing domestic and public spheres as separated realms, Risshō Kōseikai conceived the household as a foundational element of society, tightly embedded in it. In these terms, devoting oneself to the family could be read as a form of social contribution. This idea allows Hōju staff to reconcile the constant exhortations to actively contribute to society with the promotion of gender roles centred on motherhood and domesticity. Even regarding social engagement in a broader sense, caring remains the guiding principle along which participation is articulated. This is, for example, the case of volunteering initiatives promoted by the school.
Many students are involved in caregiving activities directed at children, the elderly or the sick. Kōseikai-related institutions such as Kōsei General Hospital (Kōsei byōin) or Kōsei kindergarten (Kōsei ikujien) represent the privileged venues for these practices. While students’ involvement is rooted in the Buddhist virtue of compassion, it also reflects a conception of female identity as centred on maternity. In this respect, Hōju’s teachings reinforce cultural expectations of women as essentially carers and nurturers embedded in Japanese society (Cavaliere 2015; Inose 2017). This trend is shared by many female vocational schools; in this regard, women’s colleges serve to consolidate the gendered identities constructed by a “broader educational experience that systematically socialises women from the start” (McVeigh 1997, 15–16).

What makes the case of Hōju distinctive was the intersection of gender norms and religious values. Buddhist notions like compassion contributed to strengthening existing patriarchal structures by “sacralising” the gender division of labour and the ideal of motherhood (Inose 2017, 30). Religious values play a similar role also in relation to “docility.” As seen previously, the doctrine of dependent origination fosters a tendency to adopt an accommodating and at times submissive attitude. These notions acquire a gendered undertone when applied to women’s roles within the family and the workplace. In relation to family life, invitations to docility translate into an exhortation to be serviceable and compliant wives and mothers. In the field, this emerged in narratives circulating within the school and the religious organisation more broadly. Family issues were seldom addressed explicitly at Hōju, but they were one of the topics most frequently discussed in Kōseikai publications and local congregations. A recurrent pattern emerging in testimonials and hōza saw the resolution of tensions with husbands and children due the wife/mother acknowledging her responsibility and changing their attitude.

Moving from the domestic to the professional sphere, here as well docility and compassion appeared inextricably bound to gender norms. As noted by Brian McVeigh (1997), omoiyari (empathy), which indicates the capacity to understand the feelings of others and behave accordingly, is not only among the most highly valued virtues in Japan, but also central to gendered roles in the workplace. Women are expected to become particularly skilled at reading and managing emotions. That requires gaining control over one’s self-presentation and being able to accommodate the needs of others to create a pleasant working environment (McVeigh 1997, 149–156). Strictly linked to empathy, and equally important, is obedience—to regulations, etiquette and directives from superiors. These concepts resonate with the notions of compassion and docility taught at Hōju. Religious education, thus, appears to reinforce androcentric values embedded in Japanese society and contribute to perpetrate women’s subordination within family and workplace. As suggested in the opening section, however, it would be limiting to reduce the complex intersection of gender, religion and education to a binary between liberation and oppression. The next section draws from the accounts of current and former students to discuss how they understood and enacted the values taught at Hōju. These considerations shed a light on some of the modalities of agency embedded in the ways these women inhabited norms (Mahmood 2011, 15). In particular, I argue that acceptance of religious values and gender roles allowed students to achieve agency on three levels: self-transformation, interpersonal relationships and social participation.

Agency in submission: changing oneself and managing social reality

Conversations with Hōju graduates and current students revealed a range of motivations behind the decision to attend the school. These included advice or pressures from the family, affordable fees and living costs, and more mundane reasons such as the attractiveness of Tokyo, the desire to meet new people or the perks of dorm life. Despite this variety, a common trend was the
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shared desire for self-transformation. The decision to enter Hōju was often linked to an aspiration for personal improvement: pupils hoped that the school would offer them an opportunity to change, often based on transformations previously witnessed in others. A student revealed that her sister used to be a “delinquent,” but after entering Hōju she became kinder and more compassionate. She developed a “rounder” personality, “almost like her edges were smoothed.” The younger sister enrolled in Hōju seeking a similar change. Several classmates echoed these ideas, expressing admiration (akogare) for Hōju graduates and a desire to become like them. The perceived transformative experiences of others channelled their present aspiration for change. Self-improvement emerged as a recurrent trope also in interviews with former students. When reflecting on their time at Hōju, they commonly stressed how attending the school changed them. That was the case of Itō, a graduate turned into a member of staff. In high school, personal relationships had become a source of emotional distress for Itō, to the point that she stopped going to school. At that time, she fervently desired to change herself. When she attended an open campus day at Hōju, she felt that she could achieve that there. During the following two years, she developed a more positive outlook on life and was able to soften her attitude toward people, becoming more understanding and accommodating.

Itō’s testimonial provided a further example of the tendency to docility fostered by Hōju’s teachings. The transformation sought or experienced by students could be read as a mere internalisation of the social norms they were transmitted, and thus a form of submission. Adopting a broader notion of agency, however, allows for a more nuanced interpretation of these accounts. If, as suggested by Mahmood (2011), we assume that ethical self-transformation can entail agency, Hōju’s pedagogical practices can be seen as empowering students by enhancing their capacity for (and perceived control over) personal development. Religious education provides pupils with means of identity construction through which they are able to set aside prior self-perceptions and develop a more satisfactory image of themselves. This transformative process arguably implies a degree of subordination to established social values and gender norms. Nonetheless, it brought a sense of fulfilment to many Hōju students and graduates. Like Itō, several women expressed gratification for the transformation they had gone through, which often fulfilled a pre-existent desire for change.

Self-transformation was not only seen as valuable in itself, but also generated agency in terms of increased capacity to act upon one’s surroundings. When we equate agency to resistance, the tendency to accommodate others and indulge their needs appears as a form of submission. Docility, however, can also be empowering. The notion that left the strongest impression on Itō was the idea that, if you change yourself, others will change too. This concept, rooted in the principle of interdependence of all existence, was also the one which helped her the most. “In the past,” she explained, “I tried to change others, and failed. At Hōju, however, I learnt that you cannot change people. You can only change the way you approach them.” Based on the doctrine of interdependence, however, Köseikai members believe that individual action affects the cosmos. As Itō put it, “others are like a mirror that reflects oneself.” Personal change, thus, has the power to influence others’ behaviour. These principles provided Itō with the resources to address an issue—interpersonal relationships—which she had previously struggled to handle. It could be argued that what grew was not Itō’s ability to act and affect other people, but rather her capacity to cope with distressing situations. Yet, she perceived the change as something which helped her to gain agency where she had previously felt powerless. This interpretation was informed by her religious beliefs: the notion of interdependence shaped Itō’s understanding of accommodation as means to influence the way others related to her. Docility, thus, turns into a tool through which students might manage their surroundings.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter discussed how Buddhist-inspired educational practices at Hōju contributed to shape gendered subjectivities informed by ideals of compassion and docility. I sought to move beyond the binary resistance/submission to provide a more nuanced account of the ways students inhabited norms, and demonstrated how acceptance of religiously connoted gendered roles does not imply a complete denial of agency on their part. In the opinion of both students and staff, developing a more compassionate and accommodating self increased pupils’ chances to carve out a positive role for themselves within their families, workplace and society, boosting their social participation.

For young women struggling to integrate and interact with their peers, these channels provided facilitated access to social interaction. Nurturing empathy and docility served also to shape Hōju students into desirable candidates for employment, and thus facilitate their entry in the workforce. Socialising women as caring and compassionate also help them gain access to newly emerging roles within communities and the social welfare system. From a feminist perspective, these dynamics could be dismissed as subordination to patriarchal structures, which young women themselves reproduce through their acquiescence to gender norms. Adherence to norms, however, should not be equated to an absence of agency. Religious training can help students carve out socially acceptable roles for themselves, opening spaces to negotiate the mutually contradictory pressures associated to their dual role in the family and the labour market, fostered by neoliberal ideals of womanhood (see also Cavaliere in this volume).

Reproduction of social roles, moreover, does not imply their fixity. Conversations with younger members of staff revealed an emerging awareness of social transformations and attempts to question and re-discuss the conservative norms promoted at Hōju. These trends hint at the possibility that, alongside consolidation of patriarchal structures, religious education could also provide spaces of negotiation where the same structures can be problematised and, possibly, challenged. More importantly, religious values turn into a tool of re-signification through which students could reassert their self-value, influence over others and capacity for social contribution. The sacralisation of gendered roles through their association with Buddhist concepts like compassion serve to invest caring attitudes with additional value as a form of religious practice. This process opens alternative pathways of identity construction which overcome the logic of subordination. Beyond mothers, carers and docile workers, young women can access a more satisfying image of themselves: that of bodhisattvas.

Notes

1 As noted by Brian McVeigh (1997) in his work on women’s colleges in Japan, in recent decades “internationalisation” has become a leitmotiv of vocational education. McVeigh (ibid., 65–69) highlighted how internationalism paradoxically serves as part of a broader nationalising discourse which consolidates traditional values and notions of Japanese womanhood by contrasting them with an international Other.

2 Interview 22/06/2017, Tokyo.

3 Data were collected during two fieldwork stays in Japan, primarily based in Tokyo (September 2016–August 2017 and July–September 2019), where I conducted participant observation of classes and other educational activities at Hōju, visited the annexed dormitory, consulted course material and carried out semi-structured interviews with students, graduates and members of staff. Fieldwork was possible thanks to the kind contribution of the Arts and Humanities Research Council North–West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership (AHRC NWC-DTP), the University of Manchester, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation.

4 The term bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism indicates one who is on the path toward illumination and devoted to the salvation of others.
Mothers, bodhisattvas and women of tomorrow

5 All the names used in the chapter are pseudonyms.
6 Interview 22/06/2017, Tokyo.
7 In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Buddha-nature refers to the potential for enlightenment inherent in all sentient beings.
8 Fieldnotes 25/07/2019.
9 Interview 06/06/2017, Tokyo.
10 Twice a day, on mornings and evenings, all residents gather in a large ceremony hall within the dorm to perform sutra chanting and memorialisation rites for the ancestors.
11 Fieldnotes 07/07/2017.
12 Bryant (2006), among others, highlighted the important role that women-only enclaves play in socialising women to accept gender roles.
13 Hōza (Dharma sittings) are small-group discussion sessions, gathering from 10 to 20 participants. Members share personal problems and spiritual concerns, while the hōzashu (discussion leader) offers guidance to help them reinterpret their everyday experiences in the light of Kōseikai teachings.
14 It should be mentioned that the practice of non-judgement, that is, the capacity to accept the people and experiences one encounters without judgement, is attributed crucial importance in many Buddhist schools, notably Zen and Pure Land Buddhism.
16 On the idea of compassionate motherhood as directly linked to active social roles for women, see also Cavaliere’s chapter in this volume.
17 Fieldnotes 26/07/2019.
18 Interview 04/08/2019, Tokyo.

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Aura Di Febo


