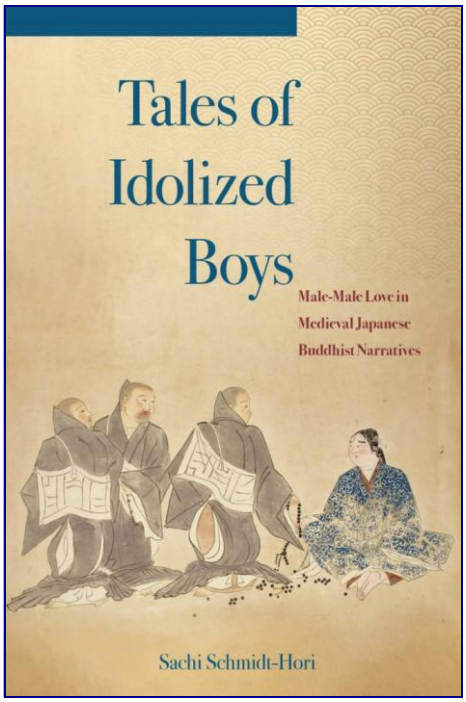
Book Review – Tales of Idolized Boys: Male-Male Love in Medieval Japanese Buddhist Narratives



Book **Review of Sachi Schmidt-Hori's** Tales of Idolized Boys: Male-Male Love in Medieval Japanese Buddhist Narratives **(University of Hawaii Press, 2021) 254 pp. (cloth $68; paperback $28) ASIN: B08M93JFRY.**

For decades now, literary criticism has fallen under the sway of what philosopher Paul Ricœur called the "hermeneutics of suspicion," which erases the notion of an author as an "illusion of consciousness" and interrogates the text to uncover its hidden role in a matrix of power and oppression. In some cases, this methodology borders on what might better be called a "hermeneutics of paranoia." This is why Sachi Schmidt-Hori's new book, *Tales of Idolized Boys: Male-Male Love in Medieval Japanese Buddhist Narratives* comes at a precarious but deeply important time for the humanities. Citing scholar Rita Felski and using what she termed a "postcritical reading," Schmidt-Hori closely studies the medieval Japanese literary genre, *chigo monogatari* (acolyte tales), stories of romantic encounters between adolescent *chigo* and older clerics within Buddhist institutions. (p. xiv) Though not dismissive of 21st century concerns of egalitarianism and secularism, Schmidt-Hori skillfully subverts the current discourses on this genre and its historical backdrop, and thaws out its humble but tender aesthetic which has been lost to the modern world, inside Japan and out.

The author

In her introduction to this book Sachi Schmidt-Hori explains her personal experiences which partly inspired her to write this book. When she was a child, her mother, a single parent of three, worked

as a *hosutesu* (an adaptation from the English word "hostess") in a nightclub in Kabukichō, one of Japan's most (in)famous red-light districts. Every night she watched her mother quickly apply makeup before cooking them an early dinner, and at six she was out the door. Their apartment was cluttered and rundown, money was not plentiful, and Schmidt-Hori recalls the discomfort she felt in the subtly demeaning way people used the word "*hosutesu*." Though, despite their less than ideal circumstances, Schmidt-Hori writes:

Watching my mother negotiate with the club management and her patrons taught me a simple fact of life: power need not stem from wealth, a high-status profession, or a special talent. Kabukichō nightclubs may seem far removed from the normative mores of the rest of society, and many people believe that a *hosutesu* is at the mercy of her clients and her employer. Nevertheless, well-established clubs are generally governed by a self-regulating system that generates a power equilibrium among the three parties involved. (p. xvii)

She explains that reputable Kabukichō nightclubs in the 1980s maintained their prestige by enforcing firm rules of etiquette for their clientele. When a *hosutesu* moved to another club, most of her patrons followed along with her, so management couldn't afford to accept clients who were not thoroughly vetted and who might alienate or abuse the women.

Moreover, there were a variety of ways a *hosutesu* could succeed in this industry aside from basic sex appeal. As Schmidt-Hori explains, "it is common knowledge in the industry that the most successful *hosutesu* in a club is not usually the most beautiful woman." (p. xvii) Some women sang and danced, others flirted, and her mother brought in businessmen with her cultured conversational skills she developed by reading numerous books on the train to work each day. Schmidt-Hori writes,

Although my mother was not notably gorgeous or even particularly cheerful, let alone seductive or submissive, she did quite well in her profession with the resources she had cultivated by reading great literature and reading people. The sources of her power, I think, were her down-to-earth personality, no-nonsense authenticity, and an unapologetic drive for upward mobility. (pp. xvii-xviii)

Schmidt-Hori's mother developed close relationships with many of these men over the years, with many of them even taking her and her children out to dinner at expensive restaurants, and her mother "regarded these men not only as the source of her income, but also as friends and allies." (p. xvi) Instead of women being subjected to any and all of her client's and manager's wishes, all three members of these groups formed an interdependent triumvirate with distinct roles and shared power.

Though the inner workings of *hosutesu* nightclubs involved unfixed, fluctuating systems of power governed by checks and balances, her neighbors were unable to see her mother as anything other than an unfortunate object of pity. While Kabukichō nightclubs in the 1980s seem miles apart from Japanese Buddhist monastaries in the middle ages, these memories of her mother inspired Schmidt-Hori to study *chigo monogatari* and the *chigo* system "to learn whether there had been a self-regulating system that created a relative power equilibrium, or a type of symbiosis within the *chigo* tradition, like the unwritten rules of the Kabukichō clubs that few outsiders know or care to understand." (pp. xviii-xix)

Context

The *chigo* system

The *chigo* system developed in Japan in the Heian period (794–1185) and was a feature of the court-centered politics of the Fujiwara regency known as *sekkan seiji.* Members of the increasingly powerful Fujiwara clan used alliance marriages to integrate themselves into the imperial court. Members of the Fujiwara clan would carefully educate their daughters for service in court, where at least one of them, it would be hoped, would be named the emperor's primary consort and bear a son with him. This son would be close in line for the throne. The *chigo* system was another process by which ruling powers, namely the aristocracy, the shogunate (military), and the religious institutions formed mutually beneficial alliances.

In this system, early adolescent boys from middle- and upper-class families would be sent to Buddhist monasteries as acolytes. In these monasteries *chigos* would receive an education, network with people in high society, and learn skills such as dancing or flute-playing, all while unambiguously being at the center of monks' and laymens' desires. There they were allowed and encouraged to brandish their charm and erotic magnetism, as well as form sexual and romantic relationships with older monks.

Because of their similarities, later scholars have drawn connections between this system and certain heterosexual arrangements, including those between *shirabyōshi* dancers and their male patrons, and *meshūdo* ("those who are beckoned") and their lords. References to *shirabyōshi* and *meshūdo* in medieval Japanese literature often depict their plight as tragic and their fate determined by the fluctuating mood of their male benefactors. The *chigo* system, however, was different in a number of ways. First, the *chigo* system was an officially recognized institution operating publicly within the religious sphere. It was also a temporary relationship; the mechanisms for its termination came built-in with its structure. Lastly, the relationship was designed to prepare the boy for a position of authority, either within the Buddhist institutions or outside of them. Schmidt-Hori writes:

… For the youths in question, participation in the *chigo* system was an opportunity to receive a premier education, to create political connections, to demonstrate their filial piety to their parents, to accumulate religious merit, and to bask in the homoerotic energy inside and outside of their home institutions as idolized boys. (p. 25)

Showing some similarities to the pederastic systems of the ancient Greece upper class, when the *chigo* system functioned as intended, Buddhist institutions would benefit by ensuring that the *chigos* they brought up were put in positions of authority in the court or the military, while aristocratic and shogunate families were able to reduce their financial burden and solidify support from the religious communities. The *chigo*, meanwhile, would be the heir of all three loci of influence.

Like marriage politics, these arrangements were imperfect, but because these were formal relationships with the long term stability of these institutions in mind, a monk exhibiting any kind of hubris towards a *chigo* would be unable to do so for long without consequences. Furthermore, unlike marriage, these relationships formed the beginning of a *chigo's* career in society, not the end. All of these factors make the *chigo* system an intricate network of reciprocal relationships with much room for individual expression at each point.

The *chigo*

Defining a *chigo* is a challenge because the concept has few parallels. In classical Japanese, the word "*chigo"* comes from *chi* 乳 (milk) and *ko/go* 子 (child), and originally meant a child of either sex from infancy to around age 12. (p. 3) Later the word was used to describe boy attendants who partook in religious ceremonies. Eventually, the word *chigo* came to mean postpubescent boys who acted in a religious and erotic capacity in Buddhist temples, and who were often thought to be avatars of the bodhisattva Kannon.*

** In Mahāyāna Buddhism (the more lay-centered sect of Buddhism which became popular in Japan) bodhisattvas are defined by the author as: "Those who have almost attained enlightenment or those who have attained buddhahood but linger in this world to help others." (p. 31) Kannon is the bodhisattva associated with compassion and mercy.*

Becoming a *chigo* required an elaborate initiation rite called the *chigo kanjō*. After the boy spends a week being purified in seclusion, the next couple of days are spent repeating various chants and prayers in front of different altars with his master. Then, the master spends some time explaining the esoteric teachings of apprenticeship with the youth. After that, there is more praying, chanting, mudras (symbolic hand gestures), and purifying of the body with incense. The ritual is completed once the boy "recites the Five Great Vows, cleanses his teeth and mouth, drinks the holy water, and blackens his teeth with a brush three times" (p. 10). Finally, he enters into *chigo*-hood by putting on a special robe and headgear and his master pours water on his crown. He is given a new name and declared reborn as Kannon.

What Schmidt-Hori searches for throughout the book is an approximate understanding of a *chigo*'s *sei* 性. *Sei*, she writes, refers to one's gender, sexuality, and sex, as well as age and social status. A nuanced explanation of this develops over the course of the entire book, but, in short, Schmidt-Hori pays close attention to the *chigo*'s "liminality," and the ways the concept of *chigo*-ness was sculpted over the years as a product of converging discourses of *sei.* For instance, *chigo*s were seen as "symbolic children," though they weren't infantilized. (p. 7) They were not regarded as masculine, though they weren't feminized. They were on the cusp of divinity, though they occupied the profane realm of humanity to guide others to salvation. The rich and complex iconography of the *chigo* and the *chigo* system inspired monks and laymen alike, as well as nuns and laywomen, and this sense of awe was channeled into *chigo monogatari,* a literary genre with an important place in the history of medieval Japan.

Overview

Chigo monogatari

Chigo monogatari (acolyte tales) arose as a literary genre in parallel with the *chigo* system. They were first written by Buddhist clergymen for circulation between monasteries, though they soon became so enmeshed in the mainstream culture that a *chigo monogatari* parody was even written. Fourteen of these stories survive extant (including the parody version), and Schmidt-Hori closely analyzes six of them, though others are mentioned for comparison. Despite all of these stories being umbrellaed under a single genre, they were not all written with the same unifying criteria. Rather, there are a series of general conventions which a *chigo monogatari* can more or less follow. According to Schmidt-Hori, these are: "(1) at least one of the principal characters is a Buddhist acolyte; (2) the *chigo* and a Buddhist monk develop mutual affection; (3) the *chigo* dies an untimely

death; (4) the surviving lover renews his devotion to the Way of Buddha; and (5) the *chigo* turns out to be an avatar of a bodhisattva." (p. 46) Interestingly, only three of the 14 extant *chigo monogatari* satisfy all five conventions.

One of those three, *A Long Tale for an Autumn Night*, is cited as one of the most iconic *chigo monogatari*. For the sake of elucidation, here is the author's summary:

When Keikai was a young priest with the rank of *risshi* (master of precepts), his heart was restless, despite his reputation as a great sage. Yearning for a true understanding of the Way of Buddha, he traveled to Ishiyama-dera and gave prayers to the Kannon for seventeen days. On the seventeenth night, a beautiful *chigo* appeared in his dream, so Kei- kai interpreted this as a positive omen. Nevertheless, the situation worsened back on Mount Hiei; the stunning image of the youth constantly occupied Keikai's mind and heart. To express his grievance, he set off to return to Ishiyama-dera. On his way, Keikai was caught in a rain shower and decided to take shelter at his home temple's long-term enemy, Miidera. There, Keikai stole a glimpse of a *chigo*, who looked identical to the very youth who had been consuming every waking moment of his life.

Keikai managed to befriend the *chigo's* boy attendant, Keiju, and learned that the beautiful youth's name was Umewaka; he turned out to be the son of the Hanazono Minister of the Left and an acolyte serving the abbot of Miidera. Keikai eventually won the trust of Keiju and this boy agreed to assist the monk with delivering love letters to Lord Umewaka. After a period of courtship, Keiju set up their first tryst. They consummated their relationship that night and exchanged vows to be lovers. Back at the Eastern Pagoda, the dreamlike night with the *chigo* further fueled Keikai's obsession, making him completely love-sick. Learning of this, Umewaka decided to visit Keikai—he clandestinely departed Miidera, accompanied only by Keiju. On their way to Mount Hiei, however, the pair was kidnapped by a band of bird-faced flying goblins (*tengu*) disguised as mountain ascetics (*yamabushi*) and was thrown into a cavern.

Meanwhile at Miidera, the disappearance of the beloved Umewaka triggered chaos among the clerics. Hearing the rumor that a Hiei monk had recently pledged his love to this *chigo*, they concluded that Umewaka's father must have given the two permission to elope. A mob of five hundred angry Miidera monks subsequently attacked the minister's residence, burning every building to the ground. In response, Keikai led a force of over a hundred thousand fighting monks from all 3,700 branch temples in a counterattack, reducing all of the buildings to ashes and leaving intact only the shrine of Shinra Daimyōjin, the patron deity of Miidera.

Fortunately, Umewaka and Keiju escaped from captivity thanks to the help of a dragon god who had also been incarcerated in the cave. Despite a moment of joy and relief, the *chigo* realized that the two places he called home, his father's mansion and Miidera, had been completely obliterated because of his own selfish actions. Crushed by agonizing guilt and despair, Umewaka jumped into the Seta River when Keiju left his side to deliver his letter to Keikai. Upon discovering the lifeless body of Umewaka, Keikai and Keiju were overcome with immense grief and pain, and both contemplated following him in death. The next day, they took the body to a nearby crematory and helplessly watched the beautiful boy's flesh turning into a wisp of smoke. After three days of mourning, Keikai set out on a pilgrimage, carrying his lover's ashes in a small container strapped around his neck. Later he built a hermitage in a place called Iwakura on Mount Nishi, where he prayed for Umewaka's salvation. Keiju, too, became a priest and retreated into seclusion on Mount Kōya.

In the aftermath of the violent conflict, thirty surviving Miidera priests kept vigil in the shrine of Shinra Daimyōjin. Deep in the night, when dream became indistinguishable from reality, a lavish procession escorting Hie Sannō, the guardian deity of Mount Hiei, appeared in the eastern sky and descended to Miidera. The Shinra Daimyōjin then threw a splendid banquet and entertained his guests with a feast and music all night long. The next morning, after the strange visitors disappeared into the sky, one priest inquired of the Shinra Daimyōjin why he was so amicable toward the patron god of their enemy. The great deity explained that the destruction of the temple was not in vain, because it had opened up a myriad of opportunities for accumulating religious merit, such as rebuilding the halls and recopying sutras. Shinra Daimyōjin went on to say that he and Hie Sannō were ecstatic to see Keikai's profound religious awakening. Basking in awe, these thirty Miidera priests decided to visit the hermitage of Keikai, who had now taken a new name, Senzai. He later built Ungoji near the capital so that he could directly serve the masses. Numerous worshippers from all walks of life were seen gathered around this holy man, crying tears of utmost bliss. (pp. 58-59)

Like many *chigo monogatari*, *Autumn Night* is loosely based on real events. *The Rise of Conflicts between Enryakuji and Miidera*, a 13th-century account detailing the above depicted intertemple skirmishes, reports a rumor that there was indeed a *risshi* from Mount Hiei who fell in love with a boy from Miidera whose later disappearance sparked a large scale attack and counterattack, causing destruction on both sides.

Schmidt-Hori cites Nishizawa Masaji's (1980) comparison of the two texts to study the *monogatari*-ization of *Rise of Conflicts* into *Autumn Night*. Nishizawa calculates the percentages of the major points in each story to see which elements were expanded and which condensed. For example, in *Autumn Night* the battle between Enryakuji and Miidera decreased from 34 percent of the story to 14 percent, while the romance between Keikai and Umewaka lengthened in *Autumn Night* to 38 percent from only 15 percent. This comparison shows that *chigo monogatari* did not emerge out of thin air, but served to amplify and highlight the homoerotic elements of its literary and historical precursors.

One of these precursors which *chigo monogatari* made use of is the literary genre *hōben-tan* (skillful means stories). *Hōben* (skillful means) is an integral feature in many schools of Buddhist theology, and according to Schmidt-Hori it "can refer to a 'provisionary divine intervention' that meets a short-term goal as a step toward the ultimate goal of enlightenment, comparable to a raft that a person desperately needs to cross a river and will abandon once reaching the other side." (p. 31) The influential Mahāyāna Buddhist text, the *Lotus Sutra*, illustrates this concept in the "Parable of the Burning House," wherein a man's three children are playing while their house is on fire. Their father has a cart outside for them to escape in, but they are too distracted by their toys to listen. The man uses "skillful means" to get them outside by telling them that there were three carts outside drawn by three different animals: An ox, a goat, and a deer. Because he knew that each of his children liked a different animal, he enticed them all in different ways. Once they were all outside, they all escaped together, not in three vehicles ("*yāna*"), but the single, true vehicle ("*ekayāna*").

The idea that erotic beauty could also be a vehicle ("*yāna*") by which one comes closer to understanding *mujō* (impermanence) and reaching buddhahood was formulated by many in medieval Japan, but perhaps most fully by the founder of Shin Buddhism or True Pure Land Buddhism, Shinran (1173-1263). Shin Buddhism was one of the most widely practiced sects of

Buddhism in medieval Japan, and since indigenous Japanese Shintoism already had a relaxed view of sex,* this gave both hetero and homoeroticism a soteriological justification in pre-modern Japanese literature. This juxtaposition between the earthly need for affection and the divine recognition of this worlds' evanescence presented in *Autumn Night* demonstrates how, "Tragedy helps humans find bliss in ordinary events, while profound affection for others makes the loss thereof all the more painful." (p. 61) The author continues, "The most significant step in developing an anecdote into a *chigo monogatari*, therefore, is foregrounding the plight of the lover, followed by the solemn revelation that renunciation of all earthy attachment is the only path to enlightenment." (p. 62)

** There were discourses in Shintoism that associated sexual behavior with uncleanness, though this usually referred to contact with body fluid and could be expiated with purification rituals, similar to the idea of ritual impurity in the Hebrew Bible. The moral problematization of sexual acts and desires, however, was uncommon in traditional Shinto beliefs. (p. 29)*

20th and 21th Century Receptions of *Chigo Monogatari*

Sachi Schmidt-Hori first encountered *chigo monogatari* during a graduate seminar. She writes in the prelude, "These narratives turned out to be an abundant repository of all things fascinating: Heian-esque courtly aesthetics, depictions of nonbinary gender, an array of Buddhist ideals, portrayals of male-male love, and intricate negotiations of power between the *chigo* characters and those around them." (p. xviii) Then she writes, "Yet above all, the reception history of acolyte tales intrigued me." (p. xviii)

The Edo period of Japan 1603-1867 was a time of economic growth, the widespread distribution of art and culture, and an intensely isolationist foreign policy (*sakoku*, "locked country"). In 1853, U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry approached Japan with far superior warships with the intent to strong-arm the country into agreeing to open up trading ports for Western merchants. Seeing the United States' power was unstoppable and knowing that taking the initiative would allow them to better control the terms of the treaty, Japan flung open its doors to the outside world, and thus began the Meiji Restoration – the returning of imperial rule back to the Emperor, ending centuries of shogun control, and the spurring of the rapid Westernization of Japan.

This had countless effects on Japanese culture, one of which was the adoption of Western sexual mores. These mores seeped into critical discourses of Japanese literature, and for a number of decades *chigo monogatari* could only be openly discussed so long as authors "prefaced their works with blatantly homophobic apologia for the subject matter." (p. xviii) Ichiko Teiji (1955), for example, "In his analysis of the *chigo monogatari* genre, … comments that *nanshoku** is an 'unnatural act and a perverted sexual desire seen in perverts.'" (p. 35) Similar language was used by many other scholars in Japan as well. People around that time also began looking for an "explanation" of male homosexuality (though not of male heterosexuality for, as Schmidt-Hori notes, under Western influence "men's desire for women (was) taken for granted as the normative behavior"). (p. 33)

** Nanshoku is a word for homosexuality. It literally means "male colors." "Colors" in Japanese has the added meanings of "love," "beauty," etc.*

Then, in the 1980s, once again, ironically, due to Western influence, the tone of voice in Japanese scholarship changed, and "discriminatory sentiments about homosexuality have waned in Japanese

academic publications." (p. xviii) Of course, within a short period of time, *chigo monogatari* was quickly shoved backed into the closet, as "The homophobia-inspired negative evaluation of the *chigo* tales propagated by Ichiko and his contemporaries was replaced wholesale by similar denouncements of the genre – this time around, for its portrayal of lovers with an age gap." (p. 37)

Just like before, as Schmidt-Hori shows, depictions of age-discrepant homosexual relations are now reviled with the same uncritical certainty as homosexual relations in general were less than 50 years ago. To demonstrate this, the author cites several scholars from the last few decades, including Bernard Faure who, in *The Red Thread*, sees *chigo monogatari* "as a rather crude ideological cover-up for a kind of institutionalized prostitution or rape" (p. 37; cited from Faure, 1998). According to Schmidt-Hori, Faure supports statements like this by "extensively cit[ing] Hosokawa Ryōichi," who writes that *shōnen-ai* (love for boys) in monasteries "coerces the younger partner into a unilateral sexual servitude" during which time "the powerful priest controls the boy's body and personhood, including his 'inner-self' (*naiteki jiko*)." (pp. 37-38)

It's apparent that these are deeply interested and culturally influenced readings, and Schmidt-Hori responds to them by writing,

… their hyperbolic and highly speculative language irresponsibly demonizes the Buddhist institutions and parents of the historical *chigo*. To paint the *chigo* system with a broad brush as "child sexual abuse" contributes nothing to efforts to prevent actual sexual exploitation in our society. Worse, the hyperbole surrounding the *chigo* system and *chigo monogatari* stigmatizes these very topics. This stigmatization undermines the objectives of deepening our understanding of human sexuality across time and culture and of countering the sexual exploitation of vulnerable populations as well as various forms of discrimination against sexual minorities. (p. 38)

Meanwhile, studying the reasons for the sudden paradigm shift in discussions of normative male homosexual behavior, she writes,

Today, when the idea of transgenerational male-male coupling is evoked, we tend to make a series of mental leaps, from "inserter vs. insertee" to "active vs. passive," and then to "dominance vs. servitude" and "predatory vs. victimized." The contemporary critiques of *chigo nanshoku* and *chigo* tales seem to be premised on these mental leaps. (p. 37)

Furthermore, these "mental leaps," she asserts, are a major part of what binds contemporary research on *chigo monogatari* to reductionist and stereotypical caricatures primarily formed through eisegesis.

A concrete example of this is the misapplication of René Girard's "scapegoat theory" to some of the more tragic elements in the genre. This theory, as Girard put forth, posits that societies assimilate their collective guilt onto a few individuals whose demise cleanses the community of their misdeeds. Often, as with the crucifixion of Christ, the victim is later revered for the sufferings they endured for their communities' sanctification. Connecting this to *chigo monogatari*, Faure, followed by others such as Paul S. Atkins (2008), suggests that the authors of *chigo monogatari* must have automatically known that the *chigo* system was immoral. Thus, to atone for their desire for boys, the *chigo* is depicted in the literature as "as an innocent victim who is sacrificed for the purpose of subduing communal violence and reinstating order in society." (p. 48) This theory supposedly accounts for the unfortunate ends that many *chigo* face in the genre, and why they so often are later revealed to be bodhisattvas.

Schmidt-Hori, however, illustrates why this too hasty assumption is unfounded. Aside from the fact that the *chigo*s survive the endings of many of these tales, when they do perish there is no reason to conclude that their death is evidence of the authors' and readers' shame in their erotic pleasure, conscious or otherwise. Instead, Schmidt-Hori connects *chigo monogatari* to the broader "aesthetics of romantic Heian court literature, namely, the *waka* poetry and courtly *monogatari* that *chigo* tales tend to emulate." (p. 49) These literary traditions which *chigo monogatari* often drew from "privilege the poignant aspects of romance, such as desertion, change of heart, forbidden love, and, of course, the death of the lover, over a happy-go-lucky ethos." (p. 49) Furthermore, death in Buddhist culture, while frightening and mournful, was conceptually for the ones still alive, "an opportunity to realize the impermanence of life and the need to accumulate Buddhist merit to ensure one's own enlightenment. Indeed, the unification of love, loss, and awakening is a well-established framework that was prevalent in medieval Buddhist literature." (p. 49) This shows how Girard's philosophy, however interesting in its own right, is inapplicable to these narratives.

Observations

In addition to *Autumn Night, Tales of Idolized Boys* closely analyzes five other *chigo monogatari*. This includes the dark and dramatic *The Tale of Genmu*, a collection of five lighthearted and bawdy vignettes, *A Booklet of Acolytes* (*Chigo no sōshi*), and the *chigo monogatari* parody, *The Chigo Known as Miss Rookie*, a work likely penned by a women which depicts a *chigo* who falls in love with a minister's daughter. Each story has its own distinct flavor, as they all try in their own way to capture the mysterious and enticing aura of the *chigo*. Schmidt-Hori meticulously combs through each of them, studying their particularities and comparing them to other texts to situate them into the medieval Japanese cultural milieu, and it is apparent that her knowledge of medieval Japanese literature and history is highly developed.

However, for all of the interesting historical tidbits and pieces of trivia, Schmidt-Hori does not lose sight of presenting *chigo monogatari* first and foremost as literature. The context behind the characters and events in these stories, including vindictive stepmothers, warfare between temples, and kindhearted nun-goblins, are all discussed in terms of the role they played in traditional Japanese synecdoche, not cynically with the intent of "breaking the spell," but to give the reader a better appreciation of the watch by revealing the intricate gears and springs within.

If one needed to find a fault with this book, perhaps it would be a general lack of focus in the final chapter. Here Schmidt-Hori discusses the above mentioned *chigo monogatari*, *Miss Rookie*. Because *Miss Rookie* is a parody of the *chigo monogatari* genre, it is naturally separated from the other five stories analyzed (nine if you count each vignette separately in *A Booklet of Acolytes*), hence its commentary is likewise disconnected somewhat from the rest of the book. Parodies are an excellent avenue for understanding a particular genre, as seeing which elements of it are subverted and rearranged gives better insight into the genre's essential structure and how it was received, especially by readers for whom it was not primarily written. However, such a large and sudden shift in the book's direction was noticeable. Perhaps condensing this last chapter and incorporating another of the eight remaining *chigo monogatari* would have done the final product some good.

Verdict

Sachi Schmidt-Hori combines composure and open-mindedness with scholarly rigor to counter the dominantly accepted articles of faith on human sexuality and social organization as they pertain to

chigo monogatari and the *chigo* system. Despite moral disapproval from publishers and suggestions that she "choose a 'safer' topic for (her) first book," her tenacity and natural curiosity towards the inner workings of power relations alone have made this work possible. (p. xix)

No blind adoration, though, of *chigo monogatari* and the *chigo* system can be found in this book, either. Her intention instead was "to let *chigo monogatari* speak for themselves first, rather than approach the texts with a predetermined thesis." (p. 164) This she does through a close reading of these works designed to reestablish the original ambiance and *modus vivendi* of medieval Japanese court life, and present *chigo monogatari* to 21st century readers in its proper form. Though this book documents a relatively slim episode of all of Japanese literary history, its potential applications for anyone interested in Buddhist studies, gender/queer studies, reception history, and social theory is immense and makes *Tales of Idolized Boys* well worth the time.