

Carol Richmond Tsang
War and Faith: Ikkō Ikki in
Late Muromachi Japan

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Carol Tsang has produced a comprehensive history of an important social and religious movement, the Ikkō *ikki*, a phenomenon comprised mostly of commoners that commanded the attention of medieval political leaders. The topic has been treated in less detail in studies of the Jōdo Shinshū school of Buddhism and in various works of political history, including several studies of Oda Nobunaga. No other work in English, however, gives the Ikkō *ikki* central consideration. My comments here are chiefly on Tsang's work as political and social history, but she does not ignore the religious basis of the movement. She places its early history in the emergence of sectarian Patriarchs, and she ties its evolution both to their teachings and to their control over their followers. Tsang employs a wide array of primary sources. She gives sectarian sources careful attention but includes aristocratic diaries and other non-religious sources as well.

Tsang weaves political, military, religious, and organizational aspects into a chronological narrative. This is both a strength and a shortcoming: her approach reveals the full social and political complexity of the age, but as a result the narrative is sometimes dense and lacking in thematic coherence. At times one feels that there is too much information to absorb and too few visual aids. (A genealogical table of Rennyō's family, for instance, would have been helpful to the non-specialist of religion.) This is especially frustrating when, as is often the case in medieval topics, there is also a lack of the kind of definitive information that allows clear-cut conclusions. I sympathize fully with this dilemma and can supply no easy remedy. The fact is that model- or theory-driven narratives of medieval topics often veer toward misrepresentation in their tendency to oversimplify and omit. Nor can a character-driven narrative be fashioned for a phenomenon

composed mostly of commoners undifferentiated from one another in sources. I admire that Tsang eschews such approaches in favor of a careful and thorough treatment of sources, but the result can be a challenging read.

To her credit, Tsang does characterize the Ikkō *ikki* as part of the larger *ikki* phenomenon. Although its immediate causes were local as she points out, the Ikkō *ikki* can be seen as part of a larger historical trend starting in the early medieval period with the formation of estate *ikki* followed by debt amnesty *ikki*, religious *ikki* (Ikkō and Lotus), and provincial *ikki*, and eventually extending into the Tokugawa period. Her comparative discussion of the contemporaneous Ikkō and Lotus ("Nichiren") *ikki* is especially useful and illuminating. As Tsang makes clear, the *ikki* phenomenon cannot be generalized simply as lower orders rising up against elites. These leagues were each formed for a specific purpose and as a result they could have a socially diverse membership. Even more emphasis on Ikkō *ikki* as part of the larger *ikki* phenomenon might have provided greater narrative coherence.

A related way of contextualizing the Ikkō *ikki* might be to characterize the entire Sengoku period, from the Onin War until the Tokugawa victory, as one in which Japanese society became militarized at many levels. This is not so much to say that warfare was endemic but rather that many people came to be organized in a military or paramilitary fashion that could dominate their lives at times. In the sixteenth century we see religious *ikki* phenomenon evolving into an all-consuming lifestyle. Appropriately, Tsang focuses on the exclusive nature of Lotus and Ikkō teachings that drove its members to fight not only each other but adherents of older forms of Buddhism as well.

Tsang firmly lowers the curtain in the late sixteenth century, noting factually that the Ikkō *ikki* were destroyed and that religious *ikki* had no direct descendants in Tokugawa times. She asserts that the lasting legacy of the Ikkō *ikki* was the firmly anti-Christian stance of early modern rulers. Participants in *ikki*, Tsang argues, were basically defending their own temples, encouraged by the Patriarch's guarantee that participation in *ikki*—in warfare, that is—would be rewarded with rebirth in paradise rather than in

hell. Furthermore, she characterizes the Honganji as regarding the emergence of one national leader (Nobunaga) as contrary to its interests. It is logical to think that Nobunaga's Ikkō *ikki* experience made clear to subsequent rulers that their grip on power could be threatened by those holding allegiance to a spiritual cause; how much more so if that cause could be backed up by foreign military power? Ikkō *ikki* were too subversive to exist in the early modern world of political confederation; from the perspective of the rulers they had to be destroyed. Christianity likewise would not be tolerated. These are useful observations, implicitly acknowledging the early modern exercise of authority as a new beast. Religious or not, however, *ikki* occurred frequently in the Tokugawa period. The impulse to form a league based on a common goal was fundamental to all *ikki*, from medieval through early modern times. As social and political events, therefore, they were a sty in the eye of the authorities over about seven centuries. This does not contradict Tsang's analysis of the demise of the Ikkō *ikki*, but simply acknowledges their significance in a larger historical context.