

生き残りをかけた問い
～日本における寺院仏教と人口減少～

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Japanese Temple Buddhism, Depopulation, and Questions of Survival

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Abstract

This article explores responses to depopulation at a temple community in rural Hokkaido. Based on two years of fieldwork, I provide an ethnographic account of the ways in which priests and temple leaders in depopulated regions frame temples as providers of social services and sites of collective memory where the efforts of previous generations to establish the community are acknowledged and made known to future generations. Beyond simply providing an overview of attempts to ensure future viability, I will also shed light on the contradictory moods and motivations of temple priests and leaders as they struggle to ensure their temple's future despite simultaneously being confronted with the knowledge that the temple and surrounding community have experienced declines in population and social services which threaten to derail any attempts at achieving a sustainable future.

Observers of Japan have long noted the threat that population decline presents to the whole of Japanese society. Since the mid-1960s Japanese social scientists have engaged in research that studies the effects of depopulation in Japan's rural areas.¹ Increasingly rapid decline in the population of Japan presents numerous challenges for the entire nation. Since 2015 all forty-six prefectures began experiencing a decrease in population and as journalist Kawai Masashi makes clear it is possible to

predict a future where even prefectural capitals disappear.² Rural regions that have been experiencing a decline in population for decades are projected to continue to shrink at a much greater level than large urban areas. In a press release in September 2016, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism announced that nationwide 75,662 and villages in 1,028 municipalities were located in disadvantaged areas (条件不利地域).³ The transformation of Japanese rural areas is

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readily visible at the ground level: vacant homes, abandoned and reforested fields, empty schools, and shuttered stores are all common sights. Temples and shrines in these disadvantaged regions are not immune to the challenges presented by depopulation. Reports of priests working at multiple temples or shrines and seeking employment in other fields are increasingly common.⁴ In pan-sectarian Buddhist newspapers and magazines, such as *Chūgai nippō* 中外日報 or *Gekkan jūshoku* 月刊住職 reports on sectarian and temple responses to depopulation are a regular feature.

Recognizing that depopulation presents a threat to both governmental and private institutions numerous efforts at revitalization have been undertaken. One of the most well known the Great Heisei municipal mergers 平成の大合併 (1999-2010) were carried out with the goals of decreasing the cost of governing, preserving essential services, and increasing the efficiency of local governments.⁵ In rural areas, the result of the mergers has been declines in the very services the reforms were designed to protect. Under policies instituted as part of the decentralization process, rural regions were tasked with a process of activating (活性化) the community in such a way to ensure its future viability. As a result of these policies, villages and towns that were already struggling to survive now operate under neoliberal policies which threaten, “to leave behind places which cannot draw upon their own energies to sustain themselves.”⁶ Despite numerous public and private government campaigns having been undertaken to lessen the impact of Japan’s shrinking population, it

is becoming increasingly clear these measures are in vain as the disappearance of local villages is inevitable. In this paper, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in rural Hokkaido, I focus on documenting and analyzing the way individuals participate in efforts at revitalization while simultaneously acknowledging the disappearance of their community is certain.

In order to ground my discussion, I will focus my remarks today on Ganjōji, a Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha affiliated temple that celebrated its centennial in 2013.⁷ Located in northern Hokkaido in the village of Yamakawa-cho on the far eastern edge of the Minami-Nupuri municipality, Ganjōji is just over an hour’s drive from the municipal center, and five hours from Sapporo. Changes in the economic and agricultural sectors have had a particularly devastating impact on Hokkaido. The effects of depopulation are so widespread that 83.2% of Hokkaido is classified as a depopulated region.⁸ Additionally, the percentage of households in Hokkaido dependent on social welfare, are consistently among the highest in Japan.⁹ A lack of economic, educational, and social opportunities has resulted in young people leaving rural areas for regional and metropolitan centers. As villages and rural areas become increasingly grey, family farms and businesses are forced to close when there is no one left to keep the business running. While prefectural and local governments have worked to ensure essential services continue to be offered, the number of service providers and quality of services is perceived as having declined.¹⁰

Priests, Temples, and Communities

The establishment of a temple in Hokkaido during the Meiji and Taishō eras, as historians Sasaki Kaoru and James Ketelaar have convincingly shown, served as a concrete marker of a communities' establishment.¹¹ Temples were sites of culture, education, religious practices, and political power. Photographs from the colonial era reveal how temple structures transformed the landscape. In many villages, temples were much larger than other buildings in the immediate area. Temple records describe the sacrifices colonists made when establishing temples. Privately published temple histories document instances of women donating jewelry, hairclips, and other goods to be melted down and refashioned into temple bells. At monthly services held in front of parishioners' home altars, priests will bring up memories of one's parents and grandparents commitment to the temple as a means of encouraging younger generations to get involved in temple activities. For many temple members, a well cared for and functioning temple serves as a collective memorial to their grandparents, parents, and the village's founders. Although aware that the temple will not survive without drastic changes, its closure represents the potential erasure of a physical site of communal memory.¹²

At temples, like Ganjōji, which are positioned at the periphery of their municipality, resisting the effects of depopulation often entails finding ways to encourage members who have moved to other areas to continue their relationship with the temple. For larger services and events, Ganjōji often provides a mi-

crobus to bring members to the temple. Originally offered for nearly all temple services, due to rising costs and decreased utilization, at the time of my research the bus was only offered at Hōonkō 報恩講 and other select temple events. Members who have moved to more urban areas are now encouraged to attend monthly propagation services at temples closer to their residence while still maintaining their relationship with Ganjōji for funerary rites and larger services

At Ganjōji perhaps no one better embodies the spirit of resistance than Takeda Yoshio. A longtime supporter of the temple as emphasized by his active participation at temple services and social activities, Takeda, as his grandfather and father before him, currently serves as president of the temple board. A contractor by trade, after services and other temple events, Takeda often spends a few minutes inspecting the temple's physical structure. A small hole in the *shōji* sliding doors that surround the temple's main hall, or marks on the tatami flooring from the stand on which caskets are placed during funerals held at the temple are written in Takeda's notebook so that he can make plans for repair. On one of my first visits to Ganjōji, Takeda stated proper care of the temple honored the efforts of his grandparents and parents who had been members of the temple from its founding. Moreover, a well-maintained temple serves as a signal to others of the importance of the temple to the community as a whole. Takeda elaborated that proper upkeep of the temple was the responsibility of the entire temple membership working in conjunction

with the priest and his family. Towards that end, at Ganjōji, the temple's male members are responsible for cleaning the main hall after services while female members maintain the social hall and kitchen.¹³ One morning as we stacked chairs following a service, Takeda credited the temple's head priest with instituting this division of labor based on his awareness that that temple's membership was aging and the old way of doing things had become overly burdensome for the temple's female members. The temple's *bōmori* on multiple occasions mentioned seeing male members take charge of cleaning the main hall, reenergized the women's association, and allowed them to focus their efforts in other areas. Finally, stacking chairs and vacuuming the tatami flooring are tasks, which while not requiring any special skill, easily become potential nodes of access for newcomers to immediately become involved at the temple.

During my visits to Ganjōji, Takeda often provided insights into the factors that he felt would ensure Ganjōji's sustainability for future generations. On multiple occasions, Takeda mentioned the importance of strong relationships between the priest and members of the temple and community as a whole. Over grilled lamb and draft beers following Ganjōji's annual park golf tourney, Takeda explained to Arai Ichidai—who had recently returned to Hokkaido to prepare to succeed his father as the abbot of the temple—that his father's close relationship and willingness to work alongside temple members motivates the men of his generation to attend temple events. Takeda then began questioning Arai's plan to encour-

age his generation to get involved in temple activities. Takeda expressed disappointment that despite his best efforts at encouraging young people to participate in this year's park golf tournament, the only participants under fifty had been Arai, the visiting researcher, and our partners. After questioning his abilities to connect with young people, Takeda suggested from this point the onus of recruiting younger members was on Reverend Arai. As Arai's daughter rode her bicycle in the temple parking lot, Takeda encouraged Arai to use contacts established through participation in the elementary school's PTA to encourage young families to take part in temple activities. Arai ought to participate in a variety of community events, Takeda explained, to show he was a committed member of the community. As the sun dipped behind the western mountain range, Takeda's wife signaled it was time for them to return home. Finishing his beer, Takeda reminded Arai that the committee to revitalize the village (元氣村会) was scheduled to meet the next evening and his attendance was expected.

Motivated by Failure?

2013 was a year of celebration at Ganjōji. In April, Arai, his wife Chiharu, and their daughter had returned to Hokkaido. Although he had been ordained fifteen years prior, after graduating high school Arai had pursued graduate education and later worked as a lecturer at universities in Tokyo and Kyoto. For Ganjōji's members, Arai's return was talked about as a sign that the temple would remain viable—or at the very least have a resident

priest-for another generation. Despite welcoming Arai's return, other priests in the region commented that given his education and the difficulties temples in depopulated regions are facing, his return was a waste (もったいない). A temple-wife from a neighboring temple who also happened to be Arai's great aunt on multiple times questioned the logic of Arai's return to Ganjōji. Making clear her belief that Arai, his wife, and daughter would all have better futures-both economically and educationally-if he would have accepted one of the full-time positions he had been offered at universities in both Tokyo or Kyoto. In what follows, I attempt to shed light on why this young priest, who despite being aware that the temple will most likely close under his leadership, chose to return to Ganjōji and prepare to succeed his father as abbot.

During a follow-up interview I conducted with Arai in August 2014, we returned to the topic of the impact of inter-municipal and inter-regional migration on Ganjōji and Yamakawa-chō. Arai explained that, of the people he went to elementary and junior high school with, only one other person still lived in Yamakawa-chō. The majority of his classmates have moved to either Minami-Nupuri or Sapporo. According to Arai, these individuals have left the community and it is unlikely they will come back to the temple for services or memorial rituals at Obon or the spring and autumnal equinoxes. In response to questions about where the responsibility lies for the failure to transmit the teachings to his generation, Arai notes that many of his classmates who left Yamakawa-chō had participated in

the now defunct temple Boy Scout troop and attended dharma school with him. These individuals moved due to the lack of opportunities for work in the village. Now they have families of their own and are active in their new communities. For many, attending a single hour-long event at the temple would necessitate a four to five-hour drive. Arai has little belief that appeals to the sacrifice their ancestors made in establishing and supporting the temple will be an effective means of encouraging his classmates to continue to support the community. Support for the temple, he explained, must be based on more than feelings of nostalgia or the idea that the temple was a monument.

During the summer of 2014, as part of an effort to open the temple to the community, Arai invited a classical musician, to perform a concert at the temple. Arai advertised the event widely and reports that at the concert, the temple's main hall was full, with only one-third of the audience made up of temple members. At first glance the event would appear to be a success. However, while Arai enjoyed the music, he expressed some frustration that he has been asked when the next concert at the temple will occur by individuals who seem to have no desire to become involved in any other activities at the temple.¹⁴ While Arai hopes to continue to find ways to transform the temple into a place that is valued by the community as a whole, he noted that he needs support from community members in carrying out these events. Moreover, he shares his parents' concern that the temple remains a center of religious activity. The

purpose of the temple he reminded me was as a place to hear the dharma. Moreover, there are other places within the community where concerts and cultural events occur and Arai feels it is better to support rather than compete with these events. Towards that end, Arai is an active member in the local elementary school's Parent Teacher Association and enjoys working alongside other parents preparing games and snacks to entertain and feed revelers at town festivals.

Although the number of active supporting members at Ganjōji continues to decrease, Arai considers himself lucky. Because the temple buildings were recently built (a new temple building and priestly residence were built in 2000) and many members generously donate time and money to the temple, Arai has the time and the space to focus on ways that he can continue to ensure the temple's viability. As our discussion proceeded, I asked Arai his thoughts on the summer 2014 announcement that the Honganji has decided to decentralize its response to depopulation by instructing regional headquarters to research the problems within each region and develop appropriate plans of action. Without hesitating, almost as if he had anticipated my question, Arai stated, "there is no real support for temples from the Honganji, we are on our own; all this change means is another survey for the temple to complete."

Conclusion: Relationships, Temples, and Motivations

Given all of the above—particularly the fact Arai had another viable career path, readers

may question why Arai chose to return to his family temple. On multiple occasions, Arai made clear that returning to Ganjōji had been his choice. Arai cites a variety of factors as influencing his decision. The first time I asked, Arai recalled support received from particular temple members following his initial ordination (得度) and lessons they taught him concerning how to be a priest. In a dharma talk, Arai once discussed how a former member of the temple board had requested, he, rather than his father, visit during the Obon season and how over tea Arai heard stories about the early struggles colonists to the community faced and the sacrifices they made when building the temple. On yet another occasion, Arai mentioned that if he had not chosen to succeed his father, there may have been pressure on his younger sister to marry someone willing to take over their family temple and that he had no desire to limit her marriage prospects. Similarly, if his sister's partner were unwilling to take over the temple, its closure would be hastened. While Arai speaks very frankly about the fact that demographic changes will almost certainly lead to the temple being shuttered or merged with a neighboring temple or temples at some point in the future, it was present connections with temple members, awareness of the temple's history, and concerns about his sister having opportunities to pursue her goals that drew him back to Ganjōji.

It is worth noting that Arai's motivations for preparing to take over the temple are similar to the beliefs that drive Takeda's efforts at Ganjōji. Both are galvanized by relation-

ships with community members and a desire to honor the efforts of those who had established the temple. For Takeda this manifests in his work to maintain the temple's physical structure, Arai's belief that choosing to not succeed his father would accelerate the temple's closing suggests he has also given thought to the characteristics of a good temple closing. Although aware that the challenges faced by Ganjōji are systemic and shared by temple communities nationwide, we have seen how Takeda and Arai are responding to secular and religious policies that have put the burdens of responding to depopulation on individuals. What will the effects of these choices be for individuals like Arai and Takeda? How will Arai's participation in community revitalization efforts impact his thinking about the town and temple's future? How will having succeeded his father as abbot in the spring of 2019 impact Arai's understanding of the temple's place in Yamakawa-chō? Will Takeda become frustrated if he does not witness younger generations participating in temple events? Answers to these questions remain elusive.

Temple communities in rural Japan face many challenges. By documenting the ways individual priests and temple members are engaging with questions of communal survival, I have shown how sustained ethnographic research reveals how questions of revitalization and closure both serve as motivating factors at rural temples. This brief paper is merely a microcosm of the various circumstances that religious institutions throughout Japan face. National policies-both religious and

secular-local realities, familial concerns, and individual motivations are all ingredients that when combined with religious teachings and practices shape the quotidian realities of temple communities throughout Japan.

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¹ See for instance Sakaguchi, 1966.

² Kawai 2017, 109.

³ 国土交通省 2016: http://www.mlit.go.jp/report/press/kokudoseisaku03_hh_000095.html

⁴ Mark Rowe reports that depending on how outside employment is classified sectarian surveys consistently find between twenty and forty percent of priests working away from their family temple (Rowe 2011, 19). One of the most striking reports was written by journalist Yamamura Akiyoshi who after encountering Shinto priests working at multiple shrines (including one priest who reported working at 66

shrines) , priests unable to survive on the income earned at shrines, and several priests without a successor in place concluded that shrine Shinto was in a state of crisis (Yamamura 2009.

⁵ On the impacts of the Heisei mergers see Rasusch 2016.

⁶ Love 2013, 122.

⁷ To protect my informants' anonymity, I use pseudonyms for people, cities, and temple names.

⁸ Hokkaidō kaso chiiki jiritsu sokushin hōshin no gaiyō 北海道過疎地域自立促進方針の概要, http://www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/ckk/grp/05/kaso_houshin_outline.pdf

⁹ In the fiscal year 2013, Hokkaido had the second-highest rate of individuals receiving public assistance. See Chapter 23: Social Security-Section 40: Households and Persons Receiving Public Livelihood Assistance by Prefecture (都道府県別生活保護被保護実世帯数及び実人員 (平成25年度), Japan Statistical Yearbook 2016, last accessed 1 November 2020, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/65nenkan/1431-23.htm>

¹⁰ Culter 1999, 85-86.

¹¹ Sasaki 2004, and Ketelaar 1997.

¹² On similar themes in the context of the closure of Catholic parishes in Boston see Stetiz 2011, 143-144.

¹³ At the majority of temples I visited men were generally responsible for maintaining the temple grounds and physical structure while women generally were tasked with cleaning the temple. On gender roles and the work of Buddhist temples, see Starling 2019, in particular chapters two and three.

¹⁴ Hosting cultural events such as concerts and 500 yen yoga classes are some of the ways that temples have tried to reimagine their role in the community. Yet based on my fieldwork findings it seems the majority of participants at these events, especially at yoga classes, have little or no interest in participating in any other activity at the temple.

