Doing belonging in Jōdo Shinshū temple communities: 
An ethnography of Buddhism in Japan’s depopulating regions 

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 
in the Faculty of Humanities 

2019 

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# Table of Contents

**List of Figures** ................................................................................................................. 4  
**Abstract** .............................................................................................................................. 5 
**Declaration** ......................................................................................................................... 6 
**Copyright Statement** ......................................................................................................... 6 
**Note on Japanese Terms and Transliteration** ................................................................. 7  
**Acknowledgements** .......................................................................................................... 8  
**Introduction. Buddhist temple communities and change** ................................................. 11  
  - Introduction: ‘Because of my en’ ....................................................................................... 11  
  - On en .................................................................................................................................. 14  
  - “Crisis? What crisis?” ......................................................................................................... 17  
  - Buddhist temple communities: “lived religion” as a network ........................................... 19  
  - Researching temple Buddhism in contemporary Japan .................................................... 23  
  - The field setting and the field method ............................................................................. 29  
    - The method .................................................................................................................. 31  
    - The field: Jōdo Shinshū ................................................................................................. 33  
  - Chapter outline and goals ................................................................................................. 36  
**Chapter One. “What is your en?”** ....................................................................................... 39  
  - Introduction: en in Buddhist temple communities ............................................................ 39  
  - What is en? ........................................................................................................................ 43  
    - Buddhist ingredients of en: doctrine and practice ......................................................... 45  
    - En as a material and affective practice ....................................................................... 49  
  - Doing belonging: what has en got to do with it? ............................................................. 55  
  - Making and breaking Buddhist temple communities ...................................................... 59  
  - Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 61  
**Chapter Two. En as an inherited practice: mobilising filial bonds** .................................... 63  
  - Introduction: the making of the next generation .............................................................. 63  
  - Inherited burden of en .................................................................................................... 65  
  - Temple children (o-tera no ko) ...................................................................................... 67  
  - Mobilising the bonds ....................................................................................................... 74  
    - Remembering the dead and tightening the bonds ......................................................... 76  
  - Long-distance connections ............................................................................................. 81  
  - Releasing the ties ............................................................................................................ 83  
  - Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 85  
**Chapter Three. Economies of belonging: transfers, temple support networks, and labour** ................................................................................................................................. 87  
  - Introduction: the economy of belonging ...................................................................... 87  
  - On transfers and co-stewardship: who owns a Buddhist temple? ................................. 90  
    - “It’s all part of the same system” ................................................................................ 95  
  - Voluntary labour and the local politics of belonging .................................................... 102  
    - Bukkyō fujinkai’s en: weakness in numbers ............................................................... 107  
  - How many members is not enough? .............................................................................. 112  
  - It has been a long time coming! .................................................................................... 115  
  - Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 117

---

117

115

112

115

111
Chapter Four. Local Buddhist temples as storehouses of value: the materiality of belonging, memory and religious waste ................................. 118

Introduction: on worth and waste ........................................................................ 118
En as a value-generating practice: value and waste ........................................ 121
Temples as storehouses of value: feeling the presence of the past .................. 122
Experiences of value: the relational framework of survival ............................ 128
Gifts as burdens: dealing with waste ................................................................. 128
Nōkotsudō: sites of ultimate value and abandonment .......................................... 135
Are temples wasteful? ......................................................................................... 142
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 143

Chapter Five. In anticipation: proactive (after)life and modes of belonging in ageing and death ................................................................. 144

Introduction: An everyday crisis .......................................................................... 144
Elderly lonely agents ........................................................................................... 145
The missing generation ......................................................................................... 150
Proactive (after)life ............................................................................................. 153
Hoping for the best: shared narratives of disappearance in rural Japan .............. 156
Balancing the books ........................................................................................... 160
The logic of mutual and self-care ....................................................................... 162
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 169

Chapter Six. The aesthetics of Buddhist belonging: En as an institutional and institutionalising practice ......................................................... 171

Introduction: The aesthetics of Buddhist belonging .......................................... 171
Shaping Buddhist identities: sensing and projecting en ...................................... 172
On family: the royals of Shin Buddhism ............................................................. 177
Temple-to-temple networks ................................................................................ 183
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 188

Conclusion. What happened to change? ............................................................. 189

En beyond the temple .......................................................................................... 191
Nurturing networked belonging ......................................................................... 194
Debating religious change .................................................................................. 197
Concluding remarks ........................................................................................... 199

Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 201

Appendix I: Participant information sheets, consent forms and interview topics ................................................................................................. 216

Participant information sheets and consent forms .............................................. 217
Interview topics ................................................................................................ 226

Appendix II: Glossary of key Japanese terms ....................................................... 229

Word count: 80,000
List of Figures

Figure 1. Arriving at Yōanji temple (16 May 2017). ................................................................. 39
Figure 2. Handprints made during shosanshiki, Yōanji temple (16 May 2017). ............ 41
Figure 3. Soba-making with Hirata-san (31 December 2016). ................................................. 51
Figure 4. Donation tablets at Myōkōji made by the Hirata family (12 November 2016) .................................................................................................................. 59
Figure 5. Examples of postcards made by Nakata-san (November 2016, January and March 2017). ................................................................................................................. 58
Figure 6. Morning sutra chanting by Suzuki-san senior, Myōkōji (3 January 2017) ... 66
Figure 7. An o-mairi space at the house of one of Myōkōji’s supporters (16 October 2016) ................................................................................................................... 77
Figure 8. Myōkōji’s repaired temple gate (4 July 2017)............................................................... 87
Figure 9. Members of Ichiba jōkai during mizo sōji duties (2 April 2017) ....................... 95
Figure 10. Ichiba jōkai members carrying the coffin of Myōkōji’s caretaker, Suzuki-san senior’s paternal uncle (3 December 2016) ............................................................... 96
Figure 11. Suzuki-san preaching about the history of kō gatherings to the members of Ichiba jōkai (12 March 2017) ................................................................. 99
Figure 12. Members of Myōkōji’s bukkyō fujinkai working in the temple’s kitchen (28 August 2016) ........................................................................................................ 105
Figure 13. One of the Ichijōji temple’s parishioners playing erhu, the Chinese violin (3 June 2017) ............................................................................................................... 106
Figure 14. Members of Myōkōji’s bukkyō sōnenkai and the temple board, and Suzuki-san’s son, during o-migaki cleaning duties (13 January 2017) ......................... 119
Figure 15. A sculpture gifted by Nishimura-san’s father’s to Myōkōji. It represents the ”namu amida butsu” inscription (12 October 2016) ....... 124
Figure 16. A picture of Uemura-san’s birthday card pinned to one of the beams in her house (23 July 2017) ......................................................................................... 131
Figure 17. In anticipation of the butsudan kuyō ceremony performed at Uemura-san’s abandoned house (24 July 2017) ............................................................................. 133
Figure 18. Hirata Yuki — the front cover of her photo book (13 May 2017) ................. 136
Figure 19. Suzuki-san and the members of Myōkōji temple praying at the nōkotsudō facility in Kyoto. The urns are stored in the bottom section; the Buddhist altar is fitted in the top section (10 June 2017) ......................................................... 141
Figure 20. An example of an abandoned home, which was later demolished for redevelopment into a memorial hall (see Chapter 4) (24 July 2017) ............ 147
Figure 21. Memorial service for the dead rōjinkai members at Myōkōji (14 March 2017) ...................................................................................................................... 159
Figure 22. Dentō hōkoku hōyō service at Nishi Honganji. Ōtani Kōjun, the new spiritual leader of the sect, and his family (9 March 2017) ........................................ 179
Figure 23. A poster encountered at one of the local temples. The poster promotes daily Buddhist practice in the company of one’s multigenerational family with the following slogans: “Aiming for the society of togetherness” [top left corner]; and “I’m pleased to see (worship) you [Amida] in the morning and in the evening, Let’s live today together” [top right], (28 June 2017) ........................................ 182
Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic inquiry into how Buddhist narratives and practices of interdependence shape processes of belonging and community-building in depopulating regions — with a particular focus on local Jōdo Shinshū temple communities in Hiroshima Prefecture. The aim of the thesis is to address ongoing debates on Buddhism’s survival by examining the role that local Buddhist temples play in shaping people’s experiences of depopulation and regional decline. Thus far, scholars of regional issues have largely ignored the role of religious institutions in these processes, while, in the scholarship on Japanese religions, Buddhist institutions have long been denied consideration in their role in community-building processes, particularly in post-war Japan. This thesis seeks to address these shortcomings by analysing Buddhist institutions as community-dependent entities. I argue that by analysing temple-community relations through the prism of socio-religious networks of belonging, Buddhist temple communities can serve as a diagnostic tool for understanding the ways in which people are dealing with demographic changes and responding to socio-economic decline in their regional communities.

The thesis addresses questions of survival and how people belong in crisis, as well as how they make sense of the socio-religious and economic changes that have been transforming their local temple communities in recent decades. In the context of shifting demographics, I examine the currents of change influencing notions of belonging and socio-economic existence within the temple and its broader communal, regional and organisational frameworks. By engaging with the analytical concepts of interdependence, karmic and social connections (en), and networked belonging, I investigate how people perform belonging to a religious community and how these practices shape the past, present and future of Buddhist institutions and the communities that host them. Drawing on rich ethnographic data, this thesis comments on the current state of demographic crisis in Japanese temple Buddhism and regional Japan. It is based on data collected through participant observation, informal and in-depth semi-structured interviews and archival research during a twelve-month period of ethnographic fieldwork. As such, the significance of this study also lies in addressing the dearth of longitudinal studies of Buddhism in contemporary Japan.
Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Note on Japanese Terms and Transliteration

Long vowels are indicated by macrons (ō, ū, ā) except for words and names commonly used in English (e.g. Tokyo, Kyoto, Shinto).

I have included Japanese kanji in the Glossary of key Japanese terms in Appendix II. This does not mean that kanji have been provided for every Japanese term, name or institution mentioned in the thesis, but only for those included in the glossary and to the key term goen that has direct and specific relevance to the topic at hand.

When talking about religious institutions in Japan associated with its two main religious traditions, Buddhism and Shinto, I follow standard conventions and refer to Buddhist institutions as ‘temples’ and Shinto ones as ‘shrines’.
Acknowledgements

The past four years have been an incredibly enjoyable and challenging ride with all the characteristics of the British rail system experience, including the huge sense of accomplishment and relief on finally arriving at your destination - exhausted, but with a backpack full of stories to tell and people to thank. I am well aware that this thesis is the product of a large number of serendipitous connections (some would perhaps even call it en), friendships and unseen support. Although I cannot exhaust the list of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude I will try to name at least a few of the most prominent contributors to this thesis. All shortcomings are, of course, my own.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my advisor Erica Baffelli for giving me the academic training, intellectual freedom, and unconditional support that allowed me to grow into a scholar. The magnitude of support that I received cannot be overstated, including a personal introduction to a Buddhist priest in Japan who opened many doors to me including the ones to his own temple where I spent twelve months. One could not wish for a better mentor. I would also like to thank Chika Watanabe and Ian Reader. It would have been impossible to complete this project without their tireless support. Chika’s insightful comments made my ethnography and analytical focus sharper. My sincere thanks go to Ian for his intellectual generosity and for reading countless drafts of various parts of this thesis, even though he should have been enjoying his retirement and travels instead. Erica, Chika and Ian taught me to narrate and tell stories, to think critically, to be self-reflective, and to enjoy the research process.

The project and my fieldwork in Japan were made possible by financial support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council and the President’s Doctoral Scholar Award at the University of Manchester. This dissertation project would never have been possible without the support of a great number of friends, colleagues, librarians, and administrative staff at the University of Manchester who were extremely generous with their support and guidance. I am deeply grateful for having had the opportunity to study within the University’s Division of Japanese Studies and Department of Social Anthropology, where I enjoyed excellent research conditions. I am also indebted to Hiroshima University for giving me institutional home and access to the library during my fieldwork, particularly to Professor Arami Hiroshi and the members of his research group.

I am grateful for the opportunity to spend one month at the Center for Contemporary Buddhist Studies located in the Department of Cross-Cultural and
Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen in June 2018. Trine Brox, Jane Caple and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg provided me with a thriving research environment and inspiration, helping me bring my work to another level. I also thank Astrid Trolle for her insights. I am also indebted to the members of the Aesthetics of Religious Belonging group for their perceptive comments on three of my chapters and buckets of encouragement. Levi McLaughlin, Dominique Townsend, Frederik Schröer, Gwendolyn Gillson, Paride Stortini (in addition to other members mentioned already), thank you indeed.


My colleagues and friends in Anthropology have been greatly supportive over the years. Vlad Schüler-Costa, Joana Nascimento Akimi Ota, Tree Kelly, Marisol Verdugo Paiva, Diego Valdivieso, Guilherme Fians, Stephanie Meysner, Tom Boyd and others, thank you for many stimulating conversations and offering me your friendship. You kept my spirits up and gave me anthropological theory and mead when I needed it the most. I am equally grateful to my colleagues in the Graduate School for sharing this adventure with me and cheering me on. Thank you Nichola Tomlinson, Julie Casanova, Mao Deng, and Katarzyna Nowak. My special thanks to Aura Di Febo for sharing much of this journey with me.

I would also like to thank my friends and family, my mother in particular for being such a legend and for her unswerving support and belief in me. I thank my brother and his family for their high tolerance of my forgetfulness. Thank you for letting me miss so many big moments, so that I could get this project done. Thank you to my in-laws for all the support. My warmest thanks to my friends. Nadine Ruddock, Nosheel Rahi, Błażej Marek, Anna Stasica, Angelika Bielawska, Zuzanna Baraniak-Hirata, Hirata Wataru, Maria Karnowska, Tamsin Parish, Tom Glass, and Marzena Piątek — you took one for the team listening to my struggles, thank you.
My partner, Iain Flinn, and our four cats (Milo, Millie, Michi and Mia) have been the most wonderful blessing of my life on this journey. Without Iain’s loving support, intellectual engagement, humour, patience and geographical flexibility, the project would have never come to fruition. Thank you for doing life admin on my behalf for the past four years, for every cup of coffee, every midnight snack and every plant that you have kept alive in our house, especially in the past few months when my writing has truly taken over our life. I could not have done this without you, and I am grateful.

Last on this list, but first in my gratitude are my interlocutors and research partners, who, out of respect for their privacy, I will not name. I am sincerely grateful for their incredible generosity, continuous friendship and unbounded patience. This project is a product of your kindness and openness. Thank you for your stories.

I dedicate this work to Mamuś and Bebos.
Introduction

Buddhist temple communities and change

Introduction: “Because of my en”

Whenever I asked Yoshida-san, an eighty-six-year-old lay supporter of the mid-size regional Myōkōji temple, about his motivations behind supporting his local temple — financially and otherwise — he deferred. I first met him shortly after my arrival in Myōkōji, where I was living during fieldwork: he had visited with a gift of freshly harvested vegetables from his garden, a form of support practiced almost daily by many members of the local community. Yoshida-san was one of many elderly U-turners who had left his village for education and employment during the first wave of depopulation in the 1960s and 1970s, but then returned to his ancestral home after retirement to look after his elderly parents. Upon his return, he became active in the civic and religious life of his community. During my time in the field, we met regularly at various community and temple events as well as temple board meetings where he served as a representative for his neighbourhood. In late June 2017, we spent a morning together with a group of fellow neighbours weeding out Myōkōji’s temple garden and pruning the trees. That evening, after months of many informal conversations and shared communal work through which our friendship had developed, Yoshida-san invited me to his house to conduct a more formal, recorded interview. When I mustered the courage to ask him yet again about the material and labour support that he commits regularly toward the temple, I decided to pause the recorder. He smiled, nodding approvingly.

1 In an effort to maximise participants’ anonymity, I use pseudonyms for all of my interlocutors following Japanese naming conventions: surname first, followed by given name on first mention; thereafter surname appended by the honorific ‘san.’ For the same reason, I also anonymise the names of temples and refrain from revealing details concerning specifics of geographical locations including the names of towns and villages. At the same time, I retain details pertinent to the discussion, such as local socio-economic conditions. This is in an attempt to balance the difficulty of ensuring participants’ complete anonymity (see e.g. Van der Hoonaard 2003, p. 141) with concerns over “the way anonymization naturalizes the decoupling of events from historically and geographically specific locations (and with the way location or place itself is conceptualized)” (Nespor 2000, p. 549). Although many official ethics guidelines recommend disguising the personal identities of research participants as a default position (see Economic and Social Research Council 2015), I recognise that practices of anonymising places are a far more contested issue.
After a moment of hesitation, he answered with a glimmer of humour in his eyes, “because of my en (goen ga arimasu kara),”2 then took a five-yen coin from his wallet and held it out. I realised that the word goen, which I had heard people use so often to explain their relations to the temple, was a homonym of a two-character compound meaning ‘five’ (go) and ‘yen’ (en). Pleased that I understood his wordplay, Yoshida-san put the coin down and explained: just as we can put a string through the middle of five-yen coins to connect them to each other, we can use coins to maintain connections between the living and the dead in our communities. “I support the temple,” he said, “because of my ties in this and the next world. It is like paying off your debts or a bank loan, you see, while using the capital to reinforce the foundations of your house.” Yoshida-san, like many of my lay interviewees, saw a direct link between his involvement in the community’s socio-religious affairs, his sense of belonging and interconnectedness in this and the other world, the method of materialising this belonging, and the wellbeing of his community.

For Yoshida-san, his local temple was one of many cogs in a wheel of communal vitality that needed protecting. It was also an important foundation for coping with the deaths of his neighbours and friends, and his own experiences of ageing and facing death. The word goen ご縁, meaning a special kind of karmic connection or a bond, represented practices that tied people to others. Yoshida-san was aware of the changes in his community caused by depopulation, Japan’s transformation into a low-birth ageing society (shōshi kōrei ka shakai) and the drain of important human and economic resources through rural-to-urban migration. He nonetheless explained that despite weakening community ties, members in his community were still striving for a sense of belonging in this life and the afterlife.

Such encounters inside and outside of the temple compelled me to reflect on the role of Buddhist institutions in the processes of community-building and to consider the types of bonds (en) that constitute Buddhist temple communities and that exist between the Buddhist priests, their families, lay persons and institutions. I draw on my conversation with Yoshida-san and his understandings of en to open up a discussion on the survival of Buddhist temple communities in depopulating regional Japan as well as the networks and practices of interdependence that shape them. In this thesis, I zoom in on how such networks of interdependence are curated, arguing that by investigating regional Buddhist institutions as community-dependent projects we can start to understand how people are dealing with demographic change and responding to socio-economic decline in their regional communities.

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2 Interview, 28 June 2017.
I thus explore the complex personal meanings of *en* to unpack local people’s experiences of change and loss, and their capacity to imagine a future. Such an approach offers a new perspective on the much-debated crisis and decline of Buddhist temples and regional communities in contemporary Japan. Rather than focus on the question of whether Buddhist temples and regions are in decline, I pay attention to people’s responses to demographic change, showing how individuals and collectivities remain active in community-building processes despite their anticipation of the catastrophic changes that may well be just round the corner.

I employ the term “Buddhist temple communities” as a methodological and analytical framework for investigating the survival of Buddhist institutions. It captures the reality that the existence of these institutions is intrinsically linked to that of the communities of which they are part. The notion of *en* evoked by Yoshida-san is instrumental to this conception of Buddhist temples. It is how my interlocutors made sense of the complex networks of interdependence and mutuality that kept their communities together. By tracing these networks and the emotional, material and practical sets of expectations and obligations upon which they are built, I aim to develop a basis for understanding local approaches to the issues transforming a structurally and demographically fragile system of “Japanese Temple Buddhism,” and to assess the relevance of this system at a local level. I argue that by thinking about temple-community relations through the prism of *en*, we get a clearer picture of how temples operate, how traditional temple structures are being supported and how they are being affected by shifting demographics and contemporary conceptions of community in regional Japan.

This introductory chapter maps out the significance of studying contemporary Japanese Buddhism from the perspective of regional Buddhist institutions as embedded within local networks of belonging. It also sets out the analytical and methodological framework of the study, which examines regional temples through the prism of religion as lived through complex networks of local and trans-local belonging, and introduces the field setting, methodology, and chapters. Before delving into a discussion on the ongoing debate on the crisis in Japanese Temple Buddhism in regional Japan, I introduce the central concept of this study, *en*, and relate it to the set of key research questions that this thesis addresses.

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3 I borrow the expression “Temple Buddhism” from Covell who defines it as “Buddhism as lived by the members of those sects of Japanese Buddhism that were founded before the 1600s” (2005, p. 4).
On en

En serves as a useful analytical tool for mapping out the intricacies of local networks of belonging since it allows me to focus on individuals’ power to effectively “act out,” or “perform” their karmic and social interdependence. To perform one’s en means to articulate one’s “interdependent agency.” In M. C. Escher’s artwork “Drawing Hands,” two hands are busy drawing one another. People’s efforts of mobilising or performing en resemble these hands, constantly at work to sketch out the network of lines that acknowledge each other’s significance. We can also envisage a scenario in which one or both hands attempts to erase the lines and thus each other or themselves. If we liken the drawing hands to individuals and Buddhist temple communities, and the lines the hands draw to karmic and social networks of belonging, we can imagine how a careful study of such lines — their strength and fragility, direction, redrafting and absence — might reveal people’s capacity and determination to navigate the demographic and religious changes transforming their surroundings, as well as the detail and extent of decline.

I thus take en in its multidimensional incarnations to refer to a relational marker of human (and non-human) existence in this and in the other world. To have en means to be connected to another person, a place or a sentient being by destiny and by shared practice. In his book on the origins of “bondless society” (muen shakai), Tachibanaki Toshiaki (2011) distinguishes between three kinds of en relations, which he traces through the social structures of group belonging: blood/kin relations (ketsuen), regional bonds (chien) and corporate/employment ties (shaen). However, this classification conceptualises en as a category of social belonging in almost institutional terms and does not take account of what Kathryn Goldfarb (2016) refers to as “ineffable connections” — en that is fated and otherwise (linguistically speaking) unspecified. Nozawa Shunsuke (2015, p. 391) argues that en in its unmodified form “presents a relation but leaves the entities that may occupy it underdetermined.” It is the dimensions of such hidden en that can be traced through socio-religious networks of belonging that are of interest here.

Static interpretations of en as something that “is” have not quite picked up on the way that people use the term. En can be something that one has/possesses as in en ga aru (“to have en”), but it is also something that is done. En can be tied (en o musubu), protected (en o mamoru), received (en o itadaku), created (en o dekiru), extended (en o hirogaru), inherited (en o uketsugu), and it can be severed (en ga

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4 Rowe (2011, pp. 45-46) provides a slightly different typology of en relations: family-centred blood relations (ketsuen), regional bonds (chien) and marital ties (en-musubi).
It is therefore a highly malleable connection that is expressed through praxis and can be transformed through action: I draw on this emic understanding of en when I evoke the idea of its agency-imbued nature. However, an exclusive focus on language does not capture the richness of expressions of en and its analytical capacities. Notions of en develop beyond texts in material and embodied spheres of human and non-human existence. My interlocutors did not define en as a process per se, but they often pointed to a particular ritual or social practice (or a product of those) saying: “this is also en (kore mo en desu).” This led me to think about en as a type of work that people do to articulate their belonging in a particular way. When I frame en this way, I am therefore expanding the emic notion beyond the way in which it is was used by my interlocutors to convey the deeper and multidimensional implications of en that they showed me through their practices.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine individual, complex and multidimensional meanings of en by drawing on ethnographic data collected during a twelve-month period of immersive fieldwork in Jōdo Shinshū temple communities in Hiroshima Prefecture (August 2016 to August 2017). Living at one of the temples throughout, I was able to observe how religious professionals and lay people adapted and responded to challenges posed by demographic changes and other associated transformations. I thus organise my thesis around a detailed ethnographic study of my host temple, Myōkōji, supplemented by many conversations with Buddhist priests and their families, lay supporters, neighbours and community leaders associated with eighteen separate temple communities in northern Hiroshima Prefecture, as well as a further eleven Shin Buddhist temples in Shimane, Gifu and Miyazaki prefectures, and urban areas of Hiroshima, Kyoto and Tokyo. I create a link between my methodological and analytical approach by starting my investigation into what I frame a “networked belonging” from the “inside” of a temple, tracing the networks of belonging outwards through people’s practices of interdependence. “Networked belonging” is a term I employ to refer to a form of belonging enabled through people’s practices of interdependence.  

5 Jōdo Shinshū is one of the main Buddhist sects in Japan today. A brief overview of its history and teachings is provided later in the introduction.

6 Some scholars (e.g. Amit and Caputo 2015) differentiate between “networks of belonging” associated with offline interactions and identifications, and “networked belonging,” which implies a form of belonging nurtured through online activities, i.e. developed or networked through virtual spaces. However, I use both terms interchangeably to imply a sense of belonging rooted in a relationality based on a special kind of karmic and social connection (en).
As such, I take a "network" to be more than a structure.⁷ I see it as a dynamic sphere of relational flows.

I used Myōkōji as a base for building connections with the broader surrounding community of neighbours, members and other priests and their affiliated communities. Over time, my affinities with lay communities led me to access stories of people disassociated with Buddhist networks. By employing the language of “community,” “networked belonging” and the analytical and topical lens of en, I wish to escape the tendency to essentialise Buddhist temples as a focus of inquiry about the role and relevance of Japanese Buddhism. Instead, I aim to engage with current debates on the 'crisis’ in Japanese Buddhism by discussing Buddhist institutions vis-à-vis the specific sets of relations and dependencies that sustain their wellbeing.

Of particular importance to this thesis are thus the socio-religious processes through which people perform their belonging in regional temple communities in contemporary Japan. This includes how Buddhist temple custodians and lay people relate to their filial obligations, mutual economic dependencies, and histories of community building and temple building. Focusing on the manner in which people define and practice their own ideas of interdependence (en) and the encounters that lead to the continuation and development of Buddhist temple communities in depopulating Japan, I am particularly keen to explore the role that emotion and materiality play in informing and shaping human and non-human bonds, how the presence or absence of certain bonds hold Buddhist temple communities (and institutional frameworks) together, and what happens when such bonds malfunction, change or are abandoned altogether.

The thesis thus seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How are narratives of belonging, continuity and disappearance reflected in the relationship between Buddhist temples and their communities? How are they narrated on individual and collective levels within regional and temple communities battling the consequences of shifting demographics?

2. How are religious professionals and lay practitioners recognising and coping with demographic change? How is depopulation shaping religious change in Buddhist institutions at a local level?

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3. What constitutes a Buddhist temple? In what ways does Buddhist materiality and practice inform and shape people’s ideas of belonging to Buddhist institutions?

By focusing on these questions, I also address a broader inquiry into the role that Buddhist institutions and practices play in individual and collective approaches to dealing with demographic change.

“Crisis? What crisis?”

Scholarly and public discourses concerning traditional Buddhist institutions in post-war Japan have been dominated by narratives of institutional (Ishii 1997, Reader 2012a) and moral crisis (Covell 2008, Hardacre 1997). Buddhism’s bureaucratic and, often, gloomy and costly association with death has led to public and scholarly critiques of Buddhist institutions and an emergence of the disparaging term “funerary Buddhism” (sōshiki bukkyō) (Tamamuro 2004 [1963]), which is suggestive of a passive tradition that has compromised its doctrinal underpinnings and no longer holds spiritual potency and social relevance (Rowe 2011, p. 7). Such criticism has also been linked to the commercialisation of Buddhist practice, particularly in the area of death rites (Suzuki 2000, Covell 2005, Kawano 2010, Rowe 2011) and the de-professionalisation of the priesthood (Covell 2005, Horii 2006, Ukai 2015). Such critiques can also be found in popular films and literature. For instance, Itami Juzo’s film Osōshiki (1984) is a criticism of Buddhist ritualistic opulence during the gilded age of the bubble economy, which is defined by extravagance, waste (Siniawer 2019), and a steady flow of rural-to-urban migration that has disconnected people from local Buddhist temple communities.

In recent years, the language of crisis has been fuelled by transformations stemming from processes of secularisation and disengagement from religion (Reader 2012b); economic and demographic challenges (Ishii 2015, Ukai 2015, Sakurai and Kawamata 2016); shifting social values relating to family (Shimada 2010, 2016, Kawano 2003), gender (Kawahashi 2003) and community structures (Murakami 2018); and a moral panic over social fragmentation (Tachibanaki 2011, Daneley 2019) and the aging population (Baffelli and Reader 2018, Watanabe 2016), which has affected both rural and urban communities. Scholars of regional issues (Yamamoto 1996, Matanle and Rausch 2011, Matanle and Satō 2010) have highlighted the drastic demographic reorganisation of Japanese society. Intensified rural-to-urban migration

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8 See, in particular, Kisala and Mullins (2001), Reader (2000), and Baffelli and Reader (2012) on the aftermath of the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attack perpetrated by the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyō.
trends strengthened Buddhism’s post-war image as a religious tradition in crisis—particularly in rural areas where the drain on human and economic resources has posed a challenge for local bodaiji temples (Fujiyama 2015), which traditionally relied on the generosity of their members for their socio-economic survival.

Japan’s rural decline was facilitated by the immediate post-war reconstruction, which saw heavy investment in education, employment, and modern comforts centred in the cities. From the 1970s onwards a gap between rural and urban lifestyles emerged and growth becoming increasingly less prevalent in rural regions, leading to public concern over the emergence of deserted villages (genkai shūraku), overall rural decline (kaso) (Yamamoto 1996), and even ‘extinction’ (shōmetsu) (Fujiyama 2015, Masuda 2014). Others argued that these narratives of crisis could spark regional regeneration (Yamashita 2014) and championed rural revitalisation (Odagiri 2014, Yamashita 2012) through investment in education, farming and the environment (Masuda 2014). Nevertheless, according to the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2019), nearly 60 percent of Japan’s regions are designated as depopulated, including 817 villages, towns and cities which are home to only 8.6 percent of Japan’s population. This number is expected to drop further as the elderly population reaches an estimated 40 percent by 2040.

With many young people leaving to seek education and work opportunities in bustling metropolitan areas, villages and towns have been thinning out, class sizes are falling in the schools, and temples have been forced to close down (NHK 1988, Reader 2012a, Ukai 2015). In recent years, rural decline has been the single most frequent cause of temple closures. Thirty-five percent of Japan’s temples have been referred to as “marginal religious organisations” (genkai shūkyōhōjin), while in areas such as Shikoku the number exceeds 50 percent (Ishii 2015). In line with the Masuda Report (2014) which offered predictions about the intensity of population and regional decline, this number is expected to increase in the coming years with some areas such as Akita Prefecture predicted to witness the disappearance of all local temples (Sakurai and Kawamata 2016, 11). As a result, an often-polarised discourse of decline (Ishii 2015, Ukai 2015) and revitalisation (Sakurai 2017, Sakurai and Kawamata 2016) has dominated public and scholarly discourses on Buddhist temples.

This polarised academic discourse on regional issues and the survival of Buddhist institutions privileges narratives of growth and failure, while obscuring the slow, incremental processes of change and local people’s responses to transformations in their communities. Religious organisations such as temples are overlooked in regional studies, even though they often constitute one of the dimensions within local networks of belonging. I argue that it is crucial to investigate the community-building capacities
of Buddhist institutions within the regional context of demographic decline because their survival is intrinsically linked to that of the communities that host them and the commitment of individual members. Thus far, not enough attention has been given to the community dynamics that invariably shape and transform the conditions of the said crisis faced by regional temple communities. While some scholars show the importance of religion for the regional context (for instance, see Reader 2005 on how the Shikoku religious pilgrimage is being used to boost tourism), the issue of religious decline and the impact of rural decline on communal identity are often not considered.⁹ Ethnographic explorations of local narratives and connections are an equally infrequently treated topic in scholarly debates. Yet, they can offer a window onto local experiences of Buddhism “on the ground” by showing how different actors develop their individual and collective understandings of Buddhism as a living entity in their communities, and how those conceptions are incorporated into communal narratives of belonging and sustainability vis-à-vis local temples.

**Buddhist temple communities: “lived religion” as a network**

Scholars of Japanese Buddhism such as Ian Reader and George Tanabe (1998) have long advocated for the anthropological study of religious practice and the material dimensions of people’s religious identities. Recent scholarship has emerged that approaches institutional Buddhism as a lived religion, with emphasis on relationality and socio-religious bonds. Notable examples include Mark Rowe’s (2011) study of the impact of changes in burial forms on temple Buddhism and Jessica Starling’s (2019) ethnographic study of temple wives in contemporary Jōdo Shinshū. Both studies engage with the notion of en as a category for understanding the practices of sociality between the living and the dead. Starling in particular draws attention to the personal dimensions that such connections entail. This thesis builds on such studies, but aims to reorient the discussion away from Buddhist temples towards the idea of “lived religion” as a network.

I employ the term “Buddhist temple communities” as a methodological and analytical framework for investigating the survival of Buddhist institutions. I maintain that the socio-religious and economic survival of Buddhist temple communities is rooted in the depth and resilience of human and non-human networks of belonging. In public and scholarly debates, Japanese Buddhism is often associated with Buddhist temples and elite practitioners of Buddhism, i.e. Buddhist priests. Stephen Covell’s (2005) framework of “Japanese Temple Buddhism” made a crucial scholarly

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⁹ Some notable examples of scholarship engaging with the issues include Sakurai and Kawamata 2016, and Borup 2008, 2016.
intervention by acknowledging the importance of temple-laity dynamics and the complexities of the role played by Buddhist priests. At the same time, the use of “Temple Buddhism” as an analytical category has entrenched the association of Buddhism with its institutional frameworks, diverting attention from Buddhist practices and the formation of Buddhist identities at an individual and community level. Following Covell (2005), Rowe (2011, p. 4 note 5) interprets Temple Buddhism as “the activities and institutional structures of temples.” This institutional orientation in scholarship is not limited to research on Japan. Scholars working on, for example, Thailand (Cook 2010) and Taiwan (Yü 2013) have also often prioritised the study of institutional systems. Such approaches have led to a particular way of speaking about Buddhist temples as, for instance, “closing down,” “developing new opportunities,” or “reviving.” This way of conceiving of Buddhist temples and, by extension, of Buddhism obscures the agency of individuals, particularly non-elite lay practitioners who constitute the socio-economic lifeblood of Buddhist institutions. Moreover, there is a particularly urgent need to focus on individuals and their practices in light of the ongoing debates concerning Buddhism’s institutional crisis and claims of revival.

Recent scholarship on Buddhism in Japan and other religious traditions elsewhere acknowledges these tensions and attempts to tackle them by broadening the focus of investigation from institutions to practitioners and from texts to materiality. Since the early 1990s, scholars such as Robert Orsi (1985, 1997, 2007), David Hall (1997), Nancy Ammerman (1997, 2013) and Meredith McGuire (2008) have developed the concept of “lived religion” and advocated for more holistic, ethnographic studies of religion that investigate how religious practice and belief operate across and are experienced in the many domains of everyday individual and community life. Orsi (1997, pp. 6-7) argues that:

Something called ‘religion’ cannot be neatly separated from the other practices of everyday life, from the way that human beings work on the landscape, for instance, or dispose of corpses, or arrange for the security of their offspring. Nor can ‘religion’ be separated from the material circumstances in which specific instances of religious imagination and behaviour arise and to which they respond.

Stemming from the ground-breaking critical genealogies of the study of religion by scholars such as Talal Asad (1993, 2003), Russell McCutcheon (1997), Masuzawa Tomoko (2005) and Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair (2011), recent scholarship on religion, secularity and modernity has taken a material turn (Meyer 2008), challenging the Protestant bias that has long shaped the spirit/matter divide in academic discourse on religion. Asad’s writings (1993) in particular problematise modernist constructions of religion as fixed and univocal, showing how this desocialises and ahistoricises religious traditions and the groups and communities practising them. The reorientation
of scholarship on religion – and Buddhism in particular – away from an exclusively
textual and institutional focus towards the study of embodied practices, rituals and
material objects enriches prescriptive, philosophical and doctrinal perspectives on
religion with a more historically, culturally and economically grounded perspective of
religion as lived.

My understanding of “lived religion” as a network relates to the idea of a network
as both a system of cultural forms and a personal compilation of relationships (Amit
and Caputo 2015, p. 157). As such, I am interested not only in what constitutes
Buddhist temple communities but also how such communities are developed and
maintained via socio-religious networks of belonging. My methodological approach and
data — which I will discuss in detail later on — follows an analytical framework similar
to that suggested by Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 178), who asserts that “localities”
such as neighbourhoods are “primarily relational and contextual rather than scalar or
spatial.” I see Buddhist temples as entities firmly embedded within, defined by and
dependent upon their relationship (or the relationships of their custodians, to be
precise) with members of their local and institutional communities. Therefore, I focus
on Buddhist temples not as spaces, but as networks of individual and group belonging.
Such an approach foregrounds the notion of mutual dependencies, allowing us to
explore Buddhist temples as community-dependent projects and to focus on the
networks of support that sustain them.

This thesis thus seeks to focus on the practices of lay members and religious
professionals who together build the temple community, combining the perspective of
“lived religion” with the idea of networked belonging in order to highlight the Buddhist
temple’s embeddedness within local and trans-local community dynamics. By
analysing people’s experiences and practices “on the ground” through the notion of
en, I am able to highlight the types of work through which individuals negotiate their
belonging. Analytically, networks of belonging become animated through the “lived
religion” lens. Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (2012, p. 14) assert that “lived
religion’s emphases on studying religion as practiced in multiple settings has clear
connections and links with scholars who are interested in understanding the power
and force of secular-religious relations taking shape in practice in modern societies.”
I share this interest by exploring both how Buddhism happens through practices such
as giving and voluntary labour within the physical setting of the temple (Chapter 3),
as well as beyond the physical boundaries of a temple at lay members’ homes
(Chapter 2), in hospitals and care homes (Chapter 5) and within local neighbourhoods
(Chapter 3).
My analytical focus on networks is also linked to two larger methodological and analytical issues addressed throughout this thesis. The first concerns the notion of interdependence and how it shapes Buddhist institutions’ role within the community as well as individual members’ belonging to their temple and regional communities. This thesis thus offers a theoretical contribution to the field of Japanese religious studies by unpacking the socio-economic, emotional and material dimensions of en (see Chapter 1). Rather than positioning the temple at the centre of my investigation into the meaning of a Buddhist temple, I analyse it as only one element in a diverse network of community belonging, which is shaped by the individual and multifarious meanings of en in people’s daily lives. The second issue is methodological. By paying attention to personal relationships and material forms of effecting belonging, my aim is to broaden our understanding of temple Buddhism and the complexities of the perceived crisis in contemporary Buddhism. The thesis thus answers Elizabeth Pérez’s (2016, 11) call to address the gaps in scholarship on religion by looking “beyond valorised genres of ritual action [often explored in Buddhist Studies] to see the centrality of micropractices in fashioning sacred selves, spaces and societies.” In focusing on diverse understandings of en, including quotidian practices like cleaning and cooking as well as Buddhist rituals of memorialisation, this thesis attends to a wide variety of examples of “doing belonging” to a Buddhist community. Such a perspective does not only disrupt religious/secular dichotomies. It also foregrounds the importance of ethnographic research and serves to address another gap in the existing scholarship of Japanese Buddhism and religions in general – the dearth of ethnographic studies of Japanese Buddhism.11

Why should we consider Buddhist temples through the prism of community dynamics and practices of keeping en? Buddhist temples (similar to many other religious institutions in contemporary Japan and elsewhere) are ultimately community-dependent projects and function as only one of the many small cogs that constitute and contribute towards sustaining an operational community that has its economic, social and psychological needs met and catered for. Community wellbeing is reliant on human activity to connect people to each another, as well as to places, practices and memories about them. Doing en is what keeps communities and Buddhist temples afloat. This notion of sustaining connections and fostering networks of belonging emerged as key concerns in my conversations with religious professionals and lay community members. Those concerns tended to become particularly pertinent in

10 For example, see Bodiford (1992) and Foulk (2008).
11 Recent notable ethnographies of traditional Temple Buddhism include Starling (2019) and Daniel Friedrich’s ongoing project on Buddhist temples and depopulation in Hokkaido Prefecture.
depopulating temple communities such as my host temple, Myōkōji, where shared awareness of the consequences of depopulation meant that departures, deaths and institutional closures were potentially more noticeable, personal and impactful.

**Researching temple Buddhism in contemporary Japan**

My focus on Buddhist temples rather than, for example, Shinto shrines or festivals, is precisely because Buddhist institutions have long been denied consideration in their role in community-building processes. This is partly a result of macro-level legislative and socio-economic changes that radically changed the role and position of temples in the post-war period.

In the post-war period, Buddhist temples began operating as not-for-profit family-run enterprises,\(^{12}\) transforming people’s conception of local temple ownership. In 1947, land reforms aimed at democratising Japan’s post-war economic structures brought in the abolition of the long-standing landlord system and introduction of independent farms (nōchi kaihō, ‘farmland release’). Under those measures, any national land deemed not crucial to religious activities was sold off. Buddhist temples thus lost regular income from tenanted farmland and the crops from their independently farmed land (Rowe 2011, pp. 26-27).\(^{13}\) Temples with close links to rural areas, including the vast majority of Jōdo Shinshū temples, were the most affected, losing over sixty-six-thousand hectares of temple land in the process (Suzuki 1959, pp. 186-87). Although the land reforms did not bring the collapse of temples, they changed the rules of engagement. Temples became more reliant on the support of their members. Out of the eighteen priests whom I interviewed, twelve reported that most of the rice and other agricultural produce consumed at their temples now comes from members’ donations, particularly in the summer and autumn months. They also became more reliant on alternative forms of income, with many Buddhist organisations in urban and rural areas alike utilising their remaining land and property resources for running parking lots, nurseries, rental properties and medical clinics as a means to generate supplementary income.\(^{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) The term NPO includes groups classified by the Japanese government as non-profit public-interest entities (kōeki hōjin) along with school, religious, medical, and social welfare organizations. Pekkanen (2000, p. 116 note 12) points out that in Japan, the borrowed term “NGO” typically refers to organizations involved in international work, while “NPO” refers to domestically active groups.

\(^{13}\) For a detailed overview of the land reform in Japan see Dore (1978).

\(^{14}\) For instance, it is estimated that the number of temple nurseries increased fourfold in the post-war period (Rowe 2011, p. 18).
With the introduction of the Religious Corporation Law (Shūkyō Hōjinbō 1951), Buddhist temples became legally autonomous financial entities. Like other organisations recognised as religious corporations (hereafter Shūkyō Hōjin organisations), Buddhist temples were granted the legal capacity to possess, maintain and dispose of worship facilities and other properties, as well as to engage in business activities in support of their religious aims and purposes without the state’s interference or support. Shūkyō hōjin organisations, similar to other non-profit sector organisations in Japan, became exempt from corporate income tax, real estate tax and registration tax (Amenomori and Yamamoto 1998, pp. 8-9). Buddhist temples were thus incorporated into the country’s new not-for-profit sector and Buddhist priests were faced with a new model of temple economics. They were now personally accountable for their temple’s finances and more dependent on income generated through donations (fuse), particularly for death-related rituals, as well as offerings and gifts (orei), and fundraising campaigns for collection of membership fees and funding of special temple repairs (see Chapter 3). This was particularly the case for Buddhist institutions such as the bodaiji temples that are the focus of this study and had traditionally relied on the household affiliation system (danka) and a tradition of ancestral rites. Under the economic pressures of the new post-war order, along with the modernisation and commercialisation of life across Japan, Buddhist institutions had to rely more heavily on revenue from temple graves, funerals and memorial services. This shaped an image of Buddhist priests as being increasingly preoccupied with funerary and monetary matters and as passive, lazy, disengaged and uninterested in the Buddhist teachings and proselytisation practices.

As Tamamuro (1999, pp. 227-8) notes, migration to urban areas (mainly by branch households) along with nuclearisation of the family meant a weakening of familial and ancestral ties to rural temples. For Buddhist temples, this community disconnect meant that people became more dependent on the services of commercial funeral companies (sōgisha) and funeral directors (sōgiya), with the priest’s role being diminished to that of a rentable ritual specialist who could be summoned for an appropriate fee. People also stopped relying on their neighbours to organise funerals through neighbourhood support groups, removing another avenue for connecting with a local temple. The most recent example of the transactional nature of Buddhist rituals is the development of "Bin O-bōsan" services whereby an individual can order a Buddhist priest to perform a memorial ritual via online platforms such as Amazon and other specialist sites. The burden of the monetary association and the overall expense

15 The Religious Corporation Law followed the Religious Organisations Law (Shūkyō Dantaihō) of 1939 and the Religious Corporations Ordinance (Shūkyō Hōjinrei) of 1945.
of funerals, hiked up by the booming funeral industry, created a perception of Buddhist priests as disconnected from the needs of their community and as cynically commercialising grief (Rowe 2011, p. 38).

Buddhism, as it is lived and practiced in Japan today, remains intimately tied to death-related practices and the notion of family. Buddhist rituals, domestic Buddhist altars (*butsudan*) and multigenerational ancestral graves have long provided symbolical and material media for venerating the dead in Japan. These practices have been rooted in the generational transference and inheritance of practice through the patrilineal household system whereby the oldest son is usually expected to inherit the Buddhist altar, the Buddhist grave and the responsibility for memorialisation rituals. The duties of a temple priest as a ritual specialist and caretaker for family ancestors are also hereditary. These lifelong hereditary Buddhist identities have their roots in the temple-parishioner (*danka*) system – a compulsory system of affiliation, developed in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), according to which all households had to register with a local temple, make donations for membership and rituals, and attend temple events. This compulsory temple membership system was de-legalised in the Meiji Period (1868-1912) and the post-war constitution subsequently introduced a legal separation of religion and state, and granted people religious freedom. However, this institutionalised system of Buddhist belonging persists today, mainly through death and memorialisation rituals, particularly in rural areas – even if the duty of care persists within a moral, rather than a legal framework. Buddhist temples from the seventeenth century onwards have thus been reliant on *danka* relations with membership assumed at a household level (as opposed to a level of an individual). This has contributed to the image of traditional Japanese Buddhists as passive practitioners of inherited duties of care, rather than active agents shaping their Buddhist belonging through engagement in memorialisation practices.¹⁶

Nonetheless, current public and academic debates have yet to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of how the realities of temple-community relations are fashioned. Some Japanese literary works do use temple life as a backdrop, providing some insight into community dynamics. For example, Shimazaki Tōson’s *The Broken Commandment* (*Hakai* [1906] 2005) is partly set in a Shinshū temple and includes scenes involving temple life, and Niwa Fumio’s *The Buddha Tree* (*Bodaiju* [1955] 1986) is authored by the son of a head priest, providing the reader with many examples of temple life.¹⁷ More recently, short documentaries, TV dramas and films

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¹⁶ See in particular Chapter 2.
¹⁷ Since this thesis focuses on Jōdo Shinshū temple communities, I limit my examples to accounts relating to the Jōdo Shinshū sect.
concerned with the life stories of contemporary Buddhist priests have also brought the public’s attention to the realities of temple living. For instance, an episode of NHK’s *Jinsei Dezain U-29* (2016) series tells the story of Tokumasa Shunpei who married into a temple family, decided to become a priest, and returned to Hiroshima Prefecture to work in a temple. Temple life also serves as the background to the love story in Fuji TV’s dramatization of the manga series *From 5 to 9: The Monk who Fell in Love with Me* (*Goji kara kuji made – watashi ni koishita obōsan*, 2015). Finally, the generational transition of priesthood in rural Japan is tackled head-on in the film *I am a Monk* (*Boku wa bōsan*) (Makabe, 2015): Itō Atsushi portrays a young man who, following his grandfather’s death, is suddenly faced with the reality of becoming a Buddhist priest and running the family’s temple in a rural part of Japan. It would seem that where the scholarly literature is lacking, the recent public debate concerning the lives of priests has increased the visibility of “active” Buddhist identities in the public domain.

The treatment of Buddhist identities in popular culture reflects the tendency in broader public and scholarly debates to construct either universal or “special case study” narratives about Buddhist temples and priests without paying much attention to the framework within which they operate (see e.g. Nelson 2013, Ukai 2015). Notable exceptions include Covell’s (2005) research on the Tendai sect in contemporary Japan, the work of Mizuki Shōdō (2016), a Buddhist priest and scholar at Kyushu University who offers a critique of the Buddhist lifestyle reliant on the *danka* system, and Starling’s (2019) recent ethnographic study of Jōdo Shinshū temple wives (*bōmori*). Various chapters in an edited volume by Sakurai Yoshihide and Kawamata Toshinori (2016) also offer some invaluable insights into community-temple relations. Of these, Ōtani Eiichi’s (2016) chapter on *danka*-temple relations is of particular relevance to discussions on the location of Japanese Buddhist temples within community dynamics.

The legislative changes introduced after World War II had a great impact on the socio-economic situation of all religious institutions in Japan. The new constitution promulgated in November 1946 included two important articles (Articles 20 and 89) which conditioned the legislative status of religion in post-war Japan by introducing the legal separation of religion and state and sanctioning freedom of religious belief. The latter in particular can be considered a turning point for Japanese secular society, liberating individuals from obligations of religious affiliation, including the provision of

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18 NHK’s *Jinsei Dezain U-29* series (2014-2018) tells stories of young Japanese (29 and younger) — many of whom are U-turners who moved back to their hometowns and chose alternative lifestyles, i.e. a career outside of the lifelong employment system.
financial support to particular institutions. Buddhist institutions faced a new reality in which temple affiliations could be freely changed, and new religious organisations could be relatively easily established. This meant competition for membership from existing and newly formed new religious movements (NRM) with strong charismatic leadership, such as Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai. It also meant a new financial reality, since any monetary obligations stemming from the customary remnants of the disintegrating affiliation-based *danka* system were dissolved. In this new reality, the agency of urban dwellers who chose to join the NRM was emphasized (Reader 1991), while those maintaining their affiliations to the traditional Buddhist temples were either underrepresented in the literature or portrayed as largely disengaged or non-religious (*mushūkyō*). Although recent scholarship investigating Buddhism in Japan as lived or living religion has enriched our understanding of the religious lives of Buddhist professionals and lay members, as Reader (2012a) notes, the scholarship of the post-war era tended to focus on the urban setting of Buddhist institutions, while largely ignoring the regional context of institutional decline and assuming comparable (if not more advanced) processes of social fragmentation.

As noted above, narratives of crisis associated with phenomena such as secularization, social fragmentation, the loneliness of aging and dying, depopulation and the consequential disappearance of local Buddhist temples (among other institutions) have been ubiquitous in public, scholarly and Buddhist denominational discourses in recent years. In contrast, very little has been written about the role of Buddhist temples in community-building processes. It is thus of note to investigate

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19 However, as Thomas (2019) has shown, the concept of religious freedom was not novel at the time, while under the guise of religious freedom, the SCAP’s objective was to create a framework of economic control.

20 Sōka Gakkai, founded in 1930, is Japan’s largest new religious movement. Its teachings are based on Nichiren’s interpretation of the Lotus Sutra. For in-depth studies see Tamano (2008) and McLaughlin (2012, 2019). Risshō Kōseikai is a lay Buddhist movement founded in 1938 and focused on ancestor veneration and the Lotus Sutra. See Mukopadiyāya (2005) and Di Febo (2016) for an overview.

21 Constitutional changes to the legal status of religious institutions that came into effect in 1947 also made it possible for Buddhist temples to legally disaffiliate themselves from their sects and become independent (e.g. if there was disagreement over doctrine, practice or finances). For further discussion and examples see Deal and Ruppert (2015, pp. 231-32).


23 There are some notable examples of historical studies of dependencies between temples, *danka* households and surrounding communities (see e.g. Hōzawa 1995, 1997, Williams 2005, Vesey 2003). Moreover, in her study of Kodaira City, Robertson (1991, pp.
Buddhist temples as embedded in the context of local and trans-local communities that are built upon and reconfigured through human connections, feelings of belonging, practices of togetherness, and a memory thereof. People's sense of belonging, their locality, depends on complex networks of relationships, rituals and restrictions, and the human agency that produces and negotiates them. Such locality – shaped by networks of en – is both institutionally and subjectively embedded. The focus of this thesis is on those networks and bonds recognised by my interlocutors as en, and they will serve as a framing narrative throughout.

I am not suggesting that the challenges facing Buddhist temple communities are unique, but as I will show, they do represent a crucial element in a much bigger and more complex picture of the way people try to make sense of decline, loss and disappearance, and to embrace potential futures. This thesis thus addresses gaps in our knowledge of the regional context of Buddhist institutions and the dynamics of communities that host them, in particular through its exploration of individual actors' approaches to Buddhist practices concerned with death, memory and economics that have long been the source of scholarly and public criticism of Buddhism. The thesis thus takes religious professionals and lay members to be active agents aware of their motivations for participating (or not) in Buddhist practice.

It is also not my intention in this thesis to suggest that Buddhist temples are in any way experiencing an institutional, social or symbolical renaissance. To the contrary, the micro-level statistical data that I draw on clearly suggests that local Buddhist temples are indeed in trouble. Unless regional depopulation is countered, most of the priests who I interviewed expected their local family temples to cease to exist, if not in their lifetime then certainly within two generations. However, by paying attention to the complex relational dynamics that shape the strengths and weaknesses of the dependency networks maintaining Buddhist temple communities, we can reflect on the role of Buddhist temples in community-building processes at both local and institutional levels. By tracing and mapping out the complexities of personal and communal relations conditioning the multivalent systems of belonging and structures of sustainability, I interrogate the local experiences of the uncertain present and possible futures for the survival of regional communities and local Buddhist temples operating within particular religious and social identity structures.

110-49) draws attention to the importance of religious institutions (in this case Shinto shrines) for nurturing communal identities.
The field setting and the field method

The north of Hiroshima Prefecture is officially designated as a depopulated area. Along with other mountainous regions of the Chūgoku area of Hiroshima Prefecture where I conducted my fieldwork, it underwent a process of administrative municipal merger in 2004, which featured several school closures. The municipality has a population of just over fifty thousand, its population having dropped by nine thousand since the merger. Over 40 percent of the population are aged sixty-five or above. This, in comparison to other parts of the region, is still relatively low. The Buddhist temple communities with which this thesis is concerned are thus located in a rural community struggling with issues of depopulation, an aging society, low birth rates, invasive governmental administrative mergers, shrinking regional budgets, and insufficient (or non-existent) public transport links. Temples in this area, ubiquitously, face diminishing membership numbers — especially among what I refer to as “active membership” — and this is having a drastic impact on their activities and finances. Other challenges include issues of succession, both in relation to the next generation of priests and the next generation of temple members.

My choice of community was not random. Since I was interested in the topic of religious change and how people address issues of decline within their communities, I wanted to be based in a community where decline was ongoing, but where depopulation had not yet reached a critical level. This was crucial for my project’s objective of investigating “the middle ground” of decline to contribute in a meaningful way to the debates on Buddhism’s institutional fragility. There was also a more practical reason for conducting research in Hiroshima Prefecture: it was dictated by an ability to negotiate access. Research access to the groups and communities is often navigated through personal connections, friendships and interests. Covell (2005) gained access to a number of Japanese Tendai Buddhist sect temples and priests through the friendships and contacts that he had developed during his training and service as a Tendai priest. Comparably, Levi McLaughlin gained access from “the middle to the bottom” (McLaughlin 2010, pp. 8-9) of the Sōka Gakkai religious group through introductions to members facilitated by his university colleagues. In my case, it was my supervisor’s personal and professional connection that facilitated an introduction to the forty-six-year-old head priest of Myōkōji, Suzuki-san. I first connected with him via email and then conducted a two-week period of preliminary

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24 Depopulation is often presented as a statistical fact for regions characterised by a population decline rate of 25 percent and more, over 24 percent of the population aged sixty-five and above, and less than 15 percent aged between five and thirty, and with a fiscal power index of less than 0.42 (Yamamoto 1996, pp. 2-13).
fieldwork (March-April 2016) during which I visited Myōkōji for the first time to negotiate permission to conduct my research from Suzuki-san’s temple and my level of access to temple activities. Suzuki-san’s interest in my project was key to negotiating my way to my research base at his temple, where I spent twelve months. His personal concerns over the survival issues of his and many other temples in the area positioned my project as having the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the local discourse on Buddhist communities’ decline.

From the outset this project was designed to be conducted from the "inside" of a temple and thus required intense interactions with informants and “deep-hanging out” (Geertz 1998) with my interlocutors to investigate the physical and psychological landscape shaping their reality. In considering my methodological approach, I was inspired by McCutcheon’s (1999) discussion of insider/outsider approaches to the study of religion, which draws on Kenneth Pike’s (1967) technical explanations of emic and etic terms in linguistics. I wanted to combine emic and etic narratives, describing my interlocutors’ descriptions and practices and re-describing this data analytically through an interpretative system of my own making. However, I also wanted to gain access to different levels of depth and spheres of influence across the emic spectrum. By living and researching at and from a local Buddhist temple, I was attempting the complicated task of becoming an insider in temple life and practices (by essentially becoming a member of a Buddhist temple family who shadowed priestly temple duties) while at the same time using the opportunities that this insider position afforded me to reach out to other temples and local community members.

My motivations in taking this approach were three-fold. First, an insider perspective would provide me with a detailed understanding of the “micropractices” constituting daily temple life. This, in turn, would allow me to observe points of intersection between Buddhist temple activities and the activities of the community and individual lay members. As pointed out by Helen Hardacre (2003, p. 71), “fieldwork is essential to reaching an understanding of religion as lived and living tradition, as opposed to a body of doctrine or an abstract statement of creed,” which leads to my second motivation. Full immersion and participation in temple life would inform my areas of inquiry for the interviews that I hoped to conduct in the second half of my stay. It would also provide me with the access and valid social connections to develop local networks of trust, so that my interlocutors would feel comfortable about sharing with me their conceptions of Buddhist practice. Finally, I wanted an opportunity to observe the community from inside the temple in order to challenge the centrality of the Buddhist temple in the wider context of the community. This could only be observed by positioning the object of inquiry around me, instead of in front of
me. My understanding of Buddhist temple communities as networks of belonging has thus developed through my experiences in the field, as well as through the ethnographic methods I employed and my subsequent analysis of the data.

Recent decades have been marked by a scarcity of ethnographic studies of Japanese religions. A general withdrawal of academics from fieldwork studies and subsequent weakening of the field has been one of the repercussions of the Aum affair (Baffelli and Reader 2012). This thesis compensates for this lack, relying on rich ethnographic data to carry out an in-depth investigation of the dynamics through which members of Buddhist temple communities have negotiated meanings and practices of interdependence both within and beyond the boundaries of local temples. The advantage of a field-based approach is that it illuminates the differences that characterise individuals who practice their belonging in multiple ways and through complex patterns of meaning. Therefore, building on such approaches, I focus not on a single practice or regional site per se, but rather on the notion of networked belonging and individual understandings of interdependence as a socio-religious concept materialised through practice and personal connections. By viewing a Buddhist temple community as an arena towards and within which certain religious professionals and lay persons orientate their belonging, this thesis takes a different point of departure from many field-based studies of contemporary Buddhism both in Japan (e.g. Rowe 2011, Starling 2019) and elsewhere (e.g. Caple 2019, Fisher 2014).

**The method**

Most of the material contained in this thesis was collected using three methods: close observation (often participant observation) of temple and community life; person-centred ethnographies of five priests and seven lay members and informal and formal semi-structured and open-ended interviews with over one hundred people (more details are given below). My use of a person-centred ethnographic method was facilitated by the level of access I gained at Myōkōji and friendships that I was able to develop with a few of my lay interlocutors. My ethnography will reveal different levels of closeness with my interlocutors, but my decision to employ person-centred ethnography stems from my belief that an understanding of Buddhist temple

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26 For examples of the most recent field-based studies on Buddhist NRM, see McLaughlin (2019) and Di Febo (2019).
27 See Appendix 1 for interview guide themes.
communities and the complexities of their interdependencies needed to begin with specific, in-depth descriptions of human experiences and human subjectivity. Such an approach creates an opening to explore the emotional landscape of people’s practices (Hollan 1997, Samuels 2010, Rowe 2017, Samuels et al. 2016).

My research began but did not end at Myōkōji. The bulk of my time was spent accompanying Suzuki-san and his father on their daily visits to practitioners’ homes, as well as to meetings and events held at other local temples. I also attended most of the community events held within the community, sometimes attending on behalf of the temple family, but in most cases at the invitation of neighbours and fellow community members. Establishing these personal networks of association within the community was important for nurturing trust, but also for creating opportunities for me to speak to people who did not engage with their local temple or engaged less frequently. I was also hoping that familiarity would make people more comfortable with my presence during visits when I accompanied the priests. One of my strategies for developing connections with neighbours was to go for a daily morning run, meeting people along the way as they worked in their gardens. In this rural research setting, the use of formal consent forms was not always appropriate (I deal with consent for interviews separately in the next paragraph). My relationship with the participants was largely based on trust, and formalisation of the process by insisting on formal signed consent was often obstructive to that relationship of mutual trust. However, all of my interlocutors were made aware of my role in the community as a researcher and the topic and objectives of my research. My position in the field was that of a non-member interested in the issues of depopulation affecting Buddhist temples. Although I was asked to participate in Buddhist practice — particularly during visits to parishioners’ homes — I remained unambiguous about my role and non-Buddhist identity.

There were thirty-four Jōdo Shinshū temples in the research community (one had closed down and two were without a resident head priest). During my fieldwork, I visited twenty-three of them at least once, conducting participant observation and informal interviews with either a head priest or a member of their family. The extent of my involvement in direct detailed observations in various temple and community-related activities will become evident in the following chapters. Apart from the countless informal conversations that I had with local priests, neighbours, lay practitioners and members of various temple families, I also conducted formal interviews. I reached out to the custodians of all thirty-four Buddhist temples in the region with a request for an interview and an appropriate consent form attached (see Appendix 1). The families looking after eighteen of these temples agreed to be interviewed, including sixteen current head priests and two previous head priests.
whose children were working away, seven temple wives, and six children under the age of 18 (with parental permission obtained). In most cases, I was also able to conduct more informal repeat interviews that took between two and four hours. When interviewing lay members, written consent was obtained whenever appropriate (see Appendix 1), with fifteen counts of formal interviews among Myōkōji’s lay members and neighbours. If written consent was not appropriate, verbal consent was recorded on a voice recorder if the interviewee had agreed for it to be used. In Chapter 3, I discuss activities of neighbourhood groups and temple-affiliated associations. In the neighbourhood group that Myōkōji temple family belonged to, I was able to interview eighteen people belonging to thirteen different households. Further afield, I conducted formal interviews with another twelve community members. In addition to this, I conducted informal interviews with over one hundred people. Some took place at community meetings to which I was regularly invited and at which I was able to stage group interviews, which sometimes led to follow-up one-to-one informal interviews. During informal interviews, I either took notes (when possible) or made mental notes and wrote them down as soon as possible after a conversation took place. I occasionally asked my interlocutors to write down something that they had said.

It is important to note that I did not go into the field with the intention of focusing on the notion of en. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 1, this was something that emerged from the way people chose to describe their relationality. However, in the last two months of my fieldwork, having already noticed some of the patterns in the way people employed this notion, I incorporated a question about the Buddhist meaning of en into my conversations with Buddhist priests, many of whom used the term in their preaching. I understand that the manner in which lay people and religious professionals talk about interdependence and the role of Buddhist practice within it differs. I have therefore tried to reflect on such areas of converging and diverging meanings in my analysis. Wherever I felt that the voices of my interlocutors were best suited to narrate the more intimate and emotional dimensions of their belonging, I have allowed the voices and emotional states of my interlocutors to come through as much as possible in an attempt to capture their affective qualities.

**The field: Jōdo Shinshū**

This brings me to the specificities of the Buddhist context of the field. It is impossible to progress further without providing an overview of the Jōdo Shinshū tradition and a brief consideration of its key teachings. Although the issues discussed in this thesis, particularly those pertaining to the matters of demographic decline are not unique to Shin Buddhist institutions (or to the geographical context of Hiroshima Prefecture),
many of my interlocutors — including lay members — engaged to some degree with Jōdo Shinshū teachings in doing and describing their belonging.

The Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land) sect is one of Japan’s traditional Buddhist sects. It is also the largest in terms of the number of affiliated temples (over ten thousand in Nishi Honganji-ha alone). The tradition is characterised by its emphasis on salvation through faith alone: the goal of the Buddhist path is not the attainment of enlightenment or liberation from samsara in this lifetime, but rather rebirth in the Pure Land (jōdo) created by the Buddha Amida. For Jōdo Shinshū practitioners, enlightenment is ensured through rebirth in this Pure Land. Thus, in this lifetime their sole practice is religious devotion to Amida. The primary form this devotional practice takes is the nenbutsu, the meditation on or utterance of the Buddha’s name in the form of “namu amida butsu” (“I take refuge in the Buddha Amida”).

Shinran (1173-1262), known as the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, developed his doctrinal teachings in a number of writings, in particular the Kyōgyōshinshō (Teaching, Practice, Faith and Enlightenment) which is customarily chanted during the regular home-visits that priests pay to lay members to perform memorialisation services (omairi). Among the concepts explicated in the Kyōgyōshinshō there are three that are particularly relevant to this thesis: tariki, shinjin and jishin kyōninshin. The opposition between tariki (“other-power,” namely, the salvific power of the Buddha’s compassion) and jiriki (the power of one’s own religious exertions) has defined the contrast made by Pure Land adherents between the Pure Land and other schools of Buddhism. This belief in the importance of other-power and the futility of self-powered efforts toward enlightenment means that one has to possess a complete absence of doubt in the power of Amida’s compassion, and abandon any notion of self-power. This experience of unconditional faith is known as shinjin (‘entrusting’ oneself). In Shinran’s account, both the nenbutsu and faith itself originate not from the believer’s own efforts, but rather are bestowed by Amida. The nenbutsu chant and one’s admission of

28 Throughout this thesis, I use a term “sect” to refer to different Buddhist denominations. Apart from the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, the main Buddhist sects in Japan today include Jōdoshū (Pure Land), Sōtō Zen, Rinzai Zen, Tendai, Nichiren and Shingon.
29 It is worth noting here that due to depopulation more than half of the Nishi Honganji temples have experienced a decrease of membership with two thirds reporting the associated financial difficulties (Jōdo Shinshū Honganjihai dai 9 kai shūseikihonchōsa jissen senta 2011, p. 68).
30 See Dobbins (2002) for an in-depth explanation of nenbutsu.
31 Many scholars have argued that shinjin should be translated as ‘entrusting’ meaning an attitude of faith and devotion, rather than ‘faith’ to avoid Christian connotations of ‘belief’ (Ueda and Hirota 1989, pp. 142-150).
unconditional faith in the benevolence of Amida constitute an essential part of death-related rites in the True Pure Land tradition.

Furthermore, Shinran’s experience of faith was accompanied by a desire to awaken faith in others, a concept he explained as “having faith oneself and causing others to have faith” (jishin kyōninshin). Broadly conceived, this notion refers equally to proselytising activities and to any activity that springs from one’s gratitude to Amida. It is referred to in a variety of ways in later Shin teachings, such as the “activities of the repayment of one’s debt to the Buddha” (butsuon hōsha no keiei) and has come to form the underlying principle of Shin religious practice. The idea is that, although the matter of one’s rebirth may be settled through the experience of faith, the activities of gratitude for this salvation – and for the long and arduous path undertaken by Amida to accomplish this salvation for us – are never complete. This grateful striving to provide opportunities for others to experience faith in Amida is the central practice of Shin Buddhist believers. Although this practice is not linked in a causal way to the believer’s own salvation, it is nonetheless imperative to living an authentic religious life.

A consequence of Shinran’s teachings on “other-power” is that rituals conducted by religious professionals do not produce any kind of karmic merit or external benefit. As such they do not have the kind of value traditionally attributed to Buddhist practices such as giving. Instead, in an orthodox doctrinal sense, the significance of one’s practice is generated through the practice of gratitude and cultivation of shinjin in others. Like other practices such as reading and listening to the teachings, uttering the nenbutsu, and paying reverence to the Buddha image, rituals such as the o-mairi visits discussed in Chapter 2 present an opportunity for followers to open themselves to the working of Amida’s compassion and thus attain salvation. Although Jōdo Shinshū’s doctrinal teachings deny the existence of spirits of the dead (Bloom 1977), the school’s ecclesiastical authorities admit that ancestor worship constitutes an important part of the school’s rituals (Yamaori 1986). Despite doctrinal discrepancies, they also represent the backbone of temple economics and an important gateway into understanding the local sociality structures of Buddhist temples and their communities. For the vast majority of Buddhist temples in Japan, fiscal survival depends on the generosity of their supporting members. This generosity is often motivated by feelings of duty, grief, or gratitude, and is expressed through donations offered in return for memorial and funerary rites.

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32 Dobbins (2002, p. 30, citing the Kyōgyōshinshō (Shinshu shōgyō zensho 1, p. 661).
33 On the importance of ancestor worship in Japan, see Smith 1974.
Chapter outline and goals

This thesis sets out to examine how people effect and materialise their belonging within Jōdo Shinshū temple communities in rural Hiroshima Prefecture and how they employ ideas and practices of interdependence to nurture a sense of continuity in the context of regional decline. I work with the notion of en to investigate the environments of a temple community, not just as a context but as a topic of inquiry, in order to engage with current debates pertaining to the crisis in Buddhism and demographic decline and evaluate the role of Buddhist institutions in community building.

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical and analytical starting point for the thesis. It offers a discussion on en, understood as a type of work that can be realised through various affective and material practices such as rituals of mourning, memorialisation of the dead and practices of supporting the institutions and people who deliver such rituals (i.e. Buddhist temple custodians). I explore three key dimensions of en relations — karmic and social, material and emotional — as vehicles for understanding people’s engagement (or lack thereof) with local temples and Buddhist practice. Using ethnography to show what constitutes a Buddhist temple community and to discuss the complexities of Buddhist belonging, I argue that en emerges in relations and that the survival of Buddhist temple communities is entrenched in the complexity and resilience of those relations. This argument is unfolded through each of the subsequent chapters, which focus on a particular dimension of en.

Chapter 2 focuses on en as a set of practices related to the generational inheritance of Buddhist identities as organised and negotiated through the concepts of family and filial piety. By analysing the daily practices of household rituals (o-mairi) performed by Myōkōji’s Buddhist priests, I show this form of en to be symptomatic of the risks faced by contemporary Buddhist temple communities. How should they negotiate the generational transition of practices and Buddhist values when there is an ideological disjunction between generational cohorts who are shaped by different values of unity? This issue becomes even more evident in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 turns to examine en as an economic practice. I explore how the concept of Buddhist generosity is shaped through networks of social cohesion extending beyond the sphere of religious practice, showing how fundraising and voluntary labour correspond to local civic networks through which Buddhist belonging happens, (a process I refer to as “Buddhist transfers”). I then relate this to the malfunctioning system of recruitment – a consequence of individual and collective complacency in addressing issues of dwindling membership. I postulate that a lack of
proactiveness within recruitment and retention initiatives and a failure to diversify the field of Buddhist practice respectively will likely lead to the cessation of even the most engaged temple communities as access to available resources (human and economic) dries out.

In Chapter 4, I work with the concepts of memory and materiality, drawing on anthropological theories of value to argue that Buddhist temples (and by extension their communities) are repositories of both worth and waste in which en is considered to be a value-producing practice. People nurture their en relations by transforming individual histories into matters of communal concern. At the same time, I show how a practice oriented towards maintaining en – the storage of one’s ashes at one’s local Buddhist temple – also creates spaces of abandonment, rendering the local temple a repository of waste and dead values by shifting the burden of filial piety from the family to the temple family and remaining community.

This leads us into Chapter 5, which explores the notion of en as an anticipatory practice of coping with ageing, decline and loss. It examines the proactive approaches taken by elderly members to maintaining departed members’ bonds with the local community and the temple, as well as to dealing with loneliness and remaining active in this life and connected in the afterlife. I take as an example the volunteering practices of elderly members who support peers residing in long-term care facilities. The gendered conception of Buddhist identities comes fully to the fore as I then turn to focus on the activities of Myōkōji’s Buddhist female lay members who support palliative care patients in the local hospital, showing how Buddhist women navigate their gendered role within their Buddhist temple communities.

In Chapter 6, I explore how en is being employed as an institutional narrative of belonging and as an institutionalising practice designed to nurture institutionally conscious Buddhist identities. I review how particular ideal forms of being a Shin Buddhist that stimulate cognitive and sensorial experiences are employed to nurture people’s sectarian affinities. Drawing on examples of collective rituals and educational programmes and preaching, I show how emotional and ideological nurturing of collective interdependencies can both enhance and impede the formation of my interlocutors’ notions of institutional affinity vis-à-vis their more intimate experience of belonging to a local temple community.

Building on from the chapters and highlighting the implications of their findings, I conclude with a consideration of the future of regional Buddhist temple communities and the meaning of religious extinction, discussing the potential consequences of institutional complacency about generational divergences in values and the ever-
widening divide between rural and urban institutional fragility. I thus draw out a number of potential lessons for temple communities and propose some future trajectories for research that will further our understanding of the issues and challenges highlighted in this thesis. In particular, I argue that further study of demographic transformations in Japan would benefit from the analytical and methodological capacities of en as a framework for mapping out religious change and demise.
Chapter One

“What is your en?”

Introduction: en in Buddhist temple communities

One afternoon in May 2017, I took an hour-long drive up north from my host temple, Myōkōji, to visit a small Jōdo Shinshū temple in a more remote region of the municipality. As I followed the river northwards towards Shimane Prefecture, the landscape became more desolate, houses became sparser, shops disappeared and, every now and again, I could spot abandoned buildings that nature had begun to claim back and incorporate into the surrounding lush green scenery. In this part of the municipality, the aesthetics of the landscape made depopulation more palpable. I left my car at the tiny car park of a community centre that nestled at the foot of a hill with Yōanji temple towering above it. As I climbed up to Yōanji, I passed a huge playground attached to the temple that appeared abandoned, its once blue-painted
swings visibly gathering rust. I ascended through the stone temple gate and bell tower to a beautifully kept garden and the temple’s main entrance (see Figure 1).

I was there to meet Yamamoto-san, the then seventy-six-year-old head priest of Yōanji – the seventh generation of this temple’s custodians, whose son was already lined up as his successor. This was my first formal interview with Yamamoto-san, one of eighteen local priests who agreed to be interviewed for my research project on depopulating Buddhist temple communities. After exchanging formal greetings and chatting for a while about the history of his family temple and my research, I asked him what he thought were the biggest challenges for his temple considering the demographic and social shifts in that community. Without hesitation, he leaned forward and began: “Schools. If schools get shut down, the community will not survive. If there are no schools to educate the next generation, even people who are still here and have children will leave.” After a short pause, he added:

If schools disappear, communities will begin to disappear, and temples will follow soon after. Temples have no future without a community. Not the other way around. You want to know what depopulation feels like? Well, depopulation becomes real when bonds between people disappear. When en disappears (en ga nakunaru), it means the death of the community. When people no longer come together to do [my emphasis] things, when they abandon their en to the living and the dead, that’s the end. Depopulation is loneliness and hopelessness. But we are not there yet.34

He smiled and gestured me to follow him through a narrow corridor that led from the living quarters to the temple’s main hall. At the entrance, we stopped in front of a wall covered by white pieces of paper bearing colourful child-size handprints along with the names and ages of the children to whom the prints belonged (see Figure 2).35 He explained that all children in this community are invited to take part in an annual ceremony introducing the youngest members of the community to their local temple. The ceremony, known as shosanshiki (meaning ‘a first visit to a Buddhist temple’), was traditionally intended for newly born babies. It involves customary sutra chanting and a sermon by the temple’s head priest, following which the parents of the children and the rest of the attendees are invited to take turns at the main altar to offer thanks for Amida’s benevolence. With their hands held up, palms pressed together in a prayer position, they bow at the altar on their child’s behalf. Afterwards, each child is usually gifted with a wagesa (a loop shaped stole) and a Buddhist rosary as symbols of admittance to the community of Buddhists. At Yōanji, most children repeat the ritual

34 Interview, 16 May 2017.
35 Some other temples in the region incorporate similar practices in their shosanshiki ceremonies (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha Sōgō Kenkyūjo 2013, pp. 108-112)
every year until they graduate from primary school at the age of twelve. The new element of creating handprint mementos was introduced a few years ago.

As I tried to differentiate between the prints in the half-light of the corridor to count the number of participating children, Yamamoto-san’s voice sounded again: “Look, this is en,” he said pointing at the wall:

The hand prints are a memento, a reminder of a bond tied (en wo musubu) with this community. Perhaps they [the children] will wish to come back one day to press their hands again, this time against the hands of their younger selves. And perhaps they will remember their local temple (jimoto no tera) and their homeplace (furusato) with gratitude in their hearts. In the meantime, it is our job to preserve the en (en wo mamoru).

Yamamoto-san made it clear that he, as a priest, ought to preserve the en in case the next generation chose to return in the future.

This ethnographic moment, which I continue to unfold throughout this chapter, raises questions about the possibility of imagining survival among people living in a constant state of anticipation conditioned by transformations to the nature and strength of human bonds (en) in ageing rural Buddhist temple communities. What is en? How does a person preserve it and to what effect? What can en tell us about the

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The term ‘en wo musubu’ is often used to mean ‘to get married,’ but it emerged from the Buddhist term kechien meaning ‘to make a connection with a Buddha.’
human condition – its past, present and future – and the networks of causality and interdependence that shape contemporary Buddhist temple communities in regional Japan? These are the questions at the heart of this chapter.

By focusing on the notion of en as a road map to understanding processes of change in contemporary Buddhist temple communities, I join other scholars of Japanese Buddhism in exploring the doctrinal and social significance of interdependence for understanding connections between temples and their lay members. These scholars have tended to focus on en as something that a person has (en ga aru) – en is a condition or a serendipitous occurrence rather than a process (see e.g. Rowe 2011, Starling 2019). Where my analytical take on en diverges from its previous interpretations is in my focus on praxis and feelings, two elements that constitute the core of Japanese religiosity (Davis 1992, p. 236, Reader and Tanabe 1998). Here and throughout this thesis, I examine how my interlocutors defined en in different ways as a type of work and instantiated en through their affective and material practices, including rituals of mourning, memorialisation of the dead and practices of supporting the institutions and people who deliver such rituals (i.e. Buddhist temple custodians).

Affective practices (ritual or otherwise), in my understanding, are both embodied and cognitive. As such, they relate to the material, social and emotional (moral) realities of human existence. I will thus conceptualise en relations as having three key dimensions: karmic and social, material and emotional. This will, I hope, help to provide an insight into the role of priests in reaffirming and nurturing people’s material and affective loyalties towards their local temple with the ultimate aim of fostering a community willing to invest their time and resources to support it. I thus focus on the narratives and practices prioritised by local Buddhist priests who are in the process of making sense of their own existence and relevance.

In this chapter, I show that social and karmic dimensions of en and their material and emotional articulations are all interwoven. The karmic is thus implicated and realised through the social. I acknowledge the complexity of the contexts in which en accounts for the relational conditions of a person’s life, as well as the significance of individual (subjective) meanings of en. Therefore, I focus on the experiences of Buddhist priests and their families, and lay members, to showcase how polysemous the notion of en can be. I thus argue for the utility of en as an analytical concept in my attempts to map out temple-community networks of interdependence and illuminate the diversity of issues faced by contemporary Japanese temple communities and how people respond to them.
What is en?

In the opening vignette, I chose to translate en as a bond, meaning a relationship, a connection or an affinity. When I arrived in the field in August 2016, the question of my own en to my host temple, Myōkōji, figured in all my conversations with neighbours, lay members and other local Buddhist priests alike. People were curious to know how I came to live in this particular temple, village and region. Many also noted that, by meeting me, they had received a mysterious connection (fushigina goen o itadakimashita). Over the coming weeks and months, I came to learn that the term en (or goen as it is often used in an honorific form) is used repeatedly by the people associated with Myōkōji and the other temples that I visited to describe their connections with others (including the dead). En was also a term that featured heavily in the Buddhist sermons that I heard and the printed materials that I collected in the field.

At first, I understood en in its colloquial usage as simply meaning a ‘connection’ or a ‘relationship’ that a person has with someone or something (en ga aru) – be it of karmic or social consequence. This understanding started reshaping as my interactions with the community deepened and I began to notice links between the way people talked about en and how they did en. As I began to analyse my data towards the end of my fieldwork, certain patterns in how my interlocutors were defining their relatedness to one another began to emerge, ultimately developing into the focal analytical narrative of this thesis: what my interlocutors did to generate, nourish and sustain their interconnectedness and how this was linked to local narratives of communal unity and their local temples’ role (or lack thereof) in maintaining this unity and a sense of continuity.

In the contemporary lexicon of many Japanese, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, en is a marker of fate or destiny – a mysterious force that binds or a particular kind of serendipitous and magical connection. It is often combined with another character gi to mean an omen, a sign of luck or causation (engi, the doctrine of dependent arising: everything has a cause and there is nothing that arises out of nothing). A number of scholars of Japanese society have drawn upon the notions of mystery and causality evoked by en. Nozawa (2015), in his article on phaticity as an emergent form of sociality among Japanese people, recognises en as a cultural idiom of connection imbued with destiny-bound “magical” meanings and as a socially ordering structural

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37 In her study of Reiyūkai Kyōdan, Hardacre (1984, p. 104) links such serendipitous notions of en (or innen) to the idea of deep, hidden meaning: the purpose of one’s existence is not to discover this hidden meaning, but to act out the connections that originated in the past through one’s own karma and that of one’s ancestors.
component that defines an individual’s belonging to a given group. He thus joins a
number of other scholars in defining the Japanese personhood as relational (Kawano
contributes to the ongoing debates on relationality by engaging with interdependence
as a concept in the context of Buddhist temple communities. Whether otherworldly or
socially structured, en can be explored as a basic ordering narrative and practice of
human and non-human connectivity.

*En*, in my understanding, comes in various guises which ultimately depend on
being expressed in multiple arenas of mutual belonging such as family, household,
community and religious institutions. This mutuality of being hinges on geographical,
emotional, karmic and material proximity. For Yamamoto-san, shared labour and
communal rituals such as *shosanshiki* designed to nurture a nostalgic sense of home
are en. For a sixty-year-old local farmer named Tabata-san, a monetary donation for a
memorial service or a gift of freshly picked cabbages are en. For the head priest of my
host temple, inheriting your father’s or mother’s practice is en. For a neighbour named
Maeda-san, draining rice paddy canals with your neighbours is en. For Myōkōji’s
*bōmori* (Aki-san), spreading Buddhist teachings and values is en. For Hashimoto-
san, the head of Myōkōji’s Buddhist women’s group (*bukkyō fujinkai*), volunteering
one’s time to chant sutras for departed members of the community is en.

*En* is a notion that evokes a range of individual, complex and multidimensional
meanings. Its socio-religious magnitudes and their material manifestations are not
different kinds of en. They are different layers that permeate one another throughout
people’s social and karmic interdependencies. Such connections and bonds should be
viewed as partial, distributed and heterogeneous by nature. They can only appear in
certain places, at certain times and can only be practised by certain people. What en
means and for whom and how individuals choose to embody and perform is personal
and conditioned by a person’s individual and shared values. Such personal
understandings of en foreground the notion of agency and, perhaps, a yet barely
perceptible sense of urgency to act while one still can. How do people channel this
agency and energy into generating ways of making sense of the present? What kind of
narratives and practices do they employ to create mental and emotional space for
imagining a future?

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38 *Bōmori* (and its honorific form *bōmori-san*) – meaning “temple guardian” – is a term
specific to the Shinshū tradition that is used to refer to the wife of a head priest of a
Buddhist temple. In other sects, terms such as *jitei fujin* or *jizoku* (a collective term for a
temple family) are used. For a detailed study of *bōmori* in Shin Buddhism, see Starling
Imagine for a moment that en in their multiplicity and multivalence are a skeletal structure that sustains temples as one of their anchors of local connectedness. Should individual “bones” within this structure degenerate, break or be remodelled, this would mean transformative changes to the entire organism (i.e. the Buddhist temple community). En like bones are thus relational entities. They take on form and material properties through the interactions which take place with and within them. As such, they come to be defined and shaped within diverse types of relations. These relations, as Hallam notes, “can be at once material and social, emotional and political” (2010, p. 468) and they can develop and change over time, impacting on people’s understandings of Buddhist doctrine and practice.

**Buddhist ingredients of en: doctrine and practice**

My interlocutors understood en to be a connection that is socially and karmically binding. In Buddhist doctrinal terms, en refers to the conditions (Skt. *pratyaya*) that support the fruition of a person’s past karma. En therefore represents a fundamental tenet of the Buddhist theory of the twelve-fold chain of causation (*jū ni engi;* Skt. *ptatītyasamutpāda*), which relates to the conditional nature of all sentient existence. All physical and mental elements of the universe are interconnected through complex chains of causes and conditions, often referred to in Buddhist terms as the law of cause and effect. As Reader (1991) notes, the contemporary Japanese view of karmic causality is characterised by the recognition that physical events have spiritual causes. Defining karma (*innen*) as “the notion that all events and actions have repercussions (...),” Reader (1991, pp. 47-48) goes on to explain that:

Karma may thus be transmitted and shared – recognition, indeed, that people do not stand in isolation but are closely bound, especially through blood and familial ties, with each other, existing as a result of a series of interconnected causal relationship and defined through them, rather than in more individual terms.

Karma need not have negative connotations: the word en (affinity, karmic relations) which is frequently used in terms of relationships has distinctly positive nuances. (...) en may bring people into contact with each other [i.e. guided by the Buddha’s en]. The whole field of relationships that develop between people (...), Buddhas and ancestors is closely connected to the concept of en, to the process of creating it and causing it to continue for the benefit of the living.

*En* is thus often evoked to explain the fundamental Buddhist concepts of causality, suffering and the potential path to end suffering (Rowe 2011, p. 46). As such, it is also essential to teachings related to the four inevitables in human life — birth, aging, sickness and death (*shōrōbyōshi*) — with en as a marker of both rupture in and continuity of one’s existence (Hirakawa 1988, pp. 540-543). *En*, in the karmic
sense, are the underlying links between everything and everyone in a person’s life, and yet, these bonds are also attachments that prevent a person from escaping the cycle of suffering and attaining enlightenment.\textsuperscript{39} In Buddhism, death is thus considered to be a way of realising one’s impermanence and interdependence with the universe.

However, in practical terms, the Buddhist notion of en is usually related to practices of memorialisation whereby the bonds between the living and the dead are affirmed and nurtured. Recent ethnographic studies have shown how maintaining en between people during life and after death has become a driving factor behind transformations in funerary, memorial and mourning practices in Japan (Boret 2014 and 2017, Kim 2016, Rowe 2011). Practices of reciprocity that are rooted in notions of interdependence, indebtedness and gratitude for past benevolence represent a key aspect of ritual care for the dead. A person lives their life – a life that is ultimately a collection of human bonds – utterly dependent on the inevitable consequences of aging and death, insofar as the independent identity of the individual is subsumed in both the doctrinal and societal sense (Rowe 2011, p. 46).

Death leads to the severing of a person’s bonds with this world. Yet it also means staying ever connected through the rituals performed by those who are left behind in the realm of the living, entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining bonds between the dead and the living (that is, until their own moment of liberation and renewed bondage through death arrives). Thus, the way in which lay Buddhists are encouraged to make sense of doctrinal teachings related to en in their daily interactions is (for the most part) related to the process of dealing with the realities of decay, loss and death. Namely, they are encouraged to maintain their bonds to their ancestors, recently departed family members, Buddhas and the community of fellow Buddhists.\textsuperscript{40}

Beyond the general Buddhist view of karmic causality and interconnectedness, Jōdo Shinshū doctrine also contains guidance on how karmic en ought to be realised through socio-religious practices. According to the founder Shinran, the achievement of rebirth in the Pure Land is accomplished purely through the salvific power of the Buddha’s compassion: the other-power (tariki). This belief in the importance of other-power and the futility of self-powered efforts toward enlightenment (jiriki) means that

\textsuperscript{39} For an in-depth discussion of the concept of en in Buddhist teachings see Hirakawa (1988, pp. 534-558).
\textsuperscript{40} During fieldwork, these were some of the main themes of sermons delivered by local Buddhist priests during both ceremonies performed at parishioners’ homes (o-mairi) and preaching sessions delivered at the temples (hōza).
one has to possess a complete absence of doubt in the power of Amida’s compassion, and completely abandon all notions of self-power. This experience of unconditional faith is known as shinjin (‘entrusting’ oneself). Realising one’s shinjin means living one’s life with a sense of gratitude and thanks to Amida, placing adherents in a constant state of indebtedness to Amida which they can attempt to repay through meritorious deeds. Aptly, Starling (2019, p. 37) defines en as “the karmic conditions for the attainment of faith.” In Shinran’s account, both the nenbutsu practice of chanting Amida’s name and faith itself originate not from the believer’s own efforts, but rather are bestowed by Amida, meaning that en is generated through Amida’s benevolence. Scholars of Shin Buddhism assert that such soteriology fundamentally plays down individual agency.\footnote{For example, see Dobbins (2002, pp. 147-48).}

Many of my interlocutors did often describe en as something that they had received from others or from Amida itself. However, they also felt that they had a duty to maintain and pass on these ties for the benefit of the living and the dead.

The meaning of the term en may be more or less explicitly linked to one’s karmic conditions, but as Starling (2019, 92) notes, “the view of causality that it invokes is certainly of Buddhist origin.” How Buddhist professionals and how lay people talk about Buddhist dimensions of en is different. Priests are more inclined to be explicit, doctrinal and consciously engaged with the soteriological notions of karma, the Pure Land and salvation. Lay practitioners tend to be more implicit, employing the language of gratitude, indebtedness, duty and faith. Ritual and other practices thus serve as a vehicle for articulating lay people’s meanings of en.

Buddhist meanings of en are intrinsically linked to social notions of connectedness. The association between Buddhist death rituals and household (family) lineage (ie) is an illustrative manifestation of such multivalent en dependencies. Ie has long been a primary organising element in Japanese social structure. It defines people by their relational belonging to a group, rather than as stand-alone individuals (thus reinforcing values of interdependency). Traditionally, ie – and the extended family that it represents – is composed of the living and the protective spirits of the dead. These watchful ancestors and recently departed members of a family (soon to become ancestors) are memorialised through Buddhist rituals of memorialisation and ancestor worship (senzō kuyō). The social structure of ie became an inherent element in the role of Buddhism of caring for the dead and for the karmic dependencies between the living and the dead. Tanigawa (1992, pp. 288-89) notes that the shift toward a family centred consciousness emerged during Tokugawa period, when there was a surge in
family-centred graves and society-wide popularisation of memorial services for the dead.

Traditionally, affiliation to a given Buddhist temple (and a denomination) was defined through the household and rarely related to matters of personal belief. The obligatory household-temple affiliation system (danka seido) was formalised during the Tokugawa (1600-1868) period as a mechanism of social control and regulation. Households were required to register births and deaths and to support temples economically through fees paid for funerary and memorial services and donations offered during Buddhist temple festivals such as higan and o-bon,\textsuperscript{42} attendance at which was compulsory. Although the danka system was abolished in 1871 and fully de-legalised with the freedom of religion act inscribed into Japan’s post-war constitution, it solidified Buddhist professionals’ and rituals’ role in caring for the bonds between the living and the dead, and in ushering the dead onwards in their journey to become ancestors.

The persistence of customary inheritance in relation to Buddhist burial practices and the consequences of the family system on the grave inheritance practices are of note here. Rowe (2011, pp. 23-25) has shown that the legislative changes of the modern period, particularly the 1898 Meiji Civil Code (minpō) which codified the elite model of the extended Japanese household (ie) as law, transformed the very nature of families, binding them to temples through generational transition of practice. In other words, the household-bound succession of family graves and family Buddhist altars became both a right and obligation centred on memorial rituals and ancestral rites that served as vehicles for ensuring continuity of the ie and, ultimately, of Buddhist temple communities. I discuss the notion of en as inherited practice in detail in Chapter 2, but it is important to mention here that despite the legal dissolution of the ie system in 1947, the ties between the family system and temples maintained through the inheritance of religious assets are still defined by the law and remain a crucial aspect of temples’ socio-economic support structures (as I will discuss in Chapter 3).\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42}Higan is a Buddhist holiday celebrated during the Spring and Autumn equinoxes when Japanese people tend to visit family graves (o-haka mairi) and Buddhist temples hold special annual services. O-bon, also referred to as the “ghost festival,” originated from the Buddhist custom of honouring the deceased spirits of one’s ancestors. Dating back to the early seventh century, it remains one of the most widely celebrated festivals in Japan. See (Teiser 1996) on the historical origins of the festival.

\textsuperscript{43}See Inoue (1990) on the legal phrasing of the current rules relating to the inheritance of religious assets.
As will become apparent, this notion of maintaining bonds and recognising mutual dependencies extends beyond the realm of the dead. *En* is also about defining a person’s belonging in this life, including their social and institutional relations. Imagine that every person is “a nexus in a series of human interrelationships” (Becker 1999, p. 70) that are articulated, negotiated and maintained through ritual practices, with death – in the karmic sense – understood as an ultimate moment of resolution and solidification of these interrelations. As such, interdependence and impermanence of *en* are realised, practised and articulated among the living – for the benefit and constraint of all involved. In other words, *en* only exists as a cognitive and affective concept in a society as it is expressed through practice – time and time again.

In the proceeding discussions, I will therefore continue to interpret *en* through the notion of agency (human and non-human) and to focus on its karmic, social and material dimensions.\(^{44}\) As such, I frame *en* not just in terms of fated interdependence (something that simply *is* or *occurs* as part of a person’s karmic destiny), but also as an affective, co-responsible and conscious ‘doing’ of belonging, something that *is done*. *En* is the very *doing* of belonging that is doctrinally and socially constructed, repeated and sanctioned. My use of *en* as an analytical concept foregrounds the agency of my interlocutors as they remained active in mobilising or undoing their connections. My interlocutors, on the other hand, used the emotional language of *en* to describe and materialise what they saw was already there: the very natural (*atarimae*) state of interconnectedness. Although they were conscious of the effort that went into the “doing” and potential “undoing” of *en*, their understanding of it emphasised the emotion that guided their agency.

**En as a material and affective practice**

To understand the value and meaning of *en* for the survival of Buddhist temples, it is important to pay attention to the perspectives of lay community members, as well as those of religious professionals. This was evident during one of my visits to the house of Hirata-san – an active member of Myōkōji’s Buddhist women’s association (*bukkyō fujinkai*) – then, in her mid-seventies. She became one of my most frequent interlocutors and a guide into the world of lay Buddhist life. She also became a friend with whom I often participated in the events of *bukkyō fujinkai*.

*Bukkyō fujinkai* – colloquially referred to as *buppu* or *fujinkai* – is a term used for the women’s groups that started proliferating during the 1890s in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition. They emerged as study groups for women in the Tokyo and Kansai regions

\(^{44}\) Note that I do not equate *en* with agency.
From the turn of the twentieth century, Buddhist women’s groups in both of the major Shin sects sprang up in local districts throughout the country. In 1908, the sect’s headquarters consolidated its numerous local and regional *fujinkai* into a national confederation and the *urakata* (the wife of the head priest of Nishi Honganji, at that time Ōtani Kazuko) was appointed as its head. As Starling (2013, 284) notes, by the time of the first national convention in 1908, there were 103 regional *fujinkai* groups with a total membership of 200,000 women. Local and national Buddhist women’s groups were formed as a result of both grass-roots efforts and the administrative support of the sects, which recognised the immense human, economic and spiritual capital that the activities of these women constituted. In line with these sectarian developments, many local Buddhist temples in Shin Buddhist strongholds such as Hiroshima Prefecture began establishing temple *fujinkai* groups, particularly in the post-war period.

According to Starling (2012, p. 62), the groups thrived due to “the emerging concept that women as good wives and wise mothers were to be the moral backbone of public society.” Nowadays, each Shinshū Buddhist temple is said to have such a group. Membership is usually hereditary and participation is intrinsically linked to the workings of the temple-community dynamics, with *buppu* representing the feminine ideal of Buddhist women as “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsaikenbō*) which emerged during the Meiji period. This feminine ideal reinforced the reproductive role of women who were expected to perform family centred duties, self-sacrifice and obedience (Fujita 1989, p. 72, Kanbayashi and Miura 2003, p. 104). Thus, the ideal Buddhist woman is a domestic propagator of Buddhist values and an educator socialising younger generations into Buddhist practice. In practice, this often means that women are tasked with domestic ritual labour and the responsibility of cultivating the household’s socio-religious ties with the dead, the temple and the community as a whole, even though it is the men who are expected to inherit the household’s religious assets. Members of *bukkyō fujinkai* at most of the temples I visited were customarily tasked with organising *shosanshiki* rituals and annual summer school activities for the local children. I will return to the issue of women’s voluntary labour and the activities

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45 As Starling (2013, p. 284) notes, Buddhist reformer Mokurai Shimaji is said to have started one of the first modern women’s study groups in the Honganji-ha in 1888, called the Ladies’ Teaching Assembly (*Reijo Kyōkai*). However, female confraternities had existed in various local areas since the late Edo period (Chiba 2001, p. 59).

46 See Starling (2013) and Nakanishi (2000) for an overview of the historical development of *bukkyō fujinkai*.

47 For detailed studies of *bukkyō fujinkai* groups and their activities see Starling (2012) and Inose (2016a).
of Buddhist women’s groups in Chapters 3 and 5, but here allow me to return to my visit to Hirata-san’s home.

On 31 December 2016, I arrived at Hirata-san’s house at eight o’clock in the morning equipped with the apron that she had gifted to me the first time we had met. That encounter had taken place at Myōkōji’s kitchen while preparing a lunchtime meal for the attendees of a monthly preaching service (hōza) the day after my arrival in the field. We had bonded over our passion for cooking and so, on that cold December morning, I was standing in her kitchen rolling up my sleeves to learn how to make soba noodles. She had invited me for this cooking lesson partly to introduce me to her family at the family butsudan and to meet her grandson who was visiting from Tokyo. In my ill-fitting (albeit beautifully hand-painted) apron, I kneaded the dough and measured and cut it into even strips, while Hirata-san offered advice and supervised my progress (see Figure 3). In less than an hour, we had eight plastic boxes filled to the brim with floured strips of soba noodles.

Figure 3. Soba-making with Hirata-san (31 December 2016).

Hirata-san asked me to take them back as a gift for the temple. After we had finished our work, we settled underneath electric blankets for a cup of tea. I asked her
why she wanted me to take the soba noodles back to the temple. I figured that she and her grandson would need to keep some of them for their evening meal. Before she answered, she made me promise that I would take all of them back with me to be served at the temple that night when people came for the midnight service to ring the temple’s bell. She then started to tell me about her en to Myōkōji temple, a narrative that I quote here in full in order to do justice to its depth and complexity:

I support Myōkōji, because of the bonds (goen) that my family and I have cultivated there. Well, [whispered] we are not montō members of Myōkōji and the head priest of our family temple still comes twice a year to perform a memorial service at our butsudan. But my husband, father-in-law and I have plenty to be grateful to Myōkōji for. For example, the [temple] family’s great grandmother was my husband’s teacher. She was from Hawaii and spoke English. She was widowed in the war and took on temple duties on her own when her son was only two or three years old. The previous head priest and I are almost peers – he is one year older. As a child, I remember seeing her ride a bicycle whilst wearing her priestly robes on the way to their members. She could have left, but she stayed and cared for the dead. When my first-born daughter died, that’s where I went for comfort, you see. So, our family chooses to support it. My husband supported it until he died, as his father did. Did you see all the donation tablets inside the temple [see Figure 4]? They both made them using wood from the forest behind our house. It is their writing on them too. Whenever I enter the hall and see their brushwork, I get nostalgic. I feel grateful for the years we had together as a family. By getting involved at the temple, I also developed ties (en) with all the fujinkai members there, fostered many friendships – including you. I feel that we are also connected now. You met my grandson and our dead today. I have Myōkōji and Amida to thank for it. Besides, I received my Buddhist name from the head priest of Nishi Honganji temple in Kyoto at a kikyōshiki ceremony at Myōkōji a few years ago. They have a photograph of me receiving it at the temple. You would not believe it; I still dyed my hair black back then. So many precious memories. That day, it seems, I formally tied a bond with the buddhas and the dead. It is a bit scary as it means I am getting closer to death [laughs], but it is also a comforting feeling (anshin na kanji) that we are all in it together. We have to look out for one other before and after we die. I’ll keep helping out for as long as I can and with what little I have.

For Hirata-san, her own connections (with the living, the dead and the buddhas) combine with connections made by her husband and father-in-law that she inherited.

48 In the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, the term montō is the standard Buddhist term for an affiliated household (i.e. danka) member.
49 In Japan, the Buddhist name or hōmyō (often referred to as kaimyō in other Buddhist sects, see Covell 2005, pp. 165-90) is a name given to monks at the point of ordination and to the deceased as a symbol of posthumous ordination. In the Jōdo Shinshū tradition (among others) a lay person can obtain this name from the sect’s headquarters during their lifetime and take part in their local temple’s naming ceremony or kikyōshiki (lit: ceremony of return) during which the deceased return to receive their names.
50 Interview, 31 December 2016.
She recognises the non-linear intersubjectivity of her own existence and her relatedness to both those who are still alive and to the spirits (hotoke) of those who have passed away and the bonds that they have left behind. By referring to Hirata-san’s existence as one of non-linear intersubjectivity, I mean that the trajectories of her life combine the duties and emotional attachments of other people with those of her own, both past and present. She supports Myōkōji because of her duties as a wife, her own friendships with the living and the departed members of the temple community, and her personal spiritual relationship with Amida. Parallel to her subjective reasons for cultivating her ties with the temple, she takes responsibility for her husband’s and father-in-law’s debts of gratitude. This interrelatedness, as I will argue here and in subsequent chapters, is maintained within complex affective and material networks of kin and non-kin-based loyalties, indebtedness and gratitude that are of significant karmic and social consequence.

Figure 4. Donation tablets at Myōkōji made by the Hirata family (12 November 2016).

The material and non-material manifestations of en – such as donation tablets, brushwork, and the more elusive images stored in the human memory – have the capacity to evoke strong emotional associations and a range of feelings – from nostalgia to gratitude and a sense of responsibility and commitment of care. In her

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51 The term hotoke carries a number of meanings including ‘a departed soul’, ‘a Buddha’ and ‘an enlightened being,’ indicating that the aim of Buddhism in Japan is to become enlightened after death, not during one’s lifetime (Reader 1991, p. 41).
analysis of self and society in the Japanese family, Jane Bachnik (1994, pp. 143-67) highlights the importance of protecting one’s true feelings by observing the division between obligation and the expression of human feeling, which are reserved respectively for the public and private spheres of life. However, *en* is where this division between the two becomes blurred. The polyvalence of *en* allows people to articulate their true feelings, private sentiments and emotions through ritualistic practices in the public sphere that allow (or compel) them to stay connected and nurture their affinities or, conversely, to loosen or abandon their ties to local Buddhist temple communities. Emotions are often highly entangled with notions of morality, insofar as emotions are often effective mechanisms of ethical comportment.

Emotional affinities to people, places, divinities, ideas, and objects influence our moral choices and shape our ideas about duty and responsibility. However, emotions, through their multivalence and through the circulation of “their” agency between the subjects and objects of their relations, have the power to navigate different moralities or even subvert them, thus allowing people to explore alternative avenues, connections and forms of belonging.

My interlocutors did not usually identify their emotionally loaded affinities with a Buddhist temple as an institution: *en* did not convey a sense of denominational belonging. Rather, they described their connections and practices of maintaining *en* vis-à-vis other people, divinities and an ideal of communal unity. In his research on structures of belonging within Japanese companies, Fruin (1980) noted that Japanese people display a preference to connect and identify emotionally and intellectually with their workmates, rather than with a corporation. The firm is only ever as important as the complex networks of interdependence between the individuals that work within in.\(^52\) I argue that the same applies to a Buddhist temple: its value depends on the value ascribed to the community that surrounds it and the connections (*en*) between the individual human and non-human active agents that build and maintain this community. We therefore need to focus on the quality of human relations and the work that goes into nurturing them, rather than abstract concepts of “Buddhist” institutional belonging.

As Yamamoto-san pointed out, Buddhist temples as institutions cannot exist without a community of people within which the quality of human relations is cultivated. Institutionalised networks of obligation are certainly of importance for maintaining community structures. However, Hirata-san chose to support her local temple out of her emotional attachment (which she defines as *en*) for her husband

\(^{52}\) See Smith (1985).
and other temple affiliated members with whom she recognises a shared emotional bond (even friendship). Similarly, the head priest of my host temple stepped onto the path of inherited priesthood out of his emotional and intellectual attachment to his parents, as well as in recognition of the friendships, generosity and kindness of heart afforded to him and his family by lay members. However, a person’s emotional and material commitment of belonging is not permanent. Many Buddhist priests and community leaders recognise that, individually and collectively, they should be making continuous efforts to keep people’s loyalties fresh and to nurture practices and attitudes of co-responsibility.

**Doing belonging: what has en got to do with it?**

I foreground the notion of *en* as a practice-dependent set of socially constructed relations that can be purposefully nourished and abandoned. For this to happen, it is important to pay equal attention to the narratives that people produce about *en* and to material realities and bodily practices that articulate *en*.

In their work on “emotional translations,” Pernau and Rajamani (2016, p. 48) propose a three-point process for investigating how material reality and concepts intersect:

First, material reality can be linked to interpretation only through the intermediary of the body and the senses. Second, the interpretation does not proceed only through language-based concepts, but also through visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory signs, which together form a multimedial semantic net. Third, for interpretation to shape material reality through practices, the body has to be brought in again.

They acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings and diversity of sources (“multimedia networks”) in the process of developing knowledge and meanings of concepts/notions. As such, *en* is not only a marker of “human connections.” It also comprises the embodied practice of, for example, a *shosanshiki* ritual that welcomes new children to a temple. All the sounds, smells and textures of this ritual generate emotional connections and material markers of such connections, such as the children’s handprints, which are an articulation of social and karmic belonging. As we have seen, Yamamoto-san hoped that this ritual would evoke feelings of nostalgia or an emotional urge to revisit the practice. Drawing on similar examples, I will further unfold processes of performative and emotional belonging, focusing on people’s

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53 In his study of Nichiren-shū priests, Horii (2018, pp. 176-77) also points out that for majority of temple-born priests, becoming a priest is predominantly a family matter; many of his interviewees cited the inspiration provided by their priestly fathers as a direct reason for their choice.
implicit and explicit instincts to belong through religious practice and affiliation to local and regional temple communities that are striving for survival.

For Buddhist priests, the presence of en often means to belong in this life and beyond. Yamamoto-san at Yōanji wanted to foster the psychological and material presence of en through the shosanshiki ritual ceremony and an add-on practice of producing handprints. My lay interviewees such as Hirata-san also felt that, through their labour and by offering the products of their labour, they nourished their connections with human and non-human entities. During the twelve months I was in the field, I was also unwittingly generating and deepening socio-religious bonds of en with the living and the dead in the researched community. As I joined locals to empty rice-paddy water canals in the spring, to polish the temple’s ornaments in winter and clear weeds from the temple garden in the summer heat, to practice bon odori at a local school in August, and to chant sutras at household Buddhist altars almost daily, I was producing and preserving en. “Now we have truly developed a bond (ima wa hontōni goen wo dekimashita),” I was often told after the event.

One female parishioner, Nakata-san, used to make and send hand-painted postcards to me every time our paths crossed at temple and community events. In her messages she attributed our curious bond (fushigi na goen) to the benevolence of the buddhas, and she was by no means the only one to do so. I always responded in writing and we kept this form of recognising and maintaining our connection throughout my fieldwork and since. Towards the end of my stay, I asked Nakata-san about the meaning of her postcards (see Figure 5). She responded:

By making and sending the postcards, I wanted to acknowledge our en. We met through a shared practice of chanting namu amida butsu, and we developed a connection thanks to Amida and Myōkōji. We kept our bond by exchanging postcards. Such things have value and should not be easily abandoned, especially at the time when it is becoming harder to stay connected to people.

Nakata-san attributed this difficulty to stay connected with others to her own and other people’s fragile health, old age and lack of interest, as well as to the death of friends, or simply the absence of a next (younger) generation who would subscribe to the same set of values (an issue that I will explore further in Chapters 3 and 5). The difficulty of maintaining bonds or the state of being without them (muen) has been emphasised in the recent public and scholarly discourse of moral panic over the

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54 Bon odori is a form of dance performed during o-bon (see p. 46 note 40).
55 Namu Amida Butsu – meaning ‘I take refuge in Amida Buddha’ – is the religious invocation known as the nenbutsu, a core Jōdo Shinshū practice (see p.33).
56 Interview, 8 August 2017.
social disintegration of communal ties (muenshakai; ‘bondless society’), the phenomenon of dying alone (kodokushi) and the resultant abandonment of the dead (muenbotoke; ‘abandoned dead’ or ‘bondless spirits’). The notion of en (and its antithetic notion of muen) is thus often evoked as a marker of a troubled and disrupted sociality related to death, aging and loss. These are concerns shared and appreciated by my interviewees such as Nakata-san who nonetheless considered practices of nurturing en worthwhile, despite her own declining health.

What is of note here is the role attributed to the origin of our en. For Nakata-san, our correspondence (the act of producing, sending and receiving it) was a manifestation of en bestowed upon us by Amida and facilitated by the temple through shared ritual practices. By exchanging postcards, we continued to act out our socio-religious bond. I would go even further to suggest that the practice itself (a ritual of sorts) – the doing of it – was indeed en: a performative declaration of our affinity to one another. Consequently, what comes to the fore is the agency imbued in en – what people do and how they articulate their belonging and their responses to the transformations that affect their individual and community lives. Even if en occurs as a mysterious gift bestowed upon individuals by the buddhas (an inherent marker of universal relatedness), it is people’s agency that ultimately allows en to either manifest itself or disintegrate in the world. Disintegration or abandonment of en is a result of agency rather than a lack thereof. It takes on a transformative nature that alters the nature of human bonds and people may choose to break their en away from

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57 For public and scholarly debates on muenshakai see NHK ‘Muen Shakai Purojekuto’ Shuzaihan (2010), Ishida (2011), Rowe (2011, pp. 44-45) and Tachibanaki (2011). Japanese discourse on social fragmentation relates to the broader discourse on lack of social cohesion in post-industrial societies, exemplified by Robert Putnam’s work (2000) on ‘social capital.’ Drawing on the theoretical framework of social capital, scholars of religion in Japan began highlighting the significance of religious practice and institutions in nurturing social trust, in-group mutuality and intergroup cooperation (for example, see Borup 2018, Sakurai and Kawamata 2016). Although I find the framework of relationality in Putnam’s work fruitful (whereby social capital is interrogated as resilience and effectiveness of networks of social relations), social capital angle tends to locate value of religion in public-facing and public-benefiting initiatives while side-stepping the conversation of value that is transmitted within the religious lives of practitioners and associated community members. Namely, it highlighted the significance of the outward-facing incarnations of religion, while overlooking the importance of human relations at a highly localised level that are of varied consequence for Buddhism’s institutional and community-level survival, which I interrogate instead through the emic notion of en.


59 For example, see Rowe (2011, pp. 46-7) and Danely (2014, pp. 104-5).
the traditional regime of karmic morality to search for new sets of values and to establish alternative ways of belonging to a community.

Figure 5. Examples of postcards made by Nakata-san (November 2016, January and March 2017).

Even as a researcher participating in various individual and communal practices as a non-member, local and trans-local networks of *en* became part of my experience through formal and grass-roots-level organisational structures that bind, and through practices that enable people to establish and cultivate relational ties on personal and communal levels. At first glance, such bonds may appear to be fated and serendipitous (as many people perceived my arrival in the community in the first place). However, as I have argued in this chapter (and will continue to do so throughout the thesis), that these bonds were in fact purposefully produced and reproduced, crafted and maintained through ritual, material and affective practices designed to evoke feelings of longing and nostalgia for one’s spiritual home. In the case of children who are welcomed annually into Yamamoto-san’s temple community through the *shosanshiki* ceremony, their belonging to the temple community is ritualised through the rite of inclusion. It is then commemorated through a material handprint of their connection, which it is hoped will evoke an emotional reaction of longing and sense of familiarity in the future.

Such seemingly serendipitously developed bonds are a guide to understanding the temple-community dependencies upon which Buddhism’s local institutional survival hinges. To begin to understand those connections, I have discussed *en* through its socio-religious, affective and material dimensions as a signifier of relational
sociality among the living and between the living and the dead. As will become apparent, *en* is not necessarily a static and non-negotiable notion, but rather, it constitutes a practice-dependent set of socially constructed and sanctioned relations that are maintained and abandoned via one’s own praxis, by one’s own choice (purposefully re-produced) and by the choices of others (inherited). Moreover, these relations constitute affective bonds that are emotionally implicated by notions of reciprocity, gratitude and indebtedness. Such sentiments are often emulated through social values such as filial piety and neighbourly aid, the relevance of which for social interactions in Japan is widely acknowledged (Befu 1968, Bestor 1989, Dore 1963, Smith 1985). However, the key to understanding both the karmic and social meanings of *en* is the framework of interdependence.

**Making and breaking Buddhist temple communities**

In essence, Buddhist temple communities are sites where *en* is created or can come to fruition. In mapping out *en*, there are two areas of focus here. One is on agency, which I have discussed above. The other is on the narratives of survival and crisis, which provide an important contextual framework for my analysis. Realisation of the importance of *en* comes from the experiences of loss, death and decline that shaped the everydayness of all my interviewees. Tracing the presence of *en* also means dealing with absence (Meyer 2012) and change, and unpacking the risks posed by disjuncture in Buddhist networks of belonging predicated on Neo-Confucian notions of filial piety, communal loyalty and karmic interdependence.

The notion of “not yet” relating to depopulation, echoing Yamomoto-san’s words in the chapter’s opening vignette, emerged very strongly in my conversations with Buddhist professionals and lay community members alike. My interlocutors were not oblivious to the transformations, challenges, and threats posed to their temples and communities by the demographic and socio-economic shifts discussed in the Introduction. However, they were carefully evaluating the current status quo that positioned their experiences somewhere in-between “no longer” and “not yet.” To questions about whether they felt if their community was depopulated, my interviewees often answered something along the lines of “Here? No, not quite yet,” and almost invariably pointed their finger upwards towards Shimane Prefecture.

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60 Nakae Tōju (1608–1648), a pioneer of Japanese Neo-Confucian thought, emphasised filial piety as the most eminent virtue one can possess. He espoused the idea that children owe to their parents a debt of such enormity that it can never be repaid, which remained the guiding principle of ethics education until 1945 (Hardacre 1984, p. 3). It continues to inform Buddhist morality in contemporary times (Hardacre 1984, Reader 1993, Starling 2019), especially in the area of death practices (Rowe 2011).
suggesting that if I wanted to see depopulation, I should really go there. As Yamamoto-san noted, unless regional depopulation is countered at the community level, he expects his family temple to cease to exist – perhaps not in his lifetime, but certainly in the next two generations, provided that they can secure a successor and continue to develop a supporting community to survive even that long.

The collection of handprints at Yamamoto-san’s temple is an example of the connections – and thus community building – established through repeated ritual practice. The *shosanshiki* ceremony is intended as a way of institutionalising one’s belonging to a Buddhist community, and as a way of developing and nurturing children’s affective relationship with the people and places of their childhood. Yamamoto-san incorporated the ritual of producing and displaying local children’s handprints in his temple in order to nurture the bonds between the children, his temple and the community. He also decided to involve all the children and their parents year after year. On the one hand, this repeated participation offered a practical solution to the problem of not having enough children being born into the community in order to sustain ritual continuity (some years there might be no newly born babies to be welcomed). On the other hand, he also hoped that the repeated practice would deepen the bond and engrave in people’s memory a sentiment of belonging to the community of which his temple is a part. I suggest that these adaptations to the ceremony are the very doing of *en* and a way of affirming its material presence, psychological depth and karmic and social consequences.

This is just one example of such effort to establish the psychological and material foundations on which people’s belonging and interestedness (or lack thereof) is produced and fostered at both personal and institutional levels. The head priest of Yōanji and other priests in this region who expressed their concerns over disappearing human connections are not unique to my research. John Nelson (2012) reports on similar issues, which surfaced in his interviews with priests around central Japan. Several of his interviewees identified a “‘weak relationship’ with parishioners” (2012, 56) as one of the biggest domestic challenges to Buddhism in Japan. The original Japanese is not provided, so it is unclear whether the priests were referring to *en* when they talked about a “weak relationship,” but Nelson did point to temple-household relations and the economic consequences of declining *danka* membership numbers on temples’ financial stability.61

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61 Issues related to the temple’s economic support structures will be explored in detail in Chapter 3.
By tracing these human connections and the practices that sustain them, I aim to provide an insight into the challenges faced by Japanese Buddhist temples in the context of complex community dynamics. This will, I hope, allow to ground issues related to decline and continuity in contemporary Japanese Buddhism more clearly within the local communities that sustain and surround Buddhist institutions, and, in turn, to examine how (in this case) local Jōdo Shinshū temples remain (dis)engaged in their traditional roles of fostering community spirit and loyalty, and making the issues of death, aging and temple survival an interconnected communal affair.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that in a socio-religious sense, *en* is an expression of interdependence, a relational marker and a type of work, that is sustained and articulated through affective and material practices, including rituals of mourning and inclusion, memorialisation of the dead and the production of memory, as well activities oriented towards supporting the institutions that oversee, encourage and facilitate such practices. In the subsequent succeeding chapters, I will unpack each of these practices in turn, framing *en* as an inherited practice, an economic practice, a value-generating practice, an anticipatory practice of dealing with decline, and finally as an institutional strategy for survival.

Thus far, I have shown that *en* can be understood to be a socially ordering notion that enables “the mapping out of people onto a relationship of group-based rights and obligations anchored to social institutions” (Nozawa 2015, p. 388) such as kinship, locality or being a member of a Buddhist temple community. Yet, *en* also appears to stand for a more subjective notion of seemingly serendipitous encounters and resultant connections, which can be considered as the fated manifestation of universal interdependence. These two meanings of *en* cannot be separated – the more serendipitous and mysterious notion of *en* represents an illusion of freedom from institutionalised forms of inherited fated identities instantiated through, for example, the household-based temple membership system and the *ie*-based system of ancestor worship. At the same time, I point out that people ultimately have agency. *En* is not entirely imposed upon them. Explaining it away with societal obligations or “magic” alone takes away the richness and complexity of people’s experiences, their self-reflexivity and the creativity of the solutions that they employ to psychologically and physically frame and conceptualise their belonging in this and in the other world.

To appreciate how emotional narratives and practices of *en* affect and are counter-affected by socially ordering mechanisms of belonging (such as family and community), I have concentrated on what it means to articulate *en* through practice.
En is thus performative. It is what is done and what it does. It is nurtured and it nurtures. It allows people to feel connected – to be seen, heard and valued. By defining en in this way, I propose to look at temples and their custodians as embedded in networks of emotional and material interrelations, as well as to explore those interrelations without essentialising the temple as a uniform entity. Agency does not rest with a Buddhist temple (both as an abstract concept and in its material form); the doing of ‘survival’ and ‘decline’ of Japanese temple Buddhism is performed by and dependent upon people, as individuals and as communities, who may choose or be compelled to nurture or abandon their connections to the living and the dead members of their social networks. What is striking is how and why people choose to express their belonging to a local community (or its prescribed variant) through Buddhist and temple-related practice. The fact that people find these practices worthwhile and oppressive (at times simultaneously) helps us to revaluate the role local Buddhist temples and their custodians play and are imagined to play in the community-building processes through which people adapt to and deal with change.

In the next chapter, I turn to ethnographic examples of daily life at a Buddhist temple to investigate how thinking about temple communities through the prism of en as a type of work that impinges upon the material and social/emotional realities of temple communities can deepen our understanding of the issues faced by local Buddhist priests and lay members in their daily struggle to preserve human connections and to deal with lost ones. I will therefore focus on en as an inherited practice which is of considerable existential consequence for temple families and lay members alike.
Chapter Two

*En as an inherited practice: mobilising filial bonds*

**Introduction: the making of the next generation**

Life in a Buddhist temple, as I came to know it, is an act of waiting. Yet, it is not a state of calm contemplation. It is steeped in anticipation and a constant state of readiness. It is an act of listening for the sliding door to rattle and then swoosh on opening, for the footsteps of the first morning visitors, for the sound of a phone ringing that makes a spoon loaded with warm rice porridge freeze in the air during breakfast. An interruption is usually followed by the quick steps of a head priest hurrying to welcome the visitors or to answer the phone. Life at a temple is an act of mundane practice filled with the noises and silences of everyday tasks, checking budgets, writing postcards and organising preaching sessions. Every now and again, a muffled female voice floats down from the radio box fitted near the ceiling of the temple’s living space with a list of regional announcements. Everyone freezes for a moment to see if there is any news of upcoming funerals, recent deaths, festivals, community gatherings or other local updates.

According to Suzuki-san and his father, being a custodian of a temple is not a job, it is a “24/7 service” (*nenjūmukyū no sābisu*) to the temple and to the community. Given the demands of the temple life, I wondered why people chose to commit to it.

I always knew that I was going to become a priest. It was not something that I was asked my opinion about. I kind of assumed that I should not harness too much hope for making my life successful in any other way. I helped with the rituals from as early as I can remember, and then the transition just felt obvious. [Matsumoto-san, a female head priest (60)]

How did I become a head priest? Well, my older brother who was supposed to inherit our family temple came back after his studies, but could not quite settle into rural life. With our place being so remote – and already few young people left back then – he also struggled to find a wife. He wanted to leave and lead a different life. I was in Kyoto at the time and had already met my wife and married, so we just came back. That’s how it goes. It moves along the line until it sticks. [Moriyama-san, a male head priest (56)]

I retired a few years ago. We had the whole ceremony and then my eldest son took over the temple officially. That was an important gesture to show to the members that he is ready to take over whenever the time comes. But he still has his successful career, so he only comes back at the weekends. My wife and I still take care of things in the meantime. People were a little bit concerned because his first engagement did not work out, but, as you know, he got married this April and we are already expecting a grandson. Our members are thrilled. (...) Also, why wait with the transition? If the head priest gets too old, the congregation ages with
them, and we can all but forget about attracting the next generation of engaged lay supporters. [Satō-san, a male retired head priest (62)]

I married into this temple family from another temple. I was the second son, and second sons usually do not inherit, so they have to either find employment outside of a temple or enter another temple family. You see, I wanted to be a priest. We have three children, and, for now, they are all free to do what they wish, pursue their dreams and all that, but when they are home, they are always involved in the temple activities. You met my daughter and her boyfriend at the summer school. It is important to show that the younger generations are as invested in all this as we are. Otherwise, how could we encourage our members to pass on the teachings to their children and grandchildren? Why would they want to bring their children here? And why would the children want to come if there are no other kids around, and a temple is just associated with death? [Tarō-san, a male head priest (48)]

This is my grandmother's temple. I came back from Tokyo a few years ago. I was working as a graphic designer and a DJ, but my grandmother asked me to come back. There was no one else to take over the temple, so after months of internal turmoil, I came back. When my parents divorced, she kept the family steady, so I guess it is only fair to help her keep the temple steady now. I could not have refused. I guess I always knew that, sooner or later, she would ask me. [Itō-san, a male head priest (35)]

These quotes come from the interviews that I conducted with twenty-two head priests of Jōdo Shinshū temples between April and August 2017. I always opened my interviews with priests with a question about their journey into Buddhist priesthood. All of them, in one way or another, stressed the ideas of family, continuity, duty of care, filial piety and a sense of anticipation of the generational transition that would take place sooner or later in their lives.

In this chapter, I investigate the notion of en as an inherited set of connections and practices. In the process, I draw further attention to the link between traditional notions of family (or household, ie), death rituals and affective routines that bring intimate family ties into the realm of Buddhist practice (which I introduced in Chapter 1). Here, I argue that the notion of continuity epitomised by the ideal of family promoted in Buddhist temple communities is, for many Buddhist priests, an inherent element of en. By exploring the ways in which Buddhist priests mobilise human and non-human connections through Buddhist ritual practice, I also show what happens when people either choose to break the en, or when over time they let things slip as life gets busy and they become concerned with other things.

Our main guide to this story is Suzuki-san – the current head priest of my host temple Myōkōji – who having turned forty-seven during my fieldwork was one of the youngest head priests in the region. Like most Japanese Buddhist priests, he became

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62 See Appendix 1 for a copy of the interview guide.
a priest because, as the eldest son born into the temple family, he was expected to fulfill his family lineage duties of inheriting the temple and the duties of care for the bonds of all of its affiliated dead and living members. His inheritance of both practice and en relations are of paramount importance here: they represent an assumed norm that defines people’s belonging in Buddhist communities. How do people develop, maintain and inherit en, and what happens when they choose to abandon it? These are the questions that I will continue to probe throughout this chapter, focusing specifically on the activities that constitute regular temple routine as experienced by Suzuki-san.

**Inherited burden of en**

Growing up in a temple family carries with it a burden of responsibility of care. Every day started early at Myōkōji temple. The head priest and his wife woke up before five in the morning to prepare breakfast for the children and send them out of the door in time for one of the first Hiroshima-bound trains of the day. Trains were infrequent, and the journey took about an hour and a half, so there was no margin for error. Meanwhile, the previous head priest – Suzuki-san senior – climbed down from his room and unlocked the doors to the vestibule leading to the temple’s living quarters. The village alarm located in the nearby community centre rang at six and that was my cue to head over to the temple’s dining area to help prepare for breakfast. Shortly after, Suzuki-san senior finished his coffee, folded away the paper and headed over to open the door to the family’s butsdan and to set up the temple’s main hall for the morning service. He waited in a sitting position in front of the main altar of Buddha Amida while the head priest, his wife (bōmori-san) and I set up breakfast.

Before the meal, the family gathered for morning sutra chanting at the main temple hall and for a brief incantation at the family altar, a widely practiced routine at temples in this region. Suzuki-san senior delivered the sutra at the main hall (see Figure 6), whereas Suzuki-san took his turn in front of the butsdan whilst bōmori-san pottered about tidying away the dust of burnt incense and watering the altar flowers. The chanting culminated with a triple chant of “namu amida butsu” and a hearty “Good morning!” directed at all the living and all the dead. The buddhas had been greeted and the day at the temple had officially started. This morning ritual was repeated every morning, without fail. It was a compulsory act of mental preparation and a short moment of reflection before the day’s events unfold.

The main temple hall and butsdan were where the family’s and temple’s successes and troubles were celebrated and communicated, where promises to do one’s hardest were made and thanks for accomplishments (big and small) were
uttered. The morning ritual was a way of sharing news with dead family members, but also with departed members of the community. The main hall and temple’s butsdan were part of the temple where personal and communal, private and public spheres merged. According to Suzuki-san senior, it was a place where individual and community bonds (en) between the living and the dead were renewed and maintained every day.\(^63\) The inexhaustible repetitiveness of this morning practice was a constant reminder of a promise made by this temple family to always be and serve as custodians to the temple.

Figure 6. Morning sutra chanting by Suzuki-san senior, Myōkōji (3 January 2017).

Aside from its personal dimension, the ritual constituted a professional act of offering greetings and thanks to Amida on behalf of the entire community of supporting members and neighbours. Beyond an individual religious practice of renewed gratitude, a strong sense of duty (gimu) and responsibility (sekinin) for collective representation appeared to rest on the shoulders of this temple family. Over twelve months of sharing this practice of morning salutation, I developed an understanding that it constitutes a daily marker of the formal re-start to the service that the head priest and his family feel that they are committed and required to deliver to the living and the dead members of their temple community. What is this service exactly? What does a Buddhist priest do and why? And what does the

\(^63\) Fieldnotes, January 2017.
everydayness of temple existence tell us about community dynamics, individual and collective structures of belonging and Buddhist temple communities’ capacity for survival?

**Temple children (o-tera no ko)**

One summer evening in July 2017, whilst on our way back from a preaching service at another temple, I asked Suzuki-san whether he enjoyed temple life and his role of a head priest. I was hoping that the past few months of developing mutual trust in each other had built a base to ask such a direct question, and what is more, to be given an honest answer. He replied without a hesitation: “I do enjoy it: I returned sooner than I expected but I always knew that I would, so there are no regrets. It is a good life surrounded by my family and people who truly care for this temple.” After a slight hesitation and with sudden concern in his voice he added: “I only feel sorry for my son. I think he understands his duties (gimu) and it is making him feel lost. He is not sure what to study at university and is weary about pursuing his passions.” I asked, in turn, “Does he understand why he needs to take over the temple?” Suzuki-san paused for longer this time and then said quietly: “He understands his obligations (gimu), but his en – not quite yet. I didn’t either.”

Suzuki-san and his wife were both in their late forties and had been helping to run this temple since they had relocated back to rural Hiroshima nearly twenty years ago. An unfortunate chain of events including illness in the family and the premature death of Suzuki-san’s mother, as well as caring responsibilities for elderly members of his family, meant that Suzuki-san had transitioned into his role as a head priest much sooner than he had expected. Both he and his wife were well-educated: Suzuki-san had been pursuing a career as a researcher, and Aki-san had worked as a nurse at a children’s hospital. Taking over the temple duties limited and eventually curtailed their personal career aspirations. Running a relatively well-supported, mid-size Buddhist temple came with a lot of freedom in certain areas (such as a rewarding family life and the ability, as a father, to spend time with one’s children), but it also came with a heavy load of responsibilities and expectations, of which the pressure to maintain the priestly lineage is a crucial one.

The first and foremost obligation of a temple child (o-tera no ko) is to ensure the continuity of the temple family lineage and to gradually take over temple duties from one’s parents, an organisational characteristic of the Shin Buddhist tradition that

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64 Fieldnotes, July 2017.
65 Fieldnotes, November 2016.
Michael Solomon (1974, p. 403) refers to as the practice of developing a “religious dynasty.” Suzuki-san represents the fourteenth generation of head priests at Myōkōji temple. He succeeded his father, who began his priestly duties at the age of nine when he accompanied his mother to conduct a funeral for the first time. Suzuki-san senior’s mother, a Hawaii-born Japanese, had joined her husband to return to the north of Hiroshima Prefecture to take over the family temple before the start of the Pacific War. Before Suzuki-san senior was born, his father was conscripted to the army and posted to the Philippines where he is said to have died soon after. His wife and infant son were left to care for the temple and provide the community with memorial and funerary services. Suzuki-san senior’s school absences were always excused and tolerated because of the role he played in the community and because death is often unexpected (as he himself says, the dead and the grieving cannot wait). Like many other priests of his generation, Suzuki-san senior (then in his mid-seventies), believes that his primary duty is to spread the Buddhist teachings by serving his community and by helping to nurture a community built on togetherness, compassion and family values. It is also clear that, in his understanding, this duty extends through family bonds to his children, grandchildren and thereafter.

The importance of the family for the wellbeing of Buddhism as an institution in Japan stems from the historical relationship between the ie (household/family lineage) system and the temple discussed in Chapter 1. The family as an idealised unit – the continuity of which depends on the ritualised preservation of en – forms a basic part of ordinary Jōdo Shinshū teachings. This is reflected in many of the denominational published materials I have seen and in the Buddhist sermons that I witnessed being delivered during ritual visits at parishioners’ homes and during preaching events at the local temple. The ideal of a perfect family and inheritance of duties of care is thus replicated within the temple setting.

66 For a detailed debate on hereditary priesthood, see Jaffe (2001).
67 When emigration to Hawaii began in 1885, one of the first groups to make the crossing were 963 people from Hiroshima Prefecture who constituted 33 percent of the first wave of migrant workers to be employed on the American sugar cane plantations in Hawaii. By 1940, nearly 4 percent of the Hiroshima Prefecture population had emigrated to Hawaii (Ayukawa 2008, pp. 9-11). Among them were the parents and grandparents of Suzuki-san’s grandparents. See Ayukawa (2008) for a detailed history of the Hiroshima immigrants to Hawaii and Canada.
68 Fieldnotes, October 2016.
70 Starling (2019) also writes about the similar pressures faced by the temple wives, particularly among the older generation of bōmori.
In the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, the practice of inherited priesthood dates back to Rennyo’s (1415-99) ministry, whilst the custom of marrying and having family has been a distinguishing feature of the Shinshū priesthood since its early beginnings in the Kamakura period, starting with Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū. Practices of temple and priesthood inheritance became fully developed during the Meiji (1868-1912) era with the decriminalisation of clerical marriage (nikujiki saitai) in 1872. Finally, legal changes related to religious institutions in the post-war era and the introduction of the Religious Corporations Act essentially transformed Buddhist temples into family-run NPOs with a lineage of emotional attachments and ancestry to be preserved and obeyed. The legal status of ie as a basic socio-religious and economic unit in Japanese society was legislated out of existence by the Occupation-inspired Civil Code of 1947. As a result, individuals, not families, were made the basic social unit (Goldfarb 2018, p. 185). Although these legislative changes had a profound impact on Buddhist institutions (as discussed in the Introduction), household-temple dependencies have continued to define relations between individuals, households and local temples, particularly in rural areas.

As the eldest son, Suzuki-san was always expected to return and take over the temple and, as he says, he always knew that he would. He returned in his late twenties and became a head priest in his early thirties. Now, in his late forties, he looks with distant fondness and gratitude at his childhood at the temple, but he is also acutely aware of the burden that the pressure to carry on places on an individual. Bitter tales about growing up at a temple and episodes of bullying surfaced in many of my conversations with the younger generation of priests, priests-to-be and temple family members, especially those in small rural communities where any form of

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72 Nikujiki saitai was a law promulgated by the Meiji government reflecting Japan’s attempts at modernization, in this case the separation of religion and state, as influenced by the West. The law actively contradicted the precepts of renunciant Buddhism (shukke bukkkyō), decreeing that: “[F]rom now on Buddhist clerics shall be free to eat meat, marry, grow their hair, and so on. Furthermore, they are permitted to wear ordinary clothing when not engaged in religious activities” (Jaffe 2001, p. 72). However, meat-eating and clerical marriage had been Jōdo Shinshū practices from its very beginnings.

73 As Goldfarb (2018, p. 195) notes, the ie system was legally abolished due to its connection to the imperial system. However, the family registry system (koseki seido) that stems from the ie system continues to shape everyday sensibilities concerning legal family forms and bureaucratic processes. See Krogness (2010) for a discussion on what he refers to as “koseki consciousness.”
“sticking out” tends to be punished by the majority, and where personal disagreements tend to lead to generation-long conflicts. Above all, they often expressed an indisputable awareness of their pre-determined future: sooner or later they would be ordained and become a priest.

Suzuki-san did not feel that he had pressured his son to take over the temple: it was not something he would explicitly tell him to do anytime soon. Although the pressure was not overt, I noticed small gestures of encouragement in the parents’ commitment to ensure that both of their children enter priesthood (tokudo) and hold a priestly licence. Suzuki-san’s son (Kenji-san) was a seventeen-year-old high school student when I interviewed him. I was intrigued to learn that the idea of succeeding his father one day appeared to be already clear in his mind, and he was indeed aware of his destiny (even if he was yet to develop his understanding of Buddhist concepts such as en):

I hope that one day I will understand and become interested in Buddhist teachings, I hope that perhaps as I grow older, I will be able to understand and teach them to other people. I realise that a time will come when I will have to return, I understand this. But first I want to leave, I want to experience a different kind of life, and maybe secure a job that might help me and my family in the future. When I see my mother, my father and grandad working hard every day to keep the temple going, and I see the generosity of other people who offer food and money to us, I know that I owe it to my family and I want to, one day, continue their efforts.

Kenji-san’s words reflected a common struggle to reconcile personal aspirations, faith and the nurtured gratitude and obligation towards one’s family and the community of supporters. There also appeared to be a shared understanding and expectation (implicit and explicit) among the danka members and the parents that, sooner or later, Kenji-san will indeed become the fifteenth jūshoku of Myōkōji temple and take over the service duties from his father and grandfather.

Within some temples’ by-laws, it is stated explicitly that the first son of the head priest will be his successor (Starling 2019, p. 23). Most temples operate within “the axis of the structure of the ie” (Nakane 1967, p. 2), which emphasises the importance of succession following the classic model of ie kinship organisation defined via a ‘4-P’

74 The reasons behind such bullying that surfaced in my interviews included excessive donations and the practice of using honorific language towards temple children, which makes them stand out among their peers. In the Japanese context, bullying can occur because a person sticks out for both “positive” reasons (e.g. being the child of a Buddhist priest) and for “negative” reasons (e.g., being the child of a single mother) (see Inamura 1986, Kamata 1998). See also Covell (2005, pp. 82-84) on the bullying of temple children in Tendai Buddhism.

75 Interview, 13 August 2017.
model of descent: patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal and primogeniturial. Continuity of the ie-as-members is defined by kinship (chi no tsunagari or ketsuen, i.e. “blood ties”). However, many scholars have challenged the idea that “blood” is isomorphic with biology and argued that Japanese kinship is a cultural matter (Bachnik 1983, Goldfarb 2018). Recruitment strategies for temple succession, similar to those in many ie enterprises, include marriage, adoption, ordination by a lay member or a group of members, open-call recruitment through the sect’s headquarters, and the transfer of ritual responsibilities to another local priest (preferably with a kin connection, however distant). There are many examples of younger sons, daughters and wives inheriting temples. The number of women who inherit family temples has increased significantly, particularly in the post-war period. Suzuki-san senior’s mother is one example. Female priests are perhaps more visible in the Shin Buddhist tradition: the subject of female ordination is less controversial in Shin Buddhism than in other denominations and cases of wives and daughters of Buddhist priests who hold a priestly licence are far more frequent.

Nevertheless, in most cases, temples are still inherited from father to son. In some cases, the potentiality of inherited en takes precedence over sectarian regulations. One day in late July, a funeral was held at Myōkōji. Because of severe flooding, a priest from another local temple who had been asked to help with the ritual was unable to travel in. Kenji-san, who had yet to take his ordination exam was asked by his father to step in. However, Suzuki-san needed to ask the family of the deceased for their permission. In theory, Kenji-san did not yet possess the ritual and spiritual qualifications to conduct the funerary rites. In a doctrinal sense, this could impact on the efficacy of the ritual. However, a consensus was reached in the temple’s hall that Kenji-san should assist with the funerary rites dressed in priestly robes. The reason behind this approval was his en. “He is the son of the head priest after all, so we have nothing to worry about,” said one of the people in attendance. In other words, his connection to the temple family trumped his professional qualifications as a ritual specialist. His authority was asserted through his inherited lineage. I asked Kenji-san about his experience that day: “I was nervous, but this kind of sealed it for

78 See Rowe (2017) on female Buddhist priests in contemporary Japan.
79 See Kawahashi (2003) on feminist Buddhism and a discussion of women as active agents in Buddhism.
80 Fieldnotes, July 2017.
me. It was as if I realised something that day which had been decided for me long ago. Maybe even before I was born. There is no escaping it now.”\(^{81}\) This realisation did not shock him. Despite his nervousness, it felt natural to assist his father, but this small gesture was interpreted as a clear statement of commitment by many lay members.

The generosity of members is an expression of their expectations and an insurance of sorts that a transition from father to son will take place. Once a month, Yoshida-san, a female danka member in her eighties, walks down to Myōkōji temple with a plastic bag filled with a selection of yoghurt bottles and small cartons of mixed vegetable juice. The contents of the bag are a gift (o-rei) for the children of the temple family. Packed with vitamins and calcium, the gifts are a form of endowment in support of the temple children’s health and wellbeing. Trivial as it may seem, this practice is a clear articulation of her gratitude and an expectation, as she says, that her local temple’s lineage will continue. There is a sense of anticipation that at least one of the children will eventually return ‘home’ to take over the local temple, and that (as the eldest and male offspring) it will most likely be Kenji-san.\(^{82}\)

“We are one of the lucky ones,” Yoshida-san told me once as she dropped off the bag of goodies at the temple, “this is a good family, we have a head priest who understands his path and we have to support him on it.” In contrast, there are many temples without a new generation willing to take over. Temple-\(\text{ie}\) dependence is of significance here. \(\text{Ie}\) exists both as a socio-religious group and as an economic group (or a group enterprise). The socio-religious dimensions involve the history of \(\text{ie}\) and its ancestors, while the economic dimensions encompass the property and physical house. As such, a Buddhist temple, conceptualised as the epitome of \(\text{ie}\), is also an enterprise oriented towards its socio-religious role,\(^{83}\) and there are different kinds of continuity depending on the ability and willingness of a nominated successor to carry out the duties of the heir.

Temple wives are therefore under tremendous pressure to bear and rear a male child to inherit the family temple. The expectation of success in this task is a constant

\(^{81}\) Interview, 6 July 2017.

\(^{82}\) Daughters are just as likely to be ordained and take over a family temple if necessary, but they are usually expected to marry into another temple family and secure that family’s lineage. Alternatively, they might be expected to attract a husband willing to be ordained, ideally the second or third son of another temple family. These are not hard and fast rules. In recent years there have been many cases of temple children marrying partners outside of temple circles, including Suzuki-san.

\(^{83}\) For example, see Bachnik’s (1983) debate on the sociocentric nature of \(\text{ie}\) when \(\text{ie}\) is taken as a term for a ‘position’ not ‘kin’-oriented entity.
source of concern for all of the bōmori whom I had a chance to interview. This role as a mother to the next generation of Buddhist custodians and practitioners is ascribed to Buddhist women at all levels. Noriko Kawashashi (2003, p. 293) notes, “they are exhorted to devote their entire body and mind to those tasks as the exalted work of a bodhisattva.” As such, women, in their capacity as mothers are burdened (or entrusted) with the responsibility of communicating the Buddhist teachings to their children, awakening their faith (shinjin) and making it possible for generational transition to take place smoothly. However, in a region where the population had dropped by 15 percent over the previous ten years, securing the next generation of temple custodians depended on many factors beyond the effectiveness of motherly guidance.

Out of thirty-four Jōdo Shinshū temples in the region where I conducted my study, there had been two closures of temples in the past two years. Three temples remained without a resident head priest. The majority of the local head priests relied on employment outside of the temple to keep their temples financially afloat (meaning that they were only available to conduct religious services at weekends or once or twice a month). More than half of the temples had no successor lined up. The reasons varied, but often included the lack of a biological heir (male or female) combined with an inability to attract an adoptive successor (yōshi). In other cases, temple children were unwilling to return due to non-existent employment and education prospects for themselves and their families, and (more often than not) their lack of interest in Buddhism and commitment to temple life.

All of these explanations are, in one way or another, linked to the temples’ economic prospects (a point that will be developed further in Chapter 3). At the time of my research, only five temples in the region were able to rely entirely on parishioners’ donations and income from their head priest’s guest preaching. Myōkōji was one of them, but its financial survival was intrinsically linked to the ability and willingness of people to nurture human connections and act out their belonging to the temple community. For many temple-born children this means accepting inheritance of priestly duties of care, and for head priests, it requires readiness to manage and navigate human relations and to nurture and mobilise emotional and material ties with individual members and the community as a whole. The same burden and responsibility is afforded to the lay supporters who are expected to honour their

84 Temples are organised administratively into regional units of so.
85 The term yōshi refers to an adoptive child (usually male). It is fairly common for Buddhist temples to try to secure a succession line by attracting a distant kin or non-kin male (or female) priest to take over a temple.
formal obligations and emotional attachments to the dead through ritual practices of participation and belonging. In a sense, the issue of obligation that Kenji-san hinted at, an obligation that has an element of gratitude and belonging embedded within it, articulates the idea of en very clearly.

Mobilising the bonds

How does the Suzuki family ensure that a similar sense of inherited interdependence is nurtured among the supporters of their temple as it is in their children? At Myōkōji, one of the most important elements of the temple custodian’s service to the living and the dead in their care is conducting o-mairi visits at parishioners’ homes. The act of performing o-mairi refers to the act of going somewhere to worship before a shrine. In the case of priestly visits to members’ households, the practice involves a memorial service at the family Buddhist altar, usually performed annually on the anniversary of a person’s death. According to Suzuki-san (and many other interviewed priests), performing such visits is the best way to remind people about their bonds (en) to the dead members of their family and to cultivate their affiliation to the temple. When I asked Suzuki-san senior about the process of scheduling the o-mairi, he explained:

Following the funeral, there is a memorial service on the seventh day and another one on the forty-ninth day. This is when the urn with ashes is moved from the butsudan and committed to the family’s grave. We used to schedule another memorial service on the hundredth day, but people are no longer really doing it, so the next o-mairi is usually scheduled on the anniversary of the person’s death, and annually from thereafter. Some members opt out after a year, but otherwise, it is our responsibility to record and remember, so that when the time comes, we just go for an o-mairi.

This notion of “record and remember” carries a range of bureaucratic associations dating back to the danka system of the Tokugawa period when temples were charged with recording births and deaths (among other life events) of their members on behalf of the state. The instrumentality thus associated with “recording death” is often perceived as damaging to the image of Buddhism in Japan.

Aside from bureaucratic and obvious economic motivations, there appears to be something deeper in the notion of “remembering” that continues to motivate priests at Myōkōji to keep a record of every death anniversary. There is a sense of responsibility of care and, as such, there appears to be a mutual understanding that a priest will

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86 I investigate other forms of o-mairi in Chapter 3.
87 Traditional funerary rites consist of a makura no gyō ("pillow rites") ceremony once a person has died or is about to, a wake and a funeral, followed by regular memorial services.
88 Interview, 12 November 2016.
show up on a given day to perform a memorial service. Buddhist priests are guardians of human memory of deaths, which need to be acknowledged and processed through rituals of memorialisation. The chain of repeated practice evokes images, memories and human connections. Through the repetition of the ritual of o-mairi, priests rely on their responsibility to remember and to remind people of the bonds they share with the dead and with their local temple as a way of reasserting members’ belonging and evoking sentiments of care, loss, connection and comfort.

The practice of holding Buddhist memorial services for the dead constitutes a long-standing tradition of transferring merit to the deceased that is entangled with the tradition of ancestor worship, intended to memorialise the dead who are seen as household protectors. According to the Jōdo Shinshū teachings, however, the spirits of the dead neither exist nor need appeasing for they have departed to the Pure Land and attained the state of Buddhahood. Although such doctrinal teachings deny the existence of the spirits of the dead (Bloom 1977), the Jōdo Shinshū’s ecclesiastical authorities admit that ancestor worship constitutes an important part of its sect’s rituals and we would be hard pressed to find a case of a Buddhist priest refusing to conduct memorial services for the dead. Despite doctrinal discrepancies, these rituals also represent the backbone of temple economics and an important gateway into understanding the local sociality structures of Buddhist temples and their communities. It is, thus, the job of the head priest to keep track of the required memorial services, and to perform them for the benefit of all involved. At Myōkōji, records of all danka households are scrupulously stored in the temple’s offices, but Suzuki-san uses a Google calendar on which he records all upcoming memorial services for individual member households. It is rare for a priest to call in advance to confirm an appointment. After all, it is the priest’s job to cultivate the memory of the dead and to jog the memory of the living.

During my time at Myōkōji, I accompanied Suzuki-san and his father to most of their o-mairi services. Although there were days when no visits were performed, they made anything between five to fifty visits a week, depending on the time of the year. The busiest time of the year, when Suzuki-san visits almost all danka households (approximately three hundred), falls in November and December. While other local priests that I interviewed favoured the o-bon season in August for such mass-level renewal of bonds, November marks the anniversary of Shinran’s death, which is when temples are supposed to conduct o-mairi visits to danka households. These visits are

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89 When I started fieldwork, Suzuki-san called parishioners to ask permission for my participation in the visits, but as they became accustomed to my presence there was no need to give advance notice.
referred to as *hōonkō* which symbolises the visited households’ belonging to the Shin Buddhist and a given temple community. During *hōonkō* season, Suzuki-san schedules, on average, between ten and twenty visits each day for himself and his father. According to the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, this is one of the most important celebrations, and Suzuki-san believes that it is an opportunity to connect with the entire community. It is a time of tightening the bonds between the temple and its members.

In October, he contacts all of his *danka* households by post to advise them of the day and time when he intends to visit their home for a *hōonkō* service. Such postal announcements are a material reminder of the connection that people have with their local temple. Throughout the year, Suzuki-san also sends out monthly newsletters to his parishioners and announcements of monthly preaching sessions and special requests for donations. Ultimately, Suzuki-san reaches out to the community to remind them of the visits, update them on the news about the temple, and remind them of their unwritten obligation to nurture their ties to Myōkōji by participating in the ritual services at the temple (a topic to which I will return) and making donations to support the temple’s annual upkeep.

**Remembering the dead and tightening the bonds**

One morning in December 2016, armed with my Buddhist rosary and a red copy of the sacred book of sutra and prayer scriptures, I joined Suzuki-san on his *o-mairi* rounds. Having taken a quick glance at the temple’s calendar, I was readying myself for a day of continuous chanting and helplessly stiff legs. The first house we visited was the Takeda household, whose reception room where the family butsuden was located looked out onto a stunning and proudly trimmed garden. It was my third visit to this house. Takeda-san and his wife were in their eighties and both struggled to walk unaided. As at other houses, the unlocked or fully open doors of the guest entrance usually signified that they were expecting a Buddhist priest’s arrival. It was an equally efficient way of gauging whether someone had forgotten about a scheduled *o-mairi*.

Suzuki-san sat automatically on a flat pillow that had been lined up for him, his back to a calligraphy scroll in the Takedas’ elegant decorative alcove where flowers

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90 The book of sutra scriptures in the True Pure Land Sect is called *Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha Nichijō Gongyō Seiten*. It comes in different colours and formats (including a children’s easy to read version) and is comprised of the most common sutras such as the *Bussetsu amida kyō* (Amida Sutra / Sukhavati Sutra) and the *Shōshin’nenbutuge* or the ‘Hymn of True Faith.’
and various pieces of art were displayed. The age and quality of well-maintained wooden structures and decorative pottery gave an impression of an old and perhaps once rich household. Following initial brief greetings, Suzuki-san took his place in front of the Takedas’ Buddhist altar (for example, see Figure 7). It was an old well-preserved wooden structure with elaborate golden ornaments (a recognisable feature of a butsudan in the Jōdo Shinshū school). The entire room was immaculately kept. To the left of the home altar was a shelf with a single black and white photograph of an elderly woman. I later learned that this was Takeda-san’s mother and our visit combined the hōonkō ritual with a death anniversary service for her. Whenever possible, Suzuki-san scheduled visits to combine the two rituals. He recognised that preparing for a priest’s visit was both a physical and organisational challenge for the parishioners.

Figure 7. An o-mairi space at the house of one of Myōkōji’s supporters (16 October 2016).

The Takeda household had been holding monthly memorial visits at their home for a number of years, but it was far more common for people to hold such services only once a year, on the death anniversary. During my fieldwork, the Takedas were one of only five families still holding monthly services to generate merit for the deceased. According to Suzuki-san, the practice used to be more prominent and provided temples with a healthier stable income. But the last twenty years had brought a sharp drop in the number of households receiving monthly memorial visits. It is important to point out here that although temples are usually thought to generate
their income from temple graveyards, there is only a handful of temples in the north of Hiroshima that have one and Myōkōji is not one of them. The number of people requesting local priests’ presence during visits to family graves, often located high up in the mountains, had also dropped considerably.

There are many possible reasons for this, including ideological changes affecting family networks (and resulting in weakening the tradition of religious practice), depopulation and aging membership (causing a natural drop in temple membership and mobility issues) and the economic strain that regular ritual services and accompanying donations put on household budgets in economically troubled depopulating communities (an issue to which I will return). This financial burden and the pressure to offer more than was deemed affordable in order not to offend was something that most of my younger interviewees pointed to. In contrast to their parents and grandparents who benefited from the economic stability of the bubble era, life-long employment, a considerable saving capacity and reliable pension incomes, members of the younger generation are said to be faced with less disposable income and are also less inclined to regard regular memorial rites as necessary and of the same karmic and social value (see Chapter 5).

According to Suzuki-san’s observations, over the twenty years since he had returned home, the neighbourhood had lost a third of its population. On a short walk, you could see six or seven unoccupied houses where there were no living successors to inherit the property. It was not uncommon that the remaining family members of the elderly person who had lived in the house had moved away and that the elderly person had been relocated to an elderly care facility as they were no longer able to care for themselves. Many priests pointed to depopulation when asked about the levels of engagement in their temple communities. Similarly, priests at Myōkōji observed that the number of households holding o-mairi at home had dropped by one third, and the number of parishioners attending monthly preaching sessions at the temple had dropped by nearly 60 percent over the last ten years.91 Depopulation has certainly had a huge impact on regional temples and their communities. However, there are a number of other factors that are stifling the temple’s activities. One such factor is the ageing of the temple’s support base: many of the elderly neighbours who no longer visit the temple explained their lack of participation by ill-health and their lack of confidence in their physical strength.

Takeda-san and his wife are among those who never visit the temple, mainly due to their lack of confidence in their fragile health. I asked Takeda-san whether it

91 Email correspondence, 16 November 2015.
troubled him that he was not able to visit the temple, but he felt that because Suzuki-san visits their household every month, they are able to pay their dues to the dead and to the temple: “I am at peace because I still maintain my en (en wo mamoru).” Takeda-san’s concerns are representative for a considerable number of the elderly lay members who I interviewed. Those who are still able to engage and physically support temple and other community activities consider this to be a marker of their vitality, usefulness and of being a part of something bigger – a marker of still belonging. On the other hand, o-mairi visits allow people to stay connected and to continue to feel part of the community out there. In my understanding, the practice of o-mairi is as much a social service as it is a religious one. In many ways, a priest brings the rest of the community with him to each individual household. He plays a socialising role as a bearer of local news about neighbours and events, and he brings with him teachings and a message of belonging to the Jōdo Shinshū community and to the local community more broadly.

Staying in touch with danka members (and in some cases connecting them to the life of a community) and creating opportunities to spread Buddhist teachings and to make them relevant to the lay members’ lives is at the heart of all o-mairi visits, which involve sutra chanting usually followed by a short sermon. Recurring themes in preaching sessions delivered by Suzuki-san and by many other priests include: the reassuring possibility of the Pure Land for all; Shinran’s and Amida’s support on one’s path to salvation; and the notion of karmic and social interconnectedness (as well as the importance of maintaining it). During one visit, Suzuki-san gave his danka members the following explanation of o-mairi memorial practices in his sermon:

The role of religion is to provide a story. That’s the start. And what is the story in the Jōdo Shinshū teachings? We can all be saved as we are. Shinran Shōnin writes that he was just like everyone else and would be saved and reborn in the Pure Land, so everyone is to walk along with Shinran on the path to salvation. Our lives are filled with multiple links (en) and we are all interconnected with the buddhas, with the dead, and with Shinran on our path to Pure Land. Protecting and remembering these bonds is vital.

This explanation is an attempt to deal with questions of meaning and belonging. How do I belong? How do I fit into this practice and this community? In Suzuki-san’s sermon, en poses as a metaphor of ultimate belonging, with all human beings destined for the Pure Land. To my question about the use of metaphors such as “walking along with Shinran” (or with hotoke) that he often deployed, Suzuki-san explained that the idea of tying one’s en with the ancestors and the buddhas (hotoke)

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92 Interview, 9 April 2017.
93 A sermon delivered during an o-mairi visit. Fieldnotes, November 2016.
represents a reassuring conceptualisation of death for the living. Indeed, in many ways, it represents a promise for the living, a coping mechanism, a reminder that one belongs in life and in death. It is a metaphor that softens the reality of life’s suffering and death: an individual is, it would seem, ever interconnected and never truly alone. This narrative provides a reassuring vision for many, especially elderly members living alone who face the prospect of an unattended death and a disconnected (muén) afterlife with no family members left or willing to shoulder the burden of memorialisation rites and the upkeep of en (a point that will be developed further in Chapter 5).

Memorial rituals evoke a shadow realm of fleeting images and memories of the deceased members of the family, but they also remind us of the impermanence of our existence. They are a continuous reminder of the interplay between presence and absence. In his study of Hyolmo Tibetan Buddhist mortuary practices, Robert Desjarlais (2016) proposes that death-related rituals conjure up the invisible myriad of our social, cultural and familial loyalties. In our mourning and remembrance, we rely on words, images, objects, bodies, memories and virtual imaginings to relate to our loved ones. In contemporary Hiroshima, the dead are both present and absent through the family’s butsudan and our connections (our en) with them are renewed through the practice of o-mairi. To quote Suzuki-san:

There is a gap in understanding memorial services. People think that they do it for the dead, but memorial services are for the living. To remember, to grieve and to cope with the bodily finality of death. To prepare for it emotionally by building up understanding that they will continue to belong in the afterlife.94

The practice of o-mairi (along with its material framework) is an acknowledgement of interdependence and a process of building emotional resilience towards the perishing of the self. For both a Buddhist priest and a lay member, the practice is thus an expression and a material and emotional enactment of interdependency and a promise that all parties will always provide for the needs of the other. At its heart is the notion of memory as something that keeps open the channels of communication between the living and the dead. In many ways, keeping up this practice represents the most important element of the priest’s daily routine in a Jōdo Shinshū community. The True Pure Land School of Buddhism has been built on a concept of all-inclusive community (Akamatsu and Kasahara 1963, pp. 35-73). For many priests, venturing out into the community to visit their parishioner’s homes is still the most meaningful service that they can provide. Suzuki-san believes that for as

94 Interview, 2 December 2016.
long as there is at least one person needing his service, he will continue on his path as a priest.  

**Long-distance connections**

During my fieldwork, I accompanied Suzuki-san and his father to a few long-distance o-mairi visits. Myōkōji has a sizeable group of members living outside of the region who still maintain their affiliation (and there are other temples in the area reporting similar patterns). Such households are colloquially referred to as *tabi monto*, meaning *danka* members to whom a priest has to travel some distance to perform memorial services, or who travel back to the region once or twice a year to have the memorial services performed either at the temple or at a family *butsudan* (or grave), should either still exist. Tokyo is the furthest that Suzuki-san had ever had to travel for a long-distance visit. Most such members live in Hiroshima city, which is still at least an hour’s drive from Myōkōji. In such cases, it is customary for the lay members to cover the costs of travel and accommodation (if necessary). This is in addition to the usual ritual donation.

Scholars of Japanese Buddhism have long reported that as Japanese people move away from rural areas, they lose touch with their local communities and family temples in the countryside (Rowe 2011, Reader 2012a, Ukai 2015). This trend is indeed dominant, but there is evidence in my data to suggest that there is a notable contingent of people who choose to keep their emotional, karmic and financial connection going. For instance, a handful of long-distance supporters requested to join a regionally organised trip to Honganji in Kyoto in March 2017. One man, currently living in Osaka, explained that for him it was an opportunity to re-connect with fellow members, catch up on local news and honour his ancestors. It was a walk down memory lane (of sorts) that allowed him to feel at peace and a part of a community that he had long left but continued to care about and support financially. Admittedly, the number of actively engaged *tabi monto* is comparatively small. At Myōkōji they constitute only 10 percent of the membership, and not all of them remain active.

For the relatively few long-distance members who do maintain their connections, temples and Buddhist practices appear to offer a channel through which they can stay connected not only to their ancestors, but also with the community of the living. Nostalgia-driven narratives of *furusato* (homeplace) are often at the centre of such experiences, which combine local government regional revival initiatives with the efforts of Buddhist priests and lay members to remind one another of communal *en*.

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95 Fieldnotes, November 2016.
One such example is an event that was held at Honganji Hiroshima Betsuin in Hiroshima city on 28 January 2017. It was publicised as a *furusato hōyō* (lit. Buddhist memorial service for a hometown), a memorial service for the deceased members of the most depopulated communities of Hiroshima Prefecture whose descendants, for the most part, have relocated to nearby cities. Members and priests of three Jōdo Shinshū temples from that area put together an event that would allow the members who had moved away (the majority of their *danka*) to come together to memorialise their ancestors, celebrate their community and be reminded of their “*goen*” (according to the invitation letter sent out to the members, n.d.). I was not able to attend the event, but I later interviewed Sasaki-san, the head priest of one of the participating temples, and I received a DVD recording of the event (*Furusato Hōyō Dai Ikkai* 2017).

Sasaki-san explained in our interview that, “the event was meant as a call out to everyone who still feels that they have ties to their local temples and to the community.” It came out of a collaborative research project concerned with the impact of depopulation on Buddhist temples in his region, which had revealed pockets of *danka* members — most of them elderly — living in Hiroshima City who were eager to reconnect with their temple communities. The event was thus a combination of Buddhist ritual and an opportunity for members to hear news about their hometown villages. People were also encouraged to purchase local produce from the region such as sake produced at one of the temples organising the event that day (thus lending some financial support to the local producers, and in the case of the sake, to the local temple) and to join a volunteering programme supporting the elderly community members still living in the area.

Over forty people attended the event and made appropriate donations for the ritual service. Participants listed either recently departed family members or household ancestors to be memorialised, the names of whom were read out during the ceremony (*Furusato Hōyō Dai Ikkai* 2017). For the priests who decided to organise this event, there was potentially a lot at stake. By reaching out to their long-distance *danka* members, the aim was to rekindle their memories about their homeplace and revive the socio-religious bonds that they still shared with the community and their ancestors. According to Sasaki-san, they hoped that this would translate, in one way or another, into the mobilisation of greater support for their seriously struggling temples and the community members left behind. However, there is not only a

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96 Interview, 6 July 2017.
97 The project was conducted by researchers at Ryūkoku University and the Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha Institute for General Research (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha Sōgō Kenkyūjo) in Kyoto in 2015.
financial cost and gain to be considered here, but also an emotional one. Such efforts to maintain en may prove encouraging for some people, but others will find them burdensome.

**Releasing the ties**

Despite the apparent strength of the inheritable nature of en in lay and religious professionals’ practices, it is in fact dualistic and fraught with problems. Various circumstances offer people a chance to easily break away from it. On the one hand, inherited practice is a norm in Japanese Buddhism and constitutes an intrinsic element in its social make-up (and perceptions of it), but it is also a significant factor in Buddhist communities’ problems and tensions. Some danka members perceive inherited practice as an imposed emotional, social and economic burden, and seek ways to sever the ties.

One such case involved a family whose ancestral home had burnt down in a fire. The family’s butsudan had been consumed in the flames and the family decided not to replace it. Instead, they called the temple a few months later with a request to cancel any future o-mairi visits. Suzuki-san explained: “(s)ince their butsudan burnt in the fire, they felt that the spirits of their ancestors were no longer there, and there was no need to continue with the memorial services.”

The family also stopped receiving annual ritual visits and withdrew their support for the temple’s maintenance fund (gojikaihi) and their participation in Myōkōji’s Buddhist women’s and Buddhist men’s associations. Their withdrawal from the cycle of memorial practices meant a total withdrawal and a liberation of sorts from the cycle of socio-economic dependencies associated with their local temple. The materiality of en – the tangible proof of its existence – had disintegrated in the flames. Since I was not able to interview anyone from that household, it is not clear whether they persevered with their emotional attachment and memorial practices in an alternative manner. However, the family made a clear choice to abandon the socio-religious constraints that had tied them to the local temple and their ancestral lineage.

Such cases are perhaps infrequent and, in practice, most temples in the depopulating regions lose their members due to the absence of a new generation to take over the duties of care (this has proven to be the case at most temples that I interviewed at). This is particularly the case for elderly community members who

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98 Fieldnotes, October 2016.
99 Other studies have also identified this as the most prevailing trend, including a recent Jōdo Shinshū-led research project in the northern parts of Hiroshima Prefecture (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha Sōgō Kennkyūjo 2016).
have long lost touch with relatives who moved out of the region, for childless families
and for parents who have significantly outlived their children or whose children died tragically as the result of an accident. Others choose to gradually withdraw their
support by limiting the number of memorial services held at their homes and limiting
their participation in temple-run events. There are also many cases of Buddhist
professionals who choose to abandon their priestly responsibilities and sever their ties
with the living and the dead of their local community.

To illustrate this, let me present this chapter’s final example. There had been a
recent temple closure in the region where I conducted my study. A local head priest
had decided to formally shut the doors of his family temple, resolve his legal status as
a shūkyō hōjin (religious organisation) and relocate with his wife and children to a
nearby metropolitan area. Since it was an un-consulted closure, the news raised
concerns among the other thirty-three temples and the regional administrative centre.
The danza members split – more or less evenly – into three groups. One third of the
lay membership (approximately one hundred households) decided to abandon their
temple ties altogether; the others chose to affiliate with one of the two other local
temples in the area. I was able to talk to four affected members when I visited the site
of the closed temple. All of them had decided to affiliate with one of the other two
local temples based on connections that they felt already existed (“goen ga arimashita
kara”). As they recalled the people and events that tied them to their ‘newly’ affiliated
temple, I sensed that these connections were, more often than not, of an emotional
kind – steeped in feelings of nostalgia, friendship and gratitude for past benevolence,
and a desire to belong and continue their duties of care for the dead in their family. At
the same time, they expressed hope that when their time came, someone would be
there to memorialise them. Reflecting a more general pattern that emerged from my
interviews, the implication was that this “someone” was more likely to be a fellow
community member than a blood-based kin-relation (see Chapter 5). This case also
highlights the importance of the broader connections that temple custodians foster
within their local communities, which may prove of consequence if (as is likely)
demographic conditions push local temples into mergers.

Such extreme cases of closure are rare in this region. Buddhist priests usually
remain in service to their community (sometimes by commuting) whilst being
employed at a different temple as an assistant priest or working in a different
profession full time. For instance, Yamamoto-san (profiled in Chapter 1) took up his
priestly duties full time after retiring from his job as a schoolteacher and an education
advisor for the Hiroshima prefectural government. Akin to the elderly priest of Yōanji,
his son works as a maths teacher and only performs his priestly duties at the
weekends. Nonetheless, however rare cases of complete abandonment might be, tracing how and why people maintain and abandon their bonds reveals striking insights into the current conditions of Buddhist temple communities in depopulating Japan – particularly in relation to the inheritance of practice, the alternative choices people make about their futures, and the significance of inter-communal agency for understanding the nature and scale of the crisis. Belonging can be a matter of engagement and association, but also one of disassociation and disjuncture (Amit 2015) that creates space for creativity and improvisation. Serendipitous and deliberate disengagements (as in the case of a burnt up butsudan and the closure of a local temple) are not necessarily markers of clear-cut un-belonging. Instead, they signify belonging of a different kind and to a different kind of structure. Such divergences have a bearing on the generational transference and inheritance of Buddhist identities. As I will go on to unfold in Chapters 3 and 4, local communities have been trying to come to terms with such transformations and divergent values in various ways.

Conclusion

I have highlighted here the issues associated with the inheritance of belonging, drawing on narratives of sociality imbedded in Buddhist practices. For many Jōdo Shinshū priests (in this and other regions), the daily practice of o-mairi is seen as a path to engaging with parishioners and spreading the Buddhist teachings as means of transmitting en. As such it constitutes one of the most important priestly responsibilities. Generational transition is essential to the survival of any religious institution or community. The current era represents an important moment of uncertainty and change for Buddhist organisations and their communities in Japan. Demographic ageing and shifting social values relating to family and community are bound to shake the institutional foundations of a tradition that relies heavily on the notion of inherited practice and derives its socio-economic stability through donations for memorialisation rituals. As mobility, diverse household structures and commercial developments in the end-of-life and after-life care sectors continue to drastically transform how life, death and ageing is experienced in Buddhist temple communities, religious professionals and lay members (many of whom are elderly) are faced with challenges to an inheritance-based model rooted in connections that are mobilised through values such as filial piety.

The issue of generational transference of practice does not only affect traditional Buddhist institutions. Recent timely studies on the impact of aging in the NRM (Baffelli and Reader 2018, McLaughlin 2019) have provided a valuable insight into the scale of the problem in religious organisations across Japan. According to the results of recent research projects on the impact of depopulation and aging on Buddhist temples and
their lay supporters in Hiroshima Prefecture (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha sōgō kenkyūjo 2016, Inose 2016b), less than half of the two hundred lay respondents stated that they had been able to secure a successor to inherit their family’s butsudan and only half had identified the next caretaker of their family graves (Tokunosukuru – Nōson Kenkyūjo 2016, p. 9). In other regions, the figures are even lower (Nakajo 2016, pp. 2-3). Securing the next generation of practitioners and temple custodians has therefore long posed a challenge for many rural temples (Reader 2012a, Sakurai 2017, Ukai 2015). What comes to the fore in my ethnographic data is the anxiousness of Buddhist priests and their parents to highlight the visibility of the next generation. The presence of temple children is a promise of sorts to the lay members that the support they give will not be wasted. However, generational transition is even more problematic among lay practitioners. As I have shown in this chapter, this means that many priests identify as their core mission the mobilisation of the bonds that are the lifeline of their temple communities.

For a temple to survive, it needs a committed priest to run its affairs, a congregation that is prepared to come together and care for it, and a valued place within community dynamics. Myōkōji (among many other bodaiji temples) must maintain an active temple community based on social and religious networks of interdependence in order to remain relevant and to survive. However, these notions of dependency rely heavily on a specific model of socio-religious belonging that for many Japanese today represents an outdated and bothersome form of sociality rooted in filial piety, social conceptions of family and ike, and Buddhism’s association with death. As we have seen, head priests’ own connections to their temples are entangled with their feelings of family-oriented duty. Such a model appears to be particularly under threat in communities with diminishing human resources. For local Buddhist temples and the central sectarian institutions that they support, communal bonds of belonging, mobilised and nurtured by individual priests, may well play a far more important role than family-oriented duties in sustaining Buddhist institutions.

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100 Nakajo (2015) reports that issues of generational transition equally affect civic engagement in rural communities (see also Chapter 3).
Chapter Three

Economies of belonging: transfers, temple support networks, and labour

Introduction: the economy of belonging

In July 2017, a notice accompanied by a wooden Buddhist rosary was circulated to all households who had contributed to the repair of Myōkōji’s temple gate. Maintenance of temples’ traditional structures goes beyond members’ occasional generosity.\textsuperscript{101} To repair Myōkōji’s gate, Suzuki-san asked each \textit{danka} household, non-affiliated local community member and neighbour for a donation of 10,000 yen. Almost three hundred households contributed almost half of the total repair budget of 6.5 million yen (c.£44,520). The Suzukis, as members of a local neighbourhood group (\textit{jōkai}),\textsuperscript{102} also contributed. The rest came from the temple’s maintenance fund.

\textsuperscript{101} See Kolata (2020) on the pressures that temple restorations place on local communities.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Jōkai} do not correspond with the \textit{danka} membership system, i.e. not all members of neighbourhood groups are Myōkōji’s affiliated members and vice versa. Throughout this
That year, the bottom section of the time-worn wooden gate dating back to 1717 was replaced by a concrete structure in order to prevent the gate’s collapse (see Figure 8). The retrieved wood was then used to produce Buddhist rosaries that were gifted to donors as a tangible acknowledgement of their generosity. The fundraising campaign was driven by the elderly leaders of individual neighbourhood groups, as well as members of the temple board and the Buddhist women’s and men’s groups.\textsuperscript{103} To secure the necessary funds, lay leaders solicited and collected donations among the neighbours, while Suzuki-san made regular public appeals during temple events and liaised with local community leaders to drum up support for the project.

Similar fundraising campaigns had taken place when Myōkōji’s roof required repairs a few years earlier and members had repainted by hand the colourful paper tiles decorating Myōkōji’s ceilings. During our interviews, a further seventeen priests reported comparable initiatives and stressed their reliance on neighbourhood and local religious networks for successful delivery of maintenance projects. Six priests anticipated that should “[the] tatami mats in the temple hall rot”\textsuperscript{104} or “the roof begin to leak”\textsuperscript{105} they would be unable to conduct any future repairs. They felt that the community could not afford or otherwise assist in repairs. Two others had already relocated ritual services from their main halls to temple butsudan rooms because the halls had become structurally unsafe and heating them during cold months had become too expensive.

When feasible, fundraising campaigns exemplify the collective exercise of voluntary and customary generosity that is indispensable to the successful completion of any temple restoration project. They also reveal the structures of support that enable and, at times, police people’s practices of generosity, while divulging a multifaceted economy of belonging. An economy of belonging, in my definition, stands for the temple-laity economic transfers (monetary, material, or labour-based) through which people choose to or are compelled to assert their socio-religious affinity to a

\textsuperscript{103} Men’s bukkyō sōnenkai groups are the equivalent of the women’s bukkyō fujinkai groups.

\textsuperscript{104} Interview, 27 June 2017.

\textsuperscript{105} Interview, 28 April 2017.
temple, family, neighbourhood or community at large. Tracing those transfers reveals the complexity of Buddhist temples as economic entities built on the shared labour and financial investment of lay members and temple families. Limitations in mobilising such efforts and difficulties in evoking an economically conscious sense of belonging highlight weaknesses in the existing temple support structures.

Although Buddhists are often portrayed as rejecting the material world in favour of spiritual pursuits (Obadia 2011), scholars of historical and contemporary Japanese Buddhism have shown that all religious organisations in Japan (and elsewhere) have always been closely associated with money and other material resources. The material and financial sponsorship of rituals, religious infrastructure and temple activities is what makes religion practicable, profitable and possible (Reader and Tanabe 1998, Reader 2014, Usunier and Stoltz 2014). Despite this conspicuousness, religious fundraising and temple budgets are largely avoided in scholarly debates about Japanese Buddhism, often due to difficulties in gaining access to the financial circumstances of individual temples.

Drawing on financial data that I accessed during fieldwork, I focus on examples of lay members’ generosity to argue that economic obligations are not just another burden imposed on the members by religious professionals and the remote sectarian headquarters. They are also an expression of local, communal, and spiritual expectations, and of organisational structures that, for now, firmly embed Buddhist practices within a broader context of communal unity. I thus focus on what I refer to as economy of belonging, exploring people’s ideas of en as an economic practice to frame Buddhist temple communities as entities negotiated across personal, family, community and broader regional networks of belonging. I am interested in not only “the what” of what connects people in those communities, but “the how”. How and why do people make economically significant connections that bring people together? Commitment (or lack thereof) of money, goods, time and labour creates, nurtures and severs socio-religious bonds. For many of my interlocutors, such commitment had underlying socio-religious meanings and goals and remained firmly rooted in community-building practices and in strong forms of relationality. I argue that these relations are rooted in Buddhist materiality and expressed actively through practices of voluntary and institutionalised generosity.

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By examining Buddhist temple communities through a lens of economic interrelations and dependencies, I join scholars of Buddhism who in recent years have been leading the way in exploring the intersections of Buddhism and economy in Japan and beyond.\textsuperscript{107} Other research has also focused on the commercial and market dimensions of religion in Japan more broadly.\textsuperscript{108} Of note here is the emerging field of publications by Buddhist priests in Japan (Hashimoto 2014, Mizuki 2016) and consultancy programmes on temples’ financial management (Matsumoto and Ide 2013).\textsuperscript{109} Scholarly engagement with Buddhist economies has led to a greater focus on individual actors and the processes that manage and shape Buddhist temple economies in Japan and beyond,\textsuperscript{110} while acknowledging the important function that the handling of such transfers of material goods between lay supporters and religious institutions has in community-making processes (Starling 2019, pp. 63-80). Drawing on Starling’s and others’ research, I add to the debate by focusing on the attitudes and practices of lay members towards the material upkeep of their local temple communities.

At a time when Buddhist institutions, particularly in regional Japan, are looking into a rather uncertain future faced with a host of demographic challenges and shrinking incomes, it is worth considering Buddhism’s relationship with grass-roots level economics to gauge how local temples secure their livelihoods and fund their operations. This chapter, therefore, explores not only how Buddhist temples are funded in regional Japan but how they are able to function in Japan’s secular society. Legislative, demographic and social shifts have been transforming both rural and urban temple communities for decades. It is time that we looked more closely at Buddhism’s relationship with grass-roots level economics and the networks that sustain Buddhist institutions.

**On transfers and co-stewardship: who owns a Buddhist temple?**

Moving away from the language of economic exchange, this section thinks about ownership in terms of the economic transference of bonds, revealing the structures

\textsuperscript{108} For examples, see Astley (2015), Borup (2018) and Shimazono (1998).
\textsuperscript{109} One example of a management consultancy programme for Buddhist temples affected by depopulation and ageing is the Jūshoku Juku O-tera no mirai programme run by Matsumoto Shōkei (Oteranomirai, n.d.).
\textsuperscript{110} For instance, see Reader and Tanabe (1998), Reader (2014) and Rowe (2011). Beyond Japan, see Sihlê (2015a); see also Samuels (2010), Caple (2019), Brox and Williams-Oerberg (forthcoming).
and individual attitudes that enable and jeopardise Buddhist temple communities’ economic futures. I thus focus on how en – as an economic practice – is channelled and mobilised through civic and religious networks of obligation, social cohesion, regional histories, gratitude and faith. Since the laity’s involvement in the temple’s upkeep and running of temple activities is of paramount importance for the temple’s socio-economic and religious survival, I pay attention to lay community structural frameworks (such as neighbourhood groups and Buddhist associations) and individual members’ approaches. An insight into the financial matters of a Buddhist temple is not only an opportunity to appreciate the operational mechanics of religious institutions in contemporary Japan, but also to explore how practices of giving and receiving, fundraising, and voluntary labour impact on narratives and rituals of communal and individual belonging (and vice versa).

The thank you note sent to Myōkōji’s donors used the term konshi, meaning “funds” offered to a temple by a Buddhist follower (believer) from the kindness and generosity of their heart — thus framing their donations as an expression of religious generosity (at least in name). According to Suzuki-san senior, the gate was repaired thanks to the merit-making activity of lay members: by offering goods, money and services, they accumulated merit in this and the other world. Myōkōji’s bōmori explained that “our relationship with the community is mediated through Amida’s benevolence. Every hundred yen and each grain of rice given and received is a gift laden with responsibility, but also a recognition of our role as temple custodians and lay members’ individual ties to the temple.” Aki-san and other bōmori interviewees (who are often in charge of temple domestic budgets), felt that their livelihoods depended heavily on people’s generosity and how well they managed that generosity. “When I request and spend money on behalf of the temple,” Aki-san explained, “I feel accountable for every decision. (…) Money, flowers, rice and other produce received at this temple are not for us, we should not take it as ours. It is for Amida.”

The Suzukis often explained that people’s reluctance to support the temple came from the misunderstanding that what people gave or did for the temple was a personal gift or a favour to the family. However, the Suzukis saw it as a repayment of spiritual debt (hō-on) to Amida. In Aki-san’s own words: “To feel a desire to repay this debt, a

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111 Economy and materiality have been inherently part of Buddhism, and the issues of economics has long served as an important tool for understanding Buddhist institutions, teachings and practices. See Collcutt (1981), Collins (1997), McMullin (1984) and Goodwin (1994) for a discussion on Buddhism and economy in medieval Japan.

112 See Starling (2019) for a detailed account of the economic lives of bōmori in contemporary Japan.
person has to feel assured that Amida’s compassion accomplished their salvation a long time ago. These ideas are part of Shinran’s teachings, but sometimes it is difficult to inspire people’s generosity in these terms.” She felt that it was the temple custodians’ responsibility to help people realise these connections by spreading Buddhist teachings and inspiring shinjin in others, in order “to help us and them in repaying this debt to Amida.” In our many conversations, Aki-san articulated clearly how Buddhist transfers of money, time and other material gifts are meant to help people realise their own trust in the benevolence of Amida. Starling (2019, p. 69) asserts that this process of realising one’s indebtedness through the circulation of material gifts is one way through which the Shin Buddhist doctrine of tariki is meant to be realised.\footnote{113}

Yoshino-san supported Myōkōji’s gate repairs and received a Buddhist rosary made from the wooden legs of the gate. She explained that, at first, she was reluctant to support the repairs, but the rosary made her realise that she had underestimated the real importance of her contribution. “The rosary,” as she explained, “allows me to keep an important chunk of the region’s cultural and religious history in my house. I can use it for praying at my family’s butsuden, which should make chanting namu amida butsu more powerful.”\footnote{114} This small gesture of reciprocity was conceived of by Myōkōji’s bōmori as a way of giving something meaningful and tangible in return for the members’ support. In other words, lay members were invited to share the stewardship of the temple with the temple family, while fundraising campaign leaders and the most generous donors received larger rosaries to reflect their greater level of commitment and accumulated merit. The gesture reaffirmed the co-ownership of the Buddhist temple (on individual and community levels) and incorporated the temple’s physical presence into the daily practice of individual members within the intimacy of their homes.

Why is this model of co-stewardship important? The post-war reformulation of temples’ legal set-up led to a greater preoccupation of religious professionals with the problem of earning a living. People’s heightened awareness of Buddhist temples’

\footnote{113} In a wider Buddhist context, a Buddhist gift is meant to be offered without obligation or expectation. Ohnuma (2005, p. 118) calls it an experience of “pure sacrifice,” but she asserts that such transference stands for only an illusion of “the pure gift” which is allowed for by the abstract uncertainty of the reward (e.g. a rebirth in the Pure Land or a guarantee of survival for a local Buddhist temple). While practices of giving can be understood as a leap of complete trust (e.g. in the benevolence of Amida’s vow of salvation), I argue that a sense of reciprocity and a notion of “payback” is always present (albeit not universally binding). See also Sihlé (2015b).
\footnote{114} Interview, 21 May 2017.
embeddedness within the market economy also led to more open public scrutiny of religious institutions in general (see Baffelli and Reader 2012). Historically, Japanese Buddhist temples were economically self-sufficient, but they established and nurtured complex networks of economic transfer with the lay community that developed into a dependency on lay patronage as a form of important religious practice (Covell 2005, Goodwin 1994). Nowadays, Buddhist temples resemble NPOs structurally, economically and legally, while their legal status as shūkyō hōjin dictates that the responsibility for a temple’s financial affairs rests with religious professionals and their families who are the legal and customary custodians of temple grounds, buildings and religious objects. Financial management of a temple thus legally rests with a chief responsible officer (daihyō yakuin) (usually, a head priest) supported by other responsible officers (sekinin yakuin), i.e. members of a temple board which can include a head priest’s wife or a lay representative. Buddhist priests are thus not only ritual masters, but also business managers, legally liable for the management of temple resources, raising funds for temple repairs and construction projects, filing tax statements, renewing insurance policies, paying bills and controlling their stock of religious paraphernalia. Fulfilling these responsibilities requires robust networks of lay members’ support.

Temples are enmeshed in institutional and communal networks of financial accountability. They pay annual taxes to the headquarters, while lay supporters are expected to provide financial support to temples. For instance, Jōdo Shinshū’s sectarian laws remind members of their participatory obligations (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 2014 [1947]),[115] which in practice mostly translate into monetary donations and voluntary labour. This is echoed in each temple’s own set of by-laws, which determine lay members’ levels of engagement. Such responsibilities are, however, morally rather than legally prescribed. Those wishing to engage in temple management may become part of the gojikai or sōdaikai — a group of lay representatives referred to as a temple board or a temple advisory board. Their role is often mainly advisory, rather than managerial (i.e. members are not legally accountable for a temple), but, as I have already shown, their support is crucial.[116]

Lay patronage still constitutes most of temples’ income, in terms of both monetary donations and the fundraising, organisational and maintenance work that lay members contribute. As well as a board, each temple tends to have several associated groups — most commonly Buddhist women’s and men’s groups – which are the lifeblood of most temples and further support temple activities through their

[115] See Article 16 and Articles 27-29.
independent budgets assembled from separate membership fees. Despite the head priest’s legal status as a chief responsible officer, Myōkōji temple (as a juridical person) is not the private property of the Suzukis. The priest is customarily accountable to members for how the temple is managed. For instance, Suzuki-san established a budget for repairing the Myōkōji’s temple gate, selected contractors and decided to replace the gate’s wooden legs with more manageable and cheaper concrete structures, but to secure funding for the repairs he needed to either seek the lay members’ approval or take out a loan in Myōkōji’s (i.e. his own) name. Developing and nurturing the temple’s economic networks is thus a key responsibility of any head priest. Temple by-laws might make vague references to the rights and duties of lay members, but members’ contributions to temple maintenance projects and initiatives are nonetheless voluntary.

From a practical standpoint, the Buddhist practice of giving remains an important component of religious practice as an expression of gratitude and contractual co-dependence, as well as a more prosaic manifestation of co-responsibility for the economic survival of the local temple – a concrete guarantor of realising one’s and one’s ancestors rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land. Through the repetition of ritual giving, including fundraising campaigns and o-mairi visits, priests not only remind people of their shared bonds with the living, the dead and the buddhas; they also reiterate their own relevance as ritual specialists, acting as mediators to convert people’s material offerings into acts of meaningful giving.

I refer to such practices of giving and receiving as mutually-beneficial “Buddhist transfers.” The language of “transfers” rather than “exchanges” better articulates the sense of social interrelation that underpins the nurturing of Buddhist bonds through networks of economically connected communities. The gate episode has already revealed the economic co-dependencies that motivate and result from such transfers. It has shown how temples are integrated into the life of a community and how the life of a community is, in turn, articulated through Buddhist practices and the temple-related activities of individuals and organisations such as neighbourhood associations and Buddhist groups. In further ethnographic examples, I specifically address the question of how en is manifested and embodied through economic

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117 On the question of land ownership, see Chapter 4.
118 I use a term “mutually-benefiting” rather than “reciprocal” to reflect the Jōdo Shinshū language regarding debt, particularly one’s spiritual debt owed to Amida, which can never be repaid (Starling 2019, p. 79).
practices of giving and receiving, and how such networked material transfers reflect the relational agency of mutual trust-based connections (en).

“IT’s ALL PART OF THE SAME SYSTEM”

Buddhist transfers are enabled through Japan’s tradition of mutual help via neighbourhood groups, with 85 percent of households in Japan said to belong to such groups (Taniguchi and Aldikacti Marshall 2016). Members of neighbourhood civic organisations take turns to work together cleaning public spaces, planning events for children and elderly in the community, and supporting disaster readiness and recovery activities as well as policing. The community surrounding Myōkōji temple is divided into eighteen neighbourhood groups clustered into four villages. The mutual help system represents a form of face-to-face interaction among neighbours that involves mutual responsibility for the collection of dues and donations, the rotation of chores and the circulation of a notice board passed from household to household which includes official announcements, local crime alerts and a community event calendar.

Figure 9. Members of Ichiba jōkai during mizo sōji duties (2 April 2017).

One morning in early April 2017, wearing heavy-duty gloves and equipped with a shovel and a plastic tray, I joined members of Ichiba jōkai for the mizo sōji duties of clearing out mud and dead leaves from the water canals that supply irrigation to rice paddies cultivated within the neighbourhood’s borders (see Figure 9). This includes a small patch of Myōkōji’s land, farmed by a neighbouring household on the temple’s
behalf. That day, I teamed up with Maeda-san, a neighbour in his late seventies, who I knew well from our frequent chats during my morning runs while he worked in his garden. As we emptied the mud from our plastic trays onto the back of his small white truck, he gestured around and said: "This is also en. This is how we nurture human relations. We work together and it means we are part of the same community, so we help one another when the time comes." I asked how the temple was connected to this idea of a community. He answered: "It is all part of the same system. That’s why everyone, even the temple family, is expected to do their share. Especially now that it is becoming harder to keep things going at the temple and in the community." By “their share,” Maeda-san was referring to a detailed list of community events and obligations such as cleaning duties and community funeral support, as well as to monetary contributions relating to safety, agriculture and religious activities including harvest-related Shinto festivities.

Figure 10. Ichiba jōkai members carrying the coffin of Myōkōji’s caretaker, Suzuki-san senior’s paternal uncle (3 December 2016).

That morning, I represented the Suzuki family at Myōkōji who (apart from their temple duties) also belong to the community’s organisational civic structures and, as such, are expected to be good neighbours and volunteer their time and money to local causes. Concurrently, individual neighbourhood groups offer their support to Myōkōji (and sometimes to other regional temples). During my research stay, I experienced

119 Fieldnotes, April 2017.
local people coming together in a number of different ways. In August, women representing their neighbourhood groups met at Myōkōji to clean the temple hall, while men took their turn in January for the bi-annual polishing of the temple’s ornaments, and again in June for the annual weeding and pruning of the temple’s gardens. On a number of occasions throughout the year, members of the Ichiba neighbourhood group came together to support the organisation of funerals for members who had passed away (see Figure 10). At times like this, the community joined forces to clean, to mourn, to remember, to labour, to gossip and to negotiate appropriate levels of mutual help and commitment. The socio-economic cohesion of a community depends on people’s willingness and ability to commit to such cooperation. Buddhist temple communities and their institutional stability are intrinsically rooted in lay members’ inclination to volunteer their time and capacity to donate money, as well as in the temple families’ ability to inspire such support.120 As Maeda-san notes, it also simply depends on the physical existence of people healthy enough to nurture and honour their relations within neighbourhood support groups and beyond.

Neighbourhood clusters such as jōkai also tend to have strong ties with other groups such as PTA, agriculture and forestry cooperatives and municipal and community halls, as well as with local religious institutions (Pekkanen 2006, Pekkanen and Tsujinaka 2008, p. 713, Pekkanen et al. 2014). In Hiroshima Prefecture, the historical context for neighbourhood bonds with Buddhist institutions is important: it highlights the socio-religious sentiment that continues to influence people’s ideals about their communal and regional history and the role of Jōdo Shinshū temples in it. The membership remits of jōkai groups appear to overlap with those of the Shin Buddhist confraternities (kō) of the past.121 Kō were lay-Buddhist congregations of Shin adherents bound together through their trust in Amida teachings and their neighbourly ties and who conceptualised the Shinshū temple as a space open to all

120 Volunteering has always been a bedrock of religious institutions’ prosperity and survival. The voluntary work discussed here is focused on the institution and practices nurturing internal cohesion but volunteering also takes place in the outside world whereby practitioners can practice their religious belonging through external engagement, for example through the provision of elderly care. I explore examples of such outward-facing engagement in Chapter 5. See also Cavaliere (2015, 2018), Di Febo (2019) and Watanabe (2019).

121 The tradition of setting up lay local congregations dates back to Rennyo’s times (1415-1499) when the kō became the grass-roots unit of the Honganji’s religious organisations. As Dobbins (2002, 139) notes such local congregations were the functional equivalent of the dōjō in Shinran’s times.
where human and non-human connections are to be made. The ideal of a temple as a collectively owned entity is at the heart of practices oriented towards the development of such neighbourly ties. This cooperative ideal seems to still hold sway in rural Japan, despite the contemporary legal set-up of Buddhist temples discussed above.

In Hiroshima Prefecture, the Buddhist confraternities are associated with the history of people referred to as “Akimonto,” a collective name for Jōdo Shinshū followers living in the western part of Hiroshima. Mizuhara Fumitake (1996, pp. 57-58), a scholar of the Aki monto history, notes that Shin Buddhist congregations, similarly to today’s jōkai, were units based on regional bonds (chien) comprised of between ten and thirty households. Kō members met once a month to read sutras and listen to local Buddhist priests’ preaching. Households either took turns to host such gatherings or they were held at a local temple (once temples became established in the region). Once a year, leading up to the anniversary of Shinran’s death, members met for a hōonkō memorial service to express their indebtedness and thankfulness, the two qualities said to characterise the outlook of a Shin adherent on Amida, the world, and other people (and central to how people understood their support for local temples).

In early February 2017, I attended two Buddhist services akin to the annual meetings held in the past by kō congregations. In the morning, fourteen people from three local jōkai groups gathered for an o-mairi at a local meeting house (each jōkai had their own meeting house) delivered by the head priest of Myōkōji. In the afternoon, twenty-five members of two other jōkai groups gathered for the same purpose. In both cases, the meetings began with sutra chanting followed by a preaching session for which thanks were offered to the head priest in the form of a monetary donation. On both occasions, Suzuki-san chose to talk about the history of the kō meetings and the beginnings of the Shinshū tradition as a way to remind people of the historical roots of the meeting in which they were partaking (he was then asked to repeat the sermon at a meeting of the Ichiba jōkai in March 2017, see Figure 11).

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122 See Starling (2019, 37) on the importance of constant human presence at the temple in nurturing the idea of a religious place open for interaction, and the role that bōmori play in nurturing this ideal by performing “stay-at-home” (rusuban) duties.
123 Hiroshima Prefecture is comprised of two domains: Aki, in the west (stretching east as far as Mihara, see Map 1) and Bingo to the east. For an overview of the Akimonto in Hiroshima, see Asaegu (1973) and Mizuhara (1996). On the history of kō and development of Jōdo Shinshū communities in Hiroshima see also Ikeda (1984).
Both groups still possessed a scroll copy of the *Tannishō*, a thirteenth century Shin Buddhist text, which dated back to the Tokugawa period. Shinran’s writings were circulated in the past as a proselytising tool and provided affiliated congregations with an official religious bond with the Honganji temple and the *kō* as a tangible reminder to sustain their practice and belief. Some local groups in Hiroshima Prefecture chose to store their scrolls at the temple for safekeeping (four such scrolls were stored at Myōkōji, see Chapter 4), while others looked after them collectively on a rotational basis. For many, especially elderly members of the community who were keeping this tradition going, the history of *kō* gatherings was an important element of local history that fed into their spiritual and economic obligation to support local

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124 The *Tannishō* (“the Lamentations of Divergences”), thought to have been authored by a disciple of Shinran, Yuien, is a collection of sayings attributed to Shinran with commentaries by Yuien (Andreasen 1998, pp. 26, 69-73).

125 As Dobbins (2002, p. 130) asserts, *nenbutsu* inscriptions were the central object of worship displayed equally in temples, *dōjō*, and later in *kō* meeting spaces, a practice that dates back to Shinran’s ministry.
temples with donations, populate their social networks of support, and fund their maintenance and economies.\textsuperscript{126} Local priests were also keen to cultivate the memory of the kō practices as a reminder of moral and economic allegiances.

The people involved in these Buddhist preaching gatherings were often the most engaged advocates of temple causes in their respective neighbourhoods, and they often assumed responsibility for managing temple-community ties. To manage their local connections to Myōkōjī (and other religious and civic institutions), Ichiba jōkai members gathered once a year for a budgetary meeting and to select the neighbourhood representatives, which included a designated person to support temple activities and a female member to fulfil the duties of coordinating the jōkai members of Myōkōjī’s women’s group, buppu, which in most cases rotate on an annual basis.\textsuperscript{127} Economically speaking, they did not have direct budgetary ties with local temples, and despite modest subsidies from the local government,\textsuperscript{128} neighbourhood groups were economically independent from the state (van Houwelingen 2012) with membership-dependent incomes. In principle, the membership was voluntary.

Contemporary jōkai function as basic organisational units that depend on regional bonds and the activities of which are influenced by shared religious history. I am not suggesting that today’s neighbourhood groups’ involvement in local temple activities stems directly from their lay Buddhist heritage, but awareness of past connections, reinforced by the remnants of danka obligations and the inherited nature of Buddhist practice, does serve as an important factor for religious professionals and lay members alike who wish to maintain the existing status quo and preserve the traditions of past generations. Cultural meanings that in an affective sense shaped the regional history of Hiroshima Prefecture, such as shared ideals of living one’s life with a sense of gratitude and thanks to Amida (shinjin) and to fellow Jōdo Shinshū members, are mobilised as guides for moral attitudes and action. When I asked


\textsuperscript{127} Individuals were also appointed to support the local shrine, to sit on the board of a local shrine, and to look after the local statue of Kannon Buddha; as well as to serve as representatives to the neighbourhood council (jichikai), various agricultural committees, the disaster prevention committee, the crime prevention group and steering committees for farmland access roads, waterways, environment and road safety (Fieldnotes, March 2017).

\textsuperscript{128} The local government contributed 300 yen per household in 2016-2017 (down from 500 yen in the previous year). Temple family households that belong to a given neighbourhood group are excluded from this support, e.g. Myōkōjī’s neighbourhood group has twenty-one households, but the subsidy was only paid for twenty household members, which meant an annual subsidy of roughly £45.
Myōkōji’s bōmori why she thinks people continue to support her temple’s activities, she said, “the people who support the temple today are the children of parents who cared for it yesterday.” For her, it was a form of family obligation and respect rooted in generational continuity. However, the number of people willing to fulfil such obligations has taken a significant downturn in the post-war period due to the increased mobility and aging of local Buddhist communities and issues relating to the generational transition of practice and recruitment of new followers in a tradition that relies predominantly on the inheritance of Buddhist ritual identities within the family (as discussed in Chapter 2).

According to a Chūgoku Shimbun survey (1976), 57 percent of Hiroshima Prefecture’s population considered themselves to be followers of Shin Buddhism. This number has continued to fall due to an increased number of newcomers, especially in the metropolitan centres. That said, rural areas remained largely unchanged with most households able to trace their family histories from the moment of settling in the region during the Tokugawa period or earlier. Therefore, the mountainous region in the north of Hiroshima Prefecture is still a stronghold for Jōdo Shinshū temples such as Myōkōji, which continue to benefit from the support provided by local neighbourhood groups committed to protecting their local heritage and family histories (a topic that I return to in Chapter 4). Most of the lay members of the local community whom I encountered were aware of the region’s religious history and many were still eager to uphold elements of this tradition commemorated in regional songs and expressed through Buddhist practices, such as introducing all newly born members of the community to a Buddhist temple via the shosanshiki ceremony discussed in Chapter 1.

Buddhist institutions’ reliance on these regional connections (chien) and sentiments of local belonging is putting temples’ economic structures in danger. Geographical mobility has been diversifying the demographic landscape of Hiroshima Prefecture for generations. The trend of overseas and rural-to-urban migration in search of education and employment continues today. Coupled with demographic ageing, it drives the depopulation processes and transforms people’s sense of locality. Concurrently, the limited migration of people into the region (mainly U/I-turners and people who move into the region through marriage) has diversified the fabric of how people shape their local identities. Newcomers, especially younger ones, are usually reluctant to conform to the jōkai-based system of communal responsibility. Many, such as Endō-san (a recent returnee in his thirties), tend to find the temple support system

\[\text{129 Fieldnotes, September 2016.}\]
based on inherited obligation, filial piety and neighbourly duties oppressive and void of spiritual meaning.\textsuperscript{130}

As a result, rural Buddhist temple communities have been shrinking due to diminishing membership because they have been unable to inspire younger generations to get involved, or because they have not yet begun trying to do so. The issue of falling membership numbers (caused by demographic and attitudinal shifts) poses a palpable threat to the unity of the community insofar as changing rules of communal engagement drive temples to face the necessity of paying for work that used to be supported by members’ volunteering and the reality of more limited access to members’ generosity.

**Voluntary labour and the local politics of belonging**

How was Buddhist practice incorporated into jōkai responsibilities? In each jōkai, membership (akin to a temple affiliation) was assumed at the household (ie) rather than individual level. Jōkai membership, although considered voluntary, was steeped in reciprocal obligations rooted in notions of interdependence and indebtedness, which are widely acknowledged paradigms for social interaction in Japan (Befu 1968, Bestor 1989, Rupp 2003).

Ichiba jōkai, to which the Myōkōji temple family belongs, included twenty-one households, each required to make an annual contribution of 10,000 yen to support the group’s activities (akin to a membership fee), along with additional smaller amounts requested throughout the year for specific causes such as the purchasing of ceremonial sake for Shinto ritual services and support for the annual matsuri held at a local shrine every autumn. While shrine-related activities, usually associated with harvest cycles, were subsidised by neighbourhood groups, financial support for the temple activities was excluded from the neighbourhood budgets. Instead, as had happened in the case of Myōkōji’s gate, jōkai representatives mobilised fundraising campaigns and coordinated the provision of various support for temple maintenance and Buddhist events.

Management of temple events such as preaching meetings (hōza), constituted by far the most important responsibility of lay members in situations when jōkai structures were utilised for support. “Hosting” a hōza is customarily a jōkai-based responsibility and temple-relations representatives are responsible for ensuring that

\textsuperscript{130} Interview, 9 July 2017.
hōza preparations are sufficiently staffed. During my fieldwork, Myōkōji temple was supported by twenty-four jōkai groups whose members took turns as representatives for managing temple-neighbourhood relations, fundraising and volunteering at temple events and for cleaning duties. Most households in these groups were either affiliated with Myōkōji temple or were affiliated with another local temple in the area but supported Myōkōji due to their local and personal connections. Apart from the fundraising efforts discussed earlier, preaching events were an important example of activities supported by members who belonged respectively to bukkyō fujinkai and bukkyō sōnenkai via their jōkai. Technically, all women and men in each jōkai were expected to be members of one of the two groups. Again, membership was voluntary in principle and required a payment of annual membership fees to the association, which administered its own budget to support various temple initiatives such as preaching sessions.

I was often told by local priests and lay members alike that preaching sessions were one of the most important activities in the calendar of temple events that relied heavily on community support and participation. At Myōkōji, the preaching sessions were run monthly, but in this regard my hosting temple was an outlier. Most temples in the region had reduced the frequency of hōza meetings to six times a year (or fewer), with many smaller temples opting for a maximum of two preaching sessions per year (usually to celebrate o-bon and hōonkō). Interviewed priests and lay members alike often noted that the format and frequency of these gatherings had transformed significantly over the past couple of decades due to the diminishing and ageing membership being unable to support and attend temple events. Changes in employment patterns, especially among younger members, had also had an impact: people were unable take time off to organise and attend temple events. Shifts in female employment had significantly limited women’s ability and willingness to volunteer their time at the temple.

Ahead of my first hōza experience in August 2016, Suzuki-san explained that twenty years ago, hōza used to be a three-day event. The preaching had usually started in the evening of day one, with a full-day programme on day two and a morning preaching session on the last day. Over the past twenty years, the format had been adapted to a one-day or a half-day affair. A similar shift had also occurred in relation to community-based funerals. Jōkai members had traditionally supported the organisation of mourning and funerary services. Local priests observed that over the past two decades, neighbours’ involvement in funerary affairs had either become

131 The exception are group-specific events, which are sponsored and staffed by the group members.
minimal (e.g. staffing of a reception desk at the wake) or non-existent with a general preference for smaller “family-only” funerals, especially among younger members of the community. In both cases, temples have needed to find a balance between causing people inconvenience and balancing out the costs. Similarly, many priests in rural areas support their families through employment outside of a temple. Hosting (and preaching at) a three-day event also depends on a head priests’ personal ability to commit time and can cause conflict in a workplace due to absences.

Lay members offer various forms of support during events. On some occasions, individuals donated flowers and fruits to decorate the Buddhist altars in the main temple hall, or the food produce necessary to prepare a lunchtime meal offered to attendees during breaks between sermons. Other times – for example, at a combined preaching meeting and shosanshiki ceremony organised by Myōkōji’s bukkyō fujinkai – lay supporters took over the organisational arrangements and running of the events, taking care of the cleaning, cooking, hosting and funding. On the 27 and 28 August 2016, I joined the buppu members in what was my first experience of a hōza meeting, helping them to prepare flower arrangements, clean and cook (see Figure 12).

Temples thus rely on lay support for hosting hōza gatherings and for attendance at the services accompanied with appropriate monetary donations. Healthy attendance numbers, nonetheless, are something with which many temples struggled. The very same people who found it difficult to volunteer their time to organise temple events due to work commitments and ill health were likely to find it equally difficult to attend. During my time at Myōkōji, lay attendance at preaching sessions varied between ten and thirty people. Smaller temples with less frequent events tended to attract larger numbers of attendees, but Suzuki-san and other priests who kept a relatively busy temple schedule believed that running regular events, although bothersome at times, allowed them to nurture a sense of mutuality and vitality in temple-lay relations.

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132 See Murakami (2018) on the individualisation of funerary practices and decline of communal funerals, as well as the more general impact of changes in employment and social organisational structures on communal relations. He argues that the move away from agriculture-based employment has left people less dependent on one another for survival (p. 38).

133 For instance, one of the highest costs of funerals is the practice of reciprocating condolence gifts (kōden).
One day in early June 2017, I attended a day-long hōwa gathering at Ichijōji temple in a nearby village, held to celebrate Shinran’s birthday. It combined a standard preaching session by the head priest, a display of local crafts, a tea ceremony pop-up café, a shosanshiki ceremony and an erhu concert by a locally well-known Chinese musician who allowed people to try out the instrument (see Figure 13). As part of my attendance at the event, I was asked to lead a meditation session and to deliver a talk on the influence of Japanese Buddhism in Europe. I was told by one female attendee that events at Ichijōji are usually well attended because it allows the entire community to “chip in” and connect over sutra chanting, gossip, and overall revelry. Over sixty people attended the session – by far the largest crowd I witnessed at a hōza preaching during my fieldwork.

Ikeda-san, the head of Ichijōji’s fujinkai told me over lunch that the costs of the event significantly outweighed the donations received from the attendees, but she noted that: “We only hold one big event like this each year and I like to think that the work we all put into it makes our head priest, Amida and Shinran happy. It is his

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134 Fieldnotes, June 2017.
birthday after all.” I ask her about other events: ”We have six in total, including this one. The other ones are smaller and not so well attended, so somehow we manage to even out the June deficit.” To my query about the cost ratio of smaller services, she explained that smaller gatherings were more manageable: “There is less risk of going into the red, and even if people do not show up for it, the input of labour and money used in preparation is small enough to at least balance the books.”

Aki-san made similar observations about events at Myōkōji. In most cases, even during small monthly hōza, donations offered by attendees did not cover the organisational costs. Most of the money was spent on a donation offered to the guest preacher and, in many cases, their travel costs on the day. According to the budgetary data made available to me by priests and lay members, preaching events rarely provide temples with additional funds and, for the most part, they cannot be delivered without the engagement of the local community. Rather, they serve as a vehicle for nurturing temple-laiyty bonds. When I asked Ikeda-san why Ichijōji’s supporters continued to organise such events if they tended to have such a negative impact on the temple’s economic wellbeing, she explained: “It is what keeps us connected. It means we are still alive, and we can still make people care — old and young. Plus, we

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135 Interview, 3 June 2017.
get to nurture our faith and bonds with Amida. And if, as promised, Pure Land is there at the end of the road, well, all this-worldly costs and labour will prove their value.”

Although they are often more of a burden than a source of immediate support, there are two clear ways in which such events are deemed worthwhile. On the one hand, they activate several different local and spiritual networks of belonging. They provide an opening for interaction that allows people to cultivate a sense of communal unity, despite the challenges posed by shifting demographics and shrinking local economies. On the other hand, mobilising people’s labour is a form of reminding people about the place of Buddhist practice and Buddhist institutions in their life. It is a reminder that temples are also one of the elements in local systems of belonging and can play a role in community-building efforts. In the long run, this may nurture a sense of loyalty that can be translated into concrete examples of generosity and continuity of practice such as the memorial services discussed in Chapter 2 and the fundraising campaigns for temple repairs mentioned in the opening vignette. The biggest challenges to this are the overall downward trend in temple membership, the absence of a new (next) generation of practitioners and a diversification of values relating to how people choose to belong to and organise their communities.

**Bukkyō fujinkai’s en: weakness in numbers**

As the population surrounding Myōkōji is shrinking and ageing, so too are the economic and human resources of individual groups. Members’ ability to participate in Buddhist activities and to pass the baton of participation to the next generation has become a struggle. This is reflected in the membership numbers at all levels. In November 2016, I joined Myōkōji’s bōmōri at a bukkyō fujinkai regional meeting encompassing all thirty-four Jōdo Shinshū temples in the region. There were over five hundred participants that day, less than half the number attending the same meeting fifteen years ago.\(^\text{136}\) As already discussed, there is even a sharper drop in membership numbers at the temple level.

Women represent the core of active membership at Myōkōji and most other temples in the region. One afternoon in February 2017, sixteen members of Myōkōji’s fujinkai gathered to prepare for a monthly preaching event scheduled for the following day. As the women assembled, the temple’s main hall filled with chatter, laughter and gossip. When I joined a group sitting at the back, one of them leaned over and whispered in a low conspiratorial voice: “Sixteen is not bad at all. I mean, it is not...”

\(^{136}\) Fieldnotes, November 2017.
good either, but it’s almost a third of all members.”

Over the past fifty years, the association has experienced an over 80 percent drop in membership. Even though the temple membership has not dropped that alarmingly yet, active participation in temple affairs has become a physical and psychological burden on many supporters. This poses a problem for local temples that rely greatly on lay support, especially that of female members.

In Shin Buddhism, female members, guided by the example of their temple’s bōmori, are meant to represent the moral backbone of public society and to nurture the domestic sphere of their religious communities. As Starling (2013) notes in her study of temple wives in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, the feminine ideal of Buddhist women as “good wives and wise mothers” has prevailed even in the postwar period, especially in rural communities. The normative gendered division of labour, which assigned women to the domestic sphere of childrearing and running a household and men to working outside the home, is still reinforced in contemporary society, especially in many temple households (Starling 2019, pp. 37-43). This division is seen in the respective roles of a head priest and his wife, but also in the roles assigned to lay members. Men usually take care of matters such as minor repairs of temple facilities, the cleaning of the temple’s heavy ornaments and the arranging of furniture and handling of donations during temple events. Women are usually tasked with cleaning duties, flower arranging and cooking, as well as preparing and serving refreshments. Buddhist women are also often entrusted with the domestic propagation of Buddhist values (Starling 2019) and socialisation of younger generations into Buddhist practice (Kawahashi 2003). The centrality of marriage and the hereditary transmission of practice in Shin Buddhism means that membership in the association is also hereditary. Daughters and daughters-in-law are expected to inherit their duties and Buddhist practice from their mothers, mothers-in-law and grandmothers.

Hashimoto-san, the eighty-two-year-old head of Myōkōji’s fujinkai, told me that twenty years ago (when she became the head of the association) the membership numbers were around three hundred, but now there were only about fifty women left. When we spoke, she had been ready to retire for the past ten years, but had not been able to because, she said, the younger generations postpone getting involved until their parents or parents-in-law pass away. Women usually become

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137 Fieldnotes, February 2017.
138 My focus on the activities of female lay supporters is partially motivated by the fact that as a woman, I had greater access to female members and their activities.
139 See also Hidaka (2009) and Ueno (2009).
140 Interview, 25 April 2017.
members in their sixties (or later) after retiring from employment. If governmental plans to keep workers in employment longer come into play (Takenaka 2019), this will have a direct impact on men and women’s voluntary engagement in temple activities and other community volunteering projects.\textsuperscript{141}

However, there are other reasons why Hashimoto-san has been unable to identify a successor. Being the head places on a person a responsibility to take part in all temple events and usually to spend a sizeable portion of their personal income in the process. This includes attendance at most hōza meetings, but also taking part in fujinkai and temple trips, workshop sessions and educational programmes.\textsuperscript{142} There are also various duties of cleaning, event planning and chasing other members for contributions or participation. This, as she remarked, is becoming harder to do with one’s own diminishing health and a shrinking number of members who are often expected to remain equally involved.\textsuperscript{143} She speaks from experience when she says that younger women have many other obligations relating to work and childrearing, as well as other volunteering duties as part of the parent-teacher’s association (PTA). She felt sympathetic to the fact that many of my younger interlocutors found it difficult to commit time to Buddhist practice.\textsuperscript{144} Some of the younger community members who I got to know admitted that they chose to socialise through different networks such as parental groups and farming cooperatives. Some cited Buddhism’s preoccupation with death practices as discouraging, while others were put off by the absence of other younger women in the association.

This was the case for Kawanishi-san, a newcomer to the community following her marriage to a local man. When we met one afternoon in May 2017, she explained that she had tried to fit within the local networks of cooperation by taking on the role of Myōkōji’s fujinkai representative within her jōkai. She had been expected to become a member after her mother-in-law passed away. A Hiroshima city-native, she had moved to the village from Shimane Prefecture only a few years previously when her mother-in-law could no longer live on her own. Her husband’s mother was an eager supporter of the local temple and a member of the association. However, after a year during which she was asked to manage the fujinkai’s budget, she gave up. Kawanishi-san had found it difficult to reconcile her buppu duties with her work commitments and her own spiritual explorations. In her own words:

\textsuperscript{141} See Chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{142} See Chapter 6.
\textsuperscript{143} Fieldnotes, January 2017.
\textsuperscript{144} Interview, 25 April 2017.
I knew I had to join, but I was so scared of getting anything wrong that I felt ill almost every time I thought about it. My grandparents support our local temple, but we did not live with them and I never had to do anything related to this. People here are so good at managing all those relations and I did not understand the social rules. But I am shy, and I felt that I could not ask. When I go to a jōkai meeting, if there are things that I do not understand, I can come home and ask my husband what is what. But there is no one to ask at home about bukkyō fujinkai stuff. It’s like there is a wall, well, maybe not a wall, but it is difficult to enter this world. I didn’t know about higan, I had never prayed at a Buddhist grave, I had never read a sutra (...) Fujinkai women were really helpful, especially some of the older ones. They took me under their wings as if I was their daughter and they tried to show me the ropes. But I just felt like I had missed out on years of crucial training and it felt like I was too young to be there too. (…) Also, I have quite a high-level job and I travel a lot. You know, I married my husband late and there are no children, and I love my job. I just wasn’t able to commit as much as I was expected. I am also interested in the Christian teachings and I find them easier to manage. I have only myself, my own salvation and my own faith to worry about if I chose to follow it. In Jōdo Shinshū, I guess in Buddhism in general, interdependence and nurturing all those relations is so important. Shy as I am, I could not handle the pressure.¹⁴⁵

After a year, Kawanishi-san confided her anxieties in Myōkōji’s bōmori who advised her to quit out of consideration for her mental wellbeing. In our conversation, a number of significant challenges emerged. First, she pointed to an important issue of generational transition of practice and responsibilities, which again highlights the pressures that come with inheriting other people’s ties to the community and to the temple. In this case, Kawanishi-san was trying to follow in the footsteps of her mother-in-law and to uphold the values of her husband’s family which markedly deviated from her own. She felt out of place because, as she said, she had missed out on years of socialisation into Buddhist practice. As a result, she was completely unprepared for the job of being a Buddhist.

She also clearly articulated her anxieties over the psychological and karmic load that comes with practices of nurturing and realising “all those relations” which for some people feel overwhelming, claustrophobic or simply bothersome (see also Chapter 5). Her disconnect from regional sentiments and local ways of doing belonging was visceral. In fact, she openly chose not to belong because she did not feel like she knew how. Dependencies that may be commonplace for locals do not necessarily resonate with the newcomers and with younger generations, especially if they have no time to learn or no one to learn from.

My conversation with Kawanishi-san lay bare some of the issues facing Buddhist temple communities that rely strongly on affective regional and socio-religious ties of

¹⁴⁵ Interview, 14 May 2017.
co-dependency and mutual indebtedness. She is not an outlier in this regard. Similar concerns were raised by other younger interviewees, particularly newcomers and younger I/U-turners to the community. Often, the only articulation of people’s en within the local temple community was the economic ties that they continued to maintain with the temple in the form of annual membership donations, as was the case with Kawanishi-san.

A couple of weeks later I met the head of Myōkōji’s fujinkai for our second formal interview. Considering Kawanishi-san’s experiences, I was eager to ask her about the future of the association. I started by asking about her personal journey as a member. She had served as the head for over twenty years and, as she explained, had become more involved in the temple activities following her husband’s death:

It is then that I became the head. All of a sudden, I had more time to spare and I found solace among fujinkai friends. We pray together, we work together, and it is our responsibility to cultivate Shin values in our families and our community. Because we grew up with Jōdo Shinshū teachings and practices, we understand our en instinctively. I find peace of mind in volunteering my time at the temple. What we do matters. It makes me feel connected. Not only to my dead husband, but to the life of the community and I am able to inspire kindness of heart in others through my own faith. Do not misunderstand, it is exhausting. I wish I could take a back seat now and just enjoy being a regular member and have more time for playing grand golf and visiting the temple at leisure, especially since I also like attending sermons at other temples. Well, depending on the preacher, of course [she laughs].

Throughout our interview, Hashimoto-san repeatedly brought up the fact that it was hard for her to continue in the role because of her advancing age, but she also recognised the benefits of the connections that she had developed and helped other people to develop through her work. “As fujinkai members we are well connected with other women in the community and in the region, so there are many opportunities for us to explore,” she observed. “People around here complain when there is work to do at the temple, but they would complain even more if we had none.” She felt that the collapse of their local temple would mean that people just gave up on one another. She therefore believed that: “although money is difficult to talk about, we must talk about it openly.” Hashimoto-san and many other lay temple leaders felt that now (more than ever before) the economic fragility of Buddhist temple communities ought to be openly acknowledged.

In 2017, Myōkōji’s fujinkai lost the membership of two jōkai groups (twenty households) because the women living in those two neighbourhoods decided that they could no longer commit the effort required to support temple activities. I asked

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146 Interview, 30 May 2017.
another female member in her seventies what she thought about the future of the association and the temple: “(i)t made me realise that we really are in crisis. We need new blood and new ideas. I almost feel like we failed the next generation because we allowed membership numbers to drop so dramatically. I hope we are not too late and there is still time to mobilise the next generation.” As my fieldwork progressed, such voices emerged more strongly among lay women concerned about gaps in the local networks of communal support that they were part of. Hashimoto-san, by doing this work, felt that she was able to promote and forge connections (en) between fellow lay members and the temple. Those connections were nonetheless being threatened by complacency of current members. As she implied, *buppu* members (herself included) seemed to have forgotten or been unable to nurture the next generation of torch bearers for the association.

As Kawanishi-san’s experience shows, local networks of belonging can be restrictive and difficult to enter and navigate for some members, in the same way that economic dependencies relating to ritual labour and duties of mutual care may prove one burden too many. The socio-religious context can serve as a structure of exclusion whereby assumptions about people’s instinctive knowledge of practice and family-oriented expressions of personal religiosity create a barrier for the inclusion of new members. Women who narrated such experiences of exclusion were the outsiders, women who chose not to have a family or become mothers, who lacked access to mentorship, who did not grew up with Buddhist practices at home, and who did not share the sentiments essentialising the past and continuity of regional traditions. *Fujinkai* women are often the most outspoken advocates of temple causes – the story that they tell through their practices and values matters. However, most regional Buddhist temple communities have been slow in addressing these barriers and re-evaluating their practices, with many Buddhist priests admitting their own lack of proactiveness in this area.

**How many members is not enough?**

“How many members is not enough?” was a question that I asked all interviewed Buddhist priests. How many *danka* members were required for their temple’s comfortable survival, including provision for their families’ livelihoods, staffing of events and mobilising fund-raising? The most cited number was three hundred households (six remarked that in Hiroshima Prefecture two hundred was also a manageable number). Asking Buddhist priests openly about their membership numbers was difficult. The topic constitutes a well-known taboo among Buddhist priests and scholars of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. Membership numbers reported officially to the sect’s headquarters determine the amount of tax payable by
individual temples each year. Most priests were happy to give me an estimation of the size of a healthy community, but when it came to their own membership data, they either looked knowingly at the IC recorder, sharing the details on condition that I would not quote the data, or straightforwardly refused to answer. Their estimates of what a viable temple community ought to look like took into account the locally entrenched generosity of lay members towards their temples and the robust systems of support rooted in people’s socio-religious ideas of interdependency. However, as Suzuki-san noted in relation to his own supporters, high membership numbers did not always correspond with levels of engagement among members. Healthy membership numbers are thus only as important as the robustness of structures of mutual dependency for anticipating Buddhist institutions’ economic futures.

One afternoon in late February 2017, I attended Myōkōji’s fujinkai’s annual board meeting. The gathering opened formally with sutra chanting before Hashimoto-san joined the head priest to announce the launching of the bukkyō fujinkai review committee, “Hatsukakō.” Hatsukakō means “a congregation of the twentieth day”, a reference to the Shinshū kō tradition that was intended to resonate with local sentiments. The group was set up to address concerns over dwindling membership. As noted by Hashimoto-san, fifty years ago, fujinkai had three hundred members. Ten years ago, this dropped to 140. Now, there were no more than fifty. With the withdrawal of membership by two jōkai already, Suzuki-san expected that others might follow suit. That day, the existing members were presented with a formal letter drafted by the head priest and the group’s board members. It was a straightforward admission of complacency:

The current state of affairs means that Myōkōji’s fujinkai is in a precarious condition. We have heard in the guest priest’s sermon today how his temple no longer has a women’s group and, most likely, we have allowed ourselves to head in that direction. We have not done anything to sufficiently counter this crisis with the way we have run events until now. The head priest and the board take the full responsibility for this and we offer our heartfelt apologies.147

The head priest and the community leaders admitted that they were late in reacting to the dramatic decline in membership over the past twenty years. Launching the review committee was an attempt to remedy this and for the fujinkai “to be born anew by returning to the group’s original purpose of every member striving to spread their en within their households and communities.” That goal was meant to be realised by reconsidering the buppu participation system, shifting from obligation-based (gimu) to will-based (yaruki) membership. In other words, the aim was to stop relying solely

147 Fieldnotes, February 2017.
on imposed or inherited participation through the jōkai structures and the generation-to-generation inheritance of duties and to develop fujinkai activities that could transform the temple into an enjoyable gathering space for the entire community.\footnote{The so-called ‘new’ approach assumed that the current system was entirely duty-bound, but I have shown that for most elderly members, their en is subjective and shaped by their emotional attachments, as much as by familial and communal obligations.}

The committee was comprised of five elderly members of the fujinkai board and five new (younger) members who had been recruited by the head priest over the past few months. The selected members were to meet bi-monthly to review all activities and aimed to launch a “new” fujinkai agenda in Spring 2018. During that year, the members of Hatsukakō vowed to listen to one another’s opinions and review ideas from other women in the local community to develop a new model of activities and more voluntary and affective ways of belonging to this group and to the Buddhist community as a whole.

I attended four meetings of the review committee, encountering two radically different approaches to the issues at hand. There was a sense of ideological divide and a clear divergence in values and objectives for the group. The older members continued to insist on the “old ways” of doing things, relying on the idea of generational transmission of practice and faith: attachment to the Buddhist teachings and practice ought to be nurtured within one’s home. In contrast, the younger members were keen to focus on making their local temple “easy to enter” (hairiyasui) by developing the role of the temple: it should become a place of enjoyment and curiosity where Buddhist identities could be developed through voluntary participation in a range of (not necessarily religious) activities. By creating non-Buddhist connections with the temple, they believed that people would eventually decide to affiliate and contribute fully to its activities. The basis for this new model of affinity was to be driven by psychological connections.

One of the difficulties in reconciling these two strategies lay in the question of funding. Organising events is costly and requires a significant investment of time and other resources. Who would pay for events if membership and attendance was to become non-compulsory? As one of the older members remarked: “If only the old ones support the temple events with their time, money and energy, while the young ones only come to enjoy it as ‘customers’ without ever repaying the favour, the whole system will collapse anyway.”\footnote{Fieldnotes, April 2017.} Volunteering one’s time and money has always been a bedrock of Buddhist temple communities’ survival. Changes to the meanings of such connections may appear necessary, but for many elderly members this puts at risk the
entire network of temple-community support. Like Myōkōji, many Buddhist communities are only just waking up to the danger that depopulation and ageing pose to their economic support structures, but there are no easy fixes and the issue goes beyond Buddhist institutions.

In our conversations, local community leaders repeatedly shared their concerns over participation rates. In late June 2017, I met three representatives of a local jōkai which counts thirteen member households. All three of my interviewees were U-turners in their sixties, seventies and eighties who left their communities right at the peak of the first depopulation wave in the 1970s. They, like many others, returned either to retire in their family homes or to look after their elderly parents. Ueda-san, the head of the jōkai admitted that usually only half of the members attend the meetings. The two women accompanying him remarked that there was an ideological divide between those who had left and returned and those who had never left. She used the term “village men” (mura no otoko) to highlight the non-leavers’ stubbornness in adhering to the “traditional” way of doing things. She felt that many returnees were prepared to keep up some of the old ways, but they were in agreement that community participation ought to be driven by friendships and comradery rather than the rigidity of arbitrarily prescribed duty (gimu). As was the case for the bukkyō fujinkai, innovation alone will not galvanise new and existing members’ support. Therefore, many of my interlocutors felt that Buddhist temples’ economic futures could not be tackled without addressing the broader issue of regional revival.

It has been a long time coming!

Buddhist temple communities in regional Japan have been diminishing and ageing for quite some time now (Reader 2012a), but Buddhist temples are not isolated in their economic struggle for active membership. NRM, which in the post-war period challenged Buddhist temples’ reliance on traditional membership networks, are also ageing and facing similar struggles even in urban areas (Baffelli and Reader 2018, McLaughlin 2019, Watanabe 2016). However, issues of economic stability and declining membership in regional temple communities are not just the product of the most recent years. The realities of Buddhist institutions in Japan’s shrinking regions, as painted by Ukai Hidenori’s influential account of material decay of Buddhist temples, are partially due to the institutions’ delayed response to multiple waves of depopulation.

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150 Fieldnotes, June 2017.
Some of the most monumental economic issues currently faced by the Buddhist temples relate to ongoing structural and legislative developments and socio-economic transformations originating in the Meiji period. These resulted in urbanisation, industrialisation and increased mobility and the associated reorganisation of family and community structures. In his doctoral research on Buddhist temples in Kagoshima prefecture, Hoshino Motooki (2014) notes that some Japanese scholars were already paying attention to these changes and their impacts on the secular management of temples in the pre-war period. For example, in the 1920s, Morita Torao (1925) declared Buddhist temples to be in economic crisis as a consequence of the professionalisation of the priesthood and changing attitudes to ancestor worship that he linked to modernisation and secularisation, and geographical and social mobility, and the resulting reorganisation of the traditional family system and abandonment of socio-economic ties to ancestral temples in distant rural areas (Morita 1925 cited in Hoshino 2014, p. 8). Among his pragmatic solutions to the said crisis, Morita suggested that temples ought to develop side businesses such as facilities for arranging cremations and storage of ashes of the dead (nōkotsudō) and offering Buddhist wedding ceremonies. Following the post-war legislative changes, Morita’s strategies became a new status quo for Buddhist temples, and a new generation of scholars started evaluating the economic consequences of Buddhism’s new social and legal set-up (Chiba 2001, Imon 1972, Nakajima 2005).

Rural-to-urban migration (mainly by branch households) and changes in social life relating to nuclearization and diversification of the family unit throughout the 1960s onwards meant the weakening of familial and ancestral ties to rural temples (Tamamuro 1999, pp. 227-8). However, until late 1990s, temples in regions such as those in the north of Hiroshima Prefecture were able to maintain relatively steady numbers of affiliated households despite the general trend of loosening ties between socio-economic migrants to urban areas and their rural temples (Covell 2005, 2012, Rowe 2011, Tamamuro 1999). My data reveals that out of the twenty-two local temples that I visited during my fieldwork, at least half had been able to maintain a degree of connection to a small number of distant affiliated members, usually no more than twenty (see Chapter 2). The number of lost connections was far greater: all

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151 Covell (2012, p.3) goes even further in tracing the legal formalisation of secular temple management systems back to the early 17th century Bakufu Temple Ordinances (jiin hatto).

152 Nakajima (2005) makes similar recommendations for contemporary temples, proposing a more business-like approach functioning clearly under profit and loss rules of engagement.
except one priest who I interviewed reported a drop in membership numbers of 30 percent or more over the past ten years alone.

Nonetheless, the impact of the first wave of depopulation was not noticeable for many rural temples as long as there still existed a generation prepared to honour their ancestral obligations and offer their donations. As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 5, the second wave of demographic depopulation (1990s onward) revealed the absence of a future generation of members, an absence that dismantled the security of the generational transmission of practice in Japan’s depopulating countryside. Weakening communal ties among jōkai members have corresponded with disruptions in the economic support structures of Buddhist temple communities.

**Conclusion**

By exploring networks of economic belonging, I have shown in this chapter how Buddhist institutions represent complex economic structures that are both family-run private businesses and voluntarily funded entities. Contemporary Buddhist institutions need permanent and reliable ways of providing a stable flow of income to remain operational. Most Buddhist temples rely on their lay members’ generosity. Mobilising individual giving, collective fundraising and nurturing local economic networks of belonging through voluntary labour are essential for sustaining operational temples run according to a collective ownership model. Despite the legal role played by temple custodians, temples remain institutionally rooted in economic transfers, lay patronage and multifaceted models of co-ownership and co-responsibility that are under threat from demographic and ideological changes in Japan’s depopulating regional communities.
Chapter Four

Local Buddhist temples as storehouses of value: the materiality of belonging, memory and religious waste

Introduction: on worth and waste

One morning in early January, I joined a group of Myōkōji's male supporters for their winter o-migaki duties when all the temple’s golden and brass ornaments are removed, taken apart, washed, polished and reassembled. Before the men arrived, I helped the head priest and his son lay down sheets of tarpaulin and old linen and set up a washing station: two sizeable bowls of hot water placed on top of the temple’s stairs. By the time the twelve members of Myōkōji’s bukkyō sōnenkai arrived, we had already started removing ornaments from the three altars in the main hall. It was a chilly morning and a gentle layer of fresh snow was covering the temple yard and the surrounding rice paddies and hills. Before long, the sound of small white truck engines reached our ears. The members started assembling in the main hall. Rubbing their hands together to keep the frostiness of the morning at bay, they gathered around the three circular gas heaters warming up the air inside the hall. As we huddled around the stove sipping freshly brewed tea, I asked a couple of my companions about the propeller hanging on one of the hall’s wall. Most ornaments and items in the temple’s hall were engraved with the names of their lay donors, but the propeller was unmarked. I was curious as to how it had made its way to this temple, imagining that it might have come from a war plane.

A man in his late sixties named Ueda-san who had retired a few years ago and returned to the village answered first: “This propeller came from a little plane. The Ishida household who used to live in the area, a big wealthy household with a long lineage, they moved away a few years ago.” He paused for a quick sip of warm tea before continuing: “The Ishidas’ son was a pilot, so after his parents’ passing, the family relocated to Kantō because of his work.” The other man interjected: “Was it Kantō? Not Kansai? I guess it is best to ask the head priest, he will remember for sure. But in any case, after moving away, he kept flying in his small plane over the area. The propeller comes from his plane.” They told me that Ishida-san had continued to fly over the village because of his sentiment for it, but the family was never able to return to live in this community again. When he retired, he asked for the

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propeller to be stored at the temple: “He wanted someone to remember him, his story and that the Ishida household was once a part of this community.” As to why Ishida-san decided to store the propeller at the temple, both my companions saw this as the most obvious (atarimae) place to record one’s history and create a connection with the community, particularly now. “Our generation still remembers the Ishidas and the propeller story,” Ueda-san noted, “but the next generation might not. The temple seems like the safest place to keep it. The head priest will, hopefully, pass on the memory of it all to his son and so on.” The other man looked around the hall and added, “Amida willing, all this might even survive. Or so we hope. Why else would we do all this? Then again, the way we are all going, it will all become rubbish (gomi) one day. What a waste, eh?” We emptied our cups of now lukewarm tea and got on with the job.

Figure 14. Members of Myōkōji’s bukkyō sōnenkai and the temple board, and Suzuki-san’s son, during o-migaki cleaning duties (13 January 2017).

That morning, as I dried and polished individual parts of the ornaments, I watched the men around me handle every piece with extreme care and precision. It was as if we were handling not only the temple’s decorative objects, but also countless mementos of local people’s life histories and their numinous presence (see Figure 14). These objects were the proof of people’s efforts to realise their own and their deceased relatives’ salvation through donations or the sponsorship of various items furnishing the main temple hall and other parts of the temple. Every now and again, I came across characters engraved onto the ornaments, indicating which items were
purchased and donated to the temple as gifts. The characters recorded the names of donors or beneficiaries, and dates of the offerings as well as anniversaries of death. Occasionally someone would pause and try to remember the people and households whose names were carved into the material landscape of the temple. More recent gifts were marked as such by stickers or characters drawn in marker pen. They ranged from religious paraphernalia to practical items such as the chairs and flat pillows used during preaching sessions at Myōkōji, which I knew were funded by the members of Myōkōji’s *buchō fujinkai*.

All Buddhist temples are marked with the memories of people who support or once supported the Buddhist community, their names and levels of generosity often recorded for all to remember. Rows of wooden donor tablets decorate the inner walls of Myōkōji’s main hall in memory of past connections. Some of those made of darkened and weathered wood date back to the late Tokugawa period. The most recent are calligraphed on sheets of rice paper because the lay supporter who used to make the wooden tablets passed away; they include the names of those who sponsored the temple’s roof repairs only a few years ago. The tablets and the repaired roof are markers of the memory of members’ affective links, of meritorious acts in memory of people’s ancestors and of the value that people ascribe to their local temple. This value in the form of materialised memory is a tangible marker of people’s desire to belong, to remember and to be remembered — individually and collectively.154

In this chapter, my understanding of value follows Bender and Taves (2012, p. 10) reflection that “things acquire value in the context of relationships.” Things of value come into existence in the context of interactions. People in various contexts decide or experience what is of value and they develop processes that allow them to assign qualities of importance to them. The question of “Why else would we do all this?” did not seem merely rhetorical. Rather, I interpreted it as an assertion of worth, an expression that one’s efforts are not going to waste (at least not yet). Similarly, the Ishida family had chosen Myōkōji as an anchor of their local connectedness. The propeller that they had installed in the temple’s main hall placed them on the community’s emotional map, even though other material markers of their existence such as land and the family house had been erased. The propeller shows how collected material memories of the living and the dead, donated to and gathered at the temple for centuries, can contribute to the development of shared worth. The materiality of giving (not just in economic terms, but in a value-producing sense) is one of the ways

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154 Danely (2014, pp. 95-99) has also explored the performative and material aspects of the formation of communities of memory in contemporary Japan.
in which local people can articulate their *en*, acknowledging the causality and connectedness associated with it and dealing with its absence. Therefore, when dealing with questions of worth and belonging, we must also consider the question of waste and disconnect, and the possibility that one woman’s treasure may one day become another woman’s garbage. Waste, in my understanding is not the antithesis of value; it is the concomitant of all things worthwhile.

**En as a value-generating practice: value and waste**

In this chapter, I will investigate *en* as a marker of value — understood as worth and waste — and conceptualise Buddhist temple communities as storehouses of this value, arguing that this highlights the role that Buddhist institutions play as anchors of people’s belonging. In Chapter 3, I discussed the economic value of practices of giving and how they sustain temple support networks. In this chapter, I focus on the notion of value as a worth- and waste-producing process to investigate the ways in which people make or render temples worthwhile or wasteful. I analyse the giving, depositing and storing of things at the temple as memory practices that transfer and store value and allow people to process religious and “karmic waste” in a meaningful way. By “karmic waste” I am referring to the abandoned karmic bonds and unclaimed human remains associated with practices of abandonment in death. The notion of value, in my understanding, relates to the claims that people make regarding the significance of ritual actions, Buddhist practices and processing death. This significance can carry both positive and negative valences. By investigating *en* as a value-generating material practice of remembering and forgetting, I draw on anthropological theories of value that tie the concept of value not only to processes of meaning-making (Graeber 2001, Werner and Bell 2003, Bender and Taves 2012), but also to ritual actions that realise value in the world (Robbins 2015). I show how Buddhist temple communities are symbolically and physically constructed and how materiality is employed for this purpose. Rituals are meant to enact idealised versions of the world. 155 Thus, Buddhist memorial rites enable a temporal reality within which a person is remembered more fully. As Robbins (2015, p. 22) suggests, rituals “show people the values that exist in their community by providing realized representations of them, but they do not expect people to live lives singularly devoted to reproducing these values in such pure form.” Therefore, ritual action helps people to recognise things of value in their community and solicits their interest in the values present and shared in the community. Buddhist temple communities as sites where such rituals can be enabled are thus transformed into spheres where values can be stored

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(Graeber 2001) and symbolically constructed as meaningful repositories of people’s karmic futures and of religious waste.

In this chapter, I unpack value and the notion of “storage” in three ways. By conceptualising local Buddhist temples as storehouses of value, I investigate the processes of memory production through which temples come to serve as sites of memory – sites where memories of individual temple supporters and their communities reside and can be processed. Secondly, I argue that, aside from constituting sites of nostalgia and remembrance, Buddhist temples function as sites for experiencing things of value and thus have the capacity to contribute to communal unity. Finally, I also address value through the discourse of waste and wastefulness (mottainai) to show that temples function as storehouses of waste in both a metaphorical and material way, taking as an example the practice of storing ashes at nōkotsudō halls at regional Jōdo Shinshū temples. My analysis of this phenomenon shows that temples are sites where religious waste (e.g. human remains and karmic futures) is dealt with in a meaningful fashion and where the unaccounted for excess of human memory is stored. At the same time, nōkotsudō practices also risk turning temples into storehouses of religious waste and outdated values. With no new (next) generation in attendance to continue to ascribe positive value to them, temples might themselves come to epitomise “waste.”

Through ethnographic examples, I continue to show how lay members and religious professionals participate in the process of effecting their sense of belonging and their affinity to others in a performative sense (Butler 1997, Bell 1999, Fortier 1999). By establishing concrete material representations of their human and non-human bonds, individuals charge temples with meaning, rendering them worthwhile (or wasteful) in the process. The story of Ishida-san’s propeller is but one example of the ways in which people can imbue local temples with ideological value by transforming personal life histories into communal narratives of belonging.

**Temples as storehouses of value: feeling the presence of the past**

The Ishida family placed a propeller at Myōkōji to address the issue of physical disconnect with the community. By moving away, they had severed what Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) referrs to as the “chain of memory” that had tied them to past and future generations of ancestors. The propeller embodied affective connections (en) that Ishida-san had maintained by flying frequently over the region and eventually by storing the propeller at Myōkōji. Since Ishida-san and his family are not there to tell the story, it is the people left behind who must tell the stories that construct the memory of his belonging and who ascribe value to such belonging. The
propeller, along with many other objects donated to the temple, is the material marker of the value that Ishida-san might have ascribed to his local temple. The donation that accompanied the propeller honoured the memory of Ishida-san’s deceased relatives and contributed to the preservation of shared Buddhist and regional heritage — a process in which Buddhist temples and their custodians have an essential role to play as "keepers of tradition." Suzuki-san explained: "It is our job to survive, to sustain our physical presence and to accommodate people’s material markers of memory. Because, for lay members, the death of a temple puts their ancestors’ karmic wellbeing at risk." Symbolically then, temples (as part of a wider social structure that weaves people together) have the capacity to constitute sites of memory, which take root in concrete form through gestures, images and objects.

Hervieu-Léger (2000) suggests that religion constitutes a “chain of memory” whereby myths, doctrines, rituals and all things religious are transmitted and preserved from one generation to the next. This chain of memory is lodged in various material forms. Photographs, drawings, paintings, carvings, statues, books, chairs, pillows, tables and propellers are all part of the community’s material history and its memory of people’s socio-religious existence. Buddhist temples are thus full of clues about connections once forged — full of gifts and mementos of encounters.

On 4 August 2017, an article was published in the regional newspaper, Chūgoku Shimbun, about the commencement of construction works for an exhibition-cum-memorial hall honouring the work and life of a locally born calligraphy artist. According to the article, his youngest son (Nishimura-san), the director of one of Hiroshima Prefecture’s art museums, wanted to create a space where roughly one thousand of his father’s art pieces could be stored, displayed and celebrated. The space was also intended to serve as a meeting and study space for events and workshops run in the community where his father grew up. The son was quoted as saying: “I want to make it into a facility that will allow the memory of a calligraphy artist like my father to stay in people’s hearts” (Chūgoku Shimbun 2018). Following a number of fundraising events, including a series of classical music concerts performed by Nishimura-san’s niece, the two-storey wooden hall was subsequently completed and the opening ceremony took place on 1 June 2018. Between August 2016 and August 2017, I observed a number of meetings and preparatory events that led to the completion of the hall. It was built on a plot of land owned by Myōkōji’s Suzuki-san senior and replaced a rundown akiya, an empty house located a couple of rice paddies across

156 Fieldnotes, June 2017.
from Myōkōji. The son wanted to design the hall to allow for one of its windows to look out onto the temple — something that he felt would please his deceased father.\(^{157}\)

Figure 15. A sculpture gifted by Nishimura-san’s father’s to Myōkōji. It represents the “*namu amida butsu*” inscription (12 October 2016).

Until the completion of the hall, a significant proportion of the artwork produced by the famous calligrapher was stored at Myōkōji. The artist had been a lay supporter of the temple with strong personal ties of friendship with Suzuki-san senior. During his lifetime, as well as in his death, he donated several of his paintings to Myōkōji – paintings that now decorated the temple’s halls and corridors. A sizeable painting of the words “*namu amida butsu*” hung in the temple’s main hall, while a modernist stone sculpture into which the same characters were engraved was placed at the entrance to the temple grounds and welcomed Myōkōji’s visitors (see Figure 15). I was told by Suzuki-san and the artist’s remaining family that he had been an ardent practitioner of *nenbutsu* and, as such, had dedicated a large portion of his artwork to Shin Buddhist themes, particularly to *nenbutsu* inscriptions, which were the feature of

\(^{157}\) Fieldnotes, March 2017.
his many paintings.\textsuperscript{158} I spoke to Nishimura-san and his wife in August 2017 during the “groundbreaking ceremony” performed by Suzuki-san on the site where the hall was to be erected.\textsuperscript{159} Nishimura-san explained that, as the youngest son, he had not expected to inherit the responsibility of preserving his father’s memory. However, after his older brothers passed away, he felt that he needed to return to the place where his father chose to store his life’s work to establish an enduring connection between his family and the temple as a way for his father to be remembered.\textsuperscript{160} Later on, as we walked back to the temple, his wife grabbed my hand and explained further:

My father-in-law truly tied his bonds (en) with this temple. I am from Osaka and that’s where my local temple is. That is where we went when my parents died a few years ago to find a priest for the funeral. But with Myōkōji, this is different. Through my husband’s father, we have created a real en with Myōkōji. We chose this, he chose this.\textsuperscript{161}

Nishimura-san’s wife felt that through the project of building the memorial hall they had come closer together, working together as a family to anchor the memory of her father-in-law’s artistry and devotion, and to mobilise the memory of the dead in a religious space that Nishimura-san had deliberately chosen to imbue with meaning as a final resting place for his father’s affective connections and artwork – artwork that in itself could be considered meritorious since it propagated the Shin teachings.

Nishimura-san had originally intended to create a private mausoleum of sorts for his deceased father – a place where the family could visit and where the temple could oversee the necessary memorialisation rituals and take custodial charge of the artwork. However, since the hall was going to be built on the land belonging to the temple it had to be open to the public and, more specifically, used for the public benefit of temple members if the temple was to avoid the taxes payable for private property construction. As noted in Chapter 3, Buddhist temples are governed through

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[158] Inscriptions of Amida’s name, referred to as myōgō honzon, became the centre of Buddhist worship during Shinran’s time, supplying “the ordinary believer with a simple and accessible object of reverence for use in worship” (Dobbins 2002, p. 66). Up to that point, religious objects had only consisted of Buddha images, which were generally only available to the upper classes who had the resources to commission them.
\item[159] A groundbreaking or ground purification ceremony (jichinsai) is usually performed before any kind of building or construction work commences in order to worship the spirits (kami) of the locality and pray that construction may proceed without incident. Customarily, such ceremonies are performed by Shinto priests, but at Buddhist sites they are usually performed by Buddhist priests. For a detailed discussion on jichinsai see Nelson (1994). On controversies over state-sponsored jichinsai in the postwar era see Hardacre (1989) and Takayama (1990).
\item[160] Fieldnotes, August 2017.
\item[161] Fieldnotes, 21 August 2017.
\end{footnotesize}
the Religious Corporations Law, which grants them exemption from corporate income tax, real estate tax, and registration tax. To take advantage of these exemptions the hall needed to be an official temple project. In order to control the costs, the building work was administered through the temple budget following a donation by the Nishimura family to front the construction costs. Moreover, the new building needed to be treated as a structural extension of Myōkōji, rather than a private building development: it had to be made accessible to the temple’s members and to operate as a temple hall with a Buddhist altar incorporated into the design.

The result was the said exhibition-cum-memorial hall that honoured both the (religious) art and life of a local artist as well as the memory of Nishimura-san’s and Nishimura-san’s father’s affective bonds. Practically and symbolically, the hall became part of the temple and, by extension, a meeting site that could be utilised by the entire community. For instance, in April 2019, the review committee of Myōkōji’s **bukkyō fujinkai** (which I profiled in Chapter 3) held a calligraphy workshop at the hall to celebrate the pronouncement of Japan’s new era, the name of which had been announced on 1 April 2019. The Crown Prince Naruhito’s formal ascension to the Chrysanthemum Throne following Emperor Akihito’s abdication on 30 April 2019 would mark the transition from the “Heisei” era into the new “Reiwa” era. In preparation for celebrating this transition, **fujinkai** members practised writing “Reiwa” characters (Suzuki-san, personal correspondence, April 25, 2019). The hall was thus “gifted” to the temple, creating an opening for the nurturing of existing and future bonds between the temple and the community and among community members. However, it also placed a responsibility of care on the shoulders of the temple custodians and Myōkōji’s supporting members who now had a duty to maintain the Nishimuras’ *en* and the material embodiment of it (i.e. the ceremonial hall). Some markers of value can prove more burdensome than others.

People donate to the temple a whole range of material things (some more covertly than others) that can sometimes lead to conflicts between the temple custodians and the donors’ families. Suzuki-san mentioned two such examples in one of our conversations. The first involved the donation of an entire family inheritance including the family home and land (which now serves as Myōkōji’s carpark). The donation was not well-received by the son of the donor, a woman who, according to Suzuki-san, had wanted her land to serve the temple. Instead, it became a source of animosity and a drain on temple resources: it was costly to demolish the existing house and convert the land into a carpark that the temple did not really need. It is

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162 Fieldnotes, November 2016.
clear from this example that some meritorious gifts in memory of the dead end up being more of a burden than a blessing, with temple custodians left to deal with the excess of such generosity.

The other example concerned the donation of insurance money that a married couple had received after their adult son died in an accident. The parents did not wish to benefit from their son’s tragic death and felt that by giving the money to the temple, it would help to support their son in the afterlife. Suzuki-san explained that the couple asked for the donation to be recorded as anonymous because they did not want their neighbours to know the extent of their generosity and their level of devotional commitment to the temple because they feared that this would cause dissonance in the community regarding appropriate levels of generosity.\footnote{Fieldnotes, December 2016.} Their donation was subsequently used for temple renovations to benefit the rest of the community.\footnote{Fieldnotes, December 2016.} Such practices of giving are often an expression of intimacy between humans (the dead and the grieving) and the temple and the divinities (or an indication of a desire to establish such intimacy). Often unsolicited, offerings of various objects are also a material articulation of individual and collective values whereby a body of people come together through acts of giving to nourish their confident assumptions of knowing to whom and to what they owe their existence, and who can be trusted to be tasked with remembering their stories. People choose how and by whom they wish to be remembered, and who they wish to help them with remembering, mourning and parting with the dead.

At the same time, they create sites of memory and significance. The gifts support the temple materially, but also become incorporated into its historical, social and karmic landscape. Both gifts and givers become part and parcel of the temple’s aesthetics and its meritorious cycles of co-dependence. As Stortini (2020) notes, matter thus becomes not a negation of a spirit, but rather an embodiment of it. Practices of memory, of remembering, of creating material markers of supposed permanence, steadiness and steadfastness temporarily subvert the reality of symptomatic demise. As such they give the illusion of a possible future that can be materialised in the present and realised in the afterlife. The material culture of every temple’s main hall attests to people’s attempts to remember and be remembered, to reaffirm their bonds and, through giving, to reaffirm the worth of the places where their gifts are stored and used. The cases of the propeller and the artwork discussed above are but just two examples of this.
**Experiences of value: the relational framework of survival**

Temple custodians make efforts to imprint the memory of their temple onto the lives of its generations of supporters. In Chapter 1, we saw how the head priest of Yōanji temple used the creation and display of children’s handprints as a way of establishing and nurturing affective relations, as well as evoking memory and feelings of nostalgia for one’s spiritual home. There are many ways in which Buddhist priests choose to nurture such bonds throughout peoples’ lifetimes — not just in death — making temples function as sites for experiencing things of value and thus making them into spaces through which communal unity is built in more than a merely symbolic way.

My lay interlocutors were usually very clear in articulating the importance of locality and personal connections of love and friendship in their support and levels of engagement with their local temple. Many priests believed that the only way to make people appreciate the worth of having a local Buddhist temple was by nurturing personal connections and reaching out to the community in a helpful way. This helpfulness presented itself in various forms. One morning in June 2017, I joined a group of middle-school and high-school children in Genjōji temple, which a few years ago had been converted into a classroom. The temple ran a cram school for children who had dropped out of or struggled with the mainstream education system (*futōkō*). The children and teachers — most of them volunteers — who I met that morning worked together to develop knowledge and skills in a range of subjects, including English classes led by the resident head priest and taught by his wife. The school had gained recognition locally.

Yusuke-san, the grand-son of Hirata-san (who I have profiled in Chapter 1 and will mention again later on in this chapter) had attended Genjōji’s supplementary school (*juku*). Thanks to the tuition he received there, he was able to pass the university entry exams and was at the time completing his degree in teaching at a Tokyo university. When I met him for the second time in August 2017, he explained:

> If it had not been for Genjōji’s *juku*, I would have never entered university. I was not a very confident child, but the head priest there was really good at teaching English and he made me feel like I belonged. We all belonged there, even if we did not [belong] anywhere else. He tried different things until we understood whatever he tried to teach us. Whenever I return here to visit my grandmother, I always pay a visit to his temple. I hope that the school will continue despite the depopulation, and when I qualify, I might be able to support the temple and the school in some way. Maybe I can teach there too, or maybe, if I can afford it in the future, I will even donate

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165 The educational environment became very competitive from the 1970s onwards, placing issues including school drop-outs (*ochikobore*), bullying, school-related suicide and phobia on the educational agenda. See Tanaka (2010) and Roesgaard (2017).
some money there. I am not religious (mushūkyō), but Genjōji has been a very special place for me. Perhaps it is strange, but I put my hands together and bow my head in front of the main hall when I visit.166

For Yusuke-san, Genjōji represented a place of significance where he was able to both belong and enrich his experiences and knowledge, enabling him to forge a path for himself in his adult life. He thus ascribed a positive value to a place where he returned time and time again to express his gratitude. As we continued our conversation, it became clear that he was concerned about the future of Genjōji in a region where depopulation is threatening the survival of entire communities, but when I asked him whether he was concerned about the survival of Buddhist temples, he explained that his main concern was about Genjōji: “When it comes to other temples, I am less concerned. To be honest, I do not even think about other temples. Genjōji matters because of my connections there.” Yusuke-san assigned value to Genjōji through the prism of interrelations that made the temple and his experiences there meaningful.

Yusuke-san was not the only individual who identified the worth of their temple encounters with what I refer to as experiences of value. When I spoke to the students and teachers at Genjōji’s school in June 2017, they shared similar insights. A female student in her late teens stated: “I am not from this village, but my mum brings me here twice a week because this school is so much better than my normal school. I finally understand maths, well some of it (she laughs).” I then asked her how she felt about Buddhist temples in general, to which she responded: “This temple is so easy to be at. My grandmother used to take me to our local temple when I was little, and I liked it. They always gave us sweets, but I do not care much for it anymore. I care about this temple; they really look out for us here. Other temples do not matter. That’s it.” I listened on as a teenage boy interjected: “If this temple closed down, it would be really awful. So sad. Where would we go if that happened?” Others shared his concerns and a few children and teachers reiterated during a group session and later on over lunch that Genjōji and the temple family’s wellbeing mattered to them because of the positive value that it brought into their lives. One of the teachers remarked, “I am not religious at all, but by working here, I guess I am becoming a better person, or I hope so. If you think about it in this way, maybe it brings some spiritual wealth (seishinteki na yutakasa) into my life.” Although he differentiated between his work as a teacher and Buddhist practice, he pointed to the sense of emotional enrichment and purpose that his engagement with Genjōji brought into his

166 Interview, 9 August 2017.
167 Interview, 6 June 2017.
life. Other teachers also highlighted Genjōji’s positive impact on the life of children who otherwise felt that they had nowhere to belong to. Most children in the school come from troubled families with histories of addiction and violence or from economically precarious single-parent families. The value ascribed to the temple’s activities and by extension the temple itself was also reflected in the wider community’s support for the head priest and his family: they reported multiple examples of unsolicited generosity of community members, regardless of their status of affiliation to the temple.

Experiences of value generated at Genjōji — and other temples involved in similar outreach projects — store value at Buddhist temples through the development of networks of belonging in this life (and the memories of such belonging) just as much as they do through the materialisation of memories of affective links to past generations. In their conversations with me, priests involved in community outreach projects always recognised the value of such initiatives for generating ties with individuals, which in time might produce the next generation of temple supporters. The handprints at Yōanji temple and the alternative forms of educational inclusion experienced at Genjōji effected a memory of belonging and the ascription of value to individual temples and, in many cases, individual temple custodians. Such practices reveal that Buddhist temples are not just markers of memory, but sites where things of value can be experienced.

**Gifts as burdens: dealing with waste**

In recent years, temple closures, demographic ageing and rural-to-urban migration patterns have generated an enormous amount of material waste. People have been turning to temples to help them deal with this waste in meaningful ways. The memorial hall storing Nishimura-san’s father’s artwork was built on a plot of land on which an abandoned house had stood for over twenty years. When I asked, no one could remember exactly when it was left empty. The calendar mounted on one of the walls stopped in May 1997. The house had been occupied by an elderly couple. After the husband died, his elderly wife, Uemura-san, continued to live there alone for a number of years until her fragile state required her to be placed in a local long-term care facility. On 23 July 2017, I joined Myōkōji’s temple family in clearing out Uemura-san’s house. When I entered, I saw a home abandoned in midst of living, now covered by a thick layer of stubborn dust. A pair of women’s garden shoes and a four-wheel shopping trolley had been left in the entrance as if in anticipation of her return. Our faces covered with white protective masks, we started removing the signs of a life left mid-way. A hand-made card celebrating Uemura-san’s birthday was mounted on one of the beams (see Figure 16), revealing that she was born in Meiji 41 (1908) on 11
November. By the end of the day, photographs, journals, crockery, clothes and all the rest of her personal belongings would be gone, packed into countless bags of burnable and non-burnable rubbish. Non-burnable items were taken to the local recycling centre, the rest — including the birthday card — was burnt in a metal barrel placed within the temple’s grounds.

Figure 16. A picture of Uemura-san’s birthday card pinned to one of the beams in her house (23 July 2017).

Uemura-san had no family. As a new memorial hall was being erected for one person, the memory of another was being forgotten. There was a sense of sadness in the air as we emptied the house of dust-covered life while the woman whose memory was being disposed of looked on from a photograph placed in front of the family’s Buddhist altar. Following Uemura-san’s death nearly two decades ago, the Suzuki family and an elderly couple living in the neighbouring household (very distant kin of the Uemuras) had ensured that the appropriate funeral rites took place, including the placement of her photograph and the hōmyō certificate bearing her Buddhist name at the butsudan. Now, they would be destroyed. Another community member would be forgotten and erased from the collective memory. Kenji-san might still remember the Uemuras as he helped to clear out the house. Perhaps they will be remembered as
part of the artist’s memorial hall’s history. Regardless, what I wish to point out here is the role of the temple and Buddhist practices. They are not only vehicles for collective memory and a log book of individual histories forgotten by everyone else. They are also sites of disposal of memory and of people’s unaccounted for bonds.

Memory — the human perpetual preoccupation with the past — is often seen as a valuable legacy to be preserved or commemorated. It is thus often reified as something that people need to convey from the past to maintain. Such considerations are even more amplified when discussions of memory pertain to communities, histories and heritage facing inevitable decline. However, I treat memory not as a transmittable object, but as a materialised social and cultural strategy to belong that imbues material objects and places with significance. In its affective capacity, I suggest that memory constitutes a perpetual bond that ties us to the present, allowing temples to play a role as storehouses of human and non-human bonds. However, as Pierre Nora (1989, p. 9) notes, memory “is blind to all but the group it binds.” Part of this strategy of belonging through remembrance thus inevitably includes acts of selection and forgetting (Augé et al. 2004, Connerton 2009).

The day after the clear out, I joined Suzuki-san, Nishimura-san and his wife, as well as two employees of the construction company hired to build the memorial hall to conduct a disposal ceremony of the Uemura household butsudan. Buddhist altars, as Rambelli notes (2010, p. 69), are not only symbolic objects and catalysts for religious activities. As veritable sacred objects, they are imbued with the “spirits” of the Buddhas and ancestors dwelling within. The process of infusing Buddhist family altars with spirits is known as an eye-opening ceremony (kaigen kūyo) or butsudan inauguration ceremony (butsudan-biraki). The reverse process is called an “extraction ceremony” (hakken-shiki) or “removal of the sacred spirit” (mitama-nuki). It usually takes place when a butsudan needs repair work, or when it is to be disposed of. That morning we gathered to witness Suzuki-san extract the spirit of the Buddha and the spirits of the dead from the Uemuras’ family altar and to dispatch them, and ultimately dispose of the butsudan through a special memorial ritual (butsudan kuyō) (see Figure 17). In other words, for the new memorial hall to be erected, a household needed to disappear. The Buddhist temple, where the butsudan was

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168 See Rambelli (2010) for a detailed account of the ceremony.
169 Butsudan kuyō is usually performed at the spring and autumn equinoxes (higan), during the celebrations for the historical Buddha’s nirvana (nehān-e on February 25), and on the “Day of the butsudan and Buddhist ritual implements” (butsudan butsugu no hi on March 27). For further details of the ritual and examples see Kretschmer (2000) and Rambelli (2007, pp. 211-258).
subsequently burnt, played an important role in dealing with the issue of waste generated by unclaimed socio-religious bonds and objects imbued with affective connections.

Figure 17. In anticipation of the butsudan kuyō ceremony performed at Uemura-san’s abandoned house (24 July 2017).

Suzuki-san reported that requests for butsudan disposal rituals had become more frequent over the past ten years. Some people had simply left unwanted Buddhist items, including entire Buddhist altars, in the temple’s yard late at night or in the early morning hours. In March 2017, the family of a recently deceased member called on the temple to drop off a Buddhist statue that they had found when clearing out the family house. They intended to relocate the family butsudan to their home in Hiroshima city, but they did not know what to do with the statue. The son who dropped it off explained that they felt uncomfortable just throwing it away, so they hoped that it could be stored safely at the temple or that the head priest would know how to dispose of it properly. “It would be wasteful (mottainai) to simply throw it away,” he reportedly said. Suzuki-san took the statue and placed it on the kitchen

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170 Fieldnotes, November 2018.
table laughing and shaking his head. It was still wrapped in a green piece of cloth and he asked me to unwrap it. When I removed the cloth, it transpired that it was a statue of Bodhisattva Kannon — usually associated with esoteric Shingon Buddhism and its founder, Kōbō Daishi. Suzuki-san was amused: Kannon was not worshipped in his temple’s tradition and, as such, he felt that the statue could not be placed in the temple hall. Since it was carved in stone, it could not be disposed of through burning and Suzuki-san was not sure how to handle the object ritually, so it ended up being stored in one of the alcoves in the temple’s butsudan room, still wrapped in the green cloth so as not to anger Amida Buddha. Despite the denominational conundrum, the temple was selected as the best place to deal with an object believed to host spiritual beings of any sort; people are unwilling to dispose of such things by just throwing them away.

As I have argued elsewhere (Kolata forthcoming), if we assume that things have lives, they also have deaths. Hence, we cannot separate the notion of worth from the notion of waste when considering temples as sites where value is stored. The notion of waste and wastefulness and designing ritual practices of dealing with decay and death of objects and people is strongly embedded in Buddhist practice. As Hannah Gould (2019) notes, the notion of mottainai refers to “an affective condition of guilt or sadness when disposing of something before its potential utility has been exhausted.” Buddhist rituals of disposal, known as kuyō, show respect for the life of material objects, but also remove waste from the life of individuals, allowing them to part with the things and the connections that these objects signify. Buddhist priests, by liberating the owners from the burden of material affects, also help them dispose of their en – in some cases, disposing of entire family histories, as in the case of Uemura-san’s household.

However, for some people, the idea that en might be disposed of so readily by those left behind is a cause of great concern. As we will see, their approaches to

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171 Kōbō Daishi, formally known as Kūkai (774-835), is considered one of the founding patriarchs of the Japanese esoteric tradition.

172 See also Siniawer (2019) on how, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the notion of mottainai was deployed as a lost Japanese value insofar that the current public discourse on mottainai attempts to evoke an era of post-war thriftiness to face challenges of mass waste and a perceived disease of affluence.

173 It is important to note that scholars have shown that kuyō practices developed as a hybrid of Buddhist and animist beliefs that cannot be easily unyoked. See Kretschmer 2000 (pp. 145-48, 193-96).
tackling the spectre of being forgotten in death can transform Buddhist temples into sites of ultimate remembrance and abandonment that epitomise waste.

**Nōkotsudō: sites of ultimate value and abandonment**

For Hirata-san – the friend who taught me to make soba noodles (Chapter 1) – the loneliness of daily life becomes even more concerning when she imagines that she will die alone and that no one will remember her and her life. She worries that her ancestors’ and her own life stories will be forgotten. One afternoon in May 2017, she took out a photo album and a rolled-up record of her husband’s household in which the story of the Hirata ie was duly noted, the last few entries written in her own hand. She pointed to the place where her name had been recorded when she had first come to her husband’s household as a bride.174 “Hirata Yuki, that’s it,” she sighed. “There is nothing more about me here, nothing about my life. How are my children and grandchildren supposed to know and remember who I was?” she asked.

She passed me the photo book with a patterned red cover that featured a photograph of herself, much younger, from the time when she still dyed her hair black (see Figure 18). The album told her story of her life. She had spent three months last winter writing short excerpts about important life events and collating photographs of herself and people who had been important in these events. Then she had asked a local photographer to produce her life story in the format of a photo book, which also included her children’s and grandchildren’s written reflections about her. As I flicked through the pages, I could sense pride and a small emotional trembling in her voice when she said: “Here you have it. This is a story of Hirata Yuki.” She then blinked quickly to keep back her tears. I asked her why she had created the book:

As I got older, I started thinking about my life more. The closer you get to death, you become more conscious of your life and how fragile it is, but the closer you get, the more you want to remember the people that you connected with in your life. I am Hirata Yuki, I am not just “Hirata.” I am also “Yuki” and Yuki-san is connected to many different people. When I die, I want people to remember ‘Yuki’, not just the bride of Hirata ie. And I do not want to be forgotten as **muenbotoke** when that ie ends.175

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174 Women are usually removed from their father’s family register upon marriage and written into that of their husband’s family, but “women in Japan were not always temporary members of the families of their birth” (Glassman 2007, 378). The adoption of Buddhist funerals and ancestral rituals by aristocratic and warrior classes influenced the entrenchment of patrilineal principles of descent (normative by the Tokugawa period).

175 Interview, 13 May 2017
The photo album was an expression of her desire to be remembered. The album reminded her of what the events in her life (those that she chose to remember) used to signify. At the same time, it consoled her with what is still alive: the connections that she is still able to draw upon and nurture (Ivy 1995). She dedicates three full pages to her involvement in temple activities. Although Hirata-san is not a *danka* member at Myōkōji, she is a very active member of the temple’s *buppu* and was a close friend of Suzuki-san’s mother. She also included the story of her encounter with the current abbot of the Jōdo Shinshū (Nishi Honganji) sect, Ōtani Kōjun, who she met during his visit to Myōkōji in 2010 before he succeeded his father as the abbot of Nishi Honganji in 2016. As Hirata-san said herself that day, she wants her children to remember this aspect (*en*) of her life because the Shin teachings of gratitude have been an important moral guiding force for her.

As she admitted, Hirata-san also created this book for herself, to remind herself of all the important bonds in her life and to articulate their significance. Therefore, she included details of her hobbies, favourite memories about her husband and stories about her engagement in the local community’s farming life. As much as it was intended as a memento for her children and grandchildren, creating it had been a process of self-remembrance and memorialisation of her own existence in preparation for her inevitable disappearance. By processing her past, she brought it to the attention of the present and secured its resonance in a future that will no longer just rely on the workings and will of human memory (particularly that of her family).
such, Hirata-san’s actions indicate that she took a proactive approach to ensuring that
she was remembered and memorialised after her death. Even though, technically, this
remembrance depended on other people viewing the photo album, what appeared to
be most important for Hirata-san (and many other elderly community members who
created similar albums) was the hope that through her actions in this life, including
creating an album, she would be remembered after death.

This notion of hope becomes even more transparent when we consider the
album in connection to Hirata-san’s plans to reserve one of the spaces in the Myōkōji’s
memorial hall for storing ashes (nōkotsudō). She intended to do this in order to
maintain her connection (en) to the community and collectively with the Buddhas and
the dead. She chose her local temple as the ‘final’ resting place of her en. On multiple
occasions, she had made it clear to me that she did not expect her children to
continue with the memorialisation rites for her and Hirata ancestors. At the same
time, she acknowledged that she did not wish to become a burden for her family. In
her words:

The previous generation were farmers, our generation are part-time
farmer, while the next generation will want to know nothing of the land. In
the same way, I am a Buddhist, my son might take it up part-time if I
make him, while my grandson will not be interested in following the
Buddhist ritual. Maybe I do not give them enough credit, but this path
requires commitment and I do not want to become a bondless spirit should
the responsibility of remembering me overwhelm them. If the temple looks
after me, my children and grandchildren could still visit, but if they don’t, I
will be taken care of. You see, gratitude to the buddhas and indebtedness
are no longer such popular values. (...) This way, I can at least try settling
my and my family’s debt to Amida in advance. And, after all, it is the job of
the temple family to remember its members.176

She was clearly concerned with the impact of her karmic future on her family. Jason
Danely refers to such a process of acknowledgement as "moral self-evaluation" (2013,
p. 111) whereby an elderly person considers the impact of their own existence and
values on others. A similar sentiment of un-burdening appeared in conversations with
many of my interviewees who equally feared the prospect of becoming a forgotten
entity, should their families neglect the practice.177

At least five out of thirty-four temples in the area where I conducted my
fieldwork had a nōkotsudō storage facility, while a few others were planning to install
one provided that they could gather sufficient funds. At Myōkōji, a few years ago,
Moriyama-san, an elderly lay member whose children lived in Tokyo and hardly ever

177 My other interlocutors produced similar narratives of un-burdening concerning their
ageing (see Chapter 5).
visited her, asked the head priest of Myōkōji whether she could deposit her ashes at the temple. According to Suzuki-san, the woman wanted her ashes to be stored at the temple because she knew that her children would not want to inherit the family’s *butsudan* and would not tend for her grave. Soon after, the *nōkotsudō* facility at Myōkōji was set up, funded with members’ donations. It is a small room at the back of the main temple hall. It accommodates a Buddhist altar in the centre of one wall and two blocks of cupboards, nine on each side, for storing the ashes. During my fieldwork, only half of the drawers were either occupied or reserved.

Nagaoka-san, another female member in her eighties, explained that if she stores her ashes at the temple, she will redirect her karmic connection there.\(^{178}\) As such, her children who live in Tokyo will not have to face the high costs of relocating the family grave from its current location in the mountains.\(^ {179}\) The future dwellers of *nōkotsudō* are expected to cover the costs upfront in a one-off donation. This, in turn, provides them with the promise of continuous memorialisation. At Myōkōji, the donation is equivalent to thirty years of annual membership fees (2,000-3,000 yen per year) plus thirty to forty years-worth of donations for an annual ritual service (on average 1,000-5,000 yen). Another Buddhist temple in the region has the donation guidance for *nōkotsudō* storage stipulated in its temple bylaws. Interested members are instructed that storing the ashes of one person should inspire a donation of at least 300,000 yen. Compared to the cost of a funeral (on average 2.3 million yen) or to the process of relocating a family grave, the storage of ashes is a considerably more affordable option.

For my interviewees, aware of their children’s and grandchildren’s shifting values and priorities as well as of their absence (physical and possibly ideological/spiritual), their main motivations were not necessarily financial. Instead, they hoped to secure the safety of their memory by preparing to make appropriate donations to rest at their local temple where a familiar and respectable lineage of temple custodians would care for them after death. They also put trust in the community to ensure that their local temple would somehow manage to weather the decline. This notion of trust in locality is important. It is not an articulation of naïve hope. My interviewees were aware of the irreversibility of some of the changes affecting their religious and regional communities. *Nōkotsudō* are rather an expression of anticipation and readiness for

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\(^ {178}\) Interview, 5 May 2017.

\(^ {179}\) The average cost of relocating the family grave is approximately 3 million yen, plus the cost of a new grave is estimated at approximately 1 million yen (Interview, 7 October 2017).
decline. They are a tentative promise for the living that they will continue to be remembered and to belong in death.

The notion of a person being ultimately “taken care off” by a Buddhist temple is not new, but what is of significance here is people’s choice to proactively take care of arrangements for their own memorialisation and final resting place. Also striking is the conscious choice that my interlocutors made to store their ashes at their local temple, rather than at a family grave, and the pressure they have put on their local temples to accommodate their wishes. The emergence of nōkotsudō halls in the region is thus a development that stems from local efforts to address concerns over issues of memory and socio-religious disconnect.

Nōkotsudō is not a region-specific phenomenon. I witnessed similar developments in Miyazaki Prefecture where, in 2012, the head priest of a small regional temple had redeveloped a building previously used as a temple-run nursery into a nōkotsudō facility. The initiative was motivated by requests from neighbours living in the temple’s vicinity, particularly those in economic difficulty, single mothers and elderly neighbours without any remaining family. Most neighbours were not the temple’s danka members but had developed a connection to the place through the charity outreach that was nurtured at the temple. Here, people had different storage options, each with a different level of donation expected in return. The basic distinction was between individual or collective storage units. The cheapest option was to have only their name inscribed onto the sacred scroll hanging in the middle of the hall with a “namu amida butsu” inscription: a purely symbolic storage of one’s ashes. Many of the people whose names were inscribed could not have afforded funeral or memorialisation rites. Hence, their storage was accepted donation-free.

Before the practice of nōkotsudō emerged at the local level, it had already been in use at the Jōdo Shinshū sect’s headquarters in Kyoto where Shinran’s grave is located. People used to purchase grave plots for their family grave to be located close to the sect’s spiritual centre. I visited the Ōtani Honbyō (Ōtani Main Mausoleum) in June 2017, together with Myōkōji’s head priest and a group of seven lay members. Instead of expanding the graveyard located at the site, the sect’s headquarters had decided to develop a nōkotsudō facility which now towers above the graveyard. This development took place over fifty years ago in response to the surge in people’s interest in depositing their ashes (rather than purchasing expensive graveyard plots) there. Individual Buddhist altars with storage drawers beneath them can be purchased

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by individuals, entire families or temples. Most applications are made by head priests
to acquire a collective storage altar. A few years ago, Suzuki-san applied to lease out
two such altar spaces – one for the lay members and the other one for the temple family.

The cost of altar storage space at the Jōdo Shinshū main mausoleum, I was told,
is worth approximately two brand new Suzuki Swift cars (a basic four-door model).
Needless to say, the cost is definitely not insignificant. As such, independent
applications for a space at the central nōkotsudō are rare. Instead, members who
choose to store their ashes or their family ashes in a temple-owned nōkotsudō at the
central mausoleum in Kyoto make one-off donations to their local temple every time
each individual urn is stored. Usually, people only store a small portion of their or their
family members’ ashes there, but those who do, hope for heightened spiritual
nourishment for their dead family members by being physically and spiritually closer
to the founder of the sect. For members who visit the Jōdo Shinshū nōkotsudō in
Kyoto (see Figure 19), the feeling of comradery and shared feeling of belonging to a
local community and to a wider Jōdo Shinshū community, as well as the spiritual
insurance of themselves and their deceased family members being closer to Shinran
and Amida Buddha, are among some of the key motivations of lay interviewees who
opted for or are considering such solution.

Suzuki-san organises a group trip to visit the site in June every year. However,
each year, the visiting party gets smaller as elderly members have less confidence to
travel the distance; some might also be unable to cover the cost of the trip and the
required donation. In theory, the lease is permanent, but it is also conditional on
continued use of the storage facilities. After thirty years, if no one affiliated with the
family/individual or temple has visited the site, the storage altar will be repurposed
and offered for use to someone else. In this case, the continuity of memorial rites
partially depends on the continuity of practice among remaining kin. The Kyoto-based
nōkotsudō therefore present the same challenges as caring for graves and butsudan:
it is costly and time-consuming and, ultimately, depends on kin relations. Local
solutions accommodate raised anxieties about social and family disintegration
(Morioka 2012, Kotani 2016) in a more effective way.
Hirata-san saw storing her ashes at the local temple as a way of preserving and continuing her en. She felt that a society without the morality of human and non-human connections was a scary prospect, but one that a person had to face and mitigate against. Entrusting one’s karmic and social bonds to a local temple (and by extension to the community that supports it) ensures continuity and provides a promise for the living that they will continue to belong in the afterlife. It is a promise of hope and a leap of faith that the temple will weather the storm of surrounding death, decline and disinterest. It also places trust and financial responsibility on the living to continue their support for the memory of departed ones. Those who die become eternally embedded in the collective practice of memorialisation and no longer need to rely on their family (or a successor) to maintain a family grave and perform funerary and memorialisation rites. It does not mean abandonment of en. Instead, it mitigates against the possibility of abandonment.

Nōkotsudō represents an alternative mode of being memorialised through a practice of self-care. It foregrounds self-reliance and non-kin dependencies. As such, temples, as repositories of human socio-religious bonds, play an important role in
helping people deal with the challenges of depopulation, ageing and death. On the one hand, priests may be able to seize an opportunity in responding to these demands for continuity and, at least temporarily, secure another avenue for memorialisation practices and the temple’s economic sustainability. On the other hand, the practice completely deemphasises the importance of meritorious acts in memory of deceased relatives. Instead, this responsibility is shifted to the temple. Temple custodians are entrusted to protect the model of inherited practice that Buddhism traditionally relies on for survival and to ensure that the next generation of temple custodians is there to fulfil their duties. This makes Buddhist institutions directly accountable for the other-worldly futures of their lay supporters. As such they are transformed into repositories of value through which some level of continuity of practice can be ensured and, as such, are rendered worthwhile in people’s lives.

Are temples wasteful?

Just as the artist bestowed his art for eternal safekeeping at the temple, lay members bestow their ashes for eternal memorialisation. This practice materialises both their hopeful conception of the future and their attempts to defend against the decay of their own memory and the fragmentation of the social and communal structures that are meant to protect it. However, the practice of nōkotsudō undermines the very continuity that it is trying to ensure. By removing the pressure of filial piety duties from within the family of the dead, it potentially deprives temples of their next generation of practitioners and supporters. The practice of materialising one’s memory is a sign that people still care about what happens to them in death and the afterlife. However, transferring the value of one’s en to the temple shifts the burden of responsibility for memorial practices on to the community and the temple family.

As a result, nōkotsudō results in the production of religious waste. Drawers and cupboards of countless urns of departed community members will inevitably become a burden for the temple custodian – spirituality and materiality. Availability of space is just one aspect of this. Another is the level of expectation placed on the temple family to ensure that the shared efforts of its members to remember and be remembered do not go to waste. However, as we have seen, temples in rural areas face challenges relating to practice inheritance and temples are forced to close down if they are unable to find a successor to priestly duties.

As such, in a practical and metaphorical sense, temples do function as storehouses of waste. They are places where religious waste — including human remains, karmic futures and socio-religious bonds — is dealt with in a meaningful way and where the unaccounted-for excess of human memory is stored. Yet, with no next
generation in attendance to continue to ascribe positive value to them, there is a possibility that temples will themselves come to epitomise “waste” as sites of outdated models of relationality.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have conceptualised temples as storehouses of value to evaluate the role of Buddhist institutions as anchors of people’s belonging. By framing *en* as a value-generating practice, I have argued that temples are sites where value is stored and where experiences of value take place, showing that Buddhist temples are symbolically constructed as meaningful repositories of people’s memories and karmic futures, but are also sites where religious waste is accumulated and disposed of. I thus argue that temples continue to play a role in the life of local communities as a means through which they manage change and loss. Temples are invested with meaning rendering them both worthwhile and wasteful. People ascribe to them an ideological value, transforming their personal life histories and karmic salvation into communal narratives of belonging. At the same time, practices oriented toward continuity and belonging transform temples into storehouses of religious waste and sites of abandonment. Certain strategies for developing meaningful networks of belonging (often beyond kin relations) can only generate relational value within specific temporal limits. *Nōkotsudō* is just one example where the efforts to preserve memory and ensure its continuity are undermined by the very proactive nature of the practice itself. In the next chapter, I turn to investigate further examples of such anticipatory practices which allowed my interlocutors to make sense of the decline, loss and death in their lives.
Chapter Five

In anticipation: proactive (after)life and modes of belonging in ageing and death

Introduction: An everyday crisis

One evening in October 2016, the Suzukis and I sat down for an evening meal just as a local news report came on the television. A female reporter was describing the events of a fatal suicidal car crash that had taken place only a couple of hours earlier. As the images passed in front of our eyes, we all recognised the neighbourhood. Suzuki-san (Myōkōji’s head priest) wondered out loud who the driver might have been. After a short pause, he whispered: “This is one of our members.” As he announced this, the temple phone rang. It was the head of the neighbourhood group to which the driver involved in the fatal crash had belonged. He was calling for the priest to perform the makura no gyō prayer service for the deceased neighbour and his elderly mother.182 Later that evening, I learnt from Suzuki-san that the driver was a carpenter in his sixties who, a few years ago, had taken early retirement to return to his home village to take care of his elderly mother who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Prior to driving his car into an oncoming truck, the carpenter was said to have stabbed his mother to death. He left a note that the police later found in his car that read “I cannot take it anymore, please forgive me.”183

This tragic story is a testimony to the despair that one’s own and other’s ageing can bring to the younger generation of elderly in a society where people live longer. There are many reports of neglect and abuse towards older people being looked after by family members in Japan. A national survey in 1994 claimed that one in two family carers had subjected frail older relatives to some form of abuse, while one third of carers reported feeling “hatred” towards the person they looked after (Hayashi 1994).

182 The makura no gyō (“pillow sutra chanting”) is the first of a series of Japanese Buddhist death rituals (in the Shin Buddhist tradition it also referred to as a deathbed ceremony or rinjinū gyōgi) and is usually performed either on a person’s deathbed or soon after their passing. The number of people receiving this service has decreased dramatically in the past twenty years. Approximately 75 percent of deaths in Japan occur in hospitals (MHLW 2018), and the patient is rarely given an opportunity to return home to die or to request this service. Many local priests saw the lack of intimacy that the hospital setting presents as one of the reasons for a decline in this practice. See Tamamuro 2004 [1963] for a detailed description of funerary and memorialisation rites.

183 Fieldnotes, October 2016.
As a result, vulnerable elderly members of a society are often cared for by equally vulnerable elderly family and community members. The story of the carpenter and his mother may seem like an example of a crisis in the everyday, a tipping point, a moment of rupture, an anomaly of sorts. However, for my interlocutors, whose everyday experiences of ageing and dying in depopulating communities were marked with a constant undercurrent of anticipation and uncertainty, it served as a painful reminder of everyday crisis. Crisis was an undercurrent that shaped their approaches to death and the afterlife.

In this chapter, I focus on what I refer to as people’s anticipatory practices of belonging, exploring how people (re)produce socio-religious connections in response to the mechanics of decline and death in their lives. I thus join the ongoing ethnographic debate on ageing, dying and loss in Japanese society and connect it to the question of social relevance of local Buddhist temples in regional Japan. I argue that my interlocutors’ proactive approaches to ageing, dying and afterlife reveal creative practices of mutual care and self-care when traditional modalities of sociality through ie-based system of kinship are no longer viable as a model for the continuity of Buddhist institutions and practices.

In what follows, I first discuss elderly agency, before outlining the challenges facing the community’s elderly population, in particular the ‘missing generation’ and the impact of depopulation on traditional kinship structures. I then turn to the notion of ‘proactive afterlife,’ using ethnographic examples to illustrate the proactiveness of the practices and narratives of my interlocutors facing aging, death and the afterlife, which include the transference of familial duties of care on to non-kin relations. Finally, I conclude with a brief consideration of the transference of kinship and its impact on local Buddhist temples, their custodians, and the broader institutional frameworks of Buddhist practice.

**Elderly lonely agents**

For Hirata-san, the news story about the carpenter and his mother brought many issues close to home, especially because it happened in her own community. Hirata-san – the female lay member in her late seventies who had taught me how to make soba noodles (Chapter 1) and shared with me the album of her life (Chapter 4) – lives alone on the edge of the village; both her children have moved away. When I asked how she felt about the news, she sighed with sadness:

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184 Between 1998 and 2015, there were 716 cases of care-related murders with 331 cases of adult children killing parents in their care (Shimada 2016, pp. 19-20).
When things like this happen, it makes you think that we have somehow failed as a community. The son returned to take care of his mother, but it was way too much. He had nothing else to do with his time but to care for her. Perhaps if he had felt connected to the community, he would have shared his sorrows with someone. Perhaps something should have been done to protect his mother (...) He took on the burden [of returning to the community and caring for his mother], but things are no longer the way they were. We still have a community centre, a few shops, farming association, even a doctor’s office and a school. Life is not that inconvenient yet, people still do things together, but illness and death are a lonely thing, and so is caring for someone else. I did it. I cared for my mother-in-law, for my father-in-law and for my husband. I spent years doing it. It was isolating and tough going at times. A heavy load was lifted when it ended, and I am my own boss now. At the time, women from Myōkōji’s fujinkai were my connection to the outside world. At the temple we feel together, but we must work so much harder to keep the human connections going. When the bonds (en) are gone, depopulation truly becomes the real thing, and so horrible, truly terrible things happen.\textsuperscript{185}

For Hirata-san, as well as for my other interlocutors, such dramatic events exposed gaping holes in the family and community-based support networks of individuals, many of whom suffer through isolation and loneliness.\textsuperscript{186}

A story like this made visible the challenges that the duties of caring for others pose in communities where significantly more people grow older and live alone,\textsuperscript{187} and where heightened anxieties about social and family fragmentation (Morioka 2012) pose a threat to community-based elder care (Danely 2019). Living alone or living isolated from one’s community due to illness and social/infrastructural disconnect is not uncommon, especially in rural communities which, in many cases, can only be accessed by car due to non-existent public transport links. In 2014, 75 percent of the elderly (65+) lived alone in Japan (Population Census 2015), 60 percent of whom were elderly couples likely to become single-occupancy elderly households once a spouse passed away. Some of my interviewees who were no longer able to drive struggled to access basic services and to participate in the life of the broader local community. Others relied on family and fellow community members for support.

\textsuperscript{185} Interview, 1 November 2016.
\textsuperscript{186} Women caregivers are often among the most affected. See Kashimura et al. (2018).
\textsuperscript{187} Between the 1970s and 2018, the population aged sixty-five and over has increased from 7 percent to 28 percent of Japan’s total population (MIAC 2018) and is expected to reach 40 percent in 2040. Due to higher life expectancy for women (MHLW 2017) and an increasingly gendered division of labour in the twentieth century Japan (Ochiai 1996, Ronald and Alexy 2009), the majority of elderly carers are women. Women have thus long played an important role in the “Japanese social welfare model” (nihongata fukushi shakai) within which elderly care was usually perceived as a daughter-in-law’s responsibility. See, for example, Ueno (2009).
Japan’s universal and mandatory Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system was meant to address these and other issues of elderly care. However, as Danely (2019, p. 227) notes, in 2014 alone there were over half a million names on the waiting lists for entry into long-term residential care or nursing homes. The policy focus also shifted towards establishing a “Community-based Integrated Care System” (MHLW 2017), which prioritises elderly care solutions that facilitate people’s supported living in their own homes assisted by community volunteers, medical professionals and social care workers. The aim is to prevent or delay entry into long-term care.

Figure 20. An example of an abandoned home, which was later demolished for redevelopment into a memorial hall (see Chapter 4) (24 July 2017).

Those who manage to enter long-term care are often solo-dwelling, and thus leave behind their empty homes (akiya) (see Figure 20). In 2014, 18 percent of all houses (over eight million residencies) in Japan were akiya (Sobel 2015). In the

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188 The LTCI was introduced in 2000 to establish a system of comprehensive support for service users from a variety of institutions of their choice in an attempt to distance state policy from traditional family-based elderly care. On the impact of the LTCI system, see Campbell and Ikegami (2000).

189 Over the past thirty years, there has been a six-fold increase in the number of people living alone. The long-term care system makes access to care services easier for those living alone (Danely 2019, p. 229). As a result, co-residing with other family members, even if they are willing and able to provide support, limits people’s access to care benefits.
municipality where I conducted my research, 26 percent of all akiya newly recorded between September 2016 and May 2019 were not inherited or formally accounted for. As ageing and death statistics accelerate in Japan, 32,000 people are said to die unattended each year (Tamaki 2014, p. 211). In 2040, the number of anticipated deaths is meant to peak at 1.67 million with one in every four people expected to die alone (Masuda 2015) without anyone to care for them in death and in the afterlife.

Elderly people living alone are often portrayed in the public discourse as pitiful. For instance, NHK’s morning drama series, such as Hitomi (2008), Totoneechan (2016) and Beppinsan (2016), have ingrained in the social psyche that the ultimate ingredient in the recipe for happy ageing and death is being connected to one’s family, surrounded by children and grandchildren. However, as I have shown, living alone in old age is far more commonplace – it was the reality of the everyday experiences of most of my lay interviewees. News about their fellow community members such as the carpenter who killed his mother and then himself painfully augmented this reality. However, it also reassured them of the worth of their individual and collective efforts to develop and maintain support networks for their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. Hirata-san’s words that she and other community members needed to “work so much harder to keep the human connections going” resonated with a more general sentiment of quiet urgency to act not against change, but despite change while there was still a present worth living for and a future that could be imagined. In an aging community where death and illness constitute an everyday topic of conversation, depopulation (and the fear of disconnect and disappearance that comes with it) places people in a liminal state. Their awareness of potential outcomes and future limitations becomes significant to the way in which they make sense of their belonging and make their belonging happen. Every empty house in the neighbourhood reminds local people of friends and petty foes who they have lost, of the challenges of survival and of the absence of the next generation. These absences have an impact on the types of communities and activities that lay people and the temple custodians are able to develop and focus on. Inevitably, the nature of this focus tends to be orientated towards the elderly membership whose concerns dominate the local politics of survival.

190 NHK’s “morning dramas” (asadora or renzoku terebi shōsetsu, meaning “serial TV novel”) are serialised Japanese television drama programmes that have been broadcast on NHK General TV since 1961.

191 It is worth remembering here that Hirata-san is one of Myōkōji’s lay supporters who has arranged for her ashes to be stored at Myōkōji’s nōkotsudō (see Chapter 4).
However, as I will show, elderly people are engaged in practices of kin-making that differ from orthodox accounts of filial piety and that have consequences for their local temple communities. I explore how people, whose traditional networks of kinship and sociality are routinely disrupted and renegotiated (through social and economic conditions of depopulation), generate belonging in and through their concerns of ageing and death. I move away from narratives of "extinction" and "collapse" which evoke a sense of imminent crisis and are often present in public and scholarly discourse related to Buddhist temples (Reader 2012a, Ukai 2015) and regional communities more broadly (Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha 2007, Yamashita 2012 and 2014, Masuda 2014, Masuda and Toyama 2015). Instead, I foreground the notion of anticipatory agency, which addresses the critical transformations in people's everyday experiences of ageing, death and afterlife. I nonetheless employ the language of crisis to illustrate how the mental anticipation of decay (of an individual, a community or family structures) is reflected in the practices and narratives that allowed my interlocutors to produce a meaningful present and the potential of some kind of future (both in this and the other world).

Through ethnography, I discuss how anticipation, hope and memory become mobilised in people's struggle for continuity and shared experience. I thus focus on the agency of community members to understand emic narratives of change and continuity that are enmeshed in a local politics of survival. I show how people come to terms with the ways in which their everyday experiences are "no longer" what they used to be, but also how they are "not yet" done trying. This "yet" implies a future – a future for the dead and for the living who will continue to care for them. I argue that such other-worldly and death orientated futures correspond with practices of "kinship transference" through which temples, their custodians and fellow lay members become entrusted and burdened with the duty of continuous care.

The older generation of my lay informants will be our guides to understanding how Buddhist institutions, practices and meanings become an ultimate repository of and tool for the transference of kinship. These informants range from their early sixties to early nineties and represent nearly 70 percent of a local population of less than two thousand people.\(^{192}\) I have made a conscious choice to flesh out the experiences of this elderly core of the researched community, the ones who were "left behind" when their children migrated out of the community. These 'children' (many in

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\(^{192}\) Over the past five years, the community’s (chô) population numbers dropped by 10 percent, mainly as a result of death of community members. Since my arrival in the field in August 2016, there has been a 6 percent drop in population across the five villages constituting the town.
their fifties and above) may appear absent in my discussion. It is not my intention to silence them, but rather to realise their absence and to focus on the agency of those who remain. The children are physically absent and their attitudes and thoughts only become known through the accounts of their parents.

I postulate that this presence of an absence (in present and future terms) constitutes a crucial mobilising force and a socio-religious framework for my older informants’ perceptions of the future, especially in relation to their death and afterlife. By investigating the activities of older lay members, I am interested in locating the role of Buddhist practices (often facilitated by Buddhist temple networks) as an enabling power behind social bonds and an alternative logic of care in the face of the inevitable decline and death of individuals, communities, practices and institutions.

**The missing generation**

Many of my interlocutors who grew up in this area associate their local Myōkōji temple with a place where children gathered to play and study, where their grandparents took them to listen to stories and where they stared at colourful drawings on the temple roof while the priest and their grandparents chanted the sutras. The idea of older generations’ responsibility to socialise children into the life of a temple and to establish their bond (en) with it is still important in this and other temple communities and there are annual events organised to support such initiatives (for example, the *shosanshiki* ceremonies mentioned in Chapter 1 and annual summer schools, which were hosted at most local temples I visited). However, there are now no children running down the veranda of Myōkōji. The temple hall stands deserted for most of the year, except for the days of the monthly hōza gatherings or special events such as the annual preaching service of the *bukkyō fujinkai*. Even then, children no longer accompany their grandparents to such events. For the most part, nurseries have replaced grandparents in their childcare duties.

What is more, the area’s demographics is considerably affected by low birth rates. The city where the researched community is located has experienced a near 25 percent drop in birth-rates over the past five years. From 432 children aged under twelve months recorded from 1 July 2012 until 1 July 2013, the figures dropped to 327 children between 1 July 2017 and 1 July 2018.\(^{193}\) Therefore, one of the main concerns for lay members of the community and Buddhist priests alike are shrinking classroom sizes and the closure of local schools. Nationally, the number of new-borns hit a record low (918,397) in 2018 (MHLW 2019), staying below the one million mark.

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\(^{193}\) See City Miyoshi Hiroshima (2018).
for the third year in a row. The government has pledged to stem the population decline by expanding support for childcare and education. Elderly who used to fill the childcare void in multi-generational households are now employed longer and are more likely to take on caring responsibilities for their vulnerable parents than for grandchildren.

Temples also tend to be run by the older generations in the temple family, even if the next (younger) head priest had already been lined up for transition or had already transitioned into the role. Oftentimes, such generational changeover was symbolic, and the younger generations of custodians were not expected to return to the rural family temple until later in life. Out of twenty-nine temples that I visited regularly during my fieldwork, twenty-four were run by priests in their sixties and older.\(^{194}\) Six of the twenty-four had a head priest in the younger generation, but they were not residing at the temple, the day-to-day running of which was entrusted to their parents (and sometimes grandparents).\(^{195}\) In a couple of cases the younger generation was not able to live at the temple because of lack of space. In those instances, the young head priests and their families lived in a flat or a house nearby and commuted to their family temple for work. Their absence (and the absence of their children), however, meant the invisibility of the next generation. For example, Kobayashi-san is the previous head priest of a mid-size temple located in the metropolitan part of the region (over three hundred households). His son (the head priest) lived in the nearby block of flats. When I asked him about the impact that this arrangement was having on temple activities, Kobayashi-san responded:

> We run a children’s club at the temple, but not having my grandchildren running around the temple makes this place too quiet. So, it makes it difficult for younger members to imagine that a temple can be a place for children. It is so quiet that people do not want to disturb the dead with the laughter of children, but without this laughter we will all be dead soon.\(^{196}\)

Kobayashi-san was concerned that by “stalling” the generational transition, their family temple was becoming more difficult to enter for younger generations of practitioners. His own parents (in their nineties then) still lived at the temple and, as long as they remained there, the temple could not accommodate his son’s family

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\(^{194}\) Drawing on Nishi Honganji statistical data, Borup 2016 (p. 3) reports that 76 percent of head priests were born in temples that they managed, with 87 percent reporting that their own son is to succeed them. My own data shows that the inherited succession remains a preferred pattern for temple management.

\(^{195}\) In 1970, the average number of temple family members living in each temple was 4.6, but dropped to 3.8 in 2009 with even fewer number of residents in rural temples (Jōdo Shinshū Honganjiha dai 9 kai shūseikihonchōsa jissen senta 2011, p. 135).

\(^{196}\) Interview, 11 May 2017.
whose presence would inevitably, he hoped, attract other children and their parents to the temple. The only way to facilitate the transition would be for the young head priest’s grandparents to move into a long-term care facility. However, they were in relatively good health, which made them both ineligible and unwilling to move.

National and regional level shifts in demographics are having an impact on the way local communities are organised and on the types of activities that temples can organise in their communities, with most struggling to run events and ceremonies aimed at children. Myōkōji temple operated an English language school for years, but due to the dwindling number of children being born in the community and the diminishing number of active members to support temple activities, the head priest was forced to recalibrate his efforts. He shifted his focus to activities aimed at the elderly members of the community (mainly funerary and memorial services) and started to consider alternative sources of income through employment outside of the temple. From year to year, activities directed at children such as English classes, summer schools and shosanshiki are either being withdrawn or postponed, and events organised at and with the support of the temple, as well as the volunteering activities of danka members, tend to focus on socialising and care for the elderly and for the dead.

Members’ personal perceptions of their own death and the imagined (intimate and structural) disappearance of their community (and, with it, the bonds that shape their reality in this and the other world) have a common affective dimension: in both cases, they envision a future which, although not there yet, feels extremely real. The politics of survival and disappearance constitute the everyday reality of the community. Concerns over the community’s future vitality and survival are widely shared ones, particularly in light of the progressively smaller pool of members belonging to the (frequently invoked) “next generation” (tsugi no sedai). In the elderly community, children are often seen and described as the providers of comfort and security. When their presence represents barely a fraction of what remains of one’s community, members are likely to turn towards alternative sources of comfort, security, and modes of belonging and care that are not necessarily based on hope in future generations per se. Instead, they stem from proactive self-care and an investment in social and religious networks of reciprocity among the living that hinge on mutuality of being (Sahlins 2013, Danely 2019).

Conversations about death, aging, illness and weakening communal ties that, in one way or another, referenced the unforgiving shifts in local demographics featured in most of my interactions with local community members. The most recent public debates on akiya (‘unoccupied house’), kodokushi (‘dying alone’), muenbotoke
(‘deceased person without anyone to memorialise them and care for their grave’),
muen shakai (‘society without relations’), and the ever present spectre of depopulation
were covered almost daily in the social and community sections of the regional
newspaper, Chūgoku Shimbun.¹⁹⁷ These debates brought to people’s attention the
vulnerability of elderly groups (in many cases, their own vulnerability), laying bare the
issue of human isolation in experiences of ageing, suffering and death, and the
uncertain future.

Yet, not all is lost in such conditions of perpetuated tentative crisis and
transition, within which individuals and the community as a whole exist in a liminal
state of ‘no longer’. My interlocutors were aware of the challenging present and the
pressures that past modalities of belonging placed on the next generation of
members, in particular the family-based system of care for the elderly that was often
incompatible with the contemporary employment market (for women in particular).¹⁹⁸
They were aware of shifts in socio-religious values, exemplified by new approaches to
handling deaths in the family, for example the use of eternal graves (Rowe 2011) and
tree burials (Boret 2014), as well as the economic struggles that had left many
families without the necessary disposable income to fulfil their filial obligations of
memorial care for their family’s ancestral lineage. With the socio-economic and
religious transformations of the post-war era and the more recent pressures of
demographic depopulation (particularly in relation to kinship structures), certain
modalities of belonging to a local community (of which a local Buddhist temple and a
Shinto shrine are often a part) no longer existed or were imagined to soon become
irrelevant. The presence of this absence has created a breathing space for
(re)invention, for the agency to “work so much harder to keep the human connections
going”, and for the development of coping mechanisms to deal with the disintegration
of human bonds and with death in both its metaphorical (imagined) and actual forms.

Proactive (after)life

The “death” and “disappearance” associated with aging and depopulation can serve as
a generative force behind new configurations of identities and networks of sociality
among the living. Japanese scholars have long addressed the changes and challenges
associated with the ageing of Japanese society, emphasising its implications for the
economy, employment and sustainable community design (Kanzaki 2013, Tsutsumi
2015, Umezaki 2018, Naitō and Tamai 2015). The focus has mostly been on

¹⁹⁷ For example, see Chūgoku shimbun (2016) on declining transport networks and (2017)
on loneliness-prevention initiatives.
infrastructural developments for and the living conditions of the elderly (e.g., Miyazawa 2012), the provision of social services (Furukawa 1990, Sekimura 2016, Takeshita 2017), and technological innovation aimed at addressing issues caused by the hyper-ageing of Japanese society (Higuchi et al. 2016). Moreover, the lives of elderly Japanese have also been highlighted in academic discourse beyond Japan by scholars such as Jason Danely (2014, 2019) and John Traphagan and John Knight (2003) and through projects such as "Aged Communities and Active Aging – A case study of rural villages in the Japanese Alps" led by Pia Kieninger and Isabelle Prochaska-Meyer at the University of Vienna. Kieninger and Prochaska-Meyer’s project resulted in a thirty-minute documentary “65+ being old in rural Japan” (2014), which portrays the lives of two elderly members of rural villages and provides a commentary on their strategies for “active aging.” Active aging refers to the efforts of elderly members of the community to remain engaged in community life and make their life meaningful in old age. Akin to the two protagonists featured in the documentary, many of my interlocutors considered staying active in their old age an essential part of a daily routine that ultimately gave them freedom and a sense of independence and usefulness. This narrative is consistent with the Japanese government’s “ageless society” policy and its agenda of elderly self-sufficiency, as well as the national public discourse of staying healthy, active and useful in old age (The Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2018).

The narrative that becoming a burden is something the elderly should (morally) avoid translates into public Buddhist discourse. Over recent years, there has been a surge of publications by Buddhist professionals that promote staying physically and spiritually active despite old age and illnesses. One of the most popular books among the elderly readers in a local bookstore in the area where I conducted my fieldwork was a book by Setouchi Jakuchō (2016) entitled Oi mo byō mo ukeireyō (“Let’s accept old age and illness”). Setouchi is a ninety-six-year-old Buddhist nun ordained in the 1990s. The documentary has been made widely accessible via YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDyPwiVObzg (Accessed: 18 June 2016).

Active aging is a term formulated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) at the end of the 1990s and formally developed into a policy framework in 2002 (WHO 2012). It refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs beyond the ability to be physically or mentally active or to participate in the labour force (WHO 2012, p. 12).

On September 11, 2017, the Japanese government launched “The Council for Designing 100-year Life Society” (jinsei 100-nen jidai kōsō) to develop policies relating to education, employment and social security that cater to the needs of Japan’s hyper-ageing society (The Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2018). See also Sodei (2018).
Tendai\textsuperscript{202} tradition and a popular writer who often features in television programmes. In her book, she invites people to live a long life by following her simple guidance of aging healthily (through good diet, sleep, exercise and laughter), not surrendering to illness (by taking medicine and undergoing necessary surgery without fear and finding purpose in one’s life despite pain and suffering), and prolonging life (through daily rehabilitation exercises, supporting others, praying for other people and, above all, not fearing one’s death). She also stresses that, in old age, people should focus more on friendships than on “blood relations” (Setouchi 2016, p. 136): kin relations are important, but they disappear over time because people die or move away and do not return. It is therefore important to diversify one’s support networks with non-kin relations developed through hobbies and getting involved in the community.

In Setouchi’s writings and in my interlocutors’ attitudes to aging, the narrative of active aging is directly linked to the idea of staying connected and developing bonds beyond kinship networks that are either no longer available or have become devalued by and burdensome for relatives. Lay Buddhist interlocutors often referred to the connections formed in this way as \textit{en}, particularly those related to local temple activities. Shunsuke Nozawa (2015) argues for the non-kin derived nature of \textit{en} in his study of social belonging in contemporary Japan, claiming that it is not a marker of “normative blood-kinship” (p. 391) and that people can ‘have \textit{en}’ (\textit{en ga aru}) of a hidden, fated and often undetectable kind with anyone and anything (people, places, animals, sentient beings). Such serendipitously developed bonds, which Goldfarb (2016) refers to as “ineffable connections”, are at the core of understanding my interlocutors’ search for alternatives to kinship-based ageing and death related practices. For them, \textit{en} is a process of doing; of realising a sense of continuity and togetherness. Thus, I argue that developing these strategies of connecting to and through other people and things is a way of creating meaningful belonging in both this and the next life. It is how people generate proactive approaches to their afterlife that provide them with an opportunity for meaningful aging, hope for continuity and a promise of remembrance.

In her research on homelessness in Yokohama, the anthropologist Jieun Kim (2016) proposes the compelling concept of ‘necrosociality,’ which she identifies as a new model of belonging between the living and the dead in circumstances of social

\textsuperscript{202} Tendai is an esoteric school of Japanese Buddhism, established in 806 by a Buddhist monk Saichō (767-822). It originated from the Tiantai school of Chinese Buddhism. The sect’s head temple is located on top of Mount Hiei. The school holds the Lotus Sutra as the ultimate teaching of the Buddha and uses the Bodhisattva Precepts for ordination (a set of moral codes to advance a practitioner along the path to becoming a Bodhisattva).
fragmentation. Kim suggests that the novelty of this way of belonging rests in the fact that people develop sociality networks through non-kinship-based memorialisation practices. However, the idea that filial piety and kin-based responsibilities are and always have been standard social practice in Japan has often been essentialised in the scholarship. There are examples of non-kin related Japanese Buddhist funerary and memorial practices dating back to Genshin (942–1017) and other monastic members of the famous Nijū go Zanmai-e (Samādhi Society of Twenty-Five), a Tendai nenbutsu association based at the Yokawa retreat on Mt. Hie. The monks explicitly noted that they were departing from the model of kin-oriented practice by undertaking the burial and memorialization of fellow practitioners not related by blood – a practice that has persisted in various forms. For example, in the 1990s there was a proliferation of collective eternal graves, managed by the city administration or a religious organisation. As noted in Chapter 3, neighbourhood groups (jōkai) still organise communal funerals. Kim’s work nonetheless poses an urgent question, echoed in Nozawa’s research on social belonging: what happens when kinship stops being the default model of sociality?

I understand networks of belonging through and in death to be more than a mediation between the living and the dead. They are also a generative sociality influencing the politics of belonging and human connections of care and self-care among the living, which have consequences in this and the other world. I will now turn to consider modes of belonging that are generated through the shared and individual narratives and agency that shape what I refer to as “proactive (after)life” strategies for remembrance and socio-religious continuity. I will thus investigate how socio-religious bonds (en) might help us to understand how belonging becomes experienced as a process of dealing with loss.

Hoping for the best: shared narratives of disappearance in rural Japan

In April 2017, I attended Myōkōji’s annual gathering of the local “Association of Elderly Citizens” (rōjinkai), which is a memorial service for elderly community members who have passed away over the last twelve months. A person is thought to automatically

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203 On the Nijū go Zanmai-e, see Stone (2008, pp. 65-7). Genshin, the most influential of several Tendai scholars active during the tenth and eleventh centuries, was an elite cleric who espoused a doctrine of devotion to Amida Buddha: since Japan had entered a "degenerate age" (mappō), the only hope for salvation was reliance on the power of Amida’s benevolence.

204 See Kotani (2015, pp. 17-30)

205 See also Davies (1992, pp. 242-43) on cooperative funeral associations during the Meiji period.
become a member of the local *rōjinkai* once they turn seventy-five and begin to be classed as “super elderly” (*chōkōreisha*). Maeda-san, a neighbour in his early eighties who had invited me to the service, explained that it was important for the community to come together to remember their dead. When I asked why, he answered: “Who will remember the old, if not the old? After all, we are all next in line.” Maeda-san believed that it was the responsibility of fellow elderly community members to not only support one another in this life, but also to provide aftercare in the other world, especially since the community’s involvement in funerary practices had been significantly curtailed. Most funerals in Japan today are family-only gatherings that exclude the wider community (see Murakami 2018). At the same time, a growing number of elderly people approach the end of their lives alone. Watanabe-san, a female neighbour in her eighties joined Maeda-san and me in our conversation over lunch: “My children live abroad. I send them rice from our fields once a year, but I do not even know if they would come back for the funeral. I prepared all the instructions and set my money aside. I hope that people here will help out.” Watanabe-san was concerned that since her children were not supporting her now, they would be likely to: “just throw her ashes away.” Such sentiments were widely shared among many of my interviewees who felt that they ought to take responsibility for their own and other members’ karmic wellbeing in light of limited alternatives.

The *Rōjinkai* memorial service brought together elders of the community to commemorate fellow members, regardless of their level of association to the dead. In some cases, those attending had only heard about the distant deceased neighbour, rather than actually known them. Still, the act of collective remembrance brought together those who were still alive in the area. The donation for the memorial service came from the collective budget of the association, as did the cost of the shared lunch that followed the ritual service. As much as it was an occasion to remember the dead, it was also an opportunity to socialise and remind oneself and others about those who were still alive. For many community members over the age of seventy-five, the *rōjinkai* memorial service was one of very few opportunities throughout the year to leave their homes and meet their neighbours in a social setting. It brought together

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206 Senior citizens in Japan are classified into different categories based on their age. According to the WHO definition, a person is classed as elderly from the age of sixty-five. Sixty-five to seventy-four-year-olds are classed as “early-stage seniors” (*zenki kōreisha*). Those aged seventy-five and above are classed as “later-stage seniors” (*goki kōreisha*), but are colloquially referred to as the “super elderly” (*chōkōreisha*).

207 Fieldnotes, April 2017.

208 There is a growing body of literature addressing the issue of abandonment of elderly parents by children in life and death. See Shimada (2016) and Kotani (2016, 2017).
the living who felt the shared precarity and fragility of their existence. At the same time, it was a Buddhist practice that brought people together in this communal act of remembering the dead, which was also a promise for the living: they too would be remembered in death and would continue to belong. What struck me most in Maeda-san’s words was the responsibility that he placed on himself and other elders for the ritual of memorialisation of the dead. Through this practice, a conscious effort was being made to ensure that no-one, not even members who end up dying alone, would be abandoned in their afterlife.

Earlier that year in March 2017, a similar annual memorial service was held at the local residential day-care facility for the elderly members of the community who require assisted care (see Figure 21). Suzuki-san visited the facility annually to conduct the memorial rites for those who departed in the past year and for the ancestors of the residents, since most of the residents no longer owned a family butsudan and were physically unable to visit their family graves. Suzuki-san senior had arranged a donation of a communal butsudan to this care home only a few years before when the residents and their families had asked for an annual memorial service to be held at the facility. The communal altar provided all residents with the continuity of their ancestral bonds, as well as a symbol of memory about themselves and an assurance that they would not be alone in their passing. A calligraphed sheet with the names of those who had recently died was displayed on the wall in the home’s meeting hall above the butsudan. They were also mentioned by name during the memorial service. As such, they were memorialised as part of a collective memory, but the meaning of their individual existence was also acknowledged.
Kawahashi-san, the facility’s director, is an I-turner who moved into the area when her husband took the job of a doctor at the local health centre. Upon moving to the area, she was surprised to discover how prominent the presence of and concerns over Buddhist practices were in this area. However, she believed that the communal memorial services in her facility represented an important grass-roots level demand for solace and acknowledgement of a shared experience of aging and death. The idea of memory and continuity of human bonds reflected in these memorial services is striking. In my understanding, local people’s unifying experience of inevitable disappearance and end of life is a non-kinship-based mode of care for the dead and an emergent modality of reciprocity and connectivity (en) among the living based on a shared experience of decline. These people (who often cannot rely on the next generation of descendants to care for them in death) become united in the communal effort of securing continuity and entrusting each other and future generations of the elderly with a promise of care in the afterlife. Such efforts can be perceived as a collective response to the loneliness of death and a drive to connect to fellow human beings through the shared experience of religious practices that signify continuity of care and memory. The Buddhist priest is a facilitator (rather than instigator) and executor of this transference of trust. In turn, this trust extends to a belief in the continuity of existence of the local temple (and/or a Buddhist priest), which allows people to hope that they will be cared for in death (if not by their family) by their

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community and by the local temple. As such, the responsibility of caring for the dead is linked to the survival of local temples on a very practical level.

**Balancing the books**

As discussed in Chapter 3, memorialisation practices are always associated with offerings for the ritual labour provided by the Buddhist priest. Communal striving for the continuity of individual histories (and the role of a given local temple in this process) can therefore lead to conflict between kin and non-kin relations when it comes to dealing with the crisis of death. This was the case at Kōsaiji temple when the death of a local resident resulted in a major upset between his local Buddhist temple (*jimoto no otera*) and his family temple (*danka dera*).\(^{210}\)

Kōsaiji is a small local temple (130 household members) with a very dedicated membership base, but it had been under threat of closure for a few years by the time I entered the field. Following the sudden death of Kōsaiji’s head priest, Suzuki-san at Myōkōji had been asked to step in as an interim head priest. He was performing the role while the daughter of the previous head priest, who had returned home, prepared to officially take over once she had passed the higher level of priestly ordination. One evening in July, Suzuki-san received a call from the head of a neighbourhood group requesting the “pillow” sutra reading for one of its members, Tanaka-san. Tanaka-san had lived in a small village of less than eighty households, all of which actively supported their local Buddhist temple, Kōsaiji. In accordance with the local custom (and being unable to contact Tanaka-san’s only remaining daughter), members of Tanaka-san’s *jōkai* took it upon themselves to make appropriate funeral arrangements through Kōsaiji temple. Suzuki-san performed the initial rites as requested. However, Kōsaiji was not the Tanaka household’s affiliated temple. The next day, at two in the morning, Myōkōji’s phone rang. It was the head priest of Tanaka-san’s *danka* temple who did not support the *jokai*’s request for the funerary rites to be performed at Kōsaiji. Meanwhile, Tanaka-san’s daughter was finally contacted and arrived at her

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\(^{210}\) Historically, local priests tended to their *kō* members spiritual needs while the introduction of the *danka* system bound households to their *danka* (family) temple (often geographically distant or belonging to a different Buddhist lineage) for death-related services. The *danka* temples providing death care services were thus guaranteed regular incomes for memorial services, while local Jōdo Shinshū temples were often cut off from their *kō* members upon their death (Mizuhara 1996, p. 58). To address this spiritual and economic separation at death, a two-tier system of affiliation based on proximity (*kekō*) was developed with the spread of Jōdo Shinshū influence in the region. A Nishi-Honganji monk named Eun (1730-1782), one of the most prolific proselytisers of Shin Buddhist teachings in Hiroshima prefecture, is credited with implementing this system. See Mizuhara (1996).
deceased father’s house to take care of the funeral arrangements. She, however, had no interest in or preference as to which temple should become responsible for her father’s memorialisation. As the acting priest of Kōsaiji, Suzuki-san was tasked with reconciling the conflict.

The matter was settled a few days later. The responsibility for the funeral and future memorialisation of Tanaka-san would rest with Kōsaiji temple since this was the Buddhist temple community with which he had actively generated en. It is striking that, in this case, the will of the community outweighed what the head priest of the Tanakas’ family temple appealed to as “kōkō no kankei” – filial piety; the next generation’s duty to memorialise the ancestral lineage of their family. In practical terms, this meant that the temple lost a member who had, until his death, financially supported his danka temple through his annual membership fee donation and the annual memorial service at the family butsdan. Members of the jōkai felt that the subjective en that Tanaka-san actively maintained with Kōsaiji made them responsible for his remembrance as part of a collective effort (that Tanaka-san had also been part of) to keep the community (and, by extension, the local temple) going.

Ultimately, the crisis of Tanaka-san’s death corresponded with the ongoing everyday crisis that community members live and die through as they anticipate changes that are likely to result in the disappearance of their local community. The death of an individual is framed here as an enabling mechanism for survival or extension of community. The question of who performed the initial funerary ritual of makura no gyō was of great importance because it institutionalised Tanaka-san’s en to Kōsaiji, meaning that his local temple would now take up the role of performing the memorialisation rites for the Tanaka household. The financial contributions (fuse) that come with these rites will, by custom, now be due to Kōsaiji, a temple that is in dire need of financial support. The emotional motivations of Tanaka-san’s neighbours, I suggest, stemmed not only from an eagerness to honour (what they imagined was) his emotional investment in the temple community, but also from their genuine concern for the collective wellbeing of their community. Keeping the memory of past members within the community contributes to the broader narrative of remembrance (see Chapter 4), creating opportunities for the community to come together to mourn and celebrate the lives of the members who had helped to sustain it. In consequence, Tanaka-san’s neighbours effectively disrupted the kin-based continuity of Buddhist memorialisation practices, introducing an alternative framework of care that relies and depends upon the unity and efforts of the community in general.

Despite its demographic fragility, this community continues to protect the local facilities that the members (or at least those members who I interviewed and
observed in the field) considered to be symbols of their vitality. This included a primary school with (at the time) eighteen children across years one to six, a community centre with a range of associations including local culture-preservation groups, and a collectively run post-office. The local temple is another cog in the local politics of survival. It is a place where members not only remember the dead, but also strive to preserve something for future generations. Nakata-san, the head of the Buddhist young men’s group at Kōsaiji, told me that people had a collective responsibility to keep the community going despite overt symptoms of decline and to ensure that there would be some shared history and heritage for the next generation to inherit. The next generation is limited in number, but it is not non-existent. My interlocutors often conceived of the next generation through the prism of abstract future resilience rather than concrete dependant kin relations. Interdependence is thus predicated on communal trust and not necessarily on confidence in blood relations.

The conditions of crisis that are both felt and imagined influenced the jōkai members’ decision to effectively campaign for Tanaka-san’s inclusion into their local temple community beyond (and despite) the confines of kinship-based orthodox practices of death care. This case shows that people still care about what happens to others (and themselves) in the afterlife, a sense of future that must be actively protected and enacted in the present. People trust that unity and continuity go hand in hand. The above examples of communal responsiveness and a sense of responsibility that people feel at times of crisis illustrate that this trust is based on awareness and knowledge of a future that cannot be fully anticipated. This knowledge breeds a hope that allows people to generate and feel a sense of belonging despite and owing to death and disappearance. It nonetheless reveals the financial concerns that pose a real challenge to any sense of unity and continuity. In the process, local Buddhist temples become implicated in the communal politics of collective memory and survival in this world, and not just through material markers of this collective memory (see Chapter 4). Equally, they become a psychological tool and a catalyst for processing loss, both material and emotional. Ritual work becomes a guarantor of human social and karmic connectivity, but it also serves as a bargaining chip in the prosaic sphere of temple economics.

**The logic of mutual and self-care**

People not only act to secure unity and continuity in the afterlife, they also employ practices to navigate their own and others’ experiences of ageing in this life. My ethnography here returns to the volunteering activities of Myōkōji’s Buddhist women’s association (bukkyō fujinkai; see Chapter 3) to explore how individual members of the group negotiate, produce and honour their networks of belonging, and how (through
religious practice) they make sense of their own aging and loss of vitality. As such, I
profile women who, for the most part, constituted the lay driving force behind many
temple activities and proselytising efforts. They also represented the majority of my
lay interlocutors. As a female researcher, I was able to gain better access and to
develop a more intimate understanding of the lives and emotions of women,
participating with them in formal gatherings and personal socialising. An important
aspect of building this intimacy was developing an understanding of the notions of
faith and gratitude to Amida Buddha that constitute the bedrock of all buppu activities.
The actions of fujinkai women are orientated towards building a close-knit multi-
generational temple community rooted in the Buddhist principles of compassion and
gratitude.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Shinran’s experience of faith was accompanied by a
desire to awaken faith in others, providing the ideological grounds for a culture of
voluntary labour among male and female practitioners that is important for the
economy of Buddhist temple communities. Here, I focus on the roles that buppu
women assume in helping one another and others in anticipating the decay that comes
with ageing by nurturing their connections of faith (shinjin) and inspiring others to
develop such faith. As already noted, the notion of shinjin refers equally to
proselytizing activities and any activity that hinges upon one’s gratitude to Amida. The
grateful striving to provide opportunities for others to experience faith in Amida is the
central practice of Shin Buddhist believers, and, as I noted previously, while it is not
linked in a causal way to the believer’s own salvation, it shapes the parameters of
living a fruitful Buddhist life.

For many buppu members, this grateful striving is at the heart of their
volunteering efforts in the community. Buppu membership has been decreasing across
all temple communities that I interacted with during fieldwork, including at Myōkōji.
Issues with recruitment of new members and the loss of the existing members as a
result of ageing, illness and death has not only led to a decline in numbers (Chapter
3), but also to a re-orientation of the fujinkai women’s activities. They used to be
focused on proselytising Shin Buddhist teachings through social projects and through
the socialisation of children and members’ families into the Buddhist way of life built
on “gratitude” (kansha) and “kindness of heart” (kokoro no yasashisa). However, as
Hashimoto-san, the elderly head of the association, explained:

As our communities get ‘thinner’, there are less children born into our
community, so we turned to care for those [elderly] still left in the
community. But in order to care for those still left, we need to recruit. It
used to be a custom that buppu membership was inherited. From mother
to daughter /daughter in law, but the younger generations have no time.
With depopulation and ageing population issues knocking at our door, we
also need to focus more on the meaning of buppu practices for us. Beyond the duties. We need to derive joy and solace from our activities, and we need to feel that our actions have some impact.\(^{211}\)

As a result, buppu activities at Myōkōjī have re-orientated towards the provision of elderly care, with activities being equally directed at people in care and elderly volunteers, who use their voluntary work as a way of making sense of their own ageing.

Hashimoto-san will be our guide into these activities. In her role as the head of the association, she was responsible for coordinating volunteering activities. Despite a sharp drop in the membership highlighted, the group maintained a relatively active calendar of events including annual volunteering at local day care facilities for the elderly and monthly at a local Vihāra (in Japanese transliteration, bihāra) hospital where residents are usually admitted when facing terminal illness.

Shin Buddhism’s Vihāra movement developed in the 1980s as an attempt to revive Buddhism’s role in practitioners’ deathbed support, not only through rituals such as makura no gyō, but also through ongoing care that supports patients’ medical and spiritual needs (Tamiya 2007). Vihāra is a Sanksrit and Pāli word that is most popularly known to mean “temple” or “monastery” (particularly in Theravada Buddhism), but in Shin Buddhism it refers to activities and institutions managed by Buddhists that are focused on ageing, sickness, and death in the fields of medical and social welfare (Inose 2016a, pp. 334-335) – a usage of the term that harks back to the incorporation of medical and social welfare facilities into monastic institutions in ancient India. Although pioneering priests such as Tamiya Masashi (2007) at the Higashi Honganji branch of Jōdo Shinshū were at the forefront of supporting the development of vihāra activities,\(^{212}\) the movement developed at a grass-roots level. It quickly became incorporated into the community-level volunteering initiatives of bukkyō fujinkai groups, with local temple priests often assuming the role of vihāra priests on a rotational basis. One of the movement’s key characteristics is its cross-denominational nature, meaning that vihāra facilities are not only intended for Shin Buddhist practitioners. However, they are rooted in the idea of providing “spiritual care” (seishinteki kaigo) (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha Shakaibu Shakaigyōtantō, n.d.) and the intention of developing a nationwide initiative that unites Shin Buddhist communities, engages individual practitioners at a local level, and serves as a vehicle

\(^{211}\) Interview, 25 April 2017.

\(^{212}\) It was Tamiya Masashi who, in 1985, adopted the term vihāra to refer to terminal care practices and facilities. He favoured the term over “Buddhist hospice” which he associated with Christian groups (Inose 2016a, p. 334).
for nurturing institutional spiritual connections among the members (particularly women).

_Vihāra_ volunteering always takes place within medical facility settings, rather than at the homes of individual practitioners or community centres. _Buppu_ women across the region have been involved in the _vihāra_ activities since 1990, but the _vihāra_ hospital in northern Hiroshima Prefecture did not open until June 1995 with seventy in-patients (_Chūgoku Shim bun_ 1996). Most patients have been elderly, many with serious illnesses. The facility is managed by the temple custodians of Kaigoji temple and supported by over two hundred _buppu_ volunteers including lay practitioners and temple family women including Myōkōji’s Aki-san and several members of Myōkōji’s _bukkyō fujinkai_.

Volunteering activities at the local _vihāra_ facility are scheduled every Wednesday from noon until four-thirty in the afternoon. One morning in early April 2017, I joined Hashimoto-san during one of her shifts. The women usually coordinated with each other to make sure that there was someone who could drive on each Wednesday shift. Hashimoto-san cannot drive, so I was her chauffeur. On the way, I asked Hashimoto-san about our duties that day. Her response was straightforward: “Our main job is to make sure that they [the patients] do not feel alone”. After a short pause, she mentioned a sermon that she had once heard during her volunteering: “Shinran is supposed to have taught that all generations of sentient beings are and become generations of parents and siblings, all connected regardless of blood-relations.” If we feel that we are all united like that, she felt, then she could try to offer her own empathy to others to help them through their pain and sadness, while preparing for the possibility of similar suffering for herself in the future. In a sense, Hashimoto-san seemed to find purpose in the idea of a space where unity with all, rather than a kin-related few, allowed people to process the suffering of both self and others as they struggled with illness and death.

Upon arriving, we headed straight to a long meeting room with a permanent _butsudan_ installed at one end. The room was called the ”Vihāra Room” and I soon realised that we were here for a religious service. _Vihāra_ volunteering visits usually consisted of a lecture by one of the hospital’s doctors aimed at the volunteers, support work at the hospital wards, and a joint preaching service delivered by one of the local Buddhist priests who took turns to facilitate weekly preaching sessions at the hospital.

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213 See Inose (2016a) for a detailed overview of _vihāra_ activities in northern Hiroshima, including the incorporation of _vihāra_ volunteering into _buppu_ activities.

214 Fieldnotes, April 2017.
Shortly after our arrival, dressed in our uniforms (pale blue aprons with matching headkerchiefs), a lecture was delivered by a female doctor who warned the gathered volunteers about the risks of high blood pressure and advised on preventative measures. They were lectured and quizzed regarding their lifestyle choices and diet to raise their awareness that through healthy living they could avert this lifestyle-linked disease. The lecture was directed at volunteers who, elderly themselves, were being encouraged to delay their own need for long-term care by living active and healthy lives. After the lecture, we were directed to specific wards where, on that occasion, we were asked to rip and fold newspapers that were used as mattress protectors in patients’ beds. Since the volunteers do not possess a professional training to provide care to the patients directly, the usual tasks are limited to anything that can in some way support the nurses such as folding newspapers, changing bed sheets, rolling refreshment towels and cleaning tables during meals. Up to that point, I felt that interaction with the patients was not a priority. When we were folding newspapers, Kodama-san, one of the elderly volunteers noted:

Perhaps we are even a nuisance for the nurses and for the hospital when we come to volunteer. They have to come up with the tasks that we can do and think of the ways that we can be useful because, even if we could, we would not be able to physically help with the elderly. We have our own illnesses to contend with, my knees and hips are killing me. But those visits are important, not just for the patients that we visit, but also for us. I get to see my buppu friends and I am reminded that there is this great community of fellow members that I belong to and who might come to help me when I become useless. For now, I can still be useful, even if all we do is fold newspapers, and pray and sing hymns with the dying neighbours.\[215\]

Despite their own health issues and ailments, volunteers come together to gossip and socialise with one another, and to feel like they are contributing to the community at the same time. This is one way of doing belonging and being reminded of the inevitability of one’s own future incapacities and death. Kodama-san was aware that Vihāra activities were also there to support her in staying connected to others and helping permanently hospitalised neighbours feel that their community has not forgotten them. She, and many other buppu members, found comfort in being able to still offer some level of support.

In August 2017, when I interviewed the wife of the head priest of Kaigoji who set up the facility back in 1995,\[216\] she explained that her husband’s vision was to make Buddhism a religion fit for the twenty-first century and to show that Buddhist

\[215\] Fieldnotes, April 2017.
\[216\] Interview, 9 August 2017.
teachings spread the message of compassion, not violence. She referred to the 1995 Aum incident, which had coincided with the opening of the hospital,\(^\text{217}\) noting that Buddhism could provide people with a safe environment to navigate ageing, illness and death. I asked her to explain further: “Back in the 1990s, this community was already elderly and classed as depopulated. People already struggled to stay connected with their families. Dying unattended by anyone is not only a phenomenon of today.” She explained that her husband had suffered a stroke a few years earlier and spent some recovery time in a hospital bed surrounded by other people who were less fortunate and whose families never or almost never visited them. That, she said, was when the idea for the facility was born in his mind: “When we become ill, it is not just our body that suffers, we also suffer in other ways and prayer and Buddhist teachings help with the things that medicine cannot.” She saw the emotional and spiritual labour of volunteers as a crucial element in managing this suffering. Although Kodama-san felt that she and her fellow volunteers might be a nuisance there, their contribution, it seemed, was widely appreciated. A Buddhist priest employed at Kaigoji and at the local vihāra facility noted that the work of elderly volunteers was paramount to the hospital’s mission: “We do not have enough staff to provide people with a softer touch, someone to hold the patients’ hand, to pat their back, to listen to them. You see, to make them feel human again.”\(^\text{218}\) He felt that the practice softened the suffering of the in-patients, but also hoped that it reassured the volunteering women by reminding them that there was a system in place to assist them in the same way later down the line.

After our chores, Hashimoto-san and I headed out to assist patients out of their rooms to participate in the Buddhist service in the “Vihāra Room.” As we walked together, I saw Hashimoto-san greeting her friends and neighbours and inquiring after their health. When we were heading down the corridor with an elderly lady in her late nineties sat in a wheelchair, she said:

> We have to do it. We have to stay active and we have to remind people that we are still here as a community. We have to bring them the peace of *hotoke-sama* and make sure that they know that they have not been forgotten. I can see myself in them. I am eighty-eight now and I am next. I can only hope that when the time comes, my *buppu* friends and neighbours will still remember me. And when I am gone, someone will

\(^{217}\) The so-called “Aum incident” refers to the Tokyo subway sarin attack perpetrated by members of the cult movement Aum Shinrikyō on 20 March 1995. Aum Shinrikyō was a NRM founded by Asahara Shoko in 1984 as a yoga and meditation group. The movement attracted many young and well-educated followers, but turned to violence towards the end of the 1980s, culminating in the sarin gas attack. See Reader (2000, 2013) on Aum Shinrikyō’s history, doctrine and activities.

\(^{218}\) Interview, 9 August 2017.
continue to maintain my bonds. We ought to strive not to let them become disconnected.²¹⁹

There was a call for continuity and compassion in her words, both of which can only be actioned through a human agency that is not entirely selfless. For both Hashimoto-san and Kodama-san, coming together to alleviate the suffering of old age and illness, and to offer a vision of a meaningful afterlife for everyone involved is at the core of this practice. The feeling of anxious anticipation of decline in relation to one’s future is being reorganised as a vehicle for agency and a desire to connect with other people. Both women find it easy to connect with their fellow volunteers and patients because of their capacity for empathy. They are aware of the fragility of their own bodies. Struggling with daily tasks, their bodies exhibit the potentiality of further decay, physical and mental. Therefore, they put trust in a kind of care that hinges on interdependency – on a preparedness to comfort others whilst being in need of comfort themselves.

The memorial service that concluded our day was conducted on behalf of the ancestors of the patients and for patients who had recently passed. But again, it was also intended as a tacit promise for the living that they would also be remembered. It was a humbling experience, rendering the decay of illness and death and the impermanence of the human life truly palpable. The Buddhist priest delivering the preaching focused on the inevitability of death and impermanence of all things. He opened with the statement: “When we die, we become rubbish,” which resonated directly with the anxieties of most of the people in the room; many either shifted uncomfortably or nodded profusely. The fear of being discarded after death is a raw emotion for most of my elderly interlocutors. Most of them are already living through the challenges of old age alone, their children distant and absent. However, they have agency and they employ it to nurture their belonging to one another and to their temple communities.

Volunteering activities such as the vihāra movement allow people to stay engaged with the community and participate in its life. They nurture ideas of self-care (staying physically and mentally active), social engagement and reciprocal care for the living and for the dead beyond the constraints of kinship ties. As such, the agency exercised through religious practice may serve as vehicle for socially engaged practice,²²⁰ as well as a mechanism for establishing networks of belonging that generate connections between the living on the basis of a shared psychology and physiology of ageing and death. For Hashimoto-san and others, illness and death and

²¹⁹ Fieldnotes, April 2017.
²²⁰ See Ōtani (2019) on transforming Buddhist practice into socially engaged practice.
one's own inability to do anything about them once they arrive, are a source of anxiety and motivation to remain active and bring compassion and faith to fellow community members who are already there. In Shin Buddhism, death, as an experience of radical aloneness, is meant to prompt us to develop wisdom and compassion. Here, lay women use religious ritual and the socio-religious practice of compassion to generate togetherness and nurture responsibility for mutual care and self-care. They also help themselves and others to process the inevitability of death and loneliness.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have focused on how *en* is transferred when the loneliness of ageing and the afterlife motivates people to reconsider the kin-dependent nature of Buddhist practice. My interlocutors strived to establish alternative co-dependent care structures and ways of preserving memory about individuals and the collective existence of the community. I have drawn on examples of non-kinship-based modes of care for the dead and alternative modalities of reciprocity and connectivity (*en*) among the living and the dead to show how the notion of filial piety is replaced with a more subjective response to the threat of “being forgotten” and the possibility of abandonment in death and the afterlife.

Buddhist practice, death and its socialising mechanics reveal the social relevance of local Buddhist temples as facilitators of alternative modalities of belonging produced through the experience and anticipation of loss. People’s experiences of change relating to depopulation involve contemplation of the disappearance of individuals (through death) and of modalities of belonging that appear to be no longer viable or workable. Death – the presence of an absence, imagined or actual – is both terrifying and generative. For my interlocutors, death makes space for hope and for a promise of belonging in this and the other world. I thus argue that there is a generative potential in the absence and disappearance of certain modes of sociality. As we have seen, when Yuki Hirata heard the tragic news of the stabbing of an elderly community member by her son (who then killed himself), she felt that the communal network of support was not there to assist either mother or son with the psychological burden of illness. They were left in the precarious condition of disconnect where the burden of care proved too overwhelming for the son to fulfil his filial obligations. It is this potentiality of disconnect and affective empathy towards such examples of precarious...

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221 For instance, in a section of *Gobunsho*, the "Letter on White Ashes" (*Hakkotsu no Sho*), Rennyō reflects on the impermanence of life and the importance of relying on Amida Buddha's Vow.
aging and dying that partially serve as a driving force behind my elderly interlocutors’ proactive approaches to self-care and care for elderly in this and in the afterlife. Although I have emphasised the agency of my interlocutors in this chapter, it has to be acknowledged that institutional networks at regional and national levels often enable such proactive attitudes - Vihāra palliative care facilities and volunteering are just one example. It is to such institutional networks that I turn in the next chapter.
Chapter Six

Senses and feelings in Buddhist belonging: *En* as an institutional and institutionalising practice

**Introduction: Sensing Buddhist belonging**

In this chapter, I turn to examine the institutional dimensions of *en*. Thus far, I have explored Buddhist temple communities as dynamic networks of belonging to show how people generate connections and how they mobilise existing bonds to bring people together or articulate their own and others’ affinities. Throughout, I have hinted at the institutional dimensions that influence the processes of unity and exclusion within Buddhist temple communities — be it in the area of economics, ethics or practices of memory and community engagement. For, as I argue here, the subjective dimensions of *en* practices are inevitably embedded within the organisational frameworks and specific ideals of belonging nurtured at the institutional level of the wider Jōdo Shinshū community of temple custodians and lay members.

By exploring a range of ethnographic examples, including events staged at an institutional level, and analysing materials and initiatives produced and distributed centrally and within the local temples, I examine the institutional dynamics of *en* more systematically. I argue that *en* can serve as a mechanism for institutionalising Buddhist belonging, embedding it within specific organisational structures to nurture institutional cohesion. In other words, *en* — in its affective and relationally binding sense — serves both as a practice and narrative that institutionalises people’s religious experiences. It nurtures my interlocutors’ emotional affinities with the broader collective framework of particular temples, while also creating a sense of closeness to an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) of fellow Shin Buddhists. Local Buddhist temple communities constitute the bedrock of the sectarian community of members. The importance of nurturing members’ sense of belonging to a wider collective of Shin members shapes temple-lay relations and impacts on members’ responsiveness to debates concerning Buddhism’s institutional survival. Thus *en* not only institutionalises but also constitutes an institutional narrative of closeness and togetherness.

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222 I make a distinction here between events staged at a local community level and those prescribed by the sect’s headquarters. An example of community-led initiatives are *hōza* gatherings, while institutionally staged activities would include the locally delivered educational programmes and inaugural ritual services at Nishi Honganji in Kyoto that I will discuss in this chapter.
shifting scales to consider *en* dynamics from an institutional perspective – and to think about priests as institutional actors – I investigate the structures of belonging effected at an organisational level, asking how *en* is nurtured and sometimes enforced between the lay followers and the sect, and how local temples and their custodians are implicated and instrumental in the process.

Why focus on sensorial experiences and feelings in religious belonging in the institutional context? I suggest that people’s belonging, their practices of doing belonging, are shaped and enhanced by the values, affective states and particular emotions evoked by the imagery and narratives promoted at an institutional level. In this, I build on scholarship on religion that has broadened our understanding of the role of the body and emotions by taking into account the materiality of religion framed through the senses of the perceiving religious actors (Desjarlais 1992, Gould et al. 2019, Meyer 2008, Promey 2014, Prohl 2015, Sharf and Sharf 2001). This way of thinking about religious belonging allows us to explore both cognitive and sensuous understandings of religious materiality in institutional settings.

I suggest that exploring the institutional dimensions of *en* from an emotional perspective, which includes sensory (material) encounters with the world, creates an opening for discussing the efficacy of material forms in the formation of networked identities, in this case in relation to Buddhist institutional belonging. Here, I explore the responsiveness of temple custodians and lay members to institutionally structured affective practices both within and beyond the boundaries of local temple communities. By considering the institutional performativity of *en* in relation to the complex subjective meanings of *en* explored in the previous chapters, I provide a fresh perspective on Buddhism’s institutional capacity to nurture lasting structures of religious sociality in regional communities faced with the challenges of demographic changes.

**Shaping Buddhist identities: sensing and projecting *en***

“This is incredible. Can you see all these people?” I felt Sasaki-san, a member of Myōkōji’s neighbouring temple, grab my arm firmly to draw my attention to the sea of people meandering through the temple grounds of Kyoto’s Nishi Honganji temple, which we were queuing to enter. Before I was able to respond, Hirata-san grabbed my other arm to interject: “We are so many, who would think that there are so many of us. I wonder where other people have travelled from today?” A male companion chimed in: “Can you imagine the sound when we will all chant “*namu amida butsu*” and sing together?” Before anyone was able to say anything else, we were swiftly ushered along by stewards in yellow jackets who were controlling the flow of pilgrims.
arriving at the temple. A few minutes later, we were standing between Nishi Honganji’s majestic gate, Amidadō, and the main temple hall’s entrance, getting ready to take a commemorative picture. Most men and women in our group and those surrounding us were wearing around their necks a silk stole (hangesa/wagesa) embroidered with the official Wisteria crest of the Nishi Honganji branch of the Jōdo Shinshū denomination.223

Soon after, we were being ushered again in the direction of the Founder’s Hall. The inside of the hall was heaving with the chatter of nearly fifteen hundred people gathered in anticipation. For many lay members it was the first time they had visited the sect’s head temple and the hall was filled with camera flashes and shutter noises. A few moments before the start of the ceremony, a female member of the temple administration welcomed all “followers” (monto). As she read out the locations from where people had travelled, loud cheers erupted from various places within the hall: “Welcome to everyone from Nara... Fukui... Hiroshima... Shikoku... Tottori... Shimane... Yamaguchi... and Kyoto... and Hokkaido.” The further the group travelled, the louder were the cheers of the fellow factions. Then the ceremony began and the hall fell silent save for the rhythmic sounds of the bell and the occasional murmured "namu amida butsu.” Later that day, over dinner, people shared their emotional responses to and sensorial experiences of the ceremony. One male supporter of Myōkōji temple, Sasaki-san, remarked, “I have been doing Buddhist things all my life, but today I felt like a Buddhist. The sound alone made my heart tremble.” Sasaki-san and others kept repeating how moved (kandō) they felt when the act of prayer was collective – when people broke into a collective chant: “I realised that there is so much beauty in chanting when one properly opens one’s mouth and allows for the sound to come out loud and clear,” Sasaki-san reflected.

In early March 2017, I joined 140 lay members along with the Buddhist priests and their wives from fourteen temples across the north of Hiroshima Prefecture on a two-day trip to the Nishi Honganji temple in Kyoto. On 6 June 2014, the then thirty-six-year-old Ōtani Kōjun had become the twenty-fifth abbot of Nishi Honganji and formally inherited the sect’s leadership from his then sixty-eight-year-old father, Ōtani Kōshin. (monshu). Thereafter followed a period of celebration known as the Dentō hōkoku hōyō, which takes place whenever a new abbot transitions into the role. Between 1 October 2016 and 31 May 2017, members of all Jōdo Shinshū temple

223 The Wisteria Crest in Jōdo Shinshū is referred to as kujō sagarifui no mon. The drooping blossoms are said to suggest humility and sincere reverence to Amida Buddha. It is thought to have originally been the crest of the Kujō family, one of Honganji’s patrons. 224 Fieldnotes, March 2017.
communities were expected to travel to Nishi Honganji to take part in celebrating the passing of “the lamp” of Buddhist teachings to the next generation – hence our trip to the temple that March. The period of celebration, as explained on the sect’s website (Jōdo Shinshū honganjiha dentō hōkoku hōyō, n.d.), was also a moment of communicating the truth of Jōdo Shinshū teachings, unifying the sect, and bringing the members together.

Such notions of unity and continuity are at the heart of reconnecting the members with one another and rekindling denominational affinities. As one era ends and the new one begins, the new abbot looks for continuity and renewal. I suggest that what was intended — through the spectacle of visual clues, sounds and smells, and bodily encounters of comradery on an impressive scale — was for members to experience the power of their broader socio-religious connections; their belonging to a strong visible collective. Members journey out of their local communities into a communal feast of the senses shared with members from other communities across the entire country, allowing the wider “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) of Shin members to materialise, to be heard and seen. Events such as Dentō hōkoku hōyō thus make explicit connections (en) that might until that point have been only implied. It also infers a (perhaps temporary) move beyond Buddhist identities centred on family and community obligations by situating members in an environment in which they feel like they become engineers of their own belonging. Through the materialisation of the scale of the Jōdo Shinshū community, Sasaki-san felt that he could define himself as a Buddhist, rather than a person who just performs Buddhist things. A few days later, when I asked him about this statement, he elaborated:

In our own small communities, I forget that en goes beyond the roof of my own house. I guess that’s what priests mean when they say that we are all connected and have a bond with Shinran and Amida, and not just our dead ones, and all that. (...) I am not sure if you could find anyone who did not feel part of it all when those priests started chanting and then we all got going. I was so moved that I could not read the script, so I just chanted from memory.\(^{225}\)

Sasaki-san made it clear that the experience not only made him feel emotional, but also brought him to appreciate the ways in which emotive Buddhist practice clarified the doctrinal teachings of engi (the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising).

When I joined other participants after the main service for the kikyōshiki ceremony, they also pointed to feelings of interconnectedness with their fellow members. Kikyōshiki is a Shin Buddhist ritual marking the formal admission of a lay follower into the Shin community and during which they receive a Buddhist name

\(^{225}\) Interview, 2 April 2017.
During the ceremony, the abbot of Nishi Honganji touched the back of our heads to symbolise the ritual shaving off of our hair, while we were expected to make the vow of compassion in unison. “When he touched the back of my head, I felt something strange. Maybe it is because I was already overwhelmed and imagined that by touching all of us, one by one, he was passing something to all of us,” said one of my companions, the sixty-something Katō-san, when we exchanged our impressions over dinner that evening. When he tried to explain, he used his hands to gesticulate the passing of that “something” from chest to chest. When I probed further, he said: “I know that this makes me sound bonkers, but it was there. That something – a connection? I do not know,” he tried. After a moment he added, laughing: “You, well, you might have taken part as a researcher, but to many of us, you are as much a part of it all as we are now. You must have felt that something too.” Katō-san was pleased that he chose to receive his Buddhist name at the sect’s headquarters instead of at his local temple. He felt that it would have greater ritual efficacy (reflected also in economic terms through the cost). He might not have been able to name the feeling that his hands were trying to communicate, but he was convinced about the existence of a ritual connective tissue of sorts and recognised its socio-religious authority. The materialisation of such collective identities through sensorial encounters appeared to have played an important role in shaping lay members’ awareness of broader institutional connections.

Benedict Anderson, in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* (1991, p. 6), asserts that a community is “imagined” when its participants do not interact face-to-face but nonetheless imagine themselves to be part of a collective social unity. In Anderson’s work such processes of unity apply to nation-states. However, as Gareth Fisher (2014) has shown in his work on Buddhism in mainland China, it can be a very effective metaphor to think with in relation to religious communities. For Anderson, the development of such collective identity among a large group of individuals transforms the nation-state into a viable political and social body. Analogously, lay practitioners and religious professionals remain, for the most part, preoccupied with the affairs of their individual temple communities rather than their collective

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226 In other Japanese Buddhist denominations, Buddhist names are usually given to lay followers after they have died to symbolise posthumous ordination, but in Shin Buddhism these ‘posthumous’ names are often given during a follower’s lifetime.

227 I participated in the kikyōshiki ceremony having obtained permission from the sect’s administration. The ceremony is also referred to as okami sori meaning “shaving one’s hair” prior to receiving a Buddhist name and taking a Buddhist vow of ordination.

228 The cost of receiving a hōmyō issued by Nishi Honganji is 10,000 yen (£75), whereas hōmyō issued at a local temple is likely to only cost half.
denominational identities, but by reading sectarian publications, chanting the same sutras and listening to similar (sometimes the same) sermons they can feel that they belong to a larger socio-religious collective. Further material realisation of this “imagined” mutual collectivity can, in turn, reinforce and strengthen viable structures of institutional belonging, particularly at a time when the sect’s administration appears disconnected and unresponsive to the regional struggles of local Buddhist temple communities (a theme to which I will return). It is meant to reorient or diversify institutional loyalties from the periphery to the centre. I thus suggest that en enables the existence of a community “imagined” at an institutional level where people become aware of belonging to a larger denomination. Concurrently, belonging also happens at a very intimate “face-to-face” level where it is rooted in close personal relationships that are intertwined with the village dynamics and local efforts to survive that I have discussed in previous chapters.

It appears that the sect had to rely on an element of enforcement in order to effectively enable such connectivity. Participation in the trip by individual lay members was certainly voluntary, but it was not voluntary at an institutional level. The head priests of all affiliated temples were expected to recruit (secure) appropriate numbers of pilgrims from their temple support base. The quota for the thirty-four temples affiliated with the administrative unit (so) that Myōkōji belonged to was 320 “pilgrims,” divided into two visiting groups — the first in October 2016 and the second in March 2017. The unit fell short of its allocated quota numbers with just under 250 participants. Five temple communities were unable to send anyone. Many of the priests who attended in March admitted that if they were not able to recruit lay members, they often included their own family members in the trip or pulled favours with the members of their temple boards in order to hit their individual quota. For instance, the nine-member representation from Myōkōji included Suzuki-san and his wife, me, the head of the bukkyō fujinkai and five other members, which — as Suzuki-san remarked — was not a lot for a temple community with a base of three hundred member households.

Although many members joined the trip out of religious motivations, many were also there to sightsee, including three female lay participants from Myōkōji who were excited to visit Nishi Honganji – the sect’s spiritual core and a famous tourist site with

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229 See Fisher (2014, pp. 136-68) for a discussion on creating bonds and an imagined community of lay Buddhists in contemporary mainland China through the spread of print matter and multimedia materials.

230 Similar recruitment practices — based on personal connections — were often used when recruiting participants for sect-level initiatives.
a UNESCO World Heritage designation. The schedule also accommodated free time for visits to nearby museums in Kyoto, a banquet dinner in a hotel with an onsen (hot springs), a visit to Hongwanji Kobe Betsuin (a branch temple of Nishi Honganji in Kobe) famed for its modern architecture and, finally, a lunch on board a cruise ship in Osaka Bay. Suzuki-san had explained during one of the organisational meetings in September 2016 that it was essential to find the right balance between religious activities and fun to attract lay participants and at the same time fulfil their obligation to integrate the local Buddhist temple community into the larger Shin institution. Collaboration and mutual support among temples was thus also reinforced insofar as all temples, individually and collectively, were made responsible for the successful delivery of such initiatives to ensure a healthy image of the Shin tradition.

Before moving on to discuss these temple-to-temple connections in more detail, I will first return to the Dentō hōkoku hōyō to discuss the staging of and Buddhist practitioners’ experiences of what seemed to be one of the day’s more powerful moments. This gives us clues about how people are expected to go about engineering their enduring bonds and shaping their institutional belonging.

**On family: the royals of Shin Buddhism**

The final element of the day’s Dentō hōkoku hōyō programme featured the Ōtani family – the head family of the Nishi Honganji branch of Jōdo Shinshū. It was a ritual spectacle in the sense of a highly performative and carefully staged endeavour intended to build intimacy between the followers and the spiritual leadership of their sect by creating avenues for emotional connections and making them approachable, relatable and less distant. I have already mentioned that the guiding principle behind the ceremonial period of the hōyō was the symbolic celebration of the passing of the light of the Buddhist teachings from one generation to the next. The way in which the Ōtani family interacted with the visitors to Honganji during the hōyō served to reiterate institutional ideals of generational transition of practice and the importance of the family and the virtue of filial piety explored in Chapter 2.

The profile introducing Ōtani Kōjun to Shin followers on the Nishi Honganji website states that when he was a child, he dreamt of becoming a bus driver. Instead,

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231 Reader (2005, 2014) has observed similar patterns of participation among Shikoku pilgrims.

232 The cost of participating in the trip was 36,000 yen (£270) per person. Compared to a standard two-day package tour in central Kyoto with equivalent excursions, the trip provided good value for money in tourist terms alone.

he ordained at the age of fifteen and ever since had been preparing to inherit his father’s role as the head priest of Nishi Honganji. This anecdote about Ōtani Kōjun’s childhood dreams was repeated during the Dentō hōkoku hōyō service, which emphasised the generational transference of Buddhist practice. Once the chanting and preaching had finished, lay members were given the opportunity to speak to the Ōtani family – the final element in the programme. Three generations of the sect’s leadership appeared on the stage of the Amida Hall. The encounter was being live streamed through the Nishi Honganji online-based TV channel to screens dotted around the hall and directly to the web portal for those who could not attend in person. The staging was reminiscent of a press conference, with a young female member of the Nishi Honganji administration acting as host, feeding the audience’s questions to the family members. The mediation of the encounter through the screens created a balance between levels of intimacy and distance, maintaining the image of authority but also creating a feeling of mediated accessibility.

At first, the young abbot was accompanied by his wife, Ōtani Ruzumi, his two children and both parents. After greeting the gathered crowds, the retired abbot and his wife exited the stage leaving the younger generations in charge of answering the visitors’ questions. The next generation of the Ōtanis — a five-year-old boy and a few months old baby girl — joined their parents while they answered the gathered crowd’s questions (see Figure 22), which — I was advised by one of the Honganji administrators — were pre-prepared and carefully screened. There were quite a few questions asked directly to the children who, as many of my companions noted later, were incredibly well behaved. The little boy was asked about his favourite sweets and who he wanted to be when he grew up. In contrast to his father’s childhood plans of becoming a bus driver, the boy said that he wanted to become an astronaut. After every perfectly formulated answer, the crowds responded with gentle laughter and cheers, while many of the onlookers nearest to me were chasing away their tears, visibly touched by the experience, or a feeling, or a memory that it evoked. The girl’s mother answered any questions directed at her, but she was left to roam relatively freely on the stage to the enjoyment of the onlookers. Kaneda-san channelled the sentiments of many attendees in our group when he later explained that seeing the next generation of Jōdo Shinshū leaders and being able to engage with them and delight in the youngest one’s charms was one of the highlights of the ceremony.
“It made me feel hopeful about the future. We cannot stop depopulation, but even if our local communities are in trouble, there is a bigger picture there,” he explained a few days later when I visited his and his wife’s home.234 His wife also offered her insights: “We just have to learn from their example and look after our own and the temple families.” She felt that the message passed on to them that day was that the strength of survival of her local (not just religious) community was to be found in the basic unit of a family and the strength of the connections nurtured within it and through it. She also said laughingly that the Ōtani family’s arrival on the stage reminded her of the pictures of the royal family in the UK.235 In fact, I could not have found a more fitting analogy. The royal family in the UK has long been theorised as a brand designed to act as a focus for national identity, unity and pride, which gives a sense of stability and continuity (see e.g. Balmer 2017). Arguably, for many it has been delivering that. The “new” generations of British royals — like those of the Ōtani family — have been seen to engage with the local communities in a more approachable and relatable fashion while preserving the degree of separation that warrants their elevated symbolic status. Whether we are inclined to buy into that image is another matter, but such imagery nevertheless reinforces “family” as an

234 Interview, 28 March 2017.
235 I pick up on this analogy to the British royal family — instead of, for instance, the image of the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church — precisely because of the family values and generational continuity that it implies. Although the Pope in the Catholic tradition is a moral propagator of conservative family values, he does not symbolically embody such values.
institutional concept and a marker of good Buddhist (or British) life where all respective parties fulfil their roles within their own areas of influence and in accordance with their gender.

As I have shown already in this thesis, Buddhism, as it is lived and practiced in Japan today, is intimately tied to the notion of family and lifelong and hereditary Buddhist identities. Among all the schools of Japanese Buddhism, Shin Buddhists developed the most effective institutional hierarchy based on kin-relations. Although Shinran rejected the necessity of priests in lay members’ communication with the buddhas, as well as the institutionalisation of religion and temporal power, his descendants established a hierarchical system based on hereditary principles (Kitagawa 1965, 329). During the sixteenth century the Shin School developed into a strong, semi-feudal power. The hereditary principle was applied not only to the patriarchs but also to the priests of all local temples; from the outset the Shin School had adopted the system of married clergy. In the hierarchical structure of Shin Buddhism, the status of every priest, from the patriarch to the humble priest in the countryside, was and still remains clearly defined, while the relationship between religious professionals and lay members is also negotiated through the ideal of a family united through shared Buddhist practice and values passed from one generation to another.

As a result, the personal matters of the temple family such as clerical marriage and child rearing (sometimes even decisions to have children) often become matters of concern for lay members. Temple families feel obliged to keep their members updated on their progress in securing a succession line and keep them ritually and emotionally involved in the process. In early April 2017, I was invited to the Buddhist wedding of the oldest son of Takezawa-san senior, a previous head priest of the relatively well-off Daitōji temple in the neighbouring city. Since I had met the Takezawas and their three sons (kin relations of Myōkōji’s Suzuki-san) back in April 2016, I had become very close with the family and they kept me regularly updated on the temple and family affairs. The temple had a strong lay support base, interestingly dominated by men. The oldest son had officially become the head priest of Daitōji a few years before, but had continued to pursue his career outside of the temple and returned to the temple at the weekends to conduct ritual services and stay engaged in temple affairs.

His parents still looked after most of the temple affairs, with his mother continuing to serve as the temple’s bōmori until her son was married. Takezawa-san senior had told me about his and the lay members’ relief that his son was finally to get married: “I was not worried because he is a good person and has a successful career,
but I was concerned whether he would find someone prepared to take on the temple responsibilities.\footnote{Interview, 4 November 2017.} I asked where his concerns stemmed from: “Well, marrying a head priest means not only marrying a person, but marrying into a particular idea of a family and a household where the moral standards of behaviour have to be kept high.” He explained that his son had been engaged before. The wedding preparations were underway when the relationship soured because it transpired that his fiancée was not interested in having children, or at least not for a while. Takezawa-san senior understood that the pressure put on younger people transitioning into the roles of head priest and bōmori could sometimes be challenging, but felt that it was important for the couple to understand that certain requirements had to be fulfilled and that some things are less private in a temple setting.

He explained further: “When the engagement fell through, our members got really worried, so as soon as the new arrangement was agreed, my son announced it straight away at the next hōza.” I attended the preaching session when the new engagement was announced. A female member sitting to my right whispered: “Finally.” The woman on my left responded: “I know what you mean! He is still young, but the sooner there are children, the better we will all feel. And we will know that the temple is safe.” Afterward, over lunch, the young head priest circulated among the lay members pouring beer and receiving heartfelt congratulations from visibly pleased members. The bride was the daughter of the head priest of another Jōdo Shinshū temple and the couple had met through a temple-to-temple recommendation—a relatively standard practice that is still prevalent and preferred in temple family networks. Arguably, it is also a practice that allows for nurturing greater institutional cohesion. Bōmori who marry into a temple family without having a temple background—such as Myōkōji-s’ Aki-san—often reported that they tended to feel inadequate in their roles over the first few years because they had missed out on years of Buddhist socialisation into a specific ideal of the family. They felt pressure not only to fit into this ideal of a temple wife, but also to ensure that their children understood the burden of en and their duties of nurturing it.

At Takezawa-san’s wedding all lay supporters were invited to take part in the ceremony staged at the temple, while a group of the most engaged members were also included in the wedding reception held afterwards at one of the hotels in Hiroshima city. The lay members were very much involved in the organisation of the ceremony at the temple and in celebrating it throughout. When I met Takezawa-san a couple of months after his wedding, he was radiant and his wife was expecting.
had just arrived home to inform the members that the next generation of Daitōji temple’s custodians was on its way.  

Figure 23. A poster encountered at one of the local temples. The poster promotes daily Buddhist practice in the company of one’s multigenerational family with the following slogans: “Aiming for the society of togetherness” [top left corner]; and “I’m pleased to see (worship) you [Amida] in the morning and in the evening. Let’s live today together” [top right], (28 June 2017).

Such examples of the active involvement of lay members in the personal affairs of temple families at all levels illustrate how those imagined or actual communities are intended to derive from such ideal forms of sociality — one that is premised upon the notion of a Buddhist family. Participating in such ‘private’ affairs contributes significantly to making lay people feel en with temple families. A poster depicting a multigenerational Buddhist family that I spotted at a few local temples is a telling example of the family ideal that the sect, individual temples and lay members are trying to uphold (see Figure 23). It also provides a conceptual and behavioural symbolic pattern for uniting the “imagined” Shin Buddhist community. The Ōtani family, along with an army of other temple families, emulate an image of a family and a family-oriented multigenerational model of Buddhist practice that is rarely encountered among lay members, but nevertheless resonates with the primarily elderly members and evokes a sense of nostalgia for a traditional family model.

On the one hand, such ideals exclude alternative models of conveying and creating the Buddhist identities of practitioners — particularly, at a time when fewer and fewer people are getting married and the landscape and definition of what constitutes a family has transformed drastically along with, for example, developments in Japan’s adoption law, advancements in LGBTQI+ rights, and the proliferation of single-parent households. On the other hand, via the employment of specific ideal forms, such ideals nurture broader institutional identities based on networks of inclusion whereby members can feel part of a wider Shin Buddhist “family” connected through shared practices and ideals, and their affective materialisation. This not only provides an institutional matrix for belonging, but also continues to institutionalise people’s socio-religious bonds.

**Temple-to-temple networks**

Throughout this thesis, I have predominantly discussed Buddhist temple communities as encompassing local Buddhist institutions, temple custodians and lay supporters. They are all part of the same environment of belonging — albeit, at times, holding divergent ideas of unity and temple-lay relations. In this section, I will look at the notion of temple communities via the prism of temple-to-temple relations to show how institutional belonging is enforced and enabled at a local level among priests and lay members alike. I argue that temple-to-temple networks are a reflection of the institutional embeddedness of ensofar as Buddhist temples can collaborate to generate — voluntarily or through obligation — environments that help materialise and nurture institutional formations of belonging.

Let us start briefly with the Nishi Honganji’s institutional organisational patterns. Historically, the system of branch-temples governed inter-temple relations. Nishi Honganji had a number of branch temples affiliated to it, which in turn had their own branch temples and so on. This meant that centre-periphery interactions were diffused through a complex hierarchical system of branch temples and that there was a strong dependence between the main temple and the branch temples, including economic co-dependency, intermarriage and other networks of mutual support. In today’s centre-periphery relations, the organisational model has been simplified. All Jōdo Shinshū Nishi Honganji-ha temples are directly affiliated with the sect’s head temple should they choose to maintain their denominational affiliation. In practice,

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238 For instance, most temples with the word “betsuin” in the name used to be a direct branch temple of Nishi Honganji as in, e.g. Honganji Hiroshima Betsuin.
this mostly translates into the financial accountability of individual temples to Nishi Honganji in the form of annual membership taxes.

However, as mentioned in the Introduction, all temples are grouped into various administrative units based on geographical proximity. As such, Myōkōji, for instance, belongs to a regional unit (so) of thirty-four temples and then to a local block of six temples. Temples, as institutional entities, in these groups collaborate with one another to deliver a plethora of initiatives, some of them ordered by the sect’s central administration. One such example was the Dentō hōkoku hōyō trip. Another is a twelve-month educational programme for lay practitioners called renzoku kenkyūkai which individual so sections are expected to deliver within their communities on a bi-annual basis to foster lay members’ Shin Buddhist sensibilities.

In early October 2016, I attended one session of the programme along with thirty-five participants and eleven Buddhist priests who were there to facilitate.239 On the way to the temple where the session was being held, Suzuki-san explained that it was the fourth time that the programme was being run and usually most local head priests engaged in one way or another in the organisation, either by designing and delivering sessions or by hosting them at their temples. The programme was being run for the fourth time. Co-organising it nurtured a degree of collaboration among the priests who in their day-to-day running of a temple have very little to do with neighbouring temples.

It was the eleventh session in that year’s programme and was dedicated to issues of peace, including a presentation of exhibition panels provided by the central administration compiled for the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Pacific War. The panels dealt with Jōdo Shinshū’s wartime history and current engagement in peace promoting activities and overseas volunteering. The panels served as an opening point for small group discussions. It would be impossible to recount the entire session here, but it is of note that in our group discussions, various participants actively engaged with the themes and the format of the session with many admitting that they had never considered associating Japanese Buddhism with peace. Neither were they aware of the overseas peace activism promoted by the sect, but noted that this awareness made them proud to be part of an organisation that promoted such values. Such sentiments were particularly strong among the few participants who were old enough to remember living through the war. However, while some participants saw it as enriching their experience as a member of the Jōdo Shinshū

239 Fieldnotes, October 2016.
sect, others openly critiqued the sect for promoting its involvement overseas while neglecting rural temple communities left without support.

I found this striking because, on the one hand, it was clear from the agenda of the session that local Buddhist priests were attempting to project a particular image of the sect prescribed to them by the programme’s guidelines. Further, by utilising the boards, they were trying to evoke a sense of appreciation for a socially engaged image of the sect; the boards appeared more promotional than informative in the way that they were designed. On the other hand, the debate about world peace appeared — to many participants — very far removed from the actual problems faced by local communities. That said, I was later told that the themes of all sessions are diverse and many aimed to bring the debates closer to home, such as those on demographic issues, Buddhism’s relationship with Shinto, and dangerous cults. The topics for discussion were usually suggested by the sect’s administration, but the design and delivery of the sessions was down to the creativity of the coordinating priests which, some admitted in the debriefing meeting after the session, was something that they were struggling with.

Such educational programmes, despite the issues that I have highlighted above, are an interesting development that shows that Buddhist institutions are interested in reaching out to their members, nurturing their Buddhist identities and making them aware of the wider institutional network to which they belong. They are therefore an important example to consider at a time when traditional Buddhist institutions are being critiqued for their lack of engagement and spiritual presence in the lives of their members. However, this institutional interest comes at a cost. Members who choose or are compelled to participate have to pay participation fees and cover the costs of their travel to the various temples in the region where the individual sessions are held. In return, they receive a certificate of completion as an “advanced” Shin Buddhist member and a greater awareness of a number of different issues. Kayama-san, a lay female member of Myōkōji temple in her sixties at the time, was the only one who participated in the programme that year from her community. When I met her and her husband for lunch in February 2017, I asked her about her experience:

I absolutely enjoyed it. (...) It was not only all the new and interesting things that we had learnt, but it was the fact that we were actually asked what we think, how we feel about those different issues and why we do what we do. Usually, it is just priests preaching at us, but there they needed to make their sermons connect to different themes, so it helped me understand some of the teachings. (...) Plus, I got to go and visit all those other temples in our region. I would never think of going there otherwise, but I learnt their history and some of them were in so many beautiful locations. I mean, you know that there are other temples in the region, but you do not actually know, and you do not feel that they are part of the
same community until you actually go and learn about them. I think that I
will join the next trip to Honganji. Neither of us have ever been, but it
would be good to go there.\footnote{Interview, 7 February 2017.}

Kayama-san appreciated that as part of the programme she was made to feel
like she was an active agent in her practice and thinking through Buddhist ideas. She
also felt that, by bringing different communities of practitioners together, she actually
recognised her own belonging to a wider regional community of Shin Buddhists. She
was one of a few members, Suzuki-san once remarked, who in the past two-to-three
years had started taking notes during his and other priest’s sermons. When I asked
her about it, she stated that, "When you actually listen, Jōdo Shinshū has many
interesting teachings. What is the point of practicing, praying, chanting and all that, if
you do not understand the message? What do you belong to then? It makes no
sense." Kayama-san was not alone in showing her interest in the Buddhist teachings
and how they related to the world around her. Those who I met at hōza meetings
across the region often had strong opinions about the quality of the preaching.
Kayama-san felt that educational programmes like the one she had participated in
were good, but that more priests ought to pay greater attention to what they said and
how they said it because that is what makes people want to attend hōza meetings.

Whilst in the field, I encountered collectives of local Buddhist priests who got
together to develop best practice in preaching, including the incorporation of various
media into the delivery of sermons.\footnote{I attended two such sessions during fieldwork, one each in April and July 2017.} This is another example of temple-to-temple
cooperation that brings religious professionals together for a common purpose to
share ideas and develop techniques and multimedia and multisensory approaches to
delivering Buddhist teachings in more effective and affective ways, including use of
music and various visual forms such as film, image and theatre.\footnote{It is of note that such networks of priests and entire temple families (jizoku) also meet
locally, regionally and nationally to further their education and knowledge of Buddhist
teachings and develop the best ways of sharing them. Examples include study groups for
bōmori and the education programmes for parishioners discussed earlier.}

In early April 2017, I joined a group of eight local Buddhist priests who gathered
for a symposium on utilising creative practices in conveying Buddhist teachings. It was
effectively a practice round for testing the techniques that they wished to use in their
preaching in front of their members. One of the priests prepared a talk on the four
inevitables in human life (shōrōbyōshi): birth, aging, sickness and death. In
presenting his material, he used music rather than words to convey the different
emotions that we all encounter on our journey through life and into death. Armed with

\begin{footnotes}
\item[240] Interview, 7 February 2017.
\item[241] I attended two such sessions during fieldwork, one each in April and July 2017.
\item[242] It is of note that such networks of priests and entire temple families (jizoku) also meet
locally, regionally and nationally to further their education and knowledge of Buddhist
teachings and develop the best ways of sharing them. Examples include study groups for
bōmori and the education programmes for parishioners discussed earlier.
\end{footnotes}
a violin on his shoulder, he asked us to close our eyes and focus on the experience of sound. Then, he used the varied tempo and crescendos of his violin-playing to establish an emotional connection to moments in our life when we had encountered the arrival of a new life, an illness, the fragility of ageing and death. He allowed silences for our feelings to drift and follow the music. At the end of each piece, he formulated short explanations describing different stages of our existence. Supplementing words with experiences of sound he wanted to convey the Buddhist teaching of impermanence. At the end, I felt rather emotional, and later, when I heard him deliver the actual preaching to his members, a significant number of people were moved to tears.

In developing such affective approaches, Buddhist priests have recognised the importance of sensory experiences in influencing the intensity and quality of people’s experiences and aiding the formulation of their institutional sense of belonging. They also create an image of the Buddhist priest as someone who is not only an expert on Buddhist teachings, but also an expert conveyor of such teachings in an accessible and evocative way. Many priests remain active in their knowledge of doctrine and often engage in developing diverse aesthetic forms to realise the affective potential of communicating these teachings, rather than just expounding on their theoretical and philosophical dimensions.

Preaching plays an important role in maintaining en relations with lay members at a personal level. It is also one way of spreading en narratives. Covell (2005, p. 171) comments on public criticism of Buddhist priests’ silence and lack of preaching. It is therefore important to point out that institutional identities are also being mobilised among religious professionals through the development of local and trans-local networks of priests and their attempts to find new ways of conveying Buddhist ideas. This shows that local Buddhist institutions and priests are not just trying to stay alive and preserve the existing system of interaction with the lay membership through death-related rituals in the short term, but are thinking through how to extend their connections in the longer term through storytelling as contexts change.

Investing in developing connections with practitioners through affective storytelling may prove to be a viable strategy to keep Buddhism alive within communal and institutional settings. Preaching is a sphere in which Buddhist priests can nurture a connection between feeling, belonging and agency. Many of my lay interlocutors admitted that a good preaching (like any good story) ought to make them cry or laugh (or both) – to make them “feel” like they want to come back to the temple and listen to a similar story again. It was amusement, emotion and curiosity
that they craved, and which made them want to belong and support the system within which this belonging could take place.

**Conclusion**

I have shown here how *en* functions as an institutional and institutionalising practice and how Buddhist institutions and religious professionals reach individual members and form ties with lay communities by offering practitioners the opportunity to participate cognitively and sensually — through religious practice and associated practices of togetherness — in building Buddhist temple communities for the benefit (karmic and socio-economic) of future generations. *En*, in its affective and material capacity, can thus also be used to look at the dynamic between local temple communities and their larger denomination. I have shown how lay members remain active in their engagement with processes of belonging and the nurturing of this belonging at both local and institutional levels. I have, therefore, used the term “aesthetics” to refer to that which is embodied through people’s encounters with institutional forms of religious belonging. I believe that we can enter into a much richer conversation about belonging and identity by focusing on senses and emotion. The institutional lens applied here has enabled me to show how institutional affective principles, rooted in bodily experience and played out in social interactions, shaped my interlocutor’s experiences of institutional affinity vis-à-vis their more intimate experience of belonging, both of which remain part of people’s emotional and material networks of Buddhist belonging.
Conclusion

What happened to change?

In this thesis, I have investigated the role of local Buddhist temples in processes of community-building in the broader context of demographic change and anticipated decline. By focusing on the special types of karmic and social bond (en) that exist between Buddhist priests, their families, lay people and institutions, I have argued for the importance of studying the crisis of Buddhism’s survival in regional Japan through the prism of the complex networks of interdependence that individuals and communities mobilise to manage decline in their communities. Focusing on en helps us to see temples as part of a network of relations upon which the survival of Buddhist institutions is dependent. I have used my ethnography to show how people negotiate their belonging to Buddhist temple communities, arguing that understanding the complexities of the ongoing debate on the crisis in and decline of Buddhism requires us to think about Buddhist temples as communities of networked belonging. This draws attention to the agency of individuals and communities in shaping their local and trans-local Buddhist identities in the broader context of regional decline. Temples are a type of diagnostic for understanding how people negotiate societal and demographic change, while their networks of belonging reveal how people approach the issue of decline in their local Buddhist institutions through Buddhist practices and teachings. Buddhist temple communities are sites where human relations intersect, are stored and are sometimes disposed of in a meaningful way. Depopulation shapes the realities of individuals and entire temple communities. It constitutes the reality of disappearance, but it is also a state of mind. Stopping decline is perhaps not an option, but slowing it down and readying for its impact might be — especially if people are able to imagine an alternative status quo. I have shown that people’s practices of Buddhist giving, voluntary labour, filial piety and remembrance are central to their anticipatory strategies. Through these practices people share experiences of loss, ageing and death and are able to nurture their sense of belonging at both individual and collective levels.

My thesis thus illuminates some of the strategies that people in depopulating communities have used to imagine an alternative status quo and to handle change. In the process, I have highlighted the relevance of Buddhist networks of belonging and practices. By investigating en as an inherited, economic and institutionalising practice, as well as an anticipatory strategy for remembrance and a mechanism for coping with decline, loss and death, I have shown how people remain active in making life and
death worthwhile for themselves and one another. In so doing, they delay decline, which is kept at bay as something that is bound to happen in the future. The loss of services and people framed my interlocutors’ temporal experience of change, situating them and their communities in a liminal state of transition between the “no longer” and the “not yet.” Many things were no longer the way they were, but people also felt and showed me that the loneliness and disconnect caused by depopulation had yet to claim the life of their communities. In the process, local Buddhist institutions, practices and narratives have come to play a role as brokers of change, while their custodians (such as the Suzuki family) come to terms with the socio-economic fragility of their futures.

I have employed the notion of Buddhist temple communities — as opposed to Buddhist temples — in my discussion of traditional Buddhism in Japan to reflect Buddhist institutions’ embeddedness. By analysing these institutions as community-dependent entities (in both local and trans-local contexts), this study complicates the current understanding of crisis relating to Japanese Buddhism and regional shrinkage in general. Approaching the question of the regional survival of Buddhist institutions through the lens of networked belonging and interdependence reveals the different layers of institutional erosion of the temple system and articulates the complexities of challenges faced by regional temples and the communities that host them. If we overlook the importance of socio-religious bonds and their emotional and material manifestations in Buddhist practice, we will not gain a thick understanding of the various facets of traditional Buddhism in Japan (such as the inherited nature of Buddhist practice, Buddhist giving, memorialisation rituals, the Buddhist capacity of guiding people through grief and death, institution and community building, ritual needs) and the economic, social and institutional pressures that it faces. Concurrently, I have contributed to the ongoing debate on religious change through the prism of Japan’s shrinking regions, contributing a middle-ground perspective on post-growth survival that complicates the dominant frameworks of decline and revival in Japanese Buddhism. I have shown that Buddhist temples continue to play an important role, not in showcasing the past or historical connections to a bygone era, but because they can serve as a diagnostic tool and a means for people to negotiate their relationship to a changing society.

I have worked with the notion of en as an underpinning conceptual and analytical framework to address the question of the meaning of Buddhist temples as a community and to interrogate the minute mechanisms of everydayness that condition their survival and decline in a regional context of socio-economic, demographic and ideological transition. The thesis opened with an analysis of multiple factors that have
been shaping current debates on the crisis in Japanese Buddhism to highlight the urgency of investigating temple-community relations from a new perspective which emphasises the socio-religious interdependences (en) that shape Buddhist actors’ responses to change. Turning to specific moments in which ideas of en are constructed, defined, and performed, I have posited that local social experiences, as well as the emotional and material needs of individuals and communities, often shape people’s sense of belonging or lack thereof. I have thus suggested that it is crucial to unpack en as an affective, material and practice-intense process that guides people’s social and karmic relations if we are to understand the complexities of religious change and to develop a more detailed picture of how Buddhist institutions are being supported and how such practices influence contemporary conceptions of community in regional Japan. I have thus complicated assumptions about and interpretations of en in contemporary studies of Buddhism and religion, framing it as an analytical tool for investigating people’s networks of belonging and for identifying areas of malfunction in socio-religious practices of interdependence. This study has showcased the multivalence of en and its limitations, and the ways in which people have engaged with it in their striving for continuity and their imagining of some kind of future for themselves and their communities in this world and in the afterlife.

Throughout, I have been keen to highlight my interlocutors’ agency in the process of asserting and abandoning their Buddhist networks of belonging. I have suggested that, if their temple communities are to survive, religious professionals (as institutional actors) need to address more systematically the ways in which they employ and conceive of en as a strategy for the retention and recruitment of members, as well as the transmission of Buddhist teachings. In the remainder of this conclusion, I therefore discuss and draw out some of the implications of the research and its potential lessons for temples undergoing a process of transition in communities that are still able and willing to remain active and engaged. Returning to the crisis debate surrounding Japanese Buddhism, I reflect on what it is that is in crisis. How might en help us to understand Buddhist futures? Where might diversification in the way en can be narrated and performed come from?

**En beyond the temple**

What does the future hold for regional Buddhist temple communities and traditional sects such as Jōdo Shinshū? When will a Buddhist temple become, to borrow the expression customarily used for species and other taxa, “functionally extinct”? Will it keep it going until the last parishioner is gone or does its viability depend on a certain level of membership? The functional extinction of Japanese Buddhist temples and Japanese Buddhism at large can relate to three types of occurrences: when it
disappears completely from historical records; when its reduced population of practitioners no longer plays a significant role in the “ecosystem”; and when the Buddhist population of practitioners can no longer secure a viable transition of practice to the next generation. We might think of Buddhist institutions as languages: there is usually a specific number of speakers deemed necessary to make a language “viable,” defined by UNESCO guidelines (2003) as the “absolute number of speakers”. However, even UNESCO (2003, p. 8) recognises the elusiveness of this quantitative factor for assessing the endangerment of individual languages. The number of speakers (or practitioners) alone does not determine the language’s (or temple community’s) vitality. A language with only three hundred speakers might be considered very much alive if it is the primary language of a community and it is the first language spoken by all children in that community. When does the process of endangerment and extinction – the demise – of Buddhist temple communities begin, not just for individual temples, but for Buddhism as it is in Japan today? Can they remain functionally viable when, for example, as few as ten people among whom the language of en continues to be spoken are left in the community? These are questions that remain beyond the scope of this thesis and deserve consideration in the future, but, as this study has shown, they are not entirely academic.

Some of the most urgent challenges faced by Buddhist institutions and communities are likely to become even more pressing in the coming years. Japan is hyper-ageing. The proportion of its population aged sixty-five and over rose from 7 percent in the 1970s to 28 percent in 2018 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2019) and is expected to reach over 40 percent by 2014. This will inevitably result in a reduction of financial and human resources, and further undermine temples’ institutional frameworks of support, particularly since most rural communities and some regional metropolitan areas are already at that 40 percent level. Rural-to-urban migration will also continue to shape their futures. Reversal trends of the so-called U/I/mago-turners have grown, not only among the elderly who are returning home to look after their parents but also among younger generations interested in organic farming and a slower pace of life. However, this has not been sufficiently mainstream or geographically diverse to bring the regional revival that regional municipalities often hope for.

On the other hand, such arrivals often bring with them a notable diversification of values and thus new ideas about community-building practices. In February 2017, I attended a regional symposium dedicated to the theme of community building. A panel of speakers was addressing a crowd of nearly two hundred people of diverse age and gender. I even spotted a couple of local priests. One of them was a young priest
in his forties from a small temple in the north of the region that was struggling economically due to a dwindling population. His family had started running a sake-producing business (mentioned in Chapter 1) to support the family and the temple. The panellists, most of them U or I-turners, were sharing their stories of arrival to the area and the importance of collaborating in building healthy and economically sustainable communities by connecting with the land and tradition. What caught my attention was an argument put forward by the speakers on the panel: he suggested that although traditional markers of community such as Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines were still there, times were changing and there was a need for new ways of building a community. This was a sentiment that I encountered among many younger people living in the area. They all highlighted the importance of having people who could carry and run with a baton, but also of having a next generation of people to pass this baton to. This meant encouraging people to stay or return to live in the region. The panellists and some of my younger interviewees identified community centres as sites where such nurturing practices ought to take place. They should be the venue for events and initiatives through which adults and children could come together and mobilise their “goen” – bonds that could later on be used for cooperation and the protection of an environment that would allow people to lead enjoyable lifestyles in connection with nature and tradition. This thesis, however, shows that Buddhist temples are not merely markers of tradition. They can also be the vehicles of change because of how people relate to them, which is itself reflective of changes in their communities.

Furthermore, the panellists frequently used the tropes of nurturing human relations (ningen kankei) and nurturing people’s affective connections (“goen ga atta kara”) to land, region, family and traditional skills. This emotional notion of connectivity was also being employed in advertising. For instance, a recently concluded publicity campaign aimed at attracting people to visit — and, according to one of the campaign managers, to potentially relocate to Shimane Prefecture — employed the slogan “Goen no kuni. Shimane,” meaning “Shimane, the land of goen” (Shimane-goen 2013-2019). The campaign was skilfully designed, playing on the idea of Shimane as a place of personal bonds, encounters and returns where the time flows differently and there is space for forging meaningful connections. Popularisation of such narratives in the media, but also evidence in my data of younger and older people equally valuing the importance of the personal and emotional dimensions of en,

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243 Personal communication with the Shimane kenshōkō rōdō-bu kankō shinkō kashi mane no miryoku hashshin-shitsu kōhō senryaku gurūpu, 6 February 2019.
may provide a clue for Buddhist institutions about how and where to focus their efforts to keep their temple communities and institutional networks of support viable.

**Nurturing networked belonging**

As this thesis has shown, there appears to be readiness within depopulating communities to come together despite the transformations that are weakening their communities’ economic and social capacities. This applies to both religious and civil structures and cuts across generational and ideological divisions. However, these diverse and different social cohorts employ different dimensions of connectivity (en).

The perception shared by many that temples are no longer sites of communal unity is quite striking. This shows that somewhere along the way, the rules of engagement have changed or failed to be adapted, and that Buddhist institutions have been unsuccessful in communicating the appeal of Buddhist dimensions of en in their teachings and values – even though these teachings and values very often resemble those now promoted by publicity campaigns such as Shimane-goen. Getting people interested in Buddhism and its message in the first place might be the most viable strategy for survival, but in order to do this Buddhist institutions and religious professionals need to find ways to remain relevant and to bridge the ideological gaps within their communities. As I postulated in Chapter 3, they might need to take a more proactive rather than reactive approach to change, transforming temples into sites where en can be experienced by adding value to people’s spiritual lives (as a few are indeed already doing).

Proactive approaches to extending temple networks have recently been observed by other scholars, particularly in urban temples (Nelson 2013, Borup 2018). Still, the urban-based Buddhist priests involved in such ventures who I interviewed often reported that activities such as concerts, festivals and cooking classes rarely generated lasting connections with the people that such events attracted. One of my interviewees made a distinction between his members and people who engaged with his temple through special events, referring to the latter as “fans” rather than members.\(^{244}\) In his understanding, these “fans” did not constitute part of his temple community and certainly not a permanent one. This highlights the feeling nature of such connections as compared to “customer service” forms of exchange. Further research on the perceived quality of networked relations (are they en?) is beyond the scope of (but would build on) this thesis. This would give us further insights into how Buddhist temple communities might be sustained in the future, with examples of temples that are exploring avenues for developing a model of a temple community.

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\(^{244}\) Interview, 22 March 2016.
that does not rely on the traditional networks of affiliation often associated with death-related practices. However, as I have shown in this thesis through the examples of “outsiders” such as Kawanishi-san who tried to be a good Buddhist woman but ultimately opted out of belonging (Chapter 3), en is not something that can be manufactured. It has to be felt and made real by each person, in their own way.

Still, there are examples of initiatives designed to help Buddhist priests develop viable strategies for rebuilding or expanding the networks of belonging in their temple communities. I met some of the local temple priests who were taking a relatively proactive approach by engaging with these initiatives when I attended a couple of training sessions organised as part of the O-tera no mirai educational programme: Mirai no jūshoku juku (‘the school for the head priests of the future’). The programme — designed and run by a Buddhist priest, Matsumoto Shōkei — is a six-month ”MBA" in strategic planning and leadership for Buddhist monks. Its goal is to develop a tangible and achievable management implementation plan for each temple that will improve the participating priests’ temples’ economic prospects. On 11 October 2016, I attended a session of the programme offered in Hiroshima for priests from the Chūgoku and Shikoku regions. The session highlighted the importance of both temple management and temple leadership, making a clear distinction between the two. Through a combination of lectures by Matsumoto, peer-coaching exercises and group work-based presentations, participants worked on developing ideas about how to provide their temples with leadership and implement their vision of the future: a socially engaged temple community that continues to fulfil its traditional obligations of caring for the dead, but in a more meaningful way. According to Matsumoto, one way of achieving this was through activating the agency of the temple custodians and of the surrounding community:

A temple is like a ship. Hence, there is a difference between the temple’s management and leadership. The role of the priest is that of a leader. And the most important thing in leadership is the ability to reinvent oneself, one’s action, and adapt to the changing circumstances. But this is not a ‘one-man job’, a leader must draw on good bonds/connections (en) with other people.245

Considering his words in the context of our other conversations,246 my understanding is that he was referring to the ability to concretise the collective will deriving from human (and non-human) relations. The priest as a leader should draw on the collective image that he accumulates and reinvents through his experience of relationality. The ability to reinvent one’s actions does not apply to a single action but

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245 Fieldnotes, October 2016.
246 Interview, 23 March 2016.
rather to a capacity to make something happen: to build a temple community through a collective effort that would cater to the needs of the society. To realise this vision of temple leadership, he suggests developing a range of ‘concrete’ events and ventures that would encourage people to visit a temple out of choice and in search of spiritual nourishing.

Matsumoto refers to the graduates of his course as “sangha” and sees them as part of the process of building a temple community (o-tera zukuri) that transcends individual temples. He keeps his clients (graduates) engaged with the project and with each other through a number of follow up one-day seminars and an online community of ‘my temples,’ and by involving past participants in the delivery of case study presentations as part of the programme’s curriculum. Matsumoto has no temple of his own and has never had to face the struggles experienced by many of his clients. It is therefore fascinating that he has been successful in gathering quite a following for his vision of temple Buddhism and has become a significant authority on issues such as depopulation, the fragmentation of the family system and secularisation. By applying a management consultancy business model and employing his MBA knowledge, he has been successful thus far in encouraging action and in attracting people to his vision and method of approaching the contemporary struggles of Buddhist temple communities.

On the one hand, Matsumoto’s initiative presents a fascinating case of an individual capitalising on the economic and religious anxiety of Buddhist priests and members concerned with the survival of their temples. However, it also endorses an alternative solution for (and, for many, an exciting prospect of) asserting Buddhism’s relevance by tapping into an economically rich consumer culture. The “experimentalism” of Matsumoto’s approach to revitalising Buddhism is not novel (see Nelson 2013; Ueda 2009), but the scope of his agenda is worth noting here as I consider the future importance of personal networks for the survival of Buddhist temple communities. Matsumoto’s activities do not represent the survivalist efforts of an individual priest in a specific geographical location. Crucially, his consultancy programme mobilises groups of priests and their family members across a broad geographical, sectarian and socio-economic spectrum. This stands in stark contrast to the apparent lack of mobilisation and support for local experiences of crisis coming from the administrative headquarters of individual sects.

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247 Priests’ participation in the programme was sponsored by members in most cases I encountered.
Debating religious change

Participants in Matsumoto’s programme came predominately from temples in rural areas and were often feeling disenchanted with the lack of interest in their communities shown by their respective sects. This was a concern shared by many of my interlocutors who felt that the sect was reorienting its interest towards urban areas (see Chapter 6). This shift in focus seemed evident in a new campaign launched during the Dentō hōkoku hōyō celebrations, which is aimed specifically at urban centres as sites where new en relations can be nurtured. This implies that the new leadership intends to focus on urban centres and temples such as the Honganji Tsukiji temple in Tokyo (the leader’s family’s original temple) as sites where the future survival of Buddhist institutions is to be found.

In an open letter promoting the campaign, the new head of the sect advocated for a focus on proselytising activities aimed at younger practitioners (up to the age of forty) who thus far have no en with a temple or the sect in general (“goen no nai wakamono sō”) (Hongwanji 2016). A pamphlet promoting this initiative stated that if each out of the ten thousand Nishi Honganji affiliated temples — in cooperation with the local community — was to succeed in creating one bond (goen), the sect would create a new pattern for continuity by cohort replacement (Kid’s Sangha Hongwanji 2014). The example for this was set by a series of events held in December 2017 at Nishi Honganji which included a “Goen Expo” exhibition where different kinds of engagement with Jōdo Shinshū institutions were promoted, including through music by joining local choir groups. Such developments attest to a growing concern within the central administration about the generational gap that is ever widening within the sect. Therefore, future studies of en relations ought to explore other contexts, paying greater attention to how interdependence is materialised within urban temple communities, but also how it is conceived of across younger generations of practitioners. Such future research inquiries would enrich our understanding of Buddhism’s future survival and help nuance our understanding of which particular dimensions of Buddhist networks of belonging are in crisis — an understanding that this thesis has already enriched by exploring the regional context of such networks.

There are many examples of research that is being administered by and conducted within the sect regarding demographic issues and the closing of the generational gap, especially in rural areas. Over the past five years alone, data collection projects conducted by scholars at Ryūkoku University and researchers at the Nishi Honganji

248 Fieldnotes, October 2016.
249 See McLaughlin (2003) on similar initiatives employed by Sōka Gakkai NRM.
research centre on depopulation issues, have produced a very rich body of data. In June 2017, I attended a research meeting at Ryūkoku University that involved researchers from across all traditional Buddhist denominations. Such research symposia are held twice a year to share research findings and data on the most recent research developments concerning depopulation across different sects. The nature of the data collected and presented at the session was very rich and informed my own modes and topics of inquiry, but it was mostly quantitatively driven and focused on questions such as whether people engage in Buddhist practices such as funerals, memorialisation rites and preaching sessions. What I often found lacking were the types of questions and methodologies that would allow us to understand how people do things and whether what they say they do correspond with what they actually do and whether that matters. What I suggest could be the next step — and what Buddhist priests attending those sessions as an audience often felt was lacking — is to use the data to develop concrete initiatives that could bring meaningful change to the ways in which Buddhist temple communities are sustained and are able to adapt.

Priests’ frustration often stemmed from the fact that the data presented at such symposia often simply echoed the realities that local priests were already experiencing on the ground without providing any strategy for implementing change. Therefore, the surveys and quantitative data sets prioritised by the sect could be enriched by research projects such as this one that develop new kinds of knowledge about the importance of Buddhist practice and the needs of lay persons and religious professionals.

However, diversification of data is not the only solution. To debate religious change, it is important to pay equal attention to both the demise of religions and the reasons why they persist and in what form. It might be necessary to accept that some forms are no longer viable and attractive, and to find new avenues for engagement. In many cases stagnation is inevitable, but in others it may be avoidable. By focusing on en and people’s diverse understandings and ways of effecting it, I have drawn attention to the affective dimensions of Buddhist belonging which constitute an important aspect of understanding Buddhist decline and survival and might provide a better understanding of the problem of generational gaps in practice.

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250 The research contacts developed at Ryūkoku University in Kyoto enabled me access to such data ahead of and during my fieldwork. I owe particular thanks to Inose Yuri who explained to me the processes of research design and generously shared full data results of the surveys that she was involved in conducting.

251 A notable exception is the recent development of furusato hōyō memorial services for the members of the most depopulated communities piloted in Hiroshima Prefecture (discussed in Chapter 2). The initiative emerged from a survey conducted in the north of Hiroshima Prefecture in 2015-2016; furusato hōyō has since been rolled out elsewhere.
**Concluding remarks**

Personal relationships, emotional connections and their material representations are aspects of Buddhism that have been given little attention in scholarship. Yet, as this thesis has shown, it is hard to overlook their significance in the way in which Buddhist family members and lay persons perform their belonging to Buddhist temple communities. Further ethnographic studies will thus enrich our understanding of not only what people do but how they relate to one another in doing what they do. Such interventions have the potential to widen our understanding of the issues and challenges related to demographic transformation. As I have shown throughout this thesis, they can also inform the broader discourses on regional decline and “post-growth” regional communities. Strategies for nurturing belonging within Buddhist temple communities can inform similar strategies for broader communal belonging and the relevance of religious institutions in the process. Decline and the crisis of depopulation (among other crises) are part and parcel of my interlocutors’ everyday experiences. However, there is also something else happening at the local level where Buddhist temples appear to play a part in how people cope with the disappearance of the self, their community and the memory of it. In light of ongoing debates on regional struggles and the disappearance of local Buddhist temples, it is time to look more closely at temple-community dynamics and their consequential interdependencies. There might be ways in which Buddhist temples could play a role in practices of community-building by bridging – rather than representing – ideological gaps between generations.

These conclusions point to several areas of further inquiry. The institutional dynamics of dependency which have been considered but not fully unpacked in this study would benefit from a more focused and in-depth inquiry. Temples as community-dependent projects rely upon the wellbeing of their wider networks of support. Temples (and Buddhist sects) as institutional structures therefore depend equally upon the wellbeing of rural and urban temple communities. Besides demographic issues, issues of religious belonging, active membership and generational transmission are likely to remain relevant areas of intervention for all Japanese religious organisations due to the many pressing issues and gaps emerging in local and trans-local networks of belonging. These gaps will continue to open up spaces of opportunity for Buddhist actors to mobilise their communities.

Further future avenues of investigation that could not be comprehensively addressed in this thesis, but appear particularly worthy of attention are the urban, trans-generational and gendered dimensions of *en*. The ongoing trend towards prioritising urban temples creates an interesting opening for understanding regional
decline. Moreover, an in-depth investigation of the gendered aspects of the generational transmission of practice and teachings could provide some precious insights into the ways in which Buddhist temple communities remain present and shape the social world within which we dwell, especially when we think about generations as cohorts with diverse societal impacts and values. As already touched upon in this thesis, such gendered aspects of generational transmission are important in understanding the challenges that Buddhist temple communities face and the strategies that individual Buddhist actors employ to navigate their networks of belonging and cope with change.

If we are to take seriously — as I suggest we should — the connection that exists between, on the one hand, people’s conceptions and practices of interdependence and interconnected self (en), and, on the other, their role in shaping and sustaining Buddhist temple communities, the actions of religious practitioners need to be made intelligible. To do so means investigating how people’s practices of doing belonging in the Buddhist context relate to their personal and collective histories, individual experiences, and ideas about and hopes for the future. Given the potential shared future of decline, it is particularly pertinent to investigate the role and embeddedness of Buddhist institutions and their custodians and how people employ Buddhist practice and belonging networks to cope with transformation. In this regard, regional temple communities are at the forefront of the Buddhist institutional struggle for survival and have some important lessons to offer. The religious professionals and lay members examined in this thesis navigated and processed the socio-economic transformations in their communities by generating, mobilising and abandoning their relationality to others (human and non-human), as well as dealing with such instances of abandonment. Applying en as an analytical tool to such practices opens up our understanding of Buddhist institutions’ embeddedness within the local politics of survival, as well as of the mutually dependent connectedness in Buddhist temple communities in Japan. More broadly it offers an alternative perspective on the role of Buddhist materiality in the processes of navigating regional decline, as well highlighting people’s agency (or lack thereof) in nurturing their own and others’ networks of socio-religious belonging.

Starling (2019) in her study of temple wives in Jōdo Shinshū tradition is the most recent excellent example of an ethnographic inquiry into intimacy and relationality in the way religion is performed by women in a domestic sphere of a Buddhist temple.
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Appendix I

Participant information sheets, consent forms and interview topics

In this appendix I provide the information sheet and consent forms used to recruit participants and obtain a signed record of consent at the beginning of their involvement in the research project. Both English and Japanese language versions are included. A list of interview topics is also provided below. The interviews that I conducted were semi-structured open-ended interviews (see the Introduction). Therefore, I didn’t rely on a set of established interview questions, but rather employed the list of topics attached here as a guideline. It is also important to note that obtaining formal written consent was not always possible and neither was the recording of interviews. However, I always made sure that people were aware of my role as a researcher, understood the purpose of my research, and were willing to interact with me in that capacity. The English and Japanese versions of the consent form are not exact translations of one another. In drafting the forms, I followed the academic conventions in the respective research contexts, while ensuring that the forms reflected the same content.
Title of Research:
The ongoing problem of religious decline - what is the relationship between Buddhist temples and local communities in Japan today?

Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study [as part of a student project as the basis for the degree of PhD in Japanese Studies at The University of Manchester, UK. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Who will conduct the research?

Paulina Kolata
PhD Candidate in Japanese Studies
School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
The University of Manchester

The research will be conducted by Paulina Kolata, doctoral researcher at the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures of the University of Manchester. The research project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) in the UK, and by the University of Manchester. The project has been approved by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee on March 11, 2016.

What is the purpose of the research?

This research study aims to explore the relationship between local Buddhist temples and their communities in the context of rapidly aging population, disappearing local communities, and negative public attitudes towards Buddhism in Japan today. It aims to understand a role and level of engagement of a local temple within its community, and attitudes of the local community members towards Buddhist institutions and practices.

Why have I been chosen?

A) Community members (including lay members, temple neighbours, local community leaders, governmental representatives etc.)

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a member of the local community which is being researched.
B) Buddhist temple priests and their family members

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a head priest of a local temple or a temple family member living at and/or involved in the running of a local temple in a geographical region affected by depopulation and regional decline.

C) A Buddhist temple priests / family member associated with the O-tera no mirai temple management consultancy programme aimed at Buddhist temples in depopulated regions

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a Buddhist priests / a member of a temple family affiliated with the O-tera no mirai NPO, who have joined the consultancy’s temple management programme aimed at addressing your temple’s economic issues related to depopulation and regional decline.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

A) Community members (including lay members, temple neighbours, local community leaders, governmental representatives etc.)

The data collection will take place in the local temple communities, community centres and during various events and gatherings that will take place in the community including community volunteering in the north of Hiroshima Prefecture. The project will involve members of local temple communities including affiliated and non-affiliated members, neighbours and local community leaders, Buddhist temple priests and their families among others. I am hoping to spend time with you and participate in the daily life of local (temple) communities as much as possible. In addition, I would like to observe local community volunteering activities involving temples and local community at large including social and administrative groups, and to participate in them when possible. I will also spend time with you at your local temple during your visits to the temple, monthly community meetings at a temple, and/or during personal service visits at your home.

Also, you will be asked to take part in an interview about your local community including questions about your engagement with and your views regarding your local temple, the kind of activities that you are involved in and the relation between these activities, Buddhist practice and your local temple. I will also ask you about the impact of depopulation on your community. The interviews will take no more than two hours, and you will be allowed to take a break or to stop at any moment. An interpreter will not be used during the interviews; therefore, with your permission, I would like to record the interviews in order to ensure the accuracy of transcription and translation at a later stage. Any identifying information will be removed, and you will remain anonymous. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recording or the transcript. Only the research team will be able to listen (view) to the recordings. All information given will be confidential.

With your permissions, this study will also involve collecting photographic and video material, which will also serve as data and may be used when presenting or publishing the research material.

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

B) Buddhist temple priests and their family members
The data collection will take place in the local temple communities, community centres and during various events and gatherings that will take place in the community including community volunteering in the north of Hiroshima Prefecture. The project will involve members of local temple communities including affiliated and non-affiliated members, neighbours and local community leaders, other Buddhist temple priests and their families among others. You will be asked to spend time with a researcher at your temple during your daily activities and services/events at the temple, and/or during personal service visits to your parishioners (with their permission). Also, you will be asked to take part in an interview about your temple activities, its role locally and any challenges encountered in the running of the local temple during which you will be asked questions about your daily live at the temple, your attitudes and opinions about the role of a local temple and the issues of regional decline, as well as the involvement of the local community in the temple activities and vice versa. The interviews will take no more than two hours, and you will be allowed to take a break or to stop at any moment. An interpreter will not be used during the interviews; therefore, with your permission, I would like to record the interviews in order to enable me to ensure the accuracy of transcription and translation at a later stage. Any identifying information will be removed, and you will remain anonymous. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recording or the transcript. Only the research team will be able to listen (view) to the recordings. All information given will be confidential.

With your permissions, this study will also involve collecting photographic and video material, which will also serve as data and may be used when presenting or publishing the research material.

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

C) A Buddhist temple priests / family member associated with the O-tera no mirai temple management consultancy programme aimed at Buddhist temples in depopulated regions

The data collection will take place in the local temple communities, community centres and during various events and gatherings that will take place in the community including community volunteering in the north of Hiroshima Prefecture. The project will involve members of local temple communities including affiliated and non-affiliated members, neighbours and local community leaders, other Buddhist temple priests and their families among others. You will be asked to spend time with a researcher during the O-tera no mirai training sessions, at your temple during your daily activities and services/events at the temple. Also, you will be asked to take part in an interview about your temple and O-tera no mirai activities, your involvement in it, and any challenges encountered in the running of your local temple during which you will be asked questions about your daily live at the temple, your attitudes and opinions about the role of a local temple and the issues of regional decline, as well as the involvement of the local community in the temple activities and vice versa. The interviews will take no more than two hours, and you will be allowed to take a break or to stop at any moment. An interpreter will not be used during the interviews; therefore, with your permission, I would like to record the interviews in order to enable me to ensure the accuracy of transcription and translation at a later stage. Any identifying information will be removed, and you will remain anonymous. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audio or audio recording or the transcript. Only the research team will be able to listen (view) to the recordings. All information given will be confidential.
With your permissions, this study will also involve collecting photographic and video material, which will also serve as data and may be used when presenting or publishing the research material.

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

**What happens to the data collected?**

All collected data will be encrypted when recorded and will be accessible only to the researcher. Any photographs, voice recordings, video recordings taken during the meetings and interviews will not be taken unless you give your permission. All data gathered by the researcher, regardless of its format will be encrypted and stored securely. Video interview recordings will be used purely for collection of data and the videos will not be used on websites, in live conferences and seminars. The audio recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and encrypted to be stored securely once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study. The collected data will be used to produce a PhD thesis and other academic publications.

**How is confidentiality maintained?**

Your personal details will be encrypted when recorded and will be accessible to the researcher only. Any photographs or video recordings taken during the site visits and interviews will not be published, unless you permit for them to be used. Otherwise, they will serve as an additional memory recording to the researcher’s field notes. If you chose to share any personal letters and/or photographs, they will not be made accessible to anyone other than the researcher, unless you give the researcher your permission to use this material publically. All data gathered by the researcher, regardless of its format will be encrypted with a use of data encrypting software. Study findings will be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study and/or the results.

**What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

Participation in the research project is completely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. The safety of participants is my priority. Even if you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. You can do this by contacting Paulina Kolata on kolata.paulina@gmail.com / paulina.kolata@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk.

During the interview, you are also free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.

**Where will the research be conducted?**
The researcher will be based within a community and will engage in a site and participant observation. The site/participant observation will take place at a local temple and during public and private events within a local community.

The interviews will be conducted in a public setting at a location suitable for you and for the researcher.

**How can I contact you?**

If you have any questions or issues regarding the project, please do not hesitate to contact:

Paulina Kolata,  
The University of Manchester  
School of Arts, Languages and Cultures  
Oxford Road  
Manchester, M13 9PL  
United Kingdom

Email: kolata.paulina@gmail.com; paulina.kolata@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk  
Tel: +81 (0) 7042873226 or +44 (0) 7929900178

You can also reach me at,  
729-6332, Hiroshima-ken, Miyoshi-shi, Kamishiwachi-chō 480-1,  
Tel: +81 (0) 824-68-2810

If you wish to make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research you can contact a Research Governance and Integrity Manager, at the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, M13 9PL, by emailing: research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk or by telephoning +44(0)1612752674 or +44(0)1612758093.
Title of Research:
The ongoing problem of religious decline - what is the relationship between Buddhist temples and local communities in Japan today?

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

Please initial box

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above project and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to my treatment/service/self.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I understand that my data will remain confidential.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>I understand that the interviews will be audio and/or video recorded. I am allowing the researcher to audio or video tape me as part of this research.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>I agree to the use of anonymous quotes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I agree to my data being retained indefinitely for further research related to Japanese Temple Buddhism.</td>
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I agree to take part in the above project

Name of participant Date Signature

Name of researcher Date Signature

This Project has been approved by the University of Manchester’s Research Ethics Committee on March 11, 2016.
研究計画

研究題目：「日本仏教のお寺における過疎化・高齢化・地域社会の衰退問題とその対応—社会人類学的な視座からみる過疎地域の寺院の事例」
研究者名：コラタ・パウリナ 〔Kolata、Paulina〕
所属：マンチェスター大学、イギリス 人間科学研究科日本研究専攻—博士後期過程

本研究では、お坊さん・坊守さん・お寺の家族・過疎地域の地元の人による過疎地域の寺院・地元のコミュニティの状況の変化と現実を分析することによって、日本仏教のお寺における過疎化・高齢化・地域社会の衰退問題の影響とその対応を評価しようと考えています。本研究は、過疎地域の寺院における社会的な変化を分析するため、参与観察法やお寺さんとのインタビュー調査法を用い、お寺の活動・お寺と地域社会の関係・お寺の経営・お坊さんと坊守さんの役割・地元のコミュニティの活動・ふるさとづくりに関する活動を調査対象とします。

研究方法

本研究の目的を達成するための方法の一環として、二つの調査方法を用います。

第一に、参与観察法を通じてお寺の生活および日常活動に参加する予定です。研究期間は2016年8月26日から2017年8月23日まで予定しています。

第二に、お坊さんたち・坊守さんたち・コミュニティのメンバーとの個別インタビューを計画しております。インタビューは約60〜90分（1〜2回）を予定しておりますが、分析をするなかで改めてお伺いしたいことが出てくることがあります。その場合、追加インタビューをお願いすることがあります。研究期間は2018年9月1日まで予定しています。

お尋ねするのは、社会的な変化と自分のお寺の現状・将来、その変化に適応する解釈について、または、お寺の活動やお坊さん・お寺の役割と地域社会の関係についてのお考え・ご意見です。

インタビューでご提供いただいた情報はこの研究に携わる研究者本人以外の第三者に共有されることはありません。博士論文、学会や学術雑誌における研究の公表においては、個人情報の守秘に細心の注意を払い、あなたの名前や身元などのプライバシーに関することは一切発表しません。なお、研究データに誤りがないよう、インタビューの音声を記録させていただきます。この音声記録は暗号化してパスワード保護を施し、施錠できるキャビネットで管理保管いたしますので、研究者本人以外の第三者の耳に触れることはありません。また、音声記録を分析のために再
生する際には、ネットワークに接続されていない完全オフラインの機器を用い、研究終了後には、音声記録は研究者が責任を以って破壊・廃棄処理をいたします。

研究成果の公表の可能性

本研究の成果は、博士論文としてまとめるとともに、国際学会の発表にて公表する予定です。さらに、本研究の結果は、本学会誌の投稿論文として出版される可能性があります。その場合、論文・発表・本ではあなたの名前や勤務先の情報が匿名化にいたします。

ご希望であれば論文作成前に逐語録を確認いただくこともできます。インタビューの際に録音させていただきました音声を聞きながら、ご自身の発言が誤りなく引用されているか、また個人が特定できる情報が含まれていないかを確認していただくことができます。

また、完成後の博士論文につきましては、内容の要約資料の配布および口頭でのご説明は可能ですので、ご希望であれば、遠慮せずお申し出ください。

調査に関してご質問がありましたら、遠慮なくお尋ねください。

Paulina Kolata
The University of Manchester
School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
Oxford Road
Manchester
M13 9PL
UK

連絡先 メール: kolata.paulina@gmail.com / paulina.kolata@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
電話: +81 (0) 70 4287 3226 / +81 (0) 824 68 2810

調査の実施に関する正式な苦情を唱えたかったら、電話で+44 (0) 161 275 275 2674 又はメールで research.complaints@manchester で研究室のリサーチマネージャーを連絡することができます。
 Consent Form (Japanese)

研究参加の同意書

「日本仏教のお寺における過疎化・高齢化・地域社会の衰退問題とその対応」の研究にご協力くださり、ありがとうございます。

参与観察の調査・インタビュー調査へのご協力の同意は、あなたの自由な意思でお決めいただくものです。ご同意いただけなくても、けっしてあなたの不利益になるようなことはありません。ご同意いただいた後でも、あなたが希望されればいつでも同意を取り消すことができます。また、調査参加者は、すべての質問に対して答えなければならないものではありません。お答えになりたくないものに対して「答えない」とおっしゃってください。

インタビューをお受けくださることに同意を得た後、実際にインタビューを実施している最中でも、不快に感じることがありましたら、いつでも、その場でインタビューを中止いたしますので、お申し出ください。

以上のことをご理解いただき、研究に協力していただける場合には、以下にご署名のうえ、研究者にお渡しくださいようよろしくお願い申し上げます。

平成 29 年 _____月 _____日

協力者:

お名前________________________________________

ご所属_____________________________________

ご連絡先____________________________________

_____________________________________________ ご署名

この調査は、2016年3月11日にマンチェスター大学の研究倫理委員会によって承認されています。
Interview topics

Community members (including lay members, temple neighbours, local community leaders, governmental representatives etc.)

1. Background
   • Age, sex, family, employment
   • Family history (e.g. local, newcomer, returnee)
   • Local history
   • Personal life history including religious background
   • E.g. Temple affiliation?

2. Experiences and opinions about depopulation / living in a depopulated area
   • Opinions about the regional situation
   • Changes in the community
   • Personal experiences of depopulation

3. Involvement in temple activities / Buddhist practice / community activities
   • Connections to the temple / community
   • Types and content of activities
   • Purpose and reasons for engagement
   • Other participants
   • Frequency/time and setting (e.g. local temple, other local temples, person’s house)
   • Attitudes towards a local temple / local priest / temple family / other local members and groups
   • Volunteering
   • Giving practices and other forms of support

4. Motivations and meaning of engagement
   • Motivations for engaging in temple / community activities
   • Original motivation for getting involved in these activities
   • Experiences of community / temple volunteering
   • Meaning/interpretation
     o E.g. What do you think of temple activities / Buddhist practice / local community groups?
     o What do these activities mean to you?
     o What makes these activities worthwhile?

5. Lived experience of Buddhist practices
   • Buddhist practice and obligations on everyday basis
   • Interest in Buddhist teachings
   • Personal experiences of Jōdo Shinshū teachings, notions of faith and understanding of Buddhist practice
     o E.g. Personal interpretation of Buddhist ideas such as shinjin

6. Buddhist temples and a community
   • Role of Buddhist temples in a life of an individual and community.
   • Relation between temple activities and other community events
   • Personal experiences and attitudes towards death-related practices
7. Experiences of ageing in a depopulated region
   • Perceptions of one’s own and other’s ageing
   • Concerns about ageing
   • Local networks of support
   • Family networks of support

Buddhist temple priests and their family members

1. Background
   • Age, sex, family, employment within and outside of a temple
   • Family history
   • Temple history
   • Local history
   • Personal life history including path to priesthood / temple family
   • Daily routine

2. Temple activities
   • Types and content of activities
   • Purpose of activities
   • Frequency/time and setting (e.g. local temple, other local temples, person’s house)
   • Attitudes towards temple members, local community, neighbours
   • Connecting with the community

3. Local community life
   • Participation in community life
   • Conflicts

4. Experiences and opinions about depopulation / living in a depopulated area
   • Opinions about the regional situation
   • Changes in the community
   • Personal experiences of depopulation
   • Challenges for the temple

5. Involvement in the broader Buddhist community
   • Local level collaboration
   • Involvement in the sect’s administration / local administrative functions
   • Role of a temple
   • Role of a priest

6. Opinions about the current state of Japanese Buddhism
   • Situation in rural areas
   • Situation in urban areas
   • Survival of Buddhism
   • Death-related practices
   • Future of Japanese Buddhism, local temples, the sect

7. Temple management and finances
   • Temple membership
   • Management structures
   • Temple upkeep
• Buddhist giving
• Temple income
• Fundraising activities
• Temple inheritance

8. Buddhist and social meaning of en

Additional questions for Buddhist priests and temple family members involved in the Otera no mirai training:

1. Motivations for participating in the Otera no mirai activities.
2. Changes implemented.
3. Future challenges and plans.
### Glossary of Key Japanese Terms

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>bōmori</strong> 坊守 (and its honorific form <em>bōmorisan</em>)</td>
<td>lit: “temple guardian” – a term specific to the Shinshū tradition used to refer to the wife of the head priest of a Buddhist temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>bukkyō fujinkai</strong> 仏教婦人会 (also referred to as <em>buppu</em> and <em>fujinkai</em>)</td>
<td>Buddhist women’s association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>bukkyō sōnenkai</strong> 仏教壮年会</td>
<td>Buddhist men’s association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>engi</strong> 縁起</td>
<td>the doctrine of dependent arising: everything has a cause and there is nothing that arises out of nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>fuse</strong> 布施</td>
<td>a term used for monetary donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>genkai shūkyōhōjin</strong> 限界宗教法人</td>
<td>a religious organisation located geographically in areas designated as marginal villages or towns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hōmyō</strong> 法名 (often referred to as <em>kaimyō</em> 戒名 in other Buddhist sects)</td>
<td>posthumous ordination name, given to Buddhist monks at the point of ordination and to lay people after death, or, in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, during their lifetime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hōon</strong> 報恩</td>
<td>the repayment of spiritual debt to Amida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hōonkō</strong> 報恩講</td>
<td>Shin Buddhist memorial service held to commemorate the anniversary of Shinran’s death and to express indebtedness and thankfulness to Shinran and to Amida Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>jiriki</strong> 自力</td>
<td>a Pure Land concept denoting self-powered efforts toward enlightenment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>jishin kyōninshin</strong> 自信教人信</td>
<td>a Shin Buddhist concept meaning “having faith oneself and causing others to have faith,” referring equally to proselytizing activities and to any activity that springs from gratitude to Amida; the concept forms the underlying principle of Shin religious practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kikyōshiki</strong> 帰敬式</td>
<td>a Shin Buddhist ritual through which a lay follower becomes symbolically ordained during their lifetime and receives a Buddhist name (<em>hōmyō</em>); acts as the symbolic formal admission of a lay follower into the community of Shin followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>konshī</strong> 懇志</td>
<td>a donation (lit: “funds”) offered to a temple by a Buddhist follower (believer) from the kindness and generosity of their heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>makura no gyō</strong> まくらの経</td>
<td>the &quot;pillow sutra chanting&quot; ceremony (also referred to as the deathbed ceremony), a Shin Buddhist death rite usually performed either on a person’s deathbed or soon after their passing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>monto</strong> 門徒</td>
<td>a term used for a Shin Buddhist follower; in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition <em>monto</em> corresponds to the standard Buddhist term for an affiliated household member, <em>danka</em>, but implies that the person possesses faith (<em>shinjin</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>nenbutsu</strong> 念仏</td>
<td>the practice of chanting “namu amida butsu” 南無阿弥陀仏 (“I take refuge in Amida Buddha”), a core Jōdo Shinshū practice believed to result in rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>nōkotsudō</strong> 納骨堂</td>
<td>a hall for storing human ashes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>o-mairi</strong> お参り</td>
<td>a ritual service; in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition the o-mairi primarily consists of the chanting of the most common sutras (e.g. the Bussetsu amida kyō ‘Amida/Sukhavati Sutra’ and the Shōshin’nenbutsume or Shōshin’nenbutsume ‘Hymn of True Faith’) and practices of ancestor memorialisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>shinjin</strong> 信心</td>
<td>lit: ‘entrusting’ oneself, a Shin Buddhist term for unconditional faith in the power of Amida’s compassion, implying complete abandonment of all notion of self-power (jiriki)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tannishō</strong> 歎異抄</td>
<td>“the Lamentations of Divergences,” a late thirteenth century Shin Buddhist text thought to have been authored by a disciple of Shinran, Yuien, and comprised of a collection of sayings attributed to Shinran with commentaries by Yuien about doctrine and practice, and the idea of cutting through spiritual differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tariki</strong> 他力</td>
<td>“other power,” a Pure Land concept referring to Amida: by entrusting themselves to Amida, a person puts trust in the benevolence of Amida (the other-power), rather than the self-power (jiriki) of their own practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hōza</strong> 法座 / <strong>hōwa</strong> 法話</td>
<td>a preaching service held at a Buddhist temple attended by members during which Buddhist teachings are shared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>