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Osaka's Thirteen Buddhas: The Proliferation of Modern Japanese Pilgrimage Routes

Extended Abstract

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Biography

Greg Wilkinson is an assistant professor of Religious Education, Brigham Young University. His research focuses on ethnographic studies of contemporary Japanese religions. He holds graduate degrees in religious studies from the University of Iowa (PhD) and Arizona State University (MA). His current research projects include: the evolution of pilgrimage practices in modern Japan, new new religious movements (*shin-shinshukyō*) in 21st century Japan, , and 20th century Japanese editions of the Buddhist Canon.

Abstract

Osaka's Thirteen Buddha Pilgrimage is a route through the greater Osaka area to Buddhist temples. Thirteen Buddha pilgrimage routes have experienced growth in participation over the past few years. This new popularity has increased the number of thirteen Buddha pilgrimages routes. This proliferation in routes are a phenomenon, which deserves attention because pilgrimage participation is often used not only as an illustration of a specific religious practice but also a significant variable in the continuing discourse about Japan's secularization (Reader 2012). This study investigates more specifically Osaka's thirteen Buddha pilgrimage sites and how each has become a location for multiple pilgrimage routes of various types as well as single-site pilgrimage miniaturizations. This proliferation of pilgrimage routes illustrates the

complicated modern landscape of Japanese pilgrimage where interest in pilgrimage may be outpaced by keen competition among increasing pilgrimage route possibilities.

Introduction

Over thirty years ago, an eclectic group of thirteen Buddhist temples around the greater Osaka area coordinated together to create the Osaka Thirteen Buddha Pilgrimage. Pilgrimage sites include nine Shingon temples of various sects, a Soto Zen temple, Rinzai Zen Temple, a Pure Land Temple, and a temple, which claims to be a pre-sectarian form of Japanese Buddhism or *Washu* (peace/Japan sect). Invention or creation of new pilgrimage routes is not uncommon in Japan with dozens of routes following the pattern of the thirty-three sites of Saikoku or the eighty-eight sites of Shikoku as far back as the Edo Period (1600-1868) (Foard 1982). The thirteen Buddhas, who assist devotees in this life and in afterlife, are common and popular especially in Japanese esoteric Buddhism (Shingon and Tendai). The thirteen Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (Fudo, Shaka, Monju, Fugen, Jizo, Miroku, Yakushi, Kannon, Seishi, Amida, Ashuku, Dainichi, and Kokuzo) in turn guide the recently deceased from the first week to the thirty-third year post-mortem. Today, well-known routes can be found in Kyoto and Kamakura as well. These pilgrimage routes allow the pilgrim to visit thirteen different temples, which enshrines an icon of each Buddha allowing for broad devotional and utilitarian experiences. While each location has its own characteristics and distinctions, every temple on the route serves as a site for multiple pilgrimage routes other than Osaka's Thirteen Buddha route. These routes often utilize different icons or halls within the same temple location. At Shitennoji in southern Osaka, pilgrims can start or continue no less than 18 other pilgrimage routes. Each route is distinct in devotional object, trail, and symbol, and yet similar in transaction and practice.

Literature Review

This paper builds from previous publications, which focus on the proliferation of routes and the importance of transaction in modern Japanese pilgrimage. Michael Pye's (2014) volume catalogs the different Buddhist pilgrimage routes in modern Japan similar to various guidebooks available

in Japanese (Yagi 2012; Osaka Jūsan Butsu Reijōkai 2002). Ian Reader (2005; 2013; 2015) has also published several pieces, which identifies various routes and trails in modern Japan. Reader identifies the commercialism of modern Japanese pilgrimages as a marketplace, which includes the temple transactions within the economic activities of temples and pilgrimage associations. Pye argues for distinctions between temple transactions, as devotional acts, and associated commercial activities. Both identify the economic benefits of pilgrimage participation for temples and surrounding communities.

Methodology

Research for this paper was completed during three field studies to Japan (2013, 2014, 2015). Thirteen Buddha pilgrimages were completed in Osaka, Kyoto, and Kamakura. Several other pilgrimage routes were studied in Hokkaido, Honshu, and Shikoku. Materials from temples were collected and studied. A survey of pilgrimage route guides and other literature supplements these field studies.

Results

The proliferation of pilgrimage routes in Japan provides significant evidence for how pilgrimage intertwines commercialism, tourism, devotionism, and individualism within an increasingly secular Japanese society. This pilgrimage proliferation also evidences the benefits and detriments of commercialism as routes must balance convenience and availability with the austerity and exoticism that has traditionally marked the liminal experience and ecstatic exceptionalism of Japanese pilgrimage. Osaka's thirteen Buddha pilgrimage and the dozens of other routes that can be encountered at its participating temples illustrate this precarious balance of modern pilgrimage and the possible diminishing returns of pilgrimage route proliferation.

Conclusion and Discussion

Buddhist temples participating in multiple pilgrimage routes and traditions can be seen both as evidence of the “pilgrimage boom” of late 20th century Japan as well as the constricting market for pilgrimage participation. The Osaka thirteen Buddha pilgrimage temples often mimic the most prominent pilgrimage routes, which are experiencing the most significant growth and international attention (Shikoku’s 88 pilgrimage and Saikoku’s 33 pilgrimage) both by participating in pilgrimage replications with other temples in the region as well as pilgrimage miniaturizations (*sunafumi*) within a single temple site. As pilgrimage options, both religious and civil, proliferate in modern Japan, Buddhist temples will have to improve and expand the pilgrimage experience available to potential patrons. Multiple route participation may also illustrate the emphasis of commercial, economic, and tourism variables over institutional or ideological orthodoxy.

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