



Heritage out of Control: Buddhist Material Excess in Depopulating Japan

written by Paulina Kolata
February, 2022



Inherited Buddhist objects and their associated ritual care connect the dead with the living.

Buddhist things are not only material. They contain spiritual and emotional power, even when deemed unwanted. If mistreated or mismanaged, they can become dangerous and need to be handled carefully through ritual action (Gygi



2018). They represent inherited connections but what happens when such inherited sociality is rejected?

On the outskirts of Fukuyama in Hiroshima Prefecture, sprawling across 10,000 square meters of Fudōin temple grounds, [is a graveyard where old tombs \(*furuhaka*\) and family Buddhist altars \(*butsudan*\) come to rest](#) in peace. In 2001, the gravesite of the graves (*ohaka no haka*) replaced the temple-owned forest to become a densely populated home to Buddhist death-related objects without anyone to care for them. *Ohaka no haka* embodies the material excess of Buddhist practices and the absence and fragmentation of kin relations in contemporary Japan. This materialized absence poses a challenge to the socio-economic continuity of Buddhist community structures. Buddhist practices and associated karmic obligations are lived out through the inter-generational material heritage like family Buddhist altars, graves, and other charged items. Buddhism thus involves ritual care for such objects and the nourishment of karmic ties (*en*) involving donations (*dana*) to and ritual labour of Buddhist professionals.

At Fudōin, for a donation of 2,500 yen, the head priest Mishima Kakudō looks after this death-related material excess: from tightly arranged abandoned headstones to out-of-use wooden Buddhist altars destined for ritual disposal by burning. Such material becomes excessive and burdensome as it imposes on a person entrusted with it a duty of care they may be unable or unwilling to provide. Those who moved away from their hometowns often struggle to accommodate the elaborate Buddhist altars and the physically remote gravestones of their parents and grandparents. Mishima, as a ritual specialist, sees himself as a trusted custodian of the karmic relations that those decommissioned Buddhist objects represent. As [Fabio Gygi \(2018\) argues in his work on rubbish houses \(*gomi yashiki*\) in 'post-bubble' Japan](#), materiality can often outlive meaning and utility, thus rendering it excessive as objects move through time and space. But this excess is also generative of new meanings and structures of care.

Such material imposes on a person entrusted with it a duty of care they may be



unable or unwilling to provide.

Besides Fudōin, many local temples are facing an ever-increasing number of requests to assist with the disposal and care of emotionally, morally, and spiritually charged things. These objects are not always strictly Buddhist but are [affectively “sticky”](#) insofar their stickiness emerges from cultural and personal exchanges that result in the accumulation of affective value and, here, also of karmic and care value. Among the proliferating cases of Buddhist altars left abandoned anonymously at night within temples’ grounds, Buddhist priests in rural Japan often encounter more problematic objects, two examples of which I discuss below: a stone statue of Kannon Buddha and a plane propeller entrusted to the Myōkōji temple in Hiroshima Prefecture.

Since Buddhist temples are seen as places where such material excess can be handled meaningfully, they increasingly face the moral and practical dilemma of managing it. Decommissioning of karmically volatile materiality reveals the fragility of Buddhist care structures and highlights growing concerns about how religious activity generates waste. The management of religious materiality in the world’s fastest ageing society has extensive spiritual, moral, and practical implications.

Decommissioning of karmically volatile materiality reveals the fragility of Buddhist care structures.

Homeless Kannon

In March 2017, I lived with temple custodians of Myōkōji, a mid-size True Pure Land Buddhist temple in northern Hiroshima Prefecture. The family of a recently deceased parishioner called on the temple to drop off a Buddhist statue they had found when clearing out the family house. They intended to downsize and relocate the family *butsudan* to their Hiroshima apartment, but they did not know what to do with the statue found among their father’s belongings. The son who dropped it



off felt uncomfortable just throwing it away, so he hoped 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 said. The head priest, Suzuki Shōdō, took the statue and placed it on the kitchen 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 (or Kūkai, 774-835), who is considered one of the founders of the Japanese esoteric tradition.

Suzuki was amused: Kannon was not worshipped at his temple and, as such, he felt that the statue could not be placed in the temple hall for safekeeping. Since it was carved in stone, it could not be disposed of through burning and Suzuki felt unsure about how to handle the object ritually. At first, it was stored in one of the alcoves in the temple’s *butsudan* room, disguised in the green cloth so as not to anger Amida Buddha. Later, it was placed behind the altar in the main temple hall, the original green cover still hiding it away from the residing deities. Despite the denominational conundrum, the temple was selected as the best place to deal with an object believed to host spiritual beings. While the family of the deceased were careful to not just throw it away, they were also not prepared to home it.

