

Japanese *shōjin ryōri*: the green competition from Buddhist temples to TV shows

Chiara Ghidini

Abstract: Registered in 2013 by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as Intangible Cultural Heritage, *washoku*, the “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese,” includes the so-called *shōjin ryōri*, an expression dated to the early modern period and related to the Buddhist avoidance of meat eating. Since its early appearance, *shōjin ryōri* has undergone a variety of changes, and its evolution up to contemporary times is relevant to Japan’s cultural history. Traditionally, vegetables (*sōjimon*) were not thought of as precious or tasty ingredients. However, during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the introduction of vegetarian dishes made to resemble fish and fowl, both in shape and flavor—the so-called *modoki ryōri*—attracted people’s attention, contributing to the spread within Kyoto and the Japanese archipelago of a tastier and aesthetically pleasing Buddhist vegetarian cuisine. Throughout the 15th century local specialties and banquet cooking culture were extremely important: mountain products were generally still deemed inferior compared to sea and river ones, but in a text belonging to the *irui gassen mono* genre, the *Shōjin gyorui monogatari*, the reader witnesses the triumph of vegetables over the army of fish and animals. During the Meiji era (1868–1912), Buddhist vegetarianism faced the rise of a different culinary culture, whereby eating (beef) meat turned into a symbol for physical strength, both the individual one of young male citizens and the collective one of Japan as a new-born nation. Even part of the Buddhist clergy chose to embrace the meat-eating culture. Today, *shōjin ryōri* coexists with vegetarian choices based on different theoretical tenets, and is promoted by NHK Television within programs designed for a global audience and aimed to advocate the Cool Japan strategy as well as in TV shows like *Yamato amadera shōjin nikki*, focused on the everyday (cooking) life of Buddhist nuns in a secluded temple within Nara prefecture. While encouraging local (and Buddhist) vegetarian food literacy, this program also fulfills the government agenda in terms of rural rejuvenation policies and the promotion of *washoku* (which includes *shōjin ryōri*) as a brand to be popularized both within and outside Japan.

Keyword: Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, rural rejuvenation, Buddhist temples, NHK Television.

要旨: 2013年にユネスコから無形文化遺産に登録された「日本人の伝統的な食文化」である和食には、仏教の肉食忌避の思想に由来する精進料理が含まれている。精進料理は、その登場以来、さまざまな変化を遂げてきた。伝統的に、野菜（精進物）は、貴重な、またはおいしい食材とは考えられていなかった。しかし、鎌倉時代（1185–1333年）になると、形も味も魚や鳥に似せた野菜を中心としたモドキ料理が注目を集め、仏教の食事が普及した。地元の特産品と宴会料理が重要な役割を果たした15世紀を通じて、山の産物は一般に海や川の産物に比べて劣っていると見なされていたが、異類合戦物のジャンルに属する『精進魚類物語』では、野菜が魚や動物の軍隊に打ち勝ってしまう。明治時代には、精進料理は新しい食文化の台頭に直面した。獣肉（主に牛肉）を食べることは、若い男性の国民だけではなく、若い国家である日本全体の体力の象徴にもなり、仏教共同体の一部でさえ、肉食文化を受け入れ始めた。昨今では、ベジタリアン料理と併存する精進料理は、クールジャパン戦略の一部として促進され、また、奈良県中部の人里離れた寺の尼僧の日常的な食文化がテレビで紹介されたりしている。この番組は、地元と仏教の食品リテラシーを奨励すると同時に、地方の活性化およびブランドとしての（精進料理を含む）和食を推進することで、日本政府の政策に沿っていると思われる。

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キーワード: 精進料理、仏教、NHK

I bite into a persimmon
and the temple bell tolls
at Hōryūji
Masaoka Shiki

Registered in 2013 by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as Intangible Cultural Heritage, *washoku* 和食, the “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese,” includes the so-called *shōjin ryōri* 精進料理, an expression dated to the early modern period¹ and today variably translated as Buddhist vegetarian/vegan cuisine, zen cuisine, devotional cuisine or “temple food.”

Shōjin meals were introduced in Japan following the Buddhist practice of abstaining from eating meat. According to historian Ueda Jun’ichi, however, religious and devotional factors alone could hardly account for the popularity of *shōjin ryōri* throughout Japanese history and outside the Buddhist clergy. Ueda believes that the additional element playing a key role in the acceptance of *shōjin ryōri* among ordinary people, other than the introduction of new cooking methods from China involving extensive use of wheat flour and vegetable oil, was the *modoki* もどき (imitation, mock) culinary technique, often employed in this type of vegetarian cuisine. Simulating or recreating a non-vegetarian dish was bound to be appreciated and acknowledged as part of Japanese cultural expressions centered on the notions of *tsukurimono* (artificial, temporary creations) and *mitate* (visual transposition).²

Traditionally, vegetables (*sōjimon* 精進物) were not thought of as precious or particularly tasty ingredients. Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (10th–11th century) made this clear in her *Makura no sōshi* 枕草子 (The Pillow Book):

That parents should bring up some beloved son of theirs to be a priest is really distressing. No doubt it is an auspicious thing to do; but unfortunately most people are convinced that a priest is as unimportant as a piece of wood, and they treat him accordingly. A priest lives poorly on meagre food [*sōjimon no ashiki wo uchikui* さうじもの(精進物)のあしき(悪しき)をうちくひ], and cannot even sleep without being criticized. (Shirane 2007, 250)

To the extent that literary texts can be dealt with as historical evidence, it appears that during the Heian period vegetarian food was related to Buddhism and perceived as “bad” or tasteless.

During the Kamakura period (typically 1185–1333), the introduction of vegetarian dishes made to resemble fish and fowl, both in shape and flavor, at-

¹ Before the expression *shōjin ryōri*, within textual sources meals that made no use of animal ingredients following the Buddhist practice of abstaining from eating meat were called *shōjinmono*, or *sōjimon*. See: Mami 2019.

² Ueda 2017, 177–80.

tracted people's attention: in the *Heikoki* 平戸記, a diary compiled by Taira no Tsunetaka 平経高 (1180–1255), there is mention of mock fish, a vegetarian dish having both the shape and the flavor of fish, offered by a *nenbutsu* monk named Monshin and welcomed by those present with much astonishment due to its probably unexpected rich taste (Ueda 2017, 181).

Later, in the Muromachi period (1336–1573), *modoki* cuisine appeared on the *shōgun's* table and was offered to zen monks belonging to the powerful Gozan system.³ While still including fish and fowl, official meals also featured *modoki* dishes such as the *sanbōzen* 三峰膳, a broth decorated with the shape of the three picks of the immortal islands of Penglai, Fangzhang and Yingzhou (Ueda 2017, 182).

It is useful to point out that, even though vegetarian cuisine was indeed connected with Buddhism, historically Buddhist monks and nuns did not necessarily embrace vegetarianism. In particular, the True Pure Land school (*jōdo shinshū* 浄土真宗), which gained much popularity around the Sengoku period (1467–1615), was famous for allowing both marriage and meat consumption (*nikujiki saitai* 肉食妻帯).

Unlike a more frugal Buddhist vegetarian meal, the *modoki* technique encouraged the development of *shōjin ryōri*, meant both as a cooking method and as food presentation, into an attractive culinary genre, but wild plants and vegetables failed to gain an upgrade from “*ashiki*” (bad) to superior ingredient even in later periods. The *Shijōryū hōchōsho* 四条流庖丁書 (late 15th century), to quote an example, contains a hierarchical categorization related to the taste of food products in which mountain ingredients (including vegetables) are deemed inferior compared to sea and river ones (Ueda 2017, 180).

However, in a text dated to the same period, the *Shōjin gyorui monogatari* 精進魚類物語 (The Tale of Vegetables and Fishes), vegetables prevail over sea and river food. Usually defined as an early example of the *irui gassen mono* 異類合戦物 (tales of battles between nonhuman beings) genre, this tale describes a battle between anthropomorphized vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. Partly a parody of the famous *Heike monogatari* 平家物語,⁴ it contains Buddhist overtones, as one may infer from the final victory of the vegetarian army, comprised of vegetables, seaweeds, beans, mushrooms and fruits, over the army of *bibutsu* 美物 (tasty food), which includes fishes, shellfishes, fowl and other animals. The battle is initiated by the Roe (*hararago* 鰯) brothers, when they notice with great disappointment that in an official ceremony held on the first day of the eighth month of the first year of a fictional Fish-Bird era (*gyochō gannen* 魚鳥元年), Nattō Tarō 納豆太郎, Lord Bean (Mame Go Ryō 豆御料)'s son, has gained a privileged seat near Go Ryō 御料, Emperor Steamed Rice. Eventually, Go Ryō ends up eating the losers, who had previously built a fortress in a castle called *Nabe no jō* 鍋ノ城, the Hot Pot Castle.

³ The politically influential Gozan (Five Mountains) system of ranking Zen temples was established towards the end of the Kamakura period.

⁴ The history of the ur-text and of the surviving copies as well as the differences between different versions are discussed in Follador 2020.

The final triumph of the vegetarian party may hint at the superior value of Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, but, as Komine Kazuaki has argued, the real protagonist of the story appears to be Rice, a symbol for the emperor, who looks at the battle from the vegetarian food's side, while vegetables and fishes are the personifications of warriors (Kazuaki 2010).

During the battle, some lives are taken and married couples undergo the pain of separation. Tai no Akasuke Ajiyoshi 鯛赤助鯨吉 (Sea Bream the Red Good-Taste), soon to be killed in action, returns his wife Iso no Wakame 磯ノ和布 to the house of her father Konbu 昆布. The farewell poems that the bride and groom exchange are to be read in culinary terms as the combination of vegetables and fish through the employment of *konbu dashi* (kelp stock). Once dead, Tai no Akasuke becomes an ox-headed demon (*gozu* 牛頭) in the Buddhist hell: an *ushi oni* 牛鬼 (ox demon), or, in culinary words, *ushioni* 潮煮, the boiled sea bream that Emperor Steamed Rice eventually eats (Hokiichi 1959, 638).

According to Komine, since the Goryō's consumption of fish dates to the ninth lunar month, there may well be a relation with the so-called *shōjindoki* or *shōjin hodoki* 精進解, which marks the end of the ritual observance of a vegetarian diet. Komine rightly points out that, apart from its obvious Buddhist implications and parodic effects, the whole story appears to revolve around issues related to food rituals and taboos (Komine 2010, 17).

Judging from the attention paid to food provenance and seasonal ingredients, *Shōjin gyorui monogatari* can be added to the variety of texts testifying to the development of food culture in Muromachi Japan, a crucial topic addressed by historian Haruta Naoki, who has emphasized the relevance throughout the 15th century of seasonal products, local specialties and a cooking culture mainly centered on ceremonial banquets (Naoki 2008).

Research on *shōjin ryōri* is particularly connected with pre-Meiji historical documents and with the Kyōto area. While pointing out the necessity for a more thorough analysis of vegetarian food in rural regions, Ueda corroborates the perspective of Jesuit Luís Fróis (1532–97), according to which the capital used to set the standards for the provinces in terms of customs, and maintains that it is likely that *shōjin ryōri* gradually spread to the rest of the archipelago exactly because it had been accepted in Kyōto (Ueda 2017, 190–1).

While Kyōto played a key role in the development of *shōjin ryōri*, during the Edo period (1603–1867) Nagasaki, where Jesuits like Fróis had settled back in the 16th century and Ming Chinese traders were active, was the birthplace of a different type of Buddhist vegetarian cooking, *fucha ryōri* 普茶料理. A cuisine bearing strong Chinese influences, with respect to ingredients and preparation as well as to philosophical theories and healing notions (Marra 2011), *fucha ryōri* is particularly linked with the Ōbaku 黄檗 zen school and his Chinese founder in Japan, Ingen *zenji* 隱元禪師 (1592–1673), who, after reaching Nagasaki, went on to establish the Manpukuji 萬福寺 in Uji, near Kyōto, in 1661.

Famous for its rich taste, wheat dumplings, generous use of vegetable oil for frying ingredients and sugar, *fucha* cuisine also included—and still does—*modoki* dishes. The first book entirely devoted to this type of vegetarian cuisine, the

Fucha ryōrishō 普茶料理抄, dates back to 1772 and contains details on eating utensils, instructions on how to brew tea, a variety of recipes and a list of vegetables organized according to the four seasons.

In its manifold varieties, Japanese premodern and early modern cuisine, including the vegetarian one, aimed, as Eric Rath argues, to make food signify something invisible (Rath 2010, 7), something that reached far beyond its obvious materiality. However, it did not merely conjure the invisible, a fantasy, but also marked visible ethical and social distinctions. As for vegetarian cuisine, it did so both in terms of a taboo etiquette to observe in specific times and in terms of a more permanent dietary choice based on ethical and religious grounds.

Japanese premodern and early modern foodways (encompassing ingredients, preparation, presentation, consumption, table manners, and the naming of a given dish) evolved during the Meiji period (1868–1912), as a different culinary vocabulary began to circulate. The introduction of terms like *yōshoku* 洋食 (Euro-American cuisine) and, later, *washoku* responded to different historical, socio-political and cultural circumstances. The focus on nation-building and international ambitions contributed to the definition of food in an increased binary fashion, staging a modern *gassen* 合戦 (battle, competition) between the gastronomic identities of Self and Other.

The changed attitude toward the consumption of (beef) meat, seen as food to strengthen the young male generation for the sake of an equally young nation, affected Buddhist vegetarian cuisine to the extent that, as Richard Jaffe has maintained, “clerical meat eating came to be viewed as a necessity if the Buddhist clergy were to contribute to the Japanese effort to create a modern imperial nation-state on par with the Euro-American powers.” (Jaffe 2005, 255) The Meiji government, especially in its initial years, implemented aggressive policies against Buddhism. Following the 1872 edict, clergy’s legal privileges were abolished, while monks were allowed to marry, eat meat, wear ordinary clothes and give up tonsure (Jaffe 2021, 95–113). In 1873 the same rules and permissions were extended to Buddhist nuns: “From now on nuns may freely grow their hair, eat meat, marry, and return to lay life.” (Jaffe 2021, 82) Ordained members of different Buddhist schools, especially Jōdo, Sōtō, Shingon and Tendai, engaged in vibrant debates, criticizing the first edict as an illegitimate State interference in *vinaya* matters and opposing Jōdo *shinshū* supporters of *nikujiki saitai* (Jaffe 2005, 262–73). On the contrary, debates related to nuns, their place within monastic institutions and their destiny once returned to lay life appear to have been rather limited (Cogan 2006).

Buddhist endorsement of meat eating for the sake of the nation persisted throughout the 1930s. The words of Sōtō priest Furukawa Taigo 古川確悟, an advocate of the Imperial Way and of the New Mahāyāna Buddhism, are useful to illustrate the mobilization occurring at the time and the way it affected ordained members of a variety of Buddhist groups, including the Zen schools:

If Buddhist clerics aim even a little bit for the flourishing of the national polity (*kokutai*) and the development of humanity, they resolutely must shed the corpse

of the passive thought of the Buddhism of India and must, when circumstances require, openly nourish their body and mind through eating meat and press on with their duty. (Jaffe 2005, 272)

During the 1920s and early 1930s, however, the practice of vegetarianism following the Buddhist tenets on transmigration and the principle of causing no harm to living beings found an interesting voice within the world of Japanese literature through the lay practitioner, scientist and writer Miyazawa Kenji 宮沢賢治 (1896–1933). Born into a family affiliated to the True Pure Land school, Kenji converted in his youth to the Nichiren school and became temporarily involved with the prominent lay organization Kokuchūkai 國柱會 (Pillar of the Nation Society), established by Tanaka Chigaku 田中智學 (1861–1939), which connected the *Lotus sūtra* with the government, saw the *kokutai* as the realization of the wise Buddhist ruler, and revived Nichiren's rigorous propagation practice of *shakubuku* 折伏.⁵ Kenji's turn to vegetarianism in 1918 is documented in a letter to his friend Hosaka Kanai and was mostly due to his pondering over the paradigm of autophagy, whereby life revolved around the act of preying on each other (Kilpatrick 2013, 20), the persuasion that all living beings ought to be protected, and the doctrine of transmigration:

Suppose I were the fish, and suppose that not only I were being eaten but my father were being eaten, my mother were being eaten, and my sister were also being eaten. And suppose I were behind the people eating us, watching. "Oh, look, that man has torn apart my sibling with chopsticks. Talking to the person next to him, he swallowed her, thinking nothing of it. Just a few minutes ago her body was lying there, cold. Now she must be disintegrating in a pitch-dark place under the influence of mysterious enzymes. Our entire family has given up our precious lives that we value, we've sacrificed them, but we haven't won a thimbleful of pity from these people." I must have been once a fish that was eaten. (Sato 2007, 12–3)

Besides his short story, *Furandon nōgakkō no buta* フランドン農学校の豚 (The Frandon Agricultural School Pig),⁶ written in the 1920s but published only after his death, in which Kenji dwells on global animal welfare, of particular interest is *Bijiterian taisai* ビジテリアン大祭 (The Great Vegetarian Festival, also published after Kenji's death), a fictional report on an international gathering of vegetarians held in a mountain village within the island of Newfoundland. In this story, Kenji divides the vegetarian frame of mind into two main groups: the empathizers (*dōjōha* 同情派), who treat other living beings as equals, and the preventionists (*yobōha* 予防派), who avoid eating animals in order not to contract diseases, such as rheumatism and gout. Among the attendees, a Shintō school Buddhist believer born in a Christian country takes the floor, dwelling on Buddha's choice to stop carrying out ascetic practices:

⁵ On Kokuchūkai, see Stone 2019, 631–60.

⁶ This short story is available also in English translation: Kenji 2012.

Śākyamuni, in search of a path of renunciation, spent six years practicing abstinence and austerities [*shōjin kugyō* 精進苦行] in a forest on Mount Dandaka, eating only one grain of rice and a single sesame seed each day. In the end, he became aware that this was of no use, so he descended the mountain and bathed in the river. He accepted milk cream [*kurīmu*] offered by a village girl and experienced ecstasy [*hōetsu/ekusutashī* 法悦/エクスタシー].⁷

Then, he addresses the still debated issue of Buddha's last meal, and emphasizes the need for Buddhists to follow the entirety of his virtues, not mainly food restrictions:

Today vegetarians are stricter in terms of food than the ancient Indian sages. This is a distortion, for, while they are strict with food, they do not follow the other rules established by Śākyamuni. In particular, I want all vegetarians to keep this in mind. In his final years, Śākyamuni, having perfected his thought, was not a complete vegetarian. Behold, he accepted the food offered by a blacksmith named Cunda, which was essentially pork.⁸ This pork meat caused gastrointestinal damage that could not be cured. And that's why, at the age of eighty-one, he experienced *nirvāṇa* in Kushinagar. Fellow Buddhists, look at Śākyamuni and learn from him. Use his actions as a model! Become like him, learn and practice all his virtues on a scale of 1/20,000, 1/50,000, or 1/200,000! Only then will vegetarianism be good.⁹

Towards the end of the story, the protagonist, also a Buddhist believer, speaks to the audience, aiming to unveil the mistakes he detected in the previous speech:

The previous speaker advocated the *nikujiki* theory, denying vegetarianism from a Buddhist perspective. I can't help but pointing out his mistakes as a disciple of Śākyamuni. [...] We, as Buddhists, must first and foremost be prepared to follow the Buddhist scriptures. It is clear from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* that the five types of purified meat were allowed only for those who were inexperienced in training [...]. I will omit to mention the different dietary systems within Buddhism since someone else plans to address this issue. However, the previous speaker made a mistake when he said that Śākyamuni's last meal was pork meat: it was one type of mushroom.¹⁰ [...]

The spirit of Buddhism is compassion, it is love with perfect wisdom, which is the compassion of the Tathāgata. The point of departure in Buddhism is that all living things, us included, want to be set free from this condition of suffering. [...] All living things have undergone transmigration after transmigration for immeasurable *kalpa*. [...] One soul at one point perceives itself as a person. At one point as

⁷ The Japanese text of *Bijiterian taisai* is available on <https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/files/2589_25727.html> (2021-01-09). Original text: Kenji 1989. The English translation of all quoted passages is by C. Ghidini.

⁸ Whether it was pork or vegetarian food given to pigs is the core of the ongoing debate.

⁹ <https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/files/2589_25727.html> (2021-01-09).

¹⁰ The term in Pāli is *sūkaramaddava*, referring either to pork meat delight, or to food appreciated by pigs.

an animal. At one point, one is even born in heaven. In the meantime, it moves closer and further away from other souls. As a result, the living things around us are friends, lovers, siblings, parents and children, and so have been for a very long time. When they separate from one another, they no longer know each other. Limitless combinations are possible in a limitless span of time. [...] People of different religions would find this idea too serious and frightening. But this world is indeed terrifyingly serious.¹¹

In his “great vegetarian festival’s illusion” (*gensō* 幻想),¹² Miyazawa Kenji, whose approach to vegetarianism has been defined by Roger Pulvers as a prophetic green vision (Pulvers 2013), seems aware of current international debates, sheds light on the different positions about meat consumption or abstinence within Buddhism and in other religions, and explains the vegetarian/vegan choice in terms of empathy or of a more pragmatic quest for individual health.

Buddhist support of militarism, its changes after the promulgation of the new Constitution, wartime malnutrition, food supplies from colonial territories and the attempts at configuring new types of dietary regimes have been important themes in studies (respectively) on Buddhism and foodways during interwar and occupied Japan, leaving little margin for an in-depth enquiry into the development of *shōjin ryōri*.

Today, Buddhist vegetarian/vegan cuisine, including Japanese *shōjin ryōri*, and animal ethics across and beyond Asia have gained some popularity within the context of an increasing academic and general interest in ethical eating, based on the awareness about the moral consequences of food choices. Bypassing a historical reconstruction of its practice and textual occurrences, most informative material intended for the general public sponsors *shōjin ryōri* as a traditional alternative lifestyle in touch with nature’s seasonal cycle and actively endorsing the necessity of securing a sustainable future, as well as part of the potentially life-changing touristic experience of *shukubō* 宿坊 (temple stay).

Although “enchanted” and exotic publications on Japanese cuisine are still thriving, recent research has questioned the very definition of *washoku* as it was presented in the UNESCO nomination, exposing the promotion of Japanese cuisine as part of the nation-branding agenda, and shedding light on the politics of cultural heritage and gastrodiploacy, aimed, amongst other things, to increase trade and tourism.¹³ Included in the category of *washoku*, *shōjin ryōri* partakes of such dynamics, contributing to the colorful mosaic of what we have come to know as Cool Japan.

Cool Japan is also a popular TV program on NHK World-Japan—the international service of Japan’s public media organization NHK designed for a global audience—, aimed to show “what makes Japan cool” and rediscover the charms of Japanese culture that Japanese people tend to overlook. *Cool Japan* broadcast-

¹¹ <https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000081/files/2589_25727.html> (2021-01-09).

¹² I am referring to the last sentence of his short story.

¹³ See, for example, Bestor 2018. See also Felice Farina in this volume.

ed a special on *Shōjin ryōri* (rerun in 2021) addressing Japanese Buddhist cuisine from the viewpoint of “foreigners” (*gaikokujin* 外国人):

In recent years, the number of vegetarians has been growing around the world. Healthy meals in which vegetables are central are popular in the West, where lifestyle related diseases are becoming more serious. What’s receiving attention amidst such circumstances is Buddhist cuisine. Buddhist cuisine exists in Asian countries such as China and Korea as well, but Japan’s Buddhist cuisine is attracting attention coupled with the Japanese food boom and the popularity of tourism in Japan. There are casual Buddhist cuisine restaurants, and new styles for foods such as sweets and ramen are appearing one after another. We uncover the appeals of Japan’s Buddhist cuisine from the perspective of foreigners.¹⁴

In this program, designed to entertain and quite explicitly endorsing the Cool Japan strategy, global aspirations for ethical and healthy eating and living relate to Japanese Buddhist cuisine, and “foreigners” (vegan, vegetarian or none of the above) from different continents are given the floor to comment on and experience *shōjin ryōri*, eventually reaching a verdict to be shared with the audience.

If the special on *shōjin ryōri* was intended for a global audience, *Yamato Amadera shōjin nikki* やまと尼寺 精進日記 (A Buddhist Vegetarian Diary in a Yamato Convent), a series broadcasted on NHK Educational TV (*NHK kyōiku terebijon* 教育テレビジョン) and now available on DVD and in mook form, was tailored for a Japanese (or Japanese speaking) audience with stronger pedagogic purposes.

The “protagonist” of *Yamato Amadera shōjin nikki* is the secluded Otowasan Kannonji 音羽山観音寺, a temple in the countryside of Sakurai (Nara prefecture), the “heart of the Yamato area,” traditionally dated back to the 8th century. Situated at the end of a steep unpaved slope up a mountain road, Kannonji is run by the chief priestess (*jūshoku* 住職), Gotō Mitsuei, belonging to the Pure Land Yūzū *nenbutsu* 融通念佛 school,¹⁵ her assistant, Sasaki Jitō, and the helper, Macchan. The temple, considered part of a *reijō* 霊場 (pilgrimage grounds charged with prodigious powers), where people devoted to Kannon in the Nara period used to gather, has as its object of worship (*gohonzon* ご本尊) the statue of Thousand-armed Thousand-eyed Eleven-faced Kannon (*Senju sengen jūichimen Kanzeon bosatsu* 千手千眼十一面観世音菩薩), associated with stories of prodigious healing from eye afflictions (*ganbyō reigen* 眼病靈験). Kannon’s healing water—as the new webpage of the temple,¹⁶ which explicitly cites the NHK program, informs its readers—is still served together with each *shōjin* meal.

The inspiring and unusual everyday life in a non-urban Buddhist temple is one of the aspects that prompted Toda Yumiko 戸田 裕美子 to devote a TV program

¹⁴ <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/tv/cooljapan/20210424/4008234/> (2021-01-09).

¹⁵ Ryōnin (1073–1132) is the Tendai monk who founded the Yūzū school. From a Buddhist perspective, the notion of *yūzū* refers to the interrelationship of all things and the ability for any individual meritorious action to benefit many.

¹⁶ <https://www.otowasankannonji.org/> (2021-01-09).

to Kannonji and its seasonal *shōjin ryōri*. Toda recalls her first visit to the temple, where she had chosen to try *shukubō* after overhearing people praising the kindness of its nuns and the special food they served, almost entirely made of ingredients grown *in loco*.¹⁷ Living in harmony with the surrounding nature as a small supportive community, laughter, hard work, training, knowledge and transformation of natural ingredients into delicious meals, ceremonial dishes, and Mitsuei's wise yet simple glance on food as life are the main features of *Yamato Amadera shōjin nikki*. While being entertained, the audience learns more about seasonal vegetables and flowers, as well as about the hardships and joys of secluded yet “enlightened” rural life.

The popularity of *Shōjin nikki* owes much to the choice of showing on television a rural temple usefully located in one of the most historically charged areas of Japan and following the everyday life of three women (two nuns and Macchan) running it with patience, attentiveness, and an expression of grateful astonishment on their faces. On the one hand, this TV program has (temporarily?) benefitted Kannonji and its surrounding area, encouraging spectators to turn into occasional pilgrim-tourists and experience the temple life and food in person. On the other hand, as a tribute to local food products and cuisine, it has also contributed to the government agenda in terms of regional revitalization. A stay for two in the *Shōjin nikki* temple is one of the many gifts from Nara prefecture offered in exchange for the donation of an amount of a person's residence tax to that regional area in the *furusato nōzei* ふるさと納税 (hometown tax) system, a program introduced by the government in 2008 to rejuvenate rural areas of Japan.¹⁸ In theory, taxpayers should donate to their hometown (*furusato*), but, in practice, they are free to direct their tax payments to any Japanese prefecture or municipality¹⁹ and will receive a gift (usually local goods and accommodation packages) worth approximately thirty per cent of the donation value. One is left to wonder about the actual regional benefits of a return gift such as the *shukubō* in a temple made famous through a television program: the risk of the *furusato nōzei* system, as Anthony Rausch (2017) has compellingly argued, is that the taxpayer may be more inclined to think in terms of individual reward and select the gift on the basis of its subjective attractiveness than to make an informed choice which takes into account the real needs of that specific region.

Besides the paradoxes within the *furusato nōzei* system, national concerns about the decline of regional communities and of the Japanese countryside are a relevant element in *Yamato Amadera shōjin nikki*. The program offers its audience educational values and inspiration by portraying as daily rituals the everyday (cooking) activities of Buddhist nuns immersed in the rural landscape and enhancing their knowledge about local seasonal vegetables and vegetarian recipes. This way, *shōjin ryōri*, historically associated with ceremonial banquets

¹⁷ *Yamato amadera shōjin nikki* (Tōkyō: NHK shuppan, 2020), 2–3.

¹⁸ See: <<https://www.furusato-tax.jp/product/detail/29206/4653169>> (2021-01-09).

¹⁹ After the Tōhoku triple disaster in 2011, for example, many taxpayers chose to donate part of their residence tax to disaster relief.

held in the capital or in early modern urban contexts, is promoted as a different type of slow, yet hard-working, life, one that, however, people at large can only experience occasionally. In the interplay between global, national and local policies related to sustainability, edible identities and food security, Kannonji cuisine is branded as a “spiritual” and rural declination of *washoku*, endowed with the potential for attaining better health of both body and mind.

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