The Buddhist Virtues of Raging Lust and Crass Materialism in Contemporary Japan

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the buddhist virtues of raging lust and crass materialism in contemporary japan

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ABSTRACT
The idea that Japanese Buddhism is in a state of inevitable decline is widely accepted by scholars, clerics, and journalists as both demographic fact and doctrinal truth. However, this analysis fails to capture the complicated dynamic between the longstanding narrative of decline and the equally longstanding reality of Buddhist survival. Using animated music videos, plastic figurines, and illustrated merchandise created in collaboration between the for-profit company Hachifuku and the small Tokyo temple Ryōhōji as examples of a broader trend, this article shows that the very things that are taken as evidence of Buddhist decline—crass materialism, raging lust, and blissful ignorance of the finer points of doctrine—are actually the things that allow Buddhism to survive and thrive in contemporary Japan. I conclude with a critical analysis of the political economy of the decline narrative, showing that religious studies scholars, mass media, and Japanese ecclesial institutions all benefit from a story that is only provisionally true.

Keywords: Japan, Buddhism, anime, sex, consumerism, decline, otaku, manga
This paper challenges scholarly, journalistic, and clerical narratives of Japanese Buddhist decline by examining the innovative media outreach strategies of a small temple called Ryōhōji that is located in western Tokyo prefecture. I use the case of Ryōhōji and its collaborations with the promotional company Hachifuku to question several intertwined assumptions that inform the idea of Japanese Buddhism in crisis, namely: (1) that a pure Buddhist tradition is sullied by connections with plebeian forms of entertainment that target audience concupiscence or acquisitiveness, (2) that collaboration with for-profit companies is a survival strategy cynically adopted by clerics navigating a hostile social environment, (3) that religious doctrine is exclusively created, maintained, and policed by clerics, (4) that religious doctrine can be insulated from mundane economic concerns; and (5) that ritual practice is necessarily devout, austere, and humorless. While readers of a journal entitled Material Religion might take any one of the preceding critiques as obvious, recent studies of contemporary Japanese Buddhism (Reader 2012; Nelson 2013; Porcu 2014) nevertheless advance some of these problematic assumptions when they take the decline narrative at face value.

This paper proceeds from the assumption that the decline narrative is and always has been a fiction. It is an expedient device that Buddhists have used throughout history to garner donative support for monastic institutions, stimulate clerical reform, or justify the introduction of new doctrines and ritual practices. While it can therefore have cynical uses and instrumental effects, the idea of Buddhist decline is as integral to the tradition as the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. The notion of decline was present in the tradition even before the death of Śākyamuni in or around the fifth century BCE; it was an indispensable part of the Buddhism that was introduced to Japan a millennium later.

However, this narrative of inexorable attenuation does not mesh with the continued reality of Buddhist survival. As in earlier time periods and other geographic locales, in contemporary Japan Buddhist priests and ecclesial organizations use a variety of methods to ensure that their tradition survives and flourishes. Those methods include using attractive hooks to boost attendance, capitalizing on audiences’ prurient interest in sex and beautiful human bodies, and producing and selling material aids that allow audience-parishioners to “get in touch” with a particular religious site or its enshrined deities. Ryōhōji is unique in its particular method of outreach, but its promotional propaganda is neither atypical nor unprecedented. Like other Buddhist outreach programs past and present, Ryōhōji’s campaign attempts to strengthen affective connections between the laity and deities, aims to bring new visitors to the temple grounds, and uses cutting-edge media technologies to tout
the temple’s unique “this-worldly benefits” such as facilitating romantic connections (Reader and Tanabe 1998).

Ryōhōji’s creative collaboration with the for-profit company Hachifuku can therefore be understood as representative of the pan-Buddhist pedagogical technique known as “skillful means” (Sanskrit upāya; Japanese hōben).¹ The temple’s own Nichiren Buddhist doctrine of enticing people to venerate the Lotus sūtra (Japanese shōju) also provides doctrinal support for Ryōhō-ji’s promotional endeavors.² Yet as important as they are in understanding the Ryōhōji case, these doctrinal allowances for using a “spoonful of sugar” to help the medicine of the dharma go down share the problematic assumption that Buddhist clerics can control how their messages are broadcast and received.

Extrapolating from the specifics of the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku case (in which a temple outreach program depends on the multifarious talents of one costumed “idol” and the celebrity of an adult video performer), I argue against this “skillful means” model by suggesting that lay entertainers who perform their services for profit are equally in control of how Buddhist ideas are transmitted. The reception of their Buddhism-themed entertainment media also occurs in a context where several lay interest groups assert their own competing understandings of Buddhist doctrine and practice. In such circumstances, Ryōhōji’s resident priest and his Nichiren sect cannot retain exclusive control over Buddhist teachings. However, by situating the Ryōhōji case within broader trends in Japanese Buddhist history, I suggest that clerics have never really had a monopoly on orthodoxy anyway. My point is not that Ryōhōji’s outreach program is a novel application of the longstanding Buddhist doctrine of skillful means, but rather that responses to the Ryōhōji–Hachifuku campaign highlight the (often uneven) flows of material resources, capital, and prestige among different interest groups that are invested in the trope of Buddhist decline.

Sensational outreach programs like Ryōhōji’s elicit comment and consternation, but more than anything they get a range of parties to “buy in” to the state and fate of Buddhism. As they do, many of those parties “cash in” by boosting ratings (the media), increasing prestige (scholars), or raking in profit and donations (Hachifuku and Ryōhōji, respectively). In the final analysis, the things that Ryōhōji’s critics bemoan as evidence of the decline of the dharma turn out to be the very things that allow Buddhism to survive and thrive.

Sign of the Times, Part I: Introducing Ryōhōji

Shōeizan Ryōhōji is a small Buddhist temple of the Nichiren sect that is located in the western Tokyo suburb of Hachioji.
It is a short walk from Nishi-Hachioji station, which is positioned on the Chūō Line that transects Tokyo prefecture from east to west. Like many other temples in contemporary Japan, Ryōhōji serves a small, mostly local, clientele. Ryōhōji is also similar to some other Japanese Buddhist organizations in that it has recently engaged in a number of promotional strategies to boost temple attendance and to increase lay familiarity with Buddhism (Thomas 2015a; Porcu 2014; Nelson 2013; Ambros 2012; Rowe 2011).

Since 2009, Ryōhōji has collaborated with the production company Hachifuku to popularize its ritual services through an outreach campaign that blends traditional Buddhist iconography with the visual and material culture associated with manga and anime fandom. According to an interview conducted by Elisabetta Porcu (2014: 162–3), the resident priest originally intended to make the temple a more inviting place for the grandchildren of local parishioners and other young people. An unanticipated outcome of this initiative has been increased national and global attention (both positive and negative), a booming pilgrimage site, and – judging by videos periodically released on the Shōeizan Ryōhōji YouTube channel and a robust Twitter feed (@ryohoji) – a seemingly devoted fan base.

Ryōhōji’s experimental initiative began in May 2009 with the installation of an illustrated sign in the temple grounds featuring manga-style illustrated renditions of the various deities enshrined therein (Thomas 2015c). The sign, which was designed by illustrator-singer-cosplayer Toromi (known as ToroBenten when in costume), includes QR codes linked to a mobile phone website that offers brief explanations of the iconography and historical background of each deity associated with the temple (Figure 1).3

The sign was the brainchild of Mitsui Kazushito, the grandson of one of the temple’s parishioners and a friend of resident priest Nakazato Nichikō. Seeing that the sign was successful in garnering some attention, Mitsui, a designer, established the production company Hachifuku in the same year. Hachifuku quickly began selling Ryōhōji-themed goods such as T-shirts, mugs, and folders; the company also began sponsoring “maid cafe” events that were held on the temple grounds. At these events, casual visitors and long-time parishioners alike could enjoy the obsequious attention of “maids” dressed in black and white lace uniforms who served food at pop-up stalls, sold trinkets adorned with illustrated renditions of the temple deities, and played games with patrons.

The following year (2010) saw the production of an original anime music video called Tera Žukkyun! (roughly, Temple Thrill!) that was broadcast on YouTube and the
temple’s homepage, and distributed on limited edition DVDs (Figure 2). *Tera Zukkyun!* featured lyrics written by the multitalented Toromi; the video cut back and forth between an animated pastiche of illustrated renditions of the temple grounds, the temple’s enshrined deities, and live-action shots of Toromi dressed up as the deity Benzaiten (often called Benten, originally the Indian goddess Sarasvati).

In character as “ToroBenten” in the video, Toromi invited her audience to come to the temple, stressing its practical benefits (goriyaku) and especially its efficacy in facilitating romantic karmic connections (en musubi). The lyrics also featured a smattering of words from the *dhāraṇī* section of the *Lotus Sūtra* (the scripture venerated by the temple’s Nichiren sect). This eclectic “pastiche” approach to Buddhist doctrine mobilizing anime aesthetics has characterized Toromi’s prodigious creative output for the temple as lyricist, singer, and costumed performer.

The 2010 video was followed up with the 2011 song *Namu X Cyun* [Hail-Squeeze] and a video that introduced an additional cosplayer (Figure 3). The pornography actress and *tarento* (“talent,” a sort of minor celebrity) Kikōden Misa starred as the Buddhist deity Kichijōten, appearing under the name Kikōden also known as KissYouTen Misa.4 Whereas Toromi’s “ToroBenten” character had offered a cute, mildly infantilized aesthetic in *Tera Zukkyun!*, as her unconventionally transliterated name implies the “KissYouTen Misa” character introduced an element of eroticism to the temple’s media offerings. The lyrics of the new song and the video images were also more explicitly sexual than those of the first video; the coquettish banter between Toromi and Misa in promotional videos introducing maid café events and on the YouTube biweekly “radio” program *Minna de eimin*
(Rest in Peace with Everybody, inaugurated May 2011) has emphasized this titillating aspect through double entendre, innuendo, and sexually provocative imagery.\(^5\) Bonus videos of the two women dancing on the Namu X Cyun DVD presented Kikōden Misa’s body in a sexualized fashion by focusing on her crotch, breasts, and buttocks; her attire was also slightly more revealing than Toromi’s more modest garb.

In November 2012 Ryōhōji released a game for the Android operating system, following it up with an iOS release in May 2013. The game is currently (September 2015) only available in the Japan-based app stores for iOS and Android, but advertisements depict it as a digitized version of a card-trading game in which ToroBenten helps various ghosts and ghouls transform into “beautiful deities” who combine their powers to fight evil. Previously that year Hachifuku had also devised another game, Okyō no tatsuujin (Sūtra Master), in which players strike a wooden fish (a traditional Buddhist practice) in time with one of the temple’s theme songs as it plays on an iPad. While that game was immediately subject to a copyright infringement claim from video game company Namco and has therefore only been available in a beta version for attendees at on-site "maid
cafés” events, it – along with karaoke versions of the temple’s songs – provides a way for audiences to physically interact with the temple’s deities.6

The Ryōhōji-Hachifuku campaign has also been innovative in the sense that pilgrimage is no longer restricted to the grounds of the temple itself (Porcu 2014: 163). Fans who want to get in touch with the deities can go see them perform on a temporary stage at anime-themed events in places like Inokashira Park (Mitaka City, western Tokyo) or exhibition halls in Akihabara (two places where I serendipitously encountered Ryōhōji performances in 2012 and 2013). Users of the popular messaging app LINE can also affix Ryōhōji-themed “stamps” to their missives, complete with the deities’ catchphrases like “enmusubimu” (“karmic connection beam”).

In aggregate, these various aspects of the promotional campaign suggest that Ryōhōji is a good place to visit because it offers practical benefits such as romantic karmic connection and because its practices are packaged in a palatable, whimsical format that makes notoriously abstruse Buddhist doctrine and potentially remote Buddhist deities feel accessible and familiar. In its exhortations to visit the temple or to venerate the sexy female deities, the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku campaign makes no mention of formal membership or conversion. Instead, the campaign warmly encourages audiences to get in touch on their own time and largely on their own terms. When ToroBenten and KissYouTen Misa sing the words “Hurry and take refuge in me right now” (ima sugu watashi ni kie shite) in the 2011 song Namu X Cyun, the double entendre beckons and titillates the audience even as the imperative command parodies itself.

Sign of the Times, Part II: The Response
Responses to Ryōhōji’s media campaign have run the gamut from shocked opprobrium to grudging praise, and journalists and scholars alike have latched onto a “desperate times, desperate measures” narrative when discussing Ryōhōji’s collaboration with Hachifuku. The aforementioned opprobrium was evident in a 26 February 2010 segment on the television show Takeshi no Nippon no mikata (Takeshi’s Views of Japan), which provided mildly sensationalist reportage of the temple’s promotional activities and included interviews with the resident priest, Hachifuku founder Mitsui, and some local parishioners.7 Some temple parishioners were evidently concerned that the sign diminished the solemnity of the temple grounds; others felt it was an appropriate method for attracting young people.
The show played on popular tropes of Buddhist clerics’ acquisitiveness by asking the priest to expound on whether the character goods sold by the temple were boosting income (Nakazato deftly responded by saying that he gratefully accepted the revenue as a form of ofuse “donation”). The variety show segment pointedly indicated that few of the attendees at the first “maid café” event had any idea which particular deities were enshrined at Ryōhōji, with the female narrator snidely suggesting that the illustrated sign was not actually performing its stated goal of increasing familiarity with the temple’s main deity Benzaiten. She also noted that the event was covered by media outlets from France and Germany, but wondered with evident skepticism if “Japanese culture was being properly transmitted” Takeshi no Nippon no Mikata (2010). Perhaps most disparagingly, over a shot of a smiling resident priest standing between two nubile maids, the narrator rhetorically asked, “Perhaps they may have enjoyed themselves a bit too much?” Takeshi no Nippon no Mikata (2010). Through such rhetorical turns of phrase, the lay media program asserted that the maid café event had abrogated Buddhist doctrine, insinuating that desire and delusion (along with aversion, two of the “three poisons” that trap people in the cycle of birth and rebirth) characterized Ryōhōji’s outreach endeavors.

The media narrative suggests that Ryōhōji’s outreach program is heterodox, forming a striking contrast to the cautious praise with which the clerical world has greeted the campaign. A 9 February 2012 article published in the staid Buddhist Times—a trans-sectarian clerical newspaper that specializes in reportage on developments in the Buddhist world—isc a fitting example. Operating from the commonly accepted premise that Japanese Buddhism faces a crisis of declining membership, the article exhibited cautious admiration for Nakazato’s innovation in using the aesthetics of Japanese popular culture to reach out to the young. However, the article was quick to point out that on any given day one is more likely to find Nakazato engaged in chanting sutras than one is to see a horde of Akihabara otaku seeking connection with the illustrated deities. The Buddhist newspaper emphasized this point by juxtaposing a photo of the whimsical illustrated sign with a shot of somberly clad parishioners sitting in the main hall holding uchiwa daiko (literally, “fan-drum”), a traditional instrument used in Nichiren Buddhist practice.

Responses to Tera Zukkyun! on the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku YouTube channel (449 subscribers as of 15 September 2015) have been less magnanimous. “I’m sick of this country,” one viewer opined. Several others commented disparagingly on the inclusion of live-action shots of Toromi
singing and dancing in costume: “I don’t need the 3D shots,” or “it would have been perfect without the live-action shots” or “seriously, all joking aside, these [live action shots] are truly disgusting.” Others took issue with the song and lyrics: “Why would somebody create such a stupid song? It makes me sweat unpleasantly.”

However, some viewers have offered more positive assessments: “It’s steeped in vulgarity, but I don’t hate it.” One person even wrote rather defensively: “It’s a good promotional song. Please don’t say things like ‘it’s disgusting’ or ‘it looks stupid’ out of your prefigured prejudices.”

Finally, some viewers questioned whether the video was an appropriate representation of Buddhism: “I’m no expert in Buddhism or that sort of thing, but I wonder about this. Is it not ignoring the strict nature of the Japanese Buddhist tradition that has been around since olden days?”

The quasi-anonymous nature of YouTube comments makes it difficult to determine whether these comments come from Ryōhōji’s parishioners, fans of the costumed idols, casual observers who stumbled upon the video via social media, or vitriolic trolls trying to elicit an emotional response. What I can say is that some of the comments on the YouTube videos suggest a passing familiarity with Buddhist doctrine, situating Hachifuku’s whimsical campaign as a sign of the age of the declining dharma (Japanese mappō), or recognizing it as a reasonable use of “skillful means” to reach new audiences. Such responses indicate that at least some of the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku audience responds by “buying in” and advancing conceptions of religious orthodoxy.

These varied responses bring to the fore the problems with the decline narrative that lie at the heart of this paper. The consternation that has greeted the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku campaign is premised on perceptions of authenticity that discriminate between crass materialism and solemn piety. As the last cited YouTube comment shows (“is this not ignoring the strict nature of Buddhist tradition that has been around since olden days?”), such authenticity is evaluated in reference to a pristine Buddhist past when, presumably, priests were more assiduous and parishioners more pious. Likewise, the media reportage treating Ryōhōji’s outreach as a sign of desperation (“Temple Turns to ‘Anime’ To Lure the Young,” Tanaka 2010) reinforces the notion that “real Buddhism” would not use such measures were it not in such dire straits. While considerably more circumspect about making authenticity claims, recent scholarship on Buddhist outreach programs has also advanced the notion that priests go “pop” when they have no other choice (Nelson 2013; Porcu 2014). Behind all of these accounts lies the
palpable suspicion that fans’ apparent prurience or acquisitiveness makes for “bad Buddhism.”

**Idle Worship?**

Certainly, Ryōhōji’s promotional outreach and fan-patrons’ associated recreational activities (visiting on-site maid cafés, buying paraphernalia emblazoned with Ryōhōji characters) can easily seem frivolous, spontaneous, or whimsical and therefore may not easily mesh with perceptions of religion as being staid, deliberate, and sincere. Because I am primarily concerned with the mediated message of the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku campaign, the material paraphernalia associated with that media, and the accompanying interactions and affective relationships fostered between human bodies and temple space (both virtual and real), I do not distinguish between “casual spectators” and “sincere ritual participants.” If a person responds to the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku media campaign by traveling to the temple or to a Ryōhōji-themed event, if he engages with that campaign by purchasing ToroBenten and KissYouTen Misa paraphernalia (DVDs, amulets, votive tablets, statuary, or “fancy goods” such as file folders and pens), or if he virtually engages with the temple through online media and video games, then that person is a “pilgrim” if not a formal “parishioner.”

Rigid distinctions between “fan” and “pilgrim” serve as distractions from the basic fact that the media campaign seems to be successfully attracting an audience (4417 followers on Twitter as of 15 September 2015) and boosting awareness of the temple’s offerings (Ryōhōji has appeared on Japanese national television and in Anglophone websites and magazines).

I recognize that treating casual (and often ironic) patronage of a religious site as equivalent to sincere devotion runs the risk of erasing an important and real distinction, but throughout Japanese history pilgrimage to sacred sites has been characterized by play as much as piety (Hur 2000), playing with religious content by manipulating ideas and imagery for ludic purposes (Thomas 2007; Tanabe 2007) and what I have recently termed “tongue in cheek religion” (Thomas 2015b): the practice of playing at being religious without formally adopting a religious identity (also see Davidsen 2013; Andrews 2014; Yamamura 2015). Irony is not the exclusive province of the reflexively aware modern agent; humor, lust, and pretense have longstanding connections with “serious” religious practice.

For many fans, their consumption of Ryōhōji media and their purchases of Ryōhōji paraphernalia are almost certainly tongue-in-cheek. While some have donated votive tablets at the temple that emphasize the sincerity of their
petitions (Figure 4), I suspect that many are drawn to Ryōhōji-Hachifuku events primarily in pursuit of novelty and spectacle. This may be “bad religion” in that people are not attending the temple in order to deepen their Buddhist faith, but human bodies nevertheless physically attend the temple grounds and come into contact – however superficially – with Buddhist content. Those same people purchase character goods that contribute to the material sustenance of the temple (and, presumably, to profit for Hachifuku). Their patronage of Ryōhōji is real even if their motivations for visiting the temple have little to do with Buddhism as such.

Veneration of particular idols (a term I happily use here in multiple senses) may be based upon prurience, the pursuit of novelty, and crass consumerism. I use these terms without value judgment because I resist any analysis that begins from the intertwined presuppositions that religion is fundamentally and exclusively about interior assent to propositional statements of belief, that “real” religion strictly values the metaphysical over the material, or that religion and sex are not codependent. In practice, this means that I am interested not only in the ways that Buddhist doctrine can justify media innovations and material consumption (the “skillful means” approach); I am also concerned with how media campaigns and material objects can foster doctrinal innovations. Lay promoters and performers might present deities with new iconography, might reconfigure deities’ origin stories for new audiences, or might distinguish between “true” and “false” representations of deities in defense of their copyright claims (as Hachifuku did in a January 23, 2014 tweet when a Vietnamese company appropriated proprietary images for an iOS game app).

But I want to stress that this complicated dynamic between priest, promoter, iconography, and doctrine is also not new. Throughout Japanese history, clerics have depended on non-clerical intermediaries who introduce audiences to the particular benefits provided by a temple or other religious site (Figure 5). As a professional class,
such lay intermediaries are probably more interested in capturing audience attention and eliciting audience participation than they are concerned with ensuring that their audiences embrace a particular form of religious truth. As such, these performers and promoters enjoy considerable latitude in molding existing imagery, doctrine, and ideas to maximize palatability (either for the broadest possible audience or, alternatively, for a specific demographic). This dynamic affects audience expectations and shapes how religious institutions package their material, meaning that the lay promoter – a hired professional or an interested third party who may be primarily motivated by material gain – plays a crucial role in structuring doctrine, at least inasmuch as they deeply influence how pilgrimage locales, their deities, and their this-worldly benefits are packaged.

Additionally, because they are primarily interested in eliciting audience interest, promoters may not only work to draw audiences to a specific religious site, but they may just as readily encourage audiences to connect with material objects and associated media off-site. Such extra-temple events can serve as ways for audiences to connect with the temple or its idols. In Ryōhō-ji’s case, this might mean deepening affective bonds with the “cute” costumed promoters, their illustrated counterparts, or statues and plastic models of Ryōhō-ji’s enshrined deities. Hachifuku and the cosplayers Toromi and Kikōden Misa serve as mediators between the temple and the laity, distilling Buddhist doctrine into easily digestible messages and creating opportunities for the laity to develop familiarity with the temple and its idols. In Ryōhō-ji’s case, a little unadulterated lust and a little crass materialism might even be “good Buddhism.”
Material Girls: The Buddhist Virtue of Raging Lust

If the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku media campaign is an enticing “spoonful of sugar” to help the medicinal Buddhist doctrine go down, then the sweetener is not merely the visual presentation of deities in illustrated format or the use of songs to introduce new audiences to Buddhist practice (both have premodern precedent), but also the presentation of beautiful human bodies onto which those illustrations can be mapped and vice versa. This dynamic is apparent in a number of Hachifuku’s products, but here I will focus on the DVD Namu X Cyun, released by Ahōdera (Foolish Temple) Records in 2011. The DVD featured four videos, including the new promotional song Namu X Cyun, a truncated version of Tera Zukkyun!, and videos of ToroBenten and KissYouTen Misa dancing to each of the numbers in front of a blue screen.

The lyrics of Namu X Cyun are unambiguously sexual. While the onomatopoetic word kyun (unconventionally transliterated as cyun on the cover of the DVD) is difficult to translate, it can be rendered as a tight feeling in one’s chest that comes at a moment of heightened romantic emotion or as a squeeze like an embrace. With voiceover lines like “Let’s make our love nest in the Pure Land,” the song adds a sexual gloss to traditional Buddhist terminology.

If the lyrics abound in innuendo, the visuals (Figure 3) make it clear that Namu X Cyun simultaneously operates on multiple registers. Early scenes in the video include semen and the illustrated goddesses depicted in blushing déshabillé holding phallic symbols like popsicles. At the close of the bridge right before the final chorus, the word “release” (that is, liberation from saṃsāra, or the cycle of death and rebirth: gedatsu in Japanese) scrolls across the silhouettes of illustrated breasts, a dancing female torso, and finally expands outward from a crotch shot.

In between these illustrated and animated images are interspersed live-action shots of the cosplayers ToroBenten and KissYouTen Misa lip-syncing while performing a choreographed dance. This propaganda technique provides actual human bodies, rather than abstract and invisible deities, as objects of sexual desire and religious devotion. Video cuts between the live-action shots and the animated segments map the idealized, illustrated figures of the anime versions of the deities onto the human bodies of the performers and vice versa.

How audiences actually understand the connection between the deities, the cosplayers, and the illustrated icons is difficult to discern. With no reliable means for evaluating directorial intention or audience reception at my disposal, here I will simply say that once an audience mem-
ber has seen the Namu X Cyun video, we can surmise that the video imagery will come to structure his understanding of the iconography and characteristics of the female deities, in much the same way that seeing a film can influence or completely change one’s mental images of characters from a book.

Material Aids: The Buddhist Virtue of Crass Consumerism

The allure of the cosplayers’ bodies is emphasized in the videos by cuts back and forth between the illustrated images and scenes of the actual human women dancing on stage, but this leaves the perhaps tantalizing possibility of actually touching the distant idols. (Ryōhōji’s campaign is clearly heteronormative and marketed primarily, if not exclusively, to a heterosexual male audience.) Fans of the costumed idols can attend events where they might be able to see the female performers up close, but plastic models of the deities form another way for fans to get in touch.

Famed model designer Miyagawa Takeshi, a sculptor who had studied Buddhist iconography in art school, designed one such model of ToroBenten. Miyagawa used new materials to create a 1/4 scale model of ToroBenten that retained some of the classic elements of Buddhist iconography while matching the anime aesthetic of Toromi’s illustrations and modeling the figurine on the cosplayer’s physical dimensions. The model was subsequently enshrined in Ryōhōji’s main hall, although it is now only revealed at monthly sūtra-copying events. The limited edition set sold at Ryōhōji/Hachifuku events for ¥8,000 (roughly US$75) between 2010 and 2011. A new 1/8 scale model designed by Miyagawa (measuring about 23 cm and with a price tag of ¥12,000, or about $100) was announced in September 2014; preorders for the model’s November sale began immediately upon announcement.

Walking down the short path to the main hall at Ryōhōji, one sees on the right a designated place for hanging votive tablets (ema) before arriving at the small stall – ubiquitous at Japanese shrines and temples – selling amulets, talismans, and so forth. Ryōhōji’s merchandise include heart-shaped ema (Figure 6), CDs and DVDs, and assorted “character goods” sporting the images of ToroBenten and KissYouTen Misa. People interested in Ryōhōji-themed merchandise can also purchase items at the many comic conventions where Hachifuku operates pop-up stalls. Mobile phones and tablets provide further points of connection (and further opportunities for consumption) through game apps and “stamps” that can be purchased for messaging apps like LINE. And
although Ryōhōji creates a seemingly endless array of products emblazoned with these figures, fan-patrons of the temple also create their own sumptuously illustrated itaema to donate at the temple (Figure 7).

The Decline Narrative: Fact and Fiction, Doctrine and Demographics

The mappō trope has recently been reinforced by demographic changes such as mass urbanization and the deterioration of the traditional extended household (ie) in favor of the smaller nuclear family. Against this background, the perception that contemporary Buddhist institutions face a crisis of declining membership, deteriorating financial resources, and diminished interest in Buddhism has some basis in fact because most Buddhist sects and temples still retain an organizational structure that envisions extended households, (ie) not individuals, as parishioners. Urbanization has also ravaged support for rural temples. Legal changes introduced during the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) dealt a blow to traditional sources of economic support for temples, while postwar critiques of Buddhist complicity in Japan’s disastrous war effort meshed with journalistic descriptions of Buddhism as a morbid and moribund tradition that could only sustain itself through its virtual monopoly on Japan’s lucrative funeral industry. Recently even that formerly unshakable source of income has been challenged by the rise of non-Buddhist funeral services (on the above trends, see Reader 2011).

But as much as the decline narrative that appears in journalism and scholarship has basis in sociological fact, it also has its roots in Buddhist rhetoric. Since Buddhism entered Japan in the sixth century CE, the tradition has
been understood to be in or nearing the final days of the dharma (mappō): a time when people would forget or spurn the Buddhist teachings. Ryōhōji’s own sect founder Nichiren advocated exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sūtra as the only suitable practice for such a degenerate age. Since his time in the thirteenth century, other Buddhist reformers have periodically appealed to the decline trope to advance reformist causes and to align Buddhism with the politics du jour. The decline narrative has therefore functioned as a double-edged sword because it gives Buddhists a talking point for drumming up support or galvanizing clerics, but it also gives skeptical laypeople a reason to turn away from Buddhist institutions. Buddhist clergy have therefore fought a pitched public relations battle in which their own narratives of decline have fueled lay estrangement even as dwindling donative support contributes to the urgency with which clerics bemoan the deterioration of the dharma. This vicious cycle is periodically reinforced by scholarship on Japanese Buddhism, which curiously continues to reinvent the decline narrative decade after decade.

Conclusions: The Political Economy of the Decline Narrative
So in the spirit of writing this article for a journal that focuses on material objects and is therefore also concerned with material flows, I close with a brief examination of the political economy of the decline narrative. Sensationalist reportage and critical comments on YouTube reveal consternation about the crass consumerism or lecherous voyeurism of the Ryōhōji-Hachifuku campaign, but it must be noted that such commentary is mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Ryōhōji reaches a broader audience, Hachifuku gets more exposure for its merchandise, and newspapers and television variety shows boost sales and ratings with a catchy human interest story that practically writes its own sensationalist headlines.
While academic commentary on Ryōhōji is scarce to date (Porcu 2014; Thomas 2015c), I would be remiss if I failed to note that the academy rewards research that reinforces the notion of Buddhist decline. In recent years it has been commonplace for scholars of Japanese Buddhism to use the decline narrative to make one of two moves. The first is to accept clerical narratives of decline at face value and argue that Japanese Buddhism is in a state of unmitigated crisis (Reader 2011, 2012). This seems to be a minority position, but strikingly the scholars who champion it have used the case of Japanese Buddhism to exhume the secularization thesis that the academy at large has recently interred (Reader 2012). A second, more common, mode of argumentation is to suggest that Buddhist clerics facing rapidly declining membership have engaged in new modes of outreach to meet rapidly shifting ritual needs in the face of changing family structure (Rowe 2011; Ambros 2012), to stay connected to the laity in the context of late capitalism (Nelson 2013; Porcu 2014), or to stay relevant against the backdrop of devastating natural and artificial disasters (McLaughlin 2013a, 2013b). The award of the 2014 Toshihide Numata Prize to John K. Nelson’s 2013 book Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan is indicative of the esteem with which Buddhist funding agencies and their academic selection committees greet projects that describe Buddhism as simultaneously endangered and vibrant. Similarly, the invitation I received to publish a teaser version of this article in the confessional Buddhist magazine Tricycle (Thomas 2015c) suggests keen editorial interest in a “scrappy Buddhism survives against all odds” sort of story.

Against this backdrop, it behooves us to consider how the social structures supporting scholarly research encourage continued engagement with the longstanding narrative of Buddhist decline through lamentations of Buddhism in crisis (Reader 2011 and 2012) and celebratory stories of Buddhist survival (Nelson 2013; Porcu 2014). It is true that each millennium, century, and decade has presented Buddhists with political headwinds, demographic change, and variations in levels of donative support. But it is not the case that Buddhism is endangered, and the language of conservation that characterizes some scholarship on Japanese Buddhism runs the risk of advancing a tried and true Buddhist talking point without paying due attention to the basic fact that the very tradition that has been bemoaning a state of crisis for millennia is still with us.
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notes and references

1 In very early Buddhist texts “skillful means” referred to the Buddha’s masterful ability to teach people according to their idiosyncratic needs. With the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism around the first century CE, scriptures such as the Lotus sūtra introduced a change. The Lotus – perhaps the most influential Buddhist scripture in East Asia and the primary scripture of Ryōhōji’s Nichiren sect – presented itself as “real” against the “provisional” teachings of earlier ages (Stone and Teiser 2009; Groner and Stone 2014). This interpretive move was vividly brought to life in the famous parable of the burning house in which a father (the Buddha) tricks his distracted sons into leaving a burning building (a metaphor for saṃsāra: the cycle of birth and rebirth) by promising them three types of toys that do not actually exist. Used to justify the teaching of the “real” one vehicle over the provisional teachings of the three vehicles (arhat, pratyekabuddha, buddha), the doctrine of expedient means also legitimated the use of falsehoods (provisional distortions of conventional truth) as reasonable methods for leading ignorant humans to emancipation (ultimate truth).

2 Nichiren (1222–1282), the founder of the Nichiren sect, advocated exclusive devotion to the Lotus sūtra. He suggested that his followers adopt two methods for bringing people to this practice: Shakubuku was a method of fierce remonstration that demanded immediate conversion on the part of those who actively slandered the Lotus; shōju (“to embrace and accept”) was a method of benevolent enticement that lured those who were ignorant of the Lotus to veneration of it (Stone 1994; Stone 1999a).

3 “Cosplay” is an abbreviation of the words “costume play.”

4 KissYouTen is a creative transliteration of the goddess’s name. Kichijōten is famous as a beautiful goddess of wealth who sometimes uses her feminine allure to bring people to the dharma; several classical Japanese tales depict hapless priests who fall in love (and sometimes have sexual relations with) Kichijōten.
5 The opening shot of the videos for this program focuses on a temporary tattoo of ToroBenten on a young woman’s arm, then switches to another woman provocatively displaying the same temporary tattoo on her left breast. The soundtrack begins with traditional Buddhist percussion used for chanting sūtras, then fades into the background music of Tera Zukkyun.

6 See a gameplay demonstration video here: https://youtu.be/FyViJr7_i3c.


8 Anonymous 2012.

9 The temple’s website is divided into a splashy half characterized by the anime aesthetic, media widgets, and links to Ryōhōji-themed goods, on the one hand; on the other, a staid portion of the site provides solemn announcements about events in the annual ritual calendar.

10 I use the pronoun “he” here because the campaign seems to be primarily targeted towards heterosexual males.

11 See Kaminishi 2006, Kimbrough 2006, and Reider 2009 for examples of combinations of text and image that promoted religious sites and ideas and were targeted to lay audiences in premodern contexts.

12 See Ambros 2008 on the crucial role of oshi pilgrimage promoters and guides in the early modern period, and Reader 2007 on contemporary media representations of pilgrimage on Japanese national television.

13 Just as popular pilgrimage routes were once recreated in facsimile in other parts of Japan in the past (MacWilliams 1997), non-temple spaces such as convention halls and virtual spaces such as video games can serve as provisional sites for connecting with the temple in the present.

14 The record label Ahōdera ア法寺 is a play on Ryōhōji’s name 了法寺. It replaces the Chinese character 了 – ryō – with a derivative character, ア – ah – used in the katakana Japanese syllabary, maintains the sinophone reading of 法 (hō, dharma/law), and replaces the sinophone reading of the character for “temple” (じ) with the Japanese reading (tera). The word “ahō” is Japanese slang for “fool.” Thus, “Foolish Temple Records.”

15 Japanese onomatopoeia comes in two varieties: giongo represent sounds, while gitai go represent actions, sensations, and emotional states. Kyun is of the latter type.

16 See Saitō 2011 on otaku sexuality and the otaku’s ability to direct genuine sexual attraction to fictive characters while simultaneously inhabiting multiple fictive worlds along with the “real.”

17 Reader (2011, 2012), for example, privileges the first-person accounts of clerics, who have a vested interest in having scholars buy in to their version of the decline narrative.


