ABSTRACT

In June 2021, a proposed bill on LGBTQ anti-discrimination failed to pass in the Japanese Diet. Members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party adamantly rejected the bill by publicly stating homophobic and transphobic comments, demonstrating how Japan has a long way to go before protecting LGBTQ rights through the rule of law. Yet, despite the struggle to gain recognition in the political realm, the LGBTQ community in Japan has recently found an unexpected new group of allies: Buddhist temples. In the last couple of years, more and more Buddhist temples in Japan have begun to support the LGBTQ community through conducting gay weddings, organizing graves for gay couples, and giving posthumous names for transgender people. Why are Buddhist temples getting involved in these activities? In what ways do they benefit from them? And how do these activities contribute to broader LGBTQ activism in Japan?

My project uses a combination of ethnographic research at select Japanese temples as well as historical research on the history of Japanese homosexuality. There is a long history of homosexual relationships among Buddhist priests. Historical records from the Heian period (794 - 1185) show that senior priests in Buddhist temples practiced male love with *chigo* — young disciples who were targets of homoerotic fantasy — as a religious practice. The chigo model was later passed down to secular realms of society and became popular among samurais, students, and soldiers. I will argue that the model of the adult male-*chigo* relationships associated homosexuality with particular social hierarchies that do not translate easily into modern ideas of love and marriage. Hence, there is resistance to the idea of same-sex love and marriage.

Historically, the primary functions of Japanese Buddhist temples have been to provide funerary services. Contemporary LGBTQ-supportive Buddhist temples are now offering funerary services specifically tailored to the LGBTQ population. Additionally, LGBTQ-supportive Buddhist temples are getting into the business of weddings. In recent Japanese history, weddings have been the responsibility of Shinto shrines or Christian churches. Something new is happening here. My ethnographic research, which involves interviews with select LGBTQ-supportive Buddhist priests and nuns, explores the motivations for promoting LGBTQ funerary services and same-sex Buddhist weddings. Among these are a commitment to envisioning an inclusive and egalitarian Japanese society, as well as the pressing need for Buddhist temples to stay relevant to people's lives and deaths.

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

"WE MUST SHAPE THE NEXT FUTURE ": THE ROLE OF BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN JAPAN'S LGBTQ ACTIVISM

by

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Introduction

In the last seven years, the subject of LGBTQ rights has emerged as a topic of heated discussion in Japanese politics. While Japan does not have sodomy laws that criminalize same-sex relationships, it also does not have laws that authorize same-sex marriage or protect LGBTQ people from discrimination (Chi 2016, 75). LGBTQ people have constantly existed in Japan throughout its history and yet, they have been marginalized and excluded from political conversations. This changed in 2015 when Shibuya and Setagaya wards in Tokyo launched a same-sex partnership system in their local governments. Same-sex partnership systems are initiatives by municipal governments to recognize same-sex couples at the local level so that they can receive social benefits as couples. The spread of these partnership systems sparked a debate regarding the legalization of same-sex marriage in Japan. The general population of Japan finally began to pay attention to issues surrounding the LGBTQ community. Additionally, the discussion of same-sex marriage gave rise to the movement to establish an LGBTQ anti-discrimination law in Japan.

Nevertheless, the proposed bill on LGBTQ anti-discrimination failed to pass in the Japanese Diet during its June 2021 session. Throughout the Diet session, members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party adamantly rejected the bill by publicly stating homophobic and transphobic comments. This elucidated how Japan has a long way to go before protecting LGBTQ rights through the rule of law. Yet, despite the struggle to gain recognition in the political realm, the LGBTQ community in Japan has recently found an unexpected new group of allies: Buddhist temples. In the last couple of years, more and more Buddhist temples in Japan have begun to show support for the LGBTQ community through conducting gay weddings, organizing graves for gay couples, and giving posthumous names for transgender and non-binary people. Why are Buddhist temples getting involved in these activities? In what

ways do they benefit from them? And how do these activities contribute to broader LGBTQ activism in Japan?

Inspiration for the Study

I first learned about Japanese Buddhist temples' LGBTQ activism in February 2021. At that time, I was doing an internship at Human Rights Watch's Tokyo office where I was working on the LGBTQ Equality Act campaign. As I will explain further in this thesis, the LGBTQ Equality Act was a national and global campaign that attempted to establish an LGBTQ anti-discrimination law in Japan. I worked alongside lawyers and activists in promoting this campaign to the public and lobbying at the national parliament. In the course of my work, I came across an article that was written on Saimyou-ji's Reverend Senda and his decision to conduct gay weddings at his temple. Since most of the LGBTQ activism happening in Japan is led by young secular activists, I was surprised to read about a Buddhist temple endorsing LGBTQ equality. However, what really caught my attention was the fact that Saimyou-ji's way of supporting LGBTQ people was through weddings.

As someone who has lived in Japan for the last 10 years, I was very much aware of the stereotype that many people in Japan have about Buddhist temples. Japanese people assume that Japanese Buddhist temples are places exclusively for holding funerals. While I was unaware of the historical background at the time, I knew that people referred to Japanese Buddhism as *soushiki-bukkyō* (葬式仏教), which literally means "funeral Buddhism." I also knew from my own experience that this image of funeral Buddhism is more than a stereotype. For many temples, it is simply the reality. The Soto Zen temple that my family belongs to focuses entirely on holding funerals for people in the local community. Although the temple's gate is always open and people are free to go inside, the only activities happening at the temple are funerary rituals. The last time our family contacted the temple was a few years ago when

my grandfather died, and I am fairly certain that the next time we meet the clergy is when someone else in my family passes away. Because I had this strong association with Buddhist temples and funerals, I was fascinated by Saimyou-ji's initiative.

As I did more research on gay weddings at Buddhist temples, I learned that there were an increasing number of temples beginning to support the LGBTQ community. These temples were not only holding gay weddings but were also revising and creating new ways of doing funerary rituals for LGBTQ people. The fact that these Buddhist temples were creating new rituals and adapting pre-existing rituals meant that there was a motivation for getting involved in LGBTQ activism. This topic is of great importance to me both academically and personally. Academically, conducting research on Japanese Buddhist temples' LGBTQ activism has allowed me to deepen my understanding of Japanese Buddhism. In the last four years that I have studied Buddhism, I have become more and more interested in learning about Japanese Buddhism's focus on funerals. To this end, working on this project has allowed me to explore the historical background as well as present-day issues that account for Japan's funeral Buddhism. Personally, as a Japanese LGBTQ-identifying individual, conducting this research has helped me be more positive about the future of LGBTQ rights in Japan. It is very easy to feel discouraged when you hear homophobic slurs in the streets or see the leading political party actively deny LGBTQ rights. Therefore, it has given me a lot of joy and hopes to know that my own community is being seen and affirmed by traditional institutions like Buddhist temples.

Purpose of the Study

In the last year or so, Buddhist temples' participation in LGBTQ activism has been receiving a significant amount of attention from the Japanese media. Undeniably, Japanese people are interested to learn about how and why Buddhist temples support the LGBTQ community.

Nevertheless, there has yet to be any scholarship published on the topic by virtue of how recent the phenomenon is. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to establish an academic foundation for understanding the ways in which Buddhist temples support the LGBTQ community and the motivations behind their engagement. Because this is a newly developing trend, my goal is not to make generalizations of the phenomenon based on the temples that I interviewed. As I will discuss in the following chapters, LGBTQ supportive temples belong to a variety of Buddhist sects and are located in different regions of Japan. Supporting the LGBTQ community is by no means a regional or sect-sanctioned trend. As of now, the decision to take part in LGBTQ activism has been made by individual priests and nuns based on their own reasonings and motivations. For this reason, rather than attempting to understand what is happening through generalizations, I aim to highlight the variety of Buddhist ways to support the LGBTQ community and the complexity of the temples' motivations.

My goal in writing this thesis is to challenge two commonly held assumptions by Japanese people. The first is the idea that Buddhist temples are only for holding funerals. As I will discuss further in the body of the thesis, historical events and the current social dynamic has conditioned Japanese people to associate Buddhist temples with funerals. Nevertheless, this research brings attention to how some temples are making efforts to push against this stereotype. My interviews with the clergy at select Buddhist temples offer an insight into the many interesting activities and services offered at their temple. These include gay weddings as well as informative seminars and consultancy for LGBTQ people, all of which are specifically designed in a way to help the LGBTQ community and raise awareness of them. Therefore, I aim to challenge the image of funeral Buddhism in hope that more LGBTQ people in Japan become aware of these Buddhist temples' activities and take advantage of them.

The second assumption is the idea that LGBTQ activism in Japan is a movement dominated by young people in society. Oftentimes, I hear the older generation say that LGBTQ

rights only concern the youth population. These people believe that those who are pushing for LGBTQ rights are negatively influenced by foreign countries and trying to create a divide in Japanese society. However, this is simply not the case. As I explain in the following chapter, the history of gender and sexuality in Japan suggests that there is nothing foreign about affirming LGBTQ people in Japan. Furthermore, the initiatives of the Buddhist temples I examined indicate that LGBTQ activism is a more diverse movement than many people believe. The age of the clergy I interviewed vary between 30s and 60s and they all come from different regions of the country. Furthermore, Buddhist temples are an integral part of Japanese society and carry prestige as traditional institutions. Therefore, Buddhist temples' participation in LGBTQ activism is a testament to how the movement consists of various groups of people and not just the younger generation.

Methods

Methodologically, this research combines historical, political, and ethnographic research. In order to research the history of gender and sexuality in Japan, I read academic books and articles as well as novels written in both Japanese and English. In terms of the data on the legal, political, and social discrimination against the LGBTQ community, I was aware of most of the information through my internship with Human Rights Watch. For additional details, I studied news articles and human rights organizations' websites.

My ethnographic research began with the search for LGBTQ-supportive temples, which was mainly conducted online. Then, I researched out to temples through emails, phone calls, and social media to ask for an interview. As I did more interviews, however, I was able to meet more clergy through my interviewees' personal connections. In the end, I was able to interview eight clergy and the CEO of a consulting company that works with Buddhist temples. Overall, the priests and nuns I approached were open to talking about their LGBTQ-supportive

activities with me. Since all of them are vocal about their support for the LGBTQ community, they were happy to contribute to my research and have their real name published with it. Furthermore, because there is no prior research on the topic, many of the priests and nuns were eager to learn about the initiatives of other LGBTQ-supportive temples through my findings. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours and were all conducted in Japanese. Although I prepared many questions beforehand, the interviews were generally open-ended, and I allowed for the clergy's responses to guide the conversation. By virtue of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of these interviews were conducted over Zoom. Saimyou-ji was the only temple that I was able to visit in person during the summer of 2021.

Organization of the Thesis

The body of this thesis is organized into three chapters. In the following chapter, I provide a brief overview of the history of gender and homosexuality in Japan. Contrary to the current homophobic climate, Japan has a long history in which homosexual practices existed in mainstream society. It all began in the Heian period (794-1185) when the Buddhist monk Kūkai institutionalized homosexual practices at his temple. Historical records of this time show that senior priests in Buddhist temples practiced male love with *chigo* — young disciples who were targets of homoerotic fantasy — for the purpose of spiritual awakening. This *chigo*-model of homosexual relationships was later passed down to secular realms of society and continued throughout the Edo period (1603-1868). The understanding of gender during the Edo period was vastly different from the gender binary as we know it today. In the Edo period where women and young pretty boys were considered to be equally attractive sexual partners for men. This perception shifted in the Meiji period (1868-1912), however, when Japan went through a cultural revolution that introduced new understandings of gender and sexuality. The historical narrative I tell in this chapter is not intended to be all-encompassing. Gender and homosexuality

in Japan have a vast history and the topic is deserving of a thesis by itself. Rather, my intention is to illustrate the chronology in which the Buddhist *chigo*-model of homosexual relationships flourished in mainstream society for centuries before being demonized and losing its societal approval in the modern period.

In chapter two, I explain the legal, political, and social barriers that contribute to the marginalization of LGBTQ people in contemporary Japan. There are currently many legal restrictions that are imposed against LGBTQ people. One of the most prominent examples is the illegality of same-sex marriage. Because same-sex couples cannot prove their relationship legally, they are barred from having rights such as visiting their partner at the hospital and having joint custody. Furthermore, the process of changing one's legal gender has long been criticized as being discriminatory. The restrictions for legal gender change reveal that changing gender is only accessible to a few and excludes many transgender people in Japan. Closely tied to the legal hurdles are the political barriers to LGBTQ equality. The current ruling party of Japan has continuously failed to protect the LGBTQ community through the rule of law. By examining the Equality Act Japan's campaign to pass an LGBT anti-discrimination law, I demonstrate how leading politicians' homophobia and transphobia are the main forces inhibiting LGBTQ equality. These legal and political hurdles have impacted the everyday lives of LGBTQ people in Japan who remain vulnerable to social discrimination such as medical harassment and school bullying.

In chapter three, I explore the types of LGBTQ activism happening at the temples and present my ethnographic research interviewing priests and nuns. The temples I examined mainly support the LGBTQ community by providing graves, giving posthumous names, and holding weddings. For each of these rituals, I give a brief overview of their history in the context of Japanese Buddhism. From there, I discuss the ways in which the clergy I interviewed adapted these rituals into LGBTQ-supportive services. By highlighting individual voices, I

bring attention to the creativity of these rituals, the process of introducing them at the temples, and the struggles that the clergy occasionally face. These individual stories of the clergy reveal how there is a range of motivations for taking part in LGBTQ Buddhism. To some extent, the motivation stems from a genuine desire to help the LGBTQ community. The priests and nuns are aware that the Japanese government has continuously failed the LGBTQ community and are stepping up as alternative allies. At the same time, there is motivation to change the image of funeral Buddhism. Since many priests and nuns find the framework of funeral Buddhism to be restrictive, there is a wish to extend their services beyond providing funerals and be involved in other aspects of people's lives.

Chapter 1

History of Gender and Sexuality in Japan

In spite of the current homophobic climate, Japan has a long history of embracing homosexual practices in mainstream society. Many of these practices, as well as the language used to describe them derive from Buddhism and the rituals performed at temples. In this section, I provide an overview of the history of homosexuality in Japan. The story I tell begins with the Buddhist monk who, according to tradition, introduced the Buddhist temple practices of homosexuality to Japan during the Heian period (794-1185) and his influence on the institutionalization of homosexual practices in temples. From there, I move on to the Edo period (1603-1868) when diverse expressions of sexuality flourished in mainstream society. Next, I transition to the Meiji period (1868-1912) when new laws and norms were established to condemn homosexual practices. Finally, I talk about the ways in which homosexuality persisted throughout Imperial Japan (1894-1945) in the male-dominated sectors of society such as boys' schools and the imperial army. The narrative I provide highlights the transition in which homosexual practices in Buddhist temples were given new meanings in secular society. Moreover, my analysis offers insight into why same-sex marriage continues to be unavailable in Japan despite its rich history of homosexual practices.

Chigo: Homosexual Practices in Buddhist Temples

Kūkai (774-835), a Buddhist monk who lived in the ninth century, is well-known for studying Buddhism in China and founding the Shingon (True World) sect upon returning to Japan (Mackintosh 2010, 185). Although perhaps to a lesser degree, he is also credited for being the first person to introduce the teachings of male homosexuality to Japan. During his two years in China, Kūkai studied Shingon Buddhism, which is the esoteric tradition of Buddhism (Schalow

1985, 215). In the Shingon tradition, oral transmission from masters to disciples were customary and thus the master-disciple relationship was deemed necessary for religious awakening (Schalow 1985, 215-216). It was in this context that homosexual relationships in temples flourished. The connection between Kūkai and homosexuality is stated in *Kobo Daishi's Book*, written by Mitsuo Sadatomo and published in 1598.[1] Kobo Daishi is Kūkai's posthumous name, and this book contains words transmitted by Kūkai himself on how monks should seduce young novices and the sexual techniques that they should use (Endsjø 2012, 120). Although this book was unusual for the time, the fact that it contained the words of an accomplished monk like Kūkai legitimized the contents (Schalow 1985, 217). Moreover, the book was written with the premise that sex between men was a sacred mystery that was tied to the esoteric mysteries of the Shingon sect (Endsjø 2012, 120). Therefore, homosexual relationships between monks and their young disciples were justified as being essential religious practices.

In 816, Kūkai founded a complex of Shingon temples in Mount Kōya, located in what is now the Wakayama prefecture of Japan (Schalow 1985, 216). The idea of training in an isolated place with no distraction attracted many prospective monks, leading to the spread of secluded mountain temples across different Buddhist sects in Japan (Childs 1980, 127). It was assumed that by entering these temples, one would stay celibate and focus on Buddhist training. In reality, however, monks at Mount Kōya indulged in homosexual relationships with novice monks (Schalow 1985, 216). While the exact origin remains unknown, it was around this time that the term *chigo* became widely used among Buddhist temples in Japan. *Chigo* (稚児) refers to young trainee boys between the ages of about seven to sixteen, who served as intimate assistants to older monks at temples (Kimura 2010, 42). Among other tasks at the temples,

[1] For detailed contents of *Kobo Daishi's Book*, see Schalow, Paul Gordon, 1992, "Kūkai and the Tradition of Male Love in Japanese Buddhism," In *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gende*r, State University of New York Press.

chigo was responsible for being in submissive sexual relationships with their masters (Porath 2019, 1). The spread of this term indicates how the tradition that Kūkai established of entertaining homosexual acts in Buddhist temples spread to different sects and regions.

The Tendai sect was among the first Buddhist sects in Japan that adopted the Shingon tradition of practicing homosexuality in temples. Not only did it incorporate the practices, but it institutionalized *chigo* as a rite of passage for novice monks. *Chigo kanjō*, translated as the consecration of acolytes, became a sexual initiation ritual that empowered and sanctified young monks (Porath 2019, 2). Through this ritual, many of the young boys at Mount Hiei, a Tendai temple complex located in the current Shiga prefecture, were objects of homoerotic love in much the same way as the Shingon sect's Mount Kōya (Minamoto and Glassman 1993, 109). Young boys who went through this ritual were considered to be divine and the monks who had sex with the boys were said to be closer to reaching awakening (Porath 2019, xii). As was the case with Kūkai's Shingon sect, homosexual acts were justified in the name of religion.

What is fascinating about the practice of *chigo* is that when engaging in sexual activities, *chigo* would represent their gender as female by dressing up in female attire (Kimura 2010, 43). It is worth noting that this was not against Buddhist doctrines, since Buddhism in Japan has never forbidden cross-dressing throughout its entire history (Mitsuhashi 2015, 435). Furthermore, literature and poems based on the experiences of monks at Mount Hiei demonstrate that young boys who had attractive female-like features were the ones that became extremely popular among the senior monks.[2] Here, I would like to briefly compare the position of women and *chigo* as targets of male desire. Although women and *chigo* had different roles in society, they were similar in the sense that from a male perspective, both were seen as objects of protection, care, and admiration. Both were smaller, gentler, and prettier than adult men

[2] Chigo frequently appeared in Japanese literature at the time, leading to the creation of *Chigo Monogatari*, a genre that fictionalized accounts of homosexual love affairs in Buddhist temples. For more information, see Childs, Margaret H, 1980, "Chigo Monogatari: Love Stories or Buddhist Sermons?" Monumenta Nipponica, 35 (2): 127-151.

(Schmidt-Hori 2021, 12). In this regard, women and *chigo* were viewed as being equally sexually desirable. The difference, however, is that *chigo* were allowed to be more open about their sexual expressions than women. Whereas women were frequently rejected if they were too sexually eager, it was acceptable for *chigo* to feel and express sexual emotions by virtue of their male sex (Schmidt-Hori 2021, 17). This is why *chigo*, who had both pretty features and the capacity to exhibit sexual enjoyment, were the most popular targets of sexual interaction. These records prove that there were two sides to the motivation behind the practice of *chigo*: the first was for the sake of religious training and the second was to have attractive sexual partners that can satisfy one's needs. In the context of Buddhist temples, these religious and sexual motivations were intertwined and difficult to separate. Over time, however, the second motivation for having attractive sexual partners was passed down to secular realms of society along with the term *chigo*.

Gender Binary of the Edo Period

The Edo period was a time when popular culture such as paintings, magazines, and plays flourished and became accessible to working-class citizens. Among others, Kabuki theater was particularly popular due to its powerful dancing and dramatic stories. Kabuki is an all-male theater that performs stories of townspeople of the Edo period and remains one of the greatest performing arts in Japan to this day (Kabuki 20221). However, the Kabuki theater during the Edo period differed from what it is today in mainly three aspects. The first is that all the actors performing were young boys who were underage (Mitsuhashi 2010, 108). Although there is no age range for current kabuki, there was an age limit at the beginning of the Edo period where only young men below the age of 20 were permitted as actors. The second is that kabuki actors who played female roles dressed and lived as women even when they were not on stage (Mitsuhashi 2015, 435). This is hard to believe since nowadays, kabuki actors with female roles

only present themselves as women on stage and live their lives as men outside of their careers. The third is the social role that they fulfilled as escorts and sex workers. In the current period, kabuki actors are considered to be a distinguished group of people responsible for preserving Japan's traditional art. The path to becoming a kabuki actor is extremely limited and by virtue of its exclusiveness, the social status of kabuki actors is considered to be higher than normal citizens. However, during the Edo period, kabuki actors consisted of working-class boys and thus the actors were much more intimate with their audiences (Mitsuhashi 2010, 113). For this reason, kabuki actors not only performed on stage but also served adult men as escorts and sex workers outside of their acting careers (Mitsuhashi 2010, 113).

Kabuki actors of the Edo period are prominent examples of how the *chigo*-model of male homosexuality was introduced to secular realms of society. *Chigo* in Buddhist temples and kabuki actors share many commonalities in the sense that they were both underage boys, cross-dressed on a daily basis, and served as sexual partners for older men. In addition, homoerotic love was seen as a rite of passage in kabuki, as was the case in Buddhist temples. A common saying in the Edo period goes, "one becomes an adult after eating bamboo shoots." Since the bamboo shoot is a vegetable that is no longer edible once it grows big, the meaning of this saying is that in order to become an adult man, one must engage in sexual relationships with boys while they are young (Mitsuhashi 2010, 118). This positioning of homosexual acts as preconditions to becoming an adult is similar to that of Buddhist temples, where engaging in sex with *chigo* was seen as a way to attain enlightenment faster.

However, there are also significant differences between the two that are worth highlighting. Whereas *chigo* training at mountain temples were secluded from mainstream society and confined to an all-male institution, kabuki actors were at the center of the society and interacted with both men and women living in the city of Edo (Mitsuhashi 2015, 435). Therefore, kabuki actors coexisted with women rather than replacing them as was the case with

chigo. This coexistence of women and kabuki actors led to fascinating dynamics between the two. As popular idols of the time, kabuki actors were seen as fashion icons by young women (Mitsuhashi 2010, 110). The popular female hairstyle of the Edo period of putting one's hair up was in fact something that the kabuki actors invented (Mitsuhashi 2010, 110). In addition, *furisode*, a kimono worn commonly by young women was first worn by kabuki actors in their plays (Mitsuhashi 2010, 111). These fashion trends that are now understood to be female signifiers actually have their origins in kabuki actors, and women were the ones copying the trends.

This dynamic between women and kabuki actors resulted in the blurring of the distinction between the two. Kabuki actors were acting and dressing like women, but they also had a significant influence on how women dressed and presented themselves. Mitsuhashi Junko, a historian of gender and sexuality in Japan, argues that the gender binary of the Edo period was vastly different from that of contemporary times. Rather than the men/women binary that represents the current society, she theorizes that the binary in the Edo period was adult men/other (Mitsuhashi 2010, 106). She explains that the "other" category included anyone other than adult men, such as adult women, young women, as well as young men (Mitsuhashi 2010, 106). Because women and young men were similar in their appearances and position in society, Mitsuhashi emphasizes that there was no need for society to distinguish the two (Mitsuhashi 2010, 106).

Here, I would like to introduce two terms that are crucial in understanding the role of women and young men in Edo society— *nanshoku* (男色) and *jyoshoku* (女色). *Nanshoku* refers to the homoerotic affairs that adult men have with young male sex workers, and jyoshoku refers to the affairs that adult men have with young female sex workers (Mitsuhashi 2010, 114). It is important to keep in mind here that for both terms, the subject is the adult male and is never the young male or female. Moreover, *shoku* (色) pertains to the relationship with sex

workers and is not used to describe the relationships between adult male and female who are not sex workers (Mitsuhashi 2010, 114). Mitsuhashi explains how despite the difference of one being homosexual and the other being heterosexual, *nanshoku* and *jyoshoku* were given the same weight in Edo society due to their common nature of being concerned with non-reproductive sex (Mitsuhashi 2010, 114). *Shoku* refers to the realm of society that is irrelevant to reproduction, and the distinction between *shoku* and the household was more prominent than that of homosexuality and heterosexuality at the time. In fact, the idea of distinguishing the homo and hetero did not exist in Japan until the Meiji period when foreign influences changed the norms of society (Maekawa 2017). Thus, engaging in *nanshoku* did not automatically translate into one being homosexual and the same could be said for *jyoshoku* and heterosexuality. Interestingly, pornographic magazines at the time were not separated based on sexual orientation, but rather contained both homosexual and heterosexual content in one magazine (Mitsuhashi 2010, 120). This illustrates how sexuality was understood to be much more fluid in the Edo period than it is now.

Meiji Period and the Reconstruction of Sexuality

The Meiji period was a time of political, social, and cultural revolution in Japan. After the end of the Edo period which lasted for nearly 300 years, Japan was forced to open itself to the world and welcome foreign influences. This meant that old customs and laws that were seen as being obsolete were replaced with new ones. It was during this time that Japan's openness to various forms of sexuality came to an end and new rigid understandings of gender and sexuality were institutionalized. In 1873, a new law was enacted by the Meiji government which prohibited public displays of traditional Japanese customs that were considered to be shameful from a foreigner's perspective (Mitsuhashi 2010, 122). These customs included acts like public urination, men and women taking baths together, and cross-dressing (Mitsuhashi 2010, 122-

123). In spite of the normalization of cross-dressing among kabuki actors in the Edo period, the act was now criminalized and seen as a shameful aspect of Japanese culture. Moreover, homosexual sex was banned through the criminalization of anal sex (Mitsuhashi 2010, 125). This law was enacted to censor the educational training system that existed in the Satsuma province, where older male students engaged in *nanshoku* with younger boys (Mitsuhashi 2015). Engaging in homosexual acts with beautiful boys was seen as a status in this system and younger boys who were considered to be attractive were called *chigo-sama* and were idolized among the students (Mitsuhashi 2015). Once again, we see the hierarchical *chigo*-model of homosexuality expanding to secular realms of society. It is also interesting how the term *chigo* was used just as it is to describe the relationship between male students in Satsuma. Regardless, the prevalence of *nanshoku* in Satsuma led the concerned government to criminalize homosexual acts, which lasted for approximately a decade (Mitsuhashi 2010, 126). Once the official criminal law of the Meiji government was enacted in 1882, cross-dressing and anal sex were no longer prohibited through the rule of law (Mitsuhashi 2010, 126). However, the idea that these homosexual practices were things to be embarrassed by continued to be upheld in Japanese society.

Although it was short-lived, the sudden criminalization of homosexual customs that were widely accepted in the Edo period demonstrates how foreign influence played a major role in the reconstruction of gender and sexuality in Japan. Historical accounts of a Dutch merchant who visited Japan at the end of the Edo Period offer insight into the ways in which European foreigners grappled with the homosexual culture in Japan. In a letter to his counterpart in the Netherlands, the Dutch merchant criticized Japanese people for openly talking about their homosexual interactions without embarrassment (Mitsuhashi 2015). Furthermore, many Christian missionaries who came to Japan from Portugal condemned Japan for embracing homosexuality in such a public manner (Mitsuhashi 2015). Therefore, the

criminalization of homosexual acts in the Meiji period was a response to shaming from foreign countries. In order to be accepted by the European powers, the government abolished the ambiguous gender distinctions and began to work on creating a society based on the male/female gender binary.

During the same period in Europe, new understandings of homosexual people emerged in which homosexuality was contextualized as a medical condition (Maekawa 2017, 29). In 1886, the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing released *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which established terms such as "homosexual" and "bisexual" in addition to framing them as sexual perversions (Maekawa 2017, 29). This theory was brought into Japan during the Meiji period and was taken up by many scholars who translated the book and spread the ideas across the country (Mitsuhashi 2015, 436-437). Many people viewed Krafft-Ebing's theory as being cutting-edge and reliable, allowing it to have a significant influence on the process of reshaping sexuality in Japan (Maekawa 2017, 31). One of the ways it did so was through the categorization of "homosexuality." While preexisting terms such as *chigo* and *nanshoku* had been used to describe homosexual relationships, they specifically referred to sexual acts with younger boys and not romantic relationships. Krafft-Ebing's theory led to the creation of the term *dōseiai* (同性愛), the Japanese translation of homosexuality, which was the first term that referred to homosexual love and relationships outside of the *chigo* and *nanshoku* tradition (Maekawa 2017, 32). Through the creation of this term, Japanese people were for the first time exposed to the idea that not only homosexual sexual acts and desires but also homosexual love and romance can exist (Maekawa 2017, 32). Another way in which this theory impacted Japan's sexuality is by providing academic legitimacy for homophobia. Krafft-Ebing's conceptualization of homosexual people as being "sexually perverse" became widely used by Japanese scholars in response to homosexual practices of the Edo period (Mitsuhashi 2015, 437). Scholars were at the forefront of the cultural revolution in the Meiji period and

many of them viewed European cultures as being superior to that of Japan (Mitsuhashi 2015, 437). For this reason, Krafft-Ebing's theory became a useful tool to shut down past practices in the name of modernization.

Persistence of Homosexual Practices in Imperial Japan

The latter half of the Meiji period was met with even more policing of cross-dressing and homosexual activities. Around the time of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904), the idea of non-reproductive sex became socially unacceptable. With Japan going to war, the demand for soldiers rose and this pressured people to engage in reproductive relationships and have children, rather than indulging in non-reproductive sex (Mitsuhashi 2010, 127). People started to reject *nanshoku* and *jyoshoku* as forms of relationship and instead, the form of falling in love, getting married, and having children was incorporated into society (Mitsuhashi 2010, 127). This led to the association of sex with the household, a connection that was never really made prior to the imperial period. Due to the government's isolationist policies and the absence of disputes with foreign nations, the Edo period is said to be the most peaceful time in Japanese history. Since there was no political need to procreate, many men did not get married and engaged in the world of *nanshoku* and *jyoshoku*. As the existence of the term *jyoshoku* suggests, many women were also working as sex workers and escorts and since they were financially independent, it was unnecessary for them to get married. For this reason, it is estimated that only 30 to 40% of the men in the Edo period were in a married relationship (Mitsuhashi 2010, 127). Yet, this percentage rose to approximately 90% in the latter half of the Meiji period, establishing marriage as the social norm (Mitsuhashi 2010, 127). With the pressure to fall in love and have a family, homosexual practices were gradually alienated from mainstream Japanese society.

Nevertheless, the spread of marriage did not entail the disappearance of homosexual

relationships in Japan; they were merely hidden from mainstream society. This reality is represented in *Vita Sexualis*, a novel published in 1909 by Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) who is known as one of the founders of modern Japanese literature. *Vita Sexualis* is a homoerotic story that explores the homoerotic desires and experiences of the male protagonist Kanai Shizuka (Mori 1909). Kanai first encounters homosexuality at his boys' school dorm in Tokyo, where hierarchical sexual relationships were formed between the upper and lower classmen. For Kanai, this was his first exposure to not only homosexual sex but sex in general. In this sense, homosexuality preceded heterosexuality for Kanai, as was the case with many boys at the time (Kimura 2010, 26). One of the fascinating scenes of this story is when Kanai mentions how he thought homosexuality was something practiced exclusively in the Satsuma region. This shows how Satsuma's custom of having *chigo-sama* in male-dominated spaces was widely known among people in Japan and had spread to other parts of the country such as Tokyo. Later when he graduates from school and becomes an adult, Kanai struggles with his lack of sexual desire for women. Even after leaving male dormitories, he was not able to get rid of his sexual feelings for men. Following the paths of his male counterparts, Kanai eventually conforms to the heterosexual society and its marital system. While he participated in heterosexuality on the outside, his sexual desire for men inside remained strongly on the inside.

Vita Sexualis is a story that well represents the remnants of Edo sexual traditions during the changing climate of sexuality in Japan. The ways in which homosexuality is depicted in the story illustrate how homosexual practices were no longer acceptable in mainstream society and had to be a hidden matter. Furthermore, Kanai's confusion with the idea that heterosexuality takes precedence over homosexuality symbolizes the inner struggle that many men at the time were confronted with.[3] It is worth noting that immediately after its 1909 publication, *Vita Sexualis* was banned by the Meiji government from being sold (Nakai 1980,

[3] For personal accounts on male homosexuality at the time, see Inoue, Minato, 2020, 明治・大正・昭和の男色 [Male Homosexuality of the Meiji, Taisho, Showa Period], Kindle.

230). Due to the sensational depiction of boys' schools in the books, the government claimed that the contents were detrimental to public morals (Nakai 1980, 230). Born at the end of the Edo period and having lived through the Meiji cultural revolution, Ōgai himself experienced first-hand the rearrangement of sexuality in Japan (Kimura 2010, 17-18). Moreover, through his experience of studying abroad in Germany, he was exposed to the European-based Christian notion of romantic relations where men and women would fall in love and get married (Kimura 2010, 28). Upon returning to Japan, he saw other intellectuals promoting the ideology of romantic love as the ideal form of human relationship (Kimura 2010, 28). Therefore, *Vita Sexualis* is Ōgai's explanation of what it meant to apply Christian notions of morality to modern Japan, where homosexual interactions were normalized not too long ago. Its story offers insight into how Japanese men navigated their way through past homosexual interactions and the present heterosexual relationships. Most importantly, *Vita Sexualis* is solid proof that homosexual practices persisted at the margins of society in exclusively male spaces.

Another example that proves the persistence of homosexuality is the imperial army that many men joined at the time. In much the same way as boys' dormitories, the army base was a homosocial space that was secluded from other mainstream parts of the society. There were broadly two types of men who took part in homosexuality at the army bases. The first type was those who were exposed to homosexuality prior to joining the army. These men experienced hierarchical relationships during their time at boys' schools and came to the base with the assumption that they would be able to engage in homosexual sex again (Inoue 2020).[4] The second type is those who encountered homosexuality for the first time in the army. This type consisted mainly of younger soldiers who had not completed their education yet (Inoue 2020). Because of this differing experience level between the two types, homosexual practices in the imperial army used the *chigo*-model where the seniors led younger boys in sexual

[4] The page numbers are not included since this book is only available in the Kindle version.

activities. Having pretty boys as partners was seen as a status, and the boy soldiers were expected to follow the orders of their older partners and give them pleasure when asked to (Inoue 2020). Like Kanai from *Vita Sexualis*, most of the imperial soldiers understood that homosexuality was limited to a specific time and place and that they would eventually become part of the heterosexual society. Nevertheless, there were some retired soldiers who could not conform to the heterosexual system and continued to search for places to engage in homosexuality. These men were the first people in Japan to open gay bars and clubs where they cross-dressed and provided services to male customers (Mitsuhashi 2015, 438). One thing that should be made clear here is that these new gay bars were not the same as the brothels in the Edo period where people openly admitted to going and having sex with men. Instead, they were isolated from mainstream leisure and were viewed as secret places. Regardless, the fact that these places existed shows that there was a demand for gay bars and that there were enough customers for them to stay in business (Mitsuhashi 2010, 438). Through these new spaces, homosexuality in Japan reconstructed itself as an underground culture.

The Establishment and Implications of Homosexual Love

The cultural revolution of the Meiji period instigated the reorganization of gender and sexuality in Japan. Prior to the revolution, gender was considered to be ambiguous and there was no need to make clear distinctions between men and women. The prevalence of non-reproductive sexual culture in the Edo period allowed various forms of gender expressions and sexual relationships to take place at the center of society. What is more, people who participated in these practices were assigned specific social roles and were valued members of the community (Mitsuhashi 2015, 436). However, after the cultural revolution, European ideologies of gender and romantic relationships were incorporated. This led to the criminalization of homosexual customs of the Edo period, as well as the spread of homophobic theories in academia. Additionally, Japan's

political agenda of becoming a major power forced people to get married, engage in reproductive sex, and contribute to population growth. These changes culminated in the shift of perception among Japanese people, where they started to see cross-dressing and homosexual sex as something to be embarrassed by. Hence, even though homosocial spaces continued to exist in the post-imperial period, they were hidden from people's eyes and were not talked about publicly. During the post-WWII period, Japan went through large scale reconstruction under the lead of the United States. This increased mixed-gender social spaces such as coeducation schools, leading to a further decrease in homosocial spaces (Mitsuhashi 2015). Thus, homosocial spaces in Japan have been restricted since the cultural revolution of the Meiji period.

Looking back on the course of homosexual history in Japan, it is clear how the *chigo*-model relationship in Buddhist temples became a framework for the development of homosexual spaces in society. From young kabuki actors working as escorts to boy soldiers in imperial Japan, homosexual relationships flourished in different areas of society across time. In the long history of applying the *chigo*-model to secular settings, three features of the model were constantly passed down. The first is the age limitation for sexually desirable boys. In all cases of homosexual relationships that I discussed the target boys fall between the ages of 9 to 18. Although the definition of adult men changed between the Heian and Meiji periods, the boys who were considered to be desirable were always underage. Therefore, homosexuality in Japan has historically been understood to be a practice done exclusively with young boys. Related to the first point, the second feature that has constantly been present is the time limit for homosexual relationships. Because young boys were the sole target of homosexual attention, the relationships were expected to cease when the boys became adults. The *chigo*-model relationship was considered to be a rite of passage and not something that lasted forever. Furthermore, kabuki actor brothels, boys' schools, and the imperial army were all institutions

that men could only belong to for a couple of years. This is another way in which a time limit was given to homosexual relationships. The third feature is the hierarchical nature of homosexual interactions. Relationships in temples, boys' schools, and the imperial army were all between men in higher positions and boys in lower positions; it was never between equal counterparts. Moreover, the younger boys were expected to have submissive attitudes and oblige their seniors during the sexual intercourse. Based on these facts, the *chigo*-model can be seen as a hierarchical system for sexual actions, rather than for egalitarian homosexual relationships and love.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge the lack of lesbian narratives in Japan's history of gender and sexuality. While I was able to find many historical accounts of male homosexuality in my research, the same cannot be said for lesbianism. One of the reasons why it is difficult to find information on female same-sex relationships is because it has consistently been condemned throughout history. While there is no official record of the Edo government banning lesbian relationships, many literary works published during this time reference the prohibition of female same-sex practices (Chalmers 2002, 19). Therefore, lesbian practices did not enjoy the same level of social belonging that male homosexual practices did. Ukiyo-e arts produced during the Edo period depict female sexual intercourse, which may be considered evidence of lesbian acceptance. However, these arts were produced for and consumed by men (Chalmers 2002, 19). They were treated as pornography exclusively for male consumption and therefore are not proof that lesbian practices existed in mainstream Edo society. As the concept of *nanshoku* and *jyoshoku* demonstrates, the subject of sexual desire and relationships was always considered to be adult men. On the other hand, women and young men were viewed as objects for sexual consumption, who themselves were not necessarily expected to have sexual desires. In this context, female sexual desire was illegitimate even during the Edo period when gender and sexuality were understood to be fluid. In the post-Meiji period, lesbians faced

discrimination along with male homosexuals, if not more. With the lack of historical precedents that gay men have, women's sexual desire for other women was seen as a parental failure that families should be ashamed of (Kincaid 2015). Therefore, lesbianism has been marginalized and shamed throughout Japanese history to this day.

When thinking about the current insufficiency of social and legal recognition of the LGBTQ community, it is evident how the lack of egalitarian homosexual love in historical discourse has made it difficult for Japanese people to be accepting of LGBTQ love in the form of matrimony. Minamoto Junko and Hank Glassman state that:

> Within Japanese homosexuality...the tendency was toward liaisons between men in a hierarchical relationship like that of master and disciple; as such, it did not encourage a respect for love that comes from the independent sexuality of the individual (Minamoto and Glassman 1993, 110).

As this comment indicates, the history of homosexuality in Japan was dominated by sexual relationships based on hierarchy. It was never about love and almost always about sexual pleasure and having power over others. Therefore, the model of homosexual relationships in Japan is antithetical to the European model of relationship in terms of both sexual orientation and the purpose of interaction. When the first commercial gay magazine *Barazoku* began publishing in the 1970s, a controversial discussion sprang up about whether *nanshoku* and *chigo* should be abandoned as homosexual practices due to their overwhelming emphasis on sex and power (Mackintosh 2010, 185). While many writers of the magazine agreed that they were representative of the bygone era, they also reminisced and idolized the social acceptance of these practices and the absence of heteronormativity in them (Mackintosh 2010, 187). Even for people who identified as being homosexual, letting go of the *nanshoku* and *chigo* code proved to be very difficult.[5] Current politicians that are against the legalization of same-sex marriage claim that "homosexuality is perverse" and that "homosexuality is just a phase."

[5] For more information, see Mackintosh, Jonathan D, 2010, *Homosexuality and Manliness in Postwar Japan*, New York: Routledge.

Although it is tempting to disregard these comments as being simply absurd, the historical development of sexuality demonstrates that their attitude towards homosexuality is influenced by the post-Meiji ideologies to a great degree. As we continue to think about Japan's lack of acceptance of LGBTQ people, it is important to keep this history in mind.

Chapter 2
LGBTQ Rights in Japan

The current climate of Japan surrounding LGBTQ people is nothing like that of the Edo Period. LGBTQ individuals do not have the same rights as heterosexual cisgender people due to legal, political, and social hindrances. In this section, I give a detailed explanation of the struggles that LGBTQ people in Japan face today. I start by introducing the legal issues which continue to make it impossible for LGBTQ people in Japan to receive basic rights regarding marriage, gender identity, as well as reproduction. Next, I talk about the social discrimination that LGBTQ people face, which is often amplified by the lack of legal and political protection. Finally, I discuss Japanese politicians' reluctance and resistance to protecting LGBTQ rights and how that has led to a political stalemate over the last couple of years. A close examination of these issues reveals the complexity of the debate in Japan and the ongoing difficulty of making change through a top-down approach, where policy changes at the national level trickle down to the everyday lives of LGBTQ people. As an alternative to this, Buddhist temples are involved in the bottom-up approach to LGBTQ equality by assisting the LGBTQ community and normalizing their presence in society through traditional Buddhist rituals. This chapter provides the societal context in which the Buddhist clergy I interviewed decided to offer their community and services to the marginalized LGBTQ community.

Legal Debates Surrounding LGBTQ People

Japan's Ban on Same-Sex Marriage

When it comes to the issue of marriage equality, Asian countries have seen less progress compared to other places in Europe, Oceania, and North and South America. While there have been large public protests and online activism to fight for same-sex marriage, the issue has

been in a stalemate for many Asian countries. As of January 2022, 31 countries in the world have legalized same-sex marriage and Taiwan is the only Asian country to make it on the list (Human Rights Campaign 2022). This highlights the difficulty of making legal changes despite emerging new social norms, and Japan is no exception to this.

Under the current Japanese law, marriage is limited to heterosexual couples. Marriage is established by the Civil Code in Japan, which uses language such as "husband and wife" (夫婦) to describe marital relationships. Therefore, marriage has long been interpreted as being exclusively between a man and a woman (Marriage For All Japan 2022). Nevertheless, the Civil Code does not explicitly state that marriage between two men or two women is not permitted. The absence of such direct stipulation has helped activists bring the issue to various district courts in hope of getting the judicial system to be lenient and accept the legality of same-sex marriage. Although this has created legal momentum, the reality is that the judicial branch can only do so much without legislation from the parliament. There remain many obstacles preventing legalization, which I will discuss further in the upcoming section on political hurdles.

Due to the failure to recognize same-sex marriage, same-sex couples face many disadvantages in society. Some of the obvious issues include having difficulties receiving municipal services such as creating family credit cards, subscribing to family mobile data plans, and taking bereavement leave (Miwa 2018). In addition to these issues, many legal barriers prevent same-sex couples from accessing spousal privileges. According to Marriage For All Japan, an organization that supports legal activities surrounding marriage equality in Japan, there are mainly four prominent legal issues that same-sex couples encounter. The first is regarding inheritance. Under Japanese law, the spouse of a deceased person can inherit at least a part of their property even without a will. Yet, if a couple is not married and the deceased partner did not leave a will, the surviving spouse is not legally entitled to their partner's property.

This means that if a same-sex couple lived in a house owned by the deceased spouse, the surviving spouse could get evicted (Marriage For All Japan 2022).

The second issue is that foreign same-sex partners will not be granted residency. When a Japanese citizen marries a foreigner, the foreign partner will be given a spouse visa in order to live in Japan. However, because same-sex couples cannot legally get married, the foreign partner is not able to gain residency (Marriage For All Japan 2022). This has caused further hardships for same-sex couples in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because Japan limited the opening of its borders to citizens and residents only, people in international same-sex relationships were not able to visit their partners (Namba 2021). For these reasons, some Japanese queer people in international relationships make the hard decision to relocate to their partner's home country if same-sex marriage is legal there.

The third problem is that same-sex partners do not have hospital visitation rights. When a spouse of a married couple becomes hospitalized, the other spouse is allowed to visit them and receive details about their medical condition from the doctors. While there is no law that bans same-sex couples from visiting their partner, most hospitals check the visitor's relationship with the patient by asking for identification documents. Therefore, individual hospitals reserve the right to reject visitation if the person is not a legal family of the patient. (Marriage For All Japan 2022). For same-sex couples who have no way of proving their relationship legally, this means that they may not be able to see their partner at the hospital.

The final problem is that same-sex couples do not have co-parenting rights. If same-sex couples have a child that is biologically related to one partner, that partner becomes the legal parent of the child. However, since same-sex marriage is not legal, the other partner cannot become a legal parent. Thus, if the legal parent passes away without a will that specifies the guardian of their child, the child could be separated from the surviving partner and put into foster care (Marriage For All Japan 2022).

Due to these legal issues that make it difficult—and sometimes impossible—for same-sex couples to have the same rights as heterosexual couples, many same-sex couples in Japan have relied on alternative ways to legally become a family. One of the most common practices is for the couples to become parent and child through the adoption system. While it may seem bizarre for couples to become family in this way, this is a legal arrangement that many lawyers in support of same-sex couples recommend. By becoming parent and child, same-sex couples are able to overcome some of the legal barriers such as inheritance issues and uncertainties regarding hospital visitation. Nevertheless, the use of the adoption system has certain drawbacks that complicate the legal issues rather than providing solutions. Under Japanese law, parents must be older than their children and therefore adoption is only accepted if an older partner adopts a younger partner (Michika Judicial Scrivener Office, 2021). Thus, this system only works if there is an age difference in the couple. Further, what this means is that if the younger partner passes away before the older partner, the older partner is not entitled to their partner's inheritance. Thus, same-sex couples will still have to prepare a will to make sure their partner is able to receive the inheritance. Another drawback is that once the couple becomes a family through adoption, they are permanently banned from getting married even after they dissolve their parent-child relationship (Michika Judicial Scrivener Office, 2021). This could be an issue in the long term since even if Japan legalizes same-sex marriage in the future, couples who have already used the adoption system cannot be married to each other.

Same-Sex Partnership System

Recognizing these challenges that same-sex couples face due to the lack of legal recognition for marriage, Tokyo's Shibuya ward announced in 2015 that it would establish a special partnership system for same-sex couples. The purpose of creating this system was to help solve some of the issues that same-sex couples encounter in their daily lives by making it easier for

them to receive social benefits (Boon 2019). This partnership system allows municipal governments to issue a certificate that officially recognizes same-sex couples, which can be used at the municipal level to prove their relationship and access couple-based privileges. These privileges include gaining hospital visitation rights and receiving family discounts for public services among others (Chi 2016, 81).

Since Shibuya ward's initiative, same-sex partnership systems have expanded across Japan. As of January 2022, 147 municipal governments have established the system and 2,537 couples have received the certificate (Marriage For All Japan 2022). While this expansion of partnership systems in Japan has helped same-sex couples overcome some of the legal challenges, it is by no means an adequate replacement for legal marriage. Since partnership systems are established on a municipal level, the process of applying for a certificate as well as the accessible services differ greatly depending on the local government.[6] Moreover, since the certificates are only valid within the municipal district in which it was issued, same-sex couples will automatically lose their privileges if they move to a different area in Japan. Therefore, issues such as residency visas for foreign partners and co-parenting rights cannot be achieved through this system. Due to these limitations, the LGBTQ community views the partnership system as a symbolic gesture rather than a practical solution to legal issues. They firmly believe that legalizing same-sex marriage is the only way for same-sex couples to overcome the existing concerns.

Legal Gender Recognition System

The incapacity of Japan's laws has not only affected same-sex couples, but also the transgender community. In 2004, Japan enacted the Gender Identity Disorder (GID) Special Cases Act

[6] For details regarding the variety of partnership systems, see Naomi Chi, 2016, "What is at the End of the Rainbow?: Prospects and Challenges for Sexual Minorities in Japan," *Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers*, 10: 75-85.

which established the procedures and regulations for transgender people to change their legal gender. This was the first law in Japan that made changing legal gender possible and was seen as a momentous achievement at the time (Human Rights Watch 2019). However, getting one's gender recognized through the GID Act is known for being a discriminatory process, as it has strict regulations for who can apply. Human Rights Watch has publicly stated that these restrictions and processes are blatant human rights abuses that are contrary to international human rights standards (Human Rights Watch 2019). As I explain in the following passage, the GID Act involves multiple cases of human rights abuse that insult transgender people and strip them of their rights to make decisions regarding their own bodies.

In order to apply for gender recognition through the GID Act, there are mainly five prerequisites that applicants need to meet. The first requirement is for the applicant to be at least 20 years of age. Because the current legal age in Japan is 20 years old, this age restriction prevents transgender minors from changing their legal gender. The second requirement is that the applicant must not be legally married. This limits the applicants to only single people and implies mandatory divorce for married transgender people who want to change their legal gender (Human Rights Watch 2019). The third requirement is that applicants cannot have children under the age of 20. This propagates the discriminatory idea that transgender people should not have children and moreover is a clear violation of their right to have a family. The fourth requirement is for the applicants to be diagnosed with GID. In order to obtain this diagnosis, transgender people must go through a mandatory psychiatric evaluation which many people find extremely mentally draining (Human Rights Watch 2019). Furthermore, making a diagnosis of GID is problematic in the sense that it perpetuates the stigma of transgender identity as being a mental disorder. The final requirement is for applicants to undergo surgery to alter their physical appearances and bodily functions. This process entails sterilization, which completely strips away the reproductive functions of the applicants. For transgender

people who either are not mentally prepared for the change or did not want to undergo surgery to begin with, this requirement feels rushed and coerced (Human Rights Watch 2019).

As these five prerequisites illustrate, transgender people are expected to meet brutal requirements in exchange for getting their gender identity recognized. By coercing its applicants to go through these traumatizing procedures, the GID Act fails to ensure the security and well-being of transgender people in Japan. For people who cannot meet the requirements for any reason, legal gender recognition is not granted. Even for those who successfully meet the requirements, achieving gender recognition demands immense sacrifice. In this way, the current Japanese law makes the process of gender identity recognition inaccessible to transgender people.

Social Discrimination Against LGBTQ People

Housing Discrimination

Considering the lack of legal protection for the LGBTQ community, it is no surprise that LGBTQ people in Japan experience discrimination in various spheres of society. One of the most prominent examples is housing discrimination. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the real estate company Lifull Home's, one in four LGBTQ individuals in Japan answered that they experienced housing discrimination due to their gender or sexuality (Lifull Home's 2020). For example, same-sex couples have a disadvantage when they want to rent property due to their inability to prove their relationship legally. Landlords often consider married couples to be more credible than those that are not and therefore it is relatively difficult for same-sex couples to pass the tenant screening (Lifull Home's 2020). This is a situation where the lack of credibility makes it difficult to secure housing, but LGBTQ people also experience discrimination based on outright homophobia and transphobia. Some landlords reject LGBTQ applicants by claiming that renting to them will devalue the property. Consequently, LGBTQ

people are unfairly denied and can only live in old and unpopular properties (Lifull Home's 2020). For this reason, same-sex couples tend to hide their relationship when looking for properties and pretend to be friends that are seeking to be roommates.

Harassment During Medical Treatment

LGBTQ people also experience discrimination during medical care, and the mistreatment is particularly severe for transgender people. According to a survey conducted between 2018 and 2019 in Japan, 41.8% of transgender people answered that they feel reluctant about receiving medical treatments, based on past harassment that they experienced at hospitals and clinics (Iwanaga 2019). The harassment that transgender people are targeted with include being called by their birth name rather than their preferred name, being asked intrusive questions about their gender, and being scolded for expressing their gender identity (Iwanaga 2019). Furthermore, some transgender people mentioned that they were straight up denied medical treatment by doctors. One person, in particular, revealed that their doctor said that "gender identity disorder is too complicated for us to deal with" (Iwanaga 2019). As a result of this harassment and rejection, transgender people in Japan have a hard time receiving necessary medical treatment. The outcomes of this survey demonstrate how even in Japan's medical field, there are still many people who do not understand what it means to be transgender and discriminate against transgender people in ignorant ways.

School Bullying and Workplace Harassment

Discrimination and harassment can get especially unbearable when they happen at places that we have to go to on a daily basis, such as schools and workplaces. In Japan, there are no laws or guidelines that deal with school bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This means that when LGBTQ students report incidents of bullying to their school, the ways in

which the situation is handled depend entirely on individual teachers and staff. However, teachers at Japanese schools are not capable of mediating the issue since they do not receive comprehensive training for helping LGBTQ students (Human Rights Watch 2016). In fact, some teachers even take part in the bullying by making fun of LGBTQ students. Therefore, many LGBTQ students often refrain from reporting the bullying since they know that the teachers are incapable and unwilling to help them out.

In May 2019, Japan enacted a workplace harassment prevention law that established discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, including outing, as forms of harassments (Kamiya and Matsuoka 2020). While this was a pivotal step in preventing LGBTQ discrimination, the reality is that harassments such as outing continue to burden LGBTQ people at workplaces. LGBTQ rights activists Yuuichi Kamiya and Soshi Matsuoka state that people who out their colleagues often do so unintentionally without bad intentions (Kamiya and Matsuoka 2020). They explain how this comes from the fact that most people in Japan do not understand the harm that outing can do to LGBTQ individuals (Kamiya and Matsuoka 2020). Much like the situation at schools, workplaces in Japan do not have mandatory training or lectures to inform workers on how to interact with LGBTQ colleagues respectfully. Therefore, LGBTQ people in Japan have to either hide their sexual orientation and gender identity or work with the fear that someone could reveal their identity without consent.

Political Hurdles to LGBTQ Equality

Liberal Democratic Party's Homophobia and Transphobia

The underlying issue for many of the legal and social problems is the lack of support from the political realm. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the current ruling party of Japan, has continuously failed to protect the LGBTQ community over the last 10 years in which it has been in power. Although there have been multiple proposed bills to create an anti-

discrimination law for sexual minorities, the LDP has long been pushing them aside. Its justification is that passing these bills when society does not have the necessary understanding of LGBTQ people could lead to strong opposition and further isolate the LGBTQ community (Nikaido 2021). However, this justification that the LDP continues to mention is simply an excuse for not taking action. The reality is that in the last five years or so, the LGBTQ rights movement in Japan has vastly expanded. There is increasing representation of LGBTQ people and culture in popular media, and more and more people are taking part in LGBTQ events such as pride parades. Moreover, the mere fact that LGBTQ anti-discrimination bills continue to be submitted shows that public opinion in Japan is shifting. It is not the people, but rather the conservative members of the LDP that are preventing change from taking place.

Over the last couple of years, numerous homophobic and transphobic comments have been made by LDP members. During an LDP meeting on the LGBTQ anti-discrimination law, Kazuo Yana of the House of Representatives commented that “LGBT people go against the biological nature of preserving species” (Fujisawa 2021). Furthermore, Eriko Yamatani, a congresswoman from the House of Councilors, made transphobic remarks after this meeting. She told the reporters that “individuals with male bodies” using female bathrooms and participating in female sports just because they mentally identify as women is absurd (Fujisawa 2021). These comments were widely reported on news outlets and instantly became viral on the Internet, thereby informing the general public that LDP members hold obsolete ideas that are homophobic and transphobic. For people supporting LGBTQ rights, these incidents further aggravated the distrust and resentment towards the LDP.

Equality Act Japan

Many of these derogatory remarks were made in response to Equality Act Japan (EAJ), a worldwide campaign to establish an LGBT equality law in Japan. EAJ is a campaign that took

place between 2020 and 2021, with the goal of passing the LGBT Equality Act before the opening of the Tokyo Olympic Games in summer 2021. This timeline was extremely important for EAJ since the lobbying strategy was to pressure the Japanese government to meet the human rights standards of the Olympic Charter. The Charter specifically protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation, and Tokyo's municipal government passed an LGBT anti-discrimination bill in 2018 in order to meet the human rights expectations as the host city for the Olympics (Equality Act Japan 2022). However, Japan as a host country had not taken any actions towards preventing discrimination against LGBTQ people. EAJ raised awareness of this issue and called on Japanese citizens and foreign nationals to shame the Japanese government and pressure them into passing an LGBT equality law. The campaign organized lobbying, public demonstrations, and advocacy on social media through collaboration with various international human rights organizations and celebrities. Due to these efforts, EAJ managed to gather 106,250 petitions from both inside and outside Japan in support of the LGBT Equality Act (Equality Act Japan 2022).

In spite of this accomplishment, the LGBT Equality Act did not pass before the diet session ended in June 2021. This was because many of the conservative members of the LDP strongly opposed the bill. Their main concern was that passing this bill and creating an anti-discrimination law would allow "leftist activists to exploit the law" (Nikkei Asia 2021). Specifically, the LDP's right-wing questions the wording of the bill which clearly states that "all discrimination should not be tolerated." They argued that having such an explicit wording could lead to an increase in unnecessary lawsuits and therefore should be avoided (Nikkei Asia 2021). For people in Japan who were hoping to get this bill passed, it was disappointing to see it fail based on a simple phrase condemning discrimination. Furthermore, this event highlighted the extreme difficulty of making a political change under the ruling of the LDP.

Representation in Japan's Politics

In addition to the ruling party's lack of understanding of sexual minorities, Japan has a severe issue with regard to its representation in politics. According to a 2017 research comparing the composition of Japan's Cabinet with that of other G7 countries, Japan had the highest average age of 61.95 (Mutsuji 2017). The data showed that while other G7 countries had members in their 30s and 40s, the youngest member for Japan was in their 50s (Mutsuji 2017). This demonstrates how Japan's Cabinet lacks generational diversity and is dominated by old members. Even more striking is the lack of female participation in politics. In 2017, the ratio of female Cabinet members was only 10 percent, whereas other G7 countries scored between 21 to 48 percent (Mutsuji 2017). Furthermore, according to the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap report, Japan ranked 147th out of 156 countries in women's political empowerment (Takeuchi et al. 2021). These shocking numbers illustrate the institutional barriers that women face in political participation and the extent to which Japan is falling behind other countries.

The situation becomes more devastating if we look at the number of LGBTQ-identifying politicians. In 2019, there were only 13 openly LGBTQ-identifying politicians in Japan, which includes the national and local governments; out of these 13 politicians, only two were members of the Parliament (Policy Information Center of LGBT 2019). When examining the demographics of Japanese politicians, it becomes clear how the lack of diversity in age, gender, and sexual orientation is a notable issue. Considering the homogeneity of Japanese politicians, it is no surprise that they are ignorant of the struggles that minorities go through. With old heterosexual men dominating elected positions, Japan's politics fail to represent its people and make changes according to emerging norms and needs. In order to pass legislation in support of the LGBTQ community, Japan must face this deep problem of political diversity.

Prospects for Change

When comparing the development of legal protections for LGBTQ people among OECD countries, Japan ranks 34th out of 35 countries (Equality Act Japan 2022). This shows how Japan is behind other countries and that it is slow in terms of making change. During a recent cross-party debate, newly elected Prime Minister Kishida, along with the leaders of other parties, was asked whether he would be open to passing the LGBTQ anti-discrimination bill during the next diet session. Whereas all the other party leaders stated that the bill should be passed, Kishida was the only leader to oppose the measure (Okamura and Minami 2021). While he acknowledged that this bill had been debated for a while, he stated that more time and discussion are needed before passing it (Ando and Hamada 2021). When the leader of the country tries to drag out the process of legal enforcement, one might ask the question: is it feasible to continue relying on politicians to understand the struggles of the LGBTQ community?

Throughout this chapter, I explained the legal and social issues that LGBTQ people in Japan face. These issues are mainly due to the lack of support from the political realm, which in theory should be providing protection and equal rights to LGBTQ people. By lobbying and creating cross-party bills, activists in Japan have made immense efforts to bring about change from the nation's top. However, the ruling party's homophobia and transphobia, as well as the lack of representation in politics illustrate the situation in which a top-down approach to ensuring LGBTQ rights is almost impossible. Instead, many people in Japan are starting to realize the necessity of grassroots efforts in order to see change take place in the near future. As we will see in the next chapter, the Buddhist priests and nuns that I interviewed are very much aware of the legal, social, and political challenges that LGBTQ people in Japan face. In fact, some of them are actively involved in secular forms of activism such as pride parades and public demonstrations. By looking closely at the type of support that Buddhist temples offer, it

becomes clear how and why Buddhism plays a unique role in the bottom-up approach of LGBTQ activism.

Chapter 3

LGBTQ Activism in Buddhist Temples

In response to the legal, social, and political challenges that the LGBTQ community face, some Buddhist temples in Japan have stepped up to fulfill the needs of LGBTQ people. Through Buddhist rituals and practices, these temples allow LGBTQ people to accomplish things that they are often not able to do due to legal constraints. In this chapter, I delve into the specifics of how Buddhist temples in Japan support the LGBTQ community. After briefly introducing the temples where I conducted the interviews, I discuss the three types of activism that are taking place at these temples: providing graves for LGBTQ people, giving posthumous names to transgender and non-binary people, and conducting gay weddings. For each of these, I give a detailed explanation of the rituals and how the temples have catered them towards LGBTQ people's needs. By exploring individual cases, I highlight the creative efforts that went into LGBTQ temple activism. Next, I introduce additional forms of activism that the clergy are participating in. Unlike activism through graves, posthumous names, and weddings, these types of activism are not based on traditional Buddhist rituals. Rather, they utilize secular forms of activism such as pride parades and LGBTQ seminars to raise awareness both within and beyond the Japanese Buddhist community. Yet, they speak to the diversity of what these clergy are doing and help us understand how they came to be involved in LGBTQ activism. From there, I move on to explain the temples' motivations for supporting the LGBTQ community. These motivations are diverse, ranging from simply wanting to follow the Buddhist doctrine of equality to the need to change the public image of Buddhist temples. Finally, I talk about how these temples see themselves contributing to the larger LGBTQ activism and the future of Japan that they envision.

Overview of Temples

Before discussing the details of LGBTQ activism at the temples, I present a brief overview of all the temples that I examined. For this research, I interviewed a total of eight LGBTQ supportive temples in Japan. These temples vary by region and the sect, demonstrating LGBTQ activism is not limited to any one region or sect. Moreover, the priests and nuns whom I interviewed have differing levels of involvement with LGBTQ activism at the temple. At the end of this section, a graph is provided where each temple's name, sect, prefecture, and the clergy's name are listed (see Table 1).

The first temple is Saimyou-ji (最明寺), a Tendai sect temple located in Saitama prefecture. I interviewed Reverend Senda, who is the vice head priest of the temple. Reverend Senda is passionate about social activism and has organized multiple events at the temple to support minority groups. He has held exhibits to showcase art created by disabled children and has opened food pantries to help lower-income families among others. At his temple, Reverend Senda supports LGBTQ people by providing graves for LGBTQ people and organizing same-sex weddings.

The second temple is a Rinzai sect temple in Kyoto prefecture called Shunkō-in (春光院). Shunkō-in is a small temple that is part of Myoshin-ji (妙心寺), the largest Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhist school in Japan. Reverend Kawakami, the vice head priest of Shunkō-in, is an avid supporter of mindfulness. He has taught Zen and mindfulness to both national and international audiences, such as students at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Myoshin-ji has been involved in LGBTQ activism at the temple for over 10 years now and it provides graves and conducts gay weddings.

The third temple is Shōzen-ji (性善寺), a Shingon sect temple located in Osaka prefecture. The head priest of Shōzen-ji, Reverend Shibatani, is the first openly transgender nun in Japan. After going through the GID Act's gender recognition process in her fifties, she

became ordained and opened Shōzen-ji as a temple that welcomes all sexual minorities. Since its opening in 2018, Shōzen-ji has become a safe community for LGBTQ people all over Japan. This temple provides graves for LGBTQ people, gives posthumous names based on gender identity, and conducts gay weddings.

The fourth temple is Futenmanzan Jingu-ji (普天満山神宮寺), a Shingon sect temple in Okinawa prefecture. Reverend Kinjyo, the head priest whom I interviewed, is publicly vocal about his support for the LGBTQ community. He has put a rainbow pride flag outside his temple to show that his temple is open to LGBTQ people, which is a first for Buddhist temples in Okinawa. In April 2021, this temple created an area for natural burial graves. Natural burial graves do not require the bereaved family to take care of the deceased's grave and are therefore suitable for LGBTQ couples with no children. Moreover, in collaboration with local businesses and a queer fashion designer, Futenmanzan Jingu-ji is currently in the process of preparing for holding gay weddings.

The fifth temple is Myorin-ji (妙輪寺), a Nichiren sect temple located in Kanagawa prefecture. The head priest Reverend Kumazawa is not only a Buddhist practitioner but also a doctor who has studied medicine in the United States and China. He has been promoting health and well-being at the temples by offering yoga classes and opening a temple-run medical center for the local community. Myorin-ji conducts gay weddings, offers graves for LGBTQ couples, and gives posthumous names to transgender people.

The sixth temple is Jitsujō-ji (実成寺), a Nichiren sect temple in Aichi prefecture. Jitsujō-ji's head priest is Reverend Watanabe, who has experience training at a Buddhist temple in Hawaii. Upon returning to Japan, Reverend Watanabe has dedicated himself to learning more about how temples can support social activism and has been participating in ecumenical Buddhist study sessions. Jitsujō-ji provides graves for LGBTQ people and gives posthumous names based on gender identity.

The seventh temple is Shingyo-ji (信行寺), a Jodo Shinshu temple in Fukuoka prefecture. I interviewed Reverend Kanzaki, a young priest who is involved in many non-denominational and cross-regional activities with other temples. He runs an online community where Buddhist monastics learn about social issues and is also part of a community where priests and nuns study the business management of temples together. Furthermore, Reverend Kanzaki is very active on his blog and YouTube channel where he posts educational content on Buddhist philosophy and practices. Shingyo-ji supports the LGBTQ community by giving posthumous names based on gender identity.

The eighth temple is Tsukiji Hongwan-ji (築地本願寺), a Jodo Shinshu temple in Tokyo prefecture. This temple is one of the most popular temples in Japan and the temple's main worship hall is registered as one of Japan's Important Cultural Properties. Since 2015, Tsukiji Hongwan-ji has undergone a drastic business renovation to create services that are now in demand and keep up with the needs of the new generation. I interviewed Reverend Nishinaga, a nun who is working to advocate women's rights and gender equality at Tsukiji Hongwan-ji. She launched an ecumenical temple project which aims to promote the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and collaborates with other priests and nuns to raise awareness. Tsukiji Hongwan-ji provides graves for LGBTQ people and holds gay weddings.

Table 1: List of Temples

Name of Temple	Sect	Prefecture	Name of Clergy
Saimyou-ji	Tendai	Saitama	Rev. Senda
Shunkō-in	Rinzai	Kyoto	Rev. Kawakami
Shōzen-ji	Shingon	Osaka	Rev. Shibatani
Futenmanzan Jingu-ji	Shingon	Okinawa	Rev. Kinjyo

Myorin-ji	Nichiren	Kanagawa	Rev. Kumazawa
Jitsujō-ji	Nichiren	Aichi	Rev. Watanabe
Shingyo-ji	Jodo Shinshu	Fukuoka	Rev. Kanzaki
Tsukiji Hongwan-ji	Jodo Shinshu	Tokyo	Rev. Nishinaga

Graves for LGBTQ People

Institutionalization of Buddhist Funerals in Japan

For many people in contemporary Japan, the image of Buddhist temples is strongly associated with funerary services. When someone mentions they are going to a Buddhist temple, people naturally assume that they are either going to a funeral or visiting their ancestors' graves. This perception of identifying Buddhist temples with funerary services is attributed to the *danka* system, a policy that created affiliation between temples and households. The *danka* system was first introduced during the Heian period when each family belonged to a Buddhist temple in exchange for getting their religious needs met by the temple.[7] However, this system was later consolidated in the Edo period as a government strategy to oppress Christianity (Nakajima 2005). By mandating all citizens to register at a neighboring temple as a family unit, the Edo government forced Japanese Christians to convert to Buddhism. Not only did this diminish Christian influence and make Buddhism the de facto state religion, but also established a long-lasting mutual network between households and Buddhist temples (Fujii 1983, 41).

Under the *danka* system in the Edo period, Buddhist temples were given the role of managing the family registry and providing funerals for the registered households (Nakajima 2005). In exchange, the registered citizens were expected to financially support the temples by paying for the funerary services. Buddhist temples realized how this system was an effective way for them to earn money and created new funerary rituals and traditions so as to make more

[7] The term *danka* refers to the families that belong to Buddhist temples.

profits (Nakajima 2005). This is why funerals in Japan last for three days and many additional services exist to commemorate the deceased. At the dawn of the Meiji period, the role of managing the family registry was handed back to the government (Namba Walter 2009, 251). Yet, the connection between families and temples remained in the form of providing and receiving funerary services. Because families had been affiliated with the same temple for generations, they felt the responsibility to maintain the relationship with the temple. Therefore, Japanese people often rely on the temples at which their ancestors registered when holding their family members' funerals.

When examining Buddhist temples' openness toward providing graves for LGBTQ people, it is important to keep in mind that funerary services have historically been the main source of income for temples. For centuries, Buddhist temples in Japan have relied on funerary services for financial stability and this attitude is still present in contemporary Japan. Thus, there is a financial incentive for making funerary services accessible to all. At the same time, it is worth acknowledging how the *danka* system has been in decline over the last couple of decades. Since the *danka* system is contingent upon families continuing to reside in the same neighborhood for over generations, it is difficult for the system to survive in the current world where people can easily move to different places. While some families still have a strong bond with their temple, this is mostly in rural areas of Japan and is less seen in cities. The decline of the *danka* system means that Japanese people are becoming less willing to pay for expensive graves and funerals (Yasunaga 2020). Part of the reason why Japanese people were willing to spend a fortune on funerary services was that they felt a sense of responsibility towards the temple they belonged to.[8] Therefore, there is less motive to pay for grand funerary services when there is no relationship between the temple and the deceased's family.

[8] In 2020, Japanese people's average spending on funerary services (funeral ceremony, Buddhist altar, land for burial) was a total of 3,926,300 JPY, which is approximately 33,475 USD per deceased family (Kamakura Shinsho 2020).

Providing Graves for LGBTQ People

The graves that the temples provide to LGBTQ people are no different from regular graves. However, they are distinct in the way they are memorialized. All the temples I talked to provide a service called *eitai kuyou* (永代供養), which means eternal memorial service when translated directly. Following the funeral ceremony, the deceased is cremated and buried in a grave.[9] The burial is often accompanied by a memorial service in which the priest or nun chants for the deceased. Although this service is the final of the three-day funerary rituals, it is expected of the bereaved family to hold memorial services periodically. Most commonly, these services are held on the 49th day since the death and every year on the day the deceased passed away. There are more anniversaries where families are expected to have a service and each time, the families have to pay a service fee to the temple. *Eitai kuyo* is an option that the temples offer to bereaved families in which all these services are reduced to one. The idea is that when they bury the ashes of the deceased, the priests and nuns conduct a ceremony that permanently memorializes the deceased so that no other memorial is required. Another aspect of *eitai kuyo* is that it does not require family members to care for the grave. There is a social expectation in Japan for the living families to take good care of their ancestors' graves by making offerings and cleaning the Buddhist altar occasionally. By paying for the option of *eitai kuyo,* the priests and nuns will carry out these responsibilities on behalf of the family (Boret 2014, 187).

Shōzen-ji's head nun, Reverend Shibatani, offers *eitai kuyo* at her temple to LGBTQ people. Her decision to do so stems from her own experience as a transgender woman and a deep understanding of the struggles that LGBTQ people face:

> The reality is that it is extremely difficult for transgender people to have children. For folks like myself who changed their gender legally, we weren't able to have children or even be married. Because same-sex marriage is still illegal, it is also difficult for gay people to have children. If one does not have children, there is no one to enshrine

[9] Japan's cremation rate is 99.9%, which is the highest in the world (Hiatt 2015).

> the graves. That is why I decided to offer *eitai kuyo*, so that LGBTQ people have someone that will take care of them after they die.[10]

Reverend Shibatani recognizes that for LGBTQ people, the chance of not having anyone to take care of their graves is higher than that of cis heterosexual people. As someone who changed her legal gender, Reverend Shibatani points to the strict requirements stipulated in the GID Act that make it impossible for transgender people to have children. Moreover, she is aware of how LGBTQ people generally have a difficult time raising a family due to legal constraints. Thus, offering *eitai kuyo* is Reverend Shibatani's way of letting LGBTQ people die knowing that they will be taken care of.

At Shōzen-ji, there are three options for e*itai kuyo*: 10 years, 20 years, and 30 years. Each option determines how long the temple takes care of the graves and continues the memorial services. Once the years have passed, the temple conducts the final memorial service and removes the graves. This process is called *haka jimai* (墓終い), which literally means "ending the grave." After the grave is removed, the land in which the grave was built returns to the temple, and new graves can be built in the open spot (Shōzen-ji 2021). During the interview, Reverend Shibatani emphasized that the *eitai kuyo* graves at her temple are open to people of all religious, ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds. She underscores that not having caretakers of graves is an issue that concerns many contemporary Japanese.

One of the main issues that the funerary industry in Japan faces today is the increase of graves that have no inheritor. As I explained before, more and more people move out of their family's neighborhood, and thus the sense of responsibility towards inheriting one's ancestors' grave is declining. Moreover, Japan has a severe issue with an aging population and a declining birthrate. Even though people are living longer than before, fewer people are having children. Therefore, the increase in graves with no inheritors is also attributed to the fact that some people simply do not have children to take care of and inherit their graves. Due to this context, *haka*

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[10] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

jimai is becoming common at many temples in Japan as a way to decrease unattended graves and increase space for new ones. *Haka jimai* is conducted at most temples that offer Buddhist altar graves with *eitai kuyo.* With the understanding that it is expensive and practically impossible for the temple to take care of these graves forever, people agree to get their graves removed after a certain period when they select *eitai kuyo*. For those who do not have children, including many LGBTQ people in Japan, *eitai kuyo* and the *haka jimai* that comes with it is a way of ensuring that their graves will not be left unclean and unattended forever.

The other temples that I interviewed also offer *eitai kuyo* in order to accommodate LGBTQ people. What is fascinating, however, is that some temples have organized unconventional graves that do not come with the Buddhist altar. At Futenmanzan Jingu-ji, Reverend Kinjyo offers natural burial for LGBTQ people. Natural burial is a form of *eitai kuyo* where the deceased is eternally memorialized and taken care of by the temple. However, oftentimes it does not require *haka jimai* since natural burials do not have a Buddhist altar that takes up land. Instead, the ashes are buried in the ground, and trees and flowers are planted in the place of burial (Boret 2014, 177). The practice of burying deceased animals under trees has existed in Japan since ancient times. Nevertheless, the concept of natural burial was first established by a Zen monk in 1999 (Boret 2014, 178). It has however only recently become popular in Japan.

Futenmanzan Jingu-ji is located in Okinawa, which is comprised of small islands that are located far away from mainland Japan. Due to its distance from the mainland, Okinawa has unique funerary customs that are distinct from the rest of the country. One crucial point to keep in mind is that Okinawa was never subject to the *danka* system. During the Edo period, Okinawa was part of the Ryukyu Kingdom which was independent of the Edo government. Therefore, the bond between temples and local families based on funerary services is not as

strong as in mainland Japan.[11] Furthermore, the graves in Okinawa are known for being very large. Whereas a typical grave in mainland Japan ranges from 1~5 ㎡, graves in Okinawa can be as large as 30 ㎡ (Ii Ohaka 2021). This is because Ryukyu Kingdom practiced aerial burial where they left the dead body exposed to the wind, instead of cremation (Ohaka Sagashi 2019). Hence, the people needed a large plot of land and a big grave to leave the body. While Okinawa no longer performs aerial burial, the custom of having large graves stayed with the people.

Reverend Kinjyo understands that following this Okinawan custom is not an easy task for LGBTQ people. In April 2021, Futenmanzan Jingu-ji opened a new cemetery that has a natural burial section. When I asked his reason for doing so, Reverend Kinjyo answered:

> It is very difficult for LGBTQ couples to have children. Of course, there is the option of adoption. However, same-sex marriage is not legal in Japan. So even if one of the partners adopts a child, the couple cannot be co-parents. This complicates the situation when thinking about the inheritance of graves. In many cases, there is no point in buying a large family grave for LGBTQ couples who do not have children. That is why I decided to open graves that are made for two people.[12]

By referencing the legal barriers to raising a family, Reverend Kinjyo explains how there is no practical value in offering large family graves to LGBTQ couples; instead, he states that graves that are made exclusively for couples are suitable. These are tree burial graves that are made without the intention of being inherited, so they are only 0.2 ㎡ in size. This is convenient for the temple since it doesn't take up much space and additionally makes the graves affordable to many. Reverend Kinjyo is aware that Japanese people, in general, are less willing to pay for grand graves these days. Therefore, his tree burial graves are open to all couples who for any reason prefer smaller graves without the pressure of inheritance.

At Jitsujō-ji, Reverend Watanabe is also offering natural burials to LGBTQ people. The natural burial at Jitsujō-ji is called gardening tree burial (ガーデニング樹木葬) in which the cemetery becomes a garden. As is shown in figure 1, the trees and flowers planted

[11] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

[12] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

incorporate the graves into the garden scenery. This cemetery was designed by a professional gardening designer in order to make it aesthetically pleasing to the visitors (Jitsujō-ji 2022). Reverend Watanabe explains how his gardening tree burial is a new type of grave that was created in response to LGBTQ people's funerary concerns as well as other social issues in Japan:

> The gardening tree burial is essentially open to all. We have options for individuals, couples, and families. But this style of burial is especially suited for people who want to share a grave with someone they are not legally related to. In Japan, there are still many people who believe that family members must be legally related in order to be buried in the same grave. However, this is an impossible requirement to meet for LGBTQ people who cannot get married. Also, there are more and more couples in Japan who do not get legally married. For example, many people who get remarried at an older age stay as partners rather than being married couples. Also, because Japan's law doesn't allow married couples to have different surnames, women who do not want to change their surname refrain from legal marriage. Therefore, the gardening tree burial welcomes all these people who struggle to find graves that accommodate their needs. In fact, we also welcome people who want to be buried with their deceased pet![13]

Reverend Watanabe is considerate of people who want to share graves with those outside of the legal relationship. He describes how in contemporary Japan, there are many people who either cannot be in legal arrangements or decide not to have legal arrangements due to social conditions. Yet, Reverend Watanabe believes that this should not hinder people's post-death wishes. His principle is that whether it be an LGBTQ partner, a non-legal lover, or a pet, the desire to share a grave with someone should all be equally upheld.

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[13] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

Figure 1: Jitsujō-ji's gardening tree burial graves (Jitsujō-ji 2022).

Both Reverend Kinjyo and Reverend Watanabe mentioned that LGBTQ people have a lot of anxiety about their post-death situation. Reverend Kinjyo explains how there are often situations where the bereaved legal family prevents the deceased from sharing the same grave as their same-sex partner. The bereaved family would steal the deceased's ashes from the partner, claiming that the partner is just a roommate and not a lover. According to Reverend Kinjo, it is difficult for same-sex partners to retrieve the ashes once taken since they cannot prove their legal relationship to the deceased.[14] Reverend Watanabe also points out the disadvantage to the same-sex partner when their lover passes away. Since hospitals in Japan only contact the legal family of the patients, same-sex partners are often not informed when their partner dies. Reverend Watanabe says that because of this situation, sometimes LGBTQ people's funerary services are concluded without their partner's knowledge.[15]

In order to help LGBTQ people navigate these legal barriers, a company called Anchorage Inc. is providing legal assistance to Buddhist temples. Anchorage is a for-profit

[14] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.
[15] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

company in Japan that manufactures and sells graves to temples. They also provide business management consultancy for Buddhist temples by helping them with financial management and the digitalization of their operation (Anchorage 2022). In response to the anxiety that LGBTQ people have about the post-death situation, Anchorage drafted a legal contract that prevents unwanted issues from arising after the death. This contract is signed between the temple and the LGBTQ individual, where the LGBTQ person can designate the person who will take care of their funerary matters. I interviewed Mr. Toshihiko Kikuchi, the President of Anchorage at the time of the interview, who explained the significance of the contract in detail:

> We heard that a lot of LGBTQ people are worried that they won't have ideal funerary rituals and graves because they either haven't come out to their family or because the family isn't supportive of their same-sex relationship. As a company that works for Buddhist temples, we wanted to do something and searched the legal regulations for funerary rituals. We learned that under the current law, the person who has the most say in the deceased's funeral is the Representative of Funerary Rituals (祭祀主宰者). The default Representative of Funerary Rituals is the legal family of the deceased. However, the legal loophole is that one can appoint a different Representative of Funerary Rituals if they want to.[16]

Mr. Kikuchi describes this contract as an effective tool for upholding the deceased's funerary requests. Once both parties sign the contract, it is the temple's responsibility to contact the designated Representative of Funerary Rituals when the party passes away. The representative will have legal power over the deceased's funerary matter, which will prevent the legal family of the deceased from interfering. Anchorage has a free template of this contract available on its website. Moreover, they are suggesting the use of this contract to temples with which they are in business. Anchorage's service highlights how Japanese Buddhism's support for the LGBTQ community is extending beyond the realm of temples.

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[16] Toshihiko Kikuchi, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

Posthumous Names for Transgender and Nonbinary People

The Spiritual and Practical Significance of Posthumous Names

It is a common practice in many Buddhist traditions to give a posthumous name to newly ordained monks, nuns, and laity. In Japan, however, it is also very common to give a posthumous name to the deceased. A posthumous name is an added name given after the person's death as a way to respect and honor them. As I explained in the previous section, the consolidation of the *danka* system during the Edo period motivated Buddhist temples to come up with new funerary rituals in order to make more money. Giving posthumous names is one of the traditions that became prevalent during this time. Although the practice itself had existed since the Kamakura period, monetary incentives motivated monks to incorporate the ritual into funerary services so that everyone would have to pay for a name (Covell 2009, 298).

Posthumous names also carry deep spiritual meaning since they accord the deceased the status of Buddha (Arai 2011, 68). They are also known as buddha names, since giving posthumous names is a way to ordain a person following their death. By virtue of this ordaining aspect of the name, giving the deceased a Buddhist posthumous name symbolizes the unity between the deceased and the Buddha (Bodiford 1992, 158). Therefore, this practice enables the bereaved family members to pay respect to the deceased. Furthermore, giving a posthumous name allows the deceased to be memorialized with their ancestors. When the bereaved family consults the temple to decide on a posthumous name, the temple refers to a list of posthumous names that were given to the deceased's ancestors (Covell 2009, 304). Upon the family's request, they will select some kanji from the ancestors' names to use for the deceased. Family members decide to do this because it is considered to be a way to honor the deceased by merging them into the lineage of ancestors. Thus, the spiritual significance of posthumous names is appealing to Japanese people's value of paying respect to their ancestors.

At the same time, there are practical reasons why people give posthumous names to

the deceased. Usually, posthumous names are given before the cremation or the funeral ceremony. This is because posthumous names are deeply ingrained in these funerary rituals. During the funeral ceremony, the given posthumous names are often chanted by Buddhist clergy. Moreover, once a posthumous name is given, it will be carved onto the tombstones and will be written on the memorial tablets that are placed in home altars (Covell 2009, 299). By virtue of this significance in funerary rituals, giving posthumous names is seen as a requirement for those who want a Buddhist funeral.

Reflecting Gender Identity in Posthumous Names

One of the main characteristics of Japanese posthumous names is that they are gendered. Although the structure of posthumous names varies by sect, the general format of posthumous names includes four parts. Whereas legal names are made of first name + last name, posthumous names consist of *ingō* (院号) + *dōgō* (道号) + *kaimyō* (戒名) + *igō* (位号) (Covell 209, 299). *Ingō* is the first piece of posthumous name and each *ingō* consists of one to two kanji letters that honor the deceased's high position in society. During the Kamakura period, *ingō* was only given to aristocrats and royalty (Heian Kaikan 2021). Today, *ingō* is reserved for people who either have ancestors who have *ingō* in their posthumous names or made large financial contributions to the temple (Covell 2009, 299). The next piece is *dōgō*, and each *dōgō* includes two kanji letters that complete this piece of the posthumous name. Historically *dōgō* was only given to high-ranking priests. Therefore, high-ranking priests had longer posthumous names in comparison to others. Nowadays, *dōgō* is given to all deceased people and is used to evoke an image of the deceased's life (Covell 2009, 299). *Dōgō* may be used to describe the deceased's personality, profession, or the place they lived (Heian Kaikan 2021). For people who do not have *ingō*, *dōgō* becomes the first letters of their posthumous name. *Kaimyō* is the next piece of posthumous name. *Kaimyō*, directly translated as "precept name," is the

commonly used word for a posthumous name. It consists of two kanji letters, taking one letter from the deceased's name in the present word and the other from Buddhist scriptures (Heian Kaikan 2021). The final piece of posthumous name is *igō*. Each *igō* consists of one to three kanji letters that honor the deceased's social hierarchy and contribution to the temple and society as a whole (Heian Kaikan 2021). Another aspect of *igō* is that it differentiates between adults and children, and men and women. Moreover, historically it distinguished minority groups and outcasts from the majority population (Covell 2009, 299). Until the 1920s, posthumous names that were given to lower-class citizens, ethnic minorities, and disabled people used discriminatory kanji letters to compose *igō* (Sotozen-Net 2016). In this way, *igō* represents the age, gender, and social hierarchy of the deceased as the last letter of posthumous names.

Shōzen-ji's Reverend Shibatani firmly believes that posthumous names should reflect the gender identity of the recipient. She explains how the main reason why it is difficult to do so is that posthumous names are often given after the death, without regard for what kind of name the deceased wants. Since posthumous names are given by Buddhist clergy in consultation with the bereaved family, it is impossible to reflect the gender identity of LGBTQ people who have not come out to their families. Even for people who have come out, there is no guarantee that the family members will respect the deceased's wish and give them their desired posthumous name. In order to prevent this, Reverend Shibatani provides a service where she gives posthumous names to people while they are still alive. By preparing a posthumous name beforehand, Reverend Shibatani says that temples can avoid misgendering the deceased. [17]

Reverend Shibatani's flexibility with the timing of giving posthumous names has also helped people outside of the LGBTQ community. She is also offering services of giving

[17] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

posthumous names after the funerary rituals, in order to accommodate people's spiritual needs:

> Nowadays, people are less willing to hold grand funerary services to memorialize the deceased. Some people even have secular funerals where they don't invite Buddhist clergy…it really is a financially difficult time for many Buddhist temples. But it seems that these people who gave secular funerals for their family members regret their decision afterward. I've had some people tell me that they feel ashamed for not being able to give Buddha's blessing to the deceased. Even though the funeral and cremation had already been finished, these people asked me if I could give the deceased a posthumous name so that they can honor them. I see no problem in doing this because everyone has the right to receive Buddha's blessing. So I answered yes and gave posthumous names for the deceased.[18]

As I said before, posthumous names are often given between the passing away of the deceased and the beginning of the funeral ceremony. This is because posthumous names play a significant role during the funerary rituals. Usually, posthumous names and funerary ceremonies are offered by the temple as a set package. However, Reverend Shibatani explains how temples need to be more flexible than that in order to survive the current world. Rather than being caught up with the order of individual rituals, Reverend Shibatani prioritizes the wishes of the deceased family. She believes that no matter the timing, giving posthumous names serves to honor the deceased.[19]

Jitsujō-ji's Reverend Watanabe is also a believer in giving posthumous names in a flexible manner. He emphasizes that the purpose of posthumous names is to represent the way of living of the deceased. Since gender identity is a crucial aspect of people's way of living, he argues that it should be reflected in posthumous names. Additionally, Reverend Watanabe claims that posthumous names can be free of gender identity. He references historical records to substantiate why posthumous names should be flexible in this way:

> Posthumous names in the modern period were much less rigid than now. For starters, many people in the Edo period did not have surnames. This meant that it was difficult to pull out kanji letters from people's names for *kaimyō*. Therefore, it was only

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[18] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

[19] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

> aristocrats who had long formal posthumous names. When I look at the posthumous names given during this period, most of them have no signifier of gender. I think it is only in the postmodern period that temples started being strict about the gender aspect. This is probably because Buddhists created strict guidelines for posthumous names in order to institutionalize it as a formal funerary ritual.[20]

Reverend Watanabe reveals that posthumous names in the Edo-Meiji period were not gender binary as they are now. By explaining how the enforcement of gender signifiers was due to institutional circumstances rather than spiritual reasons, he states that there is no problem with eliminating gender identifiers from posthumous names.

At Jitsujō-ji, Reverend Watanabe also offers the option of not giving posthumous names at all. Especially for people who chose tree burials, posthumous names are not a necessity since tree burial is a new tradition that does not use posthumous names in the funerary rituals. Moreover, Reverend Watanabe explains how because each grave is small for Jitsujō-ji's gardening tree burial, there is no space to put the long memorial tablet on which the posthumous name is written. He states that for people who do not want posthumous names, their names in the present world will be engraved on the altar. Thus, Jitsujō-ji gives posthumous names to transgender and non-binary people based on their gender identity, and moreover gives the option of not having posthumous names. Reverend Watanabe reveals why he has been able to respond to LGBTQ people's needs in such a flexible manner:

> When I first started working on giving posthumous names to LGBTQ people, I realized how diverse people's needs were. Some people wanted a gendered name that reflects their gender identity. Others wanted a name free of gender identifiers. There were also people who did not want a posthumous name to begin with. Because these were all very different requests, I contacted the head of the Nichiren sect to ask if they had any formal guidelines for giving posthumous names to LGBTQ people. However, they said that they couldn't announce any formal standards at the time because they were still unsure of how to respond to these requests. All they said was to do what I thought was best as a priest, in consultation with the consultant and their family.[21]

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[20] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

[21] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

Reverend Watanabe's conversation with the head of the Nichiren sect demonstrates how there is still much work to do at the high institutional level of Buddhist institutions. Nevertheless, the absence of formal institutional guidelines has worked in Reverend Watanabe's favor. By virtue of his freedom to act as he believes, Reverend Watanabe has been able to accommodate the varying needs of LGBTQ people.

On the other hand, Reverend Kanzaki's decision to offer gender neutral posthumous names at Shingyo-ji was inspired by the Jodo Shinshu sect's policy change. The Jodo Shinshu posthumous name is different from other sects in the sense that it is shorter and only consists of three kanji letters. Moreover, the name for the posthumous name is called *hōmyō* (法名), whereas the common term used is *kaimyō*. Traditionally, male *hōmyō* consists of the kanji 釋 (*shaku)* at the top, followed by two other kanji letters. The female *hōmyō* is made from 釋 and then 尼 (*ni)*, followed by one other kanji letter. The kanji 釋 means "Buddha's disciple," and is used for all posthumous names to honor the deceased. Meanwhile 尼 is only used for female posthumous names as it means "nuns." Reverend Kanzaki explains how a couple of years ago, the Jodo Shinshu sect made a formal decision to remove the kanji 尼 from posthumous names and made the style of 釋 + two kanji letters the standard for all posthumous names regardless of gender. As a Jodo Shinshu temple, Reverend Kanzaki felt the responsibility to follow the steps of its head temple. Due to this institutional change at the top level, many Jodo Shinshu temples are able to provide gender neutral posthumous names to LGBTQ people.[22]

Gay Weddings

The Popularity of Christian Chapel Weddings

Japanese people's attitude toward religion is often described in the saying that goes "born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhism." In Japan, there is a custom called *omiyamairi* (お宮

[22] Shusei Kanzaki, interview by author, Zoom, December 2, 2021.

参り) where the family takes newborn babies to Shinto shrines to pray for their health. As I have explained in the previous sections, funerals are predominantly conducted in Buddhist temples in Japan and thus most Japanese people die as Buddhists. While this religious plurality in Japanese customs may already seem surprising, the other aspect of the saying portrays the dominance of Christian chapel weddings in Japan. Traditionally, Shinto-style weddings (神前式) were the most common style of wedding in Japan. However, this changed around the1990s when Christian-style weddings suddenly became popular. Kenji Ishii, professor of religious studies at Kokugakuin University, explains how this change was due to changing values regarding weddings. Whereas Shinto weddings emphasize the establishment of family-to-family relationships, Christian church weddings celebrate the love between individuals (Ishii 2016). Ishii explains how the emphasis on familial relationships began declining in the 1990s and Christian wedding's celebrations of love became more attractive to young couples (Ishii 216).

Out of the weddings conducted in Japan in 2019, Christian chapel weddings account for 50 percent and Shinto-style weddings constituted 20 percent (Hasegawa 2020). This shows how Christian weddings continue to be the most popular style of wedding today. On the other hand, only 0.4 percent of the weddings conducted in Japan were Buddhist style (Hasegawa 2020). While Buddhist temples have dominated the funerary industry for centuries, they have never been a dominant force in Japan's wedding industry. The societal understanding has long been that Shinto shrines take on celebratory rituals while Buddhists take care of matters related to death. Therefore, the current trend of Buddhist temples conducting gay weddings is fascinating not only because of its support for the LGBTQ community but also since Buddhist weddings are very rare.

In some cultures and traditions, one's religious affiliation determines the style of their wedding. This is not the case in contemporary Japan. Even though Christian chapel weddings

are the most popular style of wedding in Japan, the number of people who identify as being Christian accounts for less than one percent of the entire population (Christian Today 2020). The religious multiplicity in contemporary Japanese society is a complex topic to understand, but the point I am making here is that in Japan, being affiliated with a specific religion is not considered to be a precondition for participating in that religion's rituals. Thus, like funerary rituals, Buddhist gay weddings are not exclusive to Buddhists and are open to people of all religious backgrounds. As was the case with the emergence of Christian chapel weddings, meeting the needs of the couples is more valued than the religious affiliation of the ceremony.

Buddhist Weddings for Same-Sex Couples

The priests and nuns that I talked to all agreed that there are virtually no differences between heterosexual Buddhist weddings and gay Buddhist weddings. They mentioned how the wedding ceremony itself is not deeply gendered and that they did not have to make a lot of changes in the ritual. Just as Christian chapel weddings celebrate love in the name of Jesus Christ, Buddhist weddings pray for the couple's love in front of a Buddhist statue. After this prayer, the couples are given Buddhist prayer beads by the priest or nun who is conducting the wedding (Saimyou-ji 2022). This step where the couples receive the beads is equivalent to the exchange of rings in Christian weddings and is considered to be one of the most important moments of the ceremony. Usually, for heterosexual couples, the groom receives white beads, and the bride receives red beads. Reverend Senda from Saimyou-ji felt that some LGBTQ couples might not feel comfortable with this gendered practice and decided to create prayer beads with a new design.[23] This led to collaboration with a Buddhist beads shop, where Saimyou-ji made its original rainbow prayer beads (see figure 2).

[23] Myokan Senda, interview by author, Kawagoe City, August 9, 2021.

Figure 2: Saimyou-ji's rainbow prayer beads (BuzzFeed 2020).

Although Saimyou-ji had been conducting Buddhist weddings for a long time, its decision to expand to gay weddings was inspired by a political victory in the local government. In May 2020, Saitama prefecture's Kawagoe city started giving partnership certificates to same-sex couples living in the city. Reverend Senda explained how this initiative at Saimyou-ji's local government encouraged him to play a part in celebrating same-sex couples' love. Even though the wedding was inspired by the local partnership system, Saimyou-ji's gay wedding is not limited to people within the local community. Reverend Senda said that since Saimyou-ji began promoting gay weddings, he has been contacted by a lot of LGBTQ couples outside of Japan. He mentioned that a gay couple from Australia reached out to him, asking if it was possible for foreigners to get married at Saimyou-ji. The couple was rejected from a Christian church and was in search of alternative wedding venues. Another couple from China also contacted him, saying that they wished to get married at a Buddhist temple but were not able to do so in China. Reverend Senda emphasized that Saimyou-ji's gay weddings are open to

people of all backgrounds. He believes that caring for the local and international community is not mutually exclusive and that Saimyou-ji extends beyond the scope of *danka* temples. Unfortunately, neither of these couples have been able to hold their wedding yet due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Reverend Senda is optimistic that these weddings will take place soon and hopes to welcome more foreign gay couples in the future.[24]

Similar to Saimyou-ji, Revered Kawakami from Kyoto's Shunkō-in states that his temple welcomes couples outside of the local community for gay weddings. Reverend Kawakami has been conducting gay weddings at his temple for over 10 years now. He has even created a wedding package plan in collaboration with a hotel in Kyoto, which includes a wedding ceremony at Shunkō-in and three nights in a suite room in the hotel (SankeiBiz 2014). The wedding first started in 2010, in response to a Spanish woman's request to get married to her female partner at Shunkō-in (Huffington Post 2015). Since then, Shunkō-in has conducted gay weddings for foreign couples more than Japanese couples. Because Reverend Kawakami is fluent in English, Shunkō-in holds events and meditation sessions in English.[25] Thus, Shunkō-in attracts foreigners who are interested in Japanese culture and Buddhism. Moreover, Reverend Kawakami speculates that the reason why his weddings are popular among foreigners is that when he first started promoting gay weddings, the news gathered more attention from international media outlets than Japanese ones. This is understandable since LGBTQ rights were not as well-known at the time compared to now. Reverend Kawakami is pleased to see that more people are discussing LGBTQ rights and celebrates the increase of LGBTQ-supportive temples in the last couple of years.[26]

When Futenmanzan Jingu-ji's Reverend Kinjyo was putting together ideas for gay weddings at his temple, he gained inspiration from other Buddhist temples in Japan. In

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[24] Myokan Senda, interview by author, Kawagoe City, August 9, 2021.

[25] For Shunkō-in's events and experiences catered towards foreigners, see https://Shunkoin.com/en.

[26] Zenryu Kawakami, interview by author, Zoom, August 24, 2021.

particular, he was impressed by Shunkō-in's gay wedding which has been an established business for over 10 years. Reverend Kinjyo came up with the idea of doing gay weddings when he attended a gathering in 2019 for people who were interested in starting a business in Okinawa. The people who attended this event included architects, financial analysts, and people from all walks of life. Reverend Kinjyo met a queer fashion designer at this gathering, who informed him of the struggles that LGBTQ people face and provided ideas for starting a wedding business. Reflecting on the encounter, Reverend Kinjyo said:

> The queer fashion designer I met at this event told me that he was pessimistic about getting married because Japan's law does not accept same-sex marriage. I responded to this by saying that "even if the law doesn't accept your marriage, the Buddha will." Afterwards, we brainstormed what we can do to help LGBTQ people and started planning our business of providing gay weddings. Our business's selling point is to offer Buddha's blessing to LGBTQ couples as an alternative to legal affirmation.[27]

The business plan that Reverend Kinjyo and his fashion designer friend drew up coveys a strong message that Buddhism supports LGBTQ love. By promoting Buddhist weddings as being accessible to same-sex couples, Reverend Kinjyo wishes to help LGBTQ people who have negative feelings towards marriage. When he began preparing for this business, Reverend Kinjyo struggled with people's stereotypes against temples. He mentioned that some people in his local community were confused about the fact that a temple was planning to conduct weddings. In their minds, temples are exclusively for funerary services. Moreover, Reverend Kinjyo revealed that some conservative people in the community came to the temple to protest against Futenmanzan Jinguji's support for LGBTQ people:

> When the local newspaper published an article on the LGBTQ activism at my temple, many people praised the initiative and agreed that it's a good thing to help minorities. However, there were two conservative men who one day angrily barged into the temple. They were raising their voices, saying that traditional temples like Futenmanzan Jingu-ji should not be involved in inappropriate matters and that the Buddha must be crying because of my actions. I got these people to calm down and firmly told them that supporting LGBTQ people does not go against Buddhist

[27] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

> teachings. I also told them that they have no idea what they're talking about saying that the Buddha is crying![28]

While emphasizing that most people were supportive of his initiative, Reverend Kinjyo shared that not everyone felt this way. By promoting Buddhist gay weddings in Okinawa, Reverend Kinjyo aims to change people's stereotypes of Buddhist temples and raise awareness for LGBTQ rights. Unfortunately, the gay wedding business is yet to be launched due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, Reverend Kinjyo hopes to continue his involvement in LGBTQ activism at the temple and in his local community in Okinawa. He strongly believes that Buddhist temples should help alleviate people's suffering by helping those who need it.[29]

This belief is shared by Reverend Yasunaga, a priest who works at Tsukiji Hongwan-ji. As one of the most prominent temples in Tokyo, Tsukiji Hongwan-ji is a popular destination for people visiting the city. Like other temples discussed here, however, it is not immune to the decline of the *danka* system and other issues that Buddhist temples in Japan face today. In 2012, Reverend Yasunaga was hired by Tsukiji Hongwan-ji in order to reform the operations and management of the temple. He is a former businessman who was running a consulting company prior to becoming an ordained priest (Yasunaga 2020, 2-3). Based on this experience, Reverend Yasunaga was given the role of planning and implementing a business plan for the survival of Tsukiji Hongwanji. In his book *Business Management of Tsukiji Hongwanji: Extraordinary Marketing Skills That We Can Learn from a Businessman Monk* (『築地本願寺の経営学：ビジネスマン僧侶に学ぶ常識を超えるマーケティング』), Reverend Yasunaga stresses the need for Buddhist temples to alleviate people's suffering and respond to their needs (Yasunaga 2020, 124). He argues that this is a basic principle of Jodo Shinshu and that it is also the key to a flourishing temple business.

Offering gay weddings was Reverend Yasunaga's idea as part of Tsukiji Hongwan-ji's

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[28] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

[29] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

rebranding strategy. He states that while some religions reject same-sex love, Buddhism affirms all forms of love and ways of living (Yasunaga 2020, 122). Furthermore, in his book, Reverend Yasunaga points out how gay weddings have been held at California Jodo Shinshu temples since the 1970s when other religions in the US were discriminating against LGBTQ people (Yasunaga 2020, 122). He adds that the couples who had their weddings at these temples became Buddhist devotees afterward and participated in the activities at the temple (Yasunaga 2020, 123). By referring to an example in California, Reverend Yasunaga demonstrates how Buddhism has been supportive of the LGBTQ community for a long time. In addition, he explains how helping LGBTQ people could lead to establishing a lasting relationship that would be beneficial for the temple.

While it may seem that the process of starting gay weddings at Tsukiji Hongwan-ji was smooth, that is simply not the case. I interviewed Reverend Nishinaga, a nun who works at Tsukiji Hongwan-ji along with Reverend Yasunaga. She explains how the process of starting gay weddings involved much negotiation with Nishihongwan-ji, the head temple of Jodo Shinshu's Hongwan-ji sub-sect in Kyoto:

> The clergy at Nishihongwan-ji were not completely against the idea of conducting weddings for LGBTQ couples. However, they were also not fully supportive of the idea. Although they accepted the proposal in the end, they banned us from using the term "Buddhist Wedding" (仏前結婚式), and instead gave the name "Partnership Buddhist Dedication Ceremony" (パートナーシップ仏前奉告式). They said that the reason why we couldn't use the term "Buddhist Wedding" was that it was unfitting to use "wedding" for an arrangement that was not legally accepted in Japan.[30]

While understanding that institutional hierarchy takes precedence, Reverend Nishinaga does not agree with this decision made by Nishihongwan-ji. She underscores that the ceremony that Tsukiji Hongwan-ji offers is no different from other Buddhist weddings and that there should be no issue with calling it a wedding. This encounter between Tsukiji Hongwan-ji and its head temple demonstrates how despite the growing understanding of the LGBTQ community, many

[30] Akiko Nishinaga, interview by author, Zoom, December 13, 2021.

traditional institutions are still unenthusiastic about endorsing support. Reverend Nishinaga states that Buddhist temples in Japan can do better and emphasizes the importance of promoting LGBTQ rights within the Buddhist community. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Reverend Nishinaga has already been implementing this through her Sustainable Development Goals project that advocates for gender equality.

Additional Support for the LGBTQ Community

So far, I have focused on the ways in which Buddhist temples in Japan support the LGBTQ community through traditional Buddhist rituals. Nevertheless, the priests and nuns that I interviewed are involved in additional LGBTQ supportive activities that are worth highlighting. Whereas funerals and weddings are rituals that people only participate in at certain moments in life, the activism discussed in this section pertains to support LGBTQ people on a daily basis. In this way, Buddhist clergy empathize with LGBTQ individuals on an ongoing basis, thereby helping to bridge the gap between the LGBTQ and Buddhist communities. Many priests and nuns mentioned that their participation in LGBTQ activism, in general, motivated them to offer graves, provide posthumous names, and conduct weddings for LGBTQ people.

Showing Support Through Visual Representation

Many of the priests and nuns I interviewed stressed the significance of showing support for LGBTQ rights in a visual manner. For Futenmanzan Jingu-ji's Reverend Kinjyo, this was done in the form of putting a rainbow pride flag outside the temple's gate. Regarding his decision to do so, Reverend Kinjyo said that "just praying for LGBTQ rights is not enough. In order to show LGBTQ people that we are an ally, we need to visually show it" (Ryuku Shimpo 2020). On the other hand, Saimyou-ji's Reverend Senda expresses his support by wearing rainbow robes (see figure 3). He has posted pictures of himself wearing the rainbow robe on both his

Twitter and Instagram accounts (Takahashi 2020). Furthermore, Reverend Senda attends the Pride Parade in Japan wearing rainbow robes, so as to show LGBTQ people that Buddhism is supportive of their rights. Both Reverend Kinjyo and Reverend Senda mentioned that putting forward these visual items have led to positive responses from LGBTQ individuals, mentioning that they feel welcomed at the temple.

Figure 3: Reverend Senda is his rainbow robe (Forbes Japan 2020).

Among the clergy I interviewed, the most popular form of visual activism was putting on the rainbow sticker. In 2021, the Japan Buddhist Federation released a rainbow sticker for Buddhist temples to use (see figure 4). This sticker was designed by the queer Buddhist monk Kodo Nishimura, with the hope of creating a visual representation that acknowledges the presence of LGBTQ people within the Buddhist community and confirms Buddhism's commitment to diversity (Japan Buddhist Federation 2021). The sticker is sold online on the

Japan Buddhist Federation's website and additionally, a PDF version is available at no price.[31] Jitsujō-ji is one of the temples that has utilized the rainbow sticker to visualize their support for LGBTQ people. Reverend Watanabe discusses how his relationship with Jitsujō-ji's devotees changed after putting the sticker on the temple's website:

> The way people interact with me now (after putting the sticker) is completely different from before. Soon after I put up the sticker, one of my devotees came out to me. I had known this person for years, but they had never told me they were part of the LGBTQ community. There is also just simply an increase in conversations around LGBTQ and funerary matters. Some people who saw the sticker came to consult me about posthumous names. They have friends or partners who are non-binary and wanted to talk about options for posthumous names at my temple.[32]

Revered Watanabe's experience with the rainbow sticker speaks to the effectiveness of visualizing support. By putting the sticker on the temple's website, LGBTQ people in Jitsujō-ji's community felt comfortable opening up about their gender and sexuality. Consequently, this made it possible for Reverend Watanabe to offer LGBTQ accommodating rituals to those who need them.

Figure 4: Rainbow sticker (Japan Buddhist Federation 2021).

[31] To access the sticker, see http://www.jbf.ne.jp/info/detail?id=15888.

[32] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

Providing Consultation

The priests and nuns I talked to all mentioned that the one thing they can always do for LGBTQ people is to listen to their concerns and problems. As Buddhist clergy, they are trained to listen to people's worries and respond with words of wisdom based on Buddhist principles. However, for Shōzen-ji's Reverend Shibatani, providing consultancy for LGBTQ people is not only a professional responsibility but also a personal matter. As the first openly transgender nun in Japan, Reverend Shibatani believes that her own identity allows her to sympathize more with LGBTQ people than other clergy. At Shōzen-ji, Reverend Shibatani holds consultation days for LGBTQ people every month. Currently, with Covid-19, she is conducting them on Zoom. Moreover, Reverend Shibatani responds to people's worries on a website called "Hasunoha." Hasunoha is an online platform where people can post questions and concerns anonymously and get them answered by Buddhist clergy for free.[33] Reverend Shibatani is one of the subscribers of this platform and answers questions posted by LGBTQ people. Through such consultancy, Reverend Shibatani has been spreading the word that Buddhism affirms all sexual and gender minorities. She explains how these efforts have contributed to the growing community at her temple, constituting of LGBTQ people from all over Japan.[34]

Advocacy Within the Buddhist Community

The Buddhist clergy I interviewed are not only passionate about raising awareness of LGBTQ rights to the general public, but also some actively involved in other advocacy activities. In 2018, Tsukiji Hongwan-ji's Reverend Nishinaga created a community called "SDGs Temple Network" (SDGs おてらネットワーク). This community is a non-denominational network that consists of Buddhist clergy who are interested in promoting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Buddhist world. The SDGs are 17 interconnected global

[33] For details on Hasunoha, see https://hasunoha.jp/.

[34] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

goals set by the United Nations that contribute to a sustainable future for all (United Nations 2022). Reverend Nishinaga points out how many of these goals relate to Buddhist principles and that they are worth pursuing at temples. Since the establishment of this non-denominational network, she has worked with other priests and nuns to organize seminars for Buddhist clergy advocating SDGs.[35]

Reverend Nishinaga was inspired to create this community when she joined a symposium on SDGs at Tsukiji Hongwan-ji in 2017. At this symposium, she learned that one of the goals of SDGs is gender equality. Prior to joining Tsukiji Hongwan-ji in Tokyo, Reverend Nishinaga worked at a temple in a rural region. At this temple, she experienced gender discrimination firsthand and strongly felt the need to change Buddhism in Japan. She explains how Buddhist institutions are dominated by men, and that it is extremely difficult for women to be in a position of power and have a say in important decision-making. Because of this experience, SDGs' goal of achieving gender equality was appealing to Reverend Nishinaga. Like women, LGBTQ people are minorities in the world of Buddhism. By advocating for SDGs, Reverend Nishinaga hopes to push forward LGBTQ and women's rights together and bring change to the patriarchal way of Buddhist institutions.[36]

Shingyo-ji's Reverend Kanzaki is also part of a non-denominational community that works on social activism within the Buddhist community. Along with three other priests, he runs an online community called B-Learning. B-Learning was founded in 2019 and consists of non-denominational clergy who study social issues together over Zoom. The name of the community comes from E-Learning, which commonly refers to a learning system based on electronic devices, and the "E" is replaced with Buddhism's "B." B-Learning has been taking advantage of technology tools like Zoom since before the pandemic. Reverend Kanzaki explains that there is a logical reason for this:

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[35] Akiko Nishinaga, interview by author, Zoom, December 13, 2021.

[36] Akiko Nishinaga, interview by author, Zoom, December 13, 2021.

> It is pretty difficult to have an in-person gathering for priests and nuns at a temple, because we never know when we will be called to conduct funerals. That is why even before the time of Covid, we decided to use digital tools to create an online-based community. This has also helped the community become more diverse, since clergy living in various places in Japan were able to join.[37]

By making the study sessions accessible in this way, B-Learning accommodates the learning of Buddhist clergy. Through this creative approach to expanding social activism, B-Learning has become a larger and more diverse community over the years.

In 2019, B-Learning invited Fumino Sugiyama to a lecture on how Buddhist temples can support LGBTQ rights. Fumino Sugiyama is a former Olympian in fencing, who is a transgender man and one of the most prominent LGBTQ activists in Japan. According to Reverend Kanzaki, over 60 Buddhist clergy attended this online lecture to learn about what they can do for LGBTQ people. Jitsujō-ji's Reverend Watanabe was one of the attendees, and he reflected on the lecture saying:

> Fumino-san's lecture was very informative. He talked about his experience as a transgender man in Japan, as well as his current work with Tokyo Rainbow Pride. He told us that the first thing we can do is to acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ people within our community. The thing that stood out to me most from the lecture is the idea of "welcoming-out." Welcoming-out means to welcome the coming out of LGBTQ people. Fumino-san said that by welcoming coming out at the temple, more LGBTQ people will feel comfortable relying on Buddhist temples for support.[38]

Both Reverend Watanabe and Reverend Kanzaki commented that this lecture made them think about what expressing "welcoming-out" at the temple would look like. That is how they started being more attentive to LGBTQ people and their struggles. The lecture that B-Learning provided became a learning opportunity for Buddhist clergy to connect with LGBTQ activists so as to understand the struggles of LGBTQ people and deliberate on the ways in which temples can help make their life easier.

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[37] Shusei Kanzaki, interview by author, Zoom, December 2, 2021.

[38] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

Motivations for Supporting the LGBTQ Community

Buddhist Principles and Hermeneutics

Seeing all these Buddhist temples support the LGBTQ community, one might wonder: what do Buddhist texts say about gender and sexuality? Many of the clergy I talked to stated they could not find texts that explicitly talked about gender and sexual orientation as we understand it today. However, they have interpreted Buddhist principles and texts in a way that affirms and empowers LGBTQ people. Saimyou-ji's Reverend Senda points to a chapter in the Lotus Sutra called "The Parable of Medicinal Herbs," which introduces the concept of *sansounimoku* (三草二木). *Sansounimoku* means "three types of grass and two types of trees," and the Buddha uses this concept in the chapter to teach a lesson to his disciple. He explains how even though the rain falls on plants equally, there are large, medium, and small grasses and tall and short trees. He preaches that based on these unique qualities, these grass and trees all grow and bloom in their own ways.[39] Reverend Senda explains how the grass and trees in this story are metaphors for all sentient beings, and the Buddha is preaching that despite individual differences, everyone has the capacity to be a buddha. Therefore, Reverend Senda interpreted this passage as affirming LGBTQ people.

In a similar manner, Reverend Nishinaga from Tsukiji Hongwan-ji explains how supporting LGBTQ people aligns with Jodo Shinshu's basic principle of promoting equality.[40] Additionally, Myorin-ji's Reverend Kumazawa believes that Mahayana Buddhism is all about helping sentient beings attain liberation, and offering graves and giving posthumous names can lead LGBTQ people to this goal (Myorin-ji 2022). While many clergy brought up Buddhist principles and specific texts to legitimize their support for LGBTQ people, they were not their primary reason for getting involved in activism at the temple. When I asked the clergy if

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[39] For the English translation, see Watson, Burton, 1993, *The Lotus Sutra*, New York: Columbia University Press, 98.

[40] Akiko Nishinaga, interview by author, Zoom, December 13, 2021.

LGBTQ rights are supported by Buddhist texts, many of them answered that they looked into the texts after deciding to support LGBTQ people. For them, the willingness to help the LGBTQ community preceded the scriptural validity of what they were about to do. This is not to say that the Buddhist clergy I interviewed think lightly of Buddhist scriptures and teachings. As we have seen in previous sections, many priests and nuns have underscored how their activism aligns with Buddhist principles. Rather, I am arguing that there is more to explore beyond texts to understand the temples' motivations.

Reviving Historical Roles of Temples

Throughout my interviews with the priests and nuns, I noticed how many of them expressed their aspirations to revive historical roles of temples. One example that was mentioned by the two nuns, Shōzen-ji's Reverend Shibatani and Tsukiji Hongwan-ji's Reverend Nishinaga, is *kakekomi-dera* (駆け込み寺). *Kakekomi-dera* refers to nunneries that existed in the Edo which are commonly known as divorce temples or refugee temples. During this period, husbands were allowed to divorce their wives, but wives did not have the right to divorce their husbands (Honda 1993, 95). Therefore, women who wanted a divorce would run away from their homes and take refuge at a *kakekomi-dera*. Once a woman enters a *kakekomi-dera*, the nuns there would negotiate with the husband to help her get a divorce. However, if the negotiation fell through, the woman would stay at the nunnery and train for two years to become a nun. After being formally ordained as a nun, her divorce would become legally effective by virtue of the temple's law (Honda 1993, 97).

The nuns I talked to are eager to promote these values of *kakekomi-dera* by helping minorities. Reverend Shibatani explicitly stated that Shōzen-ji is a *kakekomi-dera*. While she explained that she does not have actual living space for people to take refuge, she emphasized that Shōzen-ji is always open to gender and sexual minorities who are experiencing hardships

in their daily lives.[41] Reverend Nishinaga also explained how temples should be open to people in need:

> A lot of people tell me that visiting temples is a high threshold. But in reality, temples are more accessible to the public than people think. I want everyone to start treating Tsukiji Hongwan-ji as a *kakekomi-dera*. Especially to minorities, I want to say that they can always rely on our temple.[42]

Because of Buddhist temples' association with funerals, many people in Japan think that the only scene where they can rely on clergy is when their relatives die. Reverend Nishinaga wants to change this perception. By helping those who are in lower positions of society, the two nuns are inheriting the legacies of the Edo period's *kakekomi-dera*. They believe that reviving spaces like *kakekomi-dera* is necessary to protect LGBTQ people and other minorities.

Another form of temples that was mentioned by many is *terakoya* (寺子屋). *Terakoya* refers to schools during the Edo period that were run by Buddhist temples. They were specifically for commoners and were attended by farmers, artisans, and merchants (Sangawa 2017, 155). At *terakoya*, Buddhist clergy taught reading, writing, and math among other subjects, and moreover created individual curriculums for each student based on their requests and their parents' profession (Tokyo Metropolitan Library 2011). It is said that *terakoya* existed in towns across Japan and greatly contributed to the high literacy rate of people in the Edo period (Tokyo Metropolitan Library 2011). Reverend Kanzaki is one of the priests who are eager to revive *terakoya* at his temple. He has opened an online blog called "Terakoya for Adults" (大人のための寺子屋) where he posts about Buddhist philosophy for his paid subscribers. Reverend Kanzaki explains that his pursuits of running "Terakoya for Adults," creating an online community for Buddhist clergy, and helping LGBTQ people are all about providing a variety of communities. He states that everyone has different values and needs and

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[41] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

[42] Akiko Nishinaga, interview by author, Zoom, December 13, 2021.

that it is important for temples to respect that.[43] Therefore, branching out into various activities is Reverend Kanzaki's way to ensure that everyone has at least one community that they can relate to and belong to. This eagerness to accommodate each and every one is a legacy of *terakoya*.

Futenmanzan Jingu-ji's Reverend Kinjyo is also keen to revive *terakoya*. He explains how back when temples were running *terakoya*, temples were seen as community centers where people would gather and interact with each other:

> When people see me working on LGBTQ activism at the temple, they commend me for doing something unique. But I think this is very ironic because what I am doing is no different from what priests in the Edo-Meiji period did. In old times, Buddhist priests wore many hats. They not only conducted funerals but also taught literature, math, and music to children and functioned as a community center. Originally, temples were places where people relied for daily support.[44]

Reverend Kinjyo argues that Buddhist temples supporting LGBTQ people should not come as a surprise. Priests in the Edo-Meiji period were involved in multiple aspects of commoners' lives, and he is merely following their path. As long as there are LGBTQ people in his community that are being discriminated against by society, Reverend Kinjyo believes that it is his responsibility to give them a helping hand and provide a safe community.

While none of the clergy mentioned this directly, I believe the motivation to revive these historical forms of temples is also associated with the goal of increasing business opportunities at the temple. As I have explained, the decline of the *danka* system has made it difficult for Japanese Buddhist temples to rely on funerary services as the sole source of income. The Buddhist temples I interviewed are creative and flexible with the funerary services they provide, in order to accommodate the needs of people today. The priests and nuns I interviewed find *kakekomi-dera* and *terakoya*'s aspect of naturally gathering people to the temple attractive. After all, Buddhist temples are supported by the people that depend on their services; they

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[43] Shusei Kanzaki, interview by author, Zoom, December 2, 2021.

[44] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

cannot survive if there is no demand. By reinstituting past responsibilities, Buddhist temples are striving to attract more people to the temple. Therefore, providing services to LGBTQ people is one way in which temples are trying to increase their supporters and stay relevant to people's lives.

In spite of the motivation to bring back past responsibilities to their temples, none of the clergy I interviewed mentioned the *chigo*-model of homosexual relationships to explain Buddhism's support for the LGBTQ community. Some priests and nuns referred to funerary customs during the Edo period to demonstrate how there were times in history when Japan was more lenient about gender roles in rituals. Nevertheless, *chigo* was not once brought up by them during the interviews. When I told some of the clergy that the Buddhist *chigo*-model of homosexual relationships was passed down to secular realms of society and became a code for homosexual interactions, some were genuinely surprised that Buddhism had such a big impact on the development of homosexual practices. For others who were aware of the *chigo*-model of relationships, this historical practice played no role in their decision to support the LGBTQ community. These clergy understand that the *chigo* practice was a problematic custom that exploited underage boys and is distinct from the egalitarian forms of relationship that the current LGBTQ rights movement is promoting. Thus, despite Buddhism's prominent role in spreading male same-sex relationships, this historical context and the contemporary temples' participation in LGBTQ activism are separate matters from the clergy's perspectives.

Expanding the Temple's Reach

In addition to the reviving past duties, many temples are expanding into new activities that were previously not the responsibilities of Buddhist temples. As I mentioned before, Buddhists were never active in the Japanese wedding industry. Nevertheless, many of the temples I talked to are conducting gay weddings in addition to providing funerals for LGBTQ people. This

indicates that Buddhist clergy see the value in expanding the temple's reach by offering new services. Reverend Senda from Saimyou-ji mentioned that his study abroad experience in Nagpur, India influenced his decision to start gay weddings. Reverend Senda was staying at a Tendai sect monastery in Nagpur, where he was shocked by how different monks in India were from priests in Japan. He was surprised by how monks in India are not involved in funerary services and instead spend their days talking and giving life advice to local visitors. Reverend Senda was impressed by Indian monks' deep involvement in people's living matters and felt that Japanese temples should provide similar services. Upon returning to Japan, he started getting more involved in people's lives and not just death. He explained the problem with only focusing on funerary services:

> Nowadays the relationship between the temple and people starts with someone's death. I think it is very unfortunate and sad that we only get to meet new people after they have passed away. How do you expect the relationship to nurture when they are already deceased?[45]

Reverend Senda's believes that in order for Buddhist temples in Japan to be more involved in living matters, they need to build relationships with people. However, he claims that this is difficult to do so through funerary services. Rather than only being relied on when someone passed away, Reverend Senda offers gay weddings so as to make lasting connections and be involved in people's lives.

One thing to keep in mind specifically for gay weddings is that no other religious organizations in Japan have stepped forward with the idea so far. Not surprisingly, there are many religious organizations in Japan that are anti-LGBTQ. Some of the priests I interviewed said that they have received complaints from institutions such as Shinto shrines and Baptist churches, telling them to stop conducting gay marriages. While underscoring that these organizations' discriminative stance is an issue, Buddhist clergy also see this situation as an opportunity for them to step in as supporters of LGBTQ rights. By distinguishing themselves

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[45] Myokan Senda, interview by author, Kawagoe City, August 9, 2021.

from other religious organizations, they stress that Buddhism is a religion that promotes equality for all. Since no other religious organizations are widely supporting gay weddings, it is an ideal industry for Buddhist temples to take over. Therefore, based on the context that many temples are seeking to expand beyond funerals, it strategically makes sense that they are starting to offer gay weddings.

Expanding the temple's reach can also mean reaching out to new groups of people. Reverend Shibatani opened Shōzen-ji as a temple that welcomes all sexual minorities. The kanji characters used in the name Shōzen-ji (性善寺) derive from the theory of innate goodness (性善説) which is embedded in the Buddhist philosophy that claims all sentient beings have the innate ability to be a buddha (Shōzen-ji 2021). Her wish since opening Shōzen-ji has been that the temple would become a hub for LGBTQ people in Japan who are marginalized in Japan. Nevertheless, Reverend Shibatani explains how her perspectives have broadened over the last couple of years:

> Through my work at the temple, I have become aware of the struggles that minorities in general face. As a transgender woman, I experienced a lot of hardships in my life. But sexual minorities are not the only ones that are suffering. For example, foreigners in Japan are struggling as minorities. I also realized that the *eitai kuyo* that I offer is helpful to people other than sexual minorities, such as elderly people who do not have children who can take care of their graves. So essentially, I am helping groups of people other than my initial target of *eitai kuyo.* My number one goal right now is to promote diversity and create a society that is welcoming and generous to all.[46]

For Reverend Shibatani, working on LGBTQ rights opened her eyes to the realities of other minorities in Japan. She noticed how there are people beyond the LGBTQ community who are suffering from discrimination. Moreover, she became aware that her services designed to help LGBTQ people would also be accommodating for these other minorities. There are many people in Japan who would benefit from *eitai kuyo*, such as people who couldn't have children and foreigners who do not have family in Japan. Therefore, advocating for LGBTQ rights

[46] Soshuku Shibatani, interview by author, Zoom, September 22, 2021.

allowed Reverend Shibatani to set the ground for helping other minorities.

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, LGBTQ rights are currently a hot topic in Japan that is gaining a lot of political momentum. What this means is that any activities related to LGBTQ rights are likely to make headlines. Jitsujō-ji's Reverend Watanabe revealed that he was recently appointed as the local Civil Rights Commissioner by the judicial branch. As a commissioner, he now has the authority to report human rights abuses to the legal affairs bureau to conduct a formal investigation. He explains how the legal branch found out about his LGBTQ activism at the temple and decided to appoint him as a commissioner. Reverend Watanabe is grateful for this position, stating that now he can help other people who are discriminated against, in addition to LGBTQ people.[47] As this demonstrates, working on LGBTQ activism can have outcomes that result in benefiting the larger population. What began as a pursuit to assist the LGBTQ community ends up making the lives of others better. Moreover, it is worth noting that the services that these temples offer are intersectional by nature. As Reverend Shibatani explained, they not only help LGBTQ people but also accommodate and affirm other people in Japan who are faced with issues of the current generation. In this way, working on LGBTQ rights has become a gateway for Buddhist temples to expand their reach and get involved in other civil rights issues.

Envisioning a Better Future

The priests and nuns I interviewed all agreed that political change must take place in order to solve the legal and social issues that concern the LGBTQ community. While establishing that Buddhist temples are separate from politics, they recognize that they are in a position that can appeal to authorities and contribute to change. Shunkō-in's Reverend Kawakami believes that temples can help bridge the gap between LGBTQ people and those who have stereotypes

[47] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

against them. He explains that more conversations need to happen so as to get the general public of Japan to understand the struggles of the LGBTQ community, and states that Buddhist temples are fit to mediate the conversation by having compassion for both sides.[48] Reverend Kinjyo also believes that there is more work to be done to eliminate the stigmas that people have against the LGBTQ community. He specifically mentions how many politicians in Japan lack the willingness to understand the situation that LGBTQ people are put in. Reverend Kinjyo analyzed why this is the case, and cautioned that Buddhist clergy can also fall into the same pitfall very easily:

> Many politicians in Japan come from a family of politicians. Buddhist clergy are like that too. Most of us are inheriting temples that have been run by our ancestors for generations. When you belong to a world like this, it is very difficult to meet people with different values and perspectives. Hence your worldview becomes very narrow. Unless you make an intentional effort to reach out to people outside, you will never understand what they're like or the kind of concerns that they have.[49]

He illustrates how certain traditional institutions in Japan such as politics and Buddhist temples are passed down in the same family for generations. Reverend Kinjyo thinks that in this way, politicians and Buddhist clergy are equally susceptible to being close-minded and ignorant of various social issues. In order for politicians to act for LGBTQ people —and for more Buddhist temples to be LGBTQ-friendly— Reverend Kinjyo believes that they must make a concerted effort to go outside of their comfort zone and listen to other people's concerns.[50]

In addition to mediating the conversations around LGBTQ rights, some clergy mentioned that they can contribute to the bottom-up approach of changing the social climate. Reverend Senda believes that there is symbolic value in a traditional institution like Saimyou-ji getting involved in LGBTQ activism. He explains that LGBTQ activism in Japan is often seen as a movement run by a small group of young people. However, Reverend Senda is trying

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[48] Zenryu Kawakami, interview by author, Zoom, August 24.
[49] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.
[50] Ryokei Kinjyo, interview by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

to change this stereotype by going to Pride Parade wearing his rainbow robe and being vocal on social media about his support for the LGBTQ community. He believes that by having traditional Buddhist temples join the movement, we can better pressure the political realm to change.[51] Jitsujō-ji's Reverend Watanabe also argues that waiting for change to happen from the top is not feasible:

> It is the politicians' responsibility to change the politics of Japan for the better. However, I also have my own responsibility as a Buddhist priest, that is to create the next future for all. I believe it is my job to shape a better future for everyone and in order to do so, I will continue to advocate for LGBTQ people until they are normalized in society.[52]

Reverend Watanabe feels a strong sense of responsibility to shape a future where everyone is welcomed. He believes that the most important step in doing so is to normalize the existence of LGBTQ people in society. By starting with the people within his local community, Reverend Watanabe is already implementing his bottom-up approach to changing the situation for LGBTQ people in Japan.

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[51] Myokan Senda, interview by author, Kawagoe City, August 9, 2021.

[52] Eiko Watanabe, interview by author, Zoom, November 22, 2021.

Conclusion

Currently, homophobic and transphobic rhetoric is prevalent among Japanese politicians in office. With the absence of an LGBTQ anti-discrimination law and same-sex marriage still being illegal, Japan has much work to do in terms of protecting its LGBTQ population. However, Buddhist temples' support for the LGBTQ community paints a different picture. The priests and nuns I interviewed are actively engaged in activism at their temple, which uplifts LGBTQ people through traditional Buddhist rituals. Their motivations for taking part in this movement are diverse, ranging from achieving an egalitarian society to addressing financial concerns. By virtue of how complex these motivations are, it impossible to classify them as being simply altruistic or self-serving.

As the history of gender and homosexuality in Japan elucidates, homosexual practices have existed in mainstream society for over centuries. The *chigo*-model of homosexual relationship originates from Buddhist temples during the Heian period (794-1185), when senior monks engaged in sexual acts with young acolytes for spiritual awakening. The model entered secular realms in the form of relationships between adult men and young boys in both the Edo period and the imperial army. However, the priests and nuns I talked to are not interested in reviving the *chigo* tradition. They understand how this tradition is based on a toxic power dynamic and believe that a more egalitarian form of relationship is fitting for contemporary LGBTQ people. Rather, the clergy are eager to bring back historical forms of Buddhist temples, such as *kakekomi dera* and *terakoya* which flourished during the Edo period (1603-1868). These types of temples represent an era in which Buddhist temples were involved in the daily lives of people in Japan, unlike contemporary times where people only rely on temples for funerary assistance. Therefore, supporting the LGBTQ community is a way for the temples to engage with people beyond funerary rituals and stay relevant to their lives.

The legal and political hurdles to LGBTQ equality also speak to how and why Buddhist temples are contributing to LGBTQ activism. The priests and nuns I talked to are well informed of the ways in which funerary and marital rituals are inaccessible to many LGBTQ people in Japan. In order to provide solutions for this issue, the clergy have reevaluated certain Buddhist rituals to accommodate the needs of the LGBTQ community. Understanding how most institutions in Japan do not affirm same-sex marriage, the priests and nuns are offering their temples as a space to celebrate same-sex love. Moreover, the lack of recognition for same-sex marriage entails that many LGBTQ couples struggle to have children. In response to this situation, Buddhist temples are starting to provide graves that are designed specifically for couples in contrast to large graves made for families. Furthermore, Buddhist temples are aware of how physically and mentally draining the process for legal gender change is. To help LGBTQ people have posthumous names that are reflective of their gender identity, the clergy have allowed people to prepare names before passing away and have names free of gender identifiers.

These services offered by Buddhist temples not only help the LGBTQ community but also benefit other minorities in Japan. For example, small and affordable graves like natural burial graves are appealing to people who do not have children who can take care of their graves. By virtue of how comprehensive these rituals are, supporting the LGBTQ community has become a gateway for Buddhist clergy to uplift other minorities as well. Furthermore, by offering these services, the Buddhist priests and nuns are calling out the Japanese government's homophobia and transphobia. Many of them insist that political change is crucial in order to protect the LGBTQ community in Japan. To this end, they believe that it is valuable to have traditional institutions like Buddhist temples advocate for LGBTQ rights. By appealing to their local community as well as the general public that they are in support of LGBTQ equality, Buddhist temples aim to change the situation for the LGBTQ people from the bottom-up.

Suggestions for Future Research

This thesis establishes a foundation for understanding the ways in which Japanese Buddhist temples are participating in LGBTQ activism and the motivations behind these activities. My research contributes to the academic conversation about Japanese Buddhism in relation to gender and sexuality, temples' roles in contemporary times, and social justice. Nevertheless, this phenomenon that I investigated is still at its early developing stage and as it grows, there will be further areas to examine. Therefore, to conclude, I put forward several suggestions for future research.

One of the main limitations of my research is that I was not able to find comprehensive data on the people who utilized the LGBTQ-supportive services at Buddhist temples. While there is sufficient information on how and why Buddhist temples support the LGBTQ community, there is barely any input on how these types of activism are received by the LGBTQ community in Japan. Part of the reason why this information is currently unavailable is that many of the temples I researched have only been offering LGBTQ-supportive services for a couple of years. This combined with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic means that there is inadequate information to study the people who participate in LGBTQ-supportive rituals. Furthermore, since LGBTQ people are marginalized in Japanese society, there is a risk for them to speak up about their own experiences with gender and sexuality. This makes it difficult to find LGBTQ people who not only took advantage of the temples' services but are also willing to share their experiences with them. Therefore, future research may investigate temple-based LGBTQ activism from the perspectives of the Japanese LGBTQ community. What are LGBTQ peoples' experiences with these services? Do they find these services helpful? And is there anything they wish the temples could improve on? Once more people use the LGBTQ-supportive services and the Japanese society becomes less judgmental towards the LGBTQ community, these questions are well worth examining.

Another detail that this research did not examine is the popularity of Buddhist gay weddings among foreigners. In several interviews, the Buddhist clergy mentioned how they were contacted by many foreign couples who were interested in having a Buddhist gay wedding in Japan. While this thesis introduced some motivations for these foreigners to participate in the ritual, a more comprehensive study is needed to fully understand why these foreigners are reaching out to Japanese Buddhist temples. The few cases that I discussed in this thesis implied that these foreign couples from Australia and China believed Japan to be more LGBTQ-affirming than their home countries. Thus, this future research will include studying why some foreigners may view Japan as being LGBTQ-affirming, despite the lack of legal protection for the LGBTQ community. My historical research only investigated up to the imperial Japan period, since the purpose was to understand the *chigo*-model of homosexual relationships. However, future research will require looking into the post-WWII period leading up to the current times, since there are many cultural factors that contribute to a specific image of Japan that is presented to people outside of the country. For example, in the last 30 years or so, Japan's anime industry and particularly boys-love (BL) comics and anime which depict male homoerotic love have become immensely popular among foreigners. It will be fruitful to look into the ways in which these specific aspects of Japanese culture appeal to foreigners, leading them to seek out gay weddings in Japan.

Future studies may also conduct comparative research between LGBTQ-supportive Buddhist temples in Japan and other countries. Through my research, I came across the information that Jodo Shinshu temples in California had been conducting Buddhist same-sex weddings since the 1970s. In his book, Reverend Yasunaga from Tsukiji Hongwan-ji mentioned that this example encouraged him to push forward gay weddings at his temple. In 2012, Jeff Wilson published an article that delved into the affirmation of same-sex marriage among Jodo

Shinshu Buddhists in the United States.[53] In this article, Wilson argues that the same-sex weddings conducted by these Jodo Shinshu temples were "among the first clergy-led religious ceremonies for same-sex couples performed in the modern era and were apparently the first such marriages conducted in the history of Buddhism" (Wilson 2021, 31). It is fascinating how a Japanese Buddhist sect like Jodo Shinshu has been involved in gay weddings outside of Japan for over 50 years. Therefore, a comparative study between the cases in Japan and the United States will help us understand the similarities and differences in the wedding ceremonies, as well as the motivations for supporting the LGBTQ community.

Finally, future research should look into whether Buddhist temples' LGBTQ activism has impacted Japanese politics and if so how. Many Buddhist clergy I interviewed expressed their intention of changing the political climate and improving LGBTQ rights from the bottom-up. However, political change takes time, and it is not feasible to assess the impacts right now. Thus, in the next five to ten years, it would be worthwhile to investigate the impacts of Buddhist temples' bottom-up approach to LGBTQ rights. Measuring the effectiveness of the temple-based activism will require long-term tracking of the activities at the temples, social attitudes towards the LGBTQ community, and policy shifts. Examining each of these factors will tell us whether or not there has been a success in the bottom-up approach to tackling LGBTQ equality. As I demonstrated in my research, the temples I interviewed are not simply working on LGBTQ activism by themselves. Rather, they are collaborating with other Buddhists, secular activists, as well as local businesses to make a change. With many actors involved in the movement, there is high hope that Buddhist temples' LGBTQ activism will bring about positive change in Japan over time.

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[53] For more information on Buddhist gay weddings in the United States, see Wilson, Jeff, 2021, "'All Being Are Equally Embraced By Amida Buddha': Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and Same-Sex Marriage in the United States.," *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 13: 31-59.

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