

“An Examination of Shin Propagation in Terms of Legendary Stories

Told About Shinran”

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INTRODUCTION

Shin Buddhist propagation occurs due to a complicated phenomenon as dependent co-arising. If so, we need to know about not only theories concerning Shin Buddhist propagation in Shinran’s writing but also the history of propagational events of the past. In other words, we need to study Shin propagation through not only deductive logic but also inductive logic. In terms of the inductive logic, we especially have to re-think how Shin Buddhists in various times talked about Shinran’s life and personality.

Based on an awareness of the issues described above, I will consider the legendary stories told regarding Shinran that are still being used throughout Japan for propagational purpose. One of the legends is that Shinran recited “Namo Amida Butsu” to save a woman who had transformed into a ghost on account of her strong attachment. It is obvious that the story strays from the teachings that Shinran revealed. Why did such legendary stories of Shinran spread widely across Japan? Why did such an image of Shinran emerge? I will consider how significant the legendary stories still are for the purpose of Shin propagation.

1. SHINRAN’S IMAGE OF NIJYŪYOHAI IN EDO PERIOD

A Japanese Buddhist priest, Shinran (親鸞, 1173-1263), known as the founder of Shin Buddhism, avoided taking any disciples because he realized that his efforts were undependable for attaining Buddhahood.¹

¹ This notion is expressed *A Record in Lament of Divergences* in Chapter Six as follows:

For myself, I do not have even a single disciple. For if I brought people to say the nembutsu through my own efforts, then they might be my disciples. But it is indeed preposterous to call persons “my disciples” when they say the nembutsu having received the working of Amida.

Collected Works of Shinran (hereafter CWS), 2 vols. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 1:664; *Jōdo Shinshū Seiten Zensho* 『浄土真宗聖典全書』 (hereafter JSZ), 6 vols. (Kyoto: Hongwanji Syuppansha, 2011), 2:1057. 「親鸞は弟子一人ももたずさふらう。そのゆへは、わがはからひにて、ひとに念仏まふさせさふらはばこそ、弟子にてもさふらはめ。弥陀の御もよほしにあづかて念仏まふしきさふら

Shinran clearly turned away from having disciples because the nembutsu derives from Amida Buddha's working, not from his efforts².

In fact, however, Shinran's leading disciples existed precisely because of his influence and his human virtues. Also, a number of people having strong interest in Shinran narrated his image with different interpretation³. One of the groups of his disciples is called "Nijyūyohai(二十四輩, Twenty-four disciples of Shinran)." In general, Nijyūyohai refers to the top twenty-four disciples of Shinran when he propagated Shin Buddhism in Togoku⁴ (hereafter Kanto region⁵) as well as at the temples worshipping these followers as founders⁶. By the way, it is known that Shinran was successful in his propagation while he was in Kanto region. There is no doubt that the gathering of Nijyūyohai or the Twenty-four disciples is one of the great accomplishments of Shinran's propagation in the Kanto region⁷.

Although it is still unclear and controversial as to how and why those twenty-four disciples were chosen among many disciples, the Kanto region has become an area where Shinran's anecdotes penetrated deeply and widely among the people, and the remnants remain even to this day⁸. In the present time, there are over 100 temples called Nijyūyohai not only in Kanto region but also in various parts of Japan, because their descendants left the area for many reasons including the fires of war.

What we need to pay attention is that the popularity of Nijyūyohai or the Twenty-four disciples of Shinran greatly increased during the Edo period (1603-1868) with pilgrimages spreading among ordinary people. Because people actively made pilgrimages to distant temples and group pilgrimage became more popular, Shin followers exhorted pilgrims to know

うひとを、わが弟子とまふすこと、きはめたる荒涼のことなり。」

² This attitude is acknowledged by Shinran's use of the phrase "Dōbō (同朋, fellows)" in *Lamp for the Latter Ages* (CWS, 1:551; JSZ, 2:809). After Shinran's time, this concept was emphasized by a phrase "Ondōbō-Ondōgyō (御同朋・御同行, friends and fellow-practicers)" as the important attitude for Shin Buddhist organizations. For example, Rennyo who is 8th Monshu, or head-priest, of the Hongwanji Temple of the Jōdo Shinshū mentioned that the attitude of "Ondobō-Ondogyō" is important for Shin Buddhists, in his letters, *Gobunsho* (JSZ,5:69-70). 「聖人は御同朋・御同行とこそかしづきて仰せられけり」

³ The study of this fields has been increasing such as Kikumi Enya, Kenshi Kusano, Ayako Osawa and so on.

⁴ Togoku is wider than Kanto region; however, I will use the word Kanto region as Togoku in this paper.

⁵ See figure 1 at the end of this paper.

⁶ *Shinshū Shin jiten*, (Kyoto: Hōzōkan,1983), 389.

⁷ Masaharu Imai, *Shinran to Togoku Monto* (Tokyo ,1999)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

more about the remnants of Shinran and the teaching of Jōdo Shinshū by cherishing the memories of Shinran. As a result, various legendary stories about Shinran appeared among them during the Edo period⁹.

The legendary stories that Nijyūyohai told about Shinran throughout the Kanto region have made a large contribution to Shin Buddhism propagation. In other words, thanks to the stories told by Nijyūyohai, we are able to know how Shin Buddhism spread throughout the Kanto region¹⁰. In addition, the examination of Shinran's images gives us a better indication as to how we can propagate Pure Land thought in contemporary society.

In order to consider this issue, I will focus on one of Shinran's famous legends that spread in Kanto region in Edo era, called "The Salvation of A Ghost (幽霊濟度, Yūrei saido).

2. ORIGINAL FORM OF THE LEGEND, "KOSODATE YŪREI"

Because "The Salvation of A Ghost" is based on "A Ghost Caring for Her Baby (子育て幽霊, Kosodate yūrei)" that was a Japanese folktale that circulated during the Edo period, I will introduce "A Ghost Caring for Her Baby" before considering "The Salvation of A Ghost."

"A Ghost Caring for Her Baby" also known as "Ame kai yūrei," "Yūrei ame," or "Akagozuka densetsu," has been used by many Buddhist priests at Dharma talks when sharing the kindness of parents to their children. It also has been familiar to many people as a program of Rakugo (落語, Japanese traditional humorous storytelling). Some regions that circulate the story of "A Ghost Caring for Her Baby" have candy stores which sell the ghost candies such as "Yūrei Kosodate Ame (ghost's candy to care for her child)¹¹" in Kyoto Higashiyama (Kyoto prefecture)¹². One typical example in these stories is given below:

One rainy night, a shopkeeper was closing up his shop when he heard a tapping sound at the window. Looking out, he saw a woman standing pathetically in the rain, cold and drenched. He asked her if she needed help, but all she said was, "One candy please." Even though the shop was closed, the shopkeeper

⁹ In the present era, there are tons of legends regarding Shinran and Shin Buddhism cultures. It is not only Nijyūyohai, but also "The Seven Wonders of Hongwanji Temple in Kyoto (本願寺七不思議, Hongwanji Nana Fushigi)," "The Seven Wonders of north-central area in Echigo (越後七不思議, Echigo Nana Fushigi)," and so on.

¹⁰ Myōdō Kikufuji, *Shinran Shōnin Densetsu Shū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2011)

¹¹ See figure 2 at the end of this paper.

¹² Please refer to the shop website: <http://kosodateame.com/ame/>.

felt sorry for the poor woman, so he sold her the candy. She paid him one *mon*—a very low denomination coin—and vanished into the night.

The next night, she came at the very same time, looking forlorn and disheveled. Again, she asked the shopkeeper, in a voice almost too faint to hear, “One candy please.” The shopkeeper gave her a candy, and again she paid with one *mon*, and left just as quietly as she had come.

Every night for six nights, this exact scenario played out. On the seventh night, she returned, but this time had no money. When she asked “One candy please,” she presented a handful of leaves. The shopkeeper told her that he could not accept leaves as payment. “Then take this instead,” she said, handing him her coat. The shopkeeper protested, but she insisted. Finally he gave in and accepted the trade.

The next day, a merchant from a neighboring village passed through the town. He stopped in his friend’s shop, and the shopkeeper told him of the strange woman who came visiting every night, and of the coat that she gave him as payment. When the merchant saw the strange woman’s coat hanging in the shop, he went pale. “That is the coat of my friend’s wife!”

“Really? Perhaps it was she who came to the store?”

“That is impossible! She died one week ago. She was buried in this coat!”

The merchant and the shopkeeper looked at each other in disbelief. They went to the temple where she was buried to tell the head priest what the shopkeeper had seen. The priest scolded them for believing in such superstitions. Afterwards he took them to the woman’s grave to show them that all was okay. When they reached the grave, however, they heard the unmistakable screaming of a newborn baby coming from under the earth!

They dug up the grave and discovered that it was indeed the corpse woman who had been visiting the shop! What’s more, entwined in her arms, a living baby wrapped up in cloth. The woman had given birth posthumously in her coffin. Wrapped up with the baby were the six mostly-eaten pieces of candy, which had kept the baby from starving during the week. Its mother had bought the candy with the six *mon* traditionally placed with a corpse to pay the guardians of the underworld.

They took the baby from the corpse and returned it to its family. When they reburied the woman’s body, the corpse had a serene expression on its face. And the ghostly visitor to the candy store was never seen again.¹³

“A Ghost Caring for Her Baby” is a very common story in Asia though the details vary from place to place. Basically, the main content is that a dead woman rears a child. One common

¹³ Please refer to the website: <http://yokai.com/kosodateyuurei/>.

version says that the child becomes a distinguished priest¹⁴. For example, it is known that Shin Buddhist priest Daigon (1791-1856), who was born in Yamaguchi prefecture was a baby who had been brought up by the ghost of “A Ghost Caring for Her Baby.”¹⁵

According to previous studies, “A Ghost Caring for Her Baby” started in 1661 (in the early Edo period) when Shozo Suzuki (1579-1655) compiled *katakana-bon* (book in Japanese *katakana* characters) of “Inga monogatari (the tale of Inga or Cause and Effect).”¹⁶ However, it is also indicated that it was created under the influence of Gandhara art and Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Kotani Nakao quotes Alfred Foucher’s thesis written in 1917 and reveals that an origin of “A Ghost Caring for Her Baby” can be traced back to Gandhara sculpture in the 2nd century¹⁷ and that the original scripture is from Chinese Buddhist scripture, called “Bussetsu senda etsukokuō kyō (仏説旃陀越国王経)”¹⁸.

3. AN OUTLINE OF “THE SALVATION OF A GHOST (幽霊濟度, YŪREI SAIDO)”

Depending on the stories passed down in the localities, the content varies greatly. “The Salvation of A Ghost” is no exception. Sometimes, details of the contents of “The Salvation of A Ghost” are forced to be changed due to changes in the social environment and so on. “The Salvation of A Ghost” is an extremely typical example of this. “A Ghost Caring for Her Baby” is quite similar to “The Salvation of A Ghost.”

“The Salvation A Ghost” is written in the diaries of pilgrimages known as *Itoku Hōrin Shū*, *Ōtani Iseki Roku*, *Nijyūyohai Junpai Zue*, and so on¹⁹. It is a history record of Muryōjuji Temple of Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha located in Hokota city in Ibaraki Prefecture. As one of Nijyūyohai, Junshin (順信, ???~1250) is a resident priest at Muryōjuji Temple. This temple is famous as a base for Shin propagation in Kanto region, resulting in the build-up of an

¹⁴ Kunihiko Tsutsumi, “*Kosodate Yūrei no Genzō: Sōto Shū Sōsōgirei wo Tegakaritoshite*” (Tokyo: Kanrin Shobō, 1994)

¹⁵ Please refer to Kyōsenji Temple’s website: <https://www.kyosenji.net/>.

¹⁶ Tadayoshi Sakai, “*Mother’s Love Seen in the Folk Tales, Child-Raising Ghost*” (Tottori: Tottori College, 2014)

¹⁷ See figure 3 at the end of this paper.

¹⁸ Kotani Nakao, “*The nursling of the dead woman -a sotne sculpture newly excavated at Gandhara(2)-*” (Hyogo: Otemae University, 1973)

¹⁹ Yusen Kashiwahara, Joryu Chiba, Reizo Hiramatsu and Ryukichi Mori, *Shinshū Shiryō Shūsei*, 13 vols. (Kyoto: Dōbōsha, 2003)

influential group called the “Kashima lay followers (鹿島門徒).” Although there are slight variations regarding “Engi (縁起, the temple history)” of Muryōjuji Temple as described in each text, I shall cite the summary by Sōsei (宗誓, 1645-1726) of the story in *Itoku Hōrin Shū*:

A woman died from the difficult delivery at a Zen Buddhist temple (later, Muryōjuji Temple of Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha) in Hitachi province (current Ibaraki prefecture). Her relatives mourned her passing, and they buried her body at the temple precincts. After some time, a creepy rumor emerged. The rumor was that a young woman who had died young became a ghost and appeared from the temple precincts. People were afraid of the ghost and did not want to visit the temple. Because of that, the temple did not have a resident priest. People of the village, who were at a total loss, told their troubles to Shinran who happened to pass by, and they asked him to save the ghost. Afterwards, when Shinran found out about that incident, he wrote each character of “The Three Pure Land Sutras Delivered by Shakyamuni Buddha (浄土三部経, Jōdo Sanbu Kyō)” onto a small stone by hand. He then buried these stones with the sutras at her grave and recited the nembutsu. Then, the horrible ghost immediately transformed into a Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva flew towards the west, emitting a light and attained birth in the Pure Land. All of the people in the village praised Shinran for his great achievement and they were moved to tears.²⁰

It is not clear how much of this story reflects an actual historical event. However, it exists today as part of the temple treasures at Muryōjuji Temple in the form of “Yūrei no e (幽霊の絵, a hanging scroll of the ghost)” and “Nyonin jōbutsu onkyō sekizuka (女人成仏御経石塚, a scripture tomb regarding attainment of Buddhahood by women).²¹” It is acknowledged that this legend is still functioning as part of the identity of the temple. Rev. Kataoka, who is the present head priest of Muryōjuji Temple, said that he now emphasizes “Nyonin Jōbutsu (女人成仏, attainment of Buddhahood by women)” when he explains this legend.

4. A SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LEGEND, “THE SALVATION OF A GHOST”

I would like to consider how significant the legendary story of “The Salvation of A Ghost,” which spread through Kanto region in Edo era, is in terms of Shin propagation. Although this legendary story may have various kinds of impact in propagating Shin Buddhism, it could suggest two things; 1) corresponding to people’s suffering and 2) succeeding to attract their

²⁰ Ibid., 8:643.

²¹ See figure 4 at the end of this paper.

interests.

First, this legend was in correspondence with people's suffering. During the Edo era, people generally harbored feelings of awe and fear towards the dead, particularly those of ghosts²². It meant that the fear of ghosts was prevalent as the source of people's suffering in Edo era. Under such circumstances, because the ghost is featured in this legend, it may have been easier to take interest and listen to the story for people in those days.

Second, this legend adopts Buddhist funeral rites in a well-known manner in the Kanto region²³. According to "The Salvation of A Ghost," Shinran copied one letter of the Buddhist scriptures onto small stones by hand. He then buried these stones with the sutras themselves at her grave and recited the nembutsu. These actions are called "Ichiji isseki kyō," which happens to be a popular funeral rite in the Sōtō sect (曹洞宗) in the Kanto region during the Edo period. I think that the story proved to be effective in attracting the interest of the people in the Edo period.

Therefore, this story is intentionally conceived to fit in with people in the Kanto region. In other words, the story was accepted by the needs of the people in the Kanto region during the Edo era.

Additionally, in fact, this "The Salvation of A Ghost" spread throughout Japan from Ibaraki prefecture. For example, Kōgenji Temple of Jōdo Shinshū Hongawaji-ha has owned a statue of a ghost called "Ubume no yūrei (産女の幽霊, a ghost of childbirth woman)" in Nagasaki prefecture located far away in the south west of Japan²⁴. This statue of "Ubume no yūrei" is shown to the public once every August 16th and is told a picture-story of based on "The Salvation of A Ghost" at Muryōjuji Temple. A document is added to the story, named "Nijyūyohai daisan honseki Muryōjuji ryakuengi (無量寿寺第三本席無量寿寺略縁起, historical record of Muryōjuji Temple of Nijyūyohai)," showing the information regarding Muryōjuji Temple in Ibaraki²⁵. It is thought that the statue and the picture-story at Kōgenji Temple were created while referring to Muryōjuji Temple's "The Salvation of A Ghost." Tetsuya Ecchu carried out his research examining how "Ubume no yūrei (the ghost of

²² Hiroo Sato "The Birth of a Holy Ghost: The Changing Concept of Shisha-kuyo (Memorials for the Dead) in the Edo Period" (Tokyo: Religious Studies in Japan, 2012)

²³ Kunihiko Tsutsumi, "*Kosodate Yūrei no Genzō: Sōtō Shū Sōsōgirei wo Tegakaritoshite*" (Tokyo: Kanrin Shobō, 1994)

²⁴ See figure 5 at the end of this paper.

²⁵ See figure 6 at the end of this paper.

childbirth woman)” was delivered to Nagasaki, and concluded that one of the pilgrims exhibiting the statue as Nijūyohai’s treasure throughout Japan presented it to Kōgenji temple when he visited Nagasaki²⁶. It is significant that the legendary story told regarding Shinran at Muryōjuji Temple in Kanto region spread to Kōgenji Temple in Nagasaki located far away in the south west part of Japan. It reveals the extensive background of the effort of people who propagated the legend of “The Salvation of A Ghost” throughout Japan.

5. HOW DO WE PROPAGATE SHIN BUDDHISM IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY?

The teaching of Shin Buddhism is basically centered on Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow. Due to past studies in Shin Buddhism, especially in Edo period, we know the structure of Shin Buddhist soteriology²⁷. And the teaching is summarized in 2008 for Shin Buddhist organizations²⁸.

According to the official Shin Buddhist doctrine, the nembutsu is not a tool of superstition. It is the compassionate calling of Amida, and we express our gratitude to Amida in reciting the nembutsu.

However, in “The Salvation of A Ghost,” Shinran recited the nembutsu as a form of magic or meditational method. It means that the legend constitutes a misunderstanding of Shin doctrine.

Although these stories are heretical interpretations of the doctrine, they did spread widely in the Kanto region and were handed down to contemporary society as mentioned above. It

²⁶ Tetuya Echū, “*Kōgenji Yūrei Kō*” (Nagasaki: Kōgenji, 1992)

²⁷ Esho Shimazu, “Reevaluation and Re-appreciation of Traditional Shin Buddhist Studies in the Tokugawa Period” (Chicago: IASBS, 2011)

²⁸ In 2008, Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha established “*The Essentials of Jōdo Shinshū -- My Path*” which is a summary of Jōdo Shinshū teaching as follows:

Attaining the “entrusting heart”--awakening to the compassion of Amida Tathagata (Buddha) through the working of the Primal Vow--we shall walk the path of life reciting Amida's Name (Nembutsu). At the end of life, we will be born in the Pure Land and attain Buddhahood, returning at once to this delusional world to guide people to awakening.

Guided by the teaching of Shinran Shonin, we shall listen to the compassionate calling of Amida Tathagata and recite the Nembutsu. While always reflecting on ourselves, amidst our feelings of regret and joy, we shall live expressing our gratitude without depending on petitionary prayer and superstition.

shows that it is not consistent with the correct propagation of Pure Land thought. However, temple's treasures related to the legends of Shinran are supportive evidence that the legends played a significant role in propagation. Thus, doctrine and its right interpretation are not the only useful factor in the propagation of Pure Land thought. Rather, the effort to respond to people's interests and their suffering is crucial for Shin propagation. What we have to focus on is to see how Shin Buddhists praised Amida Buddha's virtue²⁹. In that sense, one of the clues can be found in the studies of Shinran's legends. In order to know how best to propagate Pure Land thought, we need to keep considering the legendary stories about Shinran.

6. CONCLUSION

Through this study, I discussed how significant Shinran's legendary stories were for Shin propagation.

One of the great contributions of Shinran's propagation is the Shinran's legend that is told by his disciples at Nijyūyohai in Edo period. It especially circulated widely in the Kanto region during the Edo era and has now spread throughout Japan. We can highly evaluate its huge contribution to Shin Buddhism propagation.

One legend, "The Salvation of A Ghost" that became popular in Ibaraki in the Kanto region was based on famous Japanese folktale called "A Ghost Caring for Her Baby." "The Salvation of A Ghost" adapted from "A Ghost Caring for Her Baby" to meet people's needs such as 1) the theme of Ghosts and 2) their interests in the funeral method.

For Shinran, the soteriological power only comes from the nembutsu, Namo Amida Butsu, not by our acts of recitation. However, the legendary story narrated the nembutsu as magic or petitionary prayer. Ironically, this image of Shinran continues to function as the identity of these temples, and this image has spread widely from Ibaraki all the way to Nagasaki.

Shin propagation is not always implemented uniformly. For Shin propagation it is not always effective to express "correct" Shin Buddhist doctrine. Instead, we also need to try to respond to social issues even it constitutes a misunderstanding of the teaching.

²⁹ Nobuhiro Fukagawa revealed the significance of the propagation in Shin Buddhism as follows:

The significance of the propagation in Shin Buddhism is to praise Amida Buddha's virtue and have others to hear the meaning of the Name, Namo Amida Butsu.

Nobuhiro Fukagawa, *Current Challenges and Possibilities in the Propagation of the Shin Buddhist Teaching* (Chicago: IASBS, 2013)

In this paper, I provided one example of this kind of legend, but there are many legends surrounding Shinran³⁰. In terms of the inductive logic, we need to keep tackling the issue of how we express Shinran's character for contemporary Pure Land Buddhist propagation.

figure 1, Kanto region.

(Source: <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/関東地方>)



figure 2, “Yūrei Kosodate Ame (ghost's candy to care for her child)” in Kyoto.



figure 3, one of the Gandhara sculptures in the 2nd century.

(Source: Kotani Nakao, “*The nursling of the dead woman -a stone sculpture newly excavated at Gandhara(2)-*”)

³⁰ Just considering the Edo era, there are many stories. For example, “Daija saido (大蛇濟度, the salvation of a big snake)” is described as a history of Rengeji Temple in Tochigi prefecture³⁰. Also, “Zense ikotsu(前世遺骨, ashes in former life)” is explained as a history of Hōonji Temple in Fukushima prefecture (Ibid., 8:452-454, 8:636-638).



figure 4, “Yūrei no e(幽霊の絵, a hanging scroll of the ghost).”
(Source: Muryōjuji Temple of Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha)



figure 5, Nagasaki prefecture.
(Source: <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/長崎県>)



figure 6, “Nijyūyohai daisan honseki Muryōjuji ryakuengi (無量寿寺第三本席無量寿寺略縁起, historical record of Muryōjuji Temple of Nijyūyohai).”

(Source: Tetusya Ecchu, “Kōgenji Yūrei Kou”)

