Obaku's Shofukuji-temple: Some notes on an overlooked treasure of Nagasaki

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Ōbaku’s Shōfukuji-temple
Some notes on an overlooked treasure of Nagasaki

Claudia MARRA

Abstract
Conveniently located about half way between Nagasaki JR station and the Museum of History and Culture, Shōfukuji should have no trouble attracting visitors, but unfortunately this architectural gem is widely overlooked, and not only by foreign tourists.
The temple, which belongs to the Ōbaku-school of Zen Buddhism, was founded in 1677, sometime after the three other lucky temples which also later joint the Ōbaku-school. The three are: Kōfukuji, Fukusaiji and Sōfukuji¹. But, while these temples appear in most tourist guidebooks, Shōfukuji, in spite of being listed as “Nagasaki Prefectural Designated Cultural Asset”, is hardly mentioned and the lacking or awkwardly put guideposts don’t help either. At least in the case of foreign visitors, this might be due to a pitiful lack of information about the history and significance of the temple and its founder Tesshin Dōhan.
Trying to fill a bit of that information gap, I started research for this paper, but found many questions unanswered. Hopefully future studies will help to improve this situation and this paper inspires not only more research, but also more people to visit and support the preservation of that beautiful temple.

A. Historical Background

I. Nagasaki and the Chinese
Nagasaki is not only famous for its Christian history, it also is the place where the Ōbaku-school, the last Buddhist sect to arrive from China entered Japan in the middle of the 17th century.
After Nagasaki’s harbour was opened for foreign trade in 1568 by provincial lord Ōmura Sumitada (大
村純忠, 1533-1587), a growing number of foreigners started to settle in the city. The Chinese residents formed communities based on their native provinces and mostly continued with their native religious tradition, an eclectic form of Buddhism which included several local deities, among them prominently the Goddess of the Sea. Gathering places for Chinese festivals, prayers for safe journeys and others became necessary.

In the 1590s, after Toyotomi Hideyoshi had won the campaign of Kyūshū, Nagasaki was put under direct control of the government. The aim was to control illegal trade and weapon smuggling and to funnel the ports profits into the war-chest of the generalissimo. This negatively affected Chinese trade and the mood among the Chinese took a downswing. In order to strengthen the bonds of the community, Chinese expatriates Ō-Yōhō (Japanese reading: 欧陽卓宇) and Chō-Kissen (Japanese reading: 張喜泉) received permission by Nagasaki bugyō Ogasawara Ichian (小笠原一庵) to build the Jōdoshū-temple Goshinjī (悟真寺).

Later, in 1598 Magistrate Suetsugu Heizō (末次平藏, 1546-1630) allowed the opening of a Chinese cemetery. In 1603 Tokugawa Ieyasu put Nagasaki under the administration of a governor installed by the shōgunate. The Tokugawa shōgunate enforced the expulsion of Christians, and demanded the registration of all households with local temples. Since the Japanese suspected, that the Chinese secretly supported Christianity, the expatriate-community strengthened their efforts to reassure the Japanese government about their religious affiliation. Also, the existing Jōdoshū-temple was too small and didn’t meet the religious needs of all Chinese, so three Zen-temples were constructed: Tōmeizan Kofuku-ji (東明山興福寺), a temple established in 1624 with the financial support by traders from Nanking. Fukusaiji (福清寺), constructed in 1628 and Sōfuku-ji (崇福寺), built in 1635 by Chinese immigrants from Fujian province. All these temples and the Shōfukuji were built outside of the Chinese ghetto, the Tōjin yashiki.

Since 1633, Japan’s policy of national seclusion had forced the Chinese traders and their families to live within a walled compound of about 3 square hectare. For security reasons, the Chinese nationals were forced to leave Japan before winter (the 20th day of the 9th month) and return in the following season (before the 5th day of the 7th month), leaving their families back in the Tōjin yashiki (唐人屋敷). It was located near the even stricter regulated Dutch ghetto on the man-made island Dejima. Walled, double-gated and under heavy bureaucratic control, to separate them from the Japanese neighbourhoods, both foreign settlements were located in close proximity to the harbour and bordered directly on the water to increase control and to further minimize contact. The about 2000 Chinese (population of 1688) were closely monitored, especially after the failed Christian revolt in Shimabara in 1637/8, and received permission to leave the compound only for work, when Chinese ships landed, for temple visits and special festivals. Obligatory “donations”, the need for intermediators and interpreters, the elaborate bureaucracy and since 1685 also trade restrictions resulted in huge financial burdens. Considering these facts it seems quite astonishing, that a Chinese merchant could get married to the daughter of an upper-class Japanese family, like in the case of Chin-Bokujun (陳朴純), the father of
Tesshin Dōhan (鉄心道胖, 1641-1710), the man, who later became the founder of Shōfukuji, after he had finished his training as an Œbaku monk.

2. The Œbaku-school of Zen-Buddhism

The Œbaku-school of Zen-Buddhism was brought to Japan by Chinese Zen-masters Yin-yuan Longqi (隱元隆琦, jap. Ingen Ryūki, 1592-1673). Upon his arrival in Nagasaki in 1654, he found already three Chinese temples, but the training of the clergy was insufficient. These temples were led by Chinese, who had come to perform funeral rites, mark important holidays and lead the festivities around Buddha’s birthday or the Ghost Festival P’u-tu⁴ (in Japan Obon, お盆), but they were hardly contributing to the development of Buddhism in Japan and had only marginal exchange with the Japanese Zen community.

In contrast to Japanese temples, they also gave room to the worship of

1. Mazu (also Ma-tsu or Maso 媽祖, 天后聖母, 天妃娘娘, 海神娘娘), the goddess of the sea and patron to sailors and fishermen, who in Buddhism is worshipped as an incarnation of the Mercy Goddess Kannon (觀音菩薩), and

2. Guan Yu (also Kuan-ti, 關 羽), originally a historical general of the 2nd/3rd century, who originally was canonified as a warrior deity, but later came to be the patron of financial success and trade. In Chinese Buddhism, Guan Yu is revered as Sangharama Bodhisattva (伽藍菩薩) a protector of the Buddhist temples and the dharma.

The German physician Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716), who was stationed at the Dutch trading post Dejima from 1690-1692, describes these temples in his book “The History of Japan”:

“...there are three Chinese monasteries of the Zen sect, quite comely and with a good number of priests (...). The monasteries were donated during the Christian persecution by the various Chinese nations trading in Nagasaki (...) These monasteries and their temples are usually called by the birthplace of their donor rather than their own name of which they all have a great number and are as follows: 1. Nankin dera; or temple of Nanking and the country surrounding the city. This is the first temple established by the foreigners and (...) has been honored by them with the name of Kōfukuji, which means “temple of restored riches”. 2. Chokushū dera, that is, the temple of the area of Amoy, which means that of the people living in the most southern part of China and at the same time of those who live outside China on Formosa and in other more distant countries. It has a matsuji, that is, a branch or lesser monastery as subordinate, and is nearly the largest with the greatest number of priests. Its proper name is Fukuji, which means “temple of wealth” [Kaempfer misspelled the temples name here, it should be Fukusaiji/authors note]. 3. Hokushū dera, or temple of the North, the temple of those Chinese who come from the northern part of the country. They call their temple Fukusaiji [mistake by Kaempfer, the last temple was the Sōfukuji/authors note], which means temple of wealth and sacrifices.”

Yin-yuan Longqi⁴ belonged to the Linji school of Zen (Japanese Rinzai 臨濟宗) and was already 63 years old, when he arrived in Japan. As former abbot of Wanfu Temple, Mount Huangbo (Japanese
Mampukuji, Mt. Ōbaku) in Chinas Fujian province, he had gathered some fame for his success in reforming monastic discipline and for his charisma as spiritual leader. This reputation had caught the attention of some high ranking reform-minded Rinzai masters in Japan, who no longer were allowed to travel to China themselves because of the foreign isolation politics decreed by the central government in Edo⁹.

After some political string-pulling, they managed to get permission to invite Yin-yuan Longqi to Japan. Eventually he overcame his hesitations, and inspired by the urge to spread the dharma among the spiritually neglected Chinese expatriates in Nagasaki he agreed to come. Also, due to some concern about the escalating political turmoil in China, where Southern Ming loyalists were still fighting a losing battle against the rise of the Qin dynasty, his move seemed an appropriate choice.

In the seventh month of 1654 Yin-yuan Longqi received an enthusiastic welcome to Nagasaki, and was swiftly proclaimed abbot of the Kōfukuji. Not only the Chinese population and Buddhist clergy, but also numerous Japanese officials and other prominent individuals came to pay their respects to the Chinese master. In addition, approximately seventy Japanese monks joined Yin-yuan’s entourage of twenty Chinese monks to participate in his first winter retreat, held three months after his arrival.¹⁰ Kaempfer dryly describes Yin-yuan’s party as follows:

“The brothers who accompanied him partook of his sanctity and were revered more than others by the people. Even the cook of his very learned entourage from China has been elevated to the dignity of prior of the Chinese monastery of Hokushū dera here in Nagasaki.”¹¹

Shortly after that, Yin-yuan had had to discover, that the differences between the Japanese interpretation of Rinzai Zen and his own could not be easily bridged. The Japanese insisted on the Sung Chinese Dharma interpretation transmitted to Japan by Eisai (明恵, 1141-1215) in the 12th century, while Yin-yuan tried to establish the more modern Ming period school, which incorporated not only a slightly different monastic code, but also incorporated elements of Pure Land Buddhism, rejected in the Japanese tradition.

As a result a de facto schism occurred, which couldn’t be made public, because of some restrictions within the legislation governing religious organizations at that time. Instead, the Ōbaku school started out as an independent branch of the Rinzai-tradition and official recognition as an independent religious body was not granted until 1876.

Because of the deep impression Yin-yuan had left on shōgun Tokugawa Ietsuna (徳川家継, 1641-1680) during his audience in Edo in 1658, Kaempfer reports:

“the shōgun ordered that he be given a mountain in their holy city of Miyako as a residence, which had to be called Ōbaku, after the archbishop’s residence he had left in China”¹²

The construction of Ōbaku’s head temple Mampukuji (黄檗山萬福寺) in Uji, Kyoto prefecture started in 1661. After only 2 years as abbot Yin-yuan named Mu-an Hsing’tao as his successor and concentrated on writing. Both masters, together with Sokuhi Nyoitsu (即非如一 1616-1671), became also famous for their exquisite calligraphy, dubbed the Ōbaku no Sanpitsu (黄檗三筆), which also opened many doors to influential circles and helped the development of the Ōbaku-school. By the time

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of Yin-yuan’s death the school had twenty-four temples all over the country, but growth slows after a few decades, sending Ōbaku to third place after Sōtō and Rinzai.3

3. Shōfukuji’s founder Tesshin Dōhan

Among Yin-yuan’s welcoming crowds was Nagasaki born Tesshin Dōhan (鉄心道藩, 1641-1710) the son of a Chinese merchant from Fukien named Chin-Bokujun (陳朴絹)4 and a Japanese woman from the upscale Nishimura family. After his father’s death, his mother used her influence to give him a sound education in the Chinese classics.

When Tesshin met the Ōbaku-school’s charismatic founder and later also his right hand man Mu-an Hsing’tao (木庵性瑤, jap. Mokuan Shōtō, 1611-1684), the 14 year old decided to become a monk. His mother supposedly was against this plan, but Tesshin is said to have shaven his own head and so finally he was allowed to start training as a Buddhist monk under Mu-an’s tutelage at Fukusaiji.5

Later, Tesshin followed his masters to Mampuku-ji to complete his training. His Chinese and Japanese language abilities helped him to quickly advance within the Ōbaku-school, he also served as Mu-an’s translator at several occasions.6

In 1677 Mu-an formally recognized Tesshin’s enlightenment and made him his 22nd Dharma heir. Meanwhile, until the time of her death in 1671, his well connected mother and half-brother Nishimura Nanahe (西村七兵衛)7 had assured the support of the Nagasaki bugyō (長崎奉行)8 as well as the financial means to establish Shōfukuji (also called Manjusan (万寿山) in reference to the head temple in Uji, or Canton temple 広東寺 in regard of the supporting community).

Tesshin himself had also many lay patrons among influential samurai and in his later years gave lectures in the shōgun’s castle in Edo, thus the construction of an impressive temple serving the new monastic style of the Ōbaku-school could be realized.

B. The temple

4. Shōfukuji

Inspired by the architecture of Ōbaku’s head temple in Uji, Shōfukuji shows some distinctive Chinese features, like the gracefully curved roofs with their tiled eaves, carved pillar base stones or some bell-shaped windows.

Important structures in China, like the Imperial palace, usually face south. Shōfukuji’s construction follows this concept, but due to the location on a hillside, it faces slightly south-east. The positioning of the temples components on three separate levels, also show stronger Chinese influence9 than traditional Japanese Zen temples.

In contrast to Chinese customs, red paint has only been applied to some of the buildings and then only partially. Often Chinese temples’ compounds are connected with roofed, half-open corridors10, like the connecting corridor between the Buddha hall and the Founders hall. Painted and carved railings, doors and roof brackets complete the assembly of the temple buildings.
The overall structure, shichido garan (七堂伽藍), consists of 7 main buildings:
the mountain gate (山門, no. 4),
the Inner Gate (中門, no. 2),
the belfry (鐘楼, no. 7),
the founder’s hall (開山堂, behind no. 8),
the Buddha hall (仏殿, no. 1),
the monks hall (宗堂, behind no. 5) and
the kitchen office (庫裡, right to the main hall).
Shōfukuji also has some smaller side-buildings, like a tea-room and a library and a small altar between the gates enshrining Jizō (地蔵), Kannon (観音) and other Buddhist guardians to greet visitors and pilgrims.

layout-plan of Nagasaki Shōfukuji

a. The mountain gate (山門)
The two-storied Sanmon gate was completed in 1703 and has the distinctive brackets, typical for Ôbaku temples. This architectural technique allows for greater weights and more elaborately carved decorations in the Chinese fashion.

Hinting at Ôbaku’s calligraphic tradition, exquisite samples of brush-writing can be found at several temple buildings.

The calligraphy in the middle has supposedly been written by Yin-yuan. Tesshin is said to have received it some time before the temple was built. The characters represent the temples name, Shôfukuji, indicating that the name is a reference to a temple of the same name in Fukuoka, built in 1195 by the first Japanese monk to introduce the Rinzai Zen school to Japan, Myôan Eisai (明覚宗西, 1141-1215).

The Fukuoka Shôfukuji supposedly is the first and the oldest still existing Zen-temple in Japan, emperor Go-Toba (後鳥羽天皇 Go-Toba-tennô, 1180-1239) had it adorned with an inscription, which reads “This is the first Zen temple in Japan” 天平勝宝之記, naming the first “pure” Ôbaku temple in Nagasaki also Shôfukuji, was probably not too well received within the Rinzai establishment, as it could be interpreted as Ôbaku’s claim to the rightful dharma tradition.

Intermediate level, Jizô altar 地蔵堂

On the platform between the gates is a small altar dedicated to several colourfully painted guardian deities to protect pilgrims. Among them Jizô, a popular protective deity for children and travellers, known for his vows to take responsibility for the instruction of all beings and to shun Buddhahood until
all hells are emptied. He is flanked by a pair of Komainu (狛犬) in the Chinese style (typical are the big head and the small body).

b. The Inner Gate (中門)
The next structure is also a very Chinese influenced building, the Inner Gate (中門), called “Tennō-den”, “Miroku-mon” (Gate of the Maitreya-Buddha, 弥勒門) or Gohō-dō (護法堂) was added to the temple by Chinese parishioners in 1705. The calligraphy in the center is usually credited to Yin-yuan, the three characters read “mountain, joy, beauty”.
The building functions both as a gate and a shrine, the centre-part houses the Maitreya Buddha, who is welcoming the temples visitors, and in the back, separated by a plastered wall, the guardian deity of Buddha’s teachings, Skanda, in Japan known as Idaten (韋驮天), who is facing the statue of the Buddha in the main-hall behind.
The “Tennō-den” combines style-elements from Ōbaku’s head-temple Mampukuji in Uji with characteristics found in Nagasaki’s Köfukuji and Sōfukuji. In contrast to the two Nagasaki temples, red paint is used only on some parts of the structure.

c. The main hall
The main hall, Daiyūhōden (大雄宝殿) was completed in 1715. Here, too, red paint is only scarcely applied. The peach carvings on the doors are very unusual in Japan, but in Chinese mythology peaches symbolize since ancient times vitality, beauty and the power to overcome evil and death and were often used as decorative ornaments. Also typical for the Ōbaku-style is the decorated red railing carved to resemble interwoven swastikas (万字形) around the stone base of the hall.
Enshrined in the centre within is the Shaka trinity, with the sitting Shakyamuni, flanked by his disciples Ananda, the guardian of the Dharma to the left, and Mahâkâsyapa, the guardian of the Sangha to the right. During the preparation for the exhibition commemorating Ôbaku’s 350th jubilee, the statue of Mahâkâsyapa was found to contain some reliques. In front of them are next to the usual offerings of flowers and fruits, 2 “Mountains of Gold”, as often found in Chinese temples.

The alcove to the left contains an image of the temples founder Tesshin, to the right is an alcove enshrining the Amida Buddha. There are also statues of the Sea goddess Mazu or Maso (媽祖) and an image of guardian Guan Yu or Kuan-ti (關 羽)

The heavy tiled roof is another reference to Mampukuji’s late Ming-style architecture.

d. The founder’s hall (開山堂)

Connected to the main hall with a wooden corridor, the founder’s hall is situated to the left.

The structure houses scriptures and instructions by Yin-yuan Longqi and Tesshin.

e. The kitchen office (庫裡)

The kitchen office (庫裡) contains also the living quarters of the temples abbot. In the Ôbaku-school, common meals are an important part of the monastic routine. A special type of cuisine, combining Chinese and Japanese dishes, called Fucha ryōri (普茶料理) is prepared at occasions. The monks are called by sounding a wooden fish-shaped bell, (木魚, 堂魚 or 魚板), in Ôbaku monasteries its called hanpô (鯖槽). The shape is chosen, because fish never close their eyes and are always awake, thus admonishing the sangha to continuous efforts. Usually the instruments have the form of a carp holding a ball in his mouth. The ball in the mouth symbolize worldly the thoughts, that are spit out, when the fish is struck, another symbolic reminder for the cenobites.
The wooden board on the right is used to assemble the monks for work or meditation, it contains a written reminder to follow the precepts.

f. The monks hall (宗堂)
provided the living quarters for the monastic community. Noteworthy are the wooden ornaments.

g. The belfry (鐘楼)
The two-storied wooden building was completed in 1717. The bell, the biggest in town, was forged under the second abbot Gyogan Genmei (曉巖元明) but was christened "Tesshin's Bell" in the first abbots honor. The delicately carved wooden doors, also show the Chinese peach design. In Nagasaki these carvings inspired local sweet confectioners to create a cake called “peach castella” (桃カステラ).
h. Other temple features

The incinerator for discarded charms or scriptures is called Shakuji-tei (惜字亭), “word-lamenting-pavilion”. It was constructed around 1866, using some of the first nationally produced bricks in Japan. Next to it is a commemorative stele donated by the 7th Ichikawa Danjuro (市川団十郎) a famous Kabuki actor.

At the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) anti-Buddhist sentiment led to the dismantling of several temples. Among them Jinguji (神宮寺), a temple founded in the early 16th century. All Buddhist paraphernalia were removed, among them the stone gate (石門). It was brought to Shōfukuji in 1886. The inscription in the middle goes back to a calligraphy by Tesshin’s teacher Mu-an Hsing’tao. It reads "kezôkai" (華藏界), which means "Pure Land of the Buddha Shakyamuni".

Jakarta Ōharu’s well
In front of the main hall is a well, to the left also an engraved stone in tribute to “Jakarta Oharu” (じゃがたらお春, 1625?-1697), a Christian girl, who had fled persecution to Jakarta. Her letters tell of her longing for her hometown Nagasaki.

![Image of onikabe](image)

**onikabe**

Behind the founders hall are the stairs leading to the cemetery. The decorative wall “onikabe” (鬼壁) was constructed in the middle of the 19th century, using materials from different dismantled Buddhist temples.

In May 1867, Shōfukuji was one of the site of the negotiations between Sakamoto Ryōma’s Kaientai and representatives of Kii province over a ship collision, the so called Iroha Maru incident.

The temple was also the location of the movie “Gege” (解夏, 2002), based on a novella by contemporary local author and composer Masashi Sada (佐田 雅志).

i. Shōfukuji today

Since the temple does no longer have a supporting lay community (danka 檀家), the structures are falling more and more into disrepair. The roof is in a pitiful state, endangering the precious statues inside. Walls, wooden rails and lattice work suffered badly from termites and neglect, and are in dire need of repair. Some of the famous calligraphies are already barely legible, nevertheless they are exposed to the elements without any protection.

Given the artistic, architectural and historical value of this temple, it would be extremely desirable to fund extensive renovation works. In Nagasaki, a private initiative has started for this purpose, but sufficient means have not been secured yet. Support from Nagasaki city and prefecture would be a good investment, given Nagasaki's growing attraction among foreign visitors, specially from China and Taiwan.

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Here are some pictures of the temples pitiful state:

![damaged pillar base](image1)

![crumbling wall detail](image2)

![withering calligraphy](image3)

![leaky roof detail](image4)

Given the amount of damage swift action is needed! Hopefully, more public attention and visitors will help to contribute to the preservation of this beautiful temple.

**Notes:**

1. While Kōfuku-ji and Sōfuku-ji remained mostly intact, Fukusai-ji was destroyed in the Atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945. It was replaced with a new turtle shaped structure, crowned by a huge statue of the bodhisattva of compassion, Kannon (観音菩薩).
2. See [http://www.geocities.jp/voc1641/chinagasaki/1000rekisi/1100torai.htm](http://www.geocities.jp/voc1641/chinagasaki/1000rekisi/1100torai.htm)
3. In 1698, after a devastating fire, the Tōjin yashiki was moved to the Shin’chi neighbourhood, the site of the current Chinatown.
5. See [http://www.geocities.jp/voc1641/chinagasaki/2400ayofuku/2432esin.htm](http://www.geocities.jp/voc1641/chinagasaki/2400ayofuku/2432esin.htm)
9. From 1633 until 1853 Japan maintained the politics of foreign isolation “sakoku”. Japanese were prohibited from travelling abroad and foreigners were tolerated only in special cases, mostly related to some profitable trade, but access was limited to only 5 harbours, among them prominently Nagasaki.
10. See Baroni, p. 42
11. See Bodart-Bailey, p. 177
12. See Bodart-Bailey, p. 177
15. Information about Teshihs family and upbringing are very scarce. Accounts about Tesshihs first encounter with the Ōbaku masters can be found at Baroni, p. 230 and at 田谷昌弘：「長崎聖福桝寺の茶茶料理」Nagasaki 2012. p. 107f.
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