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Research Article

"Being with": Support Networks during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This article examines the activities of Hitosaji no Kai, a small, Buddhist volunteer organisation based in San'ya, Tokyo, and analyses how its networks and practices adapted to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it explores how the organisation's activities, rooted in Jōdō Shū teachings and informed by the ethos of "being with" and *shien* 支縁 (reciprocal support grounded in karmic bonds), combined material assistance with the cultivation of affective and relational ties. Pre-existing micro- and macro-level networks enabled a rapid response to emerging needs, yet the pandemic also exposed the vulnerabilities of volunteer-driven initiatives. Long-standing activities were suspended, and some volunteers, particularly Vietnamese workers and students stranded in Japan, became recipients of support. The article argues that Hitosaji no Kai illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of small-scale, relational forms of Buddhist social engagement, highlighting how practices of presence, interdependence, and collaboration sustained community connections in a time of crisis.

Keywords: Hitosaji no Kai; Jōdo Shū; Pure Land; social activities; shien; religious activism; volunteering; Japanese Buddhism

November 15, 2021. A fifteen-minute walk from Minami Senju Station in north-east Tokyo takes me to Kodomo no Gokurakudō (Children's Paradise Hall), a building located behind the Jōdo Shū (Pure Land) temple Kōshō-in. As I will continue to do every Monday until late December, I have come here to join the volunteers of the Buddhist organisation Hitosaji no Kai (One Spoonful Association)[1] preparing food parcels and other items to be distributed to unhoused or rough sleepers and food banks in the area. The hall and temple are located in San'ya, a neighbourhood between the Arakawa and Taitō wards of Tokyo previously known as one of Japan's major *yoseba* (day-labour markets), where workers lived in single-room accommodations called *doya*. Following the decline of the day-labour market in the late 1990s, the area gradually turned into a welfare neighbourhood with former day labourers still residing in the area and receiving benefits. Despite a recent process of gentrification, San'ya continues to have a unique social infrastructure providing "a sanctuary for people with nowhere to go" (Jentzsch 2021: 117),[2] and the life expectancy of its residents remains below the Japanese national average (Hammering 2022: 152).

By the time I arrive at Kodomo no Gokurakudō, just after 11 am, Kōshō-in's head priest, Rev. Yoshimizu Gakugen,[3] has opened up the building and three volunteers are already there. As we are still in the midst of the COVID-19

[1] The official name of the organisation is Shakai jigyō iinkai (Compassionate Social Welfare Committee).
[2] On the history of San'ya and its transformations see also Fowler (1996); Gill (1994). On processes of gentrification of other large *yoseba*, see Novak (2019) on Kamagasaki in Osaka.
[3] Throughout this article, family name precedes given name, following Japanese convention. Rev. Yoshimizu agreed to not anonymise his name. This is also to recognise his contribution to my fieldwork and to my understanding of Hitosaji no Kai's networks and connections. As the activities of Hitosaji no Kai are well known, I have decided not to anonymise the organisation's or the temple's name. However, due to the small number of volunteers I was able to interact with during the pandemic, pseudonyms have been used to protect their anonymity. Furthermore direct quotes and references to personal backgrounds have been limited to avoid the identification of individuals. The fieldwork received approval from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 15581).

pandemic, I have to take a rapid antigen test at the entrance. After getting a negative result, I can take off my shoes and coat and enter the room. One of the volunteers invites the rest of us to have coffee and a slice of cake. Sitting together to enjoy these refreshements, the four of us chat about our past week and start planning what needs to be done that day. It will be busy because it is one of the food distribution days. Before leaving to run some errands, Rev. Yoshimizu explains that we need to prepare around 220 parcels to be distributed that evening to rough sleepers around Ueno Park and the Arakawa River, both only a few minutes' drive away. We make a task list: check to see how many five-packs of masks and bags of sweets there are and prepare the rest; count the heat packs; and print and cut small leaflets with information about free medical clinics. Later, we will also need to check if the volunteers' cargo jackets are sufficiently packed with over-the-counter medical supplies, such as painkillers, anti-inflammatory drugs, antacids, anti-itch cream, heat patches, and plasters. A female priest joins us for lunch, but otherwise, it is only the four of us working. As Rev. Yoshimizu explained to me a few days ago, only a small number of selected volunteers are allowed on the premises at the moment, in order to control the risk of infection. Throughout the day, I find myself thinking about the last time I was there, in December 2019, when the temple hall was filled with dozens of volunteers who had been working all day to prepare *onigiri* (rice balls) and packets of sweets.

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Hitosaji no Kai is a volunteer-based Buddhist organisation, established in 2009 by a group of mainly Jōdo Shū Buddhist priests.[4] Rev. Yoshimizu, one of the founders, was born in San'ya, and his temple Kōshō-in serves as the organisation's headquarters. Initially, Hitosaji no Kai focused on supporting funerary rituals for people without an ancestral grave (Baffelli 2025), but then gradually started distributing food to rough sleepers in San'ya and neighbouring areas every two weeks (Takase 2018). The group's activities and participation in various networks have expanded over the years, spreading from San'ya to other areas of Tokyo and across Japan. Their outreach activities have been widely reported in publications discussing engaged Buddhism and welfare activities provided by faith-based organisations (Takase 2010; Watts and Okano 2012), as well as in discussions about religion and social contribution, religious and social values, and spiritual care (Kawata et al. 2018; Takase 2018; Yoshimizu 2015, 2019). These discussions gained traction in Japan following the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 (McLaughlin 2013), highlighting the mobilisation of volunteers and involvement of religious organisations in relief activities after that tragic event.

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025 to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped Hitosaji no Kai's outreach activities and how the organisation responded to a crisis that affected not only the people it supported but also its own volunteers. The impact of the pandemic on religious organisations has been evaluated by several studies and large-scale surveys, which address challenges related to religious gatherings, how groups adapted rituals, including funerals, and how they responded to the needs of their communities in different contexts.[5] The pandemic also demonstrated how new, grassroots initiatives can emerge among Buddhist communities in response to crisis (Cassaniti 2023). In Japan, religious organisations responded by adapting to restrictions, such as moving some rituals online, reducing or cancelling religious events and gatherings (McLaughlin 2020), mobilising their resources to help local communities (Cavaliere 2021), and engaging in ritual and prayers (Graf 2021).

By focusing on Hitosaji no Kai—a small, informal organisation that relies heavily on volunteers and was established before the pandemic—this article highlights the role played by pre-existing networks and connections between individuals and organisations in enabling a rapid response to crisis. It argues that

[4] https://www.hitosaji.jp/ Accessed February 3, 2026.

[5] To provide a couple of examples, see the Religious Responses to COVID-19 project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace World Affairs https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/religious-responses-to-COVID-19 and the British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19 (BRIC-19) project in the UK https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/arts-humanities/research/projects/bric-19 Accessed February 3, 2026.

a combination of micro- and macro-level networks (both local and nationwide), together with a flexible organisational structure, allowed Hitosaji no Kai to react swiftly to new challenges. As a result, it was able to address the growing needs of vulnerable populations and manage vulnerabilities within its own volunteer base. These networks and connections are grounded in ideas of mutual support and interdependence expressed by the notion of "being with" (*tomo ni aru*)—understood as spending time together, offering presence, contributing small acts of care, and mutually recognising vulnerability. For the Buddhist priests involved, this ethos is articulated more explicitly through the concept of *shien* 支縁, which links support to karmic bonds.

Although the article does not present Hitosaji no Kai's activities as representative, it thus offers an example of Buddhism-in-action in contemporary Japan that combines material assistance with affective relationships forged through the practice of "being with." The networks that the organisation drew upon during the pandemic illustrate how Buddhist practice in urban contexts in Japan operates at the margins of institutional authority and affiliation, extending connections beyond formal temple membership. Although such connections may be less structured and more informal, they are nonetheless grounded in commitment and the willingness of individuals to participate. The activities of Hitosaji no Kai also show how social support initiatives can move beyond the immediate neighbourhood, linking local efforts to wider Buddhist communities across Japan. At the same time, they point to the potential limitations of small-scale networks, particularly the challenges of returning to earlier modes of operation when new circumstances, such as those created by the COVID-19 pandemic, may have fundamentally transformed how a group operates.

Hitosaji no Kai and the pandemic

Hitosaji no Kai's activities can be contextualised in relation to earlier forms of Jōdō Shū engagement in San'ya, as well as the broader landscape of contemporary Buddhist engagement in secular spaces. Although participating priests come from across Tokyo and beyond, the neighbourhood is deeply familiar to Rev. Yoshimizu. In his autobiographical reflections (Yoshimizu 2019), he recalls first volunteering in 2008 with a group providing food to rough sleepers in Shinjuku. That experience made him acutely aware of the processes of marginalisation and the stigma attached to homelessness, often framed in public discourse as a personal failure rather than a structural issue.[6] He also remembers rough sleepers around Kōshō-in during his childhood, describing how they were commonly perceived as "smelly", "dirty", or "dangerous". Historically, support for people in San'ya has been largely provided by workers' organisations or Christian-affiliated groups. However, in the postwar period, Buddhist priests became involved, including Yoshimizu's grandfather who was involved in activities supporting children. Although such Buddhist involvement subsequently declined, some priests continued to offer memorial services for local organisations (Yoshimizu 2016).

Hitosaji no Kai has built on this legacy while also drawing on the teachings of Buddhist priests who have placed Jōdō Shū teachings in dialogue with present circumastances, a notable example being Watanabe Kaigyoku who, in 1911, established the Jōdō Shū Workers' Mutual Aid Society (Takase 2018). Recent studies on Buddhist involvement in volunteering (Starling 2024), hospice care (Benedict 2023), and interfaith chaplaincy (Berman 2018) note that Buddhist actors working in contemporary secular contexts often downplay explicit doctrinal content, making Buddhism "imperceptible to the participants" (Starling 2024: 255) while emphasising the role religion can play in society by providing spiritual care. Starling describes this as "low-frequency" Buddhism—an "understated and elusive incarnation" (2024: 255) of an institution facing longstanding negative stereotypes and weakened public presence.

[6] Maruyama Satomi (2019) explains in her study of female homelessness in Japan that the increased availability of government help for homelessness has led to a greater tendency to view those still sleeping on the street as having made a personal choice.

Hitosaji no Kai presents an interesting case in this regard. The organisation recognises the broader challenge that Buddhism faces in Japan regarding its public relevance and the difficulty of integrating religious values with social practice (Takase 2010). Moreover, many of its volunteers are not Buddhist. However, the group's activities remain clearly framed within Jōdō Shū teachings. Before each food distribution that I participated in between 2019 and 2025, there was a brief service in front of an image of Amida Buddha, including the chanting of the *nenbutsu* and prayers for volunteers and for people living on the streets. The *jūnen*—tenfold recitation of *Namu Amida Butsu* (I entrust myself to Amida)—was performed before meals shared by volunteers and again at the end of the night when they gathered after the distribution. At the same time, participation in these services was not a requirement for volunteers, and people from other Buddhist schools, other faiths, or with no religious affiliation were welcomed.[7] This openness distinguishes Hitosaji no Kai from other faith-based organisations in Japan, whose social activities are often limited to members (Di Febo 2020; Starling 2023). The group also avoids the explicit missionary objectives or overtly activist framings often associated with faith-based welfare or lay welfare organisations (Takase 2010; Shirahase 2015).

I became familiar with the organisation through Rev. Yoshimizu, who I first met in August 2019 while I was on a field trip to Tokyo with a research group studying religious minorities in the UK and Japan. During our visit, he took us on a tour of San'ya and introduced us to the activities of Hitosaji no Kai. During my next trip to Japan in December 2019 I participated in the weekly food distribution organised by Hitosaji no Kai in Ueno Park alongside a large group of volunteers. At that time, between twenty and forty volunteers (or even more) would gather fortnightly at Kōshō-in on Mondays to prepare *onigiri* and spring rolls for distribution; most of them would also participate in the evening food distribution. After returning to the UK in January 2020, I continued to follow their activities online through their updates on social media.

When I returned to Japan for two months of fieldwork in winter 2021,[8] I arranged a meeting with Rev. Yoshimizu after spending a week in a quarantine hotel. He explained that since the start of the pandemic, only a very small number of volunteers had been allowed to help, and the evening distribution was being conducted solely by a few priests. The volunteers had also stopped gathering at the temple and moved to the building next door. This building, the abovementioned Kodomo no Gokurakudō, is an old house that had been donated to the temple by a parishioner. Following its renovation, it had become a meeting place for several volunteer organizations, including not only Hitosaji no Kai, but also a group offering support to local children by providing an afternoon club and homework help, and the Grief Care Association for parents who had lost their children. The two-storey building includes a kitchen, a dining/meeting hall, and a couple of rooms with storage space upstairs. While I was there, Hitosaji no Kai volunteers spent their time downstairs, except when taking boxes in and out of storage (Figure 1).

During my fieldwork in winter 2021, only a small handful of volunteers gathered at Kodomo no Gokurakudō every Monday to prepare food and other items for distribution. In November 2021, the number of infections in Japan was relatively low, with no restrictions imposed on indoor meetings or social gatherings. However, the members of Hitosaji no Kai were very cautious about the possible risk of infection among people living on the streets and decided to take extra precautions. Volunteers followed the government's recommendation to avoid the 'Three Cs' (closed spaces, crowded places, and close contact); they wore masks at all times and took regular lateral flow tests.

[7] See also https://www.hitosaji.jp/%E3%81%B2%E3%81%A8%E3%81%95%E3%81%98%E3%81%AE%E4%BC%9A%E3%81%A8%E3%81%AF/ February 3, 2026

[8] This fieldwork was supported by a Japan Foundation Japanese Studies Fellowship. At the time, entry to Japan was still not allowed for non-residents and non-passport holders, but I was lucky enough to be among the first group of about fifty researchers who were granted exceptional entry visas into Japan as Japan Foundation Fellows on October 28, 2021. https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/10/2fea64f896e3-japan-institute-to-receive-intl-scholars-as-exception-to-covid-rules.html Accessed February 3, 2026.

Figure 1: Kodomo no Gokurakudō (Children's Paradise Hall). Photo by the author.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep-rooted inequalities in places like San'ya. In wealthy countries such as Japan, it held a magnifying glass to the precarious lives and poverty of (often invisible) minorities, such as rough sleepers, immigrant workers, and students. Thriving on sociality and intimacy, the pandemic disproportionally affected those in poor living conditions (Slater 2020). For example, the requirements of hand hygiene or physical distancing were not easily achievable for people compelled to live on the streets (Slater and Ikebe 2020). Meanwhile, precarious workers have borne a disproportionate share of the economic and social costs of the COVID-19 crisis. Religious organisations that were engaged in social welfare activities in areas like San'ya, such as Hitosaji no Kai, were also profoundly impacted. They had to adapt their work to the new situation while safeguarding vulnerable populations who relied, more than ever, on their support after publicly-funded soup kitchens closed. Paradoxically, they had to increase their support while they lost their ability to recruit volunteers.

From February 2020, Hitosaji no Kai had to quickly change the way it operated due to the risk of infection, which was particularly high for homeless people,[9] leaving them in an even more vulnerable situation than before (Slater and Ikebe 2020). Hitosaji no Kai members adapted by changing the items they distributed and how frequently. In February 2020, they started distributing masks, and from March 2020, lunch boxes replaced *onigiri* (Figure 2), thus obviating the need for people to gather at the temple to prepare food. The number of volunteers participating in food distribution was also restricted at this point, and, by April 2020, recruitment of volunteers had been completely suspended. Meanwhile, the evening trips to distribute food were carried out by only a few (usually three to five) priests who are members of the organisation, referred to as 'staff' on social media, and increased from fortnightly to weekly so they could provide support and information regarding symptoms and available assistance. Initially, only one volunteer who lived close to the temple helped

[9] The term homeless (*hōmuresu*) in Japanese mainly refers to rough sleepers, that is people living in public spaces, such as parks, riverbeds, roadsides, stations and so on. This definition excludes people staying in short-term facilities such as shelters, therefore the number of people without permanent accommodation is underestimated in official statistics. The vast majority of rough sleepers in Japan are middle-aged and elderly men. On rough sleepers in Japan see Maruyama (2019); Kitagawa (2021); Shirahase (2015).

prepare the parcels, but by the time I arrived in 2021, three or four people were gathering weekly. The evening distribution was still mainly conducted by priests affiliated to Hitosaji no Kai.

Figure 2: Bento box for distribution along with masks, candies, and information about free medical clinics and the vaccination campaign. Photo by Hitosaji no Kai.

The organisation not only adapted its regular practices of gathering volunteers and distributing food, but also took on new responsibilities. On June 21, 2021, the organisation conducted a survey among rough sleepers in the San'ya, Ueno, Asakusa, and Arakawa areas about the COVID-19 vaccination. The vaccine was provided free of charge to all Japanese citizens, but was challenging to access for people living on the streets. Of the 160 people who responded to the survey that night, only eleven (5.5 percent) had received it. Of the remaining 149 people, only twenty-eight had scheduled a vaccination appointment.[10] While some did not want to be vaccinated, several respondents mentioned that they would like the vaccination but were unable to have it. One of the main reasons for this was their lack of a physical address to receive the necessary documents.[11] Hitosaji no Kai then started collaborating with other organisations operating in the area to ensure that people living on the streets were informed about the vaccination campaign and how they could access it. Leaftets were added to the food parcels, with information about the vaccine, centres in the area providing consultations for people who wanted to receive it or who had concerns about it, and free medical clinics providing support in case of severe side effects.[12] Hitosaji no Kai's ability to respond and adapt to the new situation, as well as to draw on previous connections with local authorities and organisations, was crucial here.

Connecting to help each other

Since its establishment, Hitosaji no Kai has attracted a significant number of volunteers, including priests from other denominations, Kōshō-in parishioners, students, and other laypeople. Takase's (2018) survey of priests involved in Hitosaji no Kai underscores that their primary motivation is not doctrinal but relational: many

[10] See post dated June 27, 2021 on Hitosaji no Kai facebook page. Accessed July 8, 2025. On segment of the population excluded from the government's vaccination campaign see also: https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14480431 Accessed July 8, 2025.
[11] In addition, many did not want to disclose their personal details for fear of the consequences.
[12] See post on Hitosaji no Kai facebook page on July 20, 2021.

participate because of personal ties, particularly with Rev. Yoshimizu, and because involvement has become a significant site of learning. Their accounts highlight the importance of connections, trust, and mutual support in sustaining loosely-structured networks such as Hitosaji no Kai. Similarly, most of the other volunteers are not connected to the temple as parishioners but through other networks, such as personal relationships and acquaintances. Some of the volunteers told me that they had learned about Rev. Yoshimizu and Hitosaji no Kai while volunteering with other organisations in San'ya, such as San'yūkai, a non-profit organisation with a Christian background established in the 1980s that provides meals and a free medical clinic for rough sleepers.

Hitosaji no Kai, similar to other volunteer organisations, relies on the time given by its volunteers and the financial donations made by private individuals. Temples around Japan and private companies also donate rice and other items for distribution. It also collaborates with local and Tokyo-based NPOs to support people facing hardship. This support takes the form of providing memorial rituals, food and medical advice, helping with applications for welfare support schemes, and creating connections between volunteers and local residents. Hitosaji no Kai and its collaborating organisations aim to provide material and psychological support to socially-excluded people living on the margins of society. They also aim to create a sense of connection and belonging for those who have severed ties with their past and families, and to foster connections between volunteers and among organisations. These connections exist in the present, but also look to the future through an expectation of reciprocity, with the hope that the help received will be returned at some point in the future. An excerpt from my field notes on November 22, 2021 shows how this works in practice:

> *After working for a couple of hours, we take a break to have lunch together. Lunch provides an opportunity for volunteers to discuss personal matters or concerns, as well as to plan social activities or talk about other volunteering opportunities (Figure 3). A couple more people will join us just before or after lunch to help with the busy afternoon ahead. Rev. Yoshimizu has to leave briefly to run some errands. After a while, he calls to tell us that a young man will be visiting. He tells us to feed this man while he waits, as he may be slightly late for his appointment. The man is in his twenties and rather shy. He starts eating and talks very quietly. When Rev. Yoshimizu arrives, he talks to the man about his situation and discusses putting him in contact with an organisation that will help him find temporary accommodation while he gets back on his feet. They leave together.*

A few weeks later, I met the young man who had eaten lunch with us. He had been encouraged to come to the temple to help as a volunteer, and had brought a bag of sweets to give to rough sleepers. While he had been asked to give something back by helping to clean the temple, he had also felt that he should contribute by making a donation to people living on the streets, thereby creating a connection of reciprocal support. This idea of reciprocity was often expressed by volunteers when they mentioned how much they had learned from their experience, and how much they had gained by interacting with people on the street.

In the written material on Hitosaji no Kai and in talks given by Rev. Yoshimizu, this idea of reciprocity is expressed through the central concept of *shien* 支縁, which motivates the activities of the organisation. *Shien* means 'support', 'aid', and 'assistance' in Japanese, and is usually written with the characters shi 支 and en 援. As Rev. Yoshimizu writes *shien*, however, the second character 援 is replaced with the homonymous character 縁, which in its current use means connection or bond, both in the sense of blood or family connections and in the more abstract sense of destined bonds. In the context of Hitosaji no Kai's activities, use of the character 縁 links their volunteer support to the Buddhist notion of a karmic bond.[13] The term 支縁 has been used since around 2011 by volunteers working in Kamagasaki (now Nishinari), a large *yoseba* in Osaka that bears similarities to San'ya. In his talks and writing, Rev. Yoshimizu explains his use of the term, as a "connection of reciprocal

[13] For further discussion about how Rev. Yoshimizu uses *shien* see Baffelli (2025); on *en* see Rowe (2011); Kolata (2019).

Figure 3: One of our Monday lunches with Hitosaji no Kai volunteers. Photo by the author.

support" (*otagai o sasaeaeru goen*), which encompasses past, present, and future relationships. In an interview, he elaborated on the temporally layered triple meaning of *shien*:

> In funeral support,[14] we place great importance on the [meaningful] connections (*en*) that the individual had in the past. This is the meaning of *shien*. Then if an individual is in a difficult situation and needs help now, we help them to create the necessary connections (*en*). For instance, if they need to take a medical examination we can accompany them to the free clinic run by San'yūkai. If there is a housing issue, we might refer them to Tsukuroi Tokyo Fund.[15] This means connecting them with the networks they need in the present. The third point is that we are not simply helping others unilaterally, but we hope to build a connection (*en)* to support each other in the future.[16]

Sharing vulnerability and creating reciprocal relations of interdependence between volunteers and those receiving help are important aspects of Hitosahi no Kai, and these ideas are put into action through its activities, which extend beyond San'ya. For example, on November 22, 2021, after we had readied the items to be distributed in the evening, we prepared bags of rice (three kilograms each) for a food bank, which operated twice a month from the same premises and supported local families. These rice donations were part of an initiative that Hitosaji no Kai had been involved with since 2010: the 'One Rice Bowl Campaign' (Kome Isshō Undō), which promoted a rice distribution network involving temples throughout Japan. Started by a priest in Shiga Prefecture, the initiative was extended through collaboration with Rev. Yoshimizu and Hitosaji no Kai. Local temples collected rice donations and redistributed them to local NPOs and food pantries (Soda 2019).

[14] On funeral service support in San'ya see Marr (2021); Baffelli (2025).
[15] Tsukuroi Tokyo Fund is a Charity providing support for housing, jobs, and shelter.
[16] Interview conducted by the author on December 25, 2022.

Carrying the heavy bags of rice, each weighing ten to twenty kilograms, I noticed that many came from Miyagi Prefecture in Tōhoku, the northeast region of Japan's largest island, Honshu. On March 11, 2011, a devastating earthquake with a magnitude of 9.1 triggered a tsunami in that region, causing over 18,000 deaths. The rice distribution network participated in disaster relief efforts, and Rev. Yoshimizu and other Hitosaji no Kai volunteers travelled to the affected areas to provide material and emotional support. In his writing, Rev. Yoshimizu emphasises the importance of local connections for coordinating relief efforts and understanding the needs of those affected (Yoshimizu 2012). Ten years on, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, rice donations were being sent from farmers in Tōhoku to Koshō-in, where they were redistributed to food banks. The bonds formed through Hitosaji no Kai's relief activities in Tōhoku had endured and extended from Tōhoku's farmers to low-income families in San'ya.

Such networks, which were established prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, have been crucial for organisations during crises and emergencies. However, the pandemic also created new conditions of marginalisation and precarity for a group of volunteers working with Hitosaji no Kai.

Volunteers and the pandemic

During my fieldwork in 2021, the volunteers I met told me that even though the numbers of volunteers had been restricted, they were allowed to continue helping with the preparation of food parcels because they lived close to the temple and could walk or drive there. This was to minimise, as much as possible, the risk of infection from taking public transportation. During the hardest months of the pandemic in 2020, Kodomo no Gokurakudō became a safe space where volunteers could meet once a week and support each other while preparing food parcels and other items.

Mizue, who was both a volunteer and a parishioner at Kōshō-in, had only started volunteering a few months before the pandemic began. Initially, she joined to meet new people, and she and several other elderly parishioners helped prepare the onigiri. A widow who lived alone, she did not need to take public transportation to get to the temple, so she had continued to volunteer during the pandemic. "This is the highlight of my week," she whispered to me the first time we met, while we packed bags of rice. After a moment, Chieko joined us. She also lived alone, and was often the first to arrive and the last to leave on Mondays. She told me that she had been looking for volunteering opportunities and was introduced to Rev. Yoshimizu by a mutual acquaintance. She used to participate in the group that supported children with their homework, but those activities had been suspended because of the pandemic.

During our interview,[17] Kimiyo, one of Hitosaji no Kai's longest-serving volunteers and a skilled craftsperson, recalled the vitality of the meetings before the pandemic. When there was time left after preparing the *onigiri*, she and another student volunteer would sit and knit scarves or bonnets to be distributed in the evening. Other volunteers started bringing yarn and asked her to teach them how to knit. Among them were a group of Vietnamese immigrant workers and students, who were volunteering with Hitosaji no Kai due to its long-term collaboration with the Vietnamese Buddhist Association in Japan. The association, led by the nun Thích Tâm Trí, supports Vietnamese workers and students in Japan. Kimiyo missed those lively and sometimes chaotic moments with the different groups of volunteers. The Vietnamese volunteers, in particular, were a very active group and included many young people who would gather at the temple to prepare hundreds of spring rolls to be distributed with the *onigiri*.

The number of Vietnamese people living in Japan increased steadily during the 2010s, reaching around 410,000 by 2019, a tenfold increase since 2009. Many were students or Technical Intern Trainees who worked in poor conditions and occupied a precarious position due to their temporary contracts. Their salaries tended to

[17] Interview conducted on December 20, 2022.

be very low, and most had to repay debts incurred in Vietnam to pay for a recruitment broker and secure a place in the programme. The Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP) was established in 1993 to transfer technical skills to workers from participating countries (including Vietnam, India, Cambodia, the Philippines, Laos, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Thailand, and Indonesia). In practice, however, the programme has been used to address labour shortages in sectors such as agriculture and fisheries, and has been criticised for being exploitative (Trần 2020). In 2019, there were over 210,000 Vietnamese Technical Intern Trainees, accounting for 51 percent of the total number of technical intern trainees in Japan.[18]

Unfortunately, the pandemic made their situation even more precarious. Flights between Vietnam and Japan were discontinued in March 2020, and even when charter flights later resumed, they were usually unaffordable. Consequently, trainees waiting in Vietnam were no longer able to enter Japan. Meanwhile, those who lost their jobs in Japan due to the pandemic found themselves stranded in the country, even though their residence permits had expired, and they were often unable to access the necessary paperwork to extend them. On June 20, 2020, a post on the Hitosaji no Kai Facebook page explained that, since the beginning of the pandemic, many Vietnamese residents had lost both their jobs and their accommodation after they had to vacate the dormitories where they lived which were provided by employers. It was estimated that around 8,000 students and 10,000 trainees were affected.

In addition to no longer being able to help Hitosaji no Kai due to COVID-19-related restrictions, the organisation's Vietnamese volunteers, thus, also found themselves in need of material help such as food and housing. While they could previously donate their extra time to the organisation, they were now 'out of time'— outside the rhythms of a daily work/study routine. They had moved from a state of action into a condition of waiting and impasse, waiting for the situation to improve, to be able to go back to their country or to find another job.

At the same time, their connections with Hitosaji no Kai meant that the organisation could mobilise the networks they had previously created for the distribution of rice from temples to promptly organise support for Vietnamese residents.

In late 2020, Hitosaji no Kai participated in the nationwide 'Emergency Rice Donation Support Project for Vietnamese People in Japan' (Zainichi Betonamujin e no Kinkyū Semai Shien Purojekuto). From September to December 2020, Hitosaji no Kai posted weekly updates on their Facebook page, reporting the amount of donations they were receiving, and explaining the situation of Vietnamese immigrants in Japan. These posts highlighted the poor working and living conditions experienced by Vietnamese immigrants, which were comparable to those of rough sleepers in terms of precarity, exclusion, low social status, and difficulty accessing information. The posts also informed readers about Vietnamese Buddhism and the volunteer activities of people living in shelters in Saitama, Chiba, Kanagawa, and Tokyo, who were waiting to return to Vietnam. On December 31, 2020, a final report was published detailing donations totalling over five million yen and fifteen tons of rice from various prefectures across Japan.

By August 2021, approximately 2,068 Vietnamese individuals were still residing in shelters. One of the facilities providing accommodation was the Daionji temple in Saitama Prefecture, in the Greater Tokyo area, where Rev. Thích Tâm Trí, the temple headpriest, had moved to in the spring of 2020. She appeared in a few media articles and used Twitter (now X) to talk about the temple's activities supporting Vietnamese workers who had lost their jobs and were unable to return home due to the pandemic. Most of these people were in their twenties and thirties. As well as providing shelter and food, they provided counselling and mental health support, and repatriation support. They also continued to perform religious rituals, such as funerals and memorial services, which had been provided by the Vietnamese Buddhist Association before the pandemic. By December 2021,

[18] On TITP see also Siu and Koo (2022).

around 200 people were still living in shelters. By that time, Rev. Trí had helped over 2,000 people return home, including more than one hundred pregnant women.[19]

On Christmas Day 2021, I visited Daionji Temple with a colleague from Toyo University and Rev. Yoshimizu (Figure 4). Our aim was to deliver bags of rice donated by several temples around Japan that had been collected by Kōshō-in in San'ya. A group of nuns and volunteers from the Taiwanese Buddhist group Fo Guang Shan accompanied us, bringing additional rice donations. It was their first visit to the Vietnamese temple (Figure 5). After spending the day there, we left with a few boxes of vegetables cultivated by the people living at Daionji with the help of local farmers in the fields around the temple. These vegetables were to be distributed to the Hitosaji no Kai volunteers and enjoyed during the weekly Monday meals. We also received boxes containing hundreds of five-packs of masks, which the residents of Daionji had prepared for distribution by Hitosaji no Kai volunteers.

Figure 4: Daionji temple in Saitama Prefecture. Photo by the author.

Figure 5: Volunteers and priests chanting together at Daionji temple, Saitama Prefecture. Photo by the author.

[19] On the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant religious communities in Japan see Takahashi (2025).

Vietnamese workers and students found themselves in a state of impasse during the pandemic, a "stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic" (Berlant 2011: 4). Time was suspended and the future was unimaginable. However, during this "impasse shaped by crisis" (Berlant 2011), people were also able to develop the skills needed to adjust to new pressures and overwhelming situations. As Rev. Trí explained during our conversation at the temple, residents were involved in volunteering activities at Daionji, such as cultivating the land or preparing masks for Hitosaji no Kai. This was their way of rebuilding a positive connection with people in Japan, despite their difficult experiences. By focusing on connections rather than "donations," these organisations were attempting to give people back control over their lives and identities during the crisis, as well as responding to negative portrayals of Vietnamese people in the Japanese media. The connections between organisations formed prior to the pandemic also incentivised the creation of a structure that was not merely a temporary response to the crisis, but one that could have a longer-term effect. However, this also meant that it was difficult to return to pre-pandemic ways of doing things, even when this was seen as desirable.

"Being with" and not being together anymore

As previously mentioned, Hitosaji no Kai's main activities involved preparing and distributing food. The evening food distribution usually lasted a few hours because it involved more than simply giving away food. The volunteers also spent time talking with people on the street, listening to their stories and concerns, and providing information. In short, they were "being with" the people and creating a connection. As I described in my field notes on December 6, 2021, the moments before the distribution were both hectic and marked by reflection on the day and the upcoming activity:

> *At around 4 pm, we take another break for tea and sweets. Immediately after that, Rev. Yoshimizu returns from his errands and things get busy. He drives off to collect the 220 bento boxes he has ordered from a local shop. As soon as he returns, we need to prepare the parcels containing heat packs, masks, sweets, and information leaflets. Large bags containing underwear, socks, hand-knitted scarves, and neck warmers are ready, as are the 'medicine jackets'. The volunteers are divided into three groups (two covering different areas of Ueno Park and one covering the Arakawa River), and all items are divided according to how many are needed for each route.*
>
> *After the hectic packing, things slow down again. We sit down for a short service in front of an image of Amida Buddha, after which the volunteers leave. The three of us (myself, Yoshimizu, and a priest) staying for the evening distribution have a quick dinner of onigiri made with leftover rice from lunch and some tea. A moment later, a few priests arrive to help with the distribution. Rev. Yoshimizu invites us all to join him and say another short prayer before we head off to Ueno Park. In Ueno, we drive to an agreed meeting point and park the car. There, we meet the other priests volunteering, prepare our trolleys, and split into two groups (Figure 6).*

In Ueno Park, we walked around, stopping where groups or individuals had gathered to prepare for the night. We distributed food and mask parcels, as well as over-the-counter medicines, underwear, socks, and, occasionally, sleeping bags, while chatting about health issues, the weather, and recent events. Rev. Yoshimizu knew most of the people staying in the park, so he sometimes asked about those who were absent, in case something had happened to them. The distribution took several hours, often ending after 10 pm (Figure 7). Afterwards, the volunteers met briefly to discuss how many bento boxes were left, and whether there had been any urgent requests from the people we met.

Rev. Yoshimizu usually drove me back to my accommodation before driving around the area to distribute any leftover bento boxes. In the car, we reflected on the difficulty of forming connections. One night, after

Figure 6: Rev. Yoshimizu and the author, preparing our trolley. Photo by a volunteer.

Figure 7: Late night in Ueno park, my trolley was empty. Photo by Rev. Yoshimizu.

distributing almost all of our bento boxes in the park, we were about to walk back to the car when a man sitting on a bench caught our attention. I had seen him earlier at the entrance to the park, and he had followed us. We offered him a box, which he accepted, and he started talking to us. He told us that he was from overseas and had been in Japan for over thirty years. Rev. Yoshimizu gave him a pamphlet with information about where to find help with accommodation and invited him to come with us, so that we could help him find somewhere to stay for the night and take him to the relevant office the following morning. He agreed, but then suddenly decided to leave. We met him again in the park two weeks later. I later found out that the man had visited Rev. Yoshimizu at the temple, but had repeatedly run away before support could be arranged for him. That evening, we talked at length in the car about the difficulties of providing support in some situations, and how volunteers can feel hopeless. This was made even more difficult by the fact that the large community of volunteers could not gather together.

Hitosaji no Kai does not use a manual to train volunteers (Kawata et al. 2018) and accepts participants from all backgrounds and faiths. When I first joined the evening distribution in 2019, there were always new volunteers. Rev. Yoshimizu offered only a few brief guidelines: do not wake people who are sleeping but place food next to them quietly; avoid speaking to someone who is lying down while standing above them; instead, crouch down to talk to them; and do not simply hand over food, but greet people properly and try to converse with them. These simple practices reflect the group's central idea of "being with": doing something modest, yet meaningful, that anyone can do.

The first "Hitosaji vow" draws on the Jōdō Shū concept of *tomoiki* 共生: coexistence or living together. In practice, volunteers and priests use "being with" to describe a broader ethos of presence: talking with people on the street and treating them as equals. It emphasises small gestures, such as offering a spoonful of rice, as the basis for building longer-term relationships of mutual support. A comparable approach appears in Jessica Starling's (2023) discussion of Jōdo Shin Shū volunteers working with Hansen's disease patients, where she describes "egalitarian companionship" as an alternative to pity and as a way of "living alongside" (*ikiau*) those they serve (Starling 2023: 729). For Hitosaji no Kai volunteers, however, "being with" extends beyond companionship. It encompasses not only the support offered to people in need, but also the relationships formed among volunteers themselves.

In this context, "being with" operates as both a call to action and a commitment to shared time. It is not only about physical presence or companionship for those receiving help, but also about attending to one another within the volunteer group and recognising that anyone may need support at some point. It involves doing things together while cultivating interdependence and nurturing connections. These relationships require time; volunteers spend whole days together, and the evening distributions involve long hours of walking and conversation. In the words of Yumiko, one of the priest volunteers:

> Everyone gets sick, and no one can live without someone else providing care or support, whether we end up on the street or in a home. Living in San'ya, you see that close up: people taking care of each other. It's encouraging to see how people support each other in these relationships.

One year after my 2021 fieldwork, on Christmas Day 2022, I was sitting in the main hall of Kōshō-in with Rev. Yoshimizu. He had finally found time in his busy schedule to answer my questions about his work and the impact of the pandemic on volunteers. Despite having resumed some of the activities, Rev. Yoshimizu lamented that, for safety reasons, they were still continuing to distribute bento boxes, and he had not yet been able to reinstate all of the volunteers, especially for preparing *onigiri*. But he also mentioned that he thought that, eventually, they would go back to doing what they normally did, while being flexible and adapting when new needs arose, such as during the pandemic or after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake.

During our conversations, volunteers indulged in memories of the pre-pandemic times, when they gathered in the mornings, twice a month, in the main hall of the temple to prepare around 200 large onigiri, which were distributed in the evening. One of them mentioned that many volunteers came together to help, including elderly parishoners, some staying only in the morning. They also recalled when the volunteers from the Vietnamese community had started joining them, and how they began preparing spring rolls to add to the evening meal. For Rev. Yoshimizu, these gatherings were important opportunities for the volunteers to talk about their daily problems and worries. They provided a space where people knew they could find someone willing to listen to them when they felt lost or had, in Rev. Yoshimizu's words, "various worries in their minds." He wished to recreate that sense of community where people could learn from each other. He said that distributing bento boxes might be better for nutrition, but side dishes could also be provided with *onigiri*. He added: "It is very difficult to see that the volunteers have lost the meaning of coming here." As one of the volunteers explained when talking about their activities, "For some volunteers, volunteering is self-care."

Hitosaji no Kai provided volunteers a sense of belonging to an intentional community of individuals who were not necessarily Buddhist, but connected by a shared interest in doing something useful, as well as by their personal relationships with and respect for Rev. Yoshimizu. While connections with people on the street could be maintained during the pandemic, those between volunteers were damaged by the new circumstances.

Concluding comments

Hitosaji no Kai is a small, informal organisation that emerged and expanded through relations—relations between and among individuals, temples, NPOs, and other religious groups. As this article has shown, the organisation's emphasis on fostering connections, rather than simply distributing material aid, created new opportunities for grassroots support that remained effective despite the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions. The organisation's flexible structure and relational networks played a crucial role in enabling a rapid response to unfolding needs. Yet the pandemic also marked a significant departure from previous emergencies; unlike in past disasters, organisations could not rely on large numbers of volunteers. Their ability to mobilise many people at short notice became a vulnerability rather than a strength, as volunteers represented a potential risk to those they aimed to support. As the situation of Hitosaji no Kai's Vietnamese volunteers illustrates, volunteers could also quickly become vulnerable themselves. Although the full, long-term impact of the pandemic on the organisation remains unclear, its relationship with its volunteers has likely shifted in important ways.

In autumn 2023, Hitosaji no Kai resumed open recruitment for bi-monthly evening distributions, although it continued to limit the number of volunteers preparing parcels due to ongoing concerns about infection. For the same reason, the group continued to distribute commercially-prepared bento boxes rather than resume making *onigiri* at the temple. Many volunteers doubted whether a return to earlier practices would be possible. Nevertheless, their activities received increased media attention, which brought new volunteers interested in participating in food distribution in Ueno park, as well as donations.

In October 2025, the organisation finally resumed making *onigiri*. During a visit in December 2025, I joined about fifteen volunteers in preparing around 400 rice balls to be distributed alongside sweets, masks, and heat packs. Although activities superficially resembled pre-pandemic routines, the circumstances had changed. As a small organisation, Hitosaji no Kai depends on a core group of committed volunteers and on Rev. Yoshimizu's ongoing efforts to cultivate new connections. Yet younger volunteers have work and family commitments, while others have less energy to devote to long hours of volunteering. Ensuring coordination and long-term sustainability remains a potential challenge.

While rooted in Buddhist networks and inter-sectarian relationships, Hitosaji no Kai also extends beyond them, collaborating with non-religious actors, international organisations, and individuals. It offers one example of how Buddhist actors in Japan might work across secular and religious spheres. Fifteen years ago, John Nelson (2011) suggested that the survival of Buddhist temples would depend on priests adopting more socially relevant, innovative, and activist forms of practice. Hitosaji no Kai illustrates such an approach, while also revealing the vulnerabilities inherent in relying heavily on committed individuals. Nevertheless, the Hitosaji no Kai network continues to provide a space where people can "be with" one another; where individuals with diverse interests and backgrounds gather for an afternoon of volunteer work and, if they wish, share their thoughts and concerns. Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, this ability to create opportunities for connection and mutual support has endured.

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