

Special Feature

Where Is the Sacred Site? Research Notes on Contents Tourism Induced by *Kimetsu no Yaiba*

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Anime pilgrimage (anime seichijunrei) usually refers to the visitation of real places that have been used as the basis for background settings of anime works. However, the terms *seichi* and *seichi-junrei* are pervasively used by audiences in general, with less emphasis on references to real places featured in anime works.

Fans of *Kimetsu no Yaiba* have been identifying and traveling to “sacred places.” Many of these locations are identified because of shared names with characters or visual similarities, not because they were used as references for the background settings in the manga or the anime series. Through a review of various types of pilgrimages, this paper finds that tourism induced by *Kimetsu no Yaiba* (henceforth *Kimetsu*) is substantially diverse in the context of media mix. The question asked here is not only “Where are the sacred sites of *Kimetsu*?”, but also “What are the tourists practices and performances induced by *Kimetsu*?” This paper finds that these question have a variety of possible answers, each of which opens up a new perspective on the enjoyment of travelling.

1. Historic Sites

1.1 Shrine Visits

Fans have visited the following shrines in Kyushu that contain the characters for “Kamado” in their names, associating it with the family name of protagonist Kamado Tanjiro: Hachiman Kamado Shrine (八幡竈門神社) in Beppu, Oita; Hōmangu Kamado Shrine (宝満宮竈門神社) in Dazaifu, Fukuoka; and Mizoguchi Kamado Shrine (溝口竈門神社) in Chikugo, Fukuoka Prefecture. Katsurakiniimasu Honoikazuchi Shrine (葛木坐火雷神社) in Katsuragi, Nara Prefecture has also been identified as a “sacred site”, because of the special attack practiced by character Agatsuma Zenitsu called Honoikazuchi no Kami, which is the same name as the deity enshrined at this location. Fans have also visited Takinogawa Hachiman Shrine (滝野川八幡神社) in Kita-ku Tokyo because

Takinogawa is mentioned as the birthplace of Kocho Shinobu in the official fanbook¹.

None of these shrines appear in the *Kimetsu* manga/anime series, but fans have been actively identifying even tenuous connections between the locations to the work. For instance, the traditional new year celebration event at Hachiman Kamado Shrine, “Kamado Kagura,” is said to resemble the New Year dance of Kamado’s family in the work. And the mask in the entrance of Kamado Hot Springs nearby the shrine has been said to be similar to the character Urokodaki Sakonji, Kamado Tanjiro’s instructor.² Fans drew character illustrations on votive tablets (ita-ema) at the shrines. It is reported that the number of visitors to Hōmangu Kamado Shrine has been increasing since November 2019, and the number of votive tablets dedicated to the shrine has more than doubled from the previous year³.

The shrines welcome cosplaying and photographing, although the shrine priests of Hōmangu Kamado Shrine said he had no pre-knowledge about *Kimetsu* until receiving a request for permission of cosplaying at the location,⁴ while the priest of Katsurakiniimasu Honoikazuchi Shrine is said to be a big fan in an interview.⁵ Takinogawa Hachiman Shrine held events displaying items related to the characters and showcased Japanese swordsmiths making swords to attract tourists⁶.

1.2 Temple Visits

Kanroji Temple (甘露寺) in Kinokawa, Wakayama Prefecture shares its name with the character Kanroji Mitsuri, and the temple caretakers have enthusiastically endorsed cosplay photo shoots on their grounds, arranging for changing rooms at a nearby community center on weekends.⁷

Tōfukuji Temple (東福寺) in Kyoto has been visited by fans because its checkerboard pattern garden designed by Shigemori Mirei can be associated with Tanjiro’s Kimono pattern.⁸ The bicolor checkerboard is a traditional Japanese pattern since ancient times and became known as “Ichimatsu” in the 18th century after kabuki actor Sanogawa Ichimatsu. The black and green pattern is regarded as the symbol for Tanjiro, used not only for cosplay costumes but also for other merchandise and accessories such as face masks.

Taimadera Temple (當麻寺) in Katsuragi, Nara Prefecture held cosplay photo shoot events in its garden⁹. Katsuragi City also appealed to the connection between the temple with the character Inosuke Hashibira for its decorative tiles with a hog motif.¹⁰ The city’s PR magazine has featured a Zenitsu cosplayer in the August 2020 issue.¹¹

2. Natural Sites

2.1 Split Boulders

Several split boulders resemble the stone split by Tanjiro—which occurs in chapter 5 of the manga and in the 4th episode of the animated television series—have been identified around Japan: Ittōseki (一刀石) Amanoiwatate Shrine (天乃石立神社), Yagyūchō, Nara; Wareishi (われ岩) near Haban Jinja (破磐神社) in Himeji, Hyogo; and Tatsu no Wariishi (竜の割石) in Suzaka, Nagano Prefecture.¹² Many visitors wore cosplay costumes with Japanese swords to reenact the scene at these locations.

2.2 Mountain Climbing

Mountains straddling the boundaries between Tokyo, Saitama, and Yamanashi prefectures are mentioned in the official fanbook as the birthplace of the characters: Mount Kumotori (雲取山) as the birthplace of Tanjiro and Netsuko Kamado; Mount Ōtake, the birthplace of Inosuke; and Mount Kagenobu, the birthplace of Tokito Muichiro. There are also concerns from fans about attempting to climb the mountains without sufficient experience, appropriate clothing, and gear¹³.

3. Commercial Sites

3.1 Hotel

Ōkawasō (大川荘) Hotel in Aizuwakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture was identified by fans for its visual similarity with the scene of the Infinity Castle. Photos of the hotel's labyrinth-like wood staircases and Japanese shōji paper interior buzzed on the internet and hotel staff became aware of the connection after the hotel's Twitter account suddenly grew in followers.¹⁴

3.2 Park

Ashikaga Flower Park in Tochigi Prefecture appealed to tourists for its illuminated wisteria blossoms which resemble the background setting known as Mt. Fujikasane in *Kimetsu*.

3.3 Shopping Arcade

Asakusa Nakamise Shopping Arcade in Tokyo is a real location that is referenced in *Kimetsu*. Rice cracker shop owner at the shopping arcade has researched on the real life locations appear in the anime background and use characters' kimono pattern packages for promotion.¹⁵

4. Organized Railway Theme Tours

Inspired by *Kimetsu no Yaiba: Mugen Ressha* (Demon Slayer the Movie: Infinity Train, 2020), JR Gunma and JR Kyushu both offered special railway tours to passengers. JR Gunma offered a railway tour from October to December 2020 in collaboration with JTB, with Usui Pass Railway Heritage Park in Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture as the destination. JR Kyushu operated its steam locomotive train from Kumamoto to Hakata Station for 10 days during November and December 2020. Both trains operated on holidays and during special seasons as tourist attractions before the *Kimetsu* fever. For the special tours, the trains were adapted to theme-park-like spaces with visuals and voices that remind passenger of elements from *Kimetsu*.

I attended the tour organized by JR Gunma: “Kimetsu no Yaiba x SL Gunma Mugen Ressha Daisakusen” on December 5, 2020. The tour started from Ueno Station, Tokyo, where I picked up my tickets and was given a Kimetsu no Yaiba x JR Gunma print ID card holder as a souvenir. After one hour on the Shinkansen, I arrived at Takasaki Station, where the characters’ stamp rally spot was set. The usual station name plate was replaced by those with *Kimetsu*’s chibi-kyara illustrations. The station staff wore characters’ motif “happi,” a casual Japanese kimono cardigan, and waved goodbyes to passengers as the locomotive train departed. Announcements on board the train were pre-recorded by Hanae Natsuki, the voice actor for Tanjiro in the *Kimetsu no Yaiba* anime.

I conducted unstructured interviews on the train. A 26-year-old female was taking photos of three character toys (chibi-nuigurumi) of characters Kamado Tanjiro, Uchiha Tomioka Giyu, and Shinazugawa Sanemi, with the train seat as background (Figure 1). She was aware of the fact that two of the characters, Giyu and Sanemi, did not appear on the Mugen train in the movie, but it did not matter.



Figure 1. A tourist photographing character toys on the locomotive train¹⁶

A family were wearing character motif masks, the mother as Kocho Shinobu, the father with a flame pattern mask as Rengoku Kyojuro, the son wearing “Uroko” triangle pattern symbolizing Zenitsu, and the daughter wearing Nezuko’s Asanoha pattern mask. They bought the masks at a local drug store. The son said he chose his favorite character Zenitsu and thus did not make a Kamado brother-sister pair-look with his younger sister.

The destination was Yokogawa Station in Gunma. The local railway bento *Touge no Kamameshi* (峠の釜めし) made by eatery Oginoya (荻野屋) offered special versions with inspirations of the characters. The ceramic pot containers for the regular version is brown, while the characters’ versions have five colors: green for Tanjiro, pink for Nezuko, yellow for Zenitsu, blue for Inosuke, and orange for Rengoku.

The Usui Pass Railway Heritage Park nearby is the main tourist attraction in Yokogawa. The park displays and operates retro trains. As a collaboration event with *Kimetsu*, merchandise such as character badges, keyholders, and novelty food was sold in the park.

5. Discussion

Tourism induced by *Kimetsu* is diverse. Table 1 is an attempt of organizing the variety of tourism practice by six features observed: “○” stands for positive; “x” stands for negative; “△” stands for neutral or unclear. For instance, although Mount Kumotori, Ōtake, and Kakenobu are mentioned in the official fanbook, they are not referred to in the manga or anime work. The attitude of Tofukuji Temple’s owner towards the sudden increase of tourists cannot be deduced, and thus it is counted as a neutral.

Three primary common features can be found from tourist destinations that are identified as sacred places for *Kimetsu*: First, character-related, prominently the characters’ names, the kimono patterns, and the colors that remind tourists of the characters. Second, most of the local owners/community welcome tourists, allowing photography and cosplay on the locations. Third, most of the locations provide material mementos or evidence of trips.

First, the tourism practices are substantially character-oriented. Instead of the full image in the original work, the association between the locations are made up of partial elements of the characters: shrines and temples with shared names with the characters, and patterns of kimonos. Tourists were keen to look for the connection of their favorite characters to the locations, utilizing external evidence other than the original manga/anime.

Shrine visits inspired by anime, represented by Washinomiya Shrine, Saitama Prefecture, featured in *Lucky Star*, started with identifying the shrine in the opening scene

Table 1. Features of *Kimetsu no Yaiba* Inspired Tourism

	Used in background/credited	Visual Similarity	Collaboration with copyright holders	Association with character	Support from local owner/community (photographs allowed; cosplay welcomed)	Providing material mementos or evidence of trips (ema; stamp; souvenir)
Hachiman Kamado Shrine, Oita Hōmangu Kamado Shrine, Fukuoka Mizoguchi Kamado Shrine, Fukuoka	×	×	×	○	○	○
Katsurakiniimasu Honoikazuchi Shrine, Nara	×	×	×	○	○	○
Kanro-ji Temple, Wakayama	×	×	×	○	○	○
Tōfukuji, Kyoto	×	△	×	△	△	×
Ōkawasō Hotel, Fukushima	×	○	×	×	○	○
Asakusa Shopping Arcade, Tokyo	○	△	×	×	○	○
Ashikaga Flower Park, Tochigi	×	○	×	×	○	○
Mount Kumotori Mount Ōtake Mount Kakenobu	△	△	×	○	△	○
Split boulders, Ittōseki, Nara Wareishi, Hyogo Tatsu no Wariishi, Nagano	×	○	×	△	○	○
JR Gunma/JR Kyushu organized tours	×	○	○	○	○	○

Compiled by the author.

of every episode in the anime as the background setting. As Yamamura Takayoshi (2015) has pointed out, the collaborative anime-induced tourism in Washinomiya was made possible by local community's effort in forming favorable relationships with fans and copyright holders.¹⁷ However, shrine visits induced by *Kimetsu* share more common features with works such as *Kantai Collection* and *Touken Ranbu*. Both titles started as personified games and were later adapted into animations, in which each of the

characters are anthropomorphisms of warships or swords. For instance, fans of *Kantai Collection* visited Yura Shrine (由良神社) in Miyazu, Kyoto Prefecture, which shares the same name with the character Yura, an anthropomorphism of the light cruiser Yura. Awata Shrine (粟田神社) and Kaji Shrine (鍛冶神社), where the deity of swords is enshrined, are visited by fans of *Touken Ranbu*. This practice is emblematic of what Itō Go (2005) has called the 'kyara', an abbreviation of the Japanese word for character, to refer to the combination of name and visual design that is in some sense independent from the narrative world.¹⁸ The abstraction of the characters' image, such as the Ichimatsu pattern and green color as symbols for Tanjiro, allows for the communication across media forms and second derivations.

Second, fans of *Kimetsu* give performances by cosplaying, wearing recognizable masks or accessories. Tourism locations assisted these performances by offering their spaces, thus enabling tourists to experience themselves as subject-performers, as well as react to and be spectated by fellow travelers. Jang (2020) has observed that fans performances can create authenticity in tourism destinations.¹⁹ Korean fans of *Love Live!* Climb 'Umi Mountain' in Korea, primarily because of the shared name with the character Umi; moreover, the act of mountain climbing while wearing character T-shirts and ornaments is a visible physical performance. Interplay among participants of tourism could transform mundane places into tourist attractions. Another case of fan pilgrimage is to the Yayoi-ken restaurant in Takatsuki, Osaka every year on March 25 in observance of the fictional birthday of character Takatsuki Yayoi from the anime and game franchise *Idolmaster*.²⁰ By lining up at the restaurant, fans are able to participate in the performance as actor and spectator simultaneously.

Planned tours organized by travel agencies are generally considered as a type of mass tourism that provides a standardized experience to travelers. However, as my observation and interviews from the JR Gunma x *Kimetsu no Yaiba* tour indicate, tourists were able to enjoy individual interests such as cosplay, toy photography, and railways.

Third, the tourist destinations provide material mementos or evidence of trips such as votive tablets (ema), characters' rubber stamps, or merchandise. Drawing on a votive tablet and leaving it at shrine could be considered as a form of performance visible to the following visitors. The stamp rally, developed from the seal and signature (Shuniku) collection tradition in Japanese shrines, works as a certificate of the visitor's presence at the location and offers memento of the journey. Purchasing, exchanging, and reselling *Kimetsu* merchandise is notable. A large number of results could be found searching hashtags of JR Gunma *Kimetsu no Yaiba* tour plus the characters' names on Twitter. Exchanging limited items sold during the tour could be regarded as a derivative form of tourism enjoyment.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, *Kimetsu no Yaiba* has become a source of vibrant creative tourism. Alongside its popularity in Japan and over the world, an understanding of the diversity and complexity is needed. This research note proposes to analyze tourism practices inspired by *Kimetsu* and aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of contents tourism in the context of media mix.

Endnotes

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