Travel by Women in Early Modern and Modern Japan

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Research on early modern travel can be divided into two main kinds. One seeks to clarify the actual forms of behavior, experience, and transportation related to travel, while the other attempts to clarify popular religious beliefs by focusing on temple and shrine pilgrimage as such.

For reasons of research materials, both approaches have tended to focus on men. With heightened interest in research on women's history, however, the body of research on travel by women has now started to grow. While travel research typically relies on travel diaries as its principal source of materials, travel diaries by women are written only by women of considerable education, hence class, making it difficult to observe the actual forms of travel by commoner women.

Clearly the effort to grasp travel by women as a whole makes the discovery of materials other than travel diaries a pressing concern. Some research has made use of registries from temple inns (shukubo) and statuary such as devotional pagodas (kuyoto). This study relies on a votive scripture ledger (nokyocho) and votive tablets (ema) to reveal a facet of travel by women. The ledger was offered to Mankoin Temple in Ichihara City, Chiba Prefecture, by the Motegi family (Katsuma, Ichihara City) and records the journey made by the family's ancestor "Tora" who visited the Kannon spiritual sites in Shikoku, Bando, and Chichibu and made the eighty-eight site Shikoku pilgrimage. The ledger only enables us to trace the footsteps of Tora, but the fact that a single woman could make such a journey deserves attention. The twenty-six votive tablets dating from the Meiji and Taisho periods, on the other hand, were offered to Kiyomizudera Temple in Misaki, Chiba Prefecture by women who had made a pilgrimage to Zenkoji in Shinshu. From the images and inscriptions on the tablets, we know the course they traveled, details of their pilgrimage, and their names and regions of origin. Although the tablets date from the modern period, it is believed that women in the early modern period conducted similar journeys.

Votive ledgers and tablets do not provide the quantity of information available from travel diaries. Nonetheless, with the accumulation of information contained in such materials it should be possible to clarify further the nature of travel by women in early modern Japan.