# The GateKeeper of Enmyoin According to a 95-year-old Female Buddhist Priest

## Creative Detective Documentary About a Pioneering Nun in Rural Japan

**Title: The Gatekeeper of Enmyoin** (According to a 95-year-old Female Buddhist Priest) Co-Directed and Co-Produced by **Reiko Tahara** and **Kozo Max Uesugi** (Brooklyn, NY)

Production Company: MRex Productions

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Color & B/W, Stereo, 4:3, 124min.

In Japanese and English, with English Subtitles (Japanese subtitles also available)

Completion: 08/08

Shooting Format: DV, 16mm, Super8mm, Screening Format: DigiBeta, DVD, or HDCAM (if needed) Recorded Locations: Okayama, Tokyo, Mt. Koya, Big Buddha in Nara (all in Japan), Manhattan, Brooklyn.

#### **Screenings:**

World Premiere at the Hawaii International Film festival, Oct. 18-28, 2007 (159min. version)

Private Screening at the New School for General Studies, New York City, Mar. 28, 2008 (2hr work-in-progress version)

Vilcek Foundation Gallery, New York City, Oct. 1 & Oct. 2, 2008 (Directors' Cut version)

Japan Première at the Okayama Image/ Film Festival, Japan, Nov. 28 & 29, 2009 (at their special closing gala)

#### Very Short Synopsis

A Japanese female priest--a rarity in Japan--talks about her past, but refuses to speak about her experiences as a woman. A visit with the priest's mysterious successor, who is also a woman, inspires the filmmakers to explore the older nun's unspoken feelings. What began as a simple portrait turns into a genre-bending detective documentary, with a dash of spiritual nourishment.

#### **Short Synopsis**

Teijun Ógawa, a proud and rare niso (female priest) of Japanese Shingon Buddhist Sect, dies after telling her story to Reiko and Max, a Japanese couple based in New York. She told them about her desolate life since she was given to a temple at the age of seven, and her achievement of building the Enmyoin temple single-handedly. But she refused to share her view as a woman—as if the subject was taboo. Upon hearing the arrival of a young heiress, as though guided by old Teijun, the couple revisits Enmyoin in search of Teijun's unspoken feelings about her womanhood. While the dark reality of Teijun's female priesthood in the man-dominant rural Japanese Buddhist culture is revealed, new mysteries of the untold parts of Teijun's life emerge. The story is told through Reiko's voice, which reflects her own journey of trying to find freedom, balance and integration of her roles as a rebel, new immigrant in the U.S., woman, wife, and mother. Soon the simple unfinished portrait of Teijun develops into a genre-bending, personal detective documentary with rich narrative flavor and spiritual sustenance.

#### Quote 1

"This feature-length experimental narrative offers an extraordinary perspective on Japanese Buddhism and feminine identity; moreover, the film's biography morphs into a suspenseful mystery with twists and turns worthy of a Murakami novel. *The GateKeeper of Enmyoin* is destined to attract a diverse audience, including specialists in Japanese culture, gender studies, religion, cultural studies, memoir and biography, experimental narrative, and so on. But most importantly, it will beguile any viewer who comes with no expectations than to experience the world through an artist's fine-tuned sensibility and generous sharing of self."

- Deirdre Boyle, Documentary Historian, Critic, and Professor

### Quote 2

"Part portraiture, part detective story, part religious and cultural exploration, part identity meditation, *The Gatekeeper of Enmyoin* manages to create a series of deeply resonant connections between the unique life and times *and legacy* of Teijun Ogawa, a 95 year-old female Buddhist priest, and the compellingly persistent and roving curiosity of filmmaker Reiko Tahara, a young Japanese woman living with her family in the United States. Reiko's probing but delicate voice-over uncovers both the simplicities and the complexities found inside the spiritual world of the Enmyoin Buddhist Temple. Filled with mystery, magical overtones, compassion, and profound respect, *The Gatekeeper of Enmyoin* is also some of the most innovative documentary storytelling I've seen in a long time, with a brilliant musical score by Co-Director, Max Uesugi."

— *Alan Berliner*, Filmmaker

## The GateKeeper of Enmyoin is partly funded by:

- ◆ The Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission (JUSFC)
- ◆ The National Endowment for the Arts
- ◆ The Jerome Foundation
- ◆ The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), Individual Artist Program
- ◆ The Center for Asian American Media with funds provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting
- ◆ The Decentralization Program of the NYSCA, administered by the Brooklyn Arts Council, Inc. (BAC), Kings County
- ◆ The Greater New York Arts Development Fund of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, administered by the BAC

#### **Artist Statement**

#### Reiko Tahara

It took us 9 years to make this film(!). In the meantime, we raised our child, moved twice, struggled to maintain a family life in New York City, smelled the debris of the World Trade Center collapse, kept pondering about wars, and Max's beloved mother left this world. To be making a film while living was a challenge, and a hope for us. We learned our limitations, but focused on our possibilities. Now our girl keeps growing strong and gentle in Brooklyn, we feel content about our modest life, and this film contains essence of our first decade as a family. As I kept being tossed in a tiny boat with Max for years in the ocean of life between our two homes, and probably as I touched Buddhist thinking through Teijun's life, my young dream of making it as an independent filmmaker grew a bit wiser.

In our filmmaking, our Japanese identities and our painfully (and joyfully) "real" life in Brooklyn often build the base of our work. Then it expands. Max's interest in sound and film music, my curiosity in the issues of woman, religion, or family, and our common fascination for history give more layers. Max's musical esthetics and my visual/ story sense in documentary, and our respect for past documentary pioneers give the framework for our thoughts and feelings. We take many layers in one film as a good challenge. It may not be an easy film to watch because of its uncompromising length and complexity, but we believe that it has a power to shake viewers' minds and stay with them for a long time, and hopefully it will help them in reflecting on their own journeys toward their own happiness.

Our first attempt was to make a straightforward mini-portrait of Teijun for Western television. But I ended up looking for her imprisoned feelings after her death and turned the film into a non-traditional detective documentary. In retrospect, this film could be made because she was gone, since she wouldn't have allowed us to dig into her womanhood in her earthy presence. Strangely enough, though, I feel that it was her who drove us to make the film the way it is.

## Kozo Max Uesugi

After our second shooting trip to Japan, I began developing several musical themes, along with the entire film's structure. My initial musical ideas for this film though had already come to me while I was shooting, listening to the amazing chanting.

Before this film, I composed music for other people's films. Though meeting directors' expectation may have been successful, those experiences didn't leave me complete satisfaction as a music storyteller in the film. For this one, I was the co-director and cinematographer. So I really wanted to reflect my on-location feel to the music I would create for the film and work on my musical storytelling at the early stage of the filmmaking process – not at the first-time viewing session of a rough-cut. This idea seemed beautiful to me.

But there was one difficulty I didn't see coming—and this occurred quite often: the composer (myself) had to seek editorial changes from the editor (Reiko) and eventually approval from the co-directors (Reiko & me), in order to accomplish the composer's goals. This scenario is unusual and rarely, if ever, happens in the conventional hierarchy of any given post-production environment, which is ironically why I do want to compose on our own film. Because of that upside-down authority, the composer was able to map out his storytelling, although it took a long long time to come to an agreement with the partner(s) each time (Sometimes, an agreement was never reached).

That way, I constellated several musical themes, together and separately, throughout the film: Teijun; MRex (Reiko and Max); Buddhism; parenthood; and so on. Yet, from the beginning, I believed that the very core music of this film already existed before my music. Chanting. Variety of chanting. So the music that I made was only to serve my way of storytelling - weaving it into the voiceover or the dialogs. My hope is that by tracing of each particular theme, sometimes in a different tempo and color, audience would enjoy our *parallel sonic storytelling*, Reiko's *linguistic* and my *music* storytelling. You might discover something new, should you *listen* carefully to the film a second time.

Certainly, *The GateKeepr of Enmyoin* is about the protagonist, Teijun, her young heiress, and their Buddhist environment. But the film exists through the eyes of MRex, whose perspectives, while originally shaped in Japan, have been nurtured in New York. The film is not made in Japan or made by non-Japanese. It is made by Japanese who have a life outside of Japan. After all, this film hopes to be seen and heard beyond one culturally dominant perspective.

#### Reiko Tahara's Bio

Reiko is from Kichijoji, Tokyo. Reiko's love of writing naturally led her into filmmaking in teen years. After coming to the U.S. in 1991, her short film *remnants* (1995), an essay documentary about the image of the West in Japan, was screened at more than 30 festivals and art venues including Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival, SXSW, Women in Director's Chair Film Festival, New York Asian American Film Festival, and the Japan Society (NY). She has been collaborating with filmmaker/ film composer/ sound designer Max Uesugi since 1994.

Reiko is a fellowship recipient of 2007-08 Japanese Government Overseas Study Program for Emerging Artists in Experimental Documentary category. Reiko has been teaching documentary history/theory at the New School (New York) and Temple University (Philadelphia) as an adjunct professor since 2007 and is slated to teach Japanese Cinema at the Temple from Spring 2010. She also run a neighborhood video business specializing in memoir video creation and home movie archiving.

Reiko holds BA in Humanities from Waseda University (Tokyo), MA in Media Studies from the New School for Social Research (NY), and attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Journalism Dept.) on a special scholarship.

## Max Uesugi's Bio

Max is from Uno, Okayama, Japan. Before coming to the U.S., he managed a record store, recording studio, played the bass guitar in several bands in Osaka and hosted a radio show called, "Sweet Soul Music," a weekly program for RSK Okayama. In New York, he pursued his interests in media sound design and film music composition at the New School, MA in Media Studies.

During the graduate years, he studied critical media theory and strengthened his creativity in audio production as communication tool in different form of media whether it's film music or environmental sound portrait. His radio essay documentary series *SOUND OF REALITY* (1996, aired on WBAI, NY) poetically and humorously raised questions on our sense of hearing and listening in this digital reproductive age.

Max has also composed music for a dozen independent films and videos with wide rage of subjects. Toward the end of his graduate study, he started producing video/films of his own with a desire to incorporate his music and sound design into the storytelling itself. He formed MRex Productions and continued an independent-filmmaking adventure while trying hard to live a life and raise their daughter in Brooklyn.

Besides filmmaking at the MRex, he provides audio/video field-production services for television, primarily as sound recordist for documentaries. He has worked and traveled around the world as a crew member for US/Japan/foreign channels such as PBS, HBO, BBC, NHK (JPN), ZDF (GER), CBS, NBC, ABC, Discovery, National Geographic Channel, and Nickelodeon and so on.

He is currently busy working on the MRex's new documentary project, My Dad and Japan's Imperialism.

#### Joint Bio

After each coming to the U.S. from Japan in the early 1990's, Reiko and Max met at the New School for Social Research in New York, where they were both studying alternative media in the Media Studies Graduate Program.

With Reiko's strength in writing and (as) visual storyteller and Max's deep insight on sound and music in film, they started to incorporate their talent. In 1994, they established MRex Productions and began filmmaking together with strong belief in the fusion of form and content, and the power of media as a communication tool among people. Though their respective roles in the unit have expanded and overlapped over the years, their visions as the recently arrived residents of the U.S. and their earnest passion for creating crafty multi-layered media art remain consistent and the fiery sparks between visual, audio and story elements in their work continue to be the essence of MRex.

Reiko and Max live in Brooklyn, NY with their daughter Moie and their dog Mr. Bo Bo.

## Filmography:

- Was my dad a Spy? Japan's Imperialism and Pan Asianism in production/ HD documentary 90-100min In 2007 Max accidentally discovered that his late father was among 96 pupils (Okawa School) of Dr. Shumei Okawa, pre-war Japan's leading ideologist who was later tried for the class-A war crimes against peace at the Tokyo Trial after WWII (considered to be equivalent toJapan's Nuremberg). As we visit remaining pupils, we begin to realize that they were actually revolutionaries for Asia's independence in the midst of Western and Japanese Imperialism, and how the post-war peace education has bent our notion of pre-war history in Asia.
- Children's Message of Peace in production/Color, Sound/Interactive DVD/Web Project Based on rare Hiroshima children survivors' accounts, this video teaches US children the terror of a nuclear bomb. Aims to be used in peace education efforts in the U.S. Collaboration with Dr. Kathleen Sullivan, a disarmament educator and consultant to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs in New York. Sponsored project of New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA). Grants & Awards Received: Hiroshima Peace Grant.
- The GateKeeper of Enmyoin (According to a 95-year-old Female Buddhist Priest) 2008/124 min director's cut, 1<sup>st</sup> feature (2007/159 min long version)

A detective documentary on a life of a female Buddhist priest in Okayama, Japan. Sponsored by NYFA.

Screening: Hawaii International Film festival (10/07, 159min. version), WIP Screenings: The New School (3/08), Columbia University (6/04), Prospect Hights Film Festival (02/04)

Grants & Awards Received: NEA Production Grant (2002), Japan-US Friendship Commission Grant (2001&2002), Brooklyn Arts Council's Re-grant program from the New York State Council on the Arts & NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (2001&2002), Jerome Foundation Production Grant (2000), New York State Council on the Arts' Individual Artist Grant (2000), National Asian American Telecommunications Association Media Fund (2000)

- March on Washington in Brooklyn 2008/11min. DV, DVD Project
  - This video covered an event in Jan. 08 in which children of PS 261 reenacted the historic March on Washington from their school to the Brooklyn Borough Hall. After the unexpected response from the PS261 parents, it was decided that PTA would use it for fundraising purposes. Reiko orchestrated a parent crew of volunteer videographers (include. Max) and photographers to create this moving piece.
- Bringing Literacy to Life -2002/ 30min version & 60min. version /DV documentary

  This video documented a seven-week-long educational experiment by Vacilia Cassens, a Bank Street College Fellow at the time, in which a pre-k class brings their favorite picture book to a live performance through working with a storyteller, a musician, a dancer and a painter. Co-production with Cassens. Screened at the Bank Street College of Education.
- Chef Kato's French at Home, -2000/56min./DV/ cooking instructional video for survival. Self-distributed on/off-line. Sold at major Japanese bookstores and grocery stores in the US. Reviewed in Yomiuri America.
- World's Home Cuisine in NY: Greek Home Recipes -1999/30min/DV Cultural cooking show made as a pilot for Japanese public TV.
- Returning -1997/20min/DV/experimental narrative script
  A neo-future Japanese immigrants' story in NY co-written by Reiko & Max. Written in the Film Video Arts Artist/Mentor Program with Rea Tajiri (1996).
- Sound of Reality -1996/5-7min. x 3/radio essay 5-7min. x 3
   Max's artistic study on the sonic environment of our lives and our notion of hearing and listening, broadcast repeatedly on WBAI, NY
- remnants 1995/11min/16mm film/ personal documentary
  Reiko's personal reflection on Japan's Westernization and the image of self and others. Poetically incorporated experimental images and intergenerational family dialogs.

Screenings & Awards: Broadcast -PBS Texas The Territory. Festivals -Margaret Mead Film Fest, SXSW Film Conference & Fest (TX), NY Asian American Int'l Film Fest, San Francisco Asian American Film Fest, LA Pacific American Int'l Film Fest, Woman of Color Film Fest (CA), Woman in Director's Chair (IL). National tours -Women in Director's Chair, Pacific Film Archives. Other Showings: The Riant Theatre, Cinema Village, American Photography Institute, The Japan Society (all NYC), NY University, the New School for Social Research, Boston University. Awards: R. G. Youngson Gold Award (best film), New School Annual Competition (1995), Honorary Mention, New School Commencement Exercises.

- Media Marginalia -1994/58min/video/doc/in Japanese
   A report on NY's alternative media support system for the fellow social filmmal
  - A report on NY's alternative media support system for the fellow social filmmakers in Japan. Distributed by Video Press. Co-dir/ co-prod by Reiko & Max.
- *Midnight Train* -1993/experimental short video: Reiko's poetic essay about a girl's search for the moon.

#### **Long Synopsis:**

The film begins as a TV-like short portrait documentary of Teijun Ogawa. Born as the first daughter among 6 siblings in an islander farmer family, she was given to a temple at the age of 7. With a dream to build her own temple, she alone crossed the Inland Sea when she was 18 and moved to Uno in the mainland, an upcoming shipbuilding town. While persevering a simple, desolate life, she won the patronage of Lady Mitsui, the mother of the shipbuilding company president, and eventually built her own temple called Enmyoin. The portrait ends abruptly, uncompleted.

Teijun's story is extraordinary, and she has the aura of assurance, but Reiko confesses the reason why she couldn't complete the film that year. Outtakes of the original portrait suggest Teijun had some hidden feelings that she didn't want to share, feelings about her womanhood. Yet she acted as if it didn't matter whether she was a man or a woman because she was a priest. Why couldn't she celebrate her woman-ness and give a young filmmaker some spiritual guidance instead? Meanwhile, the filmmaker's story is told through her voice and nostalgic 8mm images that she is a woman who immigrated to New York from Tokyo seeking freedom, but now facing a challenge of being a mother, wife, and still being a free spirit. She also shows her connection to Teijun as a woman recently married into her parishioner's family. A man she met and married in NY (Max, co-creator of the film), who shared the vision as a quiet rebel from the conventionalities of the world, was from one of the most conservative areas in Japan where Buddhism has survived. A year later, while the film was left incomplete on the shelf, Teijun Ogawa dies, and the filmmakers hear the news that a young nun in her 30s, who has rich hair and rides a mini-motorcycle, inherited Enmyoin. Why a woman? Did it matter that she was a woman after all?

Feeling as if led to Enmyoin by Teijun, the filmmakers go back to Okayama. Reiko's journey to locate Teijun's imprisoned feelings as a female priest and her search for her own meaning of freedom shapes the film "The GateKeeper of Enmyoin." Upon arrival, the filmmakers find in shock that the half of her temple, her living quarters, are demolished. Who destroyed it? They meet Seijun Baba, the heir. Far from their imagination, she was a shy, afraid little creature. How did she end up becoming the heir? While seeking an appropriate approach to Seijun, the filmmaker starts gleaning clues for Teijun's feelings by talking to her sister Tsutsui-san, her close parishioners, her favorite cab driver, granddaughter of Lady Mitsui, and Seijun Baba's grandfather/ a neighboring ally priest. While Teijun's personalities and sense of responsibility as a priest are revealed, the filmmaker also learns that Teijun had rejected several male elite candidates as the heir during her last decade. Then Seijun's mother says that Teijun wanted Seijun since she was an infant. She wanted to adopt and raise her, but Sanpo-in family didn't want to give her. Meanwhile, Teijun's torment for her life is uncovered. For decades, she was severely discriminated and harassed by a powerful priest from a rich neighboring temple.

Searching for the location of female priests (niso), the filmmakers drive to the Mt. Koya, the holy mountain of Shingon Buddhism. They visit the Koya Nun School. They also visit Big Buddha in Nara on the way home, thinking all the way about the Japanese Buddhism, quality of a priest, and what it meant for Teijun to be a niso(female priest).

After the Mt. Koya-Nara trip, the filmmakers stay close to Enmyoin, and to Seijun. She opens up her mind little by little, and finally Reiko and Seijun have a long, private interview session. The filmmaker finds some important clues in her talk about the quality of a niso. Right before they leave the town, the filmmaker looks for a town historian to back up her research. Right there and then, Teijun's enemy priest Kwannon-in appears as a well-respected historian and starts telling his version of Enmyoin history, as "the true story," a terrible story. He tells that it wasn't Teijun who built Enmyoin, but another neighboring priest named Zoken Takagi. He says that there was a dispute between the two and Teijun robbed the rights for Enmyoin. Moreover, he says it is Kwannon-in himself who owns the rights for Enmyoin now.

Broken hearted, the filmmakers come back to Brooklyn. Reiko keeps watching old footage, but just can't find out the truth about Enmyoin history. Who is Zoken Takagi? What really happened between him and Teijun? Then, one day, she realizes that Takagi must have had his own family! She locates and calls his temple Shozoin. An old man's voice picks up the phone, and his name is Zoken Takagi, the very name she was looking for. But he must be long dead. He turns out to be his 72-year-old son, and the current priest. From him, again, Reiko hears depressing stories about the heroin of the film. After hanging up the phone, she realizes that she forgot to ask for a photo of Zoken Takagi Sr. When she calls, the priest's wife picks up the phone, and surprisingly, starts telling a fairy-tale like story of her father-in-law. All the things the filmmakers sew during the trip are reflected on the simple information from the wife. As Reiko's journey to find Teijun's feelings abruptly comes to an end, she starts understanding why Teijun could remain free.

## **CREDIT LIST**

## **CAST:**

Teijun OgawaJushoku (resident priest) of Enmyoin Temple, called Enmyoin-san or Ojussan.

Seijun Baba Current Jushoku of Enmyoin, Teijun's heir

Zoshu Iwasaki Jushoku Emeritus of Kwannon-in, Teijun's enemy, called Kwannon-in in the film Shugen Baba Jushoku Emeritus of Sanpo-in, Teijun's ally, called Sanpo-in or Mr. Baba in the film

Masako Tsutsui Teijun's sister

Yoji Morimoto Teijun's favorite Taxi driver

Yoshiko Baba Seijun's mother

Hanako Yura Lady Mitsui's granddaughter

Shiho Tawara kimono girl #1 from Teijun's childhood

Reiko Tahara as herself/ storyteller in the film, also as voice of Zoken Takagi's wife

Max Uesugi as himself, also as Kwannon-in's voice in animation sequence Moie Uesugi Reiko & Max's daughter, as herself and as Kimono girl #2

Hiroshi Mizuguchi liquor-store owner

Toichi Ozeki Teijun's carpenter friend

Lori Hiris, as herself, the filmmakers' good friend/helper

Yoshiaki Miyamoto Parishioners' Rep

#### Other Parishioners

Sumie Nakadai • Shizue Nakayama • Yasuyo Toma • Mitsue Miyamoto • Hisako Takasashi • Kazuko Yamaguchi • Hiroko Jige • Suzuko Yamaguchi • Nobuyuki Nagisa • Saori Takahashi

Koya Mountain Priest School (Senshu Gakuin) students

Jikou Takeuchi Former Superintendent of Koya Mountain Nun School (Niso Gakuin)

Junkou Sakata Superintendent of Koya Mountain Nun School

Reikou Chiba Assistant Superintendent Koya Mountain Nun School

Koya Mountain Nun School (Niso Gakuin)Students:

Ryosen Miya • Echo Noda • Keimyo Takano • Eiho Umezawa • Zuishin Maeda

Tetsuya Tsuda Jushoku of Daimyo-Oh-in Temple on Koya Mountain

Jitsuryo Kawazoe Steward of Daimyo-Oh-in

Zoken Takagi Jushoku of Shozo-in Temple (voice only)

Yuriko Takagi Zoken Takagi's wife (voice only)

Friends in NY

Eleni Beja • Symon Chow • Billy Gregoriadi • Heather Wood• Bentsi Beberashvili

Nara Big Buddha Tourists

People in Tamano City

## PRODUCTION STAFF

- ★ Reiko Tahara co-director/co-producer, script, editing, camera, animation, fundraising, translation
- ★ Kozo Max Uesugi co-director/co-producer, camera, sound, music, sound design/ post sound mix, translation
- ★ Lori Hiris camera, sound, english consultation (New York Film Festival, Gen Art Film Festival)
- ★ Keiko Deguchi, advising editor (*The Cats of Mirikitani* [Audience Award, Tribecca Film festival, *Fur* [dir. Steven Shainberg starring Nicole Kidman], *In a Dream* [2008 SXSW Audience Award])
- ★ Deirdre Boyle, Documentary Historian, Critic, Professor advisor
- ★ Alan Berliner, Filmmaker, Creator of *Wide Awake* (Sundance, Berlin, HBO) advisor
- ★ Don Quinn Kelley, phD, Historian, Professor advisor
- ★ Jimmy Choi Kam Chuen, Hong Kong Film Art Center, ex-Director advisor
- ★ Barbara Ruch, Professor Emerita of Japanese Literature and Culture, Director of Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, Columbia University consultant
- ★ Eleni Beja editor for publicity
- ★ Deborah Howard english consultation
- ★ Billy Gregoriadis equipment/ technical support
- ★ Bentsi Beberashvili website support
- ★ Symon Chow designer for publicity (poster/postcard design)
- ★ Ninia Baehr fundraising consultation