

<BOOK REVIEWS>Accounts and Images of Six  
Kannon in Japan By Sherry D. Fowler

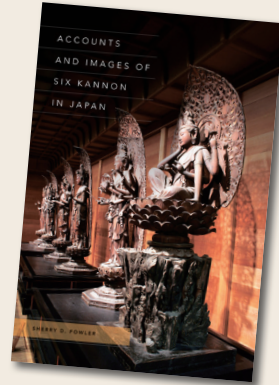
著者	MORRIS Yagi
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BOOK REVIEW

*Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan*

By Sherry D. Fowler

University of Hawai'i Press, 2016  
384 pages.



Reviewed by Yagi MORRIS

*Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan* is a remarkable study of the emergence, growth, and decline of a Japanese Buddhist cult from the Heian (794–1185) to the Edo (1603–1868) periods. The study deals with a specific group of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, but as Sherry Fowler demonstrates in this meticulously researched work, mythological structures and identities are in flux. Hence, it is the tension between the stability and fluidity of the Six Kannon group and the multifarious nature of the cult that surfaces through the pages.

The origins of the six Kannon are found in Chinese sources, most prominently Zhiyi's (538–597) *Mohe zhiguan*, which was the basis of a now lost composition by the Shingon prelate Ono no Ningai (951–1046), central to the cult's propagation in Japan. While the earlier forms of worship of the six Kannon focused on each Kannon individually, Fowler explains that during the Heian period a cult of Six Kannon crystallized in the Japanese context. The efficacy of the group was related primarily to salvation from the Six Paths of transmigration, based on the identification formed in the abovementioned texts of each Kannon with one of the Paths. The fixed patterns of narrative, however, differ from those of ritual, and the study reveals the transmutations that occur as the group adapts to changing cultic circumstances. Not only were there alterations within the group, sometimes one member was worshipped as an embodiment of the group (as in the case of Shō Kannon), while at other times worship of the group stemmed from the function of a single member (as in the case of Batō Kannon and the well-being of animals). Furthermore, the numerical structure of the group, that is its most significant feature, changed over time as it expanded into seven and finally became submerged in that of the Thirty-Three Kannon (following the number of guises Kannon takes in the *Lotus Sutra*). Hence, fluidity in the mythological realm does not imply a loss of identity or structure, but rather a flow between diverse structures, as mythological entities are drawn to certain organizing principles. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the significance of the constituent elements of a myth is produced by metonymy, or appearance in bundles, in which these elements combine among themselves. "If there is a meaning to be found in mythology," he writes, "it cannot reside in the isolated

elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined.<sup>1</sup>

Numbers are an essential component of the organizing structure of Buddhist philosophy, doctrine, visual imagery, and practice, and they also administer certain aspects of the pantheon, as with the Six, Seven, or Thirty-Three Kannon. As Fowler suggests, numbers serve further to grasp hold of the ethereal. However, in the case of Kannon, the multiplication of images also has to do with reward, since making images in increasing numbers, Fowler explains, was perceived as a form of increasing efficacy. At times, several numerical structures appear in a single place, which in turn becomes an intersection of different cults that enhance one another, as in the case of temples enshrining the Six Kannon that belong to a conglomeration of Twenty-Eight (following the number of chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*) or of Thirty-Three. Fowler further reveals that the numerical symbolism of the Six Kannon served as the basis for various doctrinal, spatial, and mythological associations. This is evidenced by the correlation of the Six Kannon with the Six Paths and also by locally formed associations, with the Six Jizō (and other deities of transmigration) or Six Gongen through which the cult diffused in Kyushu.

The association with the Six Gongen further bestowed on the Six Kannon a territorial dimension as they became integrated into local cults and practices. The relations between territory and religious practice have received much scholarly attention in the past several decades due to the rising interest in sacred space and to the growing understanding that Japanese religions in particular should be studied *in situ*.<sup>2</sup> However, we still lack an understanding of the networks through which local cults disseminated. Fowler takes an uncommon geographical approach to visual representation and discloses the hidden routes of the cult's diffusion. Her investigation further proffers a methodological approach to the study of local cults that is inherently regional rather than site-specific. As one follows Fowler on her journey, one gets a sensation of how Buddhist deities actually traveled from one place to another, interacting with local cults and attuning to the changing concerns of worshippers while maintaining their identity and structure.

The structure of the Six Kannon is juxtaposed in this book against changing cultic contexts, following an individual approach to the study of divinities. Yet at times, as the group becomes submerged in a new mythological and ritual context, the context, in the opinion of this reviewer, overrides the significance of the Six Kannon, exposing a weakness in this approach. The preeminence of the context, I sense, is evidenced in the Six-Syllable rites/mandalas developed at Daigoji during the medieval period. Following a classical art historical approach, Fowler discusses variations in the iconography of the Six Kannon in the Tendai and Shingon mandala traditions. She gives less attention to the appearance of the Uṣṇīṣa Buddha Shaka Kinrin at the center of these mandalas, and in the Shingon tradition, also to that of the Wisdom Kings, Fudō Myōō and Daitoku Myōō, which together form a tripartite structure within the mandala. In one exemplar she presents, a fourteenth-century mandala from Chōjuji that was the *honzon* of the Six-syllable rite, the six Kannon are not even present in the mandala. Instead, Shō Kannon (associated in related texts with Dainichi and Ichiji Kinrin) is portrayed at the center of a triad together with the two Wisdom Kings.

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1 Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 210.

2 Grapard 1993.

This iconography displays a proximity to wish-fulfilling jewel rites and to the related pattern of the “joint ritual of the three worthies” (*sanzon gōgyō hō*) that was first developed at Daigoji. I therefore suggest that in the Daigoji context it is the ritual scheme that is the primary structure, whereas the divinities featuring in these rites are almost interchangeable. As Bernard Faure has written, mythological narratives tend to emphasize the individuality of the gods, but in the ritual field equivalence reigns supreme and identities tend to dissolve.<sup>3</sup> Rather than iconographical variations, it would have been interesting to learn how the Six Kannon operated within the broader ritual context of Daigoji and integrated into the medieval mythological web.

And yet the strength of Fowler’s work is exactly in demonstrating the sustainability of the structure of the Six Kannon in their long journey in a rich mythological, ritual, and visual realm up until their final submergence in the Thirty-Three Kannon structure. Fowler has uncovered layer upon layer of story, and reassembled lost fragments, scattered pieces, and a very broad range of textual and visual materials to reconstruct beautifully a comprehensive history of the Six Kannon cult. In her excavation, she seems to have left no stone unturned. *Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan* is a definitive study and an important contribution to our understanding of Japanese religiosity.

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<sup>3</sup> Faure 2015, p. 24.