

Researching Benzaiten

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My research on the goddess Benzaiten 辯才天 originated with my first visit to Japan in 1991. I had just completed an M.A. in Hinduism, and wished, above all, to visit the city of Kyoto, reputed to have two thousand temples and shrines. I was fascinated by numerous aspects of Japanese religion, art, and culture, and particularly intrigued by the presence and metamorphoses of originally Hindu deities in Japanese temples, shrines, and museums. As this experience led to deeper study and successive visits, my broadening horizons eventually compelled me to write a dissertation on the trajectory of a Hindu goddess from India to Japan: from Sarasvatī, as she is known in India, to Benzaiten.¹ Through a study of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese textual sources, artistic representations, inscriptions, and historical records, I set about documenting her conceptual and iconographic development. My large-scale project, by virtue of its enormous scope, did not finish with the dissertation, and I am currently working on the combined form of the Japanese Uga-Benzaiten 宇賀辯才天, on whose head appears a coiled white snake with the face of a bearded old man, the *kami* Ugajin 宇賀神.

Both the subject of my study and my interdisciplinary approach have arisen from and been shaped by the gradual development of my various research interests, some derived from reading, but many from direct encounter. For me, first-hand experience, particularly in Japan, often preceded reading. Therefore, I will begin with a brief outline of the development of my interests, then introduce the subject of my research, Sarasvatī/Benzaiten, and finally discuss some of the advantages I have experienced in being a resident-scholar in Japan.

¹ Ludvik 2001.

1. Unfolding Research Interests

I was initially interested in Indian philosophy, in the study of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which led me to learn Sanskrit, so that I could read these and other texts, as well as their commentaries. The wonderful framework stories around these works then launched my interest in Hindu mythology. At the University of Toronto I completed a B.A. in Asian Religions, a program with rather extensive language requirements, in my case Sanskrit and Hindī (Modern and Classical). Given my interest in the study of texts, training under linguists was of vital importance. My M.A. thesis consisted in a textual study of the representation of the monkey god Hanumān in the third century B.C.E. Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, attributed to Vālmīki, and Tulasī Dāsa's Classical Hindī *Rāmācaritamānasa* of ca. 1575.² My first visit to Japan, which then followed, opened up to me the world of art history, particularly of Buddhist sculpture and painting, not to mention architecture. In addition to my attempts at learning more about the originally Hindu deities in Japanese Buddhist art, I began to take art history courses and eventually also Japanese language. My dissertation on the trajectory of Sarasvatī from India to Japan, as a consequence, reflected my now pan-Asian research interests, as well as an expansion in my approach: I studied not only written sources, but also images. Stretching across Asia likewise involved a considerable amplification in the types of texts and the languages I read: I studied Hindu scriptures (Vedic, epic, and Puranic), Buddhist sutras in Sanskrit and in Chinese translations, as well as Japanese Buddhist apocryphal works. My plunge into Buddhist texts and their renditions into other languages, in turn, awakened my interest in translation processes.³ In terms of images, I examined Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist forms of Sarasvatī, Chinese representations of Biancaitian (her Chinese name), and Japanese depictions of Benzaiten.

I moved to Japan in 1996, when I was awarded a Monbushō (Japanese Government Ministry of Education) Scholarship to study in the art

² See Ludvik 1994, the subsequently published version of the thesis.

³ See Ludvik 2004, 2006a.

history department of Kobe University for two years. I then became a researcher at the Italian School of East Asian Studies in Kyoto, where I spent a few years surrounded by Sinologists. Throughout these profitable years of research, I continued gathering photos of Benzaiten, travelling to countless sacred sites in Japan, and attending religious ceremonies. I became particularly interested in certain Indian-derived rituals, like the *goma* fire ceremony and the *yokushu* 浴酒 (sake-bath) ritual dedicated to Benzaiten, especially as performed on Mt. Hiei, headquarters of the Tendai school of Buddhism located northeast of Kyoto. I was fascinated not only by the performance of rituals, but also by the individuals who attended them: the involvement of lay people, their interaction with the clergy, and popular worship, which led to a research project on a lay confraternity.⁴ My interests in rituals on the one hand, and common faith on the other, have now become a part of my current project on Uga-Benzaiten, which draws on scriptural sources, art historical representations, and fieldwork focused on religious ceremonies and popular worship.

In sum, following upon my original specialization in Hinduism via textual studies, my research interests, including art history, the metamorphoses of originally Hindu deities in East Asia, ritual, popular faith, and lay confraternities, have arisen in Japan, initially through visits and then by living in the country. My Indian foundations, on the other hand, form a background against which much of my Japan research is set.

2. From Sarasvatī to Benzaiten

Sarasvatī was originally a river, flowing from the Himalayas, through the eastern Punjab, into the sea. At a time that cannot be precisely determined, tectonic movements caused widespread changes in the configuration of the river channels in the area, and the Sarasvatī largely disappeared. In popular belief she flows underground and meets the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā rivers at the sacred confluence of Trivenī in Allahabad.

The deified river Sarasvatī is invoked in the ca. 1200 B.C.E. hymns

⁴ Ludvik 2005b, 2006b, 2006c.

of the *Rg Veda*, the most ancient of the Hindu scriptures. The river is described as huge, powerful, uncontrollable, excelling all others in her might. She roars with energy, bellows like a cow, and ragingly snorts like a boar, breaking mountain ridges with her strong waves. In her fast-flowing waters, her worshippers perceived a symbol of inexhaustible strength and abundance, of wealth in the widest sense, in which they sought to share. They called on her in a fearful kind of devotion, as if trying to appease an all-too powerful mother-figure. They asked for prosperity, food, wealth, progeny, fame, pleasure, and, very importantly, for inspiration to compose hymns. In a circular kind of process, the goddess granted inspired thought, the poet then used it to compose hymns, and, with speech as the verbalized form of inspired thought, again invoked the goddess. Her devotees also prayed to Sarasvatī for protection against enemies, for which her invincible power, strength, and wildness were most aptly suited. She was emphatically described as destroying enemies and slaying strangers, as a metal rampart or an unconquerable stronghold.

In Vedic literature, the river goddess Sarasvatī is gradually transformed into the goddess of speech Vāc. Her association with inspired thought in the *Rg Veda* consists in the first step toward this transformation, for it implicitly connects Sarasvatī with speech as the verbalized form of inspired thought. This implied link is made explicit in the subsequent Vedas, where Sarasvatī is either closely connected with speech or identified with it. Her transformation into the goddess of speech is completed in the Brāhmaṇas, ritual texts from ca. 900-600 B.C.E., where Sarasvatī's identity with Vāc is repeatedly asserted and integrated with her river aspect: when Sarasvatī's waters are used for consecration, the individual is thereby said to be sprinkled with speech. Sarasvatī, as Vāc, thus gives created beings the power of speech, and hence the faculty of speech of the dying goes back to her. One who is unable to express himself properly offers a ewe to Sarasvatī, for she is Vāc, and she gives him speech so he is able to give proper utterance to his thoughts.

Vāc, however, is not merely speech. It is that which is embodied in and communicated through speech: knowledge. Thus Vāc is called the mother of the Vedas and identified as the Vedas themselves. She is all forms of knowledge, for all that is to be known is known through speech,

and Vāc is Sarasvatī.

Sarasvatī's association with music likewise comes to her from Vāc, who in the Brāhmaṇas is connected with music, and specifically with the *vīṇā*.⁵ Sarasvatī, who is Vāc, subsequently becomes also goddess of music and is depicted playing the *vīṇā*, her dominant attribute in so many of her images. She is most commonly represented with four arms, two playing the *vīṇā*, one carrying a manuscript identifying her as goddess of knowledge, and another holding a rosary. Her mount is a goose (*haṃsa*), like that of her spouse, the creator god Brahmā (Jp. Bonten 梵天). She is, however, also depicted with a peacock (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Modern Print of Four-armed Sarasvatī.

It is as goddess of knowledge and eloquence that she is worshipped among Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists alike. In fact, the earliest extant image of Sarasvatī is a third-century Jain sculpture from Kaṅkālī Ṭīlā near Mathurā, where the goddess is represented holding a manuscript and a rosary.⁶ Amongst Buddhist sutras, Sarasvatī appears most prominently in the enormously diffused and influential *Sutra of Golden Light* (*Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra*), a text for the protection of the state. In a chapter under her name, she bestows the qualities of eloquence and memory on the expounder of this text. The *Sutra of Golden Light* was translated into numerous languages, including Chinese, Tibetan, Uighur, Mongol, and Khotanese, and through its Chinese translations, where Sarasvatī is

⁵ The term *vīṇā* refers to different types of harps, lutes, and zithers. The ancient *kacchapī* (lute with pear-shaped body) and the *Sarasvatī vīṇā* (large, long-necked plucked lute) are associated with Sarasvatī.

⁶ This mottled red sandstone sculpture measuring 57 cm in height is kept at the State Museum of Lucknow in India. See Pal 1994, Plate 55.

known as Eloquence Deity (Biantian 辯天 or Biancaitian 辯才天), was introduced to Japan in the seventh and in the eighth century.

The Taishō edition of the Buddhist Canon includes three Chinese translations of the sutra, corresponding to differing Sanskrit originals and revealing gradual expansions on the Sarasvatī chapter:

- a. Dharmakṣema (Tanwuchen 曇無讖, 385-433 or 436) translation: *Jingguangming jing* 金光明經 (T. vol.16, no. 663), appeared in 417. This translation is based on an earlier Sanskrit version of the sutra than the extant version edited by Johannes Nobel in 1937.
- b. Baogui 寶貴 edition: *Hebu Jingguangming jing* 合部金光明經 (T. vol.16, no. 664), edited by Baogui in 597. The Sarasvatī chapter (Da Biantian pin 大辯天品) consists of a reproduction of Dharmakṣema's translation (a. above), with a small number of minor differences, followed by the translation of Yaśogupta (Yeshejueduo 耶舍崛多; d.u.) and Jñānagupta (Shenajueduo 闍那崛多; 523-600) made between 561-578. The chapter as it stands in Baogui's edition corresponds more closely to the extant Sanskrit than Yijing's considerably more elaborate version.
- c. Yijing 義淨 (635-713) translation: *Jingguangming zuishengwang jing* 金光明最勝王經 (T. vol.16, no. 665), completed in 703.⁷

In Dharmakṣema's rendering, the Great Eloquence Deity 大辯天, in consistency with her Chinese name, assures that she will endow the expounder of the Dharma with eloquence and memory, and his audience with wisdom, merit, understanding, and the highest perfect awakening. This is entirely in line with Sarasvatī's Vedic background, where her association with speech leads to her identity as goddess of knowledge. There is no description of the goddess's form in Dharmakṣema's translation.

The two other Chinese renditions and the extant Sanskrit⁸ represent

⁷ Translated into German by Nobel (1958).

⁸ My study of the sutra is limited to the Sanskrit and Chinese versions.

more developed versions of the Sarasvatī chapter, which now consists of three clearly definable parts: in the first part, corresponding to Dharmakṣema's text, Sarasvatī functions as goddess of eloquence; in the second part, she teaches a herbal bath; and in the third part, the Brahman Kauṇḍinya recites her praises. It is in Kauṇḍinya's praises that the goddess suddenly appears in her eight-armed form. The implements she carries are listed only in Yijing, whose text represents the longest version of the Sarasvatī chapter amongst the Chinese translations and the extant Sanskrit:

猶如師子獸中上 常以八臂自莊嚴
各持弓箭刀稍斧 長杵鐵輪并繩索

Indeed she is superior like the lion among beasts,
Always self-adorned with eight arms
Each holding bow, arrow, sword, long-handled spear, axe
Long vajra, iron wheel, and lasso.⁹

Yijing's version also includes amidst Kauṇḍinya's praises a hymn from the fourth-century *Harivaṃśa*. The hymn in the *Harivaṃśa*, however, is dedicated to an entirely different goddess, Nidrā-Vindhyavāsīnī, who is called on to participate in the birth story of the god Kṛṣṇa and who, in conjunction with the demon-slaying goddess Mahiṣāsūramardīnī (slayer of the demon Mahiṣa), with whom Vindhyavāsīnī is identified, will evolve into the Warrior Goddess popularly called Durgā.¹⁰ The eight-armed, weapon-bearing form of Yijing's Biancaitian, I have argued, is derived from Vindhyavāsīnī's eight-armed, weapon-wielding form and modelled on images of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, many of which also have eight arms (Figure 2) and are found as far as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Indonesia.¹¹ Under the influence of the growing Warrior Goddess cult, Vindhyavāsīnī and her associates appeared in the Sarasvatī

⁹ T. vol. 16, no. 665, p. 437c1-2.

¹⁰ On the evolution of the Warrior Goddess, see Yokochi 2004. For a study of this hymn in its Sanskrit and Chinese versions, see Ludvik 2004 and 2006a.

¹¹ See Ludvik 2007 (forthcoming).



Fig. 2. Eight-armed Mahiṣāsura-mardinī from the Rāvaṇa Phadi Cave (antechamber, right wall) in Aihole, Karnataka. Sixth century. Sandstone. (Photo courtesy of Prof. Koezuka Takashi 肥塚隆)

chapter of the Buddhist *Sutra of Golden Light*, and provided Sarasvatī with the model for a form more appropriate to her function as a defender of the Dharma in a sutra for the protection of the state.

Chinese and Japanese images of the Eloquence Deity were then produced on the basis of Yijing's description. In China, there are very few surviving representations of Biancaitian. An eight-armed form of the goddess appears in a small tenth-century Chinese painting on paper (27×43 cm) from Dunhuang conserved at the Musée Guimet in Paris (Pelliot Collection).¹² The painting depicts the Buddha Śākyamuni (Shijia 釈迦) preaching amidst divinities of the *Sutra of Golden Light*: Vaiśravaṇa (Pishamentian 毘沙門天)

on the earth goddess with two attendants stands to the Buddha's right, while Biancaitian and presumably Śrī-Lakṣmī (Jixiangtian 吉祥天) are to his left. Biancaitian appears in this painting with three heads and eight arms carrying weapons corresponding largely to Yijing's description. There is also a ninth-to tenth-century ink sketch (H. 29.7 cm × W. 43 cm) of the eight-armed goddess from Dunhuang preserved at the British Museum (Stein Collection).¹³ Biancaitian is likewise depicted here with three heads and carrying weapons corresponding in large part to Yijing. The source or inspiration for the three heads is yet to be established.

In Japan, on the other hand, images of eight-armed Benzaiten

¹² Nicolas-Vandier 1974, vol. 14, p. 18. Explanations of this painting appear in Nicolas-Vandier 1974, vol. 14, plate 8, pp. 18-19 and in Jarrige and Akiyama 1994-1995, vol. 2, pp. 328-329.

¹³ Whitfield 1982, fig. 89(a),(c).

abound (Figure. 3), and the earliest one in fact predates the few Chinese surviving examples. The oldest extant Japanese representation is an eighth-century, large (H. 219 cm) clay sculpture preserved in the Hokkedō 法華堂 of Tōdaiji 東大寺 in Nara.¹⁴ The implements the goddess carried, however, have been lost. Furthermore, a beautiful example of the eight-armed goddess is painted on the back wall of a miniature shrine (*zushie* 厨子絵) for a sculpture of Śrī-Lakṣmī (Kichijōten 吉祥天) from Jōruriji 浄瑠璃寺 near Nara.¹⁵ Both the statue and its shrine date from ca. 1212. While the sculpture remains at the temple, her shrine was removed in the Meiji period (1868-1912) and is now in the possession of the Tokyo National University



Fig. 3. Modern Eight-armed Uga-Benzaiten Metal Sculpture at Jigenji 慈眼寺, Tokushima. (Photo by author)

of Fine Arts and Music (Tōkyō Geijutsu Daigaku 東京藝術大学). Eight-armed Benzaiten appears in the center of the *zushie* (painted wood; 103.5 × 62.7 cm) surrounded by Mother Hārītī (Kariteimo 可梨帝母) on her bottom right, the earth deity Dṛḍhā Pṛthivī (Kenrōchijin 堅牢地神) on her bottom left, and two great generals (*taishō* 大將) known as Sañci (Shōryōchi 正了知) and Mañibhadra (Hōken 寶賢) above. In this painting we have a perfect match with Yijing's description, for Benzaiten holds the implements specified in the text: the arrow, the sword, the axe, and the iron wheel in her right arms, and the bow, the vajra, the particularly long-handled spear, and the lasso in her left. She and all the figures surrounding her on the back wall of the shrine, those depicted on the other walls and doors, including Brahmā (Bonten 梵天), Indra (Taishakuten 帝釈天), and the Four Deva Kings (Shitennō 四天王), as well as the Śrī

¹⁴ Nedachi 1992, fig. 135.

¹⁵ Nedachi 1992, figs. 19, 139.



Fig. 4. Modern Two-armed, Biwa-playing Benzaiten Stone Sculpture at Konsenji 金泉寺, Tokushima. (Photo by author)

sculpture are defenders of the Dharma in the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

Besides the eight-armed representation of the goddess based on Yijing's translation of the sutra, through Shingon texts and mandalas a two-armed lute (biwa)-playing form (Figure 4) analogous to the *vīṇā*-playing Sarasvatī was introduced to Japan. This form, also called Miaoyintian (Jp. Myōonten) 妙音天, "Deity of Wonderful Sounds," is based on her depiction in the Womb World Mandala (*Garbhadhātu maṇḍala*; *Taizangjie mantuluo* 胎藏界曼荼羅) brought back from China by Kūkai 空海 (774-835) at the beginning of the ninth century.¹⁶ The Womb World Mandala is based on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, which was

translated into Chinese in the first half of the eighth century by Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637-735) and Yixing 一行 (683-727) under the title *Da Piluzhena chengfo shenbian jiachi jing* 大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經, better known as the *Dari jing* 大日經 (T. vol. 18, no. 848). Yixing also wrote an important commentary on the sutra entitled *Da Piluzhena chengfo shenbian jiachi jing shu* 大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經疏, but also called *Dari jing shu* 大日經疏 (T. vol. 39, no. 1796). In Japan, Myōonten has been worshipped as a deity of music, and the production of her images in significant numbers dates from the Kamakura period (1185-1333) onwards.¹⁷

By the thirteenth century, eight-armed Benzaiten had been turned into Uga-Benzaiten, characterized, as noted above, by the appearance, on Benzaiten's head, of Ugajin, an ancient *kami* of grain with the face of

¹⁶ Nedachi 1992, fig. 125.

¹⁷ Nedachi 1992, figs. 155-164.

a bearded old man and the body of a white snake, often with a *torii* 鳥居 in front of him (Figure 3). The textual basis for the form of Uga-Benzaiten is the first of a set of three apocryphal texts popularly known as the *Benten sanbukyō* 辯天三部經 (Three Sutras of Benten) composed sometime in the late medieval period:

1. *Bussetsu saishōgokoku Ugaya tontoku nyōihōju daranikyō* 仏説最勝護国宇賀耶頓得如意宝珠陀羅尼經 (Dhāraṇī Sutra of the Buddha's Teaching for the Greatest Protection of the Country by Ugaya's Sudden Attainment Wish-fulfilling Jewel);
2. *Bussetsu sokushin hin den fukutoku enman Uga shinshō bosatsu byakuja jigen sannichi jōjūkyō* 仏説即身貧軫福德円満宇賀神将菩薩白蛇示現三日成就經 (Sutra of the Buddha's Teaching for Changing Poverty into Complete Good Fortune While Still Alive by the Manifestation of the Divine General and Bodhisattva Uga as a White Snake in the Three-day Accomplishment);
3. *Bussetsu Ugajinnō fukutoku enman daranikyō* 仏説宇賀神王福德円満陀羅尼經 (Dhāraṇī Sutra of the Buddha's Teaching for [Attaining] Complete Good Fortune through King Ugajin).¹⁸

In these texts, Ugajin and Benzaiten are identified. Benzaiten, who is Ugajin, is described as eight-armed, carrying spear, jewel wheel, jewel bow, and wish-fulfilling jewel in her left arms (from the top), and sword, stick, key, and jewel arrow in her right.¹⁹ While all these implements do in fact appear in numerous Uga-Benzaiten images, they are not usually placed in the specific arms stipulated by the text.²⁰ Yijing's axe, vajra,

¹⁸ See Yamamoto 1998, pp. 475-482, who collates and reprints the three texts as appearing in the *Ugakyō* 宇賀經 (Uga Texts) and the *Benzaiten sanbukyō ryakuso* 弁才天三部經略疏 (Brief Commentary on the Three Sutras of Benzaiten) of the Mt. Hiei Library (Eizan Bunko 叡山文庫).

¹⁹ Text 1: 有八臂左第一鉞第二輪宝第三宝弓第四宝珠右第一劍第二棒第三鑰第四宝箭 (Yamamoto 1998, p. 476, line 8. I do not include here the text marks in Yamamoto).

and lasso have been replaced here with the stick, wish-fulfilling jewel, and key. The wish-fulfilling jewel and the key to the treasure house indicate that Benzaiten is worshipped as a deity of wealth (*zaihōjin* 財宝神), as a result of her identification with Ugajin. The vision of his very form, the second of these apocryphal texts tells us, immediately makes a person “fortunate,” i.e., wealthy.²¹ The first sutra of the *Benten sanbukyō* also mentions fifteen boys (*dōji* 童子), listing each of their names, as attendants to Ugajin.²² Representations of Uga-Benzaiten accompanied by these fifteen boys (*Benten jūgo dōji* 辯天十五童子) appeared in both sculptural and especially pictorial representations from the late Kamakura period onwards.

Benzaiten’s association with wealth, via her identification with Ugajin, then led to her inclusion into the group of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (*Shichifukujin* 七福神), amongst whom, however, she is usually represented in her two-armed biwa-playing form (Figure 5). To emphasize her good fortune aspect, during the Edo period (1615-1868) the middle character for her name (*sai* 才) came increasingly to be written with the character for wealth (*zai* 財). Her connection with money is particularly evident today at the Zeniarai *Benten* 錢洗辯天 (Money-washing *Benten*) shrine of Kamakura (Figure 6), where people wash their coins and even bills in a stream running through a cave, for, the shrine claims, the amount of money washed will become multifold.

Maintaining Sarasvatī’s original connection with water, the major sites of worship of Benzaiten in Japan are the islands of Enoshima 江ノ島 near Kamakura, Chikubushima 竹生島 on Lake Biwa, and Itsukushima 厳島 (*Miyajima* 宮島) near Hiroshima, known as the “Three Great *Benten*” (*San dai Benten* 三大弁天). To these are also added two sites to form the “Five Great *Benten*” (*Go dai Benten* 五大弁天), Tenkawa 天川 near the river Tenkawa in southern Nara prefecture and Kinkazan 金華山

²⁰ For a comparison of Uga-Benzaiten images with the textual prescriptions of Text 1 of the Three Sutras of *Benten*, see Ludvik 1999. An iconographic study of Uga-Benzaiten representations also appears in Nedachi 1992, pp. 67-73.

²¹ Text 2: 見我色像現形者須臾之間成福人決定無疑 (Yamamoto 1998, p. 479, lines 9-10).

²² Yamamoto 1998, pp. 476-478.

on an island not far from Sendai. By the fourteenth century Benzaiten was already worshipped at all of these sites, as well as others. Today countless small shrines to the goddess are found all over Japan, usually located on artificial ponds (Figure 7) and on lakes, which often bear her name: *Benten-ike* 弁天池 (Benten pond).

As a testament to her continuing appeal, an 18.5-meter, fifteen-ton wood sculpture of Benzaiten was completed in the year 2000. This image, the largest extant representation of the goddess, is enshrined in Saifukuji 最福寺, the “temple of ultimate fortune,” just outside of Kagoshima city in southern Kyushu. Her figure is seated, holding an eight-meter sword in her right hand and a jewel in her left (Figure 8). On her head appears a *torii*, behind which sits a three-meter snake-bodied, human-headed Ugajin.²³ This two-armed representation, encountered also elsewhere, suggests an abbreviated form of the eight-armed Uga-Benzaiten. It is on the creation of this combined form of Benzaiten with Ugajin, its successive developments, as well as its contemporary worship, that my current research is focused.

3. Living in Japan

Living in Japan provides great advantages for certain aspects of my research and constitutes a basic necessity for others. Some of the principal benefits are direct exposure, increase in opportunities to see images/



Fig. 5. Modern Set of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (Shichifukujin) at Ryūkōji 龍光寺, Ehime. (Photo by author)



Fig. 6. Zeniarai Benten 銭洗弁天 Shrine, Kamakura. (Photo by author)

²³ On Saifukuji’s great Benzaiten, see Ludvik 2005a, p. 29.



Fig. 7. Daigoji 醍醐寺 Bentendō, Kyoto.
(Photo by author)

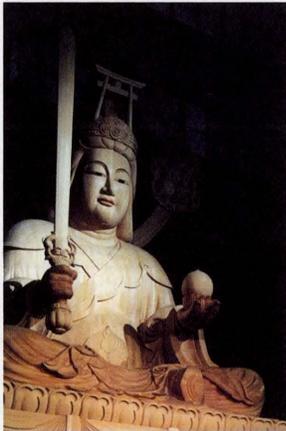


Fig. 8. Saifukuji's 最福寺 Great Benzaiten, Kagoshima. (Photo courtesy of Rev. Ikeguchi Ekan 池口恵観 of Saifukuji)

rituals/festivals and to meet people, and the luxury of time.

Written sources, if only available in Japan, can be acquired on a visit; images that are known to be extant might also be seen on a research trip; short-term stays may likewise be planned around ritual/festival times. Long-term stay or residence, on the other hand, al-

lows extensive and repeated first-hand exposure to images, rituals, and festivals, giving one the opportunity to notice not only additional features, but also changes in performance and attendance. There is, quite simply, more time and opportunity to document, to acquire supplementary and more detailed information, to compare, to check and re-check. There are, furthermore, unpublished images that are not known to exist and rituals/festivals of which only local people may be aware.

Naturally, one is far more likely to come across such images/rituals/festivals if living in Japan. Long-term exposure, moreover, continuously reinforces the context

and the function of the image in this context, whether it be in daily ritual, popular worship, or at a festival. A religious ceremony conducted by a priest(s) and attended by devotees focuses on a deity believed to be embodied in an image, let us say Benzaiten in a temple hall on Mt. Hiei, and is accompanied, in this case, by mantra- and sutra-recitation, use of ritual implements, offerings, hand and body gestures, and so on. All of these different aspects work as a unit: the text(s), the image, clergy, lay worshippers, and the ritual performance that brings them all together. Direct exposure to even one of these aspects in context necessarily

makes one aware of all of the others, and this awareness is reinforced through repeated encounter and experience: the more you look, the more you notice. And the more you notice, the more you ask. Opportunities to consult, or simply to converse with people, abound. Besides the different types of specialists, including scholars in a variety of fields, sculptors and painters of religious images, temple/shrine carpenters, priests, and so on, one can also turn to lay confraternity leaders and other members, employees, and lay worshippers in general. This brings us to a subject of paramount importance: human relations.

The cultivation of human relations often requires quite some time. Not all priests may be willing to show their images, treasured objects, or written records, or to provide information on the rituals they perform. It is, therefore, a considerable advantage to have the opportunity to go back, again and again, until a level of trust and respect has been established. For interviews with worshippers, such as in the case of my work on lay confraternities, one meeting is never sufficient. Not only do interviewees need to feel comfortable enough to speak, but multiple meetings tend to jog further memories and yield additional information. Recollections, stories, and even apparently straightforward factual information also need to be checked and re-checked for accuracy, difference of opinion/memory, and possible problems between different members. Misinformation, in such cases, can be remarkably revealing in terms of people's attitudes and beliefs. But all this takes a great deal of time and patience. Interviews, furthermore, are not sufficient: participation in the confraternity's activities, where possible, is likewise essential. In this type of research, direct exposure, occasions to talk to people and take part in their events, and ample time to do so are not simply advantages, but requirements for responsible scholarship.

As someone living in Japan, therefore, I have the opportunity to contribute to the field of the study of religion through extensive and repeated first-hand exposure to images, rituals, and festivals, and also as a result of long-term regular contacts with clergy, worshippers, and others. In conjunction with the study of written sources, my research on Benzaiten is set against the background of the development of the goddess on a pan-Asian scale, and examines her significance in religious milieus of successive historical periods, as well as in the contemporary religious

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context of Japan.

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