

*Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan*, by Sherry Fowler. University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. xx + 411pp., 27 colour plates. Hb. \$70 (£74.50). ISBN-13: 9780-824856229.

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This is a fine piece of multi-layered scholarship, presented in a very well produced book from the University of Hawai'i Press. It is the mature product of Sherry Fowler's interest in Kannon's iconography that began with her first graduate work in the 1980s, and of her pioneering doctoral work in unravelling the complexities of the temple Murōji in the countryside to the south of Nara (UCLA 1994). *Accounts and Images* is remarkable for the way in which the author builds a multi-faceted picture of the cult surrounding a group of six forms of Avalokiteśvara (Jap. Kannon 観音).

This study spans such works as exquisite thirteenth-century sculptures by Jōkei, art-historical analysis of major examples of the Six Kannon such as those at Daihōonji, and mass-printed pamphlets, both pre-modern and contemporary. Fowler also picked her way through jumbles of stone on off-beat tracks, such as one that leads to a mortuary monument that she calls the Hora Head and that – directed by amateur bloggers – she found on Mt. Wakakusa (Nara). This is the head of a Buddha (probably Amitābha/Amida 阿弥陀) on top of a hexagonal column, each side of which has one of the Six Kannon sculpted on it. She has carried over advances in method that were gaining momentum around the time of her doctoral dissertation, weaving them into this inter-disciplinary approach to materials that might otherwise be studied only as beautiful works of art in picturesque old temples. The use of more prosaic materials such as travelogues from the seventeenth century, when travel for commoners became more popular (as she did in her work on the Murōji kondō in 2000<sup>1</sup>), reminds us that this broader approach to one's sources can help break down long-ingrained perceptions of these cults as belonging to 'higher' or 'lower' cultural phenomena or social classes.

Her inclusion of stone objects highlights some still-persistent problems created by early and mid-Meiji re-configurations of Japanese cultural artefacts, brought about by the introduction to Japan of modern Western approaches to codifying and preserving objects as museum pieces or works of art. Fowler's approaches enable a different set of questions: about the motives of the people who produced these objects, about the social context of their production, about the spatial imaginings of the worshippers and, leading on from this, the patterns of authority, power and institutions in whose networks those motives and actions are enmeshed. Fowler does not allow us to forget that ritual enactments are a fundamental part of these objects' existence. These objects were nothing if they were not vivified through ritual, i.e. they were not conceived as 'works of art' but as means to ensure specific

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1. 'Shifting Identities in Buddhist Sculpture: Who's Who in the Murōji Kondō'. *Archives of Asian Art* 52 (2000–2001): 83–104.

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ends. This is the key to understanding the continuum of these objects, historically, socially and politically.

Building on an orthodox art-historical analysis, her treatment of the records hewn into stone brings the focus onto the need to record that for posterity. The stone monuments say much about people's desire to have a token of the transitory act persist indefinitely. Recording the details of the rituals that were integral to the production of these images was doubtless also part of the wish for permanence in an uncertain world, just as the choice of stone was part of a hope to transcend the vicissitudes of their times (cf. the rock-cut Tang Buddhist canon in Fang Shan, near Beijing). One example of this is the object that Fowler chose as the centrepiece of her Epilogue, the above-mentioned Hora Head, which commemorates a certain Kakuhen Mokujiki. The Head is one of those many bits and bobs that are strewn along the barely beaten paths just off temples and other ancient sites (in this case the monumental tourist nightmare that is Tōdaiji). *Mokujiki* 木食 is abstention from meat and the five grains, a non-canonical practice that originated in Daoism (*Mikkyō daijiten*, s.v. *mokujiki*) and aims at attaining immortality. In Buddhist guise this became the aspiration for becoming awakened in this very body (*sokushinjōbutsu* 即身成仏) through self-mummification (*miira butsu* ミイラム). *Mokujiki* here would thus be an epithet for Kakuhen and rather than referring to reverence for the 'natural environment' (p. 272), its aim would have been to produce an abiding physical token of this monk's having overcome the vicissitudes of impermanence, to which the 'natural environment' of modern parlance is also subject. Self-mummification was notoriously difficult to achieve and perhaps this humble stone monument succeeded where Kakuhen did not.

Like all good books, this one leaves questions that suggest further studies to be written. Fowler intimates at least three areas in her excellent Epilogue. I have already looked at some of her ideas on the ritual roles of objects: to this we can add religious geography and the relationships between text and image (more accurately, script and artefact). Implicit in all the themes that Fowler identifies, is the question of the patterns of institutional (including political) authority and patronage. She mentions frequently that the worship of Kannon in its various forms spanned – indeed still spans – different levels of society, from the aristocratic to the popular. This raises many puzzles, not least the mechanisms of how similar, if not identical, beliefs and practices were adopted and developed across the social divides. Finding similarities of worship in different sectors of a stratified society must imply the workings of power and authority and reactions to those workings.

Historically, some of the most striking examples of Six Kannon images were housed in *kokubunji* 国分寺 (Buddhist temples that were instituted nation-wide by sovereign decree in 741 and whose function had a ritual core). Fowler's analysis of the history of Six Kannon at the *kokubunji* of Ōsumi in Kagoshima Prefecture, in the context of her wide-ranging treatment of the cult in Kyūshū (chapter two), points to the integration of those beliefs and practices into territorial concerns in the body politic and hence forces us to think also in spatial terms. The Six Kannon cult is remarkable for the way in which its structure and themes are replicated at a

number of different sites and forms, not just the official *kokubunji* but throughout the social and political spectrum. Fowler has plotted various sites in Kyūshū but further systematic mapping of these sites with reference to their locale, the people or institutions associated with them, and their relation (if any) to other sites, would add another piece to the already substantial literature on the religious geography of the country. At present, many questions remain as to the precise way in which the normative syntax of authority manifested itself, also in contrast to the praxis of those on the ground who may not have cared too much about those norms.

Institutional authorities have always imposed taxonomies on the attribution of particular characteristics and powers to particular figures (here, of course, Amida and Kannon) in the metaphysical world over which they also claimed authority. Perhaps the core of Fowler's achievement in this study is that she has used a carefully crafted art-historical thesis about the development of various forms of Kannon worship to demonstrate that the Six Kannon cult is not some arbitrary arithmetical permutation of Buddhist worship, but that it was woven into a nexus of social, religious and political practices and beliefs. The *Butsuzō zui* 佛像図彙 (1690), treated extensively in chapter six, is one telling example of how institutionally codified systems became widely available, then to be adopted and adapted in many ways, sometimes creative (e.g. *Hokusai manga*), sometimes subversive, but never entirely haphazardly precisely because of supra-regional systematization. We should also recall that the *Butsuzō zui* played a part in shaping the first Western studies of Japanese Buddhist iconography, including decisions about which objects might be worthy of collection or display in museums.

There is by now quite an amount of scholarship on the relations between text and image, and there is much that needs to be worked through in this area. W. J. T. Mitchell's work,<sup>2</sup> rooted in literary studies and extended into the field of ideology, is important but not always relevant in debates that incorporate the esoteric developments of *siddham* 悉曇 script in Japan as graphic referents to a particular understanding of truth assertions. Also, 'text' can refer to quite a range of sources, from discursive explanations to inscriptions to *bonji* 文字 shorthand ('condensed text', perhaps?). Fowler's extensive treatment of the six-syllable ritual mandala in chapter four, with fine examples of the complexity of this issue, highlights the elements of this intriguing complex: a full treatment that does justice to the relations between discourse, script, grapheme and icon in Japanese Buddhism would be another full-length study that *Accounts and Images* suggests.

In all, Sherry Fowler has written a fascinating account of Six Kannon worship, which can be enjoyed on a number of levels, and has furnished us with solid grounds to build on her meditations.

2. E.g. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987.