

Sherry D. Fowler. *Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016. 440 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-5622-9.

Reviewed by Carolyn Wargula

Published on H-Japan (July, 2019)

Commissioned by Martha Chaiklin

Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan is a much-needed study on Japanese Six Kannon imagery. In this book, Sherry Fowler provides insightful analysis of many Six Kannon icons created from the eleventh to the nineteenth century, focusing not only on exquisite models of craftsmanship such as the life-size Daihōonji Six Kannon wooden images, but also stone sculptures obscured and forgotten in remote locations. Fowler reconstructs the development and magnitude of the Six Kannon cult and its later transformation into the still-popular Thirty-Three Kannon cult to explore how it impacted Buddhist practices at large. She sets up the argument that devotion to Six Kannon was not just for assistance from the Six Paths of Transmigration, but also for worldly benefits of safe childbirth and well-being. This book aligns with a growing body of scholarship dedicated to cult images, such as Hank Glassman's study on the images of the bodhisattva Jizō in *The Face of Jizō* (2012), and fills a large gap in English literature on the role of Kannon in pre-modern Japan.

One of the greatest strengths of the book lies in its analysis of a rich diversity of Six Kannon imagery. This study is replete with works traditionally marginalized in mainstream Japanese art history: incomplete sets of Six Kannon images, stone sculptures from remote sites, Buddhist paintings

formerly deemed stylistically degenerative, and even unlikely objects such as bronze sutra containers and large bronze bells. Fowler successfully incorporates a diachronic approach to examine the changing religious functions of these Six Kannon images. She provides fascinating details on the movement of these material objects and interprets their layered meanings as they were repurposed by new audiences. Through a careful examination of less-studied Six Kannon sets, Fowler contributes to a growing body of research that challenges "the canon of works lauded by earlier scholarship" (p. 4) and broadens the scope of artifacts worthy of serious art-historical investigation.

This book takes on four major themes of inquiry: the connection of the Kannon cult to local sacred geographies, particularly in Kyushu; the relationship between images of Six Kannon and Buddhist texts; the shifting ritual function of Six Kannon icons; and the expansion of the cult into the lesser-known Seven Kannon and the aforementioned Thirty-Three Kannon groupings. These issues are explored in six chapters that unfold roughly in chronological order. The book is also richly illustrated, containing twenty-seven color plates along with many well-selected black-and-white-images of relatively unknown works.

Chapter 1 focuses on the formation of the Six Kannon cult in Japan during the tenth century. Fowler traces the promotion of the cult by Shin-gon and Tendai monks who adopted and modified early Chinese texts concerning the distinct roles of the six Kannon types. She skillfully takes readers through a range of documentary examples of Six Kannon sets made during the tenth to the twelfth centuries to show how the cult flourished under elite patronage. These records demonstrate that the cult was well supported by women in particular of the Fujiwara family. Fujiwara no Onshi (885-994), Fujiwara no Anshi (927-964), and Empress Shōshi (950-1000) are briefly mentioned as some of the women who turned to these images of the Six Kannon for help in navigating the six paths of the afterlife and to ensure a safe childbirth.

Chapter 2 explores Six Kannon sets on the island of Kyushu and examines how local legends and combinatory shrine/temple practices helped the cult flourish in this area. Many images of Six Kannon discussed in this chapter, such as the Chōanji bronze sutra container and Fumonji icons, had hybrid Buddhist-kami identities and were meant to depict the Six Gongen (local manifestations of kami) in Buddhist form. Fowler also points to the interconnectivity between mainland Japan and the Kyushu area. The shrine priest of Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine in Kyoto, for example, is listed as one of the patrons of the Six Kannon sutra container. Fowler also offers sufficient evidence that the Shukuin Busshi studio in Nara created the Fumonji images of Six Kannon and suggests that these were transported later to the region. Through her geographic approach, she provides valuable insight into Six Kannon sets from Kyushu, which have received very little scholarly attention, and portrays the island as a region integrated with continental and mainland Japanese concerns.

In chapter 3, Fowler discusses two well-documented wooden sculpture sets of Six Kannon, the

thirteenth-century Daihōonji images and the fourteenth-century Tōmyōji images. She traces their movement and modification through time to show how Six Kannon sets responded to changing ritual needs. The former icons moved from one location to another and were even housed within the sutra hall of Kitano Shrine, where they acquired an additional religious function of protecting the dharma. Fowler introduces physical and textual evidence concerning the Tōmyōji set to show that the Nyoirin Kannon-labeled sculpture took on an identity change, as it was originally the Fukūkenjaku Kannon. Through these two sets, Fowler convincingly demonstrates the necessity to consider “how religious images ‘live’ and how their circumstances change over time” (p. 134), a distinct approach that can expand our knowledge of the function of Buddhist images more broadly.

As mentioned above, the ritual life of Six Kannon images is a central theme in Fowler’s work, and various chapters raise questions about the types of rituals commissioned with Six Kannon images, how the services were conducted, and what procedures were considered effective and why. In chapter 4, Fowler offers a superb account on the ways Six-Syllable mandala paintings depicting Kannon were used in the Six-Syllable Sutra Ritual (*Rokujikyōhō*). This ritual was performed for practical concerns such as averting calamities, promoting healing, and removing curses. The Six-Syllable mandala painting was one of five types of images that could be used as the main icon in this ritual. Only twelve Six-Syllable mandala paintings survive in temple and museum collections today, but Fowler argues that these images must have been frequently copied, as over thirty illustrated examples are depicted in twelfth- and thirteenth-century iconographic compendia.

In chapter 5, Fowler examines a diverse group of Six Kannon paintings and related works to show that these played a significant role in the cult’s transformation from Six to Seven and Thir-

ty-Three Kannon groupings. Fowler traces the first reference to Seven Kannon worship in the chronicle *Azuma kagami*, which claims that Hōjō Masako commissioned paintings of these deities in 1204. The Seven Kannon cult, however, did not attain prominence until the Edo period when widely popular iconographic manuals such as the *Butsuzō zui* included depictions of the Seven Kannon grouping. This chapter also discusses the intriguing issue of alternative Seven Kannon sets. Fowler examines an eighteenth-century painting depicting Six Kannon joined by the bodhisattva Seishi that has been mistakenly identified as “Seven Manifestations of Kannon” (p. 206). She proposes that this image was used in the Seven Nights of Waiting Ritual (*Shichiyamachi*), which was a popular all-night gathering among child-bearing women in the Edo period.

In the final chapter, Fowler considers how the Thirty-Three Kannon cult came to supersede the Six Kannon cult in the fifteenth century. She argues that the Kannon cult expanded from an elite to a popular practice with the spread of inexpensive prints of Kannon and the growing interest in pilgrimages. She discusses four categories of Thirty-Three Kannon groups: the thirty-three guises referenced in the *Lotus Sutra*, the thirty-three images of the bodhisattva from Chinese printed sets, the icons from Thirty-Three Kannon pilgrimage routes, and groupings of thirty-three Kannon found in iconographic manuals. At the same time, she makes clear that there are many instances when the numerical value is not exact, such as the thirty-four Kannon icons of the Chichibu Kannon pilgrimage route. Her treatment of the supernumerary of the Kannon cult illustrates a key argument she makes throughout the book that “mathematical accuracy was less important than the maximization of benefit” (p. 216).

This book offers an insightful account of the fascinating history and ritual uses of Six Kannon images. Being an extensive topic, it could have been interesting to delve into the issue of gender

more deeply in this book, as female involvement in commissioning and venerating Kannon images is briefly mentioned in nearly every chapter. What were the reasons for the Six Kannon cult’s appeal to women and how did this evolve through time? When did the Six Kannon come to be recognized as crucial deities for successful childbirth? Was this idea adopted and modified from China or did it develop independently in Japan? This point, however, does not impinge on Fowler’s well-established and comprehensive study, but rather seems a fruitful avenue for future research.

Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan is engaging, well written, and impeccably researched. The book is a valuable contribution to the fields of Japanese art history and Buddhist studies and does much more than fill a large gap in English-language studies on Japanese Kannon images. It also serves as a compelling model for how to approach the study of cult images. As Fowler emphasizes in the epilogue, there is still much to learn from these previously dismissed nonelite images of Six Kannon tucked away in rural temples or forgotten on remote mountain tops. This study may yet inspire both new students and veteran scholars alike to join in the effort of accounting for material objects that continue to be left outside of scholarship today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: Carolyn Wargula. Review of Fowler, Sherry D. *Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. July, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53776>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.