Early Transmission of Esoteric Images from China to Japan in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries

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The introduction to Japan of fully developed esoteric Buddhism and Buddhist art has often been attributed to the Japanese monk Kukai 空海 (Ch. Konghui, 774－835), who studied in Tang China from 804 to 806. When Kukai (and his contemporary Saichō 最澄, 767－822) returned to Japan, he brought with him the two key texts of esoteric Buddhism: the Mahāvairocana-sūtra (Ch. Dairi jing 大日經, trans. c. 765, T 848) and the Tattwa-rāhadvā-sūtra (Ch. Jingangdeng jing 金剛頂經, T 874), which had been introduced to China and Japan in the seventh and eighth centuries by Subhakarasimha (Ch. Shanhuwei 蘭若畏, 637－738), Vajrabodhi (Ch. Jingangzhi 金剛智, 669－741), and Amoghavajra (Ch. Bokong 不空, 705－774)41. This ushered in the so-called pure phase of esoteric Buddhism, called choson 像教, as opposed to the earlier "proto" or "miscellaneous" phase based on miscellaneous esoteric scriptures called zωmai 詩遍. The "pure" form of esoteric Buddhism also came with a whole gamut of art forms, cultic deities, and ritual objects, most notably the use of mandala42.

However, earlier forms of esoteric images had already reached Japan in the seventh and eighth centuries. For example, most types of esoteric Guanyin 観音 (J. Kannon) were already known in Japan, as was Vairocana (Ch. Daizuri, J. Dainichi nyorai 大日如來), who later became the central figure in the esoteric pantheon. This paper therefore investigates the early transmission of esoteric images from China to Japan before the time of Kukai. In contrast to earlier studies on esoteric Buddhist imagery in either China or Japan, this paper traces the path of transmission of these esoteric deity cults from China to Japan. It focuses on a few well-known seventh- and eighth-century monks, such as Xuanzang 玄奘 (600－664) and Jiangzhen 虚實 (688－763), and examines how some of their actions shed light on Buddhist practices and beliefs. Their Japanese counterparts, such as Dōjō 道和尚 (Ch. Daoci, d. 741), Genbō 玄坊 (d. 746), and Jitchu (音智, 726－815?), are also discussed because of their roles as carriers of Tang Buddhist culture to Nara Japan. Combining a study of both literary and visual materials, the paper addresses certain questions about Buddhist iconography and artistic practices. Furthermore, the documentation of these monks' activities elucidates their principal roles in the production of Buddhist art, and thus their influence on image-making. Although various types of esoteric or proto-esoteric images were already presented in seventh- and eighth-century Japan (such as the four heavenly kings, Asura, Lokapāla, and other guardian deities)43, here I focus only on the esoteric or transformed images of Guanyin 観音 (Skt. Avalokiteśvara, J. Kannon). Based on abhairu texts, which espouse the benefits of worshipping the deities and prescribe the iconography of, and rituals performed with, their images, esoteric Guanyins are considered among the "developed" forms of esoteric images first transmitted to Japan.

Esoteric Guanyin Images

Already prominent in China during the Six Dynasties period (220－589), the Guanyin cult was transmitted through Korea to Japan in the seventh century, with a significant number of images dating from the seventh century, including large wooden statues and smaller cast bronze images that belong to the Horyūjī, for example.

From the seventh through the end of the eighth century, several types of esoteric or transformed Guanyin (called bānshā Guanyin 夢想觀音) were introduced to Japan44. These include the Eleven-headed Guanyin (Ekadasamukhi, Shiṣyamin 十一面), Guanyin with the Unfurling Rope (Amoghasīśa, Bhokongzasho 不空顯密), Thousand-armed Guanyin (Sahasrabuddhārya, Qianshou 千手), and Horse-headed Guanyin (Hayaqīn, Matou 馬頭). The Eleven-headed Guanyin was the first to be introduced to Japan, in the mid-seventh century, and by the eighth century this form had already developed into a major cult. Amoghasīśa and Thousand-armed Guanyin also became major icons in Buddhist temples in Nara by the mid-eighth century, with the latter growing in importance until it eclipsed all the others. By the ninth century, Guanyin with the Wish-granting Jewel (Chentāna-ten, Royūin 如意輪) and Zhuni 朱闍 Guanyin (Cuōjī) had also been introduced to Japan45.

First we examine the cult of Eleven-headed Guanyin. It is not a surprise to find that this bodhisattva was among the first esoteric deities to be introduced to Japan, for it was also the first to develop in South Asia and China before reaching Japan. One of the earliest representations of an Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara is found in the Kanshei cave-chapel in western India dating to the sixth century; the heads are piled up vertically, in the 1-3-3-3-1 arrangement (fig. 1)46. Thus it is clear that the worship of Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara originated in India and was introduced to China in the sixth century. However, in subsequent periods this deity was not prominent in India, but became significant in China in late seventh and early eighth centuries, especially under the patronage of Empress Wu 武后 (624－705, r. 684－705) at court47.

The Buddhist texts associated with Eleven-headed Guanyin consist of a series of abhairu, or magical chants, intended to invoke the power of the deity, usually in the service of state Buddhism. The earliest text, the
Ekaśāyanamūdhāra, was discovered among the manuscripts found in Gilgit in Kashmir, and is probably of fifth- to sixth-century date\(^{15}\). The text was translated into Chinese by Yiṣhunapta in 564—572. In the mid-seventh century it was translated twice — by Yiṣhunapta in 654, and by Yukunang in 656. A fourth translation was done by Amoghavajra in the mid-eighth century\(^{16}\). The first Chinese translation did not seem to generate interest in this text in China. However, the two translations in the mid-seventh century, especially Yukunang’s translation, were directly related to the sudden flourishing of images of Eleven-headed Guanyin in China in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Amoghavajra’s translation was not known in Japan before the ninth century, suggesting that the cult of Eleven-headed Guanyin transmitted to Japan in the Nara period (645—794) came from that associated with the court of Empress Wu (see further discussion below).

In the seventh and eighth centuries, images of Eleven-headed Guanyin were found in farflung territories of China, from Dunhuang to Sichuan, Shensi, Ch’ang’an, Lo-yang, and Jiangsu\(^{17}\). At Dunhuang alone there are seven mural depictions of the bodhisattva dating to the Early Tang period (618—712; Caves 321, 331, 334, 341, and Yulin Cave 23), and another image dating to the High Tang period (712—781; Cave 32)\(^{18}\). Generally there are two major types of arrangement of the multiple heads — the vertical style, like the one at Kanheri (see fig. 1), is associated with the Indian style, while Chinese examples tend to have the additional heads arranged in a coronal or trikona fashion. In the Cave 334 mural, the seated deity has more of an Indian flavor, both in the vertical arrangement of the heads, stacked up in the 3 — 1 — 2 fashion, and in the sinewy proportions of the figure and shading of the dark-skinned bodhisattva (fig. 2)\(^{19}\). A rock carved image of the bodhisattva in Shensi, Hsiao-hsin, dating to the eighth century, also shows the heads arranged in the vertical style, suggesting an

**Fig. 2** Eleven-headed Guanyin in bodhisattvas

Tang dynasty, 7th—8th century

Dunhuang Cave 334, east wall

Wall mural

From Chiao-chih exhibition, Tōhō-kyō, pl. 58

Additional Eleventh-head Guanyin images are known from the Tang capitals of Ch’ang’an and Lo-yang, especially associated with the reign of Empress Wu. Most prominent are the sculptures that originally adorned the multi-faced pillar called the Tower of Seven Treasures, or QiHo-tai 七寶塔, which was commissioned by Empress Wu and became the centerpiece sculpture/architecture in Guangghn’s Kōtoku-ji, a temple in Ch’ang-an\(^{20}\). The tower, or pillar, has since been dismantled, but

**Fig. 3** Eleven-headed Guanyin and bodhisattvas

Tang dynasty, late 7th—early 8th century

Dunhuang Cave 331, east wall

Wall mural

From Chiao-chih exhibition, Tōhō-kyō, pl. 55

**Fig. 4** Eleven-headed Guanyin

Tang dynasty, 2nd half 7th century

Dunhuang Cave 331, east wall

Wall mural

From Chiao-chih exhibition, Tōhō-kyō, pl. 10

In addition to Dunhuang, several Eleven-headed Guanyin images are known from the Tang capitals of Ch’ang’an and Lo-yang, especially associated with the reign of Empress Wu. Most prominent are the sculptures that originally adorned the multi-faced pillar called the Tower of Seven Treasures, or QiHo-tai 七寶塔, which was commissioned by Empress Wu and became the centerpiece sculpture/architecture in Guangghn’s Kōtoku-ji, a temple in Ch’ang-an\(^{20}\). The tower, or pillar, has since been dismantled, but
thirty-two relief sculptures have survived. Some have inscriptions dating between 703 and 724. Among this group of sculptures are seven images of Eleven-headed Guanyin, clearly indicating that the bodhisattva was one of the most prominent deities represented on the pillar (fig. 6). The bodhisattva has the heads piled in the 1-5-4-1iconic fashion. For Empress Wu, Buddhism was an instrument to augment her political status and legitimacy. The powers of Buddhist deities were invoked to protect the state, and her patronage was one of the reasons the Eleven-headed Guanyin gained such importance in China, and subsequently in Japan. In this group of bodhisattvas, the style is characterized by the frontal treatment of the veer, tubular body with a small waist, a small, boling abdomen, and tightly clinging drapery delineated in sharp lines.

![Fig. 5 Eleven-headed Guanyin](image)

![Fig. 6 Eleven-headed Guanyin](image)

There are additional references to Empress Wu and the power of Eleven-headed Guanyin. In June 696, the Khitans (Qidan 突厥), a vessel state in the northeast of Wu Zhou’s empire, rose in rebellion. Empress Wu launched a military campaign to suppress the rebellion, and it took more than a year to stabilize the military and political crisis. She also summoned the help of Buddhist and Daoist priests.

![Fig. 7 Head of Eleven-headed Guanyin](image)

![Fig. 8 Head of Eleven-headed Guanyin](image)

Faxing (543–712), the eminent monk associated with the Avatamsaka school, was dispatched to perform a Buddhist ritual for the protection of the state. A statue of the Eleven-headed Guanyin was installed on the altar, and the power of the deity was invoked at the ritual. And an inscription preserved in the Shosoin 正倉院 in Japan records that Empress Wu commissioned a thousand embroidered images of Eleven-headed Guanyin in commemoration of Emperor Gaozong’s official visit (650–683) to China.

Other known examples of Tang-period Eleven-headed Guanyin images include a bodhisattva head found at Xi’an (703–710), the Tang capital site. The bodhisattva has a broad nose, a large mouth, and a plump body with a broad face and a crown-like arrangement of the hair above. Another example is the standing statue of the bodhisattva located on the south side of the west wall (entrance) of the North Cave of Leigutai 龍樹台, Longmen 衛門. The sculpture has four arms; its head is currently in a Japanese collection (fig. 8). This statue was juxtaposed with an eight-armed Guanyin image thought to be Anaghaipras (see section on “Other Esoteric Guanyin Images” below) on the north side of the west wall. Other three walls are installed with seated images of the Buddha with his right hand in the earth-touching mudra, generally thought to be modeled after the famous image of the Buddha at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhagaya (the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment), India. The presence of the two esoteric Guanyin images suggests the interpretation of the main icons of the cave-chapel as Vairocana, the transcendent, esoteric form of the Buddha. Dated inscriptions within the cave-chapel give dates of 692, 701, and 718, indicating that the cave-chapel was constructed during the reign of Empress Wu, with work extending into the Kaiyuan era (713–741) of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756). The North Cave of Leigutai and a couple of other sites at Longmen are rich in esoteric images, all of which are related to the
Early Examples of Eleven-headed Guanyin Images in Japan

In Japan, the earliest image of the Eleven-headed Guanyin (Kannon in Japanese) was excavated in 1918 from the Nachi Sutra Mound 那智文壇, within the complex of the Kumano Shrine 麓野神社 on the Kii Peninsula. It is a small bronze statue, of 31.4 centimeters in height (fig. 9). With a slender body (typical of sixth-century Chinese or seventh-century Japanese style), the bodhisattva holds a vase in the left hand, which is an attribute more commonly found in contemporary esoteric Guanyin images. The transformed heads are mostly shown on the back of the main head and do not include the differentiation of bodhisattva faces, angry faces, faces with fangs, and a laughing face as textual prescriptions stipulate.

Nachi is well known for its natural scenery, including the Nachi Grand Fall, and has long been associated with indigenous nature worship in Japan. Beautiful spots in nature are often considered to be home for gods (kami in Japanese). That the earliest Eleven-headed Kannon image in Japan was found in one of the most sacred sites in Japan signifies that very early on the Guanyin cult was already integrated with indigenous religious beliefs and practice in a process known as hannya mitasaka 本面飛踏 (translated as "true nature — trace manifestation"). This process allows for the popular synthesis of Shinto kami with Buddhist deities; for example, a Buddhist deity can be considered a manifestation of a Shinto kami, and vice versa[84]. While significant to Shinto worship, Nachi was also identified early on as Mt. Potohaka (Ch. Futoshan, Rishrakasen 鳥鷲山), the abode or paradise of Guanyin. In addition to this bronze statue, two other seventh-century bronze images of Kannon were recovered from the area in the early part of the twentieth century, attesting to the significance of the Guanyin/Kannon cult in the region[85].

Japan first sent official delegations to China in the seventh century — delegations that included student-monks who went to study with Buddhist masters, returning with sūtras and images they had gathered. However, there is no evidence to date that any of the texts associated with the Eleven-headed Guanyin were introduced to Japan in the seventh century (see discussion below). Thus it seems that the deity cult and imagery preceded the introduction to Japan of texts on Eleven-headed Guanyin (unlike in China, where the dharani sūtra on Eleven-headed Guanyin was known for almost a century before the first images were made)[86]. The large influx of immigrants (primarily from Korea and China) to Japan around this time suggests that the cult of Eleven-headed Guanyin and images of the deity were probably brought to Japan by the immigrant community[87]. Furthermore, a wood statue of the Eleven-headed Guanyin, with polychrome pigments, is thought to have been brought from China to Japan by the pilgrim monk Jyōke 裏掘 in 665 (fig. 10)[88]. Here the additional heads are arranged in three groups of three each in a crown around the main head, while the tenth head is placed at the top. The bodhisattva holds a vase in the left hand and a rosary in the right hand. While the body is rendered in slender proportions and covered with heavy jewelry reminiscent of early seventh-century bodhisattva statues in China, the rather large main head is fashioned with Indiastyles features that include arched eyebrows and the deep-set, sinuous curves of downcast eyes. The Tang capitals are known to have experienced an "Indian boom" when men such as Xuangan and Wang Xuance returned and introduced the images and drawings they had brought back from their travels to India, and this statue is a good example of the fresh Indian influences brought to the Chinese capitals.

The next two images, dating from the early decades of the eighth century, also suggest that Japan came into contact with the metropolitan style and the new cult of Eleven-headed Guanyin associated with the Tang court. These are two images of this bodhisattva, from Horyūji 东大寺, near Nara — a mural painting (fig. 11) in the Kondo, or Main Hall, and a sandalwood image (fig. 12) presented to the temple in 719, thought to have been brought from China.

Horyūji was first built in 607. After a fire in 670 the temple was rebuilt, with the building of the Kondō 金堂 completed in 711. The mural paintings in the interior of the Kondo probably date to 711 or slightly later. Included in the twelve panels of the mural is a depiction of the Eleven-headed Kannon (figs. 11, 11a) at the north end of the east wall[89]. The bodhisattva is one of
early bodhisattvas depicted, and is juxtaposed with a standard image of Shō Kannon, with Amida on his crown, on the west wall. As with the Qibaozai images (see fig. 6), the Hōryū-ji bodhisattva is shown in the frontal, erect pose, giving the figure an iconic status. Other bodhisattvas depicted in the Main Hall are portrayed in a more relaxed manner, sometimes with the contrapposto pose, flanking a central buddha. The upright pose of the Eleven-headed Kannon image in the Hōryū-ji mural thus presents the bodhisattva as an icon with its own individual status rather than as a subsidiary figure. The bodhisattva’s main head has an additional head emerging from each side; seven bodhisattva heads above, each with a buddha effigy on the crown; and a buddha head at the top, thus showing a 3 - 7 - 1 arrangement. Whereas most of the Qibaozai statues have the heads arranged in three tiers, in the 1 - 5 - 4 - 1 arrangement (see fig. 6), the 3 - 7 - 1 arrangement can be seen in two examples from Dunhuang Caves 331 and 32 (figs. 1, 5)\[50].

Jōtoku (九、十數)

Another early eighth-century example associated with Hōryū-ji is a sandalwood statue, with the variant nine heads instead of eleven (fig. 12)\[50]. Records show that it entered the temple in the year 719, and it probably was brought back to Japan from China by one of the returning pilgrim-monks before that time\[50]. Some scholars speculate that the most likely person to have brought this statue to Japan was Dōji 道智 (d. 744), although there are also scholars who disagree. Dōji, who spent sixteen years in China, from 702 to 718, is also considered the most plausible cultural agent to have introduced to Japan the Buddhist culture promoted by Empress Wu that permeated the Tang court from the late seventh to the early eighth century.

**Dōji**

Dōji was a scholar-monk who had studied Madhyamika doctrine (Ch. Sanron; J. Sanron 三論) at Hōryū-ji, and Hossō 法相 (Ch. Faixiang) doctrine at Ryumonji. He traveled to China in an official embassy in 702, and returned to Japan in 718. In China he pursued further studies of the Sanron school, while visiting masters and collecting Buddhist sûtras. Apparently he stayed at Ximingzì 西明寺, a premier monastery in the Tang capital of Chang’an, and studied esoteric Buddhism with Subhakarasimha, one of the three masters responsible for introducing esoteric Buddhism to China\[50]. If so, his residence at Ximingzì probably coincided with that of the Tang pilgrim and translator Yijing 義净 (635–713), who returned to Chang’an in 695 after his travels to India. After returning to Japan, Dōji taught the Sanron doctrine and was considered the third transmitter of this school to Japan. In 729 he was appointed to supervise the rebuilding of the Daini 大寧寺 in the new capital of Heijōkyō 平城京, modern-day Nara\[50]. It is reported that he rebuilt the Daini based on the model of Ximingzì. Some scholars doubted this claim, however. At Daini he erected a statue of the Thousand-armed Guanyin, one of the earliest known representations of this deity in Japan\[50]. Later in 729 he was appointed preceptor. Among his other known activities was lecturing on the *Golden Light Sutra* (Sarvaprajñāpāramitā-sūtra, Ch. Jingshuangming jing 金光明經) at the imperial palace in 737. Although the *Golden Light Sutra* had been introduced to Japan previously, Dōji returned to Japan with the version newly translated by Yijing, the *Jingshuangming zuoshengxiang jing 金光明最勝王經* (T 665). The *Golden Light Sutra* was considered one of three Buddhist sûtras that paid the utmost to protect the state in seventh- and eighth-century Japan, and was often recited at state-sponsored temples in services for the state; the other two were the *Subhakarasimha* (Ch. Wutiansheng jing, J. Myōryōjōkyō 昇薬童基 and the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* on the Benevolent Kings (Ch. Renshuang jing, J. Rinnōhōryōkyō 仁王般若經).

While focusing on the Madhyamika doctrine, it is evident that Dōji had knowledge of other schools of Buddhism current in China at the time, most notably the Huayan Shugen doctrine based on the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Huayan jing 航巌經; a new translation of the sûtra, with 80 fascicles, was sponsored by Empress Wu, T 279). The Daini was also host to a group of émigré monks who were specialists on the Huayan doctrine and who came to Japan in the 720s. Among them were the Chinese monk Daouxuan 道暹 (J. Dōsen, 689–757), the South Indian monk Bodhisena (Ch. Putiqian 道慧僧耶, J. Bodaiseon; 704–760), and the Korean monk from Silla, Shenzhang 禪祥 (J. Shinsō, eighth century). All three were experts on the Huayan doctrine and played instrumental roles in guiding Emperor Shōmu’s 聖武’s building
of Todaiji 東大寺. The record of the property assets of Daijiin notes that in 742, together with the master of the temple, Kyōji 敦教, and others commissioned two embroidered paintings for Emperor Shatun: Four Locations and Sixteen Assemblies of Mahāprajñāpāramitā (J. Dai hannya shijūjūrokubai 大般若四重十六会, based on the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra), and Avasatrosaka’s Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies (Ch. Qica zhihuai, J. Shichihokyu kai 十七回会, based on the Huayan Jing or Avasatrosaka Sūtra).

Since the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras form the foundation of the Mahayana doctrine and the Huayan jing is central to the Huayan doctrine, the subjects chosen for these two embroidered hangings appropriately reflected the scholastic interests current at Decaiji. Dōji is also known for introducing the Mahāprajñāpāramitā ritual (called hannya kai 般若会), which is still practiced today.

These are among some of the scant facts known about Dōji. However, there are also assertions that Dōji had some connection to the Eleven-headed Guanyin images at Horyūji. Among the scholar-monks who returned to Japan in 718, Dōji has been noted as an outstanding Buddhist scholar and leader of his time. This is evidenced by his later rise to prominence as preceptor and his leadership role at Daijiin. His broad knowledge of Buddhism, acquaintance with esoteric Buddhism and court practices in Tang Chang’an, and other cultural and artistic aspects made him the likely candidate in the early transmission of esoteric cults to Japan. In his study of the Horyūji wall murals, Kobayashi Toichirō observes that Dōji may have played a role in the introduction of the esoteric Eleven-headed Guanyin into the wall paintings of the Main Hall of Horyūji.

And since the nine-headed Guanyin statue (fig. 12) was presented to the temple in 719, just one year after the monk’s return, Dōji is the most likely agent in this episode of cultural and artistic transmission. In addition, the Daijiin that Dōji helped rebuild was to figure significantly for a group of wooden esoteric Guanyin images, dating from the latter part of the eighth century, made for this temple (see further discussion below).

Gembō and Jitchū

At least two of Dōji’s contemporaries were also instrumental in the dissemination and promotion of the Guanyin cult. Gembō 光坊 (d. 748) studied in China from 716 to 736. One of his greatest achievements was to return to Japan with a set of the Tripitaka, thought to have been a gift of the Tang Emperor Xuanzang. This collection of all Buddhist texts currently available in Tang China was invaluable to the development of Buddhism and Buddhist practices in Japan. In the development of the cult of Eleven-headed Guanyin in Japan, it may even have provided the first documentation available there of sātras related to the bodhisattva, and was concomitant with the writing of miraculous tales in Japan. According to Ishida Mokuso, who studied Nara Buddhism and its relation to sātra manuscripts available at the time, the Ekdāsamukha-dhārāṇī-sātra (Xuanzang’s translation) first appeared among records in Japan in 733, and was again cited in 737 and 753. Yasoguwa’s and Atigupa’s translations were also mentioned in the 730s, while Hoiehō’s commentary was mentioned in the 740s. Amoghavajra’s translation of mid-eighth century date, however, was not mentioned. Thus it seems that the four translations of the sātras associated with Eleven-headed Guanyin, the three early versions, and especially the one by Xuanzang, were influential in Japan in the eighth century. It also seems that Xuanzang’s translation was already available before Gembō’s return to Japan, whereas the other two translations were available shortly thereafter. It appears that the Ekdāsamukha-dhārāṇī-sātra was singled out for inclusion in the collection that Gembō brought back from China. Moreover, it was only after Gembō’s return to Japan that specific references to ceremonies relating to Eleven-headed Guanyin appear, so Gembō may have played a role in introducing such practices from China to Japan.

Jitchū 談磰 (726 – 815?) is another monk relevant to the propagation of the esoteric Guanyin/Kannon cult. There has been some speculation as to where he came from, but apparently he was a foreigner (not Chinese) who came to Japan at an early age and was well versed in esoteric practices. He was a scholar of the Huayan school and a key figure who brought the Todaiji to completion. He studied under Rōben 貴弁 (688 – 773) and succeeded him as superintendent of repairs to Todaiji, where he was known for his hands-on ability in assisting the construction of and repairs to the temple. He was equally accomplished in temple administration and in the establishment of temple ceremonies. Among the rituals he initiated was one of confession and repentance focusing on a statue of the Eleven-headed Kannon housed in the Nigatsudō 二月堂 of Todaiji. No longer extant, this statue is thought to have been of foreign origin and made of bronze, 7 cas ‘r (21.3 cm) tall. According to popular legend, Jitchū found the statue floating in the bay at Naniwa. Because of its miraculous origin, and thus its efficacy and power, the statue was enshrined at the Nigatsudō, and Jitchū initiated the rites of repentance ceremony called jaichimen kōha 十一面経会 (see further discussion below).

These purification rites, performed by a select group of monks, have roots in ancient Indian monastic practices. They involve reciting sātras, chanting hymns, and making offerings to the deity, and are performed to cleanse the sins of the old year. The monks carry out these rites not only for themselves but also for the nation, the imperial family, and all sentient beings. The climax of the rites, called Omizutori お水取り (water-drawing), is held on the last day of the second month of the lunar calendar. A procession of priests and their assistants descends from Nigatsudō to the small well, called Akaiya 阿賀井, that provides fresh, pure water. Gathered by Shinto priests, a water-bearer joins them to return to Nigatsudō and offer water to the enshrined statue of Eleven-headed Kannon. From the balcony attendants brandish long torches, whose sparks cascade over the railing to announce the arrival of the new year. The ceremony is one of the oldest Buddhist observances in Japan; it was of national importance in the Nara period, and it was also performed in other temples, mountain retreats, and the palace. From its commencement in 736, the jaichimen kōha ceremony at Todaiji has continued into modern times without intermission.

The small Eleven-headed Kannon enshrined at the Nigatsudō was considered so sacred and “secret” that it was hardly allowed to be viewed, even by Buddhist priests. During a fire in 1667,
however, the sculpture was destroyed. All that remains is the mandorla for the statue, which shows engraved depictions of attendant buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other beings surrounding a multi-armed deity identified as Thousand-armed Kannon (figs. 13, 13a; see further discussion below).

Fig. 13  Mandala for Eleven-headed Kannon
Nara period, c. 752
Inscr. in syll.: Tadeji, Nara
Gift: Takeda
H. 228.5 cm
From Nara National Museum; Kanjikyuji
Nikon mokkyô no insei, p. 58

The rites of repentance and confession in Buddhism were known in China in the fifth and sixth centuries. Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (r. 502–549) initiated regular confessional ceremonies. Recent scholarship on Buddhism in the Northern dynasties period (386–581) and the study of inscriptions in cave-chapels in the north have also revealed the widespread practice of these rites in northern China from the sixth to early seventh century. The invocation of deities and recitation of their names were part of the ritual, though in sixth-century northern China the Sūtra of Buddha Names (Fo shao Fo ming jing 佛說佛名經, trans. Bodhiruci [Ch. 華首波利支, act. 508–535], T 440) was among the most common sūtras associated with the rites of repentance⁴⁰. Other popular buddhas and bodhisattvas also became the focal of confessional ceremonies in seventh-century China. In Japan, beginning in the latter part of the seventh century, kēku ceremonies in onkō temples such as Taiseki-ji, Amitsukah, Shakyamuni, and Kōryū (the Indian goddess of fertility) were frequently recorded, often performed on behalf of the state for protection from calamities, illnesses, and so on⁴¹. Thus the rites of repentance were not without precedent but had shifted to the new esoteric bodhisattvas of Guanyin.

Fig. 13a  Detail of Fig. 13

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Other Esoteric Guanyin Images and the Daianji Group

While the Eleven-headed Kannon was developing into a major cult in mid-eighth-century Japan, other forms of esoteric Kannon were also being introduced, most notably Amoghapāsī (Bukongjinsuso Guanyin) and Thousand-armed Kannon, with large statues being installed for important temples in Nara.

In Tang China, during the reign of Empress Wu, other esoteric Guanyin images were also worshipped. The preface to the Thousand-armed Guanyin Sūtra (Ch. Guanyin qianbei guanshi jinwujing 女廁千被觀世音諸度無上金剛經, trans. Zhongjiao, T 1057) mentions that at Foshou temple an Indian monk painted an image of a thousand-armed bodhisattva on an altar and offered it, together with the dhāraṇī text, to Empress Wu, who then asked the court maidens to make an embroidered image of the bodhisattva. She also asked craftsmen to paint the bodhisattva for further propagation⁴².

Three art historians in the nineteenth century — Zhang Yanyuan 张彦远 (fl. c. 815–875), Duan Chengshi 軒渓 (fl. 865), and Zhu Jingxuan 朱景玄 (act. c. 805–835) — all mention the activities of Yuchi Yiseng 越丘乙僧 (seventh—early eighth century) in relation to a thousand-armed bodhisattva he painted at the pagoda of Cī’ensi 楚思尼 in Chang’an. Yuchi Yiseng’s father, Yuchi Bohua 于遲波華, had been sent by the king of Khotan to Chang’an around 630; both father and son were court painters known for introducing the foreign painting style called otsukai 吐蕃裝, which portrays objects in relief in an illusionist manner. Whereas Zhang and Duan mention that Yuchi Yiseng painted an image of the Thousand-armed Manjusrī, Zhu mentions that it was an image of the Thousand-armed Guanyin⁴³. The Cī’ensi was dedicated by the crown prince Li Zhi 莊治 (the future Emperor Gaozong) in memory of his mother, Empress Wende 文德皇后. In 652, an Indian-style stupa was built at the suggestion of Xuanzang, the abbot of the temple. However, the stupa later collapsed and a seven-story brick pagoda, the Dayanta 大延塔, was built around 703–705, with the sponsorship of Empress Wu. Thus the depiction of the Thousand-armed bodhisattva, most likely Guanyin, at the pagoda of Cī’ensi is again connected to Empress Wu in the early eighth century.

As for Amoghapāsī (Bukongjinsuso Guanyin), no identifiable or inscribed images have surfaced to date, though texts of this deity had been translated by Xuanzang and others since the mid-seventh century. However, since the earliest example in Japan is an eight-armed bodhisattva, several eighth-century examples in China might be considered possible candidates. In the North Cave of Leiguitai at Longmen, the bodhisattva that flanks the entrance together with the Eleven-headed Guanyin (see fig. 8) is an eight-armed deity and is considered a likely representation of Amoghapāsī⁴⁴. In Danhuang Cave 341, an Early Tang cave, two eight-armed bodhisattvas are portrayed flanking a seated Buddha. Like depictions of Eleven-headed Guanyin, they are positioned on the east wall, above the doorway⁴⁵.

The largest group of extant Guanyins come from Danhuang Cave 148, dated to 776.
The Guanyin images represented include four-armed and eight-armed Guanyin images, Amoghapāśa, Thousand-armed Guanyin (fig. 14), and Ruyilun Guanyin, along with other esoteric deities. The Thousand-armed Guanyin is portrayed as a central, seated figure surrounded by twenty attendant figures. The bodhisattva's full, fleshy face and rather sober, remote expression echo those of late Nara images in Japan. Given the late eighth-century date of the cave-chapel, the subject shown in Cave 118 represents the impact of "pure" esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang\(^{[89]}\). Of these esoteric Guanyins, Amoghapāśa and Thousand-armed Guanyin were introduced to Japan independently, while Ruyilun Guanyin was not represented in Japan until the ninth century. However, a Tang gilt bronze image of a six-armed Ruyilun Guanyin has survived in Japan and is thought to have been brought to Japan in Tang times (fig. 15)\(^{[90]}\).

The first known statue of Amoghapāśa (J. Fukuenjaku Kannon) in Japan is a dry lacquer statue in the Sangatsudo 三月堂, or Hokkedō, of Todaiji, thought to date to 748 (fig. 16)\(^{[91]}\). Standing at an impressive height of 3.62 meters, it was rendered in the new technique of dry lacquer—a technique that was popular in Tang China and introduced to Japan, where it soon became fashionable in the capital. The dharani sarvā focuses on Amoghapāśa circulated in Japan from the 730s onward\(^{[92]}\), suggesting that the influx of these came after Gensho's return from China in 736. The bodhisattva has eight arms, and a third eye on the forehead. Similar to the Eleven-headed Kannon, the inclusion of multiple arms and multiple heads signifies the superhuman power and efficacy of the deity, and indicates the incorporation of Hinu Influence in the development of esoteric Buddhist iconography. Two hands are pressed in front in the praying gesture, while the other hands hold emblems that include a lotus, pilgrim's staff, and lasso. The halo and light rays behind the statue are rendered in openwork metal, with attached flame patterns. The figure is somewhat heavy, with regular drapery folds hanging on the two legs. The bodhisattva's face has an austere expression characteristic of esoteric deities. The creation of this image is thought to have been a response to Emperor's Shotoku's decree that provincial temples install statues of this divinity\(^{[93]}\). In 716, a workshop for creating Buddhist sculptures was created at Todaiji, under the direction of Kuninaka Shinya 国山常通 (d. 744), an artist of Korean descent. Very likely this statue, along with a number of other statues at the temple, was created at the Todai-ji atelier.

The Thousand-armed Kannon also made a number of appearances in eighth-century Japan. From literary records we learn that around the 730s two statues of Thousand-armed Guanyin were installed at Daianji and Gangō-ji; both were likely associated with the patronage of Dōjō, who is also said to have written a commentary on the Thousand-armed Guanyin Sūtra. Gensho, returning to Japan with the vast collection of sūtras that make up the Tripitaka, specifically dedicated the copying of a thousand copies of the Thousand-armed Guanyin Sūtra because of the healing power of this dharani sūtra. And when Jianzhen (J. Kanjin 神真, 688—761) came to Japan in 753, he brought with him a white sandalwood statue of the Thousand-armed Guanyin and an embroidered painting of the bodhisattva\(^{[94]}\). Like Xuanzang, who recited the Guanyin Sūtra for protection during his travels to western regions, Jianzhen worshipped Guanyin as a protector of travelers.

As for extant examples from the mid-eighth century, one of the earliest is shown on the damaged mandorla (fig. 13) for the no longer extant "secret" Eleven-headed Kannon enshrined in the Negatsu-ōdō of Todaiji, the focus of the Shintai keka ceremony discussed earlier. Remaining details of the engraving on the Negatsu-ōdō mandorla (fig. 13a) reveal that the central figure on the mandorla is Thousand-armed Kannon. Surrounding the deity are fifty-two buddhas at the top; at the bottom are fourteen bodhisattvas, Brahmā, Indra, the four heavenly kings, and other classes of beings. The fifty-two buddhas and Kannon are thought to represent the fifty-three spiritual
craftsmen, and followers[14]. The statues created for Toshōdaiji were likely produced at the temple workshop and supervised by the priests and craftsmen who came with Jianzhen, many of whom were of Chinese or foreign origin. Made of dry lacquer over wood core, the technique used in the Thousand-armed Kannon differs from that of earlier statues made of dry lacquer over clay core, suggesting the import of newer techniques by Jianzhen’s disciples.

In connection with the statues made for Toshōji and Toshōdaiji, brief mention can also be made of the group of esoteric Kannon images at Dainji, discussed earlier in connection with Dōjō. At Dainji, Dōjō is said to have dedicated a statue of Thousand-armed Kannon when the temple was rebuilt in 728. That statue has not survived, although an important group of five esoteric Kannon images does remain at the temple[16]. Probably dating from the 780s to the early ninth century, they include images of Shi Kannon, Amoghapāsa, Bato Kannon (Ch. Matou Guanyin), Yoryū Kannon (Ch. Yingli Guanyin), and Eleven-headed Kannon. All are carved in wood in the single-block (ichihoku — 木) technique. The Eleven-headed Kannon has the additional heads arranged in tiers, as in the Ten sai fashion (fig. 18). Somewhat stiffer, it is carved in the frontal position, with the left hand holding a vase with lotuses. The face and body are rendered fully, while the jewelry and drapery on the surface are naturalistically carved and detailed. Compared with the Qihanai sculptures (fig. 6) associated with the reign of Empress Wu, which are characterized by slenderness and a feminine beauty, these seem heavier and convey a somber mood. This change in style is already seen in figures associated with the Toshōji and Toshōdaiji workshops that produced sculpture in the mid-to late eighth century (see figs. 16, 17). Another interesting statue in this group is the six-armed Bato Kannon, one of the earliest statues of this bodhisattva (fig. 19). The face of this bodhisattva has the frowning eyebrows, bulging eyes, and fierce expression usually associated with esoteric deities. Of his two raised hands, one holds a lotus stalk and the other holds a trident. However, this statue does not yet portray the horse head or three-headed feature found in later examples, such as the Matou Guanyin excavated from the site of Angosi 安國寺 in Chang’an, probably of late eighth- or ninth-century date (fig. 20). The Yoryū Kannon (Kannon Holding a Willow Branch) at Dainji also has a scowling face (fig. 21); very likely this statue was intended to represent an esoteric bodhisattva and not the esoteric willow-holding Guanyin popular since the late sixth century in China (fig. 22). This group of five esoteric Kannon images represents an incipient stage in the development of esoteric imagery before the ninth century. The wood sculptures also signal a new direction in using wood as a preferred material.

In this brief overview of the early transmission of esoteric Guanyin/Kannon images from China to Japan, it is clear that certain Buddhist monks played a vital role in the propagation of esoteric deity cults. The translation of dhāraṇī texts, by Xuangang and others, laid the foundation for the dissemination of these cults. Xuangang and Jianzhen themselves worshipped Guanyin as a protective deity. The sūtras and images they carried — from India to China in the case of Xuangang, and from China to Japan in the case of Jianzhen — facilitated the spread of the Guanyin cult. Their Japanese counterparts, notably Dōjō, Genbō, and Jirō, further fostered the development of esoteric Kannon cults through their patronage activities and their influence at
the Nara court and major temples in the capital. Thus even before the full impact of “pure” esoteric Buddhism was felt in Japan, these early esoteric Buddhist deities were already worshipped and fully appreciated there. Furthermore, the icons preserved in Japan enrich our understanding of the early developments of esoteric imagery in East Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries.

[1] I would like to acknowledge the support of a small grant from the Carl H. and Martha S. Lindner Center for Art History, University of Virginia, toward the preparation of this essay for publication. T is the abbreviation for Taishō shūkō daijōkiō 大正新修大藏経. Eds. Tatsukawa Junjirō 合南敬次郎 and Watanabe Kiyokazu 渡辺光俊. 8 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issōkyō kankōkai. 1921–1932. The number following T refers to the number of the text.

[2] In India esoteric Buddhism, or Tantrism, flourished after the seventh century. Matsunaga Yukie designates the “miscellaneous” phase (began much earlier in China than in Japan) and the “pure” phase in China and Japan as corresponding to the early and middle periods of Indian Tantrism; see his “From Indian Tantric Buddhism to Japanese Buddhism,” in Minoru Kyōma (ed.), Japanese Buddhism: Its Tradition, New Religions and Interaction with Christianity. Tokyo and Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987, pp. 47–48. This distinction between the “miscellaneous” and “pure” phases of Tantric Buddhism has, however, been criticized as being driven by Japanese sectarian concerns.


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Although the mutual identifications of Shaal spirits with Buddhist deities began as early as the Nara period, the concept of Hinayana shakja as a religious/philosophical theory developed in the tenth century and intensified with the introduction of the "pure" esoteric Buddhist traditions, when the pleasure of dancing in the esoteric Buddhist pantheon became identified as manifestations of local kami. See Arista Matsunaga, The Buddhist Philosophy of Animatism: The Historical Development of the Hinayana Sastra Thoya. Tokyo & Rutland, Vermont: Sophia University & Charles E. Tuttle, 1969.


Ibid., p. 122.


Ibid., pp. 1–2.

Ibid., pp. 9–10.


Horyuji garun engi no naka ni; shibunki; Horyuji teki deki shakkei, "747," in Daisu Nihon kokubyo zenshu; Daito daihokan, pp. 171–172.

Some of these assertions of Daji's connections to various places and people in China are based primarily on circumstantial evidence. For discussions of various aspects of Daji's activities, see Marcus Bingenheither, A Biographical Dictionary of the Japanese Student-Monks of the Middle and Early Eighth Centuries, in Buddhist Studies, no. 4 (2003), Munich; Ibsen, 2003, pp. 85–93. See also Assakura Akira, editors, Dogen no mondai; Dogen ni kokonotsu, Ryoko shukakai, 1957, pp. 61–72.

When the capital was moved from Fukuwajiy in Asuka to Heijokyo in 710, four state-sponsored Buddhist temples were moved there, in addition to Dainaji, the other three were Yakuji, Eizoji, and Kofukuji; Shimizu, "Horyuji.""Kobayashi Taichiro, "Narita ni no Senju Kannon Kannon gakko no michi," in Bunko keiju yu no naka ni, ed. Keiji Murakami, Nihon, no. 1, Tokyo; Tanibashi, 1974, pp. 218–219. See also the essay originally published in Bunkyokai, no. 20. (1995).

Daisu shakko nai wa, "Shinsho; Horyuji teki deki shakkei, "747," in Daisu Nihon kokubyo zenshu; Daito daihokan, 2003, pp. 116. The printing of Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies is the first known depiction based on the Asakusa-Kyo scroll in Japan; its tale suggests that its contents are similar to surviving examples in Dunhuang murals of the same subject. See Dorothy Wong, "Te Huyen/Kegon/Hwadum Paintings in East Asia," in H. A. K. Inoue, ed., Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Horyuji Buddhism. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007, pp. 337–381.
