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Merōfu Kannon and Her Veneration in Zen and Imperial Circles in Seventeenth-Century Japan

Merōfu Kannon (Ch. Malangfu Guanyin) had a significant following and was the inspiration for numerous poems and religious pictures in China and Japan. This article (1) explores the historical background and origins of Merōfu (“the wife of Master Ma”)—a potent symbol of female lay piety who became regarded as a manifestation of Kannon; (2) provides translations and analyses of some poems by Chan and Zen priests referring to her; (3) focuses on the worship of Merōfu Kannon in the circle of Emperor Gomizuno-o and Empress Tōfukumon’in. The impetus for this article were the delicately crafted *oshie* images of this deity made by Tōfukumon’in and her step-daughter Shōzan Gen’yō (founder of Rinkyūji Imperial Convent) which I discovered at temples in Kyoto and Shiga prefecture. All seem to be based on the same Chinese prototype. The second half of the article provides descriptions of the five *oshie Merōfu Kannon* known to me and documentation concerning the circumstances of their creation and donation. Through these images, I try to illuminate the meaning of Merōfu Kannon in imperial circles in seventeenth-century Japan.

KEYWORDS: Merōfu Kannon — *oshie* — Isshi Bunshu — Tōfukumon’in — *Lotus Sutra*

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ALTHOUGH most Buddhist practitioners and scholars today are unfamiliar with Merōfu Kannon 馬郎婦觀音 (Ch. Malangfu Guanyin), in earlier centuries she had a significant following and was the inspiration for numerous poems and religious paintings in China and Japan. Chün-fang Yü examines Buddhist chronicles and does a thorough analysis of Malangfu Guanyin and the related form Yulan Guanyin 魚籃觀音 (Jp. Gyoran Kannon) in China in her publications dealing with feminine images of Guanyin (Yü 1990, 66–71; 1994, 166–67; and 2001, 186–7, 419–21.). In contrast, there is virtually nothing written in English about Merōfu (“the wife of Master Ma”). I began to investigate the history and iconography of this deity after seeing the depictions of Merōfu Kannon made by Empress Tōfukumon’in 東福門院 (1607–1678) and Princess-Abbess Mitsuko Naishinnō 光子内親王 (1634–1727, better known by her Buddhist name, Shōzan Gen’yō 照山元瑤). This article will explore the origins of Merōfu Kannon, and then focus specifically on the delicately crafted *oshie* 押絵 images of this deity made by two imperial women in Japan’s early modern era.¹

Oshie are images made of a combination of painting and pieces of woven fabric, paper, and thread glued onto paper, silk, or wood backgrounds. The origins of this craft are not fully documented, but in Japan the practice of making pictures from cutting and pasting paper and cloth is thought to date back at least to the Muromachi period (KUWAHARA 1996, 2).² Originally the term *oshie* was used to describe paintings or prints pasted onto folding screens or *fusuma*, and what we now consider *oshie* were called *ishōe* (衣裳絵 or 衣裳絵; clothing picture) or *sensaizō* 剪裁像 (cut-out image).³

The technique involves first cutting out forms in stiff paper and covering them with cloth, carefully folding over the edges so stray threads do not show. The cloth-covered cut-outs were then arranged and glued onto a paper or silk background to form images. It is believed that this craft began among the women of Kyoto’s aristocratic classes, and gradually spread to daimyo households and eventually throughout the populace. Sometimes *oshie* pictures—usually secular

* Editors’ Note: The figures included in this article can be viewed in color at the *JJRS* homepage, <http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/jjrs/jjrsMain.htm>.

1. A shorter article focusing on this topic has been published previously in Japanese (FISTER 2005). This article in English includes new research and expands upon the earlier Japanese version.

2. A thorough study of *oshie* needs to be done, for there is no history of *oshie* in either Japanese or English.

3. The term *ishōe* 衣裳絵 appears in Saikaku’s *Futokoro suzuri* 懷硯 (1687), and also the *oshie* book published in Kyoto in 1739, *Hana musubi nishikie awase* 花結錦絵合. See YOSHIDA et al. 1976, 150. The term *sensaizō* 剪裁像 appears in the temple inventory of Jissōin 実相院, included in vol. 62 of the *Kyōto-fu jishikō*.

subjects—were glued onto wooden plaques and donated to shrines and temples with prayers for good fortune, and so forth. Called *oshie ema* 押絵絵馬, these votive pictures form a special genre in Japanese religious art.

The Merōfu Kannon *oshie* images by Tōfukumon'in and Shōzan Gen'yō differ from *oshie ema* in that they were actually objects of worship and housed in lacquered wooden *zushi* 厨子 (portable shrines). The images are not three-dimensional, that is, padded with cotton like the battledores and other *oshie* pictures seen today, but rather the fabric-covered forms were pasted flat onto a background so that they resemble paintings. It is unusual for paintings and especially *oshie* to be enshrined in *zushi*. Four of these Merōfu Kannon images are in the collections of Zen temples (Eigenji 永源寺, Enjuji 延寿寺, Enshōji 圓照寺, and Shōmyōji 正明寺) and one in a Tendai temple (Jissōin 実相院). All seem to be based on the same Chinese prototype, which I will discuss later. Why was this particular form of Kannon singled out for representation, and what was its meaning and significance for the women who created them and the temples in which they are enshrined? Why were these images all rendered in *oshie* rather than painted? I will try to answer these questions below, as I attempt to reconstruct the provenance and historical context of these elegant Merōfu Kannon images.

Origins of Merōfu Kannon

The legend surrounding Merōfu can be traced back to Tang-Dynasty China. According to Buddhist chronicles of the Song Dynasty,⁴ there was a Buddhist laywoman of great beauty living in Jinshatan 金沙灘 (Golden Sand Shoal) in Western Shanxi 陝西, who, in 809 (according to another account, the date was 817) promised to marry any man who could memorize the *Kannon Sutra* 觀音經 (the “Fumon” 普門 chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* 法華經) in one night. By the next morning, twenty men could recite the scripture. Since she could marry only one of them, the young woman tried to narrow down the field by asking them to memorize the *Diamond Sutra* 金剛般若經. Half of the men completed this task, at which point the woman said she would marry the one who could memorize the entire *Lotus Sutra* within three days. The only man who passed this test was Master Ma. However, the young woman became ill on the wedding day and died. Her body rapidly putrefied and she was quickly buried. A few days later, an elderly monk (in some accounts a foreign, that is, Indian, monk) stopped by Ma's house and inquired about the health of his new wife. Upon being informed of her death, he asked to be taken to her burial place. After opening the casket, they found the bones of her skeleton linked by a gold chain. Since bones linked

4. Zuxiu 祖琇, *Longxing bianian tonglun* 隆興佛教編年通論, vol. 22 (1164); Zhiban 志磐, *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, T no. 2035 (1269); and Zongxiao 宗曉, ed., *Fahuajing xianyinglu* 法華經顯應錄, vol. 2. Later versions of the story can be found in Juean 覺岸, *Shishi jigu lue* 釋氏稽古略, T no. 2037 (ca. 1374); Liaoyuan 了圓, *Fahua lingyan zhuan* 法華靈驗傳, vol. 2 (1650); Zhou Kefu 周克復, comp., *Guanyin jing zhiyanji* 觀音經持驗記, vol. 1 (1659). Yü 1990, 67.

by a golden chain were regarded as a sign of a holy person, the monk declared that the young woman was a manifestation of a great sage who had appeared to help the people in this region overcome their evil karma. After washing the bones, he carried them on his staff and flew away. Other accounts of this story have minor variations; for example, in one version, in the coffin they discovered two bones that had changed into gold, and the bones then flew away.

IYANAGA Nobumi has pointed out (2002, 472–73) that the “liberation from the corpse” finale and bones-changed-to-gold/chained bones motif are Daoist elements; the monk with staff who ascended to the heavens also recalls a Daoist sage.⁵ However, in later versions of the tale the woman came to be identified as a manifestation of Kannon or Fugen 普賢, and her miraculous appearance inspired many people of the Shanxi region to convert to Buddhism. The dating of this linkage of Merōfu with Kannon is difficult to pinpoint, but a perusal of extant texts and poems suggests it had occurred by the twelfth century. In addition to Merōfu Kannon, she is sometimes referred to as the “Bodhisattva with Chained Bones” 鎖骨菩薩.

The legend of Merōfu Kannon became interwoven with Gyoran 魚籃 (Fish-basket) Kannon (Ch. Yulan Guanyin), who assumed the form of a beautiful woman fishseller and likewise vowed to marry any man who could memorize the above-mentioned sutras.⁶ Poems written about Gyoran Kannon often make reference to her fishy smell, which is thought to symbolize her womanhood/sexuality (see Yū 2001, 420). Yet like Merōfu, she remained undefiled, even at death, when her corpse was transformed into golden bones. A third woman sometimes linked with these two, known as the “Woman of Yanzhou” 延州婦 (present-day Shanxi province), was a prostitute who had sex with any man who asked. Afterward the men were freed from their sexual desires, so her “promiscuity” was later heralded as a bodhisattva act of compassion. She was buried unceremoniously after her death at age twenty-four, but later a foreign monk came to pay respects at her roadside grave. He asserted that she had been a bodhisattva, whereupon the local villagers opened her grave and found her bones linked by a chain. Sawada Mizuho believes that the Woman of Yanzhou was the prototype for this element in the legend of Merōfu/Gyoran Kannon related above.⁷

Merōfu Kannon and Gyoran Kannon became two of the most celebrated feminine forms of Kannon in China. They were not only popular among the common people, but also with Chan monks and literati (*bunjin* 文人).

5. I am grateful to Elizabeth Kenney for pointing out this connection, and for her thorough, critical reading of this article and helpful comments and suggestions.

6. Although the content of the legends overlap, the two women appear as separate divinities within the thirty-three forms of Kannon designated in the Kamakura period.

7. The story of the “Woman of Yanzhou” appears in Li Fuyan’s 李復言 *Xuxuan guailu* 續玄怪錄. See SAWADA 1975, 145–47.

Merōfu in Chan/Zen Rhetoric and Poetry

Documents and extant works reveal that Merōfu often appears as a subject in the poems and paintings by Chan priests of the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties.⁸ Two examples from the *Jianghu fengyueji* 江湖風月集 (Jp. *Kōko fūgetsu shū*), a compilation of Chan verses published in the fourteenth century, are translated, with explication, below.

Merōfu

Chanting the Lotus [Sutra], her saliva emits a fragrance;
How can this sutra compare in profundity to her compassion?
Boxing in dreams and closing off the sky, as if the heavens had been wiped clean,
How many people have been snagged on this crescent moon?⁹

The “crescent moon” in the last line is a metaphor for Merōfu’s beautiful face, which allegedly attracted many men. “Hooked” by her good looks and wanting vainly to marry her was like trying to box up dreams or close off the sky—in other words, taking illusions for reality. Dreams, of course, have no substance. Likewise, the sky has no visible traces. By appearing real, Merōfu was able to lead people to enlightenment. Her beauty was thus an expedient or skillful means (*hōben* 方便) of Kannon to save sentient beings. When Merōfu suddenly died and rotted away, Master Ma and others were torn by grief and thus emptied of attachment to material things and their hearts were washed clean. The phrase “as if the heavens had been wiped clean” alludes to this enlightened state.¹⁰

Merōfu

Charming and modest, she deftly combs her beautiful black hair;
Her heart is like the bitter Golden Thread herb, her mouth like honeyed sweets.
Unabated for a thousand years, the water at Golden Sand Shoal,
Tinkling like jade pebbles, even now makes the sounds of sutra chanting.¹¹

This poem again refers to Merōfu as a beautiful woman who guides men to enlightenment. Encouraging men to read sutras by promising she would marry them, her honeyed words were sweeter than candy. Merōfu’s real intent, however, was to draw them into the Buddha way, and thus her heart or inner mind “like the bitter Golden Thread herb.” By inciting people in Golden Sand Shoal to memorize sutras, she helped to establish Buddhism as a viable religious practice. The reference to “the sounds of sutra chanting” continuing without cease alludes to Kannon’s never-ending merits and compassion.¹²

8. SAWADA (1975, 148–51) notes twenty-two examples of poems about Gyōran Kannon or Merōfu recorded in the collected sayings of Zen monks.

9. By Siming Deben 四明德本. For the original Chinese text, see YOSHIZAWA 2003, 124.

10. The explanation of this poem is based on YOSHIZAWA 2003, 126–27.

11. By Shugu Fanci 蜀古帆慈. For the original Chinese text, see YOSHIZAWA 2003, 430.

12. The explanation of this poem is based on YOSHIZAWA 2003, 430–31.

Merōfu even appears in a *kōan* 公案 in which the Chan master Fengxue Yanzhao 風穴延沼 (887–973) was asked by a monk, “What is the pure Dharma-body?”¹³ He answered, “Master Ma’s wife of Golden Sand Shoal.” Here the Chan master is equating the body of a woman and her impure corpse with the non-material, pure Dharma-body. Chan masters frequently employ such paradoxical responses as a means to prod students into overcoming duality. Phrases similar to “Master Ma’s wife of Golden Sand Shoal” 金沙灘頭馬郎婦 appear in many Chan poems.¹⁴ An example below is by Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), a Song literatus who was also famous as a Chan layman. He adopted this phrase as the final line in the first of his “Six Eulogies for Guanshiyin” 觀世音贊六首.¹⁵

By the seaside, jutting up alone: The cliff of Potala!
 There an ordinary sentient being reached perfect enlightenment,
 With 84,000 purified dharma-eyes,
 Perceiving the Lotus-Treasury Sea in the midst of all this dusty toil,
 And with 84,000 mudra-displaying hands,
 Reaching out to guide those mired in passion to reach the Other Shore.
 Nirvana and Samsara: do not see them as two!
 —Thus is she called, “Bestower of Fearlessness.” [*abayadāna*]
 The Eight Winds of Passion blow everywhere old age, illness, death,
 So not one sentient being obtains stability and peace.
 But when the flower of the mind illuminates all ten directions, void,
 Then will appear the compassionate eyes of Guanshiyin!
 And should you wish in truth to see Guanshiyin:
 Along the Golden Sand Shoal, there—the Wife of Master Ma!

(Translation by Jonathan Chaves)

Since many Song and Yuan paintings of Merōfu bear inscriptions by Chan priests, she had obviously become a firmly established theme in Chan discourse.¹⁶ An example is the anonymous Yuan-Dynasty Merōfu Kannon in the collection of the Maeda Ikutokukai (FIGURE 1) inscribed with verses by the priests Yongfu 永福 and Shiyue 世月 (dates unknown).¹⁷ Merōfu is depicted as

13. 如何是清淨法身(清淨法身とは何ぞや). This *kōan* appears in *Jingde chuantenglu* 景德傳燈錄 (Jp. *Keitoku dentō roku*), vol. 13 (ca. eleventh century); *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元 (Jp. *Gotō egen*), vol. 11 (1253); *Tiansheng guangdenglu* 天聖広燈錄 (Jp. *Tenshō kōtō roku*), vol. 15 (1036), and so forth.

14. It is unclear whether the poems were inspired by the *kōan*, or whether the response in the *kōan* was influenced by references to Merōfu in contemporary poetry.

15. I am grateful to Jonathan Chaves for locating and translating this poem for me. The Chinese source is *Shangujī* 山谷集, in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, 14/13a. This poem is also included in volume 1 of the *San Kannon Daishi kada shū* 讚觀音大士伽陀集 (ed. Saiun Dōtō 齊雲道棟) published in Japan through the sponsorship of Princess-Abbess Gen’yō (see page 424).

16. For example, see plates 52, 53, 93, and 94 in KAWAKAMI et al. 1975.

17. The characters for the two inscriptions are: 頂掛輪珠鬢弘雲 不知脫賺幾多人 金沙灘上家々月 何用更求前身 南湖慧雲 永福贊 and 面如滿月鬢堆雲 手執蓮經詛惑人 堪笑馬郎生意想 不知向上有全身 前住公安二聖世月謹贊.



FIGURE 1. Merōfu Kannon. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk. Maeda Ikutokukai Collection. KAWAKAMI et al., pl. 53.

a lovely, gentle woman who looks intently at the sutra (presumably the *Kannon Sutra*) she is holding. The sutra scroll is an important element in the iconography of this deity. Around Merōfu's neck hangs a rosary. Directly above her head is a small circle containing an image of Kannon, symbolizing that she is a manifestation of the benevolent bodhisattva. Originally donated to the Daitokuji 大徳寺 subtemple, Sunshōan 寸松庵, on behalf of the nun Eishin Zenjō 栄心禅定,¹⁸ The painting has been designated as an Important Cultural Property. The gender connection between the subject matter and the person to whom the scroll was dedicated should not be ignored. However, Merōfu Kannon was not worshiped exclusively by women.

The Popularization of Merōfu Kannon and Gyoran Kannon in Japan

Merōfu Kannon, and her related form Gyoran Kannon, were popularized in China through such compilations as Zhou Kefu's 周克復 *Guanshiyin jingzhou chiyan ji* 觀世音經呪持驗記 [Record of manifestations (resulting) from recitation of the Guanshiyin sutra and mantras, 1659] and Hongzan's 弘贊 *Guanyin cilin ji* 觀音慈林集 [Compassionate grove of Guanyin, 1668] (Yü 2001, 185–6.). She even appeared in novels and plays. In Japan, interest in Merōfu Kannon and Gyoran Kannon at first was limited primarily to Zen circles, literati, and the court—people conversant in Chinese literature. However, from the seventeenth century on, Gyoran Kannon seems to have been worshiped on a more popular level. The impetus for this seems to have come from China, which witnessed the spread of popular Kannon cults.

Examples are two temples constructed in the early Edo period that have a Chinese Gyoran Kannon enshrined as the main image: Gyoranji 魚籃寺 in the Mita 三田 area of Edo, and Ryōgen'in 靈源院 in Nagasaki. Gyoranji traces its origins back to Gyoran'in 魚籃院, a temple constructed in Nakatsu 中津 in Buzen

18. This information comes from the box inscription; see TŌKYŌ KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1962, 5.

豊前 Prefecture in Kyushu by Hōyo Shōnin 法譽上人 to house a wood image of Merōfu brought to Nagasaki from China by salt merchants who were allegedly descendants of the Ma family. The image was moved to the Mita area of Edo in 1630 and a small structure built to house it. Later, in 1652, Hōyō Shōnin's pupil Shōyo Shōnin 称譽上人 had a Kannondō constructed and founded the temple Gyoranji.¹⁹ Ryōgen'in 靈源院 is an Ōbaku 黄檗 Zen temple in Nagasaki founded by Tetsugan Dōkaku 鉄巖道廓 in 1660; a Kannondō was constructed in 1667 with the help of a Chinese merchant to house an image of Gyoran Kannon imported from China. In both cases, the images were worshiped by people from all walks of life who believed that Kannon would provide protection from accidents at sea, safety during childbirth, well-being for one's family, success in business, and so forth (see MITAZAN GYORANJI, 5).

Merōfu Kannon in Japanese Zen Circles and Isshi Bunshu

Although their legends were intertwined, Merōfu Kannon never gained as broad a base of worship as Gyoran Kannon in Japan, and it is rare for Merōfu Kannon to be the main image in a temple. But she was certainly a well known deity among Zen prelates and in elite literary circles in the early Edo period. In the *San Kannon Daishi kada shū* 讚觀音大士伽陀集, a compilation of poems related to Kannon sponsored by the Princess-Abbess Shōzan Gen'yō, among the approximately one hundred and sixty poems, the majority of which do not specify a particular form of Kannon, there are sixteen poems about Merōfu Kannon, and twenty-one about Gyoran Kannon.

One Japanese Zen priest who showed a special interest in Merōfu Kannon was Isshi Bunshu 一絲文守 (1608–1646). Born into the aristocratic Iwakura family, Isshi studied Rinzai Zen first at Shōkokuji 相国寺, then at Daitokuji under Takuan Sōhō 沢庵宗彭 (1573–1645). He became a favorite of Emperor Gomizuno-o 後水尾天皇 and Empress Tōfukumon'in, who turned to him for Zen instruction. Emperor Gomizuno-o built two temples for Isshi, Reigen'an 靈源庵 in the Nishigamo district of Kyoto and Hōjōji 法常寺 in Tanba 丹波, and eventually persuaded him to take over the distinguished Eigenji 永源寺 in Ōmi 近江 Prefecture, where Isshi was designated as “restorer” (*chūkō* 中興). Emperor Gomizuno-o's eldest daughter, Umenomiya 梅宮 (1619–1697), took the tonsure from Isshi in 1640, at which time she was given the Buddhist name Daitō Bunchi 大通文智. She remained a devoted pupil until Isshi's death from tuberculosis.

Eijima Fukutarō speculates that the following poem and appended explanatory text about Merōfu Kannon (FIGURE 2) were written by Isshi as an instruction in response to a query by Emperor Gomizuno-o, who shared the text with

19. Information from *Gyoran Kanzeon Bosatsu goengi* 魚籃觀世音菩薩御緣起. See MITAZAN GYORANJI, 4.

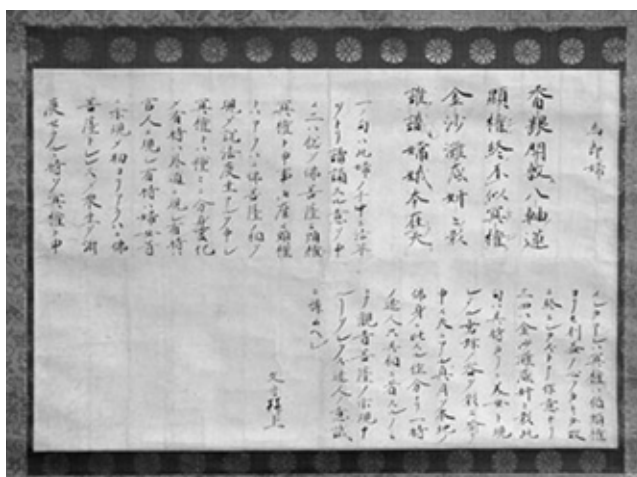


FIGURE 2. Poem and explanatory text about Merōfu Kannon by Isshi Bunshu. Ink on paper. Zen Bunka Kenkyūjo Collection. Photograph courtesy of Zen Bunka Kenkyūjo.

Empress Tōfukumon’in and Bunchi.²⁰ Or it may have been aimed specifically at Tōfukumon’in. A nearly identical version of the poem appears in Isshi’s collected sayings, *Butchō Kokushi goroku* 佛頂國師語錄.²¹

Merōfu

When she opens her fragrant mouth, the entire Lotus [Sutra] is unfurled.
Expedient means that are perceived [by sentient beings] cannot after all
equal those unperceived.

Her lovely shadow has manifested at the Golden Sand Shoal;
Who knew it was originally the moon sailing in the sky?

The first line of the verse alludes to the woman taking the *Lotus Sutra* in her hand and chanting it. The second line refers collectively to perceived and unperceived *hōben* (expedient means) of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In perceived *hōben* the buddha or bodhisattva reveals himself visibly to preach the dharma and lead sentient beings to salvation. In unperceived *hōben* they assume various transformations, at times manifesting as a non-Buddhist, at times as a court official, at times as a woman, and so forth. Unperceived *hōben* thus refers to those instances when a buddha or bodhisattva leads beings to salvation without their knowing he is a buddha or bodhisattva. Since that is so, the words “cannot after all equal” allude to the benefits

20. EIJIMA 1992, 200–1. Also EIJIMA 1994, 362. This document is presently in the collection of the Zen Bunka Kenkyūjo at Hanazono University in Kyoto.

21. The characters in the Hanazono version are as follows: 香巖開敷八軸蓮·顯權終不似冥權·金沙灘底妍々影·誰識娉娥本在天. The poem, as it appears in volume 3 of the *Jōe Myōkō Butchō Kokushi goroku* 定慧明光佛頂國師語錄, contains two different characters, in lines 1 and 4, which read: 香巖開敷八葉蓮 and 誰識姪娥本在天, respectively; T 2565, 81: 161.

wrought in the [sentient being's] mind by unperceived *hōben* which are more profound even than those wrought by perceived *hōben*.

As for the third and fourth lines, the third—Her lovely shadow has manifested at the Golden Sand Shoal—likens to a shadow the vestigial form of the beautiful woman that Kannon manifested at that particular time and place.

In the fourth line, my intent is to compare the bright moon in the heavens to the Buddha-body in its original (=untransformed) state.

We must truly pity those deluded beings who, seeing for the time being only the form of the beautiful woman, were unaware that it was actually a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Kannon who was preaching to them.

(translation by Norman Waddell)

It seems as though Isshi was familiar with the poem by Priest Siming Deben (Jp. Shimei Tokuhon 四明德本) cited earlier from the *Jianghu fengyueji*. The first and fourth lines in particular in Isshi's verse comprise similar Chinese characters and symbolism.

*The Spread of Worship of Merōfu Kannon
in the Circle of Emperor Gomizuno-o and Empress Tōfukumon'in*

The above poem with explanation by Isshi is evidence that Merōfu Kannon was a subject of interest among some Zen priests in the early Edo period, who used this bodhisattva manifestation for teaching purposes. Merōfu's lay origins made her the perfect exemplar for the men and women in Emperor Gomizuno-o's circle who earnestly embraced the Buddhist faith. Part of the attraction may have stemmed from Merōfu's Chinese origins. Other evidence of Merōfu's popularity among literary-minded people is the image of Merōfu Kannon (FIGURE 3) at Shisendō 詩仙堂, the retreat built by Ichikawa Jōzan 市川丈山 (1583–1672), a recluse steeped in the study of Chinese literature. Dressed in Chinese robes, Merōfu holds a sutra scroll close to her chest. The facial features of the statue, made of cast iron, reflect its Ming/Qing origins. There are no records of when this image entered the Shisendō, but the links with Chinese poetry and Zen Buddhism seem to point to Jōzan's taste, leading me to speculate that it was he who acquired the image. Merōfu continued to be a subject of interest in Zen circles, for later, Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1685–1768) included an account of Merōfu Kannon in his *Keisō dokuzui* 荆叢毒蘂. Hakuin basically repeats the story of her origins recounted at the beginning of this article, and ends by saying, "The Bodhisattva Kannon by skillful means manifests himself to people in thirty-two different forms. In this case he manifested himself in the form of a young woman."²²

22. From a translation by Norman Waddell. I am grateful to him for providing the original Hakuin text as well as an English translation. He also kindly read through an early draft of this article and made many useful suggestions.



FIGURE 3. Merōfu Kannon Sculpture. Shisendō. Photograph courtesy of Shisendō.

Japanese court women, in particular, found Merōfu an inspiring role model. In addition to being an archetype of female lay practice, she was linked with the *Lotus Sutra*, which was a favorite of women because of the parables and stories illustrating that females can attain buddhahood. Faith in this deity empowered women, showing them that they could serve as exemplars as well as men. To be compared to Merōfu was a form of praise, because as an attractive, literate laywoman manifestation of Kannon, she was a symbol of wisdom and liberation. For example, an inscription written in 1720 on a *chinsō* 頂相 painting of Abbess Daiki Songō 大規尊泉 (1674–1719),²³ one of Emperor Gomizuno-o's granddaughters, includes the following line:

Like the youthful wife Merōfu,
benevolence manifests itself
at the Golden Sand Shoal in the East.

Images of Merōfu Kannon by Imperial Women

According to the *Lotus Sutra*, the making and dedicating of Buddhist images was a meritorious act to show devotion and gratitude, prompting devotees to commission and/or create paintings and sculptures, and to embroider images with their own hands. Creative endeavors by women fueled by Buddhist piety were highly praised, as suggested by the following poem by Su Shi 蘇軾 (Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, 1037–1101).²⁴

The Lady of Jingan County, Née Xu, Has Embroidered a Guanyin: A Eulogy

This descendent of a family from Great Peak
Settled here in Jingan County.
Studying the Way, seeking Mind,

23. Collection of Kōshōin Imperial Convent 光照院門跡, Kyoto.

24. From *Dongpo qiji* 東坡七集 in *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 (*Houji* 後集, 20/5b–6a; and 6a). I am again indebted to Jonathan Chaves for introducing me to this poem and for providing an English translation.

With clarity she contemplated,
 Contemplated Guanshiyin,
 Austerely—never losing the image.
 And after doing this three years,
 The Dharmas of her mind perfected,
 Of Hearing, Meditating, Practice.
 The Monarch, like the sun, appeared!
 In mind she recognized the visage,
 But could not find the words to speak.
 Channeling through Six Modes of Consciousness,
 She found a way to pass it on.
 Her hand then passed it to the needle,
 The needle passed it to the thread:
 And how much more than just a needle!
 The skillfulness incalculable!
 Perhaps the needle was a Buddha,
 Buddhas number in the millions!
 For if it was not itself a Buddha,
 How could this image have materialized?
 And who now merges both of these [the artist and the needle?]
 Into the Gateway Never Dual?
 Hands together, reverently praising
 Is this Old Man of the Eastern Slope. (Translation by Jonathan Chaves)

Representations of Merōfu Kannon by women are comparatively rare. To date I have seen only five images of Merōfu purported to have been made by a woman: four by Empress Tōfukumon'in and one by Abbess Gen'yō. The choice of *oshie* as the media was probably initiated by Tōfukumon'in, who is known to have excelled in this craft. In addition to the Merōfu images discussed here, various *oshie* attributed to Empress Tōfukumon'in are known; the subjects—mostly secular—include famous poets and scenes from noh drama. Several are in the collections of temples or shrines.²⁵ Among her *oshie* the only other religious subject I have seen is Tōtō Tenjin 渡唐天神 (Tenjin who went over to China), a patron deity of scholarship and literature.

Yamakawa Aki 山川暁, Associate Curator of Costumes and Textiles at the Kyoto National Museum, has pointed out that the brocade fabrics used in Tōfukumon'in's Merōfu images resemble *meibutsugire* 名物裂 used for the covers or pouches for precious tea ceremony utensils. In other words, rather than pieces of her own robes, she used “special” fabrics prized for their beauty and

25. Kōshōji 興聖寺 in Uji; Shōgōin 聖護院 in Kyoto; Sada Tenmangu 佐太天満宮 in Osaka. There is also one example in the Omotesenke 表千家 collection. For some illustrations, see TAKEDA 1980, plates 94–96.

rarity. *Meibutsugire* were also utilized in the mounting of hanging scrolls. The superb artistry of Tōfukumon'in's *oshie* was recognized by aesthetes; upon seeing her *Ono no Komachi* 小野小町, the tea master Sen Sōtan 千宗旦 (1578–1658) asked the Daitokuji priest Ten'yū 天祐 to write an inscription and had them mounted together as a single scroll—evidence that her *oshie* were considered on the same level as paintings (*Genhaku Sōtan monjo* 元伯宗旦文書 177; quoted in KAGOTANI 1985, 89).

I can only speculate that Tōfukumon'in's step-daughter was so impressed with the Empress's Merōfu Kannon *oshie* images that she tried her hand at this medium, too. Compared to paintings, *oshie* have a three-dimensional, tactile quality, and the fabrics impart a luxurious touch which further emphasized the beauty of Merōfu. Tōfukumon'in was not known as a painter—she was apparently more comfortable with expressing herself in the medium of *oshie*. Tōfukumon'in clearly established the “standard” for the depiction of Merōfu Kannon in seventeenth-century aristocratic circles, which was copied by women in her arena. The five versions presently known to me are discussed in detail below.

Eigenji Version

Perhaps the best known of Tōfukumon'in's Merōfu images is the one she presented to Eigenji 永源寺 (FIGURE 4) in Shiga Prefecture. After Isshi Bunshu became abbot of Eigenji in 1643, Tōfukumon'in donated twenty-eight *kanme* (pounds) of silver for the rebuilding of the Hōjō 方丈 in 1646, ten taels of gold for a memorial service honoring the three hundredth anniversary of its founding in 1655, and thirty taels of gold to purchase a complete set of the Buddhist scriptures (*Daizō-kyō*, 大藏經) from China in 1672.²⁶ According to the document



FIGURE 4. *Oshie* Merōfu Kannon by Tōfukumon'in. Eigenji. Photograph courtesy of Rittō History Museum.

26. “Eigenji nenpu” 永源寺年譜 in SHIGA-KEN KYŌIKU INKAI JIMUKYOKU BUNKAZAI HOGOKA 1998, 574–75.

“Merōfu Kannon gofukukan” 馬郎婦觀音御副翰 preserved at Eigenji, which is a letter from one of her attendants to Isshi’s successor, Tōfukumon’in had promised Isshi that she would make and donate an image of Merōfu Kannon to Eigenji.²⁷ However, Isshi died in the third month of 1646 before the pledge was fulfilled. The undated letter states that Tōfukumon’in is honoring her vow by donating an image. According to the *Zuiseki rekidai zakki* 瑞石歷代雜記 (vol. 7) published in 1847, the donation was made in the eighth month of 1646 (SHIGA-KEN KYŌIKU IINKAI JIMUKYOKU BUNKAZAI HOGOKA 1998, 574). However, the “Butchō Kokushi nenpu” 佛頂國師年譜 (1698) included in Isshi’s collected sayings (*Jōe Myōkō Butchō Kokushi goroku* 定慧明光佛頂國師語錄, T no. 2565, vol. 81: 188.) records that Tōfukumon’in donated an image of Merōfu that she had “embroidered” in 1645, which would have been while Isshi was still alive. The *nenpu* goes on to describe the image as “fine and delicate, its benevolent form otherworldly.” Presumably this is the *oshie* image in FIGURE 4. The discrepancy in dates is puzzling, but the text of the letter from Tōfukumon’in’s attendant supplies convincing evidence that the donation was made after Isshi’s death.

The Eigenji Merōfu image is housed in a black lacquered shrine whose interior is covered with gold leaf and also painted. On the back of the shrine is the following inscription written by Isshi’s successor Josetsu Bungan 如雪文岩 (1601–1671), which is dated approximately ten years after the image was donated to Eigenji.

Image of Merōfu made of gold brocade by an imperial princess in the palace of the Keichō emperor [Gomizuno-o]. When my former teacher Isshi became abbot at this temple, instructions had been made to donate it. Because of that, [her] instructions were unfaithfully carried out, and the pledged donation will become a spiritual treasure for successive generations at this temple.

Third year of Meireki [1657], tenth month, on an auspicious day
Respectfully written by Josetsu Bungan of Zuiseki-zan Eigenji

金襴裁製馬郎婦之尊像者
慶長皇帝女院御所之親王也先師一絲住山之時
曾蒙可下賜之旨矣以故令不爽其信寄附于當
寺焉永代相傳可為靈寶者也
明曆第三丁酉祀十月吉祥日
瑞石山永源寺
如雪叟文岩誌焉

The robes of Merōfu are composed of pieces of five different kinds of brocade fabric, the largest segment with a rivershell pattern. Plain weave silk was used for the face, hands, and feet as well as the scroll (*Kannon Sutra*) she holds and

27. For the text of the letter, see SHIGA-KEN KYŌIKU IINKAI JIMUKYOKU BUNKAZAI HOGOKA 1998, 453–54.



FIGURE 5. *Oshie* Merōfu Kannon by Tōfukumon'in. Enshōji.

the belt is the same fabric as that in the lower hem of the Eigenji Merōfu Kannon. The head, hands, and feet are of paper, and the scroll held in her hands is made of silk. The hair of Merōfu appears to be black thread, although some of the fringes of the hairline around her face are painted in ink. The figure was mounted on a gold-paper-covered wooden panel, which has a silk border frame. It is housed in a black lacquer shrine with gold leaf ornamenting the inside of the doors.

Tōfukumon'in was an important patron for Enshōji. In addition to persuading her half brother Tokugawa Iemitsu to grant the temple land, she herself provided funding for the initial construction of buildings. She also made donations of Buddhist paintings commissioned from professional artists.²⁸ The fact that this image of Merōfu Kannon was one Tōfukumon'in created herself made it a "special" donation. Since the founder of Enshōji, Bunchi, was a pupil of Isshi, one cannot help but suppose that the connection with Isshi and his promotion of this deity discussed above was a factor in Tōfukumon'in's donation of a Merōfu Kannon to Enshōji.

for the edges of her white under-robe. The defining contour lines as well as facial features are drawn in ink. According to temple tradition, Tōfukumon'in cut some of her own hair and attached it to the figure; however, recent analysis by Hanafusa Miki 花房美紀 reveals that the coiffure is comprised of black thread coated with lacquer or *nikawa*. The figure stands approximately 49.5 cm. high. It is mounted on silk background with painted gold clouds, and attached to a metalwork lotus pedestal and an openwork mandorla (almond-shaped aureole of light) with flamelike swirls, which measures 81.5 x 32.5 cm.

Enshōji Version

Tōfukumon'in presented an almost identical *oshie* Merōfu Kannon (FIGURE 5) to the princess-nun Daitō Bunchi 大通文智, founder of Enshōji 圓照寺 in Nara. The only difference is in the choice of fabrics (four kinds) for Merōfu's clothing, although the dark blue brocade forming

28. For example, an Amida triad *raigo* painting and *nehan-zu* by Tosa Mitsuoiki 土佐光起.

Bunchi had the Merōfu Kannon installed in a shrine in 1691 and asked her half brother, Shinkei Shinnō 真敬親王 (1649–1706), of Ichijōin 一乘院 at Kōfukuji 興福寺, to add an inscription. By this time, Tōfukumon'in had died, but presumably she had presented it to Bunchi while she was still alive. The dedicatory inscription reads from left to right. Shinkei wrote out the Chinese verse by Siming Deben cited earlier, and then recorded that the Merōfu Kannon was made by Tōfukumon'in, and that in the autumn of 1691, Bunchi asked him to inscribe a verse.

Unfortunately, according to my informants at Enshōji, at present there is no known record of where this Merōfu image was originally placed nor of any rituals connected with it.

Enjuji Version

A third Merōfu Kannon image attributed to Tōfukumon'in (FIGURE 6) is in the collection of Enjuji, a Rinzai Zen temple belonging to the Eigenji school, located in Hikone 彦根 city in Shiga Prefecture. This temple also has a connection with Isshi, for the chief priest during Tōfukumon'in's lifetime, Sesshin Shōzen 拙心正千 (1630–1705), trained under Isshi and later became the eighty-seventh abbot of Eigenji. However, this Merōfu Kannon does not seem to have been a direct gift from Tōfukumon'in to Enjuji, but rather, according to the *Merōfu enki* 馬郎婦縁記²⁹ (1725) in the temple's collection, it was originally owned by the once wealthy merchant Takuma Jizaemon 宅間治左衛門 living in Hirose village 廣瀬村 in the Funakyo district 船居郡 of Tanba, whose descendents had squandered the family fortune and were forced to sell off all of their possessions. Jizaemon's aunt purportedly received this image when she served as an attendant to Tōfukumon'in during the Kan'ei era. The *Merōfu enki* describes it as being almost identical to the Merōfu Kannon which Tōfukumon'in donated to Eigenji. The Enjuji image was purchased from the Takuma family by a Mr. Okada, who, in turn, fell on hard times and needed to sell things quickly. The author of the *Merōfu enki*, chief priest of Enjuji, Ikei Saidō 威敬西堂 (d. 1753), heard about the image from Mr. Okada, and upon seeing it, bought it on the spot. By then it had passed through many hands and had not been well cared for, so he had it cleaned and restored. When the priest's granddaughter died, it was donated to Enjuji as an offering for her happiness in the next world.

The version of the *Merōfu enki* currently owned by the temple is a 1819 transcription of the original 1725 document made by the chief priest at that time, Taisū Kyō 岱崇恭. The first section, part of which was summarized above, is followed by a passage written in a different hand, stating that Tōfukumon'in made two images of Merōfu, one of which was presented to Eigenji, and the other to Priest Sesshin 拙心 of Enjuji. This addendum is neither dated or signed; I

29. I am grateful to the current chief priest of Enjuji, Yokoi Daiyū 横井大用, for providing me with this document.

believe that it was appended later in an attempt to strengthen the attribution to Tōfukumon'in.

The image is housed in a black lacquer shrine, and stands 52.6 cm. high. While clearly based upon the same model, the Enjuji version displays some significant differences from the Eigenji and the Enshōji Merōfu Kannon images. The fabrics used are rather plain in comparison, and the yellow undergarment is painted, rather than made of fabric. Moreover, the form of the figure varies slightly; the head is smaller and the neck is more slender, the face lacks the two lines between nose and mouth, and the curve of the left sleeve does not billow outward, but follows the vertical line of the body. The rough-weave silk background is also uncharacteristic of Tōfukumon'in's *oshie*. Rather than mounting the image on a lotus pedestal, surrounded by a mandorla of billowing flames as in the Eigenji version, the lotus pedestal and clouds, as well as a canopy above Merōfu Kannon's head, have been painted on the background. How much of the original may have been altered in the eighteenth-century restoration (and possibly later ones) is an important question. However, given the present differences and the fact that the authenticity cannot be confirmed by existing documents, it seems likely that the Enjuji version was modeled upon the famous Eigenji version, and thus should be considered as belonging to the Tōfukumon'in tradition, but perhaps not created by Tōfukumon'in herself.

Jissōin Version

A fourth Merōfu Kannon by Empress Tōfukumon'in (FIGURE 7) has recently come to light at Jissōin 実相院 in Iwakura. It has long been thought to be a portrait of Sanmi no Tsubone 三位局 (1583–1658), who was first married to Ashikaga Yoshihiro 足利義廣 (1572–1605) and after his death became a wife of Emperor



FIGURE 6. *Oshie* Merōfu Kannon attributed to Tōfukumon'in. Enjuji. Photograph courtesy of Hikone Castle Museum.



FIGURE 7. *Oshie* Merōfu Kannon by Tōfukumon'in. Jissōin.

Goyōzei 後陽成 (1571–1617). Sanmi no Tsubone bore three sons, one of whom became abbot of Jissōin. The Jissōin *oshie* is nearly identical to the images by Tōfukumon'in discussed above, and an examination of old temple records clarified its identity as a Merōfu Kannon from the hand of Empress Tōfukumon'in.³⁰ It was given to Sanmi no Tsubone by Tōfukumon'in and until the late nineteenth century, was preserved at the temple she founded in Iwakura—Shōkōji 證光寺. (Shōkōji was abandoned during the turmoil at the end of the Edo period, and its images and records were transferred to Jissōin.) The image's "reidentification" as Sanmi no Tsubone was probably the result of fading memories and deaths of informed people, lack of written records, and discontinuation of rituals that maintained the identity of Merōfu.³¹

The Jissōin Merōfu Kannon is pasted onto a plain-weave silk background, which is attached to a wooden panel (61.1 x 28.5 cm.) housed in a black lacquer shrine similar to the previous examples. There is a loop attached to the top of the panel, and inside the shrine, a hook from which to hang it, so it originally must have been suspended. Five different brocade fabrics were used to form Merōfu's robes, and plain weave silk for the white under-robe and the scroll she is holding. Three of the fabrics are the same fabrics used in the Eigenji Merōfu Kannon, one of which is the dark blue brocade also appearing in the Enshōji image. The head, neck, chest, hands, and feet, as well as lotus petals, were made from cut pieces of paper. Merōfu's features were deftly painted with ink, and black thread, possibly coated with something like *nikawa* or lacquer, was glued to the head to form the coiffure. The lotus pedestal on which Merōfu stands

30. The earliest record of this image is the *Kita Iwakura Shōkōji jūmotsu shodōguchō* 北岩倉證光寺什物諸道具帳 (1687). It appears in a list of objects in the Buddha hall as: 女郎婦 東福門院御作龕入一躰. However, in a later record dated 1720 (*Hōenzan Shōkōji ki* 法圓山證光寺記, Record of Hōenzan Shōkōji), Tōfukumon'in's Merōfu Kannon had become reidentified as Sanmi no Tsubone. See FISTER 2007.

31. Greg LEVINE (2005) discusses the issue of reidentification of images in a chapter titled "The Frailty of Likeness."

is similar to the Enjuji version, lending support to the former's attribution to Tōfukumon'in. However, there are no clouds in the Jissōin version, which has the added decoration of trinkets dangling from the tips of the flower petals. The border of gold peonies on a green background resembles brocade fabric, but actually consists of pigments painted directly on the silk background.

At some point, presumably after Sanmi no Tsubone's death, a sculpture of her was carved and donated to Shōkōji, presumably as a way of memorializing her as the temple's founder (FIGURE 8). According to temple lore, the sculpture was modeled after the *oshie* image by Tōfukumon'in. The costume, coiffure, and pose are certainly similar, and although one of the statue's arms is broken off, it appears that the figure once held a scroll. The sculpture was placed inside the shrine with the *oshie* Merōfu Kannon, which by 1720 had become identified as Sanmi no Tsubone. According to the inscription on the back of the sculpture, it was donated by Princess Sannomiya 三宮 (1625–1675), a daughter of Tōfukumon'in and Gomizuno-o who had a palace in Iwakura. Since Sannomiya was surely aware of the identity of the *oshie* by her mother, I wonder if she came up with the idea of depicting Sanmi no Tsubone in the guise of Merōfu, equating Sanmi with Merōfu because of her devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*. (Sanmi no Tsubone was an adherent of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism which focused worship on this sutra.) There are examples of other portraits which were intentionally “overlaid” on Buddhist images to show their identification/deification, for example Takeda Shingen 武田信玄 (1521–1573) as Fudō Myōō and Arakawa Akiuji 荒川詮 (fl. fifteenth century) as Vimalakirti (LEVINE 2005, 65). In any case, the Merōfu Kannon presented by Empress Tōfukumon'in to Sanmi no Tsubone testifies to the bond shared by these two imperial women devotees of Buddhism—a bond posthumously strengthened by the creation of a sculptural portrait of Sanmi no Tsubone based on the *oshie* Merōfu Kannon.

Shōmyōji Version

There is one more *oshie* Merōfu Kannon image (FIGURE 9), probably modeled after one of Tōfukumon'in's, which was made



FIGURE 8. Portrait Sculpture of Sanmi no Tsubone. Jissōin.

by Princess Abbess Shōzan Gen'yō 照山元瑤, the eighth daughter of Emperor Gomizuno-o. Her mother was Hōshunmon'in 逢春門院, but she was adopted by Tōfukumon'in at the age of five. Gen'yō was a devout Buddhist from her youth and she never married, receiving the bodhisattva precepts at the age of thirty-two (1665). After her father's death in 1680, she took formal vows and had her resi-



FIGURE 9. *Oshie* Merōfu Kannon by Shōzan Gen'yō. Shōmyōji. Photograph courtesy of Rittō History Museum.

dence at Shūgakuin 修学院 transformed into the temple Rinkyūji 林丘寺. Abbess Gen'yō was an avid painter of Buddhist imagery, especially Kannon, and also produced miniature statues of Kannon fashioned from powdered incense (FISTER 2003, plates 4, 5, and 6). This is the only *oshie* I have seen by Gen'yō, but I suspect she may have done others, since it was a popular activity among court women.

At first glance the image resembles a hanging scroll painting. Above Gen'yō has inscribed a poem from the *Shasekishū* 沙石集 (1283) titled “Kiyomizu [Kannon] no goei” 清水の御詠 (NKBT 85: 223–24). Based on a similar poem in the *Shinkokinshū*,³² it is a prayer to Kannon, which does not name Merōfu. *Sashimogusa* or mugwort, here representative of wild grasses or weeds, is a metaphor for all sentient beings.

We earnestly look to you
for salvation while
we are living in this world—
the mugwort of
Shimejigahara.³³

tada tanome/Shimejigahara no/sashimogusa
ware yo no naka ni/aramu kagiri wa

ただ憑めしめちが原のさしもぐさ
我世の中にあらむかぎりは

The robes of the Shōmyōji Merōfu Kannon were made with two different brocade fabrics: one for the main robe and one for the sash. In terms of the choice of fabrics, Abbess Gen'yō's version is more modest than Empress Tōfukumon'in's.

32. *Shinkokinwakashū* 新古今和歌集; SKT 1, No. 1916/1917. The poem reads: なほたのめしめちがはらのさせもぐさ我がよの中にあらむかぎりは。

33. The place name Shimejigahara appears often in ancient *waka*, and was reputed to be a site rich in the herb plants moxa and mugwort.

The head, hands, and feet of Merōfu were drawn on silk, which was cut out and pasted on the paper. Unlike the previous examples, the hair has been rendered with brushlines rather than black thread. This is not surprising, since Gen'yō's forte was painting.

The image (102.8×38.9 cm) is mounted in a plain wooden shrine. On the interior of one of the doors is pasted a piece of paper reading “Merōfu Kannon image made and inscribed by Akenomiya” 緋宮御自製並讚 馬郎婦觀音尊像. (Akenomiya 緋宮 was Abbess Gen'yō's childhood given name). The image was donated by Gen'yō to the Ōbaku temple Shōmyōji 正明寺 in Shiga Prefecture, a temple which had been restored by Emperor Gomizuno-o. The priest Isshi Bunshu discussed above was also involved in the restoration of Shōmyōji, and Gomizuno-o hoped to appoint him as “restorer,” but Isshi died before the rebuilding was completed. Following in her father's footsteps, Abbess Gen'yō became an important patron of Shōmyōji. This is one of many works that she donated over the years. Since her step-mother had donated an image to Eigenji on Priest Isshi's behalf, it is possible that Isshi may have been in Abbess Gen'yō's mind when she presented this image to Shōmyōji. In 1718 she presented a complete transcription of the *Lotus Sutra* to Shōmyōji and had it enshrined in a stone pagoda. Her donation of this Merōfu Kannon, who symbolizes the promotion and efficacy of the *Lotus Sutra*, may also be linked to this endeavor.

*Chinese Prototype for Merōfu Kannon Images
by Empress Tōfukumon'in and Abbess Gen'yō*

The figure type seen in all of the above examples appears to be based on a Chinese model. While the exact prototype for Empress Tōfukumon'in's images cannot be confirmed, there is a compositionally identical Southern Song /Yuan painting of Merōfu Kannon published as being in the collection of Nakamura Katsugorō 中村勝五郎 (FIGURE 10). The hanging scroll is done with ink on paper, with dimensions of 64.4×25.3 cm. It has an inscription by priest Zhuoweng Ruyan 拙翁如琰 (1151–1225).³⁴ The seal in the lower right, reading “Dōyū” 道有 is a seal of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義滿 (1358–1408) indicating that the scroll was once in his collection. Many paintings from the Ashikaga shogunal collection made their way into Tokugawa family collections,³⁵ so it is conceivable that Tōfukumon'in may have had access to this particular painting.

A quick comparison reveals that the *oshie* images discussed above all follow the basic composition of the Chinese painting. The pose, including the tilt of the head, coiffure, positioning of hands, scroll, and feet, is nearly identical, along with the outer contours of the garments. Using fabrics to replicate the robes,

34. The inscription reads: 「雲鬢垂々丰姿濟々 日視蓮經鈎頭有餌 貧他底恙他底 金沙灘頭風波 未已 徑山比丘 如琰敬贊」.

35. GUTH 1989, 49. I am grateful to Patricia Graham for calling my attention to this reference.

Empress Tōfukumon'in has elaborated a little, making the hemline more curved, and extending and broadening the sash. The major difference compositionally between the colorful *oshie* and austere *sumie* painting lies in the shape of the face and facial features. The faces of the Japanese images more closely resemble Japanese paintings of beauties than the Chinese model.

Empress Tōfukumon'in surely had ample opportunities to view Chinese paintings, and it is likely that she made or had a drawing made of one she admired. Or her inspiration may have been a Japanese painting of Merōfu modeled after a Chinese example. In any case, the ultimate prototype for the *oshie* images by Empress Tōfukumon'in and Abbess Genyō can be traced back to Song/Yuan China, the period when Merōfu rose to popularity in Chan and literati circles.

Conclusion

Questions still remain concerning the significance and ritual usage of Merōfu images at the Japanese temples in which they were enshrined. I wondered initially if these *oshie* images were linked to the practice of donating *oshie ema* to temples and shrines. But I have not found any documentation of specific prayers or petitions connected with the *oshie* Merōfu images discussed above. Rather, it seems that they were donated by Empress Tōfukumon'in and Abbess Gen'yō, active patrons of temples as well as devotees, with the idea that Merōfu was a deity who should be venerated, presumably in connection with the *Kannon Sutra*. Merōfu symbolized the virtue and efficacy of reciting the sutras in general, and as a *hōben* of Kannon Bodhisattva, her image was also used to illuminate aspects of Buddhist doctrine, especially the goal of extinguishing passions and desires. Women were often associated negatively with sexuality, but by encouraging men to focus on sutras, Merōfu led them toward the path of detachment and inner peace, in the end, herself remaining undefiled.

Were Japanese imperial women thinking about a rotting corpse when they made the Merōfu Kannon images discussed above? Probably not. I think rather that they were attracted to the theme of beautiful, literate laywoman as bodhisattva. The Merōfu images seen here are remarkable for their ordinariness, even



FIGURE 10. Merōfu Kannon. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Private collection. KAWAKAMI et al. 1975, pl. 52.

worldliness—no auxiliary arms or heads and usually not even a halo. She was a potent symbol of female lay piety, illustrating that buddhahood was accessible without first having to be “reborn” as a man, as in the case of the Dragon King’s daughter. Merōfu was also a symbol of the all-encompassing compassion and powers of Kannon, who could assume numerous identities in response to the varied situations and needs of devotees. These aspects of Merōfu’s persona resonated particularly with women and undoubtedly underlay interest in and advocacy of Merōfu Kannon in imperial circles in seventeenth and eighteenth century Japan.

REFERENCES

ABBREVIATIONS

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