In early modern Japan, for Buddhist temples endowed with famed “secret Buddhas,” the kaichō was a lucrative means of public fundraising. In particular, at a time when a large-scale project such as building or repairing a Main Hall required sizable funding, many temples often turned to holding kaichō events, during which lay Buddhists evinced a spectacular enthusiasm for the secret Buddhas that were on display. Through the example of Zenkōji, this article reveals that the popularity of kaichō, which was unique to Japanese Buddhist culture, was fostered as well as manipulated within traditional Japanese ideas regarding yorishiro (lodging place), saijitsu (ritual date), and marebito (visitor-deity). The aura of secrecy and mystery surrounding, and inseparable from, kaichō deities was used not only for the benefit of kaichō temples but also for the benefit of kaichō visitors.

**KEYWORDS:** fundraising—Zenkōji Triad—yorishiro (lodging place)—saijitsu (ritual date)—marebito (visitor-deity)

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The Main Hall (Nyorai Hall) of the Zenkōji Temple in Nagano, completed in 1707 and now designated a national treasure, represents the Buddhist architectural style of the mid-Edo period, with its thatched roofing composed of layers of cypress bark (hiwadabuki). The magnitude of the building is imposing: its T-shaped wooden bell hammer (shumoku) measures 24 meters long, 54 meters deep, and 30 meters high. In constructing this building, Zenkōji spent 24,577 koban gold ryō (Kobayashi 1979, 41–42). Given that it only held a land grant of 1,000 koku in 1707, which would yield no more than 500 koban gold ryō a year as a regular source of income, how was Zenkōji able to raise the huge amount required for building expenses? The answer lies in the kaichō (lit. “opening of a curtain”), which was conducted for five and a half years between 1701 and 1706. These kaichō exhibitions, which were known as “all-around-the-country” (kaikoku kaichō), enabled the Zenkōji administration to generate an income of more than 23,000 koban gold ryō during this time (Kobayashi 1979, 39–40). With this money, Zenkōji was able to rebuild its Main Hall, which had been lost to a fire in 1642 and replaced with a temporary structure in 1650 and again in 1666.

Throughout the late seventeenth century, Zenkōji made vigorous efforts to erect a new Main Hall. Prior to the major endeavor launched in 1701, in 1692–1694 Zenkōji officials had thrown themselves into a Santo kaichō (a tri-city kaichō held at Ekōin in Edo for 55 days, at Shinnyodō in Kyoto for 66 days, and at Tennōji in Osaka for 54 days). The Santo kaichō of 1692–1694 turned out to be quite successful, netting more than 25,000 koban gold ryō. However, despite this, the attempt to build a new Main Hall failed miserably. In 1694, Zenkōji officials secured a site for the new hall north of the existing temporary hall, and three years later they began building it. In 1700, during construction, a massive fire broke out in the front district of the temple. It consumed almost all of the temple buildings as well as the piles of lumber that were to be used for the construction of a new Main Hall (McCallum 1994, 171).

Luckily, in 1700, the newly installed leaders (Keiun of Daikanjin 大勧進 and Chizen of Daihongan 大本願) of Zenkōji were related to Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu 柳沢吉保 (1658–1714), Shōgun Tsunayoshi’s right-hand man in the bakufu (Keiun was his nephew and Chizen was his daughter). Thus, they were able to secure a permit from the bakufu and to launch an all-around-the-

1. One koban gold ryō was worth about 1 koku of rice (1 koku = 180.39 liters).
country kaichō in 1701. During this nationwide fundraising campaign, Keiun exercised strong leadership, and this eventually led to the successful construction of Zenkōji’s towering Main Hall.

Kaichō events, which, in theory, were designed to provide people with special opportunities for worship in the context of Buddhist merit-making, were used mainly for fundraising purposes. Whenever possible, the Zenkōji administration made good use of kaichō events to raise funds for building and other major projects. The bakufu and local domains, which were finding it increasingly difficult to provide funding to temples, began to allow the latter to collect “clean monies” from their lay followers. This system was known as kange 勧化 (exhortation of Buddha’s teachings), and it enabled Buddhist temples to solicit donations directly from the populace by holding a kaichō or even by demanding specific donations from a given area or region. This type of fundraising, which posed an extra burden upon the public, was subject to the approval of the government. For example, when a temple wanted to hold a kaichō in Edo, Osaka, or Kyoto, it had to appeal to the bakufu’s Magistrate of Temples and Shrines, who, through permission-granting procedures, would try to regulate the frequency and duration of a kaichō. Bakufu officials tried to ensure that temples did not depend too heavily on these events for their finances. In Edo, the government tried to grant only five permits per season and to limit exhibitions to sixty days per permit. Furthermore, the bakufu stipulated that an institution could hold a regular kaichō only at thirty-three-year intervals. In practice, however, these policies did not mean much. It was not uncommon for a kaichō to last sixty to eighty days, and there were often five to ten simultaneous “exhibitions” occurring at any given time. It seemed to be quite easy to persuade bakufu officials to grant “special” permission to prominent temples to hold special kaichō events..

As a matter of fact, the bakufu’s leniency toward special kaichō events was not entirely incompatible with its own interests. As Hiruma Hisashi points out, the bakufu’s policy toward kaichō was related to its attempts to deal with its own financial woes. Due to fiscal constraints, the bakufu found it increasingly difficult

2. Since Zenkōji had successfully completed a special kaichō only six years previously, it was not easy for it to obtain permission for another special kaichō so soon. Permission for a special kaichō involving multiple domains and jurisdictions was especially hard to get because the final decision had to come from the Shogun through the mediation of state elders. And this was far beyond the level of the Magistrate of Temples and Shrines. The lobby of Daikanjin and Daihongan, who had blood connections with Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, was a decisive factor in Zenkōji’s ability to secure permission from the bakufu. For more details, see Kitamura 2001, 32–35.

3. For a comprehensive chronology of major kaichō, including degaichō, held in Edo during the Tokugawa period, see Nishiyama et al, 1994, 776–849.

4. For a comprehensive list of kaichō permissions given by the bakufu’s Magistrate of Temples and Shrines from 1733 to 1852, see Asakura 2001, 1–34.
to provide direct grants-in-aid even to temples of national importance. Instead, it allowed them to raise funds through kaichō events or other forms of direct, albeit decorous, public solicitation (Hiruma 1973, 24–26).

The Zenkōji administration was quite successful in persuading the bakufu to permit it to hold special kaichō events in the Santo and along Japan’s major travel routes. Among Zenkōji’s special kaichō events, the most successful was the all-around-the-country kaichō of 1701 to 1706, which eventually enabled it to rebuild its Main Hall. Lay Buddhists who responded to this special kaichō event transformed Zenkōji into one of the most prominent religious fundraisers in early modern Japan. What led to people’s religious interests and the kaichō enterprise being so seamlessly fused? The cultural context of kaichō poses a puzzle. By exploring some specific examples of Zenkōji’s kaichō events, this article reveals that the religious worship and economic enterprise that merged so spectacularly during these events were grounded in Japan’s distinctive religious culture.

The Kaichō of Zenkōji

Kaichō, or “opening of a curtain,” refers to the special public exhibition of a hibutsu (secret Buddha) which is otherwise enshrined in a sealed receptacle and kept “secret” behind its “curtain.” A kaichō is therefore a special religious event that provides an opportunity for worshippers to come face to face with a secret Buddha and to appeal directly to its compassion. A kaichō could be held either at the home temple (ikaichō) or at an outside temple (degaichō). If it were held at the latter, this entailed moving the sealed receptacle from its home temple.

The kaichō held at the home temple of Zenkōji was called goekō (transference of Buddhist merit). During the Edo period, Zenkōji conducted sixteen goekō events: the first was held in 1730 and the last was held in 1865. The intervals between these events did not follow any particular schedule. There were three basic reasons (sometimes occurring separately, sometimes in combination) for holding them: (1) the completion of continuous major multi-year devotional rituals involving diurnal and nocturnal nenbutsu-chanting (1730, 1762, 1773, 1785, 1799, 1811, 1821, 1832, 1847, 1865); (2) the completion of a major degaichō (1742, 1799, 1804, 1811); and (3) the completion of major construction or repair projects involving the Main Hall, entrance gates, roofs, or the canon storage area (1745, 1759, 1791, 1832, 1840, 1865) (Kobayashi 1973, 153–55).

There were two categories of degaichō: (1) Santo (tri-city) kaichō and (2) kai-koku (all-around-the-country) kaichō. In the case of the former, the format was fixed: it was first held in Edo and then moved to Kyoto and Osaka in the following year or the year after. Altogether, there were three Santo kaichō during the Edo period (1692–1694, 1740–1741, and 1778–1780), and the levels of income from these events reflected the changing economic strengths of the three
cities.\(^5\) The *kaikoku kaichō*, which were held four times during the Edo period (1701–1706, 1745–1748, 1780–1782, and 1794–1798), required a large amount of preparatory work, and were very expensive, proved to be quite lucrative.\(^6\) In the *kaikoku kaichō*, the duration of hibutsu exhibitions in a given place did not usually exceed five days.

**What is Kaichō for?**

In 1829, the subtemple (*jinai* 寺内) and residents (*monzen* 門前) who lived in front of it petitioned the Zenkōji administration, which, at that time, was planning to hold a *kaikoku kaichō*.

Over the past few years, the economy has been in bad shape. All merchant families are hard pressed for money and their businesses have not prospered. Due to this, some families in trouble even sell their wives and children as prostitutes or abandon their old parents and run away to Edo…. We earnestly ask that a goekō of the Nyorai be held next year. If so, money will pour in from other provinces, and the residents will naturally be stabilized and people’s minds will calm down. (Kobayashi 1973, 156)

Daikanjin Kōdō 昆道, the top administrator of Zenkōji, accepted the petition, and he soon abandoned his plan to hold a *degaichō*. In its stead, a *kaichō* at the home temple was held in 1832, and the “bad” economic situation of the Zenkōji community was considerably improved.

In 1835, however, Kōjun 光純 was newly installed as Daikanjin and announced another plan to conduct a massive *kaikoku kaichō*, the aim being to kick-start his tenure with considerable fanfare. The residents of subtemples immediately appealed to Kōjun. Here, again, we see clearly how *kaichō* events were intricately entwined with the Zenkōji economy.

The people of subtemples (*jichū* 寺中) are very poorly paid. In ordinary times, they run inns for the visitors’ guides, and conduct, through the mediation of those guides, merit-making rituals for the ancestors and parents [of lay worshippers] through the mediation of these guides, or offer rites of Buddhist lineage connection (*kechimyaku* 血脈) [for lay worshippers]. They make a living by conducting services like these, which generate income. If a *kaikoku kaichō* is conducted, all those merit-making rituals, rites of Buddhist karmic connection, *goimon* 御印文 (stamping the seal), and so forth will be moved away

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5. In 1803 and 1820, respectively, a Santo *kaichō* was planned, but it was limited to Edo due to the need to shorten the time the *hibutsu* was away from home.

6. For more details, see Asakura 2001, 146–52. For which items were carried, displayed, and transacted at a *degaichō*, see Ambros 2004, 10–17.
from the home temple. If that happens, the people of subtemples will not be able to survive. (Kobayashi 1973, 156–57)

The “front-district” residents delivered a similar petition to the head monk, asking that the Nyorai not be taken away from the Main Hall for a degaichō event. The petitioners even threatened to use force to ensure that this did not happen. Clearly, tensions ran high.

The Zenkōji front-district residents, who depended upon the temple economy, argued that even the temporary absence of its central object of worship—the Nyorai—would increase their economic woes. They insisted that their best shot at reviving the distressed economy would be to hold a kaichō at home as that would get “monies pouring in from other provinces.” For them, the kaichō was simply a means of attracting customers. Similarly, the subtemple residents—that is, the managers of and workers at subtemple lodges and religious halls—argued that their livelihood, too, was dependent upon external worshippers who visited the Zenkōji Nyorai and, in particular, upon their guides, who channeled Zenkōji followers to Zenkōji rituals and worship activities (Kobayashi 1973, 120–21).

As far as those who made a living in the Zenkōji community (including monks, workers, merchants, and temple personnel) were concerned, more than anything else, the kaichō meant an opportunity for financial gain or loss. In 1835, under mounting pressure from all sides, a group of temple officials submitted the following letter to Daikanjin Kōjun:

If you proceed to go ahead with your plan of kaikoku [kaichō] at a time like this, it would certainly invite a great disturbance. In such a case, some 4,000 or 5,000 people in the temple land would start a riot and it would be beyond what the temple monks could possibly handle. There are so many people who rely for a living upon outside visitors of worship for a living, along the entering routes leading to Zenkōji. So nobody knows what kind of trouble is going to happen [if you insist on the kaikoku kaichō]. (Kobayashi 1973, 157)

The threat was real. In distress, Kōjun gave up his plan, using the excuse that the disease in his leg would not allow him to travel. Three years later, he resigned from his position. For Zenkōji worshippers, however, kaichō was primarily a religious event. When a kaichō was held, laypeople visited the temple to worship and view the secret Buddha, which was normally hidden from the public gaze. When visitors attended a kaichō, they would customarily pay an admission fee at the entrance and toss an offering, usually consisting of coins, into the offertory box set up at the display site. But the core of their activity involved face-to-face worship of the kaichō deity. After having engaged in worship and prayer activi-

7. For the temple holding the kaichō, numerous small donations in the form of entrance fees and offertory coins usually proved to be far more lucrative than did the few large donations that
ties, visitors usually proceed to enjoy the *kaichō* as a recreational opportunity, a diversion from their daily routines. Not surprisingly, when a *kaichō* was held, its temple site was quickly transformed into a bustling market and place of entertainment, where all kinds of sellers and street performers catered to visitors.

**Questions about Kaichō**

The *kaichō* exhibition, which prospered from the early modern period, is an idiosyncratic Buddhist cultural event most commonly found in Japan. *Kaichō* is certainly inseparable from Buddhism; however, interestingly, it betrays the very spirit of Buddhism. We cannot find any Buddhist scripture that suggests that the image of a Buddhist deity can be locked up in a feretory and kept from public view. It appears even more antithetical to Buddhist teachings to suggest that the doors of that feretory can occasionally be opened and that the iconic image within can be put on display for the purpose of financial gains. In other words, the *kaichō* is premised on the notion that a special type of Buddhist compassion, exercised by the *kaichō* deity on special occasions, is extendable only to those worshippers who can afford entrance fees or who can make financial contributions to the deity’s home temple. In the *kaichō* setting, Buddhist compassion is turned into an object of financial transaction.

So far, with regard to *kaichō* events, scholars of Tokugawa religion have looked at administrative procedures, preparations, advertisements, the setting up of facilities, the collection of entrance fees and offerings, the functions of temple personnel and confraternity members, and markets and entertainment activities. Much attention has also been paid to the social infrastructure of *kaichō* events as they relate to travel, transportation, and the economy.

Questions that remain less explored are: What is the origin of the idea of secrecy attached to the *kaichō* Buddha? How was the secrecy surrounding a Buddhist image nurtured and manipulated? How was the divinity of a secret Buddha associated with and represented by its iconic image? We also need to pay attention to the fact that a *kaichō* was held only on scheduled dates and that visitors attached special meaning to their face-to-face worship of *kaichō* deities.

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8. For a doctrinal position that runs counter to the scheme of *kaichō*, see *Konkōmyōkyō* 金光明経 (念七仏品), *Bussetsu kanbutsu zanmaikaikyō* 仏説観仏三昧海経 (念七仏品) in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大蔵経, no. 643, 15.693a.

9. For major works on *kaichō* in this category, see Hiruma (1980), Kitamura (1989), and Edo Tokyo Rekishi Zaidan (1993).
The “Secret Buddha” in Zenkōji Kaichō

The origin of the Zenkōji Triad (Amida, Kannon, and Seishi)—the object of the Zenkōji kaichō—first described in the Fusō ryakki 扶桑略記 of the late Heian period, has seen many versions (McCallum 1994, 39–41). The most commonly known version goes like this: In ancient India there was a wealthy man named Gakkai 月蓋, who had a beautiful daughter named Nyoze 如是. Nyoze died suddenly but was resurrected thanks to the intercession of Amida Buddha. Out of gratitude, Gakkai sculpted an image representing the Amida Triad and venerated it.

Nearly one thousand years later, the story evolved into a scene in Paekche, an ancient kingdom on the Korean peninsula, where Gakkai was reincarnated as King Sŏngmyŏng 聖明 and the Amida Triad flew to preach to him the way of compassion. Another time, the Amida Triad traveled to Japan, where Gakkai and King Sŏngmyŏng were now reincarnated as Honda Yoshimitsu 本田善光 (his first name is read as “Zenkō”), who would bring the Triad to Shinano, enshrine it in a newly built temple, and venerate it. But Yoshimitsu soon encountered a tragedy. His son Honda Yoshisuke 本田善佐 and his wife Yayoi 弥生 suddenly died and fell to the other world, where they suffered agonies. Through the compassionate power of the Triad, they were saved from hell and ensured rebirth in paradise. Upon hearing this, Empress Kōgyoku (r. 642–645) awarded father and son with governorships and provided them with funds to build a grand temple named Zenkōji to house the Triad.

Here we see the constant themes of the Zenkōji engi 善光寺縁起 (Zenkōji chronology)—death, the other world, and rebirth—all of which find expression in the salvific power of the Zenkōji Amida. As Gakkai, Nyoze, King Sŏngmyŏng, and the Honda family all experienced, the Zenkōji Amida was able to rescue the dead from hell and to ensure their rebirth in paradise. Over time, due to its miraculous compassion, which transcended both time and space, the Zenkōji Amida came to be seen as a living Buddha who could maintain the warmth of the body, speak, write, and sing hymns (YAMANOI 1987, 238). People believed that, as the saviour of dead spirits who were suffering in hell, the Zenkōji Amida could reach anyone at any time and in any place.

But the Zenkōji Amida was soon made into a “secret Buddha” (hibutsu), and worshippers were expected to use the occasion of kaichō to gain direct access to its compassion. Legend has it that, in 645, Emperor Kōtoku (r. 642–645) ordered the Zenkōji Triad images to be kept away from public view. The following year, Honda Yoshimitsu sculpted and erected a “front-standing” replica of the original Triad images and sealed the originals away in a locked feretory (YAMANOI 1995, 114).

As far as history goes, it is known that, at least from the thirteenth century to the present, only one person has seen the original Zenkōji Triad. This occurred
in 1702, when the rumor that the Zenkōji Triad had been stolen shook the foundation of Zenkōji worship. Deeply concerned, and in an attempt to quash the damaging gossip, the Rinnōji monzeki 輪王寺門跡 (who oversaw the Zenkōji institution) dispatched a deputy monk, Genryūin Keitan 現龍院敬諶, to Zenkōji to inspect the secret Triad images. Keitan ascertained, with his own eyes, that the Zenkōji Triad was indeed well preserved in the sealed receptacle (KOBAYASHI 1973, 33–36). The original Zenkōji Triad was never shown, even on the occasion of a kaichō, which was supposed to “open up the curtain.”

As was the case at many other kaichō temples, so it was at Zenkōji: the kaichō event never actually featured the exhibition of the original Triad images. Instead, a replica of them—a set of bronze-gilt images known as Maedachi Sanzon 前立三尊 (the Triad that Stands in Front)—was put out for display and served as the locus of worship. The original Triad, which permanently vanished from public sight, still dwells in secrecy behind the curtain.

Nevertheless, the Maedachi Sanzon of Zenkōji provided viewers with an awe-inspiring presence. The central figure is the Amida Buddha. It stands on a pedestal, is approximately forty-three centimetres tall, and is the focal point of popular worship and prayer. The worshippers have neither doubted the authenticity of this replica nor questioned the veracity of its genesis. The mysterious aura of the original Triad, explicated in a variety of Zenkōji chronicles, has been somehow transplanted into the Maedachi Sanzon. The latter has, without fail, fulfilled the function of the former on the occasions of kaichō, even though it is not clear how the replica could be equated with the original.10

Kami in the Kaichō Buddha

What made lay Buddhists uphold the secrecy of kaichō Buddhas? Why did kaichō visitors believe that the secret Buddhas released special salvific grace on the occasion of public display? How did this secret Zenkōji Triad become so popular throughout the country?

Stories about the miraculous power of kaichō Buddhas were abundant, and they caught people’s attention and attracted visitors to the kaichō sites. For example, the widely circulated Zenkōji chronicles, boasting more than eighty-five versions from the Nara period (710–784) to the Taishō era (1912–1926), promoted the extraordinary compassion of the Zenkōji Triad to a nationwide audience (YAMANOE 1995, 115–16). In addition, one-page paintings featuring the Zenkōji Triad in various sizes and colors catered to the religious curiosity of laypeople

10. On the question of how the copies succeeded in functioning as the original, McCALUM (1998, 213–14) suggests that “there is some ambiguity in the conceptualization of the prime object/replication relationship, a vagueness that was perhaps purposely designed to direct attention away from the somewhat problematic status of the copies.”
throughout the country. These paintings, which were available at an affordable price during a *kaichō*, were particularly popular. In 1799, when a *kaichō* was held at Zenkōji, more than 200,000 copies of this sort of single-piece painting were sold at the Main Hall alone (KOBAYASHI 1973, 155).

The Zenkōji Triad, which was better known as the Zenkōji Amida, generated a fever of worship throughout the country in the early modern period, thanks particularly to peripatetic proselytizers known as Zenkōji *hijiri* 善光寺聖, who carried a replica of the Zenkōji Amida on their backs. The proselytizing activities of the traveling Zenkōji *hijiri*, who were associated with subtemples or lodging facilities in the Zenkōji complex, were critical in elevating the sacred aura of the secret Zenkōji Amida. Furthermore, the Zenkōji *hijiri* were instrumental in establishing branch temples of Zenkōji; they made copies of the Zenkōji Triad and established or helped to build temples for enshrining them, all of which were to be named Shin Zenkōji or, simply, Zenkōji. Currently, there are over one hundred branch temples carrying the name of Zenkōji or Shin Zenkōji, and these function as the local hubs of a nationwide Zenkōji cult.11

In addition, unlike other temples, Zenkōji did not have *danna* 檀那 (temple patrons) who were exclusively associated with it. In other words, Zenkōji differed from other temples, which were primarily devoted to serving their local patrons. The Zenkōji *hijiri* only loosely maintained their “territories of right” (known as *kasumi* 霞) for local Zenkōji believers. As a matter of fact, during the Edo period, Zenkōji maintained the system of *kasumi* territories (which were also called *mochigōri* 持郡 [possession of counties]), in which the country’s counties were divided into thirty-nine groups that corresponded to its thirty-nine subtemples. Each of these subtemples had its own accommodations and was associated with its own *sendatsu* 先達 (guides) and proselytizers. As these religious affiliates of Zenkōji subtemples also worked for other local temples and religious halls, it follows that the local patrons of Zenkōji subtemples were free to pursue religious activities not related to Zenkōji. Without maintaining any exclusive claim to patronage, the Zenkōji Amida was open to anyone, regardless of sectarian affiliation, gender, or age.

Indeed, the popularity of Zenkōji *kaichō* spread across the country. In particular, the *degaichō*, which provided local people with a rare opportunity for a face-to-face encounter with the renowned Zenkōji Amida, delivered a powerful message of universal salvation. The *degaichō* booth, which was set up along the *kaichō* route, was a miniature of Zenkōji’s Main Hall. The multiple curtains that enveloped its secret Buddha were open, facing the worshippers; the spatial

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11. According to McCallum’s (1994, 89) study, the distribution of Zenkōji, or Shin Zenkōji, is nationwide, with only Kōchi, Nagasaki, Saga, and Okinawa Prefectures lacking traces of Zenkōji establishments.
arrangements of the altar replicated the sacred geography of Zenkōji; and all necessary offertory boxes and entrance gates were in place. The *degaichō* booth, with the Amida Triad at its center, was a mobile entrance to the other world, or the Western Paradise, transplanted from Shinano (NAGANO KEN 1982, 715). At this sacred entrance, which was guarded by the Amida Buddha, worshippers were able to pray directly to the Living Buddha of Zenkōji Amida for rebirth in Paradise—as long as they could pay an entrance fee, of course. Needless to say, for the Zenkōji administration, the Zenkōji Amida, which was enormously popular and carefully moved along the heavily populated routes of the country, offered tremendous opportunities for public fundraising.

But no matter how popular or how appealing it might be, the original Zenkōji Amida remained strictly out of the public view. Its ultimate mystery was communicated only by proxy, through the Maedachi image. For their part, worshippers paid attention to the compassion of the Zenkōji Amida when it was on “display,” despite the fact that the motivating force behind *kaichō* ran counter to Buddhist teachings. They believed that the original Zenkōji Amida’s “secret” divinity was present in the image on exhibition, thus enabling them to connect with it directly through an act of worship or prayer. In fact, the structure of worship at a *kaichō* resembled that at a Shinto shrine, in which visitors stood in front of the ritual hall (*haiden* 拝殿) and prayed toward the deity that was present in the Main Hall (*honden* 本殿) or the inner hall (*okumiya* 奥宮). Traditionally, when a ritual of worship or prayer was conducted on a scheduled date, the Japanese believed that the deity in question came down from its unknown residence and manifested itself in the Main Hall.

The secrecy of a *kaichō* Buddha is grounded in the psychic structure of worship, which itself is steeped in indigenous religious ideas and practices. Yamaori Tetsuo has examined the *Shunie* 修二会 ritual (also known as the *Omizudori* お水取り ritual) held at Tōdaiji Nigatsudō 東大寺二月堂 and featuring the procession of the two secret Kannon images (the *hibutsu* of Tōdaiji) enshrined in the *Naijin* (inner hall) to the *Reidō* (worship hall) and then back to the *Naijin*. He suggests that the whole structure of the ritual for the Kannon *hibutsu* resembles the procession format of a portable shrine (*mikoshi* 神輿) in the *matsuri* (祭り, Shinto festivals), which moves from the Main Hall (*honden* 本殿) to a temporary lodge (*otabisho* 御旅所) and then back to the Main Hall (YAMAORI 1987, 169–72). The *matsuri* is premised on the belief that the deity is invited to the lodging place (*yorishiro* 依代) of a portable shrine and that the latter is then carried and temporarily installed in the *gotabisho*, where local parishioners can pay homage to their tutelary deity.

As the Tōdaiji’s *Shunie* ritual indicates, the divinity of a *kaichō* Buddha is *kami*-like: it is invisible, divisible, and amorphous, dwelling behind a veil of secrecy, yet it is associated with a specific hidden Buddhist image of which it is the temporary manifestation. Thus, while being a supernatural being, the *kaichō*
Buddha is also endowed with a certain physicality. When the hidden Buddhist image is temporarily incarnated in its iconic representation—that is, on the occasion of its kaichō—worshippers are delighted by the prospect of connecting with it directly.

*The Kaichō Buddha and Yorishiro*

Despite the kami-like traits of secret Buddhas, it should be noted that worship activities in the kaichō were not directed toward an abstract divinity but, rather, toward a specific Buddhist deity that was incarnated in a specific image. Another famed kaichō deity in early modern Japan, the Asakusa Kannon of Edo’s Sensōji Temple, is exemplary of this phenomenon.

The Asakusa Kannon refers to a small golden image of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Kannon), which was allegedly found by two fishermen in the Sumida River in 628. This tiny Kannon image, enshrined in a house that became the future Sensōji Temple, was later kept out of public sight and made “secret.” Since then, this image has elicited enormous religious veneration throughout the country (Hur 2000, 5–10). However, this particular Kannon image was not the only such image enshrined at Sensōji. In the Edo period, for example, the Sensōji precincts contained five other minor Kannon halls, all of which enshrined Kannon images of various sizes and shapes. Furthermore, flanking the Asakusa Kannon image in the Main Hall were six additional Kannon images positioned shoulder to shoulder (Matsudaira 1939, 53–63). However, in terms of religious efficacy, none of these was considered comparable to the tiny Asakusa Kannon image.

Buddhist doctrine makes no mention of a deity’s efficacy or salvific power being dependent upon the size or shape of its image. In fact, it makes no mention of a deity’s needing to be represented by an image at all. Nevertheless, images were the primary source of religious veneration and worship. And some of them were given particular prominence, as may be seen in the Zenkōji Amida. The extraordinary power of the Zenkōji Amida image, whose reputation exceeded that of all the other Amida images to be found at Zenkōji as well as throughout the country, had little to do with Buddhist doctrine. Indeed, its secret nature was contrary to Buddhist teachings pertaining to universal salvation.

Throughout its history, Zenkōji has been struck by several disastrous fires; yet it is claimed that its original Amida image somehow mysteriously survived. However, in the late sixteenth century, it was taken from the temple and kept temporarily at different places until finally being returned to Zenkōji (Okuno 1986, 106). Interestingly, the issue of whether the original image had been lost, or possibly replaced with a new one, did not seem to trouble the believers, who prayed to their “ever-present” icons at Zenkōji. As Donald McCallum (1994,
suggests, “what really traveled around was a concept, the concept of the ‘Living Buddha’ who could offer salvation to believers.” This concept of the “Living Buddha” (shōjin nyorai 生身如来), which served as the agent of miracles and salvation, was graphically revealed in the secret image of the Amida at Zenkōji. 

Zenkōji was the site of a cult whose concern was a specific image of the Zenkōji Amida—an image that was imbued with the power to perform miracles—not the abstract, universal divinity of the Buddha Amitābha.

Why did the Japanese people pay so much attention to and venerate these images? The religious icon can be viewed as a representation of the deity, a symbol of the deity, or the deity itself, but none of these interpretations fully explains why, with regard to the same deity, certain icons attract such strong religious piety while others do not. Needless to say, there were hundreds of thousands of icons representing the Buddha Amida, but they did not all have equal religious efficacy or powers of salvation. Only a few were singled out to enjoy nationwide religious veneration, and the Zenkōji Amida image topped them all. So from where did the religious power of the Zenkōji Amida come?

In order to understand this, we need to pay attention to Japanese ideas regarding a deity’s manifestation, which requires a specific yorishiro 依代, or lodging place. Traditionally, the Japanese people believed that a deity’s religious efficacy was most effective when it was invited into a specific lodging place and was worshipped there directly. The term yorishiro, also known as tamashiro 霊代, yorimashi 依坐, or kamishiro 神代, refers to a specific distinctive object into which a deity is invited to enter to receive worship (NISHIMURA 1985, 45–55).

The most archaic forms of yorishiro were rocks, trees, plants, or other natural objects, which were usually cordoned off from their surroundings. During religious ceremonies, the deity in question would be invoked and would manifest itself in a specific yorishiro object, and then people would worship it. Over time, permanent structures for honoring deities were built, and the yorishiro was placed at the altar of the inner space of those structures. Eventually, the yorishiro
took the form of a shintai 神体, or “deity-body,” which was often represented by such objects as a sword, a spear, a mirror, or curved jewels. All these deity-bodies, sealed in a container or placed on a stand, were hidden from public sight and kept in the inner hall. Without a yorishiro, or shintai, a deity could neither be invoked nor directly worshipped. For this reason, when a matsuri was held in the community, the parishioners made yorishiro objects such as a pine tree, a bamboo basket, an umbrella, a spear, or a float, and they performed fūryū 風流 (entertainment) to welcome the entry of their tutelary deity into the yorishiro in question. Under Buddhist influence stemming from the Nara period, some shrines installed anthropomorphic images or portraits (shinzō 神像) of deities, which were also understood as yorishiro (Hur 2000, 5). It was commonly believed that deities that maintained permanent dwellings far away came down to these yorishiro objects when invoked for purposes of worship.

It follows that most rituals involved a three-part procedure: (1) inviting a deity to a specific yorishiro, (2) worshipping it, and (3) sending it back to its permanent residence (Sueki 1989, 37–38). When anthropomorphic Buddhist statues were introduced, the Japanese understood them less as visual representations of Buddhist deities and more as particular places within which those deities were lodged when called upon. Through stories, symbols, politics, and an appreciation of cosmological wonders, generations of Japanese people created layers of religious meaning around these yorishiro representations (Itō 1983, 175–226). Seen from within this tradition, the Zenkōji divinity of the Buddha Amitābha may simply have been a special—indeed, probably the most prominent—yorishiro into which the compassionate divinity of the Buddha Amitābha entered and manifested (suijaku 垂迹) itself. The Zenkōji divinity of the Buddha Amitābha was believed to reveal itself and to offer compassion to its worshippers when they contacted it directly by worshipping at its yorishiro.

Kaichō Dates and Saijitsu

For Zenkōji worshippers, the Buddha Amida portrayed in the Buddhist scriptures remained an abstract, remote, and amorphous deity. On the occasion of a kaichō, the divinity of the Buddha Amida was transformed into a Living Buddha specific to Zenkōji, and the revelation of the latter was represented by the clandestine “lodging place” of the Zenkōji Triad, which was opened to the public.

Traditionally, the Japanese believed that a deity would most strongly exercise its divine power if it were worshipped at a designated lodging place and at a designated time. By securing direct contact with a deity at a specific time, the Japanese believed that they could establish a personal salvific connection with it—a karmic connection that would allow them to accumulate special religious merit and thereby be ushered into the world of the deity’s miraculous power. In
doctrinal Buddhism, on the other hand, any day on which one worships a Buddhist deity is one’s ennichi 縁日, or “connection day.” In other words, the religious merit gained by worshipping should not vary according to date. Despite this, as we have seen, Buddhist preachers promoted the idea that if one were to worship a Buddhist deity on a special date and in a direct manner, then one would acquire far greater religious merit than would be the case on an ordinary day.

In the case of Zenkōji, temple officials emphasized that, by worshipping the Zenkōji Amida on the seventh to fifteenth day of the first month for goinmon 御印文 (which refers to receiving on one’s forehead a vermilion stamp representing the Zenkōji seal) and on the anniversary (Goeshiki 御会式) of the day on which the Zenkōji Triad had been moved to the current site (the fifteenth day of the third month), one could double and even triple the religious merit that could be gained on an ordinary day. The idea of enhancing one’s religious merit reached its highest point at the time of a kaichō: one could attain hundreds or thousands of times more merit with a single act of worship than could be attained on a non-kaichō day.

The idea of special dates for merit-making was compatible with what occurs on a Shinto worship day, which is referred to as saijitsu 祭日 (ritual date)—a day when the deity is invited to its temporary lodging place, worshipped, and then sent back to its permanent residence. Preparation for greeting the saijitsu usually began the day before, with an okomori お籠り (confining oneself in a closed space), which involved worshippers being sequestered in a shrine for an entire night. This ritual conduct was designed to greet the descent of the deity to its “lodging place” or “deity-body,” the premise being that worshipping such a deity required a tangible space, time, and object. All these ideas combined to produce a culture of kaichō, which featured the scheduled public exhibition of a deity who had descended to its closeted yorishiro.

The blossoming of kaichō culture, fostered by Japan’s traditional ideas of yorishiro and saijitsu, had no parallel in the Buddhist world. Some records suggest that the divine body of a deity was kept away from the public gaze and used for a kaichō in China. Nonetheless, as far as we know, this happened only on a few occasions and never developed into a religious fashion of the kind seen in Japan. In contrast, in early modern Japan, which was blessed with hundreds of secret Buddhas, kaichō events were innumerable and lucrative. Any time a famous secret

13. In Shinto, on the occasion of a matsuri, a deity was believed to descend to its shintai (for example, a mirror, a rock, a sword, a bell, or a comma-shaped bead), which was encased in the inner space of the main hall. For more details, see ONO 1963, 209–10.
14. For a detailed discussion of saijitsu, see YANAGITA 1963, “Saijitsu kō.”
15. In T’ang China, the term kai-chang (J. kaichō) was used to refer to the display of a Buddhist relic—allegedly one of the finger bones of Śākyamuni. See FOWLER (1991–1992, 137–38). Some dhāraṇī Buddhist texts cite examples of secret images, but their citations are brief and almost meaningless. For details, see FOWLER 1991–1992, 139.
Buddha was supposed to manifest itself at a kaichō, people eagerly anticipated making face-to-face contact with it and appealing directly to its compassion.

**Degaichō and Marebito**

The beginning of a kaichō, which featured the opening of the Amida receptacle curtains, was an occasion for dramatizing the manifestation of the secret Zenkōji Amida through the notion of descent. In particular, when a degaichō was held at a location removed from the home altar, the descent of the Zenkōji Amida represented the manifestation of the Buddha Amida, who had traveled all the way from the beyond. The path of this secret deity was twofold: (1) from India through the Paekche Kingdom on the Korean peninsula, in what was known as Sangoku denrai (Three Kingdom Transmission), and (2) from Shinano. The story of the Zenkōji Amida’s visit from the continent as well as from Shinano was compelling, and it moved local worshippers.

At the degaichō event, the Sankoku denrai legend, which overlapped with the visit of the Amida from Shinano, reinforced the popular belief that the Zenkōji Amida was a deity from the other world who visited in order to save worshippers from suffering in this world. For local worshippers, the descent of the Zenkōji Amida from a distant realm resonated with the traditional idea of marebito (visitor-deity). According to folk beliefs, the marebito referred to a deity who visited the village from tokoyo (常世) on a regular basis, usually annually, in order to bring blessings (and warnings) and good harvests to the villagers. Although the tokoyo originally denoted a realm beyond this world, or the other-world of the dead, it gradually came to include the sea, heaven, or a vast mountain where ancestral spirits were believed to dwell. When a marebito visited the village, often in the guise of an old man with a long white beard or as a young child, the villagers greeted it with a matsuri and prayed for good harvests (Orikuchi 1964, 3–5; Komatsu 1985, 39–43; Suwa 1992, 47–48). For kaichō viewers, the Zenkōji Amida was a very powerful and miraculous marebito.

The concept of marebito, then, provided another layer of sacred meaning to the Zenkōji Amida while the latter was on tour. As the Fusō ryakki describes it, the Zenkōji Amida arrived from beyond the sea—a realm of tokoyo. Its transmission from tokoyo over the sea thus corresponds with religious folk beliefs regarding visitor-deities (Yamanoi 1987, 245–46). In this context, Gorai Shigeru even

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16. Itō Yuishin suggests that the ancient Japanese regarded deities from abroad, including Buddhas and bodhisattvas, as marebito. The names of these deities as found in ancient records are various (for example, daitō no kami [deities of Great T’ang] in the Fusō ryakki; adashikuni no kami [barbarian deities] in the Nihon shoki; takokushin [deities of foreign countries] in the Gangōji engi; and marōdo no gami [visitor-deities] in the Nihon ryōiki), but their divine powers were almost identical. See Ito 1983, 177–80.
suggests that the Zenkōji Amida Triad “returned to Japan” and that, through the event of degaichō, the Triad kept returning to the villages of Japan from Shinano, a remote Japanese holy place (GORAI 1988, 68–69).

Conclusion

During the Edo period, the kaichō at Zenkōji was embedded within layers of beliefs and practices rooted in traditional religious culture. The religiosity of the early modern Japanese, which was not necessarily bound to a particular locality or sectarian affiliation, ensured the prosperity of many temples that were blessed with owning unusual secret Buddhas. The nationwide Zenkōji cult, which was most dramatically demonstrated on the occasion of kaichō events, reinforced the belief that the Zenkōji Amida offered an entrance to the Western Paradise.

At the site of Zenkōji, on the occasion of a kaichō, worshippers appealed to the manifestation of the Buddha Amida and secured their salvific connection with the divine compassion of the Living Buddha of Zenkōji Amida. In doing so, they also ensured salvation for themselves and their loved ones in the other world. In this tradition, many families sent the teeth or hair of the deceased to Zenkōji and enshrined them at its charnel house, honoring the long-held custom of “depositing ashes,” or nōkotsu 納骨. Those who could not afford to make a trip to Shinano enthusiastically greeted the Zenkōji Amida on a degaichō tour. The sacred seat of the Zenkōji Amida was mobile, and its mobility catered to the religious customs of local worshippers.

For Zenkōji officials and associates as well as monzen merchants, the kaichō offered an economic opportunity. In particular, given that building maintenance was a major financial challenge and that government support for Buddhist temples was very limited, Zenkōji officials realized that kaichō offered a very tempting solution to their financial problems. For most temples, building repairs became a private task to be addressed through recourse to landed property, danna patrons, public fundraising, and other business operations. As far as Zenkōji was concerned, kaichō events proved to be the most effective method of fundraising. The upkeep of the magnificent national treasure that is Zenkōji’s Main Hall has owed much to the fusion of beliefs and practices intrinsic to traditional Japanese religious belief.

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