

# Talking Pictures: The *Life of Xuanzang* in a Fourteenth Century Japanese Handscroll

**Rachel Saunders**

Paintings can be powerful in many ways. In some transcendent beauty, extreme size, exquisite workmanship, or supreme originality may induce awe in viewers. Others have reputations that precede them and do not even need to be viewed to be effective. The fourteenth-century illustrated handscrolls known as *Genjō Sanzō-e* (*Illustrated Life of Xuanzang*),<sup>1</sup> kept closeted within the great temple of Kōfukuji in Nara for much of their history, had such a reputation as early as the fifteenth century. However, their power was not confined to their cultural or political currency. This set of twelve scrolls of inscribed texts and paintings depicting the historical sixteen-year journey of the Chinese monk Xuanzang (c.602–664) to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures for translation into Chinese, is a landmark work of sophistication and painterly refinement. This article focuses on the orchestration of word-image interaction in these handscrolls. It attempts analysis of certain technical elements while keeping in mind both the overall narrative cohesion internal to the scrolls, and the ‘external’ narrative of the life and afterlives of the scrolls as significant objects in the religio-political landscape in which they were commissioned and preserved.

Japanese *emaki*, or illustrated handscrolls, are narrative paintings that consist of many joined sheets of paper or silk covered with texts and paintings, mounted together around a dowel. The scroll is read by unrolling it a section – about a comfortable arm’s width – at a time. *Emaki* hold a special place in the cannon of Japanese art, those produced in the late twelfth century in particular being regarded as some of the most refined and aristocratic of all Japanese paintings. What is particularly remarkable about them as picto-literary objects is the opportunity the format creates for a range of both somatic and intellectual interactions between word, image and reader. It allows, for example, for the enhancement of narrative time: as is often pointed out, a

---

Rachel Saunders is a PhD candidate in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University.

<sup>1</sup> Although Xuanzang is known as ‘Genjō Sanzō’ in Japanese, I use his Chinese proper name throughout; *e* means picture.

viewer of a scroll effectively holds the past in his right hand, and the future in his left, and can control or even reverse the flow at any time he wishes.

In general, art historians have used two broad categories to describe the narratological mechanics of Japanese handscrolls: the episodic (*danraku*) mode, and the continuous (*renzoku*) mode.<sup>2</sup> In the episodic mode, text and image sections alternate: a section of text is paired with an accompanying image, followed by another section of text with accompanying image, and so on. The narrative is considered to be primarily advanced intellectually by the text. In the continuous narrative mode, the narrative literally unfolds before the eyes as images, rather than texts, sometimes extending over many meters, propel the story forward. These broad definitions are offered to assist in the navigation of the rich variety of visual and textual kinetics deployed in Japanese handscrolls. Close reading of images and texts together however frequently complicates this conventional understanding of how handscrolls enact narrative progression, demonstrating exactly how *emaki* require the active participation of their viewers to ‘tell their stories.’ In many cases readers (or those being read to), would already know the full narrative of the story depicted in the scroll, and so the actual inscribed texts and painted images before them, usually based on a pre-existing text, would likely have been received and intellectually activated through combination with this ‘pre-knowledge.’<sup>3</sup>

### Stories about Scrolls

*Emaki* are compelling objects not only for the tales they tell, which range from courtly romances and vernacular literature, to the miraculous origins of shrines and temples, to war tales and depictions of hell, to the lives of eminent monks,

---

<sup>2</sup> See Akiyama Terukazu, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity in the Pictorial Composition of Handscroll Painting,’ *Acta Asiatica*, no. 56 (1989), pp. 24–45.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive introduction to the Japanese handscroll, see Melissa McCormick, *Tosa Mitsunobu and the Small Scroll in Medieval Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 39–82. Sano Midori has treated the subject of narrative mode in handscrolls extensively, notably in Sano Midori, ‘Genji Monogatari no sekai,’ in *Fūryū, zōkei, monogatari: Nihon bijutsu no kōzō to yōtai*, ed. Sano Midori, (Tokyo: Sukaido 1997), pp. 301–326; Sano Midori, ‘Monogatari no katari, kaiga no katari,’ in *Heian Bungaku to kaiga*, eds Gotō Shōkō et al., (Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 2001), pp. 3–29; Sano Midori, ‘Setsuwaga no bunpō: Shigisan engi emaki ni miru jojutsu no ronri,’ in *Nihon kaiga shi no kenkyū*, ed. Yamane Yūzō sensei koki kinenkai hen (Kyoto: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1989), pp. 3–31. Takio Kimiko’s important 1981 article offers an analysis of handscroll narratology in terms of ‘scene’ and ‘setting’ that resonates with the concept of a theater production, in which different scenes take place within sets on a stage. Takio Kimiko, ‘Emaki ni okeru “bamen” to “kei,”’ *Bijutsushi*, vol. 31, no.1 (1981), pp. 15–25.

and well beyond. As highly complex and expensive objects produced for a limited audience, or sometimes no (human) audience at all, *emaki* were prime objects for the display of cultural hegemony. This was especially true in the reign of Emperor GoShirakawa (r.1127–1192) whose wild enthusiasm for *emaki* led to the commissioning of large numbers of scrolls, kept in a special storehouse, and shown only to the favored few. Their ‘secret’ nature of course enhanced the prestige of the actual objects themselves, and the mythic aura of the emperor’s storehouse continues to touch *emaki* research even today. *Emaki* were also commissioned to pacify restless, vengeful spirits, as dedicatory objects to shrines and temples in supplication or gratitude, and for imperial edification. Their cultural significance was used to full effect when scrolls were deployed as gifts, and in politically charged loans and viewings that were recorded in official diaries.

Until recently, the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls, designated National Treasures and now in the collection of the Fujita Museum in Osaka, had not been widely accessible. However, in the summer of 2011 they were exhibited in full at Nara National Museum, allowing visitors to pore over the 190 meters of extraordinarily fresh and extravagantly pigmented paintings to experience the scrolls in unprecedented proximity.<sup>4</sup> Many questions remain – their purpose, the identity of the patron, and of the calligraphers who inscribed the text of the scrolls, for example, have still to be established beyond doubt. However, on the basis of close stylistic similarities, the *Genjō Sanzō-e* has long been linked to another remarkable set of handscrolls known as the *Miracles of the Kasuga Deity*. This set of twenty scrolls presents a series of miracles brought about by the deity of the Kasuga Shrine, the Fujiwara clan Shinto Shrine, also in Nara.<sup>5</sup> These scrolls include a colophon, on the basis of which scholars have determined the date of the scrolls (c.1309–1315), that the chief painter was the court painter Takashina Takakane (fl.1309–1330), that the commissioner was the aristocrat Saionji Kinhira (1264–1315), and that he commissioned the scrolls for dedication to the Kasuga Deity in thanks for his reinstatement to political office.<sup>6</sup> The *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls unfortunately lack such a colophon.

---

<sup>4</sup> The scrolls are published in full in colour in Komatsu Shigemi, ed. *Genjō Sanzō-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1990), Vols 4–6, and in the exhibition catalogue: Nara National Museum and Asahi Shinbunsha, eds *Tenjiku e: Sanzō Hōshi san man kiro no tabi* (Nara: Nara National Museum and Asahi Shinbunsha, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The Kasuga scrolls are now in the Imperial Household Collection. They are published in full colour in Komatsu Shigemi, ed. *Kasuga Gongen Genki-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1991), Vols 13–14.

<sup>6</sup> See McCormick, *Tosa Mitsunobu*, p. 85, and Suegara Yutaka, ‘Kasuga Gongen Genki-e no hōnō o megutte,’ *Nihon rekishi*, no. 695 (2006), pp. 62–70.

Kōfukuji and Kasuga though were so theologically, geographically, and institutionally intertwined, they were effectively a syncretic multiplex for much of their history.<sup>7</sup> It is thus very tempting to follow prior speculation by art historians that the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls may have been commissioned at around the same time out of similar concerns, and to consider the two sets of scrolls as companion works.<sup>8</sup> What is clear is that the two sets of scrolls were most likely produced by the same workshop, and that both are surrounded by an aura of extreme exclusivity.

Today Xuanzang's story is widely known in its late sixteenth-century incarnation *Journey to the West* (Jp. *Saiyūki*), a popular version of his journey to India in which Xuanzang himself is rather overshadowed by the antics of his companions. However, Xuanzang's momentous story was originally transmitted through two seventh century texts. The first is an encyclopedic account of the places and people he saw, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions* (Jp. *Daitō saiikiki*), which Xuanzang completed in 646. The second is the compelling *Life of Xuanzang* (Jp. *Daijionji Sanzō Hōshiden*) by his disciple Huili (Jp. Eryū).<sup>9</sup> The latter is clearly the base text for the scrolls, which relate how Xuanzang, inspired by a dream, dedicated his life to correcting the anomalies he found in Chinese understandings of Buddhism. He spent sixteen years on a remarkable, and at times, extremely hazardous journey through Central Asia to India on a mission to collect as many sutras in the original Sanskrit and to visit as many of the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites as possible. He returned to China with 657 texts, and spent the rest of his life painstakingly translating them from Sanskrit to Chinese. His work was foundational to the Consciousness-only (Skt. Yogācāra) school of Buddhism in China (Ch. Faxiang), known in its Japanese incarnation as Hossō. Kōfukuji, founded in the seventh century and the tutelary temple of the supremely powerful Fujiwara family, is a Hossō sect temple. Many of Kōfukuji's documents were destroyed in devastating fires during the 1180s, and again in

---

<sup>7</sup> The process of affiliation and the balance of power between the Buddhist temple and the Shinto shrine was of course not static over time. For an in-depth account of the process of syncretisation of Shinto gods into the Buddhist paradigm at Kasuga-Kōfukuji, see Allan Grapard, *The Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Minamoto Toyomune, *Yamato-e no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1976), pp. 393–395.

<sup>9</sup> Huili in fact died before he had completed the compilation of the biography; the work was finished in 688 by Yanzong.

the fourteenth century,<sup>10</sup> but the temple's copy of Huili's *Life of Xuanzang*, dating to 1071 survived, and is the oldest extant copy.<sup>11</sup>

The *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls are of superb quality, and contain images that are startling even in photographic reproduction. The intense, supernatural azure of the infinite sea in Xuanzang's inspirational dream of Mount Sumeru, the cosmic mountain at the center of the Buddhist universe (scroll 1, episode 4) [Figure 1], Xuanzang's solitary crossing of the Taklamakan desert, plagued by squabbling, limb-toting demons (scroll two, episode two), the dramatic deathly cold of the journey into the heart of the Tianshan mountains (scroll three, episode three) [Figure 2], and the paradisaical grandeur of Nālandā Monastery (scroll six, episode two) are some of the visual highlights. The paintings are characterised throughout by a fantastic array of people, flora and fauna native to lands outside Japan on which the painters expended a great deal of imaginative energy and highly coloured pigment.

It is not only modern viewers who have found the scrolls compelling. On the thirteenth day of the eighth month of the second year of the Chōkyō era (1488), the courtier and veteran connoisseur Sanjōnishi Sanetaka (1455–1537), as he did most days, wrote in his diary:

Rain. Today is the autumnal equinox, and a vegetarian Buddhist meal was served at the palace; for several days before I observed ritual abstinences. I brought one type of fruit for presentation. I placed it inside the lid of an ink-stone box and Kōtō no naishi presented it for the imperial feast together with a food tray at the hall of deliberation. The Imperial Prince, Shikibu Kyō no miya, Daijō-in no miya, Anzenji no miya, Ninnaji no miya, Ren Kiken and Ban Shōken were in attendance. Minamoto Dainagon, myself, Minbu no kyō, Iryō no Ason, and Minamoto Tominaka also partook of the feast, and when the matter was concluded, we went to another room and were invited by imperial request to look at the *Genjō Sanzō-e* and to read the inscribed text aloud.

*Interlinear note:*

Painted by Takakane, a painting belonging to the Daijō-in sub-temple of Nara. It is like the bloodline of this temple. It is said to be a miraculous treasure. The colors of the paintings are so marvelous,

---

<sup>10</sup> The complex was largely destroyed in 1180 when Taira Kiyomori's forces burned the temple during the Genpei War between the Taira and Minamoto clans. The conflicts of the Northern and Southern Courts era (1336–1392) between two rival imperial courts also resulted in massive destruction at the temple.

<sup>11</sup> The text is published fully annotated in Tsukushima Hiroshi, *Kōfukujibon Daijōniji Sanzō Hōshiden koten no kokugogakuteki kenkyū* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1965–1967). Given the related institutional provenance, it is a possibility that this copy of the *Life of Xuanzang* was the point of origination for the inscribed texts of the handscrolls.

so superb, it startles the eye. Altogether there are twelve scrolls. I read nine scrolls, and Ren Kiken read three scrolls.<sup>12</sup>

At first sight, the diary entry appears to be a rather formal account of a ritual that took place at the imperial palace. Compared with other paintings mentioned in the diary though, the praise Sanetaka gives is unusually effusive – he doubles-up the adjectives he conventionally uses to express approbation of fine objects in the diary – making the scrolls stand out. What kind of an object was it that required this group of the highest-ranking men to ritually purify themselves before viewing it? And just what does Sanetaka mean by ‘temple bloodline’? The scene described is one of great exclusivity and intimacy. The men are ‘invited’ by imperial request to read the scrolls, which, given their combined length, they do in what must have been a very long sitting. One imagines that Sanetaka ceded the position of reader to Ren Kiken owing to fatigue after making his way through 150 meters or so of the scrolls.

A diary entry by Jinson (1430–1508), the abbot of the Daijō-in sub-temple of Kōfukuji, helps explain what Sanetaka meant by ‘bloodline’:

Twelfth day of the third month of Kōshō 3 (1457)

Viewed the *Genjō Sanzō-e*. This painting was originally the painting of Bodaisen Hongan. First, it was passed down to High Priest Ryōen of the Ichijō-in sub-temple, [but] afterwards Bodaisen’s [disciple] High Priest Jisson said thus: “[This painting] illuminates the transmission of our school. And our school’s fundamental principles have been transmitted exclusively to me, Jisson. Why was this painting passed to Ryōen?” Since he argued that because the fundamental transmission should earlier have been given to Jisson, [the painting] was taken back from Ryōen and transmitted to Jisson. Since then it has been transmitted from High Priest Enji to High Priest Sonshin to High Priest Jishin and so on, from generation to generation as the great treasure of this sub-temple. As regards the [dissemination of the] Buddhist Law, this sub-temple has special circumstances. Thus with regard to the adherents who were founders, the Daijō-in is superior. Since Jisson this dispute has been clear. As regards the painter of this work, there are two theories: it is said to be either Sumiyoshi Hōgan, or Ōtakuma Hōgan. In the former Kyōtoku era [1452–55] the painting was taken to the palace in accordance with a personal order from the emperor. It is said the Emperor [GoHanazono] asked Tachibana Iryō [about it, commenting that] the painter of the first six scrolls is different from the painter of the last six. He was instructed to check and comment on this matter, and

---

<sup>12</sup> Sanjōnishi Sanetaka (1455–1537), Takahashi Ryūzō, ed. *Sanetaka Kōki* (Tokyo: Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1979–80), Vol. 2, pp. 117–118. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author.

truly [he agreed] they were different from each other. This was an outstanding remark. Iryō was a painter. Thus, it seems that this painting was produced by two men.<sup>13</sup>

Abbot Jinson's account of the scrolls gives very little attention indeed to the scrolls themselves making one wonder what kind of 'viewing' this in fact was. Instead he recounts what seems to be a pedigree, underscoring the significance of the *existence* of the scrolls for the rival Kōfukuji subtemples, the Daijō-in and Ichijō-in. Jinson suggests that the scrolls were commissioned by Bodaisen Hongan, the prominent aristocrat and Hossō priest Shinen (1153–1224). He became head of the Ichijō-in sub-temple at age fourteen, and abbot-in-chief of Kōfukuji at age twenty-nine. He was chiefly responsible for the rebuilding of Kōfukuji following the devastation of the 1180 burning of the temple.<sup>14</sup> Before his death, Jinson tells us, Shinen transferred the scrolls to his disciple and nephew, the priest Ryōen, also of the Ichijō-in.

However, Ryōen passed away in 1220, four years before Shinen himself did. At this point Jisson, also a nephew-disciple of Shinen, stepped up to air his grievance that he, and not Ryōen, should really have been granted the scrolls since the line of transmission was rightfully from Shinen to himself. Jisson though was not of the Ichijō-in – he was head of the rival Daijō-in.<sup>15</sup> The result of the dispute was that Shinen gave the scrolls to Jisson at the Daijō-in, where they were passed down for sixteen generations, at which point abbot Jinson saw them in 1457 and recorded the event in his diary. In his diary, Jinson explicitly characterises the scrolls as evidence that the origin of the Buddha's Law at Kōfukuji lies within the Daijō-in (its 'special circumstances'), thereby emphasising the Daijō-in's superior position within Kōfukuji's institutional structure. Fittingly, the scrolls themselves depict the theme of transmission of the Buddhist law, taking as their central theme Xuanzang and his prodigious mission. Jinson's account speaks clearly to the nature of the scrolls as objects of special status, functioning as a marker of the true transmission of the Law from abbot to abbot within the Daijō-in, much as contact 'relics' such as mantles and bowls or patriarch portraits did in the wider Buddhist tradition.

Jinson's account is tantalising, but his repeated, emphatic assertion of the superiority of the Daijō-in over its rival sub-temple and the deployment of the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls in the service of his argument, indicates that it should

---

<sup>13</sup> Tsuji Zennosuke, ed. *Daijōin Jisha Zōjiki* (Tokyo: Sankyō Shoin, 1931–1937), Vol.1, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Ueda Masaaki et al. eds *Kōdansha Nihon jinmei daijiten* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> The abbots of these sub-temples were customarily chosen from the Fujiwara aristocracy; in the case of the Ichijō-in, the abbot was usually selected from the Konoe or Takatsukasa houses, and for the Daijō-in, from the Kujō or Ichijō houses.

not be taken at face value. According to Jinson's account, the scrolls would have been produced sometime in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, which is clearly at variance with the generally accepted early fourteenth century dating and Takashina Takakane attribution for the scrolls now in the Fujita Museum. This discrepancy led the scholar Minamoto Toyomune to argue that in fact the Fujita scrolls are a copy of an older, original set of scrolls, now lost, and that this 'original' set is what Jinson is referring to in his diary.<sup>16</sup>

Space precludes a full exposition of the evidence against Minamoto's thesis here, to which I do not subscribe. However, working only from Jinson's diary entry, we have the observation of GoHanazono and his painter Iryō that the painter of the first six scrolls appears to be different from the painter of the last six scrolls. This observation resonates strongly with the Fujita Museum scrolls. Close observation of the scrolls, and in particular the depiction of figures, leads me to conclude that a master painter was heavily involved in production of the first seven scrolls, painting many figures in scrolls one and two, and closely supervising a team of painters for scrolls three to seven.<sup>17</sup> However, scrolls eight to twelve, whilst still attempting to follow the stylistic conventions of the earlier scrolls, are clearly not as successful, suggesting that the master painter was less involved with the production of the later scrolls. My suggestion is that this indicates it is likely the scrolls GoHanazono viewed in the 1450s are the same scrolls today in the collection of the Fujita Museum, and that we should regard with caution Jinson's somewhat hyperbolic account of the origins of the *Genjō Sanzō-e*.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Minamoto, *Yamato-e no kenkyū*, pp. 389–393.

<sup>17</sup> Stylistic analysis of the entire scroll set of course deserves its own extended discussion, not possible here. Briefly, in the case of the figures, the quality of line and masterful immediacy characteristic of the major characters in scrolls one and two is lacking in the later scrolls, which are clearly in other hands. In scrolls three to seven, there is evidence that those painting the figures were attempting to adhere closely to certain formal stylistic traits evident in scrolls one and two – the delicate elongation of hands, the use of a certain combination of strokes to form the head of a monk, for example – but the figures lack the enlivened, highly expressive quality of those brushed in the opening scrolls. There is no comparison with scrolls eight through twelve, where the depictions become less consistent, the brushwork becomes noticeably rougher, and some of the pigments appear to be of lower quality.

<sup>18</sup> There is also very little about the production values of the Fujita Museum scrolls that suggests they were a copy. They entirely lack the static, hollow atmosphere of many close copies, instead exuding bravura originality and an enlivened quality it would be rare to achieve in a copy. See also Mikael Bauer, 'The Power of Ritual: An Integrated History of Medieval Kōfukuji' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2011), pp. 201–205 for an account of Shinen's political position at what constitutes the beginning of the rivalry between the two main sub-temples at Kōfukuji.



## Talking Pictures

The question of what it means to regard the scrolls as a temple ‘bloodline,’ then, comes into clearer focus via investigation of the documentary record. But to see what it was that made Sanetaka declare the *Genjō Sanzō-e* ‘marvelous’ and ‘startling to the eye,’ we must turn to the paintings and inscribed texts that generate the internal narrative of the scrolls themselves. On initial viewing, the *Genjō Sanzō-e* seems to fall squarely into the category of episodic or *danraku* progression. However, closer examination shows there is a great deal of variety in the length of the alternating text and image sections, and that narrative progression is by no means solely achieved through textual propulsion with supporting images. The scenes of high drama at the beginning of Xuanzang’s journey, when he crosses the Taklamakan desert alone, and traverses the Tianshan mountains, for example, are portrayed in sections of paintings which are disproportionately long compared to the short textual passages which precede them.

Xuanzang’s crossing of the Tianshan mountains (scroll three, episode three) [Figure 2] begins ominously with a view of a sharply sloped rocky outcrop. The fast-paced calligraphic contour strokes above sound a warning note – the stroke just below tree roots at the very opening of the scene for example, appears to have been ominously prematurely cut off. Holed up in a cave within this outcrop are two wild animals, possibly pumas, one with its open mouth, the other closed, in an iconographic echo of temple guardian figures whose postures symbolise the beginning and end of all things. Even these powerful beasts are not venturing where Xuanzang is to go. A little further to the left, at the bottom of the image, two exotic birds, which appear to be a magical mixture of mandarin duck (head), pheasant (wings), and phoenix (tail), fly determinedly counter to the right-left progression of the scroll in a bid to exit stage-right. Thick white pigment blankets the blue-green rocks, and flecks of the same pigment, boldly flicked onto the painting, show that the snow continues to fall. Xuanzang’s previously roan horse has turned a dull brown, and the monk himself, in a rare outward show of his inner condition, has reddened cheeks beneath his wide hat, on which snow has settled. His party looks about them anxiously and huddles in their travelling cloaks. A thin waterfall wends its way through the rocks, but is almost concealed by a vertiginous wall of snow-covered rock which be-speaks deadly cascades of snow as the pitch and tension of the herringboned rock planes increases. An even larger outcropping of snow-covered rock briefly obscures our view, and then we find that the party is progressing still deeper into the mountains and we are left to watch their backs. Framed in the foreground by two sentinel-like outcrops of rock is a dead horse, sinking into the deepening snow, together

with its rider. Xuanzang is just visible, disappearing into the heart of the mountains. Another spitefully cragged rock face snakes from the bottom of the picture frame, right to left, moving the eyes onwards. The image makes us ask, will we ever see Xuanzang again? How can he make it through this impossible landscape? The viciously tight, twisted crags of this rock face suggest the horrors of the path within the mountains we cannot see. The scene fades out as fingers of cosmic clouds pull us away from the sight of the resolute monk's back. There is nothing we can do. The artist leaves us at a graphic cliffhanger.

The drama is literally cut at this point, as the snow scene ends abruptly, and the next textual inscription begins: "They came out of the mountains and went through a place called Pure Lake..."<sup>19</sup> At this point the viewer can let out the breath stopped by the artist's bravura visualisation of the mountain crossing. Clearly the over-riding human interest of this part of the story, in common with other perilous parts of the journey, is the drama of extreme danger, which is overcome through faith and reliance on the Buddhist scriptures.<sup>20</sup>

### Textual Acoustics

Conversely, in other episodes, it is words that are used to intensify the experience of the story. The text calligraphically inscribed on the scrolls has been described as a direct rendering of the Chinese source text, Huili's *Life of Xuanzang*, into Japanese.<sup>21</sup> But what does this 'translation' really look like? Whilst it is true that the Japanese text is relatively faithful to Huili's Chinese, equally, a good deal of editorial work was done to make selections for the handscroll or the work would have become totally unwieldy. (Among the sections which did not make it into the scroll perhaps the most regrettable today is the description of the enormous Buddhas at Bamiyan, since they might also have been illustrated.) A closer investigation by X. Jie Yang has revealed that this kind of macro-level editorial shaping was by no means the limit of the editorial intervention. Yang's meticulous examination of sections of the inscribed texts of the scrolls reveals that the Japanese 'translation' was elegantly enhanced by the careful insertion of both Japanese and Chinese poetic embellishments. The poetic referents would have been familiar to the scrolls' cultivated readers versed in repositories of Chinese and Japanese

<sup>19</sup> Scroll 3, section 4. Komatsu, ed. *Genjō Sanzō-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki], Vol. 4, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> This is also true, for example, of Xuanzang's crossing of the Taklamakan desert in episode two of scroll two, and the pirate attack on the Ganges in episodes six and seven of scroll four. See Komatsu, ed. *Genjō Sanzō-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki] Vol. 4, pp. 58–59 and pp. 175–185.

<sup>21</sup> Minamoto, *Yamato-e no kenkyū*, p. 395.

literature, in particular, the early eleventh century Japanese anthology *Wakan rōei shū*.<sup>22</sup> The technique evokes emotion by activating a known poetic signifier, couplet, or referent.

For example, in episode one of scroll four [Figure 3], Xuanzang visits the Dragon Cave in Nāgarahara, Northern India, where the Buddha famously left his shadow in the wall for the faithful to see. Seeing the shadow is not an easy task, even for one of Xuanzang's merit, and he is forced to repeat scriptures and prostrate himself several hundred times before the Buddha's image eventually appears. Xuanzang then calls the six monks with him at the time into the cave. They also pray, but only five of them can see the image of the Buddha, surrounded by bodhisattvas and arhats. The sixth monk laments his lack of merit and weeps. Xuanzang then offers flowers and incense to the Buddha, the image disappears, and they leave the cave.

In Huili's *Life of Xuanxang*, the end of the episode is described thus:

When he had seen [the shadow] he ordered the six men who were outside to bring fire to burn incense, but when they brought in fire, the Buddha's shadow immediately disappeared. He quickly told them to put out the fire and prayed again and it appeared again. Out of the six men five could see it, but one could not see anything. It was clearly visible for about half the time of a meal. When they had worshipped and praised and offered flowers and incense, the light disappeared, and they left the cave. The Brahmin who had led them was ecstatic and said he had not seen it before. "If it were not for the master's sincerity and determination, this could not have come to pass," [he said].<sup>23</sup>

The inscribed text of the handscroll however conveys the scene slightly differently:

The Master summoned the six accompanying him in to worship, but in the end one did not pray. "What wretched karma is it that distances me from His image?" he lamented. Then, when the Master offered incense and scattered flowers, the shadow immediately disappeared. It is moving to think that he must have felt as sorrowful as Emperor Han Wudi over the soul-summoning incense.<sup>24</sup>

In Huili's text, after the shadow disappears, the group leaves, and the Brahmin who had led them into the cave expresses his great joy at having seen the

---

<sup>22</sup> See Thomas Rimer and Jonathan Chaves, *Japanese and Chinese Poems to Sing: The Wakan rōei shū* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Translated from Tsukushima, *Kōfukujibon*, pp. 60-61, lines 277-283. The (punctuated) text is accessible through the online SAT Daizōkyō Database, reference T2053 n. 50, p. 230, a12-17, at: <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/ddb-sat2.php?lang=en>. Accessed 9/30/2012.

<sup>24</sup> Translated from Komatsu, ed. *Genjō Sanzō-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki], Vol. 4, pp. 141-144.

shadow for the first time. In the Japanese scroll text, there is no mention of the Brahmin, and after the Shadow disappears, we are told that Xuanzang must have felt as sorrowful as Han Wudi over the soul-summoning incense. This is a reference to the well-known story of historical Emperor Han Wudi's (156–87 BCE) terrible grief at the death of his consort, Lady Li. Desirous of seeing her if only once more, the Emperor asked a wizard to burn this special incense in the smoke of which it was said one could see the departed once more. The legend is one of many about Wudi recorded in Chinese literature, beginning with the *Ten Islands in the Inner Seas* (Ch. *Hainei shizhou ji*) traditionally attributed to Dongfang Shuo, a Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) Daoist. It is also included in the Japanese compilation, the *Wakan rōei shū*. The intention of the addition in the Japanese scroll text is to heighten the emotional intensity of the reader's experience of Xuanzang's experience by evoking a familiar trope of the earnest desire to see a trace of one departed from this world.<sup>25</sup>

The painter reflects Xuanzang's earnestness in a slight curve of the single eyebrow we can see as the priest prostrates himself before the wall, holding an incense burner; offertory flowers lie on the ground. We can also clearly see the pilgrim who could not see the Buddha's shadow, covering his face with his hand as he weeps. In the inscribed text though, another figure, who until now has also remained in the shadows, steps forward: it is the narrator. Until this point, we have barely been aware of his presence as the events in the cave have been related concisely, as matters of fact. But in the last sentence of the inscribed text, the narrator shifts position and speaks to the reader directly. He comments on the scene, telling the reader that Xuanzang must have felt as grief-stricken at this parting from the Buddha's shadow as Han Wudi at the loss of his Lady Li, floating the emotion of an irrevocable parting within the atmosphere of the cave.<sup>26</sup> In so doing, the narrator

---

<sup>25</sup> The choice of this incident, which has clear Daoist overtones in the use of the magical incense is interesting as the context of Wudi's 'attachment' scarcely seems appropriate in a Buddhist context. Possibly it reflects awareness of some of the many other (and evolving) sources of transmission for Xuanzang's story outside of Huili's *Life*, including folktales and drama. By the time the story has evolved into *The Journey to the West* in the late sixteenth century, Daoist themes are explicit in the tale. See 'Introduction' in Anthony Yu, ed. *The Journey to the West*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), Vol. 1, pp. 1-62 and Glen Dudbridge, *The Hsi-yu chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Chinese Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>26</sup> The grammar of the final sentence of the inscribed text (specifically, the use of the auxiliary verb *kemu* (*ken*) (speculative) in *tamaiken*) indicates that the narrator is firstly speculating on how a third person (i.e. Xuanzang) *must have felt*, and then expressing how sorrowful (*awarenari*) he himself feels it to be. The expectation is that the reader too will feel this sorrow (*aware*).

unmistakably cues the emotion the reader should take away from the episode as it ends and the reader returns from narrative time to real time, if only briefly, before the next episode begins. This shift in narrative voice provides a rhythmic break in what is *in toto* a long, attention-consuming text, perhaps even creating a pause for discussion among a group of readers such as those gathered around Sanjōnishi Sanetaka on that rainy night in 1488.

The poetic intensifier does not only serve to create emotional proximity to the story. It is also important for the narrative as a whole since the *painting* of this section of the story portrays the scene when the Buddha's shadow has appeared and Xuanzang's fellow travelers have entered the cave to see it, not the preceding period of time during which Xuanzang's repeated prayers went unrewarded and he wept, and indicates through the presence of incense and scattered flowers what will come next. Through the insertion of the reference to the soul-summoning incense, and its visible resonance in the painting in the figure of the grief-stricken monk who cannot see the shadow, we are able to experience the whole narrative arc of this episode, from Xuanzang's not seeing the shadow, to his seeing the shadow, to its departure, even though we are superficially presented with only a picture of the moment of seeing. Text and image here work together to animate and intensify each other in the reader's mind, making time flow within the painting. The text-image choreography is so calibrated that the dynamics of the brushed calligraphic scroll text itself also enhance the experience: the characters for "Emperor Han Wudi" and "soul-summoning incense" are brushed in much more saturated ink than the characters around them, making them dance and jump out of their columns, effectively highlighting them and drawing the attention in even a cursory glance across the sheet.<sup>27</sup>

In episode one of scroll five, Xuanzang visits the ancient sacred site of Jetavana monastery (Jp. Gion Shōja), originally a magnificent complex where the Buddha himself had once dwelled, and finds it utterly ruined. Huili's *Life of Xuanzang* relates that:

Five or six *li* to the south of the city was Jetavana, the garden of Anāthapiṇḍada. Now it was a desolate site, [but] in the past there had been a monastery there. To the left and right of the East Gate there were two stone columns more than seventy feet high. King Aśoka had erected them. All the buildings were entirely dilapidated [except for] one tile-roofed building that housed a golden image. Long ago when the Buddha ascended to heaven to preach the Law to his

---

<sup>27</sup> This technique is also used earlier in the passage when the Buddha's shadow fully appears and is described as being like a 'golden mountain appearing out of the mist.' The characters for 'like a golden mountain' are brushed in dark saturated strokes compared to the less saturated 'misty' strokes of the surrounding characters.

mother, King Prasenajit yearned [for him]. He heard King Udayana had carved [an image of the Buddha] from sandalwood, and so he had this image made.<sup>28</sup>

The Japanese handscroll text dwells far more on the wreckage of the once-great monastery:

Five or six *li* south of the city were the ruins of Jetavana monastery, the abandoned garden of Anāthapiṇḍada. The foundation stones were swathed in moss and the steps were buried in autumn leaves. The worship halls and the monks' quarters were all leaning, the morning and evening bell was sadly silent. It was no more than a garden of briars and brambles, the dwelling place of the tiger and the wolf. What a dreadfully sorrowful sight.<sup>29</sup>

Yang singles out and compares the couplet “the foundations were swathed in green moss, the steps were buried in red leaves,” with a very similar couplet in the *Wakan rōei shū*, which the commentary tells us evokes an atmosphere which is “hard to bear.”<sup>30</sup> Again, the intention is to heighten the emotional impact of the scene for the viewer by channeling an established atmosphere; emotions are accessed through the delicate sounding of a particular poetic tone. The viewer is not spoken to directly, but a full reading is only achieved through elegant inter-textual resonance between the inscribed text and its references to other texts, and between this amalgamation of texts and the paintings. The intensified experience of reading the handscroll is thus achieved in large part through intellectualised aestheticism and a deliberate expansion of both text and image to produce a sum much greater than their parts. Perhaps this construction in which distant times and places are brought closer through the use of familiar poetic imagery may have been designed to facilitate a sense of intellectual proprietorship over the exotic story. At the very least, it was surely intended to generate empathy.

The painting of the Jetavana [Figure 4] carefully mirrors the inscribed text. Green moss engulfs the what is left of the monastery as miniaturised versions of the serpent-like rock forms used to frame the paintings throughout the scrolls here appear *within* the image, consuming the dilapidated architectural foundations. Red leaves are scattered throughout the scene, and a large tree drops red leaves resembling maple leaves – a conventional signifier of melancholy and transience in the Japanese poetic tradition – onto a flight of steps. Two wild animals run freely in the grounds of the former monastery.

<sup>28</sup> Translated from Tsukushima, *Kōfukujibon*, pp. 87–88, lines 94–98. Taishō Tripitaka T2053 no. 50, p. 234, c22-27, accessible via the SAT Database (see footnote 25).

<sup>29</sup> Translated from Komatsu, ed. *Genjō Sanzō-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki] Vol. 5, pp. 2–3.

<sup>30</sup> X. Jie Yang, ‘Emaki no hyōgen yōshiki e no ishikiron: “Genjō Sanzō-e” ni okeru kanbungaku no sanyo o tegakari ni shite,’” *Bungaku*, vol. 2, no. 5 (2001), pp. 126–128.

They are not tigers or wolves, but appear instead to be foxes, notorious in East Asian folklore for haunting abandoned areas, especially temple gates and graveyards, as well as for their ability to shape-shift. The reference to tigers and wolves itself is perhaps best read as a conventional poetic indicator of wildness rather than indicating the actual presence of these specific creatures. Nevertheless, the maple-like leaves and the fox-like creatures suggest the painting is translating and intensifying the haunting atmosphere of the ruined Indian monastery for a domestic audience familiar with maple leaves and foxes and their associated imagery.

The presence of a skull beneath the large red-leafed tree in the painting, though, is not mentioned in either the inscribed text of the handscroll, or in Huili's *Life of Xuanzang*. However, after Huili has recounted the story of the Dragon Cave, he goes on to describe several other well known sites near the monastery where those who had tried to harm the Buddha had variously fallen into hell. The first site to be mentioned is where heretical Brahmacarins killed a harlot and then accused the Buddha.<sup>31</sup> For the monks and aristocrats well versed in Buddhist texts and literature who were the likely audience for the scrolls, it is not a great stretch to think that the skull could well have mentally cued this incident and the other related sites even though they are not mentioned explicitly in the handscroll text. The skull is also complementary to the shape-shifting abilities of the foxes. In the Tang dynasty (618–907) collection of stories *Youyang zazu* (Jp. *Yūyō zasso*) for example, foxes are said to transform themselves by placing a skull on their heads and bowing to the north. If the skull does not fall off when they bow, they can take on human form.<sup>32</sup> Further, the account of Xuanzang's great predecessor Faxian's (c.337–

---

<sup>31</sup> Hui-li, *The Life of Hsuan-tsang, the Tripitaka Master of the Great Tzu-En Monastery*, trans. Li Yung-hsi (Peking: Chinese Buddhist Association, 1959), pp. 91–92.

<sup>32</sup> Komatsu Kazuhiko, *Ikai to Nihonjin: E-monogatari no sōzōryoku* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2003), p.146. Further research is required into the circulation of the *Youyang zazu* in Japan. However, at this stage at least, it does not seem unreasonable to point to the possibility that the editor of the *Genjō Sanzō-e* may have been making specific, though oblique, reference to it since the collection also contains an account of a Japanese monk traveling to India in the eighth century, and finding Xuanzang's sandals, spoon, and chopsticks. The implicit inclusion of 'unorthodox' texts in the scrolls is evident from close analysis of certain discrepancies between the inscribed texts and what actually appears in the paintings. Elsewhere, I have explored in detail the distinct resonances between the scroll paintings and the so-called Song dynasty *Saiyūki*, a collection of *setsuwa* (Buddhist vernacular tales) with two variant titles, now known as either as the 'Tang Monk Retrieves the Sutras' (Jp. *Daitō Sanzō shukkyō shiwa*), or more simply as 'The Kōzanjibon' (the Kōzanji version). The text of this Song-dynasty printed edition now in the collection of the Ōkura Shūkōkan in Tokyo is reproduced in Ōta Tatsuo, *Sōhan Daitō Sanzō shukkyō shiwa: Ōkura Bunka Zaidan zō* (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 1997).

c.442) visit to Jetavana in the *Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (Jp. *Bukkokuki*) includes the episode where a woman belonging to an ‘erroneous system’ tied extra clothes around her waist so as to make herself appear pregnant, and accused the Buddha of having acted ‘unlawfully’ towards her. Whereupon Sakra, ruler of the Devas, transformed himself and some devas into white mice, which bit through the strings she had used to tie the clothes around her revealing her disguise, and she fell into hell alive.<sup>33</sup> The theme of bodily transformation introduced by the inclusion of the foxes in the painting has certain resonances with this episode. Indeed, the painted foxes themselves have been transformed from the tiger and wolf they are written as in the inscribed handscroll text.

This kind of reading would have been possible for elite courtiers and scholar-monks whose status might have made an encounter with the scrolls possible. But for an even more restricted group of people, another kind of intensifying inter-textual resonance could have been triggered when viewing the scene of Xuanzang’s visit to Jetavana. This group consists of the extremely limited number of people who had been privileged enough to view both the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls and the scrolls of the *Miracles of the Kasuga Deity*. Sanjōnishi Sanetaka was one such man. His diary records that he viewed the Kasuga scrolls in 1490, two years after the reading of the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls.<sup>34</sup> As such, he would have been in a position to see the startling similarity between the depiction of the Jetavana monastery, and the depiction of the aristocrat Fujiwara no Toshimori’s (1120–c.1180) garden in episode two of scroll five of the Kasuga scrolls. Toshimori’s expansive villa-garden is exquisite, filled with beautiful cultivated plants, including imported flowers,<sup>35</sup> and miniature bonsai landscapes, equipped with an aviary, and complete with a lake above which water-birds fly. The villa is the epitome of prosperity, which the text tells us, is entirely attributable to Toshimori’s practice of monthly pilgrimages to the Kasuga Shrine to worship the Kasuga Deity.<sup>36</sup> There are

---

<sup>33</sup> Faxian (c.377–c.422), *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> Once again, Sanetaka ritually purified himself before coming into contact with the scrolls. For more on Sanetaka’s viewing of the Kasuga scrolls and its personal significance to him see McCormick, *Tosa Mitsunobu*, p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> The rose blooming prominently in the foreground has been identified as *Rosa chinensis* (Jp. *Kōshin bara*), native to southern China. See Kasuga Taisha Hōmutsukan, ed. *Kasuga Gongen Genki* (Nara: Kasuga Taisha, 2009), p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> For translation of the story of Fujiwara no Toshimori’s rise from obscurity to Assistant Director of the Grand Empress’ Household thanks to the Kasuga Deity, see Tyler, Royall, *The Miracles of the Kasuga Deity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 193–196.



unmistakable similarities between the two paintings, both compositionally in the placement of a body of water after a series of buildings, and in the details, in particular the depiction of the water-birds with their elegantly elongated wings which fly above both Toshimori's pond and over the wild lake at Jetavana. Even more striking than the visual correspondences is the poignant contrast between the *state* of the two scenes: one a ruined glory in India, the home of Buddhism, a place where there is no longer any trace of the Buddha's presence to be found, the other an evocation of what looks like an earthly paradise, unmistakably situated in Japan, and granted by the munificence of the native Kasuga Deity, almost within living memory.

Close readings can illuminate the specific textures of the scrolls' text, but these poetic embellishments also raise important questions about the deeper implications of this literary act itself, and whether its efficacy was confined to the evocation of readerly emotion. There was an active and evolving debate in Japan over the conflict between the practice of poetry, described as 'wild words and specious phrases,' seductive, false words which deceive, and true religious discipline. This debate putatively began in Tang China when the poet Bo Juyi (772–846) dedicated a group of his poems to a monastery in 835. In Japan, the equation of *waka* (Japanese poetry) and scriptures advanced to the point that the teaching of *waka* poetry was incorporated with esoteric Buddhist initiation ceremonies. The insertion of poetry into prose to amplify or advance narrative has a long history in both Chinese and Japanese literature. But given the explicit intentionality that characterises the management of almost every detail of the scrolls, we cannot discount the possibility that these insertions had a potentially transformative effect on the scrolls' very object-hood, enhancing their numinosity in line with their status, which seems to have fallen somewhere between icon and relic within the Daijō-in sub-temple.<sup>37</sup>

### **Pictures Paint Words Paint 'Place'**

The question of the depiction of place was one of the primary challenges for the artists of the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls. In handscrolls for which the setting was Japan (the vast majority), there already existed clear conventions for the depiction of both generic and specific places, developed over centuries through

---

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, William LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Herbert Plutschow, *Chaos and Cosmos: Ritual in Early and Medieval Japanese Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1990); Herbert Plutschow, 'Is Poetry a Sin?' *Oriens Extremis*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1978), pp. 207–218; Susan Klein, *Allegories of Desire: Esoteric Literary Commentaries of Medieval Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

a melding of poetic and painted forms.<sup>38</sup> However, in the case of the *Genjō Sanzō-e*, the entire narrative takes place outside Japan, some of it in China, which was visually familiar in Japan through imported Chinese paintings,<sup>39</sup> but the majority of it in Central Asia and India, neither of which had a comparable visual presence in Japan. Scholars to date have mostly interpreted the visualisation of India in the scrolls as a super-exoticised China.<sup>40</sup> Trees and plants, for example, are given recognisable native forms, but the usual colors of blossoms or leaves are exchanged for outrageous, unnatural shades; textiles and clothing within the scrolls are given extremely detailed attention conveying difference; and Indian monasteries are depicted as grand Chinese-style edifices with pagodas and tiled roofs which in some places feature fabulous animated architectural details. However, I believe that the painter's intentions were more sophisticated than has generally been perceived, and that the alterations to the expected in these images of India do not simply freely super-exoticise the conventional depiction of the "foreign" (i.e. China) to convey an unknown 'India.' Rather than simply relying on imaginative artistic license, I contend that the painters filled in what was missing from their iconographic repertoire by using *words* to guide their compositions. The resulting 'altered' images function lexigraphically, communicating meaning through the interaction of words un-written in the scroll texts, and images that are supplementary to the main narrative thrust.

These altered images, or 'lexigraphs,' are particularly evident in the depiction of the Indian landscape, which is represented principally through vertiginous serpentine blue-and-green rock forms pitted with burrowing caves. Some instances represent relatively small, conventional enhancements. Vulture Peak, where the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra for example, is depicted in the shape of an enormous vulture in episode four of scroll six, a conventional move in Buddhist painting, where the name/word Vulture Peak is turned into a

---

<sup>38</sup> By the thirteenth century, specific visual formulations were becoming sufficiently conventionalised as to be immediately recognisable as the product of the cross-pollination of poetic topos and actual place that produced the aesthetic category of *meisho* (literally 'famous place'), which carried both visual and verbal imagery. See Chino Kaori, 'Chūsei no meisho-e,' in *Nihon byōbu-e shūsei* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1980), Vol. 10, pp. 115–120.

<sup>39</sup> Buddhist paintings are likely to have been key referents, in particular those imported to Japan from the city of Ningbo, present-day Zhejiang Prefecture.

<sup>40</sup> Tsuchiya Takahiro, 'Kamakura-Nanbokuchō ni okeru "ikoku" hyōgenzō no ittan – "Genjō Sanzō-e" o megutte,'" in *'Mono' to imeeji o kaishita bunka denpa ni kansuru kenkyū—Nihon chūsei no bungaku/emaki kara*, ed. Ikeda Shinobu (Kagaku ken'yūhi hōkoku, 2009), pp. 36–51; Minamoto Toyomune. 'Genjō Sanzō-e Sōsetsu,' in *Genjō Sanzō-e Hossō hijiri ekotoba*, ed. Minamoto Toyomune [Shinshū Nihon emaki zenshū] (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1977), Vol. 15, pp. 3–20

picture of the iconic mountain. The play on form leaves the identity of the mountain in no doubt. When Xuanzang travels through Nāgarahara with its great concentration of Buddha relics (scroll four), the lithe rock forms used to describe the landscape repeatedly intimate the presence of giant reptiles with suggestively sinuous lines and eye-like inky fissures in the rocks. The images are cued by the coalescence of ambiguous landscape forms into an actual, unmistakable monstrous head at the very end of the preceding scroll (scroll three, episode seven) [Figure 5].<sup>41</sup> Here it seems possible that the artist may be playing on the Sanskrit word *nāga*, indicating a spiritual being who appears as a dragon/snake, and using it to guide the depiction of the sacred landscape of Nāgarahara.<sup>42</sup> The sacrality of the very landscape is further underlined when, outside the Dragon Cave, we find three male spotted sheep, one golden, one turquoise, and one white. In Chinese, three sheep (Ch. *san yang*) is a rebus for the first month of the New Year, associated with spring, renewal, and great auspiciousness.<sup>43</sup> This word-based play is thus embodied in the very fabric of the painted landscape, the image of the sheep ‘writing’ the rebus for the receptive reader, and thereby conveying the fundamental nature of the landscape.

The painters of the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls made up for their lack of an iconographic model for India by enhancing the visual model of the ‘other’ they did have (i.e. China) by using the received understanding of India as the ultimate earthly holy land, which had been transmitted textually to Japan through China with Buddhism itself, to create the most compellingly Indian India they could. Thus the use of the Chinese-language sheep rebus, for example, at one level, is analogous to the very process of the transmission of Buddhism to Japan. The painters’ ingenuity in rendering word-based knowledge as images that the reader must convert back to text for a full

---

<sup>41</sup> Xuanzang has just visited the site, marked by a *stupa* set by King Asoka, where the historical Buddha met the Dipankara Buddha.

<sup>42</sup> This serpentine landscape also has a distinct resonance with the version of Xuanzang’s story told in the Song dynasty *Daitō shukkyō shiwa*, where in chapter four, the pilgrims pass through the Kingdom of Snakes. For the original text, see Ōta, *Sōhan Daitō Sanzō shukkyō shiwa*, p. 12 and pp. 91–92. They are surrounded on all sides by fierce, writhing snakes, some enormous, others tiny, but the snakes do not harm the pilgrims, merely observe them, and then part to allow them to pass. For a longer exploration of these resonances, see Rachel Saunders, ‘Genjō Sanzō-e kenkyū – Genjō Sanzō no futatsu no katachi oyobi kyoten tekisuto no jūōsei,’ *B1 Bulletin of the Institute for Advanced Research on Asia*, University of Tokyo, vol. 6, (March 2013), pp. 17–27.

<sup>43</sup> The rebus is two-fold. Images of sheep (羊 *yang*) can be used to represent auspiciousness (祥 *xiang*). *Yang* is also the reading for the character 阳, the male principle. The phrase *sanyang kaitai* 三阳开泰 (*Book of Changes*) is a punning rebus for the return of spring.

reading of the scrolls enlivens the scrolls in a unique way, and gives new meaning to adherence to the “spirit of the word.”<sup>44</sup>

The most striking example of this type of lexigraphic inscription though is in the depiction of scholars’ rocks, which make numerous appearances throughout the scrolls. Scholars’ rocks are rocks of remarkable form which have a long history of contemplation and appreciation in China, where large specimens were set in gardens, small ones on the gentleman’s desk. In most cases, they appear in the scrolls as classic twisting, perforated scholars rocks. But in scrolls two and six the rocks are unmistakably zoomorphosised. Song dynasty (960–1279) poetry and prose shows that scholar rocks were a distinct topos, and could be likened not only to men, but also to fearsome beasts and powerful magical sages.<sup>45</sup> In episode six of scroll two, Xuanzang is detained in the palace of the King of Kharakhoto in Central Asia – the king is so desirous of learning from the monk that he attempts to force him to stay rather than go on to India. In response Xuanzang goes on hunger strike, and in this painting he is pictured seated before a meal with his head bowed opposite the irate king. Behind Xuanzang is a remarkable rock, startlingly topped by a lion’s head with its mouth open. The rock is not mentioned in the inscribed text. So why should the artist have chosen to insert this striking image here?

The answer seems to be provided by the appearance of a second lion-shaped rock in episode seven of scroll six when Xuanzang sits in study with his teacher Śīlabhadra at Nālandā Monastery. On encountering Śīlabhadra, Xuanzang realised he had finally found a worthy teacher, and he spent several years studying there, receiving instruction in the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*, the foundation text of Consciousness-only Buddhism, from Śīlabhadra. In front of them are two rocks, the rock in front of Xuanzang an apparently unformed though substantial shape. The rock in front of Śīlabhadra is in the shape of a towering lion. Śīlabhadra is expounding the Buddhist Law, also known as the “Lion’s Roar” (Jp. *shishikū*).<sup>46</sup> The metaphorical appellation conveys the meaning that when the lion roars, all the inferior creatures in the wild submit, and that similarly, when the Buddha speaks, false teachers naturally feel the difference and become silent. If we read the large lion as Śīlabhadra, then the

---

<sup>44</sup> These types of ‘lexigraphs’ are not evident in scrolls eight to twelve, which I interpret as another indication that the first seven scrolls were produced under different conditions from the last five.

<sup>45</sup> The literary and historical origins of the phenomenon of scholar-rock appreciation in China are the subject of Yang Xiaoshan, *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> Sanskrit *siṃha nāda*.

smaller lion in the King of Kharakoto's garden might be read as a representation of the young Xuanzang's rectitude in the face of false convictions. Read against the ground of Song dynasty rock appreciation, it appears that the creators of these scrolls were well aware of the possibilities of scholars' rocks as a somewhat playful, yet significant visual index of scholarly integrity and spiritual advancement.

It is possible though that we are intended to read further still into this image. A closer examination shows that the smaller rock in front of Xuanzang is not actually entirely formless. It is in fact topped by three distinct peaks so that it resembles a Buddhist trident. One of the key ritual implements used in the most important of all Kōfukuji's yearly rituals, the 'Yuima-e,' was a scepter called the *goshishi nyoī*. The Yuima-e was a seven-day long series of lectures and debates based around the Vimalakirti Sutra.<sup>47</sup> This scepter, held by the presiding lecturer, has two important components: the trident, and five lions carved on the reverse. The lions represent the exoteric, and the trident the esoteric branches of Buddhist thought.<sup>48</sup> Read this way, the two rocks in the painting of the Chinese monk studying in distant India, seem to point not only towards Kōfukuji's *Yuima-e* ritual, but to be literally drawing a line of transmission between Xuanzang and his most important period of study in India, and the significance of contemporary ritual practice at Kōfukuji in Japan.

It is thought provoking to consider this painting against the background of what historians have described as a movement for a 'return to orthodoxy' in the face of socio-political changes which were beginning to erode the power of the great Nara monasteries in the fourteenth century.<sup>49</sup> Certainly Xuanzang was not the only possible candidate for depiction in a set of scrolls that effectively became a marker of transmission within the Hossō temple.<sup>50</sup> However,

---

<sup>47</sup> It was not only a grand religious ritual. From its establishment at Kōfukuji in the ninth century, it also provided an important forum for the "theater of state." See Bauer, *The Power of Ritual*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Mochizuki Shinkō et. al. eds *Mochizuki Bukkyō Daijiten* (Kyoto: Sekai shōten kankōkai, 1954–1957), Vol. 2, p. 1195.

<sup>49</sup> These 'conditions' require a paper of their own, but briefly stated, include the shift of interest among ruling elites from the older monasteries and so-called Southern Buddhism centered around Nara, to Zen. See Bauer, *The Power of Ritual*, p. 86, and Mikael Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), pp. 288–345.

<sup>50</sup> Xuanzang, despite his momentous contributions through translation and commentaries on the scriptures, including the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra* that became the foundational text for Hossō Buddhism, failed to gain recognition as the first patriarch of the school. Rather, this status was given to his disciple Kuiji (632–682), who wrote commentaries on Xuanzang's translations. See Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), p. 134. Yogācāra

Xuanzang was the translator of the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*, and the author of the *Treatise on Consciousness-Only*, the foundational Hossō texts, and the putative founder of the Chinese Faxiang school, the source of the transmission to Japan. Furthermore, Xuanzang's own journey was of course itself a return to orthodoxy, born out of the necessity to return to the source to correct critical anomalies in the understanding of Buddhism in a land far from its origin. He was also the recipient of state support from Emperor Taizong (599–649) on his return to China and through his long years of translation. The choice of Xuanzang, then, appears highly appropriate, even expedient in the face of complex and changing religio-political conditions in the early fourteenth century.

### **Narrative and Navigation**

The lexicographic approach is both symptomatic and generative of great expressive plasticity within the scrolls, creating an ecology in which visual and verbal extra-textual amplification results in a sum far greater than the constituent parts. 'Place,' among other things, is thereby exposed as a contingent category. It is unsurprising, then, to find that just as 'China' is used to create 'India' in the scrolls, India is also used to create Japan. At several points in the scrolls we find that the twisting, angular Indian landscape is supplemented with sets of incongruous, softly rolling tree-topped hills. These hills are unmistakably part of the iconography of the Kōfukuji-Kasuga complex, established in so-called Kasuga mandalas that use a variety of different methods to represent the deities of both the Shrine and the Temple, often in the same painting. Despite the wide variations in the iconography of Kasuga mandalas, all iterations depict the shrine and temple deities against the background of the gently rounded sacred Kasuga hills, at the foot of which both the Shrine and the Temple are actually located. Syncretic thought which had accommodated native Shinto gods in the Buddhist worldview as avatars of Buddhist deities, and anxiety over the possibility of salvation in a land so distant in time and space from the birthplace of the Buddha, had facilitated the habit of conflating sacred Buddhist sites in India with actual places in Japan. At Kōfukuji-Kasuga, the Benares Deer Park where the Buddha gave his first

---

thought traditionally originates with Asanga and Vasubandhu in fourth century India; Kuiji, and Japanese monks who traveled to China and were directly instrumental in the transmission of Consciousness-only Buddhism, such as Dōshō (629–700) and Genbō (?–746), might also have been candidates. Documentary records show that at Kōfukuji, Xuanzang was depicted on the walls of the Southern Octagonal Hall, but he did not feature among the extant sculptures of the so-called Six Hossō Patriarchs installed around the main icon in the hall, all of whom were Japanese monks.

sermon, for example, was also said to *be* the Kasuga Hills (where sacred deer still freely roam today), and Mount Mikasa, behind the Kasuga Shrine, *was* Vulture Peak. The Kasuga scrolls even depict the series of oracles delivered to the Japanese monk Myōe (1173–1232) to prevent him from travelling to India. The message was that there was no need for him to leave—all that was needed for salvation was already present in Japan.<sup>51</sup>

With this awareness, when Xuanzang visits a temple in Bactria housing the Buddha's ewer, fly-whisk, and tooth in episode five of scroll three, it is difficult to avoid the impression that when we see the familiar tree-topped rolling hills with two vermilion pagodas in front of them, we are simultaneously seeing the double vermilion pagodas of Kasuga-Kōfukuji.<sup>52</sup> The impression is even stronger when we reach Nālandā Monastery in episode two of scroll six where we find another pagoda, grand tiled roofs, and an expansive pond. Wisteria, the emblem of the Fujiwara family whose tutelary temple Kōfukuji was, blooms luxuriantly in a magnificent pine tree by the pond, resonating with the corresponding Lake Sarusawa at the Japanese temple. If we *are* to read Nālandā as Kōfukuji, then the claim is large indeed, for in the middle of the pond is a miraculous rock from which three animal heads, an ox, an elephant, and a lion, spurt water. (The fourth side of the rock is not visible.) In Buddhist cosmology, Lake Anavatapta, the sacred lake at the center of Jambudvīpa, the terrestrial world, is represented with an animal head at each cardinal direction: an ox to the east, a horse to the west, an elephant to the south, and a lion to the north. Four great rivers flow from their mouths that encircle the lake, and then flow into the surrounding sea.<sup>53</sup> Not only, then, is Nālandā conflated with Kōfukuji, but both are also with elided with Lake Anavatapta, locating them squarely at the center of the terrestrial Buddhist world.

---

<sup>51</sup> See scrolls seven and eight, published in Komatsu ed. *Kasuga Gongen Genki-e* [Zoku Nihon no emaki] Vols 13–14.

<sup>52</sup> The pagodas are no longer extant, but are a consistent element in Kasuga-Kōfukuji mandalas.

<sup>53</sup> This imagery has been used to represent Jambudvīpa since the eighth century in Japan, the date of the earliest extant depiction, on the petals of the Great Buddha lotus pedestal at Tōdaiji. The *Genjō Sanzō-e* image may be the earliest extant example of the imagery associated with Xuanzang's pilgrimage, pre-dating the 1365 Hōryūji *Gotenjikuzu*, a map-like image showing his pilgrimage route, by 50 years or so. (Max Moerman, personal communication, July 2011.) Lake Anavatapta is not mentioned in Huili's *Life*, but it is described in *The Great Tang Record*. See Xuanzang (ca. 596–664), *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of The Western Regions*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996), p. 18.

When figural elements of the *Genjō Sanzō* scrolls are isolated for analysis and then ‘read back’ into the scrolls as a whole, a set of scrolls that appeared to be a depiction of a pilgrimage West from China to India, suddenly also begins to look very much like a journey in entirely the opposite direction, the ultimate destination of which is Kōfukuji in Japan, far to the East. The way is signposted lexigraphically as supplementary elements in the paintings ostensibly depicting India – famous sites such as Nālandā monastery, and eminent Buddhist monks, for example—simultaneously point to places and practices at home in the Kasuga hills. These navigational aids thus mark a direct path between Kōfukuji and the foundation story of Hossō Buddhism itself. The scrolls bridge both time and space and communicate, much as the Kasuga Deity did to the monk Myōe, that there is no need as Japanese monks had in the past to look to intermediary China, or even to attempt pilgrimage to inaccessible India since everything necessary is already present at Kōfukuji. The scrolls insist on this point. They constitute a painted pedigree of correct transmission to Kōfukuji by setting up Xuanzang, whose journey and translations led to transmission of Consciousness-only Buddhism to China and eastwards, as the first patriarch over any of the other possible candidates.

The degree of creativity and finesse evident in the *Genjō Sanzō-e* is such as to suggest the production of the scrolls itself constituted an act of praise. The texts and images are so tightly choreographed as they are ‘translated’ for full narrative potential, it almost seems to echo the infamous accuracy of Xuanzang’s translations. The lexigraphical approach highlighted here in many ways actually materialises the central themes of the story – translation and transmission – translating words and communicating meaning as fully and accurately as the producers of the scrolls were able. This seems apposite for a set of paintings which themselves became a marker for a slightly different kind of transmission: the abbot-ship of the Daijō-in sub-temple. From our vantage point in time, the external historical narrative of their transmission starts to resemble an analogue of their internal narrative. Or perhaps it was the other way around, since the question of whether the scrolls were commissioned for the express purpose of being passed from abbot to abbot, or whether something happened between their creation and their designation for this purpose, is still open. But it is clear that the story of the scrolls as significant cultural objects becomes only the more intriguing when it is read together with their contents, as words become pictures then words again, and the dynamic relationship between them opens up a space of remarkable expressive possibility.



**Image credits:**

All images are reproduced, with the kind permission of the Fujita Museum of Art and Nara National Museum, after Nara National Museum and Asahi Shinbunsha, eds *Tenjiku e: Sanzō Hōshi san man kiro no tabi* (Nara: Nara National Museum and Asahi Shinbunsha, 2011).



Figure 1: Xuanzang's dream of Mount Sumeru (scroll one, episode four).  
*Genjō Sanzō-e*; Kamakura period (early fourteenth century); ink and color with gold, silver, and mica on paper. Collection of the Fujita Museum of Art.



Figure 2: Xuanzang and his party traversing the Tianshan Mountains (scroll three, episode three). *Genjō Sanzō-e*; Kamakura period (early fourteenth century); ink and color with gold, silver, and mica on paper. Collection of the Fujita Museum of Art.



Figure 3: Xuanzang inside the Dragon Cave (scroll four, episode one). *Genjō Sanzō-e*; Kamakura period (early fourteenth century); ink and color with gold, silver, and mica on paper. Collection of the Fujita Museum of Art.

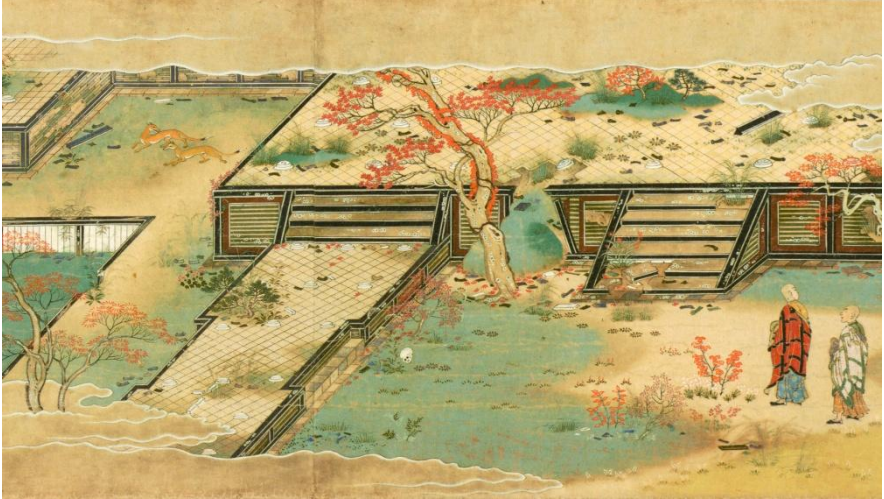


Figure 4: Xuanzang visits Jetavana monastery (scroll five, episode one). *Genjō Sanzō-e*; Kamakura period (early fourteenth century); ink and color with gold, silver, and mica on paper. Collection of the Fujita Museum of Art.

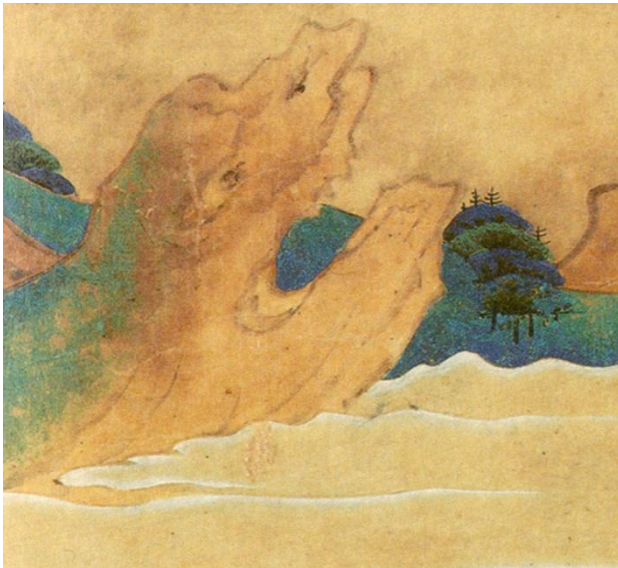


Figure 5: Landscape in Nāgarahara in the form of a reptilian head (scroll three, episode seven). *Genjō Sanzō-e*; Kamakura period (early fourteenth century); ink and color with gold, silver, and mica on paper. Collection of the Fujita Museum of Art.