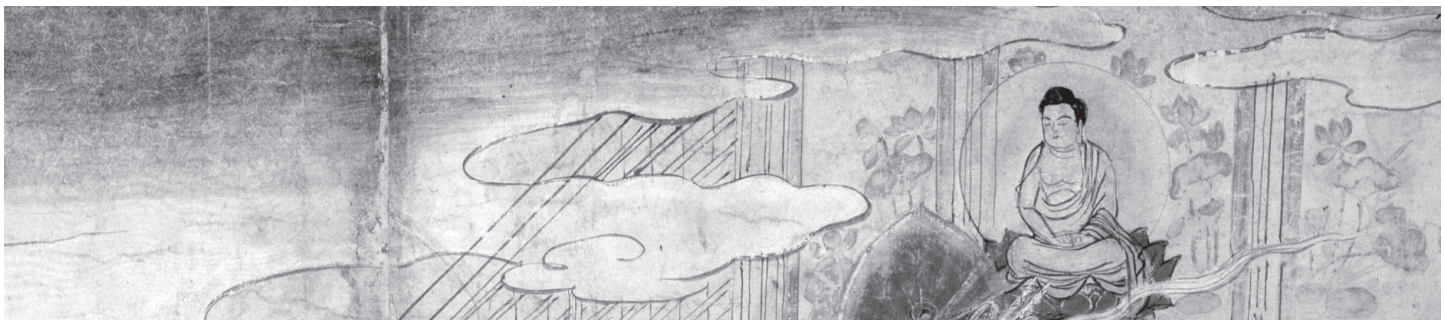


Origins of the Statue of Kannon as a Boy

Origins of the Statue of Kannon as a Boy (*Chigo Kannon engi*) tells the story of an aging holy man living near Nara who wishes for a disciple to care for him in this life and pray for him in the next. He prays before a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara) at the nearby Hase Temple, and, after more than three years of monthly pilgrimages, his hopes are realized when a very attractive teenage boy appears mysteriously out of the morning mist, playing a flute.

As the title suggests, *Origins of the Statue of Kannon as a Boy* was written to explain the provenance of a specific statue, no longer shown to the public, that depicts Kannon in the form of a *chigo* (boy).[1] More specifically, the Japanese term *chigo* refers to boys who served Buddhist monks and abbots or court nobles as personal assistants. They are portrayed in paintings as having feminine features—long black hair, white skin, and red lips. *Chigo* were made much of at the temples where they lived, often occupying the highest seats at banquets. In return for room, board, and, typically, an education in music, poetry, and the Buddhist scriptures, the *chigo* entertained the monks and their guests and provided companionship, including sexual services, to their masters. *Origins of the Statue of Kannon as a Boy* is but one example of a small subgenre of medieval Japanese short stories about the *chigo*. Often, a cherished and coveted *chigo* meets an untimely death due to suicide or murder but, in the end, is revealed to be the manifestation of a higher being. *Origins of the Statue of Kannon as a Boy* is somewhat atypical in this regard.

The translation and illustrations are from the *Chigo Kannon engi* picture scroll (ca. early fourteenth century) in the collection of the Kōsetsu Art Museum, transcribed and photographically reproduced in Komatsu Shigemi, ed., *Taima mandara engi, Chigo Kannon engi*, Nihon emaki taisei 24 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1979), 37–72, 156–59.

1. Tagawa Fumihiko, "Jisha engi no saiseisan to sono hen'yō: *Chigo Kannon engi* o megutte," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 52, no. 1 (2003): 234.

A contemporary proverb held that parents and children spend but a single lifetime together; husbands and wives, two (the current one and the one to come); but teachers and students, like lords and vassals, are joined by karma in three lifetimes: this life, the previous one, and the next. At the very end of the tale, Kannon himself reveals the depth of his relationship to the holy man through an allusion to this belief.

Long ago in this realm of Japan, in the province of Yamato, not far from Hase Temple, there was an extremely distinguished holy man. At his window of contemplation, he never neglected to perceive myriad phenomena in a single ordinary thought; on his cot where he attained the five phases of buddhahood, he accumulated the merit of practicing the Buddhist dharma through years of devoted practice. He was more than sixty years of age.

Yet he lacked a disciple to serve him closely in this world, to follow his footsteps in the Buddhist teachings, and to pray that he should gain the virtuous fruits of enlightenment in the next life. Deeply, indeed, did this holy man rue the skimpiness of the good karma he had accrued in the past, and so he decided to make a pilgrimage to the Kannon at Hase every month for three years.

"Grant me a disciple fit to serve me closely in this world, to whom I can bequeath my place in the dharma," he prayed.

Three years passed, but still no wondrous boon came to him.

Although he resented the Kannon, the holy man kept up his pilgrimages for another three months. Yet even after the passage of three years and three months, there was no miraculous sign. Then, resenting his poor karma, he said, "The great holy one, the revered Kannon is the crown prince of the Pure Land Paradise, the master of the Potalaka realm. His solemn vow of compassion is profound. Nevertheless, his promise to treat all equally as his own children has omitted me, and reveals partiality. Though the moon may illuminate a thousand rivers without discrimination, it does not let its light float upon muddy waters. And while the moon of Kannon's compassion may be pure and bright, he does not send that light to dwell in the clouded minds of sentient beings. Such is beyond my powers to change."

The persistence of his sins and karmic obstructions, like so many stubborn clouds, had brought the holy man nothing but grief, but the next morning, as he made his way home in tears, he was passing the foot of a mountain called Obuse when a boy of thirteen or fourteen, refined in appearance, with a face as lovely as the moon

and a figure as pretty as a blossom, appeared before him. The boy wore a purple under-robe with narrow sleeves under a white silk jacket and an elegant pair of divided skirts dyed russet brown. With a melancholy air, he played a flute made of Chinese bamboo. His long hair was gathered in a ponytail that hung down his back. It was dawn on the eighteenth day of the eighth month. Wet with dew, the boy seemed even more lovely than a willow in spring blowing wild in the wind.

The holy man beheld him, with a sense of utter unreality. He thought the boy must be some sort of evil being that had transformed itself. Nevertheless, he approached and asked, "Here you are, with the night still dark, in this mountain meadow, all by yourself. That seems unusual. What sort of person are you?"

The boy replied, "I was living near Tōdaiji Temple, but the other day I grew angry with my master, and I ran away, walking all through the night, wherever my feet would take me. Where do you live? I know that monks are very compassionate. Take me with you, and make me your page boy. Please, I beg you."

Delighted, the priest said, "There must be more to the story than this. But it can wait for later; right now, I shall take you with me," and he left, bringing the boy with him back to his cloister.

The priest was overjoyed. Days and nights passed with no one coming to inquire about the boy's whereabouts. Nothing he did displeased the holy man. The boy was without peer in poetry and music. Years and months went by, as the holy man rejoiced in the generosity of Kannon. Then, as the spring of the third year came to a close, the boy suddenly fell ill. His body grew weaker with each day, and he drew near to death. The boy rested his head in the holy man's lap as they held hands, face to face, and each bade the other farewell. The boy's last words were especially poignant: "For the past three years, I have spent my days in your cloister of compassion, and my nights under your quilt of forbearance. In what lifetime could I possibly forget the lessons you taught me morning and evening? Although it is the way of the world that the old do not always depart before the young, I had hoped to outlive you so that I could pray for you as a son after your passing. But now my wishes have come to nothing, and I regret only that I must go on before you. They say that the bond with one's teacher lasts three lifetimes, so we will meet again in another life.

"After I have taken my last breath and passed away, do not bury me in the earth, or turn me into smoke to rise above the fields, but rather lay my body in a coffin, place the coffin in the memorial chapel, and, after five weeks have passed, open it and see—" he said, and before he could finish he breathed his last.

The boy's spirit departed, as evanescent in its vanishing as the dew in a graveyard.

The holy man was completely bereft. When birds are about to die, they chirp softly; when humans part ways, their words touch the heart. Realizing that these

words are the last someone will ever say, one pleads with the dying one about the past and the future, and it is all the more poignant and sad. The misery and pain of being separated from a loved one is something that all experience, but this grief was one that had few precedents.

He who gazes at the blossoms on a spring morning laments their scattering; and he who chants poems under the moon on an autumn evening resents the cloudy sky.

The holy man's affection was unparalleled, as he felt the boy was a reward for the pilgrimages that he had made to Hase Temple for three years and three months. And for three years and three months, they had grown used to each other when, all of a sudden, they were parted. His grief was extraordinary.

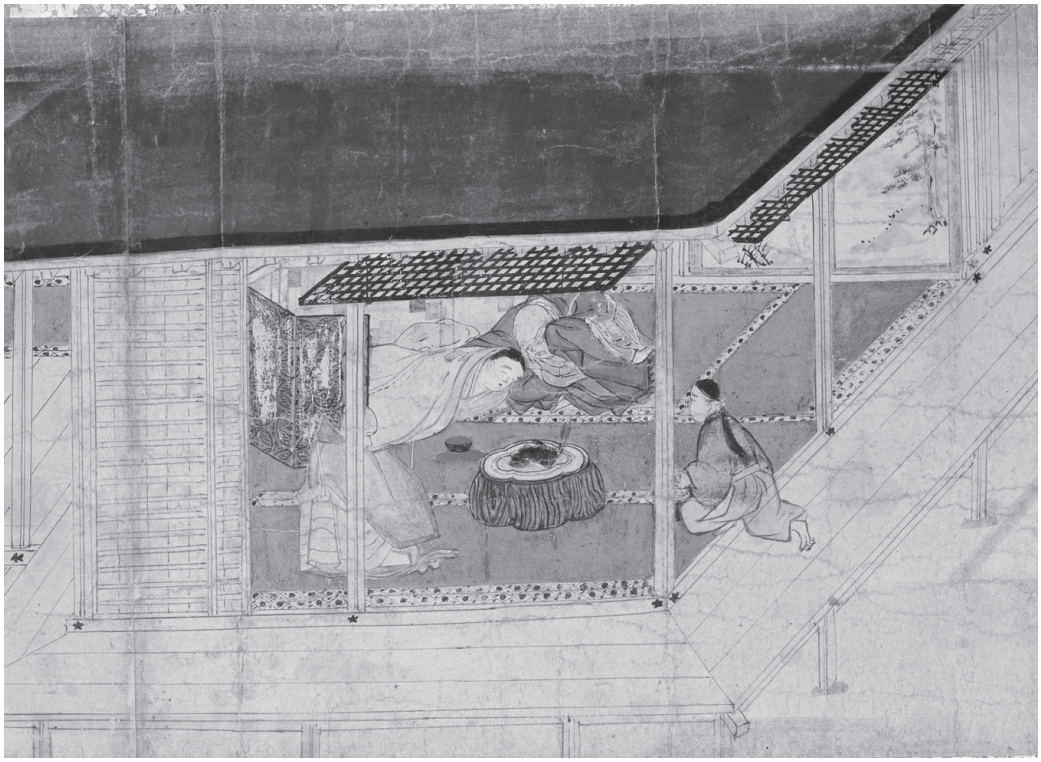
That face like the moon—which cloud was hiding it now? That blossomy complexion—what sort of breeze had lured it away? His sleeves were soaked in

The holy man encounters a beautiful flute-playing boy. (From *Chigo Kannon engi*, courtesy of the Kōsetsu Museum of Art)

tears at the thought of the youth who had passed away before an aged man—when would they ever dry? And the master's grief at being separated from his disciple—when would the day come for it to end?

How poignant it was! The old one remained behind, while the young one had gone away. It could be compared to the scattering of dayflowers or to the heartlessness of falling colored leaves. It was like a drop of water slipping off the root of a plant, like a bead of dew evaporating from the tip of a leaf.

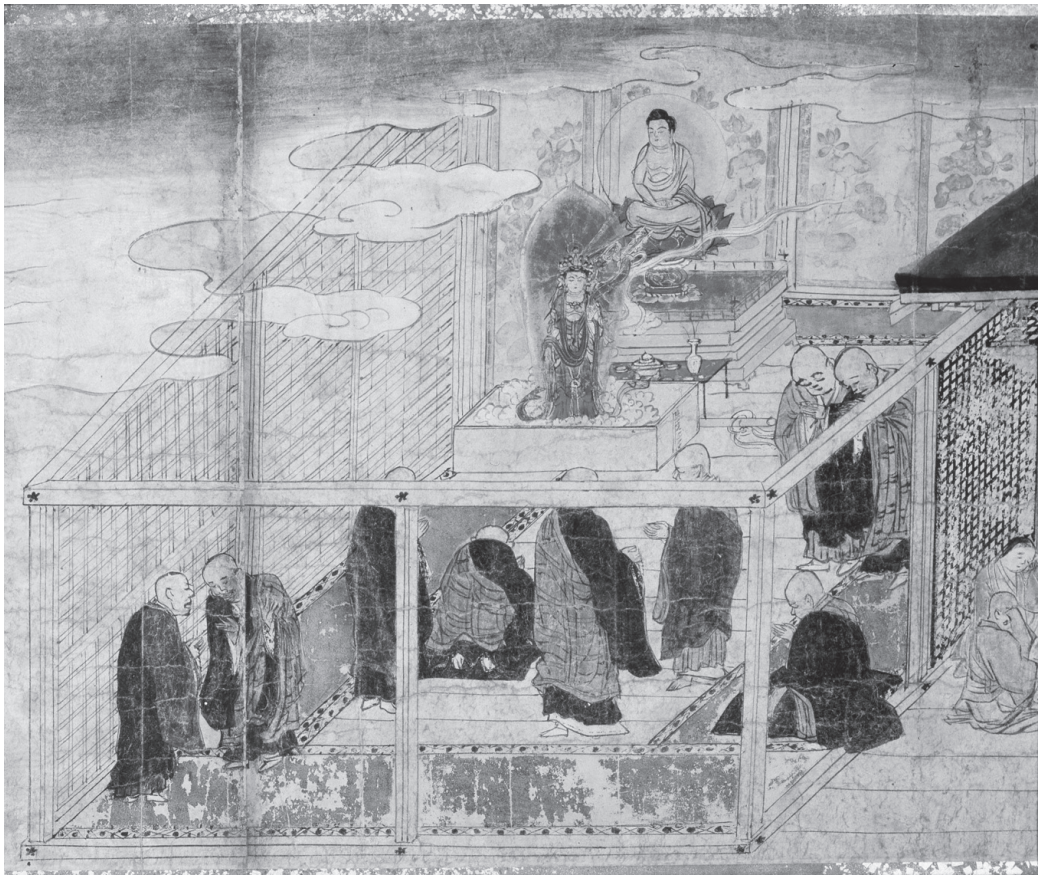
The holy man could not go on weeping forever, so he laid the boy in his coffin. In accordance with the boy's last words, they placed him in the memorial chapel and did not neglect to perform the rites. Worshippers gathered from the nearby villages and the distant hills, and then they copied the Lotus Sutra in a single day and held a memorial service, offering the sutra on behalf of the boy's enlightenment.



The holy man weeps over the boy as he dies. (From *Chigo Kannon engi*, courtesy of the Kōsetsu Museum of Art)

After he delivered a sermon at the service, the holy man was so overcome by grief that he lifted the lid of the coffin and peered inside. A strange fragrance of sandalwood and aloeswood filled the room. The boy had changed his alluring appearance of times past and appeared now as Kannon, with eleven golden faces. His eyes shone clear like green lotuses; his lips were majestic, like cinnabar. Smiling, he spoke with a voice like the kalavinka bird and said to the holy man: "I am not a being of the human world. They call me the Master of the Potalaka Realm, the great holy one, the revered Kannon. That is who I am. For a while, I dwelled in the foothills of Onoe on Mount Hase in order to rescue a sentient being with whom I had a karmic bond. You were kind enough to make pilgrimages there for many years, and so, of my thirty-three manifestations, I assumed that of a boy, and joined with you in a pledge to last two lifetimes.

"Seven years from now, in autumn, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, I will come for you. We shall be reunited on a lotus pedestal in the ninth level of paradise." Then he released a burst of light like a bolt of lightning and ascended into the sky, vanishing among purple clouds.



The boy emerges from his coffin as the bodhisattva Kannon. (From *Chigo Kannon engi*, courtesy of the Kōsetsu Museum of Art)

This is the Boy-Kannon currently located at the Bodai-in Cloister in Nara. Kannon really did appear as a boy to bestow blessings on someone who had made a vow before him and accumulated merit by making pilgrimages. When the people from nearby villages and the distant hills gathered to make a copy of the Great Vehicle that is the Lotus, Kannon appeared before them immediately in his original form, to show them the blessings of interior enlightenment. Apparitions in this world of the buddhas of the past, present, and future are blessings of interior enlightenment from the great holy one, the revered Kannon.

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION BY PAUL S. ATKINS