

---

---

# The Relationship of Image to Text in Paintings of the Six Realms (*Rokudô-e*)

Jun TAKASU

Aichi University of Education

---

## Introduction

In our daily lives we encounter many images. We are so accustomed to seeing combinations of image and text in finished products—film, television, illustrated books, comics, posters, signs, and advertisements—that we rarely think about the process of wedding visual and textual media. We also tend to think that the combinations presented to us are the only forms possible. However, images and words originally had separate functions within a kind of coded system, and the relationship between them can take many different forms.

For the past fifteen years, I have researched painted expressions of the Buddhist afterlife made in Japan between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries. I primarily work on images of hell, paintings of the Ten Kings who judge the good and bad deeds of the dead performed while they were alive, and paintings of the six realms (*rokudô-e*) that people go to after death: the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, *asura* warriors, humans, and heavenly devas. The genre of paintings that I study represents a tiny portion of the world of Japanese paintings, but even by focusing exclusively on this type of images, multiple relationships of image and text can be seen. In fact, paintings of hell and the six realms provide an unusual opportunity to explore this relationship because, since medieval times, such images were important subjects of *etoki* (picture narration), the presentation of paintings accompanied by verbal performances. (Fig. 1.)

In the past, through the practice of *etoki*, Japanese explored many different combinations of image and word. In this essay I look at a few concrete examples from hell and six realm paintings, in order to elucidate some of the possible relationships between image and text.

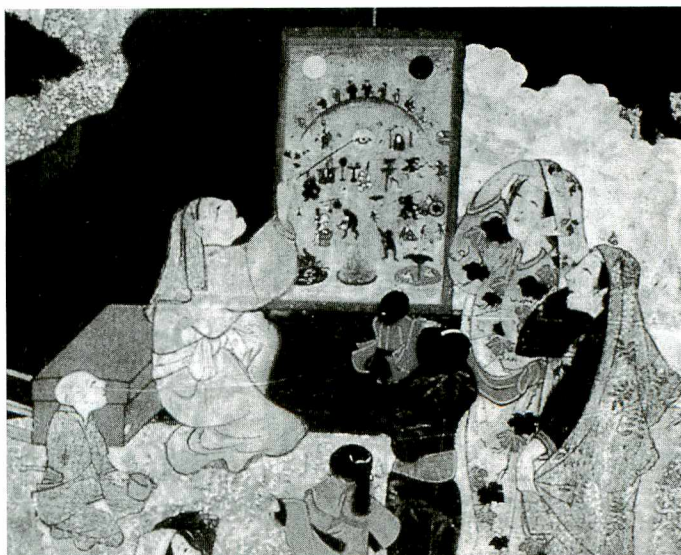


Fig. 1 Sumiyosi-jinja shrine festivals (Freer Gallery of Art 16C)

## Indra in the Asura Warrior Realm

Among the six worlds depicted in six realm paintings is that of the *asura*. The *asura* realm's iconography is the first subject of this essay. In most six realm paintings where the *asura* realm is depicted, we see a battle between the army of *asura* warriors, led by King Asura, and the army of heaven, led by King Indra (the heavenly king). The thirteenth century Shōju raigō-ji temple's *Rokudō-e* (fig. 2) *asura* scroll follows this pattern. We see the confrontation between King Asura, attempting to block the sun with his left hand, and Indra, riding on a white elephant (fig. 3).

It is important to note that, until the early modern era, the most authoritative, influential Buddhist text on Japanese hell and six realm paintings was the *Ôjô yôshû* (The Essentials of Salvation), compiled by the *Tendai* monk Genshin in 985. (Fig 4.) While it is no exaggeration to say that, to one degree or another, most hell and six realms paintings made in Japan were influenced by the *Ôjô yôshû*, the six realm painting purportedly most faithful to descriptions in the *Ôjô yôshû* is this Shōju raigō-ji scroll set. Nevertheless, you can read the *Ôjô yôshû* many times over searching for a passage detailing the *asura* realm as it is depicted in those scrolls, but you will find absolutely nothing there on the war between King Asura and King Indra. The *Ôjô yôshû* only contains the following:

If thunder sounds, they say it is the rumbling of the drums of heaven. [The *asura*] panic and

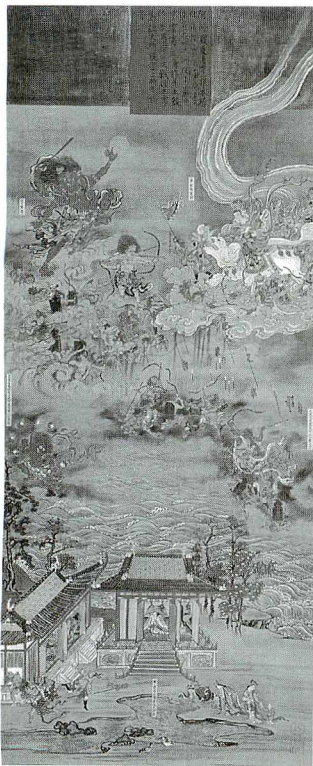


Fig. 2  
Rokudō-e (Shōju raigō-ji  
temple original 13C) Realm  
of Asura



Fig. 3 Detail of Fig. 2

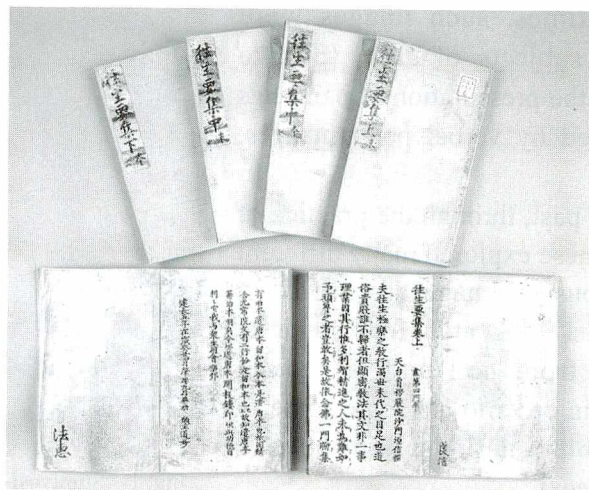


Fig. 4 Genshin "Ôjô-Yôshû" (edited in 985)

their hearts fill with dread. What is more, during regular invasions by heaven's armies, their bodies are injured and lives are lost.

This is not a very elaborate passage and, as might be expected, this quote from the *Ôjô yôshû* is almost never illustrated in paintings of the six realms. One cannot, however, conclude that the *Ôjô yôshû* had no influence on depictions of the *asura* realm in six realm paintings. Actually, in the Shôju raigô-ji six realms painting, although the scroll incorporates visual content about the *asura* realm not described in the *Ôjô yôshû*, at the top edge of the image is a colophon citing this passage from the *Ôjô yôshû*. For some reason, only in the depiction of the *asura* realm, the Shôju raigô-ji six realm paintings included this passage from the *Ôjô yôshû*, while also incorporating a strong impulse that goes beyond that content. That impulse may have developed out of an independent iconographical tradition. We find here the interesting phenomenon whereby, even though the content of a particular text is clearly included, an image has followed a separate, independent tradition.

### Hell's Cauldron

The second topic we will turn to is depictions of the cauldron of hell, particularly to images of a demon stirring a boiling pot into which the dead have been thrown. We see this image used throughout East Asian Buddhist art as a simplified expression of hell. For example, in a tenth century Chinese illustrated Scripture on the Ten Kings (*Jûô-kyô*), each of the six realms is portrayed with a concise symbol, and among these we see demons stirring a cauldron. (Fig. 5.) In other words, in the world of images, the motif of the cauldron itself suggests hell. This symbolism was carried over into Japanese art as well. In Heian era sutra frontispieces, we also see illustrations of demons stirring a cauldron as the symbol of hell. Such visual traditions for depicting hell predate the writing of the *Ôjô yôshû*. There is a legend that the lid of hell's cauldron opens during the summer Bon festival for the dead, and that the spirits of the dead can then return to this world. I wonder if the visual tradition of cauldrons representing hell lies behind that legend—in Japanese paintings of hell and the six realms, when salvation or the release from hell are depicted, we frequently see hell's cauldron cracking and its contents spilling out.

For example, in a fourteenth century *Rokudô jûô-zu* (Six Realms Ten King Painting) from Mizuo Miroku-dô we see a depiction of salvation from hell. (Fig. 6.) Hell's cauldron cracks open, the boiling water it contained turns into cool, pure water, dead people who had been cooking inside become babies, and these babies are reborn into paradise. The lotus flowers sprouting from the flowing water of the broken cauldron symbolize rebirth, deriving from explanations that birth in paradise is achieved by means of lotus flowers that bloom in a lake in paradise.

Strictly speaking, those who are born atop a lotus flower in hell have not arrived in paradise, but the very image of lotus flowers growing out of the cracked cauldron of hell should be interpreted as a symbol of salvation and rebirth in paradise. This particular iconography is, of

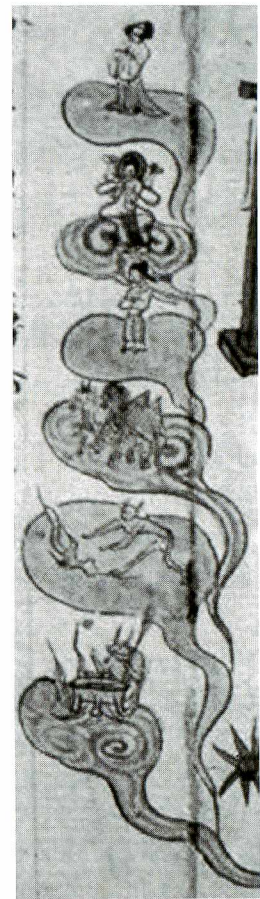


Fig. 5  
Illustrated Sutra of the Ten  
Kings of Hells (Kubosô  
Memorial Museum 10C China)  
detail



Fig. 6 Rokudô-jûô-zu (Mizuo Miroku-dô 14C) detail of right scroll

course, often connected with specific stories and some of these stories are faithfully illustrated in images, but, as we can see in this Mizuo Miroku-dô painting, there were also, more than one might expect, uses of this iconography in contexts that did not adhere to any specific narrative.

To confirm what we have discovered about hell's cauldron, let us look at one more example. In the Idemitsu Museum's sixteenth century painting of the six realms and ten kings (fig. 7) we also see pure water flowing from hell's cracked cauldron and rebirth in paradise symbolized by a lotus flower. This resembles the Mizuo Miroku-dô painting, but here we see a wealth of additional details, such as the dead flowing and tumbling out of the cauldron along with the water, a flustered demon, and another demon profoundly impressed by the miracle of salvation he has just witnessed. Undoubtedly, such lively visual expressions enabled exciting *etoki* painting narratives. There is one more important illustration of a cauldron in this large painting, composed of six hanging scrolls, that I want to look at. This second cauldron derives from a different context from that discussed above (fig. 8).

In the bottom corner of the sixth scroll we find an image of Kaku Kyo, a legendary filial son. Kaku Kyo was an impoverished Chinese farmer without the means to support his family. His aging father gave what little food he had to his grandchild and was always hungry. The dutiful

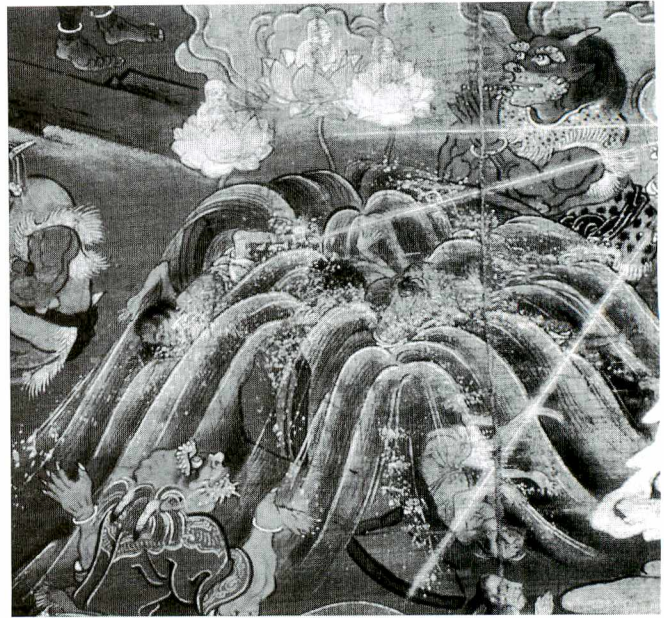


Fig. 7 Rokudô-jûô-zu (Idemitsu Museum of Art 16C) detail of 4th scroll

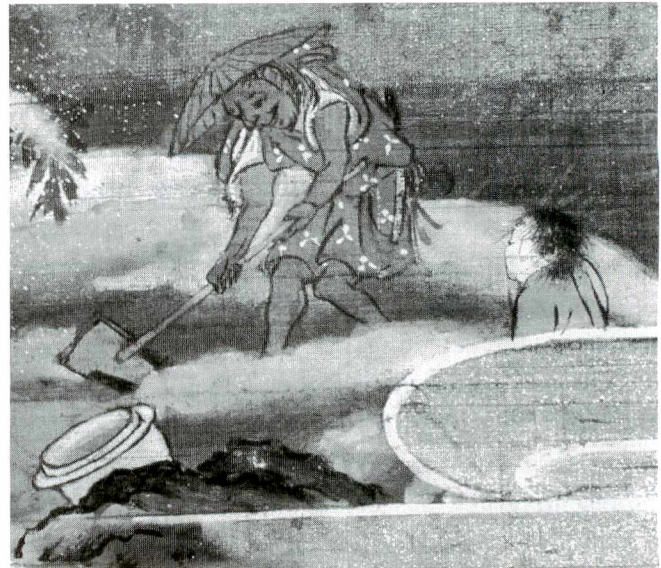


Fig. 8 Rokudô-jûô-zu (Idemitsu Museum of Art 16C) detail of 6th scroll

Kaku Kyo noticed this sacrifice and was deeply troubled. In order to reduce the number of mouths he had to feed, he resolved to bury his own child. He started digging a hole for the child, but the heavens were so impressed by his intense devotion to his father, that they arranged for him to dig up a golden pot. Kaku Kyo became a wealthy man and was able to live with his family in luxury thereafter.

In Chinese Buddhism, the holding of appropriate funerary rites for parents and ancestors in order to save them from the six realms resulted in a focusing on the virtue of filial piety. Including the famous tale of Mokuren saving his mother, there are many illustrated stories promoting the virtues of filiality, and these virtues were further stressed in *etoki* performances. Kaku Kyo's inclusion in this *Rokudô jûô-zu* is connected to such traditions of filial behavior, but that general cultural trend does not sufficiently explain the choice to insert the story of Kaku Kyo, instead of one of the many other stories of filial sons then in circulation. I think that Kaku Kyo's story appeared in this painting of the six realms because the cauldron of hell and Kaku Kyo's pot resemble each other visually.



Fig. 9 A Illustration of “Jûô santan shuzen-syô zue” (1850) Kaku Kyo

Here let us consider an illustrated text called the *Jûô santan shuzen-shô zue* (fig. 9), an interpretation with popular appeal of the *Jizô jûô kyô* (Scripture on Jizo and the Ten Kings) edited and embellished by Tetsugai in 1850. The *Jizô jûô kyô* ranks alongside the *Ôjô yôshû* as one of the texts most influential on images of hell and the six realms. In Tetsugai's edition we find a strange conversation about the reality of hell:

Senior Retainer: During what era, by whose preferences, and by what workshop's master was cast the cauldron of hell?

Monk: Let us answer this question later.... Do you think that the stories of the twenty-four T'ang Chinese filial sons are true or false?

Senior Retainer: How could they possibly be false?

Monk: One of the twenty-four is Kaku Kyo. During what era, by whose command, and by what workshop's master was cast the golden pot that he unearthed? ... You should think upon that example if you wish to know the artisan of hell's cauldron.

The senior retainer asks a perverse question challenging whether or not hell is real, and the monk responds with contorted logic. His absurd argument, that there is no major difference between hell and Kaku Kyo's story, is not based on reason and is not an effective answer. Nevertheless, why bring up Kaku Kyo's legend here? Probably, as we saw in the Idemitsu Museum's painting, in images hell's cauldron had already met with Kaku Kyo's pot. The two cauldrons encountered one another in visual representation and, in this dialogue from the *Jûô santan shuzen-shô zue*, they were connected and a new story was born. Images brought about a new textual variation.

## The Decomposing Corpse

Now we move to our third topic. Paintings of the six realms depict six worlds that should be avoided. In these images, the corpse's decay symbolizes the impurity of the human world. For example, in the Shôju raigô-ji six realm painting (fig. 10) a corpse decomposes in nine stages, from its recent death at the top of the image to its bleached bones at the bottom. In the colophon at the top is a passage from the *Ôjô yôshû* explicating the impurity of the human realm. From this we know, without a doubt, that this painting was made with the intention of demonstrating the impurity of the human realm.

There is, however, one incongruous image of the corpse's decay located toward the bottom of the scroll where it is being devoured by dogs (fig. 11). As mentioned above, depictions of the corpse in this work decay increasingly as our eye moves from top to bottom. With each progressive stage, the color of the skin gradually changes and the flesh deteriorates. Why then, in spite of the fact that the decomposition in other stages has proceeded to a considerable degree, does this image of the corpse with dogs look as if she has just perished, and is still fresh and beautiful?

When we look at images that systematically follow the structure of one text, we are inclined to imagine that new images may be created in order to accommodate that text, but the strangely out-of-sequence insertion of this corpse demands our reconsideration.

Actually, an extremely similar composition can be found in a thirteenth century handscroll contemporary with the Shôju raigô-ji painting which also depicts the impurity of the human realm, but this work, entitled the *Kusoushi* handscroll, is based on a different text. It illustrates a practice designed to enable the overcoming of attachment to the material world. This was achieved through contemplating nine appearances or stages of a corpse's decay, a type of image training fundamentally different from realizing that the human realm is impure, as promoted in Genshin's *Ôjô yôshû*. In the *Kusoushi* handscroll we also find a voluptuous woman's body decomposing in nine stages. One of these stages illustrates the corpse's consumption by dogs (fig. 12). The direction the corpse faces and the placement of the dogs is different from the Shôju raigô-ji painting, but if we look at each of the dog's poses, we can clearly see that the image belongs to the same visual tradition.

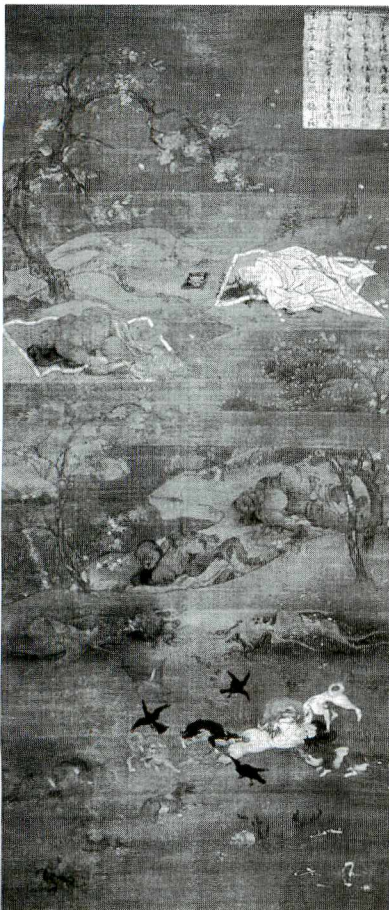


Fig. 10 Rokudô-e (Shôju raigô-ji temple original 13C) The decomposing body



Fig. 11 Detail of Fig. 10

The theme and narrative differ in these two examples, but we find a shared image, indicating that textual context was disregarded and that the image was recycled. The *Ôjô yôshû* does not describe the stages of the corpse's decay. The theme of contemplation of the nine stages found in the *Shôju raigô-ji* painting was borrowed from elsewhere and inserted into the scroll depicting the impurity of the human realm. It seems that the relationship between image and text is not a one-to-one, fixed correspondence.

Let us look at one more example. The Mizuo Miroku-dô's *Rokudô jûdô-zu* also includes a decomposing corpse illustrating the impurity of the human realm, as we saw in the *Shôju raigô-ji* painting, but the visual correspondence with the *Shôju raigô-ji* painting is not as strong. Only the scene of the corpse being devoured by dogs (fig.13), similar to that found in the *Kusoushi* handscroll, clearly derives from the same iconographic tradition. The same can be said for the thirteenth century *Gokuraku-ji* six realm painting's depiction of the impurity of the human realm. For some reason, in the iconography of the stages of the decay of the corpse, only this image with the dogs developed independently. Perhaps it originally came from a different context. We do not know how it became established in this tradition and we do not know its original context. It is certain, however, that the image comes from an independent context, that it was borrowed and placed into the new context of texts on "impurity" and the nine stages to create a new composition.

### In the Field

Our fourth and last subject is the field in which corpses were left out for exposure. As I will explain below, the motif of the field plays an extremely important role in determining the composition of six realm paintings. In fact, in texts the field does not seem terribly important. One of the last stages of the contemplation of the nine stages is the grave mound, an image of a dilapidated grave. When the decay of the corpse here is described in texts, we find almost no emphasis on the field as its location. When looking at the composition of images of the six realms, however, we can clearly see that the image of the field wielded powerful influence by looking at how it was employed in various images. For example, in *Zenrin-ji*'s painting of the ten worlds (*Jikkai-zu*) from the thirteenth century, we see "impurity" images in fields and the conveying of corpses to fields for burial or exposure. A corpse is conveyed in the *Shôju raigô-ji* six realm painting's scroll depicting death and suffering in the human realm. This image does not accord with the conception of "impurity" and was therefore placed in a different scroll. The *Gokuraku-ji* six realm painting depicts a field (fig. 14) that includes an image of a corpse being conveyed (fig.



Fig. 12 Detail of Kuzoshi Emaki (private collection 13C)



Fig. 13 Rokudô-jûdô-zu (Mizuo Miroku-dô 14C) detail of left scroll

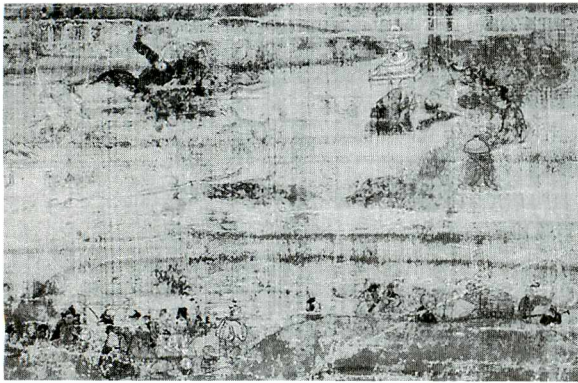


Fig. 14 Rokudô-e (Gokuraku-ji temple 13C) detail of right scroll

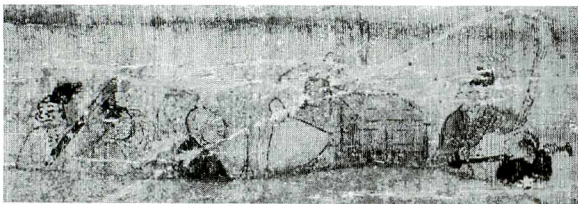


Fig. 15 Detail of Fig. 14 (attendance at a funeral)

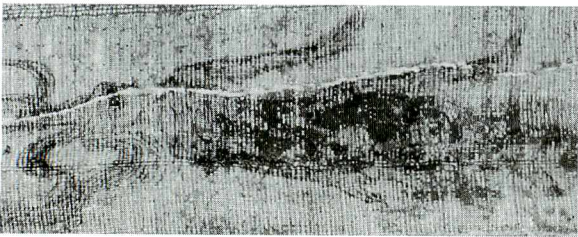


Fig. 16 Detail of Fig. 14 (decomposed body)

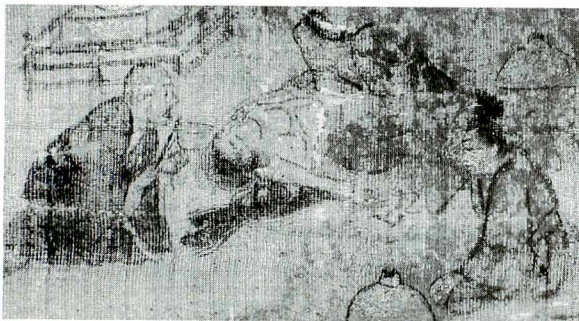


Fig. 17 Detail of Fig. 14 (pain of separation)

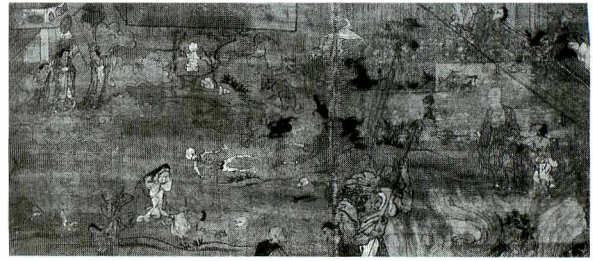


Fig. 18 Rokudô-jûdô-zu (Mizuo Miroku-dô 14C) detail of left scroll



Fig. 19 Detail of Fig. 18 (pain of separation)

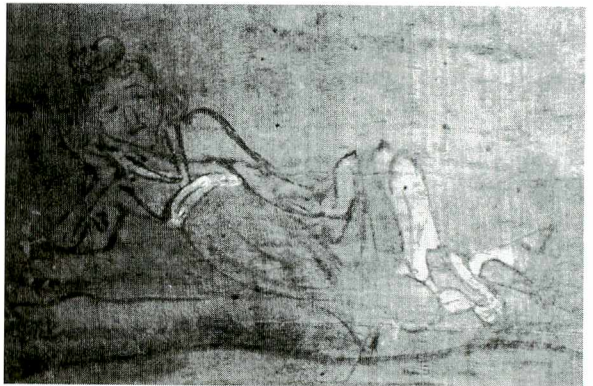


Fig. 20 Detail of Fig. 18 (weakening of a heavenly being)



Fig. 21 Detail of Fig. 18 (revival of a dead)



15), one of “impurity” (fig. 16), and another of the pain of parting from those we love, a scene from depictions of suffering in the human realm (fig. 17). As is appropriate in a field, next to the dead woman we see mourning parents and a priest chanting a sutra.

We can see the significance of the field even more clearly in the Mizuo Miroku-dô's *Rokudô jûô-zu* (fig. 18). In this painting we see not only parents grieving over the death of their young child, depicting the suffering of parting from loved ones (fig. 19) and human impurity, but also dimensions different from what originally belonged to the human realm, such as depictions of the signs of mortality displayed by heavenly beings (*deva*) in the heavenly realm at the end of their lives (*Tennin gosui*, fig. 20), and of the dead being led by the Bodhisattva Jizô from the world of the dead to the world of the living (fig. 21).

Even though the field is not emphasized in any texts describing these situations, when scenes from these texts were translated into images, artists had to place them against the background of the field. We find here that when the space of the field is painted, elements not found in one text are absorbed into the composition one after the other, united by certain similar qualities, and that they are thrown together with images from other contexts. Paintings of the six realms are composed of numerous iconographical elements, weakening consciousness of creating a unified sense of compositional space. It may therefore have been easy to tie various elements together by the iconographical themes they shared.

## Conclusion

Above, we analyzed some details of hell paintings and six realm paintings and found what I consider to be clear examples of fluctuation in the connection between image and text. We have seen traditions of images that are dependent on Buddhist texts while simultaneously resisting textual narratives. We have seen that new texts can be born from encounters between images. Some texts and images assembled from different contexts joined to create new images. The relationship between image and text is not one-dimensional. The range of expression in these various relationships between image and text is remarkably flexible and rich.

**A. Hashimura** (Musée préfectoral de l'histoire de Hyogo). Je suis responsable de la peinture bouddhique. Vous parlez du rapport qui existe entre l'image visuelle et le texte. Je voudrais savoir si ce rapport existe aussi entre deux textes différents, ou encore entre deux textes en image.

**J. Takasu** Je pense qu'il y a une interaction entre deux textes, soit de nature différente, soit de même nature. Je peux dire qu'il y a cette espèce d'interaction entre deux textes en image. Il arrive que des images exercent une influence les unes sur les autres. Ainsi, il existe des peintures qui ont des variantes ou des modifications différentes. Concernant le texte, je pense que plusieurs d'entre vous peuvent montrer des exemples de ces interactions entre les textes.

**Y. Abe** (Université de Nagoya) En rapport avec ce que vous avez dit, il y a un art d'*étoki*, c'est-à-dire,

présentation des images en les commentant. C'est donc un acte de récit. Comment est joué le rôle de cet art d'*étoki* dans les interactions entre le texte en image et le texte écrit ? J'ai une autre question en rapport avec la première. Vous avez montré le cadavre d'une jeune femme qui était dévorée par des chiens. Sur ce cadavre, bien que la personne soit morte depuis longtemps, la peau reste fraîche. Et vous avez montré un autre tableau du même genre qui avait été réalisé sur la base de la même partie. Or, dans ce tableau, on ne trouve pas la fraîcheur de la peau du cadavre de la jeune fille. Pourquoi le Shôju raigô-ji bon a introduit un cadavre avec une peau fraîche ? Il y a une interaction entre les légendes médiévales qui racontent ce récit et une telle illustration à travers l'art d'*étoki* ?

**J. Takasu** Je vais essayer de répondre à vos

question pour l'art d'*étoki*. Les tableaux qui sont utilisés pour l'*étoki* ne parlent pas à eux seuls. C'est par l'*étoki* que les tableaux et les images sont liés au texte. Il y avait un texte écrit et le commentateur qui commentait les images lisait ce texte. Je pense que concernant les images de la Marmite de l'enfer, quelqu'un a peut-être mis les deux tableaux l'un à côté de l'autre par hasard et il a trouvé une ressemblance. Cette personne pouvait être la personne qui commentait les tableaux. Je pense que cela s'est passé comme cela. Donc il n'y avait

pas de liens solides entre le texte et les images. Les liens étaient plutôt ponctuels et la répétition, l'accumulation de ces rencontres a donné le résultat qu'on a vu tout à l'heure. Pour répondre à votre deuxième question, j'aurais dû vous montrer d'autres panneaux qui montrent les autres étapes du cadavre, entre autres, le cadavre à la peau fraîche. L'image du cadavre à la peau fraîche est peut-être due à la connaissance d'une autre légende. Cette image est tellement impressionnante que l'on a tenté de reprendre son motif.