In a famous passage of the *Kakuzen shō* 覺禪抄, a Shingon 眞言 ritual-iconographic manual compiled in the late twelfth century, Bodhisattva Nyoirin Kannon 如意輪觀音 (Ruyilun Guanyin) takes the form of a “jewel woman” (*yunü*; *gyokujo* 玉女), a beautiful concubine who brings boundless good fortune to the sovereign and causes him to be reborn in the Pure Land paradise of Amida Buddha after death. In fact, such “jewel women” appeared in the dreams of several prominent Japanese Buddhist monks in the early years of the Kamakura 鎌倉 period (1185–1333); scholars have drawn attention to the wording of this *Kakuzen shō* passage because it prefigured Shinran's 互般 account of a dream in which Kannon promised to become his consort, which inspired him to leave the celibate priesthood and marry. The *Kakuzen shō* passage is also important, however, because it explicitly identifies Nyoirin Kannon—a tantric form of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara—as female, a development that seems to have occurred only in Japan. Nyoirin’s appearance as the jewel woman reflects a long history of her convergence with other deities within the Ono branch of Shingon, in a process of mythological contagion that endowed her with the qualities of a fecund goddess of fertility and fortune.
By the time the Kakuzen shō appeared, Nyoirin was already widely known in Japan for her power to grant both salvation and worldly happiness. Medieval esoteric texts and also sculptures and paintings dating from the early Heian 平安 (794–1186) period onward offer glimpses of an image that might well have haunted the dreams of monks—a graceful figure seated on a lotus blossom, holding in her six hands symbols of both material and spiritual wealth, one hand cupping a wish-fulfilling jewel (cintāmaṇi; ruyi baozhu; nyoī hōjū 如意寶珠), another twirling a wheel (cakra; lun; rin 輪) symbolizing the Buddhist teachings. Reflecting these attributes, the bodhisattva’s Sanskrit name is Cakravarti-Cintāmaṇi-Avalokiteśvara.3

Texts and images devoted to Nyoirin had reached Japan by at least the mid-eighth century, but the Tang 唐 (618–907) Chinese texts that serve as the basis for her worship in Japan contain no clear precedent for her manifestations in female form.4 In these texts Ruyilun appears as an androgynous or male tantric deity, one of several esoteric forms of Avalokiteśvara and, like them, the bearer of an all-powerful dhāraṇī spell symbolized by his wish-fulfilling jewel. On a broad scale,

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3 The name has also been reconstructed as Cintāmīnicakra-Avalokiteśvara, though the Chinese texts devoted to Ruyilun give the name as Cakravarti-Cintāmaṇi. See the Ruyilun tuoluoni jing (T. 1080.20:188c9–26), and the Ruyilun pusa guanmen yizhu bijue (T. 1088.20:216a22–2b), a text thought to have been composed by Kūkai’s master Huiguo. One of the most celebrated images of Nyoirin in Japan is the nineteenth-century statue housed at the Shingon temple Kanshinji 觀心寺, long praised by Japanese priests and art historians for its mysterious charm. The so-called “femininity” of this and other Nyoirin images is debated, however, because most can also be read as androgynous. In a sense the images leave open possibilities for feminization that the texts render more explicit. Because of the problematic nature of the term “feminization,” the phenomena that our texts reveal might also be described as a kind of “gender play” in which female identities became central to the persona(s) of this bodhisattva in Japan. On the “gender” and history of the Kanshinji image, see Bogel 2002, 32–64. Nyoirin is variously depicted with two, four, six, eight, ten, or twelve arms, though in Shingon the six-armed form is most common. On Nyoirin’s iconography in Japanese sculpture, see Fowler 1989, 58–65.

4 These translations, found in T. vol. 20, are attributed to Bodhiruci (Putīliuzhī 菩提流志; Bodairushi; 572–727), Amoghavajra (Bukong Jin’gang 不空金剛; Fukū Kongō; 705–774), Vajrabodhi (Jin’gangzhi 金剛智; Kongōchi; 671–741), and others, and were done mostly in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. In Japan Nyoirin became particularly important in the Sanbōin 三寶院 lineage of the Ono branch of Shingon, founded by the priest Shōbō 聖寶 (832–909) at Daigoji 醍醐寺, and one of the earliest streams of this tradition. The Guanzizai pusa ruyilun niansong yigui 觀自在菩薩如意輪念诵儀軌 (Kanjizai bosatsu nyoirin nenjugiki) and the Guanzizai ruyilun pusa yugie jayao 觀自在如意輪菩薩瑜伽法要 (Kanjizai nyoirin bosatsu yuga hōyō), among others, are important Sanbōin ritual texts. See T. 1085 and 1087.