CHAPTER 6

Karako Asobi: Images of Chinese Children at Play*,†

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6.1 Images of Children and Karako (Chinese Children) in Japanese Painting

Assigned the theme of representations of close affection, I began to think about their expression in Japanese paintings. How is intimacy expressed in Japanese art? That is the starting point for a subject not often discussed up until now. Thus, this chapter will consider the relationship between intimate affection and paintings, particularly images of children in pre-modern Japanese art, focusing on an examination of the theme of karako asobi, or Chinese children at play.

In Japanese painting, where do images of children appear, in what kind of settings? In terms of the portraits of specific children, there are portraits of historical figures such as Shōtoku Taishi and Kūkai as children. These were created as objects of worship, and while they represent actual individual persons, they are a form of ancestor image within the broader genre of Buddhist painting. In the background of the worship of infant or youthful figures is a layering of belief systems, both Buddhist teachings and the worship of children in Japan as a form of Shinto deity. It has been frequently indicated that Shinto deities appear in the guise of children.

Outside of the realm of religious art, in general, portraits of children were created as part of the grieving process upon the death of a child. As noted in Bunchō gadan (Bunchō’s Treatise on Painting), to paraphrase, “In Japan, portraits of living subjects who are less than 30 years old are not created. In the belief that creating an exact likeness of the figure will hasten their death, portraits of living subjects are depicted without visual resemblance to their subject.”1 Thus, given the high mortality in the past, it is natural that painting

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1 Bunchō gadan (Bunchō’s Treatise on Painting), published in Sakazaki 1917, pp. 757–817, esp. p. 816. “The custom in Japan is that portraits of people less than 30 years of age are not to be created, probably for fear of jinxing their luck and causing grief. When I was once making a
pictures of living children was avoided, since it was believed to shorten their life. Examples of extant Muromachi period and later portraits of children known today include Hosokawa Hasumaru as a small child (Chōshōin Collection), and Tokugawa Ichihime (Seiryōji Collection). In Japan, ancestor worship means that portraits of ancestors are as carefully handled as images of Buddhist and Shinto deities. In that sense, even though it is hard to strictly differentiate these two portraits of deceased children from works of religious art, they were actually depicted in their adorable living form, not a strict formality that might conjures images of their divine sanctity. In such choices we can sense the grieving sentiments of the parents of the deceased child. While the original purpose of posthumous portraits of children was to pray for them along with deceased ancestor spirits, they were also prized as a means of remembering the appearance of the late child.

On the other hand, what about the depiction of children in genre scenes, such as narrative handscrolls or screen and wall paintings? Beginning with handscrolls, images of families, including children, can often be found in early pre-modern era genre paintings, customs of the twelve months paintings, and rice cultivation through the four seasons paintings. Examples of children playing together are particularly well known in the Scenes In and Around Kyoto (Rakuchū Rakugai) screens. For example, in Kanō Eitoku's Scenes In and Around Kyoto, known as the Uesugi version, children are shown playing New Year's games, such as tug-of-war and buriburi gicchō, a traditional ball and stick game. These images are important historical evidence of how children acted at the time. However, there was no development of this imagery from thumbnail image inclusion in larger compositions to genre scenes focused on Japanese children. The courtesans and theatrical figures who similarly appear as motifs within larger compositions later developed into independent picture subjects, such as beauty pictures and actor pictures, and thus we can assume that the consumers of genre pictures at the time did not create a demand for pictures of Japanese children.

Kusumi Morikage's Enjoying the Evening Cool under a Evening Glory Trellis (Fig. 0.3) is known as a depiction of a child with its family. The two-panel screen shows three figures, who appear to be father, mother and son, enjoying the cool evening air together on a single straw mat. This painting is the first work that