
In The Face of Jizō, Hank Glassman offers a richly drawn history of the cult of the bodhisattva Jizō in medieval and early-modern Japan. Glassman traces this history mainly through an examination of visual representations. This approach is particularly suited to his subject matter. Even among bodhisattvas—a class of beings regarded as intimately involved in the lives of mortals—Jizō has long been regarded by devotees as the most relatable and “down to earth.” Glassman asserts that this sense of Jizō’s approachability stems in part from the fact that Jizō veneration in Japan has often been characterized by devotion not to some abstract, celestial figure, but to its specific, localized manifestations—that is, Jizō’s individual instantiations in specific statues or paintings (p. 13). Thus, we gather, a study of this bodhisattva would do well to incorporate an analysis of both images and textual sources.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, Glassman is able to illuminate many of the distinct routes of diffusion of a tradition of daunting complexity. Jizō, we learn, is a figure whose history is woven together from many disparate threads—an object of veneration taken up by diverse sets of individuals and groups, from elite official monks to outcasts, and whose cult was colored by exposure to and at times combination with a variety of other traditions. Glassman’s study highlights some of the key moments in this history, focusing on early promotion of Jizō among elite monks of Nara temples, the role of underclass performers in the spread of Jizō traditions, and the blending of Jizō legends with the cults of local gods dedicated to fertility.

Glassman’s first chapter, “The Iconology of Jizō,” serves as his introduction. In it, he discusses the influence on his methodology of Aby Warburg, an early twentieth-century art historian. Warburg rejected formalism in
favor of an approach that sought to understand images in terms of their cultural contexts and to “restore connections that would have existed in the mind of the contemporary viewer but are lost to modern eyes” (p. 5). By placing these images into their historical and cultural contexts, Glassman seeks to reconstruct the meanings they had for those who produced and venerated them. He is careful to point out, however, that religious icons resist a single interpretation. Following from this, Glassman asserts that his book is not intended as the definitive history of Jizō, but rather as one of many histories that could be written. This is admirable humility from an author with such a commanding knowledge of such an intricate subject.

Glassman also uses his first chapter as an opportunity to provide a brief overview of the history of the Jizō cult in China and Japan and a “fragmentary theory” of Jizō, consisting of four theses: that Jizō was “a malleable figure, easily associated with local deities”; that his iconographic identity as a monk made him a “stand-in” for the Buddhist clergy; that in contrast to other figures from the Buddhist pantheon characterized by stillness, Jizō has been characterized by motion; and that he has commonly been associated with liminality (p. 11).

The book’s second chapter, “Monastic Devotion to Jizō,” identifies thirteenth-century Nara as one of the key points of origin for the medieval Jizō cult, describing how and why elite Nara monks came to promote devotion to Jizō, who had hitherto inhabited a relatively obscure corner of the Buddhist pantheon. The chapter takes as its launching point an analysis of an early thirteenth-century statue, the so-called “Rockerfeller Jizō” that contains inscriptions including seed syllables (bijā), a votive document (gamanmon) dedicating the merit from the icon’s production, and the names of its sponsors, four of whom were elite Kōfukuji monks. Glassman asserts that Jizō’s rapid rise in popularity in the Kamakura period can be attributed, in part, to the efforts of Kōfukuji monks, such as Jōkei (1155-1213), who, due to their Fujiwara connections revered Jizō on account of the bodhisattva’s identification as the original ground (honji) of Amenokoyane, the third of the four deities of Kasuga, the ancestral shrine of the Fujiwara. Glassman then follows the spread of the Jizō cult with the expansion of the Nara-based Ritsu sect into eastern Japan and beyond in the thirteenth century. Although this summary implies a relatively straightforward trajectory, along the way, Glassman uses images and statues to trace a tangled web of connections that led to Jizō’s adoption by Buddhists of various sectarian stripes.