

Sherry D. Fowler, *Murōji: Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. xiv + 293 pages.

Sarah Thal, *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods: The Politics of a Pilgrimage Site in Japan, 1573–1912*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xiv + 409 pages.

Of the two scholarly monographs published in 2005 with the word *rearranging* in their title or subtitle, both pertain to my former field of Japanese religion, and both are centered on religious sites that are familiar and meaningful to me. What a pleasure it was, then, to read these two books—both also impressive reworkings of the authors' doctoral dissertations—and to be able to revisit my memories of pilgrimages to the Murō 室生 Temple in Sherry Fowler's offering and the Kotohira 金刀比羅 Shrine in Sarah Thal's contribution. Together, these works by Fowler, an art historian at the University of Kansas, and Thal, a historian at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, shed light on not only the histories of these two sites but also the

complicated history of religion in Japan vis-à-vis identity, association, representation, and interpretation.

At the heart of her lavishly illustrated *Murōji: Rearranging Art and History at a Japanese Buddhist Temple* (with seventy-nine monochrome and thirteen color plates, many taken by the author herself), Fowler considers the literal rearrangement (and re-identification) of Buddhist statuary in what is today known as the “Golden Hall” (Kondō 金堂) of the Murō Temple, located approximately 25 kilometers southeast of the city of Nara in present-day Nara Prefecture. Founded between 778 and 793, the forested mountain complex of Murōji preserves a large number of monuments from the ninth and tenth centuries in excellent condition. Although originally affiliated with Hossō Buddhism, Murōji became home to a type of Buddhism that included elements of Tendai, Shingon, and *kami* 神 (“god” or “deity”) worship. Fowler traces the complex association of the sacred mountain site with a rain-controlling Dragon King (Ryūō 龍王), “a creature that imbues the mountain with a numinous nature” (p. 41) and also serves to exemplify her themes of plurality of religious practice and multiple identities. Kūkai 空海 (774–835, also known as Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師), the founder of Shingon Buddhism, purportedly buried sacred relics from China on the mountain. The temple was officially declared Shingon in 1700 and remains so to this day, although it also benefited from its associations with Kōfukuji and the Kasuga Shrine in Nara City. Fowler traces the connection between Mt. Murō and (Kūkai’s) Mt. Kōya (in neighboring Wakayama Prefecture), and she offers an interesting investigation into the history of Murōji’s sobriquet as “Nyonin Kōya” 女人高野, or “[Mt.] Kōya for women,” which was used as early as 1681, because Mt. Kōya was off limits to female pilgrims until 1872.

Although one of Fowler’s foci is to present theories of Japanese art historians and offer her own hypothesis about the triad of Buddhist images displayed on the altar of the Golden Hall (a building that dates to the mid-to late ninth century), her discussion is not limited to the specifics of the site itself. Instead, Fowler relates her discussion to larger intellectual systems of *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹, originating in the tenth century, in which each Buddhist divinity (the source, *honji*) was considered to assume forms of *kami* (the manifestation, *suijaku*), and *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合, a broader and more general amalgamation of *kami* and buddhas. Her method of analysis of the “composite identities” (p. 203) of certain icons, such as the Yakushi–Shaka main image in the Golden Hall, could easily be appropriated and applied to other images of uncertain representation. Especially interesting is her in-depth descriptions of “mandorlas” (*ita kōhai* 板光背, or wood-board nimbuses that frequently stand behind Buddhist sculptures), given that mandorlas “are largely unappreciated because they have been viewed as accessories to the sculptures they stand behind” (p. 148). Like the freestanding sculptures they frame, mandorlas could be—and often were—

moved. A circa 1915 postcard of sculpture in the Golden Hall (reproduced on p. 164) shows the mandorlas reversed from how they are currently positioned and demonstrates Fowler's use of historical material culture of the Murōji site.

One other particularly fascinating portion of Fowler's book considers the 1998–2000 rebuilding and restoration of the five-story pagoda at Murōji after it was severely damaged during a September 1998 typhoon. Standing only 16.2 meters tall, the pagoda, a national treasure, is the smallest full-scale five-story pagoda in Japan. I had visited Murōji and seen the pagoda just a few months before the typhoon; and I saw the restored pagoda, which now stands in a small clearing, in December 2000. But because I was not living in Japan during the interim, I did not have easy access to news about the rebuilding process after the disaster. Fowler's book provides a review of the technicalities of the rebuilding as well as information regarding Japanese scholars' revision of the date of the pagoda from either the eighth or ninth century to circa 800, secret images uncovered inside the pagoda, the rethatching of the roof (apparently only twenty artisans in Japan today are skilled in the traditional method of *hinoki*-bark thatching), and how the funds were raised not only for this restoration but also for a general restoration in 1560. The typhoon brought unanticipated public attention to Fowler's fieldwork site; and a companion book that focuses on the post-typhoon restoration could provide a fascinating exploration into not only the modern, technical side of a "traditional" craft but also the ways in which the media in contemporary Japan portrays religious history and the importance and meaning of national treasures.

In addition to being attractively produced, the book is also extensively indexed and documented, pointing readers to numerous primary Japanese sources as well as secondary sources in Japanese, Chinese, Korean, English, and French. Almost refreshingly, though perhaps not fair to readers unfamiliar with the Japanese language, Fowler does not translate certain Japanese terms (such as the *-dera* 寺 and *-ji* 寺 suffixes for temple names or the term *koku* 石, which refers to an amount of rice). And although I prefer for Asian characters to be incorporated into the main text, one virtue of a separate list of characters (as has Fowler's book) is that it saves the student from having to make a study list of the more esoteric names and technical terms. One need only study the list, which can provide a useful test of comprehension in that it lacks English definitions. For the time-constrained reader, Fowler's brief introduction (seven pages) and even briefer conclusion (only five pages) offer an engaging foundational outline and summary, respectively, of the main ideas that are fleshed out in the five chapters of the book.

Just as Fowler's training as an art historian clearly shines forth in her text, so, too, is Thal's giftedness as a historian obvious in her *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods: The Politics of a Pilgrimage Site in Japan, 1573–*

1912. In short, Thal tells a *very* compelling story about the reasons why and ways in which the attributes, affiliations, and even appellations of *kami* associated with one particular site on the island of Shikoku, Mt. Zōzu 像頭 (Mt. “Elephant Head”), have changed over time. Her work epitomizes the following point, made in 2006 by William Cronon (a colleague of Thal’s at Wisconsin): “historians have never abandoned [their] commitment to narrative storytelling as an essential rhetorical and analytical tool for conveying historical knowledge.”¹

Thal’s presentation is ultimately so successful because she continuously personalizes the narrative by invoking diaries, letters, inscriptions on votive tablets (*ema* 絵馬), and other historical documents that emphasize the lives and, perhaps most importantly, experiences of individuals with respect to the site she so thoroughly explores in her work. In her first chapter, for example, she describes a pilgrimage to the site undertaken in 1858 by a well-to-do, rural samurai named Nakahara Suigekka. By using his diary, Thal is able to describe what Nakahara saw, what he did, and how he felt as he journeyed from his home on the main island of Honshū to Mt. Zōzu, the site of the famous shrine to Konpira 金毘羅 (Japanese pronunciation of the Sanskrit Avatar *Khumbīra*), which was renamed Kotohira in 1868. With his servant, and in the company of numerous other pilgrims, Nakahara traveled by boat, horse, palanquin, and—ultimately—foot as he approached the sacred precincts, noting attractions along the way and stopping for breaks at teahouses and at an inn near the foot of Mt. Zōzu. At the shrine, he prostrated himself, offered thanks through prayer, and perhaps purchased a protective talisman or amulet. Like practically every chapter of the book, this one is supplemented with several of the forty-two monochrome images (maps, woodblock prints, photographs) that offer a fascinating then-and-now look at the site. Moreover, the figure descriptions are excellent, with cultural and historical information aplenty: One could learn a lot just by flipping through the book, examining the figures, and reading their captions.

In the Epilogue, as a fitting bookend and satisfying conclusion to her work, Thal recounts a visit she herself made to Mt. Zōzu in July 2003. Here she notes some of the transformations with an air of nostalgic regret, commenting, for example, that “prominent landmarks from the past have receded into obscurity” (p. 300). Her book serves to preserve what might otherwise be a series of “forgotten moment[s] in the history of the shrine” (p. 302).

Thal’s introduction masterfully sets out the purpose of her investigation and the theoretical framework she uses to organize the thirteen easily digestible chapters of her work. Her goal is “to understand the changing significance of the gods over time” in Japan (p. 1), especially from the late sixteenth century to the early twentieth century. As a historical investigation, the book is arranged chronologically. Her focused investigation offi-

cially begins in 1573, when the first shrine to the deity Konpira was constructed on the mountain, and continues until the death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912. In the interim, Japan—and, with it, understandings of Mt. Zōzu—are truly transformed. The shrine on Mt. Zōzu has a unique position “*within* history, not outside it,” Thal argues (p. 314, original emphasis). Throughout her work, she demonstrates the fascinatingly symbiotic relationship between politics and religion in Japan, how ritual landscapes were transformed through architecture and iconography, how shrine activities and growth were affected by economics, and even how religion affected national diplomacy. Although Thal’s examples center on one particular site, her analyses are relevant to religious sites all across Japan.

Especially fascinating are the central chapters (6–8) that focus on changes to the mountain and shrine in the years immediately following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Here the reader witnesses how the creation of modern Shintō (as well as the nascent idea of “modern Japan”) affected the shrine complex on Mt. Zōzu: sites, buildings, and associations with Buddhism on the mountain were renamed (or, in the case of the bell tower and pagoda, destroyed) to affiliate with Shintō and align the complex with the nativist agenda that, simply put, sought to desyncretize Japanese religious expression by removing overt foreign influence. Previously sacred Buddhist images and texts, if not burned, were demoted to cultural artifacts that could be put on display and viewed, for a fee, as works of art. A hierarchical system of official shrines was established in 1871, resulting in fascinating struggles with rival shrines (most notably Ise 伊勢 and Izumo 出雲). Through its involvement with the Great Teaching Campaign, the newly renamed and revisioned Kotohira Shrine was transformed into a center of state indoctrination. And the Kotohira Shrine Reverence Association, established in March 1874 (and still in existence today), helped embody the nativist vision in the community and nation. Many of these decisions exemplify how, throughout history, priests associated with Mt. Zōzu made concerted, strategic efforts to raise the status of their shrine and to increase its income. Through “delicately negotiated alliances” (p. 249) toward the latter years of the nineteenth century, priests sought, for example, “to profit more directly from the pilgrimage business” (p. 248). Steamships entered the Inland Sea transport routes by 1871, affecting the ways in which pilgrims from outside Shikoku approached the island—and beginning a series of technological transformations to pilgrimage that have culminated with the possibility of virtual visits, via the Internet.²

The writing is lucid, clear, and well organized throughout. Without fail, Thal’s chapters begin with useful introductions that present her interpretations and highlight the development of her thematic, chronological organization; examples, information, and data that support her claims follow. Thal’s prefatory “Note on Pronunciation, Names, and Dates” (pp. xiii–xiv)

suggests—accurately, I believe—that her book will be read (and enjoyed) by more than just scholars of Japan and Japanese religion. And her “Glossary and Selected Biographical Dictionary” (pp. 373–81), although it lacks Chinese characters, provides a most useful resource, as does the thorough index. Finally, the importance of such histories is underscored by the numerous occurrences of “the late” as a preface to names in Thal’s Acknowledgments: As scholars and informants pass away, an additional responsibility of the historian is to ensure that her or his interpretations and representations of the landscape of history preserve and disseminate the perspectives of previous generations so that the landscape may be adequately revisited and revised—and its rearrangements contextualized and understood—in the years to come.

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Notes

¹William Cronon, “Getting Ready to Do History,” in Chris M. Golde, George E. Walker, and associates, *Envisioning the Future of Doctoral Education: Preparing Stewards of the Discipline* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 327–49: 333.

²See <http://www.konpira.or.jp>, the first official shrine Web site in Japan (launched in January 1996).