

July 2019

Gallery | Potent Substances in a Thirteenth Century Japanese Scroll Painting

Katja Triplett
University of Leipzig

Barbara Gerke
University of Vienna

Jan M. A. van der Valk
University of Vienna

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Triplett, Katja; Gerke, Barbara; and van der Valk, Jan M. A.. 2019. Gallery | Potent Substances in a Thirteenth Century Japanese Scroll Painting. *HIMALAYA* 39(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss1/5>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Artwork is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Gallery | Potent Substances in a Thirteenth Century Japanese Scroll Painting

Katja Triplett
Barbara Gerke
Jan M. A. van der Valk

Each of the images in this gallery is part of a continuous six-meter-long, hand-sketched Japanese scroll. It was painted in 1267 and depicts medicinal plants that were considered potent in the treatment of horses, and divinities related to equine medicine. The scroll was transmitted secretly by Sai Amidabutsu, who was probably a veterinarian working in the military cavalry service. In the absence of a title, the scroll is simply known as the Japanese *Scroll of Equine Medicine* (*Ba'i sōshi emaki* 馬医草紙絵巻). The different sections are reproduced here with permission of the Tokyo National Museum, which presents it as part of its e-museum database.¹

Religious Studies scholar Katja Triplett analyzes this scroll in detail in one of the research articles published in this special issue of *HIMALAYA* (Triplett 2019), in which she offers a new interpretation of the scroll and explores the naming practices of the plants and what this tells us about their potency. Even when viewed separately, however, these paintings are beautifully intricate pieces of art. The use of three languages in the scroll—Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese—testifies to a widely shared medicinal and ritual lore of treating horses that was transmitted across Asia.

The scroll has to be read from the right to the left. Hand scrolls are held between the two hands presenting a ca. 50-60 cm long section of the scroll to the reader or viewer. The scroll is then slowly unrolled with the left hand and rolled up with the right, so the content moves along—similar to a film, in this case presenting an uninterrupted flow of images of deities and plants, creating a special effect. This technique is especially exciting for narrative scrolls, though difficult to reproduce in other formats.

The first part depicts scenes with horses in stables as well as ten divine figures, which represent deities and famous veterinarians specializing in horses. In the second part of the scroll, sixteen different plants and one fungus are painted as line drawings in mild tones of green, red, and blue, followed by a short postscript. The line drawings were done almost to the size of the actual plants, and as Triplett suggests, could have been used for plant identification. The postscript refers to the owner of the scroll and its secret transmission as a 'ritual certificate' for cavalry veterinarians.

The ten veterinarian figures—from China, India, and Japan—appear in various forms, either as mythological divinities or historical figures. The veterinarians are painted, for example, as Buddhist monks, Chinese noblemen or officials, a female shamaness with a drum, Bodhisattvas, and the figure of the Divine Farmer, dressed as a Japanese court official. Each is accompanied by a mantra or short recitation (*dhāraṇī*), giving it a decisive Buddhist character. An auspicious calendrical date in each image points to a favorable day to conduct each of the related healing rituals or *dhāraṇī*. Triplett suggests that the entire scroll could also have been used during ritual empowerments.

Plant names are written at the top-right of every botanical drawing in Chinese characters and Japanese *katakana* (syllabic alphabet), which is a practical way to 'read' Chinese in Japan. Considered to be the oldest surviving Japanese botanical illustrations, these drawings transmit medico-ritual knowledge and power by means of representation, identification, and naming. Even though modern botanists have identified each of the seventeen 'paper specimens' with reasonable confidence (Triplett 2019), it remains impossible to ascertain whether the items in this set were selected because of their suggestive names—related to Buddhism and horses—or are exclusively based on their practical uses. Human-plant interactions are varied and multidimensional, including food, medicine, ritual, technology, language, and aesthetics. It should therefore perhaps not come as a surprise to find that herbs in the list such as mugwort (*Artemisia* sp.) not only have multiple uses in Chinese-style medicine, but are also potential fodder or incense, carrying meaningful names and associations with the realms of healing, religion, myth, and everyday life that may all contribute to their potency in one way or another. Triplett shows that a comparison with a later sixteenth century manuscript indicates that most of these plants were indeed used together as ingredients for a potent panacea to treat horses, as a 'Dharma medicine.'

Below, we present the scroll in fourteen sections, each with an explanatory caption.

Horse doctor picture scroll E0017048-E0017061 (sign. A-10479), color on paper 29.6 x 610.2cm, artist unknown, 1267 (Kamakura period), Tokyo National Museum Digital Research Archives: <<https://webarchives.tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/E0017048>>, copyright: Tokyo National Museum Digital Research, reproduced in accordance with 'Terms of Use of Digital Contents without Charge'. Originals digitally cropped for formatting.

1. The scroll can also be found online at <http://www.emuseum.jp/detail/100283?x=&y=&s=&d_lang=en&s_lang=ja&word=馬医&class=&title=&e=®ion=&era=&cptype=&owner=&pos=1&num=1&mode=simple¢ury=>> (accessed on 30 April 2019). The website provides texts in Japanese, English, French, Chinese, and Korean.

Triplett, Katja. 2019. Potency by Name? 'Medicine Buddha Plant' and Other Herbs in the Japanese *Scroll of Equine Medicine (Ba'i sōshi emaki, 1267)*. *HIMALAYA* 39(1).



The image of Bole, the famous Chinese horse doctor, has been lost at some point in history but the picture of his two stout horses, stabled in a tiled building, are still well preserved. The two mantras connect Bole to the Medicine Buddha and Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

The name of the Buddhist monk depicted means 'Medicine-king Dharma medicine.' He holds a vajra staff and a prayer chain. Above his head appears a Buddha, the monk healer's original form. A novice is feeding a magnificent black horse. The images and names of the figures link them to esoteric Buddhism.



Leigong (right), Thunder Duke, is connected to the Yellow Emperor and thus to medicine. The function of the second deity (left), Tōgun (Ch. Dongqun), meaning Eastern Herd, whose brown is tethered in a tiled stable, is unknown today. Both divine figures are dressed as Chinese noblemen or officials. Leigong sits on a precious animal's pelt.



Ten (Ch. Tian (right)) looks nearly identical to the preceding two figures. His name, Heaven, or just Deity, is generic, and his actual significance remains obscure. Ōnamuchi (left) is the name of a male Shinto deity who is here depicted as a dancing shamaness (Jp. *miko*) with a small double-sided drum. Her female attendant is called Kotori, Little Bird. In mythology, Ōnamuchi is connected to the healing of animals.

Ōryō (Ch. Wangliang), meaning King Good, a reference to one of the divine kings of the Chinese Zhou dynasty, is dressed in a vermillion-colored robe holding a wooden ceremonial staff. His mantra hails Ākāśagarbha bodhisattva (Jp. Kokūzō bosatsu), the guardian of the treasury of all wisdom and fulfillment of wishes.



Fan Kuai (right), written here Fan Gai, is a second-century BCE Chinese general, dressed similar to Ōryō. Shinnō (Ch. Shennong) (left), the Divine Farmer, is the mythical founder of agriculture and the healing arts in general. He is usually depicted as a hairy wild mountain man, but in the scroll, he appears as a Japanese court official.

Echigo no Tansuke looks like a medieval Japanese nobleman, with splendid robes and an elegant hat. He holds a riding whip, and he sits on a decorated woven rice straw mat. A short text praises Echigo no Tansuke as a protector god of travelers who "works wonders in fixing wicker suitcases, palanquins, horses, and clog supports." To the left we see the beginning of the plant section.





When the Chinese characters are translated literally, the primary names given for the first three plants are 'medicine Buddha plant,' 'dharma medicine plant,' and 'in front of wheel plant.' These names clearly indicate that the plants play a role in Buddhism or are connected to the world of the horse.

The so-called fu mushroom (right) can easily be identified as *Wolfiporia extensa*, syn. *Poria cocos*, commonly known as Indian bread or tuckahoe. The mushroom remains important in Chinese-style medicine. The second plant, mistletoe (middle), differs from the other pictures in style. 'Wolf sprout' (*komatsunagi*), the secondary name of the third plant (left), indicates a connection to the animal world.



The four plants from right to left show Chinese ramie, horse-heal, Japanese yellow loosestrife, and Japanese fiber banana. The primary and secondary names of two plants given in the scroll link them to religion: '(monastic) robe herb' or 'in front of the Buddha.'

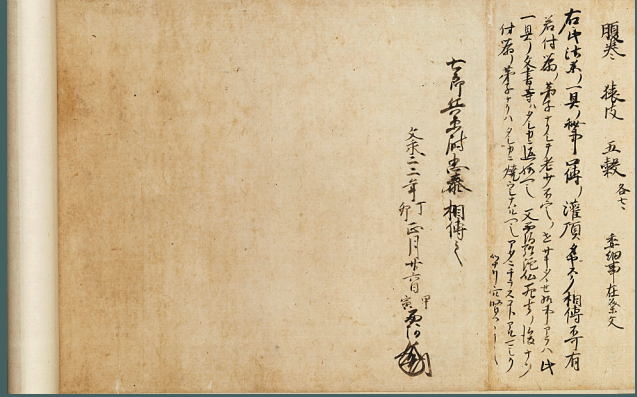
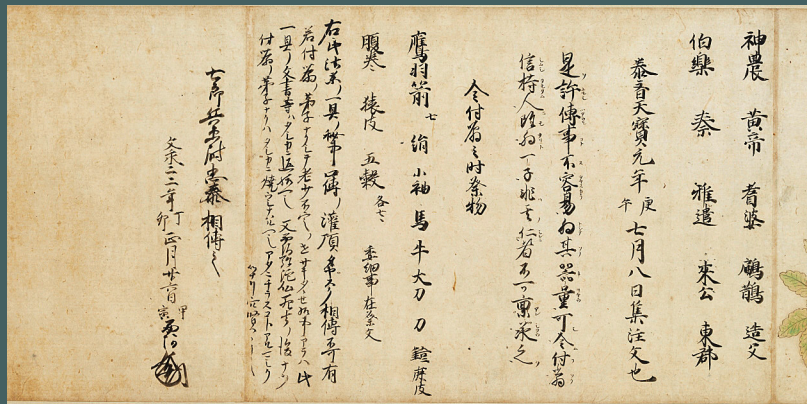
Modern botanists have identified 'weasle's buttock pouch,' (right) and 'horse's head plant' (middle) as *Carpesium abrotanoides* and *Achyranthes bidentata* var. *japonica* respectively. The third plant, 'Chinese artemisia' (left) is a species of the beneficial mugwort, also used in equine medicine in modern Europe.





Names such as 'leech's straw mat', the only aquatic plant listed in the scroll, 'big dog polygonum,' 'celestial garment plant', and, finally, 'the Buddha's seat' (from right to left) all connect the herbs to religion and the animal world.

The postscript lists a lineage of ten Chinese mythical healers and healing divinities that differ from the ten deities pictured in the first part of the scroll. A list of ritual objects with links to cavalry culture and myths connected to the horse follows. The text also gives instruction to keep its content secret.



Someone called Sai Amidabutsu signed and dated the dedication of the scroll: "Given to Tadayasu, Third Officer of the Seventh Rank of the Imperial Guards, on the twenty-sixth day, first month of the fourth year of the *Bun'ei* era" Tadayasu must have been a practicing veterinarian who cared for cavalry horses.

- Front Outside Cover
Andrew Mason, 2014, Orpiment (*haritāla*). Orpiment (*haritāla*) after purification, being heated at middling temperatures between two sheets of mica to produce the Ayurvedic compound 'red-colored ruby nectar' (*rasa māṇḍikya*). Copyright: Andrew Mason, Neterapublishing™ (<<http://neterapublishing.com>>). Reproduced with permission.
- Back Outside Cover
Andrew Mason, 2018, Bitumen (*śilājīṭ*). Bitumen (*śilājīṭ*) in its raw state, prior to purification. Copyright: Andrew Mason, Neterapublishing™ (<<http://neterapublishing.com>>). Reproduced with permission.
- Front Inside Cover
Andrew Mason, 2015, Mercury (*pārada*). Pre-processed mercury (*pārada*) is mixed with purified sulfur. Copyright: Andrew Mason, Neterapublishing™ (<<http://neterapublishing.com>>). Reproduced with permission.
- Back Inside Cover
Andrew Mason, 2019, Copper (*tāmra*). In Ayurveda, copper (*tāmra*) is purified by heating and pouring the liquid metal into buttermilk seven times. To aid in the reduction of surface oxidization, *guñjā* seeds are sprinkled upon its surface. Copyright: Andrew Mason, Neterapublishing™ (<<http://neterapublishing.com>>). Reproduced with permission.