

Article

The Sanctification of the Disabled: A Study on the Images of Fortune Gods in Japanese Folk Beliefs

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Abstract: Similarly to China, Japan has a long history of worshiping fortune gods. The act of making offerings and praying to these deities has been practiced since ancient times. Fortune gods are figures in Japanese folk religion that are believed to bring happiness, hope, and good luck. When speaking of fortune gods in Japan, people will first think of the Seven Lucky Gods. Apart from them, there are also some local fortune gods such as Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro. These gods share some common traits and also have connections with the Japanese folk belief in Fukuko (fortune child). This study adopts a comparative methodology to compare Japan's Seven Lucky Gods with the local Japanese fortune gods as well as Fukuko, and then analyze their similarities. This article argues that the Japanese fortune gods have two major common characteristics: the super power to bring good fortune, and their distinctive appearance. By systematically analyzing the common features of Japanese fortune gods, this study will clarify the mechanism behind their deification as fortune deities and also help us to gain a better insight into the Japanese conceptions of deities and spirits.

Keywords: Japan; fortune gods; images; mechanism; Japanese conception of deity

1. Introduction

People's longing for a happy life is the same in most countries and ethnicities. This has led to the emergence of various beliefs in gods of good fortune, the most famous example in China being Fu Lu Shou (福禄寿), the Three Stars of Happiness, Wealth, and Longevity. In Japan, there are also gods of fortune unique to them, namely the Seven Lucky Gods of legend. The concept of fortune gods has spread around the Asia and with a broad and far-reaching impact in Confucian cultural cluster. As an important pillar of folk belief, the belief in fortune gods is deeply loved and respected by the general public, and has prompted scholars to explore it from a variety of perspectives.

Studies about fortune gods are commonly seen in China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Many studies have focused on the origins and development of fortune gods (Kita 1987, p. 3; Yoneyama 2001; Yato 2005; Zheng et al. 2014), the functions of fortune gods as well as related customs (Miyata 1998; Park 2012; Huang 2017), and the transformation or the acceptance of the concept by other countries (Kuji 2003, p. 31; Qiu 2013; Qie 2020; Bi 2020). Additionally, Chinese and Japanese scholars place emphasis on comparing the worship of the Eight Immortals with that of the Seven Lucky Gods (Y. Wang 2011; A. Wang 2015).

For example, Zheng et al. (2014) discussed the origins and development of fortune gods in Vietnam as well as the role belief in this deity has played in the spiritual life of Vietnamese society and its people. Miyata (1998, pp. 24–27) focus on providing a comprehensive description of the Seven Lucky Gods as a whole as well as related customs. Huang (2017) explored the popularity of the Seven Lucky Gods pilgrimage and its religious customs. Bi (2020) focused on the two cases of localization of Daikokuten (大黒天), sorting out and analyzing the formation process and reasons for the worship of Daikokuten, the fortune god in Japan. Y. Wang (2011) elaborated on the characteristics of the people of



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Japan and China valuing worldly benefits and happiness from the Seven Lucky Gods and the Eight Immortals.

The above-mentioned studies have provided us with a rich research foundation and provided us with good awareness that what are fortune gods? We can see a plurality of scholarly perspectives about how the belief in fortune gods was spread, and the function of a fortune god in people's daily life. However, previous studies lacked a discussion of the mechanism behind the deification of fortune gods. Based on previous studies, I have questions that why fortune gods have similar characteristics and what the reasons are for their deification. Specifically, in Japan, in addition to nationwide fortune gods, there are also well-known local fortune gods, such as Sendai Shiro and Fukusuke. Both nationwide and local fortune gods share some similarities. So, this study will analyze the questions as follows: (1) the similar characteristics of fortune gods; (2) the reasons of their deification; and (3) the mechanism of fortune god deification. This study will adopt a comparative approach, as it is one of the most indispensable methods in the study of religion. It involves looking at an object of study in relation to another, often applied when looking for patterns of similarities and differences, explaining continuity and change. This paper mainly use the historical comparative methodology of Weber ([1949] 1905). The historical comparative methodology, combines the comparison of different cases and the historical analysis of changes over time to understand and explain large-scale social phenomena. Weber used this approach to analyze the causes and consequences of various social and economic systems, comparing societies and historical periods to identify patterns and causal relationships. Weber's methodology is not only applicable to sociological research but is also widely used in the study of religious studies and folklore. This paper takes a diachronic perspective, focusing on the images and characteristics of fortune gods in different periods to identify their intrinsic commonalities.

First, this study will analyze the origins and the images of fortune gods. Secondly, a comparison of the Japanese national fortune gods—the Seven Lucky Gods—with the local fortune god is provided to explore their similarities from different angles. Through comparison, we can more clearly discover the commonalities between these fortune gods. During the research process, it was also found that these fortune gods share some common traits and have connections with the Japanese folk belief in children with disabilities. Thus, the study will also compare fortune gods with children with disabilities and explore their relationships.

To achieve this, this article will mainly utilize literature research methods. To provide a clear perception of the origins and characteristic image of fortune gods, this study will delve into a wide range of textual sources. For example, this paper analyzes the depictions of fortune gods in myths and legends, while also focusing on collecting records of fortune god worship from local histories, newspapers, and other sources. In terms of collecting textual data, I mainly used two major databases: CiNii Research in Japan and CNKI in China. In addition, in some case studies, this paper also employs fieldwork to further verify the authenticity of the subject as a fortune god and to examine the current state of worship. In addition, in some case studies, this paper also employs fieldwork to further verify the authenticity of the subject as a fortune god and to examine the current state of worship. For example, on 28 July 2017, the author visited Mitakisan Fudo Temple (三瀧山不動院) in Ichibancho, Sendai, and observed its related ritual activities to determine Sendai Shiro's status as a fortune god in nowadays.

2. The Origins and Images of Japan's Seven Lucky Gods

When mentioning fortune gods in Japan, what come to mind first are the Seven Lucky Gods, which are known collectively in Japanese religion and refer to seven deities that are believed to bring good luck and fortune. The Seven Lucky Gods in Japan consist of six male gods and one female goddess from Taoism, Buddhism, Brahmanism, and other faiths originating from Japan, China, and India. People pray to the Seven Lucky Gods for prosperity in business, peace at home, longevity, and to attract good fortune. Wor-

shipping of the Seven Lucky Gods emerged in the Muromachi (室町) period. It is said that its origins lie in the Buddhist concept of overcoming seven disasters and inviting seven fortunes. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods of China, there was the legend of the Seven Sages, and the Jin (晋) Dynasty also had the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (Miyata 1998). People considered seven to be an auspicious number. Later, painters made hanging scrolls depicting the images of the Seven Sages, and these scrolls were brought over to Japan. Influenced by the aforementioned Chinese culture and after some evolution, the Seven Lucky Gods first appeared in Kyoto, the old capital of Japan, during the Muromachi period. At that time, worshiping the Seven Gods of Fortune became very popular, with temples and shrines specifically built for them, taking Kyoto as their place of origin. According to the *Seven Lucky Gods*, written by Yamamoto Kitayama in 1799 during the Kansei (寛政) era, the finalized members of the Seven Lucky Gods in the late Edo (江戸) period were Ebisu (恵比寿), Daikokuten (大黒天), Bishamonten (毘沙門天), Benzaiten (弁財天), Fukurokuju (福祿寿), Jurojin (寿老人), and Hotei (布袋) (Miyata 1998, p. 306). Since then, many shrines and temples across Japan have enshrined the Seven Lucky Gods, and making a pilgrimage to them became popular starting in the Edo period. According to Ooshima (2008, p. 230), towards the late Edo period, paying respect to the Seven Lucky Gods as a New Year custom initially gained popularity among literati, later gradually prevailing among commoners. Even today, the custom of worshiping the Seven Lucky Gods is still preserved every New Year in Japan. Apart from Ebisu being a native deity in Japan, the rest were imported from abroad, with Daikokuten, Bishamonten, and Benzaiten coming from India, and Jurojin, Fukurokuju and Hotei from China. As for the overall image of these seven deities, six of them seem to have a strong tendency of appearing to have disabilities (in Japanese, 障害者 shogaisha).

Ebisu, the leader of the Seven Lucky Gods (in Japanese, Ebisu is pronounced the same as “夷”, with both meaning “bringing happiness from a faraway land”), can also be written as “Hiruko (蛭子)” or “Ebisu (恵比寿)”. He is an indigenous deity in Japan, also worshiped by the public as the god of ocean voyages and fisheries. Japan’s earliest historical literature documents the abandonment of Hiruko. The *Kojiki* (古事記, 712) records that “Izanagi (伊邪那岐) and Izanami (伊邪那美) conducted their conjugal affairs and gave birth to the water god Hiruko. They placed this child in a reed boat and let him drift away” (Oono [712] 2001). The *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, 720) has a similar account: “After Izanagi and Izanami gave birth to the sun and moon, they next gave birth to the leech child Hiruko. When this child turned three, he still could not stand on his own feet. (...) They next made a boat of the evergreen camphor laurel tree, placed Hiruko aboard, and let him drift away downstream” (Toneri [720] 2019, p. 7). According to the accounts above, in Japanese myth and legend, Hiruko was Izanagi and Izanami’s first child. Due to his congenital deformity and lack of human form (many people believe Hiruko had infantile paralysis, i.e., unable to stand or walk (Kawano 2007, p. 20)), the two gods placed him on a reed boat and abandoned him. From this, we can see that Ebisu’s prototype Hiruko had atrophic limbs and was disabled, what we now call infantile paralysis. In the mid-to-late Muromachi period, Hiruko came back to life in folklore, becoming the “Ebisu God” known today. According to Y. Wang (2006), in ancient Japan, coastal residents referred to anything mysterious that drifted ashore as Ebisu, such as stranded whales, sharks passing by, and dolphins that could leap out of the water—these were an inexhaustible and abundant source of wealth to residents in times of low productivity and extreme scarcity of life’s necessities (Zhang 2015, p. 332). The reason is that large fish such as whales and sharks are always followed by schools of fish, getting close to them allows for catching a lot of fish. Since Hiruko was placed on a boat by the twin gods to drift along the water, people believed everything that drifted to shore was delivered by Hiruko. Hence, people gradually came to believe that Ebisu was Hiruko incarnate.

Regarding the deification of Hiruko into the God of Fortune Ebisu, Orikuchi (1955, pp. 326–27) proposed the “Marebito (稀人 rare guest) faith” theory. “Marebito” refers to gods who periodically visit the human world from the spirit world and bring good for-

tune. This faith believes that “Tokoyo (常世)”, the eternal land beyond the sea, periodically sends these rare guests, bringing prosperity, abundance, and good luck to villagers. These marebito bring blessings to this world, and take disasters back with them when they return to the realm of the spirits. According to Irie (2009, p. 18), Ebisu is also written as “夷” “蛭子” “胡子” “惠比須” or “惠比寿”, and refers to unfamiliar or distant things, people from remote or border areas, as well as foreigners or those with different customs. In Japan, there has been a belief since ancient times that foreigners or those with different customs were not only objects of contempt and fear, but also that people from distant lands could bring unexpected happiness. From these beliefs, customs can be observed among fishermen to enshrine those who drift ashore as “Yorigami (漂着神)” or “Marebito (稀人神)”.

After Ebisu was born and exiled to the sea, he was first worshiped and revered as the Sea God by fishermen. During the Edo period, he began to be widely worshiped by merchants as well. He could protect the lives and families of fishermen, and also bless merchants with prosperity in business. Entering the modern era, he became the God of Commerce who guarded enterprises and brought happiness, earning widespread faith among people. To this day, the Ebisu Shrine in Nishinomiya (西宮) of Hyogo Province, has become the center of Ebisu faith as the God of Commerce, attracting huge popularity.

According to Li (2007, p. 125), Mahakala (大黒天) originated from Hinduism and was originally an incarnation of Shiva (also known as Maheshvara), the eternal lord who could grant immortality to all living beings. Mahakala, called Dahei (大黒) in Chinese, is the guardian deity in Buddhism with the traits of a war god, wealth god, kitchen god, and lord of the underworld. The faith in Dahei was brought to Japan alongside Buddhism and gained extensive popularity, continuing to this day. In Japanese, “大黒 (daikoku)” sounds similar to “大国” (daikoku; okuninushi), so Daikoku was considered to be the same deity as Okuninushi (大国主神), a god in Japan’s native Shinto religion. This reflects the syncretism between Buddhism and Shinto in Japan. Under the Buddhist–Shinto syncretism, the honji suijaku theory (本地垂迹説), which posits that the origins of kami are buddhas and bodhisattvas who appeared in the form of kami to save the people of Japan (kami are temporary forms, and their true forms are buddhas and bodhisattvas) was established. This honji suijaku theory spread nationwide from the mid to late Heian period, and specific buddhas and bodhisattvas were attributed to various native gods (Katsuya 2013, p. 104). In the relationship between temples and shrines, for example, Kasuga Taisha is paired with Kofukuji Temple in Nara, and Hiyoshi Taisha with Enryakuji Temple on Mount Hiei, where, from the Buddhist perspective, the kami are seen as protectors of the buddhas (Hirai 2002, pp. 5–6). According to Sasama (1993, pp. 29–30), through this process, after Mahakala’s introduction into Japan, he gradually merged with Okuninushi and formed a uniquely Japanese deity. In the legends, Okuninushi appeared with a “black hood on his head, a sack slung over his left shoulder, his right fist placed on his hips, and his feet trampling sacks of rice”. Having entered Japan during the Tang dynasty, Mahakala integrated the imagery of Okuninushi and evolved into a figure with “a kind, fat, smiling face, wearing a black hood, carrying a sack over his shoulder, wielding a wooden mallet in his hand, and trampling two rice bags underfoot”. Scholar Iyanaga (2002, p. 66) pointed out that his image widespread among commoners has him with a grinning face, standing on rice bags, a fortune sack slung over his left shoulder and holding a wealth-beckoning rod, enjoying a very high divine status. This represented another “transformation” after Mahakala’s arrival in Japan. However, as he is often depicted half-naked with an ever-smiling face, people generally see Daikoku (大黒天) as a dull-witted figure (Kawano 2007, p. 20).

Bishamonten (毘沙門天) was originally a Hindu god who later became Vaisravaṇa, one of the Four Heavenly Kings in Buddhism. In China, he is generally called Pǐshāmén Tiānwáng or Kūnshāmén Tiānwáng, while in Japan he is known as Bishamonten. His prototype was Vaisravaṇa in Hinduism, who converted to Buddhism and became one of the Four Heavenly Kings, often listening to the Buddha’s teachings at lectures and hence given the name Vaisravaṇa, the most powerful warrior among the Four Kings. Vaisravaṇa could bestow wealth, so he was also called the God of Wealth, a famous wealth deity in

Hinduism. After belief in Vaisravana was transmitted to China, he took on the traits of a warrior god, with records of his worship dating back to the Tang Dynasty. According to Comprehensive Collection of the Search for Divinities of the Three Doctrines (Anonymous 1990, p. 350), During Tang Taizong's (唐太宗) uprising against his predecessor, a god descended in front and claimed himself as Vaisravana, willing to quell the chaos together". Such miracle stories deified Vaisravana to various extents and greatly boosted the popularity of his cult. By the Kaiyuan (开元) era during Emperor Xuanzong's (唐玄宗) reign in the Tang Dynasty, belief in Vaisravana had spread nationwide. Tang Xuanzong was able to suppress several revolts thanks to Vaisravana's blessings, so he decreed that special offerings be made to Vaisravana. The Tang army banners all bore Vaisravana's image, called Tianwang banners (Heavenly King banners), to bless martial fortune. According to Kuji (2003, p. 31), in Japan, Bishamonten is worshiped by the public as the god guarding wealth and blessings, removing bad luck, protecting warriors, and overseeing learning and wisdom, power and status, and martial arts and sports. After entering Japan from China, Vaisravana still retained his warrior traits. According to Inoue (2006, p. 87), many warriors converted to Buddhism during Japan's Sengoku period (戦国時代), among whom was the prominent military leader Kenshin Uesugi (上杉謙信) from Echigo (越後) province, who claimed himself to be the incarnation of Vaisravana, with the character "毘" (variant character for 毗/Vaisravana) on his army banner. During the Muromachi (室町) period, Vaisravana was included as one of the Seven Lucky Gods in Japan's folk beliefs, quickly spreading nationwide and gaining numerous followers. Bishamonten is commonly depicted wearing armor while holding a pagoda and sword, trampling demons underfoot, sometimes riding a treasure ship. Scholar Hanada Shuncho pointed out that Bishamonten has abnormal skin and bone structures compared to ordinary people, making him appear to have disabilities (Hanada 1993).

Benzaiten (弁財天) originated from the Hindu goddess Saraswati, who is also called "the Goddess of Eloquence". Her name is Sarasvati, and later she became one of the guardian deities of Buddhism. In Buddhist scriptures, she was initially recorded as "弁才天". After being transmitted to Japan, because she was given the character and functions of a "God of Wealth" and "God of Happiness", and since "才" (ability) and "財" (wealth) are homophones, she is often also called "Benzaiten (弁財天)". She is the only female deity among the Seven Lucky Gods, well-versed in music and eloquence, and also the only member without any physical disability.

Fukurokuju (福祿寿), one of the Seven Lucky Gods, is the god of happiness, prosperity, and longevity. According to Yamamoto, regarding the origin of Fukurokuju, there are two different theories. One theory suggests that like Jurojin (寿老人), Fukurokuju was an incarnation of the immortal old man of the South Pole in Chinese mythology. Another theory suggests he was an incarnation of Taishan Fujun (泰山府君), the ruler of the underworld in Chinese mythology who had supreme authority over the realm of the dead (Yamamoto 1798, pp. 15–17). In Japan, Taishan Fujun was the chief deity of Yin and Yang who controlled people's lifespan and status. He also manipulated people's fortune and misfortune. It is said that the belief in Fukurokuju was transmitted to Japan during the Muromachi period and blended with Japan's existing "immortal being beliefs" (Matsukura 1977, p. 33). People regarded those who cultivated themselves in deep mountains as immortal beings, so immortals' long lifespan resonated with Fukurokuju's characteristic of longevity. According to Kudo and Miwa (2002, p. 17), from the Heian (平安) to Muromachi periods, festivals for Taishan Fujun were very popular among onmyoji (陰陽師 yin and yang masters) and esoteric Buddhists. Taishan Fujun not only governed longevity but was also seen as the god who brought happiness and prosperity. According to *Study of the Seven Lucky Gods*, Taishan Fujun was described as follows: "he was 1.5 m tall and 0.9 m wide, occupying the center, and his portrait showed a long head with a short body, consistent with the current image of Fukurokuju" (Yamamoto 1798, p. 16). In summary, Fukurokuju has the image of an elderly person with a long head, crane hair, and a young face, holding a staff with dragon head, accompanied by turtles and cranes. This is very

similar to Taishan Fujun. Due to its long head and short body, people generally believe this appearance is close to dwarfism (Kawano 2007).

Jurojin (寿老人) is an immortal originating from Chinese Taoism. Legend has it that he was originated from the Southern Pole Star, also known as the Southern Immortal Elder. Jurojin is depicted holding a cane in one hand and a peach that symbolizes longevity in the other, accompanied by a deer. Judging from his appearance, Jurojin is also a white-haired and bearded elder holding a walking stick, bearing great similarity to Fukurokuju appearance. Therefore, he is often seen as an incarnation of the same god.

Hotei (布袋), who legend has it came from a monk in Fenghua (奉化) County, Mingzhou (明州), China, is the only actual person among the Seven Lucky Gods of Japan. He is affectionately called “Hotei-san (布袋尊)” in Japan. Hotei has a big belly and a fat body, and is named after the cloth bag he always carries with him, which is also seen as a bag of fortune. Later literati respected this venerable master and composed a couplet in praise of him: “His big belly can contain things that are difficult for the world to contain; his laughing mouth is always open, laughing at the laughable people of the world”.¹ This eulogizes Hotei’s generosity in accommodating people and events. During the Warring States period in Japan from the Muromachi to early Edo periods, wars were frequent and people’s livelihoods were declining. As Zen Buddhism prospered, the Hotei faith, which was introduced from Chinese Zen Buddhism, also gained popularity among commoners in Japan, and he was included among the Seven Lucky Gods. According to Komatsu (1998, p. 61), since the Muromachi period, Hotei has often been a subject of ink wash paintings, with his bag also called a “bag of fortune”, containing inexhaustible gifts and blessings. Together with his magnanimous spirit as represented by his big belly, he became a widely welcomed symbol of good fortune at the time, and was thus inducted into the Seven Lucky Gods. Due to his fat body shape, Hotei is also seen as a patient of “obesity”, different from ordinary people.

In summary, the Seven Lucky Gods in Japan, like the Eight Immortals in China, are gods in folk belief that represent auspiciousness, happiness, prosperity, and good fortune, while most members are also seen as gods with defects. In China, Eight Immortals are also deities that bring people good fortune, auspiciousness, happiness, and longevity. The members of the Eight Immortals are not without flaws. For example, among the Eight Immortals, Tieguai Li is a cripple (Yu 2014, p. 121).

3. The Local Fortune Gods: Fukusuke (福助) and Sendai Shiro (仙台四郎)

In Japan, in addition to the nationally worshiped Seven Lucky Gods, there are also two locally worshiped fortune gods that are famous nationwide—Fukusuke (福助) and Sendai Shiro (仙台四郎).

The origin and image of Fukusuke

Fukusuke refers to a lucky charm doll with a big head and small body, sitting upright with a forelock hairstyle. The oversized head is its most distinctive feature. It is said that the original form of the Fukusuke doll started becoming popular in Edo around the first year of the Bunka (文化) era (1804). People offered them at tea houses and courtesan houses, and now they are considered to be auspicious dolls that invite happiness and good fortune (Yoshii 1988, p. 207). In many temples, shrines, and company homepages, people directly refer to Fukusuke as a deity. For example, Mii Temple (三井寺), Takino Shrine (瀧尾神社) and Fukusuke Corporation (the company of Japanese socks)².

According to Aramata (1989, pp. 18–20), there are various theories about the origin of Fukusuke, among which the following three are the most well known. First and foremost is the “Kyoto Kimono Shop Oomonoji (大文字屋) Theory”. It is said that during the reign of the eighth shogun Yoshimune (吉宗), a commoner named “Shimomura Saburouemon (下村三郎兵衛)” in Fushimi Castle (伏見城) gave birth to a son named “Hikotarou (彦太郎)”. Hikotarou had had a big head and short stature since childhood. At the age of 9, he started working at the Oomonoji shop and was recognized by the owner. He then opened a branch of the Oomonoji shop at Fushimi Castle’s Kyomachi (京町) on his own. The pure cotton socks and handkerchiefs sold at Hikotarou’s shop were very popular, and

the owner Hikotarou thus became successful. The doll makers in Fushimi Castle then created a doll called “Fukuuke” modeled after “Hikotarou”, which immediately became hugely popular upon release. This is the first theory of Fukuauke’s origin. The second theory is the “Commoner Sagoemon’s (佐五右衛門) Son” story. It is said that a commoner named Sagoemon in Nishinari (西成) County, Settsu (摂州) Province lived a very long life. When he passed away, his son Sataro (佐太郎) was only two feet tall. Although Sataro had a big head and small body, he was blessed by good fortune all his life. Therefore, the doll shops in Edo created dolls modeled after him which sold very well once launched. The last is the continuously spread “Mugwort Shop Kameya (亀屋)” story. It is said that at the Kashihara (柏原) station located at the foot of Mount Ibuki (伊吹) in Shiga (滋賀) Prefecture, there was a mugwort shop “Kameya” that had been run by generations. The shop owner, Fukusuke, had had very large earlobes since childhood, different from ordinary people. Fukusuke was righteous and always abided by the business philosophy passed down since the founding of the shop. He would passionately promote mugworts to passing customers while dressed in samurai garb and holding a folding fan. Fukuju was very patient, attentive, and sincere to customers, so business was booming and the owner also valued him greatly. Legend has it that not long after, when Fukusuke’s story spread to Kyoto, doll shops in Fushimi Castle created dolls modeled after “Fukusuke” and sold them as auspicious mascots for inviting wealth and good fortune.

As we can see, the origins of all three stories are based on real historical figures of “big head and small body, suffering from dwarfism” (Aramata 1993, p. 32). It can be said that Fukusuke’s appearance bears great similarities with Jurojin (寿老人), one of the Seven Lucky Gods.

3.1. The Origin and Image of the Sendai Shiro

3.1.1. Sendai Shiro’s Character Portrait

Sendai Shiro was a real person who was born in Sendai (仙台) towards the end of the Edo period. An existing photograph of him during his lifetime serves as solid proof of his existence. It is said that because Shiro had an intellectual disability, the locals called him “Shiro the Fool (Shiro Baka in Japanese)”. Through the records in the Sendai Dictionary of Names, we can catch a glimpse of what Shiro’s real character was like.

Shiro was known as “Shiro the fool” and was the son of firearms expert Haga (芳賀) So-and-so from the Kita Ichibancho (北一番町) in Sendai. Because his family home was located under a fire lookout tower, he was nicknamed “Shiro from under the Tower”. Although Shiro was dull-witted by nature, unable to distinguish black from white or east from west, he was beloved by the whole neighborhood. Around 1902–1903 during the Meiji (明治) era, Shiro passed away in Suga district (須賀町) in the neighboring Fukushima prefecture. (Kikuta 1933, p. 556)

During the Meiji era, Shiro from Sendai was beloved by commoners and merchants alike as a lucky charm for commercial prosperity. Legend has it that any shop visited by Shiro would surely become popular and thrive in business. It was believed that Shiro’s visit would invite good fortune, hence the popular saying “One smile from Shiro brings luck”. As a celebrity back then, many local newspapers in the Meiji period reported on him, such as the Sendai Newspaper in 1877, the Sendai Daily Newspaper on 18 October, 1878, the Ryu-u Daily Newspaper on 23 June 1881, the Sendai Daily Newspaper on 27 May 1885, the Ou Daily Newspaper on 7 August 1895, and the Tohoku Newspaper on 4 September 1900. Through these reports by renowned local publishers across different times, one can gain more insights into Shiro’s character portrait. For example, the 27 May 1885 edition of the Sendai Daily Newspaper wrote the following: “On the 250th Memorial Day of Date Masamune (伊達政宗)’s passing, the founder of the Sendai Domain, Shiro was arranged to lead the memorial parade”. The 7 August 1895 edition of the Ou Daily Newspaper recorded the following: “The well-known local figure Shiro was spotted wandering around the small Fukushima Town. Shiro would get 50% off any ride. Owners of restaurants visited by Shiro all believed he would boost their business, so he was warmly wel-

comed". In addition, the Tohoku Newspaper on 4 September 1900 mentioned that "Shiro was also very popular in the neighboring Yamagata (山形) Prefecture. He was especially welcomed in tobacco and willow plantation areas there". Hence, Shiro from Sendai had already become a local celebrity, and people commonly believed he possessed a special power to "boost business prosperity" wherever he went.

3.1.2. The Process of Shiro Becoming Deified as a God of Fortune

Sendai Shiro was already widely welcomed and loved during his lifetime for his special power to bring prosperity to shops, but he was not formally named a "God of Fortune" and worshiped until after his death. First, in 1917, the Chiba (千葉) Photo Studio in Sendai sold postcards featuring a photo of Shiro from Sendai captioned "Meiji Fortune God: Lord Shiro from Sendai". Around Shiro's picture on the postcard sold by Chiba, in addition to the title "Meiji Fortune God: Lord Shiro from Sendai", cautionary words were also written that translate to English as "Lord Shiro from Sendai, Meiji Fortune God, one smile from him brings luck. For a thriving business, one needs to: open shop early; work hard and diligently learn business; be courteous and treat customers as nobles". (translated by the author) [明治福ノ神 仙台四郎君 ▲笑フ門ニ福來ル▼ 泣ヒテ暮スモ笑フテ暮スモ自分ノ心ノ持チ方ナリ ▲朝起キ福來ル▼ 朝起キ三ツノ徳アリトカ朝寝シテ財産ヲ造リシ人ナシ ▲營業ノ繁榮ハ勉強ト親切▼ 十錢ノ客ヨリモ一錢ノ客ノ方ヲ大切ニスル様務ムベシ.....繁榮ハ成功ノ始メナリ] Based on this content, we can say that from Meiji era, Sendai Shiro started to be referred to as a "God of Fortune" by people.

Entering the Showa (昭和) era, Shiro from Sendai appeared as a God of Fortune in many local histories and gazetteers. For example, the Sendai Folklore Magazine (仙台風俗誌, 1913) recorded the following: "The more brothels, restaurants and inns Shiro visited, the more customers and thriving business they would certainly have. Shiro was welcomed by many shops as a God of Fortune". Sendai in Those Days (仙台あのころこのころ八十八, 1978) wrote the following: "Shiro from Sendai always had a big smile on his face and was hailed as a God of Fortune by citizens at large". Our Hometown Sendai Rumors (郷土仙台耳ぶくろ, 1982) also noted that "You have the God of Fortune Shiro to thank for blessing you to grow up healthy and strong". Hence, by the Showa period, the title of "God of Fortune" for Send Shiro had become firmly established and widely accepted.

3.1.3. The Rise of the "Shiro Boom" in Sendai

Regarding the development process of the Sendai Shiro faith, Kurino (1993) divided the period from 1882 (Meiji 15) to 1993 (Heisei 5) into five stages. First, the period from 1882 (Meiji 15) to 1917 (Taisho 6) was the initial phase. During this period, Sendai Shiro began to be named as "Meiji Fortune God: Lord Shiro from Sendai". The period from 1918 (Taisho 7) to 1933 (Showa 8) was the second phase. The Sendai biographical dictionary included an explanation and introduction of the figure "Sendai Shiro" during this time. It shows that he was regarded as a local hero. The period from 1935 (Showa 10) to 1980 (Showa 55) was the third phase where Sendai Shiro appeared in various local folklore writings. The period from 1986 (Showa 61) to 1993 (Heisei 5) was the fourth stage. In addition to print publications, television stations also started to report on Sendai Shiro. Moreover, Mitakisan Fudo Temple (三瀧山不動院) in central Sendai's shopping district began enshrining posters of Shiro. From 1993 (Heisei 5) onward represents the fifth phase, during which Shiro from Sendai received extensive media coverage again. Mitakisan Fudo Temple became known for enshrining the God of Fortune "Sendai Shiro". On 28 July 2017, the author visited Mitakisan Fudo Temple (三瀧山不動院) in Ichibancho, Sendai, and found that even now, Mitakisan Fudo Temple enshrines a statue of Sendai Shiro and refer to him as the Fortune God—Sendai Shiro (Figure 1). At the Nakamise (shopping street located within the precincts of a shrine or temple), they sell amulets, auspicious items, and Sendai Shiro goods (Figure 2). It is said that the stores Sendai Shiro visited were always bustling with customers. Due to such legends, many old houses and long-established shops in Sendai display photographs or figurines of "Sendai Shiro, the God of Fortune". Even today, in

various places in Sendai shops, such as on household altars or beside cash registers, you can find photographs and figurines of Sendai Shiro (Figures 3 and 4), and his image also appears in TV commercials. Additionally, it is common for people to buy Sendai Shiro lucky charms from shops along the approach to the Mitakiyama Fudojin temple in Sendai and display them at home.



Figure 1. The statue of Sendai Shiro displayed at the festival of Mitakisan Fudo Temple (Photographed by the author, 28 July 2017).



Figure 2. Sendai Shiro merchandise sold at store (Photographed by the author, 28 July 2017).



Figure 3. The statue of Sendai Shiro at the Izakaya Datehan Nagaya Sakaba (Photographed by the author, 28 January 2018).



Figure 4. The statue of Sendai Shiro at the Rikyu Sendai Main Street Store (Photographed by the author, 10 May 2018).

3.2. A Comparative Analysis of Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro

Comparing Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro, we can find commonalities between them. As shown in Table 1, Fukusuke or Sendai Shiro are both figures with disabilities, yet they are believed to possess the supernatural ability to bring prosperity and thriving business to shops. Notably, their identity as people with disabilities also parallels that of the Seven Lucky Gods. So, what exactly are these Lucky Gods? Kita (1935) defined them as deities one can pray to for happiness and blessings. Miyamoto (1987) pointed out that the Lucky Gods have the spiritual character of bringing good fortune. Seven Lucky Gods are mystical in conferring blessings. Both Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro have the mystical effect of attracting wealth and fortune. During Fukusuke's lifetime, business thrived in the shop where he worked. Therefore, placing his Mannequin at home or in shops is thought to

bring prosperity. Sendai Shiro has similar powers—shops he frequented were guaranteed to enjoy thriving business and streams of customers, while shops that tried hard to fawn over him but were spurned faced closure. After his death, people used his photos and figurines as lucky charms, hoping to reap his wealth-attracting blessings.

Table 1. A comparison of Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro.

The Character	Fukusuke	Sendai Shiro
Real name	Kano Fukusuke (葉福助)	Haga Shiro (芳賀四郎)
Aged	Unspecified	It is said that he died at the age of 47 in Fukushima Prefecture.
Appearance and characteristics	Big head and small body; youthful, endearing appearance; suffering from dwarfism.	Intellectual disabilities; although speaking unclearly, there is always an endearing smile that makes people happy.
Key points of deification	Suffering from a certain physical disorder; having the ability to promote business prosperity and thriving transactions.	Suffering from intellectual disabilities; having the ability to promote business prosperity and thriving transactions.
Belief object	Doll	Picture, doll

From the enshrinement of Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro as gods, we can see that in both cases, the process of deification of these two historical figures contains two key elements: they were disabled and were believed to be efficacious in summoning wealth and good fortune. This is highly consistent with the nationwide Japanese gods of good fortune, the “Seven Lucky Gods”. At the same time, this inevitably calls to mind the “belief in Fukuko (fortunate child; 福子信仰)” that has long existed in Japanese history.

4. Fortune Gods and the Belief in Fukuko (福子)

In Japan, from ancient times, people with intellectual disabilities have been called “Fukuko” (fortunate child 福子), “Takako” (treasured child 宝子), “Fukasuke” (fortunate helper 福助), or “Fukumushi” (fortunate insect 福虫). They were seen as guardian deities that could bring good fortune to a family, and were carefully nurtured. It was said that when a disabled child was born, the family’s home would prosper, and the entire family would work hard so that the child would be well provided for throughout their life, thus bringing even greater prosperity (Yamada 1993, pp. 269–70).

In his collection of Japanese folklore materials, prominent folklorist Yanagita (1990, p. 376) recorded traditions stating that “In recent years, along the coast of northern Japan, there is a custom of cherishing village idiots. Because local people believe that after death, they (village idiots) would be reborn as whales and swim back to shore to bring wealth to the village”. According to Takada (1979, p. 16), Yanagita later pointed out in his essay collection *Fuzoku Minwa* (folk Stories) that “the custom of idiots born as Fukuko bringing prosperity to a family was also heard of in the Osaka area”. Ono and Shiba (1983, p. 40) conducted extensive field research on what children with disabilities were called in different parts of Japan. Their investigations showed that terms like “Fukuko”, “Takako”, “Fukasuke”, and “Fukumushi” were used, and that each region had many related legends. For example, in Hiroshima (広島) prefecture, people widely believed that families with a child with polio would have a thriving household business, and cherished them as Fukuko. In Kagawa (香川) prefecture, children with disabilities were called “Fukugo”, and locals believed they could bring wealth to a family. Ono and Shiba also pointed that Fukugo were generally short in stature and intellectually impaired. Such stories could be heard until the late Taisho (大正) period (Ono and Shiba 1983, p. 40). Inspired by this, Tsubogou (1983, pp. 107–12), together with the Japan League for the Help of Mentally Retarded Children (now the Japan League for Development of People with Intellectual Disabilities), further investigated legends of Fukuko from all over Japan. Through Tsukabo’s research,

it was discovered that children with disabilities in different regions had various names like “Fukuko”, “Fukasuke”, “Takako”, “Fukumi”, “Fukujoo (divine girl)”, and more.

The above research shows that Japan has had a long-standing custom of regarding children with disabilities as “Fukuko” who could bring good fortune to a household. Regarding the reason why fortune gods and Fukuko appear with physical disabilities, the Japanese religious scholar Yamaori (1996, p. 264) explained that “Deformity is an abnormality, a way for the spirits that transcend human existence to manifest themselves. Japan has long believed in visiting gods, with people believing that in fixed seasons or times, these gods come from a different world across the sea to bring good fortune, wealth, abundance, and life. Deformity signifies a lack of something, serving as a medium between two different realms, the mundane world and the otherworld, life and death. For example, the winter solstice festivals on the 8th day of the 12th and 2nd lunar months called ‘Kotoyouka (事八日)’, and the ‘Daishi Kou (大師講)’ lectures on the 23rd day of the 11th month—the gods with one eye or lame legs often visit during these seasonal or yearly transitional periods for the aforementioned reasons. For people of this world, deformity becomes the means to communicate and interact when the otherworld or death appears before their eyes”. Komatsu (1998, p. 167) also pointed out that ancient people attributed all physical or mental abnormalities to the otherworld. This otherworld contained both benevolent

“Good spirits” and malicious “Evil spirits” towards humans. And in order to bring blessings to a particular family or village, the gods would send them “abnormal children” as “Fukuko”. Therefore, Komatsu saw these “abnormal children” as messengers from the gods, bringing blessings to human society with an almost divine existence. As for why “Fukuko” appeared in human society in the form of “abnormal children”, Komatsu (1998, p. 39) explained that “Fukuko, as projections of gods into this world, were seen as the source of group vitality”. Regarding this point, I think that in order not to let such children struggle in life, the whole family works hard to prosper the household, so the abnormal child actually becomes the driving force behind family’s efforts.

In summary, whether referencing the Seven Lucky Gods, local fortune gods, or Fukuko of Japan, they all exhibit two major characteristics: first, some form of physical or mental impairment, an extraordinariness; and second, the ability to bring good fortune and prosperity. The reason behind the physical deformity can be seen as a means for the “spirits” of the otherworld to interact with the mundane world, inspiring awe, while their formidable fortune-bringing powers led to admiration and worship. From the myth of Hiruko in the *Kojiki* to the widespread belief in the Seven Lucky Gods, there are ample precedents for the deification of Fukusuke and Sendai Shiro in later periods. In Japan, there has long been a belief in the visiting gods who come from the other world to this world to bestow blessings. From the medieval to the early modern period, this belief became linked with the concept of “benefits in this world”, leading to the development of a unique faith in fortune gods. Particularly in the early modern period, the pursuit of worldly benefits was prominent, and the common people held strong expectations for the miraculous efficacy of deities and Buddhas, as well as the magical benefits of sutras. One result of this was the popularity of the Seven Lucky Gods faith. It can also be said that the birth of the Seven Lucky Gods met people’s needs for worldly benefits such as bountiful harvests, good health, and commercial prosperity.

5. Conclusions

In summary, in Japan, the emergence of fortune gods reflects people’s pursuit of worldly benefits. Specifically, it reflects the folk religious views of the public praying for blessings and good omens, hoping to obtain the protection of fortune gods. Japan’s fortune gods include both foreign deities from India and China as well as native deities, exhibiting a diverse attitude of faith and reflecting the Japanese people’s polytheistic religious views.

By analyzing the similarities of Japan’s Seven Lucky Gods and local fortune gods, this paper argues that the Japanese fortune gods have two major common characteristics: the super power to bring good fortune, and their extraordinary appearance that present

some kind of physical or mental defect. Therefore, we can summarize the mechanisms of the deification of fortune gods in Japan into the following two points. Both the aspect of having a disability and the miraculous power to bring good fortune must be considered. In particular, people's pursuit of worldly benefits such as happiness and wealth is the main reason for the emergence of fortune gods. Regarding why fortune gods in Japan appear in the form of the disabled, the author believes that this is closely related to Japan's ancient belief in Marebito. Marebito appear in unusual forms (disability or deformity) and visit this world. As mentioned earlier by Yamaori, disability or deformity is an extraordinary, transcendent way for super human spirits to manifest. Therefore, we can say that disability or deformity is the way that a god comes to this world.

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Notes

- ¹ This is a couplet describing Maitreya Buddha, whose prototype is Budai, a monk from the Five Dynasties period. The couplet was created by the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. It is now located next to the statue of Maitreya Buddha in Tanzhe Temple in Beijing.
- ² I have referred to the following website: <http://www.shiga-miidera.or.jp> (accessed on 20 April 2024); <https://瀧尾神社.com> (accessed on 20 April 2024); <https://www.fukuske.com> (accessed on 20 April 2024).

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