Blurring the Boundary between Play and Ritual: Sugoroku Boards as Portable Cosmos in Japanese Religion

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Blurring the Boundary between Play and Ritual:
Sugoroku Boards as Portable Cosmos in Japanese Religion

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April 16, 2021
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1. Introduction

The flow of the Kamo River, the roll of the sugoroku dice and the mountain monks [of Enryakuji] are things I cannot control.

— Cloistered Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129)

Although Emperor Shirakawa 白河法皇 remained powerful politically during his cloistered rule, he continued to lament over three things beyond his control. He firstly bemoaned the flooding of the Kamo River. The frequency of the flooding that occurred in Heian-kyō (nowadays Kyoto) increased dramatically during the life of Emperor Shirakawa. This reflects an uncertainty toward threats not only from the terrestrial landscape but also, because the capital was itself built according to cosmological principles, the entire cosmos in general. He also lamented his inability control the rioting mountain clerics of Mt. Hiei, many of whom took Buddhist vows without official ordination. Their unruly acts, such as setting fires around the capital and at the palace, remained a real headache for the emperor. But it is Shirakawa’s second concern that will interest us here. He laments his lack of control over the dice of a board game called ban-sugoroku 盤双六/盤雙六 (board sugoroku). Winning or losing the game depends upon the rolls of two dice, and chance makes the game beyond one’s control.

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One may wonder why the dice of a harmless game would be worth mentioning in parallel with life-threatening concerns with political significance. In fact, the board game ban-sugoroku was much more than just a popular pastime to medieval Japanese people. Several Japanese scholars such as Hatahira Hirofumi and Koyama Satoko have noted that the game enabled players to communicate with Shinto and Buddhist deities. In this thesis, I will build upon this research to demonstrate how sugoroku, as well as a later board game bearing the same name, had profound meanings for all three aspects of Shirakawa’s concern: the cosmos, chance, and religious beliefs. Both types of sugoroku carry cosmological meanings and religious functions, as both serve as anchor points connecting the religious realm and the ordinary world. I will argue that the sugoroku boards are accessible alternatives to the other important religious objects of the same eras, and that the process of playing the games generates similar effects as the well-established practices in which those religious objects were used. In the hands of lay people, sugoroku board games became powerful objects that promised the transcendence of the boundaries of the religious and the secular.

1.1 Brief Introduction to Sugoroku and Its Study

As mentioned above, the thesis focuses on two Japanese board games, both named sugoroku (literally, “double sixes”). Ban-sugoroku, a type of backgammon, is the oldest known board game in Japan. Its name might derive from its Chinese counterpart shuanglu 雙陸/雙六. Masukawa Koichi suggests that it was first introduced to Japan in the seventh century, enjoyed popularity during medieval times, and declined in the early modern era due to the influx of

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Western backgammon. With the decline of the Japanese backgammon, since the seventeenth century until today, the term *sugoroku* generally referred to another game, *e-sugoroku* (picture *sugoroku*). *E-sugoroku* is a racing game similar to Snakes and Ladders. Originally designed with a Buddhist theme, *e-sugoroku* later developed to include popular themes such as kabuki actors and famous places (*meisho* 名所). The history of Buddhist *e-sugoroku* can be traced at least to the fifteenth century, but the game became popularized in the seventeenth century with increased use of woodblock printing technology. Unfortunately, those late medieval-period copies of Buddhist *e-sugoroku* did not survive. Accordingly, I will use copies from the Edo period (1603–1868) for my discussion on *e-sugoroku*. For the purposes of this thesis, I will mainly focus on one group of Buddhist-themed *e-sugoroku* called Pure Land *sugoroku*. Based on the belief of escaping the six paths through rebirth in Amida Buddha’s Western Pure Land, Pure Land *sugoroku* has the ultimate goal of rising to the Pure Land or specific deities on the game board.

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7 Masukawa, “*Ban-sugoroku,*” 105, 109-110.
If studied as board games, the two types of sugoroku are radically different in terms of their materials, layouts, and rules. Two prints by Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770) featuring courtesans playing the two games (Figure 1.1) could help demonstrate some of the differences. As depicted in the print on the left, the ban-sugoroku board is in the shape of a wooden table or rectangular box. The top surface of the ban-sugoroku board is divided into three parallel sections, and the outer two fields of this tripartite design are divided further into twelve rectangular spaces. Game pieces include fifteen white and fifteen black stones. Players in ban-

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sugoroku use two hexahedron numeral dice to determine moves. They roll the dice in a bamboo tube and throw them onto the board.\textsuperscript{11} According to the numbers shown on the two dice, the player can either move two stones according to the point shown on each dice, or move only one stone as many squares as the total numbers shown on the two dice.

In \textit{e-sugoroku}, players use either one dice with numbers or characters inscribed, or colored sticks. Unlike the table-like \textit{ban-sugoroku}, the \textit{e-sugoroku} board is a flat sheet of paper full of illustrated small squares. Each player places one game piece at the square labelled “start” and progress towards the “goal” square following the throw of the dice.

Due to the distinct time periods and designs of these two types of \textit{sugoroku} games, previous scholars have tended to see them as two completely different and unrelated games, and thus seldom study both together. However, the juxtaposition of Suzuki Harunobu’s prints above suggest that even as \textit{ban-sugoroku} declined in the early modern period, it was seen to have similarities with \textit{e-sugoroku}. As I will demonstrate throughout the thesis, these two games of chance can be understood as similar when we take into account their rich cosmological meanings and religious functions.

The ethnographer Stewart Culin was the first to introduce both types of \textit{sugoroku} to English audiences. In his 1920 article published by the Brooklyn Museum, Culin introduces the layouts, equipment, and history of the Japanese games in relation to similar games in China and Korea.\textsuperscript{12} He mainly relies on living sources he met during his visits to Japan in early 1900s—Japanese librarians, curators, collectors, and “experts” of the games. Following the publication of Culin’s article, \textit{sugoroku} was not a subject of serious concern in English scholarship until

\begin{footnotesize}
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recently. In Yui Suzuki’s 2014 essay on birth scenes in medieval Japanese handscrolls (*emaki* 絵巻), she speculates that *ban-sugoroku* had a religious function.\(^{13}\) Suzuki suggests that the game could be used either as a divination tool or as a ritual implement to cure diseases or facilitate a smooth delivery of the child. In Charlotte Eubanks’ 2020 article on a late-Edo version of Pure Land *sugoroku* called “Good and Evil *sugoroku* Journey to the Pure Land” (*Zen’aku sugoroku gokuraku dōchū zue* 善悪双六極樂道中図絵; hereafter, *Good and Evil sugoroku*), she conceptualizes the game as a type of multidirectional reading.\(^ {14}\) Eubanks argues that the game navigates players back and forth around the game board in a complex way similar to the Japanese way of reading a sutra. Noting a “ritual turn” in Buddhist Studies, she draws readers’ attention to certain squares on the game board that represent specific Pure Land rituals.

Although both Suzuki (an art historian) and Eubanks (a scholar of comparative literature) suggest that there are religious connotations of the games and mention the concept of ritual, they each focus on only one type of *sugoroku*. In so doing, they fail to situate the games in a more holistic picture of East Asian games and religion. For instance, although Suzuki infers from visual sources that *ban-sugoroku* could be used in healing, she does not compare the game to other religious objects commonly used in similar rituals. As such, the reason why *ban-sugoroku* might serve such religious functions remains to be addressed. Likewise, Eubanks emphasizes the importance of religious rituals, but fails to notice that the process of playing Pure Land *sugoroku* also includes ritualistic features and could be regarded and studied as a ritual as well. In addition, because *e-sugoroku* can be understood as a visual form of Buddhist knowledge, it is important to examine the game in the context of other aspects of Buddhist visual culture as well. Therefore,

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\(^{13}\) Suzuki, "Twanging Bows and Throwing Rice," 33-34.

prior research on these games can only be considered the first step towards a more profound understanding of the meanings and functions of the two types of sugoroku.

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Ritual and Play

As suggested above, the study of the history of sugoroku is incomplete if we neglect to examine its religious dimensions. Nevertheless, sugoroku has never been discussed by scholars of religious studies. One possible reason for this neglect is given by Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris in their survey of religiously-themed board games and dolls in the contemporary world. They note the influence of a Western philosophical worldview that celebrates clear boundaries when it comes to religion, for example, high versus low religion and religion versus everyday activities.15 Another reason for the lack of scholarship on sugoroku stems from the lack of attention to “folk practices” among studies of premodern Japanese religion.16 Lori Meeks points out that it is a misconception that scholars can neatly separate the religious activities of ordinary laypeople from the intellectual and institutional histories of Buddhism.17

I must admit that during the first half of my research process, I spent much of my time attempting to distinguish occasions when people used sugoroku in religious contexts from when they used it as a form of secular play. However, it was a challenging process. For example, records of playing of ban-sugoroku are often associated with rituals surrounding childbirth. A diary entry on Shōkunmon’in’s 昭訓門院 (1273–1336) birthing notes that a female medium and

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her attendant took turns playing *ban-sugoroku* in order to induce a smooth delivery.\(^{18}\) Similarly, in a type of banquet held in celebration of the birth of a new royal child (*ubuyashinai* 産養), guests played *ban-sugoroku*.\(^{19}\) Scholars such as Karen Gerhart suggest that the game might be a form of fortune-telling or serve to ward off malicious spirits.\(^{20}\) Moreover, *ban-sugoroku* was also played to cure ailments. Another example is found in Nakayama Tadachika’s 中山忠親 (1132-1195) diary from an entry dating to 1184. Tadachika reports that the Cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa (*Go-Shirakawa hōō* 後白河法皇, 1127–92) fell ill, lost his appetite, and had a haggard look.\(^{21}\) He then played *ban-sugoroku* all night to cure his illness. The act of playing board games lacks the solemnness and the carefully arranged space one would usually imagine to have in a ritual. However, records of Go-Shirakawa using *sugoroku* to treat diseases were mentioned after other healing rituals of esoteric Buddhist tradition.\(^{22}\)

The interwoven nature of ritual and play also holds true for the later Buddhist-themed *e-sugoroku*. One would not consider a family activity of playing *Good and Evil sugoroku* happily in celebration of the New Year as a ritual performance. However, as I will later show, the process of playing the game is in fact similar to a virtual visit to Buddhist landscapes such as the Pure Land and other sacred locations, which is a commonly defined ritualistic behavior in a religious sense. In sum, in both types of *sugoroku* I discovered an extraordinary intersection of play and ritual, such that it is almost impossible to detach one from the other. Therefore, I argue that it is both necessary and beneficial to study *sugoroku* alongside their contemporary religious

\(^{18}\) Suzuki, ”*Twanging Bows and Throwing Rice*,” 34.


\(^{21}\) Koyama Satoko, “*Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku: chūsei zenki o chūshin toshle*,” *Setsuwabungaku kenkyū* 51 (2016), 6.

\(^{22}\) Koyama, “*Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku*,” 7.
objects and practices, such as mandalas, etoki 絵解き (explaining Buddhist doctrines using pictures), and others to be discussed throughout the thesis.

Scholars studying religious rituals have begun to recognize important similarities between ritual and play. These scholars have shown that both ritual and play are repetitive, establish an “as if” world, and have a transformative effect on those who practice them.\textsuperscript{23} Claiming that ritual is a special form of adult play, Buddhist Studies scholar Robert Sharf probes into the practice of sitting meditation (zazen 坐禅) using the concept of play.\textsuperscript{24} In contrast, there are few scholars who do the reverse of contextualizing games in the world of religion. Although Bado-Fralick and Norris make an important observation on the interwoven nature of religion and play in games worldwide,\textsuperscript{25} they limit their scope to games that are designed for children. Similar to Sharf, their study of games is characterized by an underlying assumption that play is for children and rituals are for adults. This thesis challenges this idea in its examination of both types of sugoroku, which were used by a diverse range of players. As such, my study on sugoroku redefines the boundaries between ritual and play and the sacred and the secular, thus providing a new perspective for future scholars to think about those issues.

1.3 Comparative Study: Board Games, Cosmograms and Religion

Although scholars such as Eubanks have shown that sugoroku is not too “frivolous” to be included in the study of Japanese religion, the limited textual sources concerning sugoroku are another impediment to its research. For instance, diaries written by courtiers in the medieval

\textsuperscript{24} Braak, “The practice of Zazen as Ritual Performance,” 162.
\textsuperscript{25} Bado-Fralick and Norris, \textit{Toying with God.}
period never explain why people used board games to cure diseases, and temples in the early modern period never explicitly announced their reasons for publishing the games. Nevertheless, as stated above, this difficulty can be partially solved by comparative analysis. One method is to compare sugoroku with other religious objects, rituals, and beliefs of the same time period. Another method is to compare sugoroku with similar board games in a broader East Asian context.

This thesis adopts a comparative framework in both senses noted above. I argue that both types of sugoroku belong to a category of visual objects I call “cosmograms,” which I define as diagrams or figures depicting a cosmology. As demonstrated in Rolf Stein’s monograph, Asian cultures have a long-existing tradition of man-made objects designed to be miniatures of the world. These objects usually functioned as anchor points through which practitioners might communicate with or receive help from various spirits and deities. Similarly, many premodern Asian board games were designed or mapped with contemporaneous religious beliefs about the cosmos. In both literary sources and visual representations, the game boards also had similar abilities to connect the player with the supernatural. As I will elaborate in detail in Chapter 2, ban-sugoroku’s potential antecedents, nard (Persian backgammon) and liubo (the earliest known board game in China), each reflect cosmological imaginations of people in middle Persia or early China. Moreover, the game Go (igo 囲碁) also carries rich cosmological meanings related to esoteric Buddhism. Igo is particularly close to ban-sugoroku in that it was often used interchangeably with ban-sugoroku in various rituals during the medieval period. In Chapter 2, I will rely on encyclopedic sources and illustrated scrolls for analyzing the cosmological meanings

of *ban-sugoroku*. By doing so, I will also demonstrate how *ban-sugoroku*’s cosmological significance matches the meanings given to certain religious objects used in esoteric healing rituals. I contend that similarities in cosmological meanings make *ban-sugoroku*, as well as *igo*, appropriate ritual implements.

For my analysis of *e-sugoroku* in Chapter 3, I will first trace the potential origins of the game. I argue that the visual contents of Pure Land *sugoroku* boards might come from pictorial traditions indigenous to Japan; its form as a Buddhist-themed game of chance might derive from Asian games without illustrations. Therefore, I first compare the game to various visual traditions in Japanese Buddhism. In normal preaching practices, a preacher would point at multiple spots in a painting and explain the meanings of places such as heavens and hells. Without any preacher, Pure Land *sugoroku* takes players out of their ordinary life and leads them travel around horrifying hells and paradisical landscapes presented on the game board. Second, I will draw from East Asian Buddhist games with themes similar to Pure Land *sugoroku* in order to explain the function of chance in the game. The Chinese game *Selection of Buddhas* (*xuanfo tu* 選佛圖) is one such game. *Selection of Buddhas* plausibly originated from the same period and might have impacted the development of *e-sugoroku*. The extant copy of the game has a manual written by a prominent late-Ming monk Ouyi Zhixu 蕅益智旭 (1599–1655). Building on his manual and similar divination-based religious practices, I propose that playing Pure Land *sugoroku* may have been conceptualized as a way to visualize one’s own karma. The players would experience the joy of rising to Pure Land and other sacred places and the sorrow of sinking to terrifying hells. Either by tracing previous moves they take on the game board or reflecting on their deeds outside of the game, the players might learn about the fundamental doctrine of moral causation through traveling in the embodied Buddhist cosmology.
2. Ban-sugoroku, the Otherworldly, and Exorcism

The Kōmoto 河本 family version of the Scroll of Hungry Ghosts (Gaki zōshi 餓鬼草紙, Figure 2.1) includes a depiction of childbirth in an aristocratic family.\textsuperscript{27} As I will demonstrate later, the illustrated picture scroll (emaki 絵巻) reveals the perilous nature of childbirth caused by unseen spirits. It also depicts various religious practices implemented to protect the parturient woman from evil-doing spirits and ensure a smooth delivery. Because medieval Japanese also identified these malevolent spirits as the cause of various illnesses and they ward off them using a similar procedure, these religious practices performed around childbirth can be considered a type of healing rituals.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{scroll_of_hungry_ghosts.png}
\caption{Scroll of Hungry Ghosts (twelfth century, 26.9 x 380.2 cm, color on paper, Tokyo National Museum)\textsuperscript{28}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{27} Besides the Kōmoto family scroll in the Tokyo National Museum, there is another extant example of the Gaki zōshi, the Sōgenji 曹源寺 version in the Kyōto National Museum. Thus, some scholars infer that the hungry ghost scrolls might have multiple variants; see Shibusawa Keizō, Multilingual version of pictopedia of everyday life in medieval Japan: compiled from picture scrolls, vol. 1 (Kanagawa University 21st Century COE Program, 2008), p. 118.

It might be to a twenty-first-century viewer’s surprise to see a *ban-sugoroku* board laying at the lower right corner of this scene. Why does a game board appear in a delivery room? Does it serve any practical purposes and if so, what distinct qualities of the game board enable it to serve such functions? The *ban-sugoroku* board in the *Hungry Ghost Scroll* has sparked the interest of many scholars, and current discussions on *ban-sugoroku*’s religious functions have been closely related to this important visual source. The painting provides essential information in situating *ban-sugoroku* and related practices in their social and cultural context. Therefore, I believe there might be no better way to start the discussion around *ban-sugoroku* and healing rituals than looking closely at this picture scroll.

2.1 The Scroll of Hungry Ghosts and Its Enigmatic Ban-sugoroku Board

In this section, I will first briefly introduce the subject matter of the *Hungry Ghost Scroll*. Then, by decoding visual elements with the aid of scholarly articles, I will mention the fear of malicious illness-causing spirits among the elites and the syncretic ritual practices used to facilitate childbirth. Finally, drawing upon this analysis, I will summarize and evaluate previous scholars’ speculations on the function of *ban-sugoroku* in this scene. Building upon their ideas, I argue that the *sugoroku* board’s cosmological meanings and its ability to connect the human realm with the unseen world might enable it to facilitate the process of healing.

The *Scroll of Hungry Ghosts*, along with other handscrolls such as the *Hell Scroll* (*Jigoku zōshi* 地獄草紙) and the *Scroll of Diseases and Deformities* (*Yamai no sōshi* 病草紙) created around the same time, was originally part of a set of thirty-six scrolls known as the *Paintings of*
the Six Realms of Transmigration (Rokudō-e 六道絵). 29 Presumably commissioned by Emperor Go-Shirakawa, 30 these handscrolls have a common focus on the sufferings of unenlightened beings in the six paths. Their purpose was didactic: to generate fear in viewers through illustrations of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. Although a painting of the Six Realms was mentioned as early as the Record of Miraculous Events in Japan (Nihon ryōiki 日本霊異記, 787-824), a surge in the production of paintings of this genre was stimulated by Genshin’s 源信 (942-1019) Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land (Ojōyōshū 往生要集, 985). 31 The first section of the text, “Loathing the Defiled Realm,” is a lengthy demonstration of the undesirable state of rebirth in the six realms. 32

The hungry ghosts (Sk. preta, Jp. gaki 餓鬼) constantly suffer from hunger and thirst and are considered one of the three unfavorable rebirths, and the Scroll of the Hungry Ghosts reflects great fear towards falling into the Hungry Ghost Realm. As portrayed in the handscroll, these creatures have scrawny necks, abnormally thin limbs and torsos, and swollen bellies. In addition, by situating the grotesque gaki in banquets, on streets or in cemeteries, the scroll shows some types of hungry ghosts as invisible threats to human beings in everyday settings.

Among the five sections of the handscroll, the second section lively depicts a middle-ranking aristocratic delivery room after a successful childbirth. This scene has a seemingly

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31 Keizō, Multilingual version of pictopedia of everyday life in medieval Japan, 118; Chin, “The Gender of Buddhist Truth,” 280.
delightful atmosphere in celebration of both the birth of the newborn and the release of the placenta. The women in white-colored garments at the center of the handscroll are a parturient woman and her female attendants. To their right, an old woman with a white hood is likely to be a midwife. Either happily looking down at the newborn or laughing delightfully, they seem unaware of the approaching danger – the red-haired hungry ghost in charge of child excreta (Jp. shieijiben 伺嬰児便) is extending its arms to the infant. This type of hungry ghosts pledged revenge on those who killed their sons in their past lives. When they smell blood they can travel swiftly to kill fetuses or unguarded infants.

The hungry ghost is not the only evil spirit that was thought to jeopardize the health of the infant and its mother. Medieval Japanese people believed childbirth was when space and time of the living overlaps with realms of the dead and unseen malevolent spirits. These spirits attracted by parturition blood and afterbirth were believed to be the leading cause of not only physical symptoms experienced by the laboring woman but infant and maternal mortality. Among various of ill-causing spirits, spirits of the deceased (mononoke 物気/モノノケ) were of greatest concern by aristocrats and were most frequently identified as the cause of diseases in recorded sources from the Heian to early Kamakura periods. These invisible but malignant

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33 Yui Suzuki recognizes that the newborn is still attached to the placenta in the Gaki zōshi, and she points out the importance of the placenta’s proper delivery in pre-modern Japan. See Suzuki, “Twanging Bows and Throwing Rice,” 18-19.

34 Anna Andreeva, “Childbirth in Aristocratic Households of Heian Japan,” Dynamis 34 no.2 (2014), 359. There is an alternative interpretation that the old female figure is a nun, see Suzuki, “Twanging Bows and Throwing Rice,” 18.


37 Ibid, 361.

38 Koyama Satoko, “Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōboku: chūsei zenki o chūshin to shite,” Setsuwabungaku kenkyū 51 (2016), 1. In the ninth century, mononoke were understood to be the causes of inexplicable inauspicious phenomena experienced by the emperor; from the late ninth century, the workings of mononoke extended to encompass any life-threatening situation such as a prolonged illness. See Yui Suzuki, “Possession and the
spirits often manifested themselves by possessing human bodies or objects. Therefore, the efforts of midwives and physicians were not sufficient. The delivery room should be suitably equipped and ritually secured to protect the mother and child from dangers from the unseen world.

As shown in the *Scroll of Hungry Ghosts* and literary sources, the rituals often consisted of works of multiple religious professionals and servants in the elite family. The earthenware fragments are scattered in the foreground. These might be broken dishes dropped by servants to ward off *mononoke*, or clay tiles from the bedroom’s roof to induce a smooth delivery of the placenta. The male courtier standing at the sliding door on the far left holds a lengthy branch with white paper wrapped around its upper part. Likely from a nearby temple, the paper (kanzu巻数) documents esoteric Buddhist sutra recitations performed by high-ranking clerics. Although these clerics are not directly depicted in the *Hungry Ghost Scroll*, their contributions to the smooth delivery might be recorded on this paper, which usually contained the titles of the sutras recited, the number of times performed, and the name of the priest. Also absent from the scroll were Shinto priests who conducted purification rites, and yin-yang diviners (*onmyōji* 陰陽師) who calculated the most auspicious positions, sites and times for childbirth. The *onmyōji* would perform divination to discern types of possessing spirits if possession was suspected.


39 Koyama, “Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku,” 11.


41 Suzuki, “Twanging Bows and Throwing Rice,” 21-22. Other scholars such as Anna Andreeva and Shibusawa Keizō infer the object as a bow for the twanging bow (meigen 嘯弦) rite. However, though the male figure in the childbirth scene from the *Kitano Tenjin emaki* 北野天神絵巻 is depicted plucking a bow, the wooden branch in the *Gaki zōshi* does not have any strings.

42 Ibid, 21.

43 Ibid, 21.
whereas the subjugation of those spirits was a collaborative task between Shingon or Tendai priests (*genza* 騷者) and female mediums (*yorimashi* ヨリマシ).\textsuperscript{44}

To the right of the partition screen in the *Hungry Ghost Scroll* sit such a pair of a Buddhist priest and a female medium. The exorcising process consists of three parts: First, the malicious spirit was transferred into the medium’s body. Second, sequestering the spirit there, the priest learns about reasons behind the possession through the medium’s mouth. Finally, when the patient or parturient gets better, the priest will release it back into the spirit world.\textsuperscript{45} In the *Hungry Ghost Scroll*, the Buddhist priest holds a string of prayer beads, which serves as a catalyst for *kaji* 加持, the mutual empowerment between self and Buddha to expunge evil spirits.\textsuperscript{46} As I will further elaborate on this notion later in this chapter, the Buddha’s universal energy enables the practitioner to diagnose illness and administer effective treatment.\textsuperscript{47}

In the *Hungry Ghost Scroll*, the female figure sitting next to the Buddhist priest is a *miko* 神子/巫女, a type of Shinto professional often translated as “shrine maiden” or “female shaman.” Her identity is identifiable by the red trousers and her unkempt hair. Before the twelfth century, the role of female medium was usually played passively by ladies-in-waiting (*nyōbo* 女房) or female youths taking care of the sick person.\textsuperscript{48} In this case, possessions relied fully on the power of the *genza*. However, from the twelfth century onward, *miko* took over the role of servants to be mediums in healing rituals. *Miko*’s specialty in spiritual services enabled them to actively possess the spirits and keep them in their body for a longer period of time.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{44} Suzuki, “Possession and the Possessed,” 75.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 78; Koyama, “Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku,” 2.
\textsuperscript{46} Suzuki, “Possession and the Possessed,” 77.
\textsuperscript{48} Koyama, “Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku,” 11-12.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 11-12.
According to Koyama Satoko, the *ban-sugoroku* board depicted behind the *miko* was what gave her agency to actively possess malevolent spirits and keep them spell-bound.\(^{50}\)

Koyama observes that, similar to the practice of throwing earthenware vessels to ward off evil spirits, *miko* would spell-bind the spirits by hitting the *sugoroku* board hard enough to make loud sounds. However, there are several issues with this argument. First, the *miko* in the *Hungry Ghost Scroll* sits with her back to the board. Since the priest is talking with a female attendant, the *miko* might not be engaged in exorcism in the post-childbirth moment captured by the painting and thus does not have the game board in front of her. Nevertheless, if she were hitting it during the process of labor, the painter would have chosen to depict the board in front of her. Second, the loud sounds often served a role in expulsion rather than binding. Besides breaking clay vessels, the loud chanting of incantations (mantras and *dharanis*) also has a powerful dispelling effect on these malevolent spirits.\(^{51}\)

Yui Suzuki proposes another theory for the existence of *ban-sugoroku* in the scene. Suzuki focuses on a story in the *Great Mirror* (*Ōkagami* 大鏡) in which Emperor Fujiwara no Morosuke 藤原師輔 (908-960) used *sugoroku* dice to foretell the gender of his grandchild.\(^{52}\) The emperor held a party on the fifty-seven day in the sexagenary cycle (*kōshin* 庚申) and his guests played *sugoroku*.\(^{53}\) He rolled a pair of *sugoroku* dice to predict if his daughter Empress Anshi (927-964) is carrying a boy or not. A double six came up the very first time, which was considered a wonderful omen. Later, Empress Anshi did give birth to the future Emperor Reizei. Drawing from this example, Suzuki suggests that *sugoroku* would be used as a divination tool in

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\(^{50}\) Though the image is blurred, one can still identify several distinct features of *ban-sugoroku* including the tripartite division and the twelve masu on two sides of the board.

\(^{51}\) Suzuki, “Possession and the Possessed,” 79.

\(^{52}\) Suzuki, "Twanging Bows and Throwing Rice," 33.

Hungry Ghost Scroll.\textsuperscript{54} Besides rituals surrounding childbirth and physical healing, miko usually engaged in services like the transmission of oracles from deities (takusen 託宣), divine petition (kitō 祈祷) and fortune-telling (uranai 占い).\textsuperscript{55} Nevertheless, as Koyama has pointed out, if divinations were performed, there must have been records of the results.\textsuperscript{56} Moreover, Morosuke relied mainly on the dice in divination, but only the board is depicted in the \textit{illustrated scroll}. If the dice did play a crucial role, they should not have been omitted.

I generally agree with Koyama’s point that miko might use ban-sugoroku boards to facilitate the subjugation of malicious spirits by keeping them spell-bound within her body for a longer period of time. Building onto her argument, I propose that sugoroku would serve a similar role to commonly-used objects, for example strings of prayer beads, in esoteric Buddhist healing rituals.

One may wonder why miko would be familiar with Buddhist practices. Lori Meeks’ work has suggested an extraordinary fluidity between premodern communities of miko and Buddhist priests.\textsuperscript{57} Buddhist monasteries often invited miko to perform at large-scale ceremonies. More importantly, arukimiko 歩き巫女 (traveling miko without permanent institutional affiliation) were sometimes portrayed wearing prayer beads (juzu 数珠).\textsuperscript{58} In private services to individuals, they used the prayer beads not only for prayer but also to conjure spirits. Also, as discussed above and exemplified by the \textit{Hungry Ghost Scroll}, miko were often working together with Buddhist priests to provide healing services. Thus, it is evident that some miko in the medieval

\textsuperscript{54} Suzuki, 33. Suzuki also mentions the sugoroku board in the \textit{Kokawadera engi} (thirteenth century) and recognizes the game board in that scene as a ritual implement to cure diseases.
\textsuperscript{55} Meeks, “The Disappearing Medium,” 222.
\textsuperscript{56} Koyama, “Igo ・ Sugoroku ni yoromono no chōbuku,” 10;
\textsuperscript{57} Meeks, “The Disappearing Medium,” 219, 237.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 223.
period were familiar with Buddhist practices.\(^5^9\)

Moreover, as Suzuki has noted, the presence of the *ban-sugoroku* board in the illustrated scroll, especially given the general lack of objects in the depiction, suggests that the game board has some important meanings. Therefore, I believe it might be important to consider what features of the game board that made it suitable for its use in healing rituals.

In healing rituals involving spirit possession, prayer beads, *vajra*, or *shikiban* 式盤 (cosmographic divination boards) were employed. All of them were considered to be embodiments of the underlying order of the cosmos that empowered the user with the power of Buddhas or other cosmic deities.\(^6^0\) Likewise, as I will explain in the following section, *ban-sugoroku* boards also have rich cosmological meanings with strong religious connotations. Other board games used in similar occasions such as *igo* were also believed to be miniatures of the cosmos.\(^6^1\) In addition, like *igo* and other board games, *sugoroku* and its Chinese counterpart were believed to serve as anchor points connecting the spiritual realm and the ordinary world. Therefore, I argue that these two characteristics mentioned above made *ban-sugoroku* a perfect substitute for certain religious objects.

2.2 The Cosmological Imaginations of Ban-sugoroku

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\(^{59}\) Because both shine miko and arukimiko provided similar healing rituals, Meeks claims that it was hard to determine *miko*’s identity in the *Gaki zōshi* (p. 248). However, It seems to me that the solitary existence of the *sugoroku* board violates one basic iconography of shrine *miko* that they always appear accompanied by at least one of the three musical instruments (*suzu* bells, Japanese *zithers*, and *tsuzumi* drums). For the iconography of *miko*, see Meeks, “The Disappearing Medium,” 223.


\(^{61}\) Koyama explains cosmological imaginations on *igo* and *weiqi* in her article, but fail to address cosmological meanings of *ban-sugoroku*. 
It is not uncommon to see pre-modern game boards, especially Asian games, as miniatures of the world. Playing the game had a symbolic meaning of controlling the world or imitating the symbolic creation and destruction of the world.\(^62\) Winning the game, therefore, gained positive connotations – sometimes interpreted as a sign of sophistication, other times an auspicious omen. Cosmological meanings given to these boards, which can be found in encyclopedic sources, poems, and historical tales across cultures, often reflect contemporary religious beliefs. This section will focus on *ban-sugoroku* and other board games having close affinity to it. In adopting a comparative approach to these games, I suggest that the association between board games and the cosmos has a long history, but for similar board games in different regions and time periods, their meanings vary significantly based on their religious and cultural contexts.

*Liubo*, the earliest known board game in China, was also a game of chance (dice, sticks, or the two combined) designed with great cosmological and religious significance. Scholars such as Koyama Satoko suggest a close relationship between *liubo*, *shuanglu* and *sugoroku*.\(^63\) Some Chinese scholars even propose *liubo* as a progenitor of *shuanglu* and *sugoroku*.\(^64\) Based on archaeological evidence, scholars have reached a general consensus that *liubo* was popular from the Warring States to the end of the Han dynasty. Scholars such as John Major and Li Ling propose the design of *liubo* boards derives from the earth plate of *shi* 式, a model of cosmology.

\(^62\) Koyama, “Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku,” 5.
\(^63\) Ibid, 4.
\(^64\) Song Dejin 宋德金, “Shuanglu and Cultural Exchange and Fusion between Different Nations 双陆与民族文化的交流和融合,” *Historical Studies* 历史研究, 2003 (3), 32-43. Starting from the Tang dynasty, *liubo* was sometimes mistakenly believed to be the same as *shuanglu*. For example, both the *Commentary on the Tiantai Bodhisattva Precepts* 天台菩薩戒疏 (Ming Kuang 明旷, ?-623) and the *Brahmajāla Sutrea* 梵網經本疏日珠鈔 (Gyōnen 凝然, 1240-1231) note that *liubo* and *shuanglu* are identical.
used by ancient Chinese numerologists in divination. This cosmological model consists of two parts, the square-shaped earth plate and the circle-shaped heaven plate. The square shape of the liubo board, as well as representations of “earthly bonds” (diwei 地維) on it, makes the game board symbolic of the earth. Mapped with ten celestial stems and twelve terrestrial branches, the game board can be used to answer inquiries about marriage and childbirth, disease, and more. For instance, given a specific day in the sexagenary circle, one would first find the day’s position on the game board, which has a corresponding sign. Each sign corresponds to an oracle. One can also use the board to figure out an auspicious date doing the procedure the other way around. In addition, as I will discuss in further detail later, patterns on the liubo boards also has the function to ward off evil and bring good fortune and longevity.

Another game often considered as a potential progenitor of shuanglu and sugoroku is nard (also named nardshir or narde), the Persian backgammon. According to the Middle Persian narrative Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon (Wizrishn i catrang ud nihishn i new-ardashir, the ninth-century), the game was designed by the wise Wuzurg-Mihr.

Although the narrative is most likely fictitious and the game might in reality have an Indian

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66 Lillian Lan-Ying Tseng, “Representation and Appropriation: Rethinking the TLV Mirror in Han China,” Early China 29 (2004): 192-199. Tseng also points out that similar scheme of earthly bonds was widely applied in the Han dynasty, one example being a Mawangdui document regarding the proper method for burying the afterbirth. For more on this pattern and afterbirth described in the Book of the Generation of the Fetus (Taichan shu 胎產書), see Donald J. Harper, Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 374-377.


68 Ibid, 163-164.


70 Mackenzie and Finkel, Asian Games, 89. Mackenzie and Finkel note that the text was composed sometime in the ninth century but the events illustrated in the text happened in the reign of Khustraw I (521-79).
the story still provides valuable information about how ancient Persian people interpreted the meaning of the game. Just as how ancient Chinese saw liubo, ancient Persians’ understanding of nard was full of cosmological and religious images. Likewise, they believe that the board’s shape symbolizes earth, or more specifically, the goddess of the earth (Spənta Ārmaiti).

Given that both nard and ban-sugoroku are types of backgammons, it comes as no surprise to find some of the cosmological meanings of nard are similar to those of its Japanese counterpart described in the Ainōshō 塒囊鈔 (1446), a Japanese encyclopedic work composed by the priest Gyōyo 行譽.

It is said that ban-sugoroku was designed by Ashoka (c. 304-232 BCE, Jp. Aikuō 阿育王). In India (Jp. tenjiku 天竺), sugoroku is called hara 波羅. It is also called “six dice six letters” (rokusai rokyūji 六彩六字). In China, it is called shuanglu 双陆, which means “double-six”. The game was transmitted to Japan during the Tianjian (Jp. Tenkan 天鑒, 502-519, reign of Emperor Wu of Liang) period. On Emperor Shōmu’s (Shōmu tennō 聖武天皇, 701-756) “winding stream party” (kyokusui no utage 曲水の宴), participants who were unable to write poems were asked by the emperor to play sugoroku. It was said that the emperor wagered three thousand kan 貫 on the game. [...] In addition, the sugoroku board is four-sun 寸 thick to represent the four seasons, eight-sun broad to represent the eight directions, and the board’s twelve-sun length has 12 blocks lined up to symbolize the twelve months. The board’s breath was divided in three to depict the three principles of Heaven, Earth and Man. The two fields on either side symbolize the cosmic principles of Yin and Yang. The thirty stones function like the days of the month, and the

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73 Ainōshō 塒囊鈔 (Tokyo: Nihon koten zenshū kankōkai 日本古典全集刊行会, 1936), 26-27. There is a later, revised and enlarged edition called the Jinten Ainōshō 聖添塀囊鈔 (1532). Contents about ban-sugoroku are identical in both sources, see Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho 大日本仏教全書 (Tokyo: Bussho Kankōkai 仏書刊行会, 1912–1922), 150: 39-40. For my following comparative analyses, I will use Daryaee’s article as a reference for the Persian backgammon and its cosmological meanings.
74 King Ashoka was an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty. He embraced Buddhism and sponsored Buddhist monks to travel.
75 In the Chinese text of the Nirvana Sutra, India is also suggested as the origin of shuanglu, and was called boluosai xi 波羅塞戲 (Sk. prasena).
76 In the “winding stream party”, participants have to compose poems within a time limit set by the passage of a cup of wine floating towards them on the water.
two dice symbolize the sun and the moon. The bamboo tube, cut to the length of three *sun* and three *bu 分*, represents the Thirty-three Heavens of Mount Sumeru as it covers the revolutions of the sun and the moon.

In both *nard* and *sugoroku*, the thirty game pieces or stones were believed to represent the days of the month. Although the Persian backgammon only has one dice and the Japanese one has two, they were both thought to be cosmic bodies. The dice of *nard* symbolizes the constellations and firmament, while *sugoroku* dice represent the sun and the moon. Therefore, the rotation of dice means the revolution of constellations or of the sun and the moon.

However, in terms of what the features of these two games represent, there are more differences than similarities. Unlike the Persian backgammon, *ban-sugoroku* has a bamboo tube to hold the dice. According to the *Ainōshō*, the tube should be cut to the length of cut to the length of three *sun* and three *bu 分* to represent the Heaven of the Thirty-three of Mount Sumeru (Sk. Trāyastriṃśa; Jp. *Sanjūsanten*), the central axis of the universe in Buddhist cosmology.77 At the summit of this sacred mountain is the heaven ruled by Śakra, the king of the gods.78 The *Ainōshō* states that the bamboo tube is like heaven, covering the revolutions of the sun and the moon. Similar cosmological metaphors first appeared in the *Illustrated Story of Minister Kibi’s Adventures* (*Kibi daijin nittō emaki* 吉備大臣入唐絵巻; hereafter, *Kibi’s Adventures*), a scroll commissioned by the Cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa.79 After Minister Kibi no Makibi 吉備真備 (695–775) arrives in China as an envoy, he establishes a good relationship with a demon,
who is the dead spirit of Abe no Nakamaro 阿倍仲麻呂 (698–770), a former Japanese envoy. The demon helps him with challenges posed by Chinese officials such as living life without food. At the end of the story, Kibi has the demon carry a sugoroku set and hides the sun and the moon in the tube. By doing so, Kibi threatens the Chinese court to permit him to return to Japan, otherwise China would remain dark forever. The story suggests that the tube, although small enough to be held in one’s hands, is in fact a cosmic realm large enough to contain celestial objects.

Moreover, in contrast to the relatively straightforward imagination of nard board’s shape as the earth, a ban-sugoroku board is a construct filled with both temporal and spatial elements: the board should be as thick as four sun 寸 to represent the four seasons, as wide as eight sun to stand for the eight directions, and as long as twelve sun to embody the twelve months. Moreover, although both games have two fields where two players compete with each other, the Persian narrative explains this feature as to how people in the world smite one another, while the Japanese encyclopedia uses the cosmic principle of yin-yang to interpret the same design. The Ainōshō also understands the tripartite divisions as the three principles of Heaven, Earth and Man (ten-chi-jin 天地人), a concept derived from Chinese philosophy.

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80 Reider, “The Illustrated Story of Minister Kibi’s Adventures in China,” 91.
81 Ibid, 91.
82 It should be noted that these parameters do not apply to all the sugoroku boards. Culin also notes that there are two kinds of sugoroku boards represented in the Poetry Contest by Various Artisans (Shokunin zukushi uta-awase 職人尽歌合, ca. 1744), a book with illustrations of artisans during the Kenpo 健保 period (1213-1218). The thinner one similar to the one in the Hungry Ghost Scroll matches the dimensions mentioned in the Ainōshō. See Tokyo National Museum Digital Library, “Kenpo shokunin zukushi uta-awase,” https://webarchives.tnm.jp/dlib/detail/3526;jsessionid=940A0AA83BFCAD9F67193A9691499B7C.
83 The concept of three principles, also referred to as the “three potencies” (san cai 三才), appears in the Book of Changes (Yijing 易经, 125 BCE). The co-dependence of the natural realm (the heaven and earth) and the human realm is emphasized. See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing),” https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-change/.
To my understanding, the differences mentioned above are less relevant to physical
distinctions in designs, but more about divergent concepts and features of the religious systems
surrounding the games. The Persian narrative puts an emphasis on the fate (baxt) represented by
the dice, which corresponds to the God Zurvan.\footnote{Daryaee, “Mind, Body, and the Cosmos,” 292.}
The fact that each move is under the dice’s control has a metaphorical meaning that human destiny is controlled by the seven planets and
twelve zodiacal signs.\footnote{Ibid, 292.} Such astrological fatalism is key to Zoroastrian beliefs popular in the
Sasanian Empire (224-651).\footnote{Ibid, 292.} Although having a design similar to the Persian backgammon,
\textit{ban-sugoroku} bears cosmological imaginations from diverse religions—Mount Sumeru and the
Heaven of the Thirty-three are crucial to the Buddhist cosmos, whereas the concepts of \textit{yin-yang}
and the three principles are of Chinese philosophical origin. Therefore, the cosmological
meanings of \textit{sugoroku} illustrated in the \textit{Ainōshō} reflect the syncretic nature of cosmological
ideas important for medieval Japanese religion.

Besides \textit{liubo} and \textit{nard}, \textit{igo} is an example that is particularly close to \textit{ban-sugoroku} and
was often used interchangeably in various rituals during the medieval period. In a ritual called
\textit{fukasogi no gi} 深曽木の儀 (Figure 2.2), a five-year-old boy or a four-year-old girl would stand
on a Go board or a \textit{sugoroku} board to have their hair cut. They then vigorously jump down while
facing a lucky direction to celebrate the child’s progression towards adulthood.\footnote{According to \textit{Koji Ruien 古事類苑} (a Meiji-era encyclopaedia of previous Japanese governmental system,
ancient books and culture), \textit{fukasogi no gi} could be traced back to the Heian period.} Besides, similar
to \textit{sugoroku}, \textit{igo} boards were played for therapeutic purposes. For instance, in a historical tale
named the \textit{New Mirror} (\textit{Imakagami} 今鏡), a healer-priest Fujiwara no Morimichi 藤原教通
(996-1075) instructed the High Prelate Jingaku 僧正深覚 (955-1043) to play igo, and Jingaku’s condition returned to normal by the end of the game.\(^{88}\)

Figure 2.2

*Fukasogi* in an illustrated version of the Tales of Genji (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語)

The *Ainōshō* also contains an entry of *igo* right next to the one for *sugoroku*.\(^{89}\)

Methods to make *igo* boards: The thickness, length, and breadth of the board should be 6 *sun*, 14 *sun* and 13.8 *sun* correspondingly. The edge of each small square is 7 *bu*. The 360 intersections (*moku* 目) represent days of a year. The nine *hijiri-me* 聖り目 (also known

\(^{88}\) Koyama, “Igo Sugoroku ni yoru mononoke no chōbuku,” 8.

\(^{89}\) *Ainōshō* 墊囊錦 (Tokyo: Nihonoten zenshū kankōkai 日本古典全集刊行会, 1936), 27.
as *seimoku* 星目, literally “star points”) symbolize the “Nine Luminaries” (*kuyō* 九曜, Sk. Navagraha). 360 black and 360 white stones imitate nights and days. It is said that the game was designed by the King of Yao (Gyōō 堯王, a pre-historic legendary Chinese ruler) and transmitted to India. The King of India stopped faultless monks and handed *igo* to them. There are also two monks who played Go continuously. Bodhidharma felt sad about this. When asked about the reason, he answered: when the black side died, [I was] delighted that *kleshas* resulted from unwholesome actions (*kugō bonnō* 黒業煩惱) declined; when the white side died, [I felt] sorrow for the diminishing of moral roots (Sk. Kuśala-mūla) from pure, proper teachings (*byakuhō zenkō/sengon* 白法善根). This is a contemplation on supreme awakening (*mujōbodai* 無上菩提). The monks felt joy and sorrow as Bodhidharma did. When they passed away, they were welcomed by the Amida Buddha and bodhisattvas from the Pure Land (*shōju raigō* 聖衆来迎).

According to the *Ainōshō*, the *igo* board embodies elements of Buddhist cosmology and doctrines. Notably, the design is closely associated with esoteric Buddhism as the nine star points on the board symbolize the “Nine Luminaries” that were thought to control the fortune of humans.⁹⁰ Later in the chapter, I will demonstrate how *ban-sugoroku*’s cosmological significance matches certain religious objects used in esoteric rituals as well.

### 2.3 Ban-sugoroku as a Channel between This and the Other World

As mentioned in the previous section, Kibi made a demon carry the *ban-sugoroku* set for him to perform the magic of hiding the sun and the moon. *Kibi’s Adventures* is not the only story that contains human-demon interactions associated with *sugoroku*. In fact, in premodern China and Japan, occasions when demons or other supernatural beings were mentioned with board games are not scarce. In this section, by closely examine these instances, I demonstrate that *ban-

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⁹⁰ The concept of the “Nine Luminaries” originates from Hindu astrology, transmitted to China, and introduced to Japan together with Esoteric Buddhism. Among the Nine Luminaries, there are five good planets (Sun, Moon, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury) and four evil planets (Mars, Saturn, Rāhu, Ketu), see Eugene Wang, "Ritual Practice Without a Practitioner? Early Eleventh Century Dhāraṇī Prints in the Ruiguangsi Pagoda," *Cahiers D'Extrême-Asie* 20 (2011), 150. These nine planets, used in *onmyōdo* divinatory practices, are also often represented in star-mandalas (*hoshi mandara*) pertaining to the esoteric tradition. See Matthias Hayek, "Divinatory Practices and Knowledge in Early Modern Japan: Redefining Onmyōdō from the Inside," *Cahiers D'Extrême-Asie* 21 (2012), 265.
sugoroku and similar games have long been viewed as channels through which communications between human beings and the spiritual realm happen.

In historical records and artistic imageries, the game liubo had close associations with Daoist immortals (Ch. xianren; Jp. sennin 仙人) and heavenly god (tianshen 天神). The *Grand Scribe’s Records* (*Shiji* 史記) mentions that Emperor Wu-yi 武乙 of Shang (d. 1113 BCE) created an idol of the heavenly god and gambled with the deity using *liubo*.91 When heavenly gods lost the game, the emperor humiliated them. Although the story is most likely a fictitious one,92 it demonstrates the absurd and disrespectful behavior of Emperor Wu-yi. In the game, the emperor challenged the authority of the heavenly god and the Way of Heaven. Besides, the motif of two immortals playing *liubo* or an immortal playing the game with a person was popular on carved stones, decorated bricks, and bronze mirrors during the Han dynasty.93 More importantly, it is evident from the *Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) and imagery on stones and bricks that the *liubo* board was an important part in rituals for the Daoist deity Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母).94 As an offering to this deity, the commoners would put on *liubo* boards, sing, and dance.95 Therefore, it would be possible that the game board was an invitation for the deity’s descent, serving as an anchor point between believers and the deity’s sacred realm.96

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92 Some Chinese scholars, relying on this textual evidence in the Grand Scribe’s Records, believe that the first *liubo* was invented no later than the Shang dynasty; see Fu Juyou 傅举有, “Lun Qin Han shiqi de boju, boxi jianji bojuwen jing” 论秦汉时期的博具、博戏兼及博局纹镜 [On the games, game articles and chessboard patterns on bronze mirrors of the Qin and Han dynasties]. *kaogu xuebao* 考古学报 1986 (1), 35. Nevertheless, based on archaeological evidence, I believe the game did not exist in Emperor Wu-yi’s time and the story was fabricated.93 Tseng, “Representation and Appropriation,” 186-188.
96 Similar statements can be found in Kanno Emi 菅野恵美, “Dōkyōteki kanten kara kanbo to sono gazō wo yomitoku 道教的観点から漢墓とその画像を読み解く,” *Tōhō* 東方 440 (2017), 28.
Just like liubo, ban-sugoroku and shuanglu were often seen as a game favored by Daoist deities, who play it with humans visiting their celestial realm. Among the documentary novels in the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (Taiping guangji 太平廣記, 978 CE), three stories describe supernatural beings or deities playing shuanglu. Among these three stories, two of them have Mount Tai as the setting. Mount Tai was believed to be the abode of the dead in folklore and ritual, and the Lord of Mount Tai (Ch. Taishan fujun; Jp. Taizan fukun 泰山府君) was the magistrate of the netherworld, controlling the fate of both the dead and the living. In one story, a person called Shen Jiahui 沈嘉會 met with the Lord of Mount Tai. The deity told him reciting the Diamond Sūtra once a day would eliminate all sins one had. After chatting, they played the game shuanglu together. In the other story involving Mount Tai, an official’s wife died suddenly due to a heart attack. After burning three talismans, the wife came back to life. She said she was taken to the top of Mount Tai. While attendants were helping her dress up, the Third Son of Mount Tai (Taishan sanlang 泰山三郎) played shuanglu with other young men, who were likely to be dead spirits or other deities. Likewise, the Ainōshō and the Jinten Ainōshō mentioned the Journey to the Grotto of the Immortals (Yūsenkutsu 遊仙窟).

It is said that people play ban-sugoroku with courtesans as a means to bet yone. Yone does not refer to rice (yone 米) but courtesans (yone 宿). In Yūsenkutsu, the protagonist

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98 Taiping guangji 太平廣記, vol. 102, Retribution (baoying 報應) 1, the Diamond Sutra (Jingang jing 金剛經) 1, Shen Jiahui 沈嘉會

99 Taiping guangji 太平廣記, vol. 298, Gods (shen 神) 8, Zhaozhou canjun’s wife 趙州參軍妻

100 Originally from the book Legends of the Tang Dynasty (Tangren Chuanqi 唐人傳奇) written by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (658-730 CE), Yūsenkutsu 遊仙窟 was transmitted from Tang-dynasty China to Nara-period Japan. The text was lost in China but survived in Japan.
named Chō Bunsei 張文成 played this game with Jūjō 十娘 to determine whether they sleep together or not. Jūjō asks, “how to bet sleeping?” Chō answers, “If you lose, you will sleep with me for a night; if I lose, I will sleep with you for a night.”

Although both sources use the story as an example of using sugoroku in gambling with courtesans, the story of Chō Bunsei and Jūjō is different from playing with courtesans in ordinary brothels. The setting for the game is a fairy grotto and Jūjō’s identity is a female divinity.

Sugoroku’s ability to connect the mundane world and the spiritual realm is more obvious in a Japanese context mentioned in an earlier encyclopedia called Bag of Rubbish (Chiribukuro 塵袋, 1274–1281). While Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (also called Midō Kanpaku 御堂関白; 966–1028) was playing sugoroku with Fujiwara no Michikane 藤原道兼 (also named Machishiri-dono 町尻殿; 961–995), he saw his name written on the latter’s foot, and thus knew he was being cursed. This story suggests that bouts of sugoroku sometimes became the occasion in which curses were placed and other supernatural things happened. Reviewing retrospectively at the Hungry Ghost Scroll mentioned in the first section, I propose that the sugoroku board placed next to the female medium may serve a similar function. The female medium might use the board to connect with malevolent spirits.

The liminal space created by sugoroku also appears metaphorically in Buddhist-related occasions, especially with associations to bodhisattva Jizō 地蔵. In medieval Japan, Jizō was seen as the protector of deceased children or aborted fetuses at a dry riverbed called Sai no Kawara 賽の河原 located at the boundary of hell. Because these children do not properly

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belong to the world of the living nor the dead, they are obligated to pile up rocks for their parents at this liminal space.\textsuperscript{103} Doris Bargen states that the name of the riverbed, Sai, “refers to stones piled up in sugoroku.”\textsuperscript{104} I suggest that both the sugoroku and the riverbed are in-between spaces connecting the living and the dead. In addition, since mizuko’s obligation was derived from the custom of building rock pagodas on riverbanks to prevent illnesses or facilitate recovery,\textsuperscript{105} there is an implicit association between the chess pieces and the rocks that they have curing functions.

There was also a legend in which Jizō appeared on the game board to help a female worshipper.\textsuperscript{106} In the Kamakura period, Jizō was believed to be not only a guardian of children but a protector of women, who were also seen as the weak and humble.\textsuperscript{107} According to the legend, Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼 (1227-1263) and his wife played sugoroku. The consort lost the game and was asked to disrobe entirely. She prayed to Jizō, hoping to avoid the embarrassing punishment. As her wish, Jizō appeared miraculously on the game board, naked in substitution to her. A naked Jizō with a standing pose on the game board was thus commissioned between 1332 and 1334.\textsuperscript{108} Therefore, the sugoroku board was a channel connecting humans with bodhisattvas who are willing to help.

2.4 Ban-sugoroku and Cosmographic Divination Boards in Shingon Rituals

The previous two sections demonstrated how ban-sugoroku and similar game boards were designed or mapped with contemporaneous religious beliefs about the cosmos. These

\textsuperscript{104} Bargen, ”Ancestral to None: Mizuko in Kawabata,” 338. fn 3.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 342.
\textsuperscript{107} Brinker, “Anointing with Eyes, Raiment and Relic,” 159; Bargen, ”Ancestral to None: Mizuko in Kawabata,” 344.
\textsuperscript{108} Brinker, “Anointing with Eyes, Raiment and Relic,” 161.
cosmological-themed game boards often functioned as anchor points through which players might communicate with, make offerings to, or receive help from various spirits such as Daoist and Buddhist deities, ghosts and demons. In this section, I contend that these game boards fit properly under the broader category of man-made objects seen as miniatures of the world. The practice of interacting with and benefiting from various deities through those miniatures has long existed in China, Japan, Tibet and beyond. Building on this notion, I will rationalize the use of sugoroku in healing by comparing it to cosmographic divination boards (Ch. shipan; Jp. shikiban). Shikiban is generally understood to be a divination tool. However, in several Shingon rituals, it was not used for divinatory purposes but treated as the center or the central deity of veneration (honzon 本尊). Nishioka Yoshifumi suggests that these rituals might only be circulated around the twelfth century as secret practices to attain worldly benefits. Ban-sugoroku and shikiban bear strikingly similar cosmological meanings and were used for similar purposes. Hence, I propose that, due to widespread anxiety towards malicious spirits among medieval Japanese aristocrats, they may have used the game board as a more accessible alternative to shikiban.

It is not uncommon to encounter miniatures of the world in all sorts of Asian architecture and religious objects. Examples include rock gardens (Jp. sekitei 石庭), five-ringed stupa (Jp. gorintō 五輪塔), and mandalas, to name only a few. Although Rolf Stein’s monograph focuses mainly on container gardens and architecture, he also discusses the shikiban. He describes it as “a flat stone serving as a chessboard,” something essential to an abode of Daoist immortals and

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is always present in miniature gardens (Ch. *penzai*; Jp. *bonsai* 盆栽). Stein fails to elaborate on which type of game board he is referring to as well as the relationship between the cosmological divination board and the game board. However, as demonstrated in the previous two chapters, *liubo*, *shuanglu* and *sugaroku* were also believed to embody the cosmos through which one can communicate with various supernatural spirits.

According to Stein, container gardens and other miniatures’ nature as microcosms enables them to not only ward off evil and evil-doing demons but also to bring power and longevity. We can see exactly the same for Han-dynasty bronze mirrors bearing *liubo* patterns: with *liubo* patterns engraved, the mirror turns into a microcosm and gains the ability to prevent the invasion of evil spirits and bring good fortune, immortality and longevity. Often times the power comes from the sacred landscape presented by the miniature, most commonly Mount Kunlun 昆侖, Mount Penglai 蓬萊, and Mount Sumeru. In esoteric rituals, the two-part *shikiban* represents the two fundamental mandalas in Shingon traditions (the Diamond Realm mandala and the Womb Realm mandala). These mandalas are two-dimensional representations of the realm of the enlightenment. Through various visualization techniques, the practitioner units with deities represented in the mandala and thereby “enters into” the enlightened realm. Similarly, in rituals involving *shikiban*, the board bring the divine powers of the cosmic deities

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113 Ibid, 49-57.
117 Yamasaki, *Shingon*, 125.
presented on it into the practitioner’s body.\textsuperscript{118} Unlike those used for divination practices in
Onmyōdō, esoteric \textit{shikiban} (Figure 2.3) were enshrined and venerated on ritual altars.\textsuperscript{119}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{shikiban}
\caption{The restoration of a \textit{shikiban} used in the “ritual of sudden realization”\textsuperscript{120}}
\end{figure}

It is notable that the cosmological significance of \textit{ban-sugoroku} illustrated in \textit{Ainōshō} and
\textit{Jinten Ainōshō} is similar to the key features of \textit{shikiban} described in the “\textit{Shō Kangiten} ritual”
(Jp. \textit{Shō Kangiten shikihō}, Ch. \textit{Sheng Huanxitian shifa} 聖歡喜天式法) and “ritual of sudden
realization” (\textit{Tonjō shitsuji hō} 頓成悉地法). The \textit{shikiban} has two parts, one heavenly board

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Faure2016}
\bibitem{Nishioka2017}
\bibitem{Nishioka2017a}
The restoration of a \textit{shikiban} used in \textit{Tonjō shijji hō} (Dakini hō) in Nishioka, “Aspects of Shikiban-based Mikkyō Rituals,” 145, Fig. 2.
\end{thebibliography}
(tenban 天盤) corresponding to Yang and one earthly board (chiban 地盤) being Yin. The heavenly board, with a cylindrical or conical shape, is similar to the bamboo tube. The earthly board, like the game board, is square. The tripartite component of “heaven, man, and earth” is also emphasized in shikiban that the upper part (tenban) corresponds to the heaven, and the lower part (chiban) represents the earth with the human realm subsumed. As we saw earlier with ban-sugoroku, the shikiban is identified with Mount Sumeru as well.

In the Shō Kangiten ritual, matching one of the four Vināyakas (obstructive deities that brings sufferings to people) represented on the heavenly board with the eight directional devas on the earthly board to produce wanted results. Using the shikiban, one can give fever to a person, bring together or separate husband and wife, and return a curse to the sender. Among these feasible outcomes, the most relevant to my discussion is facilitating childbirth. By linking Getsuai 月愛 with Enmaten 焚摩天 on the board, one can help a pregnant woman achieve a quick delivery. The purpose of this ritual recalls the sugoroku board depicted in the Hungry Ghost Scroll discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

The “ritual of sudden realization”, as Bernard Faure notes, aims to immediately fulfill all wishes by transforming one’s body to become cosmic adamantine. To perform this ritual, one would use the image-manifesting technique by visualizing the power of Dakiten 荼枳尼天 and her

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122 Faure, Gods of Medieval Japan, 154.
123 Ibid, 155.
124 The four vināyakas are mentioned in the Mānava Grhyasūtra. They are believed to be separate manifestations of a single Vināyaka primarily known as Kangiten, Shōten and Tenson in Japanese Buddhism. Charles A. Muller, “Gaṇeśa,” http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?6b.xml+id(%27b6b61-559c-5929%27).
126 Ibid, 110.
127 Ibid, 110.
128 Ibid, 154.
four acolytes entering one’s body and one’s power entering the deities. One also uses the transformation technique to first merge one’s body with a jewel transformed by the Sanskrit syllable ro, envision the jewel turning into a three-part shikiban where the deities reside, and finally one’s body parts (the head, the chest and the lower body) merges with the shikiban accordingly therefore becoming the deities. In this case, shikiban could also be seen as a symbolic form (a pagoda, vajra, or sword) of the deities.

Given this ritual’s emphasis on the corporeal symbolism and the tripartite design of the board, I propose that the function of ban-sugoroku in healing rituals would be similar to that of shikiban in the “ritual of sudden realization.” Among similar shikiban-centered rituals involving Dakiniten, there is one healing ritual called “Ritual to extend [one’s longevity] for six months” (Nōen rokugatsu shidai 能延六月次第). Using the divination board, the practitioner would mutually empower with Fudō Myōō 不動明王 to subdue Dakini. This specific ritual further validates the possibility of using sugoroku, a cosmos-themed board similar to shikiban, as a channel through which mutual empowerment happens.

In sum, both ban-sugoroku and shikiban contain similar cosmological elements, serve as communication channels between humans and deities, and are used in healing rituals. Notably, the use of the two boards on similar occasions for aristocrats can be found around the same historical time period: shikiban rituals did not survive beyond the medieval period, and the use of ban-sugoroku in healing rituals only existed from late Heian to Kamakura as well. In addition,

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129 Yamasaki, Shingon, 156; Faure, Gods of Medieval Japan, 154.
130 Faure, Gods of Medieval Japan, 154-155.
131 Yamasaki, Shingon, 156.
133 Ibid, 150.
134 Faure, Gods of Medieval Japan, 153.
both shikiban and ban-sugoroku rituals were used for obtaining this-worldly benefits.\textsuperscript{135} Faure regards shikiban as “a worldly mandala” containing all beings of the world,\textsuperscript{136} and given the cosmological meanings elaborated in the Ainōshō I claim the same for ban-sugoroku.\textsuperscript{137} Moreover, because the shikiban rituals were potent enough to be performed regardless of one’s rank or position, the female medium or even the patient could be the performer.\textsuperscript{138} Although shikiban rituals set little limitations to the identity of their performers, shikiban boards were enshrined and venerated on ritual altars,\textsuperscript{139} which made them relatively inaccessible physically. Unlike the temple-owned shikiban, ban-sugoroku was prevalently possessed among aristocrats. For these reasons, I maintain that, due to the anxiety of medieval Japanese aristocrats about illnesses caused by malicious spirits, it is likely they used ban-sugoroku as a more accessible alternative to shikiban.

\textsuperscript{135} Trenson, “Shingon Divination Board Rituals and Rainmaking,” 108. \hfill \\
\textsuperscript{136} Faure, \textit{Gods of Medieval Japan}, 155. \hfill \\
\textsuperscript{137} In fact, other scholars have proposed the possibility that the cosmological design of the backgammon was connected with and corresponded to mandalas of Indic tradition, see Daryae, “Mind, Body, and the Cosmos,” 292. \hfill \\
\textsuperscript{138} Nishioka, “Aspects of Shikiban-based Mikkyō Rituals,” 138. \hfill \\
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 147.
3. E-sugoroku and the Playful Learning of Buddhist Worlds

Unlike the wooden box-like ban-sugoroku, e-sugoroku (often translated as “pictorial sugoroku”) is a race game played on a flat sheet of paper using one die or a set of bamboo sticks. As noted in the Introduction, e-sugoroku features a wide range of popular themes, including but not limited to travel, kabuki, and pleasure quarters.140 The following chapter will focus on a special type of e-sugoroku game called Pure Land sugoroku (jōdo sugoroku 浄土双六). Pure Land Buddhism centers on the Buddha Amida, whose Western Pure Land provides salvation for those who called on his name with whole-hearted devotion.141 For the purposes of this chapter, I use “Pure Land sugoroku” to refer to e-sugoroku that include either jōdo or gokuraku極楽 (“paradise”) in their titles. All types of Buddhist-themed e-sugoroku (see Table 2.1) except “Progression to abhisambuddha” (no. 2) and “Shinto-Confucianism-Buddhism sugoroku” (no. 7) fall under this category, and they all have a goal of reaching to either Amida’s Western Pure Land or specific deities in the Pure Land.

In this section, I will first briefly introduce e-sugoroku and how it is played. Then, zooming in on Buddhist-themed sugoroku, especially Pure Land sugoroku, I will summarize scholarship on the development of the game. I contend that the content of the sugoroku board might come from pictorial traditions indigenous to Japan, and the form of it as a Buddhist-themed game of chance might derive from similar Asian games without illustrations.

140 Rebecca Salter, Japanese Popular Prints: from votive slips to playing cards (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 166.
3.1 Pure Land sugoroku in the Buddhist e-sugoroku Family

At the beginning of the game, every player would place one game piece (koma コマ/駒) on the square labelled “Start” (furidashi 振り出し). Following the throw of the dice, the first one to reach the “Goal” (agari 上がり) wins. Interestingly, the same Japanese word also means “ascending” when talking about rising to the Pure Land. There are two types of designs: in meguri sugoroku 廻り双六 (“turning/circling sugoroku”), players move from one square to another in order; in tobi sugoroku 飛び双六 (“leaping sugoroku”), instructions on each square indicate that players are to “jump” to various places on the board. If there is no indicated direction corresponding to what the player throws, the player stays in the same square and waits for the next turn to try again. All extant Buddhist-themed sugoroku boards are of the “leaping” form and have the “Goal” placed near the central upper space. They have linear ascending layouts with squares representing lower rebirths (hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals) at the bottom and higher realms (such as the Pure Land and heavenly beings) at the top (see Figure 3.1 for a nineteenth-century example). Some types of Pure Land sugoroku also include squares representing doctrinal concepts such as good and bad deeds (see Figure 3.2 Good and Evil sugoroku, for example). To the sides of and below the “Human Realm” square (Nanenbushū 南閻浮州) are squares of the Three Poisons (greed, hatred, ignorance) and Five Evils (intoxication, lust, deceit, stealing, and taking of life).\footnote{Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” 56. My translations on the terms (the Three Poisons, Five Evils, etc.) mainly rely on Eubanks.} Above the human realm are Six Perfections (tolerance, abstinence, keeping the precepts, generosity, concentration and wisdom) and six moral values in the Edo period such as “confession of wrongdoing.”\footnote{Ibid, 56.}
Figure 3.1

*Pure Land sugoroku* (nineteenth century, ink and color on paper, 122.4 x 84.2 cm, Tokyo National Museum)\(^{144}\)

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\(^{144}\) *Pure Land sugoroku*, nineteenth century, in Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel, *Asian Games* (New York: Asia Society, 2004), 78, Figure 6:2.
Table 3.1 sorts Buddhist-themed *sugoroku* into seven types, roughly following a chronological order. The chart includes information about the Start, the Goal, the Stop Point (After landing on this square, one will not be able to move to other squares), and the type of dice or sticks used to determine moves. As shown on the graph, the characters engraved on the dice or represented by various patterns of the strips have various meanings. Invocations such as the “homage to Amida Buddha,” (*namu amida butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏) or “homage to the
transformation bodies of all buddhas” (namu bunshin shobutsu 南無分身諸仏) tend to appear on the dice of relatively older versions of the game. The former one contains the exact six syllables a devotee would recite in the practice of nenbutsu 念仏, the repetitive chanting of Amida’s name. The latter one is relatively unknown, but with the six sides of the dice embodying the six paths, this invocation might indicate that there are buddhas in all realms to guide the players. Some other dice have doctrinal concepts such as the threefold training (virtue, mind, and wisdom) and the three poisons (ignorance, attachment, and aversion) engraved.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Start (furidashi)</th>
<th>Goal (agari)</th>
<th>Stop point (yukitomari)</th>
<th>Dice/sticks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pure Land sugoroku (Jōdo-sugoroku)</td>
<td>Nanenbushū 南閣浮州 (Sk. Jambu-dvīpa, &quot;this world&quot;)</td>
<td>hotoke 仏 (buddha)</td>
<td>yōchin 永沈 (the Avici Hell)</td>
<td>dice (na 南・mu 無・bun 分・shin 身・sho 諸・butsu 仏, or 1 through 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression to abhisambuddha (Skhāzōkin-no-zu) 詣果増進之図</td>
<td>Nanenbushū 南閣浮州</td>
<td>hosshin 法身 (Sk. dharmakāya)</td>
<td>miken 無問 (the Avici Hell)</td>
<td>dice or painted strips of paper/bamboo (kai 戒・jō 定・e 依・chi 酔・jin 鎖・ton 錢)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumano Pure Land sugoroku (Kumano-jōdo-sugoroku) 熊野系浄土双六</td>
<td>jinsai 人生 (&quot;life&quot;)</td>
<td>Jōbonjōshō Amida 上品上生阿弥陀, Jōbonchūshō Yakushi 上品中生薬師, Jōbongeshō Dainichi Nyorai 上品下生大日如来, Chūbonjōshō Seishi 中品上生勢至, Chūbonchūshō Jizō 中品中生地蔵, Chūbongeshō Kannon 中品下生観音, Miroku 弥勒, Fudō 不動</td>
<td>miken 無問</td>
<td>dice (na 南・mu 無・a 阿・mi 弥・da 陀・butsu 佗, or na 南・mu 無・bun 分・shin 身・sho 諸・butsu 佗)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monster Pure Land sugoroku (Yōkai-jōdo-sugoroku) 妖怪浄土双六</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>agari 上り (gokuraku jōdo 極楽浄土, &quot;the Pure Land&quot;)</td>
<td>yōchin 永沈 (the Avici Hell)</td>
<td>dice (1 through 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Land of Immeasurable Life Pure Land sugoroku (Muryōjōdo-sugoroku) 無量寿浄土双六</td>
<td>Issaiyō 一さい経 (&quot;the complete canon of Buddhist scriptures&quot;)</td>
<td>Jōbonjōshō 上品上生 (with the Amida Buddha depicted)</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>dice (1 through 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good and Evil sugoroku Journey to the Pure Land (Zen'aku sugoroku-gokuraku-dōchū-zu-e 智恩双六極楽道中図絵)</td>
<td>Nanenbushū 南閣浮州 (kokoro 心)</td>
<td>gokuraku jōdo 極樂浄土, &quot;the Pure Land&quot;</td>
<td>jigoku 地獄 (hell)</td>
<td>painted strips of paper/bamboo (gi 銀・shin 信・zen 禪・aka 鬼)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinto-Confucianism-Buddhism sugoroku (Shinjutsu furidashi 神仏仏仏分勝分語録)</td>
<td>Shinjutsu furidashi 神仏仏仏分勝分語録 (&quot;the starting point for Shinto-Confucianism-Buddhism&quot;)</td>
<td>agari 上り</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>dice (1 through 6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1
Types of Buddhist e-sugoroku and their basic elements

It is worth pointing out that the game can be understood to have both competitive and non-competitive aspects. The game is competitive in that people may compare who arrives at the goal first, but it also non-competitive in that players does not have the ability to interfere with each other. Instead, each of them only needs to focus his or her own path to the goal. Circling sugoroku may only have one route to the destination, but the leaping form of Buddhist sugoroku
enables multiple trajectories towards the Pure Land and Buddhist deities. For instance, in the *Land of Immeasurable Life Pure Land sugoroku* (Muryōjukoku-jōdo-sugoroku 無量寿国浄土双六; hereafter, *Immeasurable Life sugoroku*, no. 5 in Table 3.1), one can arrive at the goal “superior grade superior form [of rebirth]” (jōbonjōshō 上品上生) through squares of Fudō, heavenly beings, or “superior grade middle form” (jōbonchūshō 上品中生),¹⁴⁷ and there are also multiple squares on the board that point to these three locations. Relatedly, playfulness and seriousness also coexist in the game. In the Edo period, Pure Land *sugoroku* was usually played as a family leisure activity around the New Year.¹⁴⁸ Family members were able to sit around the richly illustrated table-top game, competing to see who ascends to the Pure Land first. At the same time, once the game starts, the players depart from their ordinary life to envision horrifying hells and paradisical landscapes where Buddhas and Bodhisattvas reside. In addition, another serious dimension of the game is its function to help accumulate merit for the player. As suggested by the manual of Good and Evil *sugoroku* published in 1907, the aim of the game is to help gain merit to escape from the samsara and be born into the Pure Land.¹⁴⁹ Often purchased or acquired from temple stores or door-to-door salesmen, the Pure Land *sugoroku* is therefore on par with other religious practices being sold around the same time.

Scholars have reached a consensus so far that Buddhist *e-sugoroku* is the oldest among all themes of *e-sugoroku*,¹⁵⁰ whereas they have different views on which type among the Buddhist-themed boards is the earliest. Some scholars argue that *meimoku sugoroku* 名目双六 ("Nominal sugoroku," alternatively called *buppō* “Buddhist law” *sugoroku* 仏法双六) was the

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¹⁴⁷ Saranya, “Kinsei nihon no yūgi ni okeru hotoke no hyōjō,” 39.
¹⁴⁸ Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” 45 and 52.
¹⁴⁹ Saranya, “Kinsei nihon no yūgi ni okeru hotoke no hyōjō,” 16.
¹⁵⁰ Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” 44; Mackenzie and Finkel, *Asian Games*, 77.
first to appear. Based on Ryūtei Tanehiko’s 頼田種彦 (1783–1842) Recycled Wasted Paper (Sukikaeshi 還魂紙料, 1826), the emergence of Nominal sugoroku can be traced back to the Kōan 弘安 period (1278–1287). According to this record, the game was a teaching tool to familiarize Tendai monks with central doctrines and terms, and monks whose learning was insufficient would be blamed for “not knowing Nominal sugoroku.” Nevertheless, given the fact that the original source text mentioning the Kōan-period no longer extant, other scholars believe Pure Land sugoroku to be the oldest. Pure Land sugoroku was first noted in Lord Tokikuni’s Diary (Tokikunikyōki 言国卿記, 1474) and other aristocratic diaries around that time. This textual evidence could be supported by words of a Japanese curator Imaizumi Yusaku saying that the oldest specimen of Pure Land sugoroku was made in the Muromachi period (1336–1573) and might have belonged to a temple on Mount Kōya.

There are several different theories tracing the origin of the design of Buddhist-themed esugoroku. I classify them into roughly two groups, based on what claims are have been made regarding their origin: one contributes its design more to external influences outside of Japan, while the other scholars claim an indigenous origin. Beverley McGuire, citing May-Ying Ngai’s dissertation, claims that the Chinese game Selection of Buddhas (Figure 3.3) or its prototypes were transmitted to Japan and Korea. Therefore, it might be possible that Buddhist-themed e-

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151 May-ying Mary Ngai, “From Entertainment to Enlightenment: a study of a cross-cultural religious boardgame with an emphasis on the Table of Buddha Selection designed by Ouyi Zhixu of the late Ming dynasty,” PhD diss., (University of British Columbia, 2011), 283; Rebecca Salter, Japanese Popular Prints, 165. Many argue that Progression to abhisambuddha (Shōkazōshin-no-zu 証果増進之図) might be similar to the Buddhist law sugoroku prototype, if there is any.
153 Ibid, 6, ft. 13.
154 Mackenzie and Finkel, Asian Games, 77.
155 Ibid, 77; Saranya, “Kinsei nihon no yūgi ni okeru hotoke no hyōjō,” 5.
sugoroku might be influenced by prototypes of Selection of Buddhas. This possibility is supported by similarities between e-sugoroku and one extant version of the game produced by a prominent Ming monk named Ouyi Zhixu (1599–1655). Ouyi stated that there were earlier versions of the game, but McGuire notes that none of them are extant.\(^\text{158}\) Like Buddhist sugoroku, the Chinese game is also a race game played on a piece of paper filled with soteriological and cosmological terms. Similar to dice used for some of the Buddhist sugoroku, Selection of Buddhas has the six-character name of the Amida Buddha carved on the dice.\(^\text{159}\) However, Ngai notes the two games differ in their designs. The Selection of Buddhas has a spiral form resembling “turning sugoroku,” while most Buddhist-themed e-sugoroku have linear ascending layouts, which is in turn similar to karmic themed games in Tibet and South Asia.\(^\text{160}\) Given the close association between the Tendai sect and Nominal sugoroku, Ngai also suggests esoteric mandalas brought from China might have influence on e-sugoroku layout designs.\(^\text{161}\)

\(^{159}\) Ngai, “From Entertainment to Enlightenment,” 16.
\(^{161}\) Ibid, 284.
There are also theories that suggest the design of Buddhist sugoroku was inspired pre-existing pictorial traditions in Japan, such as illustrated hanging scrolls and mandalas that are specific to Japan. Ryûtei Tanehiko speculated that the Kumano mandala might be one source of inspiration. The Kumano mandala and Kumano sugoroku (no. 3 in Table 3.1) are similar in terms of their contents, material aspects, and lineages through which they were transmitted. They were also folded in the same way. I will elaborate on these similarities in the second section. In addition to Kumano mandalas, a popular category of premodern Buddhist painting called “White Path Crossing Two Rivers” (Niga byakudō 二河白道) has been suggested as

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163 Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” endnote 33.
another plausible origin. This type of painting is a pictorial version of a moral tale in Shandao’s 善導 (613–681) commentary on the Contemplation Sutra (the Scripture of the Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, Ch. Guan wu liang shou fo jing 觀無量壽佛經; hereafter, Immeasurable Life Contemplation) The white path situated in between rivers of fire and water is what leads the dead soul towards the western bank, where Amida’s Pure Land locates. Similar to the vertical ascending design of Pure Land sugoroku, hanging scrolls of this genre feature Amida and his Pure Land at the top, the white path in the middle, and the mundane world with creatures from the six paths at the bottom. Based on a moral tale in the Immeasurable Life Contemplation, these paintings have a strong narrative nature. In the story, a man traveling to the west meets the two intimidating rivers and the thieves behind him deceitfully urge him to come back. However, hearing the encouragements by the Sakyamuni Buddha and the Amida Buddha, the man proceeds steadfastly along the white path. The process of playing Pure Land sugoroku can also be seen as unfolding a narrative, but the journey in the game’s narrative is not always successful.

Additionally, I propose some connections between the paintings of Welcoming Descent of Amida (raigō-zu 來迎) and Pure Land e-sugoroku. The welcoming descent images depict the scene in which the Amida Buddha, sometimes accompanied by his attendants, descend from heaven to take the deceased back to the Western Pure Land. This type of image was often hung within sight of a dying devotee. Together with the repetitive chanting of Amida’s name,

165 Mackenzie and Finkel, Asian Games, 79-80.  
168 Ibid, 292.  
169 Ibid, 292.
welcoming descent images were an important part of the deathbed ritual to ensure a rebirth into the Pure Land.\textsuperscript{170} Similarly, some Buddhist-themed \textit{e-sugoroku} were also played with the hope that the dead family members can arrive at the Pure Land smoothly. Playing the Good and Evil \textit{sugoroku} served such function as a form of mourning services (\textit{tsuizen kuyō} 追善供養) after natural disasters.\textsuperscript{171} The notion of playing the game as death rituals performed for others might be different from this thesis’s focus in following sections on the impact of the game has on the players themselves. However, just as one would chant Amida’s name both in everyday life and at deathbed to ensure a rebirth in the Pure Land, one would also play Pure Land \textit{sugoroku} in their everyday life to accumulate merit.

In sum, the form of Buddhist \textit{e-sugoroku} as a table-top game of chance might be influenced by games in other Asian countries demonstrating the workings of karma and Buddhist spiritual paths through throwing cubic die. These games predate the emergence of \textit{e-sugoroku} in Japan, and therefore may have provided some inspiration for the gaming form of Buddhist \textit{sugoroku}. Moreover, the content and the illustrated form of \textit{sugoroku} might come from preexisting indigenous traditions such as the Kumano mandala and Pure Land-themed hanging scrolls.

Concerning Pure Land \textit{sugoroku}’s content and form, I believe the examination of the game should be twofold. One part should address its content in comparison to preexisting Japanese Buddhist visual culture, and the other part may require contextualizing the component of chance within a broader East Asian context. Therefore, in this chapter, I will first argue that Pure Land \textit{sugoroku} resembles a Japanese form of preaching by deciphering pictures. The game guides its

\textsuperscript{170} Ngai, “From Entertainment to Enlightenment,” 303.
\textsuperscript{171} Saranya, “Kinsei nihon no yūgi ni okeru hotoke no hyōjō,” vi and 77.
players to virtually travel or visualize a Buddhist landscape in which players seek to win salvation. I argue that the Pure Land sugoroku provides a more accessible form of preaching in the absence of an actual preacher. Second, by comparing Pure Land sugoroku with other devices used to test one’s karmic status in Buddhist traditions in East Asia, I propose that one way to interpret the result of the game is through the lens of karma. Although these practices are different in terms of time periods and places, they reflect shared Buddhist concerns such as the hope to escape from sufferings in the six paths and eagerness to learn about one’s karmic status. I argue that the game of Pure Land sugoroku helps players learn about karmic causalities. Good karma may lead players to make connections with buddhas and bodhisattvas, whereas an unsatisfactory karmic status might make players fall into the worst hell.

3.2 Visualizing the Buddhist Cosmology: Pure Land Sugoroku as Etoki

Charlotte Eubanks regards the immersive experience of playing the Good and Evil sugoroku as a reading of the Pure Land scripture the Smaller Sutra of Amitāyus (Amidakyō阿弥陀経; hereafter, the Smaller Sutra). She claims that just like the Small Sutra, the game consists of vivid descriptions of Amida’s Pure Land; and just like how Japanese devotees read Buddhist texts, players take movements back and forth on the game board, reading the pictorialization of the Smaller Sutra in a multidirectional way that one jumps from one square to another. Building on Eubanks’ argument that the game is a pictorialization of Pure Land scriptures and including other types of Pure Land sugoroku in my discussion, I will demonstrate the similarity between Pure Land sugoroku and another pedagogical yet entertaining preaching practice called

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172 Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” 61-68.
173 Ibid, 66.
**etoki.** By conceptualizing the Pure Land sugoroku as a special form of etoki without a preacher, I argue that the game makes Pure Land teachings more accessible to lay people.

The etoki performance often involves a monk or a nun pointing at a mandala, an illustrated scroll, or a picture hall to explain Buddhist principles. At the end of the performance, the audience will donate to the religious professional thus contributing to the monastic community. Ikumi Kaminishi demonstrates a three-fold meaning of etoki in her monograph (see Figure 3.4).\(^{174}\) First, the image used in the performance is itself a form of etoki. It pictorializes texts from the Buddhist canon and secular tales. Second, the preacher is another form of etoki that turns the meaning texts to sermon. Finally, there is the act of decipherment that turned painted images into verbal preaching.\(^{175}\) I argue that the Pure Land sugoroku board is a pictorialization of the Buddhist cosmology (the Ten Worlds\(^ {176}\), for instance), deities, and doctrines (ethical and unethical conducts). The process of playing the game is a type of decipherment of the images depicted on the game board. I will first discuss some of the general similarities between the game and etoki, and then focus on specific examples to further illustrate how Pure Land sugoroku guides its players to visualize the Buddhist cosmology.

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177 Tripartite signification chart showing three kinds of etoki in Kaminishi, *Explaining Pictures*, 6, Figure 1.1.
Etoki and Pure Land sugoroku were similar in terms of audience, circulation and media. Etoki was first performed by monks in early medieval period as a private service for the elite and ruling class.\(^{178}\) In the thirteenth century, Pure Land evangelism precipitated the emergence of itinerant etoki preachers who reached out to commoners.\(^{179}\) Although Pure Land sugoroku might not have existed before the fifteenth century, the spread of the game followed a similar pattern. It was originally designed for and played by high-ranking aristocrats but then popularized among the commoners. Due to the varied audience, e-sugoroku boards and paintings used in etoki vary widely in formats and materials. Etoki preachers used wall paintings, hanging scrolls, and handscrolls on various mediums for proselytization.\(^{180}\) Most extant Pure Land sugoroku are monochrome or multicolored prints, whereas others are hand-painted with pigments (some parts with gold paint). It is plausible that the earliest aristocrat-commissioned Pure Land sugoroku might be rendered in more precious materials.\(^{181}\) In these ways, both etoki and e-sugoroku represent religious media that saw a spread from the elite to the commoners.

Kaminishi claims that etoki is both secular and religious, because it includes semi-secular contents and can be performed by quasi-religious workers. Here I argue the same can be said for Pure Land sugoroku. First, both etoki and sugoroku were performed or distributed by agencies in and out of the monastic communities. In the late medieval period, performers of etoki not only included monks and nuns but quasi-religious workers wearing black-colored Buddhist attire and

\(^{179}\) Ibid, 74-77.
\(^{180}\) Ibid, 13.
middle-class *eboshi* hat.\(^{182}\) Similarly, Pure Land *sugoroku* published in Edo were marketed by both temples and booksellers around the New Year.\(^{183}\) The sale of *sugoroku* boards in temples was thus important for the monastic economy. This is similar to *etoki*, which was also performed to raise funds for monastic communities. Second, *e-sugoroku* and the paintings used in *etoki* are similar in their semi-secular content. *Etoki* preachers often made use of a diverse genres of paintings that illustrate not only Buddhist scriptures but moralizing folktales, historical narratives, and others.\(^ {184}\) Likewise, most Pure Land *sugoroku* contain depictions of both sacred landscapes and secular lives through a moral or karmic lens. For instance, in the *Good and Evil sugoroku*, the start is positioned at the lower half of the game board and surrounded by various secular scenes. To the start’s lower left, there is a square named “Intoxication.” The square depicts a scene in Edo’s pleasure quarters, featuring a group of courtesans sitting together with their clients. At the furthest right of the same row is a square marked “Greed.” It depicts a bustling riverside marketplace with a bird’s-eye view.\(^{185}\) Starting from these illustrations of activities that Edoites may be familiar with in their everyday life, the game leads the player into a religious dimension with Amida’s Pure Land as the ultimate goal. Therefore, in both its circulation and content, *sugoroku* complicates the distinction between the secular and the religious.

Another similarity between *etoki* and Pure Land *sugoroku* is their relationship to *nenbutsu* 念仏, the repetitive chanting of Amida’s name. Kaminishi notes that at the end of each *etoki* performance, the preachers would encourage the audience to recite *nenbutsu* repetitively.\(^ {186}\)

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\(^{182}\) Ibid, 123-124.

\(^{183}\) Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” 44.

\(^{184}\) Ibid, 11.

\(^{185}\) I refer to Eubanks’ translation of the labelled names. For the complete chart, see Eubanks, “Reading as Patterned Play,” 58, Figure 7.

\(^{186}\) Kaminishi, *Explaining Pictures*,” 82.
Likewise, multiple types of Pure Land sugoroku encourage similar practices as well.\textsuperscript{187} For instance, the six sides of the dice used to play Kumano Pure Land sugoroku (Kumano-jōdo-sugoroku; hereafter Kumano sugoroku) each have one character of the nenbutsu invocation written on them. To draw another comparison, the dice could function in a way similar to prayer wheels or “revolving treasury” (rinzō 輪蔵) to accumulate merit. Just as spinning the prayer wheel is equivalent to the recitation of a mantra, rolling the dice might be analogous to the recitation of the nenbutsu. Moreover, inscribed on the board of Kumano sugoroku is the following: “Made by Kōbō Daishi\textsuperscript{188}; first chant the name of the [Amida] Buddha for a hundred times” (Kōbō daishi gosaku saki nenbutsu hyappen 弘法大師御作先念仏百遍) on the left and the nenbutsu invocation the right. Similarly, according to Good and Evil sugoroku’s published in 1907, the players were required to recite the incantation three times every time before throwing the strips.\textsuperscript{189} Therefore, in Pure Land sugoroku, the element of nenbutsu was deeply incorporated and reinforced in multiple ways.

Moving forward, I will examine two types of Pure Land sugoroku as examples. By comparing with two mandalas typically used in etoki, and by juxtaposing the experience of playing the game with the procedure of etoki, I will demonstrate that the game functioned both as pictorialization and decipherment.

The first type I will discuss, the Kumano sugoroku, has close associations with the Visualization Mandala of the Heart and Ten Worlds of Kumano (Kanshin jikkai mandala). There are three extant copies of the Kumano sugoroku (see Figure 3.5). The Japanese scholar Ogurisu

\textsuperscript{187} Reciting Amida’s name is also required when playing the Chinese game Selection of Buddhas. “Each time one throws the dice and deciphers one’s roll, one recalls the Buddha’s name,” see Beverley Foulks McGuire, “Playing with Karma: A Buddhist Board Game,” \textit{Material Religion} 10, no.1 (2015), 11.

\textsuperscript{188} Kōbō Daishi is the posthumous name for Kūkai, the founder of the esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism.

\textsuperscript{189} Saranya, “Kinsei nihon no yūgi ni okeru hotoke no hyōjō,” 16.
Kenji notes that all of them are from the descendents and related shrines (Wakabayashi-ke 若林家, Chōgaku-in 長学院, and Kumano-ke 熊野家) of Kumano nuns, a sect of nuns known for preaching to commoners itinerantly from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Nowadays the surviving game boards transmitted in those temples are no longer used as entertainment but rather hung together with the mandala in multiple Buddhist rituals and services.

Figure 3.5
Kumano sugoroku (mid-Edo period, ink, color, and gold on paper, 104.8 x 81.7 cm, Wakabayashi-ke)

191 For a ritual dedicated to Fudō on April 28th, the kumano-jōdo-sugoroku was hung together with the Kanshin Jikkai Mandala in main room (hondō 本堂); for a ritual called “okoromaki おころまき” on August 31st, the same pair of sugoroku and mandala was put in the guest room (zashiki 座敷), see Saranya, “Kinsei nihon no yūgi ni okeru hotoke no hyōjō,” 15; Ogurisu, “Kumano-kei jōdo-sugoroku ron jōsetsu,” 85.
Passed down together with the *Kanshin jikkai mandala*, the game boards are similar to the mandala both in terms of contents and physical conditions. Painted in the same type of pigment (*doro-e* 泥絵) with ocherous background and folded in the same way, both the mandala and the game board depict similar scenes to explain plausible next life (*raise* 來世), using this life as the starting point.\(^{193}\) Based on evidence mentioned above, Ogurisu suggests that Kumano nuns would use this type of *sugoroku* together with the mandala in preaching to help spread Pure Land Buddhism, and in turn, Kumano nuns’ activities might have facilitated the popularization of Pure Land *sugoroku* in late medieval Japan.\(^{194}\)

In the following section, I will elaborate on how the Kumano *sugoroku* or the Kumano nuns deciphers the meanings of images painted on the game board or on the mandala. Given that there are no written records on how *etoki* was performed by the Kumano nuns, Kaminishi analyzes a *jōruri* play in which a simulated *etoki* is performed by someone who pretends to be a Kumano nun.\(^{195}\) In the play, the *etoki* starts on a brief sentence on how one would arrive at the Pure Land. After that, there is a lengthy illustration of types of torments in hells, stressing the ephemeral nature of this life. For Kumano *sugoroku*, the sequence of decipherment unpacked through the process of the game is more randomized. After “this life,” there is a one third chance that the game would end in one step. Following what is shown on the dice, the player would end with reaching the Amida Buddha, or falling into the “interminable hell.”\(^{196}\) There are other possibilities that one would start the journey from “the eight hot hells” (*Hachinetsu jigoku* 八熱

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195 Ibid, 142.
196 The “interminable hell” (*muken jigoku*) is not depicted on the game board, but is listed as possible next steps of other cosmological landscapes. Therefore I assume that the player falling into the “interminable hell” will end the game there.
Although the unpredictable nature of the dice makes the trip more random than a preacher-performed etoki, the sequence of the journey does follow certain rules. As Eubanks notices in the *Good and Evil sugoroku*, one is more likely to be in another hell or unfavorable rebirths after falling into one hell. This might also be what the audience of *etoki* would have experienced: the Kumano nuns would more likely to explain hells next to each other. Notably, nearly every hell (except the interminable one) has a one-sixth chance to return to the human realm, which is through throwing “butsu 仏,” the Buddha. Through playing the game, the salvation power of the Buddha is highlighted. It is not hard to imagine that every player who falls into the hells would have a sincere hope for the Buddha’s rescue.

Another type of Pure Land *sugoroku* with close affinity to mandalas is the *Immeasurable Life sugoroku* (the left in Figure 3.6). The mandala it resembles is the *Taima mandala* (the right in Figure 3.6) which pictorializes of the three central Pure Land sutras with Amida’s Pure Land depicted at the center. Because the painting is a copy of an eighth-century mandala belonging to the temple Taimadera, it is named after the temple. By comparing the *Immeasurable Life sugoroku* to the *Taima mandala*, I will show that the *sugoroku* is a condensed version of the mandala with depictions of Edo commoners’ secular lives.

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197 The great brahmā is the highest of the three heavens in the world of form (sk. *Rūpaloka*), see Buswell and Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, 2013), 924. The *Naiin* refers to the inner circles of the Womb mandala. It also refers to a place in *Tosotsu-ten* (sk. *Tusita*), where Bodhisattvas are born before taking their final birth in the human world and attaining buddhahood, see Buswell and Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1714.

At first glance, one can tell that the *Immeasurable Life sugoroku* is nearly identical to the *Taima mandala* structure-wise. Consisting of one central court and three narrow ones on the peripheries, the *sugoroku* was likely modeled after the mandala’s basic structural design with enlarged periphery courts. The central court of the *Immeasurable Life sugoroku* is a truncated version of the mandala, containing similar architectural settings at the center.

Kaminishi points out that the *etoki* performed on Pure Land images aimed to "demonstrate the meditative process of visualizing Amida’s paradise." As a meditation guide,

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200 For the line drawing, see Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas: Representations of the Sacred Geography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 14, Figure 1; for the actual mandala, see Cleveland Museum of Art. Accessed April 10, 2021. [https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1990.82](https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1990.82).

201 Kaminishi, *Explaining Pictures,* 57.
the *Taima mandala* is designed and meant to be explained according to the *Immeasurable Life Contemplation*.\(^{202}\) One would first start on the left vertical court of the prefatory legend of Queen Vaidehī, the right vertical court for the thirteen contemplations, then the bottom court on the nine classes of rebirth in the pure land, and finally the central court featuring Amida’s paradise illustrated in the *Smaller Sutra* and the *Larger Sutra of Amitāyus* (*Muryōjukyō 無量寿経*).\(^{203}\)

Like the mandala, the central court of the *Immeasurable Life sugoroku* board also features Amida Buddha, Bodhisattvas, the ground, the pond, the heavenly beings, creatures and various objects in the Pure Land. However, compared to the *Taima mandala*, the *sugoroku* further abbreviated information from the three central Pure Land sutras into a sheet of paper of a smaller size. For instance, although major elements of the thirteen contemplations are present on the *sugoroku* board, the separate court illustrating each element is absent. Instead, guided by the dice, the players would pass by or visualize them in a random order. Moreover, in the mandala the nine classes of rebirth is depicted in the lotus pond, whereas only four classes were shown in the *sugoroku*. The story of Queen Vaidehī is shorted into one square. What is added to the *sugoroku*, however, is one good deed (Giving Alms) and the five evil acts (Stealing, Taking Life, Lust, Lying and Drinking) illustrated in the *Larger Sutra*. Depicted on the three periphery courts, these squares replace figures dressed in archaic styles in the mandala and showcase the life of Edo commoners. If we see the game as a meditation guided by the dice, these squares of unethical conducts show a more realistic aspect of the practice: there are cases when the visualization gets distracted by worldly desires or fails.

\(^{202}\) Ibid, 59.

\(^{203}\) Ibid, 59-60.
In sum, above I demonstrated how different varieties Pure Land sugoroku might be conceptualized as different types of etoki: With the game board being a moral and cosmological Buddhist landscape, playing the game is therefore a virtual travel or a visualization of the landscape. In the context of actual etoki performances, giving donations to the preacher is one way listeners can earn merit. Buying a copy of Pure Land sugoroku from a local temple might have been understood to have a similar effect, since both are acts of supporting the monastic community (sangha). Another way to attain merit, as Chieko Nakano suggests, is the act of viewing and listening to the etoki performance itself.204 In the next section, I will expand on this point and discuss how players benefit from the game by learning. What does it mean to win the game by landing on certain Buddhist deities? And what does it mean to lose by failing to “visualize” the Pure Land and ending up in the hells?

*Chance as Visible Karma*

In the last section, I conceptualized the Pure Land sugoroku as a special form of etoki without a preacher. If the process of playing the game can be understood as a visualization of Buddhist cosmology, how might players have understood the result of the game? As demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, the gaming form and the component of chance was plausibly imported from other Asian regions. Therefore, I argue that one way in which we might interpret the role of chance in Pure Land sugoroku and understandings of what it meant to win or lose in light of the broader context of what chance signified in Buddhist culture in East Asia. In this section, I will demonstrate how one’s karmic status can be revealed by seemingly random choices.

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In the first half of this section, I will discuss ways to interpret what it means to win the game. I suggest one way is to conceptualize it as an establishment of “karmic affinity” (kechien 結縁) with buddhas and bodhisattvas. As Nakano points out, forming karmic bonds with buddhas and bodhisattvas is crucial to one’s future transmigration, and often considered an initial step to achieve enlightenment in the future.205 Beginning in the early medieval period, both monastics and lay persons suggest the karmic bonds can be established both through actual pilgrimage to specific sacred sites as well as through the viewing of religious-themed illustrated scrolls depicting these sites.206 Both allow pilgrims and viewers to get close to the sacred, and the physical or virtual proximity to the sacred corresponds to approaching one’s religious goal.207 Likewise, the Pure Land sugoroku provides players an opportunity to undergo a similar experience. Winning the game by reaching the Pure Land or specific deities on the board, in particular, could have been considered by players as an encounter with the sacred.

Unlike illustrated scrolls mentioned above, some types of the Pure Land sugoroku have multiple deities as potential destinations and therefore there are multiple possibilities as to whom a player will build karmic affinity over the course of the game. For instance, players of the Kumano sugoroku can end up arriving at one of eight deities (Amida, Yakushi, Dainichi, Seishi, Jizō, Kannon, Miroku and Fudō). The consecration rituals (kanjō 灌頂, Sk. abhiseka) described in the Mahāvairocana Sutra (Dainichi-kyō 大日経) might provide a way to interpret the diverse results. The Mahāvairocana Sutra describes five levels of consecration rituals in particular, with each level reaching at a different depth of consciousness.208 The first level begins with simply

205 Nakano, “‘Kechien’ as Religious Praxis in Medieval Japan,” 43.
206 Ibid, 217-218, and 272..
208 Yamasaki, Shingon, 176.
looking at a mandala from a distance. “Bond-establishing” consecration (kechien kanjō) is the second level.\(^{209}\) In this ritual, a layman throws a sprig of anise onto a mandala, thereby establishing a Dharma-bond with an esoteric deity residing in where the sprig lands.\(^{210}\) Casting an anise sprig onto the mandala is also the first part in the third-level consecration (“mantra-receiving consecration,” jumyō kanjō 受明灌頂) performed by laymen intending to formally study and practice the esoteric teachings as a disciple.\(^{211}\) Therefore, because the target audience of Pure Land sugoroku is also laymen, the game might have a similar effect as an consecration ritual to establish some connections with a deity at the end of the game.

But what leads a devotee or a player to a certain deity? A story of Kūkai receiving three consecration rituals with his flower landing consecutively at Dainichi shows that there is more than chance in this seemingly random selection. In the six month, Kūkai was blindfolded to toss a flower at the Womb Realm mandala, the mandala that represents the realm of enlightened beings in the Mahāvairocana Sutra and symbolizes Dainichi’s secret teachings.\(^{212}\) Kūkai’s flower landed on Dainichi’s body at the center of the mandala, which suggest that Dainichi was Kūkai’s personal divinity.\(^{213}\) A month later, Kūkai received the mantra-receiving consecration in which he was initiated into the Diamond Realm mandala, which symbolizes the realization of Dainichi. He threw a flower onto the mandala and it fell on Dainichi again.\(^{214}\) In the eighth month, Kūkai proceeded to a higher level of consecration which aimed to enable him to transmit the teachings. He was blindfolded for a third time and the flow fell again upon Dainichi, and

\(^{209}\) Ibid, 176.
\(^{210}\) Ibid, 176.
\(^{211}\) Ibid, 176.
\(^{213}\) Ryūichi, The Weaving of Mantra, 122.
\(^{214}\) Ibid, 124.
master Huiguo 惠果 (746-805) bestowed upon him the name “Shining in All Directions” (henjō kongō 遍照金剛), a reference to the pervasive light of Dainichi Buddha.\footnote{Philip L. Nicoloff, Sacred Koyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kobo Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha (SUNY Press, 2007), 44. According to Abe, the mandala for this third ritual in the eighth month was not specified in Kūkai’s record. Abe suggests that the ritual might be conducted in a mandala visually constructed by Huigo and Kūkai in their meditation, see Abe, The Weaving of Mantra, 124.}

In this story, Kūkai’s flower landing on Dainichi is not three random incidents but a thrice-proven link between him and the Dainichi Buddha. This story has often been read as testimony of Kūkai’s extraordinary potential as a successor of Huiguo. For example, in the Indian monk Śubhakarasimha’s commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sutra, Śubhakarasimha claims that the flower-throwing ritual as a way for the master to “assess the student’s qualification as a religious leader.”\footnote{Abe, The Weaving of Mantra, 135.}

At the same time, Śubhakarasimha’s argument and the story of Kūkai might also be read to help us understand what it means to win a game of Pure Land sugoroku by landing one’s game piece on a certain Buddhist deity. I argue that one might learn about two models of the functioning of karma while playing the Pure Land sugoroku. In the first model, the cause and effect of the karma is presented in each move in a granular way. In Good and Evil sugoroku and some other types of the game, their boards have squares represent ethical concepts such as charity. Therefore, players would learn from previous moves that squares of good deeds lead them to favorable rebirths and closer to Buddhist deities, whereas those representing the bad deeds drives them away from the sacred. In the second model, the causality turns out in a more sudden and unexpected way. For example, in both Pure Land sugoroku (no. 1 in Table 3.1) and Kumano sugoroku, there is a chance that the player can place their game piece at the location of the buddha after one roll of dice. For the Immeasurable Life sugoroku, the shortest route to the
Pure Land only requires two steps. In this case, players might not be able to find a sufficient explanation for the end result through tracing previous steps they took in the game. Therefore, they may turn their eyes to their own karmic status outside of the game. If an Edoite arrives at the location of the buddha after the very first throw of dice, it is not hard to imagine that he will probably say proudly to other players, “Look how great my karma is!”

In contrast to the favorable cases mentioned above, there is still a chance, though small, that the player would fall into the interminable hell and never come out. What would the downhearted players do to resolve their dissatisfaction? There is no explicit suggestions on any type of Pure Land sugoroku about what to do in this situation after the game ends. However, Ouyi Zhixu’s manual for the game Selection of Buddhas (1653) could provide valuable information in light of the lack of early textual sources for Pure Land sugoroku. Building on Ouyi’s manual and other divination-based karmic diagnostic practices, I propose that Japanese players of Pure Land sugoroku would reflect on their wrongdoings both inside and outside of the game to rationalize the result of ending up in hells.

Ouyi’s manual highlights the importance of repentance in and outside of the game. Claiming that players can change the karmic potential through penance, Ouyi also sees the lack of repentance as a cause for rebirth in hell. He states that players should always be aware of their previous sins and reform themselves. Not only players stuck in the middle of the hell but those in higher realms such as devas, asuras, and humans should reflect on their past sins and spiritual deficiencies.

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217 Ibid, 15-16.
218 Ibid, 15-16.
219 Ibid, 15-16.
Ouyi also notes that the design of the dice was modeled after the *Sutra on the Divination of Good and Bad Karmic Retribution* (*Zhancha shan’e yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經, late sixth-century; hereafter, the *Divination Stura*).\(^{220}\) As suggested in the sutra, by throwing a set of wooden wheels one can examine various aspects of one’s karma: types of good and bad karmas in the past lives, the distance of these past karmas to the present and their strengths, and the time one would receive the retribution (past, present or future).\(^{221}\) The karmic diagnosis provided by the divination device is a start that urges the practitioners to reflect on their past behaviors. For Ouyi and other practitioners, divination is a legitimate diagnostic tool for karma because both the karmic obstacles it reveals and the repentance it spurs has positive roles in spiritual formation.\(^{222}\) Thus, the game *Selection of Buddhas*, and plausibly Pure Land *sugoroku* as well, can be seen as a less complicated karmic diagnostic device than the wooden wheels that facilitate the spiritual practice of repentance and regret.

In addition, Ouyi argues that the throwing of the dice functions in the same way as the wheel in the *Divination Stura* that aims to “turn people towards the right path” and move “from the ordinary to the sagely.”\(^ {223}\) Just like the dice used in *Selection of Buddhas*, several types of the Pure Land *sugoroku* also have similar design of the *nenbutsu* or the invocation with homage to all buddhas carved. Even when the *sugoroku* dice leads the player to the lower realms of rebirth, the player would still aspire to arrive at the sacred land. Therefore, both the *Selection of Buddhas* and the Pure Land *sugoroku* may aim at having transformative effects on their players that continue to impacting them after the game ends.

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\(^{221}\) Itō Makoto, “The Role of Dizang Bodhisattva in the *Zhancha jing*,” *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 64, no.3 (2016), 1297.


As discussed in paragraphs above, the Pure Land sugoroku, especially the use of dice in the game, might resemble the Selection of Buddhas and the wooden wheel described in the Divination Sutra to reveal karmic obstructions, promote repentance practices and help practitioners improve themselves. In addition, concerning the process of playing Pure Land sugoroku as a form of visualization, I find it necessary to compare it to Buddhist meditation practices of the Pure Land.

Just as the players of Pure Land sugoroku may feel out of control throughout their journeys in the Buddhist cosmology, meditators trying to contemplate the Pure Land often encounter unexpected images in their visions. For instance, for a practitioner contemplating the sun, the sun would appear at a certain point in that practitioner’s mind. If the sun appears being shaded by clouds, the vision suggests the existence of karmic obstructions. Eric Greene notes that the act of contemplation and the unanticipated vision resembles “the active process of inquiry and a passive reading of signs” in divination. Likewise, throughout the game Pure Land sugoroku, the players strive to ascend to the sacred locations where deities reside, and the steps they take or the squares they land on do not always align with their will. Drawing from the Immeasurable Life Contemplation, Greene suggests that if signs of karmic obstructions appear in the vision, they confirm the presence of sin and a ritual of repentance is necessary. If conceptualizing the experience of playing e-sugoroku as a contemplation practice, the result of ending up in hells would also suggest an unsatisfactory karmic status and require reviewing one’s actions and regretting for past wrongs. Similar to how a player would explain a quick arrival at the game’s destination, one would also have two potential ways to explain the result of

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225 Greene, “Visions and Visualizations, 322.
226 Ibid, 316.
ending the game in the interminable hell. I would imagine the player tracing the previous steps in the game leading to the hells, or reflecting on misdeeds outside of the game.

In sum, I propose that Pure Land sugoroku might be a simplified “karmic diagnostic device.” As Greene suggests, chance and karma are both things outside of one’s control. In the context of the game, although each move appear to be accidents resulted from chance, it could be considered a manifestation of karma. Therefore, the game might provide an opportunity for players to learn how karma functions and facilitate proper Buddhist practices such as repentance.

The accessible nature of Pure Land sugoroku allows it to be considered a type of expedient means for salvation. By definition, expedient means is as a skillfully devised method employed by buddhas and bodhisattvas to lead people to salvation. Because the true Doctrine (dharma) is too profound, expedient means provides alternative explanations of it for individuals with different levels of comprehension. Although these devices are not ultimate truths in themselves, they bring the audience closer to them. Similarly, the designs of the Pure Land sugoroku might not be complete portraits of the whole Buddhist cosmology. Compared to the Taima mandala, the Immeasurable Life sugoroku was much more simplified. It is also hard to say that the trajectory of the players in the game explains the elusive concept of karma entirely. However, the game still served as a great teaching tool for the laity. It demonstrated the horrible nature of the hells, lead players to reflect on their past deeds, and guides them to have a wholehearted belief in the Amida buddha.

Finally, I would like to conclude my discussion on e-sugoroku by a vignette related to the Korean version of the Selection of Buddhas. According to McGuire, the game is still played

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today by nuns in Zen monasteries on New Year’s Day.\textsuperscript{228} After the game ends, the top three players are asked to sit in lotus position and the rest of the nuns would prostrate before them for three times as if they were the Buddha.\textsuperscript{229} In this way, the winners were worshipped by the rest of the players for their quick arrivals at the location of the buddha on the game board. Thinking about an Edo family playing Pure Land \textit{sugoroku} in a New Year’s day three hundred years ago, were they feeling the same as this group of Korean nuns?

\textsuperscript{228} McGuire, “Playing with Karma,” 22.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid, 22.
Chapter 4. Conclusion

Scholars have recognized that board games are not only pastimes; they are also mirrors that reflect cultural values and should be valued in the investigation of communities worldwide. As Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel demonstrated in their catalog, there is an extraordinarily rich collection of Asian games. However, the study of Asian games still remains an unexplored area in English scholarship in religious studies. My thesis has focused on two Japanese board games called sugoroku, both of premodern origin. Previous studies have tended to regard them as unrelated games and therefore studied them separately. It is true the two types of sugoroku are made of different materials, have distinct layouts, and enjoyed popularity in different time periods. Nevertheless, my thesis has demonstrated that the two games strikingly similar: both carry cosmological meanings, and their religious functions are closely tied to the process of playing.

Through examining encyclopedic sources and folk tales, I have contended that ban-sugoroku belongs to a broader category of man-made objects that were designed to embody the universe. Just like other miniatures of the world that were created in East Asia, the sugoroku game enabled its users to interact with and benefit from various supernatural beings such as ghosts and bodhisattvas. I also proposed that the similarities in the cosmological significance of ban-sugoroku and the esoteric ritual device known as the shikiban would have made ban-sugoroku a legitimate alternative for the latter for healing rituals. One would use the game to facilitate childbirth by matching the bamboo tube onto the board, or conducting mutual empowerment through the game board between one and Buddhist deities to cure diseases. It is probable that, due to the fear among medieval Japanese aristocrats towards ill-causing spirits,

they used *ban-sugoroku* as an accessible ritual implement that could be performed by themselves and not esoteric priests.

In Chapter 3, I conceptualized the experience of playing Pure Land *sugoroku* as a visualization of Buddhist cosmology. Unlike preaching performances that often require the guidance of some religious professionals in a monastic setting, a layperson could begin their trip to the Pure Land anytime by simply opening up an *e-sugoroku* board at home. Although the players would always hope to reach the sacred landscape, the game shows that the journey is not always successful. To speculate as to how players may have interpreted the results of Pure Land *sugoroku games*, I compared the game to other Buddhist-themed games of chance and divination-based Buddhist practices. In the end, I proposed that the game enables its players to learn about karmic causalities and repentance practices. *E-sugoroku* might have served as an accessible device to address fundamental Buddhist concerns such as learning about one’s karmic status and escaping from the six paths.

There are two major takeaways from my discussions on the two types of *sugoroku*. The first one concerns the inextricable nature of ritual and play. According to Robert Sharf, during a religious ritual, one enters an “as-if” world: “one partakes of the water as if it were the flesh of Christ; one hears the voice of the shaman as if it were the voice of an ancestor.” Likewise, *ban-sugoroku* players shake the bamboo tube *as if* they were rotating the sun and the moon in their hands; *e-sugoroku* players progress their game pieces to the square illustrating Pure Land *as if* they were entering the sacred buddha land. Emperor Go-Shirakawa—whose great-grandfather’s quote about *sugoroku* I opened this study with—might have played *ban-sugoroku as if* he were asking help from the deities residing in the board in order to

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cure his disease. Ordinary lay persons playing e-sugoroku in the Edo period might have seen their quick arrival at the location of the buddha on the board as if it were the result of a manifestation of their good karmic status.

The second takeaway is the more accessible religious ideas embodied by the games. Ban-sugoroku makes the highly specialized knowledge of esoteric rites tangible and manipulable by spirit mediums and aristocrats. Ban-sugoroku as an accessible ritual implement might have helped to alleviate the widespread anxiety among medieval aristocrats toward malicious spirits. E-sugoroku enables virtual travels to the Buddhist cosmology at home. In the meanwhile, it also demonstrates the fundamental yet elusive concept of karma to the laity. Therefore, e-sugoroku might have facilitated the popularization of Pure Land beliefs and other Buddhist teachings among ordinary lay people.

It is my sincere belief that sugoroku and similar games will appear more frequently as subjects of serious concern. Due the limited space and time, this thesis was not able to explore several aspects of sugoroku. For instance, future studies might fruitfully explore Buddhist-themed e-sugoroku further by examining diaries in the Edo period. This is important because current research on e-sugoroku, including this thesis, has focused exclusively on features of the game board and makes deductive claims about players’ experience. Diaries would provide important evidence on how Edoites thought about the game themselves. In addition, my thesis fails to include board games beyond Asia. It would be worth exploring whether recreational games with cosmological meanings also serve religious functions outside of Asia.
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