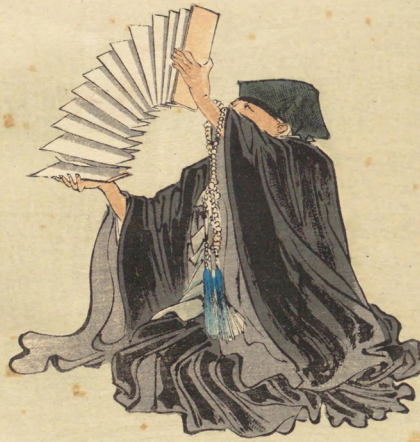




Flowing Sands: The Tripitaka Monk in Medieval Japan

PhD Colloquium Guest Lecture

by Prof. em. Michael Watson, Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo/Yokohama

Friday, May 22, 2026, 14:00–15:45, Room ZUB 3-317, Zürichbergstrasse 4, 8032 Zurich

The Chinese monk Xuánzàng 玄奘 (602–664) made the long and dangerous journey across central and western Asia to India and returned sixteen years later with hundreds of sutras and other Buddhist texts. His Chinese translations of many sacred texts reached Japan in the Nara period, together with factual records of his journey. Fictional representations of his pilgrimage became widely disseminated in different genres, most famously in the Ming-period novel *Journey to the West*. In this talk we will examine an earlier Japanese work, a *nō* play that is recorded as having been staged in 1432. *Daihannya* 大般若 (“The Great Wisdom Sutra”) fell out of the performance repertoire for centuries before being revived in 1983. The play has most recently been performed in 2022 at the Yakushiji in Nara, a Hossō-sect temple with a long and close connection to the historic Xuanzang. While translating the play, we were able to study the DVD recording of a performance given in 2006.

Known in Japan as the Tripitaka or “Three Treasures” Monk (Jp. Genjō Sanzō Hōshi), Xuanzang is typically represented in Heian and early medieval art with a sutra case on his back. The pilgrim’s statue is often paired with the figure of a sinister supernatural being who wears a

necklace of human skulls. These iconographical details are present both in the surviving texts of *Daihannya* and in modern stagings of the play.

After discussing aspects of sources, structure, style and language, we will talk about the difficulties of doing research on non-canonical *nō* plays that have been revived for contemporary performance.

Michael Watson is Professor Emeritus at Meiji Gakuin University. Trained at the University of Oxford (DPhil 2003), his research has focussed on medieval Japanese war tales and *nō* drama, with an interest in both canonical and non-canonical plays. He is a contributor to and co-editor of two volumes, *Like Clouds or Mists: Studies and Translations of Nō Plays of the Genpei War* (2013) and *A Companion to Nō and Kyōgen Theatre* (2025). He has published articles on narratology, *Heike monogatari*, and translation history.

This lecture takes place in the context of the PhD Colloquium in Japanese Philology and welcomes graduate-level students to the discussions of research methodologies in Japanology.