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Statesmanship and Sainthood: The Legend of Prince Shotoku in the Founding of Japanese Buddhism

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Statesmanship and Sainthood: The Legend of Prince Shotoku in the Spread of Japanese Buddhism

In the early seventh century C.E., the imperial court of Japan was in a complete state of disarray. Disparate familial clans vied for power in a land where a weak emperor held primarily symbolic, rather than political, authority.\(^1\) By the 645 C.E., however, the power structure had completely transformed, and the Japanese emperor emerged from among the clans as a hereditary sovereign with sole administrative, judicial and fiscal control of the realm.\(^2\) While a number of factors went into this profound political shift, credit has traditionally gone to the efforts of only one man: Prince Regent Shotoku Taishi, better known as the “Father of Japanese Buddhism.” According to the Nihon Shoki, Japan’s semi-legendary second oldest written history, Shotoku was able to unite the court through the principles of Buddhism by drawing up a new religiously-inspired constitution by which the imperial court and all of its subjects had to abide. This simultaneous religious and political act turned him into a cult figure and a hero of imperial strength—so much so that after his death he was extolled as the sole propagator of Buddhism within the Japanese island. Eventually, the Prince became so revered by his followers he was deified as an incarnation of Kannon (a divine Buddhist spirit) and eventually of Buddha himself.

While the legend of the Prince makes for a rather convenient story about the entrance of Buddhism into Japan and its subsequent role in politics, the actual process of its spread across the country was not nearly as simple as the Nihon Shoki would have it seem. The legend’s isolationist approach disregards the important foreign political events that had just as much—if not more—effect upon Japanese Buddhism than the work of powerful domestic policies. Regardless, it cannot be said that the legend has no merit in the expansion of Buddhism to Japan, and in truth it does play an important part in the establishment of everyday Japanese politics and culture. In fact, the spread of Buddhism within Japan was the result of a two part system of events spurred by increased

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\(^2\) Ibid., 34
international exchange: first, the arrival of the religion through Chinese political and cultural influence, and second, its entrenchment in the Japanese emperorship through the legend of Shotoku Taishi’s Buddhist politics and subsequent deification.

**Chinese Cultural and Political Influence**

At the time the *Nihon Shoki* claims Prince Shotoku was to have lived, Japan was in the midst of several drastic and interrelated social changes. Devastating civil wars in both Korea and China led to the influx of thousands of refugees to the island, bringing with them new ideas, technology, and an increased openness to foreign cultural influence. Of all this new foreign exchange, one of its most important and influential products was the importation of Chinese script. While the newfound ability to write using this script gave the Japanese imperial court numerous political advantages they did not have before—the establishment of permanent law books and written history—it was the subtler effect of this system of writing that had a larger effect on the Japanese system of governance. Through its distinctive phrasing and even the very shape of the characters, the script itself embodied important Chinese cultural concepts including Confucian ideology and, most significantly, Buddhist theology. Use of the script, therefore, meant that much of Japanese politics and history was looked at in an entirely different way from that propagated by the old Shinto and mythological oral traditions; the new way to look at Japanese cultural life was through a distinctive Chinese cultural lens.

This new way of looking at the world was especially appealing to the leaders of the Japanese island, where internal strife and outside opposition had led to prolonged political, cultural and economic stagnation. Looking for inspiration, clan leaders began to send more and more expeditions to the Chinese mainland—efforts which led directly to another great social change. Japanese voyages to the mainland picked up right at the end of the Chinese civil war, when Chinese

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4 Ibid., 20
civilization was reorganizing itself into the powerful T’ang Dynasty. Frequently called the “golden age” of China’s political development, the T’ang Dynasty brought a new level of political control to the Asian continent, and was characterized by a strong central government organized through the adoption of Buddhist and Confucian principles. In short, this new highly controlled, centralized and dominant China was everything that Japan was not, but could aspire to become. Seeing the success of this dynastic rule through their journeys abroad, the current Japanese imperial leaders began to transform their own court to reflect the concepts of power embraced by the Chinese. Creating an almost exact political replica of the T’ang capital in their own capital at Nara—from the architecture of its buildings to the religion practiced by the politically elite—the formerly weak Japanese emperor soon emerged from this Chinese influence holding sole authoritative powers over the realm—powers which had never before been held in the hand of only one person.

As to be expected, this transformation did not come without its problems, and required a powerful mediator other than mere fascination with the Chinese way of life to lend it legitimacy; it is here where the importance of Buddhism enters Japanese political life. Japan was first and foremost a Shinto society, and the political influence of clan leaders was stifled by the limited religious intercession that ancestors had upon their own family. For example, Shinto emperors could only ask for political intercession from their gods on behalf of their own families, which had a limited effect upon the Japanese people as a whole. A Buddhist emperor, however, could invoke godly powers independently of familial limitations as long as they followed religious principles. In addition, by following these principles, the power given an emperor could be seen as being derived from the Buddha himself, who had granted authority upon his devoted follower to rule upon the Japanese people. A good Buddhist emperor, therefore, could appear far more powerful to his subjects than a Shinto one, as he could now break free from clan affiliation and rule (supposedly)

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5 Totman 1981, 16.
objectively over a large body of people. In turn, he was ruled over by the Buddha, who held
compassion for the Japanese people and would check the emperor’s authority. As a result, an
emperor who was controlled by a deity who looked after all people rather than his own family was
able to earn a lot more trust from Japanese peasants and noble society than the leaders of more
traditional clans who might rebel against him.

Invoking Buddhism for legitimacy did have its drawbacks, however. People—like the
leaders of these more traditional clans—who did not like this centralized control could also appeal
to Buddhist principles and invoke the power of the Buddha upon their own behalf to overthrow the
emperor. With an all-powerful deity behind both the emperor and his enemies, Buddhism appealed
to all those who were politically ambitious. In this way, the introduction of Buddhism from China
had the simultaneous effect of quieting clan rivalries through the creation of a centralized emperor
while strengthening them for the very same reason. Regardless, it was the influence of Chinese
political structure that allowed many sides of Japanese society to embrace Buddhism for both their
religious and political aims.

**Shotoku Taishi and Buddhism**

While Chinese cultural influence had been pouring into Japan since the
establishment of the T’ang Dynasty, in modern as well as ancient history books the use of
Buddhism to legitimize the newfound power of the Japanese emperor is often traced back to the
sole efforts of the legendary Shotoku Taishi. In the pages of the *Nihon Shoki*, Shotoku Taishi was
the Prince Regent and successor to Empress Suiko. ⁸ Raised in the Imperial Palace, he spent his
days learning from a Korean Buddhist monk, and by the time he ascended to power in 593 C.E., he
was well versed in Buddhist doctrine and had written several treatises on the subject. Situated in the
imperial court, Shotoku also understood that Buddhism occupied a central position in Chinese
conceptions of sovereignty, and combining the adoption of this religion with other Chinese

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techniques for state control—such as the creation of a unified calendar and formal foreign
diplomatic relations—would increase imperial control over both territory and people. Using his
knowledge of the religion and Chinese politics, Prince Shotoku made two political moves that
strengthened the role of Buddhism in Japan and subsequently served to strengthen the role of the
emperor.

The first of these reforms was to write Japan’s first constitution, called the Seventeen Article
Constitution. This was not a constitution in the modern sense, but it was rather a set of maxims
created as a guide to the subordinate nobility in the conduct of their daily life. These maxims were
not only heavily influenced by the Chinese Confucian concepts and Buddhist principles, but their
effect was to make Buddhism the official state religion without actually stating it. This can be seen
in Article Two of the constitution:

Sincerely reverence the Three Treasures. The Three Treasures viz. the Buddha, the Law and the Priesthood, are the final refuge of the four generated beings and are the supreme objects of faith in all countries…Few men are utterly bad. But if they do not betake unto them the Three Treasures, wherewithal shall their crookedness be made straight? With an explicit clause calling people to follow Buddhism in the new Constitution, Shotoku Taishi effectively made non-reverence for Buddhism a punishable offence. Rather than specifically stating that Buddhism is will eradicate Shintoism, however, Shotoku left the mechanisms by which the Japanese people convert to the new religion open. In response, Shinto beliefs were absorbed in Buddhism, making Buddhism as a mechanism of power even stronger, as it incorporated all people. In addition, by including Buddhism in the law of the land, Shotoku made its regulation a political and legal issue. As such, the emperor became the supreme religious authority—at least in terms of censoring Buddhism to support his own interests. The hierarchy of authority was then

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10 *Nihongi (Nihon Shoki)*, 129
shifted in terms of religious ideals, with Buddha at the top, then the emperor followed by all other mechanisms of authority.

Despite how it sounds, state regulation of Buddhism was not a one way reform. In order for Buddhism to reinforce Japanese authority, Shotoku had to find a way for Buddhist leaders to agree to the limitation of their own religious authority. This led to Shotoku’s second reform: the establishment of state sponsored temples. During his lifetime, he sponsored the building of forty-six temples, the most famous of which are Shitennoji and Horyuji. These temples drew a number of monks from all over Korea and China, whose presence reinforced the power of the Chinese emperorship, but also led to the strengthening of the Japanese emperorship through the propagation and further development of Buddhism in Japan. In return for the state-sponsorship and increased number of followers, Buddhist religious authorities provided support for imperial power. Interestingly, this state funding also led to the melding of Buddhist and Shinto tradition into the distinctive Japanese Buddhism that can be seen today. With money from clan leaders being poured into Buddhist temples rather than their traditional Shinto shrines, keepers of the shrines looked toward Buddhist temples for financial support. By absorbing the shrines, Buddhist temples received Shinto visitors, whose eventual conversions led to increased support for Japanese imperial authorities and reduced the visibility of Chinese cultural norms within Japanese Buddhist traditions. Because it was Shotoku Taishi who implemented the reforms that allowed for this mixing to occur, it is he who is credited with the creation of Japanese Buddhism as well as the creation of the centralized emperor.

The Deification of Shotoku Taishi

Shotoku Taishi supposedly died in 622 C.E., and at the time of his death both Buddhism and the newly strengthened role of the emperor were well on their way to becoming

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12 Doo, 34.
entrenched in Japanese society.\textsuperscript{13} As Buddhism continued to spread throughout the island, Shotoku became somewhat of a mystical figure, revered for his courage in politically propagating Buddhism. Over time, this reverence led to rumor and the attribution of mystical qualities, which were then compiled and written as fact in the \textit{Nihon Shoki} one hundred years after he allegedly lived. For instance, rather than merely learning Buddhism from a Korean monk, the history recorded his birth as having been foretold to his mother in a dream by a golden Buddha, who transplanted knowledge of enlightenment to the Prince at his conception. Once Regent, he was said to have had the gift of foresight and could hear the complaints of ten men at the same time.\textsuperscript{14} As the legends in the \textit{Nihon Shoki} became better known and widespread with the permeation of Chinese literacy among the elite, Shotoku was ultimately revered by newfound Buddhist converts as an incarnation of past Buddhist founders, the bodhisattva Kannon and eventually Buddha himself.\textsuperscript{15}

It comes as no surprise, given the close relationship of Buddhism and the imperial court, that emperors at this time encouraged this obvious deification. Shotoku’s new role as a Buddhist god-figure had two beneficial effects for the court. Firstly, it allowed the emperor to trace his (in reality) new-found authority all the way back to Buddha. Secondly, with Shotoku as the progenitor of both Japanese Buddhism and the centralized emperorship, the imperial court was able to diminish the role of China as the inspiration for a more authoritarian government and simply declare it as the will of Heaven.\textsuperscript{16} This exploitation of the mystical memory of Shotoku was employed by monasteries, too—especially those supposedly established by the Prince himself—to draw even more converts to their fold and to legitimize their place in what has historically been a nation of Shinto belief. Their effective promotion of Prince Shotoku as god and champion served as a pattern for later political and religious groups to utilize, which created an ongoing circle of ever growing Shotoku worship.

\textsuperscript{13} Pradel, C. 2008. "Shoko mandara and the Cult of Prince Shotoku in the Kamakura Period". \textit{Artibus Asiae.} 68 (2): 215-246

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Nihongi (Nihon Shoki)}, 131

\textsuperscript{15} Doo, 50

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 71
institutional legitimacy resulting from this worship, and the further legitimacy of Shotoku himself as a mystical and religious figure.

It is for this last point—the reinforcing circle of legitimacy—that many modern day historians doubt the existence of Shotoku Taishi outright. Tsuda Sokichi and Oyama Saiichi both believe that he was an invention of the writers of *Nihon Shoki* meant to legitimize the rise of an authoritarian emperor to a people who had never before been ruled by one.\(^{17}\) His accomplishments are most likely the product of time and the later Taika Reforms, which were written in 646 C.E. and called for the reassessment of imperial authority, rather than the outright religious devotion of one man.\(^{18}\) Furthermore, the construction of several of the phrases in the Seventeen Article Constitution are ahead of their time, suggesting they were written much later than in the period they are said to have been written by Shotoku in the *Nihon Shoki*.\(^{19}\) The spread of Buddhism, therefore, and Shotoku Taishi’s role in its Japanese establishment and subsequent deification within it, was a successful political attempt by imperial authorities to legitimize their authority through a religious medium.

**Conclusion**

Despite this less than thrilling conclusion of Prince Shotoku Taishi as the possible figment of an increasingly powerful imperial court’s imagination, it must be said that his legend did wonders for the spread of Buddhism throughout Japan. As Japanese history progressed and the imperial court got stronger, Shotoku the supposedly historical statesman and Shotoku the legendary Father of Buddhism were intricately woven together to create one in the same image, where Buddhism reinforced the imperial authority and the imperial court reinforced the importance of Buddhism. Just like the character of Shotoku himself, the two parts could not be separated without severely diminishing the authority of either side—a risk which neither institution was willing to

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 35  
\(^{18}\) Totman, 1981, 21  
\(^{19}\) Asakawa, 169.
take. In addition, this depiction of Shotoku as both the Father of Buddhism and the imperial court allowed the writers of the *Nihon Shoki* to completely disregard China’s immense influence over Japanese historical events, including the extremely important entrance of Buddhism into both Japanese political and religious life. Fiction and history through Shotoku had become so entwined as to isolate Japan from world history—and making it appear stronger, at that.

Through the legend of Shotoku, Japanese history has not been rewritten to forget history (in the case of Chinese influence), but rather has been reimagined to create history—the history of a strong central government, the history of a religious movement, the history of a mystical man. Japan is not alone in this regard; the world is full of such reimagined histories. And just like the legend of Shotoku Taishi, whose legend led to the very real effect of a strong government, the real events of the present become so entwined with these imagined histories that one can say imagination oftentimes becomes reality.
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**Primary**