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# The Buddha's Mandate: Buddhism and Japanese Kingship

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**THE BUDDHA'S MANDATE: BUDDHISM AND JAPANESE KINGSHIP**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion  
of the University of Mary Washington  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Jason D Dunne

April 2016

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Jason Dunne  
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04/30/16

Jason Dunne  
Senior Thesis  
Fall 2015

# The Buddha's Mandate

*Buddhist Kingship in Asuka Japan*

## Introduction

*It is said that the great Shugendo mystic En no Gyoja was meditating amidst Mount Yoshino's thousands of sakura trees, when Śākyamuni Buddha appeared before him. "This form is not suitable for Japan," En no Gyoja told the gentle Awakened One. Śākyamuni assumed the form of the future Buddha, Maitreya the Merciful, and again En no Gyoja called the form unsuitable. Śākyamuni then took on the terrifying blue visage of Zao Gongen, with his three-peaked crown and fierce expression, one hand miming the symbol of the sword, the other bearing the invincible vajra. "Yes!" En no Gyoja exclaimed. "It is perfect!"*

*-Adapted from a fable recounted  
in Foundation of Japanese Buddhism<sup>1</sup>*

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From the European Divine Right to the godhood of the Egyptian pharaohs, there are as many conceptions of kingship as there are thrones to place a king. The ideal of a monarch who is synonymous with their kingdom, who can represent their people before heaven, has proven its emotional and societal appeal time and again. A model of kingship that one culture finds compelling may not take root elsewhere, however, and such was the situation during the sixth century in Japan. Ambitious leaders and well-educated immigrants had been attempting to create a strong monarchy on the archipelago for centuries, but none could find a vision of kingship compatible with Japanese culture. All of that changed when a Korean king wrote an enthusiastic letter to his Japanese allies, extolling a profound new doctrine called Buddhism.

When Buddhism was formally introduced in Japan in 538, it found an island divided among many chiefdoms, each with its own *kami* (god) protecting its borders. Powerful

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<sup>1</sup> Matsunaga 245. I'm invoking poetic license to use the older Sanskrit terms in place of the Japanese for Śākyamuni/Shaka and Maitreya/Miroku, since in the legend, Buddha is being portrayed as an outsider.

chieftains dubbed themselves Great Kings<sup>2</sup> and bound the central chiefdoms into a loose confederacy called Yamato,<sup>3</sup> but upon their death it would inevitably fracture again. Unable to build a stable dynasty and limited to only the weakest authority over their territory, the Great Kings bore their style as an aspiration, not a reality. To truly unite Yamato and gain the loyalty of its insular rivals, the Great Kings needed to unite the kami as well. Buddhism provided the universal religion that would transcend and unify the local deities, by making the Great King and their court into the human reflection of the Buddhist divine order, justifying their rule. To this end, Buddha would come into Japan not as a humble teacher, but as a divine king with crown on head and sword in hand.

The Great Kings had been attempting to implement their own version of the Chinese Mandate of Heaven for some time, utilizing their own Shinto kami. In Section I, I will examine how Shinto's localized deities and negative attitude towards death made such efforts ineffective, and how Buddhism resolved those issues. In Section II, I will turn to the Great Kings' successful adoption of a uniquely Japanese variant of the Mandate of Heaven, which replaced the Chinese folk deity Shangdi with Buddha in order to resolve crucial cultural differences with the original Confucian system. Section III will demonstrate that the theoretical advantages of Buddhist kingship did in fact come to pass, by examining the simultaneous rise of royal authority and Buddhist faith. Finally, I will conclude with an example of how the Buddhist Mandate of

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<sup>2</sup> I follow Joan Piggott in eschewing the later term 'Emperor' (tennō) in favor of the contemporary 'Great King' (ōkimi) for the early Japanese regents. 'Emperor' is not an accurate representation of the power the Great Kings held, nor an accurate translation of the style they used during their lifetimes. Given the importance of the anthropological concept of kingship in this essay, it is also useful to use the word 'king.' Like Piggott, I use 'Great King' as a gender-neutral term, for the title fell often to female rulers, and using 'Queen' invites the incorrect assumption of the sort of legal differentiation between male and female rulers that existed through most of Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Together, the Kofun and Asuka periods comprise the Yamato period, which lasted from 250 to 710 CE. Confusingly, Yamato is the name of the capital, the province it was in, the polity that it ruled, the time during which it ruled, and (poetically) Japan itself. During this period, there were smaller rival polities all over Japan. The Yamato rulers generally considered them unruly barbarians.

Heaven functioned in practice, and peer ahead to later eras when Buddhist doctrine and the needs of Japanese monarchs no longer aligned.

## I. Shinto's Rebellious Kami

*In the thirtieth year of her reign, the Great King Suiko sought to expand her fleet. She dispatched Kahabe no Omi, one of her most powerful vassals, to the western province of Aki, where he was to fell the forest for her warships.*

*While seeking with his workmen for the sturdiest timber, Kahabe no Omi came upon a great tree, and marked it for the axe. Yet before he could make the first swing, a local man intervened, telling him that this tree was the body of a great Thunder-Kami, and must not be cut.*

*“Shall even a Thunder-Kami oppose royal command?” Kahabe no Omi replied. And after making the proper offerings to the great tree, he ordered his workmen to cut it down.*

*A great storm arose, as the Thunder Kami vented his rage with with rain and thunder. Kahabe no Omi drew his sword, urging the god to direct his anger upon him rather than the workmen. Ten times the Thunder Kami split the sky, and ten times it failed to injure Kahabe no Omi. Defeated, the kami became a small fish, lodging between the branches of the tree. Kahabe no Omi took this fish and burned it. The Great King's ships were built.*

*- Adapted from the Nihon Shoki, XXII. 30.<sup>4</sup>*

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Until Buddhism arrived in the sixth century, Shinto had been the sole source of divine blessing for the Great Kings. Dubbed ‘Shinto’ (‘The Way of the Gods’) only when a name was necessary to distinguish it from ‘Bukyō’ (‘The Way of Buddha’), this tradition is literally built into Japan, for its animist kami are not only living things but also mountains, rivers, and trees.

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<sup>4</sup> Aston II 147.

The earliest kami seem to have been fertility deities, and as agriculture developed they were called upon to grant life to the harvests.<sup>5</sup>

Shinto was excellent at supporting the authority of leaders at the village and regional levels, but faltered at the state level. A priest was thought to be chosen by the gods, and so ancient villages often chose their priests by means of drawing straws,<sup>6</sup> but the position soon became hereditary. Village leaders interceded with the kami who occupied local geographical features, and so Shinto traditions varied immensely based on the terrain.<sup>7</sup> The village itself generally had a “tutelary” (guardian) kami to protect it. Such deities were rarely able to offer any help outside of their own borders, which were marked (in order of decreasing power) at the door of their shrine building, at the *torii* gate guarding their shrine grounds, and at the borders of the village itself.

Japan’s wet rice agriculture necessitated cooperation between villages, for a small communal village of 25-50 people could not manage it alone.<sup>8</sup> A chief was necessary to oversee these cooperative efforts. Since it was agriculture rather than war that this chiefdom was formed to carry out, its chief was valued for their mystical connection to the kami who would bring the harvest. In this ‘prestige society’<sup>9</sup> where the most valuable ruler was a shaman who could control nature, Shinto was the backbone of a chief’s authority. These chiefdoms gradually evolved into *uji* (roughly, ‘clans’),<sup>10</sup> powerful regional groups who would later become the primary barrier to a full Japanese kingship. Each developed its own *ujigami* (clan kami), based

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<sup>5</sup> Cambridge 11.

<sup>6</sup> Called *kamifuda* (Cambridge 14).

<sup>7</sup> Cambridge 19.

<sup>8</sup> Piggott 19.

<sup>9</sup> Piggott 19.

<sup>10</sup> Uji are not as concerned with bloodline and family as the term ‘clan’ implies. Their primary loyalty is regional. See Amino 246.



on some grand feature of local geography they deemed superior to the village kami, or on an especially authoritative figure from regional mythology.

At the final, state level of authority, Shinto began to reach its limits in justifying rule. The first state-level authority we find clear reports on is Himiko, a 3rd century woman characterized in the Chinese *Records of Wei* as “a theurge who enchanted the people.”<sup>11</sup> The reports of Himiko are as much legend as history, but it is quite credible that her influence with the kami was a large part of her power. Himiko would have ruled as a ‘paramount chief’—one who united multiple chiefdoms. But whereas chiefdoms were fairly stable, developing hereditary transmission and creating uji with rich unifying traditions, Himiko’s paramountcy dissolved into open war with her death.<sup>12</sup> The Great Kingships of the next two centuries would meet the same fate, as the state-level authority won by a few charismatic individuals generally died with them.

Great King Yuryaku’s (r. 456-479) efforts to consolidate power give a good picture of the difficulty in using Shinto to stabilize state-level rule. He attempted to associate himself with a kami superior even to the mighty ujigami, by sending his daughter to be the priestess of the sun goddess Amaterasu.<sup>13</sup> While identifying his kingship with Amaterasu granted him his desired prestige, it did not grant him access to the absolute authority he might hope for. The Shinto kami were not inherently good, nor were they infallible. Indeed, one of Yuryaku’s responsibilities as king was to send royal ritualists to subdue various kami with magic. Every kami had the

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<sup>11</sup> Piggott 15.

<sup>12</sup> Piggott 29.

<sup>13</sup> Piggott 61.

potential for good or evil, and even Amaterasu herself was well-known to have a dark side.<sup>14</sup>

Shinto doctrine permitted Yuryaku's followers to oppose the decisions of the sun goddess, which implied that they could oppose his decisions as well.

Perhaps lacking a more absolute moral authority would not have been so harmful to kingship if Shinto did not also have a tendency to abandon the Great Kings when it was needed the most. The crisis point for establishing a stable succession is, naturally, the moment a ruler dies. The Kofun period Yuryaku ruled during is named after the giant earthen mounds the Great Kings and the uji beneath them built for their tombs. Like Amaterasu's patronage, these tombs were certainly effective. Not only did they glorify the ruler in death with their grandeur, they also were permanent, visible signs of membership in a line of descent, which helped legitimize their successors.<sup>15</sup> Allied uji would build tombs of the same shape (the Yamato Great Kings favored a round keyhole design) to signify membership in a league.<sup>16</sup> However, Shinto is a deeply vitalist, life-worshipping tradition, and the *kofun* were unavoidably places of death.

Shinto's fundamental discomfort with death undermines every goal of the *kofun*. The bodies of the powerful people interred there were often pinned down with a heavy rock on their chest.<sup>17</sup> Far from glorifying the leader, this self-explanatory practice implied that the people should hope their deceased ruler stay safely gone. Worse, since a *kofun* was a grave, it was intrinsically inappropriate to put a shrine near it, much less worship the *kofun* itself.<sup>18</sup> Shinto shrines were kept meticulously swept even of insect corpses to avoid this pollution, and no

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<sup>14</sup> *Akujin*, often translated as 'evil god,' as opposed to *zenshin*, the good aspect. Cambridge 11 argues for a softer interpretation where the *akujin* simply blocks the life-giving force, but I would note that blocking the life-giving force is the very reason old shrines are torn down and rebuilt. Does a king want to be torn down and replaced?

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge 2.

<sup>16</sup> Piggott 53.

<sup>17</sup> Matsunaga 225.

<sup>18</sup> Cambridge 525.

graves were permitted anywhere near them. Shrines were rebuilt every twenty years simply to avoid the slight rot that began to creep into the wood; a human corpse was entirely befouled.<sup>19</sup> If anything, the pollution from a Great King's death was far greater and more fearful. The entire capital city had to be moved to escape such pollution, and it was, repeatedly, until the rise of Buddhism eliminated this costly practice.<sup>20</sup> Even the Shinto afterlife was unsuitable for glorifying past Great Kings, as the spirits of the dead were commonly thought to linger there for only fifty days or so before losing their mortal identity.<sup>21</sup> It is little surprise that when Great Kings died, the residual authority of their memory almost always failed to secure a bloodless succession. Not even their own ghosts remembered them for long.

Shinto, then, was unsuitable for producing a stable model of Japanese kingship because it was fundamentally local, because it lacked any sort of omniscient or omnibenevolent deity, and because its doctrines defiled rather than deified dead Great Kings. Buddhism was equipped to answer every one of those problems, if only a Great King would sponsor it.

Where Shinto was local, Buddhism was universal. The Mahāyāna tradition transmitted to Japan viewed all phenomena as fundamentally empty. Mahāyāna was not even prepared to allow that a human has an absolute connection to their own body, much less that a god might be bound to a certain boulder—save by their own ignorance. The Buddhist cosmology brought to Japan from Korea was not built into nature. It transcended nature entirely. The buddhas and bodhisattvas dwelled in a realm that transcended even heaven.

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<sup>19</sup> Cambridge 12.

<sup>20</sup> Matsunaga 225.

<sup>21</sup> I have been unable to rediscover my source for this assertion, though I am confident it exists. It is important enough to my argument that I am leaving this footnote to remind myself to find it, should I revisit this essay.

The uji's devotion to their local kami was an effective barrier to centralized authority because in Shinto, authority flows upward from the bottom, not downward from the top.<sup>22</sup> Small kami dwelling in pebbles and puddles do indeed have to fear the superior tutelary kami of a village, which in turn has to fear the ujigami that dwell in mountains or ancient artifacts. But even a pebble-kami has a small sacred area around it that belongs to that kami alone. It is not a coincidence that the Great Kings ruled over a polity not unlike that of the kami themselves. The human and spirit realms were both decentralized, with subordinate powers acknowledging higher authorities while retaining much of their autonomy.

In the Buddhist cosmos,<sup>23</sup> authority flows from the top to the bottom. The Dharma was brought into this world by a single enlightened man, who spread it downward through those who would listen, enlightenment spreading like roots through soil. The closest a given pebble can get to divinity in Buddhism is to be used as a tool of enlightenment, and the end goal would be to transcend the pebble. To get overly attached to the pebble itself (say, by worshipping it) is counterproductive. Buddhism was not a religion confined by the boundaries of shrines and villages. It was bigger even than the archipelago of Japan, having already been adopted by much of the known world. This at last was a structure that could supercede the ujigami.

This would still leave the Great King open to rebellion, however, if the Buddha were imperfect as Amaterasu was imperfect. But a fully enlightened Buddha was omniscient and omnibenevolent, a being of pure compassion. It was a high honor, to be sure, to be the

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<sup>22</sup> Cambridge 14.

<sup>23</sup> Or at any rate, the version of Buddhism Japan was aware of. Not only was this only one of many different types of Buddhism, the Japanese took some time to fully understand some of its philosophical nuance. When I refer to "Buddhism," I am generally referring to Buddhism as a force in Asuka Japan, without making a broader claim to fundamental truths about Buddhism. When Asuka Buddhism seems to actually contradict Buddhist doctrine, however, I will point it out.

descendent of the sun goddess, but even the sun goddess herself made many mistakes. How much more her great-grandchild ten times removed?

It was no accident that early Japanese Buddhism gravitated to interpretations that considered all buddhas to be emanations of some specific celestial Buddha. This permitted the cosmos to be made quite orderly, and the Great King could have a direct counterpart. Initially, Śākyamuni himself was used for this purpose. The story of En no Gyoja at the beginning of this essay has Śākyamuni appearing not only as the fearsome Zao Gongen, but also as his own successor Maitreya. As Japanese Buddhist philosophy grew more sophisticated, this single source-buddha shifted from Śākyamuni himself to Śākyamuni's celestial body Vairocana (Japanese *Rushana*), the Primordial Buddha. As the center of the heavenly order, Vairocana was adopted as an explicit symbol of the Great King.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Buddhist practice was an immediate and obvious improvement over Shinto's handling of death. It did not take a Great King to see the advantage, either. A Buddhist temple was able to bring the dead right inside to perform a funerary rite, whereas Shinto priests would have to carry the body off to a riverside or crossroads where the death-pollution they so feared could not accumulate.<sup>25</sup> A Great King had two choices of landmark to leave behind: a Shinto *kofun* or a Buddhist temple. The *kofun* would receive offerings once and then never again<sup>26</sup>, but the temple priests would enthusiastically sanctify the Great King's lineage.<sup>27</sup> The *kofun* would

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<sup>24</sup> Cambridge 355. Vairocana only ceased to be the most popular buddha when Amitābha usurped him, in the eyes of many Japanese Buddhists, as the most fundamental buddha.

<sup>25</sup> The riverside was purified by a constant flow of water, whereas the crossroads was a sort of in-between place where pollution did not "stick" easily.

<sup>26</sup> Cambridge 325.

<sup>27</sup> Cambridge 539. When Buddhism later grew stronger, its priests would grow far less compliant, and at times they had enough influence to bully the court. However, at this early stage they were quite happy to sanctify their patrons quite loudly.

link the Great King to the uji, but the temple invoked the awe-inspiring authority of China. The *kofun* would protect others from the Great King's pollution until they faded away; the temple would symbolize their ascent to enlightenment. It is no wonder that within seventy years of Buddhism's first patronage, construction of *kofun* had all but ceased,<sup>28</sup> and the *Nihon Shoki* reports that "all the [most powerful nobles] vied with one another in erecting Buddhist temples for their Lords and parents."<sup>29</sup> Buddhism was adept at sanctifying a lineage, and that could make the difference between a smooth succession and a bloody civil war.

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<sup>28</sup> Piggott 100. *Kofun* continued to be constructed in areas distant from the capital, however, as per Kidder 127.

<sup>29</sup> Aston II 123. Aston has "shrines" instead of "temples," but since the 1956 publication of this translation, English-language Japanese studies conventions have changed to favor "shrine" for Shinto places of worship and "temple" for Buddhist.

## II. An Uncomfortable Confucian Legacy

*“In Heaven above there are Gods; on Earth there are Emperors. Besides these two classes of Gods, what else is there which we should fear?”*

- Nihon Shoki, XXII. 5.<sup>30</sup>

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Despite its successes, Heavenly Descent from Amaterasu had ultimately failed to provide a theological model capable of justifying the sort of centralized, unifying temporal authority that the Kofun period Great Kings strove for. As the Asuka period began, Buddhism provided a cosmology superior for this purpose. The reason it was so much more effective, however, is because it did not simply provide a better Heavenly Descent. It allowed for a full, Chinese-style Mandate of Heaven.

The Mandate of Heaven is a concept originating with the semi-mythical dukes of Zhou, whose ancient era of learning and justice was the inspiration for Confucius’s social philosophy. Like all Confucian thought, it takes as axiomatic that the universe is a place of order, and that harmony with that order is equivalent to righteousness. The Mandate itself is granted from Heaven to a virtuous ruler, who then becomes the temporal representative of Heaven here on earth. The Chinese state is thus seen as a reflection of a divine state. The Emperor reflects Shangdi, the sky god and Emperor of Heaven, and so too are there twin imperial courts, twin states, twin realities. It is a beautiful vision that helped China maintain its impossibly large

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<sup>30</sup> Aston II 125.

empire. It is also highly incompatible with the bottom-up patchwork of authority held by Shinto deities, which is far from orderly. Why China was able to utilize its folk religion for this reflection where Japan was not is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is crucial to understand why China's Mandate of Heaven envisions Shangdi in Heaven, whereas Japan's envisions Buddha.

Yamato Great Kings certainly tried their best to import the Mandate of Heaven without Buddhism. As early as the legendary Himiko, Japan had aspired to imitate the grandeur of the Chinese Emperor, Son of Heaven. Himiko was recorded in Chinese history largely because she sought and received investiture from the Son of Heaven, whom she petitioned to recognize her rule.<sup>31</sup> This continued through the Kofun period and into the Asuka. For the Son of Heaven, every foreign ruler petitioning him was another part of the Empire, even if, as in the case of Japanese rulers, China had no administrative authority over them. For Himiko and the Great Kings, investiture granted them secondhand glory from the Mandate of Heaven, along with precious garments and artifacts to mark them as rulers.

When Japan finally did adopt its own version of the Mandate of Heaven, it had the external appearance of Confucianism. Korean Buddhist priests had transmitted numerous Confucian documents to Japan, and when the Korean kingdom of Silla fell and its royalty became permanent guests of the Yamato court, Japan would have had a near-complete picture of the Confucian kingship system. Unfortunately for the Great Kings, many aspects of that system were incompatible with Japanese culture.

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<sup>31</sup> Piggott 25.



For one, Confucianism was too patriarchal. Yamato kingship was still an unformed concept, but the most potent historical ideal it had to draw from was *himehikosei*,<sup>32</sup> a style of rule in which a woman takes charge of spiritual affairs<sup>33</sup> and a man (usually her brother or other relative, rather than her husband) handles temporal administration. To the 21st-century observer, this may seem to be a way to relegate women to a ceremonial role, creating a misogynistic gilded cage to keep them away from real power. However, we have seen already that the chieftains who had been Japan's first rulers were primarily shamans, not warriors or diplomats. Until about 200 CE, the spiritual aspect of rulership was *more* important than the temporal. The paramount chieftain Himiko was part of a *himehikosei* pair with her younger brother, but her authority was dramatically greater than his. The *Records of Wei* scarcely mention him, and all credit for control over the realm is given to Himiko's *kidō*, or "spirit way."

In such a social environment, it was natural that many early Japanese chieftains were women.<sup>34</sup> Even when paramount chieftains like Himiko began to use military force to subdue and unite lesser chieftains, the chieftain continued to be valued more for their spiritual influence than their martial talents.<sup>35</sup> When Himiko's male successor is unable to control her polity and a succession war erupts, the throne ultimately goes not to the battling chieftains but to Himiko's

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<sup>32</sup> This is an etic term devised by Takamura Itsue, a modern scholar. The concept it refers to may or may not have had a formal name during the Yamato period. See Piggott 39.

<sup>33</sup> Like most animist religions, Shinto often reckoned the spiritual power of women greater than that possessed by men. Given the particularist nature of Shinto, 'often' is a necessary hedge, as different regions had different traditions. Some were outright matriarchal, others were not.

<sup>34</sup> As usual when speaking of pre-literate Japan, evidence is indirect. Piggott 37-38 includes a list of those remembered in later Japanese histories. Even if they are fictional, I consider this strong evidence, as the increasingly patriarchal era in which they were written would be more likely to downplay than exaggerate the role of women.

<sup>35</sup> Cambridge 26.

thirteen-year old niece Iyo, who they expected would inherit her aunt's link with the kami.<sup>36</sup> The shaman's power was that of ceremony, but it was not merely ceremonial.

In the more recent centuries preceding Buddhism's arrival, however, the Great King's role as shaman had begun to degrade, and Japanese kingship was growing more patriarchal. The Kofun period (250-538) was the first time Japan experienced large-scale interregional and foreign warfare. Chinese iron, Korean civil war, and increasing Japanese military sophistication combined to transform the Great King from shaman-in-chief to commander-in-chief. When the Kofun-era Great King Yuryaku sent his daughter to become the first princess-priestess of Amaterasu's shrine at Ise, he was drawing on a strong tradition of female shamanism to help legitimize his rule.<sup>37</sup> But by this time it was the temporal role that held primary authority.

Regardless, female authority remained a powerful force in Japanese culture at the time the Yamato rulers were attempting to adapt Confucianism. True, the matriarchal people of Kinki (modern-day Kansai) were invaded and conquered by the patriarchal people of Tsukushi (modern-day Kyushu), who imposed male chieftains upon them. But these patriarchs were conquered gently in return as they abandoned their own warlike, masculine religious symbols (patterned after a legendary spear) in favor of the feminine iconography of the defeated.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, as the Yamato rulers consolidated power, they abandoned their own male deity and elevated Amaterasu. Lineage remained cognatic, freely following either the matrilineal or patrilineal line.<sup>39</sup> The feminine retained its aura of power, and there continued to be female

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<sup>36</sup> Cambridge 98.

<sup>37</sup> I would not say that Yuryaku ruled as *himehikosei* partners with his daughter. He simply utilized the traditional dichotomy by making her a spiritual authority.

<sup>38</sup> Cambridge 105.

<sup>39</sup> Amino 237.

chieftains and Great Kings. In fact, it was during the rule of a female Great King that the Japanese version of the Mandate of Heaven was devised.

It is not hard to imagine Great King Suiko's dilemma as she, like her predecessors, aspired to match the glory of the Chinese Son of Heaven. If the status of female rulers had grown uncertain in Shinto Japan, it was anything but in Confucian China, which had established a patriarchal feudal society back when Japan was still developing agriculture.<sup>40</sup> Yamato succession was a chaotic mixture of seniority, political consideration, and personal preference (the ratio left to the whims of a given Great King), but even when the Kofun period brought a clear preference for male heirs, women remained perfectly acceptable successors. China, on the other hand, had been cleaving as closely as circumstance allowed to strict agnatic primogeniture for over a thousand years.<sup>41</sup> Under the Confucian system Suiko envied, she would not have been able to become Great King to begin with.

Nor was patriarchy particularly easy to separate from the Mandate of Heaven. As a worldview, the Mandate relies on the notion that everything and everyone has its rightful place in an order patterned after that of Heaven. Confucianism classified Five Cardinal Relationships<sup>42</sup> that explained the ideal social order: ruler/subject, father/son, elder brother/younger brother, husband/wife, and friend/friend. Relationships such as mother/daughter were understood only by analogy to male relationships, leaving women's roles clearly defined but clearly inferior. To accept the Mandate of Heaven, a ruler had to mimic divine order, and Confucian divine order was patriarchal. The Chinese emperor had a ruler/subject relationship with his subjects and a

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<sup>40</sup> Around 1000 BCE in both cases. In China, this refers to the founding of the Zhou Dynasty, in Japan, the beginning of wet-rice cultivation at the end of the Jomon period.

<sup>41</sup> 986

<sup>42</sup> Note that the number 5 is linked to the Five Elements. As with the elements, these Five Cardinal Relationships are an exhaustive list, but they can be modified and combined to constitute other relationships.

father/son relationship with Shangdi, Emperor of Heaven; the title “Son of Heaven” is quite literal. In over 4,000 years there has been only a single empress regnant of China, and she was yet to be born when Japan was trying to adopt the Mandate, meaning there was no precedent at all for female rule.<sup>43</sup> In a relatively brief 2,600 years, Japan has been ruled by least eight female monarchs-regnant, and probably considerably more.<sup>44</sup> Given that, starting from Suiko, half of the next twelve Great Kingships went to women, it is clear that Japan was not yet culturally prepared to accept agnatic succession.<sup>45</sup>

Not all of the Japanese objection to the Mandate of Heaven was so high-minded. Part of the reason the Mandate was such a compelling vision of governance was that it was not just a justification of kingship; it was also a justification for rebellion. The Mandate was granted on the basis that the Son of Heaven rule justly, as defined by harmony with the heavenly order. The Great Kings had been operating on a model of Heavenly Descent, whereby the Great Kings drew

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<sup>43</sup> This was the Emperor Wu Zetian, who crept in through a regency when her husband was incapacitated, and generally seemed to define herself as a woman happening to take on a male role. To be sure, many Japanese female Great Kings were chosen as a sort of neutral selection to avoid war between powerful male claimants, or as a regent for an infant male relative, but there was no sense that it was a male title.

<sup>44</sup> The present-day, official Imperial line includes eight female Emperors regnant. However, this represents an ahistorical revision of the historical record intended to dignify the imperial line, as does the use of the term “Emperor” for such early rulers. The actual number of women who achieved primary regnancy over Japan is impossible to determine, as it is not until the 33rd monarch that the *Nihon Shoki* and other histories are generally considered reliable (see Piggott 287-290 for a discussion of the *Nihon Shoki*'s reliability). This 33rd monarch, though, happens to be Suiko, the first officially acknowledged female regnant monarch. We have already seen how ridiculous it is to suggest that the first time a woman had regnancy was in 593, because as semi-legendary as they are, the Chinese reports of Himiko and her niece Iyo should still be taken as more reliable than the Japanese records of the same period. The *Records of Wei* were written in the late third century, just a few decades after Himiko was meant to have ruled, by a historian with little stake in Japanese politics. The *Nihon Shoki* was written in the *eighth* century as part of a politicized process, and even so it mentions a “Queen of Wa” whose actions match those of Himiko in the *Records* (Aston I 245).

While it is not possible to come to an exact number of female regnant monarchs of Japan, it is obvious that there were more than eight. As soon as records become reliable, suddenly the official history switches from having 32 male reigns in a row to having 6 of the next 12 reigns go to women (Suiko, Kōgyoku twice, Jitō, Genmei, and Genshō), all during a period when female authority was *declining*.

<sup>45</sup> Japan did, however, continue to grow more patriarchal. Confucian and European influence combined with internal cultural development and an occasionally anti-feminist interpretation of Buddhist doctrine (Yusa 44), until the Meiji Constitution formally banned female succession in 1889.

authority from being Amaterasu's descendents. Though we have examined the flaws of this model, it does have the advantage of being difficult to revoke, because authority is inborn. The Mandate of Heaven, on the other hand, can be lost through misrule and claimed by rivals. By Great King Suiko's reign, China had only just reunified under the Sui Dynasty, after a long and costly period of war during which many rivals claimed the Mandate. For its part, Japan had still never managed a stable system for succession, and already tended to erupt into war upon the death of a Great King. The Yamato monarchs wanted a Mandate that would not easily revert to rivals.

Additionally, the Great Kings had no intention of entirely discarding Heavenly Descent. Throughout its long history China had already undergone numerous changes in dynasty, but the Yamato Great Kings still traced their lineage in an unbroken line. The Chinese Zhou Dynasty that first formulated the Mandate of Heaven was itself a new, upstart dynasty, and had every motivation to ethically justify the righteous overthrow of a previous imperial line.<sup>46</sup> This theory of "dynastic succession" restored a measure of order and dignity to the seemingly arbitrary results of civil war by portraying the victor as divinely chosen. In Japan, however, even a single such dynastic succession would have delegitimized the Heavenly Descent of the Great Kings by breaking the blood-tie to Amaterasu. Indeed, the Mandate of Heaven was initially formulated to counter Heavenly Descent! The Shang dynasty, which claimed descent from Shangdi himself, had been asserting an inborn right to rule on the basis of their divine blood. The Zhou successfully argued that the Shang had lost Shangdi's favor through unjust rule, and that the Mandate had now passed to the Zhou.

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<sup>46</sup> Amino 248.

The Yamato Great Kings had more in common with the Shang than the Zhou in this matter, and therefore had no interest in promulgating a convenient justification for a rival to depose them. By the time the Great Kings were calling themselves Emperors, they had even discarded their family names altogether,<sup>47</sup> for in Japan there was only one Imperial dynasty, and the Great Kings intended to keep it that way.

Given this focus on Heavenly Descent from Amaterasu, it may seem odd that another sticking point in trying to adopt Confucianism was that Japan did not—and could not easily begin to—practice ancestor worship. Ancestor worship was the most important element of Chinese folk religion, from which Confucianism drew its cosmology. Deceased ancestors lingered indefinitely as spirits, and had the power to help or curse their descendents.<sup>48</sup> This practice grew from and reinforced a traditional Chinese focus on the family as the basic building block of society, and as the template for most of the Five Cardinal Relationships of Confucianism.

Despite popular perception to the contrary, early Japan did not practice significant ancestor worship. As explored in Section I, Shinto belief generally did not suppose that the spirits of the dead lingered for more than a few decades, and the kofun tombs of great leaders were explicitly inappropriate for worship. As Edward Kidder puts it, “Shinto was totally oriented toward life and anything deviating from it was classified as a repulsive pollution.”<sup>49</sup> Despite sharing a tradition of filial piety with China, Shinto-dominated Japan permitted almost no room for worshipping departed relatives.

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<sup>47</sup> During the late 7th century reign of Empress Jitō, at the latest. Part of the reason for the change was that the Emperor took control over granting uji names, and not having their own symbolized that there was no one with higher authority. See Amino 247.

<sup>48</sup> Earhart 990.

<sup>49</sup> Kidder 17

The one exception to this rule also demonstrates the problem that ancestor worship would have presented the Yamato Great Kings. Occasionally, a given uji would claim their own ujigami (regional deity) was not only their guardian but also their ancestor as well. At first glance this seems to be tautologically ancestor worship, as the uji would perforce be worshipping an ancestor. But as George Sansom incisively observed, “Making your god into an ancestor and making your ancestor into a god are not the same thing.”<sup>50</sup> This practice was more akin to totemism than ancestor worship, in that the uji was simply identifying itself with a given kami (who was often an animal) via bloodline.<sup>51</sup> It subordinated ancestry to the kami, rather than elevating it.

Actual ancestor worship, on the other hand, would have served to strengthen the already uncontrollable uji who resisted centralization. Though strictly speaking they were more regional groups than bloodline-based clans, uji were still dominated by certain powerful families. Even without the ability to actually worship the people interred within, the *kofun* were already providing a means for uji to glorify themselves and signify alliances opposed to the Great Kings. The royal Heavenly Descent from Amaterasu could exert at least some sway over the lesser regional kami, but the dynasty would suffer if people started comparing the might of their ancestors instead of the might of their gods. At the time of Great King Suiko, no one had ever fully subdued the uji to create a stable kingship. How was she—or any Great King—meant to draw upon the authority of her ancestors to justify a type of power none of them had ever wielded?<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> George Sansom, quoted in Cambridge 338.

<sup>51</sup> Unlike in totemism, however, the uji would not then consider themselves to actually be, in a spiritual sense, the same sort of animal as their ujigami.

<sup>52</sup> The making-the-best-of-it answer is, of course, is to exaggerate the past. Like most monarchs, the Yamato rulers did just that, but it was only so effective. The uji chieftains all had ancestors as well, and the Great Kings only held marginal dominance over them.

The Yamato Great Kings needed the Mandate of Heaven to legitimize their rule, but Japanese culture was too incompatible with Confucianism to successfully pattern Japanese kingship after Confucian principles. Shinto was even less suitable, as we examined in Section I. For the sake of argument we could imagine a daring reformer attempting to adapt Amaterasu into the omniscient Empress of a perfect, orderly heaven, where previously she had been an impressive sun goddess with vague authority over an ungovernable patchwork of puddle kami and vengeful mountain gods. But even if such an effort somehow overcame the dissonance it would create within Shinto, it could not easily alter the Heavenly Mandate. Any such change faced the burden of proving itself superior to prestigious Chinese wisdom.

It is difficult to overstate the regard held by the Japanese for Chinese learning. Without mastery of written language or bureaucracy; lacking significant supplies of gold, iron, and silver; and hundreds or thousands of years behind China in various disciplines of art and natural philosophy; Asuka Japan could only regard its continental neighbor with awe.<sup>53</sup> For all its spiritual power, Shinto had no monasteries, no philosophers to sally forth and debate Chinese scholars. Himiko might have been the first Japanese Great King to seek investiture from the Son of Heaven, but she was not the last. Any modification to the Confucian Mandate of Heaven would need to enlist an authority so compelling that it could supercede a tradition the Japanese had come to view as the very definition of true kingship.

Of all options available to Asuka Japan, only Buddhism had that sort of prestige. The *Nihon Shoki* reports how the king of the Korean kingdom of Paekche portrayed Buddhism when he, for the first time, attempted to interest the Japanese court in this new doctrine:

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<sup>53</sup> de Bary 255, Earhart 1096-1097.



This doctrine is among all doctrines the most excellent. But it is hard to explain, and hard to comprehend. Even the Duke of [Zhou] and Confucius had not attained to a knowledge of it. [...] Moreover, from distant India it has extended hither to the three Han, where there are none who do not receive it with reverence as it is preached to them.

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The king of Paekche is clearly invoking the Duke of Zhou and Confucius respectfully, even if he places Buddhist teachings above theirs. They are singled out specifically *because* they are so well-regarded, so as to show that Buddhism is greater still. From the very beginning, Buddhism was being presented to Japan as a tradition with authority superior to that of Confucianism. The mention of the Duke of Zhou is particularly direct evidence for our purposes, for tradition holds that it was he who first developed the Mandate of Heaven! Drawing on the sterling reputation and superior antiquity of Indian traditions, the king of Paekche unwittingly offered Japan a tradition with enough prestige to justify a divergence from the wisdom of Confucius.

And Buddhism had an answer ready to every problem Confucianism offered Japan. Where Confucianism contextualized women as an inferior part of a family unit (which implies reproduction and gendered roles), Buddhism gave them a mostly-egalitarian role in a *sangha* of believers. When there is no self and the body is an illusion, it is difficult to make the case that

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<sup>54</sup> Aston II 66. The “three Han” are unrelated to the Han people of China. They are, rather, the three kingdoms of Korea. Note that by this point in the *Nihon Shoki*, the history it records is proximate enough to its composition to be considered more reliable than previous sections, though issues of authorial agenda remain.

the illusion of being male or female signifies much.<sup>55</sup> The *Nihon Shoki* records that the first three Japanese to become ordained in Buddhism were all nuns,<sup>56</sup> which is in keeping with Japan's tradition of female shamanism.

The version of Buddhism initially received by Japan was especially positive towards women. The three most important texts in early Japanese Buddhism were the *Lotus Sutra*, which features a young dragon girl who exceeds the wisdom of men; the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, which makes mock of the venerable Śāriputra for thinking a female body is inferior; and best of all, the *Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā*. This last text glorifies the noble Queen Śrīmālā as a teacher and philosopher whose virtue protects her kingdom, and Great King Suiko's nephew was said to have read it to her frequently.<sup>57</sup>

Buddhism also offered a method for Japanese kingship to avoid the messy spectre of dynastic succession, at least for a while. Confucianism was more philosophy than religion, and swearing loyalty to its precepts would not have created a priesthood.<sup>58</sup> Patronizing Buddhism, on the other hand, gave Japan its first formalized hierarchy of priests. Overjoyed just to have patronage, they were happy to glorify anyone who would build them a temple, and in these early days of Japanese Buddhism almost no one else understood its doctrines.<sup>59</sup> Even the king of Paekche, as quoted above, seems to find it confusing. If the Buddhists priests endorsed the Great King, most chieftains would be unable to mount a credible Buddhist argument against it,

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<sup>55</sup> Which isn't to say that no one tried. During the Heian period, the idea (which crops up sooner or later in most Buddhist traditions) that birth as a woman was inferior grew popular, and women were not allowed on sacred mountains (Yusa 45). However, it is no surprise that when Japanese Buddhism's view of women became the most negative, it was under the influence of Chinese Neo-Confucianism (Yusa 87).

<sup>56</sup> Aston II 101.

<sup>57</sup> de Bary 263-264. Unfortunately, later popular Buddhist texts in Japan were not always so positive towards women.

<sup>58</sup> Earhart 994-995.

<sup>59</sup> Matsunaga 10-11.

especially since those most opposed to centralized power were slowest to adopt Buddhism. Buddhism spread from the top of society downward,<sup>60</sup> and so the Great Kings were initially able to draw on an entirely loyal priesthood, which they kept concentrated at great temples in the capital.

The protection that the loyal support of Buddhist priests granted against dynastic succession was temporary. The Buddhist priesthood grew increasingly powerful as it grew more popular. By the later Nara period, harsh regulation was required to keep the Buddhist temples firmly under royal control, and when even that was not sufficient the (still devotedly Buddhist) court went so far as to severely restrict the teaching of Buddhism to commoners, lest it give them the idea that rebellion could be justified.<sup>61</sup> Part of the proof that the formation of Japanese kingship relied primarily on a Buddhist Mandate of Heaven, as opposed to the old Shinto Heavenly Descent, is that it introduced a possibility for righteous rebellion despite the Great King's best intentions.<sup>62</sup> During the Asuka period however, a Buddhist challenge to the Mandate was out of the question, and this was more than enough time to build a stable Japanese kingship.

Finally, replacing Shangdi with Buddha made adopting ancestor worship along with the Mandate of Heaven unnecessary. The Buddhist cosmology was poorly understood during the Asuka period, which probably helped rather than hindered its role as the Heaven granting the Great King authority. The problematic nature of a king using the authority Śākyamuni renounced, to rule over a reality Śākyamuni discovered was empty, was not obvious. It was clear enough, however, that the end goal of Buddhism was to reach an abstract (and confusing)

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<sup>60</sup> Kidder 15.

<sup>61</sup> Matsunaga 20-22.

<sup>62</sup> The Ikkō-ikki revolts during the feudal era are the most vivid example, but there are many instances of Japanese commoners and nobles alike taking advantage of the powerful idea that a ruler can be overthrown with divine permission. The fact that this never happened to the Japanese Emperor will be examined later.

enlightenment, not hang around your old house and lay curses on your great-grandchildren for disobeying their mother. Ancestor worship *did* begin to creep into Japanese society after the introduction of Buddhism, since it offered a worldview that was not explicitly averse to death-pollution. But Buddhism did not grant ancestors the central role that Confucianism would have, and so the great legacies of the uji were denied sacred endorsement.

The end result was a uniquely Japanese Mandate of Heaven. Though it had a Confucian structure, it drew its authority from a Buddhist Heaven. Even as the Asuka Great Kings openly emulated China and cited its philosophical authority in support of the new system, they utilized Buddhism's great prestige and Indian pedigree to overwrite unwanted aspects of the original Mandate. This process of customization was probably never conscious. It is natural for someone to seek out, learn, and actualize precepts that resonate with them personally, and the Great Kings and their supporters were no different. Buddhism simply offered Japan a worldview more congruent with Asuka-period culture than Confucianism.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Confucianism had long held a comfortable place in Japan's regard, and remains influential to this day, but Buddhism was absorbed more quickly and thoroughly, and continues to be a stronger influence. See Matsunaga 5-8, in addition to earlier sections of this essay, for an examination of the many similarities between Buddhism and traditional Japanese (which is to say, Shinto) culture. de Bary 255 observes that Japan adopted Buddhism far more quickly and enthusiastically than China.

### III. Under the Buddha's Heaven

*Sincerely reverence the three treasures. The three treasures are the final refuge of the four generated beings, and are the supreme objects of faith in all countries.*

*What man in what age can fail to reverence this law?*

*- The Seventeen-Article Constitution, Article 2*

*In a country there are not two lords. The people have not two masters. The sovereign is the master of the people of the whole country. The officials to whom he gives charge are all his vassals.*

*- The Seventeen-Article Constitution, Article 12*

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A Japanese Buddhist kingship finally came to pass under the reign of Great King Suiko, for whom Buddhism was a family tradition. Suiko's mother was kin to the Soga—the uji that had been granted responsibility for the Buddhist doctrines transmitted by the king of Paekche. The Soga had taken to this role with great enthusiasm, collecting all the texts, artifacts, and monks that they could get from their Paekche allies,<sup>64</sup> and commissioning Chinese immigrants to build a Buddhist temple in their holdings. Recent wars against their nativist Mononobe rivals had been successful enough to permit the Soga to marry into the imperial line. Despite their direct influence over Suiko's father, Great King Kimmei, he responded cautiously to Buddhism's growth, permitting the Soga to practice Buddhism while not endorsing it. Shinto had little ideological objection to Buddhism per se, viewing the Buddha simply as the kami of another land.<sup>65</sup> Japan's localist culture, however, led to fears that the native kami would be angered at

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<sup>64</sup> Piggott 93.

<sup>65</sup> Tamura 26.

the presence of foreign kami. Such fears seemed to find justification when a terrible plague broke out. The vindicated Mononobe set fire to the Soga's worship hall, seizing their precious image of Buddha and heaving it into a canal.<sup>66</sup>

Buddhism's influence was clear at this stage, but it was not yet being used as a tool of the state, much less a model for kingship. The next two Great Kings were Suiko's husband Bidatsu, then Suiko's brother Yōmei, both of whom continued to regard Buddhism primarily as a source of theurgic power. When the Soga chieftain fell ill, Bidatsu heeded a seer's advice and had the Buddha-image retrieved from the canal in order to heal him, but did not endorse the faith. Yōmei took this respect for Buddhist magic a step further, becoming the first Buddhist Great King by converting when he fell sick. Convinced that only the superior theurgy of Buddhism could save him, he commissioned a statue of the healing buddha Yakushi. He died without completing the statue or elevating Buddhism to a state religion, but his sister Suiko would come to achieve both.

Great King Suiko ascended to a throne that lacked the intellectual "technology" to create a stable centralized government. The uji remained the most powerful force in Japan, while the Great Kings struggled just to remain first among equals amidst the rival factions. Her brother's successor had been assassinated by Suiko's own Soga uji. The need for a better system would have been obvious to Suiko, whose moral authority as immediate kin to three different Great Kings was barely sufficient to stave off civil war. But this need had always been obvious; Great Kings had been trying out different configurations of Shinto and Confucian kingship for

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<sup>66</sup> Kasahara 54. Kasahara notes that the Mononobe's reaction, while extreme, is not dissimilar from anti-plague measures utilized against Shinto deities, and should not be understood solely as theological opposition.

centuries, to little avail. It is not a coincidence that Suiko, who succeeded where her predecessors had failed, was a Buddhist nun.

No picture of Great King Suiko's rule is complete without her nephew and regent, Prince Shōtoku. The two ruled Yamato together<sup>67</sup> in an arrangement that recalled the *himehikosei* ideal of female/male co-rulers, drawing upon ancient traditions to legitimize an unstable throne. Neither Suiko nor Shōtoku restrained themselves to the ideas of the past for long, however. In 594, Suiko issued the Three Treasures Edict, officially recognizing Buddhism as a state religion. Ten years later, Shōtoku's Seventeen-Article Constitution was published. Though it was more akin to moral philosophy than system of law, the Constitution was nonetheless the first articulation of the Japanese Mandate of Heaven model.

The Seventeen-Article Constitution is often seen as primarily Confucian in nature,<sup>68</sup> as it lays out a relationship-based model of governance in which harmony is achieved by each person honoring the duties of their particular station in society. Buddhism is directly mentioned only in Article 2 (quoted above), where it is endorsed as a universal law respected in all lands. Lest the temptation to view Buddhism as “merely” a justification for a vision of Confucian governance grow too strong, however, we should recall that kingship *is* justification. We have already examined how poorly the Mandate functioned in Japan without a palatable philosophical basis. When Article 12 declares that “In a country there are not two lords” and denies the uji the right to levy taxes,<sup>69</sup> it is directly contradicting the localist traditions of Japanese society. The

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<sup>67</sup> There is no consensus on which of the two wielded more power, nor much evidence from which to formulate one. Michael Como emphasizes Suiko as being “primarily responsible for the affairs of the court,” (Como 216), while Kasahara claims that Shōtoku “directed both domestic and foreign affairs” (Kasahara 58).

<sup>68</sup> Robert Oxnam writes that the Constitution “gave voice to Confucian principles,” for instance. Retrieved from “Classical Japan.” Asian Topics on Asia for Educators. Accessed November 22, 2015. [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/cl\\_japan/cj06.html](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/cl_japan/cj06.html)

<sup>69</sup> Article 12 of the Seventeen-Article Constitution, translated in Aston II 131.

only reason 's Constitution was able to succeed in the face of such resistance is Buddhism's universality (emphasized heavily by Shōtoku) offered a sufficiently compelling alternate worldview. It is to be expected that the Constitution enlists a Confucian model of governance, as but it is in service to a Buddhist kingship. It would soon become the first "kingship" in Japan to truly deserve the name.

We have seen already how potent the results were. Where once the uji had glorified their own ujigami, now they competed to be seen as Buddhist paragons. They ceased building *kofun*, abandoning the symbol of their powerful alliances in favor of erecting Buddhist temples. Styling herself Great King of the Buddhist Law (*Houou Daiou*), Suiko claimed direct authority over all of these temples,<sup>70</sup> and with it the loyalty of a grateful priesthood. Through the Soga alliance with Paekche and the Great King's traditional relationship with the Chinese Son of Heaven, Suiko controlled access to precious Buddhist artifacts and scholars, and could dole them out at her whim. Her agents were charged with bringing gifts to temples in the provinces, granting her a line of communication across Yamato that was appreciated instead of resented. Literacy began to explode across Japan, as the influx of Chinese-trained scholars combined with a new desire to achieve spiritual merit through reciting Buddhist texts, and the new literate class undertook the bookkeeping necessary to actually administrate the lands the Great Kings had long claimed. All the while, Suiko and Shōtoku's exposure to Buddhist scripture was inspiring them to create a court as grand and opulent as those of the legendary Buddhist queens and kings.<sup>71</sup>

The rise of Buddhist kingship continued with future Great Kings, each closer than the last to the title of Emperor (*tennō*). The Soga assassinated Shōtoku's son after the prince's premature

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<sup>70</sup> Piggott 95-96.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



death at forty-eight, but when this succession crisis led to the utter defeat of the Soga, it had the paradoxical effect of bolstering Buddhist kingship. The Soga uji's enthusiastic (and relatively long) history as Buddhists had been the last barrier to complete state control over the religion. With the Soga gone, the Great Kings imposed increasingly rigid regulation over the monasteries, to the point of writing the codes of monastic conduct and even controlling the ordination of new clergy. Monks were pressed into service as scribes, ambassadors, and administrators for the newly centralized kingdom,<sup>72</sup> fusing the dignity of Buddhism with that of the Great King. Confucianism continued to be the central inspiration for the actual organization of court and government, but the highest masters of Confucian philosophy in Japan were often Buddhist monks. When Great King Tenji created a sophisticated, Confucian-style court to bring prestige to his dynasty, he was following the teachings of the T'ang Emperor T'ai-tsung, but it was the Buddhist monk Dōshō who had mastered those teachings and disseminated them to Japan.<sup>73</sup>

The first Japanese ruler to bear the title of Emperor is generally agreed to have been Suiko's great-great nephew Tenmu. The inception of this title does not necessitate the inception of a full Japanese kingship; the exact threshold of centralization, *demesne* size, and dynastic authority required to constitute kingship is subjective. Kazuo Kasahara, for instance, would point to Jomei, indicating that kingship was achieved by Suiko's very first successor.<sup>74</sup> There is power in a name, however, and the decision to alter the royal style is significant even if it was in some sense tardy. So even if there is no causal relationship between Tenmu proclaiming that each household should feature a small Buddhist shrine, and his assumption of the style of Emperor, there is nonetheless a certain symmetry between the events. With Buddhism as the

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<sup>72</sup> Piggott 110.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Kasahara 62.

divine source of his authority, the Great King became an Emperor as soon as there was a sutra enshrined in every home.

#### IV. A Vision of Japanese Kingship

*The famine that had afflicted Yamato during the last years of Great King Jomei's life had lifted around the time of his death. The respite lasted long enough for a single rice crop to be planted and gathered, but by harvest-time the land was already growing dry again. Jomei's niece and favored consort, Takara, had succeeded his throne. Now, as the new Great King Kōgyoku,<sup>75</sup> she would have to succeed his troubles as well. Not a year into her reign, her court was filled with talk of drought.*

*Shinto priests, widely considered the best rain-callers,<sup>76</sup> had been sacrificing precious horses and cattle in vain.*

*The prestigious arts of Tang had been brought to bear to orient the village markets in harmony with mystical energies, but to no end.<sup>77</sup> The rain did not fall.*

*Chief Minister Soga Emishi summoned a host of Buddhist monks to the Great Temple. His grandfather had been the first to welcome Buddhism when it arrived, and the Soga had been faithful Buddhists since. Humbly, the monks read the Mahāyāna Sutra, while Soga Emishi prayed to the Buddha, the bodhisattvas, and the Four Heavenly Kings. The next day, rain answered the call of the newest and holiest of the sacred paths, but it was insufficient, and the day after, the ritual ceased.*

*Finally, Great King Kōgyoku herself interceded, taking a journey to the mouth of Minabuchi River. She knelt and prayed in each of the four directions, and finally turned her eyes to Heaven. Immediately and for five days hence, rain fell heavy upon Yamato, and the whole land was quenched.*

*The peasants cried out their joy in one voice. "A Great King of exceeding virtue!"*

*-Adapted from the Nihon Shoki, XXIV. 5-6.<sup>78</sup>*

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<sup>75</sup> Note that the *Nihon Shoki*, since it was written in the 8th century, anachronistically applies the term *tennō* (天皇)—which is used to this day with the standardized translation of ‘Emperor,’—to early rulers who would not have used it. The intent is to create a sense of continuity in the Imperial lineage.

<sup>76</sup> de Visser 26.

<sup>77</sup> We would call this *feng shui*. The Yang School in particular focused on orienting structures in harmony with the four cardinal directions, but Asuka-era Japanese texts seem to lump a lot of Chinese practices under one well-respected umbrella.

<sup>78</sup> Expanded with relevant historical details from Aston II 175. Note that Aston mistranslates the gender of the regent in question, writing “Emperor” and “he.” This 1896 error was discovered by de Visser by 1921 (de Visser 23), but reprints of Aston, which seem to be the only English translation used in academia, retained the error until the 2013 edition finally corrected it.

Kōgyoku's rain-calling is a story of true Japanese kingship, blessed with the Mandate of Heaven. She rules over a polity that practices Shinto, Chinese ritual, and Buddhism side by side, without strife. The Shinto priests practice the old ways, offering sacrifice to the kami to earn their life-giving aid. Those practicing Chinese ritual seek to arrange the village itself in greater harmony with the heavenly order. The zealous new Buddhists recite sutras and pray in order to obtain merit and, in a fashion typical of Japanese Buddhism,<sup>79</sup> seek divine intervention. Each method is acknowledged as effective, with different specialties, but in the Asuka period Buddhism was considered the highest of the sacred paths.<sup>80</sup> Yet even as this puissant new magic proves itself superior to both the native Shinto traditions and the prestigious Chinese methods, it fails to save the people, bringing only a drizzle.

It is the Great King who is the true link to Heaven's power. Like the ancient shaman-chieftain Himiko, Kōgyoku is an intermediary between her subjects below and the gods above. A human bridge from Earth to Heaven, she alone is empowered to win the most crucial divine blessings. In short order she achieves what the kami-possessed Shinto miko, the learned Chinese mystics, and the enlightened Buddhist monks could not: rain. Water from Heaven.

It is no surprise that the conceptual credit for Japanese kingship often goes to Shinto Heavenly Descent, or a genuinely Confucian Mandate of Heaven. On the Shinto side, Kōgyoku does not look so different from Himiko as she plays the role of sacerdotal king, taking on direct responsibility for the success of agriculture. But Himiko and her predecessors utilized the sacred

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<sup>79</sup> Ian Reader and George R. Tanabe's *Practically Religious* explores the Japanese tendency to seek benefits in this lifetime from their religions.

<sup>80</sup> The fact that all three traditions face off in this story and Buddhism makes the best showing offers one last piece of evidence for the Buddhist Mandate. Would the writers of the *Nihon Shoki*, writing their history for the benefit of some of the first monarchs to enjoy this new paradigm of kingship, represent Buddhism as the highest path if it did not match the feelings of their royal sponsors?

art of *kidō* to perform magic and pacify deities. Kōgyoku is just performing a simple ceremony, and her subjects immediately identify the reason it succeeds: Kōgyoku's virtue, not her shamanism. Like noble Queen Śrīmālā, Kōgyoku brings Buddha's blessings upon her land simply by being deserving of them. The conceptual distance between king and kingdom fades to vanishing.

On the Confucian side, the rationale I have just given for the success of Kōgyoku's ceremony may as well have been written by the Duke of Zhou, and so it is easy to view the entire process as Confucianism in action. Even the ceremony itself, which evokes the sacred order of the world by way of the cardinal directions, is a Confucian method; William Aston even refers to it as "the Chinese as opposed to the Buddhist style."<sup>81</sup> Confucius has granted Kōgyoku the rarefied arts of monarchy, and Amaterasu is her glorious raiment. True, the weight of evidence has amply demonstrated that Japanese kingship did in fact reflect a Buddhist cosmology. But was this just a fad? Was the Buddha truly *necessary*?

In the long term, he was not. With this new Buddhist kingship came centralized authority, heavy exposure to foreign culture, stronger armies fighting bigger wars, and a large class of literate thinkers. As Buddhism came into its strength, the benefits and disadvantages it offered the Emperors shifted from those it had offered the Great Kings, and often for the worse. By the Heian period, Buddhist monasteries were more rival than ally. Meanwhile, the need to justify having an Emperor to begin with grew smaller and smaller, degrading Buddhism's kingship benefits even as Japan grew more comfortable with Confucianism. As for Shinto, it had not even had a name before Buddhism arrived, and having a new religion to contrast itself

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<sup>81</sup> Aston II 175, footnote 3.

against caused the once-nebulous tradition to develop a clearer identity. Kami converted to Buddhism,<sup>82</sup> the imperial cult of Amaterasu strengthened, and the continued lack of a centrally organized priesthood made Shinto start to seem like a good alternative to Emperors weary of competing politically with Buddhist abbots.

The truth is, there is nothing about Buddhism that inherently makes it a religion of kingship. In the Tokugawa period, Confucianism rose to meet the needs of Japanese monarchs; in the Meiji period it was Shinto. There have been many different Japans throughout history, each with its own needs and fears, and its own sense for what heaven looks like. Buddhism happened to arrive in Asuka Japan and offer the right combination of philosophical ideas and raw prestige to make enough citizens of Yamato hesitantly begin to *believe* in kingship, in the existence of a cosmic order that could beget a righteous sovereignty. Divine pedigree, courtly manners, military force, and the complex arts of timekeeping and logistics are potent sources of royal legitimacy, and some combination of these tools are a basic prerequisite to kingship. But what are they legitimizing, if the people do not want anyone to be king to begin with? Technology binds people, but ideas unite them. Asuka Japan needed a certain kind of king in its heaven, and of all those that sought that throne, only Buddha won the imagination of the people.

“Yes!” En no Gyoja exclaimed. “It is perfect!”

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<sup>82</sup> Matsunaga 132. This practice was called *shinbutsu shugo*.

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