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*Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence
in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition*

Reviewed by Mark Dennis

Texas Christian University
m.dennis@tcu.edu

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A Review of *Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition*

Mark Dennis¹

Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition. By Michael I. Como. New York: Oxford, 2008, 256 pages, ISBN: 978-0195188615 (hardcover), US \$45.00.

Michael Como's *Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* investigates the development of the cult of Prince Shōtoku (573?-622?) during the two centuries between Shōtoku's death and the death in 822 of the first Japanese Tendai patriarch Saichō. A key figure from early Japanese history, Shōtoku has been the subject of a large body of research by modern Japanese scholars and a small but growing number of non-Japanese scholars. Como argues that the former has generally ignored useful non-Buddhist legend materials related to Shōtoku and has been deeply influenced by Japanese nationalist discourse. That discourse has often led scholars to assume, for example, that the Japanese royal house was the primary producer of the Shōtoku cult and that immigrant communities from the continent played at most a peripheral role in its construction. Como argues persuasively, however, that these materials show that early images of Shōtoku were, in fact, largely the product of immigrant kinship groups from the Korean peninsula who brought key aspects of continental culture to the archipelago. His book is thus meant to illuminate their influence in the "formation of some of the most basic building blocks of religious and cultural activity in pre-modern Japan" by investigating the Shōtoku cult's development in relation to ethnicity,

¹ Texas Christian University. Email: m.dennis@tcu.edu

lineage, textuality, and ritual, which were, argues Como, central to the period's religious and political discourse (3).

The book is a reworking of Como's Ph.D. dissertation titled *Silla Immigrants and the Early Shōtoku Cult: Ritual and the Poetics of Power in Early Yamato*, which he completed at Stanford University in 2000. It begins by examining the earliest written accounts of Shōtoku's political achievements and central role in establishing Buddhism, including the *Nihon shoki* (compiled in 720) and other early mytho-historical texts that describe him as a shining figure in the royal line. As regent to Suiko *tennō*, Shōtoku is described as administering the affairs of the government and came to be recognized as the author of both political and religious texts, including the Seventeen-Article Constitution, two court histories, and three Buddhist commentaries known collectively as the *Sangyō-gisho* (Commentaries on the Three Sūtras). His role in the propagation of Buddhism was evident in lectures he offered at court on the *sūtras* and his patronage of temple construction, including Hōryūji and Shitennōji. Indeed, the histories and evolving positions of these two temples serve as a point of departure for Como to illustrate the influence exerted by immigrant kinship groups from the Korean peninsula in constructing the Shōtoku cult.

Although Shōtoku would become an icon of Japanese national identity, Como argues that in its early stages this cult was a disputed cultural symbol centered not on a division between Japan and Korea, whose sense of independent identities was only beginning to emerge, but along ethnic lines between immigrants from the peninsular kingdoms of Silla and Paekche. Como traces Shōtoku's image as a warrior-king to immigrant communities from the former, arguing that the *Nihon shoki's* account of the founding of Shitennōji was modeled on the founding legend of the Silla temple Sachonwangsa. But Como identifies a second image of Shōtoku in these early records as a priest-king, which he traces to immi-

grant groups from Paekche who were closely associated with Hōryūji. From this early division, we see how these immigrant kinship groups helped to construct the figure of Shōtoku, whom he describes as a literary creation distinct from the historical Kamitsumiya—one of the prince's other names. This process is elaborated in the second chapter, which investigates Shōtoku's connections to continental notions of the Pure Land in relation to indigenous conceptions of the afterlife. It focuses on a well-known story from the *Nihon shoki* in which the peninsular monk Hyeja, who served as one of Shōtoku's Buddhist preceptors, declared that he would eventually meet the prince in the Pure Land; this declaration by a sage from across the sea was seen to authorize Shōtoku's status as a local Buddhist sage.

The third and fourth chapters expand on the roles played by these immigrant kinship groups in establishing Shōtoku as a sage ruler and in the development of the ancestor cults of the emergent royal house. Chapter 5, "Violence, Vengeance, and Purification in the Early Shōtoku Cult," examines the ongoing transformation of Shōtoku through the legend of the prince's meeting the beggar at Kataoka, a place located along the northern Great Lateral Highway that served as "a site where *chimata* rituals of spirit quelling were regularly undertaken by the Yamato court" (p. 108). These rites of propitiation, purification, and resurrection were used by the court not only to defend against the wrath of angry deities, often in response to acts of violence, but also led to the creation of new religious ideals as embodied in the *hijiri*, or sage, who, like the beggar of Kataoka, was capable of transcending death. Chapter 6 develops these themes by looking at the ways in which the *chimata* (crossroad) rites of spirit propitiation shaped popular religious movements that were connected to Shōtoku, focusing on the relationship between the cults of Shōtoku and Gyōki (668?-749), a mendicant monk who attracted a large following as he traveled throughout the country and created a network of lay followers who engaged in various sorts of meri-

torious public works.

The book concludes with a discussion of the ways in which the Japanese Buddhist monks Dōji and Saichō helped to reshape these images of the prince. Como describes Dōji as the pre-eminent intellectual of his day who may have edited sections of the *Nihon shoki* related to Shōtoku, and identifies a clear connection between those sections and passages from *sūtras* that Dōji had brought back from China. By establishing these and other such connections, Dōji was able to expand Shōtoku's image, Como argues, recasting the prince as a guardian deity of the dominant Fujiwara clan and the court who became a "paradigm of sacred kingship" (141). Como also explores the Japanese Tendai patriarch Saichō's well-known devotion to Shōtoku as father of Japanese Buddhism, which he expressed in poetry and exegetical work on the *Hokke-gisho*, one of the three Buddhist commentaries that make up the *Sangyō-gisho*. Saichō's devotion to the prince was based on the legend of Shōtoku as the reincarnation of the Chinese Tiantai patriarch Huisi (515–577). Como argues that this connection between Shōtoku and Huisi was central to the self-definition of Japanese Tendai as it represented an important part of legitimate transmission, and was thus invoked by Saichō to argue the centrality of his school to the broader development of Buddhism on the archipelago. Como also argues that similar translocal bonds were forged between Shōtoku and Maitreya, which served not only to connect Shōtoku to a broader East Asian tradition of Maitreya messianism, but which were even reinterpreted so that the Japanese Buddhist tradition came to see itself "springing fully formed from royal roots in Japanese soil" (28).

Throughout this work Como is concerned with shifting our attention away from the historical Kamitsumiya to the evolving figure of Shōtoku. Of the former, Como argues we can actually recover little more than details about his family and kinship ties. Even so, modern Shōtoku

studies have been consumed by the search for the “real” Shōtoku, which was identified as a central scholarly goal in the 1905 publication of Kume Kunitake’s *Jōgū Taishi Jitsuroku* (“The True Record of Prince Jōgū”), a trend that, Como notes, was accelerated in the work of Ienaga Saburō. Scholars adopting this goal have tried to cull the authentic words, texts, and activities of the historical figure from those they believe to have been falsely ascribed to him. While acknowledging that this effort is not without merit, Como argues that the search for the true record has generally led scholars to either perpetuate long-standing legends or to dismiss out of hand the achievements attributed to the historical prince as no more than hagiographic embellishments that are of little scholarly value. He states, “In either case, the limitations of the nationalist discourse have obscured the essential point that cultural icons such as Shōtoku are laden with meaning and associations that can never be reduced to historical figures such as Kamitsumiya” (6).

Among scholars who reject the historicity of Shōtoku’s achievements, Como cites the recent work of Ōyama Seiichi who has garnered attention with his direct writing style in which he dismisses the work of several well-known Shōtoku scholars. Ōyama sees Shōtoku as no more than a deliberate fabrication of a small group of religious leaders and politicians from the Nara period, a false figure with no significant relationship to the historical Umayado (another of Shōtoku’s names). While Como also distinguishes the figure Shōtoku from the vague, historical Kamitsumiya, he offers a distinct alternative to this reductive pursuit of the true record, arguing that by abandoning its hermeneutic of retrieval new sets of questions and lines of inquiry emerge. That is, he argues that while the available textual evidence prevents us from knowing if Kamitsumiya actually created a system of court ranks or wrote the first court chronicles, it is clear that “these events did occur and they played an important role in the promotion of continental cultural and political forms which Shōtoku came to represent” (8). Thus rather than trying to

recover the truth about the historical figure Kamitsumiya, he treats Shōtoku as a symbol of these cultural changes that can be studied to help us understand the “religious imagination of the age” and takes this evolving figure as the product of “creative religious acts” (8).

As such, rather than working backward in time simply to recover, reduce, or debunk, Como moves forward as he draws our attention to the processes of thinking, imagining, and inventing. He wants us to understand, for example, how it became possible with the introduction of continental culture to *think* the figure of Shōtoku, or, more broadly, to *think* Japan. Indeed, he maintains that Shōtoku was a “profoundly literary creation, constructed in terms of the tropes and legends of continental texts that had become paramount sources of political and cultural authority” (156). In this way, our focus is naturally directed to the activities and the products of the mind: to writing and literacy, to stories, genealogies, and gazetteers. Como shows how the introduction of literacy, writing, and books (political, Buddhist, divinatory) from the continent brought about new ways of knowing that were controlled, at first, by these immigrant kinship groups who served as custodians and gatekeepers of the textual tradition they introduced. These new modes of thought became central to reformulating and applying political and religious power through the evolving image of Shōtoku. But Como also connects these ideas to embodied activity and physical space—to violence and rituals of propitiation as well as to material realities that include soil and worms, canals and roadways. And he returns regularly to movement—imagined and physical—back and forth across the sea, but also up and down these canals and the early system of roads. As noted, we find deities and sages arriving in the Japanese islands to confirm Shōtoku’s status as a local sage by connecting him to varied translocal forms of religious authority through figures that include Huisi, the Kataoka beggar, and Maitreya.

This thought-provoking and well-crafted study of the develop-

ment of the early Shōtoku cult also offers valuable insights into nascent literacy, knowledge-power relations, and the dynamics of “otherness.” It is the product of a delightfully clear thinker who crosses traditional scholarly boundaries as he weaves together translation and detailed textual analysis with a sophisticated theoretical framework that moves seamlessly from Nelson Goodman’s ideas on “worldmaking” to Michel Foucault’s dictum on power. Goodman argues that worlds do not emerge from nothing. They are always fashioned, rather, “from other worlds. Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking” (13). And while the logic of Goodman’s statement guides this study’s focus on the influence of peninsular immigrant kinship groups in the worldmaking of early Yamato, it also suggests one of the intellectual limits of the hermeneutic of retrieval that Como forcefully critiques. That hermeneutic relies on a set of binaries in which identities and relationships (Shōtoku-Umayado, Japanese self-Korean other, Buddhism-Shinto, local-translocal) as well as key events (the composition of a text, for example) are discrete and unchanging. Its attempt at clarity and certainty fails because it cannot deal with the complexity and dynamism of the ethnic and cultural intermixing that Como reveals to be implicated in the literary creation of Shōtoku, and leads us inevitably to call into question claims—repeated again and again in studies of Shōtoku influenced by the nationalist discourse—to a pure Japanese origin.

Indeed, Como’s use of genealogies to track these influences of peninsular immigrant kinship groups is suggestive of Foucault’s genealogical approach, wherein original cultural forms are characterized not by purity and singularity but by multiplicity and dissent, just as we see in the very early dual image of Shōtoku as warrior-king and sage-ruler. And while the broader framework that undergirds Como’s historiography is one previously set down by scholars like Foucault and Bernard Faure, one of this study’s major contributions lies in showing us how it can be

used as a guide to understanding a particular time and space on the Japanese archipelago. For example, Como's description of Shōtoku as a literary creation seems to echo Faure's ideas on the "biographical illusion" that has informed much of the scholarship on Bodhidharma, a similarly seminal and elusive founding figure from Buddhist history. Like Como, Faure also rejects the hermeneutic of retrieval, writing, "As far as Bodhidharma is concerned, the biographies that do exist have literary but little or no historical value; Bodhidharma should be seen as a textual and religious paradigm, not reconstructed as either a historical figure or a psychological essence" (Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights* [Princeton, 1996], p. 128).

As noted, Como's discussion of the exercise of power (appearing in the dissertation title as "the poetics of power") draws from Foucault, who writes: "embedded within every system of power is a system of knowledge that both organizes and makes meaningful the formation and use of that power" (77). Indeed, the author offers a sustained argument about how understanding and control of continental forms of knowledge fundamentally reshaped power relations on the archipelago. An important subset of this broader argument regarding the use of power is the creation of a nascent Japanese "other" in the guise of those from across the sea, particularly from the Korean peninsula. Although Como does not cast the work specifically in the academic language of otherness, or *alterity*, the book illuminates its central concerns—particularly reconfigurations of voice and agency as control over these continental forms of knowledge were gradually appropriated by local elites. In the process, an indigenous identity began to emerge wherein these immigrant kinship groups were "figured as an 'other' in terms of which *tennō*-centered notions of 'native' could be constructed" (9). He argues that as local resistance increased, the voices of those from across the sea gradually diminished and were eventually almost completely erased, at least from sources that Shōtoku scholars have traditionally studied. Thus, his work

gives voice to these groups whose influence in transforming religious and cultural life on the archipelago went far beyond serving as scribes and composers of particular texts. They were, Como argues, the central architects of the early Shōtoku cult, and he notes the irony of the cultural debt owed these groups in the invention of Shōtoku, a figure who “as culture giver, guardian deity, and priest king became part of the basic vocabulary with which the Nara court represented itself to itself and to its neighbors. In many ways, this vocabulary still resonates in Japan today. To the degree that this vocabulary was effective, we may say that the Japanese turned to their rivals across the sea for their very means of self-understanding” (31).

Many readers will find Como’s analysis of this process of importation, assimilation, and erasure of value as it adds to a body of scholarship critiquing claims of an originally pure Japanese race and culture; this includes, for example, the work of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Marilyn Ivy, and other scholars writing in English. Ohnuki-Tierney argues that rice, an import from across the sea, was, like the figure of Shōtoku, imbued with progressively greater local resonances, eventually becoming a quintessential symbol of the Japanese self, much as Ivy argues is true of the Japanese emperor whose possibly peninsular origins suggest an “alien interiority”—a phrase that could be aptly applied to Como’s central argument about Shōtoku. And in Ohnuki-Tierney’s analysis of the changing symbolism of rice in Japan, she states, “it is a question of the development of a powerful representation of the self by the people themselves, on the one hand, and of how to reconcile a dominant representation with the apparent multiplicity within a culture, on the other hand. How does a certain representation become strategic, and how does it acquire the power to naturalize its significance?” (Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self* [Princeton, 1994], p. 6). Como’s study deftly shows us how dominant representations of Shōtoku gained the power to naturalize their significance as they met a shifting constellation of political and

religious interests that were first expressed with the help of these immigrant groups but were eventually controlled by local elites. The latter group gradually gained mastery of writing and a corpus of texts that were both the source and the means of creating and then reimagining the figure of Shōtoku who would come to be seen as a quintessential representative of Japanese interiority. And herein lie compelling questions and avenues of inquiry that Como hints at but which remain for future study. For example, as a literary construction, how should we treat Shōtoku as an author? That is, what kinds of texts do literary constructions themselves create? Do they differ in any significant way from those of say, Saichō, whose historicity and authorship are clearer, but who is similarly remembered as an exegete and patriarchal figure of Japanese Buddhism? Answers to these sorts of questions will help us clarify the implications of Como's groundbreaking work as it pertains to a range of scholarly issues, including literacy and textuality, authorship and canon.

Finally, this fascinating journey back and forth across the sea, along the canals and roadways of the archipelago would have been aided by maps, which would have been useful for tracking our imagined movements along the Manta canal or the northern Great Lateral Highway where we find beggars, sages, and ancestors, where we meet demons, snakes, and worms. So too the Japanese equivalents of key terms would have been useful for at least a portion of the book's likely readers. These are minor issues, however, in a fine work of scholarship.