

NARA JAPAN'S NATIONAL DEFENSE SYSTEM

TEMPLES AND SUTRAS:
NARA JAPAN'S NATIONAL DEFENSE SYSTEM

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Abstract

In the mid-eighth century, Emperor Shōmu ordered the creation of provincial national protection monasteries and convents (*kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, respectively) connected to the *Golden Light* and *Lotus Sūtras*. The monasteries were called the “Temples of the Golden Light Four Deva Kings for the Protection of the Country” (*konkōmyō shitennō gokoku no tera*) and the convents were the “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin” (*hokke metsuzai no tera*). Emperor Heizei added the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* to the *kokubunji* half a century later; by the end of the ninth century the three texts were known collectively as the “three national protection *sūtras*” (*sangokokukyō*). While the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* both contain passages related to national protection, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not. Nor does the *Lotus Sūtra* include the theme of atonement that could suggest why it was connected to the *kokubun-niji*.

I examine what the three *sūtras* say with regards to protection, kingship and atonement to determine if their specific messages might be responsible for their becoming Japan’s official national protection *sūtras*. I also look at King Aśoka, Sui Wendi and Empress Wu’s relic distributions as forebears to Emperor Shōmu’s *kokubunji* system, where he may have spread *sūtras* as relic replacements. Finally, I examine the relationship between atonement and national protection. I propose that Kūkai and Saichō, both looking to promote their sects’ protective powers, made use of these three *sūtras*, which were already seen as particularly potent protective texts on account of their association with the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*.

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Introduction

Japanese emperors began utilizing Buddhism's beneficial properties to protect and aid the state not long after the religion's introduction in the mid-sixth century. In particular, national protection (*chingo kokka* or *gokoku*) was an indispensable part of Buddhism's appeal to the state. In early records such as the *Nihongi* and the *Kojiki*, we see references to Buddhist monks reading *sūtras* to protect Japan against calamities such as drought, illness or invasion from the seventh century on. According to the *sūtras* themselves, reverential acts such as copying and reading these texts would create vast amounts of merit and beneficial results. By the late ninth century, three texts arose above the others as the official "three *sūtras* for the protection of the country" (*sangokokukyō*). We see many references to these three texts, the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, during the Heian and Kamakura periods (794-1192 and 1192-1333 respectively). There is even a record as recent as the early nineteenth century where the Tendai monk Ryō-a (1800-1882) purportedly copied all three *sūtras* with his own blood.¹ We also see references to these *sūtras* in the Asuka and Nara periods (538-710 and 710-794 respectively), often in connection with national protection. But how did these three *sūtras* rise above other Buddhist scriptures also being recited for the nation's security to become the *sangokokukyō*?²

Surprisingly, this issue has been little explored in modern English scholarship.

This is not to say that the *sangokokukyō*'s origins have been completely ignored. For

¹ M.W. De Visser, *Ancient Buddhism in Japan: Sutras and Ceremonies in Use in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries AD and Their History in Later Times* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1935) 1:121.

² Other *sūtras* also recited for Japan's wellbeing include the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*. They will be discussed more in chapter 3. See also De Visser vol. 1 and 2.

example, in Miyata Koichi's look at the *Lotus Sūtra*'s acceptance in Japan, he highlights its use as a national protection *sūtra* and asks the poignant question of why it would be used for this purpose when it lacks the pertinent protective promises we see in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*.³ As I will similarly do, he reasons that the *Lotus Sūtra* became one of the *sangokokukyō* because of its connection to the provincial national protection convents (*kokubun-niji*) that were established in the mid-eighth century. However, Miyata goes no further than to list historical examples of its use for defense. Moreover, considering his claims that "after the emperor [Jōmei, 593-641; r. 629-641] took control of the monastic order, the Lotus Sūtra was revered as one of the three sutras for the protection of the state,"⁴ it is baffling why he would use eighth century historical events to explain why the *Lotus Sūtra* was a national protection *sūtra* in the seventh century. There is no evidence in Miyata's article of why or when the *Lotus Sūtra* became one of the three national protection *sūtras*, only that it did occur.

Paul Groner briefly addresses the issue in his book *Saichō*. He notes that, while one of the first references to the three *sūtras* being read together for country's protection is in 877,⁵ Saichō (767-822) had already established these three *sūtras* as a set unit of study for Tendai practitioners in approximately 810.⁶

³ Miyata Koichi, "The Acceptance and Impact of the Lotus Sūtra in Japan," *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 11 (2001): 126.

⁴ Miyata, 125.

⁵ Paul Groner, *Saichō: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 75 note 44; De Visser notes that, in this episode, Emperor Yōzei issued an ordinance that all lecturers at the annual retreats had to teach on these three sutras. As will be noted in chapter 3, though, there are slightly earlier mentions of these three sutras being read together. However, this is one of the clearest references. De Visser, 2:661.

⁶ Groner states that the specific date for the beginning of this lecture system is unclear and that sources range from 807 to 810. Groner, 75 note 42.

Although all three texts had been popular during the Nara period as *sūtras* protecting the nation, Saichō was probably the first to combine the three into a unified course of study. They later became known as the three *sūtras* protecting the state.⁷

This connection between three *sūtras* and Saichō is especially relevant when considering that all three texts were important to Zhiyi (538-597), the founder of Tendai's Chinese counterpart Tiantai.⁸ Moreover, in supporting and promoting his newly introduced sect, Saichō took pains to emphasize its protective abilities, perhaps in order to draw imperial support. He devoted half of his yearly ordinands to reciting the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* for the sake of protecting the country.⁹ After the capital's move to Kyoto at the base of Tendai's headquarters on Mt. Hiei in 794, Tendai grew in prominence and popularity largely for its potential to block inauspicious forces from Kyoto's northeastern quadrant.

Just looking at this combination of features, we might be tempted to come to the conclusion that the *sangokokukyō*'s selection was based on Tendai's influence. After all, even though the *Lotus Sūtra* does not specifically refer to national protection, its inclusion as a protective text could be explained by its being Tendai's primary *sūtra*. Saichō's contemporary Kūkai (774-835) also promoted these three *sūtras* with his

⁷ Groner, 75.

⁸ See Paul L. Swanson, "What's Going On Here? Chih-i's Use (and Abuse) of Scripture," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 20, no. 1 (1997): 1-30.

⁹ In an 802 edict, Emperor Kanmu (737-806; r. 781-806) awarded only the Hossō and Sanron schools five new ordinands per year. Under Saichō's suggestion, in 805 Emperor Kanmu changed the numbers to award the Hossō and Sanron three yearly ordinands each and two each for the Kegon, Ritsu and Tendai schools. However, Emperor Kanmu added the stipulation that the Tendai yearly ordinands had to be divided into two schools. One would follow the Meditation Course and the other would study an Esoteric Course. Groner, 68-76.

Buddhist school, Shingon, an esoteric-based sect introduced around the same time as Tendai that also emphasized national defense.

However, while Saichō’s promoting these three *sūtras* as a set curriculum of study undoubtedly influenced their later designation as the *sangokokukyō*, to completely ascribe their status as protective texts to Tendai and Shingon ignores their connection with the provincial national protection temples of the mid-eighth century. I argue that without this country-wide system of monasteries and convents (*kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* respectively) connected with the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* these three texts may not have become the *sangokokukyō*. Particularly pertinent to my argument is the fact that the *Lotus Sūtra* does not seem to have been used for national protection until it was connected with the provincial convents, the *kokubun-niji*, which were entitled “The Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin” (*hokke metsuzai no tera*).

Before proceeding with my look at the *kokubunji* system and their relationship with the *sangokokukyō*, I will first note a few main points. First of all, the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* were not yet known as the *sangokokukyō* when the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were established. As mentioned previously, we do not see evidence of these three texts being associated with one another and expounded collectively for the state’s protection until the ninth century. The first record we have of them recited as a set group to protect the country is in 806,¹⁰ and the first reference to them as the “*sūtras* protecting the country” is not until 872.¹¹ Therefore,

¹⁰ De Visser, 1:418.

¹¹ De Visser, 2:442.

although I will refer to the *sangokokukyō* throughout this study, this is a heuristic device and should not be taken to mean that they were known in this way in the eighth century.

The second point is that we see no official association between the *kokubunji* system and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* at this time. The *kokubunji*, the national protection monasteries, were connected with the *Golden Light Sūtra* and were known as the “Temples of the Golden Light Four *Deva* Kings for the Protection of the Country” (*konkōmyō shitennō gokoku no tera*). Their convent counterparts were named after the *Lotus Sūtra* as stated above. While the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was recited prior to and during this time for the country’s protection, it was not alone in this distinction. Emperor Shōmu (701-756; r. 724-749), the ruler who called for the creation of the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* in 741, also promoted the copying and expounding of the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* (Skt: *Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra*; Ch: *Da bore buluomi jing*; Jp: *Dai hannya haramitsu kyō*)¹² and the *Diamond Sūtra* (Skt: *Vajracchedikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*; Ch: *jingang bore boluomiduo jing*; Jp: *kongō hannya haramita kyō*)¹³ for protecting the country.¹⁴ This fact alone makes it all the more curious that he would select the *Lotus Sūtra* for the *kokubun-niji* considering its dearth of protective promises.

Emperor Shōmu did call for the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*’ recitation in 729 and again in 746, but this was not a primary protective text for him.¹⁵ His daughter Empress

¹² Xuanzang’s translation from 660-663 CE is found in T 220.

¹³ There are six versions of the *Diamond Sūtra*: Kumārajīva’s from 403 CE (T 235); Bodhiruci’s from 509 CE (T 236); Paramārtha’s from 562 CE (T 237); Dharmagupta’s from 605 CE (T 238); Xuanzang’s from 648 CE (T 220[9]); and Yijing’s from 703 CE (T 239).

¹⁴ For more on these *sūtras*, see De Visser 2:495-498 and 2:523, Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, Indo-Iranian Monographs no. 6 (s-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1960) and Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom: the Diamond Sūtra and the Heart Sūtra* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

¹⁵ De Visser, 1:117.

Kōken (718-770; r. 749-758; also reigned as Empress Shōtoku from 764-770) promoted the text more than her father had, even calling for its recitation at Tōdaiji, the head temple of the *kokubunji*.¹⁶ However, it was not until Emperor Kōnin (709-782; r. 770-781) that the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was expounded in the *kokubunji* themselves in the year 772.¹⁷ Conversely, from the ninth century on, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* not only grew in popularity, it later came to overshadow its two fellow national protection *sūtras*.

The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' growth in popularity is probably related to its eighth-century makeover by the cleric Bukong (Skt: Amoghavajra; 705-774) in China. Written in fifth-century China, the original version of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* contained many Chinese references that too clearly pointed to its non-Indian origin. Bukong removed several of these passages, rewrote certain sections to better support the contemporary Tang dynasty (618-907) and included popular esoteric ideas that Bukong himself was promoting.¹⁸ We know Kūkai (774-835) brought back a version of this “retranslated” text in the early ninth century upon his return from China and that he used it in Shingon esoteric rituals.¹⁹ One of the main features of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* is that it instructs rulers how to perform a ritual that will help protect a kingdom “even on the brink of chaos.”²⁰ This may be part of the text's growth in prominence from the eighth century onward.

¹⁶ De Visser, 1:118.

¹⁷ De Visser, 1:118.

¹⁸ See Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Groner, 121 note 47; Orzech, *Politics*, 3, 30.

²⁰ Orzech, *Politics*, 245.

As the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was not involved in the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* until well after their establishment in 741, I will not reference it when looking at the temples themselves. At the same time, though, it is curious why a *sūtra* that promised national protection, contained a “fail-safe ritual” and had already been recited numerous times alongside the *Golden Light Sūtra* was passed over in favor of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which offered none of this. Why did the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* have to wait thirty years after the *kokubunji*’s establishment to even be recited in the prefectural national protection temples? What in the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* makes them preferable to the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, at least in the year 741?

Chapter Summary

I have the above questions in mind when looking at the three texts in Chapter 1 and in more detail in Chapter 3. I have identified three themes that I consider crucial for understanding how Buddhist scriptures were used: protection, kingship and atonement. This latter theme’s inclusion might seem peculiar at first glance, but as the convents were called the “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin,” to at least some degree atonement was important in connection with the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. Again, at first, it seems that only the *Golden Light Sūtra* contains any references to atonement. The idea is missing in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. But when we take into consideration that the *Lotus Sūtra* was often seen as the middle text of a triad known collectively as the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, this connection with atonement becomes clearer. The final section of the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, the *Meditation Sūtra on the Bodhisattva*

Samantabhadra (hereafter the *Meditation Sūtra*), presents itself as a continuation of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s final chapter. The pervading theme of the *Meditation Sūtra* is atonement and its purificatory aspects. As will be seen in the third chapter, this is likely the reason for the *Lotus Sūtra*'s not only becoming the base text for the *kokubun-niji* but also for its association as a national protective text.

My second chapter looks outside Japan at international precedents for the *kokubunji* system. Several scholars note that Emperor Shōmu was copying Chinese examples in his creation of provincial temples, but I have yet to find any studies that compare these non-Japanese provincial temples with Emperor Shōmu's system.²¹ I first begin with the third century BCE Indian ruler of the Mauryan Empire, King Aśoka (304-232 BCE; r. 273-232 BCE). His legendary relic distribution into eighty-four thousand *stūpas* is the model Chinese, Korean and Japanese emperors later attempted to emulate. Particularly important is this relic distribution's religio-political aspect; this was a key element in King Aśoka's transformation from a massacring tyrant into a benevolent wheel-turning Buddhist monarch (*cakravartin*). Moreover, these *stūpas* effectively identified the land they were on as being part of the Mauryan Empire. The two major Chinese examples I will look at, Emperor Wendi (541-604 CE; r. 581-604) of the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and Empress Wu (625-705; r. 690-705) of the Zhou interregnum, both came to power in the midst of massive overthrows. Imitating King Aśoka's relic distribution was an extremely effective way of similarly attempting to overwrite a bloody

²¹ For references to foreign influences on the *kokubunji* system, see Groner, 40-41 note 8; Brian D. Ruppert, *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 70-72; Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism* (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1974), 120; Tamura Yoshiro, *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*, trans. Jeffrey Hunter, (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2000), 43.

past with munificence while also using Buddhism and these *stūpas* to unite their new realms.

Empress Wu was influential for Emperor Shōmu. Not only was she an example of a strong female ruler – appealing no doubt to Emperor Shōmu’s wife Empress Kōmyō (701-760) and their daughter the future Empress Kōken/Shōtoku – but it was possibly from Empress Wu that Emperor Shōmu was inspired to enshrine not relics but *sūtras*. While we do have evidence of some relics entering Japan even before Buddhism’s official introduction in the early to mid-sixth century, it is not until the early ninth century that relics were imported *en masse*.²² T.H. Barrett and Jinhua Chen suggest that Empress Wu, or another on her behalf, distributed printed protective verses known as *dhāra ī* enshrined in miniature pagodas.²³ Empress Shōtoku carried out a similar enterprise using the same *dhāra ī* from the years 764-770.²⁴ In addition to this theory, I will also look at the ways the *sangokokukyō* were used in the Sui and Tang periods.

In the third chapter I will bring these points together to suggest why the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* became the *sangokokukyō*. In the first half I will focus on the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. I will pay particular attention to why the *Lotus Sūtra* was the base text for the national protection convents. I

²² The earliest known reference to relics being brought to Japan is in 535 CE, when two Koreans accompanied a Japanese envoy and brought with them relics of the Buddha. Lewis R. Lancaster and C.S. Yu, eds., *Introduction of Buddhism to Korea: New Cultural Patterns* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 13.

²³ T.H. Barrett, “Stūpa, Sūtra and Śarīra,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2001): 1-64 and Jinhua Chen “Śarīra and Scepter: Empress Wu’s Political Use of Buddhist Relics,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25, no. 1-2 (2002): 33-150. See also T.H. Barrett *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

²⁴ See Brian Hickman “A Note on the *Hyakumantō Dhāra ī*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 30, no. 1 (1975): 87-93 and Peter Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: a Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 1998), 114-117.

will next look at the three texts' use in Tendai and Shingon. As Saichō and Kūkai promoted their sects' protective abilities to gain imperial and court favor, they utilized esteemed *sūtras* that already had a protective association. It is my position that these three *sūtras* became the *sangokokukyō* largely because of their importance with Tendai and Shingon. However, this probably would not have occurred without the *kokubun-niji* advancing the *Lotus Sūtra* as a protective text. Around the time Saichō and Kūkai began promoting their newly established sects, we also see that the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* joined the other two *sūtras* as a required recited text.

Significance to the Field

As has been noted already, there is not a lot of English scholarship on either the *kokubunji* system or the *sangokokukyō*.²⁵ The topics are often mentioned in books and articles on early Japanese Buddhist history, but I have not found research focused specifically on these subjects. As can be seen, though, the national protection temples and *sūtras* are important to many other areas of research. For example, the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* are important in looking at early male and female monasticism. Emperor

²⁵ There are several Japanese books and articles about the *kokubunji*, many of which are archaeological records on specific *kokubunji*. Tamura Encho, "Kokubunji sōken kō," *Nantō Bukkyō* 46 (1981): 55-82; Kamata Shigeo, "Chūtō no bukkyō no hendō to kokka kenryoku," *Toyo Bunka Kenkyūjo kiyō* 25, (1961): 201-245; Nakai Shinkō, "Heian joki no kokubunjisei," *The Journal of Historical Studies. The Ōryō shigaku/Bukkyō daigaku rekishi kenkyūkai* 8 (1982): 159-190; Inoue Kaoru, "Gunji to kokubunji," in *Sakamoto Tarō hakushi koki kinenkai*, ed. Zoku Nihon Kodaishi Ronshū, (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1972), 1:585-612; *Shōmu Tennō to kokubunji – zaichi kara mita kantō kokubunji no zōei*, ed. Kanto Kogawara Kenkyūkai (Tokyo: Yūzankaku Publishing, 1998); Tsuboi Kiyotari, *Asuka no tera to kokubunji* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1985); Baba Akira *Kokubunji nihyakunenshi* (Tokyo: Shinjinbutsu ōraisha, 1982); Oishio Chihiro, *Kokubunji no chūseiteki tenkai* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1996); Tsunoda Bunei, ed. *Kokubunji no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1986).

Shōmu's decision to connect the *kokubun-niji* with the *Lotus Sūtra* probably because of its atonement ritual shows significant insight into Japanese understandings of purity and religious efficacy at this time. Moreover, we can also see how Buddhism was adapted to suit Japanese needs. Since Emperor Shōmu was probably imitating international examples of relic distributions and prefectural temples, the *kokubunji* system is a relevant example when looking at Japan's relationship with the Asian continent at this time.

While my topic is focused on three Buddhist texts and their use in eighth- and ninth-century Japan, there are many further implications to the research and suggestions included in this study. For example, both the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* were widely used throughout East Asia for safeguarding, so their becoming two of the three national protection texts is not particularly extraordinary. However, Emperor Shōmu's use of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the *kokubun-niji* has been little looked at in modern scholarship. The research and suggestions presented in this thesis are important not only to understanding the early Japanese's court's use of Buddhism, but may also offer new insight into the relationships between atonement, purity and religious efficacy with national protection in China and Korea as well. Therefore, while at first glance this thesis' scope appears relatively limited, the conclusions and implications extend well beyond the time and place considered here.

Chapter 1 National Protection Texts

In this chapter I treat significant themes from the three state protection *sūtras*, *sangokokukyō*, that clarify why these were chosen to protect the early Japanese nation-state. I am particularly concerned with protection, kingship, and atonement in the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, as these concepts address some of Buddhism's most appealing attributes to rulers. Through these scriptures, early Japanese sovereigns could theoretically control the environment, deflect warring neighbors, quash uprisings, increase sacred imperial support, unite and expand their domains, and eliminate, or at least lessen, future karmic consequences incurred in establishing or maintaining rule. Atonement rites based on the *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Lotus Sūtra's* repentance chapters added extra support in maintaining and restoring personal spiritual power as well as “correcting” imbalances such as pestilence or natural disasters.

Gregory Schopen lays out an excellent argument against relying too heavily on doctrinal texts as sources of everyday practice.¹ I agree with his position that Buddhist scriptures were often not known amongst practitioners, and that even if a *sūtra* includes clear directives, in and of itself that is not actual evidence that its decrees were or were not followed. When we look at early Japan, though, through contemporary records (as well as histories based on those records and written in the ensuing centuries) we can tell that certain *sūtras* were known on account of their continual recitations for state and

¹ Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 1-14.

imperial support. I am not arguing that monastics necessarily followed all commands mentioned in the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, but nonetheless the texts may hold the answers as to why they were (1) recited for the country's protection, (2) connected with the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, and (3) singled out as the official “national protection *sūtras*.”²

I will first introduce each *sūtra*'s history and primary messages and then break my analysis into multiple topics to better address the three themes of protection, kingship and atonement. Next, I will address why protection is a significant attribute in becoming one of the *sangokokukyō* and then examine what each *sūtra* has to say with regards to this topic. I will then examine what the texts promise concerning right rule and kingship, particularly in comparisons made between kings and bodhisattvas and in the potential transformation into an especially powerful Buddhist ruler known as a *cakravartin* “wheel-turning” king. Finally, I will explore confession and repentance themes in these texts. As we will see in Chapter 3, Emperor Shōmu likely chose the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* as the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*'s foundational texts based largely on their repentance chapters.

Introduction – The *Lotus Sūtra*

Considered an early and foundational Mahāyāna text, the *Lotus Sūtra* (Skt: *Saddharmapu arīkasūtra*; Ch: *Miaofa lianhua jing*; Jp: *Myōhō Hokke kyō*) was

² For more insight into sutra-based rituals, see De Visser, vol. 1 and 2.

translated at least six times in Chinese; of these, only Dharmarak a’s (ca. 223-300)³ and Kumārajīva’s (ca. 350-410)⁴ versions, respectively written in 290 and 406, remain.⁵ The *Lotus Sūtra*’s main text, from which these Chinese translations derive, was probably established circa 150 or 220 CE.⁶

While the *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the most influential texts in East Asian Buddhism, both religiously and culturally, ironically the *sūtra* does not actually have any central teaching beyond its own self-promotion. It opens with the Buddha addressing a large gathering and promising an astonishing sermon that will shock and amaze. The rest of the text is then devoted to continual praise, promises of protection, predictions of persecution, and parables demonstrating and confirming the awesome power of the *Lotus Sūtra* without ever actually expounding the promised teaching. In the words of George Tanabe, “it is a lengthy preface without a book.”⁷ Its popularity and the mass of scholarship dedicated to the *Lotus Sūtra* derive primarily from the *sūtra*’s various stories meant to further demonstrate its miraculous powers.

³ T 263.

⁴ T 262.

⁵ The text primarily used here is Leon Hurvitz’s English translation of Kumārajīva’s version. There is a third extant translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, that being the last of the sixth and written in 601, however, Hurvitz notes that this version is little more than a revision of Kumārajīva’s. Leon Hurvitz, *The Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sūtra) Translated from the Chinese of Kumārajīva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), ix. The issue of dating the *Lotus Sūtra* is complicated by the fact that it appears to exist in at least two layers – prose and verse – likely reflecting the editing of either multiple versions or combining original text (probably the verse) with a commentary.

⁶ Shiori Ryōdō, “Formation and Structure of the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in *The Lotus Sūtra in Japanese Culture*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr., and Willa Jane Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1989), 24. For more on sutra development, see Kōgen Mizuno, *Buddhist Sutras: Origin, Development, Transmission* (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing Co., 1995).

⁷ George J. Tanabe, Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe, “Introduction” in *The Lotus Sūtra in Japanese Culture*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1989), 2.

The parables and promises for which the *Lotus Sūtra* is particularly known had the specific aim of further arguing its own supremacy. At the same time, these very stories – many of which were purposely constructed to be controversial, paradoxical and astounding so as to better support the text’s preeminence – are the source of several significant Mahāyāna Buddhist principles. It is these parables and promises that are the key to the *Lotus Sūtra*’s popularity. However, compared with the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not contain specific, relevant passages that could help determine why Emperor Shōmu chose it as the national protection convents’ foundational text. When we consider, though, that the nunneries were named the “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin” (*hokke metsuzai no tera*), both their function and the *sūtra*’s applicability become clearer.

We do not see atonement addressed in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself; for this connection we must look at the *Meditation Sūtra on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* (Ch: *Guan puxian pusa xingfa jing* Jp: *Kan fugen bosatsu gyōbō kyō*)⁸ (hereafter *Meditation Sūtra*), which, at least by the sixth century in China, joined the *Sūtra of Innumerable Meanings* (Ch: *Wuliangyi jing*; Jp: *Muryōgi kyō*)⁹ as the *Lotus Sūtra*’s respective conclusion and introduction.¹⁰ They are known collectively as the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*. Willa Jane

⁸ T 277.

⁹ T 276.

¹⁰ Chinese translations of both of these texts date at least to the fifth century, but there is no extant Sanskrit edition of either. Therefore, whether they were always part of a set collection or not is uncertain. Considering that most Buddhists of the times and places considered in this study did see this as an established trilogy, though, all three texts must be considered when reviewing the *Lotus Sūtra*. While passages from the *Lotus Sūtra* itself are taken from Hurvitz’s version (primarily because of translation preferences), a separate edition containing the *Sūtra of Innumerable Meanings* and the *Meditation Sūtra* will also be referenced where pertinent. Bunnō Katō, et al., trans. *Threefold Lotus Sūtra: Innumerable Meanings, the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, and Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1975), xiii-xviii.

Tanabe specifically points out that when Emperor Shōmu ordered the *Lotus Sūtra* copied and enshrined in seven-story pagodas in all provinces, he intended all three *sūtras* (known collectively as the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*).¹¹ Therefore, because of the *Meditation Sūtra*'s association with the *Lotus Sūtra* during the time period we are specifically looking at (the late eighth century and early ninth century), we should not restrict our study of the *Lotus Sūtra* to that single scripture alone.¹²

The earliest mention of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Japan dates to 606. According to the *Nihongi*, Empress Suiko (554-628; r. 593-628) ordered the mytho-historical Prince Shōtoku (573-621) lecture on both the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* (Ch: *Shengman jing*; Jp: *Shōman gyō*).¹³ In 615, he purportedly wrote annotated commentaries on both of these *sūtras* as well as the *Diamond Sūtra*.¹⁴ Despite this text's connection with this important semi-historical Japanese Buddhist figure and its importance in Mahāyāna Buddhism, I have not found mention to the *Lotus Sūtra* being expounded or copied until Emperor Shōmu's time.¹⁵ This absence is suggestive. From the seventh century onward,

¹¹ Willa Jane Tanabe, "Visual Piety and the Lotus Sūtra in Japan," in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sūtra*, ed. Gene Reeves (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2002), 85. Richard Bowing also states that the three sutras were "always read in conjunction." Richard Bowing, *The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 129.

¹² As the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi (538-597) comments upon the *Meditation Sūtra* and bases his fourfold samadhi practice in part on this text, we know that the sutra was known and associated with the *Lotus Sūtra* at least by the sixth century. See Daniel B. Stevenson, "The Four Kinds of Samādhi in Early T'ien-t'ai Buddhism," in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 45-97. Zhiyi's contribution to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s repentance rites and Tiantai's significance in determining the *sangokokukyō* will be explored further in Chapter 3.

¹³ De Visser, 1:29; W.G. Aston, *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1972), 2:135. The *Śrīmālā Sūtra* is an early Mahāyāna text focusing on buddha nature. For an English translation, see Alex and Hideko Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

¹⁴ William M. Bodiford, "Shōtoku, Prince (Taishi)," *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 772.

¹⁵ The primary records I consulted are Aston, *Nihongi*; J.B. Snellen, trans., "Shoku Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan, Continued, from A.D. 697-791," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*. 2nd

there are many references to *sūtras* being copied and expounded for protection from pestilence, warfare and natural disasters.¹⁶ The most popular *sūtras* recited for national protection include the other two *sangokokukyō*, the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, as well as the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*. The fact that we do not see a clear connection between the *Lotus Sūtra* and protection until the mid-eighth century suggests that it may not have gained this “guardian” attribute until it became the base text for the *kokubun-niji*. Therefore, to answer the question of why the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* became the official three national protection *sūtras* in the ninth century again we see a connection with Emperor Shōmu’s *kokubunji* system.

Introduction – The Golden Light Sūtra

The *Golden Light Sūtra* (Skt: *Suvar abhāsottamasūtra*; Ch: *Jinguang ming jing*; Jp: *Konkōmyō kyō*) can be traced at least as far back as the first century CE in India.¹⁷ In

series, no. 11 (1934): 151-239 and no. 14 (1937): 209-278; George B. Sansom, “The Imperial Edicts in the Shoku Nihongi (700-790 A.D.),” *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 2nd series, 1 (1924): 5-39; and De Visser vol. 1 and 2.

¹⁶ See De Visser.

¹⁷ Catherine Ludvik, “A *Hariva śa* Hymn in Yijing’s Chinese Translation of the *Sūtra of Golden Light*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124, no. 4 (2004): 709. It is worth noting that the translation I am using, R.E. Emmerick’s 1970 version, is from a Sanskrit edition of the *Golden Light Sūtra*, which he claims is likely not older than the mid-fifth century. R.E. Emmerick, trans., *The Sūtra of Golden Light: Being a Translation of the Suvar abhāsottamasūtra* (London: Luzac & Company, 1996), xi. Emmerick’s translation is based upon the J. Nobel’s 1937 German translation of the Sanskrit, which he then complements with clarifications and variations from the Tibetan, Chinese and Khotanese versions as seen in translations by J. Nobel (Tibetan and Chinese) and P.O. Skjærvø (Khotanese). While there are certainly disadvantages to using a translation not based upon a Chinese version, Emmerick has at least enhanced his translation with occasional references to and verse reconstructions recognizing variations among the different language editions. Therefore, while quotations from Emmerick’s version might not always be consistent with the Chinese translations known in ancient and medieval Japan, the general messages do appear to correspond. See also Johannes Nobel, *Suvar abhāsottamasūtra. Das Goldglanz-Sūtra* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958); P.O. Skjærvø, *This Most Excellent Shine of Gold, King of Kings of Sutras*.

addition to the Sanskrit, there are also translations in Tibetan, Uighur, Mongolian, Sogdian, Khotanese, Hsi-hsia (Tangut), and, most pertinent for this study, Chinese.¹⁸ The earliest Chinese translation was by Dharmakēma (385-433) in 417, but it was Yijing's (635-713) translation in 703 that truly popularized the text in China and quickly replaced Dharmakēma's translation in Japan.¹⁹ According to M.W. De Visser, the first mention of Yijing's edition was in 734, and this is the edition Emperor Shōmu ordered distributed throughout the realm.²⁰ However, this was not the first time the *Golden Light Sūtra* was copied and spread outside the capital. In 694 Empress Jitō (645-702; r. 686-697) had one hundred copies of the *Golden Light Sūtra* sent to temples in various provinces “to be read without fail when the moon of the first month was in her first quarter.”²¹ In 728, nearly two decades before establishing the *kokubunji* monasteries known as the “Temples of the Golden Light Four *Deva* Kings for the Protection of the State” (*konkōmyō shitennō gokoku no tera*), Emperor Shōmu distributed ten chapters from the *Golden Light Sūtra* to each province where they were to be read “for the sake of the peace of the State.”²²

The Khotanese Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra, Sources of Oriental Languages and Literatures 60-61, Central Asian Sources 5-6 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 2004).

¹⁸ Emmerick notes that the Chinese translations were also the basis of translations in many Central Asian languages, including Tibetan, Sogdian, Hsi-hsia and Uighur. Emmerick, xii.

¹⁹ There are three Chinese translations of the *Golden Light Sūtra* included in the Taishō Canon: Dharmakēma's from 414 (or 417) (T 663), Baogui's from 597 (T 664), and Yijing's from 703 (T 665). Ludvik, p. 709. Baogui's version is not a unique translation but rather a compilation of previous Chinese editions. Emmerick, xii.

²⁰ De Visser, 2:437. Although, as Yoshida Kazuhiko notes, the *Nihon Shoki* cites a passage from Yijing's *Golden Light Sūtra*. As the *Nihon Shoki* was finished in 722, Yijing's translation was probably in Japan at this time. Yoshida Kazuhiko, “Revisioning Religion in Ancient Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, no. 1-2 (2003): 3.

²¹ De Visser, 2:436.

²² De Visser, 2:437.

There are three main themes in the *Golden Light Sūtra*: repentance, national protection, and the divine nature and responsibilities of kings. The *Golden Light Sūtra*'s repentance ritual, derived from its fourth chapter, offers unique insight into Buddhist confession and repentance rituals that will be further examined below. Also significant is the twelfth chapter wherein the cosmic nature of kings and their divine responsibilities are described. Of the three *sūtras* that became the *sangokokukyō*, the *Golden Light Sūtra* best exhibits the three themes I am focusing on in this chapter. Additionally, while there do not appear to be any direct connections between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, the *Golden Light Sūtra* is the lynchpin among the three. The *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* were translated (or written, in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' case), around the same time in fifth century China and, as they have complementary themes, often were expounded alongside one another.²³

Introduction – The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*

The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* (Ch: *Renwang jing*; Jp: *Ninnō kyō*)²⁴ is unique among the *sangokokukyō* in that it is an example of a Chinese Buddhist apocryphon.²⁵

²³ Orzech, *Politics*, 108.

²⁴ T 245. Bukong's version is found in T 246.

²⁵ Chinese Buddhist apocrypha are sutras written in China either addressing Chinese concerns not mentioned in Central Asian or Indian Buddhist texts or reconciling (often with a Chinese bias allowing for Confucian and Taoist philosophies) seemingly contradictory teachings that, when brought together in China, appeared incompatible. Many modern scholars of Chinese Buddhism, including Charles Orzech, the translator of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, have debated the use of the term "apocrypha," pointing out that "[since no Buddhist texts can be irrefutably linked to the Buddha] all Buddhist texts are apocryphal and the category is at best meaningless and at worst mischievous." Orzech, *Politics*, xiv. While this is a valid critique, my decision to utilize the category of Chinese apocrypha was based upon the fact that contemporary practitioners themselves made an obvious distinction between "legitimate" sutras with clear translation lineages pointing to original Indian texts and "spurious" sutras of Chinese origin that were pretending to be translated from Indian sources. I am not attempting to make a hierarchical division

Despite its Chinese origin, the text copies the language and rhetoric of Indian *sūtras*, such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*, to present itself as a “legitimate” Buddhist text. The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*’ exact origins are unclear beyond the fact that it was created in China by approximately the fifth century CE.²⁶ Following the general trend of Buddhist apocrypha, its purported author is the famed translator Kumārajīva, but the true writer is unknown. The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* became quickly associated with the *Golden Light Sūtra*, likely because of their similar messages and because the latter’s first Chinese translation dates to approximately the same time.²⁷

Despite the fact that the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*’ Chinese origin was largely suspected, it was still used a great deal on account of its significance to supporting imperial rule. The monk Bukong’s eighth century “retranslation,” which was really an adaptation of the fifth-century text to better suit contemporary Tang Chinese interests, reflects his esoteric bias and seems to have settled the issue of its authenticity.²⁸ As this version was not created until 765, though, it has no bearing on the development of the national protection monasteries and convents.²⁹ However, Kūkai brought this version back to Japan with him in the early ninth century and it became significant in both Shingon and Tendai sects as well in further national protection rites and rituals.³⁰

between “legitimate” and “counterfeit,” but rather recognizing that ancient and medieval Chinese Buddhists *were* making this distinction. For a more complete discussion on the roots and meanings of the term “apocrypha” as well as a more detailed defense of the use of the word, see Robert E. Buswell, Jr., “Introduction: Prolegomenon to the Study of Buddhist Apocryphal Scriptures,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1990).

²⁶ Orzech, *Politics*, 108.

²⁷ Orzech, *Politics*, 116,

²⁸ Orzech, *Politics*, 77.

²⁹ Orzech, *Politics*, 135.

³⁰ Orzech, *Politics*, 205.

It is unclear whether its spurious reputation kept the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* from becoming officially part of the *kokubunji* system. However, while not included in the titles of temples dedicated to protecting the nation, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was nonetheless on par with the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* with regards to its purported salvific abilities and its importance in Japanese history.³¹ The first mention we see of all three *sūtras* recited concurrently is in 806 when Emperor Heizei (774-824; r. 806-809)³² ordered all monks read and recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in addition to the previously stipulated *Lotus Sūtra* and *Golden Light Sūtra* when on their annual retreats.³³ He also ordered the *kokubunji* monks to recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in addition to the *Golden Light Sūtra* for national protection.³⁴ As will be examined in Chapter 3, this connection between the *kokubunji* and these three *sūtras* may have influenced Saichō and Kūkai as they established their Tendai and Shingon sects in the early ninth century.

Unlike the *Golden Light Sūtra*, in which its national protection promise is but one of several themes, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' primary message is that proper recitation will result in local deities and their retinues coming to a country's defense. Its

³¹ For example, Emperor Shōmu and Empress Kōmyō's daughter, Empress Kōken, in 756 had one hundred seats established in the head temple of the provincial monasteries, Tōdaiji, in accordance with the hundred-seat ritual as enumerated in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. De Visser, 1:118. In 806 Emperor Heizei ordered the *kokubunji* add the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* to the *Golden Light Sūtra* as the two most important national protection texts. This is the first official connection we see between the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *kokubunji*. De Visser, 1:418.

³² De Visser, 1:418-419.

³³ According to tradition, the Buddha established the annual Buddhist retreat in response to complaints that monks and nuns were killing microscopic organisms as they traveled during India's three-month rainy period. Therefore, the rainy season became a resting period. Jonathan S. Walters, "Festivals and Calendrical Rituals," *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Reference, USA, 2004), 284-288. For more on the retreat's history in India, China and Japan, see De Visser, 1:410-423.

³⁴ De Visser, 1:418-419.

secondary purpose is to illuminate the various stages along the bodhisattva path, which one translator, Charles Orzech, claims is part of both the fifth- and eighth-century versions' intention to associate kings and bodhisattvas. Orzech asserts that the language chosen in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* purposely plays upon Chinese homonyms, homophones and other linguistic subtleties (which Orzech categorizes as “puns”) to advocate a connection between *cakravartin* kings protecting their states and bodhisattvas protecting the “Buddha-fruit.”³⁵

National Protection – The *Lotus Sūtra*

At first glance the *Lotus Sūtra* does not appear to include any references to protection, at least in terms of national security. Its clearest protection promises are in Chapter 25, “The Bodhisattva Sound-Observer,” which focuses on the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara’s (Ch: Guanyin; Jp: Kannon) pervasive salvific power. While the rest of the *sūtra*’s subtle protection promises are restricted only to those who are venerating this “king of *sūtras*,” Avalokiteśvara’s vow has absolutely nothing to do with the *Lotus Sūtra*.³⁶ The only requirement to be saved is to call upon him. This simplicity and all-encompassing promise of rescue in the *Lotus Sūtra* makes it one of the primary textual

³⁵ Charles D. Orzech, “Puns on the Humane King: Analogy and Application in an East Asian Application.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 1 (1989): 20.

³⁶ Although the Buddha does state that, when preaching the Dharma (which could be referring to the *Lotus Sūtra*), Avalokiteśvara is able to change his appearance based on which form will best appeal to the person he is proselytizing to – a clear use of *upāya* as described in Chapter 2, “Expedient Devices.” It is worth noting, though, that this transformative ability is missing in Chapter 25’s verse account, which many scholars believe is the original text upon which the lengthier prose is based. It is possible the prose’s authors purposely included this *upāya* theme to better situate this chapter within the *Lotus Sūtra*. Hurvitz, 314-315, 22-47, xvii.

sources of Avalokiteśvara’s pervasive cult throughout East Asia.³⁷ This chapter includes very specific examples of situations he can interfere in – such as when caught in a storm on the ocean, when justly or unjustly imprisoned, or when trying to conceive – thus demonstrating his power and diversity.³⁸

This chapter stands in marked contrast with the *sūtra*’s few other promises of protection and defense, which are – perhaps intentionally – vague regarding just what the *Lotus Sūtra* will guard people from. For example, in Chapter 10 “Preachers of the Dharma,” we see the following promise concerning anyone who remembers, copies or recites even so much as a single verse of the *Lotus Sūtra*, particularly during the degeneration of the law (Ch: *mofa*; Jp: *mappō*):

O Medicine King, be it known that after the extinction of the Thus Come One, those who can write it, hold it, read and recite it, make offerings to it, or for others preach it the Thus Come One shall cover with garments [i.e. protect them]. They shall also benefit from the protective mindfulness of Buddhas now in other quarters.³⁹

The other protection promises are generally along these same lines. The essential message is that the *Lotus Sūtra* will take care of whoever takes care of it. Only in the final chapter do we see a protective promise somewhat reminiscent of those included in the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, as will be laid out below. Like the other two national protection texts, in this chapter we see a single deity (the bodhisattva Samantabhadra) (Ch: Puxian; Jp: Fugen) coming forward to offer protection and aid.

³⁷ For other scriptural references to Avalokiteśvara see Chapter 1 “Scriptural Sources for the Cult of Kuan-yin,” p. 31-92 in Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

³⁸ Hurvitz, 311-315.

³⁹ Hurvitz, 178.

In the last five hundred years, in the midst of a muddied, evil age, if there is anyone who receives and keeps this scriptural Canon, I will guard and protect him, keep him from decline and care, enable him to gain tranquility, and prevent those who seek to get the better of it from doing so.... If that person, whether walking or standing, reads and recites this scripture, at that time I, mounted on a white elephant-king with six tusks, together with a great multitude of bodhisattvas will go to that place and, personally revealing my body, make offerings to him, guard and protect him, and comfort his thoughts.⁴⁰

These meager references alone might not be enough to explain the *Lotus Sūtra*'s inclusion as one of the three *sūtras* for the protection of the Japanese nation, but when taken in consideration with the repentance rituals built around the *Meditation Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra*'s use as a protective text becomes clearer.

National Protection – The *Golden Light Sūtra*

Of the three texts, the *Golden Light Sūtra* is the most direct as to why, how and who can save an entire realm as well as the requirements needed to attract these deities' attention. This promise of divine protection for any country that properly upholds this *sūtra* occurs in the form of a conversation between the Buddha and the cosmic *deva* kings of the four directions. Each side goes back and forth six times stating the beneficial effects that will happen to those who properly venerate the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the resulting benefits.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hurvitz, 333.

⁴¹ 1) Four Kings: Reading the *Golden Light Sūtra* empowers the Four *Deva* Kings and their retinues. They will end any oppressions occurring in any area the text is in. Whatever honor, protection or blessing an earthly king bestows upon a member of the *sa gha* who enters his domain with the sutra the Four *Deva* Kings will amplify and will grant that same honor, protection or blessing upon the king. Buddha: Considering their devotion to peace and welfare, the Four *Deva* Kings certainly have both the ability and inclination to carry this promise out.

Similar to the *Lotus Sūtra*, a prerequisite for receiving the Four *Deva Kings*' protection is keeping and venerating the *Golden Light Sūtra*. In each of the six exchanges, the *Deva Kings* specifically state that the king first must hear the *sūtra* and second must protect the *sa gha* who keep the text. The *sūtra*'s intended audience is not the Buddhist community at large, but very specifically those who are protecting and promoting the *Golden Light Sūtra*, namely monarchs and monastics.

The *Golden Light Sūtra* emphasizes a mutually dependent relationship between the *sa gha* and the state. This connection becomes clearer in the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s treatise on kings and right rule in its twelfth chapter. The Four *Deva Kings* can prevent warfare and invasion, but the balance of nature is entirely dictated by an earthly king's

2) **Four Kings:** Whatever earthly king follows the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s twelfth chapter, "Instruction concerning Divine Kings," he will magnify the Four *Deva Kings*' power. The Four *Deva Kings* will prevent any hostile countries from invading the protected kingdom by causing internal and external wars to erupt there. They will force any invading army to turn back. **Buddha:** The Four *Deva Kings* will cause all kings to be content with their realms and only gain kingship based on karmic reward. As a result of this pervasive peace, the continent will flourish and nature will be in balance. Everyone will be healthy, wealthy and happy. This will affect future rebirths, which, for the most part, will be in the god-realms.

3) **Four Kings:** If a king wants to have his family protected, he should place himself in an inferior position to a monk that he must look upon as a teacher and from him hear the *Golden Light Sūtra*. He must then look upon his wife, children and harem with affection and happiness. **Buddha:** If the king looks upon the monk not only as his teacher but also as the Buddha himself, he will establish the seeds of merit to protect himself, his loved ones and his entire realm. He will also forever shut out any possibility of being reborn into one of the three lower realms and will establish numerous rebirths with the power of Brahma-kings, Śakra and *cakravartin* kings.

4) **Four Kings:** If, in addition to hearing the text and honoring the *sa gha*, a king purifies his palace for and hears the sutra with the Four *Deva Kings*, gives away part of his merit, and spreads perfume just before the sutra's reading, pleasant-smelling flowers and gold lights will appear. These will attract the attention of several high-ranking gods, among them Brahma, Śakra and Sarasvatī. **Buddha:** The flowers and bright lights will attract innumerable gods and *asuras*. Millions of buddhas will appear and predict that the teacher-monk preaching the sutra will gain many powers, do many awe-inspiring things, and will help many millions of people escape the cycle of birth and rebirth to become buddhas.

5) **Four Kings:** If there is a king who does not honor the *sa gha*, does not properly revere the text, and does not increase the power of the Four *Deva Kings*, they will neglect the area. Disputes will arise, nature will be out of balance and foreign armies will destroy the kingdom. **Buddha:** The Four *Deva Kings* must defend and help the *sa gha* so that they might be protected and be at peace to preach and explain the *Golden Light Sūtra*.

6) **Four Kings:** Offer praise to the Buddha by identifying many of his buddha marks. **Buddha:** States the *Golden Light Sūtra* must be protected and summarizes its primary qualities as laid out in the exchanges above. Emmerick, 25-44.

virtue. Even then, they will restrict their help to those kings who properly uphold the text's "Instruction Concerning Divine Kings." The only real protection against disasters is to prevent them from even occurring. The only apparent way to keep problems at bay is for a king to continually act virtuously. Once calamities begin, though, there is no mention of how to aright the balance.

National Protection – The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*

Luckily for earthly kings, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* can fill the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s obvious gap of how to end or undo cataclysmic occurrences. Like the *Golden Light Sūtra*, this text emphasizes the interdependence of *sa gha* and state, promotes the divine nature of kings and has a means for protecting the state from not only warfare but also natural disasters. Unlike the *Golden Light Sūtra*, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* does not place the blame for the chaotic state of nature solely upon earthly kings. Rather, the Buddha says the Seven Difficulties⁴² are a result of unfilial behavior and from kings and bureaucrats not practicing the "Correct Teaching."⁴³ Under the Mandate of Heaven, any one of these Seven Difficulties could indicate that a king had lost his divine support and therefore should be replaced so as to restore order and balance to the cosmos. Buddhist ritual as laid out in scriptures such as the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* provides a means for understanding, preventing and counteracting such disasters. Whether a king is virtuous or

⁴² The Seven Difficulties as stated in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* are: 1) Abnormal signs from the sun or moon such as they lose their courses, turn unusual colors, are eclipsed or are surrounded by halos; 2) Stars lose their courses and planets or comets appear during the day; 3) Conflagrations and epidemics; 4) Seasonal aberrations; 5) Violent winds; 6) Excessive heat or drought; 7) Rebels, attacks from within and without country borders and mass killing. Orzech, *Politics*, 266-267. For variations in the fifth century version, see p. 284-285.

⁴³ Orzech, *Politics*, 267.

correctly upholds the law, though, is essentially irrelevant in light of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' hundred-seat ritual. No matter the circumstances, the text maintains this ritual can correct anything.

The heart of the hundred-seat ritual is the text's recitation. In the fifth chapter, "Protecting the State," the gathered kings are told to establish a ritual area with one hundred buddha images, one hundred bodhisattva images and one hundred seats for one hundred dharma masters. Various sacrificial offerings should be placed there and twice a day the masters should expound the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. The end result is that local deities will come forward with their minions and they will protect the state even if it is "on the brink of chaos."⁴⁴

Unlike the *Lotus Sūtra* or the *Golden Light Sūtra*, though, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' protective deities are not identified as Buddhist.⁴⁵ This is probably a reflection of the text's Chinese origin: the apocryphon's creators are accounting for and making use of local deities already in the area.⁴⁶ However, the text readily admits that, while the state will be saved, these spirits' chaotic nature will corrupt and damage the country and the people. Therefore everyone should recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*.

⁴⁴ Orzech, *Politics*, 245.

⁴⁵ While there are no specific mentions of Buddhist deities in the fifth chapter where we see the hundred-seats ritual described, in the seventh chapter the Buddha commands the Five *Deva* Kings of the directions to protect Buddhist countries. At first glance this section appears to correspond with the *Golden Light Sūtra* and merely accounts for a change in Chinese geomancy that incorporated the center into the cardinal directions. However, the fifth-century text does not mention the Five *Deva* Kings but rather invokes the "great-howl bodhisattvas." Bukong probably changed the great-howl bodhisattvas to the Five *Deva* Kings both because they were more familiar figures and because it makes the text more similar to the *Golden Light Sūtra*. This change was possibly in accordance with Bukong's attempt to legitimize the apocryphal *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. Orzech, *Politics*, 286.

⁴⁶ Who these "local deities" are is not specified.

The result will be wealth, happiness and the erasure of all transgressions.⁴⁷ This could be part of the explanation for the *sūtra*'s distribution throughout the Japanese's countryside in multiple temples, especially in *kokubunji*, that were all commanded to perform the hundred-seat ritual.⁴⁸ However, unlike the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras*, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* does not insist on its preservation or replication in exchange for its protection. This could perhaps be part of the reason it was not included in the *kokubunji* system: enshrining the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was not necessary to capitalize on its protective powers.

Kingship – The *Lotus Sūtra*

The *Lotus Sūtra* does not directly address earthly kings, unlike the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, but it does include references to monarchs that give some insight into royalty's perceived eminence at the time of its composition. Much of the assembly itself is composed of kings from various types of beings. This esteemed gathering lends the *Lotus Sūtra* an element of social prestige to demonstrate its message is significant enough to attract such elevated beings.

Royalty's importance is also emphasized in some of the narratives. One of the most important parables in the text involves a young *nāga* princess who aptly demonstrates the *sūtra*'s power by instantly transforming into a buddha. The subtle suggestion is that, although she has three negative attributes (age, gender and species)

⁴⁷ Orzech, *Politics*, 245-246.

⁴⁸ We do have at least one reference to the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* being read by all people, from the priests to the peasants, in the tenth century. De Visser, 1:189.

conflicting with her buddha potential, at the same time she is a relatively important person. It may be that her position allowed her to be in a situation where she could hear the Buddha teach the *Lotus Sūtra* or that, since her prominent birth is directly related to her past karmic deeds, she is at least somewhat spiritually advanced.⁴⁹ Emperor Shōmu may have chosen the *Lotus Sūtra* for the *kokubun-niji* based on this story and its applicability to women, but there is nothing in this narrative to suggest why the *Lotus Sūtra* became a national protection *sūtra* nor why the *kokubun-niji* were called the “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin.”⁵⁰

We also see a few references to *cakravartins* that demonstrate a twofold understanding of perfect and imperfect wheel-turning kings.⁵¹ While the latter is understandably comparatively weaker and less prominent, this is the type of *cakravartin* the Buddha chooses to compare with himself. In this story, a *cakravartin* gives away all his possessions to his soldiers as reward for helping him conquer his realm. However, he does not and cannot give away the pearl atop his topknot, which signifies his rank. Eventually, at the proper time, he does bestow it to his soldiers. The Buddha compares the *cakravartin* with himself and the pearl to the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁵²

⁴⁹ Hurvitz, 199-201; For more on the *nāga* king’s daughter, see also Yoshida Kazuhiko, “The Enlightenment of the Dragon King’s Daughter in *The Lotus Sūtra*,” trans. Margaret H. Childs, in *Engendering Faith*, ed. Barbara Ruch (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 297-324.

⁵⁰ See Yoshida, “Dragon King’s Daughter,” 305.

⁵¹ The different levels of *cakravartins* are also in the introductory chapter where they are differentiated from “petty kings.” Hurvitz, 3. John Strong draws out this seemingly minor reference and states that this reflects a three-fold understanding of kings: 1) a *cakravartin* king that rules over all four continents (*caturdvīpacakravartin*), 2) a lower *cakravartin* who rules only a single continent and must rely on some form of force (*balacakravartin*), and 3) kings that rule minor areas (*ma alin*). John Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 53-54.

⁵² Hurvitz, 218-224.

Kingship – The *Golden Light Sūtra*

As can be seen in Chapter 12, “Instruction Concerning Divine Kings,” the *Golden Light Sūtra*’s perception of rulers is as divinely recognized beings infused with the essence of the godly divine kings. Because of this dual heavenly and human nature, these godly divine kings see earthly kings as their “sons” who will properly carry out Buddhist law in their realms.⁵³ Their kingly nature is inherent in them from birth and, therefore, only those born as kings can be kings.⁵⁴ The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s author is probably speaking to a kingly audience. On the one hand he emphasizes the earthly king’s indisputable right to rule and on the other indicates that the king still has responsibilities to his people, his domain and to Buddhist law (*dharma*). If the earthly king does not satisfy his heavenly counterparts, he will lose their support and his kingdom will suffer, as will he through loss of family and possibly loss of empire.⁵⁵

The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s divine protection is contingent upon a king’s hearing the text recited and supporting those members of the *sa gha* who keep and propound it.⁵⁶ However, the Four *Deva* Kings do not protect against natural disasters. Only the king’s abiding by and upholding the law can regiment nature’s balance. This is a significant point that the *Golden Light Sūtra*’s authors likely intended for kings to embrace: just as their elevated position was the result of divine designation, heavy responsibilities

⁵³ Emmerick, 61.

⁵⁴ Emmerick, 60-65.

⁵⁵ The list of disasters includes: bad winds and rains, famine, angered gods, lawlessness and destruction, disease, the deaths of the king’s loved ones, ministers and favorite animals, meteors and other inauspicious astrological signs, internal feuding, corruption within the government and the general dissolution of virtue and honesty among the people. Emmerick, 24-44.

⁵⁶ Emmerick, 27.

accompany the rank. Kings are first and foremost servants to their kingdoms and to the *dharma*.

This message of kingly self-sacrifice is reemphasized in multiple *jātaka* stories following the twelfth chapter. The most famous of these tales is in Chapter 17 when the Buddha as Prince Mahāsattva sacrifices himself to a hungry tigress. This act, he claims, was not unusual for him in his search for enlightenment: “Just as I became king or prince, so I sacrificed my body.”⁵⁷ Other *jātakas* in the *Golden Light Sūtra* also contain messages of altruism, such as the opening lines in Chapter 13:

When I became Cakravartin-king then I gave up the earth with its oceans.
I presented the four continents full of jewels to the former Buddhas. And
there is no loved, pleasant object which I did not formerly give up.⁵⁸

Inasmuch as these passages and stories demonstrate the Buddha’s self-sacrifice, they likewise present models for earthly kings to emulate on their paths to buddhahood. This theme is also emphasized in Chapter 12: “Therefore a king should give up his own beloved life but should not give up the Jewel of the Law, by which the world may become blessed.”⁵⁹

Kingship – The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*

Like the other two *sūtras*, there is a sacred element to the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*’ treatment of earthly kings as well. Its assembly includes a variety of beings including gods, members of the *sa gha* and seventeen kings, most prominently King

⁵⁷ Emmerick, 96.

⁵⁸ Emmerick, 65.

⁵⁹ Emmerick, 65.

Prasenajit on whom the chapter on protecting the state is focused. These are, presumably, the benevolent kings of the text's title. Unlike the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras*, though, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' understanding of monarchs incorporates the Chinese idea of the Mandate of Heaven wherein natural disasters and inauspicious astrological phenomena indicate the ruler has lost heaven and nature's support and therefore should be replaced.⁶⁰ But, like the two other *sūtras* reviewed here, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* also portrays kings as having sacred natures. The way a king cares for and protects his kingdom is comparable to the way in which a bodhisattva cares for and protects Buddhist *dharma*. The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' discussion of the bodhisattva path includes four ranks of *cakravartin*.⁶¹ The kingly and bodhisattva paths intersect. A king may also be a bodhisattva and vice versa.⁶²

The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* is not entirely positive towards kings or the interaction between *sa gha* and state, though, as is made apparent in the final chapter. First, the text entrusts itself to kings and not to the *sa gha*, which it characterizes as

⁶⁰ That is not to say that kingship in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* is entirely based on Chinese indigenous ideas. For example, in Chapter 7 the Buddha states that kings have attained their ranks on account of past veneration to buddhas and have been born as kings in order to produce happiness and prosperity. Orzech, *Politics*, 268.

⁶¹ 1) Kings superior in the “ten [grades of] good [faith]” are iron-wheel kings like King Aśoka; they only rule over a single continent (Jambudvīpa). 2) Kings who have “acquired lineage” (presumably a bodhisattva lineage along the ten stages) are copper-wheel kings who rule over two continents. 3) Kings at the “stage of innate lineage” are silver-wheel kings who rule over three continents. 4) Gold-wheel kings are “firm in [faith] and merit” in their lineages and rule over all four continents. Orzech, *Politics*, 231. See also Strong, *Aśoka*, 51.

⁶² While there is a chapter devoted to the bodhisattva path, the association between bodhisattvas and kings is not immediately clear. In his textual analysis, though, Orzech demonstrates that this connection is made through linguistic “puns” wherein a single word is used in regards to the actions of both kings and bodhisattvas. For example, the Chinese word *hu* contains the implications of both “protect” and “nurture.” Both of these connotations are implied, establishing a direct parallel between kings who “protect/nurture” their states and bodhisattvas who “protect/nurture” the Buddha-fruit. Orzech, *Politics*, 95-96; Orzech “Puns on the Humane King.”

corrupt.⁶³ Possibly the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' author is relying on the king's bodhisattva nature to preserve the text in the ages to come. Second, the final chapter unabashedly predicts that the state will eventually control the *sa gha*, which is in opposition to the Buddha's teachings and is a sign of the degeneration of the dharma. Ultimately, the *sa gha* and the state will destroy one another.⁶⁴ This negative perception of the state is reflective of the fifth-century's Buddhist persecution in northern China and the apocrypha's writers' fears for the future.⁶⁵ One of the fifth-century edition's primary motivations appears to be the support and superiority of the *sa gha* in a time of persecution.⁶⁶

Atonement – The *Lotus Sūtra*

For the connection between the *Lotus Sūtra* and atonement, we must look outside the *sūtra* itself and at another text that was perceived as, and indeed presented itself as, the *Lotus Sūtra*'s conclusion. The *Meditation Sūtra* continues the theme from the *Lotus Sūtra*'s final chapter where the bodhisattva Samantabhadra promises to look after those who properly meditate upon this most sacred of texts. Samantabhadra vows that during the age of the law's deterioration he will protect and guard any person receiving and keeping the text. He will personally attend to the devotee and remind him or her of any

⁶³ Orzech, *Politics*, 72; the text predicts future kings will not be able to distinguish between good and bad monks and will be led astray by depending on their examples and not relying on Buddhist law. This is a sign of the end of the dharma. Orzech, *Politics*, 273.

⁶⁴ Orzech, *Politics*, 273-274.

⁶⁵ For more on this, see Orzech's fourth chapter "The End of the Teaching and the Creation of Chinese Buddhism." Orzech, *Politics*, 99-133.

⁶⁶ In Bukong's eighth-century version he flips the focus from attempting to use the state to support the Buddhist community to using the Buddhist community to support the state. Orzech, *Politics*, 138.

forgotten words or verses, thereby preserving the text's integrity. If practitioners meditate upon the *Lotus Sūtra* for three weeks,⁶⁷ Samantabhadra will personally appear upon his white elephant and will teach them a *dhāra ṭi* against which no one can hurt or beguile them. Samantabhadra himself will continually protect them.⁶⁸

When we look at this vow, we see that Samantabhadra's protection bears little resemblance to the act of sheltering a person from harm. Rather, 'protection' in the *Meditation Sūtra* is more akin to spiritual guidance through teaching practitioners how to properly repent of their sinful actions in both this and prior lifetimes. Part of this repentance requires meditating upon and rejecting the impurities accumulated in each of the six sense organs.⁶⁹ By means of this repentance ritual, practitioners and their faculties are purified, resulting in heightened spiritual prowess. It is this repentance and its ensuing purification that will allow people to see Samantabhadra and the other bodhisattvas he calls forth.⁷⁰ The Buddhist figures the practitioners encounter mirror their religious advancement brought by self-reflection and confession. This is the first of three types of repentance mentioned in the *Sūtra on Meditation*.

The second form is reminiscent of repentance in the earliest Buddhist communities, wherein confession and penance was a required part of monastic practice and preserved proper practice and relationships within the *sa gha*.⁷¹ Before starting the

⁶⁷ The *Meditation Sūtra* does admit that it might take some practitioners more time. Those with heavy impediments need to meditate for forty-nine weeks and those with much heavier impediments will need to wait from one to three rebirths before they will see Samantabhadra. Bunnō, 348.

⁶⁸ Hurvitz, 333.

⁶⁹ The six sense organs are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Bunnō, 357-362.

⁷⁰ Bunnō, 348-352.

⁷¹ In his review of repentance and confession in Indian and Chinese Buddhism, David W. Chappell notes that there are three general aims in performing atonement rituals: maintaining or restoring

repentance of the six senses, the practitioner first achieves “the purity of his repentance,” following which Samantabhadra teaches him about his past lifetimes. The practitioner then must repent for his sins through spoken confession. Samantabhadra tells the practitioner how to repent for the evil sensations and attachments accumulated over the years through each sense organ. The *Meditation Sūtra*’s atonement ritual purifies both the senses and karmic misdeeds. This purification heightens spiritual advancement. Atonement in the *Meditation Sūtra*, then, is very clearly connected with Buddhist practice and spiritual skill.

We also see methods for both monastics and laypeople to atone for and absolve any negative karmic consequence associated with even the most serious of offenses. For example, if a “king, a minister, a Brahman, a citizen, an elder, [or] a state official” commits the five deadly sins or slanders the dharma but wishes to avoid falling into the deepest Buddhist hell as a consequence, he must repent. This action will eliminate the bad karma attached to these actions.⁷²

The *Meditation Sūtra* ends with the third form of repentance where the Buddha explains what the “law of repentance of Kshatriyas (warrior and kingly caste) and citizens” is. Even though this law consists of five steps known as the “five repentances,” this is actually a list of proper actions directed towards laypeople and does not involve repentance at all.⁷³ Following this list the *sūtra* predicts that anyone who keeps these

monastic purity, lessening bad karmic effects, and the complete expiation and expunging of karma. David W. Chappell, “Repentance and Confession,” *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 2:721-722.

⁷² Bunnō, 369. For absolution for monastics, see Bunnō, 368-369.

⁷³ The five repentances are: (1) Constantly have the “right mind,” not interfere with monks or those practicing “brahma-conduct,” practice the six reflections, support and venerate the “keeper of the

“five repentances” will be protected by the buddhas and will soon achieve enlightenment.⁷⁴ In this brief section we see the *Meditation Sūtra*’s concern with atonement, kingship and protection, demonstrating the interrelatedness of these three themes.

Atonement – The *Golden Light Sūtra*

The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s repentance ritual is notably different from that in the *Meditation Sūtra*. In the *Meditation Sūtra*, repentance is a religious act brought on by proper veneration of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the confession of past misdeeds. The purification achieved through confession allows the practitioner to attain a higher level of enlightenment. The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s focus is on correcting practitioners’ mindsets and drawing people into proper Buddhist practice. This will then result in beneficial this-worldly effects and in the practitioner’s eventual transformation into a buddha.

The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s repentance theme occurs in the bodhisattva Ruciraketu’s dream focused on a shining golden drum that is the object of veneration of buddhas and practitioners.⁷⁵ A brahmin begins to beat the drum and its sound is manifested apparently not in pounding beats, but rather in confessional verses. Unlike the *Meditation Sūtra*, though, specific sins are not recounted. To make a rather general

Great-vehicle,” remember the doctrine of sutras and the void of the first principle. (2) Reject filial devotion to one’s parents and respect teachers and elders. (3) Rule countries in accordance with the “Righteous Law” and not unfairly oppress their people. (4) Keep the six fast day within their countries and keep their subjects from killing. (5) Believe in the principle of cause and effect, believe in the “way of one reality” and know that the Buddha is not and never will be extinct. Bunnō, 369-370.

⁷⁴ Bunnō, 370.

⁷⁵ Presumably this is the same Ruciraketu who receives the “Instruction Concerning Divine Kings” in Chapter 12. Emmerick, 57-62. See page 40.

comparison, “confession” in the *Golden Light Sūtra* is more similar to a Yom Kippur litany than a Catholic style confessional; it is very broad, all encompassing and does not require the recollection and admission of exact sins or iniquities. It confesses to everything and therefore everything is absolved in both this and previous lifetimes.

There is also a brief request for absolution that is unique to the *Golden Light Sūtra*. The drum states that its mind is troubled because of past misdeeds and asks for the buddhas to forgive its sins and remove the defilement of impurity.⁷⁶ While there is this request to have impurity removed, the *Golden Light Sūtra*’s confessional ritual is more a means of correction than a bodily purification. The drum claims that, through the sound of its beating, it will suppress all evil, woes and poverty in the threefold world. Moreover, the sound of the golden drum will positively affect the abilities and practices of all those who hear it. The drum then bids these people to destroy impurities and act in accordance with Buddhist law.⁷⁷ It also essentially guarantees clean karmic slates and universal dedication to and veneration of the Buddha.⁷⁸ Through the power of the drum, the confessional ritual, the various buddhas and the *Golden Light Sūtra* itself, the drum hopes for a quick attainment of buddhahood.

Atonement – The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*

The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* does not include any specific references to atonement or confession. However, it does not seem to have been used in this manner and

⁷⁶ Emmerick, 12; Chappell, 772.

⁷⁷ Emmerick, 9-10.

⁷⁸ Most of its beneficial promises are on Emmerick, 9. We also see positive effects of this confessional ritual on page 17 wherein a practitioner can transfer his merit to save other beings and remember his previous births.

was left out of Japan's *kokubunji* system wherein atonement seems to have served an important function. Therefore, this absence of repentance in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* does not negatively affect this study on the three national protection *sūtras*. In fact, the lack of a confessional theme may at least partially suggest why the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was not used with the *kokubunji* or *kokubun-niji*.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the Buddhist scriptures that became Japan's three national protection *sūtras*, the *sangokokukyō*. I focused on the themes of protection, kingship and atonement because they are particularly pertinent to state support and likely appealed to monarchs looking for religious themes to defend their terrains as well as their right to rule. Moreover, these topics are consistent with the ways in which all three of these texts were used in Nara Japan's national security system focused on text recitation. These *sūtras*' specific uses for this purpose will be more fully examined in the third chapter.

Considering that the *Lotus Sūtra*'s hardly contains references to national protection, kingship and atonement, at first it might seem strange that it was included in this trio of protective texts. Upon closer inspection, though, we can see that all three of these themes are connected with the *Lotus Sūtra*. For example, this scripture is one of the primary textual sources for Avalokiteśvara's prominent cult throughout East Asia. His all-encompassing compassionate promises of protection undoubtedly aided in the text's perception as a protective scripture. Other references to protection in the *Lotus Sūtra*

demonstrate that it is particularly concerned with its own promotion and preservation. Therefore, anyone reciting or venerating the *Lotus Sūtra* will be protected. These passages at least partially account for the *sūtra*'s widespread copying and distribution throughout Japan. Additionally, the *sūtra* specifically instructs that this is what should be done with it.⁷⁹

The *Lotus Sūtra*'s references to kings are few, but there are enough to establish a generally positive view of sovereigns in the text. There are multiple kings in attendance listening to the *Lotus Sūtra*, indicating both their spiritual advancement and the scripture's own significance in attracting such an esteemed crowd. We also see a prominent story focusing on a young princess belonging to the animal realm who nonetheless surpasses everyone else to become the only person to instantaneously transform into a buddha by virtue of the *Lotus Sūtra*. There are also references to *cakravartin* kings that might have appealed to those earthly rulers who depended upon the *Lotus Sūtra* for legitimation.

For atonement rituals we need to look at the *Lotus Sūtra*'s "concluding" text, the *Meditation Sūtra*. The *Meditation Sūtra*'s repentance rituals' primary theme is purification, both in person and in karmic consequence. This text provides two main repentance rituals. The first purifies the practitioner and progresses his spiritual prowess, a theme whose importance will become clearer in the third chapter when considered in light of indigenous Japanese ideas concerning purity. The second repentance ritual teaches monastics and laypeople alike how to overcome and restore their karmic balances

⁷⁹ For example, the *Lotus Sūtra* directly states that it should be enshrined in a *stūpa*, which we see Emperor Shōmu do in the mid-eighth century. Hurvitz, 178.

even to the point of removing karma that could severely affect future rebirths. A third is referred to as the “law of repentance of Kshatriyas and citizens,” but it is list of right actions that has no apparent connection with repentance.

Of the three texts, the *Golden Light Sūtra* best addresses the three themes looked at here. For national protection, it offers the attention and shelter of the *Deva* Kings of the four directions for those kings who hear the *Golden Light Sūtra* expounded and take care of those members of the *sa gha* who are keeping and reciting the scripture. If the king also pays homage to the *sūtra* in certain ways, his family members and future rebirths will also be positively affected.

The country’s wellbeing is also connected to the text’s treatise on kingship. Here, the *sūtra* reveals that kings have been specially and divinely designated to hold their significant roles. They share the essence of heavenly divine kings who will help keep their realms prosperous and peaceful in return for the earthly kings properly following Buddhist law. This is the only apparent way to protect against national disasters. Even in the case of foreign invasion, which the Four *Deva* Kings promise to protect against, kings must abide by the “Instruction Concerning Divine Kings.”

The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s confessional ritual involves the same king who receives the “Instruction Concerning Divine Kings” later on.⁸⁰ In this section of the text, he dreams of a golden drum, which teaches him a long litany of verses that broadly confess to all manner of sins. The result, according to the text, is that impurities are removed, divine forgiveness is earned (or at least requested), and buddhahood may soon be

⁸⁰ See page 36.

attained. The confessional verses combined with the power of the *Golden Light Sūtra* rectify any irregularities in both Buddhist practice and the behavior of all beings.

The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was written in the midst of the Northern Wei's (386-534) persecution of Buddhism.⁸¹ There is apparent mistrust of both *sa gha* and state and especially their interaction expressed within the text, but at the same time the authors were likely emphasizing Buddhism's advantages to the state. The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* posited a type of spiritual protection similar to the *Golden Light Sūtra's* that accounted for absolutely any calamity and relied on local deities before foreign buddhas. However, because of the chaotic nature of these apparently non-Buddhist, "local spirits," nation-wide recitation of the *sūtra* was necessary to right their negative effects, and for that they would need the *sa gha*.

This claim to counteract any natural disaster was probably designed to appeal to Chinese rulers wary of the Mandate of Heaven. The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* also pulls in Buddhist legitimation by intersecting the natures of kings and bodhisattvas. Through linguistic homophones the text suggests that the way in which a king cares for his kingdom is analogous and parallel to the way a bodhisattva cares for the buddha-fruit. Additionally, a bodhisattva may become any of four levels of *cakravartin* kings. As we will see in the following chapter, this promise of becoming a *cakravartin* king and undisputedly ruling large areas of rich land was a very alluring idea to East Asian rulers who relied on *sūtras*, including these three, to support and expand their realms.

⁸¹ Orzech, *Politics*, 109-111.

Chapter 2 Continental Influences

In this chapter I will look at the relic distributions of King Aśoka of the Mauryan Empire, Emperor Wendi of the Sui dynasty and Empress Wu of the Zhou interregnum. Although there is no known record where Emperor Shōmu lists these specific individuals as inspiring his national protection monasteries and convents, it is reasonable to assume he would have been aware of their legends and histories. Like these three historical figures, Emperor Shōmu used *stūpas* (or, in the case of East Asia, “pagodas”) and provincial temples to unify his realm under a broad religio-political web. There is one major difference between these Indian and Chinese monarchs and Emperor Shōmu, though. King Aśoka, Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu all enshrined relics, whereas Emperor Shōmu enshrined *sūtras*. However, Emperor Shōmu may have used the *sūtras* as relic replacements, which would suggest a closer correlation between his *kokubunji* and the *stūpas* and provincial temples of his continental predecessors. Therefore, I will also look at the possibility of *sūtra* and *dhāra ī* enshrinements in India and China, particularly in relation with Empress Wu.

Following this section on King Aśoka, Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu, I will look at the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in the Sui and Tang periods.¹ It is imprudent to assume that these three texts became Japan’s three national protect *sūtras* based on their messages alone. Therefore, I will examine the historical and cultural significances they acquired in China prior to their becoming the

¹ As my focus is primarily on these rulers’ political uses of these three texts, I am not looking at Buddhist communities’ interpretations and uses of the any of the sutras mentioned herein.

sangokokukyō in Japan.² However, beyond establishing that there is a Chinese precedence for the way these three *sūtras* were used in eighth and ninth century Japan, the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* are not the primary focus for this chapter.

My purpose here is not to establish direct parallels between the above three rulers and Emperor Shōmu by suggesting that the ways they used these three *sūtras* were identical. Rather, there are key themes that suggest Emperor Shōmu copied and adapted these three rulers' relic distributions and *sūtra* veneration for his own, similar purposes. What is important here is the formula rather than the specific data – *how* to use *sūtras* as opposed to *which sūtras* to use.

King Aśoka

King Aśoka ruled the expansive Mauryan Empire that, during his reign, spread from nearly the tip of the Indian subcontinent into modern-day Afghanistan. His sphere of influence extended well into Central Asia and Europe, in large part thanks to the pillars

² Due to the constraints of my paper, I am unable to supplement this information on how the sutras were similarly used in Korea, particularly in relation to national protection. For more on this topic, see Jonathan W. Best, "Buddhism and Polity in Early Sixth-Century Paekche," *Korean Studies*, 26, no. 2 (2002): 165-215; Richard McBride, *Domesticating the Dharma: Buddhist Cults and the Hwaōm Synthesis in Silla Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Mark Harrell, "Sokkaram: Buddhist Monument and Political Statement in Korea," *World Archaeology*, 27, no. 2, Buddhist Archaeology (1995): 318-335; V.M. Tikhonov, "The World of Deities and the Power of the Sovereign: State, Buddhism, and Local Cults of the 6th-7th Centuries," in *Koreja. Shornik Statej. K 80-letju so Dnja Rozhdenja Professora Mikhala Nikolaevicha Paka*. (Moscow: Muravei Publishing Company, 1998); Narendra M. Pankaj, "The Life and Times of the Silla King Chinhung: Asoka as a Role Model," *Korean Culture* 17, no. 1 (1996): 12-23; Narendra M. Pankaj, "The Buddhist Transformation of Silla Kingship: Buddha as a King and King as a Buddha," *Transactions of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 70 (1995): 15-35; Vladimir Tikhonov, "Hwarang Organization: Its Functions and Ethics," *Korea Journal* 38, no. 2 (1998): 318-338; Lewis R. Lancaster and C.S. Yu, eds., *Introduction of Buddhism to Korea: New Cultural Patterns* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989).

inscribed with Buddhist principles he established throughout his realm as well as to the missionaries he sent throughout Asia.³ As a result, even though King Aśoka lived well before the time periods I am looking at, his historical and legendary status was well known. For that reason, before looking at Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu’s relic distributions I will first focus on the man from whom they drew their inspiration.

The primary source for King Aśoka’s legendary status is the *Aśokāvadāna*, a Sanskrit text written circa second century CE that was translated into Chinese and popularized by the time of Emperor Wendi’s Renshou relic distribution from 601-604.⁴ While in modern scholarship King Aśoka is largely known for his pillars and their content, John Strong notes that until John Prinsep decoded Brahmi in the mid- nineteenth century, the script these edicts were written in had been long forgotten.⁵ The pillars then were considered not sources of moral instruction in the time periods considered here, but rather as “ancient signposts piously erected by King Aśoka for the benefit of travellers and pilgrims.”⁶ Accordingly, in this study I am concerned less with the King Aśoka of history than I am with the King Aśoka of legend – namely, the version of him that Emperor Wendi, Empress Wu and Emperor Shōmu would have known through accounts such as the *Aśokāvadāna*.

³ See John Strong, “The Legend and Its Background” in *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3-37.

⁴ Jinhua Chen, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics*, (Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull’Asia Orientale, 2002), 75.

⁵ Strong cites the travelogues of famous Chinese pilgrims Faxian (ca. 337-ca. 422) and Xuanzang (602-644) to support his claim that the Brahmi script was likely lost within a few generations after Aśoka’s time; neither of their “translations” corresponds with any of the known Aśokan pillars and they appear to be more reflective of Chinese Aśokan legends of their times. Strong, *Aśoka*, 6-8.

⁶ Strong, *Aśoka*, 8.

There are two main themes I will focus on in this section: King Aśoka as a lower-level *cakravartin* king and his purported eighty-four thousand reliquaries. Both of these topics are significant in his transformation from a tyrannical despot to an ideal Buddhist ruler. As such, they also made King Aśoka a prime example for Emperor Wendi, Empress Wu, and Emperor Shōmu to model themselves after. All four had controversial rises to power and ruled large domains inhabited by peoples of different ethnicities, languages and cultures. The legendary King Aśoka used Buddhism to unite his vast empire. His *stūpas* extended his political influence and promoted his largesse even into rural areas. And, even though the Mauryan Empire did not last long after his death, King Aśoka's reputation as a premier *cakravartin* endured. This last point may have been particularly attractive to the likes of Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu; despite the vast death and destruction wrought in his rise to power, King Aśoka overcame the sins of his past to gain eternal eminence.

King Aśoka the *Cakravartin*

In Chapter 1 I identified themes in the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* related to kingship and right rule. Unlike the examples in these *sūtras*, though, in King Aśoka we see a mytho-historical version of a righteous king. Because of King Aśoka, becoming a *cakravartin* was not simply the stuff of legend; it was an attainable goal. Moreover, considering the mass bloodshed that accompanied his ascension and his kingdom's vast expansion, King Aśoka proved that a ruler did not necessarily have to always abide by right rule to become a *cakravartin*.

John Strong identifies multiple *cakravartin* systems involving different hierarchical stages. One of the most popular is the four-stage *cakravartin* system that we saw in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*.⁷ Each of the four *cakravartin* kings has a metal wheel. The type of metal determines the size of their domains as well as the ease with which they will conquer their terrains. Gold rules four continents, silver rules three, copper rules two, and iron rules one. A golden-wheel *cakravartin* needs merely to appear in his lands and all local kings will instantaneously succumb, whereas an iron-wheel *cakravartin* needs to display at least some show of force. According to Strong, the Chinese translation of the *Aśokāvadāna* identifies King Aśoka as “a king of the Iron Wheel ruling over Jambudvīpa.”⁸ We can logically assume, then, that Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu viewed King Aśoka as an iron-wheel *cakravartin*. When we look at their edicts and their actions, we can see that they too had aspirations of becoming worldwide wheel-turning rulers.

King Aśoka’s Eighty-four Thousand Reliquaries

Strong notes that, according to all stories about him, King Aśoka’s change from despot to dharma king (*dharmāśoka*) occurred only after he gathered together the Buddha’s relics and enshrined them throughout his realm in eighty-four thousand *stūpas*.⁹ In other words, his transformation occurred after he had literally spread both the

⁷ Strong cites Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* as having the clearest example of this four-tiered *cakravartin* system. Strong, *Aśoka*, 51.

⁸ Strong, *Aśoka*, 50. Jambudvīpa is the continent an iron-wheel *cakravartin* rules over and generally corresponds to India. King Aśoka’s actual domain included all but the tip of India, likely supporting his portrayal as an iron-wheel *cakravartin*.

⁹ Strong, *Aśoka*, 118.

Buddha's and, by association, his own presence to the far reaches of his domain.¹⁰ The new reliquaries showed King Aśoka's munificence by making the Buddha's relics more accessible to his subjects. The *stūpas* also established his spiritual authority as a wheel-turning king by reclaiming these relics from their initial reliquaries and redistributing them as he pleased.

Strong claims the number eighty-four thousand is significant for two reasons: first, it is the traditional number of atoms in a person's body; second, it equals the total number of sections in the Buddha's teachings.¹¹ For Strong, King Aśoka was trying to symbolically "reconstruct" the Buddha's body and "reawaken" him through the simultaneous enshrinement and dedication of the relics *stūpas*.¹² For the purposes of this study, though, it is probably more relevant to note that this is the same number of *stūpas* Medicine King built to enshrine the relics of the buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon in the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹³

Sui Wendi

The founder of the Sui Dynasty was not the first Chinese emperor to profit by Buddhism's unifying powers or its joint spiritual and political authority, but his relic

¹⁰ Strong, *Aśoka*, 118.

¹¹ Strong, *Aśoka*, 117.

¹² Strong, *Aśoka*, 115, 117.

¹³ Leon Hurvitz, *The Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sūtra) Translated from the Chinese of Kumārajīva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 297. This is not the only connection between King Aśoka and Medicine King. In *Relics of the Buddha*, John Strong notes the similarities in the actions and names of Aśoka (also known as Priyadarśa) and the *Lotus Sūtra*'s Medicine King (Sarvasattvapriyadarśana). Chapter 23 of the *Lotus Sūtra* tells how in a past life, the Medicine King demonstrated his devotion to the sutra by drinking resin, wrapping himself in flammable cloth and torching himself. Strong notes that there is also at least one tradition of Aśoka similarly soaking himself in scented oils and lighting himself on fire in devotion to Buddha relics. John Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 103.

distributions at the beginning of the seventh century provide key clues into the subsequent veneration and enshrinement of the *sangokokukyō* in Japan. Like King Aśoka, Yang Jian also rose to power in the midst of bloodshed and controversy. He carried out a coup to keep his son-in-law, the king of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581), from favoring a new consort over Yang's daughter. Yang then set about establishing his new empire, in which he became Sui Wendi. With no other claim to sovereignty, Emperor Wendi relied on multiple religious themes, particularly Buddhist, to legitimate his rule.¹⁴ His series of three relic distributions (from the years 601-604)¹⁵ provided the Sui emperor a unique way of supporting and promoting Buddhism while also integrating Chinese religious themes and traditions to establish himself as a legitimate ruler.¹⁶ In addition to

¹⁴ In addition to Buddhism, we also see Taoist and indigenous Chinese mountain cult beliefs influencing Emperor Wendi's reign and relic distribution. For example, the initial enshrinement date coincided with the last of the Taoist "Three Primary Days." Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 58. There were also multiple reports of auspicious signs that occurred as a result of the synchronized enshrinements, reflective of the Chinese belief in "sympathetic response" (*gangying*). James Robson, "Buddhism and the Chinese Marchmount System: A Case Study of the Southern Marchmount," in *Religion and Chinese Society*, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong and Paris: The Chinese University Press and École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004), 349. Just after claiming power, Sui Wendi established Buddhist monasteries at the bases of all of the Five Marchmounts, mountains that were particularly significant to Chinese monarchs. These marchmount temples were also chosen to hold some of the relics in the Renshou relic distribution. Robson also notes that at least on one occasion a local deity came out to greet the relic and praise the Buddha's presence on his mountain. Robson, 348, 349. For Sui Wendi's rise to power, see Arthur F. Wright, "The Sui Dynasty (581-617)," in *Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank 3, no. 1 (Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 49-149 and Arthur Wright, "The Formation of Sui Ideology, 581-604," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957).

¹⁵ Emperor Wendi enshrined one hundred seven relics over the course of the three campaigns. Chen, "Śarīra and Scepter," 41.

¹⁶ The fact that the first relic distribution occurred on the last of the "Three Primary Days," significant dates in Taoism suggests an interesting correspondence of Buddhism and Taoism. The following two relic distributions occurred on the Buddha's birthday. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 58.

establishing the presence of the Buddha all throughout his realm, Emperor Wendi was also quite literally marking his territory.¹⁷

Sui Wendi's Relic Distributions

Although the Sui dynasty did not last for very long, it was productive. Within the first ten years of claiming control, Emperor Wendi managed to reunite a country that had been divided for nearly three hundred years.¹⁸ Buddhism provided a convenient means of incorporating the entire imperium under a nation-wide religio-political web. Buddhism's presence was already pervasive throughout the northern and southern halves and received the patronage of both elites and commoners. With regional, cultural, racial and linguistic differences, Buddhism was one point of cohesion. Emperor Wendi took advantage of and systematized this commonality through the erection of pagodas and temples housing Buddha relics he was purportedly given prior to his coup d'état.¹⁹ By the time Sui Wendi came to power, the use of Buddhism for the protection and promotion of the state was already well established; the difference was the degree to which Emperor Wendi spread Buddhism and used it to unite his expansive realm.²⁰ The relic distribution also aided

¹⁷“While the relic distributors promoted the legitimacy of the Sui government and supported the Sui expansionistic ambitions, they also spread some profound and time-honored Buddhist practices to every corner of the empire.” Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 5.

¹⁸ The difficulty Emperor Wendi faced was not simply splicing together two halves of an original whole; there were extreme regional differences among these vast areas of land. In addition to the more than two centuries the northern and southern halves had been separated, within the divisions themselves there was even greater estrangement and dissent.

¹⁹ The vague story accompanying how Emperor Wendi received the relics is found in Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 63. For more on the disunity and Buddhism's pervasiveness in northern and southern China, see Wright, “The Sui Dynasty,” 49-55.

²⁰ Mark Edward Lewis, “The Suppression of the Three Stages Sect: Apocrypha as a Political Issue,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 210; Orzech, *Politics*, 116.

Emperor Wendi's expansionist aims as he endeavored to reestablish the cohesion, tributary relations and perimeters of the idealized Han Empire.²¹

We can identify at least the four following intentions behind Emperor Wendi's relic distribution: first, to establish himself as a *cakravartin* king in King Aśoka's model; second, to unite his country under this network of temples and pagodas while also spreading the Buddha's, and his, presence throughout the countryside; third, to appeal to the Buddhist community that he was relying upon for protection and repentance rituals; and fourth, to expand his domain as part of his expansionist agenda.

This first point, that Sui Wendi was modeling his relic distribution after King Aśoka's, is established with the endeavor's beginning in 601. Emperor Wendi's edict calling for the campaign specifically states that methods and procedures should correspond with those King Aśoka used.²² Associating a Chinese ruler with King Aśoka did not compete with the Sinocentric view of the time. As T.H. Barrett and Erik Zürcher have both noted, to give more credence to Chinese Buddhist holy sites, which likely originated as non-Buddhist religious locales, the theory arose that as a *cakravartin* King Aśoka had at one time ruled China.²³ Furthermore, purportedly five of his eighty-four thousand enshrined relics were in China.²⁴

In his study on Emperor Wendi's relic distribution, Jinhua Chen notes that the Aśokan *cakravartin* king motif was strengthened by a story that at an excavation for one of these reliquaries, a distributor found a written message stating that this was the

²¹ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 77-78.

²² Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 75.

²³ T.H. Barrett, "Stūpa, Sūtra and Śāriṃa," 14-15; E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959): 277-280.

²⁴ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 118.

location for “the Buddha Pagoda of the Wheel-turning King.”²⁵ In effect, the very earth itself was complying with the relic distribution and declaring that Sui Wendi was a *cakravartin* king.²⁶ Despite the Buddhist nature of this story, the idea of uncovering writing indicating nature’s opinions and intentions is a very common Taoist motif and, in this case, signifies Emperor Wendi had the Mandate of Heaven.²⁷

The second point is that Sui Wendi used the relic distribution to spread the Buddha’s presence in order to unify the country and extend his influence. Emperor Wendi faced the daunting task of ruling over a recently reunited kingdom still divided by regional, linguistic and cultural variations. Spreading a single religious ideology over the expanse was a means of establishing some uniform element. Like King Aśoka, the relic enshrinements provided an excuse to establish both a religious and political presence throughout the country. We can see a definite political agenda with the relic enshrinements. Jinhua Chen notes that, according to records of the event, everyone who

²⁵ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 75. The following passage by Arthur Wright aptly summarizes Sui Wendi’s point in emulating Aśoka’s relic distribution: “The whole galaxy of Aśokan symbols clearly was meant to impress the population with the glory, the piety, and the divine mission of the Sui monarch, and the widespread ceremonies, including nobles, clergy, officialdom, and commoners, were meant to dramatize the unity of the empire in a common faith and a common allegiance to a divinely appointed ruler.” Wright, “The Formation of Sui Ideology,” 102.

²⁶ Emperor Wendi’s claims to being a *cakravartin* date back to his initial assumption of power over northern China in 581. He established temples and steles at significant battle scenes and issued a statement declaring that he won those battles with the armed might of a *cakravartin* for the purpose of spreading the ideals of the Buddha. He also ordered services for the souls of those who had died in battle. Arthur Wright notes that these actions accomplished at least two significant purposes: first, Sui Wendi was claiming supreme power and justification of his actions by virtue of being a *cakravartin*, and second, he was promoting a new attitude towards dying in battle. This more honorable take on potentially joining the war dead is particularly significant when considering Emperor Wendi’s later expansion attempts. Wright “The Formation of Sui Ideology,” 97.

²⁷ We also see his merging Chinese and Buddhist themes in his adopting the title “Bodhisattva Son of Heaven.” Wright, “The Formation of Sui Ideology,” 98.

performed the repentance rituals connected with the relic distributions converted to Buddhism and pledged their loyalty to the Sui government.²⁸

As well as housing relics of the Buddha, these temples and pagodas reinforced Buddhism's presence in their areas. The thirty monks assigned to each of those temples housing the relics were ordered to actively proselytize on top of caring for the relics and the temple compounds.²⁹ These monks, many of whom would have been trained in large temple complexes often within easy distance of major metropolitan areas like Chang'an and Luoyang, also served as a means of connecting the country's peripheries to its hubs. Inasmuch as these monks and temples reflected religious authority in the areas they were in, they also reflected the political authority of the person who had ordered them established there.

The third point is that this relic distribution supported and appealed to the Buddhist community Sui Wendi was relying upon for rituals, particularly in relation to national protection. While Emperor Wendi's realm seemed relatively secure by the time of the distribution campaign, he still faced multiple threats from all sides, particularly from the Turkish tribes to the west and the Korean kingdom of Koguryō in the east.³⁰ At this time we see not only the use of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in support of the Sui state but also some of the clearest attempts at authenticating this Chinese apocryphon, likely on account of its significance to the government.³¹ Emperor Wendi's Buddhist

²⁸ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 59. As we will see below, there is an apparent connection between this repentance ritual and the *Golden Light Sūtra's* repentance ritual.

²⁹ Robson, 347.

³⁰ See Wright, "The Sui Dynasty" and "The Formation of Sui Ideology."

³¹ The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was included in Fajing's 594 catalogue of Buddhist scriptures, which was intended to legitimize Buddhism at this time. It is worth noting that the *Sūtra for Benevolent*

patronage was also a marked difference from the fifth-century persecution under the Northern Wei – the rulers who had first ennobled the Yang family – and the Northern Zhou’s persecution from 574-578 just prior to Yang Jian’s grab for power.³² Despite the debt he might have owed the now defunct Northern Wei and the loyalty he had once shown the Northern Zhou, Emperor Wendi was following more in the traditions of the southern Chen Dynasty (557-589), who had identified themselves as bodhisattvas and promoted the readings of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* for the protection of the country.³³

In addition to protection rites, the Buddhist community also performed repentance rituals, particularly in connection with the relic enshrinement. In the week between a relic’s arrival at a province and its eventual interment into its pagoda, a seven-day repentance ritual based upon a text purportedly written by Emperor Wendi was performed. There were three main parts to the rite: people gathered into a ceremony and worshipped the relics, they confessed and repented their sins, and they received the

Kings was not yet given a legitimating lineage yet; even Fajing at this point stated that its precise nature had yet to be determined. However, three years later Fajing provided a translation lineage for the text, likely in response to the growing Taoist threat. The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* remained suspect until the Tang Empire, but these early attempts at legitimating the text indicate its significance at the time. Orzech, *Politics*, 75.

³² Wright, “The Sui Dynasty,” 57.

³³ Lewis, 210; Orzech, *Politics*, 116. Not all members of the Northern Wei persecuted Buddhists; in fact, certain emperors proclaimed that they *were* the Buddha. Wright points out that it is significant that Emperor Wendi does not follow this example, perhaps because in the south this claim of the Northern Wei’s was seen as bizarre and blasphemous. However, as the Southern Liang Dynasty (397-414) also had claimed to be *cakravartin* kings, this idea was already well established and acceptable in the south. Despite Emperor Wendi’s seemingly keeping with the pro-Buddhist practices of the southern Chen, the deep loyalty the southern Buddhist community had to the Chen Dynasty prompted somewhat harsh measures against them, including revoking the ordinations of many southern monks. In a later attempt to placate them in response to these severe restrictions, many were reordained in 590. Wright, “The Formation of Sui Ideology,” 99.

bodhisattva precepts.³⁴ Chen points out that there are definite similarities between Sui Wen's repentance ritual and the one found in the *Golden Light Sūtra*, suggesting that this was the basis for or at least a significant influence upon the rite performed for the relics.³⁵

Finally, the fourth major purpose behind the Renshou relic distribution is Sui Wendi's own expansionist aims. In this endeavor, as in his attempts at transforming himself into a *cakravartin* king, Emperor Wendi was influenced by the legends surrounding King Aśoka. Although King Aśoka adopted a largely pacifist position following his conversion, he did not disband his large army and he continued spreading his borders and sphere of influence.³⁶ Whatever Emperor Wendi's religious commitment might have been, he clearly learned from King Aśoka's example Buddhism's potential for edging into a neighbor's terrain. Emperor Wendi's attempted invasion of Koguryō in 598 had failed, but the relic distribution provided new opportunities for encroachment.

[The relic distribution campaign] may also have been a harbinger of his intentions to extend his imperial ambitions, which were not only directed to Koguryō and Japan (eastwards), but also towards Central Asia (westwards). As a matter of fact, it seems that Sui Wendi intended to spread the pagodas to Koguryō. Wang Shao records [in the *Guang Hongming ji* 17:217a17-18] that the ambassadors of the three states of the Korean Peninsula (Silla, Koguryō and Paekche) each "requested" (or, which seems more likely, were encouraged or even coerced by the Sui government to "request") a relic to be suitably enshrined in their states.³⁷

³⁴ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 59, 69.

³⁵ For comparisons between the repentance ritual performed for the relics' arrival and the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s repentance ritual as performed at that time, see Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 71-73. The *Golden Light Sūtra* and its repentance ritual were clearly known prior to and during the Sui regime; in fact, Zhiyi himself performed the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s repentance in order to improve the health of the Princess of Jin, Sui Wendi's daughter-in-law and the future Empress Xiao. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 73.

³⁶ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 82-83 note 100.

³⁷ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 84-85.

Chen also notes that, as the country had already been reunited and ruled for over a decade, the relic distribution is more indicative of the Sui dynasty's expansionist agenda than simply a means of legitimation.³⁸

Empress Wu

Arguably more than any other Chinese ruler, Empress Wu relied on Buddhist texts to justify her rule. Like her distant relative Sui Wendi³⁹ and King Aśoka, Empress Wu attained power using sometimes ruthless methods, including usurping power from her own children and husband, the previous Tang emperor Gaozong.⁴⁰ She also relied on or altered prophecies of a future bodhisattva ruler to indicate her reign had long been foreseen.⁴¹ There are two specific events I will look at here. The first is her reliance on

³⁸ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 5.

³⁹ Empress Wu's mother had been a lower member of the Yang clan, the ruling family of the Sui. As a reward to her father for supporting the Tang's overthrow, Empress Wu was accepted into the harem of Emperor Taizong, the father of her later husband Gaozong. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*; Chen, "Śarīra and Scepter."

⁴⁰ Some disapproving contemporary historians also suggested she was responsible for the mysterious death of her second son, Li Hong, who had been heir apparent and was a threat to his mother's intended usurpation. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 126.

⁴¹ Sui Wendi too had a divinely foretold history, as recorded in Wang Shao's *Suizu qiju zhu*, Falin's *Bianzheng lun* and Daomi's biography in *Xu gaoseng zhua*. We also see evidence of the legend on a ca. 608 inscription at the Qiyansi temple in Puzhou (Shanxi). According to this legend, Sui Wendi (then Yang Jian) was born and lived in a convent where he was raised by a "Divine Nun" who proclaimed the child was under the Buddha's protection and would one day restore his dharma. The Renshou relic distribution was in part dedicated to this nun, whose image was carved within every pagoda. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 78-80. Emperor Wendi's supporters also exploited and altered the legend of Candraprabha kumāra, who was predicted to be reborn as a bodhisattva in China, by adding the passage that Candraprabha would be born in a country called "Great Sui" with the name of Daxing who would become a great *cakravartin* king. The altered passage also makes reference to "Buddha-pagodas," which may be referring to the relic distribution. Chen cites Zürcher in stating that this particular reference may have been added during or after the Renshou relic distribution campaign. E. Zürcher "Prince Moonlight: Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *T'oung-pao* 68, 1-3 (1982): 26. The *Jewel Rain Sūtra* conveniently also includes a passage predicting the coming of a bodhisattva named Candraprabha in China who would appear as a woman and become the bodhisattva Avavartika and a *cakravartin* king. Both Sui Wendi and Empress Wu seem to have adjusted Candraprabha's legend to suit their specific legitimation needs. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 115-117.

two Buddhist scriptures to promote herself as a bodhisattva and as a *cakravartin* ruler. She also named her provincial temples after one of these *sūtras*, which may have influenced Emperor Shōmu. The second event is her relic distributions. The first, and the only one we have distinct evidence for, occurred circa 677 and nominally resembles King Aśoka and Emperor Wendi's relic distributions.⁴² The second is the subject of T.H. Barrett and Jinhua Chen's theory that towards the end of her reign or soon after her death she or her son may have distributed printed *dhāra ī* in miniature pagodas throughout China, Korea and Japan – an episode we see repeated on a smaller scale with Emperor Shōmu's daughter in her second reign as Empress Shōtoku.

Empress Wu and the *Great Cloud and Jewel Rain Sūtras*

Given her rather tenuous claim to rule, Empress Wu was likely less concerned with the threat of invading outsiders than she was with the threat of being overthrown by her own court. It is understandable then that much of her Buddhist patronage focused on the *Great Cloud Sūtra* (Skt: *Mahāmegha sūtra*; Ch: *Dayun jing*; Jp: *Daiun kyō*),⁴³ a text that emphasizes the role of a future queen while similarly playing upon the same topics of millenarianism and the end of the dharma seen in both the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*.⁴⁴ Like these two other texts, the *Great Cloud Sūtra* similarly

⁴² Chen, “*Śarīra* and Scepter,” 58.

⁴³ T 387.

⁴⁴ There may have been a pre-existing association between the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *Great Cloud Sūtra* as well. Fa-lin's *Pien-cheng lun* includes a mention of an edict dated 629 calling for the monks and nuns of the capital to read the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *Great Cloud Sūtra* on the fourteenth of each month. Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century*, (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1976), 39.

promises an element of national protection and prosperity through the eventual world conquest by a queen.

Empress Wu also made use of the *Jewel Rain Sūtra* (Skt: *Ratnamegha sūtra*; Ch: *Baoyun jing*; Jp: *Hōun kyō*),⁴⁵ translated in 693. This text connected the future bodhisattva Devaputra, manifested in a woman's body, with the buddha of the future, Maitreya. Not only will Devaputra attend Maitreya in the Tuṣita heaven, (s)he also will be the recipient of Maitreya's *anuttarasamyaksa bodhi* (perfect and universal enlightenment) prophecy.⁴⁶ The issue of the Five Obstacles, five roles women cannot fulfill and thus are impediments to their enlightenment, is also dealt with by stating that Devaputra will, in female form, attain two of these positions: *avaivartika* (one who has transcended the cycle of birth and rebirth) and *cakravartin*.⁴⁷ As for the other three, while not explicitly stated in either text, now that the issue of the Five Obstacles has been surmounted, theoretically they too are no longer unobtainable.

Significantly, this translation of the *Jewel Rain Sūtra* was published two days after Empress Wu was officially asked to take on the title of *cakravartin* and six days before she officially did so.⁴⁸ The implication she likely intended is that the Buddha was predicting her own rise to power. What Empress Wu found (or, according to some later disapproving Confucian histories, ordered created or altered) were *sūtras* that provided language similar to what had made the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* popular to the Tang

⁴⁵ There are three versions found in the *Taishō*: T 658, T 659 and T 660. The latter is the one used by Empress Wu.

⁴⁶ Forte, 132. Devaputra's form will be as the bodhisattva Yuejinggang. According to Forte, the name Yuejinggang was chosen to purposely evoke the name of Jinguang, the object of the *Great Cloud Sūtra*'s prophecy. Forte, 131.

⁴⁷ The other three are *Śakra devendara*, *Brahmā Devarāja*, and *Tathāgata*. Forte, 131.

⁴⁸ Forte, 145.

emperors while also including a precedent for a female ruler.⁴⁹ These two texts also opened the prophecies and promises related to *cakravartin* kings in other *sūtras* to Empress Wu. Indeed, taken as a whole, they seemed to point directly to her. Even without this assumption, though, the mention of a bodhisattva in female form is enough to at least make her rule credible and not an abomination of the Mandate of Heaven.

Perhaps most important for the purposes of this study are the temples based on the *Great Cloud Sūtra* that Empress Wu had established in all provinces as well as the two capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang.⁵⁰ While Emperor Wendi also established provincial temples outside of the ones connected to his relic distribution, they were only in the northern provinces he had passed through during his coup. The temples were, effectively, a way of signaling where he had been. In comparison, Empress Wu was marking all that was hers. She also called for copies of the *Great Cloud Sūtra*, and perhaps its commentary as well, stored in every one of these temples.⁵¹

Empress Wu's Relic Distribution

We see Empress Wu's intense devotion to relics dating at least back to 660 when she had the famous Famensi finger relic of the Buddha brought to the palace, supposedly

⁴⁹ Forte remarks that at least by the Ming period (1368-1644), Chinese historians were stating that Empress Wu had the *Jewel Rain Sūtra* changed to better support the idea of a female *cakravartin* and of her coming being foretold. For more on the issue of interpolation in the *Jewel Rain Sūtra*, see Forte, 126-129. It is worth pointing out that the accusation of these Ming historians is reflective of the extremely negative view held towards Empress Wu at that time. However, Forte does list additional evidence supporting the idea that the passages in question were indeed added. Whether this was done under Empress Wu's direction or not is not clear.

⁵⁰ For more on Empress Wu's establishment of the Great Cloud monasteries and the distribution of the *Great Cloud Sūtra*, see Forte.

⁵¹ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 127.

to heal her ailing husband.⁵² Her relic distributions date to sixteen years after this when, on the advice of an oracle, she had the Guangzhai Quarter in Chang'an excavated. There the workers uncovered over ten thousand relic grains. Empress Wu then allotted the relics to each province and the two capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang. Each province received forty-nine relics.⁵³

Like King Aśoka and Emperor Wendi, Empress Wu likely spread these relics throughout the imperium to demonstrate her munificence and perhaps establish an element of local support in anticipation of her later overthrow. Her scope far exceeded Emperor Wendi's. His relic distributions were primarily focused on the north.⁵⁴ Empress Wu sent relics to every province. Part of this was political and cosmological strategy; like Sui Wendi, she relied on auspicious signs in nature following the establishment of relics throughout the realm to support her regional and national right to rule. But part of her rationale for this relic distribution may also have been in order to fulfill a prophecy from the *Golden Cloud Sūtra*.⁵⁵

⁵² According to the Famensi temple's traditions and an eighth century inscription, this is one of five Buddha relics brought to China by King Aśoka as part of his eighty-four thousand relic enshrinements. Chen claims it is more likely that the temple received the relic is 602 when Li Min, Sui Wendi's grandson-in-law, visited in the midst of the second Renshou relic distribution. As Li Min was purportedly part of the same Li family the Tang claimed to descend from, this connection may have created a closer association between Emperor Gaozong and this particular relic. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 118-126; Chen, "Śarīra and Scepter," 37-48. She later had the Famensi relic brought to court again towards the end of her reign, likely as a means of prolonging both her life and her rule, neither of which occurred (she was deposed within a week of bringing the relic to court and dead ten months later).

⁵³ The date is not precisely given, but Chen has found an inscription commemorating the enshrinement of one of the portions of relics indicating the event occurred in 678, the year after they were found. The inscription also states the enshrinement of these relics occurred on the Buddha's birthday; it is very likely that the others were simultaneously enshrined on the same day. Both Aśoka and Sui Wendi had their relics enshrined simultaneously, and in Sui Wendi's case the second and third campaign internments occurred on the Buddha's birthday. Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 123-125.

⁵⁴ For a map of Wendi's relic distributions, see Wright "The Formation of Sui Ideology," 103.

⁵⁵ See Forte, 201-202.

While she had not yet claimed supreme power at the time of her relic distribution, this event became an important part of her later legitimation campaign. The *Great Cloud Sūtra*'s commentary included mentions of her Guangzhai relic distribution to demonstrate she was fulfilling a prediction in the *Great Cloud Sūtra*.⁵⁶ This text, which was presented to her just prior to her creation of the Great Zhou dynasty in 690, became a foundational part of her legitimation attempts. Following the commentary's publication, there was a series of relic veneration across the country, presumably focused on the Guangzhai relics.⁵⁷

Empress Wu's *Dhāra ī* Distribution?

While the Guangzhai relic distribution was used to argue that Empress Wu fulfilled the *Great Cloud Sūtra*'s prediction, she had not yet come close. This passage stated that in another lifetime Empress Wu had vowed to distribute eight million, forty thousand relics – nearly one hundred times the number distributed by King Aśoka.⁵⁸ However, actually carrying out this vow is contingent upon having enough relics. There is but the one story of her locating a relic trove, and, while it had over ten thousand relics, that number does not quite approach the eight million needed. Moreover, she did not have merely one or two relics enshrined at a time, but at least forty-nine per province. If she did ever meet this prediction, where did the relics come from?

⁵⁶ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 128.

⁵⁷ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 128.

⁵⁸ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 128.

T.H. Barrett and Jinhua Chen have proposed that Empress Wu, or possibly her son following her death, performed a second relic distribution that extended past China's borders and into Korea and Japan. Only, in this case, the "relic" was a *dhāra ī* proclaiming that, if it was enshrined in small pagodas a set number of times, it would benefit all those who came into contact with it and would protect the area in which it was erected from all harm.⁵⁹ A copy of the *hyakumantō dhāra ī* found in a Korean temple that dates to at least 751 is the earliest known example of a printed text.⁶⁰ A passage in this temple refers to another copy of this *dhāra ī* enshrined in another Korean temple in 706. Since we have records of the *hyakumantō dhāra ī* being translated into Chinese in 704, if it was indeed distributed by Empress Wu or postmortem by her son, that would explain how the *dhāra ī* could travel from China to Korea in the space of only two years.⁶¹ The theory that Empress Wu's son may have had the *hyakumantō dhāra ī* distributed in hopes of appeasing an indomitable spirit is consistent with its use in Korea, where the copy mentioned above was found in a pagoda erected for a recently deceased Korean king's benefit.⁶²

According to the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's (601-664) travelogue, which Barrett suggests is where Empress Wu may have gotten her idea to distribute the *dhāra ī*,

⁵⁹ Chen, "Śarīra and Scepter," 113-114; Barrett, "Stūpa, Sūtra and Śarīra," 53.

⁶⁰ *Hyakumantō dhāra ī* ("one million pagoda *dhāra ī*") is the *dhāra ī*'s colloquial name in Japanese based on Empress Shōtoku's own text distribution. She had copies of the *dhāra ī* enshrined in ten thousand miniature pagodas and allotted them among ten major Japanese temples. Her distribution took place between 764-770. I have chosen to use this title because it is commonly found in scholarship in the event and is comparatively easier to use than its Chinese or Sanskrit names (Ch: *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing*; Skt: *Rāsmivimalaviśuddhaprabhādhāra ī*).

⁶¹ Barrett, "Stūpa, Sūtra and Śarīra," 4.

⁶² Barrett, "Stūpa, Sūtra and Śarīra," 57.

there is precedence for enshrining a printed text in the same manner as a relic in India.⁶³

The fact that Empress Shōtoku had the *hyakumantō dhāra ī* copied, enshrined in miniature pagodas and distributed among the ten major temples around the capital area suggests that perhaps this *dhāra ī* distribution connected to Empress Wu did occur and Empress Shōtoku may have been copying her.⁶⁴ However, we have no official record of anyone in China at this time doling out a mass-produced text as a relic replacement.⁶⁵

Whether there was a *dhāra ī*-as-relic distribution decades before Emperor Shōmu established his *kokubunji* system or not, though, it is at least notable that a *dhāra ī* proclaiming to be equivalent to a relic existed at this time. If it was in Korea by 706, then it is reasonable to assume it reached Japan by 740. As we will see in the following chapter, Emperor Shōmu may have used the *Lotus Sūtra* as a relic replacement in his provincial temple system. There is a passage within the *Lotus Sūtra* directly stating that it can be used this way, but having a *dhāra ī* proclaiming the same theme may have supported his decision to use *sūtras* as relics.

The Three *Sūtras* During the Sui and Tang Periods

As we have seen above, King Aśoka, Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu all conducted relic distributions that may have influenced Emperor Shōmu's *kokubunji*

⁶³ Specifically from the Indian Buddhist layman Jayasena's devotional custom of enshrining sutra extracts. Barrett, "Stūpa, Sūtra and Śāra," 10; for more on *dhāra ī* replication and *dhāra ī* relic-replacement in India, see Daniel Boucher "The *Pratītyasamutpādagāthā* and Its Role in the Medieval Cult of the Relics," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 1-27.

⁶⁴ For more on this event, Hickman and Kornicki, 114-117.

⁶⁵ Barrett suggests that we may not see a reference to the Japanese court receiving Empress Wu's *dhāra ī*-as-relic because it would establish her position as a worldwide *cakravartin* ruler. Barrett, "Stūpa, Sūtra and Śāra," 35.

system. Additionally, presuming Barrett and Chen are correct in proposing that Empress Wu distributed copies of the *hyakumantō dhāra ī* inside miniature pagodas, this action may have influenced Emperor Shōmu's decision to enshrine the *Lotus Sūtra* in the same manner as a relic. In this section, though, I will redirect my focus from the provincial temples and look at the ways in which the Sui and Tang emperors used the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in order to find similarities to help explain how these texts were used in Japan.

As has already been mentioned, certain Chen Dynasty rulers used the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in the sixth century.⁶⁶ These texts' protective associations probably accompanied the *sūtras* when they traveled to Japan. However, I have not found any references to the *Lotus Sūtra* being used for protection in either China or Japan before Emperor Shōmu connected it to the *kokubun-niji*. We do see *Lotus Sūtra* meditations performed during the Sui and Tang periods, though.⁶⁷

Zhiyi based one of his fourfold meditation (*samādhi*) techniques on Samantabhadra's repentance rituals in the *Lotus Sūtra's* twenty-eighth chapter and in the *Meditation Sūtra*.⁶⁸ Zhiyi emphasized the repentance ritual's ability to improve practitioners' spiritual advancement by purifying their sense organs. While Tiantai did not become popular in Japan until Saichō established the Tendai branch in the early ninth century, Emperor Shōmu likely knew at least the main idea behind the *Lotus samādhi*. Perhaps this meditation ritual contributed to Emperor Shōmu's decision to name the

⁶⁶ Lewis, 210; Orzech, *Politics*, 116.

⁶⁷ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 193 note 36.

⁶⁸ Stevenson, 45-97.

kokubun-niji after the *Lotus Sūtra*. At the very least, Zhiyi's *Lotus samādhi* demonstrates that, at least by the sixth century, there was a known connection between the *Lotus Sūtra* and its purported "conclusion." Moreover, the *Lotus samādhi* shows us that at least part of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s appeal and popularity came from its repentance association.

We also see a connection between Zhiyi and the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s repentance ritual. He performed the rite in order to improve the health of the Princess of Jin, Sui Wendi's daughter-in-law and the future Empress Xiao.⁶⁹ As we have already seen, there is also a potential connection between the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the repentance rituals carried out in connection with Emperor Wendi's relic distribution. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Buddhist repentance has an element of "purification" or "correction." It is reasonable to posit, then, that Emperor Wendi's repentance rituals prepared both the terrain and the population for the relic by eliminating impurities. Emperor Wendi's repentance text also includes a request for the expiation of past wrongdoings so that they will not negatively affect future rebirths – a theme that can also be seen in the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Meditation Sūtra*.⁷⁰

Emperor Wendi did not rely very heavily on the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, perhaps because its spurious origin had not yet been settled. However, just prior to beginning the relic distributions, Sui Wendi chose to change his reign-name from Kaihuang (581-600) to Renshou (601-604), hence the designation "Renshou relic distribution." This latter reign title translates literally to "humanity and longevity." While

⁶⁹ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 73.

⁷⁰ Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 96.

the prior reign name was synonymous with a Taoist term referring to a division of time comparable to a ‘kalpa,’⁷¹ Jinhua Chen states that this new reign-name was “obviously based on the Confucian idea that one who possesses the virtue of ‘humanity’ (*ren*), the highest Confucian ethical ideal, was to be rewarded by longevity.”⁷² What is not clear is whether or not the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, which also stresses this idea of “humanity,” was another influence upon Emperor Wendi’s reign name.⁷³ Considering the relic distribution’s Buddhist nature, this is a plausible connection. It is also worth noting that Zhiyi mentioned the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* several times in his works and even in correspondence with Emperor Wendi’s son, Emperor Yang.⁷⁴

The *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* gained greater prominence under the Tang. Although this ruling family used mostly Taoist themes to legitimate its regime, nonetheless some rulers relied on Buddhism’s protective powers as well. In 629, the second Tang emperor Taizong (599-649; r. 626-649) required all monks living in the capital Chang’an to recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* and the *Great Cloud Sūtra* for fourteen days each month.⁷⁵ As we have already seen, this latter text gained additional importance under Empress Wu. Even after the Tang reclaimed power from Empress Wu’s interregnum and returned to primarily patronizing Taoism, several emperors

⁷¹ Wright, “The Formation of Sui Ideology,” 86.

⁷² Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 51 note 2.

⁷³ Another translation of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, and the one favored by its translator Charles Orzech, is *Sūtra for Humane Kings*. As the character corresponding with “humane” and “benevolent” is the same as the first character in Renshou (*ren*), it is possible there is a correlation.

⁷⁴ Orzech, *Politics*, 130-131.

⁷⁵ Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T’ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 12. Antonino Forte points out that some of the same kings are mentioned in the assemblies of both the *Great Cloud Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, suggesting there may be a connection between these two texts. Forte, 40.

continued to rely on Buddhism for the protection of the state. One of the more prominent examples is Emperor Daizong (726-779; r. 762-779) who, under the influence of the Buddhist monk Bukong, emphasized the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' importance to national security.⁷⁶

Bukong's new "translation" in 765 further aided in the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*'s use and popularity by incorporating esoteric themes and removing suspect elements far too Chinese to be in a "legitimate" Buddhist *sūtra*.⁷⁷ Not only did Emperor Daizong approve the new translation and grant Bukong's request to perform its hundred-seat ritual, he wrote the new edition's introduction.⁷⁸ Following their completion, copies of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* were carried through Chang'an's streets and enshrined in two major monasteries where their recitations were carried out.⁷⁹ The text's salvific abilities were supposedly proven later that same year when the leader of an uprising, whose threat had prompted the text's new recension and ritual enactment, died and his rebellion fell apart.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Bukong's edition of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* even included the phrase "national protection" (Jp: *gokoku*) in its title. T 246.

⁷⁷ For example, references to the apocalyptic character Prince Moonlight were removed. See Orzech, *Politics*, 288. For other elements Bukong removed or adjusted to better suit contemporary interests, see Orzech, *Politics*, 70.

⁷⁸ According to Orzech, the combination of Daizong's preface and its inclusion in the official catalogue was essentially "putting the empire's imprimatur on it and settling the issue of the scripture's authority as genuine revelation." Orzech, *Politics*, 77.

⁷⁹ Weinstein, 78.

⁸⁰ It is worth noting that this was not the only challenge to his rule Daizong faced. His grandfather's long and prosperous reign ended in the terrible An Lushan rebellion that began in 755 and did not end until 763, just as Emperor Daizong assumed power. Even after the rebellion was finally quashed, he temporarily lost Chang'an to invading Tibetan forces that same year. The following year he faced yet another rebellion by his own general united with Uighur and Tibetan forces. As mentioned above, that ended with the general's death in 765, which was attributed to the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' power. Bukong had long influenced the Tang rulers, starting with Emperor Daizong's grandfather Emperor Xuanzong (685-762; r. 712-756), his father Emperor Suzong (711-762; r. 756-762) and then finally Emperor Daizong himself. Under his influence, all three rulers embraced Buddhism's esoteric rituals,

This episode occurred more than twenty years after Emperor Shōmu established national protection temples throughout Japan and therefore had no influence on that event. Nonetheless, the growing popularity of esoteric Buddhist practices, championed in large part by Bukong, greatly influenced Saichō and Kūkai when they went to study in China four decades later. As we will see in the following chapter, these two figures may be largely responsible for the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* becoming Japan's three national protection *sūtras*. Kūkai particularly relied on Bukong's new edition of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, which he brought back with him.

Conclusion

I am not trying to present an exact parallel between these international examples and Japan's national protection temples and *sūtras*. Rather, I am looking at these models to see if they can give insight into the *kokubunji* and *sangokokukyō*. As Emperor Shōmu would have been aware of the Aśokan legends and Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu's relic distributions, he may have copied their examples. Additionally, since we see the three pertinent *sūtras* used in similar ways in both countries, we can reasonably assume that the ways to use these texts traveled with them.

I have introduced King Aśoka because he was a paramount model of a monarch who used Buddhism to justify and strengthen his regime. His legendary status was well

which allowed for an entirely new, and supposedly superior, means of utilizing Buddhism's beneficial properties and directly interacting with the cosmos. Considering the many rebellions Emperor Daizong faced early in his reign, it is not surprising he ultimately agreed with his Buddhist ministers that his family had survived all this warfare because of Buddhism's protection. Emperor Daizong became a particularly proficient patron of Buddhism and the *sa gha*. Weinstein, 77-89.

known and, as we can see with Sui Wendi and Empress Wu, a convenient model to follow. King Aśoka established a precedent for distributing reliquaries as a means of demonstrating both his benevolence as a Buddhist ruler and as a firm political stamp of ownership onto the places where the *stūpas* were built.

Sui Wendi also distributed and venerated relics of the Buddha in clear emulation of King Aśoka. Upon conquering northern China, he quickly established provincial temples in all the territories he had traveled through in the process of claiming control. He did not follow suit after defeating the southern provinces. This relic distribution, then, offered a means of further uniting the two halves. As we can see through his attempts to spread relics into the Korean peninsula, he was possibly also using the relic dispersion to increase his country's perimeters. Emperor Wendi's relic distribution and prefectural temples had a particularly poignant effect on a later descendent of his same family, who, like him, faced nearly insurmountable obstacles in the process of establishing and maintaining sovereignty.

Of the three historical figures looked at in this chapter, Empress Wu is the most relevant in light of Shōmu's *kokubunji* system. As we see with Emperor Shōmu, Empress Wu created temples connected to a single *sūtra* in all provinces. She may have also enshrined a text in the same manner as a relic. I have not looked closely at her use of the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* or the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*, but that is not to say that she did not use them. This is not because they were unimportant at this time, but

rather because what is important in the case of Empress Wu is her example for *how* to use *sūtras*.⁸¹

With the *sangokokukyō* themselves, we can see that all three were known and used during the Sui and Tang dynasties. We know from Zhiyi's writings that there was a clear connection between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Meditation Sūtra* at this time. Additionally, we can tell that meditation rituals based on these two *sūtras* were also known. More research is needed to determine whether or not the *Lotus Sūtra* had any association with national protection at this time. If not, though, then this strengthens my position that the *Lotus Sūtra* first gained its attribute as a protective text with the *kokubun-niji*, as will be explored more in the following chapter. We see the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* used a great deal for protection, but it is not until Bukong transformed it and removed suspicious elements alluding to its Chinese origin that the text was formally introduced in the official catalogue of *sūtras*.

As we will see in the following chapter, Bukong's changes, such as including esoteric Buddhist elements, may be part of the reason the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* joined the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* as the three national protection *sūtras*. When looking at the *sangokokukyō*'s formalization we need to also keep Zhiyi in mind. He mentions all three texts in his commentaries and uses key points from them to

⁸¹ She did use these three sutras to an extent. For example, the great translator Yijing, whom she patronized, translated his version of the *Golden Light Sūtra* during her reign. This translation is the one that was used with the *kokubunji*. However, more research is needed to determine what significance it held for her. As for the *Lotus Sūtra*, Eugene Wang offers excellent insight into her reliance on this text to create visual support for her claims at being Maitreya. Eugene Y. Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sūtra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China*, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005).

formulate Tiantai doctrine.⁸² This may be part of the reason why Saichō instructed his Meditation Course students to study these three texts. However, this reason alone cannot explain why these were the *sūtras* that became the *sangokokukyō*. For that, we need to look carefully at the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* and at just why Emperor Shōmu created them.

⁸² Paul Swanson breaks down Zhiyi's arguments and points to which sutras he is referring to and pulling ideas from. Concerning our three texts, Swanson notes that Zhiyi used the *Lotus Sūtra* habitually and the *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* only occasionally. Swanson, 19.

Chapter 3 The National Protection Temples and *Sūtras*

In this chapter I will first look at Emperor Shōmu's *kokubunji* system and the historical setting within which he established it. Following this I will examine why Emperor Shōmu may have chosen to connect the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras* with his national protection temples. As stated in the prior chapters, the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras*' repentance themes may be a significant reason for why Emperor Shōmu connected these texts to his provincial convents and monasteries. Also, the *Lotus Sūtra* contains a passage where it proclaims that there is no need to enshrine relics because, in essence, it is equivalent to the Buddha's whole body.

After establishing the background for the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, I will then switch directions and focus on the three national protection *sūtras*, the *sangokokukyō*. Paul Groner suggests that Saichō was the first to combine the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* into a "unified course of study."¹ While this might be the case, this was not the first time the three *sūtras* were recited together; rather, in 806 Emperor Heizei ordered the monks of the fifteen major temples around the capital area to recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* during their annual retreats.² According to some accounts, he also established the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* as the *kokubunji*'s secondary scripture next to the *Golden Light Sūtra*.³ Therefore, while Saichō and Kūkai

¹ Paul Groner, 75.

² Empress Kōken had already ordered in 749 that the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras* were to be read at *kokubunji* retreats. De Visser, 1:418-419.

³ De Visser, 1:418-419.

were undoubtedly influential in these three *sūtras* becoming the *sangokokukyō*, we must first look at the *kokubunji* system's role.

Background to the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*

Like King Aśoka, Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu, Emperor Shōmu's ascension in 724 was controversial.⁴ When he issued the edict calling for the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* in 741, Emperor Shōmu's position as emperor was still not secure. There was rampant illness, rebellion and drought throughout the islands. It was an emperor's responsibility to keep his realm peaceful and secure through proper ritual worship and sacrifice to Japan's myriad deities, known as *kami*. Continued prosperity was assured through his personal purity and right rule. It was therefore Emperor Shōmu's fault that sickness and rebellion were rampant, which made his own position rather tenuous.

A smallpox epidemic began in 735 and reached the capital two years later. In 740, a disgruntled Fujiwara kinsman led a rebellion in Kyushu.⁵ There were continual clashes with non-Japanese ethnic groups to the north and south, and with Silla's growing power on the Korean peninsula, there was perpetual threat of a Silla or Tang (or combined)

⁴ Emperor Shōmu's mother was a Fujiwara; for the prior century or so all Japanese emperors had a double royal lineage, but Emperor Shōmu broke that tradition. His wife Empress Kōmyō was also a Fujiwara (Emperor Shōmu's mother and she shared the same father, the extremely powerful and influential Fujiwara Fuhito), and she was the first non-royal wife promoted to the position of *kōgō*, primary consort. This position allowed her the right to influence the emperor's choice of heir and potentially ascend to power if her husband died before naming an heir. As Piggott notes, the same law that gave the *kōgō* this right also limited the position to consorts of royal birth – a detail that was ignored. Shōmu's insistence on promoting his daughter, not only a woman but also a Fujiwara descendent on her mother's side, increased opposition at court. Joan R. Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 236-279.

⁵ Piggott notes that the Kyushu chieftains who supported Fujiwara Hirotsugu may have been disgruntled with Emperor Shōmu's inability to protect them from the disastrous smallpox epidemic of a few years before. Piggott, 253-254.

invasion. Considered in light of the Mandate of Heaven, any one of these problems was a complete catastrophe for a monarch. The Kyushu uprising was a particular blow to Emperor Shōmu's sovereignty as it came from a Fujiwara, a family he was maternally related to, had married into and whose support he particularly relied upon. On top of these disasters, his expensive and large-scale construction projects, (such as the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, the massive bronze Vairocana buddha in Tōdaiji, Tōdaiji itself, and building two new capitals within only a couple years of each other) strained resources. Moreover, his unprecedented insistence on naming his daughter as heir and his overwhelming support of the Fujiwara family resulted in his facing opposition for much of his reign.⁶

Emperor Shōmu may have turned to his continental predecessors for solutions to support his controversial role as ruler, cure the problems of his land, and unite a diverse population. Like Sui Wendi, Emperor Shōmu was expanding his realm into regions where there was little court influence. The peripheries were largely peopled with distinct ethnic groups like the Hirata and the Emishi who not only looked different, but also spoke different languages and had different religious and social systems. Like embassies, the land his national protection temples stood upon belonged to the central government.

⁶ Piggott notes that while women did rule as emperors at this time, it was generally because they assumed power after the death of the intended ruler. Appointing an unmarried daughter to succeed the imperial line was unprecedented. Piggott, 252. For more on the difficulties Emperor Shōmu faced during his reign, see Sonoda Kōyū and Delmer M. Brown, "Early Buddha Worship," in *Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. Delmer M. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1:359-414; Naoki Kōjirō, "The Nara State," trans. Felicia G. Bock, in *Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. Delmer M. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1:221-267; Piggott, 236-279.

As the temples were built in close proximity to provincial government offices,⁷ the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* likely complemented local imperial presence with spiritual authority.⁸

As we see with the historical examples considered in Chapter 2, these provincial temples were likely a means of marking and claiming Emperor Shōmu's territory. The *kokubunji* tied the borderlands to the center and were a source of imperial and cultural presence far from the capital. Moreover they brought a sense of cohesion to the expanding island-nation. As Joan Piggott says in her review of Emperor Shōmu and the *kokubunji* system's contribution to Japan's unification:

Not only was official Buddhism expanded thereby, but the authority of provincial governors was considerably augmented as well. So were provincial administration and operation of the Buddhist cult fully meshed by the inception of the provincial temple system.⁹

The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were not simply an expression of faith by a particularly devout Buddhist emperor; they also supplemented regional governors and representatives

⁷ Piggott includes an illustration "Provincial administration in Mino" that displays how the governmental offices and *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were oriented. Piggott, 196-197.

⁸ I have not found much indication as to how these national protection centers were received. In his examination of early relic enshrinements, including *sūtra* relics (*shinshari*), J. Edward Kidder, Jr. presents a very negative perception of the *kokubunji*. He claims that their connection with the imperial court overrode the "magnetic attraction characteristic of the *shinshari*." He continues in this negative vein, stating "The ultimate demise of the *kokubun-ji* shows that they were a much-resented symbol of court oppression, exacting heavy taxes for unrecognized returns. At one point priests were encouraged to stay indoors for their own safety. The Four Guardian Kings notwithstanding, many of the temples were destroyed during the Heian period in fires suspiciously coincidental with anti-government riots." J. Edward Kidder, Jr., "Busshari and Fukuzō: Buddhist Relics and Hidden Repositories of Hōryū-ji," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 19, no. 2-3 (1992): 227. Although Kidder acknowledges the text enshrined in the *kokubunji*, the *Golden Light Sūtra*, (he completely omits any mention of the *Lotus Sūtra* or the *kokubun-niji*) was a national protection text, he does not take into consideration that the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* do not seem to have been intended to reach out to the local populations; Buddhism in the eighth century was still very much a religion of the aristocracy. Emperor Shōmu's concern was not his people's salvation, but rather the country's welfare with regards to good weather, abundant crops and general peace. It is therefore reasonable that the *shinshari* would not appeal to the local people – they were not advertised to the general populace this way.

⁹ Piggott, 356.

with religious authority and presence. Moreover, these temples provided spiritual support for a ruler who was plagued with rebellions and epidemics his personal virtue was supposed to prevent.

Why the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras*?

The *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* are not the only two *sūtras* Emperor Shōmu depended upon. He also had the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* recited for the country's well-being.¹⁰ Two years after initiating the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, Emperor Shōmu called for the construction of a giant bronze Vairocana buddha in accordance with the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (Skt: *Avata saka sūtra*; Ch: *Huayan jing*; Jp: *Kegon kyō*),¹¹ the primary text of the Kegon school.¹² Clearly, the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras* were not the only two Buddhist scriptures that were important to Emperor Shōmu, so why did he choose them for the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*?

With the *Golden Light Sūtra*, at first the reason why Emperor Shōmu connected it to the *kokubunji* seems clear. The *kokubunji*'s official title was the “Temples of the Golden Light Four *Deva* Kings for the Protection of the State” (*konkōmyō shitennō gokoku no tera*). As we have seen in the first chapter, the *Golden Light Sūtra* promises that the cosmic kings of the four directions will come forward and protect any country that reveres Buddhism and venerates the text. Therefore, connecting this *sūtra* to national

¹⁰ See De Visser 2:495-498 and 2:523.

¹¹ The three translations are found in T 278, T 279 and T 298.

¹² Sonoda Kōyū and Delmer Brown suggest that this shows a “shift” in Emperor Shōmu's thinking and that the Vairocana statue at Tōdaiji demonstrates that Emperor Shōmu was looking this deity above the Four *Deva* Kings for protection. More likely, Emperor Shōmu was merely including Vairocana in his national protection plans, albeit in a central position. Sonoda, 400-402.

protection temples and then naming the temples after these guardian deities is not in itself odd. But, as stated above, Emperor Shōmu did not only depend on the *Golden Light Sūtra*. During the smallpox epidemic, Emperor Shōmu also had the *Golden Light Sūtra* read alongside the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* to protect the country. The year before calling for the *kokubunji*, he ordered each province create a sixteen-foot golden image of Śākyamuni and copy the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*. Because of this act of veneration, the weather was good and crops flourished.¹³

Emperor Shōmu's reliance on the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* is not out of the ordinary for eighth-century Japan. We see this same sentiment regarding the collection's powers in an edict from Emperor Kōnin dated 774:

It is said that the *Prajñā-pāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) is the mother of all the Buddhas. When I, the Son of Heaven, recite it, the nation is safe from invasions and rebellions; when my people invoke it, their households are protected from the demons of illness.¹⁴

Just from a protective perspective, the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* should have been about as effective as the *Golden Light Sūtra*. Considering this *sūtra* anthology's precedence in guarding the nation from pestilence and producing an agricultural abundance along with its apparent protective abilities, it would have made sense for Emperor Shōmu to establish provincial national protection temples connected with the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*.¹⁵

¹³ De Visser, 2:448.

¹⁴ As translated in Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 20.

¹⁵ De Visser notes that in 758 the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* did become the secondary recitation texts for the convents. Therefore, the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* was a national protection text for the nunneries, but it was not the primary one. De Visser, 449.

One might argue that the *Lotus Sūtra* best suits the national protection convents on account of the text's applicability to women. However, the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* was often personified as a female bodhisattva and as the mother of all Buddhas, so it would make just as much sense to attach it to the provincial convents.¹⁶ However, when we consider that the *kokubun-niji* were called the “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin,” we can start to understand just why the *Lotus Sūtra* was chosen instead of the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*. As we have seen in the first chapter, there was a strong connection between atonement and purification, particularly with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s final chapter and its “concluding” text, the *Meditation Sūtra*.¹⁷ In fact, as both the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* have their own atonement rituals, we start to see not only why these two scriptures were chosen but also just how important the themes of repentance and purification were for national protection.

Atonement and Purity in Japan

Atonement in the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* has already been addressed in Chapter 1, but here I would like to briefly look at its use in Japan. When we see that the *kokubun-niji* were called the “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin,” we have to take into account that “sin” in this circumstance is more akin to “impurity” than moral transgression, as it is commonly perceived in the

¹⁶ De Visser, 2:490-491.

¹⁷ While the records generally refer to only the *Lotus Sūtra* being copied and enshrined, we do see that what was intended was the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*. Willa Jane Tanabe states that what Emperor Shōmu intended was the *Lotus Sūtra* and its opening and closing chapters. Tanabe, “Visual Piety and the Lotus Sūtra in Japan,” 85. Richard Bowing also states that the three sutras were “always read in conjunction.” Bowing, 129.

Christianity-influenced West. “Sin” in eighth-century Japan is not necessarily a consciously committed misdeed, but can also refer to pollution caused by physical uncleanness. While a sin can be eradicated through confession, at least in a Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of purgation, that is not the only means of dispelling impurities and wrongdoings.

The repentance chapter in the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the confessional ritual in the *Meditation Sūtra* both carry a sense of purification. In the texts themselves, this purification aspect seems to be more in light of “correcting” or “refining” a practitioner’s physical and mental properties to advance his or her religious abilities. There are some “this-worldly” advantages that come from this purification, but the primary benefits regard Buddhist practice. In Japan, though, we see more emphasis on purification to increase practitioners’ religious efficacy for aiding the state than we do concern about a monk or nun’s individual Buddhist advancement.

Ryūichi Abé notes that until the introduction of esoteric rituals in the early ninth century with Kūkai (and to a lesser extent with Saichō), a monastic’s ability to interact with the cosmos came from his or her personal purity. Esoteric ritual provided a means around this by giving Buddhist practitioners especially powerful chantings (*mantras*) or hand motions (*mudras*) that required skill and learning rather than personal spiritual cleanliness.¹⁸ Abé summarizes the general attitude towards Buddhist monks and nuns during the late Nara and early Heian period:

¹⁸ “[Kūkai] was... presenting the Nara scholar-priests with a particularly Buddhist explanation for the efficacy of *sūtra* recitation in protecting the nation. That is, by adopting Esoteric Buddhism, the Nara clerics would be acquiring a language of their own that they could employ to explicate the efficacy of their services they performed for the state. It meant that in order to make their services take effect, they no

...the primary duty of the clergy was to protect the nation from misfortune by means of the efficacy of their services – typically, the recitation of scripture said to have been impregnated with such power – and that efficacy was in turn believed to accrue from the pure religious conduct of the clergy.¹⁹

According to Margaret H. Childs, “confession” in medieval Japanese repentance tales is not truly atonement, but rather revelation along the lines of religious awakening.²⁰

While most of the stories she studies are from a much later period than what we are looking at here, there are certain similarities between her study and this one; namely that the public acknowledgement of “sins” opens the possibility of transcending karmic limitations and improving religious practice and ability.²¹ Childs cites Takahashi Kōji’s statement that the object of confession is purification, and that it can be attained through revealing one’s wrongdoings.²² We can see then how appealing the *Golden Light Sūtra*’s confessional chapter must have been: it is a spoken acknowledgement of all manner of transgressions. When we look at the actual wording in this chapter, as in the following excerpt, though, we see that the confessor is apologizing and purging any sins he or she “may have committed” without actually admitting to any specific misdeeds:

And whatever evil, cruel act was done by me previously, I will confess it all before the Buddhas. Whatever evil I have done by not attending to my parents, by neglecting the Buddhas, by neglecting the good; whatever evil I have done by being drunk with the intoxication of authority or with the intoxication of high birth or by being drunk with the intoxication of tender

longer had to rely solely on the native Shintō belief that only spiritual and physical purity resulting from the most stringent observance of the precepts would give the clergy shamanistic power.” Abé, 64.

¹⁹ Abé, 24.

²⁰ Margaret H. Childs, “The Influence of the Buddhist Practice of *Sange* on Literary Form: Revelatory Tales,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 14, no. 1 (1987).

²¹ Most of her stories are from roughly the twelfth or thirteenth century onward, but she roots her scholarship on “revelation” (*sange*, also translated as “repentance” or “confession”) in the eighth century.

²² Childs, 55. Takahashi Kōji “Hōnen ni okeru zange to metsuzai – toku ni sono rinrisei o motomete,” in *Hōnen shōnin kenkyū*, ed. Bukkyō daigaku Hōnen shōnin kenkyūkai (Tokyo: Ryūmon, 1975), 190-191.

age... whatever evil of body, tongue and mind, bad action accumulated in threefold manner, I have done, together with similar things I confess it all.²³

With the *kokubun-niji*, instead of “Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sins,” it would probably be more correct in this circumstance to translate the *hokke metsuzai no tera* as “the Temples of the Lotus for the Expiation of Impurities.” When we see the use of confession and Buddhist *sūtras* for “atonement,” what we are actually looking at is an attempt to eliminate pollution that negatively affects both a practitioner’s spiritual abilities as well as the state of the country. For example, one of the earliest *sūtra* recitations performed for Japan’s wellbeing also includes a reference to confession. In 642, after a variety of Shintō sacrifices and rituals were performed without effect to end an ongoing drought, Soga no Oho-omi suggested having the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* read in the temples, having people repent their sins “as Buddha teaches” (in other words, in accordance with *sūtra* confessional commandments such as we see in the *Golden Light Sūtra*), and humbly praying for rain.²⁴ The ritual was apparently not successful and therefore discontinued, but nonetheless in this story we see the courts resorting to Buddhist methods for purging pollution after the native Japanese rites have failed.

From the mid-eighth century onward repentance assemblies (*kekae*) connected with multiple *sūtras*, including the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, expounded these texts for the wellbeing of the country.²⁵ One particularly notable instance was in

²³ Emmerick, 10-11.

²⁴ Aston, 2:175; According to De Visser, the *Genkō Shakusho* states that the sutra used was the “Great Cloud Sūtra” (the same one Empress Wu connected to her provincial temples, although there is likely no connection). De Visser, 1:23, 25.

²⁵ See De Visser, 1:249-409.

767, when Empress Shōtoku had all *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* perform the *Kichijō-keka* (repentance rite focused on the goddess Devī Śrī from the *Golden Light Sūtra*):

[B]y virtue of this meritorious and blissful action Great Peace of the Realm, wind and rain in due season, ripening of the five cereals, and joy of the people might be caused, and all sentient beings of the ten quarters might equally be favoured with this felicity.²⁶

In this passage, we see the beneficial results of the national protection temples' monks' and nuns' performing this repentance rite. The *Kichijō-keka* was performed annually at *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* until Emperor Kōnin stopped the ceremony in 771. He reinstated the ritual a year later, though, on account of famine and poor weather.²⁷ This is but one example of the national protection temples' performing atonement ceremonies as part of their role in protecting the state.²⁸

What we are looking at in the eighth century is a combination of a largely Chinese-influenced Buddhist concept of atonement with a Japanese perception of purity.²⁹ I see this not as applying a Shintō ethos to a Buddhist practice, but rather as interpreting notions of “purity” and “repentance” through a Japanese understanding of spiritual prowess.³⁰ We can see evidence of Emperor Shōmu's concern with monastics'

²⁶ De Visser, 1:313.

²⁷ De Visser, 1:401.

²⁸ Other examples from the ninth century include Emperor Kanmu's calling for the *Yakushi-keka* performed in *kokubunji* in 805. In 822 Emperor Saga called for repentance rituals the *Kichijō-keka* in all *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* and also called for the purification of all Shintō shrines. In 834 Emperor Tenmu ordered the *kokubunji* monasteries recite the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* in the daytime and the *Yakushi-keka* at night; this was repeated in 837. De Visser, 1:303-304, 2:453.

²⁹ We see several references to purification rituals in the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*. As they were both completed in the early eighth century, we can glean at least a partial understanding of perceptions of purity at that time.

³⁰ My use of the term “Shintō” is merely for convenience's sake. I am not implying that the shrine and *kami*-based worship of the Nara and Heian periods were akin to the more systematized and formalized understandings of Shintō we see in later years, particularly following increased interactions and borrowings between Buddhism and Shintō.

physical and spiritual purity particularly in relation to expounding the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*. In 734, Emperor Shōmu commanded that that all monks and nuns who wished to be ordained had be able to recite from memory the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*, have mastered proper prostration before the buddhas and must have maintained monastic purity as dictated by their precepts for at least three years.³¹ Three years later, he commanded all monks and nuns take ritual baths to purify themselves and read the *Golden Light Sūtra* two to three times a month.³² Shintō priests likewise had to maintain physical and spiritual purity for their own religious rites to be efficacious, which is likely the origin of this practice.³³

The *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Meditation Sūtra* both include confession rites aimed at improving religious practice and ability. In the *Golden Light Sūtra*, all manner of wrongdoings are confessed and absolved. The result is a clean karmic slate and realigned Buddhist practice that will hopefully lead to a faster attainment of buddhahood. In the *Meditation Sūtra*, the six senses are meditated upon and purified through visualizing Samantabhadra and confessing specific sins from both this and prior lifetimes.³⁴ The purification themes in both the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Meditation Sūtra* likely appealed to the eighth-century Japanese court considering the belief in a monastic's religious powers deriving from his or her physical and spiritual purity. From

³¹ Abé, 24; De Visser, 2:437-438. Monastic purity was also a concern in the Confucian influenced *Taihō ritsuryō* codes. See Sonoda Kōyū and Delmer Brown; Alan L. Miller "Ritsuryō Japan: The State as Liturgical Community," *History of Religions* 11, no. 1 (1971): 98-124.

³² De Visser, 2:446.

³³ See quote in note 15 above. Consider, for example, the countrywide purification in 678 held in preparation for worshipping the *kami*. Aston, 2:338. In both this example and with Emperor Shōmu's order regarding ritual baths, we see a concern with purifying the self before interacting with the divine.

³⁴ The six sense organs are the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Bunnō, 357-365.

this perspective of personal purity alone, we can see why the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*, the *Diamond Sūtra* or the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* would not have been suitable to connect with the *kokubunji* or the *kokubun-niji*: none of these texts contain repentance rituals that allow for the elimination of impurities.³⁵

The *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Kokubun-niji*

The first known reference to Emperor Shōmu's use of the *Lotus Sūtra* is in 726 when he had it copied and distributed during his aunt's, the former Empress Genshō, illness.³⁶ Following her death in 748, he had a thousand copies made for the sake of her soul; purportedly, this is the origin of the *Hokke sembue* or "gathering for [the creation of] one thousand copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*."³⁷ In fact, it is with Emperor Shōmu that we first see the association in Japan between the *Lotus Sūtra* and death rituals that were to gain particular prominence in the ninth through twelfth centuries, quite likely because of the *sūtra*'s purported ability to remove impurity.³⁸ The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were ordered to perform a number of *sūtra* recitations for either healing a sick emperor or

³⁵ This is not to say that there were not repentance rituals based upon these texts. In De Visser's review of repentance rituals in China and Japan, we can see that there were indeed repentance rituals based upon the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*, *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. De Visser, 1:249-409. However, unlike the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sutras*, these three do not contain specific chapters outlining repentance rites and the resulting purification.

³⁶ De Visser, 2:646.

³⁷ De Visser, 2:649.

³⁸ For more on the *Hokke sembue*, see De Visser, 2:357-366. Helen Hardacre attributes both the connection between the *Lotus Sūtra* and death rituals and with repentance with Ennin's introducing rites pertaining to these two themes from China in the latter part of the ninth century. However, whether these specific rites were known during Emperor Shōmu's time or not, given his use of the *Lotus Sūtra* for the benefit of his aunt's soul and the fact that the *kokubun-niji* were called the "Temples of the Lotus for the Atonement of Sin," we can reasonably suggest that these two themes were at least known. Helen Hardacre, "The *Lotus Sūtra* in Modern Japan," in *The Lotus Sūtra in Japanese Culture*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr., and Willa Jane Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), 218.

appeasing the soul of a recently departed imperial relative. Therefore, a significant part of being a “national protection temple” apparently meant caring for the wellbeing of the imperial family.

As seen in Chapter 2, the association between the *Lotus Sūtra* and repentance rites in China goes back at least to the Sui dynasty. Between 589 and his death in 597, Zhiyi wrote “Ceremonial rules for repentance by means of *samādhi* on the Lotus.”³⁹ As this connection between atonement and the *Lotus Sūtra* was known during the Sui dynasty, potentially there is a connection between the establishment of provincial temples and the *Lotus Sūtra* that began in China and was carried over to Japan. Empress Wu too depended on themes from the *Lotus Sūtra* to help support her right to rule, which may have also influenced Emperor Shōmu’s use of this text.⁴⁰ Whether or not these Chinese examples had any influence on Emperor Shōmu’s decision to attach the *Lotus Sūtra* to the *kokubun-niji*, considering the purposes for which he had the text expounded, the association between the text and atonement was likely well known. It is probably on account of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s atonement and purification abilities that it was the key *kokubun-niji* text and later became one of the three official national protection *sūtras*.⁴¹

As for why Emperor Shōmu connected the *Lotus Sūtra* to the national protection convents and not to the monasteries, the precise reason is unclear. As mentioned in

³⁹ De Visser, 2:355-356; see also Stevenson.

⁴⁰ See Wang.

⁴¹ Hardacre attributes Japan’s use of the *Lotus Sūtra* for repentance and ancestor rites to Ennin (794-864), who brought these rituals from China in 847 (Hardacre, 218). However, with Emperor Shōmu we already see the *Lotus Sūtra* used for the benefit of his aunt’s soul in 746. Also, considering the *kokubun-niji*’s name was clearly invoking the repentance aspect that we see in the *Meditation Sūtra*, the purported conclusion to the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is reasonable to assume that whether the specific Chinese rites were known in the eighth century or not, at the very least the associations between the *Lotus Sūtra*, ancestor veneration and repentance were known.

Chapter 1, women certainly have a prominent role in this text as compared with others, particularly with the tale of the *nāga* king's daughter. Mikoshiha Daisuke states that “some”⁴² have posited that the *kokubun-niji* were connected with the *Lotus Sūtra* and called the “Temples for the Atonement of Sin” because of the concept that women were inherently “sinful” or “impure” and therefore needed to extirpate their inborn inadequacies.⁴³ He argues against this position, quoting passages attributed to Emperor Shōmu wherein the monarch blames the country's illnesses and misfortunes on his “lack of virtue”⁴⁴ and poor example, the result of which is that “many people have fallen into sin.”⁴⁵ Mikoshiha states that, as Emperor Shōmu includes or indicates the word “sin” (*tsumi*) in his edicts, the purpose of the *kokubun-niji* was to expiate the emperor's – and thereby the nation's – sins, rather than the nuns' sins as women.⁴⁶

I agree with Mikoshiha that the *kokubun-niji* were probably not connected with the *Lotus Sūtra* and the idea of removing sin because of a cultural sense of women's inherent sinfulness, but rather in hopes that they would expunge national impurities. This perspective fits with Emperor Shōmu's creation of the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* for protection against warfare, pestilence and natural disasters. However, there likely was a personal aspect as well, in that performing the repentance ritual found in the *Meditation Sūtra* would likewise improve an individual's spiritual purity and therefore advance a practitioner's religious efficacy. From this perspective, there may not have been any specific reason to connect the *Lotus Sūtra* with convents. Or, as Emperor Shōmu had

⁴² He mentions no specific names or articles.

⁴³ Mikoshiha, 36. See also Yoshida, “Dragon King's Daughter.”

⁴⁴ *Shoku Nihongi*, 732.7.5; 737.8.13; as quoted in Mikoshiha, 36.

⁴⁵ *Shoku Nihongi*, 734.7.12; as quoted in Mikoshiha, 36.

⁴⁶ Mikoshiha, 37.

already promoted the text’s copying and recitation for his aunt’s wellbeing, perhaps there was an understood connection between the *Lotus Sūtra* and women at this time in Japan. Whatever the specific reason Emperor Shōmu had for connecting the *Lotus Sūtra* to the *kokubun-niji*, he probably chose this text largely because of its repentance ritual and its purification aspect. Moreover, as will be discussed below, the *Lotus Sūtra* allowed Emperor Shōmu to perform his own relic distribution campaign in the same vein as King Aśoka, Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu without needing to have actual physical relics.

Sūtra as Relic

The three historical figures looked at in the previous chapter all distributed body relics, whereas Emperor Shōmu distributed copies of the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras*. Even if T.H. Barrett and Jinhua Chen are correct in positing that Empress Wu may have had the *dhāra ī* known in Japan as the *hyakumantō dhāra ī* (“one million pagoda *dhāra ī*”)⁴⁷ distributed either towards the end of her reign or posthumously by her son to appease her soul, Emperor Shōmu’s *sūtra* enshrinement is still distinct from the Chinese and Indian examples he was likely copying.⁴⁸ If Emperor Shōmu was trying to imitate King Aśoka, Emperor Wendi and Empress Wu’s relic distributions, the *Lotus Sūtra* may have appealed to him because it superseded the need to have physical relics.

We do know that Japan had relics from Buddhism’s earliest introduction, but they were quickly enshrined and therefore not easily accessible to spread among the

⁴⁷ See Hickman and Kornicki, 114-117.

⁴⁸ See Barrett, “Stūpa, Sūtra and Śarīra,” *The Woman Who Discovered Printing*, and Chen “Śarīra and Scepter.”

prefectural pagodas.⁴⁹ Additionally, dispersing these relics could take power away from the capitals and major temples. Soon after the *kokubunji* were established, travelers began bringing large numbers of relics with them to Japan.⁵⁰ From the ninth century onwards relics gained particular prominence in Japan in what Brian Ruppert calls Japan's "relics cult." However, Emperor Shōmu did not have access to these relics when he established his provincial monasteries and convents. Therefore, perhaps Emperor Shōmu chose to spread *sūtras* based in part on convenience; it was theoretically far easier to duplicate texts than to call relics into existence.

The year before initiating the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, Emperor Shōmu had the provinces copy and enshrine the *Lotus Sūtra* in pagodas.⁵¹ The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were built in close proximity to these pagodas. In fact, Piggott claims the monasteries and convents were built to house ritualists so they were close to the pagodas, which were the actual centers of national protection.⁵² From this perspective, Emperor Shōmu possibly began his "sūtra-as-relic distribution" with the pagodas housing the *Lotus Sūtra* rather than with the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. Considering that he refers to

⁴⁹ The earliest known reference to relics being brought to Japan is in 535 CE, when two Koreans accompanied a Japanese envoy and brought with them relics of the Buddha. Lancaster, 13. Following Buddhism's official introduction in the mid-sixth century, we see additional relic gifts from Paekche, Japan's closest ally on the Korean Peninsula. Many of Japan's earliest Buddhist temples, such as Asukadera, Shitennōji and Hōryūji, were actually built to contain these relics. See also Kidder.

⁵⁰ One notable example is the Indian monk Bodhisena (704-760) who performed the "eye-opening" ceremony on the large Vairocana buddha in Tōdaiji. He brought two thousand relics to Japan. Ruppert, 61.

⁵¹ He also called for pagodas built in all provinces to house newly made copies of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* when ordering the establishment of the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. Whether he intended for these newly ordered pagodas to be built in addition to the ones housing the *Lotus Sūtra* he ordered the year before or was merely reemphasizing that he truly wanted every province to build these pagodas is unclear. Considering the expense and that these pagodas' nature was the same, it is reasonable to suspect he only meant for one pagoda to be built. De Visser, 2:646.

⁵² Piggott, 256.

kokubunji in an edict two months before actually calling for their establishment,⁵³ he may have seen these pagodas as serving in this role prior to the creation of the provincial monasteries and convents.

The possibility that Emperor Shōmu saw the *Lotus Sūtra* as a relic itself becomes clearer when we look at a passage in its tenth chapter, “Preachers of the Dharma.”

O Medicine King! Wherever it may be preached, or read, or recited, or written, or whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a *stūpa* of the seven jewels, building it high and wide and with impressive decoration. There is no need even to lodge *śarīra* [relics] in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One.⁵⁴

The point that the enshrined *Lotus Sūtra* is equivalent to a buddha’s whole body (as compared with a relic, which is a mere fragment) is reiterated in Chapter 11 “Apparition of a Jeweled *Stūpa*” wherein a magnificently jeweled pagoda appears. The Buddha states that there is no relic within this *stūpa* (suggesting a *stūpa* does not necessarily have to contain a relic) but rather the whole of the buddha Abundant Treasures’ body. This buddha and his traveling *stūpa* will appear at any location where the *Lotus Sūtra* is being expounded.⁵⁵ In other words, like the Four *Deva* Kings, the Buddha Abundant Treasures can be summoned by chanting a specific text.

This aspect of the *Lotus Sūtra* being equal or even superior to a relic is particularly interesting when taking into consideration the *Golden Light Sūtra*’s famous *jātaka* about Prince Mahāsattva. In Chapter 17, the Buddha brings his gathering to a *stūpa* and pulls out the relics inside. They are his bones from a past life as Prince

⁵³ De Visser, 2:452.

⁵⁴ Hurvitz, 178.

⁵⁵ Tanabe, “Visual Piety and the Lotus Sūtra,” 85.

Mahāsattva when he sacrificed himself to a hungry tigress and her cubs. This story is one of the closest ties that exists between relic veneration and *jātaka* tales.⁵⁶ However, there are no relics associated with the *Golden Light* monasteries; instead, the *Lotus Sūtra* replaces that need. The pagodas existed in neither the monastery nor the convent precincts, but rather outside both. Arguably, then, both the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were dependent upon the enshrined *Lotus Sūtra*: it was their relic.

The *Sangokokukyō* and a Change in Focus

The first time we see all three *sūtras* recited together was in 806 when Emperor Heizei ordered the fifteen major temples around the capital area recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* when on retreat. The other two texts were already being recited at retreats. In 742, Emperor Shōmu decreed that the *Golden Light Sūtra* would be the principle text expounded by all monks during their retreats. Empress Kōken added the *Lotus Sūtra* in 749.⁵⁷ Emperor Heizei also ordered the *kokubunji* add the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* as their secondary text under the *Golden Light Sūtra*.⁵⁸ Therefore, by the date 806 we see that all three of the national protection texts were recited at the national protection temples. However, we do not actually see any references to the phrase *sangokokukyō* (or any of its variations, such as *gokoku sanbu* and *chingo kokka sanbu*)

⁵⁶ Ruppert, 69.

⁵⁷ De Visser, 1:418-419.

⁵⁸ De Visser notes there is some discrepancy with this account. According to the *Fusō ryakki*, Emperor Heizei ordered the *kokubunji* recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* alongside the *Golden Light Sūtra*. Conversely, the *Daiji* states Emperor Heizei made the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* the secondary text at the retreats for the fifteen temples alone and assigned a different secondary text to the *kokubunji*. The *Genkō Shakusho* says that Emperor Heizei ordered both the fifteen temples and the *kokubunji* expound the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. De Visser, 1:418-419.

until midway through the ninth century. One of the earliest specific uses of the term *sangokokukyō* is in 872 in connection to the Tendai monk Enchin.⁵⁹ In 877 the Emperor Yōzei issued an ordinance that all provincial retreat leaders had to recite these three *sūtras* to end a drought.⁶⁰ We cannot simply assume that because the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* were all connected to the national protection temples this then led to their becoming the national protection *sūtras*. While the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* undoubtedly played a role in these *sūtras* becoming the *sangokokukyō*, we must also look at other religious developments in the ninth century.

Early Heian emperors like Kanmu (737-806; r. 781-806) began emphasizing doctrinal proficiency above the copying and recitation that epitomized Nara-period Buddhism. Emperor Kanmu required monks and nuns know and understand Buddhist theology, not simply memorize and recite the *Golden Light Sūtra* and *Lotus Sūtra* as Emperor Shōmu had required.⁶¹ Part of Emperor Kanmu's plans to improve the Buddhism's quality and effectiveness involved instituting annual assemblies focused on reciting and lecturing on specific *sūtras*.

Sūtra assemblies were not new to the Japanese court. For example, the earliest mention of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' hundred-seat assembly dates back to 660, although this was not a regular, yearly gathering until the mid-tenth century.⁶² In the early ninth century, Emperor Kanmu approved the annual meeting of two lecture assemblies based on the *Golden Light Sūtra* (the *Misaie*) and the *Diamond Sūtra* (the

⁵⁹ De Visser, 2:442.

⁶⁰ De Visser, 2:661.

⁶¹ De Visser, 2:661.

⁶² De Visser, 1:116; Sango Asuka, "In the Halo of the Golden Light: Imperial Authority and Buddhist Ritual in Heian Japan (794-1185)," (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007), 179 note 15.

Yuimae) in the Kyoto palace. Both of these assemblies date back to the eighth century and were associated with specific Nara temples.⁶³ In the ninth century, lecture assemblies based on protective *sūtras* gained prominence. Participation in the *Misaie* and *Yuimae* as well as a third assembly also based on the *Golden Light Sūtra* (the *Saishōe*) were essential steps for political advancement among monastics. Starting with Emperor Kanmu in the early ninth century, then, we start to see the *sūtra* lectures and debates that were to characterize Heian-period Buddhism.⁶⁴ This is a significant point in looking at the shift from *kokubunji* to *sūtras*: simple recitation that did not require understanding a text's meanings was replaced in favor of doctrinal proficiency.

Tendai and Shingon Influence

In the midst of this doctrine-focused setting Saichō and Kūkai returned from China with new esoteric “technologies” that could surpass the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. As Ryūichi Abé notes, both faced uphill battles in legitimating what were rather radical departures from Japanese Buddhism up to that time.⁶⁵ Saichō and Kūkai had to prove that their sects' deviations were superior to standard Buddhist practice and could still accomplish the same, if not more, than the Six Schools of Nara. As Buddhism's primary function during the late Nara and early Heian periods was protecting the state, this was the venue within which Saichō and Kūkai had to excel. Although Saichō and

⁶³ For more on the specific associations among important courtly families and these temples, see Sango and Kidder.

⁶⁴ For more on this, see Neil McMullin, “The *Lotus Sūtra* and Politics in the Mid-Heian Period,” In *The Lotus Sūtra in Japanese Culture*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989): 119-141.

⁶⁵ Abé, 61.

Kūkai employed different supportive arguments and strategies in their fight for primacy, they both relied on *sūtras* that were already central to protecting Japan – the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*.

As has been mentioned previously, Saichō used these three *sūtras* as a course of study for his students who followed the exoteric Meditation Course.⁶⁶ Zhiyi taught on all three of these texts and incorporated ideas from them into Tiantai doctrine.⁶⁷ However, while the *Lotus Sūtra* is certainly a prominent Tiantai text, Zhiyi did not highlight the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* enough to justify Saichō's choice of these three *sūtras* based on their connection to the Tiantai master alone. More likely, to position Tendai as a newer, better means of protecting the nation, Saichō used those *sūtras* already connected with national protection.

We see Saichō's concern with national security long before he left for China in 804. His training began at the *kokubunji* in his home province of Ōmi, giving him an early background in chanting *sūtras* for protecting the country, particularly the *Lotus* and *Golden Light Sūtras*.⁶⁸ His relocation to Mount Hiei in 785 was particularly propitious as a decade later Emperor Kanmu established the new capital Heian-kyō (Kyoto) at Mt. Hiei's base. According to Chinese geomancy, the new capital's northeastern direction

⁶⁶ When Emperor Kanmu readjusted the allotment of yearly ordinands in 805 and granted Saichō the two he'd requested, he added an additional provision: one novice would follow an esoteric path of study and the other an exoteric path (the Meditation Course). Emperor Kanmu's insistence on having, eventually, half of Tendai's monks study esoteric Buddhism reflects his own interest in the field rather than Saichō's proficiency in Tantricism. Groner, 71.

⁶⁷ See Swanson; Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, 73; Orzech, *Politics*, 76.

⁶⁸ Groner, 24-25.

was particularly inauspicious – as Mount Hiei and Saichō were located in that area, both became responsible for protecting the capital.⁶⁹

In what was likely another attempt to support his sect’s ability to protect the country, Saichō had six pagodas established throughout the country. Each pagoda housed a thousand copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁷⁰ Four pagodas were established in the cardinal directions with the fifth and sixth on Mount Hiei; one protected the center and the remaining pagoda guarded the other five.⁷¹ In this way, Mount Hiei not only guarded the capital, but was also the central point for a new national protection system that resembled the *kokubunji*. According to Paul Groner, “Mount Hiei was to be the center of a matrix of pagodas and temples which were to protect the emperor and the nation from harm.”⁷²

Kūkai similarly emphasized Shingon and esoteric Buddhism’s value to the state. Although the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* are not the only texts Kūkai used, nonetheless it is notable that he developed rituals and ideologies focused on those three *sūtras* that were increasingly becoming the most important to the state. For example, he “discovered” the Buddhist divinities concealed in the *Lotus Sūtra*’s Sanskrit title.⁷³ He developed a supplementary ritual to draw out the

⁶⁹ Groner, 31.

⁷⁰ The first he established in Kyushu before departing for China. As the second of these six pagodas was not built until almost twenty years later, Saichō probably did not initially intend for the Kyushu pagoda to be the beginning of a national defense stupas. Groner, 109-110.

⁷¹ Groner, 109-110.

⁷² Groner, 180.

⁷³ Abé states that in one of his commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*, Kūkai identifies the nine title characters of the *Lotus Sūtra* written in the Sanskrit text Siddham as the embodiment of the nine primary deities of the womb mandala as well as their beneficial powers. Abé, 64.

Golden Light Sūtra's powers.⁷⁴ And, with Bukong's eighth-century recension of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* that incorporated esoteric Buddhist ideas, Kūkai developed rituals particularly based around the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' *ma ala* to protect the state.⁷⁵ When we consider that of all these three national protection *sūtras*, the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* is the only one to come with its own ritual, we can start to see part of esoteric Buddhism's appeal at this time. The hundred-seat ritual, for example, can purportedly save a country from any disaster no matter how dire.

With Kūkai we also see esoteric Buddhism's influence in the Heian period's transition from *sūtra* distribution and recitation amongst the provincial temples to *sūtra*-focused assemblies primarily within the capitals. What Kūkai offered the court and clergy was a new understanding of how *sūtras* worked: they were effective because of concealed powers inherent in the texts themselves that the proper incantations or ritual interactions with could bring forth.⁷⁶

Kūkai grounded his analysis in Esoteric Buddhist texts that prescribed in detail ritual procedures for making manifest the latent power inhering in the texture of scriptural texts. He was therefore presenting the Nara scholar-priests with a particularly Buddhist explanation for the efficacy of *sūtra* recitation in protecting the nation. That is, by adopting Esoteric Buddhism, the Nara clerics would be acquiring a language of their own that they could employ to explicate the efficacy of the services they performed for the state. It meant that in order to make their services take effect, they no longer had to rely solely on the native Shintō belief that only spiritual and physical purity resulting from the most stringent observance of the precepts would give the clergy shamanistic power.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ In 834 he proposed an addendum ritual to be performed alongside the *Misaie*, the *Goshichinichi mishuhō* ("Imperial Rite of the Second Seven Days of the New Year") that was immediately accepted and instituted. Abé, 58.

⁷⁵ Orzech, *Politics*, 3.

⁷⁶ Abé, 64.

⁷⁷ Abé, 64.

In other words, with esoteric Buddhism power lay not in an individual's purity but in the *sūtras* themselves. Theoretically then, the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* did not need to expiate the emperor's lack of virtue to protect the country – esoteric rites could take care of this problem.

Conclusion

National protection was obviously the primary rationale for establishing these prefectural monasteries and convents. But, considering the temples' titles as well as the messages in the *sūtras* connected to them, we see the importance of purification via atonement rites in protecting the country. Emperor Shōmu likely chose the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* more because of their repentance chapters than because of their protective promises; the *Golden Light Sūtra* was used in protective rites long before Emperor Shōmu established the *kokubunji*, but it was not the only text used in this way. As for the *Lotus Sūtra*, while we certainly see its prominence in Japanese history prior to the mid-eighth century, it is with Emperor Shōmu that we first see it connected with protection. I maintain that their atonement chapters set these two scriptures apart from the other salvific *sūtras*. They could protect and purify. By purifying the land and theoretically improving monks' and nuns' personal spiritual abilities, the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* were thereby protecting the country from any bad effects, such as pestilence or war, arising from a ruler's inappropriate rule.

When we look at the historical context surrounding Emperor Shōmu's establishment of the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*, we get a sense of his concern with the

state of the country. The smallpox epidemic and Kyushu rebellion were challenges to his virtue and right to rule. Protection rituals, both Buddhist and Shintō, were apparently ineffective because disasters kept occurring. Emperor Shōmu's solution answered this cosmic and earthly defiance to his rule and echoed historical and legendary precedents from Indian and Chinese rulers who similarly used Buddhism to support their controversial hegemonies. While King Aśoka, Sui Wendi and Empress Wu all rose to power by means of coups, Emperor Shōmu was probably trying to prevent one. The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were the religious counterparts of the governmental offices; they supplemented the political presence with spiritual authority. Meanwhile, they also housed hundreds of new “delegates” throughout the countryside, twenty monks per monastery and ten nuns to each convent.⁷⁸ Sending these monastics to the countryside also increased political presence, particularly in areas that there were few “Japanese” as compared with other ethnic groups such as the Emishi or Hirata. Also, with the concern over monastic purity, sending these monks and nuns into the hinterlands cut off urban temptations.

The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were Emperor Shōmu's way of claiming and defending his domain. The *Golden Light* and *Lotus Sūtras* helped him in this endeavor. Both claim that reciting them will bring forward powerful Buddhist deities – which, in the case of the *Golden Light Sūtra*'s Four *Deva* Kings, will defend the country from warfare. They also both contain repentance chapters that, when viewed through a Japanese interpretation, effectively removed impurities from the land and thereby

⁷⁸ Piggott, 256; De Visser, 2:452.

eliminated illness and natural disasters. Moreover, the *Lotus Sūtra* addresses the general lack of relics in Japan at this time that would theoretically impede Emperor Shōmu's attempt at copying India and China's relic distributions. As the supreme king of *sūtras* – a self-given title it also shares with the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* – enshrining the *Lotus Sūtra* eliminates the need for relics.

Even though the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* did not become known as the *sangokokukyō* until more than a century after Emperor Shōmu's edict in 741, we see them being used for this purpose at the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. Saichō and Kūkai and their respective sects are probably primarily responsible for these *sūtras* being designated the official *sūtras* for the protection of the state. However, even though the *Lotus Sūtra* is Tendai's foundational text, it probably would not have become one of the *sangokokukyō* without the *kokubun-niji* precedent that established the scripture's protective association. In fact, considering how Saichō promoted Tendai's protective powers, we can clearly see the influence of Emperor Shōmu's *kokubunji* system.

I believe the *sangokokukyō*'s origins lie with the early ninth century shift towards esoteric Buddhism. Emperor Heizei's command that the fifteen major temples and the *kokubunji* recite the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* came in the same year Kūkai returned from China in 806 with the newer recension. Perhaps he or other travelers also brought back news of the power of Bukong's version in protecting the Tang dynasty. Whatever the reason, even though the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was recited for the country's

protection as far back as the seventh century, towards the end of the eighth and into the early ninth centuries the text gained additional prominence as a national protection *sūtra*.

It is significant that one of the earliest mentions of the *sangokokukyō* comes from a Tendai priest. Tendai and Shingon's use of the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* in protecting the state probably led to their becoming the three national protection *sūtras*. However, while Tendai doctrine in particular relies on this text, it does not account for why the *Lotus Sūtra* is a "protective" *sūtra*. I believe the *Lotus Sūtra* became one of the *sangokokukyō* because it was the base *sūtra* for the *kokubun-niji*. Saichō enshrined copies of the *Lotus Sūtra* in pagodas around the country in a manner imitative of Emperor Shōmu's pre-*kokubunji* order that all provinces build pagodas to house copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Emperor Shōmu was potentially relying on the *Lotus Sūtra* as a relic replacement and because of its repentance and purification abilities. While Saichō arguably could have been using the *Lotus Sūtra* for the same purposes, that is probably not the case. Considering the degree to which Saichō promoted Tendai's national protection properties, he was probably relying on the *Lotus Sūtra*'s position as a protective text as established by the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have looked at why the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* became Japan's three national protection *sūtras*. While the latter two *sūtras* contain clear protective promises provided the countries they are in expound them properly, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not include these same promises. Also, while we see Japanese sovereigns calling for the Buddhist community to recite the *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for the Benevolent Kings* as well as other thaumaturgical *sūtras* to protect the country, we do not see direct references to the *Lotus Sūtra* being used to protect the country until Emperor Shōmu's time. I propose that because Emperor Shōmu connected the *Lotus Sūtra* with the national protection convents, *kokubun-niji*, the *Lotus Sūtra* was reconceptualized with a protective attribute it did not previously have.

The *Lotus Sūtra* does not possess many references to protection, and what mentions we do see are limited to specific people venerating the scripture. However, through its concluding text, the *Lotus Sūtra* does have atonement rites that could be used to cleanse not only monks and nuns but also the emperor and his realm. When we consider the chaotic state Japan was in during Emperor Shōmu's reign and that he was imitating Chinese and ancient Indian reliquaries, with the *Lotus Sūtra* as a relic replacement, we can better see the *Lotus Sūtra*'s value in protecting the country. The *Golden Light Sūtra*'s confessional chapter, its protective promises and its use from at least the seventh century onward in *sūtra* recitations for protection are probably

responsible for Emperor Shōmu’s connecting it with the national protection monasteries, *kokubunji*.

Emperor Shōmu increased his spiritual and political clout through the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji*. Spread out in all provinces, the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* provided the religious counterpart to governmental offices. They also spread Buddhism throughout the countryside, which could potentially unite the diverse groups. The *sūtras* Emperor Shōmu chose supported his hopes that the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* could purify and protect the landscape. The *Golden Light Sūtra* promises that the Four *Deva* Kings will protect those countries whose kings abide by its governing directives. The scripture also contains a confessional chapter that could purify and strengthen the monks’ spiritual powers.

The *Lotus Sūtra*’s concluding text, the *Meditation Sūtra on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*, also contains confessional rites that are purificatory in nature. Considering that Emperor Shōmu called the *kokubun-niji* the “Temples for the Atonement of Sin,” or perhaps more suitably the “Temples for the Expiation of Impurities,” we can see that a fundamental purpose of the *kokubun-niji* was eliminating pollution, particularly the emperor’s. The *Lotus Sūtra* also contains stories and references to female practitioners that, arguably more so than other major Buddhist *sūtras*, make it particularly applicable to women. Moreover, the way Emperor Shōmu had the *Lotus Sūtra* copied and enshrined in seven-story pagodas connected with the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* bears a distinct similarity with the continental relic distributions. At this time Japan did not have many relics, and many that it did possess were already interred at

major Nara area temples. However, the *Lotus Sūtra* specifically commands that it should be kept in a *stūpa* and that, because the *sūtra*'s message contains in essence the entirety of the Buddha's body, accompanying relics are unnecessary.¹

The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* protected the country from within and without. The monasteries could call forth the Four *Deva* Kings, who promised to protect any Buddhist country that properly venerated the *Golden Light Sūtra* and kept its "Instruction Concerning Divine Kings." Specifically, the Four *Deva* Kings swore to protect against invasion and rebellion. As for other problems along the lines of natural disasters and epidemics, only a king's personal virtue could prevent those. There is no given remedy for what to do once those calamities have already begun. The *Lotus Sūtra*'s concluding text, the *Meditation Sūtra*, includes a repentance ritual whereby the six sense organs are purified, religious prowess improves and increases, and practitioners will receive bountiful rewards in both this and future lifetimes. Taken in tandem, these two *sūtras* protect against the forces of man and nature.

Just prior to the beginning of the ninth century, though, we see a change in court Buddhism. Emperor Kanmu was still clearly interested in utilizing Buddhism's protective properties, but was apparently dissatisfied with the existing situation. As he promoted doctrinal proficiency above simple recitation, understandably we see added emphasis given to the *sūtras* themselves. The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were not immediately obsolete, but here we see the beginnings of their decline. The *sūtra*-based lecture assemblies often took place in the capital and major temples in the Nara area and only

¹ Hurvitz, 178.

occasionally in the provincial temples. As Saichō and Kūkai promoted their newly introduced Buddhist sects they focused particularly on what Tendai and Shingon offered the state in terms of national protection. We see several similarities between the *kokubunji* system and Saichō's efforts to promote Tendai, such as his *Lotus Sūtra*-enshrining pagodas to lectures and study course on the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Golden Light Sūtra* and the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*. Kūkai also wrote commentaries on and developed rituals around the deities in these powerful texts. Moreover, the esoteric rituals he offered removed the need to rely so entirely on the provincial temples to eliminate impurities.

As female renunciants lost power and support in the Heian period, the *kokubun-niji* did too. Esoteric rites replaced the need for the convents' purification, and the *Lotus Sūtra* gained new prominence with the growing Tendai sect. The *kokubun-niji* were superfluous and soon closed or converted to monasteries.² The *kokubunji* continued to operate for several more centuries, although court-based *sūtra* lecture assemblies increasingly took precedence over recitations in the peripheries. It is worth noting that the provincial temples were not the only ones that suffered. De Visser states that the author of the *Bukkyō daijii* blamed the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings*' lecture assembly (*Ninnōe*) decline in the provinces on the "gradual decay" of the *kokubunji* and the fifteen great

² De Visser, 2:453. For more on the *kokubun-niji*, see Paul Groner, "Vicissitudes in the Ordination of Japanese 'Nuns' During the Eighth Through the Tenth Centuries," in *Engendering Faith*, ed. Barbara Ruch (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 65-108; Hongō Masatsugu, "State Buddhism and Court Buddhism: The Role of Court Women in the Development of Buddhism from the Seventh to the Ninth Centuries," trans. Masayo Kaneko in *Engendering Faith*, ed. Barbara Ruch (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 41-61; Mikoshihira Daisuke, "Empress Kōmyō's Buddhist Faith: Her Role in the Founding of the State Temple and Convent System," 22-40; Hosokawa Ryōichi, "Medieval Nuns and Nunneries: The Case of Hokkeji," trans. Paul Groner, in *Women and Class in Japanese History*, ed. Hitomi Tonumura et al. (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1999), 67-79.

temples.³ The *kokubunji* enjoyed a brief renaissance in the fourteenth century when the Ashikaga shogunate established its own “pacification of the realm” (*angoku*) provincial temples and reliquaries.⁴ At first glance, this seems to be imitative of Emperor Shōmu’s *kokubunji* system. However, the emphasis and intention are different. The Ashikaga shogunate (1336-1573) was not interested in purifying the land or improving monastics’ purity. This was an attempt to drum up local and cosmological support following civil war in the *Nanbokuchō* Period (1333-1392). The Ashikaga *kokubunji* actually bears far more resemblance to the continental relic distributions than Emperor Shōmu’s; for one thing, unlike Emperor Shōmu, the Ashikaga shogunate enshrined relics.⁵

The *sūtras* that the national protection temples were built to contain eclipsed the *kokubunji*, which gradually faded away from record.⁶ We still see references to the *sangokokukyō* throughout the medieval and even into the modern periods. De Visser notes that in 1817 the Tendai monk Ryō-a wrote copies of these three *sūtras* with his own blood.⁷ Charles Orzech claims that the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* was recited during WWII to protect against an American invasion.⁸ During the Kamakura shogunate the *sūtras* were often expounded to protect the state, most notably when the Mongols attempted to invade in the late thirteenth century.

³ De Visser, 1:177-178.

⁴ Ruppert, 254-255. The Ashikaga reliquaries were known as *rishōtō*.

⁵ For more on this episode, see Ruppert, 254-259 and Suzanne Gay “Provincial Temple System (Kokubunji, Rishōtō),” *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003), 678.

⁶ For the most part, the *kokubunji* appear to have simply degraded. The temples would fall into a state of disrepair and simply not be rebuilt, or in some cases were taken over by other sects. According to De Visser, the *Daijii* contains a list of where these *kokubunji* and *kokubun-niji* were located. De Visser, 2:453.

⁷ De Visser, 1:121.

⁸ Charles D. Orzech, “Puns,” 17 note 4.

Without the *kokubunji* system the *Lotus Sūtra* would probably not have become a national protection *sūtra*. Theoretically, with Kūkai's explanation of *sūtra* efficacy that did not rely on personal purity, the *Lotus Sūtra*'s atonement purification was no longer needed. Moreover, with the sudden increase in relic imports from the late eighth century onward, real relics could be enshrined in pagodas instead of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Yet it continued to be a national protection *sūtra* likely because it had already gained this attribute by association with the *kokubun-niji* and because of the *sūtra*'s self-promoted prominence. Perhaps the *Lotus Sūtra* would have been just as important in Japanese history without its connection to the *kokubun-niji*. Whether it still would have become one of the *sangokokukyō* on its own, though, is doubtful.

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