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Changing the Calendar

Royal Political Theology and the Suppression of the Tachibana Naramaro Conspiracy of 757

In the aftermath of the suppression of the Tachibana Naramaro conspiracy of 757, the Empress Kōken (“Kōken/Shōtoku Tennō”) issued two edicts articulating the royal political theology of the time. The first edict was a *senmyō*, inscribed in the *Shoku Nihongi* in Old Japanese; the second was a *choku* in Chinese. A miraculous omen, the apparition of a silkworm cocoon with a message woven into its surface, was interpreted as the occasion for a change in the calendrical era name, or *nengō*. This article argues that the imperial edicts express a coherent ideology combining ideas from a cultic matrix in which may be discerned proto-Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian elements.

KEYWORDS: *nengō*—*senmyō*—*choku*—*Shoku Nihongi*—Kōken Tennō—Tachibana Naramaro—omens—edicts—Shinto

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TACHIBANA Naramaro's 橘奈良麻呂 conspiracy to overthrow Kōken Tennō 孝謙天皇 in 757 was the first of three major challenges¹ to the reign of the “Last Empress” (*saigo no jotei* 最後の女帝).² Unlike the Fujiwara Nakamaro 藤原仲麻呂 rebellion of 764, which was an actual military insurrection, the Naramaro conspiracy was effectively stymied by the government after a series of secret reports from informants betrayed the plans of the conspirators, who were promptly and efficiently rounded up, interrogated, then executed or sent into exile. The account of the suppression of Naramaro and his fellow plotters is one of the lengthiest narratives in the normally terse *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀, the Chinese-style official history of the eighth century. Its description of the interrogation, confessions, and punishment of the conspirators affords unique insights not only into the administration of justice during a major crisis, but also into the political theology of the imperial institution in mid-eighth-century Japan. In particular, it provides a window onto the thinking behind a major ritual event in the Nara period, namely the changing of the calendar.

From the time of the Japanese borrowing of the era name system, or *nengō* 年号, originating in Western Han China, a portentous event, often an animal omen, provided the stimulus for the change and naming of year periods. In the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, dating was by reference to the posthumous Chinese name assigned to each emperor, until the first calendrical era, Taika 大化, was designated in 645, signifying the “great change” involved in the adoption of a Chinese-style governmental system. The next two *nengō* of the late seventh-century—Hakuchi 白雉 and Shuchō 朱鳥—designated birds. The former was occasioned by the presentation of an auspicious white pheasant to the court; the latter referred to the red bird of the south, one of the Chinese directional animals. There is some debate as to the historicity of the pre-Nara *nengō*, and there are gaps between them. With the adoption of the *ritsuryō* 律令 system, and beginning with the Taihō 大室 era name in 701, the *nengō* are designated in per-

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1. Commonly referred to as the Tachibana Naramaro *hen* 変, the Fujiwara Nakamaro *ran* 藤原仲麻呂乱, and the *Dōkyō jiken* 道鏡事件. See BENDER 1979 for the *Dōkyō* Incident.

2. See TAKINAMI 1998. Joan PIGGOTT (2003) terms her more precisely “the last classical female sovereign,” as two female emperors sat on the throne during the Tokugawa period. Kōken abdicated in 758, then reascended the throne as Shōtoku 称徳 in 764, reigning until her death in 770.

petuity. Taihō was adopted upon the fortunate omen of the discovery of gold in Tsushima (TOKORO 1996, 29–48).

Nara Japan is conspicuous for its peculiar chelonian *nengō*—Reiki 靈龜 (715–717), Jinki 神龜 (724–729), and Hōki 宝龜 (770–781)—all inspired by the appearance of sacred tortoises. The Tenpyō 天平 era name was inspired by characters engraved on the carapace of an unusual tortoise. Both the Keiun 慶雲 (704–708) and Jingo Keiun 神護景雲 (767–770) eras acquired their names from the awesome manifestation of unusually colored clouds.³

In the case of the change from Tenpyō Shōhō 天平勝宝 (749–756) to Tenpyō Hōji 天平宝字 (757–765) during the reign of Kōken Tennō, the auspicious event was a fantastic oracle woven on the cocoon of a silkworm—sixteen “jeweled characters” interpreted by court officials as prophesying long life for the empress and peace in the realm after the tumultuous events of the Naramaro conspiracy. But *Shoku Nihongi* describes not only this pivotal miraculous omen, it also records a number of imperial edicts highlighting the political theology of the court. The content of these edicts evidences the various theological strands—native, Buddhist, and Confucian—woven into the intellectual tapestry of the emerging ideology of the Nara state as the court weighed the significance of the intervention of the gods into human affairs and continued to articulate theories of divine legitimation for imperial power.

The Tachibana Naramaro Conspiracy and its Suppression

A series of entries in *Shoku Nihongi* beginning on the twenty-eighth day of the sixth month of Tenpyō Hōji One and continuing through the eighteenth day of the eighth month relate the story of the revelation of the plot: the arrest, interrogation, and punishment of the conspirators; and finally the changing of the calendar.⁴ The narrative is carried in a series of imperial edicts—seven *senmyō* 宣命 in Old Japanese, and twelve edicts (*choku* 勅 and *shō* 詔) in the Chinese of the chronicle.⁵ The story begins with a brief account of the resignation from office of Naramaro’s father, the Sadaijin Tachibana Moroe 左大臣橘諸兄, who died early in the year, then jumps immediately to a secret report by Prince Yamashiro 山背

3. Edward SCHAFER (1977, 88–89) categorized similar cloud omens in China as “atmospherics,” including phosphor or iridescent clouds and solar or lunar halos with five colors.

4. A source of possible confusion for the reader of *Shoku Nihongi* is that in fact these events unfolded in Tenpyō Shōhō Nine: when the calendar was officially changed to Tenpyō Hōji One in the eighth month, the change was made retroactive, so that the chronicle dates all events of the year to the latter year name. It should also be kept in mind that the year Tenpyō Hōji One does not correspond precisely to the Julian year 757; it began on 25 January 757 and ended on 12 February 758. See TSUCHIHASHI 1952, 24.

5. See BENDER 2009 for the different edict types of *Shoku Nihongi*—the *senmyō*, *choku*, and *shō*.

王 that Naramaro and others are plotting treason and gathering soldiers. Both Kōken Tennō and her mother, the Empress Dowager Kōmyō 光明, issue edicts addressing the conspirators and give orders to various guard units to round up the plotters. Interrogations and confessions are narrated in great detail, affording a many-sided overview of the event, and punishments of death by beating with a heavy stick or near and distant exile are pronounced. Several imperial princes are reduced to the status of commoners before being sentenced to death, and two of them assigned the names “filthy” and “foolish.” The narrative climaxes with an address to high officials and village heads by Empress Kōken, and concludes with the edict changing the calendar.

In fact the story begins in the previous year, 756, with the death of the retired emperor Shōmu 聖武 in the fifth month. Upon his death, a posthumous edict (a *shō*) was discovered and proclaimed which designated the imperial Prince Funado 道祖王, a grandson of Tenmu 天武, as the crown prince and heir to the reigning Kōken Tennō (*Shoku Nihongi* 3, 158–59).⁶

It was unusual, inasmuch as any process of succession can be said to be unusual in ancient Japan, for the crown prince to be named by anyone other than the emperor regnant. This posthumous edict almost immediately gave rise to a full-blown succession dispute. Fujiwara Nakamaro, the rising star at court, favored setting aside Funado and designating Prince Ōi 大炊王. Kōken was persuaded and accordingly issued an edict in the fourth month announcing and justifying this change. The Sadaijin Tachibana Moroe, Naramaro’s father and the most powerful member of the bureaucracy, had offended the retired Emperor Shōmu with disparaging drunken remarks at a banquet and was forced to resign; Moroe’s death in the first month of 757 left his son as the putative heir apparent to power in the bureaucracy, but still a relatively low-ranking courtier.

A number of oddities and points of interest arise from the perusal of the *Shoku Nihongi* account, chief of which is the fact that the ultimate fate of Naramaro himself was not recorded. Japanese historians tend to assume that he died in prison along with other named conspirators, but the survival of his immediate family seems peculiar given that the *ritsuryō* 律令 law codes provided severe treatment, including extermination, for the families of those convicted of high treason. Naramaro’s son Kiyotomo 清友 survived to hold high office during Kanmu 桓武 Tennō’s reign, and his grandson Hayanari 逸勢 was renowned as a great calligrapher, one of the “Three Brushes” along with Kūkai and Saga 嵯峨 Tennō. A granddaughter became the chief consort of Emperor Saga and founded an institute for classical studies in the Heian capital (BOHNER 1942,

6. References to *Shoku Nihongi* (hereafter SN) are to SN volumes 1–5 in the Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei edition (SN comprises volumes 12–16 in the series). The *kanbun* text is on the even-numbered page, the *yomikudashi* is on the odd-numbered.

190–99). Most intriguing is that in 837 Naramaro was posthumously awarded the highest court rank and the title of Dajōdaijin 太政大臣 (*Shoku Nihon kōki* 続日本後紀, 201).

An examination of these peculiarities and an analysis of the disparities of the sentences in light of the law codes provide material for a study in its own right. Those who were beaten to death with the heavy stick, those who were sentenced to near or distant exile, those who were pardoned immediately, those who were pardoned in later amnesties and those, like Naramaro himself, who were rehabilitated posthumously all seem to have been involved in the plot to much the same degree. It is difficult from reading the chronicle to understand these discrepancies, although in one edict Kōken specifically attributed the pardon of Prince Shioyaki 塩焼王 to his father's distinguished service to the throne (SN 3, 218–19).

Another issue concerning the entire narrative is the fact that it is included in volume twenty of the forty-volume *Shoku Nihongi*. The provenance and recension of the different volumes of the chronicle have been at issue since the time of its presentation to the court of Emperor Kanmu in 794 and 797, and volume twenty in particular is problematic, since the original was acknowledged by the compilers to have been lost and reconstructed at a later date (SAKAMOTO 1991, 94–95). Incidentally, other than in Brownlee's translation of Sakamoto, none of these points has been addressed in Western scholarship, which has largely ignored the whole affair. Joan PIGGOTT (2003, 37), in the three sentences which she devotes to the subject, completely misjudges the nature of the event, writing that “Tachibana Naramaro, son of the retired prime minister Tachibana Moroe, led a stunning coup...” In fact Moroe was not merely retired, but dead at the time, and Naramaro's intrigue represented not a “stunning coup” but a completely incompetent debacle. Furthermore, “prime minister” is a questionable translation for Sadaijin—Minister of the Left. Herman Ooms touches on the event several times, accurately classing it with other “plots [that] leaked before they hatched,” but he mistakenly attributes to Naramaro an order banning saké drinking at banquets in the year after his apparent death (OOMS 2008, 214).

Senmyō #19: Divine Protection of the Throne

The meat of the theological material is laid out particularly in two edicts—*Senmyō #19*, an edict in Old Japanese read on the twelfth day of the seventh month, and a Chinese-language *choku* issued on the eighteenth day of the eighth month. On the first occasion Kōken Tennō summoned not only the high officials (fifth rank and up) who were normally the audience for edicts, but also the village heads and local officials from the capital region to the grounds of the Heijō Palace. The following edict was read to the multitude:

Let the words of the Manifest Deity, the Child and Imperial Lord of Yamato, ruling the Great Land of the Eight Islands, be proclaimed, and let all pay heed—all the Imperial Princes, Princes, the Hereditary Lords, the Hundred Officials and Lesser Officials of All Under Heaven—let all give ear, thus I proclaim. The Throne of Heavenly Sun Succession, established and ruled over by the Imperial Male and Female Ancestral Deities seated in the High Throne of Heaven has been attacked by evil and treacherous slaves seeking to wrest away the Succession by force. These evildoers—Kuna Tabure,⁷ Matohi,⁸ Naramaro, Komaro and others—leading a party of traitors sought to 1. surround the mansion of the Naishō 内相 (Fujiwara Nakamaro) and kill him; 2. surround the palace of the crown prince (Ōi) and set him aside; 3. descend on the palace of the Empress Dowager and steal the bells, seals, and tokens; and 4. summon the Udaijin (Fujiwara Toyonari 豊成) and put the rulership into his hands. Next they planned to depose the Mikado 帝 (Kōken) and to put one of the four princes⁹ on the throne.

On the night of the twenty-ninth of the sixth month, they met in the garden of the Dajōkan, drank salt water and swore an oath, and bowed to Heaven and Earth and the Four Directions, concluding their plot to raise troops and attack on the second day of the seventh month. On the afternoon of the second day, at the hour of the ram, Ono no Azumahito 小野東人 called upon the Governor of Bizen 備前, Officer of the Palace Guard Kamitsumichi no Hidatsu 上道斐太都, and invited him to join the attack. Hidatsu dissembled, pretending to agree, but at the hour of the boar reported all the details to the court. Thus the conspirators were interrogated and all the details of Hidatsu's report proving to be true, the guilty were punished.

Now according to the law all were guilty of high treason and deserved death. However, We in Our mercy lightened the sentence by one degree and merely changed the surnames of some or sentenced them to distant exile. That the filthy and detestable wretches have been swept away is indeed due to the compassion and protection of the kami of Heaven and Earth and the awesome and majestic *mitama* 御靈 of the Imperial Sovereigns who have ruled since the Creation. Further is this due to the incredible power of the Rushana Nyorai 盧遮那如来, Kanzeon Bosatsu 觀世音菩薩, and the protectors of the law—Brahma 梵王, Indra 帝釈, and the Four Great Heavenly Kings. Thus the plotters have all been completely punished. These are the divine words of the Emperor who reigns and pronounces even as a god—let all hear these words, I the herald proclaim. (SN 3, 214–17)

7. Prince Kibumi's 黄文王 name was changed to Tabure 多夫礼 (“filthy,” “wicked”), and he was given the surname Kuna 久奈 before he was executed.

8. Prince Funado's name was changed to Matohi 麻度比 (“foolish”) before he was executed.

9. Shioyaki, Asukabe 安宿, Kibumi, and Funado.

Divine Protection by the Imperial Ancestral Kami

The theme of the *senmyō* is divine protection of the state both by the native kami and Buddhist deities, in whose number have been assimilated the Hindu gods Brahma and Indra and the Deva Kings of the Four Directions (*shitennō* 四天王). In *Shoku Nihongi* the edicts, both those in Old Japanese and those in Chinese, provide some of the best articulations of royal theology and as a result portions of a number of them have been translated into English. Those concerning Buddhism and its relation to the kami religion are probably the best known; one is reminded of the famous edicts of Emperor Shōmu concerning the construction of the Tōdaiji Daibutsu, or Shōtoku Tennō's edicts explaining her elevation of the Buddhist priest Dōkyō to supreme political office.¹⁰ Edicts with a more specifically Chinese flavor have also been translated and commented on as Western scholars have emphasized the Confucian aspects of Nara ideology (HOLCOMBE 1999; McMULLEN 1996).

This *senmyō* employs one of the lengthier florid and archaic-sounding prefaces which are thought to characterize the Old Japanese edicts, even though only about a third of the *senmyō* exhibit this distinctive phraseology. George Sansom's pioneering but unfinished translation of the *senmyō* rendered *akitsukami* 明神 as "Manifest Deity"; *ama no hitsugi* 天日嗣 as "Throne of Heavenly Sun Succession"; and *ama no takamikura* 天高御座 as "High Throne of Heaven" (SANSOM 1924, 7–12). Other phrases here are more unusual in the *senmyō* prefaces: *yamato neko* 倭根子, which Sansom ignores but ZACHERT (1950, 95), translates as "Das Liebe Kind von Yamato," and *sumera ga mutsu kamurogi kamuromi no mikoto* 皇親神魯岐神魯彌命 ("Imperial Ancestral Male and Female Deities") which appears in only four of the edicts. Although the *ritsuryō*, fragments of which were collected in the ninth century *ryō no shuge* 令集解 and *ryō no gige* 令義解, specified that these *senmyō* prefaces be reserved for such extraordinary occasions as the designation of a crown prince or the accession of an emperor, it has long been realized that in fact the *Shoku Nihongi* edicts follow no such pattern in actual usage. Elsewhere I have argued that the pattern of usage (or the absence) of such language reflected the theological struggles at Shōtoku's court to discover an acceptable balance between native and imported Buddhist beliefs.¹¹

Before looking briefly at some of these phrases, I would like to raise the question of whether this language may be characterized in general terms as "Shinto" language. In 1981 an influential article by Kuroda Toshio appeared in the *Journal of Japanese Studies* asserting that the term "Shinto" was useless or misleading for early periods and that the entity which we thus identify "did not exist as an

10. See inter alia DE BARY et al. 2001, 114–20; PIGGOTT 1997, 267–68.

11. See INOUE 1976, 365–69; KURANO 1936, 137–38; BENDER 1979, 149–51.

independent religion” before [early] modern times. Kuroda discussed critically its three appearances in *Nihon Shoki*, and certainly the term was not used generally in ancient Japan—a quick count shows only eight citations in the *Rikkokushi* 六国史.¹² Since then Western scholars have been rather wary of using the term, instead speaking of “kami worship” or “native cult.” However, John BREEN and Mark TEEUWEN argued forcefully for the utility of the word in the introduction to their *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami* (2000, 4–7), concluding “If we accept Kuroda’s argument in its most extreme form, and adopt his stance that there was no distinct “Shinto” tradition of thought during the premodern period, we render ourselves unable either to explain the process of amalgamation that dominated premodern Japanese religion, or to see the Shinto tradition that rose to prominence in the Edo and modern periods in its proper historical context.”¹³ In this light, I would assert that the peculiar Old Japanese terminology of the *senmyō* prefaces is indeed a type of proto-Shinto language, embodying along with the accounts of the Age of the Gods in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* the nascent concepts of the native *kami* cult. While detailed etymological inquiry is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to examine briefly some of the key terms in the preface to *Senmyō* #19.

The edict begins *Akitsumikami to ohoyashima shirashimesu yamato neko sumera ga ohomikoto rama to noritamafu ohomikoto* 明神大八洲所和倭根子天皇大命良麻止宣大命 (Let the words of the Manifest Deity, the Child and Imperial Lord of Yamato, ruling the Great Land of the Eight Islands, be proclaimed...) (SN 3, 214–5). In his commentary on *Senmyō* #1, which employs the same language, Motoori Norinaga explains *akitsumikami* as the god who is visible or “manifest” in this world ruling all under heaven—hence the emperor. He likens it to the usage *arahitokami* 現人神 in the chronicles of Emperors Keikō 景行 and Yūryaku 雄略 (MNZ 7, 196). In a recent discussion Herman OOMS (2008, 69–70) argues that both *arahitokami* and *akitsumikami* have distinct Chinese antecedents, the former as a Buddhist term for “avatar” and the latter with Daoist notions of the “perfected man.”

Ohoyashima, the Great Land of Eight Islands, is an epithet for Japan common in *Kojiki*, and *shirashimesu* is “to rule.” Norinaga glosses the characters 天皇大命 as *sumera ga ohomikoto*, again meaning the emperor—literally “heavenly sovereign and great lord.” The second occurrence of *ohomikoto* here refers rather to the words of the sovereign. Usage of such phraseology is not confined to the *senmyō*, being also common in the *Man’yōshū* 万葉集. *Man’yōshū* texts commonly gloss the characters 天皇 as *sumeroki*, which is also given as the reading

12. TEEUWEN (2002, 236–45) provides a detailed analysis of some of these citations.

13. For an elaboration of this argument, see also TEEUWEN and SCHEID 2002, and TEEUWEN 2002. My use of “proto-Shinto” below is merely a suggestion, on the analogy of historical linguistics, for example “proto-Indo-European.”

for 皇神祖 or 皇祖, with the meaning of “imperial ancestor.”¹⁴ Saeki Umetomo points out the association of Ōkimi 大君 with *sumerogi* in *Man'yōshū* poetry, referring to among others *Man'yōshū* 18:4098 which begins *Takamikura ama no hitsugi to ame no shita shirashimeshikeru sumeroki no kami no mikoto...* (SAEKI 1954, 62–5). Kaneko Yoshimitsu discusses the same poem with reference to the *senmyō*, as demonstrating the broad similarities in the nativist theology shared across Old Japanese literature inherent in terms relating to the position of the emperor and the succession (KANEKO 1987, 117–20).

Norinaga does not give an explanation for *yamato neko*, but the term commonly forms a part of the emperor's title in *Nihon shoki* as far back as the seventh emperor, Kōrei 孝靈. As we have seen, Zachert translates it as “das Liebe Kind von Yamato”; MARUYAMA's *Jōdaigo jiten* 上代語辭典 (1967, 1023) assigns the particle *ne* the function of an honorific. Herman Ooms translates *neko* as “root child,” and makes much of the fact that the term comprised a part of the name of some emperors. Although he does not discuss the language of the *senmyō*, he contrasts these imperial names to those bearing the component *ame* 天, arguing that the concept of “root child,” signifying an earthly deity as opposed to the heavenly deities, was an important component of Yamato mythology (OOMS 2008, 45).

It should be emphasized that the etymology of these and other Old Japanese words is far from certain. Alexander Vovin notes that “WOJ *sumērōki* or *sumēra* is a mysterious word.... The meaning of *sumē* is unclear, at least there seems to be no internal Japanese etymology” (VOVIN 2009, 137–38). On *neko*, he comments “I am not exactly happy with Ooms ‘root child’ for *neko*, but I must confess that anything else takes us even more far afield, and this something else looks grossly unsubstantiated like Zachert's ‘Das Liebe Kind’” (Vovin, personal communication, 1 July 2010.) The *Jidaibetsu kokugo daijiten* has no entry for “*neko*.”

The doctrine of imperial legitimacy is most clearly stated in the lengthy locution *Takama no hara ni kamuzumarimasu sumera ga mutsu kamuroki kamuromi no mikoto no sadametamahikeru amatsu hitsugi takamikura no tsugite* 高天原神積坐須皇親神魯岐神魯彌命乃定賜来流天日嗣高御座次乎 (The High Throne of Heavenly Sun Succession, established and ruled over by the Imperial Male and Female Ancestral Deities seated in the High Plain of Heaven...) (SN 3, 214–15). Norinaga comments that this is the throne established by Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大御神 and Takamimisuhi no mikoto 高御産巢日命, with the command that Amaterasu's descendants should reign in the central land of Toyoashihara 豊葦原 (MNZ 7, 318). A special point of interest here is the phrase *kamuroki kamuromi no mikoto*. As noted above, this unusual expression occurs only four times in the *senmyō*. Norinaga states that it may refer explicitly to Izanagi 伊

14. See, for example, *Man'yōshū* 1.0029; 3.0322; 3.0443.

邪那岐 and Izanami 伊邪那美, or perhaps to all the male and female imperial ancestral deities down to Amaterasu Ōmikami (MNZ 7, 100).

Toward the end of the edict the theory of divine protection by the kami is explicitly stated: “That the filthy and detestable wretches have been swept away is indeed due to the compassion and protection of the kami of Heaven and Earth and the awesome and majestic *mitama* of the Imperial Sovereigns who have ruled since the Creation.” Together with the preamble, the edict articulates the doctrine of the divine legitimacy of the imperial throne, established by the imperial ancestral kami, and also the protection of the succession to that throne by the spirits of those kami who have watched over the throne since the beginning of time.

Divine Protection by Buddhist and Hindu Deities

Divine protection by Buddhist and assimilated Hindu deities is a minor motif in this edict, comprising just a line after the theme of imperial legitimacy and protection by native kami has been sounded—“Further is this due to the incredible power of the Rushana Nyorai, Kanzeon Bosatsu, and the Protectors of the Law—Brahma, Indra, and the Four Great Heavenly Kings.” During the reign of Kōken Tennō and her reaccession as Shōtoku, the struggle to find an acceptable balance of nativist and Buddhist royal theologies would become a major intellectual undertaking at court, but in this response to the Tachibana Naramaro threat the former predominates. The Buddhist doctrine of divine protection of the state (*gokoku shisō* 護国思想) was of course a major emphasis in the sutras popular at the Nara court. The three sutras *Konkōmyōkyō* 金光明經 (*Suvarṇa-prabhāsa sūtra*), *Ninnōkyō* 仁王經 (**Kāruṇika-rāja sūtra*) and *Hokkekyō* 法華經 (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka sūtra*) were characterized as the “Three Sutras for the Protection of the State,” granting various Buddhas’ protection especially to kings and nations which revered the Dharma, and the provincial temples established by Emperor Shōmu were named after the first of the three. In reaction to the Tachibana Naramaro conspiracy, however, although a special reading of the *Ninnōkyō* was held at the palace on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month (SN 3, 218–19), a different amalgam of deities and sutras was appealed to. Rushana Nyorai was of course the Buddha enshrined at Tōdaiji as the Daibutsu. Descriptions of this cosmic Buddha are found both in the *Kegon* 華嚴經 (*Avatamsaka sūtra*) and *Bonmō* 梵網經 (**Brahmājāla sūtra*) sutras which were in vogue at the time. The latter sutra, focusing on the initiatory Bodhisattiva vows, was apparently seen as a companion to the immense *Kegon* sutra, although its depiction of the cosmic Buddha Rushana is just as vivid as that of the more frequently-cited *Kegon*.¹⁵

15. On the *Bonmōkyō* see ELISSÉEFF 1936, and for a translation BATCHELOR 2004. The *Avatamsaka sūtra* has been translated by CLEARY 1993. BOWRING (2005, 85) comments on the relationship of the two in Nara Japan.

The four great Heavenly Kings had been popular since the earliest days of Buddhism in Japan, giving their name to one of the temples allegedly founded by Prince Shōtoku. They are described in the *Konkōmyōkyō* as the guardian deva kings of the four quarters (DE VISSER 2006, 431–34). Brahma (Jp. Bonnō) and Indra (Jp. Taishaku) are associated at least in art historical terms more with esoteric Buddhism, which was making its entry into the Japanese scene in mid-Nara times along with exotic Indian deities such as Kichijoten and Bishamonten (NEMOTO 2003, 46–60). Both Brahma and Indra make their debut in *Shoku Nihongi* in this *senmyō*, appearing again in Shōtoku's later *Senmyō* #43 in 769. It should be noted that Indra is invoked also in the imperial edict translated below in connection with a *keka* 悔過 ritual of repentance conducted by Buddhist priests for the rest of the soul of the late Emperor Shōmu, and is the only Buddhist deity to appear in that more Confucian-oriented text.

On the whole, then, the successful suppression of Tachibana Naramaro's conspiracy is viewed in this edict as a miraculous instance of divine protection both by the native kami and, to a lesser extent, by the Buddhist divinities. The overall theme of divine protection of the state was the primary theological motif in Nara political ideology and the balance of Shinto and Buddhist components was articulated and reworked again and again in specific instances during the reigns of the Nara monarchs, particularly Shōmu and his daughter Kōken/Shōtoku Tennō.

The Silkworm Omen

On the thirteenth day of the eighth month, Kanasashi Toneri Maji 金刺舎人麻自, a commoner from Suruga 駿河 Province, presented to the court a cocoon on which sixteen characters had been woven by a silkworm. (The text is not explicit as to whether this was a single cocoon and silkworm or multiple, and indeed the miraculous circumstance defies description.) This astonishing portent was of such gravity that the following lengthy edict (a *choku*) was issued five days later:

We, though of little virtue, have with gratitude inherited the throne, and have now for nine years reigned over the eight directions. But We have grieved day and night that We are not adequate for the task of good government. It is as though We are treading on thin ice, anxiously standing at the edge of the depths.¹⁶ However, on the twentieth day of the third month, Heaven bestowed the omen of the four characters—Tenka Taihei 天下太平—as a sign of peace in the land, indicating that the Court will long continue to be strong. But the traitorous deposed Crown Prince Funado, Prince Asukabe, Prince Kibumi,

16. *Shoku Nihongi*: 危若臨淵. 慎如履水. Compare: *Rongo* 論語 [Lun yü] 8:3 (SKT 1: 177) 詩云, 戰戰兢兢, 如臨深淵, 如履薄冰 (“It is said in the Book of Poetry, ‘We should be apprehensive and cautious, as if on the brink of a deep gulf, as if treading on thin ice’”; LEGGE 1970, 1, 208).

Tachibana Naramaro, Ōtomo Komaro 大伴古麻呂 and others,¹⁷ with their obstinate and rebellious natures and dark deplorable hearts, turned away from the proper Way of lord and subject. Fearing not even the evil deities, they secretly formed a group of traitors and plotted to overthrow the ancestral altars. They received Heaven's chastisement and all were subjected to punishment. It is just as when those two younger brothers spread false rumors¹⁸ to stir up internal dissension but were punished by the Duke of Zhou. It is like the time when the four evildoers in the time of Shun were banished to the furthest corners of the realm.¹⁹ Now the court officials have rectified matters; there are no more foolish courtiers; order has been established and wise officials again hold sway.

Secretly We feared that Our virtue was not like that of Shun and that our fate was to live in difficult times. We feared that Our military skill was clumsier than that of Yin Tou²⁰ and that Our reign would experience the outbreak of chaos. Day and night we were consumed with apprehension, and We could neither eat nor sleep. We were deeply worried that We could not adequately bring virtue or long life to the people, nor extend civilization among them. Then a person of Yakizu District in Suruga Province presented the silkworm cocoon on which characters had formed. The characters read: 五月八日開下帝積標知天皇命百年息. Now although the country was astonished and overjoyed at receiving this marvelous omen, yet We were fearful and uncertain as to its meaning. Therefore we commanded the officials to interpret it. They reported, saying:

“This means the eighth day of the fifth month of Tenpyō Shōhō Nine, the current year. It refers to the feast for the Buddhist priests upon the conclusion of the Keka ritual, on the occasion of the late retired Emperor Shōmu's death anniversary ceremonies. It means that Indra has been moved by the faith of Kōken Tennō and the Dowager Empress, has opened the gate to the heavenly world, looked down upon the accomplishments of their Majesties in the earthly world below, and has granted that the Imperial reign shall continue for a hundred years. Everywhere that the sun and moon shine down will reflect the prosperity of the Imperial descendants, and all on earth will understand that their reign will be long. This omen is a sign that virtue will be diffused afar, that the realm will be peaceful, that compassion will be spread abroad, and that the state will be completely in order. We reflect with gratitude that although the silkworm has markings like a tiger, it periodically sheds its skin to provide silk. Although it has a mouth resembling that of a horse it does not

17. Eight more names are listed.

18. *Shokyō* 書經 [Shujing], SKT 25: 171.

19. *Shokyō*, SKT 25: 35.

20. According to tradition, Yin Tou overthrew the Hsia dynasty.

strive furiously. It dwells long in its cocoon and provides clothing to all under Heaven. From its threads are made magnificent brocades and embroidered cloth, and the splendid clothing for court ritual and festivals. That this divine insect has produced words on its cocoon reveals a divine mystery. These divine characters, referring to the eighth day of the fifth month, have been spontaneously generated at a time of uncertainty and offered up to the court. This is indeed a sign of aid from Heaven, an extraordinarily lucky omen. The numbers ‘five’ and ‘eight’ indicate that the Tennō’s years will doubtless be beyond forty.²¹ The characters ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ together form the word ‘bright’, and indicate that the Imperial palace will endure forever.”

With great joy and gratitude We received this good omen, and We reflect fearfully that Our own virtue is insubstantial. We consider that this sign has not been manifested due to Our own strength alone, but because of the meritorious assistance of Our wise counselors. Sovereign and officials together are grateful for this blessing. Now the providential command has been vouchsafed, and this is the beginning of a tremendous celebration. We should like to extend this good fortune over all the realm, and thus on this day, the eighteenth day of the eighth month of Tenpyō Shōhō Nine, we proclaim the change of the year to Tenpyō Hōji One.

As in a previous edict it was proclaimed “Let there be an exemption for one year from tax in kind and corvee in one district of each province throughout the land!”, now let that same exemption apply for one year in the other districts of each province. Let the confiscated property of the rebellious brigands be distributed widely and equally among the officials and the people. Furthermore, according to the law the general corvee should be sixty days or less. Recently the provincial and district officials have not been abiding by the law’s intention, and have been stretching the time to the limit. This has become a cause of great suffering to the people. From this day forward the number of days shall be reduced by half.

The people have become overburdened with public and private debt, and that they have not been able to repay it is due to their poverty, and truly not to their attempting to cheat. The ancients had a saying, “Take from the place that has plenty and give to that which has not enough—that is the Way of Heaven.”²² Thus the interest on seed rice loans from before last year is forgiven. This year the late crop has been damaged by drought. Therefore half the rice tax throughout the realm is forgiven. Only the sustenance land for the temples and shrines²³ are excepted....²⁴ (SN 3, 220–27)

21. Kōken was born in 718.

22. *Shoku Nihongi*: 損有餘補不足。天之道也。Compare: Rōshi 老子 [Laozi] 77 (SKT 7: 125): 天之道，損有餘而補不足。

23. “Shrines” is literally “kami.”

24. The edict ends with awards of rank, cloth, and grain to the persons who presented the omen.

Tachibana Naramaro's perfidy and the court's successful chastisement of the rebels again form the opening theme of this edict, but the language is strikingly different from the *senmyō* of the previous month. Replete with erudite references to the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of History*, the *Analects*, and the *Laozi*, the edict proclaims Heaven's chastisement of the rebels who "turned away from the proper Way of lord and subject" and "plotted to overthrow the ancestral altars." The Tennō declares her doubts about her virtue being sufficient to maintain order in the empire in times of turmoil, describing her inability to eat or sleep and comparing herself eloquently to ancient Chinese rulers who experienced chaotic eras and seditious subjects. Quite unlike the previous edict, she makes almost no reference to the miraculous protection of native and Buddhist deities, and credits Heaven's chastisement and the sage actions of worthy and upright court officials with rectifying matters.

Auspicious omens are the operative signs of Heaven's favor in this reading of the defeat of the rebels. The apparition of the four characters *Tenka Taihei* in the third month of this tumultuous year is taken as a presage of the divine protection already operative months before the Naramaro incident. Charles Holcombe has translated a *choku* from Kōken Tennō in the fourth month regarding this omen (SN 3, 178–85):

We personally beseeched the Three Treasures of Buddhism and prayed to the [Shinto] deities, hoping for a sign that Our rule was either good or bad. Then, on the twentieth day of the third month, in the screen on the ceiling of Our residence, the ideographs "Great Peace Under Heaven" appeared clearly and brightly. This, then, is help from Heaven above, and a sign from the deities. Looking far back into high antiquity, and examining past events in succession, this is something that has never been recorded in books and was unheard of in former ages. Then We knew that the [Three] Treasures of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Priesthood have prescribed great peace for the nation, and the various deities of Heaven and Earth foretell permanence for Our ancestral altars.

(HOLCOMBE 1999, 296)

The great question of state to which this omen was an answer concerned the succession—namely whether Prince Funado, named by Shōmu as his successor in a posthumous edict, should be put aside as crown prince, and Ōi named in his stead. While Holcombe emphasizes the "Confucian" side of Nara ideology, it is evident that the treatment of omens involved a quite complex amalgam of political theologies. In this instance, the native kami and the Buddhist Treasures were invoked in incubating this omen, and its appearance is attributed to their divine work. One would wish for a more precise and detailed account of the solicitation and interpretation of omens. In the case of the silkworm omen of the eighth month, the edict says only that "We commanded the officials (*gunshin* 群臣) to

interpret it.” Presumably these officials were members of the Yin-Yang Bureau (*On'yōryō* 陰陽寮), but the record is not specific. Their reading of the miraculous characters on the silkworm cocoon is given in great detail; it sheds some light on numerological interpretation of the time and highlights the importance of the silkworm and its products. The numbers five and eight are taken as a reference to the date of Shōmu's death the previous year and to the Buddhist ceremonies conducted on its anniversary. Indra is given a special significance in the interpretation of the omen. The obvious point is made that the graphs for sun and moon combine to form the character “bright” 明.

Otherwise, the significance of the omen seems to be rather generic: “This omen is a sign that virtue will be diffused afar, that the realm will be peaceful, that compassion will be spread abroad, and that the state will be completely in order.” There is nothing in the omen or its interpretation that dictates a change of era name at this time, but certainly the suppression of Naramaro's plot taken together with the mere fact of an auspicious omen seem to signify an appropriate occasion for changing the *nengō*. Of course the new era name makes a specific reference to the omen—the “precious” or “jeweled”²⁵ characters are those vouchsafed on the miraculous silkworm cocoon. As elsewhere in the Nara period, the change of calendar provides an occasion for amnesties and relief of tax burdens.

Conclusion

Changing the calendar in Nara Japan was no routine matter, particularly during the reign of Kōken/Shōtoku (749–770) and the process deserves further study. To begin with, the four-character *nengō* which characterized her reign, probably inspired by those of Wu Zetian 武則天 in the years 695–697, were unique in Japanese history. Her reign began with the era name Tenpyō Kanpō 天平感宝, which for reasons still unclear was dropped after several months in favor of Tenpyō Shōhō. Tenpyō Hōji, whose genesis we have examined here, continued until 765, after the revolt of Fujiwara Nakamaro. The fact that the *nengō* was not changed upon the enthronement of the “deposed” Emperor Junnin 淳仁廢帝 is evidence that his reign was never viewed as legitimate. Jingo Keiun, the final era name of the last empress, was occasioned by an extraordinary series of omens and portents.

Tachibana Naramaro's abortive coup comprised the first of three major threats to the legitimacy of the reign of the last empress, and her successful

25. The element 宝 was common in Nara reign names Taihō 大宝, Shōhō 勝宝, and Hōki 宝龜, and may have been as much an allusion to the Three Jewels or Treasures 三宝 of Buddhism as to earthly treasure.

handling of that threat represented a significant step in solidifying her reign. Although Kōken ascended the throne in 749, her early years were overshadowed by the presence of her father and mother, the retired Emperor Shōmu and the Empress Dowager Kōmyō. But Shōmu's death in 756 marked the beginning of an extended succession dispute which culminated in Kōken's decisive victory over Naramaro and other high court nobles and the symbolic changing of the calendar to the era name Tenpyō Hōji.

Upon Shōmu's death in the fifth month of 756 a posthumous edict, or *shō*, was found designating Prince Funado, a grandson of Tenmu, as crown prince to follow Kōken. It was unusual to have the succession dictated by the retired rather than the reigning emperor, but it was an unusual time—Kōken was an unmarried empress, only the second since Genshō 元正. Although she was the sixth female Tennō in a series reaching back to Suiko 推古, who had ascended the throne almost two centuries before, in 592, she sat on the throne only *faut de mieux* since the designated male heir to Shōmu had died in infancy. The uncertainty of the succession issue was highlighted by the setting aside of Funado and the appointment of Ōi in the third month of 757. Ōi was the candidate favored by Fujiwara Nakamaro, the rising star at court, and Kōken gave an edict (*choku*) that month defending the selection of Ōi.

Tachibana Moroe, who had risen to the position of Sadaijin during the dearth of Fujiwara candidates following the death of Fuhito's four sons in the plague of 737, died in the first month of 757. His son and putative heir Naramaro was still only in the fourth court rank and facing the rising power of Fujiwara Nakamaro when his father died. According to the testimony of conspirators interrogated in the seventh month, his designs for a coup had developed as early as Shōmu's illness of 745 (SN 3, 206–7). The ill-fated coup which was planned for the second day of the seventh month in 757 involved the assassination of Fujiwara Nakamaro and the setting aside of both the Empress Dowager and Kōken Tennō and the designation of one of four imperial princes as the next emperor. The fact that precisely which prince was to become emperor had not yet been settled upon is an indication of the hapless sloppiness that characterized the plot. In any event, numerous spies had been following the development of the conspiracy. When they denounced Naramaro and his fellows, the suppression of the plot was swift and brutal. About four hundred and fifty suspects were executed or exiled (SN 4, 292–93); the record of the interrogations and confessions comprises one of *Shoku Nihongi's* longest extended narratives.

In the aftermath, a bizarre omen was presented to the court, and on the strength of sixteen characters appearing on a silkworm cocoon discovered in the provinces, the official calendrical era name was changed, and the monarch granted amnesties and enormous tax relief measures. Two lengthy imperial edicts give striking evidence of the royal political theology of the time. The thought is

syncretistic, an amalgam of what might be designated proto-Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian strands, although these labels are simplistic and inadequate to characterize the ideology that was developing in the late Nara period. In the Old Japanese *senmyō*, well-articulated notions of divine sovereignty legitimized by the native deities predominate. Developing Buddhist thought concerning divine protection of the state is a decidedly minor motif. In the Chinese-language *choku* of the eighth month, Confucian themes prevail. The scribes display their scholarly virtuosity with erudite references to the Confucian classics, and the querulent self-examination of the sovereign's virtue as a ruler is emphasized. The native gods are not mentioned at all, and the Buddhist role in the ideology is limited to the role of Indra, heretofore an unfamiliar deity.

The *choku* emphasizes the interpretation of the omen by court officials, and reference is made to a previous omen almost as miraculous. Unfortunately the chronicle does not disclose the precise identity of the officials who perform the divination, and although great attention is given to the omen, *Shoku Nihongi* here tells us almost nothing of the process by which such portents are handled by the bureaucracy. If stars are consulted or scapulimancy or plastromancy resorted to, we are not informed. The *nengō* is changed to *Tenpyō Hōji*, symbolically continuing the great *Tenpyō* era established by Shōmu, with an added reference to the miraculous precious characters woven on the wondrous silkworm cocoon.

Predominant themes in the changing of the calendar are thus threefold. First, there is native theology. This comprises the promise of eternal rule by the manifest earthly gods, the emperors, and protection by the ancient ancestral deities who have established the throne of heavenly sun succession; seated in the high throne of heaven, they guard the succession against dirty and impure rebels. Second, there is the divine protection by an assortment of Buddhist and assimilated Hindu deities as specified in the sutras. Third, there is the affirmation of divine rule by a classical Chinese Heaven as spelled out in the Confucian classics, and the signification of political events by mysterious omens. By the late Nara rule of the last empress, the articulation of political legitimacy has evolved into a cultic matrix, a syncretic amalgam of royal theology. The proportions of the contributions of major systems of thought—proto-Shinto, Buddhist, Confucian, and perhaps Daoist—will vary as her reign continues, but the sophistication of this synthesis should not be in doubt.

Traditionally, the emphasis in hermeneutical evaluation of Nara thought has been on the Buddhist component—*gokoku shisō*, the divine protection of the state by the deities apparent in the flood of sutras imported from the continent and the dazzling court ceremonies based upon these scriptures. Although the sophisticated onrush of Indian thought reaches a high water mark in late Nara, the articulation of indigenous kami theology has proceeded apace. Alexander MESHCHERYAKOV (1983 and 2008) has pointed out the resilience of the native

tradition as measured by quantitative means—the incidence of kami rituals and shrines as reported in the chronicles by no means decreases under the Buddhist onslaught. According to Meshcheryakov, even the great Buddhist Emperor Shōmu, the Japanese Ashoka, who once described himself as the “slave of the Three Treasures,” maintained a robust Shinto system of worship. The Confucian aspects of the ideology are noted by Holcombe, McMullen, and Piggott, who emphasize the motifs of filial piety, Confucian ceremony at court, and the overall trend toward a preponderance of Confucian male-dominated political thought.

More recently scholars such as Bialock and Ooms have called attention to the elements of Daoist thought they say to be apparent although not well-articulated in Nara ideology, claiming among them systems of the apparition of omens and their relationship to the calendar and *nengō*, and language redolent of the rise of organized Daoism in medieval China.²⁶ While OOMS (2008, 145) mentions the bizarre dancing mania that surrounded the appearance of the peculiar “Tokoyo no kami” insect in 644, which he judges to have been a “huge caterpillar,” and Michael COMO (2005) has written about the “silkworm goddesses” of early Japan which he traces to continental legends surrounding weaving and sericulture, neither has commented on the silkworm omen of 757.

One assumes that it would be particularly this sort of incident that might reveal the “missing Daoism” which Bialock and Ooms are intent on envisioning, yet as we have seen there is nothing explicitly Daoist in these pronouncements of the last empress. It is worth noting that although the edicts make one reference to the *Laozi*, there were no Daoist ecclesiastical institutions in ancient Japan such as those of the Celestial Masters to parallel those in China. Whether the use of the *Laozi*, the practice of interpretation of omens, and the construction of the calendar may be spoken of as specifically “Daoist” rather than “Confucian” or merely “Chinese” seems to me still a moot point. Certainly the omen speaks of the fundamental importance of sericulture in Nara society, and obviously cults surrounding such a basic and widespread economic infrastructure must have had some relationship to continental and peninsular beliefs, but it seems just as obvious that in the reaction to the Naramaro incident there was a powerful indigenous theological dimension.

The Tachibana Naramaro conspiracy and its suppression constitute a concrete example of a political incident which is interpreted by the Nara court in theological terms. The Japanese Tennō, whose reign is legitimized by kami extending back to the creation, and protected by powerful Buddhist deities, also rules a Confucian realm. In some sense the medium is the message, as the Old Japanese *senmyō* conveys a proto-Shinto ideology, while the Chinese *choku* is more

26. BIALOCK (2007, 65) speaks of “Recovering the Daoist Text,” while OOMS (2008, 245), refers to “The Case of the Missing Daoism.”

syncretically continental in tone. The Japanese scholars are striving to become just as sophisticated as their continental counterparts and they produce edicts with classical references, interpret omens, and set the calendar. Although the mechanisms by which the calendar is handled are still obscure in many details, it is clear that the Nara state was well equipped to formulate and articulate its royal theology to meet the challenges of the management of cosmic time.

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- SKT *Shinshaku kanbun taikai* 新釈漢文大系. Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1960–.
- SN *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀. Ed. Aoki Kazuo 青木和夫 et al. In *Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikai*, vols. 12–16. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989–1998.
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