

Ryūichi ABE, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. 620 pp. \$42.00 cloth, ISBN 0-2311-1286-6. \$19.50 paper, ISBN 0-2311-1287-4.

AT THE BEGINNING of the new year of 835, Kūkai performed the Mishuhō, an elaborate Esoteric Buddhist ritual, for the first time at the imperial palace.

The intricate procedures conferred blessings, power, and protection on the emperor, “His Majesty, our *cakravartin*” (352). The term *cakravartin* referred to the universal Buddhist monarch, and the emperor, thus designated, ruled by virtue of the dharma. Ryūichi Abe describes the event as a moment of great success for Kūkai, who labored through much of his adult life to construct a Buddhist theory of language and social order that could rival Confucianism and even displace it. Kūkai’s performance of the Mishuhō “represented an attempt to supercede the Confucian characterization of the emperor as the Son of Heaven with that of the Buddhist ideal of the *cakravartin*” (65), and was a “watershed in the displacement of Confucianism by Buddhism as the state’s dominant ideology” (385). This triumph could not have been more timely, for a few months later Kūkai was dead.

With analytical skill and an impressive mastery of primary and secondary sources, Abe weaves the story of Kūkai’s accomplishment with several dominant strands of religion and politics of the late Nara and early Heian periods. The strands come in sets—Exoteric Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism; Nara Buddhism and Heian Buddhism; the *ritsuryō* system and Kūkai’s new Buddhist discourse; and the triple figures of the emperor as the Confucian Son of Heaven, the Shinto high priest descended from the gods, and the Buddhist *cakravartin*. These are all familiar terms, but Abe weaves the strands into new and interesting patterns that complement and compete with each other.

One of Abe’s main arguments, for instance, is that Kūkai, unlike Saichō, did not break his relationships with the Nara Buddhist priests and temples. Challenging the usual view of sectarian Shingon scholars, Abe argues that Kūkai did not establish a new sect, but created a discourse that complemented Nara Buddhism. Just as historians and scholars of religion have questioned the view that Kamakura politics and religion displaced the Heian establishment, so does Abe demonstrate that Nara Buddhism, far from being displaced by Tendai and Shingon, was healthy and alive in the Heian period, and that Kūkai established effective alliances with the old guard instead of declaring his independence. Shingon Esoteric Buddhism was established within the framework of the Nara orthodoxy as a complementary element.

As soon as, however, Abe engages in a closer analysis of Kūkai’s claims, the pattern shifts from complementary to competing. Kūkai clearly did think of Esoteric Buddhism as superior, but Abe explains this triumphalism in terms of ritual power, not institutional conceit. Kūkai understood that his was an “aberrant form of Buddhism” (62), and that cooperation with the status quo was necessary for Shingon to be accepted. Esoteric texts, ideas, and rituals (such as *dhāraṇī*) had long been a part of Exoteric Buddhism, but in that framework they were invisible (154 ff.), not recognized as uniquely Esoteric. Kūkai’s new taxonomy of the Esoteric made the Shingon strand stand apart from the Nara fabric in two ways: it was superior for making the Dharma-kāya’s preaching accessible and it had its own distinct lineage (234). The learned Nara monk Tokuitsu may not have had the category of the Esoteric to enable him to understand the uniqueness of the texts Kūkai brought back, but he knew something was wrong, seeing them as “deviations... from Mahāyāna axioms” (212). But even the Nara priests, similarly blinded by the

lack of the Esoteric lens, could still recognize that mantra, mandala, and mudrā were “foreign to the exoteric tradition” for they “saw these alien aspects of Buddhism through the lens of the exoteric paradigm... and had to dismiss them at once as nonsense” (177). Kūkai’s task was not so much to make the invisible visible, but to make superior sense of what was seen as nonsense.

Kūkai cooperated to be accepted, but only to prevail in the end. He functioned as a kind of double agent gaining acceptance to infiltrate and finally overthrow the hegemonic Confucian conceptions of rulership. But even here the pattern is not simple, and Abe describes again the complexities of compatibility and competition, although it is the latter that looms larger. Against the suggestion that Kūkai was conforming to the Confucian order when he complied with Emperor Junna’s request for prayers for rain, Abe argues that in using the term *raja* for king, he was “infiltrating the Buddhist theory of language and text into normative *ritsuryō* discourse.” This “seemingly conformist rhetoric” was a device to use Confucianism to spread his new discourse, and therefore “Kūkai does not aim at destroying the existing discourse on emperorship simply because of its dominantly Confucian content; rather, he attempts to refigure its trope in such a way that Confucian ideology no longer occupies a privileged, hegemonic position” (326). Kūkai the infiltrator is subversive but not revolutionary since he seeks not to overthrow the order but to reverse its priorities so that the once subordinate Buddhism could move up to the dominant position and “replace Confucianism with Buddhism as the ideology of the state that justified the emperor’s authority” (23). Clearly there is competition, but despite his description of Kūkai’s attempt to replace (23, 343), supercede (65), supplant (336), and displace (385) Confucianism, Abe is not saying that Kūkai was out to get rid of it. Using the language of compatibility, Abe notes that “Kūkai’s rhetoric underscoring the ruler’s righteousness is congruous with the Confucian theory of rulership” (336). Still the primary pattern is one of competition for the dominant role, and the secondary pattern is one of compatibility by which the emperor, first and foremost a *cakravartin* in Kūkai’s scheme, would simultaneously still be supreme Shinto priest and Son of Heaven.

The key to understanding Abe’s language of supplanting and displacement is that only dominance is at stake. It is not that Confucianism and Shinto were no longer sources of imperial legitimacy, it is just that they were no longer the *dominant* discourses. In the simplest of terms, we might see a weaving of three strands of the rhetoric of legitimacy for a ruler who (1) descends from the gods and incorporates into the imperial office and person the (2) Confucian Son of Heaven and the (3) Buddhist *cakravartin* king. It is a tripartite arrangement in which one part or another enjoys the rhetorical upper hand in different historical periods. Abe is not arguing that Buddhism destroyed the other two. He does make the case for crediting Kūkai with the development of a Buddhist theory of kingship that took its place alongside of Shinto and Confucian counterparts and even enjoyed dominance for a period of time.

Undoubtedly Kūkai asserted the dominance of the *cakravartin* over the other two imperial poses, and the Buddhist clergy, by their power to consecrate the

emperor as the universal Buddhist monarch, would be elevated to “palaces” higher than those of the emperor (334). The ultimate position was held by the Dharma Emperor (*hōō*), an abdicated ruler whose functions as an ordained priest demonstrated “that his authority was greater than that of the emperor” (379). It would seem that Kūkai bested his competition, but once again we should remember the tripartite arrangement in which Buddhism, though dominant in Kūkai’s scheme, was still in fact not the sole source of legitimacy. Furthermore, as Abe describes it, it was by abdicating and being ordained that the Dharma Emperor “was able to assume the higher religious authority” and had, as priest, the “power to legitimize, or not legitimize, the rule of his successor at the imperial palace” (378). The Dharma Emperor’s superiority was only in ritual, not political, terms. The Buddhist consecration of legitimacy was essential to Kūkai’s theory, but was it indispensable in fact? Could a Son of Heaven and supreme Shinto priest from the royal lineage still be emperor without being a *cakravartin*? The Dharma Emperor had “religious” authority alone, having given up political authority by abdicating. Could he or any other qualified priest (like Kūkai) prevent someone in the royal lineage from becoming emperor by refusing to perform the *abhiseka* consecration?

The coronation *abhiseka* (*sokui kanjō*) became a regular part of the enthronement ceremony, and Abe notes that the “ritual sequence makes the intentionality of the coronation *abhiseka* clear: to ritually transform the emperor into a *cakravartin*” (362). The ritual sequence, however, makes no mention of a *cakravartin*, and is concerned with wisdom, good deeds, the precepts, expedient means, peace, eternal life, and universal salvation. As an *abhiseka* rite, it accords perfectly with Śubhakarasiṃha’s explanation of how the Esoteric Buddhist *abhiseka* does *not* ritually create a *cakravartin* but enthrones the prince of the Dharma on the throne of the buddhas. Śubhakarasiṃha explicitly contrasts the Esoteric rite from the Indian *abhiseka*, which was used to consecrate the king as a *cakravartin* (135–36). The *sokui kanjō*, it would seem, aims not at legitimizing the emperor but blessing him.

Limited space prevents me from discussing other fare from this banquet of a book. Let me simply say that it contains the best explanation of Nara Buddhism and its relationship to the *ritsuryō* system. Abe also provides illuminating details on Esoteric rituals, ordination, and the precepts. His description of the Shingon School as a “loosely organized club, open to members of both the Nara clergy and the Tendai School” (46) again challenges the usual sectarian view of the exclusive nature of the group. Above all, he analyzes Kūkai’s difficult writings with insight, especially in regard to the linguistic and ritual dynamics of mantras that have explicative functions. Underlying it all is ritual power to manipulate natural and social events, and that power is what, through their respective technologies, the supreme Shinto priest, the Son of Heaven, and the *cakravartin* king held in common and competed for.

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