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Editor's Introduction

Esoteric Buddhist Traditions in Medieval Japan

THE TERM “esoteric Buddhism” (*mikkyō* 密教) tends to invoke images often considered obscene to a modern audience. Such popular impressions may include artworks insinuating copulation between wrathful deities that portend to convey a profound and hidden meaning, or mysterious rites involving sexual symbolism and the summoning of otherworldly powers to execute acts of violence on behalf of a patron. Similar to tantric Buddhism elsewhere in Asia, many of the popular representations of such imagery can be dismissed as modern interpretations and constructs (WHITE 2000, 4–5; WEDEMEYER 2013, 18–36). However, like its tantric counterpart, such perceptions of esoteric Buddhism in Japan did not arise in a vacuum. Rather, they are continuous with a discourse on orthodoxy dating back a millennium.

The origins of esoteric Buddhism in Japan are often identified with the semi-legendary figure Kūkai 空海 (774–835). According to the historical narrative first outlined in his catalog of imported items, Kūkai introduced the esoteric Buddhist tradition to Japan in 806 after two years of study in the Tang capital. He brought with him a trove of images, ritual implements, and new texts, some of which he called the “esoteric treasury” (*mitsuzō* 密藏). With these newly imported technologies of the Buddha’s teaching, he established a ritual system based on consecration rites (*kanjō* 灌頂) that he learned from a Chinese master named Huiguo 惠果 (746–806), who, according to Kūkai, was a disciple of the esoteric Buddhist patriarch Amoghavajra (705–774) (T 2161, 55.1060b17–26).

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Esoteric Buddhism was further ingrained into Japanese religion and society through a series of doctrinal treatises in which Kūkai explains how this new form of Buddhism was superior to the other schools in Japan. According to a prevalent view among Shingon scholars, the esoteric teachings succeeded in Japan in no small part due to Kūkai's articulation of the possibility of becoming a buddha in one's current body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏) and his propagation of these superior teachings as a new form of samadhi that dramatically shortened the path to buddhahood (KATSUMATA 1970, 33–48; FUKUDA 2000, 106). Thus, the Shingon sectarian narrative locates the beginning of Japanese esoteric Buddhism in the life and works of the patriarch Kūkai.

As an intellectual, artisan, and ritual master, Kūkai continues to be a seminal figure in the study of religion in Japan. However, focusing solely on Kūkai's doctrinal writings tends to divorce their content from the historical and political context of early ninth-century Japan. Relying on later hagiographical and commentarial literature, the sectarian model of scholarship that has long dominated Kūkai Studies understandably emphasizes Kūkai's role as the central figure in both the intellectual and ritual traditions of the Shingon school.

In *Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (1999), Abé Ryūichi takes a different approach. Contrary to sectarian interpretations that presuppose the superiority of Kūkai's esoteric teaching over exoteric schools of Buddhism, Abé argues that Kūkai's main contribution to Japanese Buddhism, and Japanese society and culture in general, lay in his construction of a new discourse on the ritual language of mantra (ABÉ 1999, 4). According to Abé, Kūkai's esoteric discourse offered Buddhist clerics—initially in Nara and, later, at monastic centers such as Enryakuji 延暦寺, Daigoji 醍醐寺, Ninnaji 仁和寺, and eventually on Mt. Kōya 高野—the ritual knowledge to wrest power and influence at court from an intelligentsia governed by Confucian political structures and social hierarchies (ABÉ 1999, 23). Thus, rather than portraying Kūkai as the founder of an independent sect of Buddhism, Abé recast Kūkai's esoteric Buddhism as a discourse whose construction had social and political implications that reached far beyond Kūkai's Shingon school.

A parallel historical narrative follows the development of esoteric Buddhism in the Tendai school. According to his own account, Saichō 最澄 (766–822) received initiation into esoteric consecration rites while on his return journey from Mt. Tiantai 天台 (DDZ 4: 381). His disciples later traveled to China for further training in the esoteric teachings and returned with new collections of texts and ritual techniques. In their commentaries and subcommentaries on the esoteric sutras, Tendai exegetes devised their own esoteric discourse that integrated the technology of mantra into Tendai's all-inclusive singular vehicle (*ichijō* 一乘) to form the unification of the perfect and esoteric teachings (*enmitsu itchi* 円密一致) (MIZUKAMI 2008, 3–4).

The role that Tendai institutions and doctrines played in the establishment of an esoteric Buddhist tradition in Japan has long been neglected in Anglophone scholarship (WEINSTEIN 1974, 179–180). This lacuna can, in part, be attributed to the overwhelming body of Japanese scholarship on Kūkai compared to his Tendai counterparts. However, the notion of two distinct esoteric traditions—one stemming from Kūkai's transmission from China and the other as a component of the Tendai singular vehicle—is premised on an anachronistic sectarian model that took shape throughout the medieval period and culminated in modern sectarian Buddhism.

Such sectarian distinctions are the result of debates over the orthodox form of the esoteric teachings between Shingon and Tendai scholastics, both of whom claimed to be the heirs to the authentic lineage from the Chinese patriarchs. Shingon partisans, eager to establish Kūkai's school as “purely esoteric” (*junmitsu* 純密), cast doctrines, practices, and rites that did not adhere to the precedents established in Kūkai's writings as merely exoteric or, in the case of the Tendai school, “miscellaneous esoteric” (*zōmitsu* 雜密) (MISAKI 1988, 3–4). For their part, Tendai scholastics argued that the esoteric teachings of Kūkai's Shingon school were premised on his inadequate understanding of the esoteric sutras and their Chinese commentaries. For instance, citing critiques of Kūkai's taxonomy of teachings, the Tendai pundit Hōjibō Shōshin 宝地房証真 (ca. 1153–1214) accused Kūkai of misinterpreting passages in the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* and its commentary to justify the hierarchy of his taxonomy, which relegated Tendai to an inferior position compared to Shingon and even Kegon, an affront to the Chinese Tiantai tradition that Saichō and the Tendai school held in high regard. According to Shōshin, proper training in basic tenets of the Tendai school were required to prevent such errors and to comprehend the true meaning of the esoteric teachings (T 2372, 74.419a21–b12, 417a7–a18).

Quibbles over the correct meaning of the esoteric teachings were not limited to Shingon-Tendai partisanship but occurred among intersectarian factions as well. The schism between the so-called “new interpretation” (*shingi* 新義) and “old interpretation” (*kogi* 古義) branches of the Shingon school began in the early twelfth century when Kakuban 覚鑊 (1095–1144) relocated the Denbōin 伝法院 from Ninnaji to Mt. Kōya. Initially a rivalry for imperial patronage that occasionally erupted in violence, the two branches eventually came to define their differences in terms of disparate interpretations of Kūkai's view on the ontology of the Buddha (ADOLPHSON 2000, 39; TOMABECHI 2000, 15–18). The “temple” (*jimon* 寺門) and “mountain” (*sanmon* 山門) split in Tendai likewise began as a political dispute regarding succession. Later, however, they identified with divergent interpretations of the esoteric teachings and ritual procedures ostensibly stemming from Saichō's disciples Ennin 円仁 (794–864) and Enchin 円珍 (814–891) (MCMULLIN 1984).

Collectively, these factions constituted what Kuroda Toshio dubbed the “exoteric-esoteric system” (*kenmitsu taisei* 顯密体制). According to this theory, Kūkai and Saichō introduced a ritual system that combined popular incantations for the prevention of calamities (*kaji kitō* 加持祈祷) with rites for protecting the state (*chingo kokka* 鎮護国家). The success of this system came to dominate the scholastic Buddhist schools in Nara. Thus, “all religions and schools were subsumed under the esoteric teachings and formed a unified system” (KURODA 1996, 252).

As a scholar of political history, Kuroda was primarily concerned with the relationship between religious institutions and the state. His theory was intended to broadly encapsulate the social and political nature of religion, and Buddhism in particular, in early medieval Japan. While a broad view of premodern social and political structures may provide an overview of medieval religious ideology, it can also obscure how the actors involved in shaping this ideology defined their institutions vis-à-vis their rivals—both real and imagined—for religious and political relevance. Rather than a unified *kenmitsu* orthodoxy, debates over lineage and interpretation of the esoteric teachings suggest that medieval esoteric Buddhism was far from a unified system. Esoteric Buddhist polemics in medieval Japan were necessary precisely because there was not an established orthodoxy.

In the ninth century, at the dawn of esoteric Buddhism in Japan, the dividing line between a Kūkai and a Tendai perfect-esoteric discourse on the esoteric teachings was marginal. When articulating a view on the esoteric teachings, subsequent generations of monks who were initiated into various consecration rites and studied the esoteric sutras and their commentaries borrowed from both Kūkai’s theory of mantra as ritual language and the Tendai doctrinal system (ŌKUBO 2004, 293). Therefore, the esoteric discourse that permeated medieval Japanese Buddhism was not limited to Kūkai’s theory of mantra as a ritual language but included a broader spectrum of doctrines and interpretations, some belonging to the Tendai system and others introduced via texts and rituals introduced after Kūkai and Saichō.

It may seem obvious that a classification as nebulous as “esoteric teachings” would be accompanied by a multitude of competing interpretations. Yet, the ways in which an esoteric Buddhist discourse that emerged from Kūkai and Saichō, and how their interpretations and applications of this concept were received and reconceived, are in need of further examination. By exploring how this esoteric discourse developed in later centuries, this special issue seeks to grapple with the many facets of esoteric Buddhism that came to dominate the religious landscape of medieval Japan. Collectively, the articles in this special issue seek to broaden the scope of what constituted esoteric Buddhism in Japan, while each contribution investigates the lineal, geographical, somatic, transgressive, taxonomical, and cosmological features of this discourse surrounding orthodoxy that continues to shape our understanding of the “secret teachings” in Japanese religion.

Overview of Articles

As one might expect from a tradition that claims the mantle of secrecy, esoteric Buddhism was propagated among monastic elites based at ritual centers such as Daigoji and on Mt. Kōya. However, in her article on Buddhist temple networks, Anna Andreeva argues that esoteric Buddhist lineages were also extended to the laity. Focusing on intellectual links between Daigoji monks and localized movements orchestrated by non-elite practitioners, Andreeva explains how esoteric Buddhist teachings were brought to Japan's countryside during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The article delves into the role that the ascetic Rendōbō Hōkyō 蓮道房宝篋 (ca. 1235) played in creating this network. Although he trained at two major centers of esoteric Buddhism, Rendōbō and his followers were later criticized by the growing Shingon hegemony on Mt. Kōya that attempted to reclaim esoteric Buddhism from "less educated" lineages. However, through a study of recently discovered works, Andreeva has previously demonstrated that Rendōbō and his movement were misunderstood and that his writings on seminal esoteric texts formed the ideological basis of a discourse underlying the practice of esoteric kami worship known as Miwaryū 三輪流 Shinto (ANDREEVA 2017). Contrary to the perception that esoteric Buddhism was the domain of monastic elites, in this article Andreeva offers a glimpse into its transmission among the laity and how such lineages prospered distant from the capital.

Ethan Bushelle likewise redirects our focus on esoteric Buddhist orthodoxy away from the political center of the capital to the serene but wayward landscape at the periphery of Japan. In his contribution to this issue, Bushelle revisits Abē's hypothesis that Kūkai never intended to break from the Nara establishment and, instead, proposed a hermeneutic for the integration of doctrine and ritual via the technology of mantra. Bushelle, however, contends that this esoteric discourse was not merely premised on abstract theories of language. Rather, it was the geography of the "mountain temple" and its distance from the capital that created a new form of Buddhism beginning in the early ninth century.

This new form of Buddhism, Bushelle argues, located the source of enlightenment not in the state-sponsored temples of the capital but in the solitude of the mountains. Saichō pioneered this trend when he established his temple on Mt. Hiei 比叡 in 788 as a center for ascetic practice and meditation. Although the capital would later be moved into close proximity of the mountain, at the time Saichō's mountain temple was remote from the monastic establishment in Nara. Bushelle suggests that Saichō thought of the mountains as a place of Buddhist practice in which one can pacify local kami and spirits who will then protect the nation. Therefore, the mountain temple served a political function as well as a soteriological one.

Following Saichō's example, Kūkai later established his own mountain temple on Mt. Kōya well to the south of both the old and new capitals. Like Saichō, Kūkai considered the mountains to be central to the goal of universal enlightenment. However, he expressed this idea in slightly different terms. For Kūkai, the mountain landscape of Mt. Kōya was a mandala in which the practitioner could attain union with Mahāvairocana Tathāgata.

The mandalization of the mountain was a novel approach to explaining the power of ascetic practice, but Kūkai's temple on Mt. Kōya was not unique. In fact, Bushelle contends that the ideal of the mountain temple was already taking shape in the eighth century; Saichō and Kūkai contributed to this tradition by justifying such remote asceticism as a means of harnessing the otherworldly forces abiding in the mountains that can be used to protect the nation.

Esoteric Buddhism concepts such as becoming a buddha in one's current body and the three secret (*sanmitsu* 三密) activities that bind the practitioner to the Buddha (*nyūga ga'nyū* 入我我入) concern the lofty soteriological goals of immanent buddhahood. However, esoteric Buddhist theorists also mused about everyday circumstances, such as the origins of life and the birth process. In his contribution to this issue, Kameyama Takahiko examines embryological theories stemming from the writings of Kakuban, the patriarch of the "new interpretation" branch of the Shingon school.

Discussions of embryology in the writings of medieval Shingon monks have primarily been treated as heresies by early twentieth-century scholars who found the sexual overtones of this language to be unsuitable for a "purely esoteric" tradition based on the teachings of Kūkai. However, as Kameyama notes, esoteric theories on the development of the embryo are rooted in the most prominent works of Kakuban, who since the seventeenth century has been heralded as the "Great Master who Restored the Teachings" (Kōgyō Daishi 興教大師). Moreover, in these works, which were based on lectures given toward the end of his life, Kakuban speculates on the religious significance of conception and gestation in terms of esoteric Buddhist ontology, namely the doctrine of the dependent origination of the six elements (*rokudai engi* 六大縁起).

Kameyama contends that embryology in Japanese esoteric Buddhism developed as a philosophical musing on the possibility of becoming a buddha in one's current lifetime and that the dualistic language of "red" (female ovum) and "white" (male sperm) that modern scholars found objectionable was an important metaphorical component to the medieval esoteric discourse on buddhahood. Drawing a parallel to Francis GARRETT's (2008) study of the embryo in Tibetan Buddhism, this article demonstrates that sexual symbolism was not anathema to esoteric Buddhist orthodoxy. On the contrary, it was concomitant with its most fundamental doctrines.

In his contribution to this issue, Gaétan Rappo addresses the alleged problem of heresy in Japanese esoteric Buddhism head on. The so-called “Tachikawa lineage” has long been associated with deviant practices involving both overt and symbolic sexual acts. However, expanding on the recent scholarship of IYANAGA Nobumi (for example, 2018), Rappo traces the development of this narrative as it evolved from an obscure reference to an unknown ritual in early medieval texts to an abominable heresy in modern Shingon historiography.

The Tachikawa “heresy” was primarily a myth concocted by the Mt. Kōya monk Yūkai 宥快 (1345–1416), the chief advocate of the “old interpretation” branch of the Shingon school. The actual Tachikawa lineage was founded at Daigoji by Ninkan 仁寛 (d. 1114) in the early twelfth century. In an effort to define his own lineage as the heir to Kūkai’s Shingon school, Yūkai included Tachikawa among the various esoteric traditions that he believed deviated from this orthodoxy.

Yūkai’s association of the Tachikawa with sexual practices in particular had a lasting impact on how the lineage was discussed in catalogs and lineage texts. Rappo refers to such works as “Shingon heresiology.” Catalogers of texts such as Kyōi 恭畏 (1564–1630) and Kenshō 顕証 (1597–1678) as well as compilers of monastic genealogies such as Yūhō 祐宝 (1656–1727) left an imprint on how members of the Tachikawa, along with their attributed writings, have been perceived by subsequent generations. By the early modern period, the label “Tachikawa” became synonymous with “unorthodox,” to the extent that the influence of this discourse can be found in the Jōdo Shin school and even anti-Christian polemics.

Early twentieth-century scholars such as MIZUHARA Gyōei (1923) and MORIYAMA Shōshin (1965) interpreted the body of monastic literature on the Tachikawa lineage through the modern category of heresy, which they translated as *jakyō* 邪教. Originally denoting the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of a teaching, in modern Shingon historiography *jakyō* became the Japanese Buddhist equivalent to the Christian concept of heresy. However, as Rappo demonstrates, such an association was anachronistic and failed to take into account how the Tachikawa lineage was defined as the “other” within the context of medieval Japanese religion.

Taxonomy was one of the main scholastic tools medieval monks employed to compare and critique disparate interpretations of the Buddha’s teachings, and the distinction between esoteric and exoteric meanings of a given teaching was a vital component of Kūkai’s esoteric Buddhist discourse. However, the contents of the “esoteric treasury” was always a matter of dispute. Taxonomies allowed for multiple layers of meaning to be imposed on a given teaching or practice, which in turn could be adapted according to the spiritual capabilities of the practitioner.

In his article, Aaron Proffitt examines how taxonomies were instrumental to the concept of esoteric Buddhist orthodoxy in medieval Japan. Specifically,

he explores the intersection of three taxonomical discourses: the Tendai notion of the fourfold rise and fall (*shijūkōhai* 四重興廢), the rhetoric of shallow and profound levels of secrecy in Shingon treatises, and various pure land interpretations of the *nenbutsu* 念仏. The fourfold rise and fall was based on classical Tendai doctrinal concepts, but came to be associated with the Eshin 惠真 lineage of the Tendai school (STONE 1999, 168–175). This four-part hierarchical taxonomy reflects the stages at which one comprehends the Buddha's teachings, which become progressively superior as one "falls" away giving "rise" to another more profound understanding.

The fourfold rise and fall was paradigmatic for an esoteric Buddhist discourse that attempted to integrate the *nenbutsu* into the esoteric teachings. Proffitt highlights the application of this method in the writings of the Mt. Kōya monk Dōhan 道範 (1179–1252) and the Mt. Hiei chronicler Kōshū 光宗 (1276–1350). By adopting the scholastic language of taxonomy from his Tendai counterparts in the Eshin lineage, Dōhan attempted to establish an esoteric orthodoxy regarding the *nenbutsu*. A century later, Kōshū integrated Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu* into his own *nenbutsu* typology based on the Tendai comprehensive model of the singular vehicle.

The final article in this special issue by Yeonjoo Park delves further into Kōshū's contribution to medieval esoteric discourse on orthodoxy by examining the construction of Sannō 山王, the mountain god of Mt. Hiei, as an esoteric deity. In his *Keiran shūyōshū*, a massive compendium of orally transmitted teachings, Kōshū compiled interpretations on all aspects of Tendai Buddhism from masters on Mt. Hiei and elsewhere. Discussions of Sannō and the deity's role in guarding and propagating the esoteric teachings is a recurring theme throughout the compilation.

Park traces the evolution of Sannō from a local mountain deity to the ultimate manifestation of Tendai esoteric Buddhist doctrine. Through the source-trace paradigm (*honji suijaku* 本地垂迹), Sannō became a signifier for the land of the kami, the bodies and teachings of the buddhas, and the entirety of the dharma realm. As the ultimate metonym, Sannō could be used to challenge old doctrines and propose new ones (GRAPARD 1987, 211–212). Therefore, for Tendai chroniclers such as Kōshū, Sannō was a convenient device for constructing and defining an esoteric orthodoxy in medieval Japanese Buddhism.

Although each of these articles evaluate different sources and utilize a variety of methodologies, they are nonetheless bound by their collective focus on esoteric Buddhism in medieval Japan. Far from a monolithic category, esoteric Buddhism has always been applied to a variety of traditions, practices, and doctrines. This special issue seeks to demonstrate the breadth of this discourse, while offering detailed studies of specific aspects of medieval Japanese Buddhism.

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- T The SAT *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Text Database*. Version 2018. By the SAT Daizōkyō Text Database Committee with approval of Daizō Shuppan. Web resource maintained by the University of Tokyo. <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/>

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- Shōrai mokuroku* 請来目錄. 1 fasc. Kūkai 空海 (774–835). T 2161, 55.
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