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## The Making of an Esoteric Deity

### Sannō Discourse in the *Keiran shūyōshū*

This study explores depictions of Sannō in the *Keiran shūyōshū*, a collection of orally transmitted teachings on Mt. Hiei compiled in the early fourteenth century. Originally a conglomeration of protective kami, Sannō rose in prominence to become the primary deity of the mountain and, by extension, the divine representation of the Tendai teachings. Based on the medieval hermeneutic of source-trace, Sannō was posited as the embodiment of Tendai esoteric doctrine. This article demonstrates that the Sannō deity of Mt. Hiei, as constructed in the *Keiran*, represents a concerted effort among Tendai scholars in medieval Japan to specify an orthodox esoteric Buddhist tradition by associating the fundamental doctrines of their school and consolidating competing interpretations into the guise of a singular deity.

KEYWORDS: Tendai—esoteric Buddhism—*Keiran shūyōshū*—Sannō—kami—*honji suijaku*

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THE *KEIRAN SHŪYŌSHŪ* (hereafter, *Keiran*) is a fourteenth-century compendium of orally transmitted (*kuden* 口伝) knowledge on medieval Tendai teachings, practices, rituals, and cultural traditions. Compiled by the Tendai monk Kōshū 光宗 (1276–1350), the *Keiran* is a record of the multifarious interpretations of Tendai doctrine that circulated on Mt. Hiei 比叡 during the early medieval period. For this reason, the text is often labeled as “encyclopedic” due to its exhaustive nature and for its ample discussions and records concerning the phenomenon of kami-buddha amalgamation (*shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合). The *Keiran* is also a valuable source for tracing the systemization of liturgies and textual exegesis constituting Tendai esoteric Buddhism.

Despite the significance of the *Keiran* to the study of medieval Japanese Buddhism, few scholars have delved into the contents of this massive collection of teachings.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one reason for the dearth of scholarship on this text is the daunting size of this work; the version published in volume seventy-six of the Taishō canon runs over three hundred pages. Furthermore, the *Keiran* lacks a comprehensive narrative, and the logic behind the structure of the extant text is unclear. The compiler, Kōshū, was primarily concerned with documenting responses from various masters regarding specific doctrinal or ritual matters (*koto* 事), rather than organizing these responses chronologically or according to their exegetical relevance, as many commentaries and subcommentaries are structured. Therefore, the contents of the *Keiran* are usually examined piecemeal, rather than treated as a single work.

Although the *Keiran* lacks an overarching logic or systematic structure, we can discern an inner consistency throughout the various topics of a given division or section of the text. For instance, the paradigm of source and trace (*honji suijaku* 本地垂迹), which is ubiquitous in the medieval discourse on kami-buddha relations, is a hermeneutical device employed consistently throughout the *Keiran*. Furthermore, the focus on one deity in particular, Sannō 山王 the mountain god of Mt. Hiei, is a reoccurring feature in the text.

In this article, I track the transformation of Sannō from a local guardian deity to the ultimate manifestation of Tendai esoteric Buddhist doctrine. The Sannō deity of Mt. Hiei, as constructed in the *Keiran*, represents a concerted effort among Tendai scholastics in medieval Japan to specify an orthodox

1. Notable exceptions include the studies cited in this article (TANAKA 2003; GRAPARD 1987; 1998; FAURE 2015).

esoteric Buddhist tradition by associating the fundamental doctrines of their school with, and subsuming competing sites and lineages under, the guise of a singular deity. Through the conflation of metaphors and traditional Tendai doctrines within the medieval hermeneutic of the source-trace paradigm, Sannō becomes a convenient floating signifier that can be used to explain away contradictions or complications in the doctrinal discourse.

### *The Mission of the Keiran*

Compiled on Mt. Hiei during the first half of the fourteenth century, the *Keiran* is a record of orally transmitted knowledge regarding the teachings, practices, rituals, and cultural traditions of the Tendai school in medieval Japan. Previous studies on medieval Japanese religion have referred to the compilation as “encyclopedic” due to its comprehensive treatment of doctrine and practice (GRAPARD 1998; TEEUWEN 2000; BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, 89–90). The *Keiran* is also an important record of liturgical texts for Tendai esoteric Buddhism (FAURE 2015, 31). Although such descriptions accurately describe the *Keiran* as a text, the compilation of this massive work also demonstrates the religious practice of “recording” and how such scholastic activities were fundamental to medieval Buddhism.

The original compilation of the *Keiran* consisted of more than three hundred fascicles. However, in her study of the *Keiran*’s textual history, Tanaka Takako notes that it must have been copied and circulated in independent fascicles or sections rather than as a single collection. The content and number of fascicles recorded in the *Kokusho sō mokuroku* vary depending on the edition. It was not until the early modern period that these dispersed fascicles were compiled into books (*satsu* 冊). The Shinnyozō 真如藏 edition, copied in the seventeenth century and housed at Eizan Bunkō, was the source text for the Taishō publication, probably due to the fact that the Eizan Bunkō held the most complete version of the *Keiran* when the Taishō was produced in the early twentieth century (TANAKA 2003, 72).

Kōshū, the compiler of the *Keiran*, was a Tendai monk and Buddhist intellectual who was well-versed in poetry, mathematics, medicine, divination, and military strategy (SUEKI 2003, 47). He obtained transmissions into multiple lineages on the mountain, including initiation into the precept tradition at Kurodani 黒谷 from Kōen 興円 (1262–1317).<sup>2</sup> He also received training in consecration rites for

2. Kōshū records the date of composition for each subsection along with his name; in most cases he identifies himself simply as a Tendai monk (*shamon* 天台沙門) but in a number of cases he identifies himself as Kōshū of Tendai Kurodani or Sanmon Kurodani 山門黒谷. The precept tradition based at Kurodani transmitted the so-called “perfect and sudden precepts” (*endon kai* 円頓戒), which was a part of the Danna 檀那 lineage (TANAKA, 2003, 14; YAMAMOTO 1998, 404–406; STONE 1999, 126–129).

kami (*shinmei kanjō* 神明灌頂) from Gigen 義源 (ca. 1289–1351), whose chronicle *Sanke yōryakuki* includes an extensive collection of transmissions regarding the worship of Sannō (TANAKA 2003, 10–13; STONE 1999, 126).<sup>3</sup> Despite his elite pedigree, Kōshū does not seem to have been involved in the political maneuvering typical of monks of his stature. Rather, based on available records, he appears to have primarily devoted himself to the compilation of the *Keiran* for most of his monastic career (TANAKA 2003, 30–31).

The extant version of the *Keiran* is arranged into four divisions of exoteric teachings (*ken* 顯), esoteric teachings (*mitsu* 密), precepts (*kai* 戒), and records (*kiroku* 記録), with each division further split into subdivisions of kami (*shinmei* 神明), meditation (*zen* 禪), and doctrine (*kyō* 教).<sup>4</sup> According to the table of contents, each of the four main sections of the *Keiran* includes its own listing of initiatory consecration rituals (*kanjō* 灌頂) followed by Kōshū’s commentary. Thus, the ritual for the exoteric teachings is the secret that “gives rise to wisdom that leads to wondrous awakening” (*shochi myōgo* 生智妙悟), the ritual for esoteric teachings is “the consecration of all dharmas” (*shohō kanjō* 諸法灌頂), the ritual for the “transmission of precepts for protection” (*chingo jukai* 鎮護授戒) is the consecration of “benefiting the land by dimming light and mingling with dust” (*wakō dōjin riyaku kokudo kanjō* 和光同塵利益国土灌頂) (T 2410, 76.503b23).

The phrase “dimming light and mingling with dust” (*wakō dōjin* 和光同塵) originally comes from a passage found in the *Daodejing* on the meaning of the way (*dao* 道) (*Daodejing*, chapter 4). In Japan, this phrase was appropriated as a synonym for the manifestation of a buddha in accordance with the source-trace hermeneutic of medieval Japanese Buddhist discourse on the nature of buddhas and kami. In the *Keiran*, a variation of this expression, “dimming the light and suspending the traces” (*wakō suijaku* 和光垂迹), is used to refer to the manifestation of a kami with the express purpose of saving sentient beings (T 2410, 76.530a12–13). Therefore, by assigning a specific consecration rite with “benefiting the land by dimming light and mingling with dust,” Kōshū implies that such rites were conducted for the benefit of sentient beings in the current, impure world.

3. From the mid-thirteenth century onward, esoteric Buddhist notions of kami began to take the form of initiation rituals through which each practitioner established a bond with a specific kami. These kami rituals were referred to by a variety of names, including *shintō kanjō* 神道灌頂, *shinmei kanjō* 神明灌頂, *jingi kanjō* 神祇灌頂, *Ise kanjō* 伊勢灌頂, and *Nihongi kanjō* 日本記灌頂 (TEEUWEN 2000, 102). Although the authorship of the *Sanke yōryakuki* is traditionally attributed to Kenshin 顯真 (1132–1192), Gigen was probably responsible for editing and compiling this work. Considering Kōshū was Gigen’s disciple, the attribution to his master in the *Keiran* is more reliable than later references (SUEKI 2003, 41).

4. This four-part taxonomy was typical of texts produced as a part of the educational system on Mt. Hiei in medieval Japan (SUEKI 2003, 37). See, for example, Aaron PROFFITT’s (2020) contribution to this special issue on the topic of taxonomies in esoteric Buddhism.

It is worth noting that Kōshū assigns this rite to the division of records. Kōshū belonged to a genre of Tendai scholastic commonly referred to as the “chroniclers” (*kike* 記家). The tradition of chroniclers emerged from the custom of recording secret transmissions of oral teachings on small scraps of paper called *kirigami* 切紙. With the influx of competing lineages on Mt. Hiei, the number of idiosyncratic transmissions of secret teachings on the mountain escalated, as did the production of *kirigami*. Chroniclers such as Kōshū endeavored to compile these disparate writings into a reference for scholastics to utilize when debating doctrines from outside the Tendai school (TANAKA 2003, 24).

For medieval Tendai chroniclers, “recording” was in and of itself a bodhisattva practice for the spiritual benefit of sentient beings by manifesting and transmitting the Dharma.<sup>5</sup> Another chronicle compiled shortly after the *Keiran*, the *Kuin bukkaku shō*, associates the act of recording and the task of the chronicler with the general mission of Enryakuji 延曆寺, using the same expression of “dimming the light and mingling with dust” (STONE 1999, 124). Therefore, the compiling of massive collections of teachings was not only for the sake of historical posterity or the frivolous activity of scholastic monks. Rather, it was a religious practice with a soteriological intent.

### *Sannō, The Lord of the Mountain*

One of Kōshū’s records in the *Keiran* documents the development of a cult on Mt. Hiei centered on the mountain deity Sannō, which literally means “the lord of the mountain.” Buddhist sutras such as the *Dirgha Āgama* (T 1, 1.114b27, c12, c18) and the *Diamond Sūtra* (T 235, 8.751C29–30A1) often use the term “lord of the mountain” as shorthand for Mount Sumeru, the axis mundi of Buddhist cosmology. However, the association of this term with a particular deity appears to have originated at Guoqingji 国清寺 on Mt. Tiantai, where according to the *Guoqing bai lu* monks venerated the “Lord of Mt. Tiantai” (Tiantaishan wang 天台山王). Saichō 最澄 (766–822), who studied on Mt. Tiantai, imported this deity to Japan and installed him as the tutelary deity of Mt. Hiei (MIZUKAMI 2011, 245; BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, 77).

Even before Saichō constructed Enryakuji, Mt. Hiei had long been venerated as a sacred mountain. After the capital had moved to Heiankyō in the late eighth century, Mt. Hiei’s location to the northeast of the capital—the malefic gateway of demons (*kimon* 鬼門)—was regarded as the sacred protectorate of the capital

5. Sueki interprets the term “record” or “recording” (*kiroku* 記録) in the *Keiran* to have both a narrow and broad meaning. On the one hand, the word “record” as in “the record section” is used in a narrow sense to denote a collection of records. On the other hand, it also refers to the “spirit” of recording as a form of religious praxis. Thus, Kōshū’s comments on the initiation ritual for the record section reflect his view on the task of chronicler (SUEKI 2003, 36–41).

and the imperial court. Mt. Hiei's role as the protector of the state (*chingo kokka* 鎮護国家) further strengthened the political influence of the Tendai school. The *Keiran* provides a record of this concentration of power in the Tendai school. In particular, the chapter entitled "Protection of the State" outlines how Mt. Hiei, and thus the Sannō deity, is the divine protectorate of Japan.

Although the "lord of the mountain" is generally rendered in the singular tense, Sannō of Mt. Hiei does not refer to just one individual deity. Rather, the epithet denotes a collective of guardian deities known as the "three sacred deities of Sannō" (*Sannō sanshō* 山王三聖): specifically, Ōnamuchi 大己貴 (or Ōkuni-nushi 大国主), who is enshrined at Ōmiya 大宮, Ōyamakui 大山咋 enshrined in Ninomiya 二宮, and Shōshinshi 聖真子. However, these three gods of Sannō were not originally a set. This amalgamation of the Sannō trinity developed over a long and complicated history that paralleled shifts in the pantheon of Hie Taisha 日吉大社.

The *Kojiki*, Japan's oldest extant chronicle, singles out Ōyamakui 大山咋 as the main deity enshrined on Mt. Hiei, but by the ninth century additional deities had come to occupy the mountain (PHILIPPI 1969, 118). At some point, the deity Ōnamuchi was invited to reside on the mountain from Mt. Miwa 三輪. Later, Shōshinshi 聖真子, from Usa Hachimangū 宇佐八幡宮, was added to the two deities already abiding on Mt. Hiei. Many scholars view the Sannō trinity as having been established by the tenth century, but this is a controversial topic among modern scholars (MIZUKAMI 2011).<sup>6</sup>

An alternative study traces the history of Sannō worship on Mt. Hiei by focusing on how the trinity evolved over time. After dividing Mt. Hiei into the Eastern and Western Pagodas, Saichō allocated Ōmiya and Ninomiya to each pagoda respectively. Saichō's disciple Enchin 円珍 (814–891) later enshrined a mountain deity called Sannō Myōjin 山王明神, which he had seen in a dream. This addition led to the formation of the first trinity of Ōmiya-Ninomiya-Sannō Myōjin, which came to be referred to as the "three sacred ones of the two areas" (*ryōsho sanshō* 両所三聖).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Ryōgen 良源 (912–985) later established Yokawa 横川 as a separated institution from the two pagodas and enshrined Shōshinshi as its guardian deity. It was following this development that the Ōmiya-Ninomiya-Shōshinshi pantheon was first recorded in 968 as the "three sacred ones as the lord of the land" (*jishu sanshō* 地主三聖). This transformation fueled the conflict between the Ennin 円仁 (796–864) and Enchin factions, which eventually led to the 993 split into the Sanmon 山門 branch (Ennin faction) and the

6. It is often assumed this conflation of deities coincided with Saichō's establishment of the Tendai school on Mt. Hiei, but this is open to debate.

7. According to EGASHIRA Tsutomu (2013, 7), Enchin promoted Sannō Myōjin as the primary divinity and as the symbol of Mt. Hiei. The phrase "three sacred ones of the two areas" first appeared in Tendai records in 888.

Jimon 寺門 branch (Enchin faction) of Tendai. Finally, by the eleventh century a “source buddha” (*honjibutsu* 本地仏) was assigned to each Sannō deity: Śākya-muni to Ōmiya, the Medicine Tathāgata to Ninomiya, and Amitābha to Shōshinshi (EGASHIRA 2013, 7).

The pantheon of Sannō at the Hie Taisha further expanded over time. In addition to the trinity, four more divinities—Hachiōji 八王子, Jūzenji 十禪師, Marōdo 客人, and Sannomiya 三宮—were added, resulting in the creation of the seven shrines of Sannō (*Sannō shichisha* 山王七社). During the Kamakura period, these seven shrines were divided into upper shrines (*kamisha* 上社), middle seven shrines (*naka shichisha* 中七社), and lower seven shrines (*shimo shichisha* 下七社). Thus, altogether there were twenty-one shrines of Sannō. Eventually, the number expanded to a total of one hundred and eight shrines with the addition of branch shrines.

The explanation of Sannō in the *Keiran*, however, differs from these later historical developments. The *Keiran* describes Sannō as an earth god (*chigi* 地祇) (T 2410, 76.520c21; 529b28). In Japanese mythology, earth gods are contrasted with heavenly gods (*tenjin* 天神) such as Amaterasu. According to Kōshū, heavenly gods lack an abode on earth, so they must demonstrate their benevolence. Conversely, earth gods dwell on the earth, so they are manifested in the land (T 2410, 76.515a5–6, 518b12–13, 864c10–11). The text continues to describe the role of earth gods as overseeing the performance of veneration rites for ancestral deities and making the soil fertile (*sōbyōshashoku* 宗廟社稷). The *Keiran* further dissects the roles of the seven shrines of Sannō, thus identifying Ōmiya, Shōshinshi, and Jūzenji as the deities of veneration rites for ancestral deities and Ninomiya as the deity of soil and grain (T 2410, 76.514.c25–515a11).

Considering the fact that Ninomiya (Ōyamakui) was the only god indigenous to Mt. Hiei, one might be tempted to conclude that this association points to an indigenous religious belief regarding Mt. Hiei and stipulates that the mountain was originally a cultic center for agricultural production. However, with the rise of Mt. Hiei’s political and religious influence, later efforts to “complete” a Mt. Hiei pantheon could have been made. The final resulting conception was of the full pantheon of earthly spirits that managed ancestral rites as well as production.

The *Keiran* also includes a discussion of Sannō in its division on exoteric teachings entitled “the august matters of Sannō” (*Sannō on koto* 山王御事) (T 2410, 76.514c16).<sup>8</sup> However, it appears that this Sannō subsection belongs to the division of records. Given that the division of records typically deals with mat-

8. The rationale for the inclusion of the kami division in the exoteric portion of the text is unclear; in addition to the kami division, the exoteric portion contains two fascicles about meditation and the doctrinal teachings of the Zen schools. Considering that these two fascicles have nothing in common with the kami division, it is uncertain why Kōshū would group them together.



ters concerning kami, Sannō, the Hie Shrine, and the cultural traditions of Mt. Hiei, we can surmise that the Sannō subsection was originally a part of the division of records along with other Shinto-related records among the lost fascicles.

### *Sannō as Esoteric Deity*

The division on the esoteric teachings in the *Keiran* is considerably longer than the others. The fact that the majority of the compilation is devoted to this topic suggests that the primary objective of this work was to collect and record secret transmissions regarding the esoteric teachings on Mt. Hiei. Furthermore, the extant version of this division of the *Keiran* includes one of the most exhaustive treatment of esoteric teachings in the Tendai school in medieval Japan. Therefore, the depiction of Tendai esoteric Buddhism in the *Keiran* provides a window into how the category of esoteric Buddhism was debated and defined in medieval Japan.

In the division on esoteric teachings, Kōshū outlines the doctrines of Tendai esoteric Buddhism that distinguish it from the Shingon tradition based at Tōji 東寺. According to Kōshū, the Tōji Shingon school is only concerned with secret transmissions on practice (*jimitsu* 事密), especially regarding the recitation of incantations. Tendai esoteric Buddhism, however, emphasizes the unification of the exoteric and esoteric (*kenmitsu itchi* 顯密一致) based on the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*.<sup>9</sup> He further stresses that the Mt. Hiei tradition of esoteric Buddhism encompasses not only the esoteric teachings but the integration of precepts with exoteric and esoteric teachings (T 2410, 74.545a). In other words, based on his collection of various transmissions on esoteric teachings, Kōshū proposes that such teachings were subsumed within the broader scope of the Tendai ideal of the singular vehicle (*ichijō* 一乘). This synthesis of esoteric practices and classical Tendai exegesis stood in contrast to the Tōji-Shingon tradition, which, at least according to Kōshū, was solely focused on incantation rites.

Central to Kōshū's view of esoteric Buddhism was the deity of Mt. Hiei, Sannō. Kōshū's construction of Sannō as an esoteric deity was developed within the context of Tendai esoteric Buddhist discourse on the bodies of the Buddha, which employed a logic of source and trace correlations. In the Tendai exegetical tradition of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Śākyamuni's identity as the historical Buddha was revised and redefined as the Buddha that long-ago achieved awakening (*kuon jitsujō* 久遠実成). This emphasis on abstract bodies of the Buddha's teaching was

9. Kōshū refers to esoteric Buddhism in the Tendai school as “mantra of the Tendai lineage” (*Tendairyū shingon* 天台流真言) and what is commonly referred to as the Shingon school as the “mantra of the Tōji lineage” (*Tōjiryū shingon* 東寺流真言). The term “mantra teaching” is, therefore, a general reference to esoteric teachings, which are divided into the two strands of Tōji and Tendai (T 2410, 76.505c16–506a6).



central to the Tendai school in medieval Japan and efforts to esotericize the sutra (STONE 1999, 21–27). This esotericization process developed in several stages. At the most fundamental stage, Śākyamuni was identified with the Tathāgata of Abundant Treasure (Prabhūtaratna), who appears in the “Treasure Tower” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a buddha from the ancient past. In this episode of the sutra, Śākyamuni enters the opened tower and sits alongside the ancient Buddha. This unorthodox depiction of two buddhas occupying the same space (*nibutsu byōza* 二仏並座) required further explication, and it is later revealed that Śākyamuni is but one of countless buddhas (LOPEZ and STONE 2019, 136–148).

Kōshū references this scene of the two buddhas from the *Lotus Sūtra* numerous times throughout the *Keiran*, as it was the canonical basis for buddha body theory in the Tendai school. However, he takes this association between the two buddhas in the sutra and its role in the esotericization of the sutra a step further by evoking the doctrine of the three secret activities (*sanmitsugō* 三密業). According to Kōshū’s analysis, the “two buddhas seated side by side” reveals the secret mental activity (*imitsu* 意密) of the Buddha, the passages of the sutras are the spoken activity (*kugō* 口業) of the Buddha, and the treasure tower itself represents the body of the Buddha’s preaching (*seppō* 說法), that is, the body of dharma (*hosshin* 法身) (T 2410, 76.608a18–20). In other words, the treasure tower of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the embodiment of this core esoteric doctrine that the body, speech, and mind of the long-ago awakened Buddha is not beyond human conception but is accessible through the revelation of the sutra.

Sannō is likewise connected to the treasure tower episode of the *Lotus Sūtra*. When recording an interpretation of the meaning of Sannō’s name from the abbot Keimyō 慶命 (965–1038), Kōshū prefaces the quote by stating, “From within the treasure tower, Śākyamuni suspended his traces (*suijaku* 垂迹) to the foot of Mount Hiei where they became the avatar Sannō” (T 2410, 76.510b8–9). By identifying Sannō with Śākyamuni of the treasure tower, Kōshū incorporates the mountain deity into the medieval Tendai discourse regarding the orthodox view of esoteric manifestations of the Buddha’s teachings. Therefore, Sannō, formerly a composite deity of the various gods occupying Mt. Hiei, effectively becomes an avatar of the secret mental activities of the Buddha, or enlightenment itself.

The esotericization of Sannō was part of a broader scheme of source-trace associations in Tendai esoteric Buddhism, which linked local deities with buddhas as well as gods of the Japanese pantheon.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the kami division of the *Keiran* opens with a discussion of Sannō and Amaterasu. The objective was to connect the guardian deity of Mt. Hiei (and by extension the Tendai school) to the protector of the nation, thus expanding Sannō’s relevance and power to all

10. For a detailed discussion of source-trace thought in the *Keiran*, see PARK (2020).

of Japan (T 2410, 76.511a11–14; DOLCE 2007, 293–294). Through this connection with Amaterasu, Sannō is further identified with Mahāvairocana Tathāgata. The *Keiran* explains this source-trace scheme as follows:

1. Amaterasu of Ise Jingū is the manifestation of Mahāvairocana (T 2410, 76.511b15).
2. Sannō of Hie Jingū is the manifestation of Śākyamuni (T 2410, 76.514c21).
3. Śākyamuni is the manifested body of Mahāvairocana (T 2410, 76.515c17–18).
4. Amaterasu and Sannō are united into one (T 2410, 76.514.c23, 528c26).
5. Mahāvairocana and Śākyamuni are nondual (*funi* 不二) (T 2410, 76.528c27, 598c11–12).<sup>11</sup>

Based on this series of correlations, the *Keiran* effectively equates Sannō with Mahāvairocana, who in both the Tendai and Shingon esoteric traditions is portrayed as the embodiment of the Dharma of the Buddha. Therefore, Sannō is none other than the body of the Dharma.

Kōshū further elaborates on the multifaceted nature of Sannō by proposing what he refers to as a secret transmission of Sannō in seven stages (*Sannō shi-chijū* 山王七重). These stages can be summarized as follows (T 2410, 76.515a12–b14; GRAPARD 1998):

1. Sannō as trace (*suijaku no Sannō* 垂迹ノ山王): Since Saichō established the Tendai school on Mt. Hiei, Sannō has served as the manifestation that protects (*shugo yōgō* 守護影向) the school of the perfect teaching (*enshū* 円宗).
2. Sannō as source (*honji no Sannō* 本地ノ山王): Because Japan is the land of gods, there are myriad transformed deities (*ōjaku myōjin* 応迹神明). Currently, the transformation of the teacher Śākyamuni is Sannō, the Hie Daigū Gongen 日吉大宮権現. Therefore, all other deities in Japan are traces of Sannō.
3. Sannō as contemplation of the mind (*kanjin no Sannō* 観心ノ山王): This stage takes the cultivation of perfect and sudden meditation (*endon shikan* 円頓止観) to be the essence of Sannō.
4. Sannō as unconditioned (*musa no Sannō* 無作ノ山王): This stage reveals the path of true cultivation and true realization, which means there is neither beginning nor end, neither near nor far. Sannō is the unconditioned, original nature of all phenomena.
5. Sannō as the three secrets (*sanmitsu no Sannō* 三密ノ山王): This stage takes the five syllables constituting the title of the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Dharma* (*Myō hō ren ge kyō* 妙法蓮華經) to be the essence of Sannō. This essence is precisely the three bodies of the Tathāgata as well as the three secrets of the practitioner (*gyōja* 行者).

11. The author has previously discussed these associations in PARK (2018).

6. Sannō as having an unknown beginning (*gensho fuchi no Sannō* 元初不知ノ山王): According to this stage, Sannō is the foundation of the myriad phenomena and all buddhas. Thus, its form is neither *yin* 陰 nor *yang* 陽. Since we cannot determine whether it is yin or yang, it is labeled as having an “unknown beginning.”<sup>12</sup>
7. Sannō as celestial manifestation<sup>13</sup> (*nyoyō zuiyō Sannō* 如影隨影山王): When abiding in the heavens, this Sannō is called the Big Dipper (literally, the seven stars). When abiding on earth, this Sannō is called the deity of the seven shrines. This is equivalent to the seven factors of enlightenment (*shichi kaku bun* 七覺分) for practitioners.<sup>14</sup> It is said that the Big Dipper originated with the seven buddhas of the east moving and casting their shadow over Jambudvīpa. The spirit of the Big Dipper descends and gives life to all sentient beings. Thus, they are called birth stars (*honmyōshō* 本命星). Therefore, Sannō is the very spirit of the Big Dipper, and the form and essence of the practitioner is, in its entirety, the essence of Sannō.

In the seven stages of Sannō, the deity is effectively equated with various doctrines of Tendai esoteric Buddhism. Kōshū’s seven-part analysis is consistent with writings on kami-buddha syncretic combinations by Tendai chroniclers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which tended to elevate the status of Sannō (BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, 87). However, the *Keiran* does more than merely praise Sannō as a superior manifestation of the Buddha. Rather, the deity has become a heuristic for an array of esoteric doctrines. As noted above, Sannō

12. In traditional East Asian philosophy, yin-yang duality is the basic paradigm for understanding the universe. All beings in this world are divided into two kinds of energy, either yin or yang. At the simplest level, yin is characterized as feminine and yang as masculine. These two energies seem to be opposite, yet are mutually complementary and interconnected. The universe functions as the harmony of yin and yang, and all phenomena arise and change due to the interaction of these two basic forces. By stating that Sannō is neither yin nor yang, the *Keiran* asserts that Sannō transcends such distinctions. For example, if day is yang and night is yin, Sannō is time itself and, thus, has an “unknown beginning.”

13. The character *yō* 影 has several possible meanings, but considering the above discussion relates Sannō to the seven stars in the sky (that is, the Big Dipper), I translate it as “celestial manifestation.” In a broader sense, the meaning of 影 in the *Keiran* is similar to *sui* 垂, meaning “manifest” or “incarnate,” particularly when paired with *gen* 現. The term *yōgen* 影現 is often used as a synonym for *suijaku* 垂迹, but without the hierarchical nuance of the phrase *honji suijaku*. The term is also associated with the manifestation of celestial bodies, such as luminaries, planets, and stars.

14. Kōshū equates each of the seven stars constituting the Big Dipper with the seven factors of enlightenment, an ubiquitous phrase found in various Buddhist sutras to denote the various effects of attaining enlightenment. The basic list includes mindfulness (*nen kakushi* 念覺支), investigation (*chakuhō kakushi* 択法覺支), effort (*shōjin kakushi* 精進覺支), rapture (*ki kakushi* 喜覺支), relaxation (*kyōan kakushi* 輕安覺支), concentration (*jō kakushi* 定覺支), and detachment (*sha kakushi* 捨覺支) (MULLER 2015).

can be a source or a trace; the deity is neither yin nor yang yet is also a radiant constellation. Therefore, just as Tendai esoteric Buddhism is a comprehensive set of doctrines and practices, Sannō represents all phenomena to all people.

### *Japan as the Land of Sannō*

As highlighted in the previous section, Sannō was transformed into the premier esoteric deity in Tendai esoteric Buddhism. Not only was he the protectorate of the Dharma, he came to embody the Dharma itself. This embodiment included the heavens and the land, especially the divine land of Japan.

As Lucia Dolce notes in her study of sacred geography in medieval Japan, the *Keiran* points to a broader tendency at the time to address Japan's marginal location on the periphery of the Buddhist world. Chroniclers such as Kōshū and the masters whose teachings he compiled in the *Keiran* were aware that the teachings of their school and lineages were far removed from the time and location of Śākyamuni's preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* in India. Therefore, they inverted the geographic relationship between Japan and India by positing the local kami as the propagators of the Buddha's teaching (DOLCE 2007, 277; T 2410, 76.511).

In an astute play on words, Kōshū explicitly identifies "the great country of Japan" (*Dai Nihon koku* 大日本国) with the "original land of Mahāvairocana" (*Dainichi no honkoku* 大日ノ本国). He further elaborates on this association in a question and answer dialogue:

Question: What does it mean that at the very bottom of the great sea on which our country rests lies the seal of Mahāvairocana?

Answer: When the deity Kuni no tokotachi dropped his heavenly halberd upside-down, there was no country below. He searched for it, and at the bottom of the sea he found three rings emitting golden light. These three rings indicate the seal of Mahāvairocana. They also signify the three venerable deities of Sannō as well as the secrets of the three major scriptures (*sanbu* 三部). Secret transmissions say that the seal of Mahāvairocana is the single-pronged vajra. Accordingly, our country is shaped as a vajra.

(adapted from DOLCE 2007, 274; T 2410, 76.518c8–12)

In this passage, Kōshū locates the Sannō deities within the creation myth of Japan. Along with other esoteric doctrines such as the three secret activities and the three primary texts in Tendai esoteric Buddhism (*Vajraśekhara*, *Mahāvairocana*, and *Sussidhikara* sutras), Sannō literally formed the foundation of the nation.

In a recent study on mythology in medieval Japan, Ogawa Toyoo discusses the broader doctrinal implications of the Tendai appropriation of the creation myth. According to Ogawa, chroniclers such as Kōshū compiled various teachings regarding seminal Tendai doctrines such as original awakening (*hongaku*

本覚). Many of these orally transmitted teachings were cast in metaphorical terms that incorporated the language of the creation myth (OGAWA 2014, 437–444). Considering that the purveyors and audience of such tales were based on Mt. Hiei, the mountain was conveniently identified with Mt. Sumeru, the central locus of the Buddhist cosmos, and the “great sea” from which it arose denoted the sea surrounding the mythic mountain. As the protector of the mountain, Sannō likewise signifies the teachings of the Buddha that are propagated there.

The correlation between Sannō, Amaterasu, Śākyamuni, and Mahāvairocana is the logical outcome of the source-trace paradigm. The equation of Śākyamuni as the long-ago awakened Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra* with Mahāvairocana was a standard Tendai doctrine by the time the *Keiran* was compiled. Furthermore, the association of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, with Mahāvairocana, literally the “Great Sun Tathāgata” (Dainichi Nyorai 大日如来), was a scholastic maneuver that situated Japan within the heart of the Buddhist cosmos. Linking Sannō to Amaterasu inserted the protector of Mt. Hiei into the center of Japan as a divine land. Moreover, these references to Sannō and Japan hint at a burgeoning nationalistic discourse that positioned the Buddha’s teaching within the geographic region of Japan. Sannō played a seminal role in this discourse by drawing a parallel between Japan as the land of the gods and Japan as the locus of the esoteric teachings. Therefore, Kōshū extols Sannō as the “Lord of the Lotus Teachings,” and proclaims the mountain god to embody the “unification of the exoteric and esoteric teachings” (*kenmitsu itchi*) (T 2410, 76.593b17, 838c27, 672b27).

### *Conclusion*

Originating as a conglomeration of protector deities assembled on Mt. Hiei, in the *Keiran* Sannō is promoted to the exalted status of embodying the exoteric and esoteric teachings. This transformation was a part of a broader discourse in esoteric Buddhism, and Tendai esoteric Buddhism in particular, that employed hermeneutic tools such as the source-trace paradigm to establish an orthodox position on the ontology of the Buddha as well as the manifestations of the Buddha’s teachings in the surrounding landscape. In fact, one of the objectives of compiling such massive compendiums was to document the process of orthodoxy.

As Allan Grapard argues in his classic article on linguistic cubism and the Sannō cult, the hermeneutic tools wielded by chroniclers such as Kōshū often began as metaphors and other linguistic games. These skillful turns of phrase were combined with expressions in traditional writings to create new interpretations of doctrines (GRAPARD 1987, 211–212). The seven-stage explanation of Sannō is a case in point. Sannō is literally the “sovereign of the mountain.” As such, he is the local (Mt. Hiei) manifestation of the Buddha’s teaching, a so-called “trace.” Just as Mt. Hiei is the source from which the Tendai teachings

spread throughout Japan, so is Sannō a source for transmitting the Dharma to other deities. Expressed in the doctrinal terms of Tendai buddha body theory, Śākyamuni is the manifested body of Mahāvairocana, and, as a trace of Śākyamuni, Sannō is likewise associated with the dharma body of the Buddha. Via the homonymic play between the Japanese rendering of Mahāvairocana's name (Dainichi) and "the great country of Japan" (*Dai Nihon koku*), Kōshū posits that Japan is the land of Mahāvairocana. Thus, Sannō is the foundation of Japan.

For medieval Tendai thinkers, the concept of Sannō could be mobilized as a sign that signifies any number of doctrinal formulations: a local god, a protector deity, a manifestation of the Buddha, or the very land of the Japanese archipelago. The discourse on Sannō demonstrates that orthodoxy in medieval Japanese Buddhist thought was more a matter of method than dogma. The flexibility of the source-trace paradigm allowed for countless possible combinations, which was precisely the point. In the world of Tendai esoteric scholasticism, Sannō was a formula that demonstrated the unchanging mutual identity of all possible realities.

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