Empress Shōtoku as a Sponsor of Printing

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There is no documentary evidence of printing in Japan until 1009, when the statesman Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1028) recorded in his diary that 1,000 copies of the *Lotus sūtra* had been printed.¹ No copies of this survive, but even if he was mistaken his entry shows that the concept of printing texts was already familiar by his lifetime. The oldest extant printed text with a date is the *Jōyūshikiron* printed in Nara in 1088. In spite of the lack of documentary evidence, however, printing in Japan has a much longer history, as is well known, and in fact dates back to the middle of the eighth century. That is when the so-called *Hyakumantō darani* were printed and in this short piece I shall explore the connection between Empress Shōtoku (718–770; reigned 749–758 under the name Kōken and 764–770 under the name Shōtoku) and the earliest known instance of printing in Japan.

Shōtoku was the last of a succession of women to sit on the Japanese throne and it was nearly a thousand years before another woman did so; since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 the Japanese throne has been barred to women (Kornicki 1999, 133–152). Her parents both appear to have been devout Buddhists. Her father, Shōmu (701–756; reigned 724–749), is best known as the monarch responsible for the construction of the huge gilt statue of Vairocana Buddha at the Tōdaiji temple in Nara, which was completed in 752, but much of his reign was governed by his Buddhist faith, which was enlisted in the protection of the nascent Japanese state (Piggot 1997, chapter 7). Her mother, Kōmyō, ran her own agency which carried out temple construction, sūtra-copying and image-making, and in 740 had the scriptorium make a copy of the complete Buddhist canon (*Issaikyō*) (Ariga Yōen 1984, 16–17). Shōtoku seems to have inherited both her parents' devotion to Buddhism and the sense that Buddhism was inseparable from the interests of the state. Apart from the *Hyakumantō darani*, her most well-known act of sponsorship of Buddhism is the construction of the Saidaiji temple in 765 as a counterpart to her father's Tōdaiji.

As the name suggests, the *Hyakumantō darani* consist of both miniature wooden pagodas and *dhāraṇī* or Buddhist spells. In the Hōryūji temple in Nara more than 45,000 of the miniature pagodas survive along with nearly 4,000

1 *Dainihon kokiroku* edition of *Midō Kanpakuki* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1952–54), vol. 2, p. 34.

dhāraṇī, but many more are to be found elsewhere in Japan and overseas. The only documentary evidence relating to the *Hyakumantō darani* is to be found in the chronicle *Shoku nihongi* (797), in an entry corresponding to the year 770.

After the uprising of the eighth year [of Tenpyō-hōji, i.e. 764] had been put down, the sovereign [Shōtoku] took a vow and ordered the construction of one million small three-storied pagodas, each 4 *sun* 5 *bu* [about 13.5 cms] in height and 3 *sun* 5 *bu* [about 10.5 cms] in diameter and containing underneath the upper part one of the Konpon, Jishin, Sōrin and Rokudo *dhāraṇī*. Once this had all been done, the pagodas were distributed to various temples. The officials and artisans who had been engaged in this work, one hundred and fifty-seven in all, were rewarded with increases in rank, according to station.²

This clearly associates Shōtoku with the *Hyakumantō darani* but does not trouble to mention that the *dhāraṇī* were printed. Considerably more information is provided in the *Tōdaiji yōroku*, a record of the Tōdaiji temple which carries a preface dated 1106 but appears to rely on much older records.

In the first year of Jingo-keiun [767], Eastern and Western Small-Pagoda Pavilions were constructed [in the Tōdaiji]. The monk Jitchū built them. On Tenpyō-hōji 8[764].9.11 the monarch Kōken had one million small pagodas made and distributed to Ten Great Temples. Each one contained a printed *Muku jōkō darani*. (Oral tradition has it that this was in atonement for the deaths caused during the rebellion of Emi [no Oshikatsu]). (Tsutsui Eishun 1971, 25–26, 104)

This for the first time mentions that the *dhāraṇī* had been printed and furthermore identifies the sūtra from which they had been taken: in Japanese, the *Muku jōkō darani kyō* (Ch. *Wugou jing guangda tuoluoni jing* 無垢淨光大陀羅尼經).³ In the year 722 it was recorded that that text had been translated into Chinese by a Tokharian monk by the name of Mitraśānta, together with the monk

2 *Shoku nihongi*, in *Shin nihon koten bungaku taikei* vols. 12–16 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989–1998), vol. 13, p. 280.

3 *T* 19, pp. 717–21, #1024. It appears that the Sanskrit original is not extant, but several Tibetan translations survive, and from these the original Sanskrit title has been reconstructed as *Raśmīvalaviśuddhāprabhā-dhāraṇī-sūtra* (see Lancaster and Sung-bae Park 1979, 126–127; and, for a different reconstruction of the Sanskrit title, Miyasaka Yūshō 1977, 18–20).

Fazang, in the closing years of the reign of empress Wu.⁴ *Wugou jing guangda tuoluoni jing* is a short text in which the Buddha recites six *dhāraṇī*. The efficacy of the first, the 'basic' spell, is described as follows:

People who wish to perform the ceremony for it should, on the 8th, 13th, 14th or 15th day of the month, walk round and round the pagoda containing the relics a full seventy-seven times, with it on their right, reciting this charm [*dhāraṇī*] also seventy-seven times: they should build an altar and keep its surface clean. They should have the charm copied out seventy-seven times, and out of respect for the ceremony should give the copyist perfume, flowers, food and drink, clean clothes and a bath, and reward him either by anointing and covering him with perfumes or by giving him much money, or by paying him according to his ability. Then they should take these copies of the charms, place them inside the pagoda, and make offerings at the pagoda. Alternatively they should make seventy-seven small clay pagodas, place one copy inside each, and make offerings. If they duly perform this, people who are about to die will prolong their lives to old age, all their previous sins and evil deeds being completely destroyed.

The sūtra goes on to recommend that 'anyone wishing to complete the six ways to salvation . . . should copy out ninety-nine copies of the first four above mentioned [*dhāraṇī*], make ninety-nine small pagodas, and insert a copy in each'.⁵

These two pieces of evidence together provide a great deal of information, but they would be subject to incredulity were it not for the survival of many miniature pagodas and their printed contents. What confirms the link between the two is the fact that although the printed *dhāraṇī* themselves are undated, many of the pagodas carry handwritten dates on their bases which correspond to the 760s. Yet this still leaves us with a number of problems: there is the origin of printing technology, there is the choice of this particular sūtra, there is the supposed scale of the whole exercise (one million rather than seventy-seven), and there is the motivation for carrying it out in the first place.⁶ With regard to the first question, it is striking that the sūtra from which the *dhāraṇī* were extracted, the *Wugou jing guangda tuoluoni jing*, is the same as the sūtra which was discovered in a full printed version in a stone pagoda in the Pulguksa

4 See T 55, #2152, p. 369c; T 55, #2157, p. 867a; and T 55, #2154, p. 566b.

5 T 19, #1024, pp. 717–21; the translations are adapted from a complete translation of the sūtra made by Eric Ceadel, probably in the 1960s, and now in the author's possession.

6 On most of these questions I have written at length elsewhere, see Kornicki 2012, 43–70.

temple in Kyōngju in 1966 and which, it is now widely accepted, was printed in the early eighth century, although there is an unresolved dispute over whether it was printed in China or in Korea.⁷ Whatever the answer to that question, it is clear that printing was practiced on the mainland before it was undertaken in Japan, so printing was without doubt yet another of the technologies transferred to Japan during the Nara period.

The link with empress Wu that is suggested by the fact that this very sūtra was one translated in her reign is intriguing. In 2008 Tim Barrett produced a mass of circumstantial evidence to suggest that printing was actively encouraged in the reign of empress Wu, but so far no concrete evidence has come to light. Even in fourteenth-century Japan the parallels between empress Wu and Shōtoku were already a matter of note: as the historian Kitabatake Chikafusa put it, ‘Some sixty years separated the rule of Empress Wu in China and the reign of Empress Shōtoku in Japan, yet how similar were the events in the two countries at these different times’ (Varley 1980, 146). Close though the connections may be, they do not prove that Shōtoku got the idea of printing from Wu, and we surely need to see the whole *Hyakumantō darani* project as coming out of the realities of politics and religion in mid eighth-century Japan, and in particular as a product of Shōtoku’s own engagement with the *Wugou jing guangda tuoluoni jing*.

A cursory reading of the *Wugou jing guangda tuoluoni jing* not only reveals the origin of the idea of mass reproduction of the *dhāraṇī* (albeit on a much smaller scale) but also casts doubt on the supposition, expressed in the *Tōdaiji yōroku*, that the *Hyakumantō darani* project was conceived as an act of atonement. The sūtra itself reveals the religious reasons for reproducing it, in terms of prolonging life, as we have already seen. In the 760s Shōtoku was in fact nearing the end of her life, as indeed had been Wu when the sūtra was translated into Chinese. But this explains neither the scale of the project nor the use of printing technology to reproduce the *dhāraṇī* and we must look elsewhere for Shōtoku’s motives.

Crucial to any interpretation of Shōtoku’s motives is the fact that the *Hyakumantō darani* were a state undertaking and that the provision of the timber, the use of lathes to fashion the miniature pagodas, the provision of the paper and ink and the use of newly-imported printing technology were all underwritten by the state. In this respect the *Hyakumantō darani* resemble her father’s construction of the great statue of the Buddha in the Tōdaiji and of a massive building to house it, also undertaken by the state. Both of these were

7 On this find, on further developments, and on the current state of play, see Kornicki 2012, 47–49.

public and political acts and need to be understood as such. As the initiator of the *Hyakumantō darani* Shōtoku is thus akin to Balthild, the Merovingian queen who is said to have ‘grasped the uses of piety, both as a means to secure personal status and as a political instrument’ (Nelson 1986, 31). It is not easy to appreciate the difficulties faced by women on the throne in early East Asia who had to deal with an exclusively male bureaucracy, but the example of Balthild suggests that Shōtoku’s motives may indeed have been concerned with securing her personal status as a woman ruler and using Buddhism as a political instrument. In these respects she may well have consciously or unconsciously found Wu’s patronage of Buddhism, and possibly of printing as well, an example worth following. If she did, she would not have been alone, for the same can be said of at least two other East Asian female rulers, Trimalo (d. 712) of Tibet and the queen of the state named in Chinese records as Dongnūguo, who visited the court of Wu in 692 in person.⁸

Shōtoku’s use of printing was thus tied up with considerations relating to Buddhist ritual and political advantage in eighth-century Japan. It had nothing to do with printing for the practical purpose of providing texts for people to read: after all, the *dhāraṇī* were rolled up and placed inside the miniature pagodas and in any case, being written in Sanskrit using Chinese characters phonographically, as texts they were accessible only to a tiny handful of people in eighth-century Japan. All the signs are that after Shōtoku’s death the *Hyakumantō darani* were seen as a political embarrassment: the treatment of the episode in the official history *Shoku nihongi*, which was revised in 794, is laconic and fails to mention the use of printing technology, and there is no mention of printing again until 1009, as noted at the beginning of this essay; the *Hyakumantō darani* themselves disappeared from the historical record completely until the eighteenth century.⁹ What is more, it was not until the seventeenth century that the next woman, Meishō (1624–1696; reigned 1629–43), ascended the throne in Japan.

Much remains mysterious about Shōtoku’s sponsorship of printing for the *Hyakumantō darani* and most of the questions are likely to remain unanswered unless archaeologists happen upon some *mokkan* (wooden writing tablets) which cast more light on our knowledge of these events. At the present state of our knowledge, all that can be said is that the scale of the whole exercise points inexorably to a political use of Buddhist ritual and of a new technology. It demonstrated her control of the resources of the state but in the long run

8 See Diemberger 2007, 341, n. 22; Uebach 2005, 37; *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 197, p. 5278. For a fuller exploration of Shōtoku’s motives see Kornicki 2012.

9 On the revisions to the *Shoku nihongi*, see Kornicki 2012, 56–7.

failed to achieve what was expected and suffered the ignominy of extinction from the public record.

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