

## Empress Shōtoku as a Sponsor of Printing

*Peter Kornicki*

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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).<sup>3</sup> 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 *Raśmīvalaviśuddhaprabhā-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).