

# Sovereign Women: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Female Kingship in Nara Japan\*

Yuyu Zhang

(Ph.D. Candidate, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Arizona)

## 국문 초록

본 논문은 8세기 일본에서 전개된 대승불교 교의와 여성 군주제의 상호 관련성을 고찰하며, 특히 쇼무 천황과 고켄 쇼토쿠 천황의 치세를 중심으로 분석한다. 종래 연구가 율령제의 가부장적 질서에 대한 대안으로서 토착적 성별 상보성 사상을 강조해온 데 반하여, 본 연구는 대승불교의 교설이 여성의 권위와 통치 역량을 정당화하는 데 있어 동등하게 중요한 교리적 기반을 제공하였음을 논증한다. 필자는 이러한 사상적 체계를 여성 능력에 관한 대승 담론이라 명명하며, 이는 불성의 보편성, 여성 성불의 가능성, 그리고 성별 구분의 비이원성 등의 교의를 포괄한다. 법화경, 유마경, 금광명경 등은 여성의 성불 가능성을 명확히 긍정하였으며, 이러한 경전들은 나라 조정에서 적극적으로 수용되고 장려되었다. 더 나아가 선지식 개념은 여성 인물을 필수적 스승으로 제시함으로써 여성의 종교적 권위를 한층 강화하였으며, 이는 경전 강의, 경전 필사, 사찰 창건 등 궁정 및 민간의 불교 실천 전반에 반영되었다. 이와 같이 여성 능력에 관한 대승 담론과 여성들의 적극적인 불교 참여는 나라 시대 일본에서 여성 통치를 가능케 한 사상적·사회적 토대를 형성하였다. 나아가 당의 무척천과 신라의 선덕여왕을 포함하는 동아시아적 맥락에

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서 볼 때, 7·8세기 여성 군주의 등장은 대승불교의 지역적 확산과 병행하여 전개된 현상이었다. 이러한 교차는 불교 사상과 여성의 정치적 정당화 사이의 상호작용에 대한 새로운 학문적 조명을 요청한다.

주제어 : 대승불교, 여성 군주제, 나라 일본, 쇼무 천황, 고켄·쇼토쿠 천황, 법화경, 선지식, 성별과 불교

## I. Introduction

In 738, Emperor Shōmu 聖武天皇 (701-756) declared his daughter, Princess Abe 阿倍内親王 (718-770), born to Queen Kōmyō 光明皇后 (701-760), as heir to the throne. The appointment, made despite strong opposition from courtiers—particularly those against the influential Fujiwara 藤原 clan to which Queen Kōmyō belonged, was a significant political event. Although female monarchs were not uncommon in ancient Japan, with five having ruled before Shōmu’s reign, the designation of the unmarried Princess Abe as *Kōtaishi* 皇太子 (Crown Prince) was unprecedented. This title was traditionally reserved for male heirs, underscoring the exceptional nature of her appointment. Furthermore, Shōmu named Abe his senior heir without designating a male successor—a decision that, as Piggott notes, was neither sanctioned by Chinese court practice, the Japanese *ritsuryō* 律令 codes, nor precedent. Unlike earlier female monarchs who had acted as interim rulers until a male heir was prepared, Abe’s role as the designated successor marked a significant departure from established norms.<sup>1)</sup> Abe’s extraordinary journey continued after she acceded to her father’s throne and became Emperor Kōken 孝謙天皇 in 749. As a female monarch, her reign was marked by exceptional challenges, culminating in her forced abdication in 758 in favor of Emperor Junnin 淳仁天皇 (733-765).

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1) Piggott 2003, 54.

However, six years later, Kōken, now an ordained Buddhist nun, defied precedent by reclaiming the throne as Emperor Shōtoku 称徳天皇, becoming the only ruler in Japanese history to ascend the throne with a tonsured Buddhist status. She is also regarded as “the last classical female sovereign,”<sup>2)</sup> with no other female sovereign appearing until the seventeenth century.

Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku’s rise to power and her ability to reclaim the throne seem to contradict the male-dominated gender hierarchy codified in the *ritsuryō* system, which the Japanese archipelago adopted from Chinese Confucian discourse beginning in the seventh century. However, despite sharply departing from Sinic norms, her reign can be understood and justified within the context of eighth-century Japan. Unlike contemporary Tang China, where Confucian discourse firmly upheld male-exclusive rulership, the Nara period witnessed countervailing traditions that tempered this male-dominated patriarchal paradigm. Scholars, including Piggott, have underscored indigenous thoughts and practices favoring “gender complementarity, bilineality, and shared social leadership by men and women,” which facilitated the acceptance of female sovereignty, particularly in Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku’s case.<sup>3)</sup> In addition, Piggott argues for the significant role of Confucian filial piety and ritual propriety in shaping this dynamic. In 743, Emperor Shōmu’s *senmyō* 宣命 (imperial edict) drew inspiration from the *Book of Rites* 禮記 and the Tang court ritual, requiring Crown Prince Abe to perform the filial *Gosechi* dance before him, Genshō Daijōtennō 元正太上天皇 (680-748), and the court.<sup>4)</sup> This ceremonial act, as Piggott contends, symbolized Abe’s role as her father’s filial daughter and partner in a gender-paired rulership framework.<sup>5)</sup> After becoming Emperor Kōken, Abe invoked similar Confucian ideals of filiality and ritual propriety to justify deposing Prince Funado, the heir designated by

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2) Piggott 2003, 66.

3) Piggott 2003, 50.

4) Kaneko 1941, 125.

5) Piggott 2003, 54.

her father's deathbed decree.<sup>6)</sup> Moreover, Bender examines the auspicious omens recorded in the official chronicles during Kōken/Shōtoku's reign, suggesting that these phenomena were framed as signs of divine approval, sent by Heaven to validate her sagemess and "supernatural support" for her rule.<sup>7)</sup> Together, these voices—indigenous practices of gender complementarity, Confucian ideals of filiality and ritual propriety, and the Chinese cosmological concept of "sympathetic resonance," which signified Heaven's endorsement of a sage-king—provided the ideological foundation for Abe to confirm and reinforce her female rulership.

However, another equally significant voice in defending female monarchy—the Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse that permeated the Yamato court and Japanese society during the Nara period, particularly the reigns of Emperor Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku, is understated by scholars. This period witnessed the most concentrated emergence of female emperors in Japanese history—Emperor Genmei 元明天皇 (660-721), Emperor Genshō 元正天皇, and Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku, and marked a crucial stage in the formation of the court polity consolidated under the *ritsuryō* bureaucracy and deeply integrated with Buddhist institutions. This structure created a distinctive political environment in which both male and female rulers could draw upon Buddhist authority. Support for Buddhism reached its zenith during the reigns of Emperor Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku: Shōmu declared himself the "servant of the Buddha," while Kōken/Shōtoku prioritized the Three Jewels of Buddhism throughout her rule. During the Nara period, Buddhism was deeply embedded in political and social life, shaping the ideological framework of the time. Scholars such as Piggott and Bender have persuasively argued that Buddhism formed an essential component of "the royal political theology," offering "divine legitimation for imperial power."<sup>8)</sup> Nevertheless, current scholarship primarily focuses on Buddhism's general role in legitimizing imperial authority, with limited exploration of its specific implications for female sovereignty. To

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6) Piggott 2003, 56.

7) Bender 2013, 48.

8) Bender 2010, 225.

address this gap, this article examines how Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse and practice contributed to the justification of women's capacity in particular. It argues that Mahāyāna doctrines, such as the affirmation of women's equal potential for Buddhahood, combined with the active participation of women in Buddhist practices during the Nara period, fostered a favorable ideological climate for the acceptance of Abe's female rulership.

## II. Prelude: Prince Shōtoku and *Shōmangyō-gisho*

Mahāyāna scriptures contain many classic episodes demonstrating female spiritual capacity. Mobilizing these scriptural sources to address practical gender-related concerns was not uncommon in ancient Japan. A notable case is the *Shōmangyō gisho* 勝鬘經義疏 (Commentary on the Śrīmālādevīsīmaṅhāda-sūtra/The Sūtra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion's Roar 勝鬘師子吼一乘大方便方廣經, abbreviated *Śrīmālā Sūtra*), one of three Buddhist scriptural commentaries traditionally attributed to Prince Shōtoku 聖德太子 (574-622).<sup>9)</sup> The other two works credited to him are commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經) and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經), both of which were among the most influential Buddhist texts in ancient Japan. That the relatively lesser-known *Śrīmālā Sūtra* was placed on par with these two seminal texts is striking. So far, no commentaries on the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* by lay Buddhists have been identified in China. By contrast, in Japan, the text attracted sustained interest, where it was even linked to Shōtoku's exegetical activity. Its treatment on par with the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* raises important questions about the polemical context of this commentarial tradition. Decisions regarding which sūtras to lecture on, annotate, or copy were not neutral but functioned as interpretive acts

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9) The *Shōmangyō-gisho* is one of the so-called "Three Commentaries" (三經義疏) traditionally attributed to Prince Shōtoku. Modern scholarship has questioned this attribution, suggesting that the commentaries were likely compiled later and retroactively linked to Shōtoku in order to enhance their authority.

through which particular doctrines were highlighted to address specific concerns. Within this framework, the association of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* with Shōtoku's exegetical legacy should be understood as reflecting the intellectual and political climate of ancient Japan, where the sūtra's distinctive doctrines resonated strongly with emerging forms of imperial ideology.

The *Śrīmālā Sūtra* is an early Mahāyāna scripture that expounds on the doctrines of "Buddha-nature" (womb of the Buddha/*tathāgatagarbha*) and the "One Vehicle." Its most distinctive feature, however, is that its central figure and expounder is a woman, Queen Śrīmālā. She not only elucidates profound doctrines in the presence of the Buddha but also receives his prediction of future Buddhahood. Following the bodhisattva path, Queen Śrīmālā first converts the women of her kingdom and then the men. As Paul notes, the text is remarkable for affirming the possibility of female Buddhas and its egalitarian view of women, portraying both "the dignity and wisdom of a laywoman concerned for all beings" and her role as "a philosopher and teacher."<sup>10</sup> The elevation of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, placed alongside the other two seminal scriptures and associated with Prince Shōtoku's exegetical legacy, seems to accord with the justification of female power within the imperial court. Emperor Suiko 推古天皇 (554-628), Prince Shōtoku's aunt, became the first officially recognized female Tennō 天皇 of the Yamato court in 593, holding the longest reign among Japanese female monarchs. According to the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (*The Chronicles of Japan*), Emperor Suiko herself showed particular interest in the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, arranging for Shōtoku to deliver a three-day lecture on it in 606.<sup>11</sup> As Ambros observes, she appears to have gravitated toward Buddhist scriptures that could reinforce her legitimacy as a female sovereign with universal authority—most notably the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, to which the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* can also be added.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the promotion of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* can be read as an interpretive act aligned with the realities of female rulership, one that resonated with imperial women and highlighted Buddhist doctrines affirming

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10) Paul and McRae 2004, 5-6.

11) Inoue 1983, 302.

12) Ambros 2015, 47.

female capacity. Passages in the *Shōmangyō gisho* emphasize precisely this point: “The term ‘my child’ is not defined by distinctions such as son or daughter, self or other, but is based solely on virtue. Śrīmālā is my child and possesses great virtue; she is worthy of hearing the supreme Dharma.”<sup>13)</sup> “Śrīmālā herself declares: ‘The Tathāgata’s appearance in the world is impartial toward all beings. Although I am an ignorant woman, I am also included among those in the world.’”<sup>14)</sup> The introduction of Buddhism thus provided female leaders in ancient Japan with a powerful theological resource to complement indigenous ideas of female *kami* and gender complementarity. The *Shōmangyō gisho*, whatever its precise authorship, marks an early moment in which Mahāyāna doctrines of female Buddhahood were mobilized to legitimize women’s sovereignty. This apologetic stance toward female rulership, grounded in Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse, continued into the following century.

### III. Female Buddhahood and Kingship: Mahāyāna Discourse on Female Capacity

During the eighth century, under the rule of Emperor Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku, Buddhist influence reached its zenith. Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Golden Light Sūtra* (*Jinguangming zuishengwang jing* 金光明最勝王經), the *Flower Ornament Sūtra* (*Dafanguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經; Jp. *Kegon Sūtra*), and the *Vimalakirti Sūtra* were widely circulated and became central to the religious and political culture of the time.<sup>15)</sup> Notably, these influential texts contain doctrines and narratives that affirm women’s religious capacity and agency. I term this body of ideas the “Mahāyāna discourse on female capacity.” By this, I refer to the constellation of narratives and interpretations within Mahāyāna Buddhism that challenge conventional gender norms and affirm

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13) *Shōmangyō gisho*, fasc. 1, T. 56, 1c29-2a03.

14) *Shōmangyō gisho*, fasc. 1, T. 56, 2a26-27.

15) Piggott 1997, 247-59.

women's potential for Buddhahood and spiritual authority. The term is heuristic, not intended to suggest a feminist movement in the modern sense. Rather, it highlights how Mahāyāna soteriological doctrines, such as the universality of Buddha-nature, the possibility of female Buddhahood, and the nonduality of gender distinctions, created a discursive space that could be mobilized in support of female rulership, providing a potent counterbalance to the male-dominated hierarchical ideologies embedded within the *ritsuryō* system of Nara-period Japan.

One of the most essential Mahāyāna doctrines is that all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature and have the potential to become a Buddha. This tenet is prominently elucidated in texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Kegon Sūtra*. For example, in the *Kegon Sūtra*, the Buddha expresses both his compassion for beings unable to recognize their innate Buddha-nature and his determination to guide them: “How strange! How is it that all sentient beings possess the wisdom of the Tathāgata, yet remain deluded and confused, failing to know and see it? I shall teach them the noble path, so they may forever abandon delusional attachments and, within their own being, realize the vast wisdom of the Tathāgata, no different from that of the Buddha.”<sup>16)</sup> Similarly, the *Lotus Sūtra* states that “all Buddhas appear in the world solely because of one great cause,”—to lead all sentient beings know their Buddha-nature and enter the Buddha's path.<sup>17)</sup> This doctrine provides a solid theological foundation for the possibility of female Buddhahood, affirming women's spiritual capacity no different from that of men. Notably, the Dragon Princess episode in the *Lotus Sūtra*, found in the “Devadatta” chapter, explicitly expounds on female Buddhahood, in which the eight-year-old Dragon Princess demonstrates remarkable spiritual attainment. She is enlightened when hearing Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī preaching the *Lotus Sūtra*, and Mañjuśrī declares her as the most advanced bodhisattva. This declaration sparks skepticism, particularly from Bodhisattva Prajñākñia and the venerable Śāriputra, who argue that the female body is incapable of comprehending this profound Mahāyāna teaching due to

16) *Dafangguang fo huayanjing*, fasc. 51, T. 10, 272c27-273a1.

17) *Miaofa lianhuajing*, fasc. 1, T. 10, 7a21-28.

the “five obstructions.” In response, the Dragon Princess offers a priceless jewel to the Buddha, transforms into a man, immediately shows full enlightenment, and expounds the dharma for the sake of all sentient beings, displaying the Buddha’s thirty-two marks and eighty excellent characteristics. Her marvelous transformation and teachings inspire many in the assembly to reach non-retrogression and generate the *bodhicitta*, while Prajñākāśī and Śāriputra silently accept and believe in what they have witnessed.<sup>18)</sup>

The Dragon Princess episode is one of the most celebrated and reiterated stories in the *Lotus Sūtra*. It is worth noting that the “Devadatta” chapter, where this episode appears, was not part of the *Lotus Sūtra* but was incorporated only by the Nara period.<sup>19)</sup> Through its circulation in this era, the story came to be regarded as a seminal episode by the Heian period. As Ryuichi Abe observes, this chapter held particular significance during the Heian-period *Lotus Sūtra* lectures, where courtiers considered it “an illustration of the power of the sūtra.”<sup>20)</sup> The Dragon Princess’s transformation subsequently became “a prevalent paradigm for women’s salvation,” especially appealing to elite women of the time because it proclaimed female Buddhahood.<sup>21)</sup> It should be acknowledged, however, that the gender-transformation motif in this episode is double-edged. The depiction of the Dragon Princess transforming into a man before attaining Buddhahood was later interpreted in medieval Japan as supporting the discriminatory theory of *henjō nanshi ryūnyo jōbutsu* 変成男子龍女成仏, which maintained that women could achieve salvation only by first being reborn as men and devoting themselves to the *Lotus Sūtra*. This view came to dominate Buddhist discourse on women from the late Heian period onward. Yet it would be anachronistic to project this later interpretation onto earlier centuries. The understanding, interpretation, and utilization of a text, even of the same episode, could vary significantly across

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18) *Miaofa lianhuajing*, fasc. 4, T. 9, 35b12-c26.

19) Ambros 2015, 47.

20) Abe 2015, 32.

21) Ambros 2015, 47.

historical contexts, shaped by the political, ideological, and social concerns of each period. Scholars have convincingly argued that the theory of *henjō nanshi ryūnyo jōbutsu* distorted the original intent of the story and did not reflect its dominant contemporaneous reception, ultimately encountering “serious opposition in medieval Japan.”<sup>22)</sup> As both Abe and Michiko Yusa point out, elite women in medieval Japan instead derived a positive and liberating message from the Dragon Princess story and the *Lotus Sūtra*. This is exemplified by Princess Senshi 選子内親王 (964-1035), whose poetry reflects a profound understanding of Mahāyāna doctrines. She articulated that the concept of the five obstructions itself acts as “a hindrance to women’s spiritual progress.”<sup>23)</sup> Moreover, her poetry sheds light on another chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which directly addresses women’s attainment of enlightenment—the “Bodhisattva Myōon” chapter. It presents Bodhisattva Myōon transforming his male body into a female one, emphasizing the fluidity of gender distinctions. Senshi’s poetry underscored the idea that gender is a provisional distinction, unrelated to an individual’s capacity for achieving Buddhahood.<sup>24)</sup> In addition, in the “Encouragement to Uphold the Sūtra” chapter, which follows the “Devadatta” chapter, the Buddha predicts Buddhahood for Mahāprajāpatī, his aunt and foster mother, and Yasodharā, his former wife, directly countering claims of women’s spiritual inferiority.<sup>25)</sup> The transformative potential of these chapters resonated deeply with medieval elite women, offering them spiritual empowerment and validation. In this light, the *Lotus Sūtra* can be seen as a foundational text of the “Mahāyāna discourse on female capacity.”

From a retrospective perspective, it is conceivable that the prominence of the Dragon Princess episode and the concept of female Buddhahood in the Heian period reflect an ongoing resonance from the Nara period. The doctrinal support

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22) Abe 2015, 40-43.

23) Abe 2015, 43.

24) Yusa 2019, 102.

25) *Miaofa lianhuajing*, fasc. 4, T. 9, 36a12-b4. For a further discussion of this chapter, see Ambros 2015, 47.

Mahāyāna Buddhism afforded to women's status could well have been even stronger in the Nara period. As Ambros notes, the *henjō nanshi-ryūnyo jōbutsu* theory only gained influence in the latter half of the Heian period.<sup>26)</sup> This suggests that in the Nara period, before this restrictive interpretation took hold, Mahāyāna doctrines affirming women's capacity for Buddhahood could be received in a more uncompromised form—arguably offering even more robust theoretical support for female sovereignty. It was during the Nara period that the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* were designated as two fundamental Buddhist texts for Buddhist institutions across the Japanese archipelago, becoming deeply embedded in the monastic fabric to legitimize and undergird imperial authority and protect the state.<sup>27)</sup> Moreover, other Mahāyāna scriptures that emphasized the doctrine of “Buddhahood potential for all sentient beings” and incorporated discourse on female capacity also gained unprecedented prominence within the court and society. One can therefore reasonably argue that the doctrinal influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism on the Nara-era court, courtiers, and elite women may well have informed political decisions concerning female rulership.

Remarkably, other influential Mahāyāna texts of this period resonated, to varying extents, with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s affirmation of women's spiritual attainment and its challenge to the male-female dichotomy. The Goddess episode in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* closely parallels the “Bodhisattva Myōon” chapter in the *Lotus Sūtra*, similarly subverting conventional gender roles. Like Bodhisattva Myōon, who transforms his male body into a female one, the Goddess—an advanced bodhisattva who had studied under Vimalakīrti for twelve years—effortlessly exchanges her female body with Śāriputra's male body. When the Goddess expounds the profundity of the dharma, Śāriputra, clinging to a strong gender bias, questions her capacity with an androcentric challenge: “Why do you not transform your female body?” To dismantle Śāriputra's binary thinking, the Goddess uses her power to exchange their bodies, stating: “Śāriputra, if you were able to transform

26) Ambros 2015, 47-54.

27) Piggott 1997, 256.

this female body, then all females would also be able to transform themselves. Just as Śāriputra is not female but is manifesting a female body, so are all females likewise. Although they manifest female bodies, they are not female. Therefore, the Buddha has explained that all dharmas are neither male nor female.”<sup>28)</sup> Through this transformative exchange, Śāriputra overcomes his bias, ultimately realizing that all things are empty of self-nature, with no fixed or unchanging essence. Acknowledging the Goddess as his teacher, he gains access to the Dharma gate of nonduality. Śāriputra’s role here mirrors his function in the Dragon Princess episode of the *Lotus Sūtra*, where he also serves as “a foil to bring to the fore the exceptional spiritual qualities of the female protagonist.”<sup>29)</sup> Both episodes elevate women as teachers of their male counterparts, dismantling dualistic perceptions and affirming the Mahāyāna teaching that the female body, like all phenomena, is a collection of marks devoid of inherent reality. This notion is further reinforced by the concept that Buddhas and bodhisattvas skillfully manifest in female forms to teach sentient beings. A notable example is Bodhisattva Kannon. The “Bodhisattva Kannon” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* describes Kannon’s ability to manifest in thirty-three forms, including those of women and young girls, to skillfully guide sentient beings. These narratives dissolve the traditional gender dichotomy that subordinates women to men, grounding this radical reevaluation in Mahāyāna doctrines of emptiness and nonduality.

It is important to note that the *Golden Light Sūtra*, which held a status equal to that of the *Lotus Sūtra* during the Nara period, likewise contains conjuring acts and incorporates discourse affirming women. The “masculine” aura associated with the Four Heavenly Kings and the power of state protection depicted in this sūtra has been thoroughly examined by scholars; however, its gendered narratives affirming women’s capacity remain understudied. A closer examination of these narratives could illuminate a more nuanced understanding of the sūtra’s broader implications.

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28) *Weimojie suoshuo jing*, fasc. 2, T. 14, 548c2-c5. Translation from McRae, in Paul and McRae 2004, 130.

29) Abe 2015, 39.

For example, Chapter 10 recounts the story of a goddess named “Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Radiance” transforming her female form into the body of a Brahmā god, and she takes a vow to help all sentient beings attain golden bodies with the thirty-two marks, neither in the male form nor in the female form.<sup>30)</sup> Aligning with Mahāyāna doctrines, it emphasizes that the Buddha’s form transcends gender entirely, embodying the ultimate reality beyond dualistic distinctions. The most remarkable gender-related pronouncement in the *Golden Light Sūtra* comes from Śākyamuni Buddha himself, who declares to the assembly that it was in one of his previous lives as a woman, that he had faith in the *Golden Light Sūtra* when hearing the Jewel King Radiant Light Tathāgata preach it: “At that time, I was a woman named Fortune Jewel Radiance.’ During his third assembly, I attended the Jewel King Radiant Light Tathāgata, upholding, reciting, and extensively expounding the *Golden Light Sūtra* for the benefit of others, with the aspiration to attain supreme perfect enlightenment. The World-Honored One then prophesied to me: ‘This woman, Fortune Jewel Radiance, will in the future attain Buddhahood and be known as Śākyamuni Tathāgata. After this life as a woman, she will be reborn among humans and gods, experiencing supreme bliss. She will reign as a universal wheel-turning king for eighty-four hundred thousand lifetimes before ultimately achieving perfect enlightenment. Her name will become universally renowned, spreading throughout the world.’”<sup>31)</sup>

The *Golden Light Sūtra* stands out as one of the few Buddhist scriptures in which the Śākyamuni Buddha recalls his past life as a woman. The ability of Fortune Jewel Radiance to comprehend, uphold, and expound such a profound teaching in the *Golden Light Sūtra*, along with her receiving the prophetic designation from the Jewel King Radiant Light Tathāgata to become the Śākyamuni Tathāgata in the future, serves as a powerful testament to the spiritual potential of women and the concept of female Buddhahood. More strikingly, this episode links womanhood, wheel-turning kingship, and Buddhahood in

30) *Jingguangming zuishengwang jing*, fasc. 5, T. 16, 425c1-c11.

31) *Jingguangming zuishengwang jing*, fasc. 3, T. 16, 417a11-20.

a seamless progression, suggesting that gender is not a limiting factor in the attainment of spiritual and secular authority. Womanhood is not seen as an obstacle to spiritual accomplishment but as a valid and dynamic stage in the journey toward Buddhahood. The fusion of female form with the roles of the wheel-turning king and the Buddha challenges traditional conceptions of gender roles in both religious and secular power structures. This radical inclusivity underscores a profound aspect of Mahāyāna thought: the inherent potential for spiritual realization and secular leadership exists beyond gendered boundaries.

When considered within the context of the prominence of the aforementioned Mahāyāna scriptures and their teachings during the Nara period, it becomes possible to discern their potential bearing on certain political decisions made by Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku. To begin with, in 738, Emperor Shōmu made the unprecedented decision to designate Princess Abe with the controversial title of “*Kōtaishi*.” *Kōtaishi* traditionally signifies male gender, making Abe the first and only woman in Japanese history to have ever been granted this title. As Piggott shows, the gender hierarchy at the Nara court had advanced to a point where this decision faced significant opposition.<sup>32)</sup> Naming a daughter as heir was already a bold move; conferring upon her a male-only title suggests that Shōmu “was pushing the logic of patrilineal succession to its natural conclusion.”<sup>33)</sup> Shōmu’s insistence on using this title for Abe is particularly intriguing, and I would argue that it can be interpreted in light of Mahāyāna teachings discussed above. Shōmu’s decision to bestow a masculine title on a female heir not only reflects an influence from the indigenous concept of “gender complementarity,” where male and female roles are seen as mutually reinforcing. Rather, it points to “gender unity” or “gender dissolution,” inspired by Mahāyāna doctrines of emptiness and nonduality, where the distinctions between genders are transcended. The legendary male-female transformation episodes featured prominently in these seminal Mahāyāna Buddhist texts appear to have been actualized and enacted by Emperor Shōmu in

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32) Piggott 1997, 257-58.

33) Piggott 1997, 257.

political reality when designating this title. Moreover, throughout his reign, Shōmu consistently emphasized the significant role of women. In 749, he issued an edict urging his courtiers to treat daughters and women equally: “As for offspring of my ministers, let sons be promoted according to their service. As for daughters, [normally] they could not be promoted. But reflecting upon the fact that only sons carry on the father’s name, should daughters go unrewarded? It is fitting that both serve together.”<sup>34)</sup>

This edict, issued shortly before his retirement, came at a time when Abe’s formal succession to the throne was still being solidified amidst ongoing courtly debates about succession.<sup>35)</sup> In this context, Shōmu’s call for the equal reward of daughters was not merely an effort to elevate women’s status but also a deliberate response to the controversy surrounding Abe’s succession. His words stand as more than a rhetorical gesture; they represent a political declaration informed by Mahāyāna doctrines emphasizing female capacity and Buddhahood—culminating in his decision to entrust his daughter with rulership. The *Golden Light Sūtra*’s portrayal of the female figure Fortune Jewel Radiance, who is predicted to become a wheel-turning king and the future Śākyamuni Buddha, likely resonated with Shōmu, given his dedication to embodying the ideal of “a universal Buddhist monarch,” the wheel-turning king.<sup>36)</sup> By aligning his political decisions with Buddhist ideals, Shōmu, the self-proclaimed “servant of the Buddha,” may have envisioned himself as a pioneer in faithfully following the Buddha’s teaching to transcend traditional boundaries through his rulership decisions, thus reimagining and redefining gender within both religious and political structures.

This vision and ambition are further evidenced by another significant political and religious initiative that demonstrates the profound influence of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra* on Shōmu: the establishment of provincial

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34) Aoki 1989, Vol. 2, 71, Translation from Piggott, in Piggott 2003, 54.

35) Piggott 1997, 269.

36) Hardacre 2016, 96.

monasteries, including both provincial monasteries (*kokubunji* 國分寺) and nunneries (*kokubun-niji* 國分尼寺). “Copies of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Golden Light Sūtra*, partly brushed in gold ink by Shōmu’s own hand, were sent to each provincial monastery.” Additionally, three sūtras were designated to be read frequently: the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Golden Light Sūtra*, and the *Great Wisdom Sūtra*.<sup>37)</sup> While the primary function of this initiative was state protection, it may also have carried additional implications, such as affirming women’s significance and indirectly legitimizing Crown Prince Abe’s rulership. It is not my intention to suggest that the founding of separate monasteries and nunneries, in itself, constituted an act of women’s empowerment, as this system followed established Buddhist precedents of gender-segregated monastic organization. Rather, the significance lies in the symbolic associations embedded in Shōmu’s designations for these institutions. The monasteries were named “Monasteries of the Golden Light Four Heavenly Kings for the Protection of the State” (*konkōmyō shitennō gokoku no tera* 金光明四天王護國之寺), and the nunneries were titled “Nunneries of the Lotus for the Elimination of Sin” (*hokke metsuzai no tera* 法華滅罪之寺). Shōmu’s use of these titles suggests a conceptual alignment between the *Golden Light Sūtra* and masculine protective power, represented by the Four Heavenly Kings, and the *Lotus Sūtra*, which he appears to associate with women’s spiritual power. As scholars have argued, this alignment may stem from the *Lotus Sūtra*’s proposition of female Buddhahood, as exemplified in the Dragon Princess episode.<sup>38)</sup> Naming the nunneries after the *Lotus Sūtra* elevated the status of women within Shōmu’s Buddhist polity, aligning their spiritual contributions with the critical task of purifying society’s sins and the collective karma, a role of vital importance for the Nara court.<sup>39)</sup> Meeks’s research on the thirteenth-century revival of Hokkeji 法華寺—the administrative head of the provincial nunneries established in accordance with Shōmu’s edict, provides compelling evidence for the association between the *Lotus Sūtra* and women’s religious authority envisioned by Shōmu.

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37) Piggott 1997, 256.

38) Tong 2008, 97-99.

39) Ambros 2015, 49.

This association found tangible institutional and ritual expression in the centuries that followed. As Meeks demonstrates, Hokkeji retained its identity as a female monastic institution and continued to perform officially sanctioned *Lotus Sūtra* recitations well into the early Heian period, attesting to the lasting linkage between the *Lotus Sūtra* and women's religious authority.<sup>40)</sup> Therefore, the designation for provincial nunneries demonstrates Shōmu's conceptual association with the *Lotus Sūtra*, as it provided ideological legitimacy for women's leadership within Buddhist institutions. The elevation of female priests may also have served a political purpose by theologically supporting Shōmu's controversial decision to designate Abe as Crown Prince. The edict ordering the establishment of provincial monasteries and nunneries was issued in the fall or winter of 738, shortly after Abe's formal appointment earlier that year.<sup>41)</sup> This period was marked by natural disasters, political tension, and opposition to Abe's succession. As Piggott suggests, the creation of provincial monasteries and nunneries during this turbulent time reasserted the Tennō's leadership in both religious and secular realms.<sup>42)</sup> At the same time, it can be viewed as a strategic effort to legitimize Abe's claim to the throne. The association of women with the elimination of sin, as symbolized by the *Lotus Sūtra*, institutionalized their indispensable role in maintaining religious and political order. By emphasizing women's contributions, Shōmu seems to have subtly intertwined this narrative with his apologetics for Abe's candidacy and future rulership.

It is highly plausible that Shōmu's actions were modeled after those of Emperor Wu Zetian 武則天 (624-705), the only female emperor in Chinese history, who established the official Dayun Monasteries 大雲寺 throughout the Tang empire to legitimize her assumption of imperial power and female sovereignty. These monasteries were named after a Buddhist text, the *Dayun Sūtra* 大雲經 (*Great Cloud*

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40) Meeks 2010, 28-29.

41) The *Shoku Nihongi* dates the edict to CE 741; however, scholars have questioned this chronology and proposed CE 738 as the more plausible date. See Tong 2008.

42) Piggott 1997, 257.

*Sūtra*),<sup>43</sup> which tells of the goddess Jingguang 淨光, whom the Buddha prophesies will become a bodhisattva and, while remaining in a female body, rule over a kingdom. By promoting the *Dayun Sūtra* and founding the Dayun Monasteries, Emperor Wu tried to legitimize the female rulership. It is unsurprising that a similar propaganda strategy is evident in Shōmu's policies, particularly as one of the main advisors for his provincial monastery project was Genbō 玄昉 (?-746), a monk who had studied in Chang'an, the Tang capital, for nearly two decades. Although Emperor Wu had passed away before Genbō's arrival, her legacy endured during his time there, as evidenced by the widespread presence of Dayun Monasteries across the empire, where the *Dayun Sūtra* continued to be recited, copied, and disseminated. Genbō's recommendations to Shōmu likely drew from Emperor Wu's example of utilizing Mahāyāna discourse to reinforce imperial authority and legitimize female rulership.<sup>44</sup> Wu's model would have been particularly attractive to Shōmu as he sought to bolster Abe's controversial candidacy and navigate a period of political instability and natural disasters. Drawing on a precedent that legitimized female sovereignty through religious institutions and doctrine, offered a persuasive strategy to consolidate both religious and political power in a divided court.

Notably, this was not the only instance where Shōmu appeared to emulate Emperor Wu. Wu was the key patron of the translation of the complete eighty-volume *Kegon Sūtra* and an ardent supporter of Rushana Buddha statue construction in China. Scholars have argued that Shōmu's construction of the Rushana Buddha, the central Buddha in the *Kegon Sūtra*, widely regarded as one of his most significant accomplishments, was likely inspired by Emperor Wu.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Kōken/Shōtoku may have also drawn inspiration from Emperor Wu. As Bender notes, the use of four-character *nengō* 年號 (era names) during her reign

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43) The full title of the *Dayun Sūtra* (Skt. Mahāmegha-sūtra) is *Dafang deng wuxiang jing* 大方等無想經.

44) Tong 2008, 97.

45) Piggott 1997, 259-60.

was unique in Japanese history and likely modeled after Wu's practice.<sup>46)</sup> This choice reflected not merely an aesthetic or ceremonial preference but a deliberate alignment with Wu's precedent of asserting legitimacy through innovative expressions of power, reinforcing her unprecedented position as a female ruler. Furthermore, like Emperor Wu, Kōken/Shōtoku skillfully employed Buddhist texts to justify her rulership. A compelling example is her declaration in the decree of 764, issued upon her reascension to the throne as Emperor Shōtoku. In this decree, she quoted directly from the *Brahma's Net Sūtra* (*Fanwang jing* 梵網經) to validate her reenthronement: "I have taken vows and donned the sacred Buddhist robe, yet it is impossible for me to neglect the affairs of state. As the Buddha teaches in the *Sūtra*: 'When assuming the position of a king, one should first receive the Bodhisattva Precepts.' Having at least left the household life to become a nun, there are now no obstacles to govern the affairs of state."<sup>47)</sup> This declaration framed her nunhood as an unparalleled qualification for rulership, strategically aligning Buddhist doctrine with her political authority. The invocation of the *Brahma's Net Sūtra* demonstrates her adeptness in using religious rhetoric as a tool for governance. Thus, in addition to native ideals and continental discourse, teachings from influential Buddhist texts were mobilized by the Nara court to navigate political rivalries and legitimize female sovereignty. By adopting Emperor Wu's strategies to their own circumstances, Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku effectively leveraged Mahāyāna Buddhism as a means to consolidate imperial power and advance a vision of female rulership that resonated with their political needs.

#### IV. Female Chishiki: Engaged Women in Buddhist Practice

Another significant Mahāyāna teaching, the bodhisattva path, along with the related concept of *chishiki* 知識 (Virtuous Guide/ Wholesome Companion), profoundly influenced the Nara court. Under the guidance of Gyōki 行基 (668–749), one of

46) Bender 2013, 46.

47) Shoku nihongi, Vol. 2.

the most prominent monks of the Nara period, Shōmu incorporated this concept into his religious framework, envisioning the establishment of a *chishiki* realm.<sup>48)</sup> He successfully propagated and rooted this concept in the foundation of Japanese society, transforming it into a driving force behind the Nara period's widespread enthusiasm for forming Buddhist fellowships, engaging in Buddhist practices, and performing virtuous deeds. As Lowe demonstrates, the *chishiki* discourse became central to early Japanese Buddhism, with various social groups organized around this ideal serving as key contributors to Buddhist patronage during the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>49)</sup>

Shōmu's understanding of *chishiki* found its scriptural foundation in the *Kegon Sūtra*. During his stay in Kawachi 河内 in 740, he visited a monastery named Chishikiji, where he encountered an image of Rushana Buddha, the central figure in the *Kegon Sūtra*. Deeply moved by this encounter, Shōmu began studying the *Kegon Sūtra* under the guidance of a Silla monk.<sup>50)</sup> The *Kegon Sūtra* defines *chishiki* in ten categories<sup>51)</sup> and introduces their embodied figures in the chapter "Entrance into the Dharma Realm." Emperor Shōmu was particularly captivated by this chapter, which narrates the transformative journey of Zenzai Dōji 善財童子 (Sudhana). In this chapter, Zenzai Dōji embarks on a quest for spiritual enlightenment, seeking guidance from fifty-three *chishiki*. These *chishiki*-virtuous guides and wholesome companions-lead Zenzai Dōji to a profound vision of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, a symbol of the infinite nature of the bodhisattva path. Shōmu envisioned himself walking in the footsteps of Zenzai Dōji, embodying the role of a seeker guided by *chishiki* toward awakening.<sup>52)</sup> This teaching deeply influenced his personal spiritual aspirations and his broader vision of state-building, where the concept of *chishiki* informed the creation of a harmonious realm.

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48) Piggott 1997, 255.

49) Lowe 2017, 99-100.

50) Piggott 1997, 258.

51) *Da fangguangfo huayanjing*, fasc. 53, T. 10, 280c2-8.

52) Piggott 1997, 258-59.

Notably, a crucial aspect of Zenzai Dōji's chapter that may have particularly resonated with Shōmu is the story's portrayal of gender through the inclusion of women among the *chishiki*. Of the fifty-three *chishiki* Zenzai Dōji encounters, twenty-one are women who play distinctive and meaningful roles in advancing his spiritual progress, collectively occupying approximately 51.1% of the story.<sup>53)</sup> His visit to Gopā, the Buddha's wife, stands out as the second-longest section of the sūtra, comprising 8.9% of the story. Additionally, various goddesses with unique abilities feature prominently; for instance, Zenzai Dōji's meetings with the eight night goddesses alone account for 26.1% of the narrative.<sup>54)</sup> Beyond the *Kegon Sūtra*, goddesses are frequently highlighted in other Mahāyāna texts, underscoring their guiding and protective capacities. For example, the aforementioned goddess in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* exemplifies their role as a wise guide, while goddesses such as *Kichijōten* 吉祥天 and *Benzaiten* 弁才天 in the *Golden Light Sūtra* are celebrated as powerful protectors alongside the Four Heavenly Kings. During the reigns of Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku, the goddess *Kichijōten* held particular significance. An important repentance rite was dedicated to her, beginning with Shōmu's sponsorship in 749 of a recitation of the *Golden Light Sūtra* accompanied by the *Kichijō* repentance rite. Kōken/Shōtoku continued this practice, actively promoting its efficacy. In 757, when multicolored clouds—a phenomenon interpreted as a heavenly sign endorsing her rule—appeared, she attributed this auspicious omen to her devotion to the *Kichijō* repentance rite.<sup>55)</sup> This practice, created by Shōmu and further developed by his daughter, served as a prototype for the Misai-e Assembly, establishing the enduring connection between the *Golden Light Sūtra* and imperial authority during the Nara and Heian periods.<sup>56)</sup> Thus, in Mahāyāna literature, goddesses are integral to the concept of *chishiki*, as demonstrated by Zenzai Dōji's journey. Their significant roles as wise teachers, supportive companions, and steadfast guardians earned them high rever-

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53) Osto 2004, 136.

54) Osto 2004, 137.

55) Bender 2013, 65.

56) Sango 2015, 9-11.

ence in the Nara court.

However, in addition to bodhisattvas and heavenly beings, the female *chishiki* guiding Zenzai Dōji toward spiritual advancement includes ordinary women, representing a range of “ideal types” of Buddhists—nuns, female lay practitioners, courtesans, young girls, wives, and mothers.<sup>57)</sup> This diverse depiction showcases the multifaceted roles women can play in spiritual practice, demonstrating their capacity to inspire and teach. The portrayal of women as indispensable guides may have resonated deeply with Emperor Shōmu, reinforcing his consistent emphasis on women’s vital roles within the family, religious institutions, and political spheres. Through Shōmu’s propagation and large-scale projects, such as the construction of the Great Buddha and the expansion of Tōdaiji 東大寺 in Nara, the concept of *chishiki* permeated not only the court and elite circles but also folk society during the Nara period. Conspicuously, women at all levels actively participated in Buddhist practices, bringing the virtuous deeds of female *chishiki* in Buddhist literature to reality. As Ambros points out, imperial women became vital Buddhist patrons. For example, Queen Kōmyō is believed to have been central to the establishment of Tōdaiji and the aforementioned provincial system of monasteries and nunneries.<sup>58)</sup> In addition, imperial women demonstrated great passion for sūtra copying, one of the most popular Buddhist practices and central religious activities of the time. During this period, the Office of Sūtra Transcription, an imperial institution for sūtra copying, was established at Tōdaiji. Queen Kōmyō and Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku respectively sponsored the 5/1 Canon and the *Jingo Keiun* Canon—“the only two imperially sanctioned canons of the Nara period.”<sup>59)</sup>

While imperial women served as prominent patrons and practitioners, women across a range of social strata likewise participated actively in Buddhist practice,

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57) Osto 2004, 138.

58) Ambros 2015, 45-48.

59) Lowe 2017, 132.

carrying the influence of female *chishiki* beyond the court and into wider society. In folk society, fellowship groups, often formed specifically for sūtra copying, included a conspicuous presence of women. Women played leadership roles, contributed as patrons of sūtra copying, or performed various forms of gendered labor essential to the functioning of these groups.<sup>(60)</sup> Their prayers reflected both personal aspirations for worldly and spiritual rewards and collective concerns for the state and imperial family. For instance, a provincial woman from Echizen 越前 Province, Ikue no Omi Iemichime, presented nine hundred scrolls, including one hundred copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*, to the court. Her prayer inscription revealed a heartfelt plea for Emperor Kōken's peace and stability during her reign.<sup>(61)</sup> The contributions of these female *chishiki* not only reflected their deep religious devotion but might have constituted a strong supportive voice for the female monarch, reinforcing her authority and legitimacy in a period when such roles for women were not that exceptional.

Women's contributions extended beyond manuscript production. As Lowe demonstrates, they also funded and participated in various projects, including the construction of halls and monasteries and the creation of Buddhist images.<sup>(62)</sup> A notable example is the significant role played by a female priest named Ōga no Morime in the building of Tōdaiji and the Great Buddha. As both a nun and a priest of the kami at the Usa Hachiman shrine 宇佐八幡宮, she actively facilitated the shrine's participation in the construction of Tōdaiji by proclaiming an oracle declaring Hachiman's wish to assist in the project.<sup>(63)</sup> The tremendous contributions from Usa were officially recognized by the retired Emperor Shōmu in his imperial edict of 749.<sup>(64)</sup> The active roles of women like Ōga no Morime likely bolstered Kōken/Shōtoku's authority by fostering an atmosphere of female contributors

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(60) Lowe 2017, 95.

(61) Lowe 2024, 42.

(62) Lowe 2024, 47.

(63) Hardacre 2016, 94.

(64) Kaneko 1941, 178-79.

whose efforts reinforced the legitimacy of female sovereignty. These female *chishiki* translated Buddhist ideals into tangible support for the Nara court, demonstrating women's capacity for leadership in both religious and political realms. The period's relatively favorable environment for women, inspired in part by Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, reflected societal recognition of their influence in shaping the state's religious and cultural identity. This environment might have provided a strong social foundation for the female monarch to assert her power and legitimacy.

Given the above analysis, it is worth emphasizing that the Buddhist legitimation of female sovereignty in the Nara period was not a timeless doctrinal principle but a historically contingent development shaped by the specific political, social, and institutional contexts of the time. These conditions allowed flexible and adaptable Mahāyāna doctrines to be interpreted in ways supportive of women's authority. As Ambros notes, from Buddhism's introduction through the Nara period, Buddhism in Japan remained inclusive of women, offering them religious and social legitimacy before later misogynistic interpretations took hold in the late Heian era.<sup>(65)</sup> On one hand, Buddhism's close relationship with the state during the Nara period meant that its survival depended on imperial patronage, especially that of imperial women, who were among its most powerful supporters. Within this framework, Buddhism functioned as a core component of imperial ideology, providing doctrinal and institutional justification for female leadership. On the other hand, women's general social standing during this period, politically, domestically, and institutionally, was comparatively high. Women played significant roles within Buddhist communities as "nuns, patrons, devotees, and even venerated exemplars of Buddhist virtues."<sup>(66)</sup> Therefore, women of this period exercised notable influence within Buddhist institutions, actively engaging in shaping religious rhetoric, discourse, and public opinion.

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(65) Ambros 2015, 54-55.

(66) Ambros 2015, 54-55.

However, the historical circumstances that had enabled this inclusivity began to shift in the centuries that followed. After the death of Emperor Shōtoku, the last classical female monarch in Japan, no woman would ascend the throne again until 1629. Several interrelated factors contributed to this transformation. Politically, the decline of the *ritsuryō* order eroded the state power that had once sustained the system of provincial nunneries, depriving imperial women of crucial institutional bases.<sup>67)</sup> Ideologically, the late Heian period saw the rise of discourses emphasizing the defilement and inferiority of women's bodies—views reinforced by the growing influence of Confucian ethics and by transformations within Japanese Buddhism itself. As Meeks observes, the rise and dominance of Tendai and Shingon Buddhism in the ninth century played a decisive role in ritualizing and institutionalizing gender-discriminatory views within Japanese Buddhism. Both traditions regarded women's bodies as impure and barred them from sacred spaces associated with the mountain-based esoteric practice, as exemplified by the establishment of *nyonin kekkai* 女人結界 (women's exclusion zone) at Mount Hiei, and even elite women were no exception to these prohibitions.<sup>68)</sup> Moreover, women's access to ordination was curtailed after the late Nara period. Excluded from monastic hierarchies and deprived of the possibility of serving as priests or Buddhist officials, elite women turned to the few remaining avenues for participation in Buddhism, particularly as patrons of temples and rituals. As Meeks insightfully observes, they continued to carve out a space for religious agency rather than merely becoming victims of the increasingly androcentric Buddhist discourse and institutional structure.<sup>69)</sup> Nevertheless, they could no longer exert the same level of influence within the Buddhist community as they had during their prime. Their capacity to shape Buddhist institutions and discourse diminished sharply, and losing insider authority meant losing the ability to challenge interpretations unfavorable to women, such as the reading of the Dragon Princess episode by scholar monks, particularly those of the Tendai school, as evidence of

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67) Ambros 2015, 65-66.

68) Meeks 2010, 99.

69) Meeks 2010, 77.

women's inherent impurity and spiritual deficiency. The erosion of the political, social, and institutional foundations contributed to the disappearance of female sovereignty after the Nara period. It reflects not a failure of Buddhist soteriology but the adaptability of Buddhist hermeneutics and the profound impact of changing historical conditions on gender ideology in Japan.

## V. Conclusion

The reigns of Emperor Shōmu and Kōken/Shōtoku reflect a confluence of political, religious, and social forces that facilitated the acceptance of female sovereignty in eighth-century Japan. While scholars have emphasized indigenous ideas of “gender complementarity” in the Nara period as a counterbalance to the male-dominated *ritsuryō* system, this study has argued that the “Mahāyāna discourse on female capacity” could also have been mobilized in the Nara court to legitimize female sovereignty. Mahāyāna teachings, particularly the affirmation of women's equal potential for Buddhahood, and the nonduality of gender distinctions, provided crucial doctrinal support for female rulership. Kōken/Shōtoku's ascent to power was not simply a defiance of patriarchal norms but a manifestation of a broader climate in which female rulers could be legitimized through religious narratives. Furthermore, the concept of *chishiki* created an enabling context for women's active participation in religious practices such as the construction of Buddhist monuments, sponsorship of sūtra copying, and leadership in fellowship groups. These contributions established a social foundation that recognized and reinforced female authority. While the direct causal dynamics between Buddhist doctrine and political action await further substantiation through textual and material evidence, the convergence of doctrinal and institutional developments in the Nara period demonstrates that the “Mahāyāna discourse on female capacity” offered a persuasive framework through which female sovereignty could be envisioned and legitimized.

A broader regional perspective is equally revealing: the seventh and eighth centuries witnessed a remarkable surge of female sovereigns across East Asia. Alongside Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku, Wu Zetian in China stood as the only female emperor in Chinese history, while in Silla, Queen Seondeok (606-647) inaugurated a line of three female rulers. This simultaneity may not be coincidental, for it coincided with the heightened political and institutional consolidation of Mahāyāna Buddhism across East Asia. This parallel development invites further inquiry into the complex relationship between Buddhist ideologies and women's political authority in East Asian history.

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## Sovereign Women: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Female Kingship in Nara Japan

Yuyu Zhang

(Ph.D. Candidate, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Arizona)

This article examines the intersection of Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines and female sovereignty in eighth-century Japan, focusing on the reigns of Emperor Shōmu and Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku. While scholars have emphasized indigenous ideas of gender complementarity as a counterbalance to the patriarchal *ritsuryō* system, this study argues that Mahāyāna teachings offered equally crucial doctrinal resources affirming women's capacity for authority. I refer to this body of ideas as the "Mahāyāna discourse on female capacity," encompassing doctrines such as the universality of Buddha-nature, the possibility of female Buddhahood, and the nonduality of gender distinctions. Texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, and the *Golden Light Sūtra* affirmed women's potential for Buddhahood and were actively promoted at the Nara court. The concept of *chishiki* further reinforced women's religious authority by presenting female figures as indispensable teachers, a vision that shaped both courtly and popular practices, including sūtra lectures, sūtra copying, and temple construction. Together, the "Mahāyāna discourse on female capacity" and women's active participation in Buddhist practices helped foster an environment supportive of female rulership in Nara, Japan. Placed in a wider East Asian context—including Wu Zetian in Tang China

and Queen Seondeok in Silla Korea—this study suggests that the flourishing of female monarchs in the seventh and eighth centuries coincided with the regional ascendancy of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This convergence invites renewed attention to the interplay between Buddhist thought and the political legitimization of women in East Asian history.

**Keywords** : Mahāyāna Buddhism, Female sovereignty, Nara Japan, Emperor Shōmu, Emperor Kōken/Shōtoku, *Lotus Sūtra*, *Chishiki*, Gender and Buddhism

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