The Indian Aesthetic in Ninth-Century Japan; A Study of Foreignness in Early Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Art

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The Indian Aesthetic in Ninth-Century Japan: A Study of Foreignness in Early Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Art

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Fall 2014
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of (Fine) Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.
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Introduction

In the early ninth century, esoteric Buddhist visual culture reached the shores of Japan and sparked major artistic shifts in Japanese religious art. New figures were added to the Buddhist canon, and new modes of depiction were developed for established figures, shaping Japanese visual culture for centuries to come. One of the first places where esoteric Buddhist material crystallized in Japan into a new visual culture was the Toji temple’s Lecture Hall in Kyoto. The Toji, the second esoteric Buddhist institution in Japan and the first in an urban setting, fell under the auspices of Kukai, the founder of Shingon, in the second decade of the ninth century. The Lecture Hall, an important part of a Japanese temple complex, featured an elaborate display of Buddhist statuary that was not only unique to the temple but one of the first esoteric layouts of its kind in Japan. The altar features twenty-one statues of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, wisdom kings, guardians, and devas. A number of these statues were either among the first of their kind in Japan or had undergone a radical shift in iconography at the Toji. The two statues that underwent the greatest visual shift were Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, a pair of deva. These Hindu gods in Japan represented the new visual language of Japanese esoteric Buddhism. They can be seen to exemplify the concept of India in relation to this vital phase of Japanese history. This paper sets out to understand how the concept of India, as it was embodied by these two figures, functioned in this first generation of Japanese esoteric Buddhist art.

Despite the distance between Japan and India, the birthplace of Buddhism remained strongly affixed in the minds of Japanese monastics. As a pilgrimage
location, India was not only the place where one could visit the sites of the Historical Buddha’s life but it featured some of the most advanced universities for Buddhist scholarship. According to Robert Morrell, “travel to India bordered on fantasy” for Japanese Monks.¹ The Shingon monk Myoe (1173-1223) dreamed of travelling to India on pilgrimage in the early thirteenth century. In a passage attributed to Myoe’s hand, he wrote “I am unable to contain my affection and longing for India, the land where the Buddha was born, and so I have drawn up plans for the journey thither. Oh, how I wish to go there!”²

The foreign nature of Buddhism was well-understood in these early centuries. According to traditional historical accounts, Buddhism came to Japan through the Korean kingdom of Paekche as a royal “gift” in the sixth century. This gift included sacred texts and statues. Sarah Horton noted that “[i]n Japan, as in China, the introduction of Buddhism revolves around statues.”³ Buddhism may have been practiced prior to its official arrival by immigrants from mainland East Asia, as well.⁴ Records of early practice of the faith have been limited to the social elite and have been used to craft a narrative of native versus foreign. The prime example of this narrative would be the military feud between the pro-Buddhist Soga clan and the traditionalist Mononobe.⁵ The Soga, with their ties to Korea and interest in Buddhism, represented the acceptance of foreign culture in the Nara era. It was

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¹ Robert E. Morrell, “Passage to India Denied: Zeami’s Kasuga Ryujin”, Monuments Nipponica Vol. 37 No. 2 (Summer 1982), 179.
² Translation of Togo-no-o Myoe Shonin Denki from Morrell, “Passage to India Denied: Zeami’s Kasuga Ryujin”, 183.
through familial ties with the Soga that Buddhism came to be embraced by the Japanese throne with the ascendancy of Empress Suiko (554-628 CE) and Prince Shotoku (574 - 622 CE).\(^6\)

In the seventh and eighth centuries, Buddhism became an established religion in Japan with backing from the imperial throne and court nobility. All of the schools of Buddhism that arrived in Japan during this time originated in India or China. Buddhism had strong advocates in China, which quickly became Japan’s primary source for Buddhist material and teachings. The Japanese government sent nineteen missions to China between the years 600 and 836 CE.\(^7\) During the Nara period (710-794 CE), Chinese culture was seen as sophisticated and worldly, and was emulated by the Japanese court. At this time, Chinese governmental principles, Confucianism, the Chinese system of writing, and literary arts were imported to Japan. Through China’s connections with India and Central Asia, China also became the main source for new Buddhist thought for Japanese monastics. In the early Heian, the monk Kukai traveled to the city of Chang’an in 804 to learn about the newest flush of Buddhist teachings to reach East Asia: Esoteric Buddhism. Japanese Buddhist art throughout the early period reflected the fluctuating manner in which China partook in Indian visual culture, culminating with the influx of Indian visual culture that arrived with esoteric Buddhism in the eighth century.

In Chinese Buddhist art prior to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), depictions of deities vacillated between Indian and native Chinese aesthetics. According to Patricia Karetzky in *Chinese Buddhist Art*, “By the last quarter of the fifth century,

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\(^6\) Suiko was the niece of the powerful Soga no Umako.

Buddhism had assimilated Chinese cultural proclivities and aesthetic characteristics. … In response to the Confucian moral anathema to exposure of the flesh, the monastic garments are arranged like a Chinese kimono, covering the entire body; at times this voluminous drapery overwhelms the figure. This adaption of the kimono treatment of the monastic garment is a reflection of the general process of sinification of the Northern Wei.⁸ This Confucian-influenced aesthetic style made its way to Japan and can be seen in the seventh-century Shakyamuni Buddha at the Horyuji temple by the artist Tori Busshi. [Fig 1] By the Tang Dynasty, the aesthetic pendulum of Chinese Buddhist art had swung back to Westernized (Indian) Buddhist art.⁹ This stylistic and aesthetic change was also transmitted to Japan in the late seventh and eighth centuries.

The Japanese Heian period (794-1185 CE) has often been cited as the moment when Japanese court culture began to develop on its own outside of Chinese influence.¹⁰ With the turmoil surrounding the falling Tang dynasty, Japan was isolated. The last imperial delegation to Tang China set sail in 838.¹¹ Sampa Biwas highlighted this change in the political landscape of Tang China during the early Heian. According to Biwas, “[t]he Chinese civilization which had entered Japan during the previous period [Nara] was that of the golden age of Tang, and although Chinese culture continued to flow into Japan at this time, they began to reflect the decline of later Tang age. This resulted in the fact that the Japanese no longer

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⁹ Ibid., 19.
regarded Chinese Tang culture as the only source of inspiration to be faithfully followed.”\textsuperscript{12}

However, the scant extant evidence of Chinese esoteric art from this period may have clouded the perception of early Heian esoteric art. In Sawa’s 1972 \textit{The Art of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism}, for example, early Shingon art is placed within Indian and Japanese aesthetics and styles with little mention of China. However, recent archaeological evidence suggests that esoteric Buddhism was well-developed in Tang China.\textsuperscript{13} A statue of Acala, Fudo Myo-o in Japan, from the Field Museum in Chicago was the basis for an examination of esoteric art at the Tang court by Rob Linrothe and may shed some light on the role of Chinese esoteric Buddhist art in early Heian Japan.\textsuperscript{14} [Fig 2] This Acala statue, which Linrothe dates to the years 745 - 845 CE, depicted the deity within the same iconographic and stylistic paradigm as the Acala statue at the Toji temple.\textsuperscript{15} The form of Acala that appeared at the Tang court and in Japan differed from the later forms of this deity in other strands of esoteric Buddhist art.\textsuperscript{16} This suggests that the early art of Shingon can be tied to a specific artistic tradition that followed the same pathway through China as Shingon’s religious lineage.

Esoteric Buddhism represented the last major phase of Buddhist thought in India. It relied on secret traditions handed from master to pupil. These teachings

\textsuperscript{12} Sampa Biswas, \textit{Indian Influence on the Art of Japan} (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2010), 91.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{16} An example of the later esoteric Buddhist Acala from the 12th century can be found in the collection of the Rubin Museum of Art.
promised the ability to lead a practitioner to enlightenment in a single lifetime whereas other traditions followed a much longer path. In the words of Kukai, enlightenment can be achieved “with a single glance” through the study of Shingon. Esoteric Buddhism, outside of its ability to aid practitioners’ attainment of enlightenment, claimed to be able to provide worldly benefits, including protection for the state and the summoning of rain. The material aspects of Esoteric Buddhism appealed to political leaders and were quickly embraced by the Japanese throne in the early ninth century. Esoteric Buddhism’s newness to Japan may also have been a factor in garnering imperial interest at the time. By gaining the support of the emperor, Kukai had a strong ally to help cement Shingon into the Japanese religious landscape. It was through this allegiance that Kukai became the administrator of the Toji temple in the new capital at Kyoto.

In 823, Emperor Saga (r. 809-823) granted the Toji to Kukai and the Shingon tradition. It was one of the two main temples in the new Japanese capital of Kyoto and represented a powerful sign of support for the Shingon sect. Kukai oversaw the construction of the Toji’s pagoda and Lecture Hall (J: Todo). The Lecture Hall altar displayed twenty-one Buddhist statues arranged in a karma mandala, a depiction of the divine reality through statuary. Fourteen of the statues on the altar underwent a stylistic shift but they remain within the bounds of earlier tradition. The Four Guardian Kings, depicted in an extremely dynamic and powerful fashion at the Toji, follow the same visual language as earlier versions. The Guardian Kings were traditionally shown as dynamic figures within Japanese Buddhist temple statuary so

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their increased dynamism augmented but did not greatly change their fierce appearance. Five of the statues, the Five Wisdom Kings, were among the first depiction of these deities in Japan, both as individuals and as a larger category of figures, and are brand new to the Japanese Buddhist visual language. These five figures only reached East Asia through the spread of esoteric Buddhism, and they exemplify resurgence of Indic visual culture. They draw extensively on Indian visual vocabulary, such as the inclusion of animal mounts and multiple limbs, and the modeling of the figures. Finally, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten answer this vocabulary by becoming dramatically Indianized, making a striking change from how they appeared in earlier temples. This revision illustrates the importance of the Indian element in Japan’s esoteric Buddhist art: Buddhism was not just being expanded at the Toji temple, it was being reshaped.

Ryuken Sawa, a preeminent scholar of esoteric Buddhist art in Japan, stated that “[t]he Taishaku Ten and Bon Ten statues, one at each end of the main altar in the To-ji Lecture Hall, reveal the purely Indian aesthetic aspects of Kukai’s interpretations.” These statues, along with the other nineteen statues in the Toji’s Lecture Hall altar, perfectly reflect the aesthetic style associated with ninth-century Japanese esoteric Buddhist art. In the literature associated with these works, there is a tension between defining their aesthetics as “Indian” or “Japanese” in character. In comparing the Toji statues to earlier works commissioned by Kukai, Sawa stated that “the heavy Indian influence is gone from the face, which is more characteristically Japanese” in one of the Toji bodhisattva statues. Sawa was not the only scholar to

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19 Ibid., 75.
describe this tension between native and foreign influences in early Heian Japan. Noritake Tsuda described Heian-period esoteric art as “[a]rtistically, the later T’ang influence, which is noticeable in this period, differed from that of the eighth century; on the one hand, in having a stronger tinge of the Indian ideals brought by the esoteric sect, and on the other, in showing the effects of the Chinese nationalization of the early forms from India.”

What is meant by the use of “Indian” to describe these icons? The style, iconography, and form of nearly all Buddhist imagery from this early period originated in India. Their forms remained relatively intact after the multiple cultural transmissions leading to the arrival of Buddhism in Japan. The generally static forms of East Asian Buddhist art reflect the importance of specific visuals in Buddhist religious culture. The manner in which these figures are depicted was derived from prescribed texts and earlier visual examples, which can be traced directly to India. This quality of “Indianness” has become a fixture of scholarship on the early years of the Toji, when scholars also see the blossoming of Japanese aesthetics at the temple.

The statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten exemplify this tension between foreign and Japanese aesthetics. Like Sawa, other authors writing on early Heian esoteric Buddhist art shift to viewing most works through the lens of pure Japanese aesthetics and de-emphasize the role of foreign styles. However imagery associated with Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten continue to be tied to Indian art. In a review, George J. Tanabe, Jr. described the early Heian images of Deva, the category of celestial figures which includes Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, as showing “a strong Indian flavor in the animal mounts, the attendants, the large size, and the otherworldly

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Whether intentionally or not, the scholarship on the Toji altar thus becomes charged with unresolved tensions as scholars declare Japan’s break with foreign influences at the same time that they acknowledge the importance of manifestly Indian elements to the Toji altar. Critically, this tension may not have existed at the time in which these statues were made.

In earlier Japanese temples, such as Horyuji and Todaiji, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were depicted as nearly identical attendant figures. In these earlier works, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were freestanding figures in Chinese-style robes. At the Toji, the statues maintained a number of similar iconographical elements, but they could no longer be confused with one another as in earlier works. In addition, while they were still presented as attendant deities, they were no longer in front of the main assembly. At the Toji, the statues were placed off to the side on the periphery of the assembly. This decentralization of the figures has two possible interpretations. Bogel argues that the Toji altar display is a *karma mandala* -- a depiction of the Buddhist cosmos through statuary. In a *mandala* display, the attendant figures would be on the periphery. This would place the location of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten into a larger *mandala* placement system instead of following their traditional placement as attendants to the main figure. The decentralization could also relate to a general decrease in visibility of these two figures within Japanese Buddhism. After the ninth century, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten underwent a shift from being an isolated pair to being included in a group of twelve *deva* figures, the *Junniten*.

The statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, like the rest of the Toji Todo sculptures, followed a different stylistic paradigm than other earlier and contemporaneous Japanese Buddhist art. This style may have had its roots in contemporaneous Chinese esoteric Buddhist art. The style present at the Toji was more naturalistic and fluid than previously seen in Japanese temple sculpture, which scholars such as Sawa tie to either native or foreign influences. In addition to the aesthetics, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten underwent a change at the Toji to incorporate their original Indian iconography. Bon Ten is recognizable as the deity Brahma, with his multiple heads and arms, seated on his traditional *vahana*. Indra remains a princely figure, and does not have any additional anatomical parts. He is now shown on an elephant, which clearly Indianizes the statue.

The tension between native and foreign influences in early Japanese esoteric Buddhist art has permeated the scholarship of this time period. How is this concept of foreignness formulated in an era when Japanese art moved away from its earlier reliance on foreign culture? The statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten will be used as a lens to examine this question of foreignness. In the scholarship, these figures have become intertwined with the concept of “Indianness” in Japanese esoteric Buddhist art. Their role at the Toji, the manner in which these figures are depicted within the Buddhist canon, and the role of “foreignness” in ninth-century Japanese esoteric Buddhism will be examined.

The circumstances behind the establishment of the Toji as a Shingon institution, the Todo altar display as a whole, and the statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten are presented in the first section of this work. Shingon was forged in

23 *Vahana* are the animal vehicles of Indian deities.
an environment in which several established continental sects of Buddhism were active. The movement of the Japanese capital from Nara to Kyoto, distancing the throne from the powerful Nara sects, and an interest in the potential benefits and power of Esoteric Buddhism to the state provided Shingon an opportunity for advancement. The cultural context for Buddhism, and its foreign nature, will help shed light on the contemporary perception of “foreignness” in early Heian Japan. This chapter endeavors to show how foreign the Toji statues would have looked in contemporary Japan and to establish the political context within which a strategy of foreignness would have been effective.

In the second section, the role that Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten traditionally play within Buddhist art will be examined. As Brahma and Indra, they were commonly used to represent the ascension of Buddhism and, to some degree, its superiority as a religious tradition. They can also be seen as the most “foreign” deities among the statues. By the time Buddhism reached Japan, Brahma and Indra had taken on the role of attendants within Buddhist sculptural displays. Despite this, their role as Hindu deities remained embedded within Buddhism through episodes in which these deities interact with the Historical Buddha. These figures have a long history of being coded to relay visual cues regarding foreignness and other traditions outside of earlier Japanese religious sculpture. Deva, unlike the enlightened Buddha, were often presented as earlier, non-Buddhist beings who converted to Buddhism.

The third section widens the scope of the inquiry to look at other ways that Kukai emphasized the foreign roots of the Shingon tradition. To this end, the chapter will examine two other examples of ninth-century Shingon’s treatment of esoteric
Buddhism’s foreign nature in different media. The *Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind* and the distilled version, the *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury*, were among the core Shingon texts written by Kukai. Within these works, Kukai laid out the Ten Stages, a pathway to enlightenment that codifies the Buddhist world and, specifically, Buddhist traditions. The Ten Stages cemented Shingon’s position as the ultimate Buddhist revelation and placed other sects of Buddhism, including those active in Japan at the time, in the lower stages. While the Ten Stages focused on the doctrinal aspects of Shingon’s position within Buddhism, a set of portrait paintings created a sense of legitimacy and continuity for Kukai’s religious authority. During his stay in China, Kukai had the position of Master bestowed on him by the Esoteric Buddhist monk Hui-kuo. This awarded Kukai the eighth position in a lineage that traced itself back through India to the ultimate buddha, Mahavairochana. Both the Ten Stages and the eight Patriarch portraits traced a pathway that tied Shingon tightly to its foreign roots.
Chapter One: The Toji, Shingon and Kukai

Scholars have perceived the Heian era to have undergone major shifts in religion, art, and culture that separated the new, “Japanese” Heian from the older, foreign-influence past. This chapter revises this view to focus on the influx of Indian iconographies into Japan during this period, and to examine the political context that this influx may have been intended to address.

The Japanese capital moved from Nara to Nagaoka, in current day Kyoto Prefecture, and then in 794 to Kyoto, which was called Heian-kyo. It is said that the capital at Nagaoka was cursed, which led to the relocation at Kyoto. The location of Kyoto was selected through the use of divination, a common practice at the time. It was modeled on the Chinese city of Chang'an, the seat of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), and on the earlier capital at Nara. There were only two Buddhist temples originally planned within the city limits of Kyoto, the Toji and the Saiji. This was partially a result of the emperor's attempt to curtail the influence of the Nara Buddhist establishments on the Japanese government. The Toji (E: Eastern Temple) and Saiji (E: Western Temple) were to sit across from each other at Kyoto's southern entrance. The temples were to be dedicated to the protection of the imperial family.

Buddhism in Japan was very closely tied with the imperial seat during its early phases in the seventh and eighth centuries. The official entrance of Buddhism

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24 It is from Heian-kyo that the Heian era is named.
26 Donald Richie and Alexandre Georges, The Temples of Kyoto (Rutland, Vt: C.E. Tuttle, 1995), 17.
27 Ibid., 18.
into Japan is recorded in the *Nihon Shoki* (E: *The Chronicles of Japan*), which is also known as the *Nihongi*. The *Nihon Shoki* was compiled in the year 720 under the supervision of Prince Toneri (676 - 735 CE). It is the second oldest extant Japanese historical work and chronicled the creation of the Japanese islands through to the seventh century. According to the *Nihon Shoki*, in 552, “King Song Myong of Paekche entrusted to the Japanese diplomatic envoy for presentation to his Emperor a gilt bronze statue of Shaka (Shakyamuni) and several Buddhist sculptures. Also attached was a document that explained in detail the reasons Buddhist law was superior to all other philosophies. Because the faith commanded followers all the way from distant India to the three ancient kingdoms of the Korean peninsula – Koguryo, Paekche and Silla – these teachings should also be transmitted to Japan and be propagated throughout the country.”

In the sixth century, the upper echelons of Japanese society were deeply engaged with Korean culture. As a result, Buddhism and other elements of Korean culture were likely active in Japan prior to the royal gift in 552. Indeed, according to Varley, “about a third of Japan’s aristocracy was by that time of foreign descent, [and] the Japanese undoubtedly already knew about Buddhism as well as other major features of continental civilization.” The historical records that surround the arrival of Buddhism were limited to the upper echelons of Japanese society. Buddhism was also likely practiced by, or at least familiar to, Korean immigrants and artisans who

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30 The oldest Japanese historical work is the *Kojiki*.
were active in Japan during the sixth century.

From the arrival of Buddhism until the late sixth century, there were tensions regarding the acceptance of a foreign tradition. This conflict has been encapsulated as a struggle between two powerful court families: the pro-Buddhist Soga and the traditionalist Mononobe. The emperor “allowed the powerful Soga family to practice the new religion before all others.”33 This military struggle has been immortalized by scholars as a conflict between the old and the new, the native and the foreign, with the Soga representing the superiority of foreign culture through their interests and ties. In the 580s, the Soga not only won this military conflict but had made further important ties to the imperial family through marriage.34

The first, great imperial proponent of Buddhism in Japan was Prince Shotoku (573 – 621 CE). In 607 CE, Prince Shotoku sent a group of scholars to China in order to study Buddhism, although Japan itself was still highly influenced by Korean culture and Buddhism at the time. Shotoku built one of the earliest great Buddhist temple complexes in Japan, the Wakakusadera, in Paekche Korean style.35 The Wakakusadera was destroyed by fire in the year 670 CE and was rebuilt as the Horyuji. After Shotoku, the Japanese monarchs were directly involved in the establishment of Buddhism. The creation of temples, number of monks and spread of Buddhism throughout Japan all fell under government and crown control during this period.

The first attempt by the imperial government to control the Japanese Buddhist body was recorded in the Nihon Shoki. In 624, Empress Suiko (554 - 628

CE) placed an administrator in charge of all Buddhist clergy following an incident in which a Buddhist priest murdered his grandfather. The Taiho Code, a series of crown regulations placed on the Buddhist religious community in 701, featured the first reference to the Sangha Office (J: Sougou). The Sangha Office was a “group of senior monks whose duty was to ensure that the regulations were enforced.” By the ninth century, the Sangha Office had become the most powerful authority in the Japanese religious community, second only to the imperial seat. The Sangha Office, based in the city of Nara, controlled the number of monks each temple and sect of Buddhism in Japan could ordinate each year. Saicho, the founder of the Tendai sect, possibly lost imperial favor through his attempt to have Tendai initiates ordained outside of Nara and created a multi-year controversy with the Sangha Office.

The Todaiji was one of many temples built by Emperor Shomu (r. 724 - 749 CE) during his reign. Like other royal patrons of Buddhism, Shomu directed his support through imperial edicts. One such edict, which was passed in 741, launched the temple building campaign that would create the Todaiji. These temples served two purposes. Firstly, they helped to entrench Buddhism in Japan, and secondly they were intended to place Japan under divine protection. This was clearly shown in the Todaiji's full name, the Konkomyo Shitenno Gokokuji (E: Temple for the Protection

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37 Ibid., 58.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 132.
40 Saicho (767 - 822 CE) founded the Tendai sect of Buddhism in Japan, a tradition that also contained elements of esoteric Buddhism. Scholars have differing stances on the relationship between Saicho and Kukai and whether or not it was competitive.
41 Stanley-Baker, Japanese Art, 46.
of the Nation by the Golden Radiant Four Heavenly Kings). One of the most famous artworks at the Todaiji was the Great Buddha. The Great Buddha was a statue of Vairochana, a deity of extreme importance to the later Shingon sect. The eye-opening ceremony for the Great Buddha took place in the year 752 CE and is said to have been conducted by over 10,000 monks, including the monk Bodhisena from India (704 - 760 CE). Bodhisena was the only documented Indian Buddhist monk to travel to Japan during the early centuries and the only direct, personal link between India and Japan on Japanese shores. The Great Buddha can be read as a statement of the supremacy of Buddhism in Japan, according to its patron Emperor Shomu, and the sheer power that Buddhism had obtained since its official recognition in the sixth century. The statue has been reworked and remade several times since it was officially unveiled, which leaves the other Todaiji states, though less famous, to exemplify the style of the later Nara period.

Esoteric Buddhism arose in India during the sixth and seventh centuries. By the eighth century, it had reached China, and esoteric teachings, such as the *Mahavairochana Sutra*, were appearing in Japan. While esoteric Buddhism was practiced in areas across China, the Chen-yen sect found its home in the capital at Chang’an. During the Nara period, Japan engaged deeply with Chinese culture, especially practices associated with the Tang throne. This royal interest in Chinese culture, and the benefits of esoteric Buddhism, led to imperial favor being bestowed on the monks Saicho and Kukai for their skill at esoteric Buddhist ritual. Kukai’s

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43 Ibid., 84.
44 Ibid., 81.
45 Translations of this text may call it a Tantra instead of a Sutra. This is a doctrinal divide between Japanese and Himalayan esoteric Buddhism.
Shingon Buddhism was to foster much deeper bonds with the emperors as time progressed.

In the ninth century, the Japanese royal family maintained a deep engagement with Shingon Buddhism. For example, in 841 the Toji temple in Kyoto, a Shingon institution, held an esoteric lay initiation for Empress Saga, wife of the retired Emperor Saga.\(^{46}\) Esoteric Buddhism’s ability to protect nation-states and the imperial character it gave to Vairochana Buddha made it valuable to the monarchy. Across Asia at the time, practices involving Vairochana were tied to royalty. In esoteric Buddhist art, Vairochana can often be identified by his royal garb and elaborate crown. [Fig 3] This created a striking visual contrast to the other buddhas who were generally depicted in monastic robes. Vairochana had become a divine mirror and counterpart to imperial power in his depiction as the *chakravartin*.\(^{47}\)

Although the Toji temple had been included in the original construction plan for Kyoto, by the year 823, the temple had yet to be completed. The Saiji was in a similar state of construction. Both projects suffered from a lack of strong, permanent directorship.\(^{48}\) In order to facilitate construction, Emperor Saga (r. 809-823) gave control of the Toji to Kukai, the founder of Shingon, in the year 823, three months before he retired. It was hoped that Kukai, a favorite of Saga, would be able to complete the Toji. Kukai received imperial approval to maintain the temple as a Shingon institution. He renamed the Toji the *Kyoogokokuji* (E: Nation-Protecting Lord of Sutras Temple), which remained the temple's formal name through to the


\(^{47}\) A *chakravartin* is a universal monarch.

Kukai was best-known as the founder of Shingon Buddhism, which has been declared to be the first “Japanese” sect of Buddhism. [Fig 4] Kukai was credited with numerous achievements beyond his religious prowess including calligraphy and civil engineering. He was one of the most influential Buddhist monks in ninth-century Japan. Kukai is known for a number of cultural innovations beyond the foundation of Shingon. He is credited with creating the kana writing system in addition to his literary prowess. He is also known by his posthumous name, Kobo Daishi, which was bestowed onto him by the Japanese court. He was born in the year 774 in Shikoku, Japan to the Saeki clan. When he was fifteen, Kukai began studying Chinese classic literature at the capital. He knew Chinese well enough to serve as a translator and calligrapher later on in his life. At eighteen, he entered college but never completed his studies. It was not until Kukai began studying at the capital that he started to embrace Buddhism. In what is believed to be his first work, *Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings*, Kukai compared Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. It was in this work that Kukai stated the superiority of Buddhism over the other foreign traditions. Kukai became a wandering ascetic after leaving college, so little is known of his early studies of Buddhism. He encountered the *Mahavairochana Sutra* at some point during these years and began a search for instruction on the Esoteric Buddhist work.

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53 Ibid., 33.
In 804, at the age of 31, Kukai was part of an imperial delegation to the Tang Chinese capital at Chang'an. Twenty years had lapsed since the last Japanese imperial delegation to China. The delegation consisted of four ships, which set sail to China from Kyushu. Out of these four ships, only two completed the journey to China. Once Kukai arrived at the Tang capital, he sought instruction from various Buddhist masters. Eventually, he became the student of Hui-kuo from the Qinglongsi Temple. Hui-kuo was a master of Esoteric Buddhism. It was said that when Kukai came to the Qinglongsi Temple, Hui-kuo announced that he had been expecting Kukai's arrival and had received a premonition that Kukai would be his successor. Kukai described their meeting in the *Shorai Mokuroku*. He wrote “[a]s soon as he [Hui-kuo] saw me he smiled with pleasure, and he joyfully said, ‘I knew that you would come! I have been waiting for such a long time. What pleasure it gives me to look on you today at last! My life is drawing to an end, and until you came there was no one to whom I could transmit the teachings. Go without delay to the ordination altar with incense and flower.’” Within three months of beginning his study at Qinglongsi, Kukai had three esoteric Buddhist initiations (Sk: *abhiseka*). He was then proclaimed to be Hui-kuo's official successor and the future master of the Esoteric tradition. He returned to Japan in 806, after spending only one year at the Chinese capital, with many sutras, artworks, and Buddhist ritual objects.

In 809, the emperor Heizei (r. 806-809) sent Kukai to the Takaosanji Temple outside Kyoto. At this time Kukai was not as well-known as he was to become.

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54 Ibid., 29.
55 Ibid., 31-32.
Saicho, the founder of Tendai Buddhism, who traveled to China on the same expedition as Kukai, was considered the master of Esoteric Buddhism within court circles. The next emperor, Saga (r. 809-823), became a great supporter of Kukai. Under his reign Kukai was placed as the administrative head of the Todaiji in Nara in 810, was granted Mount Koya in order to build a Shingon Buddhist temple complex in 816, and was given the Toji in Kyoto in 823. Kukai had a close relationship with the emperor, often traveling to the palace and exchanging letters.

When Kukai was placed in charge of the Toji, the *Kondo* (E: Golden Hall) and a few other buildings had been completed.\(^{58}\) [Fig 5] In 825, the plan for the *Todo* (E: Lecture Hall) was accepted. Although Kukai was the administrative head of the temple, he still needed official permission for specific aspects of the project. A year later, Kukai began construction of a pagoda at the Toji. [Fig 6] The pagoda was still under construction when Kukai died in the year 835. However, construction on the Lecture Hall was completed that year.\(^{59}\) [Fig 7] It was possible that the Lecture Hall was the ritual focus of the Toji complex during the first decade after its completion.\(^{60}\)

While the *Kondo* was the main shrine within the temple complex, the *Todo* was vital for the transmission of Shingon Buddhism. The *Todo* within a Buddhist temple complex was the place where lectures, rituals, and other forms of instruction occur. Buddhist traditions like Shingon, a sect of Esoteric Buddhism, emphasized the role of direct transmission from mentors to students. A place for teaching would, therefore, have been vitally important for a sect looking to grow within the urban

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 56.


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 332.
environment of Kyoto. Shingon’s other early establishment, the complex at Mount Koya, was a retreat far from the outside world.

**Toji Altar**

Under Kukai’s supervision, the Toji’s Lecture Hall became an encapsulation of Shingon Buddhism and its teachings. Construction of the Lecture Hall began after Kukai was placed in charge of the then in-progress Toji. According to Bogel, “it is also clear that the new types of icons deployed on the altar were key to the reception of the altar.”

There were twenty-one statues on the Lecture Hall altar arranged on a rectangular platform. [Fig 8] The statues on the altar were completed before the year 839, when an eye-opening ceremony took place at the Toji in front of the Heian court.

The Toji altar included the Five Wisdom Kings, new deities to the Japanese Buddhist landscape, and a *karma mandala* display. These statues, so unlike their predecessors in terms of style and presentation, captured the sense of mystery and religious depth that helped establish the sect.

It is possible that Kukai derived the Lecture Hall altar’s layout from Chinese Esoteric Buddhist temples. The lack of surviving temples in China to examine has made determining a solid link between the Toji and contemporaneous Chinese Esoteric temples difficult. Individual statues with stylistic similarity to the Toji works have been found in the ruins of the Anguosi monastery in Xi’an. Established in 710 CE and destroyed in the 845 CE backlash against Buddhism, Anguosi was a

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61 Ibid., 289.
62 Ibid., 288.
63 An eye-opening ceremony ritually empowers Buddhist statues and makes them religiously viable. It is a type of consecration.
home to the esoteric tradition in China.\textsuperscript{65} Eleven statues have been discovered from this site, some of the only extant statues from this time period that have been designed as part of the esoteric tradition. The Acala figure featured in Linrothe’s essay can be placed in this group, as well.

Japanese historical sources can shine some light on the Lecture Halls’s relationship with Chinese temples. A Japanese text written prior to 1352 claimed that the Toji’s Lecture Hall was based on the Chang’an temple Qinglongsi, the temple Kukai studied at while in China.\textsuperscript{66} It has been proposed that Kukai brought plans and drawings back from China, but there is no current evidence of their survival.\textsuperscript{67} The esoteric Buddhism practiced at Chang’an was a specific tradition that can be traced to the Indian monk Amoghavajra (705-774 CE).\textsuperscript{68} Amoghavajra, and his teacher, were known for their direct ties to the Indian subcontinent. The esoteric Buddhism that appeared in Western China at Dunhuang around this time, for example, represented a different tradition.\textsuperscript{69} This courtly tradition of esoteric Buddhism instituted by Amoghavajra was to be passed onto Kukai in the early ninth century by Hui-kuo, Amoghavajra’s primary pupil.

The twenty-one statues on the Lecture Hall’s altar can be divided into six groups: the Five Buddhas of the Diamond World, the Five Kings of Wisdom, the Five Great Bodhisattvas, the Four Guardian Kings, and Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten. Each group of five was organized in the same fashion with a primary central figure

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 296.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 290.
\textsuperscript{68} Linrothe, “Provincial or Providential: Reassessment of an Esoteric Buddhist ‘Treasure’”, 207.
\textsuperscript{69} For esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang see Matthew Kapstein and Sam Van Schiak, \textit{Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang} (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
and the secondary figures representing the four cardinal directions. These groupings of five were based on the five directions present in Buddhism: the four cardinal directions and the center. The Guardian Kings, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were located around the periphery of the altar. Several of the statues have been replaced since the 9th century, a common problem deriving from the use of wood in Japanese Buddhist art. Only fourteen of the original statues remain. The statues focused on in this thesis are all original to the altar.

The precise identification of the altar statues is based on three forms of evidence. One of the primary ways to identify Buddhist deities is through their iconography. The physical details, mudra (symbolic hand gestures), and ritual implements held by the figures are all identification aides. Throughout the Toji's history, several plans of the altar have been created. These sources are vital for helping to identify the statuary and can provide insight on the changes the altar has undergone since its inception. The earliest known plan of the Toji's altar dates to the year 922. The altar display does not correspond exactly to any textual source, which limits their use in identification. Some of the statues contain relics, which have proven useful in solidifying their identifications. Metal tubes were placed inside the statues, which contained mantras and the names of the deities. It is not precisely

71 Occasionally, Buddhist statues can be identified through the material placed inside the works during consecration rituals.
73 Texts such as the *Mahavairochana Sutra* describe the placement of figures in mandala. The Diamond and Womb World Mandala were described in sutra.
known if these relics were included during the statue's creation or during a later restoration.\textsuperscript{75}

The focus of the altar is the Five Buddhas of the Diamond World or the Five
*Tathagata* (*J: Godai Nyorai* 五大如来). The Five Buddhas of the Diamond World can
also be referred to as the Five Wisdom Buddhas. Dainichi Nyorai 大日如来 (*Sk: Mahavairochana*), the key figure in Shingon Buddhism, forms the center of this
grouping. The buddha Vairochana is traditionally shown in the guise of a *bodhisattva*
with an elaborate crown in art across the Buddhist world.\textsuperscript{76} The four buddhas
surrounding Dainichi Nyorai are Ashuku Nyorai 阿閦 (*Sk: Akshobhya*), Fukujo
Nyorai 不空成就 (*Sk: Amoghasiddhi*), Amida Nyorai 阿弥陀如来 (*Sk: Amitabha*) and
Hosho Nyorai 宝生 (*Sk: Ratnasambhava*). The current versions of these statues are
not the originals and are copies of those statues.\textsuperscript{77}

The Five Great Bodhisattvas (*J: Go Dai Bosatsu* 五大菩薩) are to the right of
the Five Buddhas of the Diamond World. The Five Bodhisattvas feature Kongo
Haramitsu 金剛波 (*Sk: Vajrparamita*) at the center. He is encircled by Kongosatta 金
剛薩埵 (*Sk: Vajrasattva*), Kongoho 金剛法 (*Sk: Vajradharma*), Kongoho 金剛寶 (*Sk:
Vajraratna*) and Kongogo 金剛業 (*Sk: Vajrakarma*). *Bodhisattvas* in Shingon
Buddhism function the same way as *bodhisattvas* in other Buddhist sects. A
*bodhisattva* is a figure who is able to ascend to enlightenment but remains behind in
order to assist lesser beings. The central figure of this pentad is a replacement of the
destroyed original.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 334.
\textsuperscript{76} Contemporaneous images of Vairochana adorned in this way can be found in India and at the
Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China.
\textsuperscript{77} Bogel, *With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Mikkyo Vision*, 316.
The Five Kings of Wisdom (J: Go Dai Myo-o 五大明王) are figures who first appear in Japan through Shingon Buddhism. They are also known as the Five Kings of Light. The central figure of this group is Fudo Myo-o 不動明王 (Sk: Acala). The four surrounding figures are Gozanze Myo-o 降三世明王 (Sk: Trailokavijaya), Gundari Myo-o 軍荼利明王 (Sk: Kundali), Dai‘itoku Myo-o 大威德明王 (Sk: Yamantaka) and Kongo Yasha Myo-o 金刚夜叉明王 (Sk: Vajrayaksa). The Toji statues are among oldest extant Japanese versions of these figures. The first version of these figures likely appeared at Mount Koya, but many of the Koya statues were lost to fire in both antiquity and modern times. Their grouping is to the left of the Five Buddhas of the Diamond World.

The Four Guardian Kings (J: Shitenno 四天王) are the traditional Buddhist directional guardians. In Sanskrit, they are the Lokapala. They are placed on the four corners of the altar, forming an outer perimeter. In early Japanese Buddhist art, the Four Guardian Kings are often the fiercest figures depicted at temples. The Four Guardian Kings are Bishamon or Tamon Ten 多門天 (Sk: Vaisravana) of the North, Jikoku Ten 持国天 (Sk: Dhrtarastra) of the East, Komoku Ten 広目天 (Sk: Virupaksa) of the West and Zocho Ten 增長天 (Sk: Virudhaka) of the South.

Bon Ten 梵天 (Sk: Brahma) and Taishaku Ten 帝釈天 (Sk: Indra) fall outside these traditional groupings. At earlier Japanese temples, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten formed triads with a single deity. At the Toji, they were placed on the right and left sides of the altar along the outer perimeter with the Four Guardian Kings. However, they are on the same axis as the three major groupings' central figures. This does, in some way, befit their occasional role as protective deities in Buddhism. Bon Ten and
Taishaku Ten face forward, like all of the Toji statues. However, they may have originally faced the statue of Dainichi Nyorai. Instead of protective deities, it is most likely that Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten are in the role of attendants. Their small size, position and iconography point towards an attendant deity, important yet peripheral, over other potential roles. In terms of religious significance, this would place Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten as the least important statues in the altar mandala. However, their cultural and political significance should not be underestimated.

The statue of Bon Ten is located along the perimeter of the Todo altar between the statues of Jikoku Ten and Tamon Ten, two of the Four Guardian Kings. [Fig 9] It dates to the year 839 and is made of wood. There is some evidence of gilding and/or paint that has faded over time. The statue is thirty-nine inches tall. It is the smallest statue on the Todo altar. Bon Ten is depicted with four heads, four arms and two legs. That he is a peaceful deity is shown in the gentle lines of the figure. This version of Bon Ten has iconographic elements derived from Indian depictions of the Hindu deity Brahma, including the multiple arms and heads. This is the first extant version of Bon Ten in Japan to show him in such a way.

The statue's primary head is facing forward with three eyes. The third eye is in the center of Bon Ten's forehead and is highly stylized. His hair is upswept into an elaborate topknot with the head of a small deity resting at the top and facing forward. This small head is Bon Ten’s fourth head, which is sometimes depicted on the back of the main head or absent but implied in Indian art. He is wearing a crown with a jewel in the center. Bon Ten's second and third head branch off diagonally from the back of the main head. These secondary heads have two eyes and have simplified

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78 Ibid., 94.
crowns and hair styles. All of Bon Ten's eyes appear to be closed as a result of pigment loss. Bon Ten's four arms are gracefully carved. They separate at the shoulder and are clearly defined. His first right hand is open, with the palm facing the viewer. His second right hand is holding a ritual staff. His first left hand is holding a lotus flower and his second left hand is holding a fly whisk. He is wearing Indian-style clothing and jewelry. Bon Ten is adorned with earrings, bracelets, armbands and crowns. The statue's chest and arms are mostly bare. He wears a sash across his chest that gathers at his left shoulder and simple pants. This style of clothing is not native to Japan but is Indian. He sits cross-legged on a lotus flower. There are three levels of lotus petals. The lotus is supported by four geese, the animal associated with Brahma. Each goose has an individualized head and neck attached to an identical body. The carving of the geese is as detailed as the rest of the work, with individual feathers carved along the neck and body and detailed legs and feet.

Taishaku Ten is on the opposite side of the altar from Bon Ten. [Fig 10] He is located on the left between two of the Four Guardian Kings, Zocho Ten and Komoku Ten. Taishaku Ten is slightly larger than the statue of Bon Ten at forty-two inches high. Like the rest of the Toji statues, including Bon Ten, the statue of Taishaku Ten dates to 839 (or slightly earlier). The statue is made of wood with pigments. Taishaku Ten is a powerful, anatomically human figure riding an elephant. He is more militaristic in appearance than Bon Ten, eschewing Bon Ten's graceful, rounded lines for sharper angles. His face is narrower and his facial features are smaller than Bon Ten's. The statue has one head with three eyes. Taishaku Ten's

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79 The Shinto-Buddhist statues at the Toji, which also date to the ninth century, are depicted in Japanese modes of dress.
third eye is identical to the third eye on Bon Ten's main head. His hair is held in a top knot by golden jewelry, and he wears a detailed gold crown. In his right hand he holds a vajra. The vajra, or lightning bolt, was an attribute of Indra that spread throughout Buddhism. His left hand is balled into a fist and rests on his left hip.

Taishaku Ten sits with his right leg folded and his left leg along the elephant's side. It is possibly an altered version of the common royal ease position seen in Buddhist statuary.\(^8^0\) He is seated on an elaborately carved saddle. Taishaku Ten wears Chinese-style clothing from the Tang dynasty. His clothing has a militaristic feel to it, which is common for statues of Taishaku Ten in Chinese and Chinese-derived Buddhist art. The elephant that Taishaku Ten rides is half the statue's forty-two-inch height. The elephant is the animal associated with the Hindu deity Indra, or *vahana* in Sanskrit. The figure is anatomically correct and has a sense of realism. The carving is very detailed, and the elephant conveys a sense of liveliness that Taishaku Ten himself does not.

It has been suggested that the statue of Taishaku Ten might originally have been grouped with the Four Guardian Kings.\(^8^1\) It is true that Taishaku Ten was sometimes included with that group. It is unlikely that Taishaku Ten was meant to be viewed with the Four Guardian Kings at the Toji, however, because he does not have obvious affinities with them. Taishaku Ten is much smaller than the statues of the Four Guardian Kings and, although in military garb, he looks far more peaceful than the Guardian Kings. It was also very common to see Taishaku Ten and Bon Ten paired together on Nara Buddhist altars, as seen at sites such as the Horyuji and the

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\(^8^0\) Sanskrit: *lalitasana*.
\(^8^1\) Bogel, *With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Mikkyo Vision*, 328.
During the altar statues, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were stylistically closest to the Five Wisdom Kings. These statues best represented a departure from earlier Japanese Buddhist art and the inclusion of new Indic elements. The only other Lecture Hall altar statue to include an animal mount can be found within the Five Wisdom Kings. Dai’itoku Myo-o is seated on a large-horned, bovine creature. [Fig 11] In esoteric Buddhism, Dai’itoku Myo-o (Sk: Yamantaka) is associated with Yama, the Hindu god of death, and is commonly shown with buffalo imagery. In his upper left hand, Dai’itoku Myo-o holds a trident, an iconographic element usually associated with the Hindu deity Shiva. In addition, Fudo Myo-o is seated on a mandala-like pedestal from the Indic tradition instead of a stylized lotus. [Fig 12] Curiously, the Myo-o, in contrast to Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, were not singled out for their “Indianness” by Sawa and other scholars, despite their highly Indic design elements. The reasons for not describing Dai’itoku Myo-o in the same manner of foreignness as Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten is not known to this author but remains intriguing.

Cynthea Bogel identified the altar's configuration as a karma mandala. A mandala is a diagram of a celestial abode or the cosmos as a whole and can be constructed in two- or three-dimensions. In Shingon, mandala depict the enlightened, true nature of reality as well as our perceived version of reality. She posited that the entire sculptural display is part of a three-dimensional mandala.

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82 The buffalo is Yama’s vahana.
instead of a single-purpose visual display. The display does not correspond exactly to any sutra available to Kukai or his immediate successors. It has been argued that the altar derives from the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, an important text Kukai imported from China, but Bogel maintains that while there are elements from the sutra seen on the altar it is not a perfect match.\(^{85}\) The most pertinent of Bogel's arguments for this work is that the Four Guardian Kings, Bon Ten, and Taishaku Ten form the outer ring of the *mandala*. *Deva* figures, the category of deities to which Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten belong, would traditionally be on the outskirts of a mandala as part of their protective and attendant functions.

Unlike the Four Guardian Kings, however, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten may have originally faced perpendicular to the viewer instead of facing the viewer. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten would be the only statues in the *mandala* to appear in this manner. According to Kukai, enlightenment can be gained “with a single glance.”\(^{86}\) This referred to the ability for the practitioner to connect with the divine through a statue's eyes and ties into the eye-opening ceremony. The eye-opening ceremony was part of a statue’s ritual empowerment and the last step taken in the consecration process. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, if they were not facing the viewer frontally, would not be vehicles for enlightenment in the same manner as the other altar statues.

Another theory behind the placement of statues in the Todo *mandala* has recently emerged in the writing of Pamela Winfield. According to Winfield, the altar’s *mandala* was a unique combination of elements from the Diamond World and

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\(^{86}\) Ibid., 3.
Womb World mandalas. The Diamond World and Womb World mandalas represent the Shingon conceptualization of a dual-natured reality: the ultimate and perceived realities. The Diamond World mandala (J: Kongokai, Sk: Vajradhatu) was traditionally placed to the left of the altar and the Womb World mandala (J: Taizokai, Sk: Garbhadhatu) to the right. However, in the Toji mandala the Five Bodhisattvas of the Diamond World are on the right side and the Five Wisdom Kings are on the left. Winfield argued that this is a deliberate attempt to represent the Buddhist concept of nonduality. This would mean that, while the Toji mandala was rooted in the Diamond World and Womb World mandalas, its form was a mixture of the two concepts of reality and was unlikely to have any direct correlation in a Buddhist sutra.

The Toji temple was the second Shingon institution created in Japan by Kukai. In 816, Emperor Saga granted Kukai’s request to build a Shingon monastery on the remote Mount Koya. The Mount Koya complex, the Kongobu-ji, was to become the center for Shingon in the years after Kukai’s death. Nearly all of the original statues at Mount Koya were destroyed in the medieval or modern period and exist through replicas and photographs. The Diamond World and Womb World dichotomy was represented through twin pagoda instead of in the Lecture Hall, as at the Toji. From photographs taken of the Lecture Hall in the early twentieth century, before it burned in 1926, it was clear that the works at Mount Koya followed the same stylistic and iconographic paradigms as the Toji statues. [Fig 13] The Lecture

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88 Ibid., 92.
89 Sawa, Art in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, 59.
Hall contained seven statues, “Ashuku Nyorai (the Buddha Akshobhya), which stood at the center of the group, Kongo Satta (Vajrasattva), Kongo-o Bosatsu (Vajraraja), Kokuzo Bosatsu (Akasargarbha), Fugen Emmei Bosatsu (Vajramoghasamayasattva), Fudo Myo-o (Acala), and Gosanze Myo-o (Trailokyavijaya).” Like the Toji Lecture Hall, there was no one text that correlates to this arrangement.

Around 837 CE, the Shingon Kanshinji monastery was founded on the route between Heian-kyo and Mount Koya. In recent times, the Kanshinji has become best-known for its ninth-century statue of Nyoirin Kannon. [Fig 14] Historical records linked the temple to a Shingon monk named Jitsue (786 - 847), described as “Kukai’s senior disciple and designated heir”, and his student, Shinsho (797 - 873). An official register of the Kanshinji dated to 883 placed eight statues and three paintings in the Lecture Hall. It listed the statues as a Butsugen Butsumo Nyorai (Sk: Buddhalocana Buddha), Miroku Nyorai (Sk: Maitreya Buddha), Yakushi Nyorai (Sk: Bhaisajyaguru), Nyoirin Bosatsu (Sk: Avalokiteshvara), Bishamonten (Sk: Vaishravana), two deva, and one Chinese portrait statue of a monk. The paintings depicted deities and not mandala. The two deva statues have not survived into the present and their exact identification has not been uncovered by this author. They may have represented Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, two of the most popular deva at the time and the most commonly paired. In general, the Lecture Hall’s display involved different deities, number of works included, and arrangement than the Toji

90 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 40.
93 Ibid., 43.
and at Mount Koya. Like those two other Shingon Lecture Halls, the display at Kanshinji did not match any single textual source.

These three Lecture Halls, which all date to the ninth century and were either constructed under the auspicious of Kukai or his direct predecessor, exemplify the problem of attribution in early Shingon art. While Kukai is credited with bringing back drawings of Chinese esoteric Buddhist images and directing the creation of images to these specifications, the line between replicating Chinese models and creating original works has become blurred over the years. The elevation of Kukai to a cultural hero of Japan and innovator has only served to complicate the matter. Of the three Lecture Halls, the Toji display remained the largest and most complex. So far as we know, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten only appeared in one Lecture Hall, the Toji.

Despite their inclusion in the Lecture Hall altar display at the Toji, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were not prominent figures in Shingon Buddhism, unlike the vast majority of the other statues. This leads one to consider whether they were singled out for dramatic stylistic and iconographic change for political or cultural reasons. Might they have been deployed to emphasize the break with Japan’s Buddhist past and to highlight the foreign nature of the new esoteric visual culture?
Chapter Two: A Pair of Hindu Gods in Japan

From some of its earliest incarnations Buddhism has enveloped deities from other traditions into its cosmology. Some deities were incorporated into the Buddhist canon as purely Buddhist figures, while others retained their origin as coming from a different religious system. In many cases, according to the Buddhist canon, these figures originally from Hinduism or Shinto converted to Buddhism. The first of these conversions, according to various Buddhist traditions, were the Hindu deities Brahma and Indra during the Historical Buddha’s lifetime.94 This chapter considers the status of these deities as converts and looks at the long history of their representation in Buddhist art to demonstrate how sudden and dramatic the change in their representation was at the Toji.

Brahma and Indra, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, entered the Buddhist visual pantheon long before their appearance at the Toji. They were, at their core, Hindu deities worshipped in India both before and after the advent of Buddhism. Although they were treated as deities in their own right within Buddhism, they were often used to express the superiority of the Buddhist tradition. By converting, they showed that their traditions did not lead to enlightenment. While some recent arguments have proposed that their inclusion in the Buddhist pantheon was a symbol of inclusiveness, which was certainly at play on some levels, there was a thread of Buddhist art and literature that used Brahma and Indra to signify the Historical Buddha’s ultimate religious authority.95

Bon Ten is the Hindu deity Brahma. Brahma was the creator of the world and

94 The Historical Buddha may also be referred to as Shakyamuni Buddha.
one of the major deities within Hinduism, especially in the Pre-Hindu Vedic period.\textsuperscript{96} He is traditionally depicted with four heads facing the cardinal directions that symbolize the Vedas.\textsuperscript{97,98} He has four arms. His right arms hold a rosary and a water vessel while his left arms hold a ladle and a book.\textsuperscript{99} In Buddhist art, Brahma tends to be depicted with one head and two arms, which makes it especially interesting that the Toji returns him to his Hindu iconography. The animal that is associated with Brahma is the goose. He is said to have a chariot that is drawn by seven geese or swans.\textsuperscript{100}

Taishaku Ten is the Hindu deity Indra. Indra was one of the most prominent figures in Vedic literature, the scriptures of the South Asian religion from which Hinduism descended. He is primarily known as the Ruler or King of Heaven and is associated with rainstorms as the “giver of rain.”\textsuperscript{101} One of Indra's main attributes is the lightning bolt or \textit{vajra}. Traditionally, he is depicted with one head and four arms. In his arms he holds a thunderbolt, a bow and arrow, a conch shell horn, and a hook and net.\textsuperscript{102} In Buddhist art Indra’s depiction, like Brahma’s, is commonly simplified to represent him with two arms. The animal associated with Indra is the white elephant.

Brahma and Indra entered into Buddhism fairly early on in India. Traditionally, their conversion to Buddhism occurred shortly after the Historical

\textsuperscript{96} The Vedic Period would predate the founding of Buddhism in India.
\textsuperscript{98} The Four Vedas are the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 216.
Buddha attained enlightenment. According to some Buddhist accounts, Brahma and Indra were among a plethora of Hindu deities that give gifts to the newly enlightened Buddha.\textsuperscript{103} One of these gifts, Indra's thunderbolt, was to become a highly important Buddhist religious symbol, the \textit{vajra} (J: \textit{kongo}). In another account, Brahma approached the Historical Buddha to entreat him to teach others how to attain enlightenment. According to Donald Lopez, this shows that the Hindu deities “depended on him [the Historical Buddha] to show them the path to liberation.”\textsuperscript{104}

Indra and the Historical Buddha can be seen interacting in a relief from a 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} century CE Satavahana period stupa from Nagarjunakonda, Andhra Pradesh, India.\textsuperscript{105} [Fig 15] The relief depicts Indra visiting the Historical Buddha in the continuous narrative format.\textsuperscript{106} Indra can be identified from the left scene where he is shown riding an elephant, the animal associated with Indra. He is depicted with one head and two arms in both scenes. In the right scene, Indra is shown in supplication to the Historical Buddha, kneeling before the Buddha's throne with his hands in prayer position. He is clearly shown to be in a subordinate position in relation to the Buddha.

Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were found together more often than not in the Buddhist context. In their role as protectors of the Historical Buddha they appeared to the left and right of the Buddha figure.\textsuperscript{107} Bon Ten was generally to the right,

\textsuperscript{103} Lopez, \textit{The story of Buddhism}, 41.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 41-42.
\textsuperscript{105} The Satavahana period dates from 230 BCE to 220 CE.
\textsuperscript{106} The continuous narrative style was the dominant narrative style in ancient Indian painting and sculpture.
\textsuperscript{107} This type of triad is common in Buddhist art and consists of the central figure (usually a Buddha) and a pair of attendants. The attendants can be \textit{bodhisattvas}, \textit{arhats} and monks (\textit{arhats} being the first sixteen disciples of the Historical Buddha), or Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten.
while Taishaku Ten was on the left. They can be found appearing this way in a wide variety of Buddhist cultures from South and Southeast Asia to China and Japan. An early example of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten appearing in this manner from South Asia is a relief dating to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} century CE. [Fig 16] The relief is Gandharan in style.\textsuperscript{108} The exact provenance for this relief is not documented. Brahma and Indra stand on either side of the Historical Buddha with their hands in prayer position. Each figure has one head and two arms.

Once Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten entered Buddhism in South Asia they would have been included as part of the Buddhist canon as it spread into East Asia. Their place in the Buddhist world became static and their inclusion in Buddhist art was a natural assumption, first in China, then Korea and Japan. By the time that Brahma and Indra appeared in the Japanese Buddhist tradition, they were primarily depicted as attendant figures.

The earliest records show that Buddhism entered Korea during the latter half of the 4\textsuperscript{th} century CE.\textsuperscript{109} At that time, the Korean peninsula was divided into three major kingdoms: Paekche, Silla and Koguryo. One example of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten in Korean Buddhist art from this period is at the site of Seokguram. Seokguram is a cave temple site attached to the Bulguksa Temple, one of the earliest Buddhist temples in Korea.\textsuperscript{110} It is located on Mount T'oham near the Silla capital of Gyeongju. The Seokguram shrine dates to the second half of the eighth century. The

\textsuperscript{108} Gandharan refers to the ancient kingdom of Gandhara in modern-day Pakistan.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 81.
shrine follows the legacy of Indian and Chinese Buddhist cave sites.¹¹¹ Seokguram consists of the Historical Buddha surrounded by a Buddhist pantheon of bodhisattvas, monks, guardian figures, and Brahma and Indra. Except for the Buddha statue, the figures are all carved in relief along the shrine's walls. The style has been described as “Tang Chinese with an added Korean softness.”¹¹² In nearly all of the examples examined here depicting Brahma and Indra within Buddhism, their forms do not conform to the traditional Hindu iconography. Brahma is shown in most cases examined here with only one head and both Brahma and Indra are depicted with two arms. The only attribute that is shown with any consistency is Indra's thunderbolt, the vajra, probably due to the importance of that symbol in Buddhism. It is possible that the vajra's presence was due to the importance of the symbol within Buddhism. This is the case in the early depictions of Brahma and Indra in Japan. It is not until the Toji statues are created that Brahma and Indra are shown in a fashion closer to their traditional Hindu iconography.

**Brahma and Indra in Japan**

Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were part of the overall Buddhist pantheon that moved through China and Korea into Japan. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were included in Japanese temple statuary from the Nara period (710 - 794 CE) until the end of the Heian (794 - 1185 CE). Their names appeared in Japanese Kanji as 梵天 (Bon Ten) and 帝釈天 (Taishaku Ten). The character "天" in their names denoted their status as heavenly or divine beings. This epitaph was also given to other divine beings within the deva category, including the Four Guardian Kings and other

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¹¹¹ Unlike most Indian and Chinese cave sites, Seokguram is completely man-made and not carved out of a hillside.

converted Hindu deities. Deva are the fourth category of divine beings behind buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the Wisdom Kings.\textsuperscript{113} Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were not the only Hindu deities present in early Japanese Buddhist art, but they were the only figures elevated in this manner outside of the guardian figures.

Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten appeared in the guise of attendant figures in early Japanese temples. They often appeared in front of temple altars, forming a triad of sorts with the main deities. Triads with one main deity, usually a buddha, and two flanking figures, usually bodhisattvas, were fairly common in Buddhist art throughout Asia and in Japan. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, however, tended to form secondary triads by appearing to the sides of the main triad.\textsuperscript{114} In earlier Japanese temples, statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were not depicted with the visual markers of a protective or guardian deity. These protective statues, such as those of the Four Guardian Kings, were often much more dynamic than the static statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten. Guardian figures were generally depicted with some degree of ferocity and militarism in Buddhist art.\textsuperscript{115} Prior to the Taishaku Ten statue at the Toji, it is a rare characteristic to see in artworks featuring either deity.

Within Japan, statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were nearly indistinguishable from each other until the Toji altar works. The two versions examined here in detail come from the Horyuji and the Todaiji temples. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten can be found at other Nara period temples as well, such as the Toshodaiji and the Yakushiji. They were depicted with natural human proportions

\textsuperscript{114} Bogel, \textit{With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Mikkyo Vision}, 292.
\textsuperscript{115} As befitting their role as protectors. Buddhist protective deities are often apotropaic.
like the carvings from Seokguram in Korea and, except for their hand mudras, do not have many major distinguishing characteristics like what will be found in the Shingon versions at the Toji temple. Eventually, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten disappeared from Japanese Buddhist altar statuary. Their placement at the periphery at the Toji may have been an early signal of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten’s marginalization in Shingon Buddhism. They similarly were diminished in other Japanese Buddhist sects as well. By the end of the Heian they were absorbed into a larger group known as the Twelve Deities (J: Juuniten). The Juuniten were a group of twelve Hindu deities in the guise of directional guardians. The Juuniten covered the four cardinal directions, the four semi-directions, heaven, earth, the sun and the moon. Bon Ten represented Heaven and Taishaku Ten represented East.

The earliest extant depiction of Indra in Japan is a painted panel on the Tamamushi Shrine. [Fig 17] The Shrine is believed to have been constructed around the mid-seventh century under the auspices of Empress Suiko (r. 593 - 628 CE).\textsuperscript{116} The Shrine is attributed to Japanese manufacture despite its strong Korean influence because it was made out of local Japanese materials.\textsuperscript{117} On the sides of the Shrine are two painted panels depicting \textit{jataka} tales.\textsuperscript{118} One of the panels tells the tale of when Indra approached the Historical Buddha in a previous life. [Fig 18] Indra offered to give the Historical Buddha knowledge about the means to achieve enlightenment but only if the Buddha was willing to sacrifice his life in return. The Buddha accepted the offer and willingly leapt from a cliff to seal his side of the bargain. Indra slowed

\textsuperscript{116} Bowring suggests that the original statue at the top of the shrine may not have been a buddha, like the current replacement statue, but have been a statue of Suiko.
\textsuperscript{117} Stanley-Baker, \textit{Japanese Art}, 31-32.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Jataka} tales are stories of the Historical Buddha’s previous lives. They often contain examples of proper Buddhist behavior and morality.
his descent and gently placed the Buddha on the ground, saving his life.\textsuperscript{119} This panel is important for two reasons in relation to the argument presented here. Primarily, it shows that Brahma and Indra were fully understood in Japanese Buddhism. These figures were part of the Buddhist visual canon but that alone did not influence their appearances in Japan. The role that they played in the larger Buddhist cosmos was acknowledged. The Japanese artists were not merely copying figures from Korean and Chinese temples. The panel also shows Indra as a non-enlightened being. He appears to help the Buddha along his path but Indra can only take him so far. Indra needs the Buddha to achieve enlightenment so the Buddha can then teach Indra in return. Both Indra and Brahma are shown begging the Buddha to teach in other Buddhist stories.\textsuperscript{120} It shows that, while powerful within their own right, Indra and Brahma were students of Buddhism akin to other practitioners.

Some of the oldest, extant examples of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten can be found at the Horyuji temple in Nara. The Horyuji temple complex contains some of the world's oldest extant wooden buildings and is home to the Tamamushi shrine.\textsuperscript{121} It was placed near Prince Shotoku's palace in Ikaruga and was one of the first major Buddhist establishments in Japan. The statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten at the Horyuji are made from sculpted clay. [Fig 19, 20] Both statues stand at forty-three inches in height. Presently, the pigments that once covered the statues are only visible in trace amounts, which give the statues a stark white appearance. Both statues show signs of wear. The easiest identifiers for these statues, their hands, are missing. The statue of Bon Ten leans slightly to the left while the statue of Taishaku

\textsuperscript{119} Bowring, \textit{The Religious Traditions of Japan}, 32.
\textsuperscript{121} Stanley-Baker, \textit{Japanese Art}, 32.
Ten leans slightly to the right. There is a slight hint that the statues may be in *tribhangha*, or “triple-bend” position, which would have entered into Japan through Indian-influenced continental Buddhist art. Without the pigments that were once present, it is hard for a modern viewer to get a true feel for the statues. They appear cold and austere, distant in a way that they probably would not have been to their original audience.

Bon Ten wears a robe that flows around his shoulders and drapes across his waist paired with a chest plate. His hair is pulled up into a knot at the top of his head and bound by an ornate crown. The hair is given texture through a series of incised lines. Bon Ten's face is solemn and peaceful with simply molded features and smooth curves. The most detailed of his facial features are his full lips and the elongated ears to either side of his head. The statue of Taishaku Ten offers very little in terms of differences from the Bon Ten statue. Their faces and detailing are nearly identical though there are some superficial differences created through sections lost over time, such as the medallions once attached to their originally identical crowns. The biggest difference between the two statues, besides the direction in which they lean, is that Taishaku Ten's robe is tied at the waist while Bon Ten's is simply draped.

The Todaiji (E: Great Eastern Temple) in the city of Nara is one of the best known early Buddhist temples in Japan. It was commissioned by Emperor Shomu (r. 724 – 749).\(^{122}\) The Todaiji was the most important temple that Shomu sponsored during the last ten years of his reign. The statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten at the Todaiji are made of lacquered wood. [Fig 21, 22] Both statues stand at one hundred

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\(^{122}\) Ibid., 46.
and fifty-eight inches high. Like the Horyuji statues, there are very few differences between Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten. Those few differences, however, are much easier to discern. The Todaiji statues have retained their hands although all but one of the attributes they originally held has been lost. Bon Ten holds a scroll, probably representing a *sutra*, in his left hand. Although rather faded, the statues have retained a great deal of pigmentat

The statue of Bon Ten at the Todaiji stands straight. He is clothed similarly to the Horyuji version with a draped robe and chest piece. Taishaku Ten, however, lacks the chest piece and instead he wears an open robe, which exposes his upper chest. The detailing of the statues is much finer than the Horyuji examples, especially in the draping of their robes. This slight change in attire places the Toji statues in a continuum with the earlier pieces. Slowly, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were beginning to be depicted differently. Although they are in the same category of figures and fulfill the same role in Buddhist altar imagery, it was understood that these figures themselves were not identical.

An additional eighth century, lacquer set of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten statues is in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. [Fig 23, 24] According to the Museum’s collection database, the statues were originally created for the Kofukuji in Nara and left Japan in the 1960’s. 123 The statues are about five feet tall and stand on triple-tiered octagonal bases. They are stylistically similar to the Todaiji pair as well as sharing a medium. The heads and hands of these figures were lost in antiquity and were reconstructed. The clothing on the figures, which

remains original to the works, closely matches the clothing of the Todaiji Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten. Both figures stand straight with delicately-crafted, polychrome, Chinese-style robes. Each figure has one head and two arms.

Unlike other Buddhist deities such as the Historical Buddha, the manner in which Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were depicted was not bound by Buddhist ritual texts and artistic treatises.\textsuperscript{124} Without a specific, prescribed manner of appearance, their appearance was freely altered within the bounds of their religious roles. As a result, Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten’s appearance has been more changeable than other figures in Buddhist art.

This ability to change the way that Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten appear in the art was taken advantage of at the Toji. Overall, the statues at the Toji followed a different style than had been previously seen in Japan. How much of this style was rooted in eighth- and ninth-century Chinese esoteric Buddhist art remains to be seen.\textsuperscript{125} In the middle part of the ninth century, a major backlash against Buddhism occurred in Tang China under the auspices of Emperor Wuzong. A devout Daoist, Emperor Wuzong is believed to have based his negative opinion on Buddhism on its foreign nature.\textsuperscript{126} Many Buddhist institutions in China were destroyed during this time and many Buddhist clergy were forced to return to lay life. Very little evidence remained from the esoteric Buddhist temples in China at the time, including the temple at which Kukai underwent his training in Chang’an. While some of the

\textsuperscript{124} Upendra Thakur, \textit{India and Japan: A Study in Interactions during the Fifth through Fourteenth Centuries} (New Delhi: Abhinau Publications, 1992), 71.
\textsuperscript{125} Thakur, \textit{Indian and Japan: A Study in Interaction During the Fifth through Fourteenth Centuries}, 28.
\textsuperscript{126} Taiko Yamasaki, Yasuyoshi Morimoto, and David Kidd, \textit{Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism} (Boston: Shambala, 1988), 22.
Buddhist institutions re-emerged after the backlash ended, esoteric Buddhism in China had changed.\textsuperscript{127}

In recent decades, some evidence of Chinese esoteric Buddhism has emerged from Xian, China.\textsuperscript{128} During excavations of the collapsed pagoda at Famensi, a sealed, Tang-dynasty chamber was discovered. Prior to the suppression of Buddhism, the Famensi temple was an important center of Esoteric Buddhism and was known for its possession of a finger-bone relic of the Historic Buddha.\textsuperscript{129} Patricia Karetzky posits that some of the objects discovered at Famensi “may once have figured importantly in a sculptural mandala.”\textsuperscript{130} Among those objects is a statue of an unidentified \textit{bodhisattva} who rests on a lotus base very similar to the Toji statue of Bon Ten. This lends proof to the concept that Kukai’s inclinations at the Toji had a basis in the esoteric Buddhist art present in Tang China.

\textbf{The Resurgence of Indian Aesthetics in East Asian Art}

Despite their simplification in most Buddhist art, Brahma and Indra’s more complex forms were not completely absent in East Asian Buddhist art. A Chinese votive panel dating from the 6\textsuperscript{th} to 8\textsuperscript{th} centuries CE shows Brahma and Indra corresponding closer to their Hindu iconography. [Fig 25] The panel consists of three figures in separate medallions painted on a rectangular piece of wood. The identity of the central four-armed figure is unknown but it has been suggested that it could be


\textsuperscript{129} Karetzky, “Esoteric Buddhism and the Famensi Finds,” 78.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 82.
a female deity. It is clear that the figure is not a traditional depiction of a Buddha. Brahma and Indra appear on either side of the central figure in their traditional arrangement with Brahma on the right and Indra on the left. All three of the medallions and the figures within them are the same size. Indra is depicted with one head and two arms. He holds a *vajra* in his right hand. Brahma is depicted with three heads and four arms. It is probable that Brahma’s traditional fourth head is not shown here but is understood to be there. He carries a bow and arrows in his upper hands and a bowl-like object in his right hand. The painting style here is a mix of predominantly Chinese motifs with Central Asian and Indian elements. Central Asia, especially the Silk Road kingdoms of the first millennium, served as an intermediary between China and India in the propagation of Buddhism. Extant examples of Brahma and Indra depicted in this manner from China remain fairly rare.

A resurgence of Indian aesthetics and modes of depiction came into East Asia with the arrival of Esoteric Buddhism in the eighth century. The art of esoteric Buddhism can be seen as rather rigid when it comes to style, aesthetics, and innovation. Despite the term “art” that has been applied to these pieces, and some of the literature surrounding them in recent years, these works were created for the purpose of religious ritual. While the statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were exempt from the textual obligations of other types of figures due to their position as *deva*, they were still created within the framework of esoteric Buddhist visual

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131 The “traditional” depiction of a buddha would be the monastic appearance of Shakyamuni Buddha, not the royal garb of Vairochana.
132 Many of the great “Western” masters of Buddhism to teach in China at the time came from Central Asia rather than India.
133 The sheer size of the Chinese cultural sphere and the variety of local aesthetics and influxes of foreign influence amounted to a large variety in Chinese Buddhist art during these centuries.
culture. In esoteric Buddhism, images of deities were direct vehicles for enlightenment. This particular visual culture impacted Buddhist art in East Asia with the arrival of esoteric Buddhist teachings and models.

Not only can the aesthetics of early Shingon art be traced to esoteric Buddhist art in Chang’an during the preceding century, but the specific iconography used can be traced as well. The statues of Fudo Myo-o at the Toji and Kongobuji temples matched the mode of depiction seen in eighth-century Acala statues found near Chang’an. This particular form of the deity was specific to Shingon and its lineage; in other Chinese areas and esoteric Buddhist traditions, Acala was not depicted in this manner. Most other surviving works that depicted esoteric Buddhist themes in Tang China come from the Mogao Caves outside Dunhuang, which followed a different strain and artistic model than seen in this Acala and Japanese Fudo Myo-o imagery. The Chang’an- Shingon form of Acala followed the description of Acala in the *Vajrasekhara Sutra* than later depictions of the deity found in Himalayan Buddhism.¹³⁴

The statue of Acala held by the Field Museum in Chicago is a rare surviving image of the esoteric Buddhist visual culture active around Chang’an in the eighth century. Linrothe dated the piece to “not much earlier than ca. A.D. 745 nor much later than A.D. 845.”¹³⁵ The eighteen-inch tall statue is somewhat crudely carved from stone. The level of skill involved in the carving hints at a non-artistic hand. Linrothe proposed that the work was created by a practitioner as part of their

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¹³⁴ The Himalayan version of Acala has lost the softness and weight of the body. Acala’s posture is also vastly different. ¹³⁵ Linrothe, “Provincial or Providential: Reassessment of an Esoteric Buddhist ‘Treasure’”, 197.
Esoteric Buddhist practice. Acala is seated cross-legged in lotus position with a rather fleshy body. In his right hand he holds an upright sword. The statue’s left arm is broken at the elbow but likely held a noose. Linrothe’s study includes images of two statues of Acala that date to the same period from the site of Anguosi that display the same iconographic features, although their styles are much more refined.

The wooden statues of Acala, Fudo Myo-o, in early Shingon art also closely follow this particular iconographic paradigm. The deity is shown with a fleshy body seated in lotus position holding an upright sword in the right hand and a noose in the left hand.

Through the close artistic tie between the Chang’an and early Shingon statues of Fudo Myo-o, a larger tie between this specific Chinese esoteric Buddhist art and Shingon can be extrapolated. When Kukai returned to Japan in 806, he brought numerous paintings, diagrams, and models from his travels in China. A number of these were commissioned at Qinglongsi in Chang’an. The Diamond World and Womb World mandala, two of the most iconic Shingon images, were copies of Chinese mandala that Kukai requested be made. These works, created in the esoteric visual culture of Amoghavajra, would have exemplified the imagery created for Qinglongsi. This Chang’an-based style, now mostly lost to modern scholars, was to be the template for the early art of Shingon Buddhism. In the literature surrounding Shingon, however, the foreign tradition that is emphasized was not Chinese esoteric Buddhism (Hui-kuo’s Chen-yen) but rather a refocusing on Indian style and

136 Ibid., 224.
137 Early works often claimed that Kukai was the artist behind Shingon statues, including at the Toji and Kanshinji.
138 Kukai and Hakeda, Kukai: Major Works, 34.
aesthetics. This pattern of realignment with India can be seen in other Shingon media from the ninth century, such as paintings and texts. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were a small facet of a larger resurgence of Indian aesthetics, and Indian-based legitimacy, which arrived in Japan with esoteric Buddhist visual culture.
Chapter Three: The Ten Stages and Shingon Thought

The return to the idea of India in sculpture was part of a broader project to emphasize the foreign roots of the Shingon tradition. By turning to parallels in esoteric scripture and portraiture, this chapter argues that the Indianization of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten was only one expression of a larger concerted strategy of legitimization. In this new “Japanese” era of history, the isolation between Japan and mainland Asian culture has been regarded as a positive quality by later historians. According to Sansom, “the Japanese wished to free themselves from Chinese dominance in matters of learning, thought, and taste.”

Despite Japan’s movement away from importing Chinese culture into other areas of the state and culture, the Buddhist religion remained known as a foreign institution in Japan. Shingon codified and structured the Buddhist world to emphasize its rightful authority and place in the larger Buddhist cosmos. Shingon envisioned itself as the ultimate Buddhist revelation, the culmination of earlier Buddhist thought and the perfected guide to enlightenment. It combined the magical, secretive revelations of the esoteric traditions with a strong, visual tie to Buddhism’s birthplace. To compete with the other Buddhist traditions in Japan, Shingon needed to have a solid and convincing pedigree. This pedigree was constructed through both Shingon’s core texts, particularly the *Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind*, and Shingon’s emphasis on the lineage of its founder’s authority through a series of portraits.

Before discussing the specifics of Shingon’s positions, a discussion of the Shingon sect of esoteric Buddhism would not be remiss. Shingon, which means “true word”, emerged in the first decades of the ninth century under the auspices of the

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Japanese monk Kukai. Although the *Mahavairochana Sutra*, and its esoteric teachings, had been known in Japan during the eighth century, it was not until the ninth century that any form of organized esoteric Buddhism arrived in Japan. Shingon was the second appearance of esoteric Buddhism in Japan and the first sect fully within the esoteric tradition. The predecessor of Shingon in China, Chen-yen Buddhism, is believed to have influenced the formation of Shingon to a large degree. The continuation of Chen-yen in China after Kukai’s founding of Shingon was often deemphasized in Japanese and Western historical accounts. Organized Chen-yen Buddhism seemed to have disappeared after the backlash against Buddhism in the late Tang Dynasty although esoteric practices remained a part of Chinese Buddhism in the following centuries.

The *Mahavairochana Sutra* (J: Dainichi-kyo) and *Vajrasekhara Sutra* (J: Kongocho-kyo) are at the core of Kukai’s Shingon. These sutra were among the earliest esoteric works to emerge in India and were translated into Chinese by the monks Subhakarasimha and Amoghavajra, respectively. It’s believed that the *Mahavairochana Sutra* (Sk: *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi*) was “written in the mid-seventh century somewhere in Western or Central India.” The *Vajrasekhara Sutra* (Sk: *Sarvatathagatatattvasamgraha*) was a little younger, possibly dating to the late

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140 The Japanese word *Shingon* is a direct translation of the Chinese “Chen-yen”, which also means true word. Both are translations of the Sanskrit word “mantra.”
141 While Japanese Tendai Buddhism involves some esoteric elements, it remained a Mahayana sect.
143 There are two different translation traditions associated with the *Mahavairochana Sutra*, one based on the Chinese translations and one on the Tibetan translations. These versions are different. For translations of the version used in Shingon practice, see Chikyo Yamamoto, *Mahavairocana-sutra* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990)
145 Ibid., 36.
seventh century, and from Southern India.\textsuperscript{147} The esoteric tradition did not arise in one place at one time, which is typical of early Buddhist teaching.\textsuperscript{148} Like all Buddhist sutra, they are believed to be the words of a Buddha, Mahavairochana Buddha in the case of the \textit{Mahavairochana Sutra} for example.

Esoteric Buddhism, or \textit{Vajrayana}, arose in India in the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} centuries CE, although esoteric ideas can be traced several centuries earlier. As was common with other early Buddhist traditions in India, the esoteric writings arose as a movement across the Indian Buddhist world instead of centralized under one person. According to Ronald Davidson, “outside of Buddhist and Saiva/Pancaratra literature, the greatest influence on the formation of Tantrism was from political sources, including the rituals and ideology associated with kingship.”\textsuperscript{149} This influence can be seen in Esoteric Buddhism’s reputation as a powerful protector of the nation-state. The appearance of Esoteric, also called Tantric, Buddhism in India is believed to be the last major phase of Buddhist thought in India.\textsuperscript{150} By the time Esoteric Buddhism spread into China, Central Asian and Indian Buddhism had long taken root. Esoteric Buddhism gained popularity for its ability to protect the nation through the use of \textit{mantra}, magical Buddhist incantations. It was from the Sanskrit word \textit{mantra} that Shingon gains its name.\textsuperscript{151} In Japan, Esoteric Buddhism came to be called “mikkyo”, which means secret teachings.

Shingon’s direct predecessor, Hui-kuo’s Chen-yen Buddhism, was the first

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} The decentralised nature of Buddhist teachings lead to the individual, isolated nature of each text.
\textsuperscript{150} The Buddhist tradition mostly left the Indian subcontinent in the centuries following the development of Esoteric Buddhism.
attempt in China to solidify the esoteric teachings into an organized Buddhist sect.\textsuperscript{152} These teachings made their way to China through traveling monks and were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese. Like most Buddhist material arriving in China, Esoteric Buddhism was transmitted in a piecemeal, ahistorical fashion. Hui-kuo pulled these somewhat scattered threads into an organized Buddhist sect. This effort to classify and combine the vast, diverse body of Indian Buddhist literature and thought can be seen in other Chinese forms of Buddhism, such as T’ian-t’ai (J: Tendai). The \textit{Mahavairochana Sutra} had been translated into Chinese in 726 and there are records of it appearing in Japan ten years later.\textsuperscript{153} The \textit{Mahavairochana Sutra} was not only the textual genesis of Kukai’s interest in esoteric Buddhist thought. Kukai’s desire to understand the sutra inspired his journey to Chang’an.

The central figure of Shingon Buddhism was not Shakyamuni Buddha, the Historical Buddha, but rather Mahavairochana. He is often referred to by Kukai as the “\textit{Dharmakaya}” or “truth body”, one of the three bodies in which a Buddha is able to appear, and as the “\textit{tathagata}” in other works, which is a title usually reserved for the Historical Buddha.\textsuperscript{154} In Shingon, the Historical Buddha was deemphasized and was regarded as a facet of Mahavairochana. Throughout the Buddhist canon, Mahavairochana is believed to have left secret teachings that can only be revealed through the study of Shingon Buddhism.\textsuperscript{155} The concept of a primordial Buddha, which is the larger category of figures Mahavairochana falls into, was common in many sects of esoteric Buddhism, although the identity of the primordial Buddha did

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\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{155} Kukai and Hakeda, \textit{Kukai: Major Works}, 67.
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change.\textsuperscript{156} Shingon “fulfills all preceding esoteric teachings, not merely by superimposing a further layer of doctrine over them, but by placing them in a different frame of reference.”\textsuperscript{157}

Shingon taught that every person can reach enlightenment within his or her current lifetime. This differed from other traditions where there were multiple stages along the path to enlightenment through which people must advance before they can achieve nirvana. In Shingon, it was possible to bypass these stages and reach enlightenment within one lifetime regardless of where a person was at the start of his or her journey. This was because Shingon taught that each person has some degree of Buddha Nature (Sk: \textit{Buddha-dhatu}) hidden within and that “the microcosmic world of the unenlightened consciousness can be integrated into the macrocosmic enlightenment of Mahavairocana”\textsuperscript{158}. By drawing out this Buddha Nature, one can achieve enlightenment. This tied into Shingon's self-placement as the ultimate Buddhist revelation. The blueprint for how to achieve enlightenment within one lifetime appeared in multiple religious texts by Kukai and was elaborated on by later Buddhist thinkers in the Shingon sect.

By the year 823, Kukai had solidified his teachings enough to have Shingon considered an official sect of Japanese Buddhism. This was evident in the fact that the Toji was allowed to function as a Shingon institution with Shingon-initiated monks. Support from the imperial throne was a major factor in the establishment and rise of Shingon in the ninth century. The imperial government controlled the number of monks and nuns initiated each year through the Sangha Office. Initiations could

\textsuperscript{156} In Himalayan esoteric Buddhism, Vajradhara or Samantabhadra usually fill this role.
\textsuperscript{157} Kukai and Hakeda, \textit{Kukai: Major Works}, 67.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 85.
only take place in Nara, which further constrained the ability of individual temples to control the flow of new monks. One could not simply join a monastery and take vows, which had led to a number of illegal monks in Japan during this time.\footnote{An “illegal monk” could be any Buddhist monastic who existed outside of the Sangha Office’s purview.}

In the year 830, Kukai wrote \textit{The Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind}. Shortly afterwards, he produced a condensed version entitled \textit{The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury}. In these works, Kukai codified the path to enlightenment from the furthest point onwards into ten stages. These stages map into a hierarchical system that classified earlier Buddhist traditions, especially those active in Japan at the turn of the ninth century. These works were at the center of the Shingon canon and illustrated the central teachings of the sect.

Although \textit{The Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind} and \textit{The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury} outlined the core of Shingon philosophy, they did not appear outside the larger Japanese religious landscape. Both works were produced through an imperial edict. In 830, Emperor Junna (r. 823 - 833) decreed that the six sects of Japanese Buddhism were to “present a treatise on the essentials of its teaching.”\footnote{Kukai and Hakeda, \textit{Kukai: Major Works}, 67.} According to Hakeda, the emperor requested a simplified version of the complex \textit{Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind}, which resulted in Kukai writing \textit{The Precious Key to the Sacred Treasury}.\footnote{The six official sects of Japanese Buddhism at the time of the edict were Ritsu, Hosso, Sanron, Kegon, Tendai and Shingon.} This combination of imperial influence and internecine competition was a major factor in the religious landscape of Japan during the ninth century. Shingon was clearly presented as the ultimate

\footnote{Kukai and Hakeda, \textit{Kukai: Major Works}, 67.}
Buddhist revelation in the *Ten Stages* text.

The Ten Stages of Shingon Buddhism were: 1. The Mind of a Lowly Man, Goatish in Its Desire; 2. The Mind That Is Ignorant and Childlike, Yet Abstemious; 3. The Mind That Is Infantlike and Fearless; 4. The Mind That Recognizes the Existence of Psychophysical Constituents Only, Not That of a Permanent Ego; 5. The Mind Freed from the Seed of the Cause of Karma; 6. The Mahayana Mind with Sympathetic Concern for Others; 7. The Mind That Realizes that the Mind is Unborn; 8. The Mind That Is Truly in Harmony with the One Way; 9. The Profoundest Exoteric Buddhist Mind That Is Aware of Its Nonimmutable Nature; 10. The Glorious Mind, the Most Secret and Sacred.\(^{163}\) The Ten Stages, as previously mentioned, were a pathway to enlightenment, leading to teachings held within the Tenth Stage. The stages, however, did not only map the states of progress possible for a human to attain. Kukai tied schools of Buddhist thought to the Ten Stages and used the Ten Stages to reinforce the superiority of Shingon’s esoteric Buddhism. A Buddhist monk of another sect may be in the Seventh Stage while a non-monastic Shingon practitioner has entered the Tenth Stage.

Other philosophical and religious traditions entered the Ten Stages in the Second Stage, which was equated to the teachings of Confucianism.\(^{164}\) The Third Stage contained the followers of Daoism and various schools of yogic Hindu philosophy. The inclusion of Confucianism and Daoism in Shingon thought is tied to what is believed to be Kukai’s earliest writing, a treatise entitled *Indications of the*

\(^{163}\) Translations of the Ten Stages’ names from Kukai and Hakeda, *Kukai: Major Works*.

\(^{164}\) The First Stage does not have ties to any religious thought and instead refers to the non-religious mind, one that disregards the basic principles of religious thought and is, possibly, the mind of a being in a Buddhist hell.
Goals of the Three Teachings. This work compared the three foreign traditions in Japan, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, and concluded that Buddhism was superior. The Fourth and Fifth Stages belonged to the so-called “Hinayana” sects of Buddhism. These sects followed the basic teachings of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths, and restricted themselves to the Pali Canon, the earliest recorded teachings of the Historical Buddha thought to have been given during his lifetime.

The Sixth Stage introduced Mahayana Buddhist thought into the Stages and placed the Yogacara school as the lowest of the sects. In Japan, the Hosso sect was a school of Yogacara thought. The Seventh Stage was the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism, represented by the Sanron sect in Japan. This ordering of the Mahayana sects reversed the historical order of their appearance. The placement of Buddhist thought seen previously in the Ten Stages correlates to the historical development of Buddhist thought, with Mahayana thought arriving long after the creation of the Pali Canon. The Madhyamaka thought of Nagarjuna (c. 150 - c. 250 CE) appeared around the third century CE. Yogacara thought appeared slightly later. Hakeda postulates that “the reason why Kukai breaks the order of the historical development of Buddhism here and places the school of Madhyamika (the seventh) a step higher than Yogacara (the sixth), reversing the sequence of their origins in India, is the inseparable relationship that exists between Madhyamika and the formation of the T’ian-t’ai doctrines.”

Tendai, the Japanese version of T’ian-t’ai Buddhism, was associated with the

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165 In modern times, these sects are called “Theravada” based on the living lineage. Hinayana, with its connotation as “lesser,” is considered somewhat derogatory.
166 The name “Pali Canon” is derived from the language used in these early texts, Pali.
167 Kukai and Hakeda, Kukai: Major Works, 73.
Eighth Stage. Tendai Buddhist teachings focused on the *Lotus Sutra* (Sk: *Saddharmapundarikasutra*), one of the best-known Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. Tendai Buddhism was known for its inclusion of varying schools of Buddhist philosophy underneath the banner of the *Lotus Sutra*. The Tendai school was brought to Japan by the Japanese monk Saicho in the early ninth century. Early Japanese Tendai became known as the first sect of Japanese Buddhism to embrace Esoteric Buddhist teachings, partially due to the established nature of Saicho’s reputation and his place in the Japanese courts. Tendai and Shingon, Saicho and Kukai, were often posited as having an antagonistic, competitive relationship.\(^{168}\) Kukai’s star in the courts rose only after Saicho lost court favor.\(^{169}\)

The Ninth Stage contained the last Mahayana school, referred to by Kukai as Exoteric Buddhism, Hua-yen Buddhism. Hua-yen arrived in Japan with the earlier traditions of Hosso and Sanron, and was translated into Japanese as Kegon. Unlike the preceding Tendai of the Eighth Stage, Kegon did not contain elements of Esoteric Buddhism. However, Tendai and Kegon had one very important aspect in common. Both Kegon and Tendai were schools of Buddhism that developed in China -- there were no Indian Buddhist schools associated with their thought and practice. With these two stages, the path of Buddhist development left India for China.

The Tenth Stage, the final stage, was Shingon. Shingon, which has often been characterized as the first Japanese school of Buddhism, held an interesting place

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\(^{168}\) Some scholars, such as Ryuichi Abe, believe that Siacho and Kukai’s relationship was more congenial.

\(^{169}\) Imperial power also changed hands at this time, which may turn this transition between esoteric traditions into a simply patronage preference.
within the Ten Stages. As they were a Shingon teaching and a Shingon invention, it came as no surprise that Shingon’s Esoteric Buddhism was the most advanced form of Buddhist thought. Including labels that applied to the schools of Buddhism active, and established, in Japan during the ninth century was a masterful attempt to show the importance of the Shingon tradition. To truly access the ultimate Buddhist teachings, one had to follow Shingon.

Unlike Tendai and Kegon, Shingon had a direct link to Indian Buddhist practice and practitioners. Amoghavajra, Hui-kuo’s esoteric Buddhist teacher, provided a direct link to India. Both Tendai and Kegon were developed in China by Chinese masters before coming to Japan. While Hui-kuo is credited with organizing the various threads of Esoteric practice that arrived in China during the eighth century, he was still the student of Amoghavajra, an immensely important figure in the history of Esoteric Buddhism in China. Amoghavajra (705 - 774) not only translated Buddhist texts but travelled to India and Sri Lanka between 741 and 746 to acquire new esoteric Buddhist works. While in Chang’an, Kukai also studied Sanskrit with Indian monks.

There is a strong historical logic underpinning Kukai’s Ten Stages. The oldest sects of Buddhism were placed toward the lower stages, with the non-Buddhist thought of India below even them, and the newer sects occupied the higher stages. However, the Ten Stages did not map perfectly to the historical development of Buddhism. The placement of the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools were swapped and Tendai, which contained esoteric elements, was below the non-esoteric

170 Buswell and Lopez, Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, 36.
171 Thakur, India and Japan: A Study in Interaction During the Fifth through Fourteenth Centuries, 49.
Kegon. The emphasis placed on India and Indian developments was slightly undercut by the position of the Chinese-developed schools of Buddhism. The Ten Stages clearly showed that Buddhist teachings did not always have to originate in India to be valid revelations. However, in the end, the importance of India was reinforced through Shingon esoteric Buddhism’s direct link to the subcontinent.

The Buddhist sects included in the Ten Stages illustrate more than the history of Buddhist thought. The geographic path of India-China-Japan appeared through the origin of the Buddhist schools presented in the Ten Stages. The earlier stages contained schools that originated in India and eventually traveled to China and Japan. While Chinese and Japanese scholars of Indian Mahayana schools have expanded upon their respective traditions, the core of these traditions can be traced back to India. The ability to trace their schools back to India, the homeland of Buddhism, was a great method of legitimacy. It was interesting, however, that the teachings associated with the deepest history, which were closer in time to the Historical Buddha did not have the same degree of importance in Kukai’s vision of the Buddhist world as the later developments.

From India, the Ten Stages moved to China. The Eighth and Ninth Stages were equated to Chinese-developed schools of Buddhist thought. Tendai and Kegon did not have Indian precursors or patriarchs in their direct teaching lineages. Like Chen-yen, they were forged through the accumulation and interpretation of Buddhist scriptures that had arrived in China after the onset of Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty showed a shift from a reactive recipient of a foreign tradition to an active contributor to the evolution of Buddhist thought, philosophy, and literature.
The inclusion and placement of the Chinese sects of Buddhism represented China as the next stage in Buddhism. Although India was always treated as the birthplace of Buddhism, China began to be presented as the new center for Buddhist thought and development. It was the new originator of Buddhist traditions and the source of knowledge for Japan. Despite Japan receiving its first flush of Buddhism from Korea, China quickly replaced Korea as the go-to for Buddhist instruction.

With Shingon, Japanese Buddhism refocused on Indian Buddhism through the development of esoteric Buddhism. The new practices within Esoteric Buddhism, such as the abhiseka initiation, served to highlight India’s role as the source of Buddhist development. Shingon, by virtue of its esoteric nature and close tie to Indian masters, was presented as the best and most accurate representative of the new Buddhism emerging from India. In addition, Kukai held an important level of authority due to his position as Hui-kuo’s official successor. This provided Kukai with a powerful legitimization tool in addition to Shingon’s position as the closest to India in terms of religious thought.

This pattern tracing the locus of Buddhism back to India appeared in other early Shingon material. In the Ten Stages and the Precious Key it appeared in textual form and teachings. While this form was incredibly important, it was not immediately accessible to the general Buddhist public. Shingon, as most sects of Buddhism, looked to gain converts. In the religious landscape of ninth-century Japan, gaining the favor and patronage of the court and the nobility was vitally important in the acceptance of Shingon outside the imperial seat.\textsuperscript{172} An arcane religious text such as the Ten Stages, which required a simplified version, would not

accomplish as much as a more accessible method of explaining Shingon’s placement. Visual media, painting and sculpture were employed to create these versions.

Among the paintings Kukai commissioned while studying in China were a series of portraits of his spiritual forefathers. The lineage portraits were a claim to legitimacy in visual form, documenting the transmission of Esoteric Buddhism from its start to Kukai, as the ultimate patriarch.\(^{173}\) It distilled a scattered system of transmission into one clear line, a clear line that did not include the patriarchs of Tendai Buddhism, the other sect of Buddhism to include Esoteric Teachings in ninth-century Japan. Through these paintings, Kukai not only emphasized the ultimate, fully-realized nature of his religious authority but re-emphasized the concept that esoteric Buddhism was closer to the source, so to speak, than contemporaneous Japanese Buddhist traditions. Esoteric Buddhism represented the newest, highest-level Buddhist thought in India in addition to its association with royalty. Shingon was only one step removed from the original texts brought to China by Amoghavajra and his contemporaries.

Teaching lineages were a common form of legitimacy in Buddhism. Lineages often traced themselves to famous monks or great spiritual teachers and emphasized the importance of the role of teachers within Buddhism. They also provided a historical record for each sect, which could be used in the internecine competition for converts. In the case of Shingon, the lineage that Kukai constructed traced the core Esoteric Buddhist teachers, a line that goes from Mahavairochana to

\(^{173}\) While each “master” had numerous students, only one was granted this title. Hui-kuo, Kukai’s teacher, had several disciples at the time Kukai arrived in China.
Kukai himself. Kukai did not attempt to create a lineage for Shingon itself but instead forged a lineage of the great esoteric masters and the teachings inherent in the *Mahavairochana Sutra*. It also re-emphasized Kukai’s role as the sanctioned Master of Esoteric Buddhism, a title conferred to him by Hui-kuo during his time in Chang’an. In a landscape with competing Buddhist traditions and more than one involving the esoteric tradition, they provided a reminder that Kukai alone held this auspicious position held a degree of importance, especially at the Japanese court.

In Shingon, there were Eight Great Patriarchs. The patriarch lineage traced Esoteric Buddhism from its genesis to the onset of Shingon. The lineage did not trace the specific teachings of Esoteric Buddhism, such as the *Mahavairochana Sutra*, but rather the position of Master of Esoteric Buddhism. The Patriarchs were Mahavairochana Buddha, Vajrasattva Bodhisattva, Nagarjuna, Nagabodhi, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, Hui-kuo, and Kukai. In Shingon, Mahavairochana was understood as the ultimate Buddha and the originator of the esoteric tradition.

Vajrasattva (J: *Kongosatta*) is Mahavairochana’s attendant *bodhisattva*. These figures formed the center of the buddha and *bodhisattva* pentads on the Toji altar. It was Vajrasattva that passed the knowledge of Esoteric Buddhism to the monk Nagarjuna. This tradition of divine revelations was fairly common in mid-period Buddhism and related to the Buddhist prescriptive that any valid Buddhist canon must originate with a buddha.\(^{174}\)

The Nagarjuna who receives the esoteric teachings from Vajrasattva was the same Nagarjuna who was regarded as the father of the Madhyamaka tradition. The Madhyamaka tradition was represented by the Seventh Stage within the *Ten Stages*.

\(^{174}\) This prescriptive would be why the writings of Kukai are not considered *sutra* or *tantra*. 
of the Development of the Mind and by Japanese Sanron Buddhism. There was no
direct transmission of Esoteric Buddhism from Nagarjuna to the next patriarch,
Nagabodhi. In fact, there were no direct relationships between the middle patriarchs.
Hundreds of years passed between these figures’ lives. Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra
were great proponents of Esoteric Buddhism in Tang China and here the master-
student relationships returned. Vajrabodhi conducted Amoghavajra’s initiation in
China. Amoghavajra would then become the teacher of Hui-kuo.

Esoteric Buddhism did not have a deep history of Indian development during
the eighth and ninth centuries. The earliest esoteric texts appeared in the sixth
century with the onset of the Tantric movement. The Mahavairochana Tantra itself,
for example, related a discussion between Mahavairochana and Vajrapani, and began
with the phrase “thus I have heard.”\textsuperscript{175} Although Nagarjuna was included in the
Master lineage, he predated the arrival of esoteric literature by hundreds of years.
This idiosyncratic, historical nature recurred in the lineage several times.

The Shingon lineage was interesting because it did not trace historical
master-student relationships until the end. The lineage actually skipped large swaths
of time between Nagarjuna, the early Indian Buddhist master and Vajrabodhi, the
great Indian master of Esoteric Buddhism active in Tang China. Vajrabodhi’s root
teacher was not included in the lineage. Interestingly enough, the Esoteric Buddhist
teacher Subhakarasimha, the translator of the Mahavairochana Sutra, was not
included in the lineage. Except for the documentable relationships between
Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra, Hui-kuo and Kukai the lineage was unverifiable and may

\textsuperscript{175} “The Vairocanabhisambodhi Sutra”,
have been constructed by either Hui-kuo during his molding of the Chinese esoteric tradition into Chen-yen Buddhism or by Kukai himself. However, the lineage did include important Buddhist masters who were known within the Buddhist world to have received teachings directly from divine figures, such as Nagarjuna.\textsuperscript{176}

In the lineage portraits, an additional step was added to the evolution of Buddhism. The first two figures in the lineage were Mahavairochana and Vajrasattva, a pair of divine Buddhist figures. Unlike the teachings associated with the Historical Buddha, who taught in ancient India, these figures were not human and did not teach on Earth. Mahavairochana taught Vajrasattva, a bodhisattva commonly associated with dharmakaya buddha figures in Esoteric Buddhism, and it was through Vajrasattva that the teachings were brought to humanity.\textsuperscript{177} Esoteric Buddhism was developed by the ultimate buddha, Mahavairochana, and was first taught to his divine disciple. It came down to earth from the Buddhist heavens when Vajrasattva taught the tradition to Nagarjuna in India. The position of patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism remained in India until Vajrabodhi and his student Amoghavajra established the tradition in China. The title was then passed onto Hui-kuo, Amoghavajra’s student, the first wholly Chinese patriarch, who found Chen-yen as the first defined sect of Esoteric Buddhism in China. Hui-kuo famously passed the title to Kukai during Kukai’s visit to Chang’an in the first decade of the ninth century. I-hsing, Hui-kuo’s Chinese successor as the patriarch of Chen-yen, was not included. There were no further patriarchs recorded in this manner within Shingon Buddhism. Kukai was the last patriarch.

\textsuperscript{177} Vajrasattva is the ideal student in comparison to Mahavairochana as the ideal teacher.
The *Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind* and the Shingon lineage portraits both emphasized the path of Buddhism from India to Japan. It was not only the geographic journey of the religion that was mapped out in this manner. Korea, an important early proponent of Buddhism in Japan, was absent from both the *Ten Stages* and the patriarch lineage. India, China, and Japan, through the advent of Shingon, were seen as places where Buddhism evolved on a pathway to its final version, the Tenth Stage. India was the birthplace of Buddhism, the originator of Buddhist traditions, and had the deepest history of Buddhist thought. Divine beings were able to directly pass on teachings to Indian masters and pilgrimage to the great monasteries of India was a lofty goal for East Asian practitioners.

The sects of Buddhism that developed in China, T’ian-t’ai, Hua-yen, and Chen-yen, were not envisioned as false traditions because they had no parallels in India. Rather they were seen are more spiritually advanced than the earlier Indian sects. This can be seen in both sources of Shingon’s conceptualization of the Buddhist world. This can be partially attributed to China’s role as a source of culture and sophistication in eighth and early ninth century Japan. As the continental culture for eastern Asia, Chinese religion, court culture, literature, and philosophy were central to the world of the Japanese nobility and upper class. In the earliest of Kukai’s attributed writings, he compared the three Chinese export religions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism against each other; not against the traditional Japanese religious path that corresponded to modern Shinto.\(^{178}\) While India was the home of Buddhism and the original source of Buddhist legitimacy, it was not a surprise that China was regarded as more important in ninth-century Japanese

Buddhism.

Shingon, through its esotericism, represented a direct tie back to India. Shingon’s superiority over other sects of Buddhism in Japan and its legitimacy were readily apparent within the esoteric Buddhist paradigm. The early esoteric practices, with their emphasis on universal order, kingship, and supreme enlightenment, were built on this foundation in India and remained central in their spread to East Asia. Esoteric literature from this time period was also known for reinterpreting earlier Buddhist canon, such as the enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha, and placing these events in an esoteric light. Shingon’s understanding of Mahavairochana was directly in line with this mode of thought. Indian Buddhism returns to the fore in Shingon’s esoteric Buddhism. The lineage presented in the *Ten Stages*, therefore, can be interpreted as placing Shingon’s esoteric Buddhism over both earlier Indian and Chinese traditions.

The fact remained that every sect of Buddhism to arrive in Japan prior to and contemporaneous with Shingon originated in China or India. Shingon alone has been singled out as the start of a “Japanese” sect of Buddhism in academic literature. This emphasis on the native development of Shingon, often tied to the rhetoric surrounding Kukai, can create a contradiction when compared to the use of “Indic” and “Indianness” as descriptors for early Shingon visual culture by modern scholars. Descriptions that have often been tied to the statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten at the Toji, meanwhile other Toji statues have become models of the “Japaneseeseness” that began to emerge in the Heian. This divide between foreign and native culture, of which Shingon itself is a mixture, was not an aspect of major concern during the
early years of Shingon, as shown in the other aspects of Shingon media that also date to the ninth century.
Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth-century scholarship on early Japanese esoteric Buddhist art, the statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten have been singled out as representing a foreign, Indian-based aesthetic. At the same time, the start of the Heian era has been heralded as the beginning of a purely Japanese sense of aesthetics in the arts. The juxtaposition between these two seemingly-contrasting positions can be seen in the Toji Lecture Hall statuary where Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten are noted for representing Kukai’s “purely Indian aesthetic aspects” while Kongoho Bosatsu is “much more characteristically Japanese.”\footnote{Sawa, Art in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, 75, 79.} This paper has questioned this narrative by placing the statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten back into the larger environment of ninth-century Japan and early esoteric Buddhism in East Asia.

An influx of Indian Buddhist visual culture reached Japan in the ninth-century through Kukai and the art of Shingon Buddhism. Unlike previous models of Buddhist art in Japan, this new esoteric art underwent little development in China and reflected Indian artistic developments closer to their original form. This can clearly be seen by the change between earlier statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten in Japan and the versions at the Toji. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, for the first time in Japan, resembled their Hindu identities of Brahma and Indra. However, they were not alone in their foreign, Indian aesthetic. Dai’itoku Myo-o, one of the new deities to arrive with esoteric Buddhism, featured a number of the same iconographic and stylistic characteristics as Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, including being seated on his large bull vahana in the same way as Taishaku Ten on his elephant. While the Toji
itself was unique in its altar design, photographic evidence of the now-destroyed statues at the Kongobuji at Mount Koya showed that the style was not. This style can be found in the few remaining works associated with esoteric Buddhism in Chang’an, the place where Kukai was initiated into esoteric Buddhist practice.

In modern scholarship, the Heian era is highlighted as a sublime period when Japanese culture reached its apex. Scholars have called the Heian “a time when Japanese civilization was at the height of its flowering.”\(^\text{180}\) It was a time when foreign influence on Japanese culture waned, although most of the imported foreign culture did not disappear, and something truly “Japanese” emerged. In the words of Ivan Morris, “despite all the cultural riches from China, Heian Japan is in many ways original and even unique.”\(^\text{181}\) Hakeda stated that “[Kukai’s] Esoteric Buddhism contributed much to the spiritual and aesthetic foundations of Heian culture.”\(^\text{182}\) However, Shingon’s aesthetic was rooted in esoteric Buddhism’s influx of Indian visual culture. When compared to non-Buddhist religious works from the same era, it is clear that the Toji statues were not based on an indigenous tradition. In addition, these works closely align with slightly earlier remains of Chinese esoteric Buddhism in Chang’an. Despite this, these works are described as “Japanese” in various texts.

Indian aesthetics have been positioned as a contrast to Japanese aesthetics in scholarly literature surrounding early esoteric Buddhist art in Japan. Sawa posited that development of late Heian art, which moved away from the style seen at the Toji, was the result of “an innate Japanese inability to understand and assimilate


The desire to understand Shingon as fundamentally Japanese has affected scholarship on the religion as well as the art. In his praise of Shingon and its artistic impact on Japanese culture, Varley divided Japanese and Indian esoteric Buddhism into two traditions, and argued that any detractors of Shingon were mistakenly conflating corrupted Indian practices with Shingon, which did not contain such things. According to Varley, “one part of Tantrism,” which he described as grotesque “Indian” practices, were “associated with Indian Shakti practices dealing with death, destruction, and living sacrifices.” Shingon, which was a different part of Varley’s Tantrism, did not contain such practices. Only Indian esoteric Buddhism did. However, these so-called Indian-only practices were clearly present in the Mahavairochana Sutra, one of the core Shingon scriptures. A desire to ignore or de-emphasize the foreign, Indian elements of Shingon and its visual culture is at work in these arguments.

The attribution of Japanese aesthetics to some works and Indian to others often seems arbitrary. Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten were closely tied to Indian aesthetics by several modern scholars despite following the same aesthetic tradition as the other Toji statuary. Some statues, such as the Myo-o, contain just as many elements of Indian aesthetics as Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten. Bon Ten and Kongo Bosatsu were created by the same artisans for the same altar display. The works displayed the resurgence of Indian aesthetics that characterized all esoteric Buddhist art from this period in East Asia.

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183 Sawa, Art in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, 80.
184 Varley, Japanese Culture, 47.
This paper has suggested that the concept of “Indianness” that has been attached to the statues of Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten, who undergo the greatest stylistic change when compared to earlier Japanese statues of these deities, has misrepresented the overall Indian aesthetic of the Toji statuary. The inclusion of these Indian-derived forms was part of Shingon’s legitimacy, along with other Shingon media from the ninth century, and represented the esoteric aesthetic that arrived in East Asia during the late eighth century. One potential reason for Bon Ten and Taishaku Ten’s modern interpretation as representations of an Indic aesthetic may lie in their position as Hindu deities. Unlike deities such as Fudo Myo-o and Dai’itoku Myo-o, they were inexorably tied to their Indian origin through Buddhist scripture, especially in the Toji versions, which correspond much closer to their Hindu counterparts. Into the Heian era, India held a strong sway in the Japanese monastic consciousness and the statues of early Shingon represented the height of Indian aesthetics in Japanese Buddhist art.
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![Fudo Myo-o](image)

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![Nyoirin Kannon](image)
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![Image of a statue](image1)

Figure 24 Unknown, *Taishaku Ten*, Nara, Japan; 8<sup>th</sup> century, Hollow dry lacquer, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

![Image of a statue](image2)
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References


