



Prince Shōtoku (574-622)

B.V.E. Hyde looks at the statesman who fathered Japanese philosophy.

https://philosophynow.org/issues/158/Prince_Shotoku

According to legend, the great sage Prince Shōtoku was able to speak as soon as he was born and was so wise when he grew up that he could attend to the suits of ten men at once and decide them all without error. He knew beforehand what was going to happen. He was the reincarnation of Queen Srimala *and* of the Indian monk Bodhidharma, and the manifestation of the Bodhisattva Guze Kannon. When the prince met a starving man on the side of the road, he provided him with food and water and also gave him his coat. The following day, he sent a messenger to check on the man, but he was already dead, so Shōtoku ordered that he be properly buried. Suspecting that he was in fact, a holy man, he sent someone to check on the tomb, who found that the corpse was gone and only the prince's coat remained. This the prince continued to wear, proving that both the starving man and the prince were holy men.

Such are the things that are said about Shōtoku. The hagiography [the writing of the lives of saints] about him is so thickly layered that it's difficult to reach historical reality. There was even a cult of the prince (*taishi shinkō*) that formed around the Middle Ages. Of course, he was a man like any other; but maybe a little wiser than the rest. In fact he was a statesman and something of a political philosopher, who would be immortalized as the father of the Japanese state, the father of Japanese Buddhism, and the father of Japanese philosophy.

Civil War in Sixth Century Japan

When Prince Shōtoku was born in 574, Japan was embroiled in a war between powerful clans. The Mononobe were the custodians of Shintō, and therefore opposed Buddhism. Mononobe no Okoshi, the head of the clan, claimed that the Japanese adoption of Buddhism would disrupt the harmony between man and the native gods and spirits (*kami*), leading to calamity. The Soga, however, were strongly in favour of Buddhism. The clan head, Soga no Iname, believed that adopting Buddhism would help Japan forge stronger ties with the Asian mainland, and thus saw Buddhism as a potential vehicle for bringing advanced science and technology to Japan.

Buddhism had come to Japan in an official capacity in 552, when King Seong of the Korean Kingdom of Baekje sent a diplomatic mission to Japan with gifts of Buddhist scriptures and a bronze Buddha statue, among other Buddhist artifacts. This brought the tension between the Soga and the Mononobe to a head. A political dilemma confronted Emperor Kinmei, for he could neither offend the Koreans by rejecting the gifts, nor could he accept them, officially sanctioning Buddhism. His solution was to deposit them into the keeping of the Soga clan.

Japan was soon overrun by plague, however. Mononobe no Okoshi was quick to blame it on the acceptance of Buddhism, petitioning the emperor to reject it where he had before accepted it – which he did, leading to the destruction of the Buddhist statuary from Korea.

The conflict peaked when Emperor Bidatsu died in 585 and the Japanese court was immediately embroiled in a succession dispute. He had apparently named one of his sons, Prince Oshisaka, as crown prince, who had the

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support of the Mononobe clan. The Soga clan, on the other hand, supported the claim of Prince Anahobe, the emperor's half-brother, who was himself descended from a Soga.

The succession struggle turned violent after a Soga and a Mononobe exchanged insults at a burial ceremony for the deceased emperor. When the Soga emerged victorious from the military confrontation that followed, their candidate Prince Anahobe was enthroned as Emperor Yōmei. His wife was another Soga and she gave birth to four sons, of whom Prince Shōtoku was the first.

Conflict resurfaced with Yōmei's death, **but was ended decisively in 587** at the Battle of Mount Shigi. The Soga won, killing Mononobe no Moriya in battle and dispersing the remnants of the Mononobe clan. Yōmei was succeeded by his half-brother, Emperor Sushun, which solidified Soga control over the imperial court.

Empress Suiko replaced Sushun at the beginning of 593, and her nephew Prince Shōtoku was installed as Regent. Suiko was Bidatsu's half-sister, Yōmei's sister, Sushun's daughter, and Soga no Iname's granddaughter. In other words, she was a Soga through and through; and, like the rest of her family, a staunch supporter of Buddhism. She was one of the first Buddhist monarchs in Japan, and had even become a nun just before her investiture.

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Prince Shotoku With Two Princes Kano Osanobu, 1842
Prince Shotoku & Friends Kano Osanobu 1842

The Father of the Japanese State

The first official document in Japanese history was Shōtoku's *Seventeen Article Constitution*, written by the prince in 604.

Although it's called a 'constitution' (*kenpō*), it consists of little more than a set of highfalutin moral injunctions without much practical application – saying things like 'Let us cease from wrath, and refrain from angry looks' or 'Give clear appreciation to merit and demerit'. In fact, the only articles in the constitution that looks like constitutional laws are the sixteenth, which mandates corvée* labour in the winter months rather than in the summer; and the twelfth, which prohibits provincial governors from levying taxes. This makes the document a lot more interesting philosophically than politically.

* Corvée: Labour due to a feudal lord.

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Philosophically, the heart of the constitution is a politic-ethical philosophy of harmony, as expressed in the first sentence: ‘Harmony is to be valued, and an avoidance of wanton opposition to be honoured’. The rest of the document presents means to achieving this harmonious ideal – including the reverence of Buddhism, absolute obedience to imperial commands, and the cessation of ‘wrath’ and ‘angry looks’.

Harmony doesn’t mean homogeneity*. It might seem to follow from a principle of harmony that social outliers, the causes of social disharmony, ought to realign themselves – we might say *harmonize* themselves – with the social norm. But by no means is this what Shōtoku meant. In the *Analects*, Confucius says that “The gentleman has peace with others but does not become the same”; while in the ancient Chinese *Guoyu* it is written that “Harmony gives rise to new things” and “Homogeneity will lead to stagnation.” Moreover, in the ancient *Zuozhuan* it is said that “complete agreement is unacceptable.” Confucianism draws a clear contrast between harmony (*wa*) and complete agreement (*do*) and Shōtoku probably did too.

* Homogeneity: Equality

What primarily motivated Shōtoku’s philosophy of harmony was almost certainly the prospect of rebellion against the imperial family, of which he was part. The Battle of Mount Shigi in 587 took place not too long before Shōtoku became Prince Regent in 593. Though the main line of the Mononobe clan was killed, there were surviving clansmen – a good measure against whom would have been to make peace and harmony a matter of national duty. This is exactly what the *Shōtoku Constitution* seems to have done. Look at the tenth article, for example, which makes it clear that the declaration of harmony is primarily a call for peace: “Let us cease from wrath, and refrain from angry looks.” Maybe what Shōtoku had in mind was the protection of the people rather than the preservation of himself – but such a genteel reading seems naïve when cast against the backdrop of the Soga-Mononobe conflict that had consumed Japanese politics for the previous hundred years.

The notion of harmony is the only ideal *directly* asserted by Shōtoku in the Constitution, but there are a number of other principles to be found within it, implicitly. Imperialism is one of them. The purpose of the document was probably to cement the imperial authority of the Soga, and there are many articles in it which smack of imperialism. For example, the third says that “When you receive the Imperial commands, fail not scrupulously to obey them”; and the twelfth says that “In a country there are not two lords; the people have not two masters.” Here we undoubtedly see the Confucian idea of ‘the mandate of heaven’ at work. We might also see in it the Shintō belief in the emperor as divine and the imperial family as descended from the gods. In any case, the *Shōtoku Constitution* made it clear that the emperor was inferior to none.

This was a message he also conveyed to the Chinese court. Shōtoku addressed a letter to the Sui Emperor Yang in 607 as “From the sovereign of the land of the rising sun to the sovereign of the land of the setting sun.” This letter gave Japan its name, as ‘the land of the rising sun’ (*Nihon*). But the Chinese emperor complained of the rudeness of this barbarian communiqué, angry that the ruler of

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what he considered a subsidiary state – which the Chinese called ‘Wa’, meaning ‘submissive’, ‘distant’ or ‘dwarf’ – would consider himself equal to the emperor of China.

Despite the *Constitution* promoting the clear supremacy of the emperor, Shōtoku appears to advocate for something more communal, even democratic, in article seventeen: “Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many.” What’s more, in the tenth article he seems to deny that there is objective good: “Their right is our wrong, and our right is their wrong. We are not unquestionably sages, nor are they unquestionably fools.” By propounding a degree of moral relativism in this way, Shōtoku acknowledges that men can modify their morality based on their experiences and reflections, rather than entirely relying on a set of moral principles dictated by an external authority. This might strike you as somewhat contradicting the third article, requiring absolute obedience to the emperor, and, moreover, with the nature of the *Constitution* as a set of moral principles to be adhered to. To assert that they’re all relative would undermine that ambition.

The Father of Japanese Buddhism

The second article of the *Shōtoku Constitution* is the principal reason why the prince is considered the father of Japanese Buddhism. It reads: “Sincerely reverence the three treasures (*sanbō*)” – referring to the Buddha (*butsu*), the Dharma (*hō*), which are the Buddha’s teachings – and the Sangha (*sō*), or the Buddhist priesthood. Traditionally, this is understood as the officiation of Buddhism as the state religion.

Reports of Shōtoku’s deep involvement in the study and practice of Buddhism certainly undergird his fame as its founder in Japan. His study of Buddhism culminated in his authorship of *Annotated Commentaries on the Three Sūtras* between 611 and 615. These were the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Yuima Sūtra*, and the *Shōman Sūtra*. He had given lectures on these at Empress Suiko’s request in 606.

Prince Shōtoku was also a great patron of Buddhist temples. He was, for example, directly responsible for the construction of Shitennō-ji and Hōryū-ji, which are some of the oldest wooden structures in the world today. It was because of his patronage and devotion that Buddhism was firmly established on Japanese soil.

The Father of Japanese Philosophy

But neither his promulgation of Buddhism nor his philosophy of harmony made Shōtoku the father of Japanese philosophy. In fact, the *Seventeen Article Constitution* wasn’t all that sophisticated: it was just a jumble of moral aphorisms. I’ve had to put quite a lot of exegetical* work into making it look like a philosophical work when, stripped bare of its historical background, the constitution doesn’t look like a philosophical text at all.

*‘Exegesis’ is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text. The term is traditionally applied to the interpretation of Biblical works. [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exegesis)

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Shōtoku was foremost a statesman, and most historians would not call him a ‘philosopher-prince’. What puts the *Shōtoku Constitution* at the beginning of the history of Japanese philosophy, though, is that it set the scene for the intellectual developments that came after it. It did this by providing a syncretic precedent for future Japanese philosophizing, meaning that it is a synthesis of various intellectual sources: in this case, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintō, and arguably Daoism and Legalism too.

They’re mixed in the *Constitution* in two ways. The first is that different articles are grounded in different sources. The injunction to cease from gluttony and abandon covetous desires is clearly Buddhist. On the other hand, the expectation that ministers will act with propriety (*rei*) is thoroughly Confucian. The second way the document is syncretic* is through the creation of new theories combining different intellectual traditions. The harmonious ideal is the best example of this: the statement that ‘harmony is to be valued’ comes from Confucius’s *Analects*, but, unlike in Confucianism itself, here harmony is not to be obtained through ceremonial propriety, but through personal moral development – which has a source in Buddhism – and through natural balance, which comes not only from Confucianism, but from Shintō and Daoism too.

* Syncretic: Relating to a historical tendency for a language to reduce its use of inflections.

In his actions Shōtoku also provided a precedent for the syncretism of Shintō and Buddhism (*shinbutsu-shūgō*) which would become characteristic of Japanese religious thought for centuries to come. For example, the prince apparently never visited Buddhist temples without visiting Shintō shrines too, and he never gave the impression that belief in one precluded belief in the other.

Did Prince Shōtoku Really Exist?

Everything that anybody says about a philosopher or a philosophical text assumes that the philosopher did in fact exist and was in fact the text’s author. In the vast majority of cases, this is not a contentious assumption. Authorship disputes are rare, and when we are unsure about the author of a text, we do at least know that the text was written around a certain period, during which time its supposed author lived. ‘Prince Shōtoku’, however, did not exist.

The prince was really called Umayado; he was only called ‘Shōtoku’ – meaning ‘sage virtue’ or ‘sovereign moral power’ – after his death. Moreover, how we have access to the *Shōtoku Constitution* is through a national chronicle called the *Nihonshoki*, which was written in 720 – more than a hundred years after Shōtoku was alleged to have written the *Constitution*. There is no evidence that its compilers had access to the original document – not least because there’s no evidence that the original document was circulated in the way that a constitution ought to have been. The question, then, is whether the chronicle’s authors wrote the *Constitution* from their memory of an original document really written in 604 by Prince Umayado, or invented it from scratch. It’s even possible that they invented the *prince* completely, and that there was no Prince Umayado!

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His commentaries on the *sūtras* might not also be his. About fifty years ago, some scholars compared them with texts discovered at Dunhuang in the Gansu Province of Northwestern China, and concluded that these commentaries were not composed by the prince in Japan, they were written in China. Others have suggested that they were written by Korean priests visiting Japan.

Despite all this, the *Seventeen Article Constitution* still belongs at the beginning of the history of Japanese philosophy. There was no other significant written philosophical activity in Japan until the Buddhist monks Saichō and Kūkai (who was supposedly Shōtoku's reincarnation) brought esoteric Tendai and Shingon Buddhism to Japan from China at the beginning of the ninth century. But both the alleged authorship of the *Constitution* by the prince in the seventh century and its possible forgery by imperial propagandists in the eighth century predate them. So whether or not he existed, the syncretic precedent set by Prince Shōtoku or his inventors was the seed out of which fourteen hundred years of Japanese philosophy grew.

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