Religion and the imperial body politic of Japan

Pamela D. Winfield

Abstract

This article offers a religious history of the Japanese emperor’s body as it was discursively constructed, visually imagined, and ritually reinforced as the larger body politic. It demonstrates that the Shintō-inflected notion of the imperial body politic (J. kokutai) technically only emerged during the early modern period in Japan. It therefore draws attention instead to the important premodern Buddhist precursors that first equated the emperor’s own body with the greater state polity of Japan. Buddhist teachings about the world-body of Buddhahood (dharmakāya), the monumental bronze Buddha body of Birushana in Nara, and Buddhist ritual activity throughout Japan’s provincial temple system all helped to construct Emperor Shōmu (r. 710–56) as the all-protecting head of the family-state (kokka). Later esoteric Buddhist teachings about ‘becoming a Buddha in this very body’ (sokushin jōbutsu) and elaborate state-protecting rites performed before Kūkai’s (744–835) multi-headed and multi-armed figures all helped to protect the body of the emperor (or his clothes), and by extension, the health and wellbeing of the country at large. Finally, modern reformulations such as Kiyozawa Manshi’s (1863–1903) ‘hand metaphor’ and Minobe Tatsukichi’s (1873–1948) ‘organ theory of government’ continued to resonate with these pre-existing Buddhist corporeal tropes, as well as with newly imported Western philosophical constructs. As a result, this premodern Buddhist analysis of the emperor’s rhetorical, artistic, and ceremonial body-state

Affiliation

Elon University, North Carolina, USA.
email: pwinfield@elon.edu
demonstrates the centrality of the human body in imagining religious authority and political power in Japan.

Keywords: Japan; emperor; body politic; Buddhism

Introduction

This article offers a religious history of the Japanese emperor’s body as it was discursively constructed, visually imagined, and ritually reinforced as the larger body politic.

It first examines the ancient Chinese texts, architectural structures, and ritual procedures that equated the emperor’s body with the larger ‘country-body’ (C. guoti 国体). This term’s simplified form in Japan (J. kokutai 国体) technically only emerged during the early modern period, when Japan’s seventeenth-century nativist School of National Learning (J. kokugaku 国学) resuscitated it and theorized that Japan’s essential character depended upon the emperor’s unbroken lineage descending from the mythic sun goddess Amaterasu. This line of thinking reached its most extreme expression during World War II.

This article then proposes the novel argument that premodern Buddhism had long provided important precursors for thinking about, seeing, and ritually performing the emperor’s body-as-state. During the Nara period (710–84), Emperor Shōmu (r. 710–56) commissioned a monumental statue of Birushana Buddha at Tōdaiji temple in the ancient capital of Nara. On the visual and discursive levels, this massive bronze Buddha-body personified the universal world-body of Buddhahood (dharmakāya), where the term -kāya literally means ‘body’ in Sanskrit. This colossal image also symbolized Shōmu’s unified, centralized state, which was likened to a ‘country-family’ (J. kokka 国家) with Shōmu at its head. On the ritual level, furthermore, Shōmu commissioned Buddhist state-protecting rites to be performed at Tōdaiji headquarters and throughout Japan’s provincial system of regional temples (J. kokubunji 国分寺). Metaphorically speaking, this Buddhist infrastructure served as a sort of circulatory or immunological system for the protection and pacification of the familial body politic (J. chingo kokka 鎮護國家).

Furthermore, during the Heian period (794–1333/36), esoteric Buddhist ideas, images, and rituals also ensured the emperor’s – and by extension, the entire country’s – physical health and wellbeing. On the doctrinal level, Kūkai’s (774–835) key teachings on ‘becoming a Buddha in this very body’ and his instructions for embodying the universal dharmakāya’s body, speech, and mind through the practitioner’s mudrās hand gestures, mantra
recitations, and mandala visualizations placed unprecedented emphasis on the physical body as a vehicle for awakening. Ritualy speaking, it also discusses Kūkai’s esoteric practice of kaji mutual empowerment between self and Buddha. Visually speaking, finally, it examines how these esoteric teachings and techniques were leveraged to protect the emperor-as-state, either in the Benevolent Kings ceremony before the sculptural mandala at Tōji temple, or in the image-filled Latter Seven Day Rite within the imperial palace grounds itself.

Finally, the epilogue considers modern Buddhist iterations of the long-standing equation between the emperor’s physical and national bodies. It analyzes the philosophical argument of the True Pure Land Buddhist reformer Kiyozawa Manshi (1863–1903), who maintained that individual citizens of the nation work together like the fingers of a hand. As a result, he proposes that personal freedoms must already be incorporated into the state’s whole body, and must therefore automatically be aligned with the king’s law (ōhō). It also reconsiders Minobe Tatsukichi’s (1873–1948) so-called ‘organ theory of government’ in light of these Buddhist precedents, and suggests that Buddhism’s rich heritage of ideas, images, and ritual institutions continued to resonate with political forms well into the modern period. This analysis of the emperor’s rhetorical, artistic, and ceremonial body-state thus locates its analysis at the intersection of Buddhist doctrine, state–sangha relations, art history, and ritual studies.

The emperor-as-state in China and Japan

Chinese origins: the ‘country-body’ (guoti 國體) and imperial ritual

The original Chinese notion of the body politic was first mentioned in records dating from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). A second-century BCE commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals called the Guliang zhuan 谷梁傳 identifies the dafu 大夫 high minister as the guoti 國體 or official embodiment of the entire country. Later, the first-century CE Book of Han also uses the term guoti as a collective singular for all the laws and officials of the Confucian government. However, it is Ge Hong’s (葛洪 283–343 CE) early fourth-century Daoist alchemical text called the Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi 抱朴子) that most clearly equates the ruler’s bodily cultivation with the realm’s wellbeing. Ge Hong writes,

The body of an individual can be pictured as a state. The diaphragm may be compared with the palace; the arms and legs, with the suburbs and frontiers. The
bones and joints are like the officials; the inner gods are like the sovereign; the blood is like the ministers of state; the qi is like the population.

Therefore, anyone able to regulate his own body can regulate a state. To take good care of the population is the best way to make your state secure; by the same token to nurture the qi [energy] is the way to keep the body whole, for when the population scatters, the state goes to ruin; when the qi is exhausted, the body dies (Kohn 2006:8).³

In its archaic form, this two-character compound for the Chinese polity or ‘country-body’ (guoti) includes the word for ‘body’ (–ti). This character is composed of two elements: the root radical for ‘bones’ (骨) as well as the character for ‘abundant’ (豊). Given the ideographic nature of Chinese language, human bones are therefore automatically evoked to indicate the country’s skeletal framework for its elaborate government structures. The healthy functioning of this corporeal government structure depended upon proper Confucian statecraft, regulated by the emperor at its head. For this reason, ‘[t]he body of the emperor and the body politic was [also] formalized in the medical treatises of the Han dynasty; which applied the principles of government to the flows of qi [energy] in the body: the same Chinese word zhi [治 to treat] refers to healing and government’ (Palmer 2007:10).

This metaphorical equation of the emperor’s human body with a healthy state polity applied to religious activity as well. During the Han dynasty, state-sponsored rituals reinforced the notion that the proper standing of the emperor’s own body directly equated to the wellbeing of his larger empire. For example, the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 [energy] (r. 9–23 CE) used state ritual to heal the state’s internal discord and to legitimate his interregnum between the Former Han (206 BCE–9 CE) and Latter Han dynasties (25–220 CE). During his annual ceremonies in the ancient capital of Chang’an (present day Xian), Wang Mang made his ritual progress through a specially constructed ritual complex called the Ming Tang 明堂 or ‘Bright Hall.’ In a kind of symbolic and distributive logic, Wang Mang’s miniature parade through the rooms of the Ming Tang’s microcosmic structure symbolically mirrored his imperial inspection tours throughout all the lands of the Han empire. In addition, his final processional arrival in the penthouse observatory of the Ming Tang established him as the Son of Heaven, ostensibly aligned heaven and earth, and thereby maintained the peaceful regulation of the cosmos. His location at the center of the ritual axis mundi as the embodied Son of Heaven guaranteed the timely rotation of the heavens, which in turn ensured the proper rotation of the agricultural seasons, and sufficient crops throughout the land. It also ritually prevented inauspicious celestial omens that could supposedly result
in pestilence, epidemic, famine, or any number of other societal ills. The emperor’s own body was therefore inextricably linked to the health and wellbeing of the larger country-body, and later Chinese emperors replicated these annual rites at the Temple of Heaven and at the Temple of Soil and Grain (Earth) in future capitals, including present day Beijing.

**Amaterasu and the body politic (kokutai 国体) in early modern Japan**

Technically, the two-character Chinese compound guoti does not appear in Japan until the early modern period, when the Japanese proto-nationalist Aizawa Seishisai (会沢正志斎 1782–1863) resuscitated the Chinese term guoti and read its simplified characters with the Japanese pronunciation kokutai 国体. In the early modern and nativist context of Aizawa’s so-called School of National Learning (J. kokugaku 国学), the term kokutai came to mean the Japanese state’s distinctive character, essence, or fundamental personhood. The simplified character for ‘country’ (J. koku 国) includes the character for jewel 玉 and/or king 王 enclosed within the country’s borders □. The simplified character for ‘body’ (-tai 体) also includes two elements: the radical 亻 to the left derives from the character for a person 人 or the people of the Japanese state, and the character 木 indicates ‘origin’ or ‘root,’ as it literally has a root at the base of a tree 木. As a result, the School of National Learning constructed the fundamental ‘essence’ or ‘character’ of the Japanese people, collectively singularized as the kokutai body politic. In the context of their proto-nationalist agenda, the School of National Learning inextricably linked this purported Japanese essence with the Shintō sun goddess Amaterasu’s imperial line and lands.

Amaterasu, the female solar deity, is perhaps the best-known Shintō kami 神 (sacred presence) both inside and outside of Japan. She first appears in two mythic histories of Japan: The Record of Ancient Matters (J. Kojiki 古事) written in 712, and the Annals of Japan (J. Nihon Shoki 日本書紀) written in 720. Both of these politically motivated texts were commissioned by the reigning emperors of their day, and constructed Amaterasu as the progenitrix of their imperial line. Specifically, according to the Nihon Shoki, Amaterasu’s grandson Ninigi begot a great grandson Jimmu, who became the semi-mythological first emperor of Japan (legendary reign dates c. 660–585 BCE).

Interestingly, the ability to read the archaic Chinese characters and properly pronounce the names of all the Japanese kami mentioned in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki had been almost completely lost by the eighteenth century in Japan. It was only by virtue of scholars like Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長 1730–1801) and the kokugaku school that these texts were taken up and
understood once again by contemporary Japanese audiences. Relying upon their scholarly reconstructions, early English translators introduced the proper names of all the various kami quite literally. For example, Basil Hall Chamberlain’s 1882 English translation of the *Kojiki* takes the sun’s namesake ‘Ama-terasu [no] ō-mi-kami’ 天照大御神 and renders it quite literally as the gender-neutral ‘Heaven-Shining Great-August-Deity’ (Chamberlain 1919:section 16:65). It is only later, with William George Aston’s first English translation of the *Nihon Shoki* in 1896, that Amaterasu is explicitly referred to as ‘The Sun Goddess’ during ‘The Age of the Gods’ (J. kami-yo alt. jindai 神代) section of the 30-chapter work (Aston 1896:49).

In perhaps her most famous mythic episode during this primordial age, Amaterasu’s obnoxious storm god brother Susanoo defecates in her palace and breaks down her rice paddy divisions. In righteous indignation, Amaterasu withdraws into a cave and effectively plunges the islands of Japan into a solar eclipse. Light and order are eventually restored, however, when Amaterasu is lured out of her cave again by her own dazzling reflection in a mirror, by beautiful comma-shaped *magatama* 勾玉 jewels hung in a nearby tree, and by the sounds of a raucous party (Figure 1). After she emerges from her cave, another quick-thinking kami closes off the cave with a boulder and Amaterasu is restored to her proper role as the reliable rising sun. As a result, the entire country-body of Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun (nihon 日本 lit. ‘sun-origin’) is mythically and inextricably symbolized and personified by the shining sun-body of the female goddess Amaterasu. As a result, in Shintō ritual halls throughout Japan, the mirror that lured her light out of the darkness becomes enshrined as a material symbol of Amaterasu’s ‘divine body’ (J. shintai 神体). Shintō ritualists today therefore typically use the honorific prefix -go 御 to refer to Amaterasu’s mirror as

![Figure 1: Amaterasu emerging from her cave. Woodblock print, Utagawa Toyokuni III, 1857 (Creative Commons).](image-url)
the *goshintai* 御神体 in order to indicate the mirror’s sacred status as the divine body of the *kami* (Figure 2).

Symbolically, Amaterasu’s divine mirror, her *magatama* comma-shaped jewel, and her brother Susanoo’s ‘grass-cutting sword’ (J. *Kusanagi no tsurugi* 草薙の剣) constituted the three imperial regalia of Japan, as they embodied the virtues of wisdom, benevolence, and valor, respectively. Historically, furthermore, these three sacred material bodies were directly associated with the emperor’s larger political body, especially during the contested period of the Southern and Northern Courts (J. *Nanboku-chō* period 南北朝時代 1333–92). Most notably, the fourteenth-century Japanese courtier and historian Kitabatake Chikafusa (北畠 親房 1293–1354), who was sympathetic to Emperor Go-Daigo’s (後醍醐天皇 r. 1319–39) southern regime, explicitly claimed in his *Chronicles of the Authentic Lineages of the Divine Emperors* (J. *Jinnō Shōtoki* 神皇正統記) that Go-Daigo’s possession of the three imperial regalia and his unbroken line of descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu together legitimated his rule over Japan. Centuries later, Kitabatake’s influential history dating from 1339–43 was instrumental in shaping the so-called Mitō ideology (J. *mitōgaku* 水戸学) of the late Edo period (1600–1868). This school’s positions on isolationism, Shintō nativism, and respect for the emperor helped to dismantle over
600 years of the shōgun's military dictatorship over Japan, and helped to ‘restore’ the Meiji emperor to the throne in 1868.6

Amaterasu and the kokutai in World War II

Historically speaking, in premodern Japan, Amaterasu’s human descendants were never considered to be divine. Technically, the imperial progenitrix Amaterasu simply functioned much like any other heaven-dwelling kami, in that she was imagined to be the lineage parent and protector of an aristocratic clan (J. ujigami 氏神). This simply legitimated the rule of the emperor’s clan over all the other clans by virtue of Amaterasu’s superior status to all the other kami. It did not necessarily turn imperial clan members into gods.

However, in the modern period, the purported divine origins of the imperial line did help to legitimate and sanctify the growing specter of fascist ultra-nationalism and expansionist imperialism leading up to World War II. This began with the School of National Learning, continued with Mitō ideology, and went unchecked with the rapid militarization and rabid nationalism of the 1930s, so that by the end of the war, Amaterasu’s human progeny on the throne was literally considered to be divine as well.

State Shintō orthodoxy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attempted to construct a fabricated Shintō motherland that was forcibly and artificially purified of all continental influences, including Buddhism. Once Japan had supposedly recovered its pure Shintō ‘essence,’ it attempted to cleanse the rest of Asia of its foreign influences as well. Metaphorically speaking, this meant shining Amaterasu’s purifying rays into the heart of Asia to purge it of Western colonialism, although Japan’s Western-trained imperial army itself hypocritically began acquiring a string of colonial spoils from the Sino-Japanese (1894–5) and the Russo-Japanese Wars (1904–5) (Hardacre 1991). Sociologically speaking, Japan’s expansionist bent in the early twentieth century meant that it exported female bodies into Manchuria, for example, to colonize, sexually reproduce, and physically expand the boundaries of the Japanese motherland. Culturally speaking, finally, it meant that prominent Japanese female authors such as Yosano Akiko (与謝野 晶子 1878–1942), Tamura Toshiko (田村 俊子 1884–1945), and Hayashi Fumiko (林芙美子 1904–1951) re-inscribed women’s bodies into the ‘essence’ of Japan’s kokutai (Horiguchi 2011).

Eventually, military officers such as Honjo Shigeru (本庄 繁 1876–1945) and ultranationalist Shintō scholars such as Hozumi Yatsuka (穂積 八束 1860–1912) and Uesugi Shinkichi (上杉慎吉 1878–1929) directly asserted Emperor Hirohito’s (裕仁 1901–89) divine status as a kami, since he was
descended from the all-illuminating Amaterasu herself (Shillony 1999:7). Accordingly, Japan’s widely used national teacher’s manual, the *Country-Body’s Fundamental Principles* (J. *Kokutai no hongi* 国体の本義) of 1937, instructed educators to teach that the emperor was a ‘manifest god’ (J. *arabito-gami* 荒人神 or *akitsu mikami* 現御神). The latter poetic expression of imperial praise originally appeared in the mid-eighth century *Manyōshū* collection of classical poetry, but it was resuscitated and interpreted quite literally in the context of State Shintō fundamentalism during World War II (Shillony 1999:4). During this period, emperor worship was sanctioned and enforced by the state under the Peace Preservation Laws, and recently established religious sects such as Ōmotokyo were severely persecuted for not including Amaterasu in their devotions. With Japan’s defeat in 1945, however, and with US-led occupation forces rewriting Japan’s constitution, State Shintō and emperor worship premised on Amaterasu’s divine nature were dismantled.

The Shintō-inflected notion of *kokutai* as Japan’s national essence still continues to live on in subtle ways, however. The postwar discourse of ‘Japanese-ness’ (J. *nihonjinron* 日本人論) and calls to restore Japan’s ‘national character’ (J. *kunigara* 国柄) are still embraced by a number of conservative right-wing groups in Japan, who wish for a return to pre-war nativism. Members of the ultra-nationalist group Nippon Kaigi 日本会議, for example, regularly pay respect to the military war dead at Yasukuni Jinja靖国神社 in Tokyo, the controversial ‘Peaceful Nation Shrine’ that nevertheless houses the spirits of 14 Class-A war criminals among thousands of other fallen Japanese soldiers since 1869. The figure of Amaterasu no longer dominates their discourse, but for many ultra-conservative Japanese nationalists, the notion of the *kokutai* at the shrine still resonates with passionate corporeal power. The striking testimony of an aggrieved war widow is a case in point. Iwai Masuko pleads in defense of Yasukuni Jinja during a 2002 hearing at the Osaka District Court,

If you must dishonor Yasukuni Shrine, kill me a million times instead. Hearing just one word that disparages Yasukuni Shrine, I feel my body shredded into pieces. And all the blood of my entire body gushes out and spreads as far as the eye can see – it is the ocean created by [the] blood of the [Japanese] troops.

(Quoted in Takenaka 2015:introduction)7

Mrs Iwai’s graphic rhetoric 57 years after the end of the war testifies to her consanguinity with the fallen soldiers’ ocean of blood, and her con-corporeality with their shredded bodies if Yasukuni’s rites are no longer able to make them symbolically whole in death. The imagined community of Japan’s ‘country-body,’ therefore, still lives on through the civic religion of
Yasukuni Jinja’s institutional ideology, as well as in the bodies and minds of Japan’s ultra-conservative right-wing nationalists.

**Buddhist correlates**

It is clear, therefore, that the word *kokutai* itself has only ever been used in Japan in the context of early modern discourse and World War II agendas to promote State Shinto and emperor worship. The original thesis of this article, however, is that Buddhism in the service of the state had previously promoted several rough correlates to the idea of an imperial body-politic throughout Japanese history, although it never invoked the term *kokutai*, strictly speaking.

**Nara period (710–84)**

The concept of a centralized state as a body, and specifically as a Buddha-body, dominated state ideology during the Nara period (710–84). Most notably, Emperor Shōmu (聖武天皇 r. 710–56) used the East Asian Mahayana Buddhist notion of the dharmakāya, or cosmic world-body of Buddhahood, as a unifying symbol for the entire country. That is, in order to symbolize the universal body (Skt. kāya) of dharma teachings that would unite his realm after a series of disasters (e.g., the smallpox epidemic of 735–7 and Fujiwara no Hirotsubo’s 藤原広嗣 (d. 740) attempted rebellion in the southern island of Kyushu in 740), in 743 Shōmu began to cast a colossal gilt bronze statue of Vairocana (*J. Lochana* or *Birushana*), the Great Buddha of Light. This figural personification of universal buddha nature resembled other monumental cut-rock Buddha-bodies throughout Central and East Asia (e.g., at Bamiyan in Afghanistan and at Leshan in Sichuan, China). Likewise, in Japan, Shōmu’s enormous bronze Buddha figure originally measured 53 feet tall (16 meters), but was destroyed due to a series of fires beginning in 1180. The current recast statue dating from the early eighteenth century measures approximately 49 feet (15 meters) tall, and is still the largest gilt bronze statue in the world housed in the largest wooden structure in the world (Figure 3).

The formal eye-opening ceremony to consecrate this massive figure was held at Tōdaiji temple in 752, at the very heart of the ancient capital of Nara. In order to gather the necessary 500 tons of materials for this monumental public works project, Shōmu appealed to his subjects to donate metal to the cause, which naturally included all weapons and armor that might be used in future rebellions against him. Shōmu’s tactical metal recall not only neutralized potential military opposition to him, but it simultaneously established a peaceful, centralized state that was both materially and
metaphorically unified through the enormous embodiment of the Buddha of Light. In his appeal, the Emperor writes,

[On this day in 743], we take this occasion to proclaim Our great vow of erecting an image of Lochana Buddha in gold and copper. We wish to make the utmost use of the nation’s resources of metal in the casting of this image, and also to level off the high hill on which the great edifice is to be raised, so that the entire land may be joined with Us in the fellowship of Buddhism and enjoy in common the advantages which this undertaking affords to the attainment of Buddhahood. (De Bary, Keene, and Tsunoda 1958:104)

This monumental Buddha-body at the heart of Japan’s earliest centralized state thus became the focal point for all state-sponsored rituals to ‘pacify and protect the country-family’ (chingo kokka). The two-character compound for ‘country-family’ (J. kokka 国家) resembles the ancient Chinese notion of the ‘country-body’ (C. guoti), but draws upon Confucian family values. These directed the ruler to govern over his people like a father governs his son, thus positioning the emperor as the metaphorical pater familias of the body politic.

In order to ensure the proper health and safety of his country-family, Shōmu commissioned Buddhist rituals in every province. Previously in 741, Shōmu had established a regional network of provincial temples
called *kokubunji* 国分寺 (lit. country-Buddha-temple). His consort-wife Empress Kōmyō 光明皇后 (701–60) likewise established a similar network of provincial convents (J. *kokubun-niji* 国分尼寺), where rituals involving the *Lotus Sūtra* (J. *Hokkekyō* 法華経) were performed. As this sutra hints at female enlightenment potential, Kōmyō is credited with including women in the larger Buddhist body politic of ancient Japan (Meeks 2010).

The imperial edicts emulated similar decrees in Tang dynasty China (618–907 CE) and Silla period Korea (57 BCE–935 CE), which were designed to unify their respective kingdoms under a single Buddhist ideology. Within the centralized infrastructure of *kokubunji* temples and *kokubun-niji* convents, state-sponsored Buddhist rituals were performed for what we might call today national healthcare and homeland security. In this regard, they resembled the ancient Chinese notion of *zhi*, which indicates both healing and statecraft. These were two tasks that were inextricably linked at the time, since a safe and healthy body-politic must be made up of safe and healthy bodies.

Specifically, ritual chanting of the *Golden Light Sūtra* (J. *Konkōmyōkyō* 金光明経) in Japan’s *kokubunji* temples called upon the four heavenly kings (J. *shintennō* 四天王) to ‘protect th[e] king and his people, give them peace and freedom from suffering, prolong their lives and fill them with glory’ (de Bary, Keene, and Tsunoda 1958:98). Later in the sutra, the Buddha himself rejoins, ‘If any king upholds this sutra and makes offerings in its behalf, I will purify him of suffering and illness, and bring him peace of mind’ (de Bary, Keene, and Tsunoda 1958:99). As a result, the *kokubunji* temples acted as a kind of early immunological system that circulated protective ritual activity throughout Japan’s early body politic. They regulated the health and wellbeing of the state, extended Emperor Shōmu’s therapeutic and political influence throughout the land, and metaphorically cast him as a universal world ruler (*cakravartin*), who literally cast the unifying personification of Buddha’s world-body (*S. dharmakāya*) at Tōdaiji headquarters in the capital. In this context, the Buddha’s conceptual world-body, his monumental sculptural body, Shōmu’s imperial body as head of the family-state, and the populace’s individual bodies – protected and prolonged by the four heavenly kings’ bodies – all intersected and overlapped to form a multivalent early Buddhist ‘body politic’ in Japan.

**Heian period (794–1192)**

In the classical Heian period, named after the eponymous capital at Heian-kyō (present day Kyoto), Buddhism continued to serve the body-politic, though in more elaborate esoteric ritual forms. Esoteric Buddhism was
a form of Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism that the patriarch Kūkai (空海735–835) brought back to Japan in 806 after studying abroad in China for two years. Kūkai’s central teachings focused on ‘becoming a Buddha in this very body’ (J. sokushin jōbutsu 即身成仏). The ritual logic behind his elaborate esoteric methods presupposed that the dharmakāya’s universal body, speech, and mind could be embodied on the microcosmic level in the individual practitioner’s corresponding mudrā hand gestures, mantra recitations, and mandala visualizations. As Kūkai’s commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra (T18:4a–5a) states,

Therefore the three mysteries of the Dharmakāya’s body, speech and mind and those of sentient beings correspond, making it possible for sentient beings to be blessed and empowered by the Dharmakāya. When, having observed this meaning, the practitioners of Mantrayāna [i.e., esoteric Buddhism] form mudrās with their hands, recite mantras with their mouths, and fix their minds in samādhi [meditative absorption], then their three mysteries become immersed in those of the Dharmakāya, resulting in the attainment of great perfection. (Trans. Abe 2000:129).11

This interpenetration of the larger Buddha-body and the practitioner’s self-body was a meditative state known as kaji 加持, or mutual empowerment, in which the practitioner senses that ‘Buddha enters me; I enter Buddha’ (J. nyūga ganyū 入我我入). Historically, priests initiated into these esoteric practices performed rituals with mudrās, mantras, and mandalas, and ostensibly channeled universal forces into the ritual hall for the pacification and protection of the family-state.

For example, beginning in 823, Kūkai performed imperially sponsored esoteric rites at Tōji 東時 temple in Kyoto to protect the country under the relatively new Heian regime. Consequently, Tōji was known as the temple dedicated to ‘The King of the Sutras That Defend the Country’ (J. kyō-ō gokokuji 経王護國寺). This preeminent ‘King of the Sutras’ refers to the newly imported Benevolent Kings Sūtra (J. Ninnōkyō 仁王経 T246), a third state-protecting scripture that Kūkai popularized to supplement the old Golden Light and Lotus Sūtras used during the Nara period. Charles Orzech observes that the Ninnōkyō was a kind of urtext or ‘charter for a national Buddhism of protection in China, Korea and Japan’ that persisted well into the twentieth century (Orzech 1998:3). He also remarks that Tōji’s sculptural Ninnōkyō mandara ‘is a striking reminder of the imperial Buddhism that dominated China, Korea and Japan for a millennium and which contributed much to the present political dispositions of all three nations. It is also a reminder of the power of religion to transform the political world’ (Orzech 1998:3).
In Amoghavajra’s Chinese version of the *Ninnōkyō* dating from 765, the Buddha warns the Indian King of Kosala to uphold the dharma, lest seven kinds of disasters befall his kingdom (anomalies in the sun and moon, stars and planets, fires, floods, storms, drought, and war). To help ward off such misfortunes, in 826 Kūkai installed a Golden Hall at Tōji temple, where officiants would recite the sutra, perform esoteric ritual sequences, and consecrate the emperor’s clothes (to be discussed below) before a three-dimensional sculptural mandala of larger than lifesize Buddha-bodies. The figural mandala has three sets of five images each. The center grouping features a sculpture of the ‘Great Light’ Buddha Mahāvairocana (*J. Dainichi nyorai* 大日如来) with four attendant wisdom Buddhas. Another grouping of benign bodhisattvas appear to the spectator’s right. Another wrathful group of the Five Great Wisdom Kings (*J. godai myōō* 五大明王) appear on the left. Figure 4 illustrates the latter grouping, excepting the central King of Immovable Wisdom (*J. Fudō myōō*, 不動明王).

The wrathful countenances, flaming aureoles, multiple arms, heads, and hand-held implements of these figures all indicate that they are former demons-turned-dharma protectors. Yet, even in their domesticated Buddhist aspects, these Wisdom Kings nevertheless still embody the terrifying power to protect the state as they ‘stand ready to defend Buddhist rulers (and others) from invasions, bandits, and meteorological disasters’ (Orzech 1998:3). Furthermore, according to Cynthia Bogel’s art historical analysis of the Tōji arrangement,

> *The Benevolent Kings Sūtra* [thus provides] the visual and conceptual guides for making mandalas for rites of key importance to the state. *Abhiśekha* [consecration] rituals ... and *Mikkyō* [i.e., esoteric Buddhist] rites related to the *Benevolent Kings Sūtra* were distinct, but both deployed mandala altars, both called out the divinities of the mandala universe, and both concerned the same goals – including the protection of the state. (Bogel 2009:285)

By the end of Kūkai’s life in 835, esoteric rites to protect the emperor’s body-as-state had infiltrated into the innermost sanctums of the imperial palace itself. During the second week of the New Year, following a week of prayers to the *kami*, Kūkai’s Latter Seven Day Rite (*J. goshichinichi mishuhō* 後七日御修法) was performed in a specially constructed palace chapel called the Shingon’in 真言院. The elaborate altar arrangement for this esoteric Buddhist rite was recorded in the late twelfth-century *Handscroll of Annual Ceremonies* (*J. Nenjū gyōji emaki* 年中行事絵巻). The illustration shows individual offering stands before hanging scrolls of the five wrathful Wisdom Kings, who as mentioned above, defend the ruler against invasions, meteorological disasters, and other misfortunes. Two side altars
before suspended images of the Womb and Diamond World mandalas on the right and left, respectively, were also prepared for fire ceremonies (J. goma 護摩).12

This elaborate week-long ritual sequence was designed to protect and empower the emperor’s physical body as a synecdoche for the country’s larger body politic. It also protected his imperial robes as a stand-in substitute for his physical presence (Rambelli 2002), and it paid devotional attention to a Buddhist relic, the so-called wish-fulfilling jewel (S. cintamani), because it was both ‘the symbol of the Dharmakāya ... [and] the natural body of all the Tathāgatas [i.e., Buddhas]’ (Abe 2000:349).13 As such, it was believed to have special state-protecting abilities (Ruppert 2000).

Specifically, the ritual began with five sets of offerings to Mahāvairocana Buddha and various Buddhist and Shintō deities, then three sets of goma
fire ceremonies to prevent calamities, to increase fortune, and to defeat
enemies.  Finally, a series of three kaji empowerments followed, in which
a high-ranking priest (J. daiajari 大阿闍梨 S. mahācharya) performed
specific mudrās, mantras, and mandala meditations to channel the
dharmakāya’s universal energies into scented water, into the emperor’s
robes, and into the emperor’s own body (Rambelli 2002:431). On the first
and last nights of the ceremony, this kaji-empowered water was directly
sprinkled onto the emperor’s body (J. gyokutai kaji 玉體加持). This liturgi-
cally constructed him as an immutable ‘jade or jewel body’ (J. gyokutai 玉
體), and discursively conflated him with the relic of Buddha’s own body in
the form of the cintamani wish-fulfilling jewel (玉). In addition, the con-
secrated water was also indirectly sprinkled onto the emperor’s robes (J.
gyoe kaji 御衣加持), which eclipsed the direct blessing of the emperor’s
body after the Meiji Restoration (Rambelli 2002:431 n. 13). This sarto-
rial segment was also present in the Benevolent Kings rites at Tōji temple
mentioned above. In addition, during the last three days of the ceremony,
more kaji-empowered water was delivered from the Shingon’in chapel to
the palace residence to bless the emperor further with physical health and
longevity.

Japanese scholar Hayami Tasuku 速水侑 directly connects these Bud-
dhist rites for the imperial body to the wellbeing of the larger imperial body
politic, especially during the late Heian period, when the powerful Fuji-
wara regents and supposedly retired (but still politically active) emperors
wielded considerable influence at court. Rambelli observes,

If Hayami is correct, that implies that in the tenth and eleventh centuries the ‘jade
body’ of the emperor … was actually a collective body including the protagonists
of the political scene, analogous to what early modern European theorists of the
‘king’s two bodies’ called [the] ‘body politic.’ In other words, the [mishuhō], rituals
that started as forms of religious protection for the emperor and his possessions,
became tools for the defense of the entire political system. (Rambelli 2002:441)15

This annual Buddhist rite for the imperial state cult was historically held
in the palace, but after a series of palace fires and several periods of inter-
ruption and resuscitation (Rambelli 2002:437–45),16 it finally moved to Tōji
temple in 1883 (Abe 2000:347). Today, this secret ritual continues to take
place behind closed doors in the Kanjōin 灌頂院 initiation hall located in
the southwest quadrant of Tōji’s temple compound every January 8–14 (in
the solar calendar). Visitors today may only observe the outdoor ceremonial
procession of the emperor’s clothing being carried into the sanctuary, and
they may only enter into the Kanjōin for one hour after the rites are con-
cluded to view the sanctuary setup. Personal observation by this author on
January 14, 2002, confirms that the disposition of mandala images, altars, offertory stands, and godai myōō hanging scrolls in the Kanjōin conforms to the illustrated twelfth-century *Handscroll of Annual Ceremonies*.17

**Epilogue: Meiji variations on a theme**

Kūkai’s esoteric *kaji* empowerments for the benefit of the emperor-as-state thus served as a template for other sectarian expressions of self-and-Buddha union. For example, during the medieval period, the Jōdo Shinshū ‘True Pure Land’ Buddhist patriarch Rennyō (1415–99) claimed that when chanting Amida Buddha’s name, ‘the believer and Buddha are one body’ (*J. kihō ittai* 機法一体; also translated more philosophically as ‘one substance’). In the modern Meiji period (1868–1912), Rennyō’s slogan was reformulated by the Jōdo Shinshū reformer Kiyozawa Manshi (1863–1903), who concluded instead that ‘the myriad things are one body’ (*J. bamputsu ittai* 万物一体). Generically speaking, *bamputsu ittai* expresses the typical Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine that the world-body is a Buddha-body (*dharmakāya*). Historically speaking, however, Kiyozawa’s reformulation of Rennyō’s motto took on added political valence in the context of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education that demanded allegiance to the emperor as a matter of national morality (*J. kokumin dōtoku* 国民道徳). Kiyozawa maintained that because ‘all things are one body,’ like the fingers of a single hand, individual members of the body politic can act with autonomy, while still fulfilling the function of the universal (i.e., national) will. Kiyozawa writes,

> Various individual actions respond to the essence and body of the one Infinite. The five fingers on each hand and their coordinated and unified movement is nothing other than this. They respond to the directives of only one mind. It is nothing but the transmission and response between this and that, this finger and that finger ... The true body (*shintai*) of the finite and the source of its appearance is not a purely finite individual. We must absolutely recognize that its true body and nature is the Infinite. As its body and nature is the Infinite, it is natural to see a reflection of the Infinite in its activity. That is, though at first sight, the finite existence of ‘this’ and ‘that,’ ‘self’ and ‘other’ appear to be independent, the reality is the same body (*dō ittai*) of the Infinite. (Trans. Fasan 2013:98).18

In the nation-building context of the early Meiji constitutional monarchy, Kiyozawa’s body and hand metaphors reconciled the philosophical problem of individual freedom versus national duty, for ‘[a]s Kiyozawa saw the present social order as in fact an expression of the divine will, submission to its dictates became one with the realization of personal autonomy’ (Fasan 2013:88). As a result, Kiyozawa commands, ‘Take the law of the king
Pamela D. Winfield

[ōhō; a moniker for the national morality campaign] as the foundation and put its ethical code first. Follow the common ways of the world and deepen your faith (anjin) within your heart’ (trans. Fasan 2013:87–8).

Kiyozawa introduced his brand of organic philosophy in his 1892 Skeleton for The Philosophy of Religion (J. Shūkyō tetsugaku gaikotsu 宗教哲学骸骨) and articulates his thoughts about limited particulars in relation to the unlimited Absolute in his unpublished 1895 draft for A Skeleton for the Philosophy of Other Power (J. Tarikimon tetsugaku gaikotsu shikō, 他力門哲学骸骨試行). It is interesting to note that even Kiyozawa’s ‘skeleton’ (J. gaikotsu 骸骨) titles give anatomical structure to his philosophical thought, but other than his clear analogies to the body, there was no visual culture or imperial rituals associated with Kiyozawa’s abstract reasoning. He was trained in Western European philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University (present day University of Tokyo) by Ernest Fenellosa, and he was influenced by Baruch Spinoza’s (1632–77) substance metaphysics, Herbert Spencer’s (1820–1903) social Darwinism, and the understudied German post-Idealist Hermann Lotze (1817–81). However, ‘In contrast to Spencer who argues that society functions like a body, Kiyozawa will submit that the Absolute Infinite is a body … Kiyozawa’s source for this novel understanding is not Spencer but Hermann Lotze’ (Fasan 2013:96–7). In addition, Kiyozawa is heir to Buddhism’s long-standing doctrine of the dharmakāya, the world-body of Buddhahood.

In the modern period, therefore, Western European philosophy and political science influenced leading Japanese intellectuals, who attempted to reconcile and integrate them into Japan’s pre-existing religious and political institutions. For this reason, given this long and varied Buddhist history of the imperial body politic in Japan, it is perhaps worth reconsidering Minobe Tatsukichi’s 美濃部達吉 (1873–1948) so-called 1911 ‘organ theory of government’ in light of Buddhist precedents. When ultra-conservatives in the House of Peers challenged Minobe’s views during the heady State Shintō days of 1934, ostensibly because Minobe’s theory put constitutional limits on the emperor instead of recognizing his elevated status as Amaterasu’s divine progeny, Minobe clarified his position. The Tokyo Imperial University professor of constitutional law writes,

To say that the sovereign is an organ of the nation merely expresses the idea that the sovereign governs not for his own private ends but for the ends of the whole nation. Article IV of the Constitution clearly states that the emperor is the ‘head of state.’ This means that if the nation is likened to the human body, the emperor occupies the position of its head. Prince Itō in his Commentaries on the Constitution says in this connection: ‘... just as the brain in the human body is the primitive source of all mental activity manifested through the four limbs and the
different parts of the body. Needless to say, the brain is just one of man's organs, but it is the pivotal and paramount organ. In other words, the emperor-organ theory is identical in meaning with the Constitution's statement that the emperor is the head of state. It has no other meaning than that ... The idea of a nation prospering or progressing assumes as its basic premise that the nation is a vital, dynamic entity comparable to a living body. The emperor is its head and occupies the position of its paramount organ. (De Bary, Keene, and Tsunoda 1958:242–3).

Thus, there is a lingering affinity or family resemblance that can be discerned when comparing the history of Buddhist imperial bodies and this modern, secular endorsement of Japan's constitutional monarchy. Emperor Shōmu's eighth-century position as a Buddhist *pater familias* in charge of protecting the country-family (*J. kokka 国家*) is not exactly the same as Minobe's placement of the emperor at the head of the constitutional body politic, but many modern Meiji intellectuals did repeatedly and explicitly speak in terms of the ‘family-state’ (*J. kazoku kokka 家族国家*) (Gluck 1987:4, 77–8, 92, 129, 187–8, 256, 265, 259, 276). In addition, the state-sponsored Mishuhō ceremonies for the blessing of the emperor's New Year's robes were not exactly the same as the Meiji emperor's modern investiture ceremony in 1889, but the sartorial symbolism was not lost on anyone. Carol Gluck cleverly writes,

[T]he emperor would become the ideological center of the imperial state. In 1889, however, he was not yet clothed for his new role. For the traditional vestments of the imperial office had been vaporous ones, designed for the emperor's long residence 'above the clouds,' and they would not suffice for his public presence as the ruler of a constitutional state. In terms of ideological process, it required the entire Meiji period to weave the emperor's new clothes and display them effectively before the people ... [By the end of World War II], most Japanese were familiar with the cut and shape of his new imperial garments. (Gluck 1987:73)

There is thus an uncanny resonance and perhaps an under-acknowledged Buddhist intellectual lineage that runs right through these premodern and modern expressions of Japan's imperial body politic. In the modern period, these expressions were certainly complemented by the State Shintō discourse premised on ancient Chinese notions of *guoti* and cross-fertilized with European philosophical and political theory. But Buddhism's conceptual, visual, and ritual contributions to the integrity of Japan's state polity – as embodied by the emperor – should also be recognized.

**Conclusion**

In Japan, the notion of the imperial body politic (*C. guoti, J. kokutai*) technically only emerged in the early modern period with the School of
National Learning. Later, in the context of late nineteenth-century Mitō ideology and twentieth-century State Shintō, the emperor eventually was revered not only as the head of the kokutai, but as the divine embodiment of Amaterasu in the land of the gods itself.

This study has argued, however, that prior to this, Buddhism had long provided early conceptual tropes, visual culture, and ritual enactments that likewise equated the emperor’s body with his empire, such that ritually protecting the health and wellbeing of his person ostensibly ensured the health and wellbeing of the land at large. During the Nara and Heian periods especially, Buddhism had promoted doctrinal concepts such as the dharmakāya world-body of Buddhahood as personified by the Birushana and Dainichi nyorai statues. Its institutions facilitated ritual recitations of the Golden Light or Lotus Sūtras throughout the kokubunji temple system, and directly before Emperor Shōmu’s monumental bronze Buddha statue at Tōdaiji. The patriarch Kūkai further provided an esoteric upgrade with the Benevolent Kings Sūtra recited before Tōjō’s five state-protecting Wisdom Kings, who also figured prominently in state-protecting empowerments during the second week of the new year. And in the modern period, Buddhist philosophers such as Kiyozawa Manshi updated medieval maxims to respond to contemporary concerns about Japan’s nascent nationhood. In all of these instances, it was the figure of the emperor’s body that was at the center of the ritual action, and that metaphorically cast him as a Buddhist cakravartin or virtuous world-ruler, who protected his realm by upholding the dharma. By attending to the numerous anatomical analogies and embodied expressions of enlightenment in both premodern and modern religio-political statecraft (J. matsurigoto 政), this article has highlighted the centrality of the human body in imagining religious authority and political power in Japan.

About the author

Pamela D. Winfield is Professor of Buddhist Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at Elon University in NC. She is the author of Icons and Iconoclasm in Japanese Buddhism: Kūkai and Dōgen on the Art of Enlightenment (Oxford University Press, 2013) which won the AAS-SEC Book Prize in 2015. She is also the co-editor (with Steven Heine) of Zen and Material Culture (Oxford University Press, 2017). Her research has been supported by grants from the American Academy of Religion, the Association for Asian Studies, and the Asia Cultural Council among others, and her scholarship on the visual, material, and embodied dimensions of Japanese Buddhism have appeared in The Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, Studies in Chinese Religions, Material Religion, and other edited volumes with Oxford University Press, Columbia University Press, Brill, Routledge, Shambhala, Springer, and others.
Notes

1 This article translates the term guoti/kokutai literally and deliberately as ‘country-body,’ or alternatively, as ‘body politic.’ These translations are preferable to the common yet anachronic mistranslation of guoti/kokutai as ‘national polity.’ The latter does not adequately grasp the premodern notion of the state before the nineteenth-century invented concept of nationhood.

2 The structure of this article as outlined above is not intended to reinforce the notion that so-called Shintō should come first as the ‘indigenous’ form of Japanese religiosity, and that Buddhism was a later, foreign influence. Scholarship has demonstrated that so-called Shintō only evolved in reaction to and in tandem with Buddhist influences from the continent, and that it was in fact pre-existing Buddhist notions of the body-politic that predated any early modern Shintō-inflected usage of the term kokutai, which only began in the early modern period.

3 DZ 1185 (18.4b) trans. Ware (1966), as cited in Kohn (2006:8).

4 In the modern period, revisionist histories and feminist retellings of these Shintō myths recast female deities in a wholly independent and empowered light. For example, Hiratsuka Raichō’s (1886–1971) ‘Manifesto’ in the first 1911 issue of Seiō journal launched the eponymous Bluestocking Movement by reclaiming a new feminist genesis for Japan, declaring that, ‘In the beginning, woman was the sun’ (J. genshi, josei ha taiyō de atta 元始、女性は太陽であった).

5 Nearly a century later, novelist Kirino Natsuo (b. 1951) creatively reimagines the Izanagi and Izanami myth from a feminist perspective in her 2008 The Goddess Chronicle, which was translated into English by Rebecca Copeland in 2013.

6 According to the Kojiki, Amaterasu’s brother Susanoo discovers the sacred ‘grass cutting sword’ (J. Kusanagi no tsurumi 草薙剣) inside the tail of a giant eight-headed serpent demon Orochi (a familiar name to many video game, manga, and anime enthusiasts today). Orochi had eaten seven daughters of a farmer, but Susanoo falls in love with the final eighth daughter and slays the dragon to save her. In so doing, he symbolically conquers the eight mythic islands of Japan and unifies the divided archipelago into a centralized state, symbolized as the single figure of the last remaining beautiful princess.

7 Scare quotes are used here to indicate that Emperor Meiji’s governing powers were never fully ‘restored’ to premodern levels. Rather, Emperor Meiji principally acted as the public face for a small oligarchy of ruling elites who hailed from leading southern feudal clans.

8 Slogans throughout Japanese history have underscored the unity of state–sangha relations, and have been translated variously as: ‘Chingo Kokka (“Purify and Defend the Nation”), Buppo no Furi (“Inseparability of the Emperor’s Law and the Buddha’s Law”), Saisei Itchi (“Unity of Religion and Government”), Kozen Gokoku (“Let Zen Prosper and Defend the Nation”), Sonno Hobutsu (“Revere the Emperor and Serve the Buddha”), Bukkyo Kokueki (“Buddhism and a Prosperous Nation”), Kyoo Gokoku (“Religion and the Emperor Protect the Nation”), Nihonkuni no Hashira (“[Nichiren as] The Pillar of the Nation”), Gokoku Aiho (“Defend the Nation and

9 There were numerous other sculpted Buddha bodies at the Tōdaiji temple complex besides the Great Buddha (J. daibutsu 大仏). For example, in 746 Emperor Shōmu installed a statue of the eight-armed esoteric manifestation of Fukuenjaku Kannon 不空羂索観音 in the Sangatsudō Hall of the temple complex. Rituals performed before this multi-limbed figure ensured that any malevolent forces that might threaten the state would be neutralized and drawn into the dharma by Kannon’s eponymous ‘never-empty lasso’ of compassion.

10 Even today, Pulguksa 仏国寺 temple in the former capital of Kyongju, Korea, still stands as a testament to the national Buddhist temple network unifying the ancient Silla kingdom.


14 A similar week-long empowerment ceremony explicitly dedicated to subduing enemies shares many of the same altar arrangements as the Second Week Ritual. It focuses on the fierce Wisdom King Āṭavaka (J. Daigensui mishuhō 太元帥御修) and promises, ‘if a king takes refuge in the general Āṭavaka, all generals will protect his country, all his foreign enemies will be defeated, internal rebellions will be suppressed …, in his country there will be no epidemics … all wishes of lay people and priests will be granted, be they the elimination of calamities, the acquisition of love, or the subjugation of evil’ (Rambelli 2002:433, citing the last fascicle of the Atabaku gensui shugyō ki). This mishuhō rite was first performed in 846 to protect the southern island of Kyūshū from Korean pirates, and was last performed during World War II (Rambelli 2002:427, 437).

15 The ‘early modern European theorists’ thatHayami references include especially Thomas Hobbes, whose 1651 Leviathan frontispiece provides the archetypical image of a king’s head atop a corporate body of citizens that rises up from the city and countryside.

16 The Shingon’in was destroyed by fire in the thirteenth century, but was rebuilt in 1429. The Mishuhō was celebrated from 1429–55 (suspended due to internal warfare), 1623–1871 (suspended during the shinbutsu bunri edicts separating Buddhism from a supposedly pure Shintō tradition), and then reinstated from 1883–1945 (provided the ritual only consecrate the emperor’s robes, not his ‘jade body’ directly). The rite was resuscitated in 1968 to pray for world peace. As a result, ‘In little more than a century, the GSN has changed from an official ritual for the protection of the emperor, to nationalistic ritual in support of an authoritarian regime, to a ceremony invoking world peace’ (Rambelli 2002:437–45).

17 I wish to thank the Kobe College Corporation/Japan Educational Exchange (KCC/JEE) for the Margaret S. Foley dissertation grant that facilitated my research under Prof. Yoritomi Motohiro at Nichibunken from 2001–2.

19 Kiyozawa, ‘Shūkyōteki shinnen no hisshi jyōken,’ Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshū, vol. 6, p. 79, as cited in Fasan (2013:87–8).

References

