

Offprint

Avatamsaka
Buddhism in East Asia

Huayan, Kegon, Flower Ornament Buddhism
Origins and Adaptation of a Visual Culture

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The Art of *Avatamsaka* Buddhism at the Courts of Empress Wu and Emperor Shōmu/Empress Kōmyō

Empress Wu 武后 (624–705, r. 684–705) was a devout Buddhist and also came to power through Buddhist legitimation, proclaiming herself the Maitreya Incarnate and a Cakravartin, a universal ruler. Among the Tang rulers, she was probably one of the most ardent supporters of Buddhism.¹ Her court sponsored a stellar group of Buddhist translators, including the Indian monk Bodhiruci (Putiliuzhi 菩提流志, d. 722), who arrived in Chang'an in 693; the Khotanese monk Śikṣānanda (Shichanantuo 實叉難陀, 651–710), who arrived in 695 and retranslated the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* (*Huayan jing* 華嚴經); and the Chinese monk Yijing 義淨 (635–713), who returned to the Tang capitals in 695 after his pilgrimage to India by way of the maritime route.

In Buddhist doctrine, the two schools most closely related to Empress Wu's sponsorship were the Huayan and the nascent Esoteric school. She sponsored a new translation of the *Huayan jing*, and Fazang 法藏 (643–712), considered the third patriarch of the Huayan school, was one of her most trusted advisors. In the Huayan cosmology, Vairocana is the absolute, transcendent Buddha presiding over all other Buddhas in the universe. This cosmological concept informed the iconography of the Fengxian Temple 奉先寺 at Longmen 龍門, built in 672–675, with the colossal statue of Roshana (Lushena 盧舍那) or Vairocana (Biluzhena 毗盧遮那) presiding over the pantheon (Figure 1). Spiritual and temporal rulers were identified as one. The cosmic Buddha literally and figuratively towers over all the others in the same way the emperor – in this case Empress Wu – exercises power over the empire. Later, in Japan, the completion of the Tōdaiji 東大寺 under Emperor Shomū 聖武 (r. 724–749) emulated the example of Tang China; its colossal bronze statue of Vairocana was dedicated in 752 (Figure 2).²

Study of the iconography of both the Longmen and the Tōdaiji colossal statues, however, suggests that the textual source was the *Sūtra of Brahmā's Net* (Ch. *Fanwang jing* 梵網經; Jap. *Bonmyōkyō*) rather than the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*.³ Considered an apocryphal text composed in China, the *Sūtra of Brahmā's Net* is nonetheless an

1 Weinstein 1987, 37–57; Forte 1996/2005.

2 For the historical background to Shōmu's building of Tōdaiji see Piggot 1997, 262–279.

3 Elisséeff 1936; Inoue 1966, 481–501; Konno 1997, 80–83.

important Mahāyāna treatise that addresses topics of bodhisattva precepts and also introduces Vairocana Buddha. The text describes Vairocana's Lotus Repository World, with the cosmic Buddha sitting on a giant thousand-petaled lotus on an ocean. Each petal supports a world. Vairocana incarnates into one thousand Śākyamuni Buddhas, one for each of the worlds (Figure 3).⁴ In the case of the Longmen Buddha, although the lower part of the statue has suffered damage, enough remains to show that the Buddha sits on a large lotus with three layers of petals (Figure 1a). On each petal there is a relief carving of a Buddha and possibly attendant figures. The iconography is similar to that of the great Buddha at Tōdaiji.⁵ That bronze statue had been burnt down and recast, with the current statue dating to the 17th century, but the original 8th-century lotus pedestal with engraving has survived. On each petal, the engraving includes Śākyamuni, with a large entourage of bodhisattvas, sitting on a giant lotus that in turn also supports many Sumeru worlds and twenty-five worlds above (Figure 2a).

However, the parallel between the Fengxiansi and the Tōdaiji Vairocana statues ends there. At the Fengxian Temple, Vairocana is flanked by two disciples, two bodhisattvas, two heavenly kings, and two guardian deities, or *dvārapālas*. Such a grouping of nine figures can be seen as a gradual development from the Buddha-triad to a grouping of five or seven figures over a century or so. In the early part of the 6th century, a triad of a Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas is quite common. By the end of the 6th century, larger groupings occur, seen in a gilt bronze altarpiece of the Sui dynasty (589–618): the Buddha is flanked by two bodhisattvas and two *dvārapālas*, forming a pentad (Figure 4). At Longmen, the Buddha now presides over a pantheon that is increasingly larger and more hierarchical. The idealized Buddha and bodhisattvas, shown ageless and calm, with downcast eyes, project an inward spirituality. In contrast, the protective figures – the heavenly kings dressed in military armor and the muscular *dvārapālas*, of lower spiritual status – are subject to human emotions and are shown expressing fierceness and determination in their roles as protectors of the Buddhist kingdom. Since the temporal rulers have been promoted as Buddhas – the ruler presides over the empire the same way Vairocana presides over all the Buddhas in the universe – these protective deities by extension also protect the secular state.⁶

In the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall) of Tōdaiji, flanking the colossal statue of Vairocana were two large bronze bodhisattvas: Avalokiteśvara (said to be Cintāmaṇicakra, Avalokiteśvara with the Wish-Granting Jewel; Ch. Ruyilun Guanyin

4 Sadataka 1997, 151–154.

5 Longmen wenwu baoguansuo 1992, vol. 2, pl. 114; Sofukawa 1992, no. 7, 214–215; McNair 2007, 116–117.

6 The notion of Buddhist kingship is an important theme in Buddhism in Asia, and has helped the religion to secure state sponsorship in many countries. In China, as early as the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), Buddhist monks who served as political advisors already promoted the notion of the emperor as Buddha. In Japan, state ideology was equally intertwined with the Buddhist notion of kingship, especially during the 7th and 8th centuries.

如意輪觀音, Jap. Nyoirin Kannon) to the Buddha's left, and Ākāśagarbha (Bodhisattva of Boundless Space; Ch. Xukongzang pusa 虛空藏菩薩, Jap. Kokūzō bosatsu) to the right (Figures 5, 6).⁷ Both of them were recast in the 18th century. In addition, there were originally two large embroidered hangings (each 35 *shaku*⁸ 尺 tall), one depicting Amoghapāśa (Avalokiteśvara with the Unfailing Rope; Ch. Bukongjuansuo Guanyin 不空羂索觀音, Jap. Fukūkenjaku Kannon) and the other depicting Shō Kannon 聖觀音 (Āryāvalokiteśvara, Ch. Sheng Guanyin), the original form of Avalokiteśvara. Notably different from the Fenxiansi grouping is the prominence of esoteric bodhisattvas, especially various forms of Avalokiteśvara, as flanking figures for Vairocana. Other chapels in the Tōdaiji, including the Nigatsudō 二月堂 (Hall of the Second Month) and the Sangatsudō 三月堂 (Hall of the Third Month, also Hokkedō 法華堂, the Lotus Hall), also have esoteric Avalokiteśvaras as principal icons.⁹ In this paper I explore the hypothesis that this combination of Huayan/Kegon ideology with esoteric deity cults at Tōdaiji can be seen as a legacy of the kind of Buddhism first developed under Empress Wu.

In addition to Empress Wu's support of the Huayan school, the Esoteric school gradually gained prominence during her reign. Esoteric Buddhism developed in India in the 7th century, and China was exposed to these new trends through more direct contacts with India after Tang China was unified under Emperor Taizong in the early part of the 7th century. It is well known that *dhāraṇī* texts had been available since early times, but the 7th century saw a drastic increase in them. The arrival of Atikūṭa in the mid-7th century and his translation of the *Tuoluoni ji jing* 陀羅尼集經 (*Sūtra of Collected Dhāraṇīs*) introduced a whole set of *dhāraṇīs* which, as Ronald Davidson has suggested, were already fully Tantric in their implications.¹⁰ The great translator Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600–664), who returned to China after his sixteen-year pilgrimage to India in 645, also translated a number of *dhāraṇī* texts, including two on the esoteric forms of Avalokiteśvara. Xuanzang himself was a devotee of Guanyin and believed in the bodhisattva's magical power.

Because of her patronage of Buddhism, a remarkable group of Buddhist translators gathered at the Buddhist temples of Luoyang, Empress Wu's capital when she reigned over her Zhou dynasty (690–705). In addition to the monks mentioned earlier, there was a coterie of foreign monks who were largely responsible for the propagation of esoteric elements in Tang Buddhism (sometimes called “Empress Wu's Esoteric

7 Contemporary records only mention the two flanking bodhisattvas as Avalokiteśvara and Ākāśagarbha. The identification of the specific form of Avalokiteśvara as Cintāmaṇicakra occurred a few centuries later. However, there are also opinions that support the tentative identification of Cintāmaṇicakra (see discussion below).

8 One *shaku* is approximately 30 cm.

9 The Senjudō 千手堂, in the Ordination Hall, originally also had a statue of the Thousand-Armed Kannon as the principal icon.

10 T 901; in a lecture given at the University of Virginia, spring 2008, Ronald Davidson discussed his current research on this particular text.



Figure 1. Fengxian Temple with Vairocana in center.

Chinese, Longmen, Fengxiansi, Tang dynasty, 672–675. Limestone.

Height of Vairocana 17.14 m. From Longmen wenwu baoguan suo *et al.* 1992, Pl. 110.

Buddhism”), including Divākara (地婆訶羅, or Rizhao 日照 in Chinese, 613–687 CE) from Central India; the Kashmiri monk Baosiwei 寶思惟 (d. 721), or Mañicintana; and Li Wuchan 李無詔, from northwestern India. Bodhiruci and Yijing both also translated esoteric texts.¹¹ Empress Wu eagerly endorsed the new deities and the associated rituals and practices. These activities paved the way for the reception of the Esoteric school in the 8th century, anticipating the arrival of the three Tantric masters Śubhākarasimha (Ch. Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735), Vajrabodhi (Ch. Jingangzhi 金剛智, 669–741), and Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong 不空, 705–74) at the Tang court.

Around this time, we see more esoteric images at Longmen, such as an image of the crowned Buddha from Leigutai, considered an esoteric form of Vairocana. Probably moved to the Southern Leigutai Cave at Longmen in recent times, this imposing image is adorned with a tall crown, necklace, and armlets, his right hand in the earth-touching *mudrā* (Figure 7). Considered a manifestation of Vairocana Buddha, the iconographical description corresponds to a passage describing the Fodingxiang 佛頂像 (image of Uṣṇīṣa, or Crown of the Buddha’s Head from the *Tuoluoni ji jing*).¹²

¹¹ See Osabe 1982; Forte 1984 and 2006.

¹² T 901, vol. 18, 785c^{18–25}.



Figure 1a. Detail of pedestal of Vairocana.
Chinese, Longmen, Fengxiansi, Tang dynasty, 672–675.
Limestone. From Longmen wenwu baoguansuo *et al.* 1992, Pl. 114.

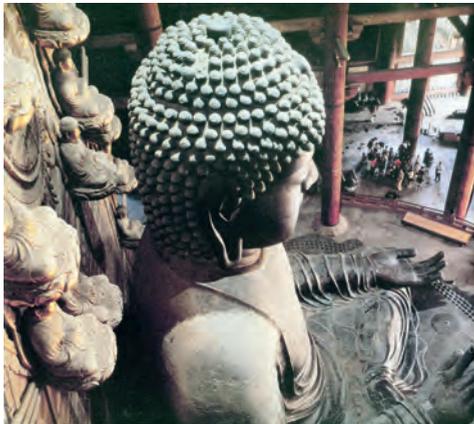


Figure 2. Vairocana Buddha.
Japanese, Tōdaiji, Nara, late Nara period, ca. 752 (recast in 1692).
Gilt bronze. Height 14.73 m above pedestal. From Rosenfield *et al.* 1986, Fig. 4.



Figure 2a. Engraving of Lotus Repository World,
on lotus pedestal of bronze statue of Vairocana.

Japanese, Tōdaiji, Nara, late Nara period, ca. 756–757.
Height of petal 200 cm. From Rosenfield *et al.* 1986, Fig. 8.

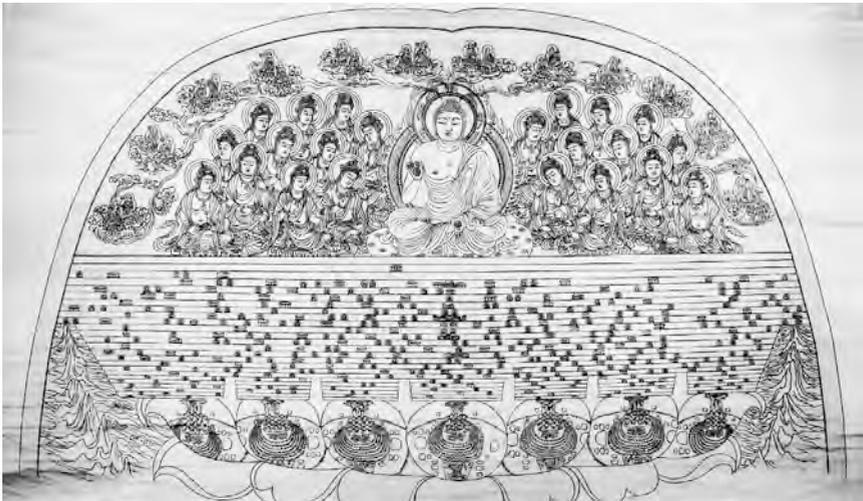


Figure 3. Drawing of engraving on petal of Vairocana's lotus pedestal in Tōdaiji.
From Inamoto 2003, Pl. 6.



Figure 4. Altarpiece of Amitābha Buddha.

Chinese, excavated south of Xi'an, Sui dynasty (589–618), dated 584. Gilt bronze. Height 41 cm. Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. From Lee *et al.* 1998, Pl. 160.

The affinity between the *Avatamsaka* and Esoteric schools is seen in the fact that they share the same principal deity, Vairocana. The statue dates to around 700, the time of Empress Wu. Several woodblock prints of the *Mahāpratisarā Dhāraṇī* (*Dasuiqiu tuoluoni* 大隨求陀羅尼, Dhāraṇī of the Great Protectress), translated into Chinese by Mañicintana in 693, have been found at Chang'an. Printed both in Sanskrit and in Chinese, some perhaps date to as early as the 8th and 9th centuries; these examples show that esoteric cults were spreading in China.¹³

More importantly, we see several esoteric forms of Avalokiteśvara that began to flourish under Empress Wu. The first to become prominent was the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara Ekādaśamukhā (Ch. Shiyimian Guanyin 十一面觀音, Jap. Jūichimen Kannon).¹⁴ Although the *dhāraṇī* text of this deity was first translated into Chinese in the late 6th century by Yasogupta, apparently it was only after Xuanzang's

¹³ Su 1999, 7–11; pls. 7a–d.

¹⁴ See Wong 2008a.



Figure 5. Cintāmaṇicakra (Nyoirin Kannon).

Japanese, Tōdaiji, Nara, Edo period, 18th century.

Gilt wood. Height 7.22 m. From postcard sold at Tōdaiji.

translation became available that this deity became widely popular in China, with examples found from Dunhuang to the capitals. An example from Dunhuang Cave 321 probably dates to the late 7th and early 8th century, the time of Empress Wu's reign (Figure 8). The bodhisattva has six arms, and the heads are arranged in the 3–5–2–1 configuration. Unlike the Indian precedent in Kanheri, which features the heads arranged in a vertical fashion, the Chinese examples tend to have the heads assembled in a conical shape.¹⁵ These murals of the Eleven-Headed Guanyin are all painted on the east wall (the interior wall of the entrance), above the door or on the side of the doorway. Their positions within the cave-chapels suggest the bodhisattva's role as a protective deity.

For Empress Wu, Buddhism was an instrument to augment her political status and legitimacy. The powers of Buddhist deities were invoked to protect the state, and her patronage was one of the reasons the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara gained

15 See Neville 1998, fig. 9.



Figure 6. Ākāśagarbha (Kokūzū bosatsu).

Japanese, Tōdaiji, Nara, Edo period, 18th century.
Gilt wood. Height 7.1 m. From postcard sold at Tōdaiji.

such importance in China. Fazang’s invocation of the power of the bodhisattva to protect the Tang from the Khitans is a well-known account. Empress Wu also commissioned the Tower of Seven Treasures, or Qibaotai 七寶臺, a multi-faced pillar that was the centerpiece of carving in Guangzhaisi 光宅寺, a temple in Chang’an.¹⁶ Dismantled, the tower or pillar’s some thirty-two pieces of carvings include seven images of Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara, clearly indicating the bodhisattva’s importance. The bodhisattva has the heads piled in the 1–5–4–1 conical fashion. In this group of bodhisattvas, the style is characterized by the frontal treatment of the erect, tubular body with a small waist, small bulging abdomen, and tightly clinging drapery delineated in sharp lines. In the example in Figure 9, the bodhisattva holds a seal in the right hand, which is engraved with the characters 滅罪 (Ch. *miezui*, Jap. *metsu-zai*), meaning “expiation of sins”. This suggests that the bodhisattva was also the

16 Yen 1986.



Figure 7. Vairocana Buddha.

Chinese, Longmen, Leigutai South Cave, Tang dynasty, *ca.* 700.
Limestone. Height 240 cm. From Watt *et al.* 2004, Cat. no. 192.

focus of repentance rituals.¹⁷ At the time of the death of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (650–683), Empress Wu also commissioned one thousand embroidered images of Eleven-Headed Guanyin for commemoration.¹⁸

Other examples dating to the late 7th and early 8th centuries include a marble head excavated at a nunnery site in Xi'an (Chang'an)¹⁹ and a limestone head, now in Japan, that came from a relief statue of the bodhisattva carved next to the entrance of Leigutai North Cave at Longmen (Figure 10). This bodhisattva had four arms, paired with an eight-armed bodhisattva on the opposite side of the entrance.

Two other forms of the esoteric Avalokiteśvara associated with the patronage of Empress Wu were Amoghpaśa and the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara Sahasrabhujarya, (Ch. Qianshou Guanyin 千手觀音, Jap. Senjū Kannon). Xuanzang had also

¹⁷ Nara National Museum 2005, pl. 1; 154–155.

¹⁸ Itō 2005, 18.

¹⁹ See Cheng 2000, p. 134.

translated a *dhāraṇī* text on Amoghapāśa, but three additional translations were undertaken during Empress Wu's reign, by Mañicintana, Li Wuchan, and Bodhiruci (Bodhiruci later translated a much longer 30-juan version of the text in 707–709).²⁰ Although we do not have extant images of Amoghapāśa from around this time, we do have a written record. In 693, Huizhi 慧智 (fl. 676–703), an Indian monk who was the son of a Brahmin ambassador born in China, composed a poem called *Odes in Praise of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara* (*Zan Guanshiyin pusa song* 讚觀世音菩薩頌) after viewing a mural in a Buddhist monastery.²¹ Huizhi wrote this poem in Sanskrit, which he also translated into Chinese. In the poem, he described the bodhisattva as depicted in the mural, including iconographic features unique to Amoghapāśa – namely, a black deerskin covering the bodhisattva's left shoulder and a serpent, or *nāga*, necklace, which carries royal symbolism. Therefore we have no doubt about the identity of the bodhisattva, and this represents the first record of the portrayal of this bodhisattva in China. The poem ends with a tribute to the empress, addressing her as the Cakravartin who turned the Golden Wheel. Since Huizhi participated in translating the key texts that supported Empress Wu's claim to political legitimacy, including the *Foshuo Baoyu jing* 佛說寶雨經 (*Ratnamegha-sūtra*),²² Antonino Forte has suggested that his goal was to propagate the idea that the China over which Empress Wu presided was the center of the Buddhist world. Thus the propagation of Amoghapāśa in East Asia began with royal cults and the notion of Buddhist rulership.²³

The Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara can also be associated with Empress Wu. The preface to the *Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara Dhāraṇī Sūtra* (trans. Zhitong 智通, 7th century) mentions that at Foshoujisi 佛授記寺 an Indian monk had painted an image of a thousand-armed bodhisattva on an altar and offered it, together with the *dhāraṇī*, to Empress Wu, who then asked the court maidens and craftsmen to make embroideries or painted images of the bodhisattva for further propagation.²⁴ At Longmen 萬佛溝 north cliff, dating to the first half of the 8th century (Figure 11).²⁵

As we turn to Japan, the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara was also the first esoteric form of Avalokiteśvara that appeared. There are a number of 7th-century examples found in Japan, including a wood statue 42 cm tall, with polychrome pigments, thought to have been brought there by the pilgrim-monk Jōe 定惠 in 665 (Figure 12). Pilgrim-monks played a crucial role in the transmission of these cults and images to Japan.

In the Main Hall of Hōryūji 法隆寺, a temple founded by Prince Shōtoku 聖德太子 in 607 and rebuilt after a major fire in 670, the wall paintings include an image

20 Wong 2007b; Wong forthcoming.

21 T 1052, vol. 20, 67a²⁹–b¹¹. See also Forte 1985; Reis-Habito 1999.

22 T 660.

23 Forte 2006, 23–24.

24 T 1057a, vol. 20, 83c¹⁰.

25 Longmen Wenwu Baoguan suo 1992, vol. 2, pl. 253.



Figure 8. Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara.

Chinese, Dunhuang Cave 321, east wall, late 7th–early 8th century.
Wall mural. From *Dunhuang Wenwu Yanjiusuo* 1981–1987, pt. 3, Pl. 55.

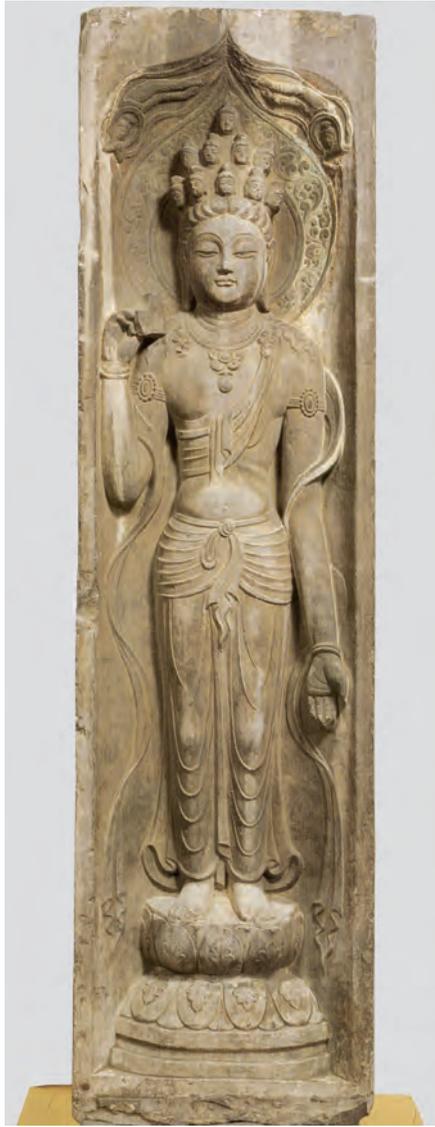


Figure 9. Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara.
Chinese, Qibaotai, Chang'an, Tang dynasty, early 8th century.
Stone. Height 85.1 cm. Nara National Museum.
From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 1.



Figure 10. Head of Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara.

Chinese, Longmen, Leigutai North Cave, Tang dynasty, early 8th century.
Limestone. Height 53.5 cm. Ohara Art Museum.
From Nara National Museum, Pl. 2.

of the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara, one of eight bodhisattvas depicted (Figure 13).²⁶ The rebuilding of Hōryūji's Kondō was completed around 711, and the mural paintings probably date to about the same time. The bodhisattva is standing upright, shown in a frontal position that gives the figure an iconic status, and the figural style of the bodhisattva is similar to that of the Qibaotai sculptures associated with Empress Wu (see Figure 9).

In 719, a sandalwood statue from China of the Nine-Headed Avalokiteśvara, a variant form of the eleven-headed version, was presented to Hōryūji (Figure 14).²⁷ Although there is no mention of who donated this image, scholars surmise that the likely candidate was Dōji 道慈 (d. 744), a pilgrim-monk who visited China from

²⁶ See my discussion of the Hōryūji wall paintings in Wong 2008b.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

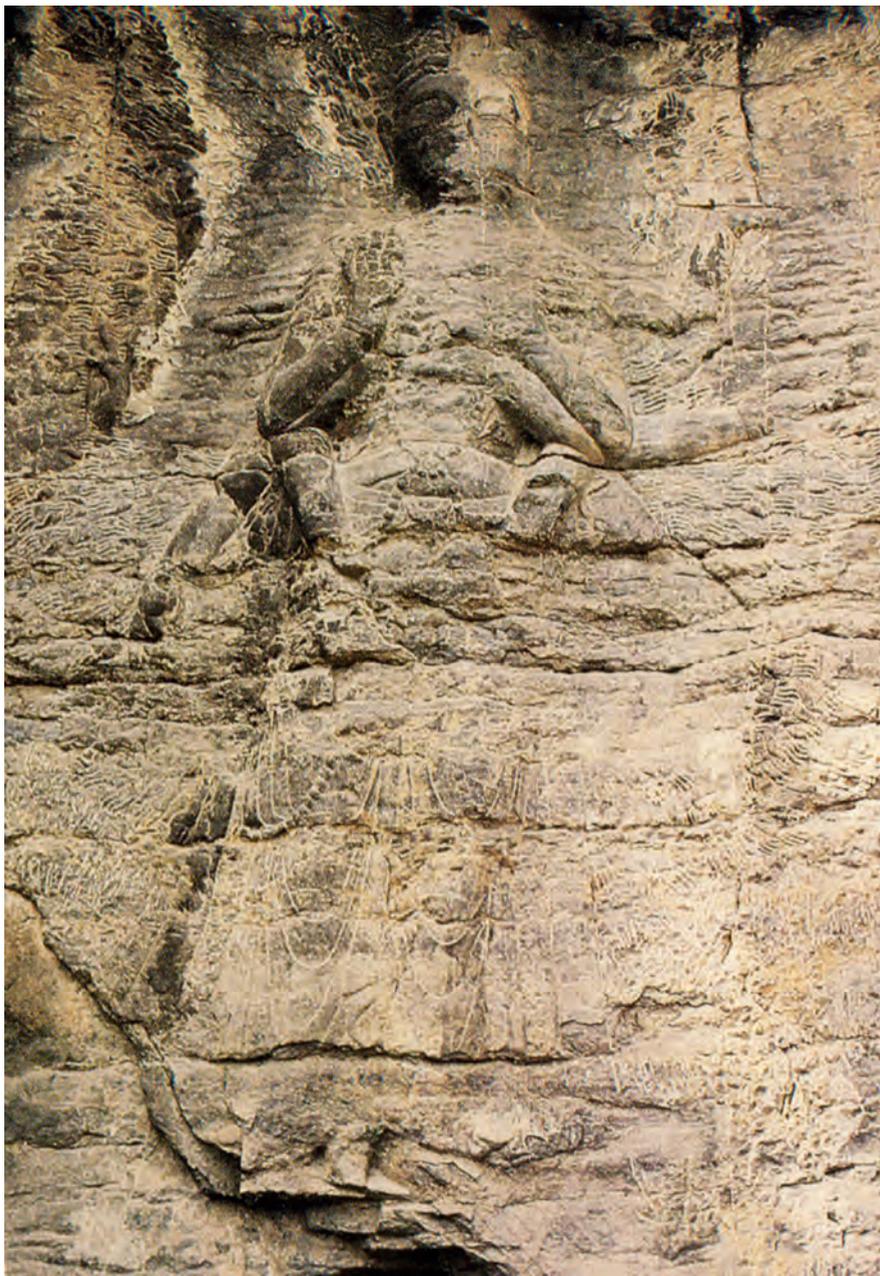


Figure 11. Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara.
Longmen, Wanfogou, Tang dynasty, early 8th century.
Limetone. From Longmen Wenwu Baoguansuo *et al.* 1992, Pl. 253.



Figure 12. Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara.

Chinese, brought to Japan by Jyōe? in 665. Wood with pigments. Height 42.1 cm.
Tokyo National Museum. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 4.

702 to 718 (Figure 15). Dōji had previously studied the Hossō 法相 doctrine at the temple. Besides, among his contemporaries he was among the most highly regarded, and was appointed preceptor in 729, one of the highest positions given to a Buddhist monk. Dōji was in China during the reign of Empress Wu and later became very influential in Nara Buddhism (see further discussion below).

The Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara was also a principal icon – in fact, a secret image – for the Nigatsudō 二月堂, or Hall of the Second Month, of Tōdaiji. An annual confession ceremony focusing on this deity commenced in 752, and has continued to the present day without interruption. The ritual, called Jūichimen keka 十一面悔過



Figure 13. Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara.
Japanese, Hōryūji, Kondō, Nara, Nara period, c. 711.
Wall mural. From Tanaka 1951, wall painting no. 12.



Figure 14. Nine-headed Avalokiteśvara.

Chinese, Presented to Hōryūji in 719.

White sandalwood. Height 37.5 cm. From Ono 1967, Pl. 59.

or Shūnie 修二會, was initiated by Jitchū 實忠 (726?–815?).²⁸ He was a disciple of Ryōben 良弁 (689–773), the chief priest in guiding Emperor Shōmu to build Tōdaiji. The temple became a center for the study of Huayan, or Kegon, doctrine, the pre-eminent school of Buddhism sponsored by Empress Wu and in Nara Japan.

Confession rituals were ancient Indian monastic practices. Including recitation of *sūtras*, chanting hymns, and making offerings to deities, these rituals were performed by monks to cleanse the sins of the old year. The monks performed these rites not

28 Tsutsui 1930; Satō 1975–1982; Horiike 1980–1982, vol. 1, 153–197; Abe 1999, 169–176.



Figure 15. Portrait of Dōji (d. 744).

Japanese, Muromachi period, 15th century.

Ink and colors on silk. Height 119.3 cm, Width 49.2 cm.

Kakuanji, Nara. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 51

only for themselves but also for the nation, the imperial family, and all sentient beings. In China confession rituals were practiced in the 6th and 7th centuries, and spread to Japan, where the rituals were often performed on behalf of the state for protection from calamities and illnesses.²⁹ Esoteric Avalokiteśvaras also became favorite deities for confession rituals, no doubt because of the bodhisattva's magical power

29 For a discussions of repentance and confession rituals in China, see Kuo 1994; Shi 1998. For discussions of early practices in Japan, see de Visser 1935, vol. 1, 249–409.

to alleviate the sufferings of sentient beings, illustrated in the Qibaotao example (see Figure 9), which holds a seal engraved with the characters *metsuzai* (“elimination of sins”) in the right hand.

At Tōdaiji, the small Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara enshrined at the Nigatsudō was considered so sacred that people were rarely allowed to view it. A fire in 1667 destroyed the sculpture; all that remains is the halo, which shows engraved depictions of attendant Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other beings surrounding a multi-armed deity, clearly an image of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara. Surrounding the deity are fifty-two Buddhas at the top; at the bottom are fourteen bodhisattvas, Brahmā, Indra, the four heavenly kings, and other classes of beings (Figures 16, 16a). One leading theory interprets the fifty-two Buddhas together with Guanyin as the fifty-three spiritual teachers whom Sudhana (Ch. Shancai tongzi 善財童子, Jap. Zenzai dōji) visited in search of enlightenment.³⁰ Sudhana’s spiritual journey constitutes the contents of *Gaṇḍavyūha*, or *Rufajiepin* 入法界品, the last chapter of the eighty-fascicle translation of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. Since the establishment of Tōdaiji and its statue of Vairocana Buddha were informed by the Huayan/Kegon doctrine, this configuration of Avalokiteśvara (one of Sudhana’s teachers) and fifty-two Buddhas and other heavenly beings illustrates the incorporation of the esoteric Avalokiteśvaras into the Kegon ideology. The back of the mandorla is engraved with a depiction of the Buddhist cosmos, including Mount Sumeru and hell scenes at the bottom (Figure 16a).

In the Sangatsudō of Tōdaiji, an imposing dry lacquer statue of Amoghapāśa, over 3.5 meters tall and dated to about 748, is probably one of the largest bodhisattva statues created in Japan up to that time (Figure 17).³¹ It was ensconced in a chapel originally known as the Konshōji 金鍾寺, the private hermitage of Rōben 良弁, a scholar-monk of *Avataṃsaka* Buddhism who was instrumental in the founding of Tōdaiji. The statue has eight arms, and a third eye on the forehead. Two hands are pressed in front in the praying gesture, holding a crystal between the two hands. The other hands hold emblems that include a lotus, pilgrim’s staff, and lasso. A separate piece of lacquered cloth covers the shoulders to represent the deerskin. The halo and light rays behind the statue are rendered in openwork metal, with attached flame patterns. The figure is somewhat heavy, and the bodhisattva’s face has an austere expression characteristic of esoteric deities.

In the Daibutsuden of Tōdaiji, originally flanking the Vairocana triad were two very large embroidered hangings (35 *shaku* tall), one depicting Amoghapāśa and the other a standard image of Avalokiteśvara.³² The hangings no longer exist, but more than a thousand characters of the inscriptions along the borders of the hangings have been recorded. They reveal that the embroideries were commissioned in 754 by Empress Kōken 孝謙天皇 (r. 748–759; Empress Shōtoku 稱徳天皇, r. 764–770) in honor

30 Nara National Museum 2005, 141–142; Inamoto 2003.

31 See Wong 2007a; Wong forthcoming.

32 Inagaki 1930.

of her mother, Empress Kōmyō 光明皇后 (701–760). Apparently Empress Kōmyō was especially devoted to Amoghapāśa. Earlier, in 746, another statue of Amoghapāśa had been made for Kōfukuji 興福寺, the Fujiwara clan temple, but it was burnt in 1180 and remade.³³ As Antonino Forte has pointed out, the cult of Amoghapāśa Avalokiteśvara, when introduced to Tang China, was closely bound up with the ideas of royalty and Cakravartin, and consequently also with the notion of the protection of the Buddhist state. For these reasons Empress Wu promoted the cults of Amoghapāśa and other esoteric Avalokiteśvaras, and it was this same ideology that took material form in Japan about half a century later, focusing on Tōdaiji.³⁴

Now we turn to the question of the choice of Cintāmaṇicakra (?) and Ākāśagarbha as flanking bodhisattvas for Vairocana. Early records on the flanking bodhisattvas of Vairocana in the Daibutsuden only mention Avalokiteśvara and Ākāśagarbha, and it was not until a few centuries later that the name Cintāmaṇicakra (Avalokiteśvara with the Wish-Granting Jewel) became attached to the identification of Avalokiteśvara. Although there is no record of Empress Wu commissioning images of Cintāmaṇicakra, several *dhāraṇī* texts on this bodhisattva were translated during her reign.³⁵

With the frequent contact between Japan and China, translated Buddhist texts were soon introduced to Japan, especially with the activities of pilgrim-monks such as Dōji and Genbō 玄昉 (d. 746), the latter of whom brought some 5,000 Buddhist texts known in Tang China back to Japan in 736. Thus the texts translated in China soon became available in Japan. *Dhāraṇī* texts on Cintāmaṇicakra, for example, were circulating in Japan by the 730s, connecting to Genbō's return from China.³⁶ Other textual evidence points to the fact that many Buddhist figures and aristocratic patrons of the time identified specific deities as their personal devotional icons. It is well known that Empress Kōmyō pledged devotion to Amoghapāśa, as shown by the image she dedicated at Kōfukuji and by the embroidery of this bodhisattva that her daughter, Empress Kōken, commissioned for her at the Daibutsuden. There are also suggestions that the influential priest Dōkyō (道鏡, 700–772), the trusted advisor of Empress Kōken, was a devotee of Cintāmaṇicakra, and that Bodhisena (Ch. Putiqianna 菩提僊那, Jap. Bodaisenna; 704–760), the South Indian monk who presided over the eye-opening ceremony of the colossal Vairocana at Tōdaiji, also dedicated a Nyoirin Kannon.³⁷

33 Empress Kōmyō came from the Fujiwara clan; Nara Rokudaji Taikan Kankōkai 1968–1973, vol. 8, pl. 12.

34 Forte 2006.

35 T 1080, trans. Bodhiruci; T 1081, trans. Yijing; T 1082, trans. Śikṣānanda; T 1083, trans. Mañicintana.

36 Ishida 1930, 84–91.

37 In assessing devotion to Cintāmaṇicakra during the Nara period, Inoue Kazutoshi (1992/1993) suggests that Dōkyō's belief was rather general and that it was not clear whether he specifically practiced the *dhāraṇī* of this bodhisattva. However, Bodhisena's dedication of an image of Nyoirin Kannon was recorded on the commemorative stele of the monk.



Figure 16. Mandorla of Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara, showing Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara and 52 buddhas. Japanese, Tōdaiji, Nigatsudō, mid-8th century. Gilt bronze. Height 226.5 cm. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 68.



Figure 16a. Detail of Figure 16.

The making of the two flanking bodhisattvas of Vairocana in the Daibutsuden, in contrast, seems to have been associated with two nuns who were quite prominent in Buddhist activities and also closely related to Empress Kōmyō and her court. An entry in the *Tōdaiji yōroku* 東大寺要錄 (*Important Documents of Tōdaiji*), compiled by Kangon 觀嚴 (1151–1236), records that the two flanking bodhisattvas were made in 749: Avalokiteśvara to the east, sponsored by Nun Shinshō 信勝, and Ākāśagarbha



Figure 17. Amoghapāśa (Fukūkenjaku Kannon).

Japanese, Tōdaiji, Sangatsudō, ca. 748.

Dry lacquer with gilt. Height 362 cm.

From Mizuno *et al.* 1990, Pl. 6.

to the west, sponsored by Nun Zenkō 善光.³⁸ The *Shichidaiji junrei shiki* 七大寺巡礼私記 (*Private Journal of a Pilgrimage to the Seven Great Temples*) by Ōe Chikamichi 大江親通 (d. 1151), who visited the seven great temples of the southern capital in 1106 and again in 1140, also mentions the nuns' names. Research on the two nuns reveals that they had been very active in supporting Buddhism, from commissioning the copying of *sūtras* to making images, and that they were very close to Empress Kōmyō.³⁹ Shinshō was a nun at Sakadaniji 坂田尼寺, a temple built in the 6th century, and was associated with a group of immigrant craftsmen who first made horse saddles and later metal castings of Buddhist images and other crafts.⁴⁰ Zenkō was the superior of Hokkeji 法華寺, founded in 745 as the head of the state nunneries (*kokubunniji* 国分尼寺), and thus equivalent in status to Tōdaiji, the head of the state monasteries (*kokubunji* 国分寺). Since the colossal statue of Vairocana was commissioned by Emperor Shōmu, the commissioning of the two flanking bodhisattvas was seen as a pious act of Empress Kōmyō, made on her behalf by the two nuns.⁴¹

The suggestion of the Avalokiteśvara image in the Daibutsuden as Cintāmaṇī-cakra, or Nyoirin Kannon, however, appears later, in *Tōdaiji zoku yōroku* 東大寺続要録 (*Important Documents of Tōdaiji, Continued*; comp. 1278–1292). The entry mentions that the statue is a two-armed Nyoirin Kannon. It also appears in the temple record of the Hokkeji 法華寺, the *Hokke metsuzaiji engi* 法華滅罪寺縁起 (*Legends of the Hokke metsuzaiji*), compiled by Nun Enkyō 圓鏡 in 1304.⁴² Enkyō records that in 1253, when restoration was undertaken in the Main Hall, various objects were found underneath the pedestal of the main images, including wish-granting jewels, a mirror, sword, gold, crystals, and other devotional objects, as well as an inscription on a gold plaque dating to 759.⁴³ The *Shichidaiji nikki* 七大寺日記 (*A Diary on [visiting] the Seven Great Temples*, by Ōe Chikamichi 大江親通) also identifies the bodhisattva on the left side of Vairocana as Nyoirin Kannon.⁴⁴

Thus far, the earliest example of a Tang image of this bodhisattva is a small gilt-bronze statue thought to have been brought to Japan in the 8th century, probably by a returning pilgrim-monk (Figure 18). The six-armed bodhisattva is seated on a lotus in the royal ease posture (*rājatilāsana*), with the right leg raised. Several arms are broken, but the bodhisattva's head leans on the top right hand, while the lower left hand rests on the lotus pedestal. This would later become the prototype for the Nyoirin

38 Tsutsui 1944, 255.

39 Konno 1997, 58–60.

40 The founding of Sakadaniji has been traced to Shiba Tatsuto 司馬達等, probably an immigrant from southern China. The craftspeople were called the Kuratsukuribe 鞍作部, and included Tori Busshi 止利仏師, who cast the Shaka image at Hōryūji.

41 Konno 1997, 60.

42 YKT 5: 140a–143b. I thank Lori Meeks for sharing the manuscript of her book, now published as *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monasticism in Premodern Japan* (2010).

43 YKT 5: 142b; Konno 1997, 60–63.

44 DNBZ, vol. 120, 2.



Figure 18. Cintāmanicakra (Ruyilun Guanyin).

Chinese, Tang dynasty, 8th century. Gilt bronze. Height 10.1 cm.
Yamato Bunkakan. From Tokyo National Museum 1987, Pl. 174.

Kannon in Japan, such as the well-known 9th-century wood statue in Kanshinji 観心寺 (Figure 19).⁴⁵ However, there are indications that 8th-century examples of this bodhisattva in Japan might have been rendered differently in iconography.

Buddhist iconographic drawings from the late Heian period, including the *Jikkan-shō* 十卷抄 (*Selections in Ten Chapters*), depict Nyoirin Kannon with two arms and seated with the left leg pendant on rocks.⁴⁶ This corresponds to the specific form of the bodhisattva on Vairocana's left in the Daibutsuden depicted in the hand-scroll painting of *Shigisan engi* 信貴山縁起 (*Legends of the Shigansan Temple*), dated to the early 12th century. In one section, a nun has gone to pray in front of the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji, and beyond the door, slightly ajar, is a detail of the bodhisattva

45 Fowler 1989; Bogel 2002.

46 Nara National Museum 2005, pls. 37, 38; 166.



Figure 19. Cintāmanicakra (Nyoirin Kannon).

Japanese, Kanshinji, Osaka, Heian period, 9th century.

Pigments on wood. Height 108.8 cm. From Sawa and Hamada 1984, Pl. 166.

on the left of the Buddha (Figure 20).⁴⁷ It reveals the pendant left leg, resting on a lotus pedestal, and the left hand with palm facing outward in the *varada mudrā* (wish-granting gesture). Another sculpture in this form is in the Ishiyamadera 石山寺, said to have been founded by Rōben.⁴⁸ The original statue was destroyed in a fire in the 11th century, and the current statue was re-carved with the same iconography, with two arms and the left leg pendant on a rock formation (Figure 21).⁴⁹ Because the *Shigisan engi* was painted before the Daibutsuden was burnt in 1180, it presents

47 Tanaka 1975–1980, vol. 3, pl. 26.

48 Konno 1997, 61–63. According to tradition, Ishiyamadera in Shiga was founded by Rōben in 749, when searching for gold with which to gild the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji. The main icon of the temple was a statue of Nyoirin Kannon. The temple's affiliation was with the Kegon school before it became a Shingon temple.

49 Nara National Museum 2005, pl. 35; 165–166.

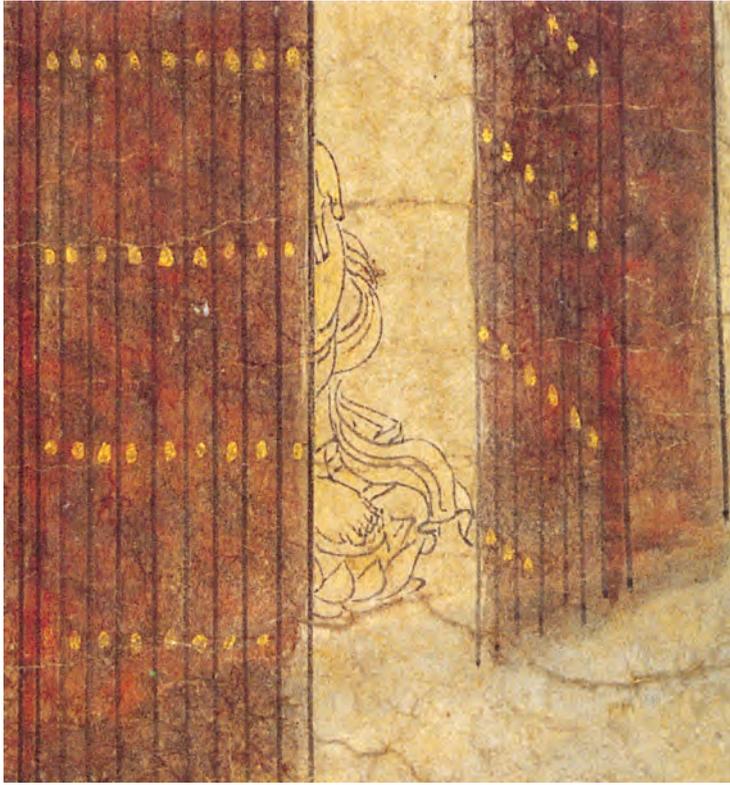


Figure 20. Detail from *Shigisan engi* handscroll, Scroll 3, showing detail of pendant leg of bodhisattva to the right of Vairocana, Tōdaiji. Japanese, Heian period, second half 12th century. Ink and colors on paper. Height 31.7 cm. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 36.

evidence of what the original Avalokiteśvara image in the Daibutsuden may have looked like; and because of the presence of other two-armed Nyoirin Kannon images in sculpture and iconographic drawings (Figure 22), this lends credence to the later interpretation that the Avalokiteśvara flanking Vairocana on the east (or left) in the Daibutsuden was intended as Nyoirin Kannon.⁵⁰

Ākāśagarbha was somewhat unusual in Chinese Buddhist art of the time, but again we can trace the statue in the Daibutsuden to personal connections. The pilgrim-monk Dōji is said to have studied with the Tantric master Shanwuwei 善無畏 (Śubhākarasiṃha, 637–735, one of the three Tantric masters in Tang China) while in

50 Scholars remain divided on this identification. Inoue (1992–1993), for example, suggests that because of the presence of the jewel as an attribute in these two-armed bodhisattvas, they became associated with Nyoirin Kannon later on. Others, including Tamura (1978–1979) and Konno (1997), accept this interpretation.



Figure 21. Cintāmaṇicakra (Nyoirin Kannon).

Japanese, Ishiyamadera, Shiga, Heian period, *ca.* 10th–11th century.
Gilt wood. Height 40.3 cm. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 35.

Chang'an. The *Ākāśagarbha Dhāraṇī Sūtra* was translated into Chinese by Shanwuwei,⁵¹ and allegedly it was Dōji who introduced the text and the *dhāraṇī* practice to Japan. Dōji's stature in Nara Buddhism at the time might explain the prominence of this bodhisattva, also known as *Gūmonji* 求聞持, in Tōdaiji (see Figure 5). Furthermore, several monks in his circle were also associated with this practice (see below).

Dōji's role in the shaping of Nara Buddhism cannot be overlooked. Although his main training was in the Sanlun 三論 (*Mādhyamika*) and Hossō schools, he had been exposed to the currents of Buddhism practiced at the Tang capitals during his visit. After his return to Japan he was appointed to supervise the rebuilding of Daianji 大安寺 (also known as Daikandaiji 大官大寺) in the new capital at Nara because of his knowledge of Chinese temples and practices.⁵² After its relocation, Daianji enjoyed

51 T 1145.

52 Horiike 1980–1982, vol. 2, 245–276.



Figure 22. Iconographic drawing of Cintāmaṇicakra (Nyoirin Kannon), detail of scroll on iconography of various forms of Kannon.

Japanese, Heian period, 12th century. Ink on paper. Height 30 cm. Nara National Museum. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 37.

a prominent status among the official temples, until its position was eclipsed by Tōdaiji when the latter was completed in 752.

At Daianji, Dōji erected a statue of the Thousand-Armed Guanyin. He had also written a commentary on the *Sutra of the Thousand-Armed Guanyin*, which is lost. Because of Dōji's experience in China, Daianji was host to a group of émigré monks who were specialists in the Huayan doctrine and who came to Japan in the 730s. Among them were the Chinese monk Daoxuan 道璿 (Jap. Dōsen, 699–757), the South Indian monk Bodhisena (see above), and a Korean monk from Silla, Shenxiang 審祥 (Jap. Shinjō, 8th century). All three were experts on the Huayan/Kegon doctrine and instrumental both in guiding Emperor Shōmu's building of Tōdaiji and in the court's adoption of *Avataṃsaka* Buddhism as state ideology.

Many among this circle were masters in *dhāraṇī* practice (Jap. *shinju* 神咒) as well as devotees of esoteric forms of Avalokiteśvara. Dōsen, who often lectured on the *Bonmyōkyō*, is said to have retired to the mountains to practice the *Gūmonjihō* 求聞持法, a rite that helps in acquiring good memory. Bodhisena, who presided over the eye-opening ceremony of the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji, dedicated a statue of Nyoirin Kannon. Because of Bodhisena's important position to the royal patrons, Empress Kōmyō commissioned for the Lecture Hall of Tōdaiji a colossal statue of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara, flanked by Ākāsagarbha and Kṣṭigarbha (Bodhi-

sattva of the Earth Store; Ch. Dizang 地藏, Jap. Jizō).⁵³ In his discussion of the iconography of the Vairocana–Cintāmaṇicakra–Ākāśagarbha triad in the Daibutsuden, Konno Toshifumi has proposed that Dōsen and Bodhisena were most influential in guiding the creation of these statues, with Emperor Shōmu as the royal patron of Vairocana and Empress Kōmyō as the patroness of the two bodhisattvas (with nuns Shinshō and Zenkō raising money for the statues).⁵⁴

Later, Kūkai 空海 (774–835) learned the Ākāśagarbha *dhāraṇī* practice from Dōji's disciples, which in turn inspired him to travel to China.⁵⁵ Thus in a way Dōji was instrumental in the establishment of Esoteric Buddhism in Japan. Ākāśagarbha is usually shown bearing a crown with five Buddhas, with his right hand holding a sword or making the *varada mudrā* (wish-granting gesture) while the left hand holds a lotus flower with a jewel on it. The bodhisattva usually sits in the lotus position, though in some cases he is seated with one leg pendant on a lotus pedestal. Framing the bodhisattva is a mandorla shaped like a moon, as seen in a drawing from the 13th century (Figure 23).⁵⁶

The combination of Vairocana with esoteric bodhisattvas was not unique to Tōdaiji. At Daianji, a painting of Vairocana Buddha (30 *shaku* tall) was installed in 749 as the main icon, flanked by paintings of Amoghapaśa and Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara (each 15 *shaku* tall).⁵⁷ At Tōshōdaiji 唐招提寺, the temple founded in 759 by Ganjin 鑑真 (Ch. Jianzhen) from China, a statue of Vairocana was also installed with a Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara to the Buddha's right; the attendant figure to the left is the Medicine Buddha (Figure 24).

Dōji was associated with the dissemination of yet another form of Huayan/Kegon art: depiction of the Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies based on the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*.⁵⁸ The record of the property assets of Daianji notes that in 742 Dōji, together with the master of the temple, Kyōgi 教義, and others commissioned two embroidered paintings for Emperor Shōmu: *Four Locations and Sixteen Assemblies of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā* (Jap. *Dai hannya shijūjūrokue* 大般若四重十六會, based on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*), and *Avataṃsaka's Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies*

53 The juxtaposing of Ākāśagarbha and Kṣtigarbha harmonizes Heaven and Earth in the *Avataṃsaka* cosmology; see Konno 1997, 81–82. According to *Tōdaiji yōroku*, statues of Ākāśagarbha and Kṣtigarbha were commissioned for the Lecture Hall in 747, while the central icon, the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara, was made in 755; Tsutsui 1944, 100; see also Ōta 1979, 294, 296.

54 Konno 1997, 66–82.

55 According to tradition, Dōji transmitted the *Gūmonji* practice to his disciples to Zengi 善議 (729–812) and Kyōshun 慶俊 (?–756–781–?); Zengi taught this to Gonsō 勤操 (754–827), who in turn transmitted the practice to Kūkai; Horiike 1980–1982, vol. 1, 432–457.

56 Nara National Museum 2005, pl. 31; 164. A 9th-century wood statue of Ākāśagarbha from a mountain temple near Nara shows the bodhisattva seated with the left leg pendant, holding a sword in the right hand and a jewel in the left hand; *ibid.*, pl. 29. The hand gestures and attributes do not match the textual description, but if this is a variant form of the bodhisattva, then it would form a pair with the Nyoirin Kannon shown with the left leg pendant.

57 This was mentioned in *Shōsōin monjō* 正倉院文書, but not in later sources; Ōta 1979, 84, 295.

58 See Giès 1996, and Wong 2007b.



Figure 23. Iconographic drawing of Ākāsagarbha (Kokūzō bosatsu).
 Japanese, Kamakura period, 13th century.
 Ink on paper. Height 89.9 cm, Width 67.5 cm.
 Daigoji, Kyoto. From Nara National Museum 2005, Pl. 32.

(Ch. *qichu jiuhui*, Jap. *shichisho kue* 七處九會, based on the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*).⁵⁹ Since the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* form the foundation of the Mādhyamika doctrine while the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* is central to the Kegon doctrine, the subjects chosen for these two embroidered hangings appropriately reflected the scholastic interests current at Daianji.

This record of an embroidered painting of the *Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies* of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* is the earliest known in Japan. In Tang China there are records of mural paintings of the *Huayan bian* in several temples in Chang'an and Luoyang, but the only extant examples are from Dunhuang, most of them dating to the mid- to late Tang (Figures 25, 26).⁶⁰ Based on Śikṣānanda's eighty-fascicle translation,

⁵⁹ DNBZ, vol. 118, 116.

⁶⁰ See Wong 2007b.



Figure 24. Vairocana flanked by Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara and Medicine Buddha.

Japanese, Tōshōdaiji, Kondō, Nara, 2nd half 8th century. Dry lacquer with gilt.
Height of Vairocana 303 cm. From Asano and Mōri 1996, Pl. 57.

these examples generally show nine Buddha-assemblies arranged in a grid plan, supported at the bottom by a giant lotus to represent Vairocana's Lotus Repository World (Buddhabhadra's sixty-fascicle translation mentions only eight assemblies). The only mural of 8th-century date in Dunhuang Cave 44 (as yet unpublished) shows a number of Buddha-assemblies arranged not as rigidly as later examples, while the bottom part shows a lotus pond with many lotuses floating, and a stone sculpture of a giant lotus in front of the niche. Did the Daijūji Huayan/Kegon embroidery look like any of the Dunhuang examples? It is not possible to guess, but surely it would have had to include the nine assemblies mentioned in the title.

This paper set out to examine the similarities and divergences of Huayan/Kegon art at the courts of Empress Wu and Emperor Shōmu/Empress Kōmyō. We noted that while Empress Wu patronized *Avatamsaka* Buddhism, she at the same time promoted esoteric cults, especially those of Avalokiteśvara. Representations of these different strands of beliefs were expressed separately in China. In Nara, however, the

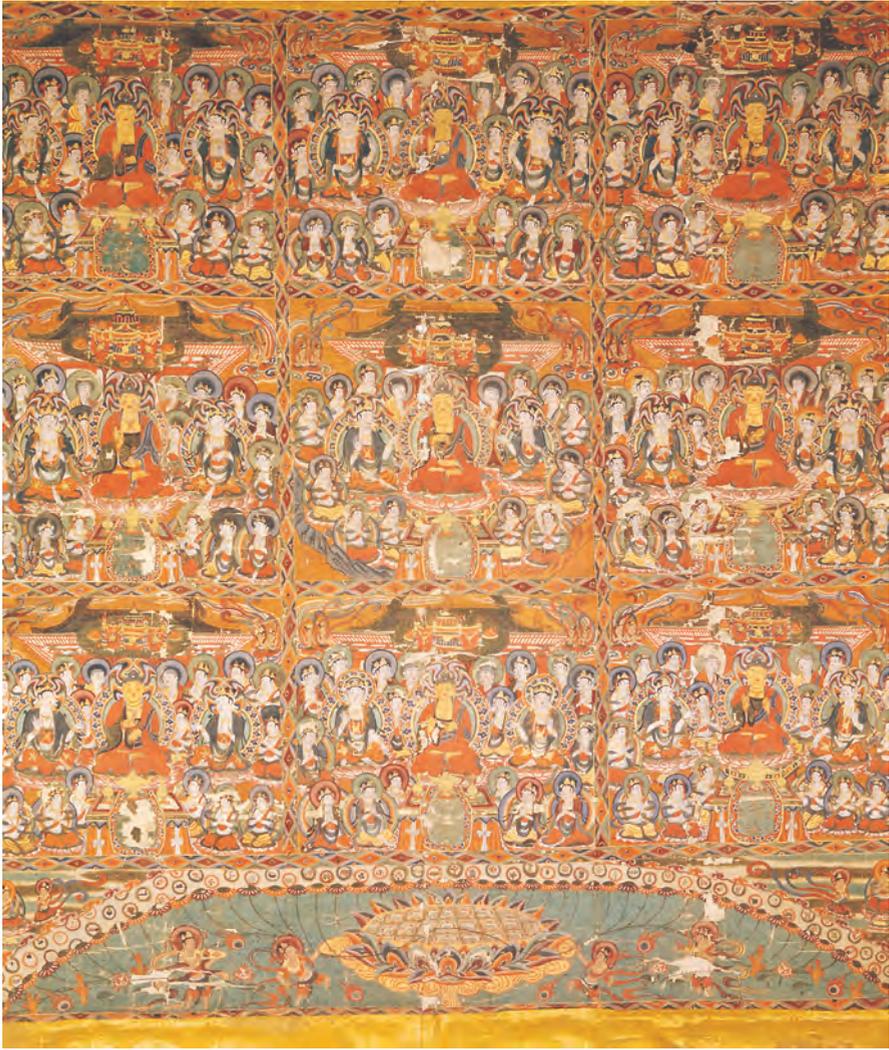


Figure 25. Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies.

Dunhuang Cave 61, 10th century. Ink and colors on silk.

Height 194 cm, Width 179 cm. Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, Paris, France.

esoteric Avalokiteśvara cults and the *Avatamsaka* doctrine became integrated, with Vairocana flanked by Avalokiteśvara in several different forms and by Ākāśagarbha, while esoteric Avalokiteśvaras were also principal icons for other halls. This synthesis of the *Avatamsaka* doctrine with esoteric cults can be seen both as a legacy and as a separate trajectory of the kind of Buddhism first developed under Empress Wu half a century earlier.

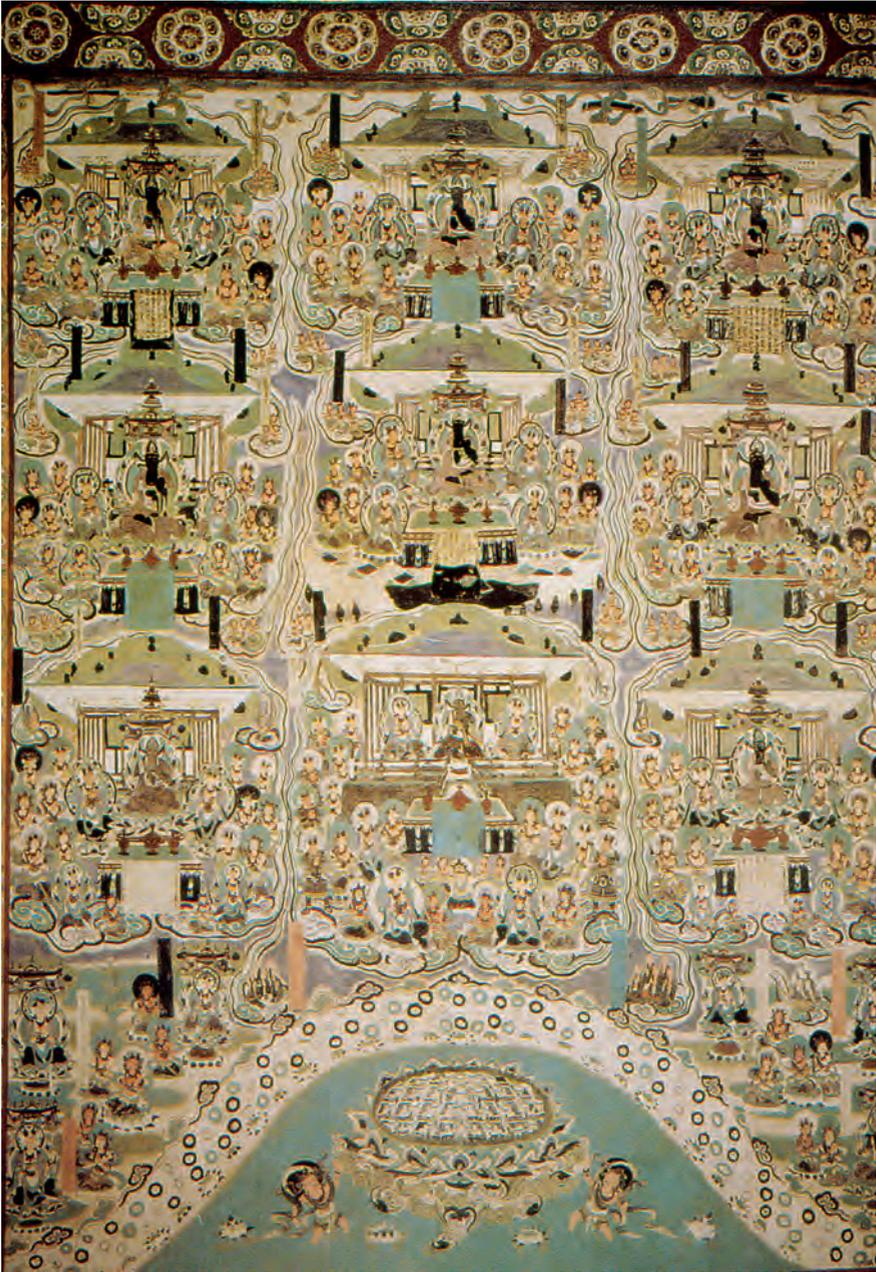


Figure 26. Seven Locations and Nine Assemblies (*Huayan bianxiang*).
Chinese, Dunhuang, Cave 61, north wall, 10th century.
Mural Painting; From Dunhuang Yanjiu Yuan 1995, Pl. 100.

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Abbreviations

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