

## Contribution

The *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* (*Sutra of the Great Dhāraṇī of Pure Light*) and Its Role in the Religious Policy of Chinese and Japanese Empresses (Wu Zetian and Koken [Shotoku-tenno]) in the Seventh–Eighth Century

Elena Lepekhova

**D**HĀRAṆĪ constitute a large part of the historical Buddhist literature and most of the important Mahāyāna sutras include sections on *dhāraṇī*, for example, the Heart Sutra and the Lotus Sutra. For many modern Buddhologists, the term is an ambiguous one, implying differing interpretations. These differing definitions of *dhāraṇī* can broadly be categorized into two groups; first, spells and magical formulas, the purpose of which is to satisfy worldly needs; and second, brief mnemonic phrases within which various concepts of Buddhist doctrines are encoded. The first group is studied in the works of Laurence Waddell,<sup>1</sup> Franklin Edgerton,<sup>2</sup> and Monier Monier-Williams,<sup>3</sup> and the second in those of David Snellgrove<sup>4</sup> and Ronald M. Davidson.<sup>5</sup> According to the definition of Monier-Williams in the *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, *dhāraṇī* comes from the verb root √ dhṛ — ‘to hold, to carry, to possess, to preserve’,<sup>6</sup> as well as the single-root word *dharana* (*dhāraṇa*) — ‘maintenance, protection,<sup>7</sup> preservation, possession’. On this basis, Étienne Lamotte defines *dhāraṇī* as ‘keeping in mind the teachings of all the Buddhas’.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, this idea of *dhāraṇī* is based on a study of the Chinese version of the treatise *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* (*A Treatise on Perfect Wisdom that Transports to the Other Shore*), attributed to Nagarjuna, where the most complete traditional definition of *dhāraṇī* is presented. Here, *dhāraṇī* is characterized as the ability of the consciousness to ‘hold, contain’ (*dhāraṇa*) or ‘the ability to hinder’ (*vidhāraṇa*). That is, in the first case, the consciousness, having accumulated all the good dharmas (*kuśaladharmāḥ*), retains them (*dhārayati*), so that they no longer disappear. The ‘ability to hinder’ consists in the capability constantly present in the consciousness to recognize the roots of the unfavorable ones (*akuśalamūla*) and prevent (*vidhārayati*) their further strengthening. The interpretation of *dhāraṇī* as the retention of all the Buddhist Dharmas in the consciousness is also there in another Prajñāpāramitā text — the fragmentary *Aṣṭadaśasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā-[sūtra]* (*The Sutra of Perfect Wisdom in 18,000 Lines*). Among other things, the text of the *Aṣṭadaśasāhasrikā* says that a

bodhisattva should study the 12 main classical genres of Buddhist canonical literature (*Dvādaśāgapravacana*). Only after he has fully comprehended its meaning, should he turn to *dhāraṇī*, which contributes to the acquisition of universal knowledge.<sup>9</sup> As Buddhism spread in East Asia and the Far East, *dhāraṇī* became an integral part of the local culture. It is noteworthy that in the hagiographies of many of the first Buddhist missionaries such as Fotudeng 佛圖澄 (d. 348), Dharmakṣema (Tánmó-chèn 曇無讖 385–433), Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏 635–735), Vajrabodhi (Jin’gangzhi 金剛智 671–741), and Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空 705–74) are mentioned their magical abilities to heal diseases, expel evil spirits, control natural forces, etc. In general, the possession of such magical skills was explained by the knowledge of *dhāraṇī* and the ability to use it properly. As Richard D. McBride concludes, the popularity of the thaumaturgic powers of such Buddhist monks was one of the main reasons that so many Chinese converted to Buddhism during the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>10</sup> In the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, (*Dazhidu lun* 大智度論) attributed to the Indian monk-scholar Nagarjuna (ca. 150–200) (translated into Chinese between 402 and 406 by Kumarajīva 344–413), are described the skills cultivated by ordained monks, among which the acquisition of *dhāraṇī* is also mentioned as one of the necessary qualities of the bodhisattva. A century later, the eminent Buddhist scholar Jingying Huiyuan 淨影寺慧遠 (523–92) was one of the first authors to analyze *dhāraṇī* in detail in his *Mahayana Compendium* (*Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章). His classification of *dhāraṇī* relied on two mainstream sources of Buddhist doctrine: Dharmakṣema’s Chinese translation of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* (The Stages of the Bodhisattva [Pusa dichī jing 菩薩地持經 trans. ca. 414–21]) and the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*. Huiyuan classified *dhāraṇī* into four groups: dharma, meaning, spell technique, and restraint. He gives three reasons why monks and bodhisattvas are able to obtain spell-technique *dhāraṇī*: 1) they rely on the power of cultivation and habitual practice in the present; 2) they rely on the efficacy of *dhyana*-meditation; 3) they depend on real knowledge deeply penetrating into the approach of the spell-technique dharmas. Thus, to Huiyuan the ability to use *dhāraṇī* is presented as a sign of a true bodhisattva.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars like S.K. Shomakhmadov cite the treatise *The Encomia on a General Interpretation of the Meaning of Dhāraṇī* (*Zongshi tuoluoni yizan* 總釋陀羅尼義讚), attributed to Amoghavajra, the third of the three famous Indian tantric masters in China, as an additional example of the definition and classification of *dhāraṇī* in Chinese Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> Also, it contains some interesting definitions

of *dhāraṇī* as exoteric teaching becoming a part of the esoteric path of practice. Other *dhāraṇī* researchers, like Richard D. McBride and Charles D. Orzech, doubt its authenticity, suggesting it was written later, during the late eighth or early ninth century, by monks affiliated to Amoghavajra's tradition.<sup>13</sup>

In this article, I will investigate the history of the text *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* (*Sutra of the Great Dhāraṇī of Pure Light*) and its role in the religious policy of two Empresses — one Chinese and one Japanese (Wu Zetian 武則天 and Koken 孝謙 [Shotoku-tenno 稱徳天皇]) — in the seventh–eighth century. Both Wu Zetian (624–705) and Koken (718–70) were known for actively using Buddhist doctrines as political propaganda to legitimize their status as rulers, and even took monastic vows. On the way to power, they both confronted opposition in the form of court officials and powerful aristocratic clans, so they used the support of the Buddhist sangha as a fundamental force and involved Buddhist monks in affairs of state administration as advisers and confidants. In Wu Zetian's case, the firm legitimization of her status as ruler was facilitated by the fact that she thoroughly substantiated her political innovations by theoretically 'feminizing' supreme power and ritual, including Buddhist and Taoist doctrines in the sphere of state ideology, thus giving a new interpretation to the traditional ideals of governance. For example, in 673, she raised funds and made huge donations for the construction of a Buddha Maitreya<sup>14</sup> statue in the Longmen Caves, which has survived to the present day. In the same period (the second half of the 670s), under her leadership, the construction of a new network of Buddhist monasteries called Daiyansi began, covering the whole of the Tang Empire. It was accompanied by her interest in the worship of the 'relics of the Buddha' in the Famensi monastery. In addition to these Buddhist practices, it is known that the Empress also attached much importance to the cult of *dharmasārīra* and the *dhāraṇī* sutras associated with it. According to Jinhua Chen, this was due to the great popularity in China of the text *Buddhoṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra* (Ch. *Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing* 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經, *Sūtra of the Utmost Superior Dhāraṇī of the Buddha's Topknot*).<sup>15</sup> In this text, special attention was paid to the description of a pillar with inscriptions of *Uṣṇīṣa vijaya dhāraṇī* as an object of worship equal in importance to a stupa with relics of the Buddha (Ch. *Rulai quanshen sheli sudubota* 如來全身舍利萃堵波塔). The erection and worship of this pillar bring to the believer incalculable merits and rewards, including the purification of karma and the attainment of Nirvana. For this reason, in China, the erection of *dhāraṇī* pillars, sometimes with the placement

of relics within, became as meritorious as the construction of pagodas, and *dhāraṇī* sutras gained special popularity due to the magical qualities attributed to them. Empress Wu Zetian also played an important role in the process of translating and spreading these sutras. During her reign, four translations of the *Buddhoṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī* were made from 679 to 688, the most famous one being the 683 version attributed to the Indian monk Buddhapālita (Ch. Photuobali 佛護). According to the legend recorded in the preface to the text, Buddhapālita was a monk from northern India who arrived in China in 676 with the intention of climbing the sacred mountain Wutaishan, considered the abode of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. There he was visited by an old man who ordered him to spread the text of the *Buddhoṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra* in China. Seven years later, in 683, Buddhapālita went with a copy of the sutra to Chang'an where he had an audience with Emperor Gaozong, who commissioned the monks Divakara and Du Xingyi to translate the sutra into Chinese.<sup>16</sup> Analyzing the preface, Antonio Forte and Jinhua Chen note that it perhaps appeared later than the translation itself, namely in 689, on the eve of those events when Wu Zetian decided to found her own Great Zhou 周 dynasty (690–705).<sup>17</sup> According to these authors, there was a hidden attempt to link the sacred Wutaishan Mountain and the nearby Wenshui area, the native place of Wu Zetian, with the Mañjuśrī cult, which can be traced back to the Emperor Xiaowen (471–99) from the Northern Wei dynasty, who constructed a Buddhist temple on this mountain. This connection gave Wu Zetian the right to claim a divine origin. This, as well as the legend of the famous Buddhist monk Buddhapālita, who actually lived during the fifth–sixth century, and the *Buddhoṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra* were both part of her political plan to turn China from the periphery of the Buddhist world into its center and introduce herself as a new king-*chakravartin*. Another reason why the Empress showed a special interest in the *dhāraṇī* sutras could be the tense situation in the country in the 680s. In 684, Li Jingye, the Duke of Ying rebelled and seized the Yangzhou region, and in 688 Li Zhen, and his son Li Chong the Prince of Langye, organized a rebellion in Yu 豫 and Bo 博 prefectures (in modern Henan and Shandong).<sup>18</sup> Perhaps for this reason the *Buddhoṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra* was translated and rewritten several times by order of the Empress since the magical qualities attributed to this text could stabilize the internal situation and strengthen the supreme power of Wu Zhao.

Another *dhāraṇī* sutra, compiled in the last years of the reign of Wu Zetian (704–05), is *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* 無塔淨光大陀羅尼經 (*Sutra of the Great Dhāraṇī of Pure Light*), a translation of the sutra

*Raśmivimalaviśuddhaprabhādhāraṇī* whose composition is attributed to the Tokharian monk Mitrasena (also known as Mitrasanta, Ch. Mitsuoshan 彌陀山). Like the *Buddhoṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra*, this text also addresses the problem of how to avoid premature death and rebirth in the continuous suffering of hell. According to the recommendations, attributed to the Buddha himself, one should construct a pagoda (or repair a dilapidated one), put a wooden tablet inscribed with some *dhāraṇī* inside it, and worship it with various offerings. This will ensure one a long life and rebirth in the Tuṣita heaven. The other feature of this text is the detailed classification of four *dhāraṇī* and corresponding methods for honoring them. In general, these methods are limited to the recitation of *dhāraṇī*, producing copies of *dhāraṇī* texts beginning from 77 to an unspecified number, and putting them inside miniature clay pagodas, whose number also varies according to the quantity of *dhāraṇī* texts. Alongside performing this ritual, one should also construct in front of a Buddha pagoda a square mandala, on which some specific rituals are to be performed. These rituals are to be followed by the enshrinement of the *dhāraṇī* copies around the pagoda or inside the central pillar atop the pagoda. After that, one should start visualizing the Buddhas in the 10 directions, reciting a fifth *dhāraṇī* 28 times, which will succeed in conjuring the appearance of various deities, who will empower the pagoda and turn it into a great *mani* pearl.<sup>19</sup> Such a pagoda, sanctified with the four *dhāraṇī*, will benefit not only the one who has erected it but also those other sentient beings who come into contact with it. They will all attain liberation as well as longevity, rebirth in Tuṣita heaven, and extirpation of bad karma. The place where the *dhāraṇī* pagoda is erected will be free from all human and natural disasters. In the end the sutra reminds the worshipper about the *dhāraṇī* pillars, which have been mentioned in the preceding paragraph, and the magical powers attributed to them. Taking into account the fact that information concerning Mitrasanta and the creation of *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* in Chinese sources (like *Fajiezong wuzu lüejī* or *Song gaoseng zhuan*) is rather controversial, it can be suggested that this text had appeared at the beginning of the eighth century, as a reaction to the ongoing process of erection of *dhāraṇī* pillars in China.

However, the history of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* is also unique due to the fact that it became one of the first printed texts, laying the foundations for subsequent Buddhist printing in the Far East. The first full printed version attributed to the early eighth century (probably 706) was discovered in a stone pagoda in the Pulguksa temple in Kyōngju in 1966.<sup>20</sup> Whether it was printed in China or in Korea is still

disputed among scholars. For example, T.H. Barrett has associated this *dhāraṇī* text with the funeral rites of Empress Wu in 705. He suggests that the 706 text of Pulguksa temple might be traced back to the effort on the part of the Wu Zetian's son Emperor Zhongzong to honor (or pacify) the late Empress's spirit by disseminating printed copies of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* all over the kingdom and several neighboring states including Korea. This *dhāraṇī* text was picked not only because it was one of the last translations that the Empress had ever sponsored, but also because of its supposed posthumous benefits for the deceased. Jinhua Chen, as well as A. Forte, also believe that this version of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* originated from Tang China, but unfortunately, there is still no concrete evidence.<sup>21</sup>

The most well-known printed version of this *dhāraṇī* text preserved nowadays is the so-called *Hyakumanto darani* 百萬塔陀羅尼, sponsored in 764 by Japanese ruler Empress Shotoku 稱德 (a.k.a. Kōken 孝謙, 718–70; r. 749–58, 764–70). It was part of an enormous project of creating one million miniature pagodas containing printed copies of several *dhāraṇī* texts, including the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* (Jp. *Muku joko darani kyo*). More than 45,000 of the miniature clay pagodas have been preserved still along with nearly 4000 *dhāraṇī* in the Horyuji temple in Nara, but many more are to be found elsewhere in Japan and in various museums abroad.<sup>22</sup> The first evidence mentioning the *Hyakumanto darani* 百萬塔陀羅尼 appears in the chronicle *Shoku nihongi* 續日本紀, where in a note corresponding to the year 770 is written that after the suppression of the uprising of the eighth year of Tenpyo-hoji 天平宝字 (i.e., 764), the Empress took a vow and ordered the construction of one million small three-storied pagodas, each 4 *sun* 5 *bu* [about 13.5 centimeters] in height and 3 *sun* 5 *bu* [about 10.5 centimeters] in diameter. Inside it were placed the *Konpon* (根本), *Jishin* (慈心印), *Sorin* (相輪), and *Rokudo* (六度) *dhāraṇī*. Later, these pagodas were distributed to the 10 largest and most significant Nara temples, Todaiji 東大寺, Horyuji 法隆寺, Kofukuji 興福寺, Yakushiji 藥師寺, Daianji 大安寺, Sadaiji 西大寺, Gangoji 元興寺, Shitennoji 四天王寺, Kawaradera 川原寺, and Sufukuji 崇福寺.<sup>23</sup>

In *Todaiji yoroku* 東大寺要錄, a record of the Todaiji temple, there is another mention of one million small pagodas made by the order of Koken, specifying that they contained *printed* texts of the *Muku joko darani*. As Peter Kornicki points out, this source for the first time mentions that a *dhāraṇī* had been printed.<sup>24</sup>

It is notable that both documents emphasize the suppression of a rebellion in 764 as the reason which had induced Koken to launch

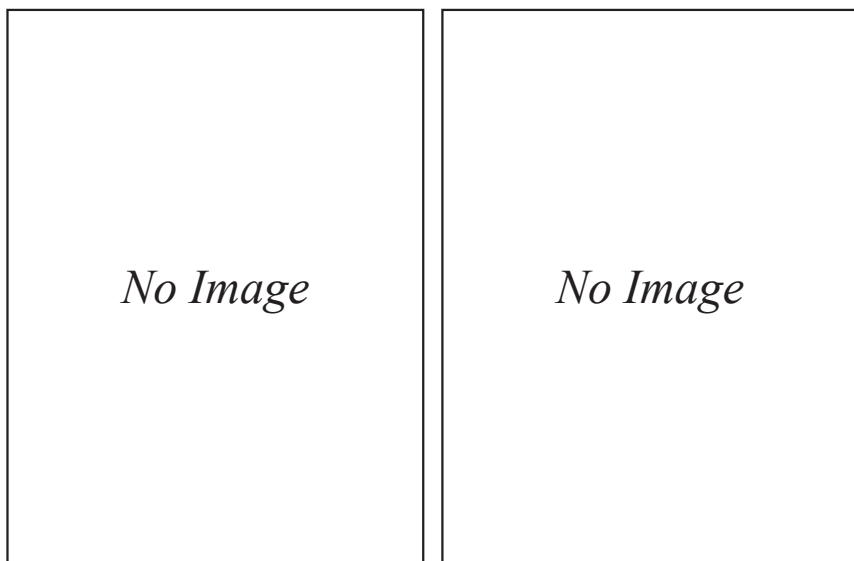


Fig. 1 Hyakumanto darani 百萬塔陀羅尼: Muku joko sorin darani kyo 無垢淨光經相輪陀羅尼經, Aoyama Gakuin University Library 青山学院大学図書館, Tokyo.

such an impressive project of mass printing *dhāraṇī* texts. In order to better understand the reasons for this uprising, it is necessary to recall the difficult conditions in which Koken ascended to the throne. Koken (Princess Abe, Abe-no Naishinno, 阿倍内親王) was the daughter of Emperor Shōmu (聖武天皇 701–56, r. 724–49) and Empress Komyo (光明皇后, 701–60). According to the chronicle *Shoku nihongi*, she was called the ‘Crown Princess’ (Taishi 太子), since the first son of the emperor, Prince Motoi (基), born to Empress Komyo, died in infancy in 728, and his second son, Prince Asaka 安積 (728–44), born to Agatainukai no Hirotoji 景犬養広刀自, also died in 744, at the age of 16. However, her position as crown princess was vulnerable due to the presence at court of other representatives of the imperial family belonging to the line of Emperor Temmu (天武天皇, 631–86), who could also be pretenders to the throne. After the abdication of Emperor Shomu in the first year of Tempyo-kampo 天平感宝 (749), his daughter ascended the throne under the name of Koken, but the real power continued to remain in the hands of her mother, Empress Komyo.

Komyo had attached her nephew Fujiwara-no Nakamaro 藤原仲麻呂 to herself and with his help put forward a new pretender to the throne — Prince Ooi 大炊 (Emperor Junnin) from the family of Emperor Temmu, who soon married Nakamaro’s daughter. In 758, this coalition forced Koken to abdicate in his favor.

In 761, Koken fell ill while travelling through the province of Omi, and at that time one of her court priests, monk Dokyo (道鏡, 700–72), who cured her illness, became her healer, spiritual advisor, and confidant. It is known that he came from the Yuge family that lived in the province of Kawachi, and that he began monastic life among Buddhist hermits, where he gained experience in magic and, apparently, in medicine. After that, he was taught by Abbot Gien from the Hosso school. Under Gien he learned Sanskrit and *dhāraṇī*. In 748 he is recorded as being at the Todaiji under Roben, the second patriarch of Kegon-shu. In the 750s, Dokyo received the rank of court priest *naidojo* and, apparently, in this capacity, he was called to Koken's court. In 762, with his support, Koken returned to the capital, removing Junnin from power and leaving to him only ceremonial functions. She formally re-ascended the throne as Empress Shotoku 稱徳, and probably under the influence of Dokyo, she also took monastic vows. In order to restore his authority, Fujiwara-no Nakamaro tried to resist Koken and Dokyo by organizing a conspiracy in 764, but he was killed during the battle of Miozaki and his army was defeated. Emperor Junnin was exiled to the island of Awaji, where he died in 765.<sup>25</sup>

Such were the internal political circumstances of the first years of the reign of Koken, which led to the rebellion of 764. Noriko Katsuura suggests that the texts of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* were printed and sent to Buddhist temples all over the country in atonement for the deaths caused during the rebellion of Fujiwara-no Nakamaro.<sup>26</sup> This theory seems quite plausible if we remember how belief in the ability of malicious spirits of the dead (*goryo* 怨靈) to bring misfortune (first of all, epidemics and calamities) was widespread in all strata of Japanese society during ancient and medieval times. For example, the death of the monk Genbo (玄昉), one of the advisers of Emperor Shomu and Empress Komyo in 746, was attributed in the *Shoku nihongi* to the revenge of the spirit of the executed rebel Fujiwara-no Hirotsugu. It would not be an exaggeration to say that rituals for the pacification (*tinkon* 鎮魂) of such spirits were an integral element of the internal policy of the state. However, during the Nara period and at the beginning of the Heian period, these rituals were predominantly Shinto, so it is quite possible that the entire *Hyakumanto darani* project was conceived from the very beginning as an exclusively *Buddhist* ritual to pacify the vengeful spirits of those who died in the uprising of 764. It should be recalled here that by that time the Empress had taken Buddhist monastic vows and in one of the imperial decrees *semmyo* (Tenpyo-hoji 天平宝字, 8 year, 9 month, 20 day, i.e., 764) made it clear



that from then on she was going to rule the country in accordance with Buddhist precepts ('*kokuo oui ni zasutoki wa bosatsu no joukai o ukeyo*' 國王王位坐時菩薩淨戒受).<sup>27</sup> Probably, from that point of view, *dhāraṇī* texts and all the rituals connected with them seemed more effective in the way of pacifying vengeful spirits due to the boundless magical powers (especially regarding the extirpation of bad karma and liberation from all human and natural disasters) attributed to them.

The other mention of conducting funeral services using *dhāraṇī* texts refers only to 863 — the reign of Emperor Seiwa (清和天皇, 850–81). Therefore, it can be assumed that the *Hyakumanto darani* project was the first official Buddhist ritual using *dhāraṇī* in the history of Japan, conducted in order to pacify the malicious spirits of those who died in the uprising of 764 and thus avoiding the following disasters.

Nevertheless, there is also the other already-mentioned aspect of the internal policy of both Empresses, Wu Zetian and Koken, toward religion, especially Buddhism. It is well known from various sources, that they both lived in a time when Buddhism was under the patronage of the imperial court and began to be integrated into the official ideology. In many ways, it happened due to the efforts of their predecessors — in the case of Koken, her parents, who ordered and sponsored the construction of Todaiji temple and the statue of Great Buddha Mahāvairocana as well as the establishment of a network of provincial temples *kokubunji* 国分寺 throughout the country. It is equally important to take into consideration the fact that both Wu Zetian and Koken lived in the realm of the developed written Buddhist tradition and actively used it. For Wu Zetian the Great Cloud Sutra (Skt. *Mahāmeghasūtra*, Ch. *Dayunjin* 大曇經), translated by Dharmakṣema between 424 and 430, played a special role in the official propaganda related to the proclamation by the Empress of her own Zhou dynasty, since it contained the Buddha's prophecy about the ability of a woman-goddess reborn as a ruler of a great kingdom. After the founding of the Zhou dynasty in 690, the 'temples of the Great Cloud' (*dayunsi* 大雲寺) were established in every province in order to spread this sutra.<sup>28</sup> As for Koken, she was also known as a venerator of Buddhist sutras, as Katsuura suggests, especially the Lotus Sutra, also proclaiming that a woman could transform into a Bodhisattva and attain enlightenment as well as high power regardless of her gender.<sup>29</sup> It is also worth mentioning that alongside the Lotus Sutra the imperial court during the Nara period also attached great importance to the Golden Light Sutra and the Benevolent King Sutra as sacred texts for 'defending the country' (*chingokokka* 鎮護国家). Their worship, recitation, and copying

were considered as acts bringing various benefits equally to people who honored them and to the country as a whole.

Given all these facts about their devotion to the sutra tradition, why during the last years of their reign did both Empresses turn to *dhāraṇī* texts? In my opinion, the answer lies in the realm of archaic Chinese and Japanese beliefs in the sacral power of the word and its magical impact on reality. This was especially true of the ancient Japanese culture, where there was a belief that words have their own souls — *kotodama* 言霊 — which contain mysterious power. *Kotodama* was often used in traditional *waka* poetry and the most famous example is the poem of Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro from *Man'yōshū* (759): 磯城島の和の国は言霊の助くる国ぞま幸くありこそ ‘*Shikishima-no Yamato-no kuni wa kotodama-no tasukurukunizo masakiku arikoso*’ (Oh, a beautiful country on the outstretched islands! // That Yamato, where words are full of wonderful power *kotodama* and bring happiness to everyone // Be happy on your way!) (*Man'yōshū*, no. 3254).<sup>30</sup> In this poem the author wishes a safe journey to the Japanese embassy to China and uses *kotodama* in a worshipful attitude toward the deities and the sovereigns, as their descendants. As a poetical element, *kotodama* also figures prominently in the poems of the *Kokinshū* (905) anthology and, most importantly, in traditional Shinto prayer *norito*. These prayers were written out and read in ancient Japanese with the emphasis on *kotodama*. As Jin'ichi Konishi points out, the archaic belief in *kotodama* is also associated with an enduring tendency to avoid Chinese and other foreign words in *waka* and *norito*, since they obviously lack *kotodama*.<sup>31</sup> The meaning of *kotodama* in these texts then, can be summarized in the following three points: 1) *kotodama* as sounds that are pleasing to the gods — *kami*; 2) *kotodama* as a means of magical identification; 3) *kotodama* as a magical influence on the surrounding reality. Buddhism at an early stage of its spread in Japan (sixth–seventh century) also adopted the traditional Shinto ideas about the sacred meaning of sounds and words, which was reflected in the significant role of verbal rituals (reciting sutras, mantras, and *dhāraṇī*) in official Buddhist ceremonies. This phenomenon later led to the fact that in all Japanese Buddhist schools, both esoteric and exoteric, a public recitation of sacred texts became an essential part of worship.

As for the Chinese tradition, it is well known that the practice of spell words (*zhouwen* 呪文) was already an integral part of native Chinese religion long before the introduction of Buddhism to China. Before and during the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), many male and female shamans, spirit mediums, and diviners, as well as Daoist sages

and hermits were believed to control ghosts and illnesses by using various spells and talismans. Among the magical capacities attributed to them by their followers were also inducing longevity and immortality, therefore many of these thaumaturges were worshiped as transcendent beings or immortals. Verbal sorcery was an important element in rituals of healing, exorcism, and subjugation of enemies, becoming one of the characteristic elements of Taoism from the third century. For example, the famous Taoist compendium *Baopuzi* 抱樸子, written in 283–343 by the Jin dynasty scholar Ge Hong 葛洪, contains a variety of stories about using the thaumaturgy of *zhouwen*: beginning from the way of making alchemic elixirs to protection from wild animals and robbers.

How popular these Chinese beliefs in the potency of spell words were finds its reflection in the mid-seventh century Buddhist ‘encyclopedia’ called *A Grove of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma* (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林), compiled around 668 by the Chinese Buddhist monk Daoshi. Here Daoshi uses Taoist tales from the *Baopuzi* and *Liezi* 列子 to show how the use of Buddhist *dhāraṇī* can be as efficacious for one’s personal welfare as Taoist spell-chanting. As Richard D. McBride argues, perhaps more cogently than anyone else, this shows the assimilation of pre-Buddhist Chinese practices into Buddhism. He also points out that the exotic pronunciation of *dhāraṇī* (‘Sanskrit-like sounds’) must also have been a factor in their popularity.<sup>32</sup>

In summation, it can be concluded that one of the reasons why the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* was so important for Wu Zetian and Koken during the last years of their reigns was the overlap of the concept of *dhāraṇī* as magical formula with the ancient Chinese and Japanese beliefs in the sacral power of words. Of course, it should be remembered that both Empresses also gathered the practical importance of *dhāraṇī* as a way of attaining worldly benefits from the Buddhist monks who were their closest counselors (Xuánzàng and Dokyo). However, in my opinion, the prevailing factor was the idea of *dhāraṇī* as a universal verbal code covering the spheres of sacred and everyday reality. It was especially obvious in Japan, where the Shinto belief in *kotodama* as a thaumaturgic way of constructing and controlling the reality was superimposed on the meaning of *dhāraṇī* as ‘to grasp and preserve’. Probably, it was one of the reasons why Koken ordered the *Hyakumanto darani* to be printed and spread to all the temples throughout the country: in order to control and subjugate all her enemies as well as natural calamities. In the case of Wu Zetian, the translation of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* in Chinese could also be an attempt to grasp power more firmly, given the growing opposition

at imperial court after 704, but it is much more likely that she was interested in this text due to the supernatural powers attributed to it to induce longevity, since at that time she was in her 80s. Anyway, the role of the *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* in the religious policy of the two Empresses (the Chinese Wu Zetian and the Japanese Koken [Shotoku-tenno]) in the seventh–eighth century could represent the following tendencies: 1) how Buddhist texts and the rituals related with them were used by the authorities as a religious way of controlling the socio-political reality and confirming the sacral status of the ruler; 2) the popularity of *dhāraṇī* sutras in China and Japan could serve as an example of the universality of ideas about the sacredness of the verbal code in South Asia and the Far East.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Laurence Austin Waddell, ‘The “Dhāraṇī” Cult in Buddhism, Its Origin, Deified Literature and Images’, *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* 1, no. 2 (1912), 155–95.
- <sup>2</sup> Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary. Vol. II: Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 284.
- <sup>3</sup> Monier Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Greek, Latin, Gothic, German, Anglo-Saxon, and other Cognate Indo-European Languages* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), 515.
- <sup>4</sup> David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004), 122.
- <sup>5</sup> Ronald M. Davidson, ‘Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature I: Revisiting the Meaning of the Term *Dhāraṇī*’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37 (2009): 97–147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-008-9054-8>.
- <sup>6</sup> Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 519.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.
- <sup>8</sup> Étienne Lamotte, *Le traité de la grand vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra) avec une étude sur la vacuité. T. IV. chapitres XLII (suite)–XLVIII* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste de l’Université de Louvain, 1976), 185.
- <sup>9</sup> Safarali Kh. Shomakhmadov, ‘On the Meanings of the Terms *Dhāraṇī* and Mantra in the Buddhist Written Tradition’, *Orientalistica* 4, no. 4 (2021): 842–57. <https://doi.org/10.31696/2618-7043-2021-4-4-842-857> (In Russ.)
- <sup>10</sup> Richard D. McBride II, ‘Enchanting Monks and Efficacious Spells: Rhetoric and the Role of Dhāraṇī in Medieval Chinese Buddhism’, *Bulgyohagbo 불교학보* (The Journal of Buddhism) 72 (2015): 175. DOI: 10.18587/bh.2015.09.72.167.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Shomakhmadov, ‘On the Meanings of the Terms *Dhāraṇī* and Mantra in the Buddhist Written Tradition’.
- <sup>13</sup> McBride, ‘Enchanting Monks and Efficacious Spells: Rhetoric and the Role of Dharani in Medieval Chinese Buddhism’, 185.
- <sup>14</sup> Ann Paludan, *Chronicle of the Chinese Emperors: The Reign-By-Reign Record of*

- the Rulers of Imperial China* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 99.
- <sup>15</sup> Jinhua Chen, 'Śarīra and Scepter: Empress Wu's Political Use of Buddhist Relics', *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25, nos. 1–2 (2002), 103.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.
- <sup>17</sup> Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: An Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Functions of the Dunhuang Document S. 6502 Followed by an Annotated Translation* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, Seminario di Studi Asiatici, 1976), 97–111; Chen, 'Śarīra and Scepter', 110.
- <sup>18</sup> Paludan, *Chronicle of the Chinese Emperors*, 101–02.
- <sup>19</sup> Chen, 'Śarīra and Scepter', 114–16.
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Kornicki, 'Empress Shōtoku as a Sponsor of Printing', in Hildegard Diemberger, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Peter Kornicki, eds., *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 48.
- <sup>21</sup> Chen, 'Śarīra and Scepter', 114–16.
- <sup>22</sup> Kornicki, 'Empress Shotoku as a Sponsor of Printing', 45–46.
- <sup>23</sup> Translation from Japanese. *Shoku nihongi* 続日本紀 (The Continuation of 'Annals of Japan'), in *Shin nihon koten bungaku taikei* 新日本古典文学大系 (New Japanese Classic Literature Series), vols. 12–16 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989–1998), vol. 13, 280.
- <sup>24</sup> Kornicki, 'Empress Shōtoku as a Sponsor of Printing', 46.
- <sup>25</sup> Translation from Japanese. Noriko Katsuura 勝浦令子, *Koken, Shotoku-tenno: Shukke shitemo matsurigoto o okonauni anikagirazu* 孝謙・称徳天皇:出家しても政を行ふに豈障らず (Emperesses Koken and Shotoku: While Taking Buddhist Percepts it wouldn't be an Obstacle to Rule) (Kyoto: Mineruba Shobo, 2014), 151–215.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>27</sup> Translation from Japanese. Kenji Kurano 倉野憲司, ed., *Shoku nihongi semmyo* 続日本紀宣命 (Imperial Edicts from 'Shoku Nihongi') (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1936), 62–63.
- <sup>28</sup> Paludan, *Chronicle of the Chinese Emperors*, 214.
- <sup>29</sup> Translation from Japanese. Noriko Katsuura 勝浦令子, *Koken, Shotoku-tenno: Shukke shitemo seiwokonafuni anikagirazu*, 95–99.
- <sup>30</sup> Translation from Japanese. Susumu Nakanishi 中西進, ed., *Man'yo-shu* 万葉集, vols. 1–4 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1981), 83.
- <sup>31</sup> Jin'ichi Konishi, *A History of Japanese Literature*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 239–47.
- <sup>32</sup> McBride, 'Enchanting Monks and Efficacious Spells', 181–82.

#### About the Author

**Elena Lepekhova** works as a senior research officer in the Department of Eastern History and Culture at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow). The main field of her study is the factors determining the emergence of the religious situation in Southeast Asia from the sixth to the 12th century. In 2013, she defended her doctoral dissertation about the genesis of the religious bureaucracy

in Japan from the sixth to the ninth century. She is now an Sc.D in Philosophy and a Professor at the Institute of Oriental Studies (Moscow). She is the author of *Buddhist Sangha in Japan in the Sixth to Ninth Century* (Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 2009); *The World of Buddhist Ideas and Monastics in Classical Japanese Literature* in co-authorship with S. Lepekhov, ed. by T.L. Sokolova-Delyushina, (Ulan-Ude, 2013); and *Empresses and Buddhism in China and Japan in the Sixth to Eighth Century* (Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, 2019). She is an overseas research fellow at Soka University.