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## Auspicious Omens in the Reign of the Last Empress of Nara Japan, 749–770

The pattern of auspicious omens reported to the court and recorded in *Shoku Nihongi* during the reign of the last Nara empress, Kōken/Shōtoku Tennō, offers essential insights into the royal political theology of the time. Royal edicts and memorials to the throne discussing portentous animals, cloud formations, and spontaneous inscriptions on unusual surfaces constituted a dialog between court and literati revealing a coherent interpretation of how the cosmos responded to the actions and situation of ruler and subjects. The omens were a component of a developing structure of yin-yang (*onmyō*) thought, although the evidence of the chronicle is that Onmyōdō itself as a formal system had not yet crystallized. Most notable is that the omens were unfailingly good omens, upholding the sovereign in an age beset by succession disputes, conspiracies, and outright rebellion, and provided the occasions for creating auspicious era names.

KEYWORDS: omens—*shōzui*—weft texts—Onmyōdō—*nengō*—Kōken/Shōtoku Tennō—edicts—*senmyō*—*Shoku Nihongi*

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THE CALENDAR of eighth-century Japan is dotted with unusual era names (*nengō* 年号) inspired by turtle omens: Reiki 靈龜 (715–717; “numinous tortoise”); Jinki 神龜 (724–729; “divine tortoise”); and Hōki 宝龜 (770–781; “jeweled tortoise”). Even the *nengō* of the great cultural era Tenpyō 天平 (729–749; “heavenly peace”) was occasioned by the apparition of a large white tortoise with seven Chinese characters (天王貴乎知百年) proclaiming peace in the realm inscribed on its carapace. These *nengō* are uniquely Japanese and differ from the Chinese-era names of the time. The Japanese-era names all resulted from portentous events in the history of the Nara period, and the periods designated—ranging from a few months to twenty years—form a counterpoint to the longer-range Chinese calendars such as the Dayan 大衍 calendar, adopted gradually during the reign of the last empress.

The reign of the last empress, Kōken/Shōtoku Tennō 孝謙/称徳天皇 (r. 749–770),<sup>1</sup> is unusual in many respects. In her reign the *nengō* adopted were four character combinations—*Tenpyō Shōhō* 天平勝宝, or *Jingo Keiun* 神護景雲. The use of four characters for era names, probably inspired by those during the reign of Wu Zetian 武則天 (690–705; ROTHSCILD 2006, 134) is unique in Japanese history. Kōken/Shōtoku was the last in a series of six female Tennō over a period of almost two hundred years, the first being Suiko Tennō 推古天皇 (r. 592–628). Not until a thousand years later were women again seated on the Chrysanthemum Throne, and then only twice and in extremely different circumstances. Kōken/Shōtoku, unlike all but one of the previous female Tennō, had never been married to an emperor or crown prince, and she herself never married. She was the first woman to be formally designated Crown

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1. *Shoku Nihongi* records that the “Deposed Emperor Junnin” (Junnin Haitei 淳仁廢帝) was enthroned in 758, then deposed by Kōken in 764 following the Fujiwara Nakamaro 藤原仲麻呂 rebellion. However, Junnin was not added to the official list of Tennō until the Meiji period, and many factors testify to his being a puppet of the Retired Empress (Jōkō 上皇) Kōken. Chief of these is that the *nengō* was not changed upon his accession. All but two of the edicts issued during his reign are attributed to Kōken. Upon friction between the two in 760, Kōken Jōkō announced that she would handle major affairs of state, leaving minor responsibilities to Junnin. This reign deserves more detailed attention, especially concerning the balance of power among Junnin, the Retired Empress Kōken, the Dowager Empress Kōmyō 光明皇太后, and Nakamaro, but for the purposes of this article I designate the reign of Kōken/Shōtoku as the entire period of 749–770. More details as to the significance of her two names are given in the text below.

Prince (Kōtaishi 皇太子) and the only woman to take Buddhist orders while an empress regnant. In the *Shoku Nihongi*, over half of the sixty-two Old Japanese *senmyō* 宣命 are ascribed to her.<sup>2</sup>

Another peculiarity of her reign, pointed out by MURAYAMA Shūichi (1981, 52), is that the number of both recorded auspicious omens and catastrophic events such as famines and epidemics peaked during this era. Japanese historians have embarked on increasingly sophisticated textual criticism of *Shoku Nihongi*, examining the circumstances of its compilation, embedded text types such as *jitsuroku* 実録 (veritable records), the influence of features such as the adoption of Chinese calendars, astronomical observations, and the wishes of later emperors, particularly Emperor Kanmu 桓武天皇 (SAKAMOTO 1971; NAKANISHI 2000 and 2002; HOSOI 2007). Hosoi in particular has provided a complete index of auspicious omens in the *Rikkokushi* as part of his analysis (see Chart 4 in HOSOI 2007, 83–85).

The omen reporting and interpreting techniques found in *Shoku Nihongi* comprise only one component of a vast, multifaceted complex of ideas trickling into Japan for centuries from the Korean peninsula, China, India, and south-eastern and western Asia for many centuries. MASUO (2002), in tracing many of these concepts and their trajectory into Japan, includes scientific systems such as calendrical, medical, and divinatory science, astronomy, formal elements of yin-yang and five phases thought, as well as a variety of folk beliefs under the general rubric of Daoism. At certain points in *Shoku Nihongi* we can glimpse with great clarity the textual basis for the formal study of these systems, for example in the curriculum of 757 laid out for students in Tenpyō Hōji 1.11.9 (MASUO 2002, 39–40; see BENDER and ZHAO 2010 for an English translation). Here are listed seven fields of study: Classics, History, Medicine, Acupuncture, Astronomy, yin-yang (*onmyō* 陰陽), and Calendar. The texts to be studied include familiar Chinese classics such as the *Shijing* 詩經, *Yijing* 易經, and *Shujing* 書經 and the three histories (*Shiji* 史記, *Hanshu* 漢書, and *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書). Also on the curriculum are more esoteric works such as the *Maijing* (Classic of the pulse) 脈經, the *Zhenjing* (Classic of acupuncture) 針經, *Tianwenshu* 天文書 (Book of astronomy), *Wuxing dayi* 五行大義 (General principles of the five phases), and *Dayan liyi* (Calendar of Dayan) 大衍曆議.

But the evidence in *Shoku Nihongi* is fragmentary, and in fact it is clear that Onmyōdō 陰陽道 as a system did not crystallize in Japan until the Heian period (YAMASHITA 1996, 1–9). Also, it was not imported wholesale from China but was in some sense constructed in Japan. The nascent system of omen interpretation in Nara was, in my view, only one strand in a developing matrix and certainly

2. Kurano (SM1, 54–64) listed *senmyō* 24–28 under Junnin's reign. Kitagawa (SM2, 43–48) attributes only *senmyō* 24 and 25 to Junnin, and a total of thirty-four to Kōken/Shōtoku Tennō.

cannot be characterized simply as equivalent to Onmyōdō. In fact, the evidence is that even the role and scope of the *Onmyōryō* 陰陽寮 itself was not yet established during the eighth century. While the *Giseiryō* 擬制令 in the *ritsuryō* 律令 specifies that omens should be reported to the *Jibushō* 治部省, the Ministry of Civil Administration, it was not until later in Shōtoku Tennō's reign that it was clarified that omens should be reported to the *Onmyōryō*, an office within the *Nakatsukasashō* 中務省, or Ministry of Central Affairs.

This article focuses on the omens in the *Shoku Nihongi* record of Kōken/Shōtoku's reign. It will demonstrate the emergence of a positive theology of omens, one in which catastrophes were not viewed as evil portents, but in which a variety of auspicious signs sent down by Heaven constituted a pattern of supernatural support for the empress's rule. A great number of the last empress's imperial edicts, both the Old Japanese *senmyō* and the Chinese-language *choku* and *shō*,<sup>3</sup> were devoted to exegeses of these seemingly random events, as were an increasing number of memorials submitted by the high nobility and clergy. The auspicious omens recorded in the official chronicle during the reign of the last empress were an integral and dynamic component in the development of a royal political theology of legitimacy.

### *Omens in the Standard Histories*

#### CHINESE HISTORIES

Statistical analysis of omens and portents in the history of the Western Han was an avenue of inquiry favored by some Western Sinologists in the mid-twentieth century. Perhaps inspired by the traditional Chinese notion that Confucius had inserted words or messages in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to express judgments of certain rulers, Hans BIELENSTEIN (1950; 1984; 1986; see also BIELENSTEIN and SIVIN 1977), building on the earlier work of DUBS (1938–1955) and EBERHARD (1933), constructed graphs of the occurrences of unusual astronomical and other portentous phenomena in the *Hanshu* 漢書 to show that the editors thus expressed indirect criticism of the Han emperors. This use of omens as an element of a broader theory of legitimacy was summed up by Bielenstein in his chapter on *Wang Mang* 王莽 and the Later Han:

In the state cult of the Han dynasty, Heaven was the supreme deity, a deity which was believed to guide the fate of the world directly. The emperor, or Son of Heaven, was its representative and ruled by its favor. A dynastic founder, as the first recipient of Heaven's mandate, was chosen over all others for his personal merit. The last emperor of a dynasty lost the mandate, because he and his house were no longer fit to rule. The coming of the mandate was heralded by

3. See BENDER 2007 for the definitions of *senmyō*, *choku*, and *shō*.

auspicious omens, the decline of Heaven's favor was announced by portents. The belief in the Mandate of Heaven deeply influenced Chinese historiography. The ancient historians quoted, suppressed, twisted, and even falsified evidence to show why the dynastic founder had been worthy of Heaven's blessing, a worthiness about which he personally had no doubt. His emphasis was on legitimacy. (BIELLENSTEIN 1986, 223)

According to Bielenstein, historians responsible for the compilation of the official dynastic histories inserted good omens either to legitimize a new ruler, or evil portents to criticize a particular emperor's actions in the course of a dynasty. In the case of *Wang Mang* the auspicious omens included "the discovery of inscribed stones and a stone ox, the appearance of Heaven's envoy in a dream, the spontaneous opening up of a well, the finding of a bronze casket with two inscribed envelope covers, and the like" (BIELLENSTEIN 1986, 230). In the *Hanshu*, the restoration of the Han dynasty was justified by similar omens, and the accession of *Wang Mang* retroactively criticized as an act of usurpation.

Similarly, the ascent of Emperor Wen 文, founder of the Sui 隋 dynasty, was heralded by fortunate omens, among many other elements of religious ideology. The *Huangsui Lingkanzhi* 皇隋靈感志, compiled by the Daoist Wang Shao 王邵, was a compendium of portents including snatches of popular songs and quotations from prognostic and divinatory texts (WRIGHT 1957, 85). Tang Taizong 唐太宗, the second Tang emperor, took a more rational approach: "Shortly after taking the throne, for example, when officials from various parts of the empire began to report lucky and unlucky omens to the throne, he retorted that whether the dynasty prospered or declined depended on the quality of its government and on the actions of man, not on heaven or its portents" (WECHSLER 1979, 189). On the other hand the Empress Wu (Wu Zetian 武則天, founder of the short-lived Zhou dynasty, 690–705), gave great credulity to omens. A white stone was discovered in the Lo River in 688 inscribed with the prophecy: "A Sage Mother shall come to Rule Mankind; and her Imperium shall bring Eternal Prosperity." Thereupon she led her court to the Altar of Heaven, declared the Lo River sacred, and changed the reign title to "Eternal Prosperity" (GUISO 1979, 302).

#### JAPANESE HISTORIES

Japanese scholars have thoroughly investigated the records of auspicious omens and catastrophic events in the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 and *Shoku Nihongi*, the first two of the Six National Histories (*Rikkokushi* 六国史), and detailed tables and graphs of these portents are easily available to the contemporary reader. The investigation began in the context of an interest in the Chinese prophetic (*chen* 讖) and weft (*wei* 緯) texts and an attempt to locate the Chinese texts that are occasionally mentioned in the omen records of the Japanese national histories.

(Weft texts were commentaries on or supplements to the “warp” texts, namely the standard classics of the Confucian canon; envisioning the later weft texts stretched out against the warp evoked an image of weaving.) The Japanese analysis of the development of the weft texts in Han and medieval China led to an interest in the background and development of yin-yang thought in ancient Japan.

In two articles on *chen wei* (Jp. *shin-i*) thought in the *Nihon Shoki*, TAIRA (1960; 1962) explained the background of prophetic and weft texts in China from the Later Han, through the medieval period, and into the Tang. He identified the *wazauta*, prophetic folk songs in *Nihon Shoki*, as growing out of this context. TAIRA listed the entire corpus of auspicious omens in *Shoku Nihongi* (1964, 64–75) and then constructed a detailed graph of the material (75–80). In these articles his primary interest was the background of the omens in the Chinese prophetic and weft texts. For example, the following quotation is found in *Shoku Nihongi* for the year 723: “When the Son of Heaven is filial, then Heaven sends down dragons, and the earth brings forth tortoises.” *Shoku Nihongi* identifies the source of this quote as the *Xiaojing Yuanshenqi* 孝經援神契 (Yōrō 7.10.23: SN2: 2, 134–35).<sup>4</sup> His graph lists six auspicious omens for the reign of Kōken and twenty-one for the reign of Shōtoku, although none are listed for the reign of Junnin.

YASUI (1977, 11–68) presented a succinct overview of the development of the weft texts in China, and then an extensive analysis of types of good omens and evil portents, their significance as prophecies in history, and their influence on the development of Buddhism (YASUI 1977, 71–218). His list of a large number of weft texts, most no longer extant, categorizes them by the classic with which they are traditionally associated. Here, for example, the *Xiaojing Yuanshenqi* 孝經援神契 is listed under the heading of “Filial Piety Wefts.”

MURAYAMA (1991–1993) has assembled the work of many scholars examining omens and portents in ancient Japan under the rubric of Onmyōdō. TAMURA (1991, 35–60) produced an extensive chart for the *Nihon Shoki*, of the sort that Taira did for *Shoku Nihongi*. A significant difference is that Tamura listed not only lucky omens but natural catastrophes, from the reign of Keitai Tennō 繼體天皇 to that of Tenmu 天武.

MURAYAMA (Chart 2 in 1981, 52) adopted a similar approach, charting disasters against lucky omens for the period from Kinmei Tennō 欽明天皇 to Kanmu. This resulted in a graph with a huge spike for catastrophes in the reign of Junnin,

4. Hereafter date and page references are given in the following format: era name abbreviation, year, month, day: *Shoku Nihongi* volume, pages. References to *Shoku Nihongi* (hereafter SN1) are to volumes 1–5 in the *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* edition; SN2 comprises volumes 12–16 in the series. The *kanbun* text is on the even-numbered page, the *yomikudashi* is on the odd-numbered.

and the highest peak for lucky omens during the reign of Shōtoku Tennō.<sup>5</sup> Murayama's analysis in brief is that the four peaks of recorded natural disasters occur in the reigns of Kōgyoku 皇極, Tenmu, Genmei 元明, and Junnin, corresponding to events such as the Taika reforms, Tenmu's consolidation of power as Tennō, the transfer of the capital to Nara, and the struggle between Fujiwara Nakamaro and Retired Empress Kōken during the Junnin era. With the reigns of Kōnin 光仁天皇 and Kanmu the numbers of catastrophes gradually fall, indicating a growing stabilization in the system of Onmyōdō (MURAYAMA 1981, 50–53).

A recent approach to the phenomenon of omens is in HOSOI (2007), where he notes the traditional theories that records of omens and disasters expressed historians' judgment on the reigns of emperors, but he instead chooses to focus on the complex issues of the compilation of *Shoku Nihongi* (HOSOI 2007, 76–81). Hosoi presented his own detailed table of the good omens in *Shoku Nihongi* (2007, 83–85, table 4). He discusses the significance of the lack of auspicious omens during Junnin's era, and the rush of omens to apparently legitimize the growing power of Dōkyō, but his interest here is primarily in issues of textual criticism. His conclusion is that the catastrophes recorded in *Shoku Nihongi* represent not the judgments of historians but a reflection of authentic records and primary materials (2007, 90). The greater part of his work is concerned with technical issues of the development of the calendar and their relevance for the compilation process of the National Histories.

### *Chinese vs. Japanese Omens*

The much-loved Chinese classic *Shanhai jing* 山海經, whose emergence is dated to the first century BC, and which has caught the imagination of commentators and illustrators ever since, was classified as “a work on omens, portents and prodigies” in the official dynastic bibliography of the Former Han (BIRRELL 1999, xiii). Translator Anne Birrell noted that:

Animals form the majority of accounts of omens (21 portents), then birds (11), fish (5), snakes (5), and fabulous birds (4). The unexpected appearance of these creatures, mostly rare, some fabulous, serves as a warning of imminent disaster. For example, the simian creature named the crimson-sate is an omen

5. MURAYAMA's table (Chart 1, 1981, 51) with the data for this graph analyzes the number of lucky omens and catastrophes in the historical record divided by the number of years in each emperor's reign to produce an index that is shown on the graph. For example, 109 natural disasters (the highest number for any reign) are recorded for Shōmu's era, but since Shōmu reigned for twenty-five years the index is 4.3. For Junnin's reign 90 natural disasters are recorded, but since he was on the throne only six years, his index is 15. Similarly, fourteen lucky omens are recorded for Shōtoku's reign; divided by the six years she was on the throne gives an index of 2.3. Only Genmei's reign has a higher index of lucky omens: 2.4.

of war. Other ominous creatures predict the catastrophes of major floods (8 instances), drought (13), war (8), conscription (1), locusts (1), panic (1), besides the less frequently mentioned good omens of peace (1) and bumper harvests (3). (BIRRELL 1999, XXXV)

In his 2002 translation STRASSBERG provided images of some of the fabulous animals described in *Shanhai jing* and illustrated by later artists, along with the omens listed in protasis/apodosis format:

Powercat: “If seen by people, it is an omen that there will be much public earth-work construction in the district.” (Plate v, 90.)

Yu-Bird: “If seen by people, it is an omen of a great drought throughout the world.” (Plate vii, 95)

Fuxi-Bird: “If seen by people, it is an omen of war.” (Plate xi, 102)

Jiao-Beast: “If it is seen by people, it is an omen of a bountiful harvest throughout the state.” (Plate xiv, 110)

The omens are primarily portents of catastrophes, as noted by Birrell above.

Martin POWERS, in his article on hybrid omens (1983), drew on the iconography of the Wu family shrines. Many of the same “hybrid omens”—“strange animals, plants, and objects” that are in some cases creatures with multiple heads or bodies—found at the Wu shrines constructed in the second century AD are also described in the “Omens” chapter of the *History of the Liu Song Dynasty* (from hereon, *Songshu* 劉宋書; Liu Song was a southern dynasty c. 420–479; see also POWERS 1983, 2). Powers analyzed these fantastic creatures, including two-headed fish and birds, winged tigers, and winged horses in terms of their political significance (see list of plates, 33–34 and 35–55). The inscriptions in plates 1 and 2 are translated as:

The hybrid beast: it appears when the virtue of the king reaches the widower and the widow.

The hybrid fish: It appears when the King protects all the retired worthies.

The hybrid bird: It appears when the King’s virtue reaches high and far.

The tree with intertwining branches: It appears when the king’s virtue harmonizes (all), and the eight directions are united as one.

(POWERS 1983, 4–5)

Powers believes, along with Michael LOEWE (1994, Chapter 1) and others, that “hybrid creatures were once part of the vast pantheon of nature deities worshipped in parts of China prior to unification under the Qin dynasty” (POWERS 1983, 5), and goes on to discuss how these chthonic deities were transmuted into symbols of political and social ideas.

LIPPIELLO (2001) also recently examined the Wu family shrines and has translated the “Treatise on Omens” from the *Songshu*. This work lists ninety-four types of auspicious signs, with a total of 872 occurrences collected from the Annals of the

dynastic histories of Han, *Three Kingdoms*, and *Liu Song*. The personages described begin with the sage rulers *Fuxi* 伏羲, with a snake-like body and human head, and Shennong 神農, with a human body and an ox-like head. It describes the emergence of the River Tablet and Lo Text, traditional portentous charts, on the back of a dragon and a turtle respectively. King Wen of Zhou 周文王 is depicted with a “dragon’s countenance and tiger’s shoulders, ten *chi* tall and with four nipples in his chest” (LIPPIELLO 2001, 278). Continuing into the history of the Han, we are introduced to other prodigious occurrences—a huge rock appearing in front of the palace to which thousands of white crows gathered; a willow tree rising up suddenly in the imperial garden, with worms gnawing at its leaves to form an inscription; gatherings of phoenixes; and flourishing of fluorescent grains with nine ears (2001, 289–91). Miraculous animals (yellow dragons, white tigers and horses, unicorns) and plants appear (2001, 299–300). The *Songshu* emphasizes the physiognomy of the infant emperors and portents at their birth, and much attention is given to the stars, solar eclipses, and other cosmic happenings (2001, 301–3).

Lippiello noted that the practice of including a treatise on auspicious signs in the official histories continued during the medieval period. Although this tradition ceased during the Tang, the reporting of auspicious omens during the Tang period is evident from compendia of administrative law, which prescribe (for example) that “All the auspicious tokens such as unicorn, phoenix, turtle and dragon are faithfully [adhering to their form] painted and described as grand auspices [*darui*] and then memorialized to the throne” (125–26; cited in LIPPIELLO 2001).

From this brief survey of omens in the *Shanhai jing*, at the Wu family shrines, and in the *Songshu* we can conclude in a preliminary way that the preference of the Chinese omen style was for fabulous, if not monstrous animals and happenings—the “hybrid omens” discussed by Powers were often beasts or birds with unusual features such as two heads or wings. From this very brief summary of the evidence, it seems that in general the omens in the *Shanhai jing* were portents of catastrophe, while those in the *Songshu* were harbingers of good fortune. Whether this was a genuine shift in world view over time is an issue beyond the scope of this article.

It should be noted too that the Chinese taste for fabulous creatures and portents was sometimes accompanied by a skeptical attitude. LOEWE (1994, 21) comments that, “In special chapters the *Standard Histories* were reporting the occurrence of portents, but Wang Ch’ung [*Wang Chong* 王充] for his part refused to believe that such events carried any message for the future of mankind.” As we have seen, *Tang Taizong* at least initially rejected the reporting of lucky and unlucky omens.

Many of the auspicious signs recorded in the *Nihon Shoki* and the *Shoku Nihongi* can be found to have antecedents in the Chinese omen texts cited above. What is striking is that the Japanese omens almost all belong to the tamer strands of this tradition. Thus auspicious animals such as white tortoises, birds, or horses with unusual markings comprise the Japanese portentous bestiary, at least in the stan-

dard histories. Certainly the account of the Age of the Gods in *Nihon Shoki* contains the appearance of strange shape-shifting creatures that change from snakes into humans, or of eight-headed dragons. But once into the more reliable historical portions of *Nihon Shoki* and all through *Shoku Nihongi*, there is a complete dearth of dragons or monstrous hybrid animals reported as omens. One might even venture to say that the Japanese imagination in the eighth century rejected the extraordinary creatures of Chinese omen lore in favor of a more naturalistic style. PÉRONNY, in his 2007 study of the animals of the *Man'yōshū*, classified seventy-two distinct types of animal, each with its scientific classification and translation into French. He found that the cuckoo appears most often (in 140 poems), followed by the horse (76), goose (67), deer (60), and crane (45), with unique mentions of eighty animals (PÉRONNY 2007, 6–7). None of these is a hybrid or fabulous beast.

A more intensive study of Chinese and Japanese omen lore would need to take into consideration the children's songs presented as portending certain events. SHAUGHNESSY, in introducing his examination of "arousing images" in the *Classic of Poetry*, produced an example of a "more or less extensive genre of folk-song that was regarded as prophetic" (2010, 67). The song is recorded in the *Chun qiu zuo zhuan*, where it is presented as an omen of the flight into exile of Duke Zhao in the year 517 BC. The occasion was the nesting of a type of mynah bird or grackle hitherto unknown in northern China. Shaughnessy gives James Legge's translation:

"Here are grackles apace! The duke flies in disgrace.  
 Look at the grackles' wings! To the wilds the duke flings, A horse one to him brings.  
 Look how the grackles go! In Kan-how he is low, Wants coat and trousers now.  
 Behold the grackles' next! Far off the duke doth rest.  
 Chow-fu has lost his state, Sung-foo comes proud and great.  
 O the grackles so strange! The songs to weeping change."  
 (Legge 1872: 709, cited in SHAUGHNESSY 2010, 67)

Edward CRANSTON (1993) gives a number of examples of the *wazauta*, or "premonitory song" in early Japanese waka. The "rapid buildup of omens pointing toward the overthrow of the Soga in 645" is reflected in a series of *wazauta* in *Nihon Shoki*, the first and most famous of which is:

<i>Iwa no e ni</i>	Up on top of a rock
<i>kosaru kome yaku</i>	A little monkey's parching rice
<i>kome dani mo</i>	Come on, old fellow,
<i>tagete tōrase</i>	At least have some rice and go,
<i>kamashishi no oji</i>	You old mountain goat, you.

The poem (NS 110) is presented as a prophecy of Soga no Iruka's 蘇我入鹿 attack on Prince Yamashiro no Ōe 山背大兄王. CRANSTON comments that "The

‘ominous’ nature of such songs (when ‘properly’ interpreted) is heightened by their mysterious appearance in the mouths of monkeys, children, or other divinely innocent folk” (1993, 115–20).

### *Natural Disasters as Evil Omens?*

There is a tendency to assume a binary opposition between “good omens” and “evil portents,” with records of natural disasters signifying the latter. Thus BIEL-ENSTEIN (1950) and EBERHARD (1957) graphed natural disasters and cosmic events such as solar eclipses as “indirect criticism” arranged by editors of the standard histories to express judgment on specific emperors. Murayama charted “good omens” (*shōzui* 祥瑞) against natural disasters (*sai'i* 災異) with the assumption that the latter indicate some sort of criticism of the reign. Tamura’s graph listed nineteen columns of calamities against one column for good omens.

However, in the reign of the last empress this is a false dichotomy, and as we have seen HOSOI (2007) has concluded that the reports of disasters reflect authentic materials. The catastrophic natural events are recorded in the chronicle almost entirely without comment, and the reactions by the government are eminently rational. Most commonly such events as famine are listed tersely, with the name of a province or provinces, and the notice that “relief supplies were granted.” The court’s reaction to a series of lengthy incidents of drought and famine from 763 to 765 was to institute measures to change the coinage system, create storehouses and methods to transfer grain to affected areas, and to remit taxes. Most striking was the institution of a system of selling government rank, usually for a fixed price for a degree of promotion in rank.

TABLE 1 shows the natural disasters recorded in *Shoku Nihongi* for the years 749–770. Famine is by far the most frequently recorded disaster. Solar eclipses, of which there were twelve during the period, are not included in the chart even though they are often included in lists of evil portents by some scholars noted above. In *Shoku Nihongi* these are never cited or commented on as catastrophic events. SNELLEN, in the 1934 introduction to his translation of the *Shoku Nihongi* through 715 CE, noted in a lengthy discussion (158–64) that the seventy-two solar eclipses recorded in *Shoku Nihongi* coincided with those found in Western records. Many of them would not have been visible in Japan, and he concluded that the court astronomers had access to astronomical calculations, presumably from Chinese calendrical data, that allowed them to predict eclipses accurately. Hosoi charted the solar eclipses for *Shoku Nihongi* (Chart 5 in 2007, 97), but his main point in a very brief discussion is that there are a relatively low number for Kanmu Tenno’s reign, which he concludes has to do with Kanmu’s interference with the editing of the history.

GRAPH 1 shows the incidence of natural disasters by year. Note the very obvious spike in the year 763, gradually declining over the remainder of Shōtoku Ten-

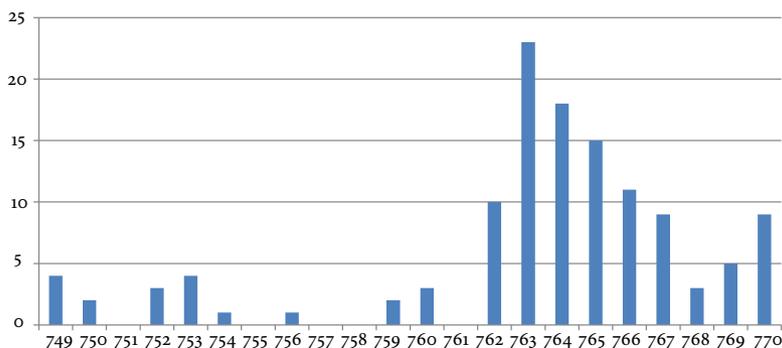
famine	62
drought	18
disease/epidemic	16
typhoon/high winds	11
bad harvest	8
flood	7
earthquake	6
fire	3
volcanic eruption	2
locusts	1
tsunami	1

TABLE 1. Natural disasters recorded in *Shoku Nihongi*, 749–770.

no's reign. According to the *Shoku Nihongi* this represents a very real increase in drought and famine, beginning in the last years of Nakamaro's power. A notice at the end of the year 764 refers to his rebellion explicitly: "This year, due to Nakamaro's revolt, and drought, the price of one *koku* of rice rose to 1000 *sen*" (TPHJ 8.12.28; SN2: 4, 58–59). I would argue that this graph does *not* represent any sort of "indirect criticism" but an accurate record of catastrophic events. As I note above, the court took a large number of economic measures to cope with these events, measures that provide material more for the economic historian than for the historian of ideas.

The few exceptions to practical economic measures in the wake of catastrophe can be briefly listed. In two instances the Tennō gave edicts chiding lazy local officials for neglecting their duties and thus producing bad harvests, and proclaiming that such behavior and their results was displeasing to the native deities (TPJG 2: 9.5; SN2: 4, 130–33; JGKU 1: 4.24; SN2: 4, 160–63). The emphasis was on the laziness of the officials rather than the anger of the gods. In three instances offerings were sent to the shrines of various kami to pray for rain (TPHJ 7: 5.28; SN2: 3, 432–33; TPHJ 8: 4.16; SN2: 4, 10–11; TPJG 2: 5.17; SN2: 4, 122–23). But for the most part, the records of natural disasters are simply that, and no theological significance is attached to their occurrence. Moreover, the graph of their incidence demonstrates a severe drought and famine in the year 763, with the emergency gradually receding.

In summary, my argument here is that the records of calamities were almost without exception not viewed as portentous events, but as emergencies to be managed by the state as practical matters. There is not a strong theology of natural catastrophes, in which such disasters signify the displeasure of the gods. The reaction to fortunate omens, as we shall see, is much more colored by a theological approach.



GRAPH 1. Natural disasters, 749–770.

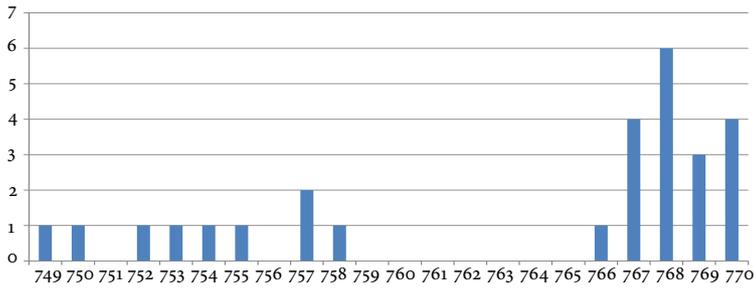
TABLE 2 lists the auspicious omens for the period 749–770. It agrees with the standard lists of TAIRA (1964, 75–80) and HOSOI (2007, Table 4, 83–85), except that several unusual events not included in their lists are here marked with an asterisk. Omitting those with asterisks, there are twenty-nine events. TABLE 3 lists the omens by frequency of appearance. The portents were reported all across the empire, from Hitachi and Musashi in the northeast to Chikuzen and Higo in the southwest. GRAPH 2 shows auspicious omens for the same period.

For the purposes of this article I use “omen,” “portent,” and “sign” interchangeably, despite the various etymologies and nuances of the terms. LOEWE (1994, 191) uses the term “oracle” to mean “messages that are inherent in natural phenomena” (“oracles of the wind and clouds”). However, for this period (and for the eighth century as a whole) I use “oracle” to refer exclusively to the well-known oracles of Hachiman. In the Nara period Hachiman, as opposed to Amaterasu, was the great Shinto divinity who spoke in oracles delivered orally by a shrine priestess. The fascinating question of whether the imperial edicts were themselves oracles, since they were delivered by the imperial kami, is reserved for a future study.

The omens, primarily white animals, are found in Chinese contexts and there are none unusual in this context. Clouds and various types of miraculous writing (*zuiji* 瑞字) also occur in Chinese lists of auspicious omens. The sightings of unusually colored clouds in 767 correspond to what Edward Schafer termed “atmospherics” in reports of cloud omens in China (SCHAFER 1977, 88–89). The third case of *zuiji*, in 758, in which insects formed Chinese characters in the roots of a wisteria bush, is strikingly similar to the case of worms gnawing the leaves of a willow tree to form a message, documented in the *Songshu* (see above). The miraculous appearance of gold and the *Bishamonten* 毘沙門天 relic are distinctive, and I have also included the birth of triplets and quadruplets

YEAR	DATE	TENNŌ	OMEN
749	TPSH 1.2.22	Shōmu	gold
750	TPSH 2.3.10	Kōken	gold
*751	TPSH 3.7.18	Kōken	triplets
752	TPSH 4.1.1	Kōken	white tortoise
*752	TPSH 4.7.20	Kōken	quadruplets
753	TPSH 5.1.1	Kōken	white tortoise
754	TPSH 6.1.1	Kōken	white crow
755	TPSH 7.6.15	Kōken	white crow
757	TPHJ 1.3.20	Kōken	unusual writing
757	TPHJ 1.8.13	Kōken	unusual writing
758	TPHJ 2.2.27	Kōken	unusual writing
*764	TPHJ 8.9.18	Junnin	star/meteor
766	TPJG 2.10.20	Shōtoku	sacred relic
767	JGKU 1.8.8	Shōtoku	unusual clouds
767	JGKU 1.6.17	Shōtoku	unusual clouds
767	JGKU 1.7.15	Shōtoku	unusual clouds
767	JGKU 1.7.23	Shōtoku	unusual clouds
767	JGKU 1.8.16	Shōtoku	unusual clouds
767	JGKU 1.9.1	Shōtoku	unusual clouds
768	JGKU 2.1.10	Shōtoku	white deer
768	JGKU 2.6.21	Shōtoku	white pheasant
768	JGKU 2.7.11	Shōtoku	white tortoise
*768	JGKU 2.7.19	Shōtoku	toad procession
768	JGKU 2.7.8?	Shōtoku	white crow
768	JGKU 2.7.11	Shōtoku	divine horse
768	JGKU 2.11.2	Shōtoku	white rodent
769	JGKU 2?	Shōtoku	white deer
769	JGKU 3.5.16	Shōtoku	white dove
770	HK 1.5.11	Shōtoku	white sparrow
*770	HK 1.6/7	Shōtoku	comet
770	HK 1.7.18	Shōtoku	white crow
770	HK 1.7.18	Shōtoku	white pheasant
770	HK 1.8.5	Kōnin	white tortoise
770	HK 1.8.17	Kōnin	white tortoise

TABLE 2. Auspicious omens recorded in *Shoku Nihongi*, 749–770. TPSH: Tenpyō Shōhō 天平勝宝; TPHJ: Tenpyō Hōji 天平宝字; TPJG: Tenpyō Jingo 天平神護; JGKU: Jingo Keiun 神護景雲; HK: Hōki 宝龜.



GRAPH 2. Auspicious omens, 749–770.

unusual clouds	6
white tortoise	5
white crow	4
unusual writing	3
gold	2
white deer	2
white pheasant	2
sacred relic	1
divine horse	1
white rodent	1
white dove	1
white sparrow	1

TABLE 3. Frequency of auspicious omens, 749–770.

noted in *Shoku Nihongi*, which are not described as auspicious omens as such, although the parents are rewarded with material aid and nursemaids.

Strikingly apparent in GRAPH 2 is the complete lack of auspicious omens during the entire period of Junnin's reign. The meteor during the reign of Junnin is listed without interpretation in the account of the suppression of Nakamaro's revolt as "a star, about the size of a large jar," that came to rest on the home where the fleeing rebel had taken shelter. It was obviously an auspicious sign from the court's point of view, though not from Nakamaro's. Equally striking is the abrupt rise in the number of omens during the last years of Shōtoku Tennō's reign.

What is the meaning of this distribution of good omens from the years 758 to 770? Does it mean that the *Shoku Nihongi* record was edited to emphasize that Junnin was a bad ruler, or not a legitimate ruler at all? What is the significance of what

Hosoi (2007) terms the “rush” of good omens during the rise of Dōkyō’s power? Why did the court suddenly attach so much significance to the oracles of the powerful native deity Hachiman, even to the point of sending Wake no Kiyomaro to distant Kyushu to ascertain the kami’s will concerning the royal succession? These are tantalizing questions that permit no easy answer. Hosoi’s discussion (2007, 82–90) raises many of these problems, emphasizing that there are no simple solutions. Perhaps the most important issue he raises is that the plethora of auspicious omens at the end of Shōtoku’s reign and into the early years of Kōnin Tennō may signify the historians’ emphasis on the end of Tenmu’s line and the shift to that of Tenji Tennō. It may be that the editing of *Shoku Nihongi* during Kanmu’s reign extended to the distribution of omens during the period 758–770. Certainly a deeper examination of omen theology during Kōnin and Kanmu’s reigns is warranted, although that is beyond the scope of this article.

The comet that “entered the seven pole stars” at the very end of the chronicle of Shōtoku Tennō is also recorded without interpretation. It seems to mark some sort of finality to the account of her reign. The bizarre procession of toads in 768 at a storehouse in Higo province is also recounted without interpretation and is ambiguous in meaning. It is the only one in the list which may perhaps signify an evil portent, although there is nothing in the *Shoku Nihongi* record to justify this point of view. Only a few of the omens listed above are explicitly described in *Shoku Nihongi* as *shōzui* 祥瑞 or *zuishō* 瑞祥—literally lucky omens. Primarily the term is used in the imperial edicts that comment on the happenings in the process of a larger theological investigation. But a number of general observations can be made on the role of auspicious omens during this period. First, they were the occasion for the change for four of the five changes in *nengō*. The discovery of gold occasioned the change to *Tenpyō Shōhō*; the writing on the silkworm cocoon the change to *Tenpyō Hōji* (BENDER 2010); the sighting of multicolored clouds to *Jingo Keiun*; and the two white tortoises to *Hōki*. Second, they were frequently occasions of great rejoicing as expressed in imperial edicts, and often for a dialog between officials and the empress as to their significance. Third, they were often the occasion for rewards to those who presented them, sometimes for promotions of court officials in general, and in one case at least of a proclamation of a Great Amnesty.

### *Toward a Theology of Auspicious Omens*

The *Shoku Nihongi* evidences a theology of auspicious omens created during the reign of the last empress by the mutual interaction of many state actors. The core of this theology is best articulated in the documents that constitute a sort of dialog between the empress and her court. On one side are the imperial edicts—*senmyō* 宣命, *choku* 勅, and *shō* 詔—and on the other the reports and petitions—*hyō* (*jōhyō* 上表), or *sō*, (*sōjō* 奏上)—from the high aristocracy and bureaucrats of

various levels around the empire. The actors comprise the empress, her court, the bureaucracy, Buddhist priests, kami shrine officials, and members of the Yin-yang Bureau, but also lower-ranking provincial officials and even commoners. Not to be forgotten are the editors and compilers of the *Shoku Nihongi* itself.

The questions of when and why good omens occur constituted the primary motif in the court's theology. According to the *ritsuryō*, the fundamental reason for the appearance of good omens was as a supernatural response to the sovereign's actions. The relevant protocols for reporting omens is spelled out in the *Giseiryō* 擬制令 section:

Omens [*shōzui*] appear in response to the actions of the ruler. If unicorns, phoenixes, tortoises, or dragons appear, and according to the omen books they are great omens, they should be reported immediately. The report should include an accurate description of its color and shape and where it was sighted; such reports should not be exaggerated. Superior omens on down should be reported to the proper officials, who should report them up to the emperor on the following New Year's Day. Omens that are birds or beasts and are captured alive should be returned to the wild after noting their description. Otherwise they should be sent to the *Jibushō*. In the case of those that cannot be captured, or as in the case of intertwined branches that cannot be sent, the local official should determine the truth of it, and then have a drawing made and present it. Edicts will be issued periodically announcing rewards as appropriate. (RR, 345–46)

Provincial governors or other officials were normally the ones to present omens to the court or to report their sighting, and they and their districts were given tax remission and other rewards. In later years however more and more commoners reported omens, and they were well rewarded, sometimes with court rank, measures of silk and other cloth, and rice. Presumably these rewards helped to encourage the growing number of omens presented to the court.

In cases of *zuiji*, such as the characters in the imperial bedchamber or on the silkworm cocoon, officials were commanded to interpret the omens. Usually these officials are recorded in the chronicle in generic terms—*kanjin* 官人, or *hakase* 博士, although in the final years of Shōtoku's reign the Onmyōryō is specifically identified as the part of the bureaucracy charged with interpreting omens.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the priests at Ise Daijingu 伊勢大神宮 are twice specified as reporters of auspicious clouds and interpreters of their significance.

The miraculous omen of the relic emanating from the statue of Bishamonten inspired great rejoicing, fanfare, and lengthy interpretation, but had a strange ending, as the priest who discovered it was found several years later to have apparently

6. The Onmyōryō was a bureau within the *Nakatsukashō* 中務省, or Ministry of Central Affairs. However, the *ritsuryō* directs omens to be reported to the *Jibushō*. The contradiction here suggests that the system of reporting was not yet clarified at this time.

manufactured the omen. Another strange event was the report from the Onmyōryō in 758 that the books of omens had predicted a disastrous year to follow. The advice from the *onmyō* officials was to carry out Buddhist rites, specifically readings of the *Daihannyakyō* 大般若經, as measures against disease and epidemic, and thus to ward off the ill luck predicted by the auspices. The Tennō gave the following edict:

The *Daishi* reported:

According to the *Kukūkyō*, next year, a *tsuchinotoi* 己亥 year, is a very unlucky year of the Three Confluences. The *Kukūkyō* 九宮教 says “In a Three Confluences year there occur disasters of flooding, drought, and epidemic.”

We have heard: “The *Makahannyaharamita* is the mother of all Buddhas. If the verse of four phrases is chanted and the sutra read, then fortunate virtue will be accumulated.<sup>7</sup> When the Son of Heaven prays thus, then military upheavals and natural disasters will not trouble the country, and if the common people pray thus, sickness and evil spirits of disease will not enter their houses. Thus evil will be averted and good fortune obtained, and there will be no further danger.”

“Therefore it is proclaimed throughout the various provinces of the empire that the *Makahannyaharamita* shall be prayed at all times in the mouths of everyone, man or woman, young or old, traveling or at home, walking or sitting down. The hundred officials both civil and military shall when going to court or to their offices while on the way on the roads daily pray this sutra. What We pray is that wind and rain will come in their season, that there shall be no flood or drought, that cold and heat will come in order, that the disaster of epidemic disease will be entirely averted. Let this be known widely far and near, and let Our wish be made known.” (TPHJ 2.8.18; SN2: 3, 280–81)

### *Provoked and Unprovoked Omens*

Why and when did auspicious omens appear to go to the heart of the thought regarding the significance and interpretation of omen theology? Here the distinction between provoked and unprovoked omens is significant.

In his famous edict read before the uncompleted image of Rushana 盧舍那 Buddha at Tōdaiji in 749, Emperor Shōmu clearly stated that he had asked the kami, including the ancestral emperors, for a sign:

When pondering these things we heard that among all laws the words of the Buddha are superior in protecting states, we placed the *Saishōōkyō* 最勝王經<sup>8</sup> in all

7. The *Daishi* 大史 here means the head of the Onmyōryō. *Kukūkyō* was perhaps a divination text referred to in the Sui history. The 四句偈 is a summary of the *Prajñāpāramitā* 摩訶般若波羅蜜多 sutra (*Daihannyakyō*).

8. This is the *Konkōmyō-Saishōōkyō* 金光明最勝王經, Yizing’s 義淨 translation of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*.

the provinces we govern and said that we would construct an image of Rushana Buddha. Thereupon we prayed to the kami that are in heaven and the kami that are on earth, and to the awesome divine Tennō who founded the Reign in the distant ages past, whose names are fearful to voice. We served by leading the many people and a disaster was averted and turned to joy; a crisis was changed and all has become peace. While we thus served, many people were doubtful of success, and We ourselves were anxious that there would not be enough gold. Then we received the omen of the particularly miraculous word of the Three Treasures, and the kami in the heavens and the kami that are on earth together sent down special favor, and also the *mitama* of the ancestral emperors vouchsafed a blessing, and they comforted us with particular affection, and made the gold appear. Thus we were overjoyed and greatly esteemed this blessing. Although We did not know whether or not to proceed, and night and day worried greatly, We are unworthy and ashamed clumsily not to have relied on the gods' favor, which we have received and which has been made manifest in Our reign.

(TPSH 1.4.1; SN2: 3, 66–69)

The only clear example of a provoked omen in the reign of Kōken/Shōtoku is the appearance of the auspicious writing on the ceiling of the imperial bed-chamber in 757. The four characters *Tenka Taihei* 天下太平 spontaneously appeared in the third month, and the empress invited high officials to view this sign. In an edict the empress explained that she had prayed to the Buddhist deities and native kami specifically asking for a sign on the propriety of her action. The question was whether the appointment of Prince Funado as Crown Prince as specified in the posthumous will of Shōmu Tennō, who died in 756, could be changed. The appearance of the omen was to her a sign that she had made the correct decision in setting aside Funado and appointing Prince Ōi instead (TPHJ 1.4.4; SN2: 3, 176–85).

Apart from this very direct request for a sign, the designation of the *Yuki* 悠紀 and *Suki* 主基 provinces for the *Daijōsai* 大嘗祭 (the “Great Thanksgiving Festival” following the enthronement ceremony) in 758 and 765 are the only other indications of a process of divination in provoking an omen. The *Shoku Nihongi* does not describe the process by which the *Yuki* and *Suki* were chosen, although a *senmyō* in 765 refers briefly to divination.<sup>9</sup>

The remainder of the omens may be considered as unprovoked, in that they appeared spontaneously rather than in response to a direct request for an omen. This is not to say that the fortunate signs were viewed as completely acci-

9. See *Miura* 御占, TPJG 1.11.23; SN2: 4, 102–3. Loewe and Blacker have described in detail the process of turtle divination, and in particular of consulting the turtle in divination of the *Yuki* and *Suki* fields based on a work of Ban Nobutomo from 1844 (LOEWE and BLACKER 1981, 64–71), but it would be anachronistic to read this process back into the eighth century, tempting as it may be.

dental—indeed the chronicle records lengthy reasoning as to why these signs appeared, and this discourse constitutes the bulk of the theology of auspicious omens. However, these are retrospective interpretations as to why the signs were manifested.

In the majority of cases the empress expressed a vague sense of unease or anxiety, sometimes articulated in words from the *Book of Poetry*: “We feel that We are treading on thin ice, standing at the edge of an abyss.”<sup>10</sup> In other edicts the empress frequently conveyed her distress at her lack of virtue, doubting whether she had the ability to adequately govern the realm. The specific language referring to her “virtue” or “power” varies, with such locutions as *kahaku* 寡薄; *katoku* 寡德; *kyohaku* 虚薄; *hihaku* 菲薄; *hakutoku* 薄德; and *toku ni hazuru* 德に慙ずる. These may perhaps be understood as formulaic or even ritualistic expressions of self-accusation or self-derogation.

But despite the seemingly formulaic nature of the empress’s edicts, it is also very obvious that the expression of self-doubt came in the context of serious political threats to the throne and to her reign—the Tachibana Naramaro 橘奈良麻呂 conspiracy of 757, the Fujiwara Nakamaro rebellion of 764 and its aftermath, and the period of the ascendancy of the priest Dōkyō 道鏡 in the late 760s. It is also quite possible that the later instances, especially in 770, were directly related to her failing health at the end of her life. In any case, the pattern of these unprovoked auspicious omens is that they follow upon a period of imperial doubt and uncertainty about the empress’s ability to adequately govern the realm.

In every instance, the auspicious portents were welcomed with great joy and gratitude and as miraculous evidence that various spiritual entities blessed and supported her rule. Thus when the four characters *Tenka Taihei* appeared in the imperial bedchamber in 757, the empress exclaimed in an edict:

This demonstrated that Heaven was aiding our government and that the kami were expressing their will. Although one peruses distant antiquity and widely examines the past, such a thing has never been recorded in documents and has never been heard of in former times. This indicates that the Three Treasures of the Buddha’s law will bring peace to the state, and shows that the various kami of heaven and earth will long bring stability to the ancestral altars. That We have received such a marvelous sign gives us a feeling of joyful astonishment. (TPHJ 1.4.4; SN2: 3, 180–81; HOLCOMBE 1999, 296)

Similar statements from other edicts exemplify the type:

1. After the suppression of Nakamaro’s rebellion:

10. TPHJ 1.8.18; SN2: 3, 220–21; TPJG 2.10.21; SN2: 4, 140–41; HK 1.7.15; SN2: 4, 288–89; see BENDER 2010 (233–35) for the complete translation of the edict of 757 employing this trope.

Fortunately the divine spirits protected our country, and the wind and rain aided our army, and within ten days Nakamaro and his allies were completely suppressed. (TPJG 1.1.7; SN2: 4, 60–61)

### 2. Upon the appearance of the relic from the *Bishamonten* statue:

When the highest Buddhist law is venerated and worshiped with a pure heart of devotion, certainly marvelous omens will appear.

(TPJG 2.10.20; SN2: 4, 134–35)

In the past sixth months the awakened mind arose in Us and We took refuge in the way of the Buddha which nothing surpasses. Now there has been a marvelous revelation of three tiny relics in a tightly-sealed container. This was wondrous, but after several months, We still did not know what it signified.

We have heard that “The five numinous creatures<sup>11</sup> are auspicious omens of the king.” In an era full of virtue, such things never cease to be recorded. However, a relic of such perfect shape has never before been seen. A harmonious response has certainly caused this. We, being of little virtue, have passed the years in dread, unable to nurture the people, as though treading on thin ice and facing a deep ravine. Then unexpectedly this relic of the Buddha’s superlative way, responding to my desolate feelings, manifested its numinous light, revealing the perfect essence of the Buddha. The traces of the Jetavana park have passed away, but it still amazes the heart. We see the relic displayed vividly before our eyes as if for the first time since the parinirvana in the sandalwood grove. The auspicious omen of a black jewel with green letters has appeared in the sagely eras, but not yet in our time. The dharma of the west has been transmitted to the east—how clear it is this day! Shall we vainly hoard this numinous jewel, or shall we not share it with the people? Thus we give promotions.

(TPJG 2.10.21; SN2: 4, 138–41)

### 3. Upon the sighting of multicolored auspicious clouds:

We have heard that in the past such a great sign, so remarkable and auspicious, was revealed by Heaven and Earth in response to the virtue of an era of a Sage Emperor. We dare not presume that Our virtue is such to move the heart of Heaven and Earth. However, these things have been manifested above the shrine of the Great Kami (Amaterasu). Hence this is a thing the Great Kami has graciously revealed, and moreover that the spirits of the unutterable earlier Emperors of Age upon age have graciously assisted. Further it is because in the first month I invited the great priests of the various great temples to expound the *Saishōkyō* and caused them to practice the repentance rite of *Kichijōten* 吉祥天. Thus the great priests together with the officials of the government

11. These are Kirin, Phoenix, Tortoise, Dragon, White Tiger; here only the first two are named.

served correctly and the Three Treasures, the various devas, and the kami of heaven and earth together revealed the wonderful and venerable great sign.

(JGKU 1.8.16; SN2: 4, 172–73)

4. From the officials' interpretation upon the appearance of a white pheasant:

The appearance of a pheasant is heaven's response to the fact that the nobles are united in one heart in allegiance to the sovereign. That the pheasant is white is a sign that the Sagely reign continues to illumine the land.

(JGKU 2.6.21; SN2: 4, 202–5)

The array of divine protectors noted here include the Buddhist Three Treasures, the native kami of heaven and earth, Heaven and Earth themselves, the earlier divine emperors, the *Saishōōkyō*, *Kichijōten*, and all the devas. In addition the unity of sovereign and subjects is cited as a supernatural phenomenon.

*Dialogs on Omen Lore*

In 758, upon the abdication of Kōken and the accession of Junnin, the high officials and Buddhist clergy presented memorials to the throne asking that Kōken and her mother Kōmyō 光明 be granted several honorific titles. First, from a long *jōhyō* from the court officials:

The Ōmi Nakamaro and all respectfully state... We reverently consider that the empress has ruled the empire for over ten years. Within the seas there has been peace, with no major events at court. Good omens have repeatedly appeared, and lucky omens in writing have appeared from time to time. Thus the sovereign has been both sagely and divine, and words do not suffice to praise the conduct of both civil and martial affairs. However, there are those in the nation who have been anxious about the succession to the imperial throne. The people desire that Heaven's illustriousness be sent down, and its graciousness shine forth, that heavenly virtue is bestowed upon the earth, and strengthen the foundations of the country... Also as for the Dowager Empress, her imperial virtue ascends on high and is harmoniously aligned with Heaven; her deeply benevolent love is bestowed below, and enlightens the earth. Sun and moon are constant and bright; heaven and earth together are tranquil. At last the imperial command has been received, and the matter of the succession firmly settled.... Lighting up the curtains of the palace bedchamber was the auspicious omen; words carved into wisteria roots heralded the imperial virtue. Now at last the hundred gods have united in providing heavenly peace, and on earth has spread broadly the virtue of unity and stability.

(TPHJ 2.8.1; SN2: 3, 268–71)

These excerpts from a much longer memorial highlight the concern with the imperial succession, and the role of omens in affirming the arrangement that

has been made, that is, Kōken's new position as Retired Emperor and Kōmyō as *Kōtaigō* 皇太后, with Junnin as the titular Tennō. Note that the memorial states that “there have been no major events at court” during the ten years of Kōken's reign. This is more than a little hyperbolic, coming as it does on the heels of the major crisis of Tachibana Naramaro's conspiracy in the previous year. But the bottom line is that Kōken is both Sage and kami, and all the gods have made the empire peaceful and established stability in the realm.

The equally long and verbose memorial from the high Buddhist clergy likewise refers to the role of omens. There are many detailed Buddhist references in this long text, but I have here highlighted the statement that the auspicious omens affirm the rule of the imperial house.

Thus we humbly submit that the words inscribed on the cast-off skin of the auspicious silkworm and the auspicious characters (in the roots of the wisteria) indicated that the imperial lifespan and the foundation of the imperial throne will be long and prosperous. (TPHJ 2.8.1; SN2: 3, 272–73)

Kōken then responded to the memorials in an edict:

We, seeing what our nobles desire, are deeply awed at the tremendous task of rule. Our virtue being weak, We wonder how we can merit this honorific name. However, as heaven has sent down its aid and revealed an age of peace as expressed in the characters on the tapestries, so the earth has sent forth the omen of the silkworm writing indicating virtue. We earnestly consider that we may not ignore the will of heaven. In accordance with the petition we shall accept the name *Hōji Shōtoku Kōken Kōtei* 宝字称徳孝謙皇帝. And we also rejoice in the honorific name presented to the *Kōtaigō*. According to the petition of the nobles, and according to the supplication of the virtuous priests, it shall be written as *Tenpyō Ōshin Ninshō Kōtaigō* 平応真仁正皇太后.

(TPHJ 2.8.1; SN2: 3, 274–75)

This dialog, constituting memorials from the civil officialdom and the Buddhist hierarchy, followed by the Retired Empress' response in an edict, comprises a rich body of political and theological thought. Our emphasis here is on the role of good omens in providing a foundation for a crucial political transition and the (temporary) solution of the ever-pressing matter of the succession. As in other documents of the time, the ideology is a rich mixture of Buddhist thought, classical Chinese ideology (here, the empress is a “Sage,” and compared to the ancient sage emperors Shùn 舜 and Yü 禹), omen lore, and acknowledgment of the foundational role of the native kami in underpinning the imperium.

A second example of this sort of dialog between officials and the empress is quoted below. Here the edict encloses a report from the officials, and then the beginning of the empress's response.

The Tennō gave the following edict:

This year on the eighth day of the seventh month We received a white raven... from Mikawa Province. Also on the eleventh day of the same month We received a white tortoise with a red eye... from Higo Province and a grey horse with white mane and tail... from Hyūga Province. The officials consulted the omen books and reported the following:

The *Furuitu* 符瑞圖 of Prince Guye 顧野 says, “A white raven is the numinous spirit of the sun.” According to the *Xiaojing Yuanshenqi* 孝經援神契, “When virtue extends to the birds and beasts a white raven descends.” The *Shiji* 史記 says, “A divine turtle is the treasure of Heaven. It together with the ten thousand things changes its color in response to the seasons. It conceals its dwelling place, and does not eat. In spring it is green, in summer it is red, in autumn it is white, in winter it is black.” The *Ruiyingtu* 瑞應圖 of Master Tai 態 says, “When a king is fair and impartial and the old people are honored, when usages of former times are not lost and the benefits of virtue are extended, then the numinous turtle appears.” The *Furuitu* of Prince Guye says, “The grey horse with white mane and tale is the Divine Horse.” The *Xiaojing Yuanshenqi* says, “When the king’s virtue and government extend to the hills and mountains, then the divine horse appears from the valley.” When the omen charts were consulted, it was found that the white crow is a medium omen, while the numinous turtle and the divine horse are great omens.<sup>12</sup>

The Tennō responded:

“Although Our virtue is weak, such signs are constantly given. In accordance with the teachings of the classics, we desire to extend their blessings to the common people. ...” (JGKU 2.9.11; SN2: 4, 214–17)

The memorial is remarkable for its display of the grasp of the sort of Chinese omen lore contained in the weft texts. It provides an excellent summary of the significance of the white animals that constitute the majority of the auspicious omens during this period.

Finally, a similarly detailed memorial from toward the end of Shōtoku’s life is presented. In this case the text again consists of an edict, followed by a response from officials, with interpretation and specific recommendations for rewards, and closes with the empress’ assent.

Previously Iyo Province... had presented a white deer.

The Tennō gave the following edict:

Although We are of weak virtue, we have reverently received the inheritance of the imperial throne, and although we have not yet been able to completely implement good government, auspicious signs are constantly sent down.

12. These works, with the obvious exception of *Shiji*, are in the category of weft texts discussed in YASUI 1977.

Last year the Governor of Iyo... presented a white deer, and this year the Dazai no Sochi... presented a white sparrow. Heaven and earth bestow prosperity, and auspicious signs are received in succession. On the one hand the sign of an auspicious bird is revealed, and on the other hand Heaven bestows the boon of an auspicious beast. Truly this is because the virtue stored up by our ancestors extends to their descendants. How can it be that We of mediocre talent deserve to receive such a boon? It seems that when We are more and more anxious about Heaven's approval that we more and more receive these awesome signs. We only desire to unite our virtue with that of the nobles and good servants assisting us in government, to follow the path of the highest good, and to respond to these signs from above. We desire, as stated in Our previous pronouncements, to carry out magnanimous government. However, in the presentation of these auspicious omens there has been cause for suffering. Although it is not difficult to catch birds, it is more difficult to trap beasts. The degree of the suffering caused should be ascertained and reported upon.

Thereupon, eleven people from the Sadaijin Fujiwara Ason Nagate and the Udaijin Kibi Ason Makibi on down reported:

Your subjects humbly say: "We have heard that from the beginning, from age to age, during the sovereign's reign there have been at times fortunate signs and auspicious responses. But has there ever been a time when signs have occurred in such profusion? We reflect that the imperial virtue has increased and that auspicious signs have again been given accordingly. Heaven and earth together have rendered judgment and determined government in accordance with auspicious signs. Rites and music are in harmony and authority is widely extended. Punishment is even-handed and the jails are empty. Winds and clouds renew their color and birds and beasts are given benevolent treatment. Rarities and good omens fill the imperial storehouses, and rare jewels and treasures from afar are so many that the pens of scribes never cease to describe them. We subjects serve honestly and loyally near the throne and repeatedly see these numinous objects. The times are truly extraordinary, and we clap our hands and dance in wonder." (HK 1.5.11; SN 4, 282–85)

(There follows a paragraph advising awards for those involved in the presentation of the signs, categorizing the white deer as a great omen, and the white sparrow as a medium omen.)

"Your subjects have determined these rewards in response to your edict, and present them as you commanded. We beg that these be proclaimed and promulgated to every region."

The Tennō approved this.

(HK 1.5.11; SN2: 4, 282–85)

This is the most comprehensive statement of omen theology to be found in the reign of the last empress. Both heaven and earth have cooperated to produce aus-

picious omens in approval of the virtuous reign of the sovereign. Good government prevails, the subjects serve with loyalty and honesty, and the benevolent sovereign bestows appropriate gifts upon those who present portentous signs. The natural forces of the universe, the winds and clouds, the birds and beasts, all exist in harmony. Note among other details the concern of the Buddhist sovereign for the harm to animals in the procurement of omens. Note also the categorization of greater and lesser omens, and the quite specific apportionment of rewards to those involved in their collection.

### *Conclusion*

The late Nara theology of auspicious omens can be summarized as follows. The sovereign, although uncertain of her worthiness to govern, has inherited the imperial throne, and despite her unworthiness Heaven periodically sends down auspicious omens of its favor. This is due to the virtue stored up by the imperial kami ancestors. Even a ruler of little strength (and here in the last days of her life) receives this response from Heaven. In return the sovereign wishes to be responsive to heaven and rule with virtue equal to that of the ancestors, with the assistance of the loyal nobles serving in the bureaucracy.

CHAN has defined “semantic legitimation” in China as “the articulation and manipulation of rituals and symbols that manifested the command of legitimate authority,” including “heavenly signs, omens, elaborate rituals, the imperial color, the formulae of language in the imperial rescripts, and the laudatory utterances of the literati” (1984, 45). This article has demonstrated the legitimizing function of the heavenly omens and the formulaic language of the empress in dialog with the literati in eighth-century Japan. Borrowing many aspects from early Tang China, the Japanese pattern of omens and the expressions of legitimacy in the imperial edicts demonstrate unique iterations of semantic legitimation.<sup>13</sup> The theology of omens was a positive one, supportive, and not critical of the imperial institution. While the Japanese literati who composed edicts and memorials were conversant with Chinese omen ideology, over and over the sustenance of the ancestral kami and the *mitama* of the ancestral emperors back to the creation were invoked as essential elements upholding the correct succession to the imperial throne.

A key concept in this theology is that of “resonance” or “responsiveness” from Heaven. Michael LOEWE has noted the reformulation in Han times of a view of the universe as “a unitary system with its component and interlocking estates of heaven, earth and man” and “a belief in a basic ‘resonance’ (*kanying*) [感應

13. It is notable that the characters chosen for *nengō* in eighth-century Japan differ almost entirely from those employed for era names in the Tang; see ROTHSCHILD 2006, 144–49.

*ganying*], or reaction in one of those three estates to a particular type of activity taking place in one of the others” (1994, 20). The term *ganying* has a deep significance dating back to ancient Chinese cosmology and is also integrated into Buddhist thought. SHARF (2002), in his discussion of Chinese Buddhism and the cosmology of sympathetic resonance, has provided a detailed interpretation of how these ancient Chinese notions were interwoven into Buddhist thought during its reception in medieval China. Sharf demonstrates how concepts such as “five phases” and “correlative cosmology” and the stimulus-response “resonance” by which the actions of the ruler and humans in general evoke a response from the cosmos produced a conceptual overlay with Buddhist concepts during the process of translation (and invention) of the Chinese sutras.

While the compound *ganying* itself does not appear in the edicts or memorials, the individual characters 感 and 応 frequently occur, and seem to refer to this working of resonance. One example is in the imperial edict upon the appearance of auspicious clouds:

We have heard that in the past such a great sign, so venerable and wonderfully special, was revealed by Heaven and Earth in response [感] to the virtue [德] of an era of a Sage Emperor [聖皇]. We dare not presume that Our virtue [德] is such to move [感動] the heart of Heaven and Earth.

Another is the interpretation of officials upon the appearance of a white pheasant:

The appearance of a pheasant is heaven’s response [応] to the fact that the nobles are united in one heart in allegiance to the sovereign.

In addition, the notions of “heaven” and “sage rulers” that appear throughout the Japanese discourse on auspicious omens would seem to derive from the process Sharf describes:

The sinitic ideal of the consummate Buddhist sage, in other words, represents a synthesis of early Chinese models of the sage-king and the Indian conception of bodhi as freedom from karmic activity... The sage-king, by simply fulfilling his role as chief arbiter, “satisfies the will of the gods” and brings harmony to the cosmic hierarchy of heaven, earth, and humanity. (SHARF 2002, 112)

Determining what precisely the last empress had in mind with her invocation of “Heaven” in many imperial edicts, and equally how Japanese officialdom specifically conceived of its workings in its memorials, is a task for future study. But there is no doubt that Japanese intellectuals of the late eighth century had a very clear idea that by sending down auspicious omens, Heaven was responding to the situation of the Japanese monarch. The theology of the time had only a very weak sense that Heaven sent down bad portents to punish the ruler, or

to announce her lack of virtue. The omen system was a positive system, one of auspicious omens, sent to affirm and bear up a monarch who was often anxious and continually hounded by political rivals, outright rebels, and a continuing crisis around issues of succession. Considering the constant political strife of the period 749–770, the theology was astonishingly optimistic:

Your subjects humbly say: “We have heard that from the beginning, from age to age, during the sovereign’s reign there have been at times fortunate signs and auspicious responses. But has there ever been a time when signs have occurred in such profusion? We reflect that the imperial virtue has increased and that auspicious signs have again been given accordingly.”

(HK 1.5.11; SN2: 4, 282–85)

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- HK *Hōki* 宝龜.
- JGKU *Jingo Keiun* 神護景雲.
- MNZ *Motoori Norinaga zenshū* 本居宣長全集. 23 volumes. Ed. Ōno Susumu 大野晋. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1968–1993.
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- SNKBT *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai* 新日本古典文学大系. 100 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989–.
- TPHJ *Tenpyō Hōji* 天平宝字.
- TPJG *Tenpyō Jingo* 天平神護.
- TPSH *Tenpyō Shōhō* 天平勝宝.

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