

Kūkai in China, What He Studied and Brought Back to Japan

By Ronald S. Green



Bronze statue of Kūkai in front of Motoyama-ji's Main Hall, Mitoyo, Kagawa Prefecture, Japan. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/4hend5su>. Photo by Toto-tarou.

The Japanese Buddhist priest Kūkai (774–835 CE) continues to be one of the most popular historical figures to persist in imagination and images around Japan. For introducing Shingon esoteric Buddhism into his country in the early Heian period (794–1184), the emperor awarded him the posthumous title *Kōbō Daishi*, literally “Great Master Who Propagated the Dharma.” Yet far from this being the extent of his accomplishments, Kūkai also exerted major influences on the development of Japanese calligraphy, poetry, and literary theory. He drew the plans for what has become one of the major spiritual and tourist destinations in Japan, the Mount Kōya Temple complex, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He also constructed ponds and irrigation systems still in use today in his native island of Shikoku. One would be hard-pressed to name another historical figure so prevalent in Japanese folklore. His life has touched people across a wide expanse of social backgrounds and historical epochs. Today, monks study his words, thousands of people from all over the world undertake the Shikoku Pilgrimage in his honor each year, and Japanese schoolchildren repeat aphorisms about him such as, “Even Kūkai’s brush makes mistakes.”

Kūkai’s study abroad in China (804–806) was particularly influential for the development of all the talents he is credited with and for the new technologies he introduced into Japan. In recent years, several popular works about Kūkai have depicted his time in China. These begin with the 2004 series of novels by the award-winning writer Baku Yumemakura, also famous for his *Yin Yang Master (Onmyoji)*, 1988 novels and movies. His four-volume series about Kūkai was made into a jointly produced China–Japan fantasy film known in English as *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017),

which won a number of Asian film awards. *Legend of the Demon Cat* is a fantasy reimagining of Kūkai’s time in China, focusing on his interaction with poets, calligraphers, and political figures. In addition, there is a currently popular manga series written and illustrated by Mari Okazaki about the life of Kūkai, along with his colleague and rival Saichō (767–822), that has been published serially since 2014. The fourteenth installment was released in September 2021 under the series title *A-Un (The Alpha and Omega)*.

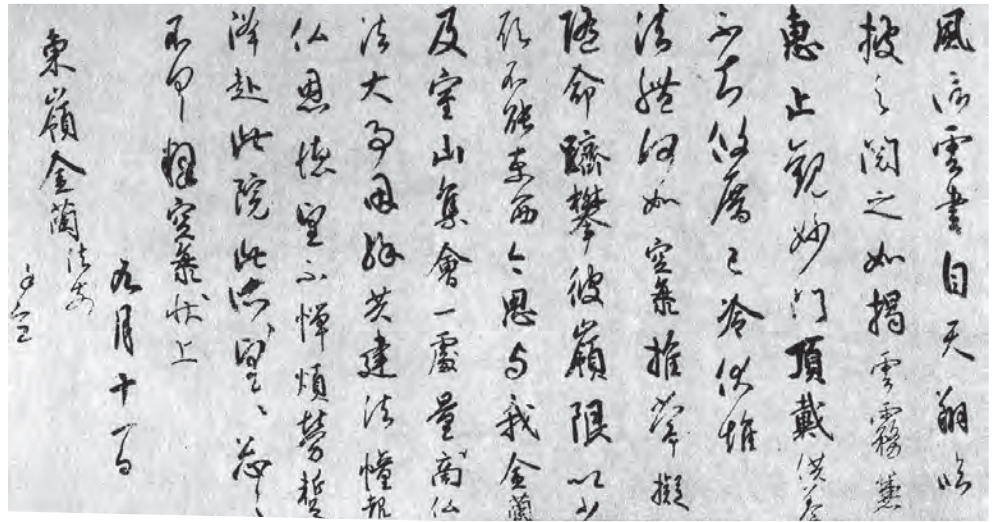
Before Going to China

Kūkai was born on the Japanese island of Shikoku into an aristocratic family. There is speculation that the family’s residence in Shikoku rather than the capital city may have resulted from some negative incident that occurred before Kūkai was born. Regardless of what led to it, the family could not expect favors that fell on those in closer proximity to the court. It appears that it was due to the influence of Kūkai’s maternal uncle Atō, who was the tutor for the crown prince in such Confucian matters as the arts and management of public affairs, that Kūkai was allowed to enter the national university and eventually overcome the barriers he must have faced in being approved to become a state-sponsored study abroad monk in China. Trained as he was in classical education, Atō is said to have recognized Kūkai as a child prodigy in language arts and lobbied for him to be accepted.

Finding that his Confucian training at the university was not enough to satisfy his range of interests, Kūkai dropped out after three years, became a novice monk, and began to engage in meditative practices in remote mountains. During this period, he realized that to truly immerse himself in the world’s more advanced schools of philosophy, poetry, calligraphy, geology,



Saichō (left) and Kūkai (right) as depicted on the cover of the first issue of the manga *A-Un* written and illustrated by Mari Okazaki. Big Spirit Comics, 2014.



Letter written by Kūkai to Saichō. The letter is stored in the To-ji Shingon Buddhist Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Source: [Wikimedia Commons at https://tinyurl.com/cctfrcer](https://tinyurl.com/cctfrcer).

and statecraft, he would need to go study under the foremost masters of these arts. At the time, Japan still looked up to China for advancing these skills.

With the political influence of his uncle Atō and likely that of fellow meditating monks high up in the state religious establishment, Kūkai was approved to join the Japanese ambassadorial delegation of four ships going to China in 804 at the age of thirty. Among those in the visiting party were four people who were to become important in Japanese history. Ship No. 2 carried public officials, including a vice ambassador and the Buddhist priest Saichō, who would later become somewhat of a rival to Kūkai for Buddhist influence and patronage. Saichō had already established Enryakuji Temple as a small meditation hut on Mount Hiei to the northeast of the capital city of Heian, present-day Kyoto. Some members of the court understood the northeast to be important in protecting the city according to feng shui principles and saw Saichō's independent spirit as potentially useful in countering the political influence of powerful monks associated with large Buddhist institutions. For these reasons, he was recruited to go to China and supported after returning to introduce Tendai Buddhism and expand Enryakuji into the major center for Japanese Buddhism that it still is to this day.

Joining Saichō on ship No. 2 was a monk who would be his successor as Tendai's patriarch of Mount Hiei, Gishin (781–833). In 824, Gishin became the first official government-recognized Tendai abbot. Saichō could read the meaning of Chinese graphs in Buddhist texts but could not speak Chinese. Gishin was to act as Saichō's interpreter. One of Kūkai's greatest strengths in arguing for the need for him to create the Shingon school in Japan was his ability to classify Buddhist doctrine in a way that showed other Buddhists why they needed esoteric Buddhism. In contrast, Gishin was left with the monumental task of interpreting and systematizing Saichō's thoughts and writings after the latter's death.

Among those aboard ship No. 1 were Tachibana no Hayanari (782–844) and Kūkai. Tachibana was a calligrapher in "clerical style" (*J. reisho; C. lishu*), which is square and angular, with emphasis on horizontal strokes. Calligraphy had been considered to be the highest art form in China and throughout East Asia from at least the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). It influenced the development of landscape painting, and classic scripts are still imitated to this day. Along with Emperor Saga and Kūkai, Tachibana is considered one of the "three brushes" of Japan, that is, the three great calligraphers of their era. Had these four people, Kūkai, Saichō, Gishin, and Tachibana, failed to make

it to China and back safely, one can hardly imagine what course Japanese history would have taken.

Kūkai must have been excited to at last be going to China, the heart of arts and culture. Yet he was likely also to have been apprehensive knowing that some of the previous voyages from Japan had ended in shipwreck and loss of lives. As luck or karma would have it, Kūkai's entry into China and unplanned early departure from that country was only achieved by coincidental timing through a narrow window, open for such trips between the two countries for a very short time. His was the sixteenth visit by a Japanese party since the first official excursion to China in 630. Not long after Kūkai's voyage, in 838, the last embassy from Japan would sail for China carrying the Tendai priest Ennin (794–864). During that trip, Buddhist persecution began in China under Emperor Wuzong (r. 840–846), and Ennin was deported along with all foreign Buddhists in 847.¹

At the time of Kūkai's expedition, because relationships among East Asian countries were tense, the preferred northern route had to be avoided in favor of a southern one, which meant much rougher sailing. To make matters worse, it was a Japanese policy at the time, formed as a matter of pride, to arrive in ships made in their own country. Those ships were less worthy of deep sea travel than vessels made in China or Korea and were more prone to drifting about. However, the passengers may have felt that it was good luck to travel with Buddhist priests.²

Regardless of the danger and financial hardships he was likely to encounter, clearly Kūkai was eager to go. In contrast, Saichō had not sought to go, even though he supported a petition to send two monks to China to learn about Tiantai Buddhism and start their own Buddhist school in Japan based on this. Nevertheless, Emperor Kanmu himself decided Saichō was the best candidate for this undertaking.³

The Perilous Voyage to China

According to the imperial court record (*Nihon Kōki*), ship Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4 set sail southward one after another. Early in the next month, a storm scattered the ships. Ship No. 1 with Kūkai aboard was blown far off course and was at sea for about one month before arriving in Fuzhou in China (present-day Fujian Province), far south of their planned destination. The No. 2 ship drifted ashore at Mingzhou, in northern Zhejiang Province. Ship No. 3 was damaged and returned home, departing again in mid-805. This time, the ship drifted and shipwrecked on a deserted island in the southward. Circumstances of the No. 4 ship are unknown, although some records indicate it was also shipwrecked.

Because of ongoing political problems and the fact that local government officials in Fuzhou were not accustomed to dealing with foreigners,



Left, the poet Bai Letian (played by Huang Xuan), and right, Kūkai (played by Shōta Sometani) in a scene from *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2019). Source: Screen capture from the film, which is available on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/tk3bvm5h>.

Kūkai's Study of Chinese Poetry and Calligraphy

Kūkai's group of twenty-three people traveled by foot more than 1,600 kilometers, or 1,000 miles, to Chang'an, the Chinese capital. By the time they arrived, Saichō had preceded them by three months, and along with Gishin was already studying on Mount Tiantai.

In Chang'an, Kūkai encountered a golden age of music, sculpture, and other arts. There were the painters Zhang Cao, Zhou Chun, and Bian Jing; literary masters Han Yu (768–824) and Liu Zongyuan (773–819); and the poet Bai Juyi (772–846, also known as Bai Letian), who is represented as Kūkai's close ally in the movie *Legend of the Demon Cat*. Biographies say that while in Chang'an, Kūkai studied with "a writing master," whom later Shingon scholars identify as Han Yu. Whomever Kūkai studied with, he was able to compile and compose a comprehensive study from Six Dynasties and early Tang poetic theories known as the

the delegation was detained for another month while inquiries could be made to the Chinese capital. The fear was that Kūkai's party were spies trying to infiltrate China. Kūkai was later recorded as saying:

At that time, the ambassador of Echizen, Great Protector of the Third Rank Fujiwara Asonkanō [i.e., Fujiwara no Kadonomaro], presented a letter I wrote to the Fuzhou government. Although he had submitted letters two or three times before this, suddenly arrangements were made for passengers to disembark.²⁴

Kadonomaro may have felt that he had nothing to lose by letting the young monk write the letter in formal Chinese language brushed in elegant calligraphy.⁵

Bunkyo Hifuron (Thesis on the Mysterious Storehouse of the Mirror of Literature) that remains an extremely important source around the world for scholars of the topic today, in part because much of what Kūkai describes was lost in wars and fires in China.

Kūkai developed an interest in calligraphy from an early age and was devoted to the writing style fashionable among the Japanese aristocracy. At that time, the Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi (307–365) was revered as the greatest calligrapher of all time. His style of calligraphy is dictated by formal rules. Having traveled in the best calligraphy circles in Chang'an, upon his return to Japan, Kūkai was highly skilled in the way of Wang Xizhi. It was not his mastery of Tantric Buddhism, but Kūkai's skill in calligraphy that prompted Emperor Saga (786–842, r. 809–823) to call him to court after returning to Japan. However, even with his skills, when working with Emperor Saga—because he was the emperor—Kūkai was unable to criticize his calligraphy style and ability.

From the time of China's Six Dynasties period, a variety of tendencies in calligraphy can be seen. Wang Xizhi was from the south of China, and his style was influential there. The style of the northern writing tradition can be seen as favored by Kūkai for writing epitaphs, and Kūkai drew his strength in calligraphy from that tradition.⁶ Yet, while he took in that school's methods, like other great artists, he fashioned his own hybrid style, which he brought back to Japan. Kūkai held the Tang calligrapher Yan Zhenqing (709–785) of the northern writing tradition in high esteem. Kūkai's emphasis on special uses of language would become prominent in his Buddhist philosophy.

Kūkai's Study of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism

At first, Kūkai lived at the residence of Ambassador Kadonomaro and probably participated in many state-related activities with him. Kūkai acted as writer and interpreter for the ambassador, and some of his ghostwritten letters survive. However, Kūkai remained in China when, on the eighteenth day of the fifth month, the ambassador departed along with Saichō and Gishin, who had met their goals of studying Tiantai Buddhism so they could establish it as a new school in Japan called Tiantai.

After that, Kūkai moved to Ximing Temple in Chang'an.⁷ Ximing was a large temple founded by Emperor Gaozong (635–756) where students studying abroad from Japan were often given lodging. There, Kūkai began work with a team of experts on a massive state-sponsored translation project under the leadership of Tripiṭaka Master Bore (or Prajñā, 734–ca. 810) from Kashmir.⁸ Kūkai may have improved his Sanskrit ability by studying under this textual scholar so that by the time he met his Esoteric master, he could better



Painting of Huiguo with an attendant. Japan, Kamakura period (fourteenth century).
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/d7jcmcyb>.

understand Indian script.

According to Kūkai's *List of Imported Materials*, he was eventually introduced to Huiguo, Esoteric Buddhism master of the Chinese imperial court, who gave him ordination into the realm of the *Garbhadhātu* ("womb realm") maṇḍala, ordination into the realm of the *Vajradhātu* ("vajra realm") maṇḍala, and granted him the fivefold abhiṣeka, a type of baptism. Within three months, Kūkai would receive the final Esoteric abhiṣeka and thereby be fully ordained as a master of Tantric Buddhism.⁹

Huiguo is considered the seventh patriarch of Japanese Shingon Buddhism, and Kūkai is the eighth.¹⁰ Huiguo served three generations of Tang emperors, performing ceremonies for their protection, as Kūkai would later do for emperors in Japan. Today, Shingon considers Kūkai's meeting with the Tantric master a dictate of fate and destiny. Kūkai later wrote that upon their first meeting, Huiguo declared a precognition, saying that he had been waiting for Kūkai and asked what took him so long to arrive. In another writing, Kūkai said that in Japan he felt that he had been snared by a hook and pulled to Huiguo in China.

Faced with numerous signs of decline in the popularity of Tantric Buddhism in China, there may have truly been a feeling the lineage was in jeopardy. It is possible to interpret Huiguo's alleged waiting for Kūkai in this light. If so, Kūkai must have felt a keen sense of responsibility. As soon as they met, Huiguo wasted no time but immediately led Kūkai before the Garbhadhātu maṇḍala of the first ordination.



The Womb Realm Maṇḍala. The esoteric Buddha Mahāvairocana sits in the middle of the lotus flower in the central square. He is surrounded by eight buddhas and bodhisattvas, who represent his perfect attributes such as wisdom and compassion. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/5x4tn39v>.

The procedure for initiation into the realm of the Garbhadhātu maṇḍala is described in the second chapter of the esoteric *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*. In summary, the initiate does the following:

1. Vows to uphold morality.
2. Is blindfolded by the master.
3. Is guided in front of a large mandala painted on the ground.
4. Tosses a flower onto the mandala.
5. The blindfold is removed and the initiate identifies with the Buddha or bodhisattva the flower fell on in the maṇḍala. For example, if the flower landed on the image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Kannon in Japanese), the initiate is foremost guided by compassion thereafter.
6. The master sprinkles water of the fivefold wisdom on the initiate's head, symbolizing a new birth into the family of Buddhas.¹¹

Huiguo began his study of Esoteric Buddhism at the age of nine with the famous master and translator Amoghavajra (705–774), the sixth patriarch of Shingon Buddhism. At the age of twenty, he received ordination as a monk. Two years later, he received the final abhiṣeka, establishing him as a Tantric Buddhist master. Thus, although Huiguo had known Amoghavajra for twelve years, it appears that from the time he became a monk until the final abhiṣeka, only two years elapsed. This situation is roughly analogous to that of Kūkai.

Huiguo died in the twelfth month of 805. Kūkai's biographies commonly claim that he received an imperial order to write Huiguo's official epitaph. Huiguo's followers may have chosen Kūkai because he had received initiation into both realms and Huiguo's complete teachings.¹² Kūkai is also said to have taken the leading role in Huiguo's funeral service and made the arrangements for his gravesite. If he did take the lead in these activities,



Painting of Kūkai, from a series of artworks entitled *Shingon Hasso-zō* (*The Eight Patriarchs of Shingon*). Japan, Kamakura period, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the collection of the Nara National Museum, Nara, Japan. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/2d93hjp3>.

despite the fact that other students must have been present who knew Huiguo for decades, it might indicate that Kūkai indeed assumed some special role in the life of Huiguo, as Shingon and biographies hold.

Kūkai's Last Months in China and the Return Home

Kūkai had been in China less than three years when he returned to Japan. It had been slightly less than half a year since Huiguo finished his transmission. According to the *Honored Spoken Memento* (Kūkai's last testament and instructions to his followers), Kūkai returned to Japan as an obligation to Huiguo to circulate good fortune to the world. The day after Huiguo's funeral, Kūkai submitted an official document of request to the newly arrived Japanese ambassador Tōnari saying that his sole aim was to propagate the Three Mysteries of Esoteric Buddhism in response to the decree of heaven. The three mysteries are the mysterious powers to induce enlightenment, that of the body activated through mudra, of speech activated through mantra, and of the mind activated through maṇḍala. Kūkai added that if he waited for the next Japanese delegation, he would be a white-haired old man before he could return home.¹³

It may also be that Kūkai could no longer afford to stay in Chang'an. It is unclear where he lived or whom he may have studied under after Huiguo passed. There is a letter from Kūkai to an official at Yuezhou, about 1,150 kilometers (712 miles) from Chang'an, requesting access to "the inner and outer collections of classical writings," that is, Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical documents.¹⁴ It appears that Kūkai spent the next few months there furiously copying texts. Kūkai's *List of Imported Materials* mentions 461 volumes of sūtras, theses, and śāstras that he brought back to Japan. Sources say he collected over 300 volumes in Chang'an. This means he would have copied another 161 volumes in Yuezhou. It was four months from the time he wrote the letter requesting the writings until his departure date. According to this estimation and later legends, Kūkai wrote almost nonstop during those months, as he said, "forgetting food and sleep." While this is meant to indicate

his tenacity, it may also suggest that his limited funds were depleted.

Among the writings Kūkai went through were sūtras, Buddhist ethical teachings of the vinaya, commentaries on sūtras, biographies, poems, verses, monument inscriptions, writings of divination, medicine, and various sciences of India. Clearly, Kūkai was interested in bringing back a variety of potentially helpful information.

A number of poems attributed to Chang'an poets and artists expressing sadness to see Kūkai and Tachibana-go still exist. For example, a fellow student at Qinglong Temple addressed a poem, "To the Japanese Tripitaka (Master) and Superior Person Kūkai, Going on Our Tang Rivers and Returning to the Sea. These Poems Are Sent to Serve as Offerings Paying Tribute on His Return to the Eastern Ocean":

*Just as it was said by the sages in ancient times
who spoke the truth of suffering and emptiness,
so much should pass along from the previous six patriarchs
to the distant foreign island . . .*¹⁵

Kūkai's poem sent in return can be seen in the imperially commissioned poetic anthology *Keikokushū*.¹⁶ Translated by Beatrice Lane Suzuki, it is as follows:

*Studying the same doctrine,
Under one master,
You and I are friends.
See yonder white mists
Floating in the air
On the way back to the peaks.
This parting may be our last meeting
In this life.
Not just in a dream,
but in our deep thought.
Let us meet often
Hereafter.*¹⁷

Kūkai and Tachibana boarded Tōnari's ship together. According to a famous legend, they encountered a powerful storm at sea with howling winds. The ship was tossed in the waves, and it seemed like it could be the end for all aboard. At that point, according to some writings, Kūkai threw a vajra, into the sky and the storm was suddenly calmed. Other writings say he threw the storm-appeasing vajra from the shore in China before leaving. For Shingon, a vajra is a ritual instrument symbolizing the destruction of vile passion, the storms of the world. It is also a symbol of *bodhicitta*, the mind of awakening. It appears that Kūkai and Saichō may have imported the first actual vajra instruments (as opposed to iconographical representations of vajras) into Japan. Kūkai imported various types of these, those with three prongs, five prongs, a single spike, and so forth.

The story does not specify which type of vajra Kūkai threw, but a legend persists at Mount Kōya that it was a three-prong vajra. The three-point vajra can represent the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the *dharma* (teachings of the Buddha), and the *sangha* (community of Buddhists). It can also represent Shingon's Three Mysteries. According to Shingon tradition as recorded in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, one who wishes to establish an Esoteric Buddhist temple complex in the layout of a maṇḍala should throw a vajra into the air. The direction the tip of the vajra points upon landing is where the temple should be built. Among other sources, the account of Kūkai throwing the vajra is recorded in *Tales of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*, c. thirteenth century), one of Japan's most beloved writings. The story concludes that Kūkai retrieved the same vajra that he threw from China, shining and dangling from a limb of a pine tree on Mount Kōya, pointing downward to indicate the spot where he should build his temple complex. Visitors to Mount Kōya today can see a pine tree designated as the biological descendent of the one from which Kūkai found his vajra hanging. This tree, enshrined by a small enclosure wall, is unusual for the area in that it is the kind that produces two needles per fascicle, but occasionally will sprout

three-needle varieties, like the three-prong vajra. Guests today search the ground around the tree hoping to return home with a lucky three-needle variety.■

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NOTES

1. Kūkai's nephew, the Tendai priest Enchin (814–889), went to Chang'an in 855 but, in such dangerous times, only found passage on a commercial ship.
2. Wakamori, 26.
3. Paul Groner., *Saicho: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 38.
4. KKZ, *Kōbō daiishi kūkai zenshū [The Complete Works of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai]* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1983–1985), 8:42. This account appears in the *Will of Various Disciples* and in the *Will of Most Venerable Shinzei*. See Shōkō Watanabe and Miyasaka Yusho, *Shamon Kūkai* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1967): 66.
5. This letter is preserved in the *Collection Divining the Spiritual Nature of Henjō*, KKZ 6:331. It is considered to be an especially excellent piece among Kūkai's numerous famous literary writings.
6. Wakamori, 33.
7. Kūkai's *List of Imported Materials*, in KZ, *Kōbō daiishi zenshū (The Complete Works of Kōbō Daishi)*, Comp. and ed. by the Center of Mikkyō Cultural Study of Kōya-san University (Yoshikawa kobunkan, Tokyo, 1910. Reprints 1934–1935, 1965), 1:69.
8. While Abé and Hakeda use the Sanskrit name for the graphs 般若 (read Bore in Mandarin), transliterated by them as Prajñā, this seems suspect since Prajñā is feminine in Sanskrit.
9. KZ, 1:69.
10. The patriarchs are: 1) Mahāvairocana, 2) Vajrasattva, 3) Nāgārjuna, 4) Nāgabodhi, 5) Vajrabodhi, 6) Amoghavajra, 7) Huiguo, 8) Kūkai.
11. Takakusu Junjirō et al. eds., *Taishō shinshō daizōkyō (Taishō Tripitaka)*, 85 vols (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932): 18:11b–12b.
12. Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra, Kūkai, and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 127.
13. KKZ, 6:347.
14. KKZ, 6:339.
15. Quoted in Watanabe 91, translated by the author.
16. A collection of the works of Chinese and Japanese poets who lived between 707 and 827.
17. Beatrice Lane Suzuki, "In Buddhist Temple: (5), Kōyasan," *Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 5, no. 4. (1931): 312.

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