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 (Omyōji, 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.


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 Kannmu 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,
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 Bunkyō 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. 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. Ximing Temple 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 Tripitaka Master Bore (or Prajñā, 734–ca. 810) from Kashmir. 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...
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”) manḍala, ordination into the realm of the Vajradhātu (“vajra realm”) manḍala, 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. Huiguo is considered the seventh patriarch of Japanese Shingon Buddhism, and Kūkai is the eighth. 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 Huigu’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 manḍala of the first ordination. The procedure for initiation into the realm of the Garbhadhātu manḍala 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 manḍala painted on the ground.
4. Tosses a flower onto the manḍala.
5. The blindfold is removed and the initiate identifies with the Buddha or bodhisattva the flower fell on in the manḍala. 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.

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. 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,
It appears that Kūkai spent the next few months furiously copying texts. Kūkai's 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 Qionglong 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_.

Kūkai's poem sent in return can be seen in the imperially commissioned poetic anthology _Keikokushū_. 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._

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 Saičō 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 botanical 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.

REFERENCES

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.
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.
8. While Abé and Hakeda use the Sanskrit name for the graphs बोध (read Bored in Mandarin), transliterated by them as Prajñā, this seems suspect since Prajñā is feminine in Sanskrit.
10. The patriarchs are: 1) Mahāvairocana, 2) Vajrasattva, 3) Nāgārjuna, 4) Nāgabodhi, 5) Va- jrajñābha, 6) Amoghapāra, 7) Huigu, 8) Kūkai.
15. Quoted in Watanabe 91, translated by the author.

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