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Through the Open Gate of Heavens: The Tōdaiji Objects and Salvation in Vairocana's Lotus Treasury World

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Abstract: The set of eighth-century objects known as the "Tōdaiji Golden Hall Platform Pacifying Objects" (*Tōdaiji Kondō chindangu* 東大寺金堂鎮壇具; "Tōdaiji objects") is among the earliest concrete evidence of ritual practice in the Nara period. This study reveals how the Tōdaiji objects transformed the space inside the temple's colossal central statue of the Vairocana Buddha into a symbolic heavenly realm where the deceased would traverse to arrive at Vairocana's Pure Land. Close analysis of the Tōdaiji objects within Sovereigns Shōmu's and Kōken's religiopolitical applications of the Kegon teaching strengthens Okumura Hideo's argument that Kōken orchestrated the emplacement of these objects in the year 757 as part of commemorating the one-year anniversary of Shōmu's death. I argue that the Tōdaiji objects encapsulated Kōken's filial piety towards her father, Shōmu, by praying for his swift ascension to Vairocana's Pure Land. The objects furthermore served as a reenactment of Buddhist repentance that not only ensured Shōmu's salvation, but also the prosperity of Kōken's new reign.

Keywords: Nara period; Tōdaiji; Shōtoku; Kōken; *Tōdaiji chindangu*; *Kegonkyō*; *Bonmokyō*; Shōsōin; Japanese Buddhism

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1. Introduction

On the ninth day of the fourth month, 752 CE, an eye-opening ceremony (Kaigen'e 開眼会) held at Tōdaiji 東大寺 (Nara Prefecture, Japan) enlivened a bronze Buddhist statue of hitherto unprecedented scale (Figure 1).[1] Over 18 m in height and weighing roughly 370 tons, this "Great Buddha" (*daibutsu* 大仏) of Tōdaiji was at the heart of Sovereign Shōmu's (聖武; 701–756; r. 724–749) plan to establish a network of state-maintained temples (*kokubunji* 国分寺) across the Yamato domain. Though more quietly, sometime following the completion of the Great Buddha, another ceremony took place, where a group of eighth-century objects, including a set of armor, swords, small knives, and containers of precious materials and contents, were buried immediately below the statue's bronze lotus pedestal (Figure 2). Unearthed in the early twentieth century, these objects are now collectively designated as a national treasure under the descriptive title "Tōdaiji Golden Hall Platform Pacifying Objects" (*Tōdaiji Kondō chindangu* 東大寺金堂鎮壇具; hereafter "Tōdaiji objects"; Figure 3) (Morimoto 2013).

The Tōdaiji objects are key material evidence of the Nara period (710–784) devotional practices at the most powerful temple of the time. No record of the emplacement of these objects remains today, but the choice and arrangement of items that were included help us to narrow down the likely timing of the offering to the latter half of the eighth century as well as tease out the commemorative wishes of the anonymous donors that infused the ensemble. The items were buried beneath the edge of the bronze pedestal supporting the colossal statue of the Vairocana Buddha (Birushanabutsu 毘盧遮那仏) and into what was originally the second tier of the stone lotus pedestal. This placement indicates: (a) whoever offered them intended for the objects to interact with the central buddha, and (b) the prestige of Tōdaiji meant that, if the objects were emplaced during the Nara period, the

temple's clerics and those in the sovereign's inner circle would have been the only individuals allowed the access required to make such an offering. Elsewhere, I argued that, contrary to the present designation, the Tōdaiji objects functioned not as *chindangu*, but rather as a kind of proto-*tainai nōnyūhin* 胎内納入品 (caches within a Buddhist statue).[2] I also compared the Tōdaiji objects to the offerings of Queen Dowager Kōmyō 光明 (701–760) and her daughter, Sovereign Kōken 孝謙 (718–770; r. 749–758), that were made to the Tōdaiji Buddha in 756 to commemorate the forty-ninth-day anniversary of Shōmu's death, and which now constitute the core of the "Shōsōin treasures" (*Shōsōin hōmotsu* 正倉院宝物) (Walley 2022, pp. 36–42). These findings aligned with Okumura Hideo's argument that Kōken and Kōmyō most likely emplaced the Tōdaiji objects during or around the one-year anniversary of Shōmu's death in 757.[3]

Figure 1. Seated Vairocana Buddha. Daibutsuden, Tōdaiji, Nara prefecture. Gilt bronze. Nara period, mid 8th century. Reproduced from (Ōtsuka 1999, p. 10).

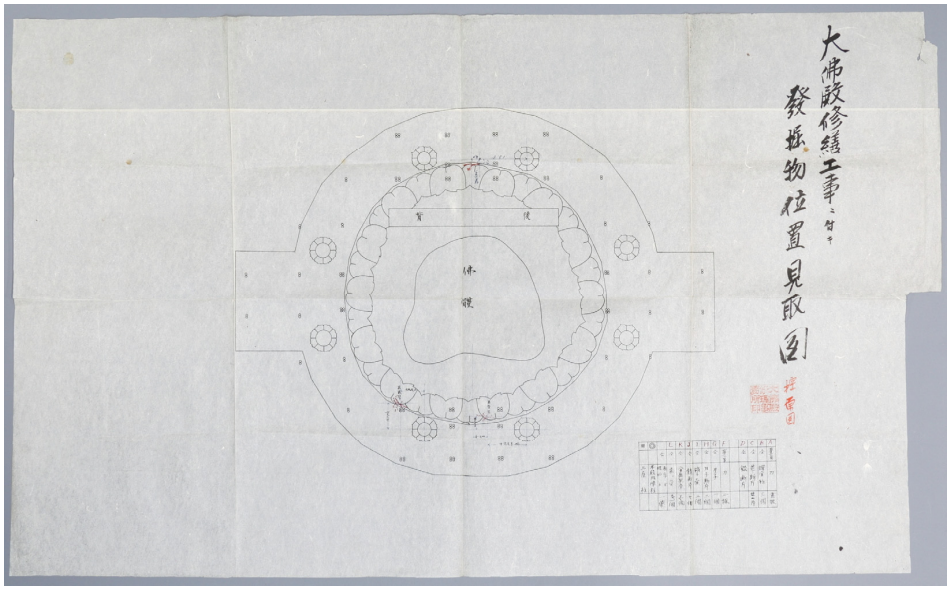

Figure 2. *Layout of the objects discovered during the restoration of the Great Buddha Hall.* Meiji period, 1907 or 1908. In the collection of Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku Bijutsu Gakubu Kingendai Bijutsushi Daigaku-shi Kenkyū Sentâ. Courtesy of Geidai Archives Center of Modern Art.

Figure 3. Sample of objects unearthed from beneath the Seated Vairocana Buddha. "Great Buddha Hall" (Daibutsuden), Tōdaiji, Nara prefecture. Nara period, latter half of 8th century. In the collection of Tōdaiji. Image: Nara National Museum.

Building on these earlier findings, this article explores what wishes were conveyed through the careful assemblage of symbolically potent items among the Tōdaiji objects by considering them through the teachings expounded in *Kegonkyō* 華厳経 (or *Daihōkōbutsu kegonkyō* 大方広仏華厳経; *Flower Ornament Sūtra*; Sk. *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*) and related *Bonmōkyō* 梵網経 (*Brahmā's Net Sūtra*; Sk. *Brahmajāla-sūtra*). The two scriptures directly informed the visual program of the Vairocana Buddha statue and Sovereigns Shōmu and Kōken's ambitious re-envisioning of the Yamato polity as a more centralized and stable system of rulership based on Buddhism.[4] This study reveals that the Tōdaiji objects transformed the space inside the statue's pedestals into a symbolic heavenly realm where the deceased would traverse to arrive at Vairocana's Pure Land by (a) reflecting the nature of Vairocana as the protector of the faithful, (b) expressing a wish for an ascent to the Lotus Treasury World (Rengezō Sekai 蓮華蔵世界)[5], and (c) presenting a symbolic relinquishing of and repentance for partaking in conduct prohibited by the Bodhisattva Precepts expounded in *Bonmōkyō*. Rather than focusing on Queen Dowager Kōmyō, whose involvement in political decision-making following her husband's death has received much attention in Nara period studies thus far, this article spotlights Kōken's political role as the only female sovereign in Japanese history who rose to the imperial rulership based on the formal process reserved for Yamato princes.[6] In the course of discussion, I underscore the centrality of the Kegon teaching in Shōmu's effort to legitimize his daughter's reign and, later, Kōken's assertion of her own authority upon her father's death. By analyzing the Tōdaiji objects and their arrangement within Shōmu and Kōken's religiopolitical engagement with the Kegon teaching, this study ultimately argues that Kōken orchestrated the emplacement of these objects for the one-year anniversary of Shōmu's death in 757 as a filial act toward her father that prayed for Shōmu's swift ascension to Vairocana's Pure Land and as a kind of reenactment of Buddhist repentance, such as her father's signature benevolent policy of relinquishing the killing of animals, which not only ensured Shōmu's salvation, but also the prosperity of her new reign.

Tōdaiji, as a monastic complex, was a syncretic sanctuary that drew inspiration from an array of Buddhist teachings and visual sources, and it was also scaffolded by the explicit blessing of non-Buddhist divinities (*kami* 神). The key justification for solely focusing on *Kegonkyō* and *Bonmōkyō* in this article is the Tōdaiji objects' placement within the "womb" of the Vairocana Buddha.[7] This study quotes extensively from the two scriptures not as a confirmation of any linear correlation between text and image, nor as an affirmation that every Nara period devotee was able to grasp the intricacies of the Kegon doctrine by reading the scriptures. Instead, I take cues from Bryan D. Lowe's recent work on the ancient scriptural cultures, where the author elegantly (re-)introduces the hermeneutic nature of the Nara period engagement with Buddhist texts, thus decoupling it from the vexing question of literacy.[8]

During the eighth century, interest in the devotional and political potential of the Kegon teaching was high, at least within the immediate circle of Sovereign Shōmu. Beginning in 740, Shōmu ordered—and on occasion also attended—a set of three-year lectures on *Kegonkyō*, which regularly continued even after the sovereign's death until 789.[9] The Yamato sovereignty also included Kegon specialists among their clerical advisors. These monk advisors would have been able to summarize the teachings, explain standard iconographies, and provide suggestions on their appropriate implementation as governmental policies. In this sense, the quotes from the two scriptures functioned as an expedient means of communicating the kind of general information about the Kegon teaching that would have been readily available to the Yamato intellectual elites, regardless of its actual method of transmission (textually, orally, or as image templates).

2. Vairocana's Universe on the Bronze Pedestal

During the restoration of the Great Buddha Hall in 1907, workers accidentally unearthed artifacts from about 45 cm below the surface of the raised dais at the south, southwest, and north locations around the Vairocana statue (Figures 2 and 3).[10] The centerpiece at all three locations was a pair of swords, which were the only objects discovered from the north side. From the south side, unearthed alongside its pair of swords, were a metal lock in the shape of a cicada, fragments of a lacquered box, and scales from armor. The southwest cavity yielded the greatest number of objects, including a pair of swords, fragments of small knives, a silver-lidded jar that included sixteen crystals, two small crystal containers that held a total of twelve pearls, a small flower-shaped mirror, glass beads and precious jewels of different sizes, a human tooth, and a bone-like fragment. In all three locations, some or all of the artifacts were emplaced just inside the edge of the pedestal.

To contextualize the Tōdaiji objects within the site of discovery, we must first confirm the Kegon vision of Vairocana's Pure Land that informed the iconographic details of the Tōdaiji's Great Buddha. Located to the east of the imperial palace within Heijōkyō 平城京, Tōdaiji, or the "Eastern Great Temple", is the common name of Konkōmyō Shitennō Gokoku no Tera 金光明四天王護国之寺 (also read "Kinkōmyō"; Temple of the Golden Light and Protection of the Country by the Four Heavenly Kings). The construction of the Vairocana statue, which began at this location in 745, was finally completed circa 771, almost twenty years after the eye-opening ceremony in 752.[11] Shōmu and Kōken mainly oversaw the execution of the statue.[12]

Figure 4. The original bronze and stone double pedestal of the Great Buddha, Tōdaiji. Excerpt from the *Illustrated Origin of Mt. Shigi* (*Shigisan engi emaki*). Heian period, 12th century. Chōgosonji, Nara prefecture. Reproduced from (Murashige 1991, plate 9).

At the center of the Great Buddha Hall (Daibutsuden 大仏殿), the colossal Vairocana Buddha sits on a bronze lotus pedestal supported by a stone dais, which was originally the core of the outer stone lotus pedestal (Figure 4) (Kawamura 1986). On each of the twenty-eight petals of the bronze pedestal is a nearly identical line carving of the Lotus Treasury World (Figure 5). At the top of the petal is a depiction of Śākyamuni Buddha in preaching, surrounded by a group of twenty-two bodhisattva attendants. A series of twelve small clouds emerges from the Buddha's head that streams down towards the left and right upper edges of the petal, carrying a total of twenty-four miniature buddhas on their own lotus pedestals (Figure 6). Śākyamuni presides over the heavenly realms delineated by twenty-five horizontal strips, most of which include images of divinities (heavenly kings, bodhisattvas, and buddhas) among palatial structures. Toward the bottom of this cosmological map is the realm of sentient beings repeated side-by-side seven times, each with a depiction of Mt. Sumeru surrounded by an ocean (Figure 7). The southern continent of Jambudvīpa—which is our world—appears below Mt. Sumeru with an image of a seated buddha flanked by two bodhisattva attendants. At the bottom of the petal, we find the partial view of a lotus flower floating on a sea framed by a mountain range along the left and right edges.

Figure 5. *Lotus-Treasury World*. Copy of the line carving on the bronze pedestal. Seated Vairocana Buddha. Tōdaiji, Nara prefecture. Original: Nara period, mid 8th century. In the collection of Nara National Museum. Image: Nara National Museum.

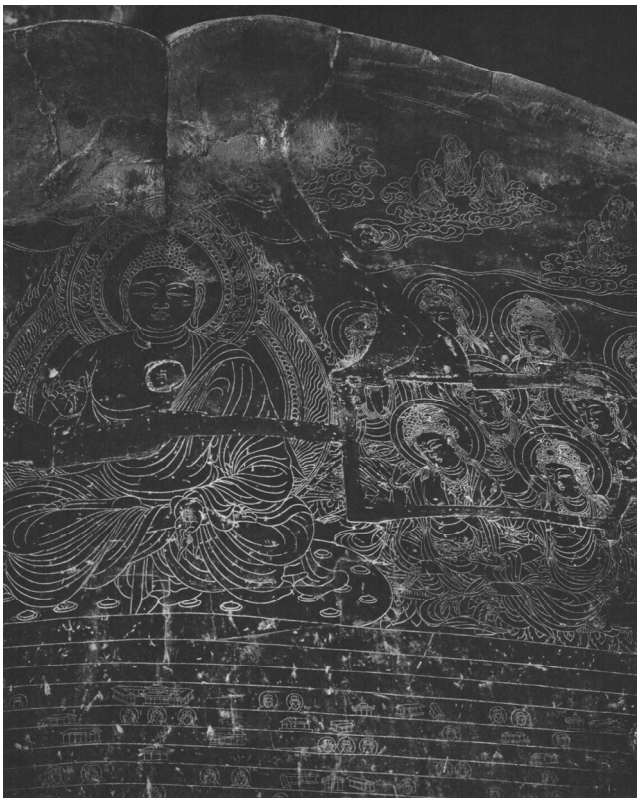

Figure 6. Śākyamuni Buddha and twenty-two bodhisattva attendants. Line carving on the bronze pedestal (detail). Seated Vairocana Buddha. Reproduced from Nara Rokudaiji Taikan Kankōkai (2001, p. 167).

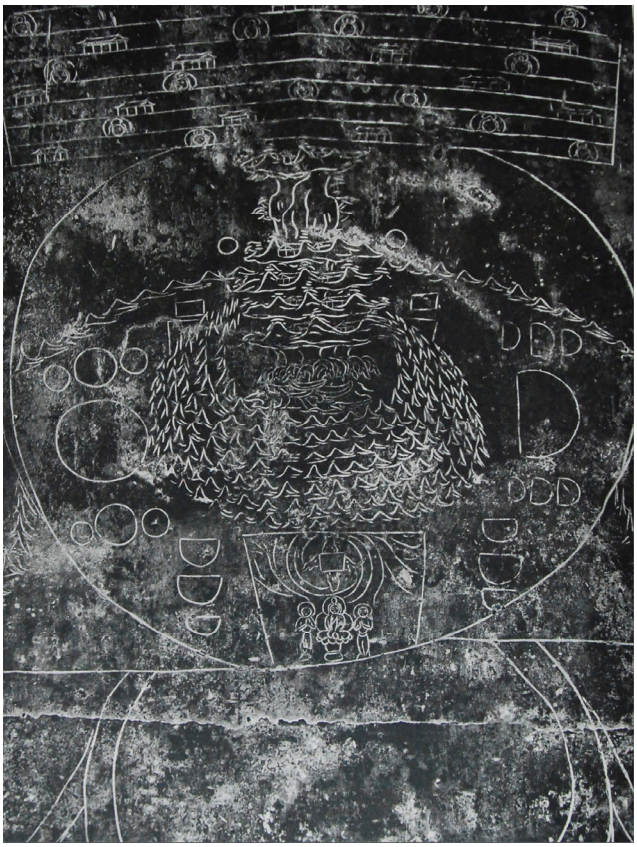

Figure 7. Heavenly realms and Mt. Sumeru. Line carving on the bronze pedestal (detail). Seated Vairocana Buddha. Reproduced from Nara Rokudaiji Taikan Kankōkai (2001, p. 169).

The formal name of the temple makes it clear that a primary inspiration for Tōdaiji was *Konkōmyōkyō* 金光明経 (*Sūtra of the Golden Light*; Sk. *Suvarṇa-prabhāsōttama-sūtra*; translated by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 in the fifth century) and its newer translation, *Konkōmyō saishō-ō kyō* 金光明最勝王経 (*Most Excellent Sūtra of the Golden Light*; translated by Yijing 義浄 in 703). At the same time, Shōmu's vision of Tōdaiji as the dynamic centripetal and centrifugal presence within the Yamato domain could not have been achieved without the intervention of the Kegon teaching.[13]

The exact source of imagination for the Tōdaiji statue has been a point of debate within Japanese scholarship for over a century, beginning with Ono Genmyō, who argued for the centrality of *Bonmōkyō* in its design.[14] Doctrinally speaking, Vairocana (also Rushana 盧遮那; Sk. Rocana) is the universal buddha featured in *Kegonkyō*. By the time of Tōdaiji's construction, two Chinese translations of this sūtra were known in Japan: the older sixty-fascicle version translated by Buddhabhadra 佛馱跋陀 circa 420 (hereafter "Old Translation"), and the newer eighty-fascicle version translated by Śikṣānanda 實叉難陀 in 699 (hereafter "New Translation"). The third key work was the Kegon-related apocrypha composed in China, *Bonmōkyō* (translation attributed to Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 in 406). Ono argued that the content of the line carving aligned most closely with descriptions in *Bonmōkyō* rather than *Kegonkyō* proper (Ono 1915, p. 7). The issue Ono raised regarding whether to consider the Vairocana statue as the lord of *Kegonkyō* or *Bonmōkyō* has still not been fully resolved. However, based on the comparison between the details on the statue and the scriptural descriptions, it is plausible that its design synthesizes imagery from both *Kegon* and *Bonmōkyō*.[15]

Ono was correct in thinking the line carvings are in closest accordance with the vision of the Lotus Treasury World presented in *Bonmōkyō*:

> I [Rocana] dwelled in the Lotus Flower Platform Store World Ocean [Lotus Treasury World], which was surrounded by a thousand petals, each petal holding

> one world, which became a thousand worlds. I transformed these into a thousand Śākyas overseeing a thousand worlds. As a consequence, each petal world further contained ten billion Mount Sumerus, ten billion suns and moons, ten billion of the four continents, ten billion Jambudvīpas, and ten billion bodhisattva Śākyas, sitting beneath ten billion bodhi trees, each expounding the bodhisattva mind-ground about which you have raised a question. The other nine hundred and ninety-nine Śākyas each manifested ten trillion Śākyas in the same way. Each of these thousand buddhas sitting atop the flowers was one of my transformation bodies. Each of the ten trillion Śākyas was one thousand Śākya transformation bodies. I am the source of all of these, and my name is Rocana Buddha.[16]

In the Tōdaiji program, the bronze pedestal itself can be interpreted as the Lotus Treasury World, with Vairocana presiding at its center. Each petal is topped with an image of Śākyamuni, indicating that the world beneath him is one of the "one thousand worlds". The seven Mt. Sumerus within a petal express the "ten billion" Mount Sumerus, suns and moons, four continents, and Jambudvīpas, while the small image of a buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas corresponds to the "ten billion bodhisattva Śākyas, sitting beneath ten billion bodhi trees". According to *Bonmōkyō*, the line carving and central statue above are connected to each other because ultimately, the ten trillion Śākyamuni are all simply manifestations of Vairocana.

In addition to the above connections Ono already identified, Matsumoto Nobuyuki argues that the twenty-four small buddhas flying down on clouds correspond to the description in fascicle 2 of *Bonmōkyō*:

> At this time the thousand buddhas sitting on lotuses[17] and the ten trillion Śākyas got up from the blazing lion thrones in the lotus flower store world and each returned [to his original place*]. Their entire bodies emitted inconceivably numerous rays of light, and in each of these there appeared innumerable buddhas. At once, they took innumerable blue, yellow, red, and white lotuses and offered these to Vairocana Buddha. Having finished receiving and memorizing the above-taught "Chapter on the Dharma Access of the Mind-ground", each took his leave and departed from this lotus flower store world.[18]

On the bronze petals, the small buddhas seem to clasp flowers and other items of offering or to press their palms together in veneration, corresponding well to the "innumerable buddhas" in *Bonmōkyō* that appeared from the rays of light emitted by the "thousand buddhas sitting on lotuses and the ten trillion Śākyas".

Overall, however, the Tōdaiji statue, with its double pedestal, better aligns with *Kegonkyō*'s description of the Lotus Treasury World. According to fascicle 8 of the New Translation ("On the Lotus Treasury World"):

> . . . Children of the Buddha! [Regarding] this Lotus Treasury World Ocean: there is Mt. Sumeru with myriads of wind disks . . . The upper-most wind disk is called the "Treasury of Extraordinary Illumination", which supports the Fragrant Ocean Ornamented with Universal Illumination of Maṇi Jewels. This fragrant ocean holds a large lotus flower called the "Fragrant Banner with Varying Illuminating Blossoms". The Lotus Treasury World Ocean is within this lotus. Its four directions are flat, pure, and firm. The Diamond Mountain rings around its edges. Its land, sea, and trees are all differentiated.[19]

The visual program surrounding the Tōdaiji statue seems to combine what *Kegonkyō* describes about the location of the Lotus Treasury World and the details of the world itself in *Bonmōkyō*. According to the New Translation, the "Lotus Treasury World Ocean" is within a large lotus growing from another "fragrant ocean" supported by wind disks, while *Bonmōkyō* clarifies that the world itself is also a lotus. The original double-lotus construction of the Tōdaiji Vairocana Buddha synthesizes this vision. Furthermore, on the bronze petals, a lotus flower floating on the roaring sea peeps from below the seven Mt. Sumerus, while the "Diamond Mountain" at the edge of the Lotus Treasury World de-

scribed in the New Translation frames the bottom edges. Here, the double-lotus configuration of Vairocana's world is repeated in the relationship between the images within the line carving on the bronze pedestal and the bronze pedestal itself.

There is no document that can shed light on the process of designing the statue, but the Great Buddha was not the first sculptural representation of Vairocana on the continent nor within the Japanese archipelago. According to *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 (*Chronicles of Japan, Continued*; completed in 797), what directly inspired Shōmu to build a statue of Vairocana was his encounter with the central deity at Chishikiji 知識寺 in 740 (Nara Kenritsu Kashihara Kōkogaku Kenkyūjo Fuzoku Hakubutsukan 2000, pp. 16–17). By Shōmu's time, images of Vairocana also already existed in Tang dynasty China and Silla Korea.[20] Considering the fervent interest in Tang dynasty culture at the Nara political center, it is plausible that the Tōdaiji design was based on an established template. However, no comparable portrayal of Vairocana has yet been found in China or the Korean peninsula, and certain details, particularly the line carving on the pedestal, are much more intricate on the Great Buddha compared with other large-scale Vairocana statues, such as at the Longmen Grottos (Henan province, China) or Tōshōdaiji 唐招提寺 (Nara Prefecture, Japan).[21]

Regardless of whether there was a preceding template, the details underscore that the makers of the Great Buddha selected its specific design to capture not only Vairocana and the relationality between this deity and Śākyamuni, but also the mindboggling nested nonduality of the Lotus Treasury World itself in all its complexities within and in relation to the real world of the devotees. In essence, the world of the devotees in Vairocana's universe is both one part of the Jambudvīpas in the ocean surrounding the Mt. Sumeru that supports the Lotus Treasury World and a part of one ten-billionth Mt. Sumeru within the same Lotus Treasury World. In the double-lotus arrangement of the Tōdaiji Great Buddha, what corresponds to the "Fragrant Banner with Varying Illuminating Blossoms" would have been the white stone outer pedestal. If so, the "Mt. Sumeru", whose wind disks support this fragrant ocean, becomes our world, thereby seamlessly connecting the space of worship within the Great Buddha Hall to the Lotus Treasury World manifested through the double pedestal.

Buried inside the pedestal, the Tōdaiji objects also amplified the Kegon teaching of nonduality. *Kegonkyō* opens with the scene of Śākyamuni attaining awakening under a bodhi tree. Both Old and New Translations describe how myriads of bodhisattvas from the ten buddha-lands surrounded Śākyamuni, all of whom "accumulated good roots and practiced the bodhisattva ways" with Vairocana and had already attained the merit and wisdom equal to that of a buddha.[22] Positioning Śākyamuni at the center of these bodhisattvas has the effect of doubling him with Vairocana at the time of his awakening. *Bonmōkyō* presents this nonduality in the portrayal of the Lotus Treasury World and as a state of mind. It explains that there are "neither one nor two" in what a sentient being may perceive to be distinctions of teachings.[23] In my earlier studies, I observed how a sword among the Tōdaiji objects buried at the north location was decorated with a Northern Dipper motif, which associates the statue with the Polar Star at the center of heavens (Walley 2022, pp. 38–39). The Northern Dipper sword affixed Vairocana at the center of the universe, whose light is radiating outward and is akin to the constellations surrounding the Polar Star in an ancient East Asian star chart.

3. Stabilizing Imperial Sovereignty through Kegon Teaching

Shōmu, Kōmyō, and Kōken established their public images as devout Buddhists while surrounding themselves with clerical advisors, including the Chinese monk Daoxuan 道璿 (Jp. Dōsen; 702–760) and Silla-trained Shinjō 審祥 (fl. 720s–740s), both of whom were specialists of Kegon teaching.[24] For this reason, it is likely that Shōmu understood what the Great Buddha visualized, if not taking an active role in its conceptualization.[25] To be clear, the Tōdaiji objects were most likely emplaced sometime after the statue's completion, and, thus, are not necessarily part of the original visual program of the Great Buddha Hall. Nevertheless, the selection of items and their arrangement indicates the intent of the individual

or individuals responsible for their burial to make the caches engage with Vairocana and his universe as manifested through the central statue. During the Nara period, the impact of the Kegon teaching reached far beyond the monastic confines into Yamato sovereigns' political ideals, just as Tōdaiji was not only a new Buddhist temple but was tasked with a larger—and more secular—political role in the centralization of the Yamato authority. The Kegon notion of nonduality among differently manifested bodies also permeated throughout Shōmu's and, later, Kōken's political activities, especially in legitimizing Shōmu's decision to formally appoint his daughter as his heir.[26] To analyze the prayers with which the Tōdaiji objects were infused, we must, therefore, review the imperial sovereigns' religiopolitical uses of the Kegon teaching that inevitably had larger ramifications with respect to the lives of the Yamato subjects.

Taking the symbolic significance of the Northern Dipper sword in the Tōdaiji objects one step further, in East Asia, the Polar Star has long been associated with the emperor. The location of the sword, therefore, confirms and amplifies the doubling of Vairocana with the imperial body. Following the outbreak of smallpox in 735 and 737, Shōmu increasingly turned to Buddhism for his state ideology. In 749, he made a series of offerings to major Buddhist institutions across the Yamato domain with a vow that singled out *Kegonkyō* as the "foundation" of all Buddhist scriptures.[27] Driven by the desire to connect and protect the Yamato domain through Buddhism, Shōmu drew inspiration from the *Sūtra of the Golden Light* to establish a network of state-sponsored monasteries and nunneries. Shōmu ordered each *kokubunji* to have an image of the Śākyamuni Buddha as its central deity, while Tōdaiji with the Vairocana statue was to be the most prestigious of these *kokubunji*. This state–province dynamic mirrored the Vairocana–Śākyamuni relationship in *Bonmōkyō*.

Upon Shōmu's death, Kōken urged the *kokubunji* to finish constructing their Śākyamuni image in time for the one-year anniversary.[28] Kōken's immediacy in picking up the thread of Shōmu's *kokubunji* project as she prepared for the state-wide commemoration of her father's passing at Tōdaiji promoted her status as the legitimate heir while reminding those who opposed her ascension that her authority was sanctioned by this worldly Vairocana, Shōmu.

The application of Kegon beliefs into state polity during Shōmu's and Kōken's reigns was, however, more sophisticated than a simple transposition of the Vairocana = center versus Śākyamuni = periphery dichotomy. In 749, Shōmu recalibrated his political persona as a "servant of the three treasures" (*sanpō no yakko* 三宝乃奴) in front of the Tōdaiji's Vairocana statue, thus underscoring the centrality of the Kegon teaching to his vision of a Buddhist ruler.[29] In 754, Jianzhen 鑑真 (J. Ganjin; 688–763) bestowed Shōmu, Kōmyō, and Kōken, along with over five hundred followers, the Bodhisattva Precepts (*bosatsu-kai* 菩薩戒) based on *Bonmōkyō* at Tōdaiji. The Yamato court invited Jianzhen, a reputed master in Yangzhou, China, to transmit the proper precepts.[30] That this imparting ceremony was the first official task Jianzhen performed in the Nara capital must have served as a powerful message regarding the court's new expectation for its leaders and subjects.

Shōmu also marshalled the idea of nonduality and the imagery of a nested Kegon universe in his effort to defuse the tension regarding imperial succession.[31] At the time of his retirement, Shōmu had no surviving son, and Princess Abe, who succeeded him, was not only a woman but was also unmarried. In 749, Shōmu called himself the "Retired Emperor Shōman, the Novice Monk" (Dajō Tennō Shami Shōman 太上天皇沙弥勝鬘) when he made his donation to major state-supported temples, preceding his formal abdication to his daughter.[32] Through a complex series of associations, this Buddhist name, Shōman, equated Shōmu to a guardian deity named Heavenly King Who Has the Power to Convert Others (Take Jizai Tennō 他化自在天王) who occupies the seventh of the "Ten Grounds" (*jūji* 十地) of bodhisattva practice expounded in *Kegonkyō*.

Shōman, or Śrīmālā, is the protagonist of *Shōmangyō* 勝鬘経 (*Śrīmālā Sūtra*; Sk. *Śrīmālādevī-simha-nāda-sūtra*). Translated into Chinese in 436 by Guṇabhadra 求那跋陀羅 (394–468), *Shōmangyō* was an early Buddhist scripture that was introduced to the Japanese

archipelago (Blum 2018, pp. 219–25). In the sūtra, Queen Śrīmālā exhibits wisdom equal to that of a buddha, despite being a lay devotee and a woman. For the Yamato court, this scripture had a particular significance, because it was associated with the legendary imperial prince, Umayato no Toyotomimi 厩戸豊聡耳 (also Umayado no Toyotomimi; 574–621 or 622). More popularly known today as Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子 (Prince of Sagely Virtue; hereafter Prince Shōtoku), Umayato was iconized soon after his death as an ideal ruler, a sage, and, eventually, as the founder of Japanese Buddhism. By Shōmu's time, Prince Shōtoku's authorship had been attributed to a commentary on *Shōmangyō* (*Shōmangyō gisho* 勝鬘経義疏), and he was believed to have also been the incarnation of Queen Śrīmālā herself. Watanabe Nobukazu proposes that by evoking the name "Shōman", Shōmu was in turn positioning himself as the incarnation of Prince Shōtoku.[33]

Interestingly, *Shōmangyō gisho* interprets Queen Śrīmālā as a bodhisattva practitioner.[34] It states that the queen's "original form" (*honji* 本地) is the king of the Mahēśvara Heaven—the last and highest of the Ten Grounds of bodhisattva practice—while her manifested body (*suijaku* 垂迹) is the Heavenly King Who Has the Power to Convert Others of the Seventh Ground.[35] Hōryūji 法隆寺 (originally established by the prince) was a temple that received Shōmu's donation in 749 and was also one of the eighteen temples where the court sent offerings in 756 commemorating Shōmu's death. Considering Shōmu's interest in the prince, it is likely that he was aware of this somewhat obscure interpretation of Śrīmālā's status. A heavenly guardian with the power to convert others seems to match Shōmu's self-image projected through his Buddhist policies. A few months after his tonsure, Shōmu formerly abdicated the imperial sovereignty to Princess Abe but with uncertain prospects for the subsequent male heir. His choice to evoke a charismatic woman figure from popularly circulated scripture as his Buddhist name could not have been more deliberate.[36] Śrīmālā was, in her true nature, the ruler of the Tenth Ground of bodhisattva practice, but manifested herself as a queen for the purpose of expounding the Law to sentient beings. Shōmu in his true nature was—as insinuated by his Buddhist name—the incarnation of Prince Shōtoku, who in turn was the incarnation of Queen Śrīmālā. Evoking Queen Śrīmālā in connection to Shōmu's body rendered the apparent gender distinction in any given lifetime or body irrelevant; by this logic, it was inconsequential that Kōken happened to manifest herself to this world as a woman.[37]

Shōmu's evocation of Śrīmālā's name is also intriguing within the visual program of Tōdaiji's Great Buddha Hall. According to Inamoto Yasuo, the seated Śākyamuni Buddha at the top of each bronze petal can be equated not only to one of the "thousand Śākyamuni" from *Bonmōkyō*, but also to *Kegonkyō*'s image of Śākyamuni preaching in the Mahēśvara Heaven at the apex of the Ten Grounds of bodhisattva practice (Inamoto 2004, pp. 59–61). By claiming to be the incarnation of Prince Shōtoku-turned-Śrīmālā, Shōmu associated himself with the Mahēśvara Heaven. By abdicating sovereignty to Kōken but, nevertheless, staying politically relevant as the "retired emperor", Shōmu essentially established a dual rulership that can easily be mapped onto the vision of the Lotus Treasury World via *Bonmōkyō* of nested Vairocana = Śākyamuni presence. If Shōmu as the retired emperor was the Śākyamuni of the thousand worlds preaching at the Mahēśvara Heaven, then Kōken would have been the Śākyamuni of the ten billion worlds. At the same time, on a macro-level, the imperial rulership as a collective entity can also be doubled with the Śākyamuni of the thousand worlds vis-à-vis the provincial governors, with the Buddha statue in their *kokubunji* as the Śākyamuni of the ten billion worlds. This nested hierarchical relationship between thousand and ten billion Śākyamuni ultimately comes back to Vairocana as the one true form.

Arguably, what Shōmu did with his appropriation of the Kegon teaching was to reconceptualize the idea of the state itself. By calling himself the "servant" of Buddhism and reinforcing this image by taking the Bodhisattva Precepts with Kōmyō and Kōken in 754, Shōmu, in effect, decoupled the idea of the "state" from any one imperial body. In 754, Shōmu was the retired emperor, a bodhisattva, incarnation of Prince Shōtoku and (by extension) Queen Śrīmālā, a symbolic Śākyamuni, and manifestation of Vairocana. In this

cosmological scheme, Vairocana is equivalent to the concept of the "state" itself, that is, inseparably tied to not only one, but all imperial bodies. In other words, the deity symbolized the imperial body as an institution that boiled down to the idea of lineage: the subjects of the imperial system owed loyalty to their sovereignty both at the local and state levels, regardless of the physical body that occupied it at any given time.

4. Tōdaiji Objects Transform Inside the Pedestal into Vairocana's Universe

The above two sections confirmed the centrality of the Kegon teaching to both the visual program of the Tōdaiji's Great Buddha and the political ideologies of its chief patrons, Shōmu and, later, Kōken, who considered her mission to complete the temple on her father's behalf upon his death. Let us now return to the Tōdaiji objects to analyze how the ensemble of items amplified certain qualities of the Vairocana Buddha and established the inside of the two pedestals as the heavenly realm that connected the space of the living worshippers within the Great Buddha Hall (and beyond) to Vairocana's universe expressed by the statue.

I will pick up the discussion on the interplay between the Tōdaiji objects and the Vairocana statue that I began in the second section (Varocana's Universe on the Bronze Pedestal) by returning to the Northern Dipper motif on the sword discovered in the north cavity. In East Asia, the Northern Dipper had a connotation beyond its ties to the Polar Star. This constellation often appeared on a sword for its talismanic efficacy to defeat one's foes.[38] In the context of Tōdaiji, the Northern Dipper's association with military victory reminds one of Vairocana's power to "quell" (*jōbuku* 調伏) sentient beings expounded in *Kegonkyō*. *Jōbuku* appears repeatedly in the Old Translation to mean "discipline", "train", or "correct" sentient beings (e.g., *jōbuku issai shujō* 調伏一切衆生) or as a translation for *vinaya* ("precepts") that benefit their awakening.[39] In Shōmu and Kōken's court, however, this concept of *jōbuku* was taken more literally as Vairocana's divine power to "quell" those who colluded against the state and put them on the rightful path of loyalty and obedience, as evidenced by Kōken's edict issued in 757 in the aftermath of Tachibana no Naramaro's attempted coup. *Shoku Nihongi* states: " . . . due to the mysterious divine power of Vairocana Buddha, Bodhisattva Avalokitēśvara, Brahman, Indra, and the Four Heavenly Kings—who are the protectors of the Law—the rebellious evil sorts were brought to the light and every one of them punished . . . "[40] Here, Vairocana is evoked, along with familiar guardian deities, in his efficacy to put down the "evil sorts" who threatened the stability of the state.

This interpretation of *jōbuku* aligns with Shōmu and Kōken's broader interest in strengthening the sense of loyalty among the state's subjects through Buddhist practices. For instance, Shōmu's vow within the 741 edict regarding *kokubunji* warns that if an "evil lord or malicious retainer breaks this vow, then calamity will surely fall upon him and his descendants, who will be sent to eternal rebirth in the land without Buddha Law". Moreover, a song performed during the eye-opening ceremony at Tōdaiji included the verse: "The loyalty of [imperial subjects] is purer than ever, and together they support the heavens". (Ishii 2018, pp. 6–10, 16–20) The message of unity under imperial rule was dire for Shōmu and Kōken due, in part, to the repeated natural disasters that plagued their reigns and because there were those within the court who did not recognize the legitimacy of an unmarried woman as the heir.[41]

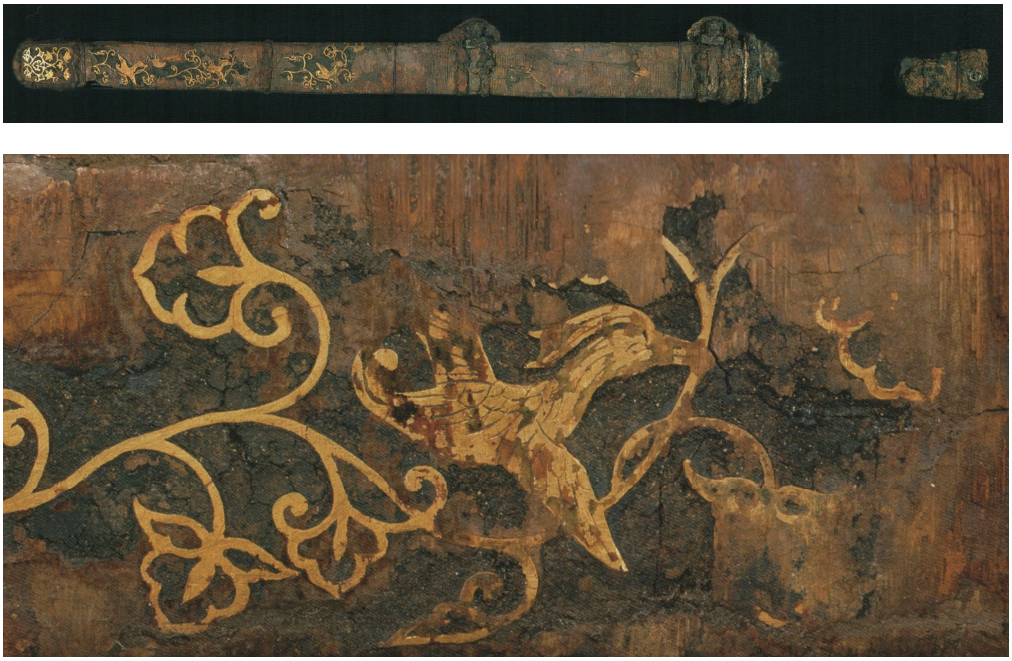

Figure 8. Sword with motif of birds and grape vines on the scabbard. Discovered from the north cavity from beneath the Seated Vairocana Buddha, Tōdaiji. Nara period, mid 8th century. In the collection of Tōdaiji. Reproduced from Tōdaiji Myūjiamu (2013, pp. 42–43).

Other items among the Tōdaiji objects echoed Vairocana's spiritual potency, if not bestowing the statue with it. The cicada shape of the metal lock, the vine motif that adorns the swords from the south and southwest cavities, and the floral pattern on the lacquered box were all familiar Buddhist visual lexica that expressed lifeforce and rejuvenation (Figure 8) (Walley 2022, pp. 23–46). The pair of swords from the southwest cavity come with inscriptions naming them the "Yin Sword" (*yin hōken* 陰宝劔) and the "Yang Sword" (*yō hōken* 陽宝劔), which can also be interpreted within the same theme (Figure 9).[42] According to Daoist mythology, the interaction of yin and yang gives birth to the world. The Yamato polity embraced the yin–yang theory in the seventh century. Kōken reemphasized its importance as the "foundation of a state" (*kokka no kaname* 国家の要) along with astronomy, calendrical studies, divination, medical studies, and acupuncture.[43] These overlapping associations with lifeforce, birth, and rebirth resonate with the Kegon teaching, where Vairocana is the universe itself, encompassing the existence of all sentient beings. Rebirth within Vairocana's Lotus Treasury World also appears in the carving on the bronze pedestal. Yoshimura Rei argues that the twenty-five horizontal bands above the seven Mt. Sumerus express the rings of light emitted from Vairocana's body that illuminated the entire universe. The divine beings within these bands of light represent the "birth of sacred beings from lotuses" (*renge keshō* 蓮華化生) (Yoshimura 1999, pp. 59–60).

Another recurring motif within the Tōdaiji visual scheme is mountains, exemplified by multiple Mt. Sumerus and Diamond mountains on the bronze pedestal. In East Asia, sacred mountains were conceived of as a threshold between the heavenly and earthly realms.[44] This belief was also adapted into Buddhist imagery. For example, at the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, a mountain scene is often found around the uppermost register of the cave walls, while the depiction of the celestial realm occupies the ceiling.[45] The similar use of mountain landscapes had already appeared on the Japanese archipelago by the seventh century. The standing statue of Avalokitēśvara at Hōryūji, popularly known as "Kudara Kannon" 百済観音, includes a relief carving of an overlapping mountain range on the metal support for the halo. The miniature Buddhist shrine, Tamamushi no Zushi 玉虫厨子, comes with familiar scenes from scriptures, all of which take place within mountains.[46] Furthermore, the interior of the Hōryūji's Golden Hall repeats mountain motifs

throughout its visual program, including the "Mt. Sumeru" pedestal (*shumi-za* 須弥座) and square canopy of the Śākyamuni triad and the murals.[47] According to Eugene Wang, in China, the ancient notion of landscape that was enlivened through animals and spirits entered into the Buddhist expression of its sacred mountains and their potency as sites for miraculous transformations (Wang 2005, pp. 182–99). A similar use for mountains was also already present in Japan by the time of Tōdaiji.

Figure 9. Yang Sword (*yōken*; **left**) and Yin Sword (*yinken*; **right**) and their inscriptions. Discovered from southwest side from beneath the Seated Vairocana Buddha. Daibutsuden, Tōdaiji. Nara period, mid 8th century. In the collection of Tōdaiji. Reproduced from Gangōji Bunkazai Kenkyūjo (2015, pp. 210, 213, 216, and 219).

Mountains appear as a key theme in the most ornamentally rich item among the surviving Tōdaiji objects: the small silver-lidded jar discovered in the southwest cavity (Figure 10). An intricately incised hunting scene adorns the jar. Four men on galloping horses aim at three deer and a boar with bows and arrows amongst flora and a mountain landscape (Figure 11). The depiction of mountains continues onto the outer ring of the lid around the handle. The smaller inner ring, which is slightly raised from the outer

counterpart, comes with a motif of three birds in flight. A small cloud pattern appears on the handle itself. It is unclear whether the silver jar was created anew to be buried or repurposed.[48] However, the fact that the patrons responsible for the emplacement of the Tōdaiji objects must have enjoyed significant wealth, status, and access, warrants a deeper investigation into how the motifs of this jar interacted with other motifs scattered across the Tōdaiji objects and with the central statue. For the remainder of this article, I refer to different details of the visual program on the silver jar as a conceptual linchpin of the Tōdaiji objects.

Figure 10. Silver lidded jar with hunting scene. Discovered from the southwest location from beneath the Seated Vairocana Buddha, Tōdaiji. Nara period, mid 8th century. In the collection of Tōdaiji Cultural Center. Reproduced from Tōdaiji Myūjiamu (2013, p. 40).

Figure 11. Diagram of motifs on silver lidded jar with hunting scene. Reproduced from Gangōji Bunkazai Kenkyūjo (2015, p. 183).

Within the southwest cavity, the silver jar occupies the space between the Yin and Yang Swords—symbolizing the heavens—and the earthly world of the devotees. This relationship matches the spatial hierarchy imbedded in the organization of the Lotus Treasury World explicated in *Bonmōkyō*. In the Great Buddha Hall, Vairocana is the center and apex of the universe. By positioning the silver jar on the side of the twin swords farther away from the central statue, it serves to duplicate this hierarchy, connecting the donors and their earthly world to the celestial realm higher up on Mt. Sumeru, beyond which presides Vairocana Buddha. Furthermore, the portrayal of birds in flight among clouds on the lid of the jar also provides a sense of ascension from the earthly realm, delineated by the sacred mountains, to the celestial realm of cosmic harmony.

Ascension is a reoccurring theme in Buddhist devotion (and more broadly in the East Asian imagination of the celestial). In the context of the Tōdaiji objects, however, one could anchor the idea more specifically to the Kegon teaching. Nagaoka Ryūsaku demonstrates that the devotion to Avalokitēśvara at Tōdaiji is connected to the concept of the Ten Grounds of bodhisattva practice featured in *Kegonkyō*. Bodhisattvas ascend the ten distinct realms as they progress in their Mahāyāna practice. Nagaoka argues that the standing statue of Fukūkenjaku Kannon 不空羂索観音 (Sk. Amoghapāśa) in Hokkedō 法華堂, located on the hill to the east of the Great Buddha Hall, represents Avalokitēśvara manifested at various stages of ascension through the Ten Grounds.[49]

To summarize, one can deduce a coherence among the ornamental motifs on the Tōdaiji objects that adheres to the spatial hierarchy established by the visual program surrounding the statue. Vairocana's body as ever-expanding light, filled with Śākyamuni after Śākyamuni, is mirrored in the nested configuration of his Lotus Treasury World with infinite fragrant oceans, lotuses, and Mt. Sumerus. In the Kegon conception, the Lotus Treasury World is simultaneously where we are and aspire to be. By being nested into and nestled under the lotus pedestals, the Tōdaiji objects, with their own earthly and celestial realms, embodied this double sense of location and destination, because they were literally one with Vairocana's body and his universe, yet below.

5. Tōdaiji Objects and Buddhist Benevolence as Kōken's Filial Act

The discussion thus far has focused on the synergy between the Tōdaiji objects and the central statue that energized the visual program within the Great Buddha Hall, while symbolically converting the internal space within the pedestal into a conduit to Vairocana and a passage to his Lotus Treasury World. Inserting caches into a Buddhist statue (including the pedestal) was still a novel act in eighth-century Japan (Walley 2022, pp. 36–38). The donor or donors, in other words, went the extra mile to infuse the statue with its subterranean network of signification. Why? The last two sections of this article reengage with the political use of the Kegon teaching during the Nara period, featuring Sovereign Kōken as the primary candidate for instigating the emplacement of the Tōdaiji objects.

In his pioneering study of the Tōdaiji objects, Okumura Hideo narrows down the potential occasions for their emplacement to (a) when the pedestal was completed circa 756, (b) the one-year anniversary of Shōmu's death in 757, or (c) sometime after Kōmyō's death in 760. He ultimately proposes the 757 state-wide mourning for Shōmu as the most plausible timing (Okumura 1976, pp. 17–18). The repeated motifs of birds and flight among the Tōdaiji objects make the offering appropriate for a time of mourning and prayer for the newly deceased. Considering the centrality of the Kegon worldview to Shōmu's political agenda and his persona as a public figure, it is difficult to imagine anyone else more fitting to receive such a commemoration. *Shoku Nihongi* presents Kōken's leadership in preparing for the 757 mourning, making it reasonable to infer that if the Tōdaiji objects were offered to the Great Buddha around or as part of this event, then Kōken would have led its arrangements. Thus, this section considers the Tōdaiji objects as a memorial offering for the deceased, and, more specifically, Kōken's filial act that prayed for her father's swift ascension to Vairocana's Pure Land.

Due to its sheer monumentality, the challenging project of casting the Great Buddha experienced many setbacks, and when Shōmu passed away in 756, he did so before seeing his colossal Vairocana in its full glory. The order in which the bronze statue was cast has been a hotly debated topic. Earlier studies, exemplified by Katori Tadahiko, hypothesized that the statue was cast bottom-up, beginning with the bronze pedestal, based on the conventional technique employed in preceding life-size bronze seated statues. Adachi Yasushi first raised the possibility of an alternate casting order in 1934 by introducing a passage from the twelfth-century *Shichi daiji junrei shiki* 七大寺巡礼私記 (*Private Journal of a Pilgrimage to the Seven Great Temples*), which suggested that the pedestal was cast after the body. Maeda Yasuji—who led the 1968 study of the bronze pedestal—compellingly argued that the Great Buddha was cast top-down from both technical and devotional perspectives.[50] In short, although *Shoku Nihongi* does not mention it explicitly, the casting of the bronze pedestal was likely not finished until a couple of months after Shōmu's death and a month or so after the forty-ninth-day ritual.

Kōken took it upon herself to follow through with her father's legacy. She urged the provinces to finish the Śākyamuni image in their *kokubunji*, while the edict in 756 (hereafter 756 edict) ordered the completion of the Great Buddha Hall prior to the "state-wide mourning" commemorating the one-year anniversary of Shōmu's death the following year.[51] *Shoku Nihongi* relays that Kōfukuji 興福寺, not Tōdaiji, conducted the forty-ninth-day rite (*shichi shichi nichi* 七七日), the milestone event in the first year of a person's death.[52] Kōmyō's family, the Fujiwara, patronized Kōfukuji. Its proximity to Tōdaiji, the fact that the Fujiwara was one half of Shōmu's blood lineage, and the centrality of Kōmyō in the forty-ninth-day rite, made the temple a logical choice for this ceremony. However, the 756 edict betrays Kōken's disappointment of having to settle for a less symbolically optimal venue for this milestone occasion, as well as her resolution to hold an epic anniversary at Tōdaiji deserving of the first "bodhisattva" sovereign in the history of Yamato.

Princess Abe ascended as Kōken on the second day of the seventh month, 749.[53] Kōken followed Shōmu's active engagement with the Kegon teaching in more ways than Tōdaiji alone. As part of the preparation for the 757 commemoration, for instance, Kōken sent sixty-two copies of *Bonmōkyō* to provinces for expounding during the anniversary cer-

emony.[54] Kōken also followed her parents and engaged in public benevolent acts based on the Bodhisattva Precepts, including the "prohibition for killing of living things" (*sesshō kindan* 殺生禁断) and saving the sick and disabled to either pray for swift recovery when Shōmu or Kōmyō fell seriously ill or to commemorate their deaths.

Bonmōkyō teaches devotees to "piously obey their fathers and mothers, honored monks, and the Three Treasures" because it is the "principle of the ultimate path".[55] Her 756 edict made explicit the centrality of the Kegon teaching to Kōken's performance of her "pious obedience" (*kōjun* 孝順), stating, " . . . the merit of [*Bonmōkyō*] is vast and it assists one's passing well . . . with the unparallel efficacy of this bliss, I pray the [former retired emperor's] palanquin to gain wings to send him on his way to the realm of treasures of the Lotus Treasury World".[56] Kōken's prayer for Shōmu's ascension to Vairocana's Lotus Treasury World harks back to the wording in Kōmyō's vow that accompanied the *List of the Nation's Rare Treasures* (*Kokka chinpōchō* 国家珍宝帳), which was an inventory of over six hundred artifacts offered to Tōdaiji's Vairocana Buddha in 756 upon Shōmu's death (hereafter 756 offering).[57] This means that, while Shōmu's and Kōken's approaches to the Kegon teaching may appear similar to us, there is now an added connotation; for Kōken, carrying out her father's legacy and pressing forward with the Kegon-inspired political agenda was not only a matter of state politics, but a performance of her filial piety.[58]

A mention of Shōmu's journey across the sky to the celestial realm also appears in *Shoku Nihongi* in connection with the one-year anniversary ceremony in 757. Three months after the one-year anniversary, Kōken proclaimed a change in era name from Tenpyō Shōhō 天平勝宝 (Victorious Treasure of Heavenly Peace) to Tenpyō Hōji 天平宝字 (Precious Ideographs of Heavenly Peace) following two findings of auspicious characters earlier that same year: one within the sovereign's private mansion on the twentieth day of the third month, and the other on a silkworm cocoon on the thirteenth day of the eighth month.[59] According to the edict issued on the eighteenth day of the eighth month, 757, the writing on the cocoon read, "On the eighth day of the fifth month, Indra gazed down through an opening and made a mark to acknowledge a hundred-year prosperity of the imperial reign".[60] Kōken's advisors interpreted this to mean:

> . . . The summer eighth day of the fifth month, Tenpyō Shōhō 9 [756], when Mars rested on the fire-cock direction, was the last day of your highness's Buddhist serving of meal and repentance ceremony for the one-year anniversary commemorating the death of the Retired Emperor. At this time, Indra, sympathetically resonating with your and Queen Dowager's utmost sincerity, opened the gate of heavens, observed down at the magnificent deeds and acknowledged your highness's reign, blessing it with a hundred years of longevity . . . [61]

Indra (Taishakuten 帝釈天) is the overseer of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas at the summit of Mt. Sumeru. The word for "open" used here is "*hiraki tōsu*" 開通, which more literally means not only to open, but to allow one's passage through. In a syncretic manner typical of this period, Kōken's advisors made the case that the sincere piety Kōken and Kōmyō exhibited in the one-year anniversary ceremony moved the Buddhist deity to open the gate of heavens to send down his message through a silkworm, which was the "insect of gods" (*kami no mushi* 神虫).

The reoccurring motifs of flight or ascension among the Tōdaiji objects align with the actively promulgated Kegon-inspired imagination of souls traversing through heavens, thus buttressing the hypothesis that they were dedicated as a memorial for the newly deceased. To review, items from all three locations include something with a motif of heavens or ascension. In the north cavity, the sword with the Northern Dipper motif was paired with another sword with a gold inlay of flying birds and grapevines (Figure 8). In the southwest location, birds in flight appear on the lid of the silver jar. On the south side, a cicada as a winged insect connects the lock thematically to the flying bird motifs found at the other two locations.

The idea of the soul's flight to the afterlife predates Buddhism in Japan, and in East Asia more broadly. Even after the introduction of Buddhism, the imagination of the ascension of the deceased was syncretic in nature, weaving together the qualities associated with birds, immortals, celestial beings, and flying apsaras. For our purposes, what is important is that Kōmyō and Kōken both imagined Shōmu's destination to be Vairocana's Pure Land and his journey as a flight across the heavens in a winged palanquin.[62] Nagaoka Ryūsaku argues that this wish for Shōmu's ascension was expressed in the 756 offering. Screens of resist-dye textiles with flora and fauna motifs, according to Nagaoka, stood in for the heavenly realms within the Ten Grounds that donors imagined Shōmu to roam before arriving to the Lotus Treasury World (Nagaoka 2014, pp. 200–23). Building on this idea, Yukio Lippit connects the "Standing Beauties Adorned with Bird Feathers" (*Torige ritsujo no byōbu* 鳥毛立女屏風) to the ancient Chinese belief in Daoist immortals who were folded into Buddhism in East Asia as occupants of its heavenly realm (Lippit 2019, pp. 167–68).

Returning to the Tōdaiji objects, flying birds had an especially close link to the imagination of the divine and the afterlife. In East and Southeast Asia, birds were commonly associated with the world of gods and the journey taken by the souls of the deceased. *Kojiki* 古事記 (*Record of Ancient Matters*; compiled 712) and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (*Chronicles of Japan*; compiled 720) include episodes of gods arriving to this world in feathered robes or of birds sent to rulers as divine messengers.[63] Bird-motif clay figurines, paintings, and wooden finials for funerary standards are common features in fourth- to seventh-century tombs. *Manyōshū* 万葉集 (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*; compiled in the latter half of the eighth century) also includes eulogies that incorporate bird imagery.[64] Beyond birds, in China, the fact that cicadas do not eat grain led people to associate them with sagely immortals, who were believed to sustain themselves on dew (Ikegami 2017, pp. 154–55). Emplacing a cicada-shaped item among the Tōdaiji objects completed the imagination of a soul's journey through the heavenly realm and its transformation into an immortal while recreating the process of "rebirth".

If (as it was argued in an earlier section) the positioning of the Yin and Yang swords, combined with the mountain motif on the silver jar at the southwest location, expressed a sacred threshold that connected the world of the devotees and Vairocana, the presence of birds and a cicada that already had intimate ties to the transportation of souls across heavens would have worked to further articulate the space within the pedestal as the conduit through which the deceased reach Vairocana's Pure Land. In the Nara period, the earliest recorded devotion to *Kegonkyō* was associated with the death ritual and was also already folded into one's exhibition of filial duty. Genshō's edict issued in 722 ordered a sutra copying to rely on "true wind" (*shinpū* 真風, that is, Buddhism) to "aid the journey through the netherworld" of her mother and the former retired emperor Genmei.[65]

In connection to the Buddhist public persona that Shōmu cultivated in life, it is notable that *Bonmōkyō* opens with a scene of Śākyamuni preaching in the heavenly palace of Maheśvara:

> Śākyamuni Buddha, residing in the state of the fourth concentration (dhyāna) in the royal palace of Maheśvara, together with innumerable Brahmā kings and inexplicable, untold multitudes of bodhisattvas, expounded the chapter of the Dharma gate of the mind-ground as explained by Vairocana Buddha in the world of the lotus flower platform store [Lotus Treasury World]. At that time the body of Śākyamuni emitted the radiance of wisdom, which illuminated from the heavenly palaces to the worlds of the lotus flower platform store. All the sentient beings in all of the worlds, seeing each other, were overcome with joy, but as they were unable to know the causes and conditions of this illumination, they all had thoughts of doubt. Countless celestial beings also gave rise to doubt . . . Śākyamuni then lifted the great assembly from this world, returning to the world of the lotus flower platform store, where amid a palace with hundreds of billions of rays of red-tinged adamant they saw Vairocana Buddha. A million lotus flowers vividly shone from above his seat. Then Śākyamuni and the members of the

> great assembly simultaneously bowed in reverence at the feet of Vairocana Buddha.[66]

Shōmangyō gisho (introduced earlier) interpreted Queen Śrīmālā's "original form" to be the king of the Mahēśvara Heaven. In *Bonmōkyō*, the devotees' journey to the Lotus Treasury World begins with Śākyamuni's sermon at Mahēśvara. When we funnel Shōmu's assertion about his existential ties to Queen Śrīmālā through *Bonmōkyō*, we recognize that his postmortem flight was simultaneously transportive and transformative; that is, Shōmu, in death, returned (via Queen Śrīmālā) to his *honji* as the king of Mahēśvara to then be "lifted" by Śākyamuni Buddha to Vairocana's Pure Land. Kōmyō's and Kōken's prayers allow us to position the Tōdaiji objects not only within the broad conceptual plan surrounding the Great Buddha Hall, but also within the commemorative practice based on the Kegon teaching that wished for the ascension of souls—in this case, Shōmu's soul—through the heavenly realm among the stars, listening to Śākyamuni's sermon at the royal palace of Mahēśvara and eventually arriving at the foot of Vairocana Buddha.

Finally, the idea of the "heavenly gate" coincides well with the side-by-side positioning of the swords, particularly at the north and south locations. Intriguingly, the interpretation of the characters on the silkworm cocoon makes it clear that the one-year anniversary was just as much a proclamation of the new beginning for the imperial rulership under Kōken as a prayer for the safe journey of Shōmu's soul. As I introduced earlier, in terms of ornamentation, the cicada-shaped lock was paired with the ivy motif on the swords and the swirling floral pattern on the lacquered box, all of which signaled lifeforce. This clustering of motifs could have served as an embodiment of such a double prayer for the rebirth of the deceased on the one hand and the rejuvenation of the imperial lineage itself on the other.

6. Transgressions, Repentance, and Tōdaiji Objects

The above discussion teased out how the Tōdaiji objects could have served as dedicatory pieces within the context of Vairocana devotion. It also introduced preceding studies that interpreted the Shōsōin treasures through *Kegonkyō* and *Bonmōkyō*. The 756 offering and Tōdaiji objects were prepared within the circle of the imperial family as part of the same prayer for Shōmu's safe journey through the Lotus Treasury World to Vairocana Buddha, and the selection of pieces was not random but purposefully calibrated to express these wishes. If so, there arises a curious conflict between certain items included in the offering and the content of the Bodhisattva Precepts expounded in *Bonmōkyō*. For instance, one of the forty-eight minor precepts explicitly prohibits the amassing of weapons.[67] At first glance, this prohibition seems to conflict with the inclusion of arms and armor in both the 756 offering and Tōdaiji objects. As Paul Groner cautions, one must differentiate between "these [bodhisattva precepts] as *prescriptions* of behavior and *descriptions* of how people actually behaved".[68] The lack of records makes it challenging to discern how Nara period lay devotees actually adhered to precepts in their daily lives. However, this point is worth considering further, because Shōmu and Kōken embraced *Bonmōkyō* as a foundation for their public conducts, thereby extending to the pragmatic aspects of state management and, more importantly, their political persona.

We return once again to the silver jar at the southwest cavity. One of the Bodhisattva Precepts that Shōmu and Kōken especially adhered to was the "releasing of living beings" (*hōjō* 放生), which they conducted to pray for family members recovering from sickness or for the deceased. *Bonmōkyō* teaches:

> My disciples, you should compassionately engage in the practice of releasing captive animals into the wild. All men have been our fathers, and all women our mothers. In our numerous past lives, there is no one who has not been our mother or father. Therefore, sentient beings in all six destinies have all been our fathers and mothers. If we were to slaughter and eat them, it would be the same as slaughtering and eating our own parents, as well as slaughtering [and eating*] my own former body. All lands and waters are my former body; all fire and wind

> are my original essence. Therefore you should always carry out freeing captive animals so that living beings can continue to be reborn and undergo rebirth . . . On the day of the death of your father, mother, or elder or younger siblings you should request a Dharma teacher to deliver a lecture from the Bodhisattva Vinaya Sutra [*Bonmōkyō*] in order to convey blessings on the deceased that they may attain a vision of the buddhas and be reborn as a human being or as a celestial.[69]

The practice of *hōjō* was codified during the reigns of Shōmu's grandparents, Sovereigns Tenmu 天武 (d. 686; r. 673–686) and Jitō 持統 (645–702; 690–697).[70] The extended prohibition on the "killing of life" (*sesshō* 殺生), however, was only executed during Shōmu's and Kōken's times.[71] For instance, on the fifteenth day of the ninth month, 745, the hunting of game animals was prohibited for three years to pray for Shōmu's recovery from his illness. This releasing of animals was coupled with a pardoning of all crimes (*taisha* 大赦) decreed two days later.[72] The killing of animals was banned again for one year in 752 and for three months in 755, again to pray for Shōmu's recovery, then for one year from the sixth month of 756 through the end of the fifth month, 757, to commemorate his death. Finally, another six-month prohibition was ordered in 758, this time due to Kōmyō's illness.[73]

Bonmōkyō couches *hōjō* in terms of one's filial duty by underscoring: " . . . sentient beings in all six destinies have all been our fathers and mothers". In relation to what has been discussed thus far, it is noteworthy that *Bonmōkyō* also instructs that, upon the death of a family member, one should request a lecture on this scripture, so that the deceased "may . . . be reborn as a human being or a celestial". It is safe to conjecture that Kōken was indeed referencing not just *Bonmōkyō* but, more specifically, this precept on *hōjō* when she prohibited the killing of animals upon Shōmu's death and when she ordered lectures on this scripture as part of the one-year anniversary ceremony. The explicit mention of rebirth in the celestial realm as one efficacy of *hōjō* aligns with the desired afterlife for Shōmu, Kōken, and Kōmyō expressed in 756.

The centrality of this precept on *hōjō* raises a question regarding the silver jar among the Tōdaiji objects: Does the scene of a hunt not conflict with the teaching about the releasing of animals? The members of the imperial family or any other person who was in the inner circle of the emperor could have selected a container with any motif. Why choose a hunting scene? An image of a hunt would have been considered an exotic motif during the Nara period, making it quite appropriate for a luxurious item such as this one. As mentioned above, sacred mountain landscapes enlivened by living creatures were also a familiar Buddhist motif. However, the inclusion of a motif that brushes so closely against the signature policy of the period, I believe, warrants further investigation, particularly because similar incongruities also exist among the 756 offering. In addition to the arms and armor that constituted about half of the entire items in the 756 offering, *Chinpōchō* also lists musical instruments, gameboards and game pieces. In *Bonmōkyō*, gambling and idly passing time on games and listening to music, songs, and plays are also considered minor transgressions.[74] The inclusion of gameboards and game pieces is particularly intriguing because in 753, Kōken reemphasized the ban on playing *sugoroku* 双六 board games that was first issued in 689 during Jitō's reign.[75]

Thus far, the only incongruity that scholars have addressed is the inclusion of arms and armor. Before they were deployed in 764 to quell Fujiwara no Nakamaro's 藤原仲麻呂 (706–764) rebelling, Shōsōin held one hundred sets of swords, bows, arrows, and armor that Kōmyō and Kōken donated. Focusing on the types of objects singled out in Kōmyō's vow accompanying the 756 offering, Kita Keita argues that arms and armor represented one half of the twin qualities of an ideal sovereign, *bunbu* 文武 (culture and military) (Kita 2008, pp. 151–52). Kondō Yoshikazu, on the other hand, interprets their inclusion in the context of preceding customs surrounding gifts to monasteries and shrines.[76] If we were only concerned with the arms and armor, both Kita's and Kondō's readings do address the certain dedicatory nature of the 756 offering.

As Kita points out, *Chinpōchō* is not a mere inventory but a kind of narrative that constructs an image of Shōmu as an ideal bodhisattva sovereign. Placing the monk's robes as the very first set of items on the list presents the late retired emperor first and foremost as a Buddhist devotee. This entry is followed by the zelkova chest that was the imperial heirloom and another chest that belonged to the Fujiwara, establishing his blood lineage. The two chests were filled with artifacts attesting to Shōmu's cultural prowess. Then comes the extensive listing of the arms and armor that can be interpreted as Shōmu's military might. In relation to Kita's argument, we have already established that Kōken at the very least believed in Vairocana's power to literally quell her foes. In her edict on 757, Kōken stresses "culture and military" as the foundation of state rulership, allocating land specifically to strengthen the imperial military force.[77] Thus, the idea of *bunbu* as the two crucial properties of a sovereign was unquestionably in the minds of the Nara court. It is also notable that there were "hundreds" of bureaucratic and military officials (*bunbu hyakkan* 文武百官) present during the 752 eye-opening ceremony.[78] Although in this case, the "one hundred" in *bunbu hyakkan* simply meant "many", the fact that there were one hundred sets of arms and armor in the 756 offering could still have evoked the memory of Shōmu's glory during the pinnacle of his achievement as a bodhisattva sovereign just four years earlier.

With regard to Kondō's argument, in *Kegonkyō*, when Śākyamuni attained awakening, celestial beings and gods of natural elements arrived to pay homage to him, along with bodhisattvas and heavenly kings.[79] One of the first major rituals that took place immediately following Kōken's ascension to the throne was the god of Hachiman's (Yahata no Ōkami 八幡大神) visitation of Tōdaiji.[80] In the narrative surrounding the construction of Tōdaiji, Hachiman consistently provides divine support and protection for the project. Ties to both the domestic gods and Buddhism constituted the twin pillars of imperial identity. Thus, it is plausible that the offering of arms and armor was deemed appropriate to pray for Shōmu's flight to the celestial realm.

Moreover, considering the careful political application of the Kegon ideals, we must entertain the possibility that these seeming incongruities were also in keeping with Shōmu-to-Kōken's Buddhist agenda. It is notable that some items in *Chinpōchō* adhere to *Bonmōkyō*'s Bodhisattva Precepts. Along with the 756 offering, Kōmyō made an additional donation of sixty kinds of medicine to be used in times of need. Caring for the sick and disabled was a signature state policy of this period, along with the prohibition of the killing of animals, and was a personal project of Queen Dowager Kōmyō, who established a dispensary (*seyaku-in* 施薬院) and hospice (*hiden-in* 悲田院) under the oversight of her Household Agency.[81] *Bonmōkyō* states:

> My disciples, if you see someone who is ill, you should always make offerings to them, no differently than you would for the Buddha. Among the eight fields of merit, that of caring for the ill is foremost. If your father or mother, teacher, fellow monk, or disciple is ill, handicapped, or suffering from any kind of ailment, he or she should be cared for until their illness is removed.[82]

Extending this relief effort to common people was partly necessitated by the same wave of natural disasters, plagues, and political crises that turned Shōmu to Vairocana. Once again, *Bonmōkyō* positions this act of benevolence within the context of filial piety by beginning the list of those one has a responsibility to care for with "your father or mother". Notably, for Kōken, this relief effort for the sick was another filial act, as was the prohibition of the killing of animals. For instance, in 755 and 756, Kōken issued an edict to save those who were ill for Shōmu's recovery from his own illness.[83] The 756 offering of medicine can be interpreted as an appropriate act within the context of a public display of filial piety.[84]

The silver jar provides a clue to understanding the seeming discrepancies between the objects offered to Vairocana and *Bonmōkyō*'s teaching. To review, the central motif of this jar is a hunting scene of horsemen chasing deer and a boar, which were the most common game animals.[85] If the motifs on folding screens or swords could embody a prayer for the safe journey of the deceased, then could a hunt scene on a jar have functioned as a symbolic

relinquishing of the act itself in accordance with *Bonmōkyō*? What is proposed here is the possibility of Buddhist offerings serving not only as giving, but as an act of relinquishing for repentance. *Bonmōkyō* states:

> My disciples, if you see any sentient beings violating the eight precepts, the five precepts, or the ten precepts, or who are defying the prohibitions by way of the seven heinous acts or the eight difficult circumstances, or any other kind of violation of the precepts, you should encourage them to repent.[86]

The exact proceeding of the ritual is not always clear, but repentance rites (*keka-e* 悔過会) were an integral part of Nara period Buddhist practice. Recall that, in *Shoku Nihongi*, the auspicious characters on the silkworm cocoon were read as a heavenly blessing sent down on the last day of the repentance rite performed during the one-year anniversary of Shōmu's death. Placing the theatricality of this sequence of events aside, this interpretation does clarify that a repentance rite was believed to be beneficial for all parties involved, both the deceased and the living. The offering of arms and armor, musical instruments, and games—the amassing and use of which Bodhisattva Precepts prohibit—exposed the very ownership of these items in a manner akin to confessing a sin. However, this material confession was performed within the framework of a benevolent act of giving. In both the 756 offering and Tōdaiji objects, the act of relinquishing effectively shifted the connotation of the artifacts. In the case of the Shōsōin treasures, the arms and armor, musical instruments, and gameboards and pieces were no longer items of transgression. They were transformed, instead, into Vairocana's (and, in more pragmatic terms, Tōdaiji's) expedient means. The arms and armor were now an extension of Vairocana's power to *jōbuku*; the musical instruments were no longer for idle pleasures, but for the embodiment of heavenly music, and even the gameboards and pieces could now serve as tools for teaching the Bodhisattva Precepts. The same can be said of the Tōdaiji objects, except here, the transformation became even more drastic as a result of the complete relinquishing of the utilitarian potential. The items now existed purely at the symbolic level. In the world cocooned inside the lotus pedestal supporting the statue, the ornamentations and inscriptions of the Tōdaiji objects came alive: the birds and cicada took flight into heavens filled with constellations beyond the sacred mountains, and the souls of the deceased ascended to Vairocana's Pure Land.

7. Conclusions

Among the Tōdaiji objects, the connotations of each of the items and what their ornamental motifs exuded echoed what members of the Nara court would have imagined to be the qualities of Vairocana and his Lotus Treasury World—expressed most eloquently through the visual program of the statue itself—as well as what they could have understood to be the spiritual efficacies of worshipping this deity. The selection of items and their arrangement, I have argued, was calibrated to evoke the Kegon teaching, particularly what *Bonmōkyō* expounded to be the proper conduct of a bodhisattva practitioner.

The items among the Tōdaiji objects intimately engaged with the statue but also with each other, both within and across cavities. The north and south cavities were connected through the central statue, and the hierarchical vision of the Lotus Treasury World presented by the statue seamlessly connected to the swords and silver jar on the southwest side. The objects and their ornamentations recalled a different set of associations: the swords with bird motifs simultaneously enacted the flight of souls through the heavenly gate while serving as the symbolic function of the gate itself, the cicada expressed prayers for both the favorable rebirth of the deceased and longevity of the living who were left behind, and the particular placement of the Northern Dipper motif orchestrated the universe properly aligned with the Vairocana Buddha as its "Polar Star", in addition to embodying the deity's power to protect the rulers.

This type of concealed offering would become commonplace in the later instances of *tainai nōnyūhin*. For example, in his discussion of the caches discovered in the standing Śākyamuni Buddha at Seiryōji 清涼寺 (Kyoto; 985 CE), Oku Takeo argues that the interior

space of the statue served as a kind of portal, where the inserted caches sanctified the threshold and mediated the realms of the devotees and the divine (Oku 2009, pp. 48–49). Such sophisticated use of offerings was still unprecedented in Nara period examples, but, interestingly, comparable cases have been found in preceding funerary practices and relic veneration. The Tōdaiji objects, in short, marked a pivotal moment in the history of *tainai nōnyūhin* as one of the earliest instances in which the interior of a statue came to be recognized as a liminal space of the heavens, transportation, and rebirth, thus mediating between the devotees and Vairocana's Lotus Treasury World.

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[2] Walley (2022). Also see, Walley (2018).

[3] Okumura (1976). For an English summary of his argument, see Walley (2018, pp. 65–66).

[4] For the reading of the sūtra titles, I followed Muller (2021).

[5] Also see Kezō Sekai 華蔵世界 (Lotus Treasury World), or more fully, Rengezō Shōgon Sekaikai 蓮華蔵荘厳世界海 (Lotus Treasury Adorned World Ocean; S. *kusuma-tala-garbha-vyūhālaṃkāra*). Muller (2021), s.v. "Rengezō sekai".

[6] Katsuura (2014, p. ii). For an accessible introduction to the Kōken's career in English, see Bender (2022).

[7] Scholars have proposed to interpret the visual program of the Great Buddha through an array of scriptures beyond *Kegon* and *Bonmōkyō* (e.g., *Daichidoron* 大智度論 or *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Scripture*). This study follows Tomura Ataru's 外村中 careful comparison that concludes that a relevant visual detail deriving from another scripture was not added to the Great Buddha unless it also adhered to the Kegon teaching. Toyama (2016, pp. 1–32).

[8] Lowe (2017). Lowe's study focuses on the activities of the Nara period scriptorium traceable through contemporaneous documents, particularly those stored in Tōdaiji's Shōsōin repository. Based on the case study of a sūtra-copying project commissioned in 748, the author demonstrates that the three scriptures selected were carefully calibrated to address specific anxieties, which could only have been possible with commissioners' engagement with the sūtras' contents.

[9] According to Gyōnen's *Transmission of Buddha Dharma in Three Countries* (*Sangoku buppō denzū engi* 三国仏法伝通縁起), compiled in 1311, these Kegon lectures continued well into the medieval period. Miyazaki (1998).

[10] For an accessible introduction to the Tōdaiji objects in English, see Walley (2018, pp. 65–73).

[11] Yoshimura (1972). For a concise timeline of key events surrounding the initial building of Tōdaiji, see Nara Kenritsu Kashihara Kōkogaku Kenkyūjo Fuzoku Hakubutsukan (2000).

[12] In 758, Kōken abdicated to Junnin 淳仁 (733–765; r. 758–764) but continued to exude authority as the retired sovereign. Eventually, she reclaimed the throne in 764 and reigned for the second time until her death in 770 ((often called the Shōtoku 称徳 era to distinguish from her first reign). This study primarily concerns the period of her first reign, so it will refer to her as Kōken.

[13] Morimoto Kōsei argues that Vairocana provided a name and visible form to the "Buddha body" (*hosshin* 法身; Sk. dharmakāya) already mentioned in *Konkōmyōkyō*. Asuka Sango describes that, in early Misai-e 御斎会 (involving a recitation of *Konkōmyō saishō-ō kyō*), a statue of the Vairocana Buddha and two bodhisattva attendants were placed on the imperial throne. Morimoto (2012, p. 298). Sango (2015, p. 16).

[14] Ono (1915). For a concise summary of the debate, see Uesugi (1994, pp. 209–33).

[15] According to Kimura Kiyotaka, *Bonmōkyō* adapted *Kegonkyō*'s worldview. Expanding on Kimura's discussion, Yoshimura Rei points out that, in Tang dynasty China, the two sets of scriptures were understood to be in a "sibling relationship"; thus, in terms of representation, there was no notable distinction between Vairocana as the central deity for *Kegonkyō* or *Bonmōkyō*. Kimura (1977, pp. 149–52). Yoshimura (1999, pp. 53–54).

[16] *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter *T*), 24:997c (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–1932). The English translation is based on Muller and Tanaka's translation of the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra* (Muller and Tanaka 2017) (hereafter *BNS*), pp. 5–6. In Muller and Tanaka's translation, what appears above as "petals" of the lotus world is translated as "leaves". This is most likely because the term used in the Chinese original, *yō* 葉 (C. *ye*), is a common quantifier used to count leaves. However, in the case of lotuses, the

same quantifier is used to count the number of petals. For instance, the most common lotus design seen in lotus pedestals and architectural details in a temple is the "eight-petal lotus", or *hachiyō renge* 八葉蓮華. For this reason, I have changed the "leaves" in the translation to "petals" for clarity.

17 The original phrasing is 千花上佛, literally "buddhas on one thousand flowers". The translation rendered these "flowers" as "lotus petals". Based on visual conventions of similar scenes, the quote above corrects it to simply "lotuses".

18 T24:1003b. BNS, pp. 38–39. Notations original to the translation will be marked with an asterisk. Also see Matsumoto (1986, p. 57).

19 T10:39a. Unless otherwise noted, translations of *Kegonkyō* are mine.

20 For a recent English language discussion on the impact of Wu Zetian's (武則天; c. 624–705) on the Buddhist activities on Shōmu and Kōmyō, see Wong (2018, pp. 169–219). For an accessible discussion of the images of Vairocana Buddha in Korea, see Park (2012, pp. 261–90).

21 At both Longmen Grottos and Tōshōdaiji, each petal on the lotus pedestal includes just one miniature image of the seated Śākyamuni Buddha.

22 T9:395b and T10:2a.

23 T24:1000a. BNS, pp. 20–21.

24 For instance, Shinjō's three-year lecture on the Old Translation performed at Konshuji 金鐘寺 beginning in 740 impacted the future conceptualization of Tōdaiji. Horiike (1980, pp. 386–31). For a related discussion on the visiting monks stationed at another prominent Nara temple of Daianji 大安寺, see Wong (2018, pp. 202–10).

25 Famously, *Zasshū* 雜集 (*Miscellany*; compiled 731) in Shōmu's hand includes an inscription from a Vairocana image. Morimoto (2012, pp. 296–99). For a discussion in English of Shōmu as an active agent in the reconceptualization of Yamato kingship through Buddhism, see Piggott (1997, pp. 236–79).

26 According to Nakabayashi Takayuki 中林隆之, the first half of the eighth century was a transitional period from the Old Translation to the New Translation. For instance, the lectures during the eye-opening ceremony were based on the New Translation, but copies of both the Old and New Translations were offered to the Tōdaiji statue. Nakabayashi (2015). In English, see Morimoto (2012, pp. 291–305).

27 *Shoku Nihongi* (hereinafter *SN*), Tenpyō Kanpō 1 (749). Intercalary 5.20. Aoki et al. (1992, 3:80–83). Translation of *Shoku Nihongi* is mine.

28 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 8 (756).6.10. Aoki, 3:164–165.

29 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 1 (749).4.1. Aoki, 3:64–65. The phrase opens Shōmu's edict presented to the Great Buddha celebrating the discovery of gold from the northeastern region.

30 Regarding Jianzhen's arduous journey and his legacy in English, see Wong (2018, pp. 221–50). For the translation of *The Great Master of the Tang Travels East*, see Bingenheimer (2003, 2004).

31 Kōchi Shōsuke argues that Shōmu made unprecedented political maneuvers regarding succession, including appointing as his heir his newborn son by his consort of non-royal lineage, Kōmyō, elevating Kōmyō's status to Queen Consort (*kōgō* 皇后) after the death of their son, and subsequently appointing their daughter Princess Abe as his heir while a grown son from another consort was still alive. Kōchi attributes his unconventional maneuvers to Shōmu's own birth as a son of Monmu and Miyako, his non-imperial consort of Fujiwara descent. Kōchi (2014, pp. 67–101).

32 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 1 (749).Intercalary 5.20. Aoki, 3:80–83. Shōmu was the first Yamato sovereign to take a tonsure.

33 Ishida (1997) (hereafter STJ), s.v. "Shōmu Tennō".

34 The authorship of this commentary is a vexing issue that is outside of the purview of this article. What is relevant to this discussion is the fact that, at the time of Shōmu, no doubt was raised as to its authenticity as Prince Shōtoku's own composition. For more in English on this commentary, see Dennis (2017, pp. 449–507), and Walley (2015, p. 122).

35 STJ, s.v. "Shōman bunin". *Shōmangyō gisho* states, "Although Śrīmālā was originally an inconceivable being, she appears in the world at the seventh stage of the bodhisattva". For the English translation of the commentary, see Dennis (2011, p. 13).

36 Including Kōken, six female sovereigns ruled between the sixth and eighth centuries, all of whom exhibited leadership equal to or surpassing that of their male counterparts. However, customarily, female sovereigns were considered to be transitional in their role, installed at a time of crisis with no male heir of suitable lineage or age. Kōchi (2014, pp. 45–52).

37 Half a century earlier, the first and only female sovereign of China, Wu Zetian, already employed a similar logic of reincarnation to legitimize her rule. For an accessible discussion of Wu Zetian's Buddhist-inspired politics, see Chen (2002, pp. 114–17).

38 Three Asuka and Nara period swords with an incised Northern Dipper motif remain, including one in the Shōsōin repository from the 756 offering. The other two examples—in Hōryūji and Shitennōji—are associated with the Four Heavenly Kings, the protectors of a state. For more on the Northern Dipper motifs on swords, see Sugihara (1984, pp. 1–21).

39 The definition of *jōbuku* is broad. *Kōsetsu Bukkyō-go jiten* lists the following: suppression, control, harmony, and submission; to restore balance and calm; to regulate and subjugate; to suppress poison with medicine; regulate one's body and mind; training;

to restore one's conduct to the correct way by suppressing and removing evil; to suppress evil within oneself; to teach the enemy to relinquish malintent; and to quell those who are one's obstacles. Nakamura (2001), s.v. "jōbuku" 調伏.

40 SN, Tenpyō Hōji 1 (757).7.12. Aoki, 3:212–215.

41 For instance, after Shōmu's illness in 745, Tachibana no Naramaro 橘奈良麻呂 (725–757) challenged Princess Abe/Kōken's legitimacy multiple times, which culminated in his attempted coup in 757. Katsuura (2014, pp. 102–19, 134–35, 141–43).

42 Regarding the identification of these swords, see Walley (2018; 2022, pp. 29–34).

43 SN, Tenpyō Hōji 1 (757).8.23. Aoki, 3:226–227.

44 For evolution on sacred mountain worship in China, see Munakata (1991, pp. 1–48).

45 Examples include Caves 249, 285, and 428.

46 The surface ornamentation of the Tamamushi Shrine is in fact characterized by repeated inclusion of mountain landscape motifs to the point that the physical presence of the shrine itself serves as a symbolic mountain. Chan (2018, pp. 63–75), and Walley (2012, pp. 320–21).

47 Hida Romi argues that the mountain landscape on the Hōryūji murals expressed the deities manifesting themselves in the devotees' realm. Hida (1997, pp. 91–114).

48 The jar went through a significant repair soon after its initial discovery in the early twentieth century, which unfortunately was never documented. However, based on its shape and the quality of the ornamentation, it was likely produced domestically during the Nara period. Tsukamoto (2015, p. 332), and Tōdaiji Myūjiamu (2013, p. 133).

49 Nagaoka (2012, pp. 41–57). In English, see Dorothy C. Wong's contextualization of the rising cult of esoteric deities at Tōdaiji within Wu Zetian's legacy. Wong (2018, pp. 184–200).

50 Maeda et al. (1969, pp. 79–87). For an overview of the debate, see Kawase (1994, pp. 235–62).

51 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 8 (756).6.22. Aoki, 3:164–167.

52 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 8 (756).6.21. Aoki, 3:164–167.

53 SN, Tenpyō Kanpō 1 (749).7.2. Aoki, 3:82–83.

54 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 8 (756). 12.30. The order was reiterated on the fifth day of the first month of the following year. Aoki, 3:170–171, 174–175.

55 T24:1004a. BNS, p. 42.

56 欲使以此妙福无上威力翼冥路之鸞輿向花蔵之宝刹 (*kono myōfuku mujō no iriki o mochite myōro o tasuke kezō no hōsatsu ni fukashimen to omou*). SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 8 (756).12.30. Aoki, 3:170–171. The reading of the passage and its interpretation are based on the transcription and annotation in Aoki, 3:171–172. I have translated a few characters more literally to clarify the nuance. For instance, the character for *tasuke* (翼) in "*myōro o tasuke*" (翼冥路) here means to "assist", but this character as a noun also has the meaning of "wings". Thus, the connotation here is to help propel or levitate by providing wings (figuratively, or in this case, literally). *Ranyo* (鸞輿) refers to Shōmu in this context, but its actual meaning is "palanquin of a heavenly sovereign".

57 Kōmyō's vow includes a prayer that begins with "I humbly pray that with this bliss would give wings to the sage [Shōmu] to long wield the wheel of dharma and swiftly arrive to the realm of treasures of the Lotus Treasury World . . . " (*fushite negawakuba kono myōfuku o motte sengi o tasuke tatematsuri nagaku hōrin o yorokobi sumiyakani kazō no hōsatsu ni itari* 伏願持茲妙福奉翼仙儀永馭法輪速到花蔵之宝刹). Much later in her career, Kōken (now returned to throne for a second reign) once again employed a similar phraseology in her prayer accompanying the Buddhist canon (*issaikyō* 一切経) she dedicated to Shōmu in the fifth month of 768. Katsuura (2014, p. 232).

58 Although the central concern of Piggott's essay is on a period of Kōken/Shōtoku's reign that postdates the timeframe of this article, her discussion of the importance of the filial relationship to Shōmu through Kōken/Shōtoku's political career is informative. Piggott (2003, pp. 47–57).

59 SN, Tenpyō Hōji 1 (757).3.20 and 8.13. Aoki, 3:176–177, 220–221.

60 五月八日開下帝釈標知天皇命百年息. SN, Tenpyō Hōji 1 (757).8.18. Aoki, 3:222–223.

61 SN, Tenpyō Hōji 1 (757).8.18. Aoki, 3:222–223. The translation of the quoted section is mine, but a full translation is available in Bender (2010, pp. 233–35).

62 A related discussion appears in Lowe (2017, pp. 74–79).

63 Specifically related to mortuary culture, Yamato Takeru 日本武尊 (one of Keikō's sons in the imperial mythology and a legendary warrior) was believed to have transformed into a "white bird" (*shiratori* 白鳥) upon his death and ascended to the heavens. *Nihon shoki*, Chūai 1.11.1. Sakamoto et al. (1994, pp. 320–21).

64 For a discussion of bird worship in Japan, see Hirabayashi (2011, pp. 113–33).

65 SN, Yōrō 6 (722).11.19. Aoki, 2:124–125.

66 T24:997b. BNS, pp. 4–5.

67 T24:1005c. BNS, p. 51.

68 Groner (2018, p. 29). Emphasis in original.

69 T24:1006b. BNS, p. 55.

70 *Sesshō kindan* is one practice where the teaching in the *Sūtra of the Golden Light* and Kegon scriptures overlap. The earlier practices during the Tenmu and Jitō's reign followed the former scripture, and not yet *Bonmōkyō*.

71 SN, 3:494–495n30. Groner points out "releasing of animals" and "prohibition on storing weapons" were among the precepts in *Bonmōkyō* that had major impacts on Buddhism across East Asia. Groner (2018, p. 35).

72 SN, Tenpyō 17 (745).9.15 and 9.17. Aoki, 3:14–15.

73 A list of major *hōjō* during Shōmu and Kōken's reigns can be found in Yoshida Takashi's endnote in Aoki, 3:494–495n30.

74 T24:1007b. BNS, p. 62.

75 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 6 (754). 10.14. Aoki, 3:148–149.

76 Kondō (2014, pp. 393–94). For other hypotheses questioned by preceding studies, see Yoneda (2018, pp. 245–46).

77 SN, Tenpyō Hōji 1 (757). 8.25. Aoki, 3:228–229.

78 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 4 (752). 4.9. Aoki, 3:118–119.

79 Fascicle 1 of both Old and New Translations lists gods and celestial beings that visited the Buddha. See T9:395c–396c, and T10:2c–4c.

80 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 1 (749). 12.27. Aoki, 3:96–97.

81 SN, Tenpyō 2 (730).4.17. Aoki, 2:234–235. Establishment of *hiden-in* appears in later entries, including the eulogy for Kōmyō. See SN, Tenpyō Hōji 4 (760).6.7. Aoki, 3:352–353. For an introduction to Kōmyō's legacy as a Buddhist patron, see Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-monks*, pp. 200–2. Morimoto Kōsei positions establishment of *seyaku-* and *hiden-in* within the broader seventh- and eighth-century state-wide relief efforts. Morimoto (2011, pp. 7–25).

82 T24:1005c. BNS, p. 51.

83 SN, Tenpyō Shōhō 7 (755).10.21, Tenpyō Shōhō 8 (756).4.14 and 4.29. Aoki, 3:154–155, 156–159.

84 Kōmyō included items belonging to the Fujiwara lineage in the 756 offering, while on the first day of the tenth month, 758, she made an additional offering of calligraphy by her own father, Fujiwara no Fuhito. For this reason, it is safe to assume that Kōmyō herself was well aware of the association between filial piety and the Bodhisattva Precepts.

85 The three-year prohibition Shōmu issued in 745 protected *shishi* 宍, which broadly meant "meat", but for this period, more specifically deer and wild boars. Hirabayashi (2011, p. 138).

86 T24:1005b. BNS, p. 49.

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