

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cjbs/index.php/cjbs/index>

Number 12, 2017

A Reflection on Dr. Asuka Sango's
Yehan Numata Reading Group at
McMaster University on December 2, 2016

Crystal M. Beaudoin

McMaster University

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author.

A Reflection on Dr. Asuka Sango's Yehan Numata Reading Group at McMaster University on December 2, 2016

Crystal M. Beaudoin
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

As the fall semester drew to a close, students and faculty in the Religious Studies department at McMaster University were delighted to host our first guest for the University of Toronto/McMaster University Yehan Numata Program in Buddhist Studies. Dr. Asuka Sango is an Associate Professor of Religion and Asian Studies at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. She is primarily interested in Japanese Buddhism during the medieval period. She is also interested in food and religion, Buddhist rituals, religion and Japanese society, and Buddhist activism in contemporary societies. She is the author of *The Halo of Golden Light: Imperial Authority and Buddhist Ritual in Heian Japan*, which was published in 2015. Dr. Sango joined us for a reading group, during which she shared with us one of her latest research projects, which is entitled *The Emperor's Dream: Reinventing Imperial Authority in Heian Japan (794-1185)*. Dr. Sango began the reading group session by giving a short synopsis of her project.

In her research, Dr. Sango examines an incident which illustrates the *Golden Light Sūtra's* ambiguous messages regarding imperial authority. Differing interpretations of this *sūtra* reflect a significant political

shift that occurred in Japan during the mid-Heian period. In his diary entry, a regent to Emperor Goichijō (r. 1016–1036), described the Emperor's recent dream. In this dream, thousands of women who were possessed by evil spirits invaded and took over the palace, and a mysterious person informed the Emperor that giving a lecture on the *Golden Light Sūtra* would be the only effective measure to prevent such an occurrence. The Emperor informed his regent of his plans to follow this mysterious person's advice. His regent, on the other hand, wrote that according to this *sūtra*, an Emperor who governs righteously will be protected from such adversity as a matter of course. Dr. Sango argues that although a political shift in which regents became quite powerful occurred, the Emperor's authority remained intact. He reinvented and reasserted his authority through the use of rituals, including those encompassing the reading and discussion of the *Golden Light Sūtra*. These rituals shifted the political focus from the Emperor's office to his physical being, as represented by his residential compound (the place where they were observed). Dr. Sango's sources include official histories, ritual manuals, diaries, visual evidence (artwork and diagrams), among others. She has enjoyed working on this project, which is based on her PhD dissertation. Indeed, our reading group very much enjoyed hearing about this project.

This reading group was well attended, and department members arrived with plenty of questions. The topic of dreams, including dream interpretation, the organization of dreams into genres or categories, and reasons for recording dreams received much discussion. Our group also considered the use of diaries as a source. Could these diaries have been embellished? Why do we refer to these written sources as diaries? To what extent were these diaries shared with the Emperor? There were also many questions and conversations regarding terminology, methodology and translation. For example, to what extent should we apply the work of scholars such as Sigmund Freud in such an analysis, and how

should we go about doing so? Dr. Sango was grateful for all of the questions and comments she received, and her audience was pleased to engage with her interesting research.

On behalf of the Religious Studies department at McMaster, I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Sango for taking the time to share her fascinating work with us. Her visit marked a very successful start to our department's 2016-2017 Numata Program in Buddhist Studies. Our next visitor will be Dr. Erik Braun from the University of Virginia, on Friday January 27th, 2017. All are welcome!