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Maria del Rosario Pradel
University of California - Los Angeles

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The Tenjukoku Shūchō and the Asuka Period Funerary Practices

Maria del Rosario Pradel
University of California, Los Angeles

Introduction

A square support fabric measuring 90 centimeters on each side holds the arbitrarily mounted fragments of an embroidered textile known as the Tenjukoku Shūchō 天寿国繡帳 or Tenjukoku Mandara 天寿国曼荼羅.¹ The artifact belongs to Chūgūji 中宮寺, a Buddhist temple in Nara prefecture, but it is now housed in the Nara National Museum for preservation purposes.² Despite their fragmentary condition, it is possible to reconstruct the history of the fragments because of the abundance of documents associated with them. An inscription recorded in an eleventh century document indicates that a *shūchō* (繡帳, "embroidered curtain") depicting Tenjukoku was made sometime in the Asuka period (538 or 552-645 C.E.).³ The history of the Tenjukoku "embroidered curtains," however, is not limited to the Asuka period. Documents of the Kamakura period (1185-1333 C.E.) mention the discovery of the artifact in 1274, where it is called Tenjukoku Mandara.⁴ Furthermore, there is reference to the manufacture of a replica of the so-called Tenjukoku Mandara, which was finished in 1275, and consecrated by the Buddhist ritual of the "eye-opening."⁵ A record shows that both artifacts were in Chūgūji,⁶ and consequently both the original artifact, and its

¹ The most comprehensive study on the fragments of the Tenjukoku Shūchō/Mandara is the book published by Ōhashi Katsuaki, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1995). Hereafter: Ōhashi, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū*.

² There are other fragments in the Tokyo National Museum, Hōryūji, and Shōsōin.

³ The inscription is recorded in the *Jōgū Shōtoku taishi hōō teisetsu* 『上宮聖徳太子法王帝説』 (*Imperial View of the King of the Law Prince Saintly Virtue of the Upper Palace*). The document is a compilation of documents related to Shōtoku Taishi (Prince Saintly Virtue, hereafter Prince Shōtoku) and consists of five sections. The inscription of the Tenjukoku Shūchō is recorded in the third section, which also includes the text of the inscriptions on the mandorlas of Hōryūji Kondō Shaka triad, and the Yakushi image. See: Ienaga Saburō, *Jōgū hōō teisetsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1972), and for an annotated version, Ienaga Saburō et al., *Shōtoku Taishi shū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1975).

⁴ The Sanskrit term *mandala* is usually used to designate the diagrams depicting the Esoteric Buddhist deities, but in the Kamakura period, *mandara* referred to all types of illustrations that explained something religious. The use of the term *mandara* in the Kamakura period is discussed by: James H. Foard, "In Search of the Lost Reformation," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 7.4 (1980): 261-291.

⁵ For a detailed account of the Kamakura history see: Ōhashi, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū*, 63-84.

⁶ See: *Shōtoku Taishi denki* 『聖徳太子伝記』, a Kamakura period document reproduced in: *Yamato koji taikan: Hōkkiji, Hōrinji, Chūgūji*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1977): 89. Hereafter *Yamato koji taikan*.

replica were damaged in the fires of 1309 and 1311, that partially destroyed the temple complex.⁷

The information regarding the size of the original artifact, and its replica varies from source to source. Some documents state that it was almost five meters, others state that it was six meters, but it is not clear if this information refers to the width or to the length. Another source says: "it was a big mandala, and it stretched between three bays." Since it is known that the "old mandara" and the "new mandara" were in Chūgūji, it is assumed that the bays mentioned in the sources refer to the spaces between the pillars of that temple. Excavations at the old temple site reveal that the space between the pillars was 2.8 meters, therefore, the "mandara" must have been almost eight meters wide.⁸ Thus, in its present state the so called Tenjukoku "embroidered curtains" or Tenjukoku Mandara is made up of fragments of two embroidered artifacts that were manufactured 650 years apart, and that were subsequently randomly mounted on a support fabric, some time in the nineteenth century.

This paper will focus on the Asuka period original artifact, and on the basis of technical aspects and textual interpretation attempt to establish the context of manufacture and the function of the "embroidered curtains" in the seventh century. The analysis of motifs and the reconstruction of the subject matter are crucial for the interpretation of the fragments, but they will not be addressed at this time.

Before continuing with the subject of this paper, it is important to give some information regarding the time period when the panels of "embroidered curtains" were made. The Asuka period is considered to be the beginnings of Japan's historical era, when the Chinese culture of the Northern and Southern dynasties (386-589 C.E.) was transmitted to the Japanese archipelago through a natural geographical bridge: the Korean peninsula. The time frame for that period is 538 or 552 to 645 C.E., and its starting date is marked by the date of the official introduction of Buddhism to Japan from the Korean peninsula, specifically from the kingdom of Paekche (18 B.C.E.-660 C.E.). After long internal disputes, Buddhism became the State Religion. The religion, however, was part of a larger cultural complex from the continent which also included a writing system, the compilation of histories, and technology. Records show that the kingdom of Paekche dispatched not only Buddhist monks, but also temple architects, sculptors, tile makers, painters, etc. Temples, Buddhist icons, tiles, and other manifestations of material culture dated to the Asuka period show strong continental influence, particularly that of the Three Kingdoms period of the Korean peninsula. Therefore, the "embroidered curtains" as a product of a period of intense cultural

⁷ For a short history of the temple, see: Nishikawa Kyōtarō, "Chūgūji no rekishi," in: *Yamato koji taikan*: 55-59.

⁸ Ōhashi, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū*: 89-92.

interchange, will be better understood if they are considered as part of the pan-East Asian culture of the sixth and seventh centuries.

Technical aspects

Analysis of the fabric structures and embroidery techniques support the information given by the documentary evidence.⁹ Research has determined that the fragments with bright colors, and well preserved embroidery threads, are part of the Asuka period embroidered curtains, whereas the deteriorated sections with faded colors are fragments of the Kamakura period replica. The ground fabric of the fragments dated to the Asuka period is a complex alternating gauze (羅, *ra*) forming a diamond motif, in purple silk. Some issues are raised regarding the gauze fabric used in the "embroidered curtains." Ōta points out that it is not clearly established when the gauze technique began to be utilized in Japan. He suggests that the technique was probably known before the Asuka period but that it is difficult to determine if the fragments of the Shūchō were made in Japan or that they might be regarded as an import. He presumes that the gauze technique was surely known in the Nara period (646-710 C.E.), since there are some fragments in the Shōsōin.¹⁰ Mōri Noboru suggests that the gauze weaving technique was unknown in Asuka Japan.¹¹ Furthermore, Nishimura argues that the fabric was an import from the continent.¹² The fragments of the Kamakura period, are of two different types: some woven in purple twill (綾, *aya*), and others in white plain silk (平絹, *heiken*).

In the same way, the embroidery threads and embroidery stitches clearly differentiate the fragments of the original artifact from those of its replica. The threads used to embroider in the Asuka period are of a very tight Z-twist, and the patterns are filled with contiguous rows of overlapping stem stitch. In the Kamakura fragments, the embroidery threads are of a loose S-twist, this low degree of twisting being the reason for their deterioration, because in silk threads, a high twist is more satisfactory for abrasion resistance and retention of shininess. There are also a variety of embroidery stitches: flat satin stitch (used on the people's clothing and turtle shells), false satin stitch (used on the people's clothing, metamorphosis motif and lotus flower), long stem stitch

⁹ The first study of the fabric structure was made by Nakagawa Tadayori, "Tenjukoku Mandara ni tsuite," *Shisō* 20 (1923): 333-341. This study was followed by Ōta Eizō, "Tenjukoku Mandara no shūgi to Kenji shūri ni tsuite," *Shiseki to bijutsu* 188 (1948): 161-176, who concentrated on the embroidery threads, and the different types of stitches. Other studies dealing with technical aspects are: Mōri Noboru, "Tenjukoku Shūchō ni tsuite - Shūchō no genpon to Kenji saikō no Shūchō ni tsuite," *Kobijutsu* 11 (1965): 27-38, and Nishimura Hyōbu, "Zuhan kaisetsu - Tenjukoku Shūchō," in *Shūbutsu*, edited by Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1964): 12-18. The most recent study, which concentrates on the support fabric and the lining: Sawada Mutsuyo, "Tenjukoku Shūchō no genjō," *Museum* 495 (1992): 4-25.

¹⁰ Ōta, *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹¹ Mōri, *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹² Nishimura, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

(used as the outline stitch), and also composite stitches, using various forms of couching.¹³

Other technical aspects are revealed by the research of the fabric structures. For instance, a lining paper was found underneath the Kamakura period fragments, therefore, it was concluded that a paper with the pattern diagram and the ground fabric was put together in order to embroider the different motifs. For the longest time, textile specialists wondered how the motifs were embroidered on to the Asuka period thin gauze fabric, since they could not find any lining paper among the fragments. In a recent study, Sawada Mutsuyo of the Tokyo National Museum discovered a very small portion, where there is a thin light purple plain woven silk underneath the gauze fabric. She concluded that the plain woven silk played the same role as the lining paper used in the Kamakura period. This discovery was particularly important because it corroborated the dating of the fragments to the Asuka period.¹⁴

The turtle shells and the inscription

The turtle shells with four characters each, are particularly important because they carried the inscription. Among the extant fragments there are four turtle motifs (only one belonging to the original artifact), and there is another turtle shell, and five small fragments in the Shōsōin, a repository in the grounds of Tōdaiji. In all, there is a total of twenty-five extant characters. Records show that there were one hundred turtle shell motifs embroidered on the original artifact, and thus the inscription consisted of four hundred characters.¹⁵ The first part of the inscription is a detailed genealogy of a couple, Prince Toyotomimi, and one of his four consorts, Princess Tachibana. The second part of the inscription indicates that the mother of the prince, Empress Anahobe no Hashihito, died in the year corresponding to 621 C.E., and that the following year, 622 C.E., Prince Toyotomimi passed away. Princess Tachibana was devastated by the loss of her husband and her mother-in-law in such a short period of time, and she went to see her grandmother, Empress Suiko, and expressed her grief. The princess mentioned that her husband used to say: "This world is empty, the only truth is the Buddha," and because he was a believer, he must be in Tenjukoku. She, however, could not visualize that land, and expressed her wish to depict him in that afterlife world in order to cherish his memory. Moved by her grandchild's suffering the empress ordered the manufacture of two panels of embroidered curtains (*shūchō nichō* 繡帳二張), which were designed by Yamato Aya no Maken 東漢末賢, Koma no Kasei 高麗加西溢, and Aya no

¹³ See: Sawada, *Op. cit.*, pp. 13-15, for an explanation of the embroidery techniques, illustrated with detailed photographs.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

¹⁵ The text is written in Classical Chinese. For a rendering in Classical Japanese see Iida Mizuho, "Tenjukoku Shūchō mei o megutte," *Kobijutsu* 11 (1965) 1965: 46-47. Also: Nishimura Hyōbu, *Op. Cit.* An English translation, and a discussion of the inscription is available in J.H. Kamstra, *Encounter or Syncretism. The Initial Growth of Japanese Buddhism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967): 379-381. There are, however, some serious mistakes in the translation, particularly the dates.

Nukakori 漢奴加己利, and embroidered by the ladies in waiting, under the supervision of Kurabe no Hata no Kuma 椋部秦久麻 .

Although many issues regarding seventh century Japan can be discussed in relation to this inscription, only those relevant for the purpose of this paper will be addressed.

1. The "embroidered curtains" are associated with prince Toyotomimi, which is another name for prince Shōtoku (574-622 C.E.).¹⁶ He is an important figure of Asuka history, according to orthodox Japanese historiography, because he is given credit for the diffusion of Buddhism in Japan. He is also believed to have played an important political role as regent during the reign of Empress Suiko (r. 592-628 C.E.).

2. The inscription gives an indication on the date of manufacture, since it states that the "embroidered curtains" were made sometime after the death of prince Shōtoku in 622 C.E.

3. Princess Tachibana, in her grieving, wanted to see the prince in the afterlife world she did not know, named Tenjukoku.¹⁷ According to the characters, Tenjukoku means: 天 *ten*, heaven; 寿 *ju*, long life, and 国 *koku*, land, which can be translated as the "Land of Heavenly Life."

4. The inscription also explains the specific function of the artifact as curtains, and also that they consisted of two panels (二張 *nichō*, two panels). Since the inscription suggests that the "embroidered curtains" were made as a memorial, one should consider the function of curtains within a funerary context.

5. As mentioned before, the Asuka period is characterized by the strong continental connections. The names of the designers, and the supervisor are associated with influential immigrant clans. For instance, the Koma were people from the kingdom of Koguryo in the Korean peninsula; the Aya, which uses the character of the Chinese Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) were descendants of Chinese who had earlier settled in the Korean peninsula. Particularly important in relation to the "embroidered curtains" is the name of the supervisor. It is known that the Hata were associated in early history

¹⁶ For other names of prince Shōtoku, see: Mayuzumi Hiromichi and Takemitsu Makoto, eds., *Shōtoku Taishi jiten* (Tokyo: Shinjinbutsu Ōraisha, 1991): 286.

¹⁷ Tenjukoku is a very controversial term. Most of the studies attempt to explain the term in a Buddhist context. Tenjukoku, however, does not apparently appear in any of the Buddhist sutras. For the various interpretation of Tenjukoku, see: Ōhashi, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū*: 125-131.

with sericulture, weaving, and metallurgy, techniques that they might have helped to introduce to Japan. Significantly, *hata* means loom.¹⁸

6. Particularly relevant is the information regarding the activities of women in Asuka Japan. Women were patrons of the arts, since it is known that the embroidered panels were manufactured upon request of Princess Tachibana and ordered by Empress Suiko, and, moreover, it shows that women actively participated in the manufacture of the curtains by embroidering.

A major issue regarding the fragments is the reconstruction of the arrangement of the turtles shells. Scholars have proposed a variety of explanations based on the information given by the sources, and some argue that the turtles were placed around the borders, whereas others suggests that the turtles were at the botton.¹⁹ Most of the arrangements are proposed on the basis of textual interpretation; however, Ōhashi carefully observed the fragments, and realized that on the only large extant fragment (right side of the upper left fragment) there was a red bird, a lotus flower, a cloud, a turtle, a bud-like motif and part of a garment. This fragment is particularly important because it reveals the relationship between the motifs in the composition and we know that the motifs did not cover the whole surface of the ground fabric, but that they were scattered on it. On the basis of the analysis of this fragment, Ōhashi concluded that the turtles were placed among the other motifs, being elements of the whole composition, and having the function of carrying the inscription.²⁰

Function of the Tenjukoku Shūchō

Because the fragments are now housed in a Buddhist temple, the present artifact was classified as an embroidered Buddhist icon (繡仏, *shūbutsu*), and believed to have served as an object of worship, or as a wall hanging to decorate a temple.²¹ The inscription, however, clearly states the function of the original artifact. It explains that they were make as a pair of curtains with embroidered motifs representing prince Shōtoku in the "Land of Heavenly Life." The facts that the ground fabric from the original artifact is of a very thin gauze with translucent quality and that the embroidered

¹⁸ For a discussion of the immigrant lineage of the designers, and the supervisor, see: William Carter, "Aya family" and "Hata family," *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, vol. 1 and vol. 3, respectively (Tokyo & New York: Kodansha, 1983): 125 and 11. See also: Wontack Hong, *Relationship between Korea and Japan in Early Period: Paekche and Yamato Wa* (Seoul: Ilsimsa, 1988), and *Paekche of Korea and the Origin of Yamato Japan* (Seoul: Kudara International, 1994).

¹⁹ Ōhashi, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū*: 92-95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105-110.

²¹ This interpretation has its basis on the Kamakura period events, and especially on the fact that, at that time, the "embroidered curtains" and its replica are called mandara.

patterns are not fully covering the ground fabric which allows light through, further supports the theory that they functioned as curtains.

Ōhashi investigated the use of curtains in ancient Japan, and pointed out that they had two main functions: first, they were used around beds, as seen in this painting by Ku K'ai-chih (ca. 344-406), from the "Admonitions Scrolls" entitled "Uncertain Bedfellows," (British Museum, London), and second, they protect Buddhist images, as seen nowadays in Buddhist temples.²² Since the inscription suggests a funerary context, I searched for the use of curtains within that context. An entry from *Nihon shoki* 日本書記, or *Chronicles of Japan*, corresponding to 646 C.E., refers to the reform of funerary practices when issues related to the tomb size, offerings, use of hearses, etc., were established. Interestingly, regarding curtains the edict says: "At the time of the interment white cloth shall be used for the curtains of the bier," which is the frame upon which a coffin or corpse is taken to its burial.²³ It is difficult to establish if embroidered curtains were used before the reform, but this entry in *Nihon shoki* confirms the role of curtains in the funerary rituals.

Conclusion

To conclude, the reconstruction of the history of the fragments is particularly interesting because it allows one to trace back the variety of roles played by textiles in Japanese ritual or sacred contexts. Firstly, we have a pair of embroidered curtains made sometime after 622 C.E., which were probably used for the funerary rituals, or as a memorial for an important figure of the Asuka period. These curtains were carefully kept in the repository of a Buddhist temple, and rediscovered in 1274. The following year the panels were replicated, and consecrated with the Buddhist ceremony of the "eye-opening," and both the "old mandara" and the "new mandara" were kept in the Buddhist nunnery of Chūgūji. When the temple was partially destroyed in the fires of 1309 and 1311, the fragments were badly damaged, but they were carefully kept, and pasted together sometime in the nineteenth century. Since then, the fragments have been worshiped as a sacred object related to prince Shōtoku.

Nowadays, people go to the modern concrete building that is Chūgūji, and worship the fragments. Only a few notice that the object being worshiped is a replica of the fragments, made in 1982, in order to preserve the ancient fragments of a Japanese National Treasure, which are carefully kept in the Nara National Museum.

²² Ōhashi, *Tenjukoku Shūchō no kenkyū*: 95-101.

²³ *Nihon shoki*, vol. 68 of *Nihon koten bungaku taikai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965): 292-294, and W.G. Aston., trans. *Nihongi. Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1988): II, 218.

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