The Birth of Kūkai as a Literary Figure: A Translation and Analysis of Shinzei’s Preface to the Henjō Hokki Shōryōshū

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Henjō Hokki Shōryōshū

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Introduction

Along with such celebrated literati as Emperor Saga 嵯峨天皇 (786–842, r. 809–823), Ono no Minemori 小野岑守 (778–830), and Yoshimine no Yasuyo 良岑安世 (785–830), Kūkai 空海 (774–835) is often considered one of the outstanding kanshi 漢詩 poets of the early Heian period. Indeed, even a brief glance at his poetic output amply demonstrates his vast erudition in the Chinese classics and his creative prowess. In modern times, the image of Kūkai as a canonized literary figure is reinforced by the inclusion of a volume devoted to his writings in the Nihon koten bungaku taikei 日本古典文学大系 (henceforth, NKBT), a 102-volume collection of the premodern literary “classics.” The addition of Kūkai’s works to this anthology in 1965 was a declaration that he could be appreciated as a figure worthy of membership at the highest echelons of the Japanese literary world, not just as an esoteric theologian or the protagonist of innumerable legends. Nevertheless, modern collections of “literary classics” are deceptive because the anthologized texts are presented as timeless monoliths of uncontroversial canonicity. The presence of Kūkai’s poetic oeuvre among premodern masterpieces lends the impression that the “literary” quality of his work was immediately apparent from the onset. Yet, despite the laudatory assessment that Kūkai’s compositions have received in later centuries, his reputation as a poet was not firmly established during his lifetime. This paper argues that Shinzei 真済 (800–861), one of Kūkai’s senior disciples, was responsible for the earliest attempts at portraying Kūkai as a literary figure. Textual evidence for Shinzei’s agenda is present in the preface he penned for the Henjō hokki shōryōshū 遍照発揮性霊集, an anthology of Kūkai’s poetry and prose that Shinzei edited. An analysis of this preface suggests that Shinzei’s attempts at literary canonization were intended to generate political and cultural capital for himself in the turbulent years immediately following Kūkai’s death.

About the Henjō hokki shōryōshū

Compared to Kūkai’s doctrinal works, the texts collected in the Henjō hokki shōryōshū (henceforth, Shōryōshū) are not widely studied by scholars either.

1 Possible translations of this title will be discussed below.
2 A note on the transcription: while texts from the Heian period transcribe the characters 性霊集 as Seireishū, this study will follow modern conventions and transcribe the collection’s title as Shōryōshū.
in Japan or abroad. This is not surprising, since the 
Shōryōshū lacks the thematic cohesion and philosophical 
synthesis of his religious treatises. Nevertheless, the 
Shōryōshū contains many important documents: let-
ters that Kūkai wrote to various officials while in Tang 
China, the epitaph he dedicated to his departed master 
Huiguo 惠果 (746–806), along with numerous poems, 
memorials, and votive documents.

David Gardiner, who has published translations of 
two documents from the Shōryōshū, offers the follow-
ing comments:

Although the Shōryōshū does not contain any of 
Kūkai’s major doctrinal works, many of its texts 
portray esoteric Buddhist theories as refracted 
through the lens of actual practice, thereby re-
vealing how Shingon Buddhism took shape in its 
initial stages, during his lifetime. The Shōryōshū is 
an important historical resource for understanding 
the concrete means by which Kūkai propagated 
Shingon Buddhism.¹

Indeed, since the Shōryōshū is a collection of miscel-
naneous documents on a variety of subjects produced 
over the course of Kūkai’s life, it provides a variety of 
insights into his everyday activities in religion, politics, 
and literature.

The 111 pieces of prose and poetry contained in the 
Shōryōshū are divided into ten volumes, with each 
volume generally dedicated to a specific category of 
writing, such as poetry, epistles, epitaphs, or votive 
documents. Textual studies on the transmission of the 
Shōryōshū text show that the first seven chapters of the 
collection have remained intact since their original 
compilation by Shinzei. However, at some point during 
the mid-Heian period the last three volumes were lost, 
so in 1079 Saisen 济暹 (1025–1115), a scholar-monk at 
the Ninnaji 仁和寺 temple in Kyoto, visited various 
temple libraries and recompiled the missing volumes 
using primary source texts he located. Yamazaki Ma-
koto has suggested that Saisen’s efforts at recovering the 
Shōryōshū were an attempt to reassert Kūkai’s prestige 
in the face of Tendai revivalism.² Strictly speaking, the last 
three volumes are referred to as the Shōryōshū hoketsu-
shō 性靈集補闕鈔 (Supplement to the Shōryōshū), but 
for the purposes of this study, the entire collection will 
be referred to as the Shōryōshū. While Saisen presents 
the entire collection as Kūkai’s work, modern scholar-
ship generally agrees that the authorship of a number 
of the texts in the Shōryōshū hoketsushō cannot be posi-
tively attributed to Kūkai.

The documents in the Shōryōshū provide a glimpse 
into the multiple facets of Kūkai’s complex life that 
cannot be readily discerned solely from his doctrinal 
writings. They demonstrate that Kūkai was not only 
an innovative theologian and erudite writer, but also 
a shrewd politician, a formidable advocate, and a pas-
ionate educator. Also, as these texts were produced by 
Kūkai during his actual lifetime, the Shōryōshū makes 
it possible to extricate Kūkai from the discourse of the 
Kōbō Daishi legend and squarely position him within 
the political, social, and literary milieu of his day.

Several years before Kūkai’s death in 835, Shinzei 
started gathering the documents that appear in the 
collection. In addition, Shinzei authored the preface, a key 
text to understanding his attempt to canonize his mas-
ter and generate political capital for himself. A com-
plete, annotated translation of the preface is presented 
below.³

Shinzei’s Preface to the Shōryōshū

西山禪念沙門真濟撰集

Compiled by Shinzei, Meditation Monk in 
the Western Mountains⁴

³ An exception is Judith Rabinovitch and Timothy Bradstock’s 
Dance of the Butterflies: Chinese Poetry from the Japanese 
hold the Shōryōshū in high regard, stating “Kūkai’s collection of 
largely Buddhist Chinese poetry and prose, Seireishū [Shōryōshū] 
remains a classic in the Chinese literary tradition of the Heian 
court and bears testimony to his belief in the high value of 
Chinese letters in imparting Buddhist doctrine.” Rabinovitch and 
Bradstock, 20.

⁴ David Gardiner, “The Consecration of the Monastic Compound at 
Mt. Kōya,” in David White, ed., Tantra in Practice (Princeton, NJ: 

⁵ Yamazaki Makoto 山崎誠, “Kaidai,” 解題 in Abe Yasurō 阿部安 
郎 and Yamazaki Makoto, eds., Shōryōshū 性靈集注 (Kyoto: 
Rinsen Shoten, 2007), 837.

⁶ Translation by William Matsuda. NKBT vol. 71 used as the source 
text (see note below).

⁷ The Western Mountains refer to the Takaosanji temple. Watanabe 
Shōkō 渡辺照宏 and Miyasaka Yūshō 宮坂有勝, eds., Sangō shiki, 
Shōryōshū 三教指帰,性靈集, in Nihon koten bungaku taikei 日本古 
When I was young, I had deep respect for the scholarly ways of my ancestors. But after reaching the age of “aspiration to learning,” I found solace in tranquility and lost interest in the Confucian teachings. Revering the profound actions of profound people, I immersed myself in the great mysteries of the Great Way. There is a saint named Dai Henjō Kongō. In the spring and fall of his student days he wore a blue collar and plucked the fruits of the forest of learning. Then, he displayed the scarlet curtain of a teacher and collected the flowers of the mountains and rivers. Despising the shallow wisdom of our isolated land, he yearned for the transcendent and the profound. He left the false and obtained the pure.

The beauty of the towering peaks and wide valleys and the variety of holy trees and sacred grasses tantalized his eyes and ears, and he could not help but be astounded. He frequently lamented, “It has been an eternity since the bodhi leaves fell. What spring does the dragon blossom tree await?” As I was born foolish, whom shall I rely upon to return to the Source? Yet, surely this Dharma exists, and what shall guide me is Heaven.” The emperor, assenting to his prayer, finally selected him to be a Dharma-seeking monk. At the end of the Enryaku reign, an era now long past, he journeyed to Tang China on the emperor’s orders. In the capital, he happened to meet the acharya Huiguo, the revered priest of the Qinglongsi temple.

Huiguo was a senior disciple of the Indian monk Amogavajra, the Great Senior Preceptor of the Tripitaka who had served Emperor Daizong. 

The dragon-blossom tree is supposed to blossom when the bodhisattva Maitreya appears in the world. (Watanabe and Miyasaka, 151).

The phrase “sent on a mission on the ruler’s orders” 衛君命而使 appears in the Liji 礼記 (Book of Rites). Watanabe and Miyasaka, 150.

12 The dragon-blossom tree is supposed to blossom when the bodhisattva Maitreya appears in the world. (Watanabe and Miyasaka, 151).

13 This is an allusion to the Analects: “The Master said, ‘There is no one who understands me.’ Tsu-kung said, ‘How is it that there is no one who understands you?’ The Master said, ‘I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame Man. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is above. If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps, by Heaven.’” (Watanabe and Miyasaka, 150).

14 The phrase “sent on a mission on the ruler’s orders” 衛君命而使 appears in the Liji 礼記 (Book of Rites). Watanabe and Miyasaka, 150.

15 Emperor Daizong 代宗 ruled from 762–779.
and quickly receive my teachings.” Then Huiguō conferred the teachings of the dual Womb and Diamond mandalas and more than one hundred texts from the secret treasury. Saint Kūkai’s nature was such that he could understand the import of what he heard, and whatever his eye passed over was retained by his tongue. He accumulated years’ worth of effort and learning in a single season.

The Great Master Huiguō suddenly went to his death. That is why when Huiguō transmitted the Dharma to Dai Henjō Kongō he said, “Now, there is a monk from Japan who came to seek the sacred teachings, embodied in the secret rituals and mudras of the Womb and Diamond platforms. He has taken the pledge in both the Womb and Diamond mandala chambers. Whether in Chinese or in Sanskrit, he received the teachings in his heart; it was like pouring water from one jar into another. How fortunate that I transmitted the lamp to you! My prayers have been fulfilled.” My master is the eighth in line from Vajrasatta, who sought Mahāvairocana’s cosmic palace and serves as his interlocutor for his discourses on all-embracing wisdom and enlightenment. Mahavairocana’s cosmic palace and serves as his interlocutor for his discourses on all-embracing wisdom and enlightenment.

The Rocks are steep, wild beasts do not climb them.

Our Emperor Kanmu, a sage whose like appears once every thousand years, spread his vast virtue throughout the realm, making it possible for Kūkai to bring peace to future generations with these new teachings from India. Ah! Lost, I ask for the way to the ford; how can I see thousands of li ahead? My disciple, have long sought a world free of dust, so I reverently received his teachings. Just as a bell and flute are in perfect harmony, newly acquainted people may speak to each other as though they were old friends. Though I have served him for many years, I have yet to see anything shallow in his thought. The dual forces of yin and yang transforming into a dragon and then forming clouds that create thunder—I now know that this is not an empty saying! Long ago, when the master was in China, he composed a poem in the li he style and presented it to Weishang, a local monk. Ma Zong, the former Inspector General

19 In the Analects, Zilu (Tsu-lu) asks two men plowing a field for directions to the river crossing. Upon learning that Zilu was a disciple of Confucius, one of the men says (in derision) that Confucius should already know the way. Watanabe and Miyasaka, 152; Lau, 150; Kanaya, 253–4. Here, it seems that Shinzei has inverted the rhetorical thrust of the source text and turned it into an expression of humility.

20 Modern commentators have opposing interpretations: Shinzei is praising his ability to immediately absorb Kūkai’s teachings, Imataka et al., 154, or the inability of his disciples to perceive fully the profundity of his actions, Watanabe and Miyasaka, 154. The second interpretation draws on commentary to the Daode jing. Ibid.

21 Weishang was one of Huiguō’s disciples, and was mentioned in the epitaph that Kūkai composed for Huiguō (refer to Chapter Two). Lihe 離合 (separating and joining) refers to a “miscellaneous” style of Chinese poetry where the component of the Chinese character (such as the radical or the remainder) used to start the first line is then used to begin the second line. Although the li he poems that Kūkai and Weishang exchanged are no longer extant in any sources from the period, the Kansekishō 緘石抄, a commentary on the Shōryōshū written by Saisen, claims to contain one of the li he poems Kūkai wrote in China:

| 碎危人難行 | Stone-paved slopes crumble, they are difficult for people to traverse |
| 石破獅無登 | The rocks are steep, wild beasts do not climb them |
and Vice-Governor of Quanzhou,\textsuperscript{22} was one of the great talents of his generation. He saw Kūkai’s poetry and was astounded with disbelief. Therefore, he sent Kūkai the following poem:

\textbf{何乃萬里来} \quad Why have you come from so far away?
\textbf{可非衒其才} \quad Surely not to flaunt your talents!
\textbf{增学助玄機} \quad Study even harder and aid the profound teachings!
\textbf{土人如子稀} \quad People here like you are rare

Afterward, his fame spread\textsuperscript{23} throughout the land, and he was revered by both laymen and clergy. Poems and rhapsodies were exchanged back and forth, and before long his letterbox was filled with poetry. In this way he let out his laments in a faraway land, and gave expression to his feelings

\textit{The heavens have granted my master many skills, but none as extraordinary as his grass script. How rare—it will be difficult to see such talent again! It is for this reason that the calligraphic styles depicting the power of a rooster’s beak or a charging beast have remained in the Nine Provinces of China, and brushwork like floating clouds and flowing water have spread to Japan. One day, Kūkai lay in the mist talking to himself and committed his thoughts to poetry. On another day, he presented a poem in reply to the emperor, and it was as though the writing just flowed from his hand. In a poem where he seeks the mountain sage, he wrote, “On tall peaks, the wind is easily aroused. In deep seas, water is difficult to measure.”}

\textit{The “Records of Eastern Barbarians” (Chinese: 東夷伝; Japanese: 東夷伝) known as the Gatha on the Admonitions of the Seven Buddhas (Chn. 七仏通戒偈; Jpn. 七仏通戒偈) is a compilation of the common teachings of the historical Buddha and the six Buddhas who came before him. The “four verses” are:}

\textit{諸惡莫作} \quad Commit no acts of evil
\textit{衆善奉行} \quad For the benefit of all, perform acts of good
\textit{自浄其意} \quad Keep one’s thoughts pure
\textit{是諸仏教} \quad These are the teachings of the Buddhas

\textsuperscript{22} Shinzei lists two distinct titles for Ma Zong: former Inspector General and Vice-Governor of Quanzhou and Vice-Governor of Quanzhou 津州別駕, Quanzhou is part of modern-day Fujian Province. Inspector General was a fairly high position (Junior Third Rank, one step below the Ministers of State) and responsible for supervising government officials. A provincial vice-governor was classified as Fifth Rank, Lower. The Old Records of the Tang and the New Records of the Tang both mention that Ma Zong was appointed vice-governor as a demotion, but not his former service as an Inspector General. Imataka et al., 154. Ma Zong claimed also to be the descendant of Ma Yuan 马元 (14–49), the famed Han general who suppressed a rebellion in what is modern-day Vietnam and erected “bronze pillars” to mark the southern boundaries of the Han state. Historical veracity notwithstanding, Ma Zong also claimed to have erected bronze pillars at the same site to commemorate his great-ancestor’s achievement. Liam Kelley, Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship (Honolulu, HI: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 7, 102.

\textsuperscript{23} The phrase 萩芸 is an abbreviated quotation of a line from the Records of the Han: 名声籍芸. Imataka et al., 154–5.

\textsuperscript{24} The “Records of Eastern Barbarians” 東夷伝 chapter of the Records of the Later Han 後漢書 refers to a land of gentlemen across the eastern seas. Watanabe and Miyasaka, 154.

\textsuperscript{25} Hu Bochong 胡伯崇 (dates unknown) was a poet whom Kūkai apparently encountered in China, but very little is known about him, and the specific location of Piling cannot be ascertained from Chinese gazetteers of the period. Watanabe and Miyasaka, 154, 493.

\textsuperscript{26} This is likely to be from a gatha 偈 (Chn. ji, Jpn. ge) known as the Gatha on the Admonitions of the Seven Buddhas 七仏通戒偈, a compilation of the common teachings of the historical Buddha and the six Buddhas who came before him. The “four verses” are:
Also, when he visited the Shinsenen Garden, he wrote, “The high dais is the work of the gods and not of man/The mirror-like surface of the pond is crystal clear and absorbs the sunlight.”

In these verses simile and metaphor vie with each other, and instruction and odes shine through out. The poems, rhapsodies, laments, and praises he composed and the monuments, prayers, petitions, and calligraphy he produced were created on the spot without benefit of a draft. If you did not seize a text as soon as he finished it, you would never see it again. I, his disciple Shinzei, worry that the gold and jade will mingle with stones in the riverbed, and lament that the orchids and cassia will be overrun by the autumn mugwort. Serving at his side, I have collected and transcribed his writings, accumulating over five hundred pieces of paper. In addition, I have included his correspondence with people of Tang as outstanding examples of poetry and prose. This collection of ten volumes I have named the Henjō hokki shōryōshū. Extraneous texts that fall outside the categories presented in these volumes have been excluded for the time being. It is my wish that Kūkai’s disciples savor his writings for years to come, and that they occasionally open and read these volumes as a diversion by or would you try to sell it for a good price?’ The Master said, ‘Of course I would sell it. Of course I would sell it. All I am waiting for is the right offer’” 子貢曰有美玉於斯韞匵而藏諸求善賈而沽諸子曰沽之哉沽之哉我待賈者也. Imataka et al., 156; Lau, 98; Kanaya, 122.

Situating the Preface

The first half of the preface provides a summary of the key elements common to hagiographic narratives on Kūkai: his first encounter with Huiguo, how this encounter was predicted by Huiguo, and how transmitting the esoteric teachings to Kūkai was as simple as “pouring water from one jar into another.” Kūkai’s facility in Chinese and Sanskrit—staples in any account that mentions Kūkai’s sojourn in Tang China—are also mentioned.

Once the requisite details establishing Kūkai’s background and lineage are provided, Shinzei describes Kūkai’s literary accomplishments. He does not attempt to situate Kūkai’s literary output into an overtly Confucian “statescraftism” or esoteric Buddhist discursive frame; rather, he presents Kūkai as a literary talent in his own right. By mentioning Kūkai’s encounters with literati-bureaucrats such as Ma Zong 馬総 (?–823), who declares Kūkai to possess a talent rarely found even in China, Shinzei establishes Kūkai as a literary figure on a par with the Chinese, something that very few Japanese literati (even those who were prolific poets in Chinese) could claim. However, this strategy should not be interpreted as an attempt to marginalize kanshi composed by other Japanese as inferior. Rather, Kūkai’s experiences in China are used to compensate for his lack of proper credentials, especially the completion of a course of study at the State College. In other words, since Kūkai was not in a privileged position as a canonical writer, “China” is evoked to provide an alternative source of legitimacy, not to challenge the quality of Japanese kanshi. Finally, Shinzei cites specific poems composed by Kūkai and presents them as examples of “simile” 比 (Ch. bi) and “metaphor” 興 (Ch. xiao), demonstrating Kūkai’s mastery of poetic forms found in canonical sources such as The Book of Songs.
suggested that the monks read them when taking a break from meditating. Finally, Shinzei hints at sharing Kūkai’s writings with a wider readership when he says “Mere amusement for the eye while alone in one’s hut—who would think of peddling them to others?”

The title of the collection, Henjō hokki shōryōshū, reveals a great deal about Shinzei’s motives. While Kūkai saw himself as a religious and philosophical pioneer, and part-time statesman, Shinzei wanted to use the Shōryōshū to establish Kūkai as a literary figure. The title itself is infused with an amalgam of continental literary and philosophical aesthetics. Henjō 遍照 (shines throughout the world, i.e., Vairocana), was often used in part of Kūkai’s Buddhist name Henjō Kōngō 遍照金剛 (the adamantite that shines throughout the world). The expression hokki 發揮 is taken directly from a line in the Yijing 易經 (Book of Changes) that states, “The six lines, as explained (by the Duke of Kau [Zhou]), bring forth and display (its meaning), and everything about it is (thus) indirectly exhibited” 六爻發揮旁通情也.29 In other words, this phrase refers to the manifestation of latent abilities. Shōryō 世霊 literally means “the spirit of the essence,” in this case, the “essence” of Kūkai’s writings. Shinzei appropriated the concept of shōryō from a line in the Wenzhang 文章 (Essay on Literature) section of the Yanshi jiaxun 頭氏家訓 (Family Instructions for the Yen [Yan] Clan) by Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591).30 The Yanshi jiaxun was composed during the turbulence of the late Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420–589), and its author rebuked the decadent tendencies of southern literature, as opposed to the relative austerity of northern culture.31 Specifically, the line Shinzei quoted reads, “I have often thought, on the basis of accumulated (experience), a body of essays exhibits the writer’s interests, develops his nature, and makes him proud and negligent of control as well as determined and aggressive”.32 Although somewhat cumbersome, perhaps the most accurate translation of the title would be “Collection of Works that Reveal the Hidden Literary Talents of the One Who Illuminates the World.”33

Yet, no anthology is a transparent enterprise. While a surface reading of Shinzei’s motives suggests that he is merely attempting to preserve exemplars of his master’s writing for posterity, the political milieu in which he operated cannot be ignored. Japanese scholarship generally affirms Shinzei’s stance and views the anthology as a literary monument to his master.34 After Kūkai’s death, rivalries among Shingon-affiliated temples, particularly Tōji and Kōyasan, meant that there was no central temple, or unified voice, for the fledgling Shingon

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31 Other translations of the title include Collected Inspirations (Donald Keene), The Spirit and Mind Collection: The Revelations of Priest Henjō [Kūkai] (Rabinovitch and Bradstock), and Henjō’s Collection for Giving Free Rein to the Spirit (Emanuel Pastreich). Donald Keene, Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from the Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 187; Rabinovitch and Bradstock, 99; Emanuel Pastreich, “The Reception of Chinese Literature in Japan,” 1084.
32 This is not such a surprise, considering that the major scholarly treatments of the Shōryōshū have been by scholars with sectarian affiliations. One of earliest attempts to provide a modern interpretation of the Shōryōshū is Sakata Kōzen’s Shōryōshū kōgi 性霊集講義, published in 1942. Sakata was a professor at Kōyasan University, and the volume is a compilation of his lectures on the collection. The work itself is impressive: it presents each text in the Shōryōshū line by line, with phonetic glosses, explanations of difficult characters, a summary in modern Japanese, and a few interpretative comments. However, he provides no background information aside from what Shinzei presents in his preface, which he appears to accept uncritically. The liberal use of honorifics to refer to Kūkai and describe his actions reveals the author’s sectarian bias. Sakata Kōzen 地田光全, Shōryōshū kōgi 性霊集講義 (Wakayama, Japan: Kōyasan Jihōsha, 1942). Watanabe and Miyasaka, the co-editors of the NKBT edition used as the primary source for this study, provide much more historical detail regarding Shinzei’s life, but do not entertain the possibility of political motivations.
will be overrun by the autumn mugwort” suggests anxiety that his rivals might attempt to publish their own Kūkai anthologies and establish competing interpretive traditions. Shinzei reassures his readers that he had exclusive access to Kūkai and his writings, claiming that he served “at his side” as his amanuensis.

**Conclusion**

Shinzei’s preface to the Shōryōshū was a monument to Kūkai’s literary talents and an embodiment of his wish to preserve the best examples of Kūkai’s writings for future generations. Situating the Shōryōshū within the political milieu of its day reveals another agenda: creating political and cultural capital for Shinzei after Kūkai’s death. A lack of unity in the newly formed Shingon “school” inevitably put Kūkai’s disciples at odds, so Shinzei drew on his background as a member of the erudite Ki clan to recast his departed master as a literary figure. In the preface, he established himself as an authority on Kūkai’s writings by highlighting his unparalleled access and editorial powers. The interpretation and transmission of Kūkai’s legacy in the years following his death are often understood within the framework of hagiographies based on the Kōbō Daishi legend. In contrast, the Shōryōshū and its preface present an opposing tradition, where Kūkai is venerated as a real person navigating the literary and political milieu of his day.

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