

## THE CONSTITUTION OF PRINCE SHŌTOKU

### Introduction

Beginning in the late 6th century, Japan's Yamato rulers sought to refashion themselves from clan chieftains into fully fledged monarchs on the Chinese model. One of the first landmarks in the effort to remake the Japanese state in the form of China's sophisticated political institutions was the Constitution of Prince Shōtoku, also known as the "Seventeen-Article Constitution." Prince Shōtoku (573-621) was the nephew of Empress Suiko and served as regent and trusted advisor on matters of civil administration during her reign. This short document charted the reform of the Japanese government using imported Confucian and Buddhist approaches to statecraft.

### Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

Freely adapted for modern readers from W. G. Aston's "Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697," in *The Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society of London*, Supplement 1, vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1896), 128-33. The text is reproduced here as it appears in *Japan: Selected Readings*, compiled by Hyman Kublin (Houghton Mifflin Company), 31-34. © 1968 Houghton Mifflin Company.

### The Constitution of Prince Shōtoku

1. Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided. Everyone has his biases, and few men are far-sighted. Therefore some disobey their lords and fathers and keep up feuds with their neighbors. But when the superiors are in harmony with each other and the inferiors are friendly, then affairs are discussed quietly and the right view of matters prevails.
2. The three treasures, which are Buddha, the (Buddhist) Law and the (Buddhist) Priesthood, should be given sincere reverence, for they are the final refuge of all living things. Few men are so bad that they cannot be taught their truth.
3. Do not fail to obey the commands of your Sovereign. He is like Heaven, which is above the Earth, and the vassal is like the Earth, which bears up Heaven. When Heaven and Earth are properly in place, the four seasons follow their course and all is well in Nature. But if the Earth attempts to take the place of Heaven, Heaven would simply fall in ruin. That is why the vassal listens when the lord speaks, and the inferior obeys when the superior acts. Consequently when you receive the commands of your Sovereign, do not fail to carry them out or ruin will be the natural result.
4. The Ministers and officials of the state should make proper behavior their first principle, for if the superiors do not behave properly, the inferiors are disorderly; if inferiors behave improperly, offenses will naturally result. Therefore when lord and vassal behave with

propriety, the distinctions of rank are not confused: when the people behave properly the Government will be in good order.

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6. Punish the evil and reward the good. This was the excellent rule of antiquity. Therefore do not hide the good qualities of others or fail to correct what is wrong when you see it. Flatterers and deceivers are a sharp weapon for the overthrow of the state, and a sharp sword for the destruction of the people. Men of this kind are never loyal to their lord, or to the people. All this is a source of serious civil disturbances.

7. Every man has his own work. Do not let the spheres of duty be confused. When wise men are entrusted with office, the sound of praise arises. If corrupt men hold office, disasters and tumult multiply. In all things, whether great or small, find the right man and they will be well managed. Therefore the wise sovereigns of antiquity sought the man to fill the office, and not the office to suit the man. If this is done the state will be lasting and the realm will be free from danger.

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12. Do not let the local nobility levy taxes on the people. There cannot be two lords in a country; the people cannot have two masters. The sovereign is the sole master of the people of the whole realm, and the officials that he appoints are all his subjects. How can they presume to levy taxes on the people?

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14. Do not be envious! For if we envy others, then they in turn will envy us. The evils of envy know no limit. If others surpass us in intelligence, we are not pleased; if they are more able, we are envious. But if we do not find wise men and sages, how shall the realm be governed?

15. To subordinate private interests to the public good — that is the path of a vassal. Now if a man is influenced by private motives, he will be resentful, and if he is influenced by resentment he will fail to act harmoniously with others. If he fails to act harmoniously with others, the public interest will suffer. Resentment interferes with order and is subversive of law.

**Questions:**

1. What specifically Confucian influences can you identify in the Constitution? Buddhist influences?
2. What does this Constitution establish as the most important values in government?
3. What are the position and the role of the ruler in this system? Do you think that the Constitution was intended to make the sovereign more

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powerful or less powerful than in the existing government system in Japan?

4. Why do you think Prince Shōtoku looked to Chinese models for this Constitution?
  5. An image of Prince Shōtoku appeared on the Japanese currency (the 10,000 yen note) from the 1950s until the 1980s. Why do you think he was honored in this way?
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