

THE CONSTITUTION OF PRINCE SHŌTOKU

Introduction

Beginning in the late 6th century, Japan's Yamato rulers tried to make themselves into powerful rulers based on the Chinese model. The Constitution of Prince Shotoku, also known as the "Seventeen –Article Constitution," was one of the first efforts to remake the Japanese state based on China's successful political system. Prince Shotoku (573-621) was the nephew of the Empress Suiko and served as regent and trusted advisor on matters of civil administration during her reign. This short document outlined the reform of the Japanese government using imported Confucian and Buddhist approach to government. The document below does not contain all seventeen articles. It was adapted from a source available from [Asia for Educators](#).

Confucius

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.

Buddhism

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.

Confucius

3. Do not fail to obey the commands of your Ruler. He is like Heaven, which is above the Earth, and the subject is like the Earth, which bears up Heaven... That is why the subject listens when the lord speaks, and the inferior obeys when the superior acts. Consequently when you receive the commands of your Ruler, do not fail to carry them out or ruin will be the natural result.

Confucius

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

Confucius

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.

Buddhism

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 elders, how shall the realm be governed?

Confucius

15. To make private interests secondary to the public good that is the path of a subject. 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 destabilizes the law.

Questions:

1. What specifically Confucian influences can you identify in the Constitution? Highlight or underline two phrases that show Confucian influence. Write Confucius in the margin.

2. What specifically Buddhist influence can you identify in the Constitution? Highlight or underline two phrases that show Buddhist influence. Write Buddhism in the margin.
3. What does this Constitution establish as the most important values in government?
Government should be orderly. Subjects should obey their ruler, but a ruler should be virtuous and worthy of the subject's loyalty and respect.
4. According to the document, what position should the emperor hold in society?
The ruler is like heaven and should be obeyed by the subject.
5. Do you think that the Constitution was intended to make the ruler more powerful or less powerful than in the existing government system in Japan? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
The Constitution was intended to make the government more powerful because it compares the leader to heaven and emphasizes obedience in articles 1 and 3.
6. Why do you think Prince Shōtoku looked to Chinese models for this Constitution?
The Chinese had created a more advanced civilization and stable government than was the case in Japan. Prince Shotoku hoped that by emulating principles of Chinese government Japan could also develop a stable government and advanced civilization.
7. How is Prince Shotoku's Constitution different from modern constitutions?
A constitution is a written plan of government. Modern constitutions have very specific rules about who makes the laws, who enforces the laws, and who decides whether a law is accurately applied or not. Prince Shotoku's Constitution was much more general in that most of the articles suggest how people should behave based upon Buddhism and Confucius rather than specify the powers of branches of Government. Still, many behaviors of Japanese today continue to be influenced by Japan's first "Constitution."
8. Are there any examples of the behaviors Prince Shotoku hoped Japanese would keep in mind that are important for Americans to consider today? If so, please give examples.
Answers will vary