PRINCE SHOTOKU’S CONSTITUTION


The five bonds of Confucius figure in each article: (1) ruler to ruled, (2) father to son, (3) elder to younger siblings, (4) elder friend to younger friend, and (5) husband to wife.

Shotoku declared, ‘Harmony is the most precious asset. We all alternate between wisdom and madness. It is a closed circle.’

According to the Nihon Shoki, a definitive history of ancient Japan written in circa 720 CE, Prince Shotoku created a seventeen-article 'constitution' which was implemented as a political tool to unite the warring clans.

This was not a modern constitution designed for the governing of state and subjects, but a set of spiritual aspirations (hopes) inspired equally by Buddhism and Confucianism. It focused on the morals and virtues that should be the aspiration of every subject in the realm and led to him receiving the title ‘Dharma Monarch.’

The following articles are evidence that this is truly a Buddhist constitution:

- Article 2: Reverence (religious devotion) to the Three Treasures of Buddhism – Shotoku firmly believed that all beings could benefit from their truth.
- Article 6: the difference between merit and demerit, reward and punishment – this demonstrates the laws of karma so central to Buddhism.
- Article 10: self-control and mind-control – the harmony between nature and society, also a strong goal of the Buddhist way of life.

The 17 articles are as follows:

1. Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided.
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.
3. Do not fail to obey the commands of your Sovereign (ruler). He is like Heaven, which is above the Earth, and the vassal (subject) is like the Earth, which bears up Heaven.
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.
5. Deal impartially with the legal complaints which are submitted to you.
6. Punish the evil and reward the good.

7. Every man has his own work. Do not let the spheres of duty be confused.

8. Ministers and officials should attend the Court early in the morning and retire late, for the whole day is hardly enough for the accomplishment of state business.

9. Good faith is the foundation of right.

10. Let us control ourselves and not be resentful when others disagree with us, for all men have hearts and each heart has its own leanings.

11. Know the difference between merit and demerit.

12. Do not let the local nobility levy (enact) taxes on the people.

13. All people entrusted with office should attend equally to their duties.

14. Do not be envious! For if we envy others, then they, in turn, will envy us.

15. To subordinate (place yourself or your interests under someone/something else) private interests to the public good — that is the path of a vassal (someone who is ruled).

16. Employ the people in forced labor at seasonable times.

17. Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone.

These tenets (principles) provide the basis of stable and peaceful Japan today 1500 years later and could be said to be part of the essence of its distinctive culture.

DIRECTIONS:

COMPLETE THE QUESTIONS ON PAGE 3. PLACE YOUR NAME AND PERIOD ON THE PAPER.
1. If article 1 starts with, “Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided,” what might you assume was happening in Japan?

2. What analogy does Shotoku use to describe the ruler [sovereign] and his subject [vassal]? (article 3)

3. According to Shotoku, why is it so important for people in power (ministers and officials) to behave properly? (article 4)

4. According to Shotoku, is it better to find a job for a man, or find a man for a job? How does he justify his position? (article 7)

5. Who should have the authority to tax Japanese citizens? (article 12)

6. Consider article 15. Summarize this section into one concise sentence.