

CHAPTER 7

Semiology of the Dharma; or, *The Somaticity of the Text*

In one of his introductory essays on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, Kūkai explains that the sūtra presents itself for reading in three “editions.”

As for the text of this sūtra [*Mahāvairocana Sūtra*], there are three kinds. The first is the [the vast, boundless] text that exists spontaneously and permanently, namely, the maṇḍala of the Dharma of all the Buddhas. The second is the broader text that circulated in the world, that is, the sūtra of ten thousand verses transmitted by Nāgārjuna. The third is the abbreviated text of over three thousand verses in seven fascicles. However abbreviated it may be, it embraces in its brevity comprehensive, broader texts. That is because its each and every word contains countless meanings, and every single letter, even every single stroke or dot, encapsulates within itself innumerable truths.¹

According to Kūkai, the original and complete text of the sūtra is the whole of the universe, which the Buddhas of the past, present, and future held, are holding, and will hold as the ultimate scripture illuminating the principle of the emptiness of all things. This is *dharma maṇḍala* (Jpn. *hōmandara*), the maṇḍala consisting of all things of the world as its letters. It is the secret, ultimate “scripture” revealed by Mahāvairocana in his cosmic palace of the eternal present to his interlocutor Vajrasattva. The second text is the one that Vajrasattva transmitted to Nāgārjuna in the iron stūpa in southern India. It is therefore an abridged translation into human language of the original sūtra of the cosmic scale, a translation that is still an imposingly voluminous text, which Kūkai says circulated widely in India. The third is a further abbreviation of Nāgārjuna’s text that was transmitted to East Asia in seven fascicles and translated into Chinese by Śubhakarasiṃha.

On the other hand, Kūkai describes these three editions of the sūtra as representing a process not merely of abridgment but of condensation. Although the sūtra text Kūkai brought back from China in 806 was only a miniature of the original sūtra, he says that in every character the seven-fascicle sūtra encompasses countless meanings. That is to say, the three editions of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* are not independent of one another. They form, instead, three mutually inclusive levels of the same sūtra: the abbreviated text is already a part of the original cosmic sūtra; the cosmic sūtra's contents are encapsulated in the abbreviated sūtra's characters. In many other places in his writings, Kūkai uses the same paradigm to explain the relationship between the text and the world for the *Vajrasāekhara Sūtra* and other esoteric Buddhist sūtras that he claims were transmitted, like the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, through the Dharma lineage of Mahāvairocana, Vajrasattva, and Nāgārjuna.² In this manner Kūkai presents the esoteric Buddhist texts as books that reflect within themselves everything in the world. Although the idea of the universe as itself a sacred scripture or scriptural text embracing the entire universe is not unique to Esoteric Buddhism (Luis GOMEZ 1995:107), Kūkai appears to be singular in having created uniquely Buddhist theories of text, writing, and signs based on such an idea.³

One may compare Kūkai's idea of the universal text with the Western concept of *summa mundi*, which in its classical sense is an imposing, complete tome—an encyclopedia of the Age of Enlightenment, for example—that claims the comprehensiveness of its contents as the mark of universality.⁴ Kūkai also appears to have trust in language's ability to reach totality. However, as is discussed below, Kūkai's text strives for totality not in its representation. His model of the text is not encyclopedic, for it is neither self-contained nor completed. On the contrary, Kūkai approaches the text as a yet-to-be-bound—or, perhaps more appropriately, never-to-be-bound—constantly re-worked manuscript. For Kūkai, the text is not a book but a writing that remains open-ended. It is endlessly related to other texts, and only by means of its openness does it reach totality. In other words, the world is made of texts and only of text—not of their representational function but of their materiality. Kūkai blurs the boundary between the inside and the outside of the text(s), for the text's inside and outside are the writings of different editions of the same scriptural text. In order to be applied to Kūkai's model of the text, the term *summa mundi* cannot merely be a genitive compound—the “text of the world”—but must serve more prominently as an appositional compound: the “text(s) as the world” *and* the “world as the text(s).”

This area of Kūkai's theoretical endeavor had no immediate counterpart in the doctrines of the Nara Schools. Some seminal texts on the Buddhist theory

of language, especially of later Indian Mādhyamika and Yogācāra traditions, had been known to the Nara scholarly circles.⁵ However, these texts were primarily concerned with logic, not with practical functions of language in pedagogical, ritual, and literary environments. The discussion in the next chapter suggests that Nara scholar-priests' reticence on such matters as writing, texts, and ritual language resulted from the Confucian political ideology of the ritsuryō state that exercised control over textual production and ritual performance in late Nara and early Heian society. In this regard, Kūkai's endeavor can be understood as his subtle strategy to level a challenge to the monopoly of Confucianism as legitimator of the state's control over intellectual production, so as to transform the relationship between the state and the Saṅgha in the latter's favor. The discussion that follows here attempts to outline Kūkai's construction of particularly Esoteric Buddhist theories of text, writing, and signs, the theories through which he attempted to effect such a change.

Of Kūkai's principal works, *Voice, Letter, Reality* (*Shōji jissōgi*, KZ 1:521–534)⁶ presents most systematically his theory of language. It is held within the Shingon School that Kūkai composed *Transforming One's Body Into the Realm of Enlightenment* (*Sokushin jōbutsugi*, KZ 1:506–520), *Voice, Letter, Reality*, and *On the Sanskrit Letter Hūm* (*Unjigi*, KZ 1:535–553) in rapid succession, aiming the three works, respectively, at illustrating the “body, speech, mind,” the three mysteries of Esoteric Buddhist divinities. Although the exact date of composition has not been established for any of the three works, modern students of Kūkai generally agree that they were composed in the brief period that corresponds roughly to the years 821 to 824, between the close of Kōnin years (810–823) and the very beginning of Tenchō years (823–834).⁷ As KATSUMATA Shunkyō (1970:148–152) has pointed out, it was during this brief period that Kūkai began to employ the concept of the six great elements (*rokudai*), the concept essential for *Transforming One's Body*. Because, as I will show, the text of *Voice, Letter, Reality* often refers to that of *Transforming One's Body*, and the discussion in *On the Sanskrit Letter Hūm* presupposes that *Voice, Letter, Reality*, modern studies generally support the tradition's claim that these works were produced in succession to form a series.

The dating by modern scholars appears to be acceptable for this study, but for a different reason: in these works Kūkai was no longer concerned with delineating the category of the esoteric, or with constructing the complementary relationship between the esoteric and exoteric scriptures, as he did in his early works. In the three works in question, Kūkai no longer refers to exoteric scriptures as frequently as he had in the earlier writings. Rather, Kūkai relied essentially on esoteric scriptures to justify the efficacy of esoteric religious practices. His priority seems to have shifted from legitimizing the esoteric to

further illustrating it as an already legitimized category. This change in Kūkai's approach to illustrating the esoteric through his writings seems to reflect the historical condition in which, as symbolized by his erection of the Abhiṣeka Hall at Todaiji in 822, Kūkai won the general acceptance by the Nara clergy of Esoteric Buddhism by the end of the Kōnin years. It then became necessary for him to provide the Nara clerics with the theoretical foundation for their practice of Esoteric Buddhism.

Of Voice, Letter, and Reality

Kūkai's construction of the interpenetrating relationship between the text and the world, discussed above, calls for an expansion of the concept of language, for not only spoken words or written characters but all sorts of things and events in the world are, for Kūkai, signs of the cosmic text. Kūkai explains this point in his celebrated verse at the opening of *Voice, Letter, Reality*.

Vibrating in each other's echoes are the five great elements
That give rise to languages unique to each of the ten realms
All in the six sense-fields are letters, the letters
Of the Dharmakāya, which is reality (KZ 1:524)

Kūkai's *Voice, Letter, Reality* unfolds as an illustration of this abstruse poem. An interpretation of the entire verse will be attempted later. For now, however, the key to understanding Kūkai's reading of the world as a text—or, more appropriately, as *the* ur-text—is line 3, to whose explication Kūkai devotes most of his work. There, in his analysis of the function of the sign, Kūkai locates the letter at the focal point of the interaction between voice, letter, and reality. Throughout the work Kūkai repeatedly argues, “The letter is nothing but differentiation (Jpn. *shabetsu*; Skt. *viśeṣa*)” (KZ 1:528, 530, 531, 534). That is, at the heart of signification is differentiation; the sign's function becomes most manifest in the letter, for the letter possesses a lasting material foundation in which its difference from other signs is inscribed, fixed, and remembered. For Kūkai, therefore, even voices are letters, patterns inscribed in the air.

Language derives from voice. Voice distinguishes itself in terms of long and short, high and low, and straight and bent. These are called patterns (*mon*). Those which manifest particular patterns are letters (*ji*), which never fail to give rise to names (*myō*). The name is always the name-letter (*myōji*), for sign is above all pattern. Therefore, pattern is nothing but letter, and pattern and letter are inseparable. (KZ 1:525)

That is, any object that differentiates itself with its unique pattern from anything else—including voice, a primary material of linguistic communication—is a letter. All sensory percepts of the six sense fields (Jpn. *rokujin*; Skt. *ṣadviṣaya*)—sight, sound, scent, taste, touch, and concepts, with the mind serving as the sixth “sense organ”—are therefore letters. Kūkai indicates that the sensory percepts of sight, for example, take the forms of color (*ken*), shape (*gyō*), and movement (*hyō*), and the combination of the three, so that each percept will be distinguished from others.

All the percepts of sight, expressing themselves in color, shape, and movement, arise from the working of [the sensory organ of] the eye [Jpn. *gan*; Skt. *cakṣus*], and become the objects of the eye. [Simultaneously,] they arise from the working of sight-consciousness [Jpn. *ganshiki*; Skt. *cakṣur-vijñāna*], become the object of sight-consciousness, and interact with sight-consciousness. [Simultaneously, again,] they arise from the working of mind-consciousness [Jpn. *ishiki*; Skt. *mano-vijñāna*], become the object of mind-consciousness, and interact with mind-consciousness. *This [process] is called “differentiation.” All things differentiated are characters (monji), marks of individualized patterns.* Each differentiated percept manifests its own pattern (*mon*), and each differentiated pattern gives rise to names. They [percepts] are nothing but letters. Color, shape, movement are, therefore, the three categories of the letters of sight. (KZ 1:528, italics added)

Kūkai thus presents his perspective on signs, in which differentiation is the heart of language’s signifying practices; in which the letter, or, more generally, writing, is the primary topos of differentiation; and in which differentiation of the letter makes possible articulation of the world by names—that is, the sign’s work of dividing the world in the primordial state of a nebulous whole into discrete parts and categories, which in turn give rise to cosmic order. That is, the rise of signs from differentiation is coterminous with the formation of a cosmos—the procreative process that I shall refer to as “semiogenetic.”⁸ With this paradigm of language as differentiation, Kūkai translates the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness into a semiological theory, which he develops along two distinct strategic paths, each of which constructs the other as its inverse mirror image.

The first is Kūkai’s deconstruction of sensory objects as but signs, objects that manifest themselves as if they were “things.” For Kūkai, as is clear from the passage just quoted, being is antedated by language, and not vice versa, for it is language’s ability to articulate that generates discrete objects. Language productive of things, in turn, is grounded in differentiating movement, that is,

the very lack of identity, essence, or immediacy. The apparent presence of a so-called thing itself is therefore preceded by and derives from differentiation, a relative positioning that identifies a thing vis-à-vis other things, which also are but signs. Things are never self-present, for they have no ontological grounding, except for their infinitely regressive reference to other things in their mutually referential network. That is, precisely because they are signs, things are of dependent co-origination (Jpn. *engishō*; Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*), for they are “empty” of essence and do not originate with any transcendental prime mover.

The second strategic path is Kūkai’s method of reading and reconstructing a text—the text in the narrow sense, i.e., writing in a human language—as the very field at which the doctrine of emptiness actualizes itself. Kūkai argues that the letter *A*, the first syllable in the Sanskrit alphabet, is the mother of all letters, words, and languages. For Kūkai, the letter *A* is the seed mantra of the Dharmakāya Mahāvairocana because, since it serves as a negative prefix, the letter embodies the principle of all things as “originally nonarising” (Jpn. *honpushō*; Skt. *ādyanutpāda*). Kūkai suggests that the letter *A* as negation, “what it is not,” represents the very movements of differentiation, dissimulation, and articulation that are the primordial conditions for the act of writing and the production of text. This second semiological strategy is studied in detail in the second half of this chapter.

MORIMOTO Kazuo (1976:126–145; 1984:485–494), an expert in contemporary continental philosophy at Tokyo University, has pointed out a similarity that he has observed between Kūkai’s understanding of differentiation and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism, especially Derrida’s notion of *différance*. Although Morimoto’s finding appears important against the backdrop of many ongoing comparative philosophical studies that investigate the relevance of Derrida’s postmodernist theory to the Buddhist theory of emptiness, Morimoto’s scope for comparison is seriously limited.⁹ However striking it may appear from time to time, students of Kūkai’s philosophy must not be blinded by the similarity between Kūkai and Derrida, for it may well have resulted from mere coincidence, as in the case of a biological isomorphism across utterly unrelated species. In addition, there also exist notable “differences” between Derrida and Kūkai, which seem to be more significant than their similarity. As I demonstrate in the next section, unlike the Derridian *différance*, Kūkai’s deconstructive strategy is a path by which he constructs and reconstructs a concrete model of the cosmos, the model that he presents as a Buddhist alternative to that of the Confucian state ideology. Discussions in the following sections are aimed not at preparing a ground for comparative philosophy but at illustrating Kūkai’s complex language theory as simply as possible, so as to

develop an assessment of the historical impact on the early Heian ritsuryō state of Kūkai's invention of the Esoteric Buddhist model of the universe based upon his language theory, an assessment that is presented in the next chapter.

Syntax of the World-Text

The foregoing brief overview of Kūkai's general approach to language and text leads to an entry point into Kūkai's enigmatic poem in *Voice, Letter, Reality*, the entry through which the poem unfolds itself as an exposure of the Dharmakāya as writing, as the world-text itself.

Vibrating in each other's echoes are the five great elements	1
That give rise to languages unique to each of the ten realms	2
All in the six sense-fields are letters, the letters	3
Of the Dharmakāya, which is the reality	4

(KZ 1:524)

Kūkai identifies the five great elements referred to in line 1 as earth, water, fire, wind, and space, which, according to Exoteric Buddhism, are the fundamental material constituents of the universe. However, according to Esoteric Buddhism, Kūkai asserts, the five great elements are also the somatic components of the Dharmakāya. In *Transforming One's Body Into the Realm of Enlightenment* (*Sokushin jōbutsugi*) (KZ 1:509–513), to whose esoteric interpretation of the five elements Kūkai urges readers to turn their attention in *Voice, Letter, Reality* (KZ 1:525), each of the five elements expresses the five essential aspects of emptiness: originally nonarising (earth), transcending designations (water), freedom from taint (fire), being devoid of primary cause (wind), and being formless as space (space).

In *Transforming One's Body*, Kūkai explains further that the five elements incessantly interfuse with one another to generate all the things of the three realms (*sanshu seken*)—material existence, living beings, and enlightened ones—that form the totality of the world (KZ 1:509). The constant interplay of the five great elements is all the movements of the world, which make all existences impermanent. Yet, despite such movements, individual things in the world maintain their identities, if only momentarily, and the world does not descend into chaos. Kūkai explains this by introducing consciousness—the sixth great element (*shikidai*), the Dharmakāya's mind that is the very awareness of emptiness—which is inherent in all the five elements. “The six elements are the creative force (*nōshō*)” (KZ 1:510). For Kūkai, the six great

elements are the Dharmakāya's body and mind, which, precisely because of their inseparability, are in a constant state of harmonious interfusion, which Kūkai describes as the Dharmakāya Buddha's eternal state of meditation: "Freely interfusing with one another, the six great elements maintain the [Dharmakāya's] timeless yoga" (KZ 1:507).

By contrast, in *Voice, Letter, Reality*, Kūkai offers a new description of this picture of cosmogony as a semiogenetic process. Throughout this work, Kūkai speaks only of the five elements. In lieu of the sixth element, Kūkai highlights the vibrant movements (*kyō*) of the five elements as the force that maintains harmony between them. It is this primeval pulsation that makes it possible for the five elements to collide and fuse, thus generating all sorts of voices in the world.

No sooner does the inner breath of living beings vibrate the air of the external world than there arises voice (*shō*). Voice always results from vibration; voice invariably has as its basis vibration.¹⁰ When voice does not cease in vain and expresses the name of a thing, it is called letter (*ji*). The names thus revealed unfailingly evoke objects, which are so-called reality. That each voice, letter, and reality divides itself into myriad parts is called meaning (*gi*). (KZ 1:522)

Kūkai here provides an overall view of the relationship that he sees between voice, letter, and reality. Voice metamorphoses from mere vibration to sign by means of letter, that is, by making itself into a consistent, perceptible pattern (*mon*) inscribed on a material foundation that stands for things other than itself, things that then present themselves as reality. Voice has first to be writing before it ceases to be a meaningless cry and becomes speech. Only after writing, and then speech, does there arise reality, the object of signs. Furthermore, the meaning of these objects derives not from themselves but from the process through which voice, letter, and reality, respectively, differentiate themselves into innumerable signifiers (*nōsen*) and signifieds (*shosen*)—that is, through the linguistic articulation of the world into parts. It is the differences between signs that produce meaning. Then, before it even becomes writing or speech, voice in its most primordial form, the vibrant interplay of the five great elements, is differentiation (*shabetsu*): the very differentiating movement toward articulation, the first possibility of writing, and then speech.

For Kūkai, then, differentiation is semiotic articulation. Through differentiation, the boundless, amorphous, timeless presence of the Dharmakāya—the perpetually oscillating five great elements, the five forces of emptiness—turns itself into discrete objects in historical processes. It is, then, through articulation that the illegible Dharmakāya (as postulated in exoteric disciplines) transforms

itself into the legible world-text. The Dharmakāya can then be located nowhere but in the text, both *in* the letters and *between* the text's letters, where the letters manifest themselves as the traces of difference.

As discussed earlier, however, Kūkai understands the actualization of articulation as dependent on the working of sensory organs, the biological function that differs from one species to another. "The same water is seen by hungry ghosts as a pond of blazing fire and by heaven dwellers as an emerald lake. The dark night for human beings is the bright day for night birds."¹¹ This is where Kūkai introduces line 2 of his verse; ("Vibrating in each other's echoes are the five great elements [1] / That give rise to languages unique to each of the ten realms [2]"). In accordance with Buddhist cosmology, Kūkai identifies the ten realms as the realms of (1) Buddhas, (2) bodhisattvas, (3) pratyeka-buddhas, (4) śrāvakas, (5) heaven dwellers, (6) human beings, (7) asuras, (8) animals, (9) hungry ghosts, and (10) hell dwellers. The differences in the manner in which they recognize things surrounding them make these ten "species" experience the same universe as ten different biological environments, which are also ten separate linguistic spheres.

Kūkai then introduces his two readings of the "writings of the ten kinds (*jusshu monji*) of the ten realms" (KZ 1:525). The first is a vertical reading, in which the ten realms are viewed as levels of progressively more profound languages. In this reading, only the language of the realm of the Buddhas, which is identified as mantra, is real, and the nine others are illusory. Mantra is "true word" (*shingon*), "because it alone can designate infallibly the reality of objects as they truly are" (KZ 1:525). On the other hand, if one adopts the horizontal reading of the text, all the languages of the ten realms are mantras, because

All sorts of names (signs) originate from the Dharmakāya. They all issue forth from it (him) and become the languages circulating in the world. The language that is aware of this truth is called the true word (*shingon*) and other languages that are not conscious of their source are called illusory words (*mōgo*). (KZ 1:526)

The horizontal reading of the world-text reveals that all the ten languages are nothing but mantra (mantra in the broad sense); however, only the language that knows this secret, the language into which this secret is built as a part of its grammar, the language that makes this horizontal reading possible, can function as mantra (mantra in the narrow sense). "As if the same medicine can be used as cure or poison, the same language [emanating from the Dharmakāya] either guides one to enlightenment or deceives one into delusion" (KZ 1:526).

In lines 3 and 4 (“All in the six sense-fields are letters, the letters / Of the Dharmakāya, which is reality”), Kūkai points to the reason for the possibility of the horizontal reading of the world-text, the reading that reveals all languages to be mantra. As discussed earlier, line 3 is where Kūkai presents his general theory of language—that all objects of the senses are letters, that all linguistic signs are first and foremost letters, and that what produces letters is differentiation. To further illustrate the implications of line 3, Kūkai takes up the objects of sight as an example from among the six sense fields (sight, sound, scent, taste, touch, and feeling) and explains in yet another verse why optical objects are the letters of the world-text. Kūkai precedes this second verse with an introductory remark: “All the six sense fields are letters. First, how do the letters of sight perform their work of differentiation?”

Defined by the objects of sight	
[the letters] of color, shape, and movement	i
Are both sentient and inanimate beings	
both life forms and their environments	ii
As [the Dharmakāya’s] spontaneous play	
and as their consequences, [these letters]	iii
Can either trick one into delusion	
or guide others to enlightenment	iv
	(KZ 1:527)

In lines i and ii, Kūkai reminds the reader that all the languages of the ten realms of the universe are already inscribed in the world-text. Not only objects described by these languages but sentient beings who speak them are aggregates of the same signs that constitute the writing of the world-text—signs that refer only to other signs, signs whose identities derive only from the way in which they are different from other signs. That is to say, although the ten realms may be separated vertically from one another by their languages, horizontally, their languages are written in the same alphabet and thus belong to the same system. Kūkai explains this mutually referential relationship that obtains in everything that exists, or in the written signs of the world-text, from a slightly different angle: “Because sentient and inanimate forms of existence are shaped by the letters of color, form, and movement, sentient existence does not always remain sentient and material existence, not always nonsentient. They are mutually dependent and interchangeable” (KZ 1:531). Kūkai then quotes passages from chapters 6 and 7 of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* concerning the permeation of the body of the cosmic Buddha Vairocana, the Buddha whom Kūkai identifies as the Dharmakāya.

The body of [Vairocana] Buddha is inconceivable. In his body are all sorts of lands of sentient beings. Even in a single pore are countless vast oceans.
(T 10:32a)

Even in a single pore are inconceivably many lands, countless as particles of dust, inhabited by all sorts of living beings. In each of these numerous lands, there resides Vairocana Buddha, who expounds the excellent teaching amidst a great assembly of disciples. In every particle of dust in these lands, one also differentiates countless lands, some small, others large. In every particle of dust of these lands, too, one finds Vairocana Buddha. (T 10:36b)

For Kūkai, this is the manner in which the differentiation of the signs of the world-text articulates the universe into multifarious things, both sentient and nonsentient. In this vision of the universe, a speck of dust in a certain realm, a seemingly simple sign in the world-text, is at once equal to countless Buddhas and their lands. A pore on a Buddha's body in another realm, another sign of the text, is a vast cosmic space encompassing countless galactic systems. As a result, the signs of the world-text are always polyvalent. This mythopoetic vision of polysemy in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* suggests that each sign reflects within itself other signs against whose difference the original sign's identity is established, thereby forming an infinitely referential network of signs that forms the totality of the world-text.

In lines iii and iv of the second verse quoted from *Voice, Letter, Reality*, Kūkai indicates that this polysemy of the world-text creates, simultaneously, hope and difficulty for the salvation of sentient beings—difficulty, because the ambiguity and indeterminateness of the signs make the world-text cryptic, if not illegible, and encourage it to be misread. The most obvious misreading, Kūkai emphasizes, is the reduction of the polyvalence of signs into the single, most obvious meaning (for example, “pore” as merely a physical part, “speck of dust” as merely a dust particle), which leads to the reification of objects.

For the fool, letters as such [the letters of optical objects, i.e., of color, shape, and movement] are the very objects of attachment, desire, and passion. Having generated greed, rage, folly, and all sorts of other delusions, they cause beings to commit the ten evil acts or five cardinal sins. (KZ 1:531)¹²

That is, from Kūkai's viewpoint, those who read the world-text only literally and linearly are bound to fail, for all the objects of desire reified by such a reading are in fact signs, which precisely because of their polysemic and thus polyphonous nature, are devoid of essence (*mujishō*). They are of dependent co-origination

(*enghishō*), and thus unattainable (*mushotoku*). The polyvalence of the sign can not be rooted in self-identity, which is always singular, but derives only from differentiation, the simultaneous difference of a sign from multifarious signs.¹³ Being polyvalent, a sign originates only in the in-betweenness of difference, in the lack of origin, or the originally nonarising (*honpushō*) of emptiness. The factuality of objects, which derives from a deluded reader's fetish, is therefore always illusory and ephemeral.

On the other hand, Kūkai suggests that on the opposite side of this same polysemy of the world-text that makes for difficulty in reading is hope for enlightenment.

What does the Dharmakāya mean? It means the originally nonarising [nature] of all things. The originally nonarising, that is reality itself. (KZ 1:526)

All sorts of names (signs) originate with the Dharmakāya. They all issue forth from it (him) and become the languages circulating in the world. (KZ 1:526)

For Kūkai, the Dharmakāya is the origin of all signs that arise from difference because the Dharmakāya is the originally nonarising, the very lack of origin. Although the Dharmakāya remains invisible, it is never separated from the signs of the world-text: it permeates signs as their (non)origin in the space between signs—as in-betweenness of signs, as their differentiation, the difference from which their identities arise. Kūkai thus indicates in the third line of his verse two ways of reading the letters of the world-text as the vector pointing to the permeation of the Dharmakāya in the world-text. First, the signs can be interpreted as pointing to the spontaneous play of the Dharmakāya (*hōni*). This is the most abstract level of the manifestation of the Dharmakāya, its “self-nature body” (Skt. *svabhāva-kāya*; Jpn. *jishōshin*), the level at which it can be conceptualized in Kūkai's writing only as the interplay of the five elements, the five vibrant forces of emptiness. This movement of the five elements cannot be described except as play, for it has no other purpose than playfully producing differences through interfusion. In other words, Kūkai is proposing to read the world-text not of the letters themselves but of their interstices, where the self-nature body's spontaneous play manifests its very movement of differentiation, the processes of articulation productive of signs. In this reading, which Kūkai identifies as the “horizontal” reading of the world-text, all letters are equal in their act of making themselves the entry points into the Dharmakāya's spontaneous play.

According to the horizontal approach, all sentient beings as well as all things of their living environments are equal. . . . Horizontally, all sentient beings

are endowed with the originally enlightened Dharmakāya (*hongaku hosshin*), his self-nature, and are equal to all Buddhas. All their bodies as well as their habitats are the manifestations of the Dharmakāya's spontaneous play.

(KZ 1:533)

Second, Kūkai indicates that the signs of the world-text itself can be understood as the manifestation of the Dharmakāya, for they are nothing but the “consequence” (*zuien*) of the Dharmakāya's spontaneous play of differentiation. By means of this process of articulation, the Dharmakāya that hitherto remained abstract, in the primordial state before naming, becomes known by many names (signs) of its anthropomorphic forms, i.e., as all sorts of Buddhas in blissfully adorned bodies (Skt. *sambhogakāya*; Jpn. *hōshin*) and bodies corresponding to human form (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*; Jpn. *ōshin*). Elsewhere Kūkai explains the Dharmakāya's transformation of itself/himself from the nameless to the named:

Without origin, without conditions, it [the Dharmakāya] is vast, limitless, and formless, just like empty space. This is called the Dharmakāya's great body. The Dharma of the Dharmakāya is naturally such. However, if only its great body were manifested, sentient beings would not give rise to faith, would not practice worship, for they would not see clearly the Buddha's face and body. For this reason, provisionally, the Dharmakāya manifests its small bodies [of anthropomorphic form] to illuminate sentient beings' minds, to plant faith in their minds, and to rouse their resolve to realize enlightenment.¹⁴

Furthermore, the Dharmakāya assumes the emanation body (Skt. *niṣyandakāya*; Jpn. *tōrushin*), a manifestation as all sorts of living beings and their environments. In this manner, it produces all the letters of the world-text as the traces of its spontaneous movement, the letters whose aggregate constitutes the threefold world (*sanshu seken*) of enlightened ones, sentient beings, and their habitats. This, for Kūkai, is the vertical reading of the world-text, the reading of its letters as the traces of the Dharmakāya's differentiating movement. In line with the discussions on Buddhas' bodies in both the *Mahāvairocana* and *Vajraśekhara* sources, Kūkai calls the letters in the vertical reading the “seals of the Dharmakāya's wisdom of differentiation” (*shabetsu chiin*).¹⁵ However, precisely because they are “seals,” which are traces, they stand for the Dharmakāya's play in its absence, are signs of presence/absence, of the emptiness of essence, whose meaning derives only from other signs. In this sense, according to the vertical reading, too, the letters are not distinct from the Dharmakāya,

for they, as traces, are “originally nonarising”—which is exactly how Kūkai understands the Dharmakāya.

In short, the creative force of the world-text and the created letters within the text are but two aspects of the same Dharmakāya. At the close of *Voice, Letter, Reality* is this passage:

The creative force (*nōshō*) is the five great elements of five forms; creation (*shoshō*) is the threefold world. This threefold world is divided into countless differences. All these infinite differences are the letters, the letters of both [the Dharmakāya’s] spontaneous play and its consequences. (KZ 1:534)

Kūkai’s notions of “spontaneous play” and “its consequences” are the two directions in which the movement of differentiation manifests the originally nonarising Dharmakāya in the world-text, and also *as* the world-text. The Dharmakāya is never the transcendental signified, or the Truth outside the world-text, for the text is made up only of differentiating relations that have neither origin nor end. It has no outside. The text’s differentiating processes, the “spontaneous play,” are generative of the text’s signs, “its consequences,” and are therefore anterior to any name. The “spontaneous play” of the Dharmakāya appears to be Kūkai’s temporary designation of this yet-to-be-named differentiating movement of the text, the process without origin. To realize truth is, then, to play this play of differentiating processes and become immersed in it.¹⁶ It is the world as the play of writing, which for Kūkai is “striding playfully of great emptiness,”¹⁷ the play on which he once wrote:

Soaring mountains are brushes, vast oceans, ink
Heaven and the earth are the box preserving the sūtra; yet
Contained in every stroke of its letters are all in the universe
From cover to cover, all pages of the sūtra are brimming
With the six sensory objects, in all their manifestations.¹⁸

It is the book (game) whose encasement never succeeds in enclosing within itself the cosmic play (writing), or the universe as writing (play).

On the Science of Writing

Kūkai’s discussion of all sensory objects as letters of the world-text provides a frame of reference for understanding his analysis of what text is in the narrow sense, i.e., writings of human language. In *Voice, Letter, Reality*, Kūkai puts it this way:

All sorts of differentiations of optical objects are letters. For example, the letter *A* and other characters written in the five basic colors [yellow, white, red, blue, black] are letters of optical objects. Various kinds of sentient and nonsentient beings, painted images, as well as gorgeous patterns woven in brocade are also the letters of optical objects. All these differentiations among the objects of sight are called letters of optical objects. (KZ 1:530–531)

It appears that Kūkai understands the question of human language as a local variation within his general theory of language, in which signs are above all letters, letters that are nothing but differentiation. On the other hand, in *Voice, Letter, Reality* (KZ 1:526) and in many other places, Kūkai asserts that all letters derive from the letter *A*. In his introduction to the Sanskrit phonetic system, for example, Kūkai states that the letter *A*, the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, transforms itself into twelve essential vowels and semivowels, which then join themselves with thirty-five consonants to produce 408 basic letters.¹⁹ This seems to contradict Kūkai's fundamental principle that letters have no origin except their mutual differences.

Kūkai's answer to this problem seems to rest in his recognition that the letter *A* is simultaneously the most basic syllable of the Sanskrit alphabet and the “indicator,” especially as a prefix, “of absence (*mu*), refusal (*fu*), and negation (*hi*).”²⁰ In *On the Sanskrit Letter Hūm (Unjigi)*, paraphrasing Śubhakarasiṃha's *Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T 39:651c), Kūkai presents his solution to this apparent contradiction.

The gate of the letter *A* teaches that all things are originally nonarising. All sorts of languages in the threefold world depend on names (signs), and names derive from letters. The letter *A*, as written in Siddham [a Sanskrit script system popularized in East Asia], is the mother of all letters. Therefore the truth of the gate of the letter *A* pervades all things.

What is the reason for this? All things consist of an agglomeration of diverse causes and conditions. Every one of these causes and conditions consists, in turn, of countless causes and conditions. The chain of causes and conditions extends endlessly without arriving at the origin. In this manner, one recognizes the originally nonarising nature of all things. There is no origin of all things except for their own originally nonarising quality.

Whenever people hear a language spoken, they hear the sound *A* [underlying all syllables]. In the same manner, whenever people see all sorts of things, they see there the originally nonarising. Those who see things as originally nonarising will realize their minds as they really are. Knowing one's mind as it really is—that is the realization of the all-embracing wisdom [Skt.

sarva-jñāna; Jpn. *issai chichi*]. This is the reason that Mahāvairocana made this single letter his seed mantra. (KZ 1:537–538)

Kūkai’s reasoning here appears straightforward. For him, all things of the world are already letters of the world-text. Because they are the system of differentiation, the letters/things are of dependent co-origination and therefore without origin. Because the letters of human language are already a part of the letters of the world-text, they are also grounded in their mutual differences. If letters in this narrow sense have any origin, it cannot be anything but the dependent co-origination, which is originally nonarising. This is what Kūkai seems to suggest as the letter *A*. It is the origin of all the alphabet’s letters, yet it stands at their origin only as a mark of absence—that is, the negation of unconditioned identity, immediacy, and permanence. The letter *A* is the origin of no origin. It is, quintessentially, the originally nonarising. In other words, the letter *A* is the origin of all letters because it stands for the very movement of differentiation, which is the absence, refusal, and negation of any self-presence of things, including that of their origin.

Kūkai says in many places in his writings that “the letter *A* means the originally nonarising” (e.g., KZ 1:404, 469, 508, 537, 730). However, Kūkai’s reference to the “meaning” (*gi*) of the letter *A* is not intended to suggest that the letter *A* is a kind of cryptogram for a secret doctrine—an interpretation pursued by many sectarian scholar-priests (KATSUMATA Shunkyō 1970:116; TAKAGAMI Kakushō 1992:109–110). In the context of his discussions of speech, writing, and sign, Kūkai most often employs the term *meaning* (*gi*) in a particular way, i.e., to signify a value produced by a certain syllable or letter as it participates in the process of linguistic articulation. As he puts it in the passage from *Voice, Letter, Reality* discussed earlier: “Voice [*shō*] always results from vibration; voice invariably has vibration as its basis. When voice does not cease in vain and expresses the name of a thing, it is called letter [*ji*]. The names thus revealed unfailingly evoke objects, which are so-called reality [*jissō*]. That voice, letter, and reality divide themselves into myriad parts is called meaning (*gi*)” (KZ 1:522). That is, when Kūkai describes the “meaning” of the letter *A* as the originally nonarising, he is referring to the letter *A* standing for the originally nonarising play of differentiation that makes possible the signs’ articulation of the world into myriad parts. For Kūkai, the letter *A* at once produces and permeates all letters: it is simultaneously the “spontaneous play” and “its result,” the two aspects of the Dharmakāya as it is manifested in the text of human language. “The Dharmakāya resides in empty space. The Dharmakāya is empty space, for it is the unattainability of cause. It [the

Dharmakāya] is the absence of the origin. . . . Because of this, the Dharmakāya is the source of all scriptural writings.”²¹

Based on Amoghavajra’s translation of a manual on the Sanskrit phonetic system,²² Kūkai in his *Essential Characters of the Sanskrit Siddham Script and Their Interpretations* (*Bonji shisstan jimo narabi ni shakugi*) identifies the “meaning” of the twelve essential vowels and thirty-five principal consonants (KZ 2:724–728).

VOWELS (MATA)	MEANING (GI)
A	originally nonarising (<i>honpushō</i>)
Ā	quietude (<i>jakujo</i>)
I	senses (<i>kon</i>)
Ī	disaster (<i>saika</i>)
U	metaphor (<i>hiyu</i>)
Ū	loss (<i>songen</i>)
E	pursuit (<i>gu</i>)
Ai	freedom (<i>jizai</i>)
O	rushing stream (<i>baru</i>)
Au	manifestation (<i>kesbō</i>)
Am	boundary (<i>hensai</i>)
Aḥ	release (<i>onri</i>)
GUTTURALS (KŌSHŌ)	MEANING
Ka	action (<i>sayō</i>)
Kha	space (<i>tōkokū</i>)
Ga	departure (<i>gyō</i>)
Gha	whole (<i>ichigō</i>)
Ṇa	part (<i>shibun</i>)
PALATALS (GAKUSHŌ)	MEANING
Ca	change (<i>senpen</i>)
Cha	reflection (<i>eizō</i>)
Ja	life (<i>shō</i>)
Jha	enemy (<i>senteki</i>)
Ña	wisdom (<i>chi</i>)
CEREBRATES (ZETSUSHŌ)	MEANING
Ṭa	arrogance (<i>man</i>)
Ṭha	longevity (<i>chōyō</i>)

Ḍa	vengeance (<i>ontai</i>)
Ḍha	clinging (<i>shuji</i>)
Ṇa	argument (<i>shōron</i>)
DENTALS (SHISHŌ)	
MEANING	
Ta	suchness (<i>nyo'nyo</i>)
Tha	abiding (<i>jūsho</i>)
Da	giving (<i>se</i>)
Dha	universe (<i>hokkai</i>)
Na	name (<i>myō</i>)
LABIALS (SHINSHŌ)	
MEANING	
Pa	primary truth (<i>daiichigitai</i>)
Pha	foam (<i>shūmatsu</i>)
Ba	bond (<i>baku</i>)
Bha	existence (<i>yū</i>)
Ma	self (<i>goga</i>)
SEMIVOWELS AND SPIRANTS (HENKŌSHŌ)	
MEANING	
Ya	vehicle (<i>jō</i>)
Ra	taint (<i>jinsen</i>)
La	aspect (<i>sō</i>)
Va	speech (<i>gonzetsu</i>)
Śa	peacefulness (<i>honshōjaku</i>)
Ṣa	bluntness (<i>seidon</i>)
Sa	truth (<i>tai</i>)
Ha	cause (<i>in</i>)
Kṣa	exhaustion (<i>jin</i>)

For each of these letters, Kūkai adds his notes, which invariably begin “the unattainability of all things as . . .” (*issai shōhō fukatoku*), to indicate his interpretation of their *meanings*. The notation for the letter *Ka*, for example, is “the unattainability of all things as action,” the letter *Na*, “the unattainability of all things as name,” the letter *Ba*, “the unattainability of all things as bond,” the letter *Va*, likewise, “the unattainability of all things as speech.” That is, because all things are of dependent co-origination they cannot be reduced to any singular essence or identity. Kūkai’s use of the term *meaning* (*gi*) here is exactly the same as the way he understands the “meaning” for the letter

A, which he interprets as the very movement of the originally nonarising for producing signs. That is to say, these basic syllables are not ciphers of doctrinal concepts. Instead, they are for Kūkai indicators of the forty-seven different manners through which the originally nonarising expresses itself as differentiation (*shabetsu*) for constructing the identity of signs and enabling signs' articulation of the world into myriad things.

This is the reasoning that leads Kūkai to understand the letter *A* as the source of all other letters, the source whose manifestation of itself, first as twelve vowels, and then as thirty-five consonants, will give rise to all the Sanskrit letters.²³ The established convention in the Sanskrit language in which the basic forms of all consonants are written with the letter *A* as their impartible part (SK 1:13–18) makes it graphically apparent that the letter *A*, as the force of differentiation, inheres in all letters.²⁴

In short, the “meaning” of each letter in Kūkai’s table, shown above, has nothing to do with the definitions of words that appear in a dictionary. It is instead the characterization in writing of a different shade of the force of the originally nonarising—the letter *A* that hides itself in each letter’s graphic form. For Kūkai, letters are signifying potentials whose differentiating power, combined and interfused, generates countless signs of the text. They may be described as “differentials” in the mathematical sense, the points that encompass within themselves infinite numbers of values, or meanings, as possibilities for their production of signs.²⁵

In fact, Kūkai’s *On the Sanskrit Letter Hūm* is his attempt to demonstrate the unlimited semantic potential of the countless meanings that issue forth from the letter *Hūm*. Kūkai first breaks down the letter into its four phonemic constituents—the letters *A*, *Ha*, *Ū*, and *Ma*—which represent four aspects of emptiness as the unattainability of the essence in all things as, respectively, origin, cause, loss, and self. He then states that these four letters together encapsulate within themselves all Buddhist writings in four areas: the principle of emptiness as the lack of origin; the teaching of dependent co-origination as the lack of cause; the practice of emptiness as the lack of suffering from loss; and the realization of emptiness as selflessness (KZ 1:548).

Mantra as Textile Production

Elsewhere Kūkai resorts to the analogy between text and texture to illustrate his view that letters are the locus of infinite semantic production.²⁶

The word *sūtra* means stringing or weaving. The [Dharmakāya’s] secret voice, the woof, and mind, the warp, weave themselves into the brocade

depicting the assembly as vast as an ocean of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although brocades vary from one another in hundreds of patterns, they are all called brocades. In the same manner, Buddhas in the sūtra appear in myriad different ways. Yet they all are called Buddhas. . . . They distinguish themselves one from another by expressing their own colors and forms. Yet however divergent they may be, all these woven patterns are seals of the wisdom of differentiation (*shabetsu chiin*) of the same Lord Mahāvairocana. It is thus said in a sūtra, “I am the universe, I am the possessor of the vajra body, I am the devas, nāgas, and the six other guardian gods of the Dharma.”²⁷ In this manner, various aspects of the Dharmakāya interfuse with one another. That is just like silken threads of diverse shades lavishly meshed and yet forming a tightly knit brocade with a perfectly coordinated design. This is the meaning of the word *sūtra*.²⁸

Kūkai here makes plain that the pattern of a brocade, the words and sentences of a scripture describing Buddhas and bodhisattvas, consists of the weaving of the voice and mind of the Dharmakāya hidden in a sūtra text’s texture—that is, the vibrations of the five great elements, the variegating woof, and the sixth great element, which sustains the harmony among the five oscillating elements, the warp that keep the woof together. Although Kūkai does not refer to letters directly, his textural analogy suggests that letters are the stitches of the brocade, the very interlacing of the Dharmakāya’s secret voice and mind. That is, letters are inherently linked with one another, for their individual identities emerge as knots within a network called language. By means of this interlacing, both the voice and mind, which hitherto were, respectively, amorphous, unnamed streams of vibrant movements, and consciousness, divide themselves into distinct parts producing the unique design of each individual brocade (*sūtra*). In this sense, letters are differentials, points of infinity, every one of which reflects within itself all other letters on the plexus, as well as words and sentences—multifarious patterns on the threads—generated by the very interlacing of the threads.

The Dharmakāya in this manner disseminates itself throughout the text as the latent force of differentiation that is productive of signs. Letters that constitute texts are the very expression of the Dharmakāya’s textual/textural permeation, for they are the transformation of the letter *A* of the originally nonarising—that is, the Dharmakāya. In this sense, all the words of scriptural texts—and, by extension, any other texts written with the same letters—are mantras, for they are the very manifestations of the Dharmakāya, which Kūkai describes as the Dharmakāya’s “seals of the wisdom of differentiation,” the traces, the simultaneous presence and absence of the differentiating movement.

Yet letters, as the marks of the Dharmakāya pervading the text, ordinarily go unnoticed. Just as observers of a brocade perceive woven patterns and not individual stitches, readers of sūtra texts read only words, which are the essential units for their semantic recognition. The knowledge of reading letters remains hidden from readers' awareness. It is this problem on which Kūkai offers his analysis of mantra, mantra in the narrow sense, i.e., a secret formula described in Esoteric Buddhist scriptures. In the last chapter of *Ten Abiding Stages of Mind* (*Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*), Kūkai states:

“O Lord of Secrecy, do you know how Tathāgatas practice their path of mantra? They do so by giving their empowerment [Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*; Jpn. *kaji*] to the letters of worldly writings.”²⁹ Because the letters of worldly languages are already capable of expressing what reality is, Tathāgatas empower [some of] them and present them as mantras. If one takes the position that the letters of worldly languages are external to the nature of the Dharma, that is nothing but the false view of a delusory mind. (KZ 1:410)

Kūkai emphasizes that when they take the form of writing, mantras are not intrinsically distinct from ordinary language. “Although Tathāgatas empower mantras with all sorts of merit they had accumulated in their countless eons of bodhisattva lives,” Kūkai points out, “the infinite merit inherent in every one of the letters of worldly language is already equal to that of mantras” (KZ 1:411). Kūkai indicates, however, that mantra is different from worldly language in its working. *Ten Abiding Stages* continues:

Question: Even children of the laity [in India] study and memorize the essential alphabet letters of Siddham. Is there any distinction between these letters and the letters of mantra?

Answer: Although the Siddham alphabet table for secular education is identical with the table of mantras, people of the world are unaware that each letter of the alphabet is already complete in its graphic form, while possessing infinite meanings of reality. . . . People of the world do not know that each letter is replete with reality, that is, the words of reality (*shingon*), mantras. Words spoken without this knowledge are the words of delusion, which lead beings to the suffering of the three evil transmigratory realms [of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell dwellers]. When they become aware of this knowledge of reality [of their alphabet letters], they annihilate all their evil karma and attain the all-embracing wisdom. This occurs just as one's medical knowledge can transform a dangerous poison into the most beneficial cure.

(KZ 1:412)

In *Voice, Letter, Reality*, Kūkai explains the uniqueness of mantra by means of his interpretation of a verse from fascicle 2 of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T 18:9c), where the nature of mantra is discussed.

*The mantras of the Perfectly Enlightened Ones
Are the generative processes of signs
Like the teaching of Indra's jewel net
They consummate all sorts of meanings*

The words *Perfectly Enlightened Ones* (Skt. *anuttara-saṃyak-sambuddha*; Jpn. *tōshōgaku*) on the first line mean the mystery of the body of Dharmakāya. The Dharmakāya's mystery of body manifested equally [as individual Buddhas and bodhisattvas, i.e., "Perfectly Enlightened Ones"] is beyond measure. As has been discussed in *Transforming One's Body Into the Realm of Enlightenment*, this mystery of body is reality (*jissō*) [unveiled by mantras]. The term *mantra* means voice, the Dharmakāya's mystery of speech. The term *signs* (*gonmyō*) means letters (*ji*). That is, voice turns into signs through letters. This is the relationship between voice, letter, and reality as presented in the above verse. . . . For example, whenever people open their mouths and emit their voices, the sound *A* is heard, the sound of the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet. Yet the sound *A* can serve as an indicator for the Dharmakāya. This is the letter of the sound *A*. What does the Dharmakāya mean? It means the originally nonarising of all things. This is the reality of the letter *A*. (KZ 1:523–524)

Kūkai grounds his argument here in his general theory of language, in which the primordial, protolinguistic cry of voice turns into signs by assuming specific patterns, patterns that according to Kūkai's definition are letters. The term for sign, *gonmyō*, in the passage above, literally means "names uttered." Only then, when naked voice turns into names uttered, are objects of signs, the signified, *articulated*, and only then do they assume the place of things to be represented by signs. Mantra is identified with this primordial voice that turns into letters and then into signs. Therefore mantra is indicative of "the generative process of signs" (*gonmyō jōritsu sō*).

Kūkai points out that anyone who utters or writes words participates in this semiogenetic process by reaffirming the legitimacy of phonic and graphic patterns of signs and their use in a language system. Yet this is the very process forgotten in the conventional use of language—the forgetfulness that constitutes the vulgar understanding of signs as labels attached to self-present

things of the world, the oblivion that leads to the delusive experience of the world as saṃsāra.

Whenever people hear a language spoken, they hear the sound *A* [underlying all syllables]. In the same manner, whenever people see all sorts of things, they see there the originally nonarising. . . . Yet ordinary people of the world fail to see this as the source of all things. They delusively substantiate their own existence and entrust themselves to the current of the ocean of saṃsāra without having the means of escaping it. They are just like an ignorant painter who by himself paints with all sorts of colors a picture of dreadful demons. When the picture is completed, he observes his own work, is horrified, faints, and falls to the ground. Like this painter, sentient beings paint the threefold world with all sorts of things, all of which are originally nonarising, then bury themselves therein, and develop their rampantly selfish minds, which receive all sorts of suffering. (KZ 1:538)

Kūkai seems to suggest that mantra in the narrow sense is a linguistic device provided by Buddhas and bodhisattvas as an antidote to the symptom he describes here. It is a wedge driven into the vicious cycle of semiological amnesia and the reification of the signified. For mantra is not merely illustrative of the semiogenetic process; it is the “generative process of signs.” This is the reason that, in the earlier passage, Kūkai interprets mantra as voice that turns itself into signs by first partaking of letters. In other words, mantra is a particular sign that, through its frequent incomprehensibility, induces a paradigm shift. To return to Kūkai’s analogy of text and texture, it is a shift of perspective from seeing (reading) only the designs of a brocade (signs, phrases, sentences) to observing the stitches (letters) that constitute the brocade’s designs. It is a shift of attention from the brocade’s surface patterns to its thickness, where the interlacing of threads, the process that generates stitches (letters) on the surface of the brocade (text), unfolds itself.

This shift in the orientation of reading the text from its surface to its depth lays bare the materiality of signs hidden in the seeming transparency of their representation of objects. Design patterns on the surface cannot be formed without material layers of intertwined threads, which in turn have resulted from the physical work of sewing and weaving. In the same manner, Kūkai suggests, signs are never separated from their material foundations—air, paper, ink, stone, and so forth—which in turn have imprinted in their materiality the somaticity of labor—vocalization, scribing, chiseling. Before they even become representations, signs are already material and somatic. For Kūkai, this means that all signs consist of the five great elements—the essential constituents of all

sorts of things of the world, both sentient and nonsentient—the elements that make up the Dharmakāya’s body of emptiness. In short, the goal of mantra may be described as a *de*-semiotization: by means of illustrating the material foundation and physical labor inherent in constructing signs, mantra strips signs of their seeming transparency and exposes as illusory and fictional the apparent self-presence of signs’ objects. In other words, mantra deprives the subject of its linguistic grounding, from which arises the fiction of the subject as the privileged user of language, as well as the subject’s delusive attachments to objects, objects constructed by its own use of signs.

In *Transforming One’s Body Into the Realm of Enlightenment*, Kūkai demonstrates this point further with the example of Mahāvairocana’s five-letter mantra: *A Vi Ra Hūm Kham*. Quoting a verse on this mantra from fascicle 5, chapter 16, of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, he identifies the syllables of the mantra with the five great elements:

I [Mahāvairocana] am none other than all-embracing wisdom
 Manifesting myself freely in all places I permeate myself
 In all sentient and nonsentient beings
 The letter *A* is the primary ground for all lives [i.e., earth]
 The letter *Vi* is water; the letter *Ra*, fire; the letter *Hūm*, wind
 And the letter *Kham* is no different from space.” (T 18:38b–c)

With this quotation, which is illustrative of Mahāvairocana’s cosmic permeation as the five great elements that constitute the Dharmakāya’s body, Kūkai points out that because of the illegibility and incomprehensibility of the mantra in the conventional use of language, its letters bring their materiality to the fore. The five syllables are equated with the five elements not because the letters are signs or representations of the five elements; rather, the sounds of the five syllables, the movements of the atmosphere when the five syllables are pronounced, resonate respectively with the vibrant movements of each of the five great elements. That is, whenever voiced, the five-letter mantra emulates in its sounds the primordial colliding of the five great elements. The polyphonous yet amorphous echoes of the vibrations of the interfusing five elements are separated into the five distinct scales and tones intrinsic to the five elements and then fixed when they are given visual forms with Siddham letters. The five-letter mantra demonstrates through its explicit materiality the very semiogenetic process through which the primordial voice takes the forms of letters for their production of signs.

Kūkai also argues that the materiality of signs as such cannot be separated from somaticity, because the materiality of the five-syllable mantra is

the somaticity of the Dharmakāya. He illustrates this with his interpretation of Mahāvairocana’s poetic proclamation (Skt. *udāna*; Jpn. *udana*) of his cosmic awakening in fascicle 2, chapter 2, of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T 18:9b).

<i>I have awakened myself</i>	
<i>to the originally nonarising</i>	a
<i>Leaped far beyond</i>	
<i>the path of languages</i>	b
<i>And attained deliverance</i>	
<i>from all sufferings</i>	c
<i>Extricating myself from the chain</i>	
<i>of causes and conditions</i>	d
<i>I have understood the emptiness</i>	
<i>that is just like empty space</i>	e

The [Dharmakāya’s] seed syllable mantra is “*A Vi Ra Hūm Khaṃ*.” That all things are the originally nonarising [line a] is the meaning of the letter *A*, the great element of earth. The transcendence from the path of languages [line b] is the meaning of the letter *Va*, the great element of water. The purity free of all taints and sufferings [line c] is the meaning of the letter *Ra*, the great element of fire. The unattainability of cause [line d] is the meaning of the letter *Ha*, the great element of wind. The nondistinguishability with empty space [line e] is the meaning of the letter *Kha*, the great element of space. “I have awakened myself” [at the beginning of the verse] is the great element of consciousness, the wisdom of enlightenment. (KZ 1:508)

Kūkai interprets the sūtra’s verse as a “translation” of the mantra *A Vi Ra Hūm Khaṃ*. (Composite syllables such as *Vi* [*Va* + *I*] and *Hūm* [*Ha* + *Ū* + *Ma*] are reduced to their basic consonant forms as in *Va* and *Ha*.) Here each letter of the mantra is identified with one of the five aspects of Mahāvairocana’s realization that he proclaims to the sentient beings of the world for their salvation. Here, the five syllables of the vibrant five great elements are Mahāvairocana’s utterance of his enlightenment, the life breath of the Dharmakāya, who, according to Kūkai, permanently abides in his playful cosmic meditation, enjoying the bliss of the Dharma (KZ 1:507). The five-syllable mantra therefore encapsulates in its materiality the Dharmakāya’s physical work of controlled breathing that characterizes his eternal meditation.

In this manner Kūkai seems to suggest that the five-syllable mantra is a meta-mantra that demonstrates the Dharmakāya’s work of disseminating his life breath, the vibration of the five great elements, in the materiality of every alphabet letter, in the hidden depth of the text. That is because the Dharmakāya’s

breath, the vibrant movement of the five forces of emptiness, as it manifests its work of differentiation (*shabetsu*), is marked most explicitly in the letters' materiality. All the Siddham letters are invariable in their power of expressing this somaticity of the Dharmakāya (i.e., in the powers distinguished as the "meaning," as they have been provided in the table of the forty-seven essential letters), and all mantras written with these letters have the power to reveal the materiality of signs. However, the five-syllable mantra is unique, for according to Kūkai, it unleashes the power of emptiness already impregnated in each letter as a primeval episode of the Dharmakāya's cosmic meditation in which he created all sorts of mantras, letters, and signs from out of his life breath.

Letters, Life Breath, and the Cosmic Palace

Kūkai's interpretation of the five-syllable mantra appears to have been inspired by a prevalent poetic image in the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* wherein the universe is portrayed as the Dharmakāya's cosmic palace (*hokkaigū*), the royal residence of Mahāvairocana, the King of Dharma, and his consort, the Queen of Wisdom (Skt. *vidyā-rājñī*; Jpn. *myōhi*). These are the Dharmakāya's male and female aspects, respectively, samādhi and mantra. In this imagery, Mahāvairocana's samādhi is symbolic of the five great elements, his physical constituents inter-fused in perfect harmony. The mantra recited, which is now indistinguishable from the cosmic Buddha's samādhi, is the sound of the vibrations of the five elements. It is the manifestation of prajñā, the wisdom of emptiness, the mother of all Buddhas. In their palace, the King of Dharma and his Queen are surrounded by countless Buddhas and bodhisattvas, their retinue, whose vast assembly transforms the universe into their maṇḍala. All the divinities in the maṇḍala, both male and female, are equipped with these masculine and feminine aspects, whose union—the consummation of their meditative practice—is generative of other Buddhas and bodhisattvas so as to sustain the lineage of the family of the Tathāgatas (T 18:22b, 23a, 24b, 31b).

For example, in fascicle 5, chapter 11, of the sūtra (entitled "Secret Maṇḍala," T 18:30c–36a), to which Kūkai turns next in *Transforming One's Body*, Mahāvairocana enters a samādhi called the "Glorification of the Universe by the Equality of the Tathāgatas" (Nyorai byōdō shōgon zanmai). Mahāvairocana expresses his bliss of samādhi by uttering the single-letter mantra *A*, which issues from all his "voice organs"—not only from his mouth but from all his pores. The sūtra then describes how Mahāvairocana produced all forms of signs and languages from this single syllable *A*.³⁰

In order to fulfill his original vow to save all sentient beings, he [Mahāvairocana] practiced [the recitation of] this mantra. Immersed in the samādhi, from all his voice organs he uttered the mantra in sounds analogous to all the voices of all living beings. With this utterance, new karmas rose and ripened in sentient beings in accordance with their original nature [i.e., the originally enlightened mind]. As the fruition of these karmas, all sorts of letters of diverse colors and shapes, all sorts of speech, and concepts corresponding [to these signs] manifested themselves. By means of these letters, forms of speech, and concepts, he expounded the Dharma for the sake of all sentient beings and caused them to rejoice. (T 18:31a)

This appears to be the sūtra’s mythopoetic depiction of what Kūkai has referred to as the generative process of signs (*gonmyō jōritsu sō*), at which the primordial, protosemantic voice transforms itself into signs via letters, which are differentiation. The sūtra continues:

No sooner had [Mahāvairocana delivered his teaching of the Dharma] than he came to issue from his pores all his transformation bodies [of Buddhas and bodhisattvas], immeasurable as empty space. Amidst this boundless world, he pronounced the single syllable [A] indicative of his permeation in the universe, a syllable heard by his audience as a verse, the “Procreation of Tathāgatas.” (T 18:31a)

Here the sūtra underscores that the Dharmakāya’s generation of signs from the letter A and his invention of the discourse on the Dharma by means of signs are coincidental with the manifestations of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the universe. That is, Buddhas and bodhisattvas, too, are signs issued forth from the letter A, the originally nonarising, the force of differentiation—which is none other than the Dharmakāya. This explains why, in *Transforming One’s Body*, Kūkai presents the verse “Procreation of Tathāgatas” as yet another translation of the five-syllable mantra *A Vi Ra Hūm Kham*.

Taking forms analogous to living beings
 I skillfully manifest the Dharmaness
 Of all phenomenal existence
 Thus established, one after another
 Are all the world-saving Buddhas, śrāvakas
 Pratyeka-buddhas, heroic bodhisattvas,
 All human teachers, then finally the world
 Of all sentient and nonsentient beings

All things generate and regenerate themselves thus
Eternally arising, abiding, decaying, and ceasing

(T 18:31a; KZ 1:509–510)

In this verse, Kūkai’s two theories of language converge: that all things of the world are the letters of the world as scripture; and that all letters of ordinary language are the signs of mantras. The two approaches become interfused in the verse’s motif of the letter *A* coterminously creating words and things—because, for Kūkai, both words and things are above all letters, that which is differentiated by the endless and beginningless differentiation of the letter *A*, the originally nonarising. A sūtra for reading is thus always a sūtra within the sūtra, the world-text. The differentiation within the text is also its outside, for the letter *A* of differentiation, the primeval life breath of the Dharmakāya, is both inside and outside the Dharmakāya’s body. As a result, reading a line of a sūtra text is always reading another part of the world-text enveloping it, which relates itself to countless other texts within. For Kūkai, therefore, reading is never linear. It is always polysemic.

Kūkai’s reading of the five-syllable mantra in *Transforming One’s Body*, in which he has “translated” the mantra into the three verses from the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, is aimed at illustrating this polysemy by demonstrating that all these different translations are correct. As such, the meaning of the mantra does not change from one translation to another, but only expands, pulverizes itself, and deposits itself in the mantra’s letters. The letters *A Vi Ra Hūm Kham* of the mantra are simultaneously the five great elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and space); the five forces of emptiness (the originally nonarising, the transcendence of language, purity, causelessness, formlessness); the Dharmakāya’s breath; the Queen of Wisdom; etc. Yet each of the five letters is just another of the letters in the alphabet table used not only in mantras and in Buddhist discourse but also in non-Buddhist, or nonreligious writings. Thus each time the five letters are written, read, or recited, they disseminate through their materiality their inherently polysemic signifying potential. Furthermore, all other letters of the alphabet are equipped equally with this overabundant semantic force, because they are all transformations of the letter *A*.

In short, for Kūkai, a text is always a field of production, in which each letter’s materiality discloses *labor*, some somatic force that has shaped the letter as difference from other letters. Kūkai’s goal in analyzing mantra is to demonstrate the superabundant meaning already inherent in each letter of the text, or any text, even before the letters turn into signs of the text—that is, to demonstrate the pluralized value of a particular letter as the difference between it and all other letters in the web of language.³¹ For Kūkai, the letter is the

primary metaphor of life, the seed mantra that germinates the tree of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the life breath sustaining the Dharmakāya's meditation, the seed to be conceived in the womb of Tathāgatas, and the originally enlightened mind. "Every single word, every single name, their every single generative process [of signs] is endowed with an infinite number of meanings. Buddhas and bodhisattvas may produce their manifestations, as countless as the dust of stars in a nebula, and have all of them explain in the worlds of past, present, and future the meanings of every single letter. Yet they cannot exhaust the infinite number of meanings [inherent in the letters]." ³² The *practice* of reading the text is aimed not at presenting a comprehensive list of all the possible meanings of the text's letters, but instead at playing with the letters and participating in their inexhaustible signifying production.

The rule of this play or game is, most typically, the meditative recitation of mantra. In one of his commentaries on the *Vajrasākhara Sūtra*, Kūkai writes: "The sūtra text is the brocade manifesting exquisite patterns of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, which are greatly admired by sentient beings. It is woven with [the Dharmakāya's] mantra, the woof, secret mudrā, the warp, and samādhi, the shuttle." ³³ The meditative practice of mantra—which accompanies the forming of their bodies into the meditative postures of mudrā—is for the reader-practitioners their play emulating the Dharmakāya's weaving of his cosmic text, the semiogenetic weaving through which voice turns into letters to form the exquisite patterns of the brocade. The locus of this textile production is the Dharmakāya's cosmic palace. The practitioners' recitation of mantra is their entry into the Dharmakāya's royal palace, where they receive their new birth from the union between samādhi and mantra of the divinities in the maṇḍala, and where they establish themselves as heirs in the family of the Tathāgatas.

At this play of mimesis, the practitioners' cultivation of samādhi through their recitation of mantra, the materiality of mantra becomes the very somaticity of the practitioners. The letters are now the physical constituents of the practitioners. That is, the practitioners realize that they, too, are signs of scripture, which constitute the "body of the text." Embodying in their recitation the breath of the mantra's letters, the practitioners become the movement of differentiation itself, the originally nonarising, which simultaneously generates their own identities and those of other things as signs of the world-text. Being different manifestations of the letter *A*, all letters that make up their names, their identities, distribute themselves throughout the text. They are many parts of the text simultaneously; they are the text itself. Kūkai speaks of this as the "meaning" of the letter *Ma*, the unattainability of self except as permeating emptiness: "I am the universe. I am the Dharmakāya. I am Mahāvairocana,

I am Vajrasattva. I am all Buddhas. I am all bodhisattvas. I am pratyekabuddhas. I am śrāvakas. I am Maheśvara. I am Brahmā. I am Indra. I am also devas, nāgas, yakṣas, rākṣasas . . . and all sentient and nonsentient beings.”³⁴ However, Kūkai cautions that this identity has nothing to do with the identity in the sense of synthesis, or grand synthesis. As he repeatedly states, “All sorts of letters are differentiations” (KZ 1:530). That is, for Kūkai, there is no identity among diverse signs of the text, except that they all are differentiating from one another, manifesting emptiness ingrained in the text, whether it is book, a royal palace, or the universe.³⁵