

Japanese Focus



With this issue of Japanese Focus, I'm going to rock your world, and explore points I believe are being ignored when people make English translations for the term "Shitennou" – the name that is used throughout *Sailor Moon* to refer to Queen Beryl's four underlings.

I'm here to tell you I don't think it should be translated as "Four Heavenly Kings".

Which will shock the heck out of anybody with a little knowledge of Japanese who can read basic kanji, since the title is made up of these characters:

四天王

SHI • TEN • OU

four • heaven • king

At first glance, the correct English translation for this word seems like a no-brainer. But there is a lot of religious, historical, and cultural significance attached to this word which merits explanation.

This specific combination of kanji - a "compound" - was originally conceived in China after Buddhism spread to this region from India during the 5th century BCE. This compound was coined to describe the **Lokapala** (sanskrit); four beings who were the gods of the cardinal directions (North, South, East, and West). These gods are also known as the "**Four Devas**", and the translation for this term from sanskrit varies across Asian countries.

In Japan, the word for the Four Devas became "shitennou" – they borrowed the same characters the Chinese used after China brought Buddhism to Japan – and the word became religious terminology. When you read Japanese Buddhist texts, and the word "shitennou" appears, it is almost always translated into English as "the Four Devas".

The direct translation of "Four Heavenly Kings" sounds unnatural to native speakers of English, and in fact that phrasing almost never appears in professional or academic translations.

Additionally, a direct translation of "Shitennou" as "Four Heavenly Kings" ignores a monumental event in Japanese history. During the **Tokugawa period**, there were a few famous generals under Tokugawa Iyeyasu who were referred to as the "Shitennou", because their military adventures were considered so amazing that they must have been inspired by the gods. Since there were four of them, and since they each controlled four "sections" of Japan under direct military rule of the Shogun Iyeyasu, the word "shitennou" in Japanese also became synonymous with these famous generals.

My opinion is that the Shitennou in *Sailor Moon* are modeled after these Tokugawa Iyeyasu generals, rather than after the Four Devas of Buddhist ideology. Since the Shitennou in *Sailor Moon* are of a high rank in a military-like setting, both when under a Queen in the 20th/21st Century and a Prince in the Silver Millennium - who is a military figure of the Earth and notably not a religious one - I translate it as "Four Generals".

Plus, incidentally enough, in various *Sailor Moon* canons the Shitennou are each given a "zone" on the Earth that they "rule over". Jadeite is the Asia / Nepal area zone ruler, Nephrite is the North America / Canada area zone ruler, Zoicite is the Europe / Switzerland area zone ruler, and Kunzite is the Middle East / Turkey area zone ruler. Since they don't rule in any religious capacity in these zones but rather militarily, this further supports my theory that "shitennou" should be distanced from the idea of Buddhist religion and connected more with Iyeyasu's famous Japanese generals.

So there you have it! I hope you found this segment enjoyable. Until next time!

Sources:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lokapala>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shitenn%C5%8D_%28Tokugawa_clan%29



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heaven forbid - corrections?
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