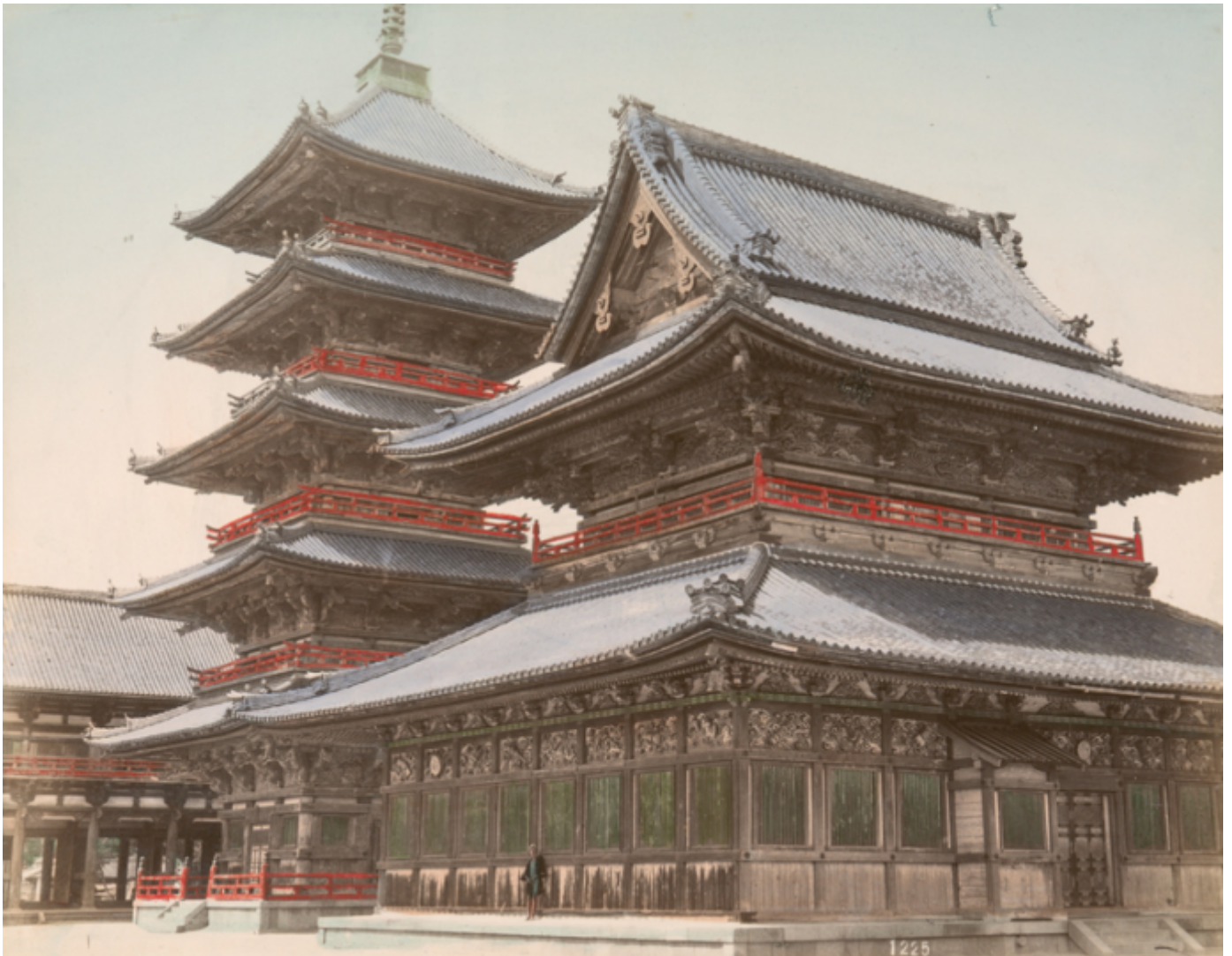


(Roughly) Daily

“Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire”* ...



Main
hall and pagoda of Shitennō-
ji [*source*]

In the year 578AD Germanic tribes were warring over the remains of the Roman Empire, an eight-year-old boy named Muhammad was growing up in Mecca, the Mayan Empire was flourishing in Central America, and the world's longest continuously operated business was founded in Japan. When Prince Shōtoku Taishi (572–622) commissioned the construction of Japan's first Buddhist temple, Shitennō-ji, Japan was predominantly Shinto and had no *miyadaiku* (carpenters trained in the art of building Buddhist temples), so the prince hired three skilled men from Baekje, a Buddhist state in what is now Korea. Among them was Shigetsu Kongō, whose work would become the foundation of the construction firm Kongō Gumi.

In the centuries that followed, the maintenance, repair and reconstruction of Shitennō-ji (ravaged a number of times by wars and natural disasters) provided Kongō Gumi's main source of income, but as Buddhism spread throughout Japan the scope of the company's work also expanded to include contributions to other major temple complexes such as Hōryū-ji (607) and Koyasan (816), as well as Osaka Castle (1583). Kongō Gumi would continue to flourish under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867), a period during which Buddhist temples received substantial financial support. The company weathered the pro-Shinto Meiji Period (1868–1912) and its often violent efforts to eradicate Buddhism from Japan, which included the destruction of tens of thousands of Buddhist temples. Kongō Gumi also survived the Shōwa Financial Crisis of 1927, keeping pace with economic and technological developments until it finally succumbed to financial difficulties and became a subsidiary of Takamatsu Kensetsu in 2006, after more than 1,400 years of independent operation.

Although Japan boasts six of the world's oldest companies and an estimated 20,000 firms over 100 years old, Kongō Gumi's longevity is certainly remarkable and worthy of study. Fortunately, the principles that guided the company over the centuries have been preserved by the Kongō family itself. The 32nd leader of the company, Yoshisada Kongō, writing during the Meiji Period, left a creed, later titled *Shokuke kokoroe no koto*, or 'family knowledge of the trade', a list of 16 precepts distilled from the company's successful past and intended to guide and preserve the family's operations into the future. Western observers might be surprised to discover that while the creed addresses 'business' subjects such as quality control and customer satisfaction, it puts equal emphasis on 'personal' issues such as how to dress (in keeping with one's station), how much to drink (in moderation) and how to treat others (with utmost respect). Indeed, the first article of the creed states that minding the precepts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto, and training to use the carpenter's rule are 'our most important duty', suggesting that the standards against which a Kongō measures his life are as critical to success as the instrument by which he measures his work...

Learning from the long-lived: "[Building on Tradition – 1,400 Years of a Family Business.](#)"

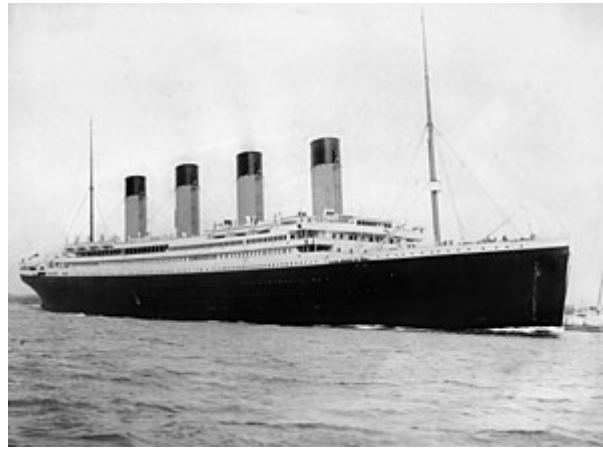
See also: "[The Data of Long-Lived Institutions](#)" from [@zander](#) at The Long Now Foundation.

* Gustav Mahler

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As we take the long view, we might recall that it was on this date in 1911 that *RMS Titanic* was launched from the boatyard in Belfast in which it was built, the largest passenger ship of its day. A state-of-the-art steamship, it set sail from Southampton on its maiden voyage on March 10th of the following year, bound for New York City. Four days later, after calls at Cherbourg in France and Queenstown (now Cobh) in Ireland, the "unsinkable" *Titanic* collided with the iceberg that sent it under in the North Atlantic, 375 miles south of Newfoundland.

(For perspective on scale)



source

Written by LW

May 31, 2021 at 1:01 am

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Tagged with business, companies, culture, history, institutions, Kongō Gumi, Long Now, long-lived institutions, longest, oldest, organizations, shipping, Shitennō-ji, Titanic

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