

A Mutual Act of Acceptance: Buddhism in Pre-modern and Post-Meiji Japan

Linfeng Yang^{1,a,*}

¹*Japanese Language and Culture, Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN, 55105, USA*

a. lyang4@macalester.edu

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Buddhism, as a religion introduced to Japan, has gone through significant evolution as Japanese society combines it with elements that are particular to Japanese culture. Therefore, it is worth exploring how recent interpretations are different from the form of Buddhism when it was first introduced. What major changes Buddhism has undergone that make it the image nowadays in Japan would be a significant topic that is worth being pursued. The author has referred to research from scholarly articles and journals that has previously explored issues and themes related to the historical development of Buddhism in Japan. After centuries of societal evolution and progressing ideologies, Buddhism has found its way of adaption in Japan, which retains essential elements from its original doctrines while not infringing the principal qualities of traditional Japanese culture.

Keywords: Buddhism, Shintoism, Martial Arts, Meiji Period, Zen

1. Introduction

Buddhism in Japan, since its first introduction, has gone through a tremendously complex set of adaptations and evolvments to become what it signifies today. The transformation of Buddhism in Japan, therefore, reflects underlying information about some of the deeper values embedded in Japanese society. A thorough examination and comparison of the various ways Buddhism has been treated will bring a more profound understanding of Japan as a nation and shed some light on its sophisticated culture.

Buddhism has experienced various stages that depart from strict scrutiny from the government to a blooming period where even ordinary citizens have the access to donating to temples. These different characteristics tell us significant information about Japanese society in different periods and qualify the tendencies of specific leaders of the country. Drawing information from previously established scholarly articles and academic journals that analyze the roles of Buddhism in specific periods of Japan. The current prevalence and popularity of Buddhism in Japan can be traced to the various attempts that enabled Buddhism, as a religion that originally came from foreign lands, to become an integral part of Japanese society. In other words, it is a mutual process that not only is initiated by Buddhist monks and missionaries, but also the Japanese society as a whole actively trying to absorb its essential values.

2. Nara Period

The very first form of Buddhism in Japan largely came from learning and imitating Buddhist practices from the Sui and Tang Dynasties in China. Not only were specific doctrines and beliefs absorbed by Japanese students who were sent to study, the government during the Nara Period also attempted to copy the way of governance as it believed the existence of Buddhism had contributed greatly to the stability in China.

There were mainly two figures who are deemed as representations of the first acceptance of Buddhism in Japan, Emperor Shomu and Prince Shotoku. At first, many ministers objected to the acceptance of a foreign religion, worrying that it would deliver instability to the nation of Japan. For example, when statues were brought to Japan as gifts from the Korean Peninsula, there was coincidentally a plague that devastated the lives of many Japanese people. Therefore, many early Buddhist statues from China and Korea were thrown into the ocean as a way of calming the god that was punishing Japan for taking in a representation of foreign beliefs[1]. But both Prince Shotoku and Emperor Shomu insisted on learning more about the Buddhist culture. Prince Shotoku had a unique way of interpreting the Three Treasures, one of the most essential values in traditional Buddhism. Instead of viewing them as three different ideas, he combined them into one thought which was to pursue the greater good of a nation. Prince Shotoku believed that if the people of a country did not have to suffer from hunger and lived a satisfactory life, then the Three Treasures would be realized at the same time[2]. Holding this belief, Prince Shotoku established Buddhist schools that aimed to spread the knowledge that all beings are equal and sponsored facilities that were meant to help the poorest in society. These facilities were often integrated with temples and were dedicated to those who suffered misfortune, providing them with food, shelter, and security. If a person suffered from a disability or illness, or a child is abandoned by his parents, the facilities of Prince Shotoku will help with their situation accordingly. Prince Shotoku hoped that such efforts would raise awareness that Buddhism is a religion of virtue, encouraging more members of the court to understand and subsequently accept its existence. Fortunately, his actions successfully influenced many people in the court, including the emperor at the time.

While Prince Shotoku minded the work of proliferating the influence of Buddhism to wider sectors of Japanese society, Emperor Shomu faced the dilemma of maintaining the balance of power between state and religion. He was the first Tenno in Japanese history to depart from his status as a ruler and enter temples to repent of his wrongdoings and regrets[2]. He believed that acts of previous governments such as imposing heavy taxes on peasants and organizing laborers to build extravagant castles had gone against the principal ideas of Buddhism because they caused great suffering and complaints from the masses. In order to demonstrate that he truly understood the principle of equality of sympathy in Buddhism, the emperor promoted the idea of Chishiki, or common friends, to summon commoners from the masses to attend the great ceremonies of Buddhist worship [2]. This, despite being one of Prince Shotoku's hopes as well, was later met with the difficulty of controlling because of the influx of people. Emperor Shomu was disappointed and helpless simultaneously, knowing that if he wished to restore the divinity of temples, he must take severe measures to control the masses. At last, facing the pressure of many ministers who were advocating for stability, in spite of being fairly aware of the necessity to reform, Emperor Shomu reluctantly published the edict that forbade many from entering the temples [2]. Moreover, in order to make the image of Buddhism achieve a more holy purpose in his mind, Emperor Shomu spent more manpower and financial resources to create the resplendent Buddha statue. Such an approach was undoubtedly contrary to the idea of caring for the people, so the ruling class of the Nara Period began to decline.

3. Struggle with Shintoism

Despite the general acceptance of Buddhism in the Japanese government, the competition between Shintoism and Buddhism still persisted. Especially around the area of the Grand Shrine of Ise, the most prominent architectural example of Shintoism in Japan, Buddhist monks and nuns were initially prohibited from entering[3]. For a religion to develop, monetary resources were required so Buddhist practitioners in the Heian Period created many campaigns that aimed to encourage donations from common followers. The act of pilgrimage was among one of the most popular forms of expression that significantly boosted the influence of Buddhism in Japanese society. The attempts made by Buddhist monks and nuns were recorded in paintings that depict city views in Heian Japan[3]. From the characters' actions and garments, one can recognize the growing popularity of Buddhism despite the strong presence of Shinto values that had dominated the religious narrative of Japan since the nation was founded. At first, Buddhist monks and nuns were only permitted to look at Shinto shrines from a distance[3]. But the relationship between Shintoism and Buddhism was not always hostile. After Buddhism entered Japan, it never denied the status and sanctity of Shinto. Because of this respect expressed by Buddhism, many Buddhist and Shinto ideologies are actually integrated in Japan [4]. More specifically, one of the most essential beliefs of Shintoism is the presence of god in every object, regardless of life. This, from its root, does not differ very much from the Buddhist principle that all beings are created equal. As a result, the competition and fusion between Shinto and Buddhism occurred at the same time.

Nonetheless, Buddhism, as a religion that faced many disadvantages at the beginning and was lower than the status of Shintoism, there must be external factors that contributed to its rise. One of the advantages Buddhism received was fundraising from notable figures including Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi [3]. Obtaining support from these individuals that held political power, Buddhism gradually occupied the main stage of religion in premodern Japan. But the underlying reason was also that notable Shoguns were actively interested in Buddhist doctrines and sided with the ideologies that Buddhism intended to convey. For example, the role of martial arts, seemingly unrelated or even against the image of Buddhism, actually helped establish the popularity of it amongst powerful Shoguns. There were primarily two sectors of Buddhism in Japan that had close relations to the practice of martial arts: Esoteric Buddhism and Zen [5]. Esoteric Buddhism focused on the controversy between the Buddhist prohibition to not killing and soldiers' behavior in wars. Many periods of Japanese history were structured with individual Shoguns possessing fiefs, and the most common reason a period ended was because of conflicts that took place between Shoguns who had major military power. The war was accompanied by thousands of killings. While conquering the country, the Shoguns were also seeking the peace of mind. Therefore, the idea of enlightenment in Esoteric Buddhism became a medicine to comfort these generals, so that they will not be too remorseful when they look back on their previous killings. Soldiers would engrave patterns with Buddhist elements on bows and weapons to soothe their souls[5].

According to orthodox Buddhism, if a person kills, he will not be reincarnated. But Esoteric Buddhism offered an interpretation that argued for the simultaneous achievement of enlightenment when the act of killing was committed. If one successfully became enlightened at the moment of taking someone else's life, then a hellish afterlife could be avoided. Therefore, as long as a person who has killed people expresses enough repentance after the killing, and sincerely believes in Buddhism and cultivates Buddhism, it will not affect his complete enlightenment[5]. The concept of Isshin, one mind, advocated in Zen is also in line with this understanding of great enlightenment. When a person's purpose in martial arts is purely to improve himself, and killing is only a sin that he has to commit because of political needs, then he has achieved Isshin. Whether in Japanese or Chinese history, martial arts are based on the purpose of self-cultivation, but people who practice

martial arts often participate in wars, so there is a certain connection between the two. When soldiers and Shoguns were Isshin, the combat effectiveness of the army would be significantly improved, because they would no longer be afraid of their fear after killing.

4. Era of Sakoku

Because of the popularity among samurais regarding the ideals of Buddhism and the gradual combination with Shintoism, Buddhist influence had reached its peak during the Edo Period. The power of the shogunate had far suppressed the political status of the emperor, so when the Bakufu shoguns worshiped Buddhism, even Shinto was ranked second [4]. This also reflects the contradiction between the emperor and the Tokugawa family at that time, and why the Meiji Restoration had to eradicate the shogunate. But the kind of Buddhism which samurais practiced was not correspondent with orthodox Buddhist teachings. Due to its affiliations with martial arts, Buddhism in Edo Japan transformed into a religion that not only preached doctrines, but managed social order and impacted laws as well[4]. Suddenly, Buddhist priests changed from begging for funds on the streets to individuals who possessed political power. Of course, it is undeniable that religious entertainers, known as gannin, who have been performing in all walks of life in Japan before having made outstanding contributions to the spread of Buddhism among the masses[6] At the same time, Japan's hostile attitude towards the invasion of Catholicism after Oda Nobunaga also helped to stabilize Buddhism's position in the Japanese political world. In order to curb the spread of Catholicism in Japan, the Tokugawa shogunate needed assistance to help it manage religious affairs, so Buddhism was chosen as the religion with this power [7].

However, having too much ability to manage society made corruption emerge, which is why Buddhism was treated as a representative of the old forces that needed to be eradicated at the beginning of the Meiji era. It was common amongst priests who committed many acts of malfeasance under the excessive protection of the Tokugawa government. Many monks were found idle and not taking up the responsibility of running the temples, severely indulged in an abundance of materialism gathered from donations and fundraising [7]. People began to miss the purest form of Buddhism from earlier times, when there were only pursuits of spiritual beliefs, rejecting the temptation of materialistic joy. Nevertheless, because of the status that Buddhism was given in the Edo Period, the ideas it advocated were widely developed through art and literature. Coupled with the Tokugawa shogunate's policy of Sakoku, Buddhism's teachings were free from the harassment of other religious ideas, and Buddhism gained a pivotal influence in Japan. Reformers wished to separate Buddhism from Shinto but met with much objection from followers [7]. They attempted to emphasize the role of Grand Shrine of Ise, the place pure from Buddhist influence and began investigating corruption within the Buddhist system, examining ties to the old shogunate that enabled monks to enjoy the privileges brought by the hierarchy system. Japanese Buddhism in the Meiji era had to adapt to the changes of the new era, and the first thing to do was to admit the previous corruption.

5. Meiji Japan

Under the large picture of renovation and the slogan of restoring power to the emperor, the Meiji Period marks a significant change in the recognition of religions. Shinto, as the religion that best signifies Japanese culture and identity, was elevated to a higher status. But because of the previous amalgamation of Buddhism and Shintoism during Edo Japan, it became a difficult process to completely separate the two. There was a blurry line between the definition of philosophy and religion during Meiji Japan, as many thinkers like Kiyozawa Manshi and Inoue Enryo believed that in order to suit the changes in Japanese society, Buddhism should be reiterated in terms of

philosophy rather than a pure form of religion[8]. Influenced by philosophical ideas from the West, because Buddhism mostly conveys a way of advocating how people live, when the content of religion is so specific, its existence becomes closer to philosophy. This realization has also led to a connection between Buddhist beliefs and political thought, most notably socialism and Marxism[9]. Because Japan had just opened its borders in the Meiji era, and many industries were waiting for new technologies to improve people's quality of life, and Buddhism has always advocated the equality of all living beings, so when seeing that there are still many commoners suffering from hunger and poverty, Buddhism began to initiate change in the status quo through practical actions. But if a religion wants to achieve substantial influence in society, it is inevitable to be involved in politics. Therefore, many Buddhist teachings at that time even appeared with words similar to the ideas concerning equality advocated by socialism and Marxism [9]. For example, Takagi Kenmyo, one of the first Buddhist thinkers who embraced the idea of socialism in Japan, declared that socialism and Buddhism share one obvious common goal, which is to uphold high standards for oneself [9]. The premise of the realization of socialism is that everyone has a good conscience and will not take away resources that do not belong to them because of greed. This is crucial to achieving true equality advocated in Buddhism, because if there is an uneven distribution, people's statuses cannot be on the same level.

On the other hand, there were traditional Buddhist believers that opposed such radical thoughts like Shimaji Mokurai [9]. Their basis comes from a social hierarchy that has not changed in millennia. Although Buddhism has always advocated the equality of all beings, it is an endless road in the real world. It is precisely because mortals cannot achieve it in the limited cycle of life, so it is necessary to achieve true enlightenment through practice and meditation. All injustice in the world today is a test for Buddhist believers. If a person is easily overwhelmed by these sufferings, then he cannot achieve the state of detachment entirely. The Meiji Era was a turning point in Japan's journey to modernization, which experienced tremendous changes in politics, science, and religion. Unfortunately, the idea of peace advocated by Buddhism was not recognized in Japan before World War II, which led to the rise of militarism afterward.

6. Conclusion

The success of Buddhism in Japan has not only originated from a unilateral missionary approach, but a reciprocal process. Buddhism found the need in Japanese society that corresponds to the values it tries to preach. Therefore, while Buddhism and Japanese culture adapt to each other, they also mutually achieve each other. However, due to the limitation of space, this paper does not discuss the views of Buddhism in modern Japan after the Meiji era. At the same time, in the Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi periods, there are many detailed and profound works of art reflecting Buddhist concepts that are not mentioned. These elements undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the development of Buddhism in Japan. Further discussion of this knowledge is necessary for a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of Japanese Buddhism.

References

- [1] McCallum, D. F. (2001). *The Earliest Buddhist Statues in Japan*. *Artibus Asiae*, 61(2), 149–188. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3249909>
- [2] Zenryū, T., & Umeyo, H. (1974). *Buddhism in the Asuka-Nara Period*. *The Eastern Buddhist*, 7(1), 19–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44361382>
- [3] Andrei, T. J. (2018). *Ise Sankei Mandara and the Art of Fundraising in Medieval Japan*. *Art Bulletin*, 100(1), 68–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2017.1367911>
- [4] Kimura, K. (2011). *The Role of the Noh Play Chikubushima: An Amalgamation of Shintoism and Buddhism*. *International Journal of the Image*, 1(4), 11–18. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8560/cgp/v01i04/44222>

- [5] Trenson, S. (2022). *Buddhism and Martial Arts in Premodern Japan: New Observations from a Religious Historical Perspective*. *Religions*, 13(5), 440. MDPI AG. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/rel13050440>
- [6] Groemer, G. (2000). *A Short History of the Gannin: Popular Religious Performers in Tokugawa Japan*. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27(1/2), 41–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233640>
- [7] Klautau, O. (2008). *Against the Ghosts of Recent Past: Meiji Scholarship and the Discourse on Edo-Period Buddhist Decadence*. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 35(2), 263–303. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233834>
- [8] Godart, G. C. (2008). “Philosophy” or “Religion”? *The Confrontation with Foreign Categories in Late Nineteenth Century Japan*. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69(1), 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2008.0008>
- [9] Shields, J. M. (2014). *Zen and the Art of Treason: Radical Buddhism in Meiji Era (1868–1912) Japan*. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 15(2), 205–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2014.898425>