

# ***Japanese Buddhism and Its Role in the Reform of Prince Shoto Kutaishi***

**Jiahui Cai<sup>1,a,†</sup>, Xiaoyu Tan<sup>2,b,†</sup> and Peilun Yin<sup>3,c,\*,†</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Huizhou University, Shenzhen, China*

<sup>2</sup>*SuZhou Science Town Foreign Language School, Huqiu, China*

<sup>3</sup>*University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Zhongshan Institute, Zhongshan, China*  
*a. 1163109472@qq.com, b. Tanxiaoyu060710@outlook.com, c. 1811000119@mail.sit.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

*†These authors contributed equally.*

**Abstract:** In 603 A.D., Prince Shoto Kutaishi conducted a reform movement in Japan. Prince Shoto Kutaishi was a crucial character in this period. His reform promoted the development and localization of Buddhism in Japan. It was the golden age of Buddhism in Japan. Another crucial thing in Shoto Kutaishi's reform was recovered the community between Japan and China. The purpose of community was exchanged Buddhist teachings and import mainland culture to Japan. However, in more than twenty years after the death of Prince Shotoku, Japan began the massive Taika Era Reforms. This paper sorts out the historical process of Prince Shotoku's reform. This study argues that Prince Shotoku implemented the reform in order to maintain the rule of the emperor and to promote centralization of power.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Shoto Kutaishi, reform, Japan

## **1. Introduction**

Buddhism is one of the most important religions in Japanese history, there was a wide range of difficulties in development. After Buddhism spread to Japan, there were very difficult transmission process. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, there were crucial changes of Japanese Buddhism. In 603 A.D., Prince Shoto Kutaishi conducted a reform movement in Japan. When Shoto Kutaishi took the power, he wanted to build an order that was a centralized system surrounded by the Mikado so as to eliminate social crises. The main measures include: build a new system called Twelve Level Cap and Rank System, enact "Seventeen-article Constitution", call up "Respect the three treasures" (Buddha, Dharma and Monk), worship Buddhism, and build up Buddhist temples across the country [1]. He also sent students to China, seeking to establish equal diplomatic relationship with the Sui dynasty. The learning of Chinese culture laid the foundation for Japan's civilization and the reform.

Prince Shoto Kutaishi was a crucial character in this period. His reform promoted the development and localization of Buddhism in Japan. It was the golden age of Buddhism in Japan. At the same time, the development of Buddhism also led to the civilization of Japanese society and the consolidation of the imperial rule, and found the base of Taika Era Reforms. Based on the records of Prince Shoto Kutaishi's contributions to Buddhism from AD 594-622, this paper discusses the relationship between Buddhism and politics during the reform. It further explores Prince Shoto Kutaishi's contribution to the development of Buddhism in Japan.

## **2. The Buddhism in Japan Before the Reform of Shoto Kutaishi**

In ancient Japan, as well as other primitive nations, the religious belief was from the worshiped of nature gods to the worshiped of ancestor gods and hero gods. They worshiped natural gods, included the sun, moon and stars, mountains, trees, animals and the universe. These were all in their reverence, which were known as 800,000 gods. Among them, the worshiped of the god of agriculture was the most crucial in their reverence. In the countryside, there were abundant prayer offerings in spring and harvest Thanksgiving offerings in autumn.

When Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it changed the religious pattern of Japan. Many ordinary Japanese converted their belief from pantheism to Buddhism. Before the Dynasty of Suiko, Buddhism received a considerable attention in Japan [2]. Through the Korean and Chinese popular and official channels, Buddhism became the mainstream religion in Japan. There were a wide range of people believed Buddhism at that time. The ordinary people who wanted to get a better respawn after death believed Buddhism. In nobilities, the spread of Buddhism had equivalent influence. After the reform by Shoto Kutaishi, Buddhism area entered a golden age in Japan.

Before the Shoto Kutaishi's reform, Buddhism was mainly spread by the immigrants from China and Korea. As early as in the Zhou and Qin Dynasties, Chinese immigrants brought Buddhism into Japan. However, folk spread that has definite evidence would ascend to the South Liang period. In the Han Dynasty, Sima Da went to Japan to install Buddha statues and converted to worship. This form of Buddhism was the belief of Chinese immigrants in Japan, but did not spread among Japanese folks. The immigrants from the Han Dynasty could move to Japan through Korea neither across the sea. As a result, Buddhism existed in Korea about 150 years earlier than in Japan [3]. Accordingly, Chinese and Korean immigrants could both spread the belief of Buddhism into Japan. It was initially popular among immigrants, then accepted by local Japanese, and finally influenced upper society of Japan. This was the major process of Buddhism spread into Japan via popular forces. At a later time, the Korean government introduced Buddhism to Japan's upper classes by offering a Buddha statue, along with sutras and religious banners to bring Buddhism into upper society of Japan. Since then, Buddhism had become the mainstream in Japan.

## **3. Prince Shoto Kutaishi's Measures to Reform Buddhism**

Prince Shoto Kuaishi's reform adopted following measures. First, he set up "Twelve Level Cap and Rank System". This system coffers person offices by personal ability of management and achievements. There were twelve different positions based on specific abilities and achievements, including morality, benevolence, propriety, faith, justice, wisdom, respectively in size, to form twelve levels of official titles. It employed six different colors (purple, blueness, red, yellow, white and black) to divide high and low positions. It was a significant change on clan monopoly the positions and wealth. A position was given to an individual, not a family. This system changed the family-name system, in which positions were often passed from parents to children in the family. The family-name system shows that individuals in each clan served Mikado. So, there was an organization for a clan. It was difficult to decide one was superior or a subordinate.

However, "Twelve Level Cap and Rank System" gave position to individuals. It avoided the nepotism in family-name system and improved political norms. Officialdom must follow the "Twelve Level Cap and Rank System". Therefore, this system solved the problem of monopoly in officialdom to some extent. Awarding honours only to individuals, rather than families, prevented further expansion.

In addition, the reform by Prince Shoto Kutaishi on positions suppressed the power of the nobles and laid the ideological foundation of imperial power for building the centralization system in future.

At the same time, he sent students to China and awarded titles to middle and small aristocrats in order to cultivate talented people and further weaken the power of aristocrats.

Another crucial thing in Shoto Kutaishi's reform was recovered the community between Japan and China. The purpose of community was exchanged Buddhist teachings and import mainland culture to Japan. One of the important purposes of the repatriation to Sui is to "prosper domestic Buddhism", so that the Buddhist belief in the dominant position in Japan, with the power of Buddhism to let the Japanese people have a unified spiritual belief. The expeditions after 607 "were not merely for the exchange of Buddhist teachings, but for the effective import of Chinese culture into Japan" [4].

On Buddhism, Shoto Kutaishi let workers who built Buddhist monastery around whole country. To reach the purpose of permanent security, Prince Shoto Kutaishi adopted mainland culture, directly sent students to China, and introduced important reforms in foreign policies. In 607A.D., he also sent envoy Ono no imoko to Sui, to seeking to establish equal diplomatic relationship [5].

After the Suiko Dynasty, because Buddhism penetrated into every class of Japan, the belief of Buddhism could not be ignored. Buddhism became the mainstream among all classes. The Nanto Rokushu in the Nara period, the Shingon Buddhism in the Heian period, and the revival of Nanto Buddhism in the Kamakura period all strengthened the influence of Buddhism in Japan. Buddhism became a state religion in Japan.

In conclusion, Prince Shoto Kutaishi reformed official positions and revitalized Buddhism to establish a national cult. He sought to consolidate the power of the Mikado and weaken the power of nobilities, eventually taking power back in the hands of the emperor from the region. However, Prince Shoto Kutaishi's reform was incomplete. The Twelve Level Cap and Rank System was established without abolishing the family name system, and it was only practiced among the middle and lower nobility in and around the capital. The Seventeen-article Constitution as an admonition could only serve to education, no more binding force. More importantly, it did not touch the Benotami system that was the main problem in that period. Thus, it limited effect on weakening the power of the clan and enhancing the imperial power. It could not solve the problem of class contradiction and saved society from crises.

#### **4. Buddhism and Its Role after the Reformation**

After Prince Shotoku's reform, Buddhism developed in Japanese society and also had an impact on Japanese society. Before Prince Shotoku's reform, conflicts within the ruling class were prominent. The clan aristocracy owned large areas of land and controlled the imperial government. Under such a heavy crisis, Prince Shotoku's pursuit of political unity required, in turn, the unification of society's religious beliefs [6].

Prince Shotoku has made outstanding contributions to the development of Buddhism and the dissemination of Buddhist teachings [7]. Among Japanese politicians, Prince Shotoku was the first to study the principles of Buddhism. At the same time, Prince Shotoku did not stop at the surface of study, but also applied Buddhist philosophy to politics. About one-third of the many emperors of Japan eventually became monks or nuns, and there were countless more monks from the imperial family. The spread of Buddhist culture promoted by Prince Shotoku enriched the spiritual and cultural world of the Japanese people. Meanwhile, it laid the foundation for Japan's continued acceptance of new foreign cultures in the future. Prince Shotoku's measures to promote the development of Buddhism were manifested in three main ways as follows.

#### 4.1. Promote Buddhist Thought as the Foundation of Japan's Cultural Establishment

Prince Shotoku took a series of measures to promote Buddhism. For example, Prince Shotoku urged the emperor to issue edicts promoting Buddhism, such as the promotion of the Three Treasures of Buddhism to Flourish the Country. The promotion of Buddhism was treated as one of the major national policies. Prince Shotoku also established the Seventeen Articles of the Constitution as a decree. By doing so, he established the status of Buddhism in Japan's national faith and promoted Buddhist thought as the foundation of Japan's cultural establishment. Prince Shotoku also established Buddhist thought as the code of conduct for Japanese officials, which led to the further spread of Buddhism. All of the above provided the possibility for the integration of Buddhist culture with the native Japanese culture and the development of a distinctive Japanese Buddhist culture.

#### 4.2. Promote Japanese Native Culture

Before Buddhism was introduced to Japan, the architectural designs in Japan were generally simple. Most of the people lived in huts. For upper class people, most of them also just had houses in larger scale with not too much elaborate design. The spread of Buddhism in Japan promoted Japanese carving and even painting techniques. Japan then promoted the Buddhist art, and built Buddha statues and Buddhist temples. Prince Shotoku spent a lot of money to build temples such as Koboji, Horyuji, Fengokaji, Kongoji and Hourinji. This promoted the building of Buddhist houses by Japanese nobles and made it a trend to become a monk and build Buddhist houses in the imperial court at that time.

Moreover, during this period, many elements of Japanese art were closely related to Buddhism, such as calligraphy, sculpture, painting, music, and dance. The famous Buddhist carver Burakumin was a descendant of Southern Dynasty artisans who moved to Japan. His skill in making Buddha statues was so great that he was later awarded the crown of Daren. The Joroku Buddha, the Yakushi statue in the Golden Hall of Horyuji Temple, and the three statues of Sakyamuni are all by his hand. These Buddha statues often highlight the atmosphere of freshness and detachment from earthly mundanity and promote understanding of Buddhism. It can be said that the period of Prince Shotoku was based on Buddhism as the foundation of Japan's cultural establishment.

#### 4.3. Widely Welcome Chinese Monks to Teach in Japan and Promote Cultural Exchanges with Other Countries

In addition to building Buddhist temples, Prince Shotoku also devoted himself to the study of Buddhist teachings. Prince Shotoku welcomed monks Huizi and Huicong to Koboji Temple in Japan and called them "the three precious pillars". When Prince Shotoku lectured on the *Srimala-devi Simhanada-sutra* and the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra*, the audience included all classes of Japan, from the emperor's nobles down to the common people. After compiling the sutras and taking into account the views of other scholars, he compiled the *Explanation of Three Sutras*. This was the first work of Buddhist studies in Japan, and it was also written in Chinese, which is of great significance to Japan.

Prince Shotoku sent messengers to the Sui Dynasty several times, reopening Sino-Japanese exchanges that had been broken off for more than 100 years. He also sent an emissary, Ono no Imoko, to China to study Buddhism and its teachings. This was the first Buddhist exchange between China and Japan, and it was also an exchange in the cultural history of China and Japan, which laid the foundation for sending a large number of envoys to China later. Japan absorbed the culture of China's mainland, and this initiative provided the basis for the later Taika Era Reforms [8]. Although the scale of the mission to China in Sui Dynasty was much smaller than that in Tang Dynasty, those who succeeded in the study played an important role in the history of Japan. For example, the central

figures of the later Taika Era Reforms, Takahata Genri and Monk Min, were monks who had studied in China during Sui and Tang Dynasty.

## 5. The Influence of Buddhist Reform on the Taika Era Reforms

In his reform, Prince Shotoku suppressed the clan aristocracy to a certain extent, but did not eliminate it completely. For example, the crown system was established before the clan system was not abolished. Besides, the 17 articles of the constitution were only admonitions and were not binding enough. The ministry system was not changed either, and even more not influenced by this ancient power on the development and edification of Japanese society, which weakened the role of Buddhism for Japanese society to some extent [9].

However, in more than twenty years after the death of Prince Shotoku, Japan began the massive Taika Era Reforms. The Taika Era Reforms established a centralized system of power in Japan. The monks and foreign students who returned from abroad brought more advanced culture and technology to help the rulers better control the unity of society. The further development of Buddhism in Japan under the Taika Era Reforms continued to build on Prince Shotoku's policies toward Buddhism at the time of the reform [10]. Prince Shotoku's reforms laid the foundation for the development of Buddhism and pointed the way. Most importantly, the development and popularity of Buddhism raised the level of indoctrination in Japanese society and the cultural awareness of the society improved.

On the other hand, Prince Shotoku's idea of the integration of God, Buddhism, and Confucianism fully demonstrated the two characteristics of originality and transformation, and also fully interpreted the meaning of integration and maintained the rule of the emperor [11]. The reform also promoted the process of feudalization of Japanese society, integrating Buddhist culture with politics and society. Thus, Prince Shotoku promoted the Suiko Dynasty and the Taika Era Reforms. His continuous innovation of Buddhism and increasing efforts to promote Buddhism led to the gradual expansion of its influence in society. As those envoys and monks returned to Japan to preach and teach in the society, they promoted the progress of Japanese society and civilization, and awakened the latent spiritual potential of Japanese society and country. This was an epoch-making reform.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper sorts out the historical process of Prince Shotoku's reform. This study argues that Prince Shotoku implemented the reform in order to maintain the rule of the emperor and to promote centralization of power. In addition, Prince Shengde took a series of measures to promote Buddhism, promoting the Buddhist thought to become the foundation of Japanese culture, promoting the development of Japanese native culture and the cultural exchanges between Japan and other countries, and laying the foundation for the later reform.

## References

- [1] Zhang Shouqiang, *On Prince Shengde and the Reform of the Push-Ancient Dynasty*, University of Yan Bian, 2010.
- [2] Li Nina, *On Prince Shengde's Contribution to the Spread and Development of Japanese Buddhist Culture*, Education of Shanxi, 2012.
- [3] Luo Ling, *The Emperor and Buddhism before the Great Refoerm*, Wuling Academic Journal, 2014.
- [4] Master Sheng-Yan, *History of Japanese Buddhism*, 2008.
- [5] Yin Na *The Spread and Acceptance of Buddhism in Nara Heian Period*, *History of Heilongjiang* , 2014.
- [6] Luo Ling. *The Emperor and Buddhism before the Taika Era Reforms*. *Journal of Hunan University of Arts and Sciences (Social Sciences Edition)* , 2009,34(4): 58-60
- [7] Japanese] Linaga Saburo. *History of Japanese Culture*. Commercial Press, 1992: 45.
- [8] Wang Yong. *Japanese Culture*. Higher Education Press, 2001:160, 188-189.
- [9] Cheng Fengchuan, *Prince Shengde and Early Japanese Buddhism*, *Forign Problem research*, 2003.

- [10] Zhuang Bing, *The First Person in Ancient Japan to Learn Confucianism and Buddhism—Princ Shengde*, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2010.
- [11] Han Yi, *Prince Sengde's Letter to Sui and the Spread of Pure Land Religion in Japan*, *Academic Journal of University Lingyi*, 2004.