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GUIDES TO BUDDHISM

# A Cultural History of Japanese Buddhism

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# Introduction

The notion that “Buddhism” is a “world religion” is an idea derived from nineteenth-century Western scholars.

Moreover, the discourse of “world religions” is alive and well in the twenty-first century, as world religions courses have, if anything, proliferated at North American and European colleges and universities. Despite revisionist views within the history of religion that call into question the unitary character of any of the great “isms,” Buddhism frequently continues to be described as a singular and stable tradition. The result is the obfuscation of manifold “Buddhisms” displaying complex, multiple religious practices and ideas.

On campuses and in college towns throughout the world, Zen centers and Tibetan monks confront us with the fact there are those among us who continue to enter Buddhist lineages and follow these religious paths. The appetite for books on Buddhism in English has similarly grown in recent decades, and while Buddhist paths are better understood in the West currently than at any time in the past, they are typically represented as emanations of a mostly “outsider” religion, a faith both monolithic and the obverse of Western monotheisms. Buddhism, such representations often suggest, is impersonal, lacks any notion of sin or hell, and is realized through a direct experience that, presumably, transcends the limitations of institutions or customs.

Unfortunately, the appearance that there is an essential core to Buddhism is also inadvertently suggested by the many books on the history of Buddhism that treat Japanese Buddhism as either an afterthought or as a not-fully-orthodox version of Indian Buddhism. Many histories of Buddhism provide but scant coverage of its Japanese

traditions and often end coverage at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when lineages of Japanese Buddhism faced increasing ideological competition from neo-Confucian and Shintō adherents. Rarely do these volumes cover contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

This study offers an in-depth, nuanced account of the history of Japanese “Buddhisms” that attempts to rectify the many lacunae of scope and content evident in books that only cursorily deal with Japanese Buddhist traditions. Incorporating scholarship not represented sufficiently in the coverage of introductory volumes on Buddhism, we attempt to break new ground by taking advantage of the many insights of scholarship from Japan and the West. The vast majority of authors of Buddhist histories are scholars of Indian or Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, which has contributed to confusion about Japanese Buddhism, including profound ignorance about features as basic as the identity of major Buddhist institutions and the sheer volume of cultural production in Japanese Buddhist traditions. (A recently published and prominent dictionary of Buddhism failed to include any discussion of Daigoji, an institution that has played a major role in Japanese Buddhist and secular history and which holds what may be the largest manuscript collection in all of Japanese Buddhism.)

We include coverage of Japanese Buddhism(s) beginning with the introduction in sixth-century Japan of continental monks, Buddhist images and texts, and related ritual paraphernalia, and continue to the present. In doing so, we use a periodization scheme that follows moments of significant transition within Buddhist organizations and in their relationship to the larger society rather than one based solely on political regime change. For example, we place “medieval” Japanese Buddhists in a period beginning in the tenth century because it was in this era that cultural practices such as writing and inheritance took on features

very different from those of earlier eras but were clearly distinct from those practiced after the tumultuous events associated with the Ōnin war (1467-77), the appearance of Westerners and their religion, and the consolidation of power under the Tokugawa shogunate. We also attempt to highlight local variations in Japanese Buddhism by drawing attention to mountain-related traditions (e.g., beliefs and practices of mountain ascetics) as well as the increased physical movement of figures such as networking monks who carried Buddhist beliefs and practices between geographical and cultural centers and peripheries.

Our rationale for this approach is to engage upper-level undergraduate and graduate students as well as scholars in more detailed discussion of issues of discourse and material culture current in the eras under study. In doing so, we explore how Japanese Buddhists of varying contexts drew upon Buddhist ideas and practices to make sense of their lives, to solve problems, and to create a meaningful world - a cosmos - out of chaos. In drawing attention to figures like networking monks as well as to physical mobility and landscape, we also want to underscore that Japanese Buddhist paths included local traditions that were often very different from those, for example, of the royal court (including aristocrats) and the warrior class, particularly in the commonly studied settings of the shogunate's headquarters and the royal capital. Our attention to material culture such as visual media centers attention on the exchange and appropriation of material objects in the practices of Japanese Buddhism. As with Buddhist paths in other cultural milieux, those of Japanese Buddhists were complex traditions with broad philosophical and ritual implications, and it is ultimately impossible to disentangle practices we associate with the "material" from others since, for example, writing in and of itself was often undertaken as a religious act and, clearly, an extension of

the religious practitioner's identity - an expression of religious modes of performative interaction with his or her environs.

Finally, readers can see that we maintain a focus throughout on Japanese Buddhist discourse, which provides a means of exploring with greater depth the multiple interpretations that people in the Japanese isles made of Buddhist texts and ideas. Japanese Buddhist thought and language are sometimes treated as if they were part of a unitary and, implicitly, unchanging cognitive complex. In fact, Japanese Buddhists appropriated Buddhist discourses to justify multiple and often competing perspectives. In sum, Japanese Buddhists "performed" Japanese Buddhism(s) at both the state and local levels, utilized material objects as a means of ritual exchange and enactment, and undertook multiple interpretations that utilized Buddhist language - all toward different and sometimes competing religious, social, and political ends.

# Overview of the Book

## **Chapter 1: Early Historical Contexts (Protohistory to 645)**

This chapter explores the multiple contexts that made possible the introduction of Buddhist texts, images, and ritual objects into sixth-century Japan, and the conditions for its development over the subsequent two centuries. We begin with a discussion of the narrative in the mytho-history *Nihon shoki* (720) of the introduction of Buddhist images and implements to the Japanese royal court. Through this discussion, the chapter considers the continental Asian influences, the struggle between the Soga and Mononobe families over the advisability of embracing Buddhist rituals, the representations of Prince Shōtoku's support of Buddhist practices, Buddhism in the late seventh-century Yamato Court, the early construction of Buddhist temples, and the relationship between Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the indigenous *kami*. Particular attention is given to the early Buddhist images such as those in the Shaka Triad at Hōryūji, which were an important focus of devotional practice.

## **Chapter 2: Ancient Buddhism (645-950)**

This chapter focuses on the development and flourishing of Buddhist institutions in the Nara and early Heian eras. Of note is the significance of the ruling family's support of Buddhist monastics and temples as well as the spread and propagation of Buddhism beyond the immediate circle of court families. This chapter includes coverage of the nationwide temple system inaugurated during the Nara period, the six Nara Buddhist lineages, the construction of such temples as the Tōdaiji, the ritual significance of sutra-copying bureaus, the monastic hierarchy, the relationship

between court families and Buddhist clerics, the increasing prominence of Buddhist rituals performed for the protection of the ruling class, the establishment of the Shingon and Tendai lineages, and the use of Buddhist rituals at court. It concludes with a discussion of women in ancient Japanese Buddhism.

### **Chapter 3: Early Medieval Buddhism (950-1300): The Dawn of Medieval Society and Related Changes in Japanese Buddhist Culture**

This chapter explores the discursive and ritual dominance of Buddhist lineages in the lives of Japanese aristocrats as well as the former's increasing influence in the lives of wider segments of the Japanese population. The chapter includes coverage of the relationship between dominant court families – such as the Fujiwara – and Buddhist practices, annual Buddhist ceremonies at court, temple-shrine patronage, the marked growth of esoteric Buddhist rituals to the Heian court, the increasing importance of Pure Land Buddhist practices and discourses, important temples and pilgrimage sites, the role of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Japanese religious lives, new interactions with continental East Asia, the popularization of Buddhist lineages and the seminal beginnings of “New Kamakura Buddhisms” (e.g., Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren), the role of older lineages in the Kamakura era, and the changing relationship between Buddhism and *kami* worship (Shintō) in this time period.

Starting with the Japanese royal court, about which there is a substantial historical record, we especially focus on how Buddhist practices informed the life of nobles and those close to them. Then we turn to the Tendai lineages because these Buddhist groups were arguably the closest institutionally to the mid-Heian court and gave rise to important changes in Buddhist belief and practice. From

there, we explore the increase in prominence of Pure Land discourses and practices and turn as well to the evolving relationship between *kami* and Buddhist divinities in sacred sites. After addressing the question of the relationship between Buddhism and the development of the arts, we consider the rising prominence of esoteric Buddhism in early medieval Japan, which introduced new ways of gathering ritual knowledge and played an integral role in the development of artistic lineages.

Meanwhile, court relations with continental East Asia resumed following a short period of virtual non-engagement. From the mid-tenth century onward, great architectural activity was regularly undertaken at the royal court, accompanied soon after or preceded by conflagration (Uejima 2010: 293–302). Aristocrats gradually made efforts to integrate the arts into Buddhist practice. Interaction increased between lay believers and monastic practitioners, including the development of monastic cloisters (*monzeki*) inhabited and operated by leading nobles or princes. Over time, the numbers of Buddhist ascetic practitioners (e.g., *hijiri*, *jikyōja*) who were semi-independent of the monasteries burgeoned. *Kami*-Buddha combinatory relations came to be elaborated in a variety of court rites in the capital region and, eventually, rites patronized by aristocrats, warriors, and members of the populace throughout the isles.

#### **Chapter 4: Late Medieval Buddhism (1300-1467): New Buddhisms, Buddhist Learning, Dissemination and the Fall into Chaos**

This chapter focuses on changes that Japanese Buddhists undertook or otherwise experienced during the concluding period of the medieval era. From the latter period of the Kamakura shogunate onward, the circumstances of life in the Japanese isles changed fundamentally. It was an era

that began with the temporary disintegration of the royal family. The splintering of the royal family into northern and southern courts and establishment of the Ashikaga shogunate in the Muromachi area of northern Kyoto (1336) were indeed accompanied by important changes in the cultural life of the aristocracy and leading warriors. The medieval era would eventually culminate with the devastating Ōnin/Bunmei war in Kyoto, entering into a transitional period marked by the decentralization of power, the landing of Europeans, and the destruction of the greatest temple complex in Japanese history, Enryakuji (Mount Hiei).

Moreover, the chaos that began the period may have contributed to the ease with which monks of assorted Buddhist lineages continued their travel throughout the land; sometimes studying under multiple masters of lineages of both older forms of Buddhism and of newer Buddhist movements. They founded temples in locations throughout eastern and western Japan. We draw attention to the Buddhist culture of learning, which thrived on new levels in the fourteenth century and permeated virtually all of the major lineages of Japanese Buddhism. What we call here networking monks, active in varied peripatetic traditions, were often intimately linked with this culture, and the temples they founded or frequented contributed to its flourishing. These included figures such as practitioners of mountain asceticism, related “holy ones” (*hijiri, shōnin*), and what would come to be called student-visitor monks (*kyakusō*), all of whom were much more active throughout the land than similar figures in the previous era, and many of them closely tied to the major Buddhist institutions. Meanwhile, monks of warrior background, especially those close to the shogunate, took on an increasingly prominent role within Buddhist culture. Zen monks began to specialize in performing funerals for parishioners, which

contributed to the wider dissemination of Buddhism to the populace. Major Buddhist institutions increasingly engaged in trade with others across the sea, and they also increasingly used block-print as a medium for reproducing sacred works which they distributed.

During the same period, some Buddhists began to increasingly conceive of the Japanese isles as not simply a realm at the edge of the world of Jambudvīpa but a unique polity distinct from continental traditions. A series of arts informed by Buddhist themes and practices became increasingly prominent among warriors, aristocrats, and, in some cases, the larger populace. Often, in this connection, preaching and related liturgical practices developed across the vast array of lineages of Japanese Buddhism, and increasingly made use of visual imagery. Taken as a whole, these varied developments contributed to the geographical and social dissemination of Buddhist beliefs and practices (although they would be propelled to new levels of prominence after the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate).

The chapter concludes with an extensive treatment of the position and activities of women. Recognizing that women's capacity for Buddhahood was variously conceived in continental Buddhism as well as in Japanese Buddhism, we draw a connection between such topoi and developments in Japanese Buddhist lineages between the ancient and early modern periods. We also consider the relationship between the social status of women, religious practice, and religious communities of premodern Japan.

## **Chapter 5: Buddhism and the Transition to the Modern Era (1467-1800)**

This chapter considers issues around the popularization of Buddhist lineages in this time period, their increasing

interaction with the population throughout the Japanese isles, and the evolving positions of Buddhists as well their learning and ritual within an increasingly *national* society. Drawing upon recent arguments that “new” Kamakura Buddhism became prominent in roughly the latter half of the fifteenth century and that the period of the late fifteenth century marked a kind of gateway to the modern – for example, the case of the “True Pure Land” school master Rennyō’s (1415–1499) ascendance – we note the devastation wrought by the Ōnin war (1467–1477) and the subsequent period of near-constant war as a veritable charnel ground of the epoch commonly called medieval Japan. Admittedly, a number of features of medieval Japanese Buddhism would continue but only do so almost invariably in muted forms given the onset of novel beliefs, practices, and social organization cast within a world newly cognizant of Ming China and the West. Printing, which had always taken a backseat to handwriting as a cultural practice – and a general emphasis on rarefaction of religious knowledge by means of esoteric transmission – now enabled a novel mode and level of dissemination of Buddhist texts. Even so-called “sacred works” (*shōgyō*) of Japanese Buddhist traditions came to be commonly purchased, a practice virtually unimaginable prior to this period.

Tracing prominent cultural developments such as the appearance of new modes of tea practice fostered by Buddhist monks and others, the chapter turns to outline the character of the ascendance of the “new” lineages of so-called “Kamakura Buddhism.” It focuses on Rennyō in his efforts to disseminate his lineage of Jōdo shinshū, and proceeds to highlight his coordinated emphasis on vernacular writing and ritual practice, worship of Shinran, and the increase of local meetings. We follow the lead of Ōkuwa Hitoshi and other recent scholars in their

interpretation of the warrior provinces period as the historical era in which the shift to the “early modern” became apparent, manifested in a broad series of changes in Japanese religion and society.

We call attention to the fact that, from the fifteenth century onward, itinerant practitioners peopled the landscape, including figures such as mountain ascetics, who had already been organized and governed for some time by major Buddhist institutions and whose status was lower ranking within the monastic system. They are comparable to the so-called temple assistants (*dōshu*, also referred to as *zenshu*, *gyōnin*, *gesu*). Meanwhile, leading monks of the traditional Buddhist monastic institutions were more interactive than ever before with those in the rural temples, such as in the case of the Daigoji Hōon'in abbot Chō'e (1432-1516), who initiated rural monks into the Hōon'in and Muryōju'in lineages in distant Kantō areas. He, along with successors at Daigoji, attempted to convert such rural institutions into branch temples.

Our discussion of Buddhism in the Edo period focuses initially on the effects of the Tokugawa regime, partially represented by the deluge of manuscript and printing production enabled - at least in part - by the newly stable political and financial situation. Moreover, this thriving Edo culture of learning benefited from the support of the shogunate. Monks and lay believers were fascinated by commentaries and other works by Japanese as well as continental Buddhist masters, and even in seemingly “sectarian” lineages like those of True Pure Land some studied teachings of multiple masters - and often went to study the teachings of the traditional schools in Nara.

We will see that although the head-branch system (*honmatsu seido*) and the temple affiliation system (*jidan*; alt. *danka seido*) seem to have initially developed prior to

the Edo shogunate and partially in reaction to local needs, it was the shogunate that consolidated these trends. It was the shogunate that especially promoted reclassification of lineages to promote clearer social categories among Buddhists, including application of Kogi and Shingi Shingon as modes of Shingon organization, increased use of the “Tendai” sectarian label for both Enryakuji (Hiei)-affiliated and Onjōji (Miidera)-affiliated lineages, and undertook novel policies designed generally to weaken the authority of traditional kenmitsu monasteries over organizations of itinerant religious practitioners. The shogunate also eyed the broad array of itinerant groups, treating a few groups – such as the komusō entertainers – as officially designated organizations but subjecting most others – such as Yin-yang practitioners – to a marginal position.

Despite images to the contrary, Buddhists on the whole experienced a revival and, arguably, a renaissance of learning in the Edo period. The strict regulations (*hatto*) undertaken by the regime actually helped promote vital interest in Buddhist studies. The major Buddhist lineages developed so-called *danrin* seminaries. The Zen lineages, for example, undertook reforms that respectfully focused on newly institutionalized *kōan* examination system and on Dōgen’s writings – features that have continued into current Japan. At the same time, preaching performances and literatures flourished and further contributed to Edo Buddhist culture. Royal convents developed what might be called a kind of “cultural salon” in their broad and deep engagement of Buddhist and non-Buddhist writings. Meanwhile, a prominent effort was undertaken to revive adherence to the precepts, resulting in a precepts movement that became increasingly prominent over the course of the Edo period and into high modernity.

## **Chapter 6: Modern Buddhism (1800-1945)**

This chapter explores the role and treatment of Buddhist lineages and institutions in the period of Japan's modernization and emergence as a world power. We first turn to the transition to the modern period, and draw attention to the fact that much historical scholarship has ignored the continuing place of Buddhist institutions, beliefs, and practices in Japanese life in the nineteenth century and their connection with modern cultural and historical trends. In some ways the transition to what we now call the "modern" begins at the beginning of the nineteenth century and is peculiarly marked by movements of religious belief and practice distinct from what came before – and often antagonistic toward Buddhists. Figures such as Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane played pivotal roles in these movements and greatly contributed to the development of modern nativism.

The chapter goes on to include coverage of the government's anti-Buddhist policies, the "separation of *kami* and Buddhas," the destruction of Buddhist temples and images, the international spread of Zen and other Buddhist lineages by such notable figures as D. T. Suzuki, the evolving custom of clerical marriage, the varied reactions to the changing times of prominent monks (e.g., Shaku Unshō, Fukuda Gyōkai, former priest Inoue Enryō, and Shimaji Mokurai), the related rise of Buddhist missions overseas, the role of Buddhist lineages in the Pacific War, and the development of new Buddhist movements like Seishin-shugi. (Although the work of Jason Ānanda Josephson [2012] is an essential contribution to our understanding of the production of the concept of "religion" in the modern period, its focus is specifically on the construction of that concept rather than Buddhisms and their cultural-historical constitution, so we do not directly address that work in this study, instead only referring to it parenthetically where relevant.)

## **Chapter 7: Buddhism Since 1945**

This chapter details Buddhist thought and practice from 1945 to the present. It foregrounds legal changes that occurred following the catastrophic defeat of the Japanese nation in the war, which radically changed the environs within which Buddhist and other groups developed and otherwise appeared. Moreover, given the reduction of the population centers to “burnt fields” (*yake nohara*) following the firebombings (*kūshū*) and the atomic bombs, the cultural and topographical landscape of Japanese society changed as significantly as any time since the Ōnin war of the late fifteenth century. (The cultural environs following the development of the modern nation-state and the “Meiji Restoration” were as radically new, but not marked by comparable destruction of population hubs.)

Given the legal and other changes, of particular note are the rising prominence of new Buddhist lineages and lay organizations, such as Sōka Gakkai, and the status of the traditional Buddhist lineages in contemporary Japan. This chapter includes coverage of various new Buddhist movements, as well as the ostensibly Buddhist movement known as Aum Shinrikyō, infamous for the deadly 1995 sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway system. This chapter also examines the status of institutional Buddhism in contemporary Japan, paying particular attention to charges of class and gender discrimination leveled at some Buddhist groups, as well as the use of Buddhist rituals to assuage – after, sometimes, engendering – the guilt of women who have had abortions. Also considered is the place of traditional Buddhist rituals in the lives of contemporary Japanese. We also turn to academe itself, where the “Critical Buddhism” movement has left an indelible mark, attempting to find an authentic Buddhism – a questionable task – while also offering solutions to problems such as conferral of discriminatory precept-

names (*sabetsu kaimyō*). Finally, this chapter examines Buddhist-themed *manga* (comics), performance art, and the utilization of media by both new and traditional Buddhist groups.

## On Translation

We have attempted to maintain historical accuracy wherever possible in our translation. For example, we avoid use of the term “emperor” as a translation for *tennō* (“heavenly thearch”) before the Meiji period, bearing in mind that the original Daoist meaning may also have held cosmological implications. Instead, we have variously referred to the Japanese political ruler as “king”, “heavenly sovereign,” and “sovereign” and his court as a “royal” court prior to the modern era because the Japanese polity did not constitute an empire until modern times.

Another translation practice is our use of “lineage” rather than “school” for the term *shūha*, because the term school is associated with thought traditions (“school of thought”) and because the terms school as well as sect imply exclusive affiliation to particular religious traditions. Although there were a few major monasteries identified almost exclusively with a single *shūha*, major temple complexes often included study of multiple scholastic and ritual traditions of *shūha*. For example, Tōdaiji is well known for having included multiple *shūha* (e.g., Kegon, Shingon, Ritsu, Sanron, etc.), but the same can be said – in varying degrees – for Daigoji (including Shingon but also Sanron), Kōzanji (Shingon and Kegon), Saidaiji (Shingon and Ritsu), Shōmyōji (Shingon, Ritsu, Zen, etc.), Kōfukuji (Hossō, Shingon), Tōfukuji (Rinzai Zen, Shingon) and other monastic centers historically.

Nevertheless, for stylistic purposes, we occasionally use “school” to refer to *shūha*, but otherwise we use the term

lineage to refer to both *shūha* and *ryū* (*ryūha*), the larger traditions as well as their individual sub-lineages. The term *ryū* refers to all sub-lineages, including sub-sub-lineages in Japanese, so the Japanese language is in many ways ambiguous in this regard; indeed, there are sets of sub-lineages that constitute a major tradition within *shūha* such as the case of the several sub-lineages referred to in Shingon as being either of the Ono-ryū or of the Hirosawa-ryū, respectively associated with the monasteries of the Ono area to the southeast of Kyoto and those associated with the traditions emanating from Ninnaji in north Kyoto. Premodern texts, moreover, use these terms in multiple ways, so that Ono-ryū sometimes refers to the multiple lineages traced to the Ono-area monasteries and sometimes *specifically* to the sub-lineage of the founder Ningai (951–1046) originating at Zuishin'in (Mandaraji). Similar distinctions are sometimes made in texts concerning what is now generally referred to as the Hirosawa-ryū set of sub-lineages in Shingon. For Ono-ryū and Hirosawa-ryū, on those occasions when they refer to the respective sets of sub-lineages in Shingon, we use the term “branch.” Such editorial and translation decisions do not offer perfect answers, but they do offer increased readability without unduly sacrificing accuracy.

## Conventions

In the main, we have followed the guidelines of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Citations are given in the text with full details in the References section at the end of each chapter.

There are so many Japanese terms in the text that we have avoided placing any kanji within the main text, instead providing them in a glossary at the end of the book. The terms listed in the glossary are limited to prominent words

in the main text. Roman transliterations of these terms are italicized in the text and in the glossary, except for proper nouns, which are capitalized and lack italics. Titles of works, however, are capitalized and italicized. We have incorporated related terms to refer to etymologically connected terms, which are placed next to the most prominent related term, to preserve brevity (e.g., *shū* (rel. *shūha*)). Characters for geographical terms have been limited to regions (e.g., Kantō) and important sites (e.g., Kamakura).

We have romanized terms using the following systems: Pinyin for Chinese, Revised Hepburn for Japanese, and McCune-Reischauer for Korean.

The following abbreviations are used:

<i>alt.</i>	<i>alternative</i>
Ch.	Chinese
J.	Japanese
K.	Korean
mod.	modern
rel.	related
Skt.	Sanskrit

## References

Uejima Susumu. 2010. *Nihon chūsei shakai no keisei to Ōken*. Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai.

# 1

## **Early Historical Contexts (Protohistory to 645)**

### **Buddhism's Transmission to Yamato: The *Nihon shoki* Narrative**

The *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) is the primary textual source for narrative details about the transmission of Buddhist texts, images, and ritual objects to the Japanese islands, and for Buddhism's early development. Compiled by imperial command and completed in 720 CE, it narrates the history of Japan from its mythic origins to 697 CE. According to the *Nihon shoki*, Buddha's Dharma (i.e., teaching) was introduced to Japan in 552 CE:

552 CE. Winter, 10th Month: King Sǒngmyǒng of the Korean kingdom of Paekche [J. Kudara] – also known as King Sǒng – dispatched Norisach’igye [J. Nurishichikei] and other retainers to Japan. They offered as tribute a gold and copper statue of Śākyamuni Buddha, ritual banners and canopies, and several volumes of sūtras and commentaries. In a separate declaration, King Sǒng praised the merit of propagating and worshipping the Dharma, stating, “This Dharma is superior to all the others. It is difficult to understand and difficult to attain. Neither the Duke of Chou nor Confucius was able to comprehend it. This Dharma can produce immeasurable, limitless meritorious karmic consequence, leading to the attainment of supreme wisdom. It is like a person who has a wish-fulfilling gem whose every desire is granted. The jewel of this wonderful Dharma is also like this. Every prayer is answered and not a need goes unfulfilled. Moreover, from distant India (Tanjiku) all the way to the three Korean kingdoms this teaching has been followed and upheld. There is no one who does not revere it. Accordingly, I, King Sǒngmyǒng, your vassal, have humbly dispatched my retainer Norisach’igye to the Imperial Country [that is, Yamato] to transmit and propagate this teaching throughout the land, thereby effecting what the Buddha foretold, “my Dharma will spread to the east.”

(adapted from Inoue 1987: 2.474–5 and Deal 1995: 218)

The Buddha may have foretold the eastward transmission of the Dharma, but this did not mean that its acceptance in Japan did not merit discussion among the Heavenly Sovereign’s (*tennō*) most powerful advisors. The same *Nihon shoki* entry continues by recounting the manner in which Buddhism was received as a result of the Paekche king’s urging.

This very day the Heavenly Sovereign [that is, Kinmei] heard this declaration and leapt with joy. He declared to the envoys, "From ancient times to the present we have not heard of such a fine Dharma as this. Nevertheless, we cannot ourselves decide whether to accept this teaching." Thereupon he inquired of his assembled officials, "The Buddha presented to us from the country to our west has a face of extreme solemnity. We have never known such a thing before. Should we worship it or not?"

Soga no Iname humbly responded: "The many countries to the west all worship this Buddha. Is it only Japan [Nihon] that will reject this teaching?"

Mononobe no Okoshi and Nakatomi no Kamako together humbly responded: "The rulers of our country have always worshipped throughout the four seasons the 180 deities of heaven and earth. If they now change this and worship the deity of a foreign country [*adashikuni no kami*], we fear that the deities of our country [*kuni tsu kami*] will become angry."

The Heavenly Sovereign declared, "I grant to Soga no Iname the worship of this Buddha image in order to test its efficacy."

Soga no Iname knelt down and received the statue. With great joy, he enshrined it in his home at Owarida and devotedly performed the rituals of a world renouncer [that is, a practicing Buddhist]. He also purified his home at Mukuhara and made it into a temple.

(adapted from Inoue 1987: 2.475 and Deal 1995: 219)

The *Nihon shoki* account of Buddhism's introduction to Japan raises a number of historical and conceptual issues. Historically, there is a wider East Asian context for Buddhism's transmission: Buddhism was received in China

from Central Asia by way of India, and from China to the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. Once transmitted to the Japanese islands, there are issues regarding Buddhism's reception and its cultural impact. Conceptually, what did the Heavenly Sovereign and his courtiers understand Buddhism to be? Or, put another way, what did they assume they were adopting or rejecting? Though there may be no definitive answer to this question, we can explore Japanese responses to Buddhism in this formative period following its transmission to the Japanese islands. We will consider these issues from both the larger East Asian perspective and from the specific context of Japan.

## **Buddhism in the China Sea interaction sphere**

Joan Piggott's (1997) notion of the China Sea interaction sphere (or China Sea sphere)<sup>1</sup> offers one way to frame East Asian relations in the era of Buddhist transmission. This term refers to the shared material and intellectual culture that flowed between parts of the Chinese mainland, the Korean peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago by way of the China Sea during the third through eighth centuries (see [Figure 1.1](#)). Exchange in the China Sea sphere impacted emerging notions about Japanese kingship and, ultimately, the formation of the state known as "Nihon," a term in use by the late 670s. Piggott stresses that China Sea sphere cultural transmission was multidirectional, and not simply Chinese culture radiating unidirectionally out to other parts of East Asia, as has sometimes been assumed. Ko, Haboush, and Piggott (2003: 9-10) argue that the China Sea sphere shared, to some extent, "compatibility in written language, institutions, law, religions, and aesthetics. Confucian texts, along with Buddhist sutras, gave elites a common vocabulary that transcended ethnic and national boundaries." They go on to note that despite

these shared elements, each East Asian region maintained its own distinctive cultural and intellectual perspectives.



**Figure 1.1** China Sea Interaction Sphere. Map by Matthew Stavros.

The transmission of Buddhism to Japan, then, constitutes one aspect of a larger process of the selective adaptation and use of East Asian mainland culture. Examples of material and intellectual culture exchanged included - in addition to Buddhism, Confucian, and Daoist ideas - the Chinese language and writing system, artistic techniques, medical knowledge, political structures, and social configurations. These cultural influences flowed into the Japanese archipelago at the same time as powerful extended families or clans (*uji*)<sup>2</sup> were competing for political ascendancy over Yamato. The transmission of Buddhism to the Japanese islands was thus intimately connected with struggles over the consolidation of political power.

Traditional scholarship on the role of China in ancient East Asia has typically viewed China as a cultural juggernaut that transmitted culture and civilization to the East Asian hinterlands. From this perspective, a one-way cultural transmission from China to Korea to Japan brought political, religious, literary, and artistic traditions to otherwise culturally deprived regions. As Piggott (1997) suggests, however, there is clear evidence that the cultural transmission was multidirectional. Cultural flows back and forth throughout East Asia included such things as trade goods, art and architectural techniques and styles, texts, medicines, and human resources (Buddhist monks and nuns, Confucian scholars, merchants, government emissaries, artisans, and craftspeople, among others) as well as intangible human resources such as language, religion, political structures, medical knowledge, and promises of political and military support.

One important aspect of this multidirectional cultural exchange was its usefulness in establishing trade and strategic relationships with other East Asian political entities in the early centuries of the Common Era. The *Nihon shoki* depicts relations between the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula. It is clear that there was much maneuvering on the part of the kings of Yamato and the Korean Three Kingdoms (Koguryō, Paekche, and Silla) to secure support, threaten retaliation, and otherwise jockey for position. In Japan's case, its relations with the Korean peninsula and the Chinese mainland reinforced the growing power of the Yamato Great Kings.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, this relationship was also one of tribute. Besides the establishment of trade relations and military alliances, "Buddhism" was one of the many things that were exchanged as tribute. In the *Nihon shoki* example, Paekche's King Sōngmyōng sent his envoys to the Japanese archipelago seeking Yamato military support for its war

against Silla and China, offering Buddhism in exchange. In this way, Buddhist material culture, because it was a part of the tribute-paying process, was implicated in the creation of alliances across East Asia.

An additional historical fact is important to understanding the dissemination of Buddhism across East Asia. In the fourth to sixth centuries, the East Asia we now think of as comprising the national entities called “China,” “Korea,” and “Japan” did not yet exist - these were later appellations. Rather, our use of the terms “China,” “Korea,” and “Japan” in reference to this time period refers to descriptions of geographical locations corresponding to the Chinese mainland, the Korean peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago.

In this time period, the Chinese mainland was undergoing a period of disunion, with multiple political regimes struggling against each other for supremacy. Similarly, the Korean peninsula was divided into three kingdoms, with an additional weaker federation. Political power in the Japanese archipelago was concentrated in a relatively small area of central Honshū known as the kingdom of Yamato<sup>4</sup> and was contested by extended clan (*uji*) lineages vying for hegemony.<sup>5</sup> It was within such unsettled political spheres that Buddhism was introduced and transmitted within East Asia.

Although Buddhism was officially introduced to China in the first century CE - and likely earlier - it was not until the late fourth century that Buddhist ideas and practices became significant and were, in turn, transmitted to the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula and to the islands of Japan. Further, it was, in part, because of political intrigue and the need for alliances that the Korean kingdom of Paekche sent envoys, accompanied by gifts of Buddhist imagery and texts, to Japan in the sixth century. Buddhism,

then, played a significant role in the transformation of the political and religious landscapes of China, Korea, and Japan. Thus, the transmission of Buddhism to Japan needs to be understood within the context of relations between the Japanese archipelago, the Korean peninsula, and the Chinese mainland.

## **Buddhist transmission routes: imperial narratives and private receptions**

While the *Nihon shoki* is by no means the only official document to narrate the transmission of Buddhism to the Japanese archipelago, it is the one most often cited in such discussions. This account has become – historically and often in scholarly discussions – canonical shorthand for Buddhism’s transmission to Japan. In isolation from similar Buddhism transmission narratives in other parts of East Asia, it is easy to assume that the *Nihon shoki* account is somehow peculiarly Japanese, or represents a reception story unlike those in other East Asian cultural contexts. However, similar narratives attended the transmission of Buddhism to China and Korea as well as variant records of its movement into Japan. Thus, we need to understand that the transmission of continental Buddhist traditions to Japan by the sixth century CE occurred within the broader religious and political landscapes of contemporaneous East Asia.

Although official imperial narratives – like the one expressed in the *Nihon shoki* – have often been cited as defining the moment when Buddhism made the leap from one cultural context to the next, there were in fact official and unofficial versions of Buddhism’s transmission in each country. The official story marks Buddhism as an entity embraced or accepted by the formal imperial bureaucracy. The unofficial story concerns the Buddhist faith of immigrants, merchants, and others who enacted their

religion in new regions. The latter is often a difficult story to tell because the evidence is mostly diffused in archaeological remains.

There are, then, two models for the transmission of Buddhism to East Asian cultural contexts in general and to the Japanese islands in particular. The first model is of Buddhism as transmitted from the ruler of one country to another. Buddhism then comes to be officially supported and patronized by the ruling classes and only later spreads to the larger population. In the second model, and the one often ignored, Buddhism is seen as transmitted from person to person within the general population. Buddhism in this instance usually meets with at least some initial antipathy from the ruling classes.

Japanese scholars, like Tamura Enchō, describe two primary routes of transmission that Buddhism followed through the China Sea interaction sphere: an imperial/royal route and a route of individual travelers (Tamura 1996: 6–8). Tamura refers to the imperial/royal route by the term “temple Buddhism” (*garan bukkyō*) in recognition of the fact that the acceptance of Buddhism in a particular kingdom was typically followed quickly by imperial patronage of temple-building projects and the creation of a rudimentary monastic system to run the temple and conduct rituals – rituals often directed toward the well-being of the kingdom and its ruling class. Buddhist transmission stories – like the *Nihon shoki* narrative – describe this route. The imperial route is also conspicuous for financial resources needed to finance temple construction projects and human resources, especially skilled craftspeople, necessary to build these temples. Imperial transmission routes and the narratives compiled to describe them were especially implicated in displays of ruling power and expressions of legitimate authority.

In contrast to “temple Buddhism,” Tamura describes the other mode of transmission as “household Buddhism” (*shitaku bukkyō*). This form of Buddhism was centered on private Buddhist practices that often revolved around Buddhist images, such as sculpture or paintings, which depicted particular Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This form of Buddhism was transmitted in an informal way, but was often the result of interactions between immigrants, merchants, and others who traversed the China Sea interaction sphere and were also Buddhists. Evidence for this form of Buddhist dissemination typically predates official transmission stories and their ideological need to control the story of Buddhism’s spread lest this powerful religious tradition be placed in the hands of those outside the ruling class. There had been significant contact between the Japanese islands and the Asian mainland prior to the middle of the sixth century, and Buddhist ideas and material culture would have been exchanged as a result of those contacts.<sup>6</sup>

This story of Buddhism’s transmission recounted in texts like the *Nihon shoki* is the official one. But Buddhism – as a private or household practice – was introduced to Japan prior to this time through Chinese and Korean immigrants who were Buddhists and who settled in Japan. Immigrants from the Korean peninsula, for instance, brought Buddhist practices to Japan earlier than the official date. From around 400 CE, immigrants from the Asian mainland – especially from the Korean peninsula – came to Yamato and settled within fixed kinship groups. They brought with them the worship of Buddhism as a private faith practiced within the kinship group. As a result, it is more than likely that Buddhist texts and images were brought to Japan, prior to the official sixth-century introduction of Buddhism to Japan, by such notable figures as Shiba Totto (grandfather of Tori Busshi), thought to have arrived in Japan in 522 CE.

According to the late eleventh century *Fusō ryakki* (Abridged Annals of Japan), Buddhist images were enshrined in the Yamato region and worshipped as the *kami* of the Great Tang.

## **Conflicting dates for the transmission of Buddhism to the Japanese archipelago**

The transmission of Buddhism to Japan is a notion that is both factually and conceptually problematic. Factually, there are two competing dates given in early texts for the moment Buddhism “arrived” in Japan. While the *Nihon shoki* provides the date of transmission as 552 CE, another text, a temple legend called the *Gangōji garan engi narabi ni ruki shizai chō* (Circumstances Leading to the Founding of the Monastery Complex of Gangōji and a List of Its Accumulated Treasures),<sup>7</sup> gives the date 538 CE, as does the *Jōgū shōtoku hōō teisetsu* (The Imperial Record of Shōtoku, Dharma King of the Upper Palace). The reason for this discrepancy is unclear and various theories have been asserted to account for it. Because all three texts have compilation dates well after the events they describe, it is impossible to use any of them to provide a reliably exact date for when King Sōng sent his envoys to Japan. The *Nihon shoki* was compiled by order of the Yamato Court in 720 CE, while *Gangōji garan engi* was compiled, according to its own postscript, in 747 CE, but the text we have today was probably a Heian-period (794–1185 CE) compilation, itself based on an earlier eighth-century – and no longer extant – text called *Gangōji engi*. The main section of the Imperial Record dates to the eighth or ninth century.

There are additional, and more specific, problems that make these dates factually suspect. For instance, with regard to the *Nihon shoki* transmission, it has long been pointed out that the statement uttered by King Sōng in praise of the Dharma he is offering in tribute to King

Kinmei – and quoted in the transmission passage for 552 – is partly a quotation from the *Konkōmyō-saishō-ō-kyō* (*Sovereign Kings of the Golden Light Sūtra*; Skt. *Suvarṇa-prabhāsattama-rāja Sūtra*). This particular translation of the *Sovereign Kings Sūtra* was not produced until 703 by the Chinese priest Yijing (J. Gijō; 635–713), who was working at the time in the Tang capital of Chang’an. Given this fact, at least parts of the 552 account were written post-703 by the compilers of the *Nihon shoki* and do not reflect older records. One widely held speculation is that the famous Nara-period monk Dōji was responsible for this addition. Dōji studied Buddhism in China from 701 to 718 so he may have been the one to import this translation into Japan. It may also have been Dōji who located the transmission of Buddhism to Japan to the year 552 because he would have been knowledgeable of the fact that the so-called Period of the End of the Dharma (*mappō*) was said to begin in that year.<sup>8</sup>

## **Buddhism as an object and Buddhism as its objects**

Conceptually, the idea that Buddhism arrived in Japan in a certain year on a particular day assumes an overly simplistic model of cultural transmission. Further, when we speak of the transmission of Buddhism to Japan what are we saying was transmitted? Buddhism is not a singular “thing” that can be carried to a new place in a single instant. Even conceding that material objects significant to Buddhist practice and thought – such as Buddha images and sūtras – were brought to Japan in a certain year, the broader conceptual and performative meanings of Buddhist doctrines and ritual prescriptions were learned and transformed over a much longer period of time.