



JAPANESE BUDDHISM AND NATIONALISM

The Relationship between Buddhism and Nationalism in the Empire of Japan



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Introduction

Buddhism is world religion that is held in high regards internationally as a religion of peace. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 6th century CE, establishing many schools of thought and became a prevalent part of Japanese culture. Buddhism was also present during one of the darkest periods of Japanese history when infamously known as a hegemonic imperialist. This paper will investigate the state of Buddhism from the advent of the Japanese Empire until its end in World War II—Investigating the relationship between Japanese Buddhism and Japanese nationalism.

The Transition of Tokugawa Buddhism to Meiji Buddhism

Since Buddhism's arrival into Japan, it became central to the government. However, at the beginning of the Edo period, The Shogunate government granted more privileges to the priesthood. Buddhist temples had a registration system for membership called the *danka* (檀家) system. The government, fearing that Christianity might spread among the archipelago, forced the *danka* system on a nation-wide scale (Macure, 1985). Thus, every household had to register with a temple. Thus, the number of temples had grown from 13,037 to 469,934 (Macure, 1985). Later, in 1614, an edict would be passed outright banning Christianity, which granted temples the liberty to determine a person Christian (Macure, 1985).

Besides restricting Christianity, these temples helped bureaucratic functions of government. The government wanted to use the *danka* system to easily project control onto citizens. Once citizens registered with a temple, they could receive certificates with their right to marry, travel, and work (Marra, 2014). Essentially, one could not live a normal life if they were not a member of a temple. Thus, the government transformed temples into an administrative office. The state relied on temples to record census data of members, such as: births, marriages, adoptions, deaths, changes of residency and occupation (Macure, 1985). In return, the temples received tax exemptions and funding to pay for services and priest's salary (Marra, 2014).

Despite the growing influence of temples, the government had implemented a system to reduce influence. The system labeled prominent temples as headquarters, and minor temples as being dependent subsidiaries. The system established temples as a bureaucratic body by placing them in a hierarchy—allowing projection of administrative power (Macure, 1985).

Through the *danka* system, Buddhism was useful for the government. By providing surveillance, the government utilized temples as lucrative tools. As a result, temples received more influence and power through funding. However, as the Edo Period ended, the Japanese government changed radically. In 1853, the Japanese were awakened from isolationism when U.S. Commodore Perry forcibly opened trade using the intimidation of the "Black Fleet." It became clear to the Japanese that they needed to modernize to avoid subjugation like their Asian neighbors. Therefore, citizens called for a change in leadership. The next few decades were a new age with the emperor Meiji as a leader. The "Meiji Restoration" was characterized by the downfall in Shogunate systems and a new direction of goals and philosophy.

The Meiji Restoration was an uncertain time for Buddhism temples. The restoration was symbolic that the government opposed any remnants of the systems of Tokugawa government (Marra, 2014). The *danka* system was sponsored by the Shogunate, thus Buddhist influence was targeted in the new government. The government denounced Buddhism and established Shinto as the new state religion. In what was known as *Haibutsu Kishaku* (廃仏毀釈), Shinto missionaries went across the archipelago to denounce Buddhism (Gier). As a result, over 4,500 temples were destroyed, and sacred artifacts were converted into weapons (Gier). In addition, most priest lost their lofty positions and forced into normal lives, Shinto priesthood, and—if they were fighting age—conscripted into the army (Gier).

The reception of *Haibutsu Kishaku* was varied among the Japanese. The government saw it appropriate, for the Buddhists were a liability. Temples consumed far too much money, and they did not pay taxes, serve in the military, or contribute to the economy (Marra, 2014). Thus, temples became a burden during the Meiji restoration. Many civil wars and rebellions had to be fought to unite the Japanese, which the government didn't have the money to support. Purging the priesthood meant the government could gather funds to expand the military (Marra, 2014). On the other hand, some Buddhists showed support in *Haibutsu Kishaku*—No doubt fearing the government. They claimed the old priesthood was corrupt, and they were eager to see the “New Buddhism” that would come from *Haibutsu Kishaku* (Gier).

These Buddhists who supported *Haibutsu Kishaku* would see that new Buddhism emerge as suppression ended in 1872 (Marra, 2014). Many western nations were critical of the suppression of religion in Japan which pressured them into ending bans on Buddhism and Christianity. From ending this suppression, Buddhism would try to become useful to the government like it was for the Shogunate. Until the end of World War II, Buddhism became distorted to become influential in the modernizing regime.

The Nationalist Reimagining of Buddhism

After *Haibutsu Kishaku*, many Buddhists felt on edge by government pressure. No longer were they in a special position in government. Now, Japanese were critical of Buddhism for not being patriotic enough in the new regime. Thus, many Buddhists rebranded themselves into nationalistic cults to support the Empire.

In 1893, we can see the beginnings of a new nationalistic movement of Japanese Buddhists at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. There every country represented their major religions. This was two decades after the suppression of Buddhism, so this was an introduction to the Buddhists who survived and adapted to the new government. Thus, most Japanese Buddhists prioritized showing their usefulness to the government. Most representatives displayed loyalty by coding their beliefs to be nationalistic in nature. These representatives proposed a hierarchy of religions with Japanese Buddhism at the top—propagating Japanese hegemony (Gier). The Tendai representative claimed the law of the Emperor and the Buddha are the same in a metaphor: “the two ways of the Emperor and Buddhism are like two wings of a bird” (Gier). Furthermore, the Jodo representative criticized Buddhists who weren't complicit with conscripting in the army. He said “[they] take out the energy from Japanese Buddhism, they

are bad influences on the Japanese national and poison Japanese people's idea of spirituality” (Gier).

The tone of the Buddhists at the conference was radically different from historical Buddhist philosophies. After suppression, Buddhists were in an uncomfortable place where they were no longer protected. They complied with the Empire’s sentiment in fear that suppression would return. The standards of thought set by the representatives would influence the future of Japanese Buddhism, which became increasingly nationalistic.

Such an example of nationalistic Buddhism was Nichirenism. Tanaka Chigaku (田中智學) was a Buddhist who merged his belief in Nichiren Buddhism with national polity to endorse expansionism abroad (Godart, 2015). He expanded upon the original message of Nichiren which places heavy importance on the lotus sutra and the destruction of evil in Buddhism (Godart, 2015). Nichirenism is critiqued as a nationalistic “distortion” supporting the Emperor and militaristic nationalism (Godart, 2015). One example of his distortion was the interpretation of Nichiren’s belief in *shakubuku* (折伏) meaning “conquering evil aggressively,” which was intended to be used against corrupt Japanese Buddhist schools (Gier). Tanaka imagined this idea employed on the enemies of Japan (Godart, 2015). He justified foreign aggression by comparing the Japanese army to a force of peace and justice which should be responsible for securing peace (Godart, 2015). This was a perverted interpretation of Nichiren’s belief to make the Japanese army appear as a benevolent force, however, the Japanese army was responsible for many inhumane tragedies during wartime. However, this no doubt was used as propaganda for the imperialists within government who needed justification to invade Asia.

Nichirenism resonated deeply with the Japanese commander Ishiwara Kanji (石原莞爾). Ishiwara joined Tanaka’s Nichirenist organization Pillar of the Nation Society in 1920, solidifying his faith in Nichirenism. Ishiwara is noted for his leadership in nationalistic movement: The East Asia League (EAL). The EAL was founded in 1939 as a political movement before becoming a radicalized religious movement in 1941 when Ishiwara took control. By the end of the war membership reached 16,000 with some sources claiming as much as 100,000—making it one of the largest movements in Japan. His movement printed propaganda articles to the Japanese people. Under Ishiwara’s control he made his theory of the final war central to the movement’s mission. This theory culminated from many ideas: the prediction of a large war by Nichiren that would spread Buddhism worldwide, and Ishiwara’s own predictions on the inevitable second world war (Godart, 2015). However, Ishiwara’s belief was that through world conquest the world would be made Buddhist (Godart, 2015). His theory also included the “Showa Restoration” which was the unity of Asia under the rule of the Japanese emperor, which expressed the nationalistic sentiment of the movement. Their most controversial idea was the transformation of the Japanese emperor to the world emperor, in which the world would be united under Buddhist doctrine and the Japanese emperor would become a spiritual figurehead for the whole world (Godart, 2015). This would make the Japanese people superior by spreading the Buddha’s law through their emperor. Ishiwara’s ideas sound fanatical at best, but this was the

voice of Nichirenist Buddhists, and they were using religious prophecy to justify the rule of Japanese hegemony.

Before World War II, Japanese Buddhist would once again prove themselves as a useful body to the state. They became outwardly nationalistic to create the image of a just and benevolent Japan, but also a superior and justified hegemon. Such examples were claiming Japanese supremacy of Buddhist thought, and the reverence of the emperor. Thus many influential figures in Japan would utilize nationalistic Buddhist thought, such as Nichirenism, into their practice. Therefore, Buddhism was used to justify fascist and militaristic policies as Japan became a modern militant state.

The International Buddhist Society

When Japan incited the Second Sino-Japanese war the term “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” (GEACP) became an explanation to Japanese aggression. The thought was that the Japanese were a necessary force to liberate East Asia from Western colonialism. The reality was that the Japanese were attempting to exert their own colonial rule onto Asia. In attempting to unite Asia, Japan sought unifying factors to legitimize control. Thus, during war, many Buddhists were employed as missionaries to spread influence among the conquered population.

One organization that helped profoundly with Japanese colonization efforts was the International Buddhist Society (IBS) established in 1933. The IBS was established by the prominent scholars Takakusu Junjirō (高楠 順次郎) and Watanabe Kaikyoku (海旭渡辺) through combined efforts to establish an accurate Buddhist canon (Ōsawa, 2015). After Watanabe’s death, Takakusu helped establish the IBS at the end of 1933 (Ōsawa, 2015).

The IBS was founded on academic principles such as: producing publications of Japanese Buddhism, hold lectures and seminars, and collaboration with Buddhist institutions across the world (Ōsawa, 2015). The growth of the IBS was rapid with a total of 94 branches in 1938 (Ōsawa, 2015). However, this growth caught the eye of the government. After Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs needed an organization to foster foreign cultural exchanges with government oversight (Ōsawa, 2015). However, they were really seeking for a way to spread propaganda through cultural means. Therefore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave sponsorship to the IBS to influence it (Ōsawa, 2015).

Now under the payroll of the government, the IBS cooperated with the propagation of the GEACP (Ōsawa, 2015). Southeast Asia became an area of interest, and the IBS helped intensively with the Japanese army to conquer it. This started in 1941, with the establishment of the Pāli Cultural School in Tokyo to teach missionaries Pāli, Thai and Burmese (Ōsawa, 2015). After education, these missionaries became employees of the army and assisted in the “agitation” of local populations (Ōsawa, 2015). In addition, the missionaries worked as informants for the government. They researched Southeast Asian Buddhism for strategic purposes during the war period, to assist policymaking decisions for occupation (Ōsawa, 2015). In short, the IBS became a tool for the Japanese government to further understand prospective subjects of Japanese colonization and cement their control through the work of missionaries. Once again, Buddhism

was used directly by the government to exert their power, which hasn't happened directly since the Shogunate government. Thus, the Buddhists were proving themselves to be necessary to the government.

Despite this accomplishment, it is important to understand that the IBS were proponents in the use of the term "East Asia Buddhism." This term was a slogan used to justify unification of the Buddhist realms of East Asia (Ōsawa, 2015). Belief in Buddhism seemed to be a common denominator for many nations of East Asia, and the Japanese could exploit this fact to establish Japanese Buddhism as the superior form of Buddhism. Meaning, the IBS supported the establishment of the GEACPS through Buddhism (Ōsawa, 2015). Throughout the remainder of World War II, many missionary activities were conducted to propagate Japanese rule.

Buddhist Missionaries During Wartime.

After the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War the Buddhists propagated their belief of East Asian Buddhism began across the continent. By 1939, there were there were "50 propagandists and 24 propagation places in Mongol, North, Middle and South China" (Ōtani, 2015). These propagation places were areas Buddhist priests would promote the slogan: "Establishing the Correct Teaching and developing Asia" (Ōtani, 2015). This was a slogan sponsored by the Nichirenists where they taught their "superior" form of Buddhism to the "degenerate" schools of Asia. The founder of the Nichirenism, Takanabe, believed that Pan-Asianism could prevail, and the subjects of Japanese would comply with a common belief in Nichiren Buddhism (Ōtani, 2015).

In Mongolia, Takanabe participated in the 4th Mongolian Convention, which established the Mongolian Allied Autonomous Government (Ōtani, 2015). In this convention Takanabe established a division of missionaries in Mongolia (Ōtani, 2015). These missionaries were able to supervise Buddhist affairs and correct their way of thinking to be more in line with the beliefs of Nichirenism.

In Korea, Buddhist influence began before the Second Sino-Japanese war. When Korea was subjugated by Japan, they began using Buddhism as a tool to spread nationalistic influence on the local population. In 1911, the Governor General of Korea adopted the "Temple Act" which transferred complete control of temples to the discretion of the Governor-General (Kawase, 2015). Such privileges included the ability to remove or merge temples and fire any religious leader in the name of "public peace" (Kawase, 2015). Given this power, the Governor General decided to force the Korean temples to adopt the same organizational structure as Japanese Buddhism, thus making the two indistinguishable (Kawase, 2015). In addition, it became part of Korean temples to celebrate nationalistic holidays such as the emperor's birthday and Empire Day (Kawase, 2015). Through these changes even common rituals of Korean Buddhism were "forcibly Japanized" (Kawase, 2015).

It was clear to the missionaries that their purpose was to "stabilize the public sentiment of the natives" and assist the process of Japanese colonization (Kawase, 2015). For example, the annexation of Korea was explained to the subjugated Koreans by Japanese Buddhists in religious terms. Gennyō, the leader of the nationalistic Ōtani school, delivered a sermon to the newly

annexed Koreans. In the sermon, “He recognized the annexation of Korea for the peace of eastern Asia”, and he said that this “‘new member of the Japanese Empire’ would be welcomed and cultivated through the charity of the ‘civilized’ Japanese, and that the civilizing mission would be consistent with the merciful heart of the Buddha.” (Kawase, 2015). This sermon uses religious words to ensure the Koreans that the Japanese annexation is justified. By drawing a connection between Japanese Imperialism and “the merciful heart of the Buddha” Gennyō makes the Japanese seem like a benevolent liberating force that annexed Korea for their own benefit.

Through the work of missionaries in World War II, the Japanese were able to effectively use Buddhist missionaries as a tool of subjugation. The missionaries would work to help stabilize native sentiment of the Japanese government. Using religious vocabulary to confuse the minds of the subjugated, the Japanese army was conveyed as a force of benevolence. In reality missionaries of nationalistic sects were working to correct the way of thinking for many Asian Buddhists into believing that their Japanese practice was the superior practice. Through the culmination of these factors Buddhist missionaries were effective tools employed by the Japanese government during wartime.

Conclusion

The Japanese Empire would come to an end in 1945 with a conditional surrender to the United States. Since the beginning of the empire, Buddhism transformed many times to conform to the ideals of the new regime. The transition from the Shogunate to the Meiji government saw the purging of Japanese Buddhism, which was an influential part of the Japanese bureaucracy. This purge had severe consequences on Buddhist thought, as many Buddhists became outwardly nationalistic to comply with the emperor’s law—fearing government consequences. This led to the growth of nationalistic movements, such as Nichirenism. The nationalism spread by Buddhism influenced the minds of influential Japanese people, who would use it as justification for expansionism. Such were the idea of Buddhist Pan-Asianism through the GEACP, which used Buddhism as an attempt to unify the people of East Asia. This led to the employment of missionaries to influence the sentiment of subjugated populations of the occupying forces, which imagined the Japanese army as benevolent liberators.

Despite the ever-changing aspect of Buddhist thought, the fact of the government using Buddhism as a tool when it becomes useful to them is constant. For example, before suppression, Buddhist temples were used by the Shogunate to exert power on their subjects and reduce the spread of Christianity. Then after suppression, the Buddhist were no longer as important as they once were—until the government needed them again. It wasn’t until wartime and colonization where the Buddhists would be employed to help stabilize the regions that were conquered. In other words, the government found yet another way to utilize Buddhism as a tool. Thus, the relationship between Japanese Buddhism and nationalism was strong throughout the Empire of Japan. Whether to be protected by the government, or be used for propaganda, both sides confided in each other for personal gain.

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