

The Early Evolution of Buddhism in Japan: The Phenomenon of “Local Draping” Before the Heian Period

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Abstract: The relationship between Gods and Buddhas is the key to a comprehensive understanding of Japanese religious history. By considering the phenomenon of God-Buddhist co-practice from the perspectives of “mutual recognition of different bodies” and “mutual construction of the same body,” the local evolutionary process of Japanese Buddhism can be systematically sorted out and analyzed, and the important role of civilizational exchange and mutual appreciation in the development of civilization or culture can be revealed.

Keywords: Shinto, Buddhism, Shinto-Buddhist practice, East Asian culture

1. Introduction

During the Nara period, the Japanese people adopted a faith called Buddhism. In order to have a better missionary effect, the monks and local believers in Japan adopted the method called “local draping” to promote the Buddhist gods, which were relatively unknown to the Japanese people. The term “local” refers to the Buddha’s Dharma body, and “draping” refers to the incarnation of the Buddha who speaks at any time in response to the opportunity in order to transform all sentient beings. This is also the reason why many Japanese gods (and dead people) were named “Gongen”, such as Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was named Toshogu Daigongen to indicate that he was the earthly incarnation of Yakushi Nyorai.

This phenomenon was not criticized until the Muromachi period by Yoshida Shinto. The criticism was initiated by Yoshida Kanju, a shrine official of Yoshida Shrine in Kyoto. Yoshida Shinto started the “anti-local draping” movement, which advocated that the Buddhas were foreign incarnations of the local gods of Japan. Yoshida Shinto’s anti-local draping doctrine was so well suited to the rising national consciousness in Japan that by the Tokugawa shogunate period (1603-1867), about half of the clergy belonged to the Yoshida Shinto system [1]. The religious evolution from the rise of “local draping” to “anti-local draping” shows that Japanese scholars and clergy were gradually establishing a Shinto-centric ideology in Japan [2]. The main idea of this ideology was to regard the Japanese state as the noblest state in the world. The present study systematizes and analyzes the local evolution of Japanese Buddhism and reveals the important role of civilizational exchange and mutual appreciation in the process of civilization or cultural development.

2. The Relationship Between God and Buddha

During the Nara period, the introduction of Buddhism was plunged into an ongoing controversy with the struggle between the Sukai clan, an upstart noble who believed in Buddhism, and the Mobu clan, an old noble who believed in Shintoism. However, no matter it was Buddhism that was trying to take over Japanese culture or Shintoism that was trying to maintain its status as the only orthodox religion, neither side could avoid was the inevitable fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism [3].

In the Heian era, this debate focused on only two points of view: God is in the upper hand, protecting vulnerable Buddhism; and Buddha is in the upper hand, rescuing the confused Shinto religion. The question of who was in a stronger position, God or Buddha, was debated endlessly in the Nara period. It was only after the Heian period that two new, but not entirely separate, views emerged from the original two: A new God under the influence of Buddha; and God is the figure of Buddha who appears in order to save the world.

3. How Buddha Saved God from Anshigao to Takeshi Mamoru – Divine Body Disengagement and Jinguji

In the God-Buddha debate, each believer sought to use the worldview of his or her religion to independently resolve the gods that originally belong under another worldview [4]. The remarkable result of this was that for Buddhists, the gods of Shintoism were equally situated in the Buddhist world. The world was divided into the heavenly, earthly, hellish, hungry ghost, animal, and Shura-do. This idea of the six paths of reincarnation originated from Brahmanism in India. During the Vedic period, from 2,000 to 1,500 B.C., the four Vedas, especially the Rig Veda, contain descriptions of divine songs about doing good or evil or going to heaven or hell according to the caste system. Under this conception, even a Buddha was a member of the sentient beings reincarnated in the six paths, not to mention the gods venerated by heretical religions.

Thus, in the early days when Buddhism was introduced to China, Buddhists rescued the native Chinese gods who were trapped in the pain of the six paths of reincarnation and had to endure suffering because they lacked the wisdom of Buddhism. According to the biography of An Shigao in Volume 13 of the Records of the Exodus, the Iranian-born royal monk An Shigao, while spreading Buddhism in China, encountered a distressed lake god on Mount Lu.

In the Buddhist worldview, the god of the lake in the Lushan region, who was famous for granting wishes, was also a member of the multitude of beings trapped in the six Buddhist paths. He needed to pray for the help of Anshigao, who was still human but believed in Buddhism, in order to be saved and liberated. Until Anshigao built a Buddhist temple for him and promises recognition to the god as a Buddhist, this god could enter reincarnation to get rid of his identity as a snake.

This way of preaching, in which a high priest brought permission for Buddhism and thus helped the heretical gods to re-enter reincarnation, soon spread to Japan. In the Reikame period, the minister Fujiwara Takeshi Maru was ordained by a god to build a shrine temple in Echizen Hikojingu. This oracle came from a fantastical dream in which the god prayed to Takeshi Maru to build a Buddhist temple for him so as to get rid of the karma of being a god. In addition, there is an example in the “Nihon Yatji” citing the “Nihon Goki”, where it is recorded in the 16th day of the 3rd month in the 6th year of the Tenno period (829) that Takeshi Mamoru also built the Hiko Jinguji Temple in Wakasa during the pension period (717-723). This construction of a Buddhist temple in a Shinto shrine is known as “Shinto body liberation”. It is considered by Buddhists to be the beginning of the Shinto-Buddhist practice of giving the Shinto gods Buddhist wisdom and freedom from the pain of the six paths of reincarnation.

In fact, Japanese Shintoism also had a worldview similar to the Buddhist six paths of reincarnation. However, they believed that the world of ghosts and gods was in a state of overlap with their own

world, that people were not the only subject of this world, and that gods and ghosts would take control of the earth at night, hence the Hundred Ghosts Night Journey [5].

4. The Bodhisattvaization of Hachiman God – The First Native Japanese God to Be Accepted by Buddhism, the Protector of Dharma and Buddhism

In the Buddhist perspective, the Buddha was in a strong position, so the Buddha needed to save the confused gods, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of the divine body leaving the body. However, in the Shinto narrative perspective, when the gods were in a strong position, the gods would become the protectors of Buddhism, and Buddhism called these foreign gods who protected Buddhism “protector gods”.

In fact, as an imported religion, Buddhism had a natural institutional advantage, but the bond between Shintoism and the regime was far from being shaken by Buddhism. An important reason for this is that Shintoism honors the emperor and the emperor’s family as their gods. Therefore, Shintoists under the emperor believed that it was the many gods of Shintoism that protected the foreign and vulnerable religion – Buddhism.

Among them, the first Shinto deity who became the protector of Buddhism as a Shinto deity was Hachiman, the deity of the bow and arrow. According to the “Chronicle of Ancient Matters”, Yukihihiko was the third son of Kikohana and Yahime. When the fire was extinguished, they gave birth to the children of Hikari, Hikari, and Hikari. In later times, the Fire Farmer was revered as the god of food, and a new faith was born as Hikari Fire Izumihito. He was the grandfather of the first emperor of Japan, Emperor Jimmu. The fifteenth emperor of Japan, Emperor Ojin, was the god of the bow and arrow, Hachimanjin.

The location of Hachiman Shrine was in Usa. Usa was the shortest route to Kyushu and a transit point to the capital of Silla (Joseon), and it was influenced by the local witch doctor beliefs from the Joseon region. This belief was brought into play during the pacification of Hayato of Hyuga in the fourth year of the retired emperor’s reign (720 A.D.). Emperor Seibu founded Hachiman Shrine in Usa in the thirteenth year of the reign. At this time, due to the influence of Shinto-Buddhist practices, Jinguji Temple in the territory of Hachiman Shrine was the first officially recognized shrine temple in the country, and subsequently established Hachiman Daishonin as the patron deity of the nation. After Emperor Huanmu’s reign, he gave the title of Hachiman Daibutsu in the first year of the reign, which could be regarded as a representative of the beginning of Buddhist acceptance of native Japanese deities as Buddhist deities. The starting point of this act was perhaps significantly related to the cultural policy of the Japanese rulers of the time [6].

5. The Birth of the Gods Influenced by the Buddha, the Gods of the Gospel

Since Buddhism advocated spiritual stability, there were many tutelary deities who, in Buddhist legends, became Buddhist tutelary deities by calming down grievances through Buddhist teachings. This was already evident in Buddhism in ancient India, where the Hindu gods, such as the nightstick, the rakshasa, and even the supreme Hindu god Brahma, were all absorbed into Buddhism and became part of the Buddhist deities in the form of transmigration. Brahma was the incarnation of the cosmic principal Brahma in Hinduism. In the Buddhist worldview, he was considered to be the master of the heavenly colorful heaven in the six paths of reincarnation, as well as the deity who requested Shakyamuni to preach for the people after Shakyamuni’s nirvana.

This phenomenon was quite common in the spread of Buddhism. Whether Buddhist preachers took the perspective that Buddha was strong and God was weak or vice versa, there is a common consciousness for believers that Buddhist worldview that was greater than the worldview of other religions because other gods were still in the Buddhist cycle of the six paths and needed to pray for

Buddhist recognition and used Buddhist teachings to obtain spiritual liberation and stability”. This missionary approach does not imply a complete absorption of indigenous beliefs, as not all gods would be recognized by Buddhism, and most would retain the status of their original religion and receive a new name after converting to Buddhism, rather than becoming full adherents of Buddhism, as the snake gods in the Anshigao biography did.

Inari was the god of harvest in Japan. The image of the god of Inari was related to the original animal worship, as the fox in the barn preyed on rats and other harmful animals, so the god of Inari had a fox-like appearance. This image of the fox god was gradually combined with the fox image of the protector deity Tadjini-ten, which was found in the Tathagata Sutra, and became an interesting deity with a sly and humorous image of a fox and the extraordinary powers of a god [7].

In 823 A.D., the Japanese monk Kukai, who had returned to China, was given Toji Temple by the emperor as a place to preach. The wood used to build Toji Temple was mostly from Inariyama, the residence of the god Inari. In order to appease the god’s anger, the emperor built a special Fushimi Inari Taisha next to Toji Temple to enshrine the god as a nationwide god of food blessing. The god was willing to become the protector of Toji Temple, and was given the name of Hakkatsu Fox Wangji Bodhisattva, and became one of the Buddhist gods.

Since Buddhism placed more emphasis on the properties of appeasing spirits than Shintoism (e.g., the mantra of the afterlife, the peacock mantra, the Earth Store Sutra, etc.), Buddhist rituals were often used to appease spirits that Shintoism did not recognize as grievances. This phenomenon often had nothing to do with Buddhist recognition, but simply borrowed Buddhist rituals [8].

Shintoism’s belief in gyojin emerged in the early Heian period, when various ministers and princes who died as a result of political persecution often left curses before their deaths, and people called these dead spirits grievous spirits. In order to calm down the series of disasters brought by the curses. Buddhist tantric rituals were used employed. The earliest goryo ritual took place in 863 A.D., when five spirits of resentment, including Prince Hayara, were worshipped at Shinzuen-en in Kyoto. Their pre-mortem resentment was considered to be in line with the Tantric characteristics of the Angry Lord, an angry protector deity that guards Buddhism. The grievous spirits that arose from the Shinto belief in goryo (most of them died because of Shintoism and the emperor’s regime) and were subdued through Buddhist rituals were called goryojin, typified by the god Tenmantenjin – the goryojin deification of the Heian period minister Sugawara Michizane. After the persecution and exile of this talented minister, the Emperor Daigo’s sons died of disease. The emperor’s palace, Seiryō-den, was struck by lightning and his persecutor, Fujiwara Kiyonan, was also killed by lightning. As a result, Sugawara Michizane was deified as the god of thunder. Because of his great literary achievements, he was posthumously recognized as an incarnation of the god of learning, which was one of the most famous gods of the Gorei faith.

In the Hundred Ghosts Night Journey, Buddhist monks may also become demons known as “Aoibos” within the Shinto religion after death. Since Shintoism was highly tied to the regime, people who were rejected and persecuted by the court were often rejected by Shintoism. It was a bit of a polite apology for Shintoism to use the power of Buddhism, which was good at appeasing their grievances.

6. Local Draping and Anti-local Draping, God Is Buddha and Buddha Is God

Founded in the 5th century in Henan Province, China, the Fahua Sect was the earliest Buddhist sect in China. It flourished in the Tiantai Mountains of Zhejiang Province and was introduced to Japan by the Japanese monk Mamoru in the early 9th century to form the Japanese branch of the Tiantai Sect, whose teachings were based on the book Myōhō-rensō-kyō (Lotus Sutra).

In order to realize the ontology of Buddhism, Mamoru introduced the concept of the unity of God and Buddha. Tendai Shinto, which emerged in the pre-Kamakura period, believed that the originator

of the Tendai sect, Mamoru, inspired his descendants to create the branch of Shintoism called Yamao Ishin Shinto, or Tendai Shinto, based on the doctrine of the “One Reality” in the Myoho Renge-kyo Sutra [9]. Tiantai Shinto was established on the basis of the teachings of the Tendai Sect on the integration of the three truths of emptiness, falsity, and neutrality. It was believed that Shakyamuni is the essence of all gods and all existence.

According to this doctrine, the Myoho-rence-kyo Sutra is divided into two parts, the first half of which was called the trace gate, and the second half was called the original gate. It was believed that Buddha was the original image and was called the local, while God was the false image of Buddha and called the pendant. The earliest doctrine of local dhyana held that the spiritual concept of the Buddha was his local, and that Chodarma Siddhartha, who was born in India and died at the age of eighty, was only an earthly dhyana of the Buddha. At the end of the Heian period, this concept was completely refined. Each Shinto deity was given its own local area. For example, the local area of Sanko Myojin enshrined in Hiyoshi Shrine, where Tendai Shinto is located, was Siddhartha Gautama. This also included the beliefs of various Goryo deities, such as Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was considered to be the Toshogu Daikon present, the relic of Dainichi Rama in the Toshogu region.

In fact, a similar doctrine of local draping arose very early in China. It was not initiated by Buddhism, but was pioneered by China’s native religion, Taoism. Wang Fu, a Taoist priest of the Western Jin Dynasty, wrote the Sutra on the Transformation of Laozi into Hu, which argued that the Buddha was an incarnation in India of Laozi, who had traveled west out of the Hakka Pass. To counter this claim, Buddhism also argued that the local Chinese gods were incarnations of the Buddha. The Buddhist sutra “The Sutra of the Beginning of the World,” composed by Jana Horatio in the Sui Dynasty, mentions, “The Buddha said, ‘I condemn two sages to go to Zhen Dan to perform incarnations: one is Lao Tzu, the Bodhisattva of Kaya, and the other is Confucius, the Bodhisattva of Confucius’”. Confucius and Lao Tzu were both incarnations of Bodhisattvas sent by Buddha to the Middle Kingdom.

7. Earth Store Bodhisattva – The Pinnacle of God-Buddha Practice

In the case of Shinto Buddhism, Shintoism is committed to drawing on the rigorous classical and ritual systems of Buddhism, but consciously retains the independence of its beliefs. Thus, most Buddhist deities were not absorbed into Shinto mythology. For Buddhism, however, it was keen to absorb Shinto deities into its own mythology. Even if the faith was not fully integrated into the Buddhist sphere (as in the case of the Hindu nightstick Nezha Khuvara, who was fully absorbed into the Buddhist belief system as the military god Nezha [10]), it was at least given Buddhist conversion status (as in the case of the Inari deity being given to the white star fox King Zhibatsu). On the way of their integration, one side was committed to retaining its independence to maintain its status as the state religion, while the other side was committed to confusing the two systems in order to preach the Word. This resulted in a continuous practice of Shinto-Buddhist convergence over the centuries.

This doomsday belief itself was greatly related to the belief in Maitreya Buddha, a product of the fusion of Mithraism and Buddhism [11]. However, the belief in Maitreya came from the Kuruts in Iran, and the branch of this belief in China was the White Lotus religion, which advocated doomsday theory and encouraged people to rebel against fate and carry out riots and revolutions. Therefore, the Jizo faith, which was also related to the doomsday theory and advocated the salvation of the world by one’s own power at the end of time, became the mainstream faith in Japan at the time [12].

Previously, Japanese Buddhists believed that the center of the world was in the Indian region of South Asia and that Japan belonged to the periphery of the world, a place that Buddha could not take into account. Therefore, it introduced the concept of the habitual union of God and Buddha, believing that the local gods were incarnations of Buddha and that Buddha was with them in the form of incarnations. This argument of cultural inferiority was particularly notable in the doomsday theory.

The political chaos and frequent wars in Japan during the Heian period, coupled with the complex and volatile natural environment, led to a time when the people were extremely prone to combine disasters with the end times. It formed an extremely fertile ground for the spread of Buddhist Pure Land beliefs and doomsday theory. The key point of Pure Land faith was that although belief in Buddhism did not necessarily bring happiness in this world, it could qualify for survival in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss in the next life. The Jizo faith was the mainstream of Pure Land faith. Therefore, for Shinto shrines, which were originally responsible for ritual prayers, they had to cater to the market's choice and began to accept Jizo beliefs.

Since Jizo Bodhisattva was believed to be active in hell to redeem the spirits of the dead, Jizo belief was believed to have the meaning of blessing the dead. Japanese people often erected statues of Jizo at the place of death to calm the spirits. It was particularly noteworthy because in Sanskrit, Jizo is called "Kushiti/Galba". クシティ means earth, and ガルバ means in-utero, child offering, Jizo Bodhisattva was portrayed in the form of a child. This may be related to the belief in Maitreya, which was called "Old Buddha Maitreya" with respect to Zruwan, the fundamental deity of Mithraism, "Myo-mi-sa" as the presiding figure of the twelve constellations, and "Muwei Soshi" as the figure who became the present reincarnation and preaches. "Muwei Soshi", the child form was called "Maitreya-dojin (Saint Maitreya Kannon)", and the figure who was the savior of the end times was called "Maitreya Buddha". The child form of Maitreya Daoist was a product of a combination of Chinese Taoist beliefs.

Since Taoism advocated setting up a Dharma altar in the home, Maitreya Daoist was often a statue of Maitreya enshrined in the home so that believers could confide in it. This was also evident in the child-like appearance of the statue of Jizo Bodhisattva. The child-like appearance of the statue of Jizo allowed believers to better confide in it, eliminated the solemnity of the old Buddha statue, and could bring them closer to the believers. When Jizo Bodhisattva statues were outdoors, they often matched the functions of the Shinto deity Dojojin, who protected travel and traffic safety and was located on the road. Because they often appeared in pairs as a man and a woman, they were also considered to be gods who blessed reproduction.

After the Shinto-Buddhist rendezvous between Jizo Bodhisattva and Dojo God occurred, the statue of Dojo God located on the roadside began to appear in the form of a single monk, a reflection of Jizo Bodhisattva's appearance [13]. In addition, since Jizo Bodhisattva was considered to be associated with the dead, roads with Jizo Bodhisattva statues were also considered to be the border between life and death, leading to the custom of the people to make offerings to the dead at intersections to express their thoughts or pray for blessings. For Shintoism, the widespread spread of Jizo beliefs in the middle of the Heian period was also the beginning of the gradual transition of funeral services to an exclusively Buddhist business.

8. Conclusion

During the Heian period, Buddhism as an imported product developed and spread rapidly in Japan through the phenomenon of local draping of Shintoism, in which, according to the worldview of Buddhist teachings (the center of the world is in the sky), the local Japanese people developed a strong sense of cultural inferiority (Watarai worship) and believed that Japan was at the edge of the end of the age. As a result, the Japanese people were pitying the loving gods and Buddhas, who appeared in the form of native gods as protection. This strong desire for development was accompanied by a yearning for the developed economy and culture of the Tang Dynasty, which greatly facilitated cultural exchange and development between China and Japan. It is worth noting, however, that despite the cultural advantages of Buddhism, Shintoism did not become dominant in Japan in the same way that Buddhism was introduced to Tibet, leading to the decline of the native benzene religion, due to the core belief of Shintoism, that the emperor is the god. In other words, in contrast to the

Benjaminites, whose interests diverged significantly from those of the ruling class in Tubo, Shintoism was strictly for imperial power from ancient times to the Heian period. This also led to the refusal of the upper ruling class to abandon Shintoism, which was culturally inferior, and at most allowed it to make local draping statements, because Buddhism could only maintain the spiritual stability of the people and bring about stable rule.

However, because of the worldview of the six paths of reincarnation, Buddhism did not emphasize the reverence of the emperor and ministers as incarnations or relics of the gods. They could maintain their natural senior status and become gods apart from human beings. The Japanese clerks said that “the emperor ‘believes in Buddhism and respects Shinto’”. Buddhism was a rigorous system and the scriptures could be followed. It thus could be believed and practiced from time to time. Shinto respected the emperor as a divine being, who has been admired by the people. Therefore, it should be respected.

Even though the samurai class believed in Buddhism, they were still required to follow Shinto rituals and did not dare to show their preference. Although Buddhism had a rigorous religious system and classics that came after Kanzen’s passage to the east, and was far superior to Shintoism in philosophical aspects such as the interpretation of this world and the next, fatalism and moral standards, Buddhism was at a relative disadvantage in maintaining rule. However, Buddhism still had a high level of voice in the ruling class and spread its ideas and culture at a high speed until it became one of the mainstream religions in Japan.

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