

The Influence of Temple Economy on Modern Japanese Buddhist Music

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Abstract: Buddhist music was introduced to Japan from China in the 6th century and marked the origins of chanting in temple and court rituals by Japanese monks. However, after the Meiji Restoration, Buddhist music underwent a transformative phase due to policy changes and western influences. Additionally, technological developments in music and increased scholarly attention have played a significant role in restoring lost ancient Buddhism music. This paper focuses on current research landscape of modern and contemporary Japanese Buddhist music, primarily addressing two issues: the diverse forms of modern Japanese Buddhist music and the underlying reasons behind their diversification. The paper argues that the temple economy stands as the main factor influencing both the popularization and diversification of Buddhist music in Japan. By exploring these critical aspects, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolution and cultural significance of Japanese Buddhist music in contemporary society.

Keywords: temple economy, Japan, Buddhist music, diversification, westernization

1. Introduction

The term “Shōmyō” refers to the original form of Japanese Buddhist music. Modern academic research on Shōmyō dates back to the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, scholars formally introduced the taxonomic concept of “Buddhist music” as a genre. For instance, in a 1913 article titled “Japanese Music”, researcher Nagakiyo Chōsei of the Tokyo Music Academy formally referred to “Shōmyō” in the genre category of “Buddhist music” [1]. Similarly, in 1917, musicologist Tabata Hisao referred to “Shōmyō” as “Buddhist vocal music” in his work titled “Shōmyō melodic systems” [2]. Music dictionaries from this period defined Japanese Buddhist music as vocal music used by monks in Buddhist ceremonies, also highlighting and referencing “Shōmyō” as a style within the genre [3]. Until this juncture, Buddhist music remained its ritualistic function and was not directly associated with the temple economy.

Buddhist music thereafter underwent a phase of diversification, leading to a distinction between the terms “Buddhist music” and “Shōmyō”. Whereas both terms were interchangeable prior to the diversification of styles. Buddhist music is now an overarching category that subsumes not only the traditional Buddhist music classified as forms that existed before the Meiji Restoration, referred to as “Shōmyō”, but also modern and contemporary styles of music that have been adapted and restored with Buddhism as its theme.

The traditional temple economy in Japan relied on the system of danka (temple parishioners) that was established during the Tokugawa shogunate in the Edo period [4]. This system raised alms and donations to cover the temples' maintenance costs from their followers. Under the Tokugawa Shogunate, the danka system required individuals to be affiliated with a Buddhist temple and become its parishioners, regardless of their beliefs. Ancestral and family funeral and memorial services had to be entrusted to the affiliated temple, and regular financial and material contributions had to be made to the temple. The danka system introduced by the government pushed the burden of the upkeep of temples from government taxes to the people directly [5]. The government also strengthened control over Buddhist sects and temples through the danka system, and delegated some forms of local governance to the temples such as serving as registries for population counts and as departments for citizens to prove their identities. In this era, the temples gained stable and substantial economic income through the danka system.

In modern times, although the danka system continued to provide considerable economic income to temples, the majority of temple territories were seized due to government restrictions, significantly weakening the danka system. Additionally, the emergence of park-like memorial gardens provided the Japanese people with new options for funeral practices. In 1935, the first Tokyo Metropolitan "Hachūji Memorial Garden", also known as "Reien", was established. Reien overturned the gloomy impression of traditional cemeteries and transformed the memorial garden into a park-like funeral space with large lawns and geometric designs, sparking a trend of imitation resembling Western "rural cemeteries" [6]. Under the influence of multiple factors, the danka system gradually declined, and temples in modern times needed to seek new profit models and methods of propagation. Buddhist music played a key role as a form widely accepted and recognized by the public. The function of Buddhist music has changed along with the changes to the temple economy.

2. Diverse Forms of Modern Japanese Buddhist Music

The traditional Japanese Buddhist music primarily appeared in solemn Buddhist ceremonies and preaching, serving the functions of protecting the nation and propagating the teachings. After the Meiji Restoration, Japanese Buddhist music started to diversify to cater to different audiences and purposes. These include theatrical performances, traditional restorations, and diversified adaptations. This section will illustrate these three musical formats in turn: ritual performances, traditional restorations, and diversified adaptations.

2.1. Theatrical Ritual Performances

There is a renaissance of scholarship of Shōmyō since the Edo era. The advances in musical technology, such as CD recordings, vinyls and digitization, has spurred a wave of compilation of recordings, musical scores, and related studies. The study of Shōmyō transcends music academia as numerous scholars from the Japanese Buddhist and music communities have also dedicated themselves to the Shōmyō research. The increased research and accessibility of compiled traditional music has led to the growth of theatrical showcases of traditional rituals. Monks now showcase their rituals on stage in theatrical performances. The most noteworthy performances are the annual Shōmyō concerts at Mount Kōya, which represent exemplary renditions of Shōmyō and have even been recorded on DVDs for commercial distribution. Additionally, traditional Shōmyō is performed at the end-of-year NHK concert. The NHK is Japan's government-backed broadcasting station that operates as a public television channel [7].

2.2. Traditional Japanese Music Concert (Performances)

In 1966, the Japanese government constructed the first national theater in the country with the primary goal of revitalizing and preserving traditional Japanese music and nurturing talent. In November 1966, the National Theater held its first “Shōmyō” concert. During this concert, performers showcased “Shōmyō” melodies and Buddhist rituals passed down from the two major Buddhist sects- Tendai and Shingon. The concert maintained the traditional form of Buddhist ceremonies and served as an experimental test to gauge the public’s acceptance and response to this theatrical form of traditional “Shōmyō” music. After the performance, the National Theater stated, “People have come to recognize the artistic nature of ‘Shōmyō’; on the other hand, ‘Shōmyō’ has finally gained general public recognition” [8]. Since the inaugural 1966 concert, the National Theater has held at least one “Shōmyō” event every year, hosting a total of 51 events by 2015 [3].

2.3. Restoration of Traditional Buddhist Rituals

In the 21st century, a wave of archaeo-musicologists began restoring ancient Shōmyō melodies. For example, a team of experts and monks led by Professor Takako Seta successfully restored the long-lost Buddhist ritual called “Saijō-e” from ancient Japan. Saijō-e was a Buddhist ceremony where the “Golden Light Sutra” was recited, and it was one of the three major ceremonies held at Nara, Japan. The ceremony was first held in 830AD at Yakushiji Temple in Nara by imperial decree, and it continued annually for seven days from March 7th to 13th. However, the ritual was lost and the practice halted after the lecture hall and the embroidered Buddha enshrined during Saijō-e were burned down in 1528.

The reconstruction of the “Saijō-e” was done via referencing the “Golden Light Sutra,” examining the historical background of the ritual’s development, and drawing inferences based on existing Buddhist ceremonial practices, Professor Takako Seta collaborated with modern monks trained in Shōmyō to restore the performance of the Saijō-e ritual on stage in 2003. The monks referred to the reconstructed Shōmyō musical scores while adhering to the current musical practices of Shōmyō. This restoration of Shōmyō performance received recognition from the Music Department of the Art Festival sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in Japan. Musicological research not only restores lost Shōmyō melodies, but also enables temples to resume its performance. Since the 2003 performance, the Saijō-e ceremony, after being lost for approximately 500 years, has become a regular ritual event held at the Great Lecture Hall of Yakushiji Temple in Nara [9].

3. Adaptations of Music Influenced by Modernization

Even in the late Heian period, Shōmyō had employed notation methods such as ink notation (bokufu) and doctor notation (hakasefu). However, due to variations in notation methods and practices among different sects, accuracy was limited, and the transmission of Buddhist music relied primarily on oral tradition. During the Meiji Restoration, the adoption of Western staff notation and standardization in Japan in general transcended to Buddhism music and facilitated the preservation of traditional Shōmyō. In the 20th century, music researchers began using staff notation to record “Shōmyō” and other forms of Buddhist music, enabling the systematic documentation and organization of musical materials. For example, the “Shin’i Shingon Shōmyō Shūsei (Yokufu-hen)” (1969), also known as the “Yokufu-hen,” was compiled by ethnomusicologist Fumio Koizumi and others. This adoption of Western staff notations allowed for adaptations in a unified format, addressing issues of inaccuracies and limited circulation of recordings [10].

The introduction of Western music has also led to adaptations within traditional Buddhist music. For instance, the Buddhist hymn “Vintārihuā” was composed by renowned Japanese composer Kōsaku Yamada and educator Seikichi Kawakami. It was published in 1952 by the Bukkyō Sanka

Association of Japan's Nishi Honganji Temple in the Buddhist hymn collection called "BUKKYOSANKA." The composition often features accompaniment by electronic organs and is sung during rituals, particularly when offering flowers or lighting lamps for the Buddha and at the end of Buddhist ceremonies. However, Western-influenced adaptations have remixed it as a choral arrangement with two or four voice parts. "Vintārihuā" skillfully combines elements of Christian hymn music, Western compositional techniques, Japanese traditional music elements, and Buddhist themes, creating a new fusion music form for Buddhist hymns in Japan [7].

4. Reasons for the Diversification of Modern Japanese Buddhist Music

4.1. Policy Factors

The early Meiji period was marked by the return to imperialism. Ancillary to the restoration of imperial rule, the new government issued a decree separating Shintoism and Buddhism. This led to the abolition of Buddhism in many regions. In 1870, the Japanese government issued a decree that explicitly established Shintoism as the official state religion and effectively broke the long-standing dependence of Shintoism on Buddhism. Although the government claimed that it had no intention of eradicating Buddhism and acknowledged the role of Buddhism in educating the public, Buddhist sects faced strict control, including the closure of temples, the abolition of sectarian registration systems, and the confiscation of temple lands.

In 1872, the Meiji government lifted the ban on meat consumption, marriage, and hair growth, which were previously imposed by the authorities [11]. It abolished monastic ranks and monastic officials, defining monks as simply a profession and prohibiting begging for alms by monks and nuns. The reduction of state support led to inevitable closures and a decline in Buddhism. However, this also led to positive developments in some areas where private support was strong. The Religious Corporation System and the lifting of restrictions on monks facilitated the integration of Japanese monks and their work into secular society in the modern era. Many religious organizations began funding railway construction and educational development and engaged in missionary work in factories and prisons.

Monks began to diversify into a whole range of professions, which inevitably included music-related professions. Using music as a means to propagate Buddhist teachings became a popular choice. For example, Gyōyu Kohyo, a nun who dreamed of becoming a pop idol, not only inherited her temple but also became a singer. She debuted under the stage name "Genai\$Bosatsu" and became a recognized crossover Buddhist star. In addition to singing, she worked as a voice actress for anime and entertained the public by cosplaying as Buddha, attracting many young Japanese people to learn about and understand Buddhism. Kōhō, a 39-year-old vice abbot of Kaizen-ji Temple, established a band called "Kissa-Quo" after graduating from university. Through music creation and performances, he realized that he could influence and reach out to more people by singing adapted Buddhist songs. In 2007, Kōhō released the song "Hannya Shingyō" (Heart Sutra), gaining the attention and support of the Japanese audience with his image as a monk playing the guitar. He also filmed Buddhist music videos in an electronic music style within solemn temples and opened a YouTube account as a "Buddhist musician", consistently updating his new works. He has accumulated over 70 million views. Starting from 2022, Kōhō embarked on a world tour and held a concert in Chengdu, China, in May 2023. These initiatives have increased accessibility of both Buddhism and Buddhist music for audiences from around the world. The modernizations have also made Buddhism compatible with economic considerations, such that the continued funding has led to new innovations in Buddhist music.

4.2. Westernization

The transformation of Japan's temple economy model was also influenced by the Western market economy system. After World War II, Japanese society underwent a period of Western-based modernizations. This invariably affected Japanese Buddhism. In 1939, the Japanese government introduced the Religious Corporation Ordinance, imitating the Western corporate system, which stipulated that religious organizations could become religious corporations by applying to the Minister of Education or the head of local government. The effect was incorporating commercial elements into a non-commercial entity. In 1951, the emperor enacted the Religious Corporation Act, amending the Religious Corporation Ordinance. The first article stated that religious groups meeting the legislative criteria possess the legal status of a corporation, enabling them not only to conduct religious activities independently but also to enjoy property rights similar to those of general corporations.

The wave of westernization not only affected Buddhist music through sweeping organizational changes, but also through musical influences from Western Christian music and jazz. During the Taisho period (1912-1926), the Japanese Buddhist community began to pay attention to Sunday schools and incorporated Christian hymns into Buddhism. Temples and sects actively engaged in the creation of hymns. This process had a synergistic effect on the development of ancillary art forms such as Buddhist dance, Buddhist fairy tales, and Buddhist operas as a side effect of hymn composition [7].

In 1917, renowned Japanese composer Kōsaku Yamada, who had studied in Germany, composed eight Buddhist hymns, including “Shussha Kazan Hikari,” at the request of his student Yasuo Sawa (a priest from Nishi Honganji Temple), while he was in Hawaii. These eight songs were recorded and published in 1918 in the collection of Buddhist hymns titled “Reishan” at the Betsuin-Rakujo Temple in Hawaii. In November 2016, during a music event called “JAZZ Sanmai,” Reverend Keinori Motoyoshi, the 34th abbot of Myōjō-ji Temple in Ebina City, performed an improvisational recitation of sutras accompanied by a jazz band. A video of this performance was uploaded on Twitter and Facebook, garnering significant attention from various sectors of Japanese society. It was subsequently covered by Japanese television stations.

4.3. Population Factors

Japan's unique population distribution pattern has also influenced temple economy and Buddhist music. Due to the governmental support in previous eras, temples had proliferated all over Japan. The lack of transportation in the past also led to localization of temples in local parishes. Thus, there is a disproportionate number of shrines from the previous eras compared to modern facilities. According to statistics, there are approximately 24,000 post offices, 35,000 primary and secondary schools and 69,000 dental clinics. Comparatively, there are 77,000 temples and 81,000 shrines. Some famous temples, such as Tokyo's Senso-ji Temple and Kyoto's Kiyomizu-dera Temple, function like “major corporations” with abundant resources and significant tourism revenue [12].

However, most temples are like “small and medium-sized enterprises” that rely on donations from believers, conducting funerals, and managing graveyards to sustain themselves. An aging population and declining birth rates leading to a decrease in the population has led to the closure of many schools and hospitals. The same phenomenon has also led to pressures on temples.

According to a survey released by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in 2018, households with individuals aged 65 and older accounted for 47.2% of the population. Among these households, couples living alone and single-person households accounted for a combined 58.9%. Additionally, an investigation by the Japanese Cabinet Office regarding the dialogue and frequency of outings for individuals aged 55 and older revealed that approximately 20% of elderly people in

single-person households engage in conversations with family members or friends once a week or less, and about 10% go out once a week or less [12].

The modernization of the family has led to an en masse loss of social connections during their lifetime and many lack descendants to support them after death. This has led to passing the upkeep and maintenance costs of family graves onto temples, whilst reducing the amount of donations. Reverend Mitsuhiro Akita, the abbot of Osaka's Daizen-ji Temple, observed that in the past 20 to 30 years, many families without descendants have found it challenging to pass down their family graves. The number of Daizen-ji Temple's believers has decreased from 450 households in 2002 to the current 350 households. Reverend Hideyoshi Tobase, a Japanese monk, stated, "40% of temples nationwide have an annual income of less than 3 million yen (approximately 21,600 USD). Only a small portion of monks earn the entire income of the temple. If this continues, more and more temples will have difficulty surviving."

In 2015, the Japan Policy Council published a report titled "Disappearance of Localities." The report mentioned that by 2040, 49.8% of local government bodies in Japan may disappear. This prediction had a significant impact on Japanese society. Furthermore, the report indicated that by 2040, more than 30,000 temples (according to research conducted by Professor Kenji Ishii of Kokugakuin University) and around 31,000 shrines may disappear. There may also be 17,000 vacant temples in 2040. Unoccupied temples without resident monks maintaining it are exposed to the elements and experience damage from wind and rain, resulting in roofs leaking and the once-existing land turning into overgrown wasteland, making it difficult to reuse. It is estimated that by 2040, 46% of temples of the Shingon sect on Mount Kōya may disappear, 42% of temples of the Sōtō sect may disappear, 39% of temples of the Tendai sect's Enryakuji branch may disappear, and 36% of temples of the Tendai sect may disappear. Various sects are facing the challenge of temple disappearance [13].

Some small temples have found ways to generate economic income through music. The 50-year-old abbot of Shōen-ji Temple in Fukui City, Yukinobu Asakura, took over the temple from his father two years ago. After noticing a declining number of visitors to the temple each year, he decided to renovate the temple and incorporate a fusion of techno music (a genre of electronic music originating in the 1980s in the United States) and Buddhist music to attract more young people to their family temple.

5. Conclusion

Modern Buddhist music evolved from "Shomyo". The modern diversifications have branched off in three main directions. These directions encompass traditional performances of "Shomyo" in more accessible theatre settings, the restoration of lost ancient hymns and melodies through scholarly research, and the modernization and Westernization of music. This paper sets out the thesis that the diversification of modern Buddhist music was partially influenced by the temple economy, specifically due to policy factors that led to the withdrawal of previous support from both the populace and the government. There are three main reasons for this phenomenon: First, the government policies implemented after the Meiji Restoration, such as the separation of Shinto and Buddhism and the lifting of restrictions on monks, prompted monks to integrate into secular society, learn modern music, and organize performances.

Moreover, the establishment of the religious corporation system has also had the effect of increasing corporate liberties and setting the stage for the enabling of commercial musical development later, including the dissemination of modern Buddhist music through platforms like YouTube. Overall, the complex interplay among temple economy, government policies, and societal changes has significantly impacted the trajectory of modern Buddhist music.

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