

The Power and Influence of Buddhism in Early China and Japan

Buddhism has had a profound impact on all of Asia. Starting in India, Buddhism's reach has extended across the world. China and Japan were both strongly influenced by the influx of Buddhism. Social, political, and economic changes were brought about due to the influence of Buddhism and Buddhist clergy on the people of China and Japan. In China the Buddhist clergy fought for favor in the royal court. In Japan the different Buddhist sects played tug-of-war between themselves for control of bureaucratic power. Both efforts had significant impact on the lives of the common people as well as on the economy of the nation. Although the roles of Buddhism and Buddhist monks were great in both China and Japan, the religious took on a more direct and assertive role in the Japanese bureaucratic arena.

In order to fully understand the roots of Buddhist power in China one must first understand the way in which Buddhism was introduced into Chinese society. Buddhism was established to China over a long period of time. Much of the reason for China's slow introduction into Buddhism was because of the difficulty in translating Buddhist texts into Chinese and adapting it to the Chinese school of thought. As Buddhism began to grow it was initially studied by Taoist scholars. These scholars took many of the ideas of Buddhism and, using Taoism as a base, interpreted them in a new and more "Chinese" manner. Although this aided the spread of Buddhism it also was the base for growing tensions between Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism began to gain its strength and

popularity in the fourth and fifth centuries. As Buddhism was domesticated in China it grew very differently in the upper classes as compared to the lower classes. In southern China Buddhism appealed largely to the aristocratic society. The “model character,” depicted in Buddhist scriptures, presented a greater appeal to the upper echelons of Chinese society. The contrast between that and the older ideal of the Taoist sage seemed to favor the Buddhist ideal. “Here was not bloodless moral paragon, not naked ascetic but a rich and powerful aristocrat, a brilliant talker, a respected householder and father, a pure and self-disciplined personality, yet a man who denied himself no luxury or pleasure while he changed all whom he met for the better. Buddhism thus presented... aristocrats with a new model for a worldly life.”¹ Because of this enthusiasm for Buddhism among the wealthy and powerful, Buddhist clergy enjoyed many benefits, these benefits will be described in detail later in this paper. Buddhism also appealed greatly to the peasantry of early China. Buddhism gave the common people hope for salvation when Taoism and Confucianism could give them none. Across China Buddhism became a part of people’s daily lives and as a result began to shape China in many ways.

The effect of Buddhism on the Chinese economy was one of its most profound influences in China. The economy was changed in both positive and negative ways by many different aspects of Buddhism’s societal role. One of the most direct influences was the change in economy due to the creation of Buddhist monasteries by the government. Most of the emperors of the fifth and sixth centuries, including emperors who otherwise appeared to hold Buddhism in a low esteem, spent large amounts of time, money and resources to building extravagant monasteries. They were more interested in erecting great things in their

¹ Wright, Arthur F., *Buddhism and Chinese Culture: Phases of Interaction*, Journal of Asian Studies, 1957, pp. 27.

names and in the name of their dynasty than they were with the way their spending would affect the economy. “It was especially after 465, in Northern China, that unrestrained expenditure for the benefit of Buddhism began to assume proportions dangerous to Chinese society. Colossal proportions were in fashion.”² Exaggerated spending and utilization of resources taxed the economy heavily. The common people, whose labor was used to build the great religious buildings, were at the mercy of the emperor’s whim. Large numbers of men and animals died while working to create the great monasteries. Natural resources such as those used to make the bricks and beams of the monasteries were waning. The resource that suffered most of all was precious metal stores. The Chin-ko monastery, built under Emperor T’ ai-tsung, was tiled with gold-plated copper. However, the majority of precious metals used for the benefit of Buddhism were not used in the construction of monasteries but in the casting of ritual objects such as statues and bells. When the amount of precious metals grew dangerously low in the late sixth century as well as the mid ninth century, the government made declarations requiring Buddhist monasteries to turn over a portion of their metal ornaments to be melted down and minted as coins for general circulation. The Buddhist needs continually ate up the recourses of the state. Because they did not labor and produced no goods, the Buddhist clergy were living off the work of others, and the economy suffered for it. However, the effect that Buddhism had on the economy was not entirely negative. Buddhism also spurred a boom in commercialism and production. Buddhist statues and other religious ornaments became popular items for common consumption. The people of China, from the peasants to the aristocratic upper class, were affected by the struggling economy much more than either the emperor or the Buddhist clergy. The emperor, who was

² Gernet, Jacques, translated by Franciscus Verellen, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp 15.

above the daily struggle to put food on the table, did not readily see the complications created by extensive spending on the Buddhists. He was more concerned with gaining the favor and blessings of the Buddhist church and less with the toll that it took on the common man. By spending great resources on the church and on individual clergy members the emperor could appease them and keep them out of government affairs as well. The emperor's official ordination of monks and nuns also had an effect on the economy. Monks could either be ordained through good work or through the purchase of ordination certificates. As the numbers of ordained monks increased the numbers of people working to support the Buddhist church and the country dropped. Although the number of officially ordained monks never exceeded one percent of the population the increase in "idle eaters" during the T'ang dynasty succeeded in frustrating both scholars and laymen. "Monks eat without having to work the land and are clothed without having to weave."³ There is some controversy as to whether Buddhism really did damage to China's economy or whether it merely consumed surplus state revenue. Buddhism was a luxury for which the Chinese society paid. It is unclear as to what the state of China's economy would have been without the expenses of the Buddhist church; however, if the economy at the time, without the added expense of Buddhism would have been considerably better than I believe it is safe to say that Buddhism was a tax on the people of China. On the other hand, the economics of Buddhism did not play as strong a role in deciding their political power as one may have thought.

Buddhism's effect on the Chinese government can be most clearly seen during the T'ang dynasty. During this time period Buddhism was on the rise. The government's view of Buddhism during the T'ang varied from emperor to emperor; however, most of the

³ Gernet, pp. 12.

T'ang emperors worked to keep the Buddhist clergy docile because they did not wish for the church to hold great power. Although they did not give any direct control over decisions to the Buddhist clergy they did make allowances and compromises in favor of the church. They modified the penal code to incorporate the Buddhist laws for monks and nuns as outlined in the *Vinya*. However, some emperors, specifically Emperor T'ai-tsung, made the punishments for crimes stricter than Buddhist doctrine specified. Monks and nun who broke the law were often defrocked and returned to lay life. Expulsion from the Buddhist order was the harshest of penalties and called for by the *Vinya*, and was only used in the case of a monk or nun violating one of the four pārajika offences. The pārajika offences are: "fornication, murder, theft and pretending to be enlightened." T'ang emperors, though, especially Emperor T'ai-tsung, enforced expulsion from the Buddhist order for much smaller offences such as wearing silk, "engaging in drunken brawling" and telling fortunes.⁴ Although regulations kept on the Buddhist clergy were strict, the clergy were afforded certain privileges that made up for the restrictions. "Clergy should live up to a higher moral standard than that of laymen since the former enjoyed privileges not accorded to the latter."⁵ One of the biggest privileges was that monks and nuns were not required to pay taxes. Although this law was neither universal nor constant, it was enough to drive dishonest men into monastic life, just for the benefit of forgoing taxes. The idea behind the exemption from tax was that because under the Buddhist law they were not allowed to own anything they therefore could not be required to pay tax on that which was not theirs. They were also granted the following benefits by the Emperor:

1. The great esteem in which were held the Three Jewels;

⁴ Weinstein, Stanley, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁵ Weinstein, pp 20.

2. the official construction of monasteries;
3. the printing of the Buddhist canon [at state expense];
4. the issuing of certificates of the [reception of the] precepts;
5. the bestowal of ordination certificates on monks which exempted them from all impositions;
6. gifts of imperial calligraphy;
7. the conferral of titles of nobility and of appanages to members of the clergy;
8. the annual donations of incense and lamps;
9. the special institution of monastic officials, thanks to which religious could not be humiliated by laymen;
10. exemption from corvée duties.⁶

Exemption from corvée duties was particularly controversial because of the large amount of human labor required for the building of Buddhist temples and monasteries. Another law, which was repeatedly challenged, was the law exempting monks and nuns from bowing their heads and paying homage to the throne and to their parents. Edicts requiring monks to pay respect to the throne and to their parents were repeatedly passed and retracted. In the year 662, when Emperor Kao-tsung opened discussions on the issue of whether monks and nuns should be required to lower their heads to both the emperor and their parents the Buddhist community instantly protested. Within six days a monk named Wei-hsiu gathered over two hundred fellow monks and traveled to the palace to present a memorial on the behalf of the community of Buddhist monks and nuns stating that a law requiring religious persons to

⁶ Gernet, pp 31.

lower their heads was against the Buddhist doctrine and ask that it not be passed. After some deliberation emperor

Kao-tsung made a compromise and passed an edict requiring the religious to bow their heads only to their parents and not to the throne. Four months later, after receiving numerous petitions, the emperor conceded the point and rescinded his edict.⁷ The fact that pressure from the Buddhist clergy was able to yield results from the emperor is an important point to note. By looking at the laws of T'ang China it is clear to see that the Buddhist clergy had an effect on the emperor's decisions. The influence of the clergy on the government may have been indirect, however it was still significant.

Buddhism in medieval Japan shares fewer similarities to its Chinese counterpart that one might expect. Yet the struggle for power and government influence is also present. To help relate the idea of the power struggle in medieval Japan I will be using the term *kenmon*, the gates of power. The *kenmon* theory, developed by Japanese scholar Kuroda Toshio in the mid 1960s, attempts to explain the balance of power in early Japan. "According to his theory, the highest authority in the state was shared by a number of private elite groups known as *kenmon*. These elites were the leaders of three power blocs- the court nobles (*kōke* or *kuge*), the warrior aristocracy (*buke*), and temples and shrines (*jisha*)- which ruled the realm together by sharing responsibilities of government and supporting each other's privileges and status."⁸ Under this system each ruling power relied on the other powers for support; the individual *kenmon* were codependent on each other for political survival and government control. Kuroda laid out five characteristics that define each *kenmon* as a high power.

⁷ Weinstein, pp 34.

⁸ Adolphson, Mikael S., *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers and Warriors in Premodern Japan*, University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

1. Each group maintained their own private headquarters that were centers of administrative work for the *kenmon*.
2. The headquarters of the *kenmon* controlled issues of relevance to “land and international disputes.”
3. Every *kenmon* was followed by a number of loyal retainers.
4. The leader of each *kenmon* had “complete judicial rights” in regards to his household and family line.
5. Each *kenmon* exercised complete control over its property.⁹

These characteristics of self-rule aided the *kenmon*'s abilities not only to maintain inner-group self identity, their political and economical separatism gave them greater freedom to influence the flow of power in Japan.

One of the most notable things, in relation to the Buddhism power struggle of Japan, is the formation and maintenance of factionalism within the Buddhist religion. Several sects were constantly battling for favor of the government and for high appointments within the court. Three of the most powerful of the Buddhist temples were Enryakuji, Kōfukuji and Kōyasan. Of the three Enryakuji was the one that held the most influence at the time. Part of the Tendai sect, Enryakuji was founded by Saicho after he returned from China with new knowledge of religious practices used by Buddhist monks in China. Located on Mt. Hiei, which is in close proximity to the old capital in Kyoto, Enryakuji's physical position aided their expanse of power and influence in the imperial court. Enryakuji was well known for its forceful protest as a means of influencing the capital. Of the demonstrations carried out by Buddhist sects in the eleventh century it is estimated that one fourth of them were staged by

⁹ Adolphson, pp. 13.

Enryakuji.¹⁰ Kōfukuji, another of the more powerful temples was founded in the late eighth century in Nara, the city that had been host to the imperial capital before its move to Kyoto. By existing near the capital before Enryakuji, Kōfukuji had a head start because it had already established itself as a power when Enryakuji entered the scene. Despite the distance put between Kōfukuji and the government once the capital was moved, Kōfukuji still rallied “divine demonstrations” and was particularly famous for its assemblage of armed clergy. The third among the top three most powerful temples was the Kōyasan temple. Because of its location on Mt. Kōya in the Kii peninsula, quite far away from the capital, the social-political atmosphere surrounding the temple is much different than that of either Enryakuji or Kōfukuji. Because of their seclusion, Kōyasan had less direct involvement in political affairs and was able to avoid entering any wars after the late Heian period. Although their ability to maintain direct ties with the government was diminished due to physical location that did not stop them from staging many of their own demonstrations. In their own way each temple had a hand in shaping the political situation of the time. The struggle for political influence was in fact so intense that fighting between individual Buddhist sects was not uncommon. The picture of Buddhist monks, armed and prepared for battle is a picture which creates a striking contrast to the passive monks in China at this time. However, the aggressive and assertive tendencies that the Buddhist clergy in premodern Japan exhibited helped them largely increase their influence over the Japanese government.

The authority that the Buddhist clergy exercised in Japan was extensive. Emperor Shirakawa once declared that, “the flow of the Kamo river, the roll of the dice and the

¹⁰ Adolphson, pp. 5.

mountain monks are things I cannot control.”¹¹ The imperial court attempted to maintain some degree of control over the clergy by setting up the *sōgō*, a body comprised of high ranking monks from various sects and imperial representatives. The imperial court was under represented in the *sōgō*, however it formed ties between the court and the most prestigious Enryakuji monks. Although Enryakuji was able to increase their number of ordained monks using the system the ties they formed with the imperial court ended up aiding the court in controlling religious appointments and thereby allowed the government to maintain some power over the clergy. A significant amount of the power held by the Buddhist clergy was rewarded to them for their roles in performing Buddhist rituals and giving lectures. That power, however, was usually granted to the individual monks who carried out the rituals. In the clergy at large power stemmed greatly from their use of “divine demonstration” or *gōso*. “The *gōso* were characterized by two important elements. First, they describe an appeal that was brought to the capital by monks from a temple, frequently also supported by service people from some of its branch shrines. Second, spiritual pressure was exercised by bringing symbols of the *kami* (the native god) Kyoto.”¹² These divine demonstrations could last days and although they were not intended to be they sometimes grew violent if tensions were high enough. Similar protests were made against government issues by the common people of Japan, however they did not wield the spiritual power that the monks did and therefore held less sway. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries sacred palanquins began to become more frequently used as a tool of persuasion by protesting Buddhists. They would carry the palanquins to the capital to remind the government that the monastic order stood to represent the spiritual world of both the Buddha and *kami*. Despite the appearance of divine

¹¹ Adolphson, pp. 2.

¹² Adolphson, pp. 241.

demonstration's efficiently it was not the first method used by monks to protest imperial edicts. In fact, they only staged protests after multiple appeals sent to the throne failed to yield any results. If demonstration did not produce the reaction the monks wished in a timely fashion they would gradually bring in more monks and more a different shrines until the spiritual pressure forced the court of take action to amend the offending edict. The success of Buddhist clergy in changing government policy in Japan was great. The power visible, even only when looking at the use of *giso* clearly shows how strong of an influence Buddhism had on the politics of premodern Japan.

Buddhist clergy, in both China and Japan, had an integral role in influencing the government of their country. In China the privileges conferred upon monks were a result of their high standing in society. Many of the privileges that they enjoyed, such as tax exemption, and government funding for the construction of Buddhist monasteries, had profound impacts on Chinese economy. Although they did not exercise much direct power over the imperial court they did had a substantial amount of indirect influence what can be seen in the laws and privileges in their favor. In Japan the influence of the Buddhist clergy on the imperial court was much more direct. They exerted their power through various forms of petition and protest. The assertive nature of the various Buddhist temples, in their quest for power and dominance, overshadows that of the clergy of China. Even though Buddhism in China played a large role in the formation of ideals, and had a dramatic effect on the Chinese economy, Buddhist sects in Japan applied more direct pressure to the political institutions and therefore had a larger effect on the government policies.

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