

Outline Lecture Seventeen—Buddhism and State Formation in Nara Japan

Today's Key Focus:

- 1) Formation of the Japanese State—evolution of an insular, embryonic entity, where the effect of every change is as magnified as it is profound
- 2) How Japan became a Buddhist nation, but also how Buddhism became a Japanese religion

I) Introduction of Buddhism to Japan

- a) Top→Down or Bottom→Up?
 - i) Traditional assumption vs. Holcombe's maritime/immigrant thesis
- b) A Maritime Transmission of Faith
 - i) Cult of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Guanyin or Kannon)
 - ii) Merchant crews usually a very international group
 - iii) Buddhism, for better or worse, symbolized internationalism to the extreme
- c) Religion of an Immigrant Community
 - i) "Hata" people in Japan
 - ii) Worship of Buddhism
 - (1) Shiba Totto around 522
 - (2) Soga clan's ties to this immigrant community

II) Conditions for the Formation of a Centralized Yamato State

- a) Crisis in the early 7th century
 - i) Geopolitical Changes
 - ii) Domestic Vulnerabilities:
 - (1) Tenuous authority of Yamato state vs. autonomy of provincial clans
 - (2) Intense rivalry between competing clans in the court
- b) Introduction of Buddhism to Japanese Court
 - i) Arrival of monk from Paekche round mid-6th century
 - ii) Soga clan's adoption of the Buddha as its clan *kami*
 - iii) Turning Point for the Soga in 587
 - (1) Ascension of Empress Suiko and Prince Shotoku (573-621), her nephew
- c) Institutional legacy of Shotoku in 7th century
 - i) Centralized infrastructure modeled after China
 - (1) Reorganization of court ranks—well-defined hierarchy
 - (2) Diplomatic relations with China
 - ii) Seventeen Article Constitution (604)
 - (1) Moral injunctions rather than an actual "constitution"
 - iii) Embryonic stage of state formation
 - (1) Adoption of Confucianism as state ideology and Buddhism as state religion

III) Experiment with Buddhism as State Religion in Nara

- a) Nara Period Capital 710
 - i) Miniature Chang'an
 - ii) Bureaucracy focused more on court matters than on provincial administration

- b) Key Differences from Chinese System of Government
 - i) Principle of Imperial Divine Descent vs. Mandate of Heaven
 - ii) Emperors often served as ceremonial figureheads
- c) Formal Establishment of State Religion
 - i) Construction of Todaiji in 728 under Emperor Shomu
 - (1) Daibatsu-Buddha—Vairocana in Sanskrit—cosmic, universal Buddha
 - (2) Functioned like a “national cathedral”
 - ii) Decree of 741
 - (1) “So entire land may be joined with us in the fellowship of Buddhism”
 - (2) Why not Shinto for this role?
 - iii) Buddhism’s monopoly over common rituals
- d) Anxiety towards Buddhism’s Power
 - i) 623, Empress Suiko’s punishment of monks and nuns
 - ii) Growing wealth and prestige of the monasteries and temples
 - (1) The Case of Dokyo

Zen Masters