TRADE-BUDDHISM: MARITIME TRADE, IMMIGRATION,
AND THE BUDDHIST LANDFALL IN EARLY JAPAN

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The conventional image of a state-driven Japanese conversion to Buddhism, from the top down, amidst a static Confucian empire inhabited by inert subsistence-level peasant villagers, obscures the extent to which Japan, prior to circa 700, was an immigrant society with pronounced maritime orientations. These oceanic interests connected Japan with the wider, still too little understood, world of trade and immigration that was actively bridging the distances between continental East Asia, the South Seas, and India. International trade spread both tangible and intangible commodities, including ideas, and served as the vehicle for the propagation of Buddhism. Japan, while occupying the far northeastern fringe of this old-world trading community, was swept up in the general Buddhist transformation.

THE EMERGING JAPANESE STATE, through the eighth century, was commercially underdeveloped even for its era. It was founded, moreover, upon an imported Chinese Imperial-Confucian vision of society, consisting largely of self-sufficient agricultural villages, coordinated and presided over by a small, ritual-bound, central governing elite.1 Some scholars question, moreover, whether the Japanese economy was sufficiently developed even to support this simple agrarian imperial model.2 Yet Buddhism came to Japanese shores at this time, propelled by vast, if not always very strong, economic currents that were flowing across maritime and continental Eurasia in the early centuries of the Christian era, from the Mediterranean world to India and China, and finally even brushing against Japan—for which the surviving evidence of Persian and other Western motifs on Japanese art objects from this period offers silent testimony.3

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These larger commercial waves may have only just barely reached Japan at this time, but they exerted a decisive impact nonetheless. Their relative neglect in conventional histories of the period is attributable in part to their undeniably small scale, but also to the limited range of acceptable elite interests in traditional East Asian civilization. The world of merchants and tradesmen passed largely beneath the recorded notice of bureaucrats and literati, whose complacent view of the lives of commoners was confined largely to docile (or, sometimes, belligerent) peasant villagers. While this unitary Confucian high culture is itself a thing of no little beauty, there are too many unaccounted for strangers passing furtively between the lines of the official histories. Here, I wish to explore the degree to which the Buddhist transmission to Japan, and East Asia more generally, occurred beyond official notice or record, and was entangled with private and sometimes even illegal international commercial activity and population movements.

THE COMMERCIAL VECTORS OF EARLY BUDDHISM

Buddhism traveled to East Asia along established trade routes, and swelled the pre-existing volume of trade by itself creating new religious incentives for travel, and a demand for imported religious articles. Buddhism legitimated private commercial wealth as a vehicle for serving sacred needs through generous donations, and Buddhism lubricated foreign exchange by overcoming narrow local prejudice with a radically more cosmopolitan, international, perspective. The developing cult of Avalokiteśvara (Ch., Guanyin; J., Kannon) as the patron bodhisattva of mariners also gave the faithful courage to confront the

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inevitable perils of distant voyages. Buddhism was thus in many ways conducive to the growth of trade—and trade to the spread of Buddhism.

In China Buddhism stimulated the practice of making pilgrimages—especially to Mañjuśrī’s reputed abode in the Wutai 五台山 mountains—which in turn promoted the circulation of goods and ideas. In 636, for example, the Sillian (Korean) monk Chajang 慈藏 had an (alleged) encounter with Mañjuśrī on Mt. Wutai, who bestowed upon Chajang a relic, valuable robe, and alms-bowl and recommended an equivalent pilgrimage site in Korea where “ten-thousand Mañjuśris constantly dwell.” The south Indian brahmin Bodhisena 婆提僧那 was drawn to make the voyage to Tang China by the lure of Mt. Wutai, but being informed upon arrival that Mañjuśrī had been reborn in Japan, departed for Japan in 736. Discounting the miraculous elements of these tales, it is clear that Buddhist faith occasionally acted as a spur to wide-ranging travel.

Religious practice also demanded certain ritual commodities that could only be obtained from (or through) India. Along the ancient central-Asian Silk Roads, “among the Indian export items Buddhist paraphernalia . . . probably dominated in terms of value.” In the South Seas the spread of Buddhism created a demand for “holy things” in the fifth and sixth centuries—incense, icons, and other religious materials—which exceeded the earlier secular traffic in elite luxury goods.

Buddhism stimulated private production and distribution of copies of the scriptures and sacred images, and encouraged the early development of print technology—a popular commercial market for printed religious texts and calendars having developed during the Tang dynasty unnoticed by officialdom, except in passing criticism.

Although the following sequence of transactions concern official embassies—almost the only kind of international exchange that traditional East Asian historians deemed to record—rather than private trade, it nonetheless demonstrates how Buddhism could facilitate commodity exchanges linking Southeast Asia, through China, to Japan. In 503 King Kaundinya Jayavarman 須跋摩耶跋摩 of Funan 扶南 (in what is now Cambodia and southern Vietnam) offered a coral Buddha in tribute to the Southern-dynasty Liang emperor of China. In 539 Liang sent a monk to Funan to receive a hair of the Buddha; in 540 Funan requested Buddhist images and texts from Liang; in 541 Paekche (Korea) requested Buddhist texts from Liang. In 542, then, Paekche sent offerings of Funan goods, and two slaves, to Japan. The gift of Funan goods was followed three years later by a Paekche present of southern Chinese goods to the Japanese outpost in Korea, coinciding with a royal Paekche Buddhist invocation calling for the spiritual release of all things living under heaven.

Buddhism prospered in China “because it offered the Chinese unlimited means of turning material wealth into spiritual felicity”; even the rich—especially the rich—could earn salvation through generous sharing of their

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7 *Genkô shakusho* 元亨释書 (History of Buddhism [Compiled During] the Genkô Era), *Shintei zôho kokushi taikei*, 31 (ca. 1322; Tokyo: Yoshikawa kôbunkan, 1930), 15.224.
13 *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 (Complete Records of the Buddha and Patriarchs), by Zhipan, *Da Zangjing* (1269), 37; T.49.351.
wealth with the Sangha. The popularity in fourth and fifth century China of the Vimalakirti figure, a comfortably wealthy layman who was nonetheless spiritually unsailable, undoubtedly reflects the aspirations of many in his audience.

The Sangha was therefore liberally endowed by pious laymen, many of whom were no doubt landowners or officials, but at least some of whom were merchants. “South Sea traders all served with honor,” for example, a certain central Indian monk (Gauna-vrdhī 求那毗地, d. 502) who arrived in the Southern-dynasty Chinese capital (modern Nanjing) circa 479, “and made offerings as they came and went” so that he became selflessly rich in the service of the Buddha.

The financial resources of the Buddhist Sangha became so great that, in the fifth century, Wang Sengda 王僧達 (423–58) could use his official position to extort “several million” in cash from one monk. In China the Sangha turned some of its vast resources to novel commercial purposes, lending out grain for a profit and experimenting with pawnbroking already in the fifth and sixth centuries. D. D. Kosambi speculates that in India monasteries provisioned caravans and lent essential capital to merchants in the early centuries of the Buddhist era, although other scholars express skepticism that Indian Buddhists would have participated so directly in commercial activity.

remains plausible, however, that the early Sangha did fill something of the role performed by the modern secular commercial infrastructure, facilitating financial services and long-distance communication.

Contact between peoples belonging to different cultures can generate ethnic friction, and even open hostility. Buddhism’s universalistic ethos helped to smooth over such parochial suspicions. In East Asia Buddhist monks themselves initially presented a truly outlandish spectacle, with their uncovered right shoulders, saffron robes, shorn heads, and bare feet. Individual Chinese, like the hermit Gu Huan 顧歡 (420–83) and Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (r. 561–78), did object to these and other alien practices, but the Buddhist reply was that “in the extremity of the Dao there is no . . . near or far,” and that all such differences are simultaneously both relative and irrelevant: at one level the Chinese empire itself had incorporated a number of what had once been foreign states and cultures, while at another level China and India were similarly just sub-regions in the vast realm of the great Buddhist Jambu Cakravartin king. As the Chan (Zen) patriarch Huien 菩能 (638–713) is alleged to have quipped: “For people there are north and south, For the Buddha-nature, how could there be?”

In Japan, the quarrel over whether or not to accept Buddhism, as it is presented in the surviving written sources at least, was couched in terms of the same opposition between native parochial interests and internationalism, with the latter eventually winning, less for noble philosophical reasons than simple pragmatism: “All the

22 Liu Xinru, 120–23, 175.
26 Nan shi 南史 (History of the Southern Dynasties) by Li Yanshou (Ca. 629; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 75.1875–77; Hong ming ji 弘明集 (Collection Expanding Illumination), by Seng You (435–518) (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 7.1b–2a, 5b–6a; Guang hong ming ji 廣弘明集 (Extended Collection Expanding Illumination), by Daoxuan (596–667) (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 10.2a/b; Fozu tongji, 38; T.49.358.
27 Fozu tongji, 39; T.49.368.
states of the Western foreigners worship it—how could Japan alone turn its back?"  

There is, of course, good reason for handling all such early Japanese accounts with caution. They are the purposeful literary creations of later generations, not pristine archival records. Still, the famous tale of Buddhist internationalism triumphing over nativist exclusion in Japan may reflect some faint echoes of the true story.

The Buddhist spirit minimized regional differences. Prince Nagaya 長業 of Japan (684–729) reportedly ordered a thousand monks' robes to be embroidered with the following passage: “The mountains and streams of different lands share the wind and the moon of the same heaven. It is up to all the children of Buddha to bind their destinies together.”

When Saichō 寺僧 (767–822) re-embarked for Japan in 805, following his brief initiation into Tantai (Tendai) Buddhism in Tang China, the Chinese governor of Taizhou 台州 observed that, while “in appearance the priest Saichō is from a foreign land, his nature truly springs from the same origin.”

Much as Christianity in Europe at about this same time fostered a sense of shared Latin civilization amid the cloisters of what were sometimes truly multi-ethnic monasteries, Buddhism in East Asia carried an international flavor. When the Chinese monk Ganjin 坦真 (687–763) set sail on his sixth and final attempt to introduce the proper Vinaya to Japan in 753, in addition to his Chinese party he brought with him in his entourage a Malay, a Cham, and another person vaguely described as Hu 胡 (northwestern foreigner).

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THE ADVERSARIAL STATE, WANDERING MERCHANTS AND VAGABOND MONKS

It is known that by the Tang dynasty a significant volume of shipping was arriving in China from the South Seas. When Ganjin passed through the southern port of Guangzhou (Canton) on his circuitous route to Japan in the mid-eighth century, he found “unknown numbers of Indian, Persian, South Sea and other boats, laden with incense, drugs and precious things piled up like mountains,” and he reported that “an extremely great variety” of foreigners “come and go and reside there.”

Chinese sources normally only record the arrival of official tribute-bearing embassies, and do not mention private vessels at all. In the absence of other data, the frequency of embassies is sometimes taken as an indication of the volume of maritime activity in general. Sometimes it is even assumed that the recorded tribute-embassies were the only foreign contacts that took place whatsoever. Prior to the fifth century there were few tribute missions, although their number swelled to a crescendo in the fifth and sixth centuries. In fact, however, there is considerable reason to doubt the reliability of official embassies as any index for the volume of trade and a good likelihood that these statistics conceal a great deal of unrecorded private shipping.

Official ideology in imperial China favored agriculture over trade, sometimes even advocating “restraining commerce with the law” to encourage farming instead. “Craftsmen and merchant families eating off of jade [uten-sils] and clothed in brocade, [while] farmers eat coarse grains” was viewed as an unacceptable reversal of the proper social order, which put farming above all other non-governmental occupations. Even when not actively hostile to trade, members of the elite were at least dismissive of it, and legal restrictions, such as the Tang ban of 667 on artisans and merchants riding horses, were not uncommon in an early imperial China famous for its...
“extreme physiocratic theories.” Just as commonly, ordinary people attempted to evade these regulations. In the early Han dynasty, for example, it was reported that citizens in the Ba-Shu 巴蜀 region of modern Sichuan province slipped out past the borders to trade illegally with Yunnan tribesmen for horses, servants, and cattle—causing the region of Sichuan to become “wealthy.”

Private trade therefore often took place outside the law, or at least beyond official cognizance. But it thrived, frequently, nonetheless. By the fourth century, the (extra-legal) economic exuberance of the Chinese Southern dynasties was making it “difficult to maintain the traditional administration and order of urban market areas.”

The very weakness of the state during the era of the Southern dynasties may have even contributed to their undoubted commercial prosperity. In contrast to the usual Chinese assumption of a close correlation between dynastic splendor and general prosperity, a strong dynasty like the early Tang might actually succeed in imposing idealistic, but economically counter-productive, restrictions on trade, with the effect of stifling it somewhat. In the opinion of the Japanese scholar Kawakatsu Yoshio 川勝義雄, Sui-Tang military reunification of imperial China may have resulted in an overall setback to the previously burgeoning southern commercial economy.

Tang, as an especially vigorous and powerful imperial dynasty, may have been relatively successful in its attempts to secure its borders and regulate trade. An imperial command of 714, for example, enumerated various commodities that could not be allowed to pass into the hands of the foreigners living along the northwest frontier, while another edict of 743 ordered the complete termination of trade across the western border, for strategic reasons, and despite its acknowledged profitability.

Early Tang efforts to limit foreign entry to official tribute-bearing embassies were concentrated, however, on this militarily vital northwestern land frontier (and diluted by sometimes rather conveniently elastic definitions of both “embassies” and Chinese “citizenship”); maritime contact along the eastern coast seems to have been less of a concern, and possibly was interfered with less.

Tang legal restrictions, moreover, proved ultimately to be an ineffectual bar to foreign trade, and famously disintegrated toward the end of the dynasty. Yet even in late Tang the state still attempted to maintain a regulatory approach to commerce, in 851, for example, mandating the appointment of officials to supervise the markets of all districts with three thousand or more households. Although members of the socio-political elite themselves were not always above competing with commoners for commercial profit, the Tang government remained resolutely indifferent to commercial interests. In 863, for example, officials created considerable distress among the trading community when they arbitrarily confiscated private merchant vessels, and jettisoned their cargoes, so that they could be used to provision troops by sea from Fujian to Guangzhou.

Despite this official disregard, indirect evidence of flourishing sea-borne commerce, unrelated to any tribute embassies, is provided by the notoriously continuous, uninterrupted opportunity for official corruption presented by trade in the southern ports, from the Han dynasty through the Tang. Guangzhou (Canton) and Jiaozhi 交趾 (a Chinese administrative city in the vicinity of

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40 Han shu 漢書 (Dynastic History of the [Former] Han), by Ban Gu (32–92) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 95.3838.


44 Tōkyō daibakaku tōyō bunka kenkyūsho fuzoku (1986), ngoi ky 5.165.


46 Tōkyō dai�iyō 86.1583.

47 Tōkyō daiyō 86.1582.

48 Dai viet su ky doan thu 大越史記全書 (Complete Historical Records of Great Vietnam), by Ngo Si Lien (1479; Tokyo: Tōkyō daibakaku tōyō bunka kenkyūsho fuzoku, 1986), ngoi ky 5.165.
modern Hanoi) were long known as places where merchants could become rich. Complaints of official extortion become endemic in the region as early as the late Han. In the early fourth century, at a time when tribute embassies were few, it is nonetheless reported that Chinese officials in what is now northern Vietnam made outrageous demands upon the foreign merchants who came by sea, bringing gifts of valuable goods as bribes. One contemporary wit explained that in Guangzhou there was a “spring of avarice,” drinking from which caused officials to lose their incorruptibility. Around the turn of the fifth century it was reported that the combination of economic opportunity and insalubrious climate insured that only corrupt and greedy officials were willing to risk appointment to far-off southern Guangzhou.

Official exactions continued into the Tang. For the year 817 it was observed: “Foreign ships arriving at their moorings were taxed to drop anchor. When they first arrived, there was the entertaining of the inspectors of the cargo—horn and pearls in profusion, with bribes reaching even to their servants.” In the late ninth-century, when the rebel Huang Chao 黃巢 (d. 884) offered to surrender in exchange for appointment as Protector General of Annam (Vietnam) and Military Commissioner of Guangzhou, he was rejected on the grounds that “The profits from South Sea trade are immeasurable. If a rebel obtains them he will increasingly prosper, while the state’s consumption will suffer.” All of this is indirect, but conclusive, evidence of a fairly substantial private maritime trade throughout this period, including intervals when tribute-missions were rare.

Further evidence of continuous private trading activity, even as official embassies slowed to a trickle during the interim between the great unified Han and Tang dynasties, is provided by the number of Buddhist monks who are known to have come to China by sea. Kang Senghui 康僧會 (“the Kang—or Central Asian—Monk Hui”; d. 280) is a good example. His family was originally from Samarkand, but had lived for generations in India. Kang Senghui’s parents moved to Chinese Jiaozi “on business,” where both parents soon died. The orphaned Kang Senghui then became a monk, after completing the prescribed mourning for his parents, and in 247 moved north to the capital of Three Kingdoms Wu (modern Nanjing), becoming allegedly the first śramaṇa to appear there. He was reported to the throne by an officer as “a Hu,” or Central Asian, “calling himself a śramaṇa, whose appearance and dress are not normal,” and he subsequently made a favorable impression on the ruler of Wu with his Buddhist miracles.

The Kashmiri monk Guṇavarman 求那跋摩 (367–431) is another example. After being warmly welcomed in Java, he was “delighted” to receive an official invitation from the emperor of Southern-dynasty Song China, and, traveling by ship through the port of Guangzhou, arrived at the Song capital in 431. A brahmin from central India named Guṇabhadrā 求那跋陀羅 reportedly “drifted with the shipping across the sea” to Guangzhou in 435. Going the other way, the Chinese monk Yijing 衣漬 (635–713) embarked upon a voyage to India aboard a merchantman departing from Guangzhou in 671. Vajrābodi 金剛智 (in China 719) and Arghavaharja 不空 (705–74) must be counted among the most influential western monks in Tang China; both “followed the South Sea” to Guangzhou.

Three subjects that mainstream traditional Chinese historians seldom addressed were trade, Buddhism, and foreigners. In the sixth century the Buddhist author Huijiao

52 Jin shu 晉書 (Dynastic History of the Jin), ed. Fang Xuan-ling (644; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 97.2546; Tong dian, 188.1008.
54 Jin shu, 90.2341.
55 Han Changli quanji 韓昌黎全集 (Collected Works of Han Yu [768–824]) (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1991), 33.416. See also Xin Tang shu, 163.5009.
56 Xin Tang shu, 225C.6454.
Political division in China, and the succession of Southern dynasties that were established beginning with Three Kingdoms Wu and Eastern Jin in the third and fourth centuries, promoted the development of maritime trade through the South Seas simply because these politically struggling but commercially prosperous Chinese states were cut off from the traditional Central Asian caravan routes to their north. In the third century, already, Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300) could write that “today those who cross the South Seas to arrive at Jiaozi are without interruption.” On the Malay peninsula a principality called (in Chinese) Dunxun 道遜 communicated with China to the east, and India and Persia to the west. “In its markets over ten thousand persons from east and west converged each day. There was no treasure or precious commodity they did not have.” Merchants from India and even more distant lands “frequently” traded with Funan (in modern Cambodia and southern Vietnam) and the Chinese administered regions of modern northern Vietnam during the period of the Chinese Southern dynasties.

63 Gao seng zhuang, 1.10–11; Chu sanzang ji ji, 13.516.
66 Liang shu, 54.787; Cefa yuanyui, 959.11289. For the location of Dunxun, see Willem Pieter Groeneveldt, Notes on the Malay Archipelago and Malacca, Compiled from Chinese Sources (Batavia: 1876), 119–21; Kenneth R. Hall, Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1985), 64–67.
67 Liang shu, 54.798. In the Tang dynasty it was reported that Funan “adjoined” eastern India, and was “only separated from it by a small sea.” Tang huiyao, 100.1786.

THE “INDIANIZATION” OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

This booming South Sea trade was encouraged by the formation of a “Sanskrit cosmopolis,” a vast Indic okumene extending throughout nearly all of South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium of the Christian era, and marked by the use of Sanskrit as the universal language of celebratory public inscriptions. Although often described as a process of “Indianization,” no direct Indian political domination, conquest, or colonization of the region was contemplated, nor was there even a single preexisting “Indian” culture to expand across the region: “In fact, much of India itself was being Indianized at the very same period as Java or Khmer country—and in a hardly different way...”

Any suggestion of sweeping physical Indian colonization of the South Sea trading zone is decisively contradicted by the persistence there of quite unrelated Austronesian languages, among which Indian loanwords were restricted to Sanskrit terminology having narrowly elite religio-political applications. That the direction of population movement to some extent passed both ways is, moreover, evident from the apparent settlement of Madagascar sometime after 400 A.D. by Austronesian-speaking people coming from what is now southern Borneo. Yet a thin, perhaps, dispersion of actual persons from the Indian subcontinent must have been essential to the rise of “Indianized” communities in Southeast Asia, enabling the formation of an overarching Sanskrit cosmopolis which embraced such diverse native lands.

China, too, was constructing its own “universal” Sinic world-order in East Asia at about this same time; one forged, in this case, chiefly by direct imperial conquest. But Chinese merchants rarely ventured beyond Chinese
ports, and China played a largely passive role in the South Sea trade of this era: Southeast Asians and Indians seem to have handled most of the shipping prior to the rise of Arab trade in the mid-eighth century.71 In Funan, “Southeast Asia’s first state” (ca. first–sixth centuries), an Indian brahmin named Kaudinya 廣陳如 became king in the late fourth century, and reportedly altered its institutions to conform to Indian usage.72 Other Indians are supposed to have ruled in Funan even before that time, and Indian and even Roman artifacts and inscriptions have been uncovered there by archaeologists dating from as early as the second century.73 Following the demise of Funan in the early seventh century, the heavily Indianized Buddhist trading community of Śrīvijaya 釈利佛帝國, on the island of Sumatra, rose to dominate Southeast Asian trade for several centuries, beginning about 670.74

On the Chinese border, in what is now central Vietnam, Austronesian-speaking peoples established a heavily Indianized kingdom called Champa 林邑 towards the end of the second century.75 The early Cham kings reportedly dressed after the fashion of Buddhist images, and went out in procession astride elephants in the Indian manner, shaded by parasols, to the sound of the blowing of conches and the beating of drums.76 In 331 (or 337) the Cham throne was usurped by a certain King Wen 文王, who some accounts claim was born farther north in China proper, but who as a youth had become a household slave of a tribal leader in Chinese-administered Vietnam, and traveled widely in the capacity of a merchant. In Champa he impressed the native king with his extensive knowledge of the world, and eventually engineered his own usurpation, after which time Champa became an increasingly serious military threat to the southern Chinese administrations.77

Coedes believed that the Indianized communities of Southeast Asia became progressively more Hinduized as well, but that commerce and Buddhist missionary zeal were the initial impulses driving this expansion of Indic culture.78 During the early centuries of the Christian era wandering Indian Buddhists must have been a surprisingly frequent sight in Southeast and even East Asian waters. In the context of a Buddhist account, five large Indian merchant vessels were reported in the middle reaches of the Yangzi River, above Lake Dongting, in the early fifth century.79 In 499 a foreign monk is recorded to have arrived in central China, claiming to have come from Fusō 扶桑 (Ch., Fusang), an obscurely legendary land located beyond Japanese Wa. The monk explained that in 458 five bhiksus from Kashmir had introduced Buddhism to that island.80 Although Fusō cannot now be located, and his story is unverifiable, there is no reason to doubt his reported arrival in China, or the scattering of other monks out across the South Seas. It may be questioned how many of these were from the actual Indian subcontinent, but their Indic orientation is beyond suspicion.

By the fifth century the fringe of this Indian diaspora may have reached modern Korea.81 Of greater relevance, a few Indians seem to have even put ashore in Japan. The Nihon shoki records that in 654 four persons from Tokhara (Afghanistan) and a woman from Śrīvastī (northeast India) were blown by a storm to Hyuga, in southeast Kyushū.82 Writing in the nineteenth century, Aston dismissed this ancient Japanese record with the observation that “it is absurd to speak of natives of India being cast ashore” in Japan.83 In the light of the archeological and other evidence for a universalized Indic community extending

71 Wang Gungwu, 43–44, 103; Hall, 42.
72 Hall, 48–77; Liang shu, 54.789; Tong dian, 188.1008; Coedes, 56. Ray, 159–60, suggests that unlike a modern “state” or “kingdom,” this Funan was more of a simple congeries of “chiefdoms.”
73 Hall, 59; Coedes, 17.
74 Coedes, 81; Wang Gungwu, 97, Hall, 78.
75 Lù Shìpēng 呂士朋, Bei shu shìqí de Yuènǎn: Zhòng-Yüè guānxi shì zhī yì (Vietnam in the Period of Subordination to the North: A History of Sino-Vietnamese Relations) (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong, Southeast Asia Studies Section, 1964), 86–87. On the island origins of the Chams, see Charles Higham, The Bronze Age of Southeast Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 304–8. The kingdom of Champa is said to have survived, in one form or another, until the early nineteenth century.
76 Cēfu yuǎnguǐ, 959.11288; Taiping yulan 太平御覽 ([Encyclopedia Assembled for] Imperial Inspection during the Taiping Era) (983; Taibei: Shangwu yínshùguān, 1980), 786.3611.
77 Shuǐ jìng zhū 水經注 (Annotated Classic of Rivers), by Li Dāoyuàn (ca. 520; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 36.685; Jīn shū, 97.2545–46; Liang shu, 54.784; Tong dian, 188.1008.
79 Gāo sēng zhūan, 2.50. See Feng Chengjun, 35.
80 Liāng shū, 54.808.
82 Nihon shoki, 25.256.
throughout Southeast Asia in this period, however, it is not at all unbelievable that isolated Indians or other Indianized persons might have voyaged as far as the coasts of Japan, although the recorded Indian place-names may well be garbled ("exaggerated," or embellished, perhaps), and their numbers must have been few. There is also, moreover, the well documented case of the south Indian brahmin Bodhisena, who famously officiated at the ceremony "opening" the eyes of the Great Buddha at Nara in 752, and who arrived in Japan in 736 in the company of a Cham monk he had met "at sea."84

**EARLY JAPAN'S SOUTHWARD TILT**

Buddhism, of course, came to China overland, via the caravan trade routes of Central Asia, as well as by sea. If anything, this continental land transmission of Buddhism is better known, and was more influential. By 509, for example, there were a reported three thousand monks from the western regions in the Northern Wei empire.85 The construction of over a hundred and twenty Buddhist stone grottoes in China beginning in the fourth and fifth centuries is enduring proof of this silk-route connection. Interestingly, however, this northern silk-route-style of Buddhist architecture extended no further east than Silla, in Korea, and no further south than approximately the line of the Yangzi River in China.86 Such grottoes are notably lacking in Japan and Southern-dynasty China.

Although Buddhism was introduced to northern Korea from the northern (semi-) Chinese conquest states, presumably by land, it was introduced into the southwestern Korean kingdom of Paekche by a Hu monk Mālānanda 摩羅難陀, coming from Southern-dynasty Jin in 384, presumably by sea.87 Thereafter, Paekche, which was renowned among the Korean kingdoms of the period for its sophisticated Buddhist culture, maintained notably close ties with the Chinese southern dynasties, especially from the late fifth century.88 And it was Paekche, in particular, which was responsible for the transmission of Buddhism and other aspects of continental culture to Japan.89 A number of scholars claim to detect a direct connection between the Buddhist culture of Southern dynasty China, Paekche, and Japan.90 And when the Japanese subsequently began communicating directly by sea with China in the seventh century, bypassing Korean middlemen, their immediate point of disembarkation was also in south China, especially at the port city now called Ningbo.91 All of this suggests a special relevance for the southern maritime diffusion of Buddhism to Japan. And, of course, the final jump across the straits of Tsushima or the East China Sea had, perforce, to be made by boat.

**AN IMMIGRANT SOCIETY**

Most of those who sailed to Japan in these early centuries, however, came as permanent immigrants—sometimes unintentionally, like the ten Paekche monks who were blown off their course home from south China in 609 and petitioned to be allowed to remain in Japan92 —

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84 Genkō shakusho, 15.224; “Nan tenjiku baramon sōjō hi” 南天竺波羅門僧正記 (Inscription for the Brahmin High Priest from Southern India), Nara ibun (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō shuppan, 1967), 887; Kamata Shigeo, 166, 277.

85 Fōzu tongji, 38; T.49.355.

86 Sun Changwu, 199–201; Liu Xinru, 124, 144; Kamata Shigeo, 255; Luo Zongzhen 羅宗真, Liù chao kaogu (Six Dynasties Archeology) (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1994), 101, 241.

87 Samguk sagi 三國史記 (Historical Record of the Three [Korean] Kingdoms), by Kim Pu-sik, annotated tr. by Ch’oe Hō (Ch’oe Hō) (1145; Seoul: Hongsin munhwasa, 1994), 2:37 (Paekche basic annexes 2); Samguk yusa, 3; T.49.986; Kamata Shigeo, 277.


89 See, for example, Saitō Tadashi 斎藤忠, Chōsen kodai bunka no kenkyū (Studies in Ancient Korean Culture) (Tokyo: Chijin shokan, 1943), 245; Kim Ch’ungnyō 金忠烈, Gaoli ruaxue sixiang shi (A History of Koryŏ Confucian Thought) (Taipei: Dongda tushu gufen youxian gongsi, 1992), 35–38, 43.


92 Nihon shoki, 22.151–52; Genkō shakusho, 16.231.
rather than transient traders. The numbers of such immigrants were clearly substantial. For the year 540 alone the Nihon shoki records the registration of 7,053 households of “Hata”苗族 people. This surname, Hata, makes allusion to the name of the first imperial dynasty of China (Ch., Qin), but in practice in early Japan it held little more specific significance than “immigrant.” Even in later centuries the Japanese did not always distinguish clearly between Chinese and Koreans, and such modern ethno-national labels should be applied only with caution, if at all, to this early period. These numbers certainly suggest, however, that unrecorded, unofficial, crossings between the continent and Japan must have greatly outnumbered the handful of known official embassies.

It seems quite likely that some of these immigrants quietly slipped Buddhism into Japan as well, some years before the official public transmission. There is a well-known story about a man from Southern-dynasty Liang named Shiba Tato (司馬達等), who supposedly built a thatched hall to worship Buddha in Yamato in 522. Shiba is a controversial figure, however. His name is clearly a misreading of the Chinese-style name “Sim Da and others” (Ch., deng 等; J.: to or -ra); and, if such a person ever really existed, he is as likely to have arrived in Japan in 582 as in 522. Even if we discount the Shiba Tato story entirely, however, it remains interesting that the region of southern Yamato where he supposedly built his thatched hall was in fact a major center of immigrant activity, and an immigrant clan of saddle-makers claiming descent from Shiba Tato did shortly thereafter play a prominent role in the promotion of Buddhism in Japan.

Immigrants were essential to the early vitality of the Buddhist religion in Japan. In 584, when Soga no Umako 蘇我馬子 (d. 626) obtained a stone Buddhist image from Paekche, only a solitary lapsed priest from Koguryö (Korea) could reportedly be found in Japan to supervise its worship. In 623 a priest from Paekche was made the first official head of the Japanese Buddhist church, and immigrants in general were quite prominent in early seventh-century Japanese Buddhism.

Part of the conflict over whether or not to endorse Buddhism officially in sixth-century Japan in fact revolved around a struggle between the Soga, Mononobe 物部, and other leading clans for control over immigrant groups, who were associated not only with Buddhism, but other more tangibly valuable skills as well. Soga family support for Buddhism was predicated upon a special Soga patronage relationship with immigrant communities, whose expertise in turn helped make possible the rise of the Soga to great power. Among the skills imported by these immigrant groups must have been some familiarity with the already substantially commercialized economy of the continent.

Immigrants were made administrators of state finance in sixth-century Japan, possibly because of their reputation for success in accumulating private wealth. The Nihon shoki records that, as a result of a dream, emperor


95 More precisely, the written graph refers to Qin; the spoken pronunciation “Hata” is probably of Korean derivation. See William Wayne Farris, Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures: Issues in the Historical Archaeology of Ancient Japan (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai 1998), 100.


102 Genkō shakusho, 16.230–31, 17.244; Nihon shoki, 20.112–13. This story also involves Shiba Tato.

103 Nihon shoki, 22.164–65; Xia Yingyuan, 117; Kamstra, 299–300.

104 Ueda Masaaki, 126.

105 Ueda Masaaki, 120; Ienaga Saburō, 60, 62.

106 Ueda Masaaki, 137–39.
Kimmei (r. 539–71), while still a youth, adopted as a favorite an immigrant named (in Japanese) Hata no Ōtsuchi 秦大津父, who is quoted as saying he had previously “traveled to Ise on business.” Hata became very wealthy under the future emperor’s patronage, and when Kimmei assumed the throne, he appointed Hata to the treasury.107

For 553 there is a brief but tantalizing reference to a man, of evidently Korean extraction, who was sent under imperial command by Soga no Ina 衍我智目 (d. 570) “to count and record the shipping taxes.”108 As usual, our information is most complete for official embassies, but there is reason to suppose that private vessels passing between Japan and the continent must have frequently outnumbered the official ones. Huang Yuese 黄约瑟, for example, counts two Tang embassies to Japan and fifteen Japanese embassies to Tang, but over thirty known private commercial ventures to Japan in late Tang alone.109

Nor is it correct to suppose that unofficial voyages to Japan only began in the late Tang dynasty. Clearly, they began in (Japanese) prehistory. A third-century Chinese account observed that residents of the islands in the straits between Korea and Japan “ride boats north and south to trade for grain.”110 Contact between the continent and the northern Japanese seaboard, across the Sea of Japan, was achieved by private fishing communities long before the rise of centralized political authority under the Yamato state.111 Toward the end of the fifth century immigrant groups still reportedly lived scattered throughout Japan, under no central supervision.112 The Nihon shoki mentions a boatload of people from Manchuria who spent the spring and summer of 544 fishing on an island off the northwest coast of Japan, eating their fill and frightening the local inhabitants.113 Less obtrusive landfalls must have often gone unrecorded, or even unobserved.

The Yamato court certainly did eventually embrace the Chinese imperial ideal of confining international exchange exclusively to official tribute missions. The emerging centralized state in Japan, from the late fifth through the early seventh centuries, in fact owed much of its supremacy to its success in mobilizing groups of skilled immigrants, and supervising the distribution of foreign prestige goods.114 This attempted monopolization of foreign intercourse by the centralizing core elite may have begun, as Hirano Kunio 平野邦雄 suggests, as early as the fourth century,115 but it is unlikely that the incipient Japanese state was capable of patrolling the entire coastline with vigilance very much before the late 600s, and its effectiveness may be exaggerated by orthodox accounts even then. Hermetically sealed borders were, at best, a phenomenon of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, after which both the random immigration and petty trading of pre-“unification” Japan, and Nara period state-regulation, gave way to a new, more purposeful, form of private trade.

An official Japanese report, dated 842, observed that since the time of Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–49), Sillans had been slipping privately into Japan as traders, without following the established procedure for tribute missions.116 Lee Sungsi 李成世 takes the mid-eighth century as a turning point.117 An indicator of the evolving orientation away from enforced official tribute embassies towards more private commercial exchange may be found in the court’s award to top officials in 768 of a half-million bolts of cloth for the purpose of individually purchasing Sillan trade goods.118 Below the level of elite luxury items, we may presume an emerging local trade in humber commodities that passed beneath official notice, but which was perhaps cumulatively even more significant.

By late-Tang times Sillans (from a now unified Korea) appear to have dominated shipping in northeast Asian waters, and enjoyed well-established business communities in China.119 Regional trade must have been largely

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108 Nihon shoki, 19.79.
109 Huang Yuese, 47.
112 Nihon shoki, 14.385. Entry for 471 A.D.
113 Nihon shoki, 19.70.
119 Edwin O. Reischauer, tr., Ennin’s Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law (New York: Ronald
contained within East Asian hands, and there is little evidence of direct traffic between Japan and the South Seas. In 642, however, there is one fascinating passing reference in the Japanese annals to a report from some attendants of the Paekche delegation that their ambassadors had thrown "Kunlun" diplomats into the ocean, presumably during their mutual approach to Japan. Kunlun was a generic Chinese term for Southeast Asians in this period, and since, as we suspect, private unreported commercial traffic tends to exceed public official transactions in volume, the account does suggest some marginal level of direct maritime contact between Japan and the South Seas in the seventh century. Most South and Southeast Asian exchange with Japan, however, must have come indirectly through China and Korea.

THE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY OF EARLY JAPAN

Unlike the continent, in newly imperial Japan the economy remained essentially at the barter level. Coins were not introduced until 708, and not very successfully even then. The Japanese court had repeatedly thereafter to issue edicts urging the people to make use of this new medium of exchange, and threaten the confiscation of fields that were priced for trade in objects other than money. In 672, at the start of the civil war that would bring Emperor Temmu (r. 673–90) to the throne, an urgent démarche forced the future emperor to set out from Yoshino without adequate mounts, obliging his party to requisition a train of fifty packhorses they encountered carrying rice for the baths at Isé. While this suggests an impressive enough premodern transfer of bulk goods, it is not clear that it represents what could exactly be called private trade. We are left with an overall image of a pre-monetized packhorse economy in the Japan of circa 700 A.D. that compares unfavorably with the "caravans of five hundred or more ox-wagons at a time" and "regular coinage" ascribed to India as early as the seventh century B.C., a millennium earlier.

Despite the flourishing sea-borne trade between China and South and Southeast Asia, transportation from China to Japan remained difficult. In 631, perhaps making a virtue out of necessity, the Tang emperor absolved the Japanese of their supposed obligation to offer annual tribute on the grounds of the distance involved. A Tang envoy sent to Japan in 641 described a voyage of "several months" that took him through the "gates of Hell." In the eighth century, Ganjin's disciples were unresponsive to his request for volunteers to hazard a crossing to Japan, one of them finally explaining: "That country is too far. It is difficult to preserve one's life—not one in a hundred arrive across the vast waves and boundless waters."

Neither Chinese nor Japanese states were well disposed towards unregulated trade, and both were equally suspicious of unregulated religion—especially as propagated by foreigners—freely circulating among the common people. In 700 Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (607–700), in China, complained of "wandering monks who all use the doctrines of the Buddha to deceive living persons," and of the presence of Buddhists in every village and marketplace. Among many decrees of like nature that could be cited, in 656 the Tang banned Central Asians from practicing "magic," and in 727 ordered the concentration of Buddhist monks into a relatively few large, closed, monasteries. The eighth-century Japanese state was equally concerned to isolate the Buddhists in monasteries, where they could recite sutras for the protection of the state without causing a popular disturbance. In Japan, where the unity of government and religion (saisei-itchi 祭政一致) has long been a special tradition, Buddhist activity outside the monasteries was forbidden by law.

But private trade and popular Buddhism both flourished anyway, most spectacularly in China, and to a lesser extent in Japan. Surprisingly, Buddhism and trade often

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120 Nihon shoki, 24.190.


122 Shoku Nihongi, 1:5.172–73; 6.194–95.

123 Nihon shoki, 28.311.

124 Kosambi, 124–25.
flourished together, through a process of mutual stimulation. Since official sources were ideologically disinclined to report on either activity, still less any symbiotic positive interaction between them, we may turn to "the earliest collection of Buddhist legends in Japan," the Nihon ryōiki 日本靈異記, "a key document for understanding how Buddhism was accepted by the Japanese in the first few centuries after its introduction," to catch a relatively unguarded, unofficial glimpse at the popular Buddhism of early Japan.131

Although caution needs to be taken against misinterpreting material that may well have been contaminated by Chinese and even Indian themes, the stories of miraculous reward and retribution contained in the Nihon ryōiki unfold amidst a remarkably mercantile, un-peasant-like, Japanese society. There is, for example, the story of a man who traveled with his older brother on business, and was murdered by his brother over a dispute concerning forty-odd catties of silver. His bones were left in a mountain pass near modern Kyoto, to be trampled upon by men and beasts for many years until a Koguryō monk rescued them in 646.132 A reed merchant from Kawachi overloaded his packhorse, angrily thrashed it for not moving, and after selling the reeds killed it.133 A self-ordained (unauthorized) Buddhist novice (śrāmanera), also from Kawachi, collected popular donations with the false claim that he was constructing a pagoda, and enjoyed the proceeds privately together with his wife.134 The wife of a district official in Sanuki, known for her stinginess, waters down the wine she sells, forcibly extracts profit, and uses small measures when she makes loans but large measures when she collects repayment. The inevitable divine retribution shames her grief-stricken husband and children into atoning for her sins in 776 by donating all of the family's wealth to the church, and forgiving their debtors.135

These are miraculous tales, which cannot be accepted as literal fact. But perhaps they convey something of an authentic flavor that is missing from the official histories, bound as they are by elite ideological preconceptions. Such tales may serve as a useful corrective to our conventional understanding of both Buddhism and early Japanese society. In China Buddhism apparently took root among the common people before it found popularity with the elite.136 In Japan, despite the leading role of the state and great families in promoting Buddhism, the popular dispersion of the religion may have been greater than we realize. And popular disregard for official regulation generally, even at the peak of the centralized ritsuryō 令制 state in eighth-century Japan, is evinced by the large numbers of Japanese-commoners who routinely fled the government-imposed vision of them as registered, tax-paying and service-providing, farm households.137

Buddhism simultaneously censured the immoral excesses of, itself profited from, and circulated amidst a society in which small-scale, premorden trade was more widespread than is usually supposed. Nara Japan could hardly be described as a developed, urban, commercial state, but the "agicultural fundamentalism" of the Confucian-imperial bureaucratic ideal enshrined in official sources obscures the real diversity of occupations that did exist, and perhaps especially the "strong marine flavour" of early Japanese culture.138 Ancient Japan was certainly less commercialized than contemporary China, but probably even more reliant upon seafaring.139 And it was the open sea that finally brought Buddhism to Japan, together with an array of other international cultural, political, and economic influences that was rather richer than we often realize.

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136 Qu Xiaoyiang, 189–90.