



RELIGION & SOCIETY
IN ASIA PACIFIC

Belief and Practice in Imperial Japan and Colonial Korea

Edited by
EMILY ANDERSON



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Editor

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Religion and Society in Asia Pacific

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The Question of Quintessence: Buddhism in Wartime Japanese Academia

Orion Klautau

It is still astonishing to many people that Buddhism, a purportedly peace-loving and insightful religion, has institutionally supported nearly every national war effort in recent Japanese history. Indeed, from the armed conflicts between shogunal and imperial forces leading up to the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the end of the Second World War in 1945, traditional Buddhist schools played a major financial and ideological role in supporting the establishment and further expansion of the country

This chapter reproduces parts of my “Between Essence and Manifestation: Shōtoku Taishi and Shinran during the Fifteen-year War (1931–1945),” in *2012 nendo kenkyū hōkokusho*, ed. Ryūkoku Daigaku Ajia Bukkyō Bunka Kenkyū Sentā, 279–294 (Kyoto: Ryūkoku Daigaku Ajia Bukkyō Bunka Kenkyū Sentā, 2013); and “Jūgonen sensōki ni okeru Miyamoto Shōson to Nihon Bukkyō,” *Kindai bukkyō* 19 (2012): 26–39, reprinted here with permission. In preparing this chapter, I benefited from conversations with Ishii Kōsei and Sueki Fumihiko. I thank Emily Anderson for her valuable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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as a modern empire. Although historians are not necessarily appalled by this fact due to their familiarity with it, those who come to the religion from a more doctrinal perspective often see these events as going directly against Buddhism's essential nature.

That is, from a normative standpoint, this connection between Japanese Buddhism and imperialism is perceived by practitioners themselves as a regretful aspect of recent history, and as such, one that shall not again be repeated. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of the scholarship on the topic comes from a sectarian context, and is aimed, ultimately, at inviting reflection on what should be the ethical grounds of Buddhism.¹ Whereas some of this research has focused more on how the Dharma changed in the context of modern nationalism, in recent years, a number of works have also appeared that consider how Buddhism eventually contributed to the shaping of empire itself.²

Following this recent trend, this chapter will consider the ideological role played by public scholars of Buddhism in “clarifying” the national essence (*kokutai*).³ After a brief overview of how essentialist notions of “Japanese Buddhism” developed following the Meiji Restoration, I will discuss the ideas of two scholars, Hanayama Shinshō (1898–1995) and Miyamoto Shōson (1893–1983), colleagues at the Department of Indian Philosophy of the then Tokyo Imperial University. Unlike their peers who taught at private sectarian institutions, these individuals were, in their role as public scholars, not only directly responsible for but also expected to provide connections between Buddhism and mainstream *kokutai* discourses.

JAPANESE BUDDHISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Efforts to find the unique character of “Buddhism” as it developed in the Japanese archipelago are by no means new. These ideas, already found in the context of Heian Japan (794–1185), were further developed during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333), at which point they became the essential framework for the writing of Buddhist history.⁴ In these centuries, a historical narrative was established in which Buddhism was born in Tenjiku (the Indian subcontinent), spread eastwards to Shintan (a classical term for China), and then was transmitted to Honchō (lit. “this court,” i.e., Japan). While in this context one does find assertions that Japan is the land most appropriate for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings, they were not mainstream: in fact, Satō Hiroo has recently suggested that

“a negative understanding” of Japan, based on the perception of it as an “evil and peripheral land in the final age of the Dharma” (*mappō hendo no akkoku*), might have indeed been the norm.⁵

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century, this cosmology ceased, in many senses, to function, as it became clear that the world included regions heretofore unknown to the Japanese, such as Europe and Africa.⁶ However, as recent research by Okada Masahiko has shown,⁷ this previous worldview remained through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an important discursive structure in which Buddhist scholars arranged the latest cartographic and astronomical knowledge imported from Europe. By the Meiji period (1868–1912), while there were some who continued to uphold a more traditional version of this discourse,⁸ most eventually ceased to acknowledge its authority. This was, as one may infer, due to the new paradigmatic position “western” science came to occupy.

Nevertheless, although the “three-nation” ideology ceased to be credible when viewed from western science, it did remain as a valid trope for narrating Buddhist history.⁹ In the mid-Meiji period, the diffusion of Buddhism eastward—from India to China, and then Japan—was reimagined within a social Darwinist framework, which, in turn, led to an understanding of Japan—theoretically the last country Buddhism took root in and the nation in which it was most “alive”—as “the fittest land” for this religion.

Behind these Meiji developments was the appropriation by Japanese scholars of the “scientific” idea that the teachings of the Mahayana had not been directly expounded by the historical Buddha. This type of idea, known in Japanese as *daijō hibussetsu*, had been presented in a more or less systematic fashion at least since the eighteenth century by thinkers such as Tominaga Nakamoto (1715–1746). However, especially after the 1880s, after being rearticulated using the findings of western orientalist scholarship, the *daijō hibussetsu* eventually attained the status of “scientific fact,” and became, in a sense, an impelling force for all Japanese intellectuals who sought to describe Buddhism as a unified (or systematic) religion. Scholars such as Tomoko Masuzawa, for instance, have depicted the ways in which late-nineteenth-century European scholarship considered Mahayana Buddhism a corrupt form of what was then regarded as “True Buddhism.”¹⁰ Due to this trend, justifying the Mahayana as a legitimate heir to the tradition of Gautama Buddha both domestically and more broadly became one of the most urgent matters for Japanese Buddhists.¹¹

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