

## **The Development of an Interdependent Relationship Between Buddhism and the Early Japanese State from the Asuka Period to the Nara Period**

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**Abstract:** Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century, sparking a series of political debates that lasted for four centuries. Monarchs of classical Japan made significant efforts to elevate the status of Japanese Buddhism. However, this article aims to highlight that the promotion of Buddhism was always accompanied by political tension, a trend particularly evident during the reigns of the empresses. The flourishing and prosperity of Japanese Buddhism was the legacy of this mutually beneficial relationship.

**Keywords:** Japanese Buddhism, Asuka Period, Nara Period, National Religion, Legitimacy

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Buddhism has historically made significant political connections with early East Asian states, particularly in Japan during the Asuka飛鳥 period (592-710) to the Nara奈良 period (710-794). This essay will argue that the political connection was strengthened in a long progress by many generations for monarchical legitimacy. Not only did two famous pious monarchs Shōmu Tenno and his daughter Shōtoku Tenno (who was also Kōken Tenno) integrated Buddhism into many aspects of Japanese political system, it initially was involved in establishment of the early Japanese centralised state (Orzech, 2010). This essay will explore that how Buddhism was embedded into Japanese society through the efforts of generations of monarchs. By examining the role of Buddhism in Japanese domestic politics and diplomatic activities, this essay will argue that Buddhism had vital political functions for the Japanese court since its transmission into Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and its importance further enhanced by later regimes. Buddhism developed an interdependent connection with Japanese ancient politics (Caldararo, 2016; Deal & Ruppert, 2015). The Japanese court reinforced its legitimisation and authority by using this strong connection between Buddhism and the Japanese society. Meanwhile, this approach also made Japan further

solidifying a concept of the combination of religious authority and political power of Tenno (Bowring, 2005).

When Buddhism came into the view of Japanese court, it is more likely to be a political issue instead of a religious issue, ministerial clans Soga and Mononobe had used it to scramble the dominance in politics. According to the records of Nihon Shoki in 14<sup>th</sup> year of Bidatsu Tenno (585), Mononobe no Moriya claimed that the plague in the country should be blamed to Soga clan worshipping Buddha. With the support of other ministers like Nakatomi, they burned the Buddha's status and destroyed temples. However, After the death of Bidatsu Tenno, Mononobe clan did not successfully prevent the Soga clan from placing his nephew Tenno Yōmei on the throne. During the war to suppress the Mononobe's rebellion, Soga no Umako pledged that after achieving victory, he would spread Buddhism and build temples (Kleine, 2022; Wayman & Wayman, 1990). And Prince Umayato (Prince Shōtoku) also worshiped the status of Caturmahārāja for support and blessing. The contradiction between these two clans to a large extent centred with if Japan should accept Buddhism, but it fundamentally was a political struggle. The Mononobe clan was the clan managing forging weapons and relevant sacrifice like military. And its ally in against Soga clan Nakatomi was managing relationship between 'gods and Tenno' (Lopez Jr, 2002). Their clan's duty decided that they would be more conserved with exotic religion. On the contrary, the Soga clan had long been responsible for handling affairs on the Korean Peninsula and managing immigrants. These two tasks made them to have frequent interactions with foreigners and access to advanced technologies at that time from outside (Lowe, 2014). Because the Soga clan could monopolise diplomacy and controlled the importing of advanced technologies from abroad, they held increasing influence within the Japanese court. It could claim that Soga clan's contrasting attitude to Buddhism was a challenge to other ministers, some importer direct attack within them even was documented in official history book (Matsuo, 2007). It could claim that from Buddhism transmitted into Japan, it was used to satisfy political demand to reinforce governors' authority. After Buddhism survived in Japan during the political struggle between the Soga clan and the Mononobe clan, it eventually gained a sort of orthodox status in Suiko Tenno's period, achieved by the reformer Prince Shōtoku (Williams, 2013). Not as same as China, where the relationship between Buddhism and the state experienced fluctuations over time. Depending on the ruling dynasty's attitudes toward the religion patronage and persecution occurred alternately. The position of Japanese Buddhism remained stable for a considerable period thereafter until medieval period, and its relationship with state power was gradually

strengthened. In 605 to 606, as the relevantly clear start point, the famous 17 constitutions enacted by Prince Shōtoku, 'respecting Buddhism' and 'Flourishing Three Treasures' was put at the the second term. In political centralising progress of early Japanese state. It was aiming to establish a new social order, Buddhism on the one hand, was protected by the state and even embedded into national administrative system to weaken the influence of clan society (Heine, 1994). As Hyodou points out that the unification of religion and regime, suppressing local systems with the imperial belief system was an unavoidable and continuous topic in ancient Japanese politics. Buddhism became the foremost complement to complete the political system (Rambelli, 1996). Meanwhile, for monarch's personal power, Suiko Tenno was the first female governor in Japanese history, her status was controversial. However, compare with other young inheritors, Suiko was expected to settle down the political chaos. An intriguing example is that Suiko Tenno publicly expressed her willing to build temples at the same year of the constitution. After that, she required Prince Shōtoku to have Buddhist seminar of Shōmangyō and Hokkegyō. The former one has a very clear hint. It tells a story about a princess of an ancient India state became one vehicle of Buddha to spread Buddhism (Yoshida, 2003). Females especially in royal family played important roles in flourishing Japanese Buddhism. The reason for Suiko Tenno choosing this sutra presumably was to seek some religious support for legitimacy of her throne.

Although expanding temples' strength caused dismay of the court, and the restrictions to temples were continuously existed. In 624, Suiko Tenno established official posts of e posts of Sojō and Sozu to supervise the manners of monks and nuns. This could be regarded as the preparatory works in future government official institution Sōgō. Because of these offices of priestly affairs, Japan could record precise numbers of temples, monks and nuns. This figures also reflected that the Japanese state had a quite active attitude in managing Buddhist affairs. On the other hand, Japanese Buddhism in a long term played a role in the culture and civilisation. Prince Shōtoku himself was taught by a Goryeo monk. Further, the preserve institution of a large number of texts, temple always associated with education. Meanwhile, Buddhism was an effective channel to communicate with other East Asian countries. For instance, the reason used by Soga no Iname to persuade Kinme Tenno accepting Buddhism is 'western countries all worship Buddha, why only Japan does not follow?'(Yiengpruksawan, 1987). Some political practice which recorded by Chinese history indicates that pilgrim monks were common diplomatic activists for Japan to absorb Chinese culture and technology. There are also many records that Korean Peninsula states send craftsmen and

monks to Japan. In that case, Buddhism not only met the demand for a new ideology in politically centralized Japan but also reflected some actual needs for foreign advanced technology and common diplomatic customs (Bentley, 2020).

A long time in the progress of early Japanese state creation, Buddhism meant more than a political tool to governors. strengthening the connection between Buddhism and politics while emphasizing the authority of the Tenno. In other words, Prince Shōtoku and his successors may manipulate Buddhism to make it serve for centralising political system, it would develop itself with a relatively independent path. Buddhism was a medium of cultural communication of East Asia and even India and it was an important issue in the Sino-Japanese even East Asian diplomatic activities. However, unrecorded Buddhist communication among the ordinary people also had huge impact on Japanese Buddhism. This fact decided the foreign characteristics of Japanese Buddhism was comprehensive and extensive. The independence of Buddhism also was because of its sophisticated philosophy. Comparing with Japanese tradition world view, it offered a powerful and systematic ideology in forging the Japanese national identity. One representative example is the geographical idea of Sumeru. This typical Buddhist world view regards the Sumeru Mountain as the centre of the Realm of Saha. Human world was settled on the south continent Jumbudvipa of the world with its centre India. Japan was scattered lands like grain millets (Heine, 1994). This actually made Japan dropped in a paradox. Indeed, Buddhism contributed significantly for the court emerging a narrative to proof its legitimacy and divinity such as claiming Prince Shōtoku as the to be the incarnation of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva to combine religious power and political power. However, this logic may have potential undermine for royal family's authority. To identify the nature of the Prince Shōtoku's reforms, as argued by Sueki, the initial Japanese Buddhism as a new social ideology did not destroy the older clan society rather than it introduced the old social organisational norms into new Ritsuryo system (Wayman & Wayman, 1990). Since Prince Shōtoku firstly used Buddhism as the source of political authority, the court had no choice but closely bond with this narrative. This notion was reinforced from the Asuka period to the Nara period with various political and religious practice.

Jitō Tenno 持統 (686–697) was a competent successors of Suiko who also actively contributed to the prosperity of Buddhism in ancient Japan. From the latter half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the state enacted policies that aiming to promote Buddhism, such as the construction of temples and Budda statues, the

sponsorship of rituals and the copying of sutras. What made Jitō Tenno to be a different and remarkable politician was that Jitō Tenno decided to use the Buddha's Dharma in order to assimilate the northern tribes emishi. This fact reflects the further expansion of Buddhism's role in Japanese political discourse. In 689, the two representatives of the emishi – brothers Maro and Kanaori asked the official permission to be the monks, which recorded as 'asked to shave their hair and become monks'. For the south of Japan, by her order, in 692, in the province of Osumi and Ato, were sent the Buddhist missionaries (Rambelli, 1996). In domestic Buddhists management, she also established rules for the ordination of monks and nuns, which was similar with the Chinese model for official recognition of those ordained (Yoshida, 2003). These examples showed that using Buddhism for the integration of local tribes into the state and expanding ideological influence was effective and it was an important political issue. Jitō Tenno's contribution more likely to be an inherited work, but as argued above, she still firmly supported the position of Buddhism in Japan and strengthened its political function to become a more powerful national ideology. The adjustment to Japanese Buddhism did not end, as Yoshida claims, at Jitō's period, a dual religious foundation was established which means the state based on both kami rituals and Buddhism (McMullin, 1989). Ueda also made a similar argument in examining the Shigo (titles for dead monarchs in ancient Chinese or Japanese monarchs to summarise their lives) of Jitō Tenno. The 'Takama no Hara' was the first time added into a Shigo, which was indicating a clear sign of 'orthodoxy awareness' in religious meaning (Ketelaar, 1997). Creating new political norms itself was a method to proof a monarch's political capability. Considering Jitō Tenno as an empress who experienced Jinshin War in 672, policies that could reinforce her governance were necessary. In this progress, Buddhism raised its importance in Jitō Tenno's period, and it was gradually included in Japanese religious narrative.

The promotion of Buddhism has consistently been tied to the demand for political legitimacy by rulers throughout Japanese history. Emperor Shōmu and his daughter, Empress Shōtoku, intensified this political-religious connection to be stronger than any previous era. As it has been discussed above that Buddhism experienced a rise in status and an expansion in its political application. In Shōmu period, this trend was reflected in the notion of national protection. In Japanese state sponsored temples, it was an important task to read state-protection sutras. Sutra of Golden Radiant Wisdom 金光明經 and Sutra for Humane Kings 仁王經 were representatives (Bowring, 2005). What make this scripture unique is that it bluntly points out

that the path to enlightenment for a bodhisattva and the path to power for a king are the same. Meanwhile, Emperor Shōmu ordered to construct Todai Ji temples and Kokubun Ji temples across Japan. This promoted the placement of Buddhist images nationwide. By appointing Buddhist ‘lecturers’ (Kokushi) in each temple strengthened the link between the imperial family and Buddhism. Shomu Tenno was so pious and even called himself as the ‘servant of the Three Treasure’. However, non-official missionary activities to ordinary citizens were strictly forbidden. It was during the construction of the Great Buddha, the control over the non-official Buddhism was significantly strengthened (Orzech, 2010). Based on this fact, the nature of the ‘state protection’ Buddhism was transferring people’s fear of kami’s supernatural power to Buddhist belief. The development of Buddhism, especially the transmission of esoteric Buddhism was an unignorable reason for this trend. On the one hand, systematic esoteric rituals were the most attractive thing for the monarch. It offered a series of practices like Buddhist healing and life-expansion to made it be able to approach the ministers and Tenno. In that case, some government posts like Royal Buddhist Healers (Kanbyō Zenshi) were appointed. It was an institutional assurance that Buddhism could have influence on the court. However, it duty decided the influence depends on the individuals, ultimately, it is not an administrative position. The real political power of the monks was still managed by the court. A monk could hold sway over the entire state, but the origin of this political power was always the connection with the court.

Empress Shōtoku’s (also known as Empress Kōken in her second term) period might the most typical era to be described as the ‘Buddhist State’, it was also the time witnessed the fiercest contradiction between the court and Buddhism. Under the influence of her father, Empress Shōtoku ascended to the throne in a period marked by significant political and religious influence on imperial succession. However, the legitimacy of her succession did not bring stability to her political power, her governance was nominal (Beghi, 2011). Fujiwara no Nakamaro, with the support of his aunt, Queen Consort Kōmyō’s, suppressed Tenno’s power in many aspects and even once deposed Empress Kōken. Because of the huge political danger, she had to seek support from other ministers. Although there are numerous of unfavourable rumours about Dōkyō and Empress Shōtoku, but as Royal Buddhist Healer, he might be the most reliable and convenient choice to be the channel with the court. As argued above, Dōkyō’s success in helping Empress Shōtoku reclaim the throne earned him the trust of the Tenno. This nearly gave him unlimited power. He was subsequently awarded new governmental posts. In 765, he was appointed Buddhist Minister of State (Daijin Zenshi), followed

by his promotion to Buddhist Grand Minister of State (Dajo Daijin Zenshi) and the unprecedented title of Dharma King (Hōō) in 766. Dōkyō's power nearly equaled that of the Empress herself. Toward the end of Empress Shōtoku's reign, she wanted to enthrone Dōkyō. This strongly opposed by other ministers, including her former political allies.

Despite Empress Shōtoku's controversial patronage to a monk, a lot of pro-Buddhist policies were enacted in this period. Regular Buddhist policies were implemented such as supporting the development of Buddhist institutions, particularly through the construction and renovation of temples like Saidai Ji. During her reign, remaking Buddhist canon and million-pagoda projects were the most distinctive move which deeply strengthened the ties between the imperial authority and Buddhism. According to Lowe, the notion of Buddhist canon existed in early Japan as issaikyō even before the Monk Genbō brought back the first systematic Buddhist catalogue from Tang dynasty. In the first half of Nara period Chinese catalogue represented the textual authority (Yiengpruksawan, 1987). However, the practice in making new canons was continuous, and different canons may be sponsored by the same individual. For example, former canon (sensha issaikyō) and later canon (kōsha issaikyō), both of them were sponsored by the Shomu emperor. For their contents, the former one was produced as a Buddhist encyclopaedia, which includes Hinayana, Mahayana and extracts texts. The later canon only includes Sutra and Vinaya texts which were frequently used by monks in religious practice. In other words, this canon more likely to be a daily catalogue for Japanese Buddhism. As same as her father, Empress Shōtoku also was a patronage of canonical works. She appointed Jicchū 実忠 produced the first monk-led Buddhist canon and now it known as Initial Set Canon (sen ichibu issaikyō 先一部一切經). Similar with Suiko Tenno who was highlighted a certain sutra with a female figure, Jicchū also 'crafted the canon highlight doctrines attractive to the political needs of the ruler'. He added the sutra *Scripture of the Woman Who Attained no Impurities* into the canon to justify a female monarch could manage supreme wisdom and Buddha-nature (Sango, 2015). The million-pagoda project was a relatively more famous religious policy because it left contemporary people with numerous material legacies, which is the last of the massive Buddhist activity in classical Japan (Lowe, 2014). As mentioned above that Empress Shōtoku had political to signal her intension after taking back the throne and commission the million-pagoda. This motivation also was reflected by the religious narrative because the production of pagodas was largely influenced by King Asoka, who is historically the closest figure to a Cakravartin (Wheel-turning King, a

theoretical Buddhist kingship) (Biswas, 2010; Lopez Jr, 2002). She also made a compromise by using dharani scrolls to replace the Buddha's relics in Asoka's pagodas. This change ensured that the number of pagodas could be extremely high without the limitation of the real material relics. As a summary, during her reign, particularly through million-pagoda project and the reproduction of Buddhist canon, she further solidified Buddhism's relationship with the state. These policies also reflected her religious idea as a ruler and her dependency on the legitimacy Buddhism provided. Compare with former Tenno, her lacking personal authority was the fundamental reason for that balance between Buddhism and politics to be break.

In conclusion, from the Asuka Period to the Nara Period, the connection between Japanese Buddhism and politics continuously strengthened after its transmission. The legitimacy was the eternal theme that monarchs and politicians were seeking from Buddhism. In Suiko Tenno's period, Buddhism played the role to unify the ideology for the whole nation. Jitō Tenno inherited this national organisation form and kept expanding Buddhism's political function, utilised it in assimilating other tribes in her regime. Until late Nara period, with the transmission and development of Chinese esoteric school, Buddhism became a more systematic and practical national ideology. In this period, Buddhism inside the court experienced institutionalisation. Special governmental posts were created, and it was also the reason for the Japanese most famous bewitching monk could appear in this period. Looking back at historical time points, Buddhism consistently strengthened its connection with politics whenever the Japanese state faced innovations in its social structure. Further, it might be a coincidence, all of these time points that Japan had a female monarch, this fact brought them more motivation to seek political legitimacy. Overall, the strengthening of Buddhism's political ties with the state is a long-term dynamic process. Specific monarchs played a relatively greater role, but the fundamental reason lies in the mutually beneficial relationship.

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