

Shinbutsu Kakuri: The Phenomenon of Isolation between Gods and Buddhas in the Early Stages of Buddhist Dissemination in Japan

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Abstract. After Buddhism was introduced in the late Kofun period, it rapidly spread with the support of government during the Asuka and Nara periods, resulting in the emergence of the “Shinbutsu-shūgō”, which is a sign of the gradual mixing of local Shintoism and foreign Buddhism into one belief system. This stage is also known as the “Shinbutsukonkō”. However, in the early stages of the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism, local Shintoism still consciously separated the two religions in an attempt to maintain the local status of Shintoism. This phenomenon is known as “Shinbutsu kakuri” and is sometimes overlooked by some researchers. This paper comprehensively analyzes the phenomenon of separation of Buddhism and Shintoism based on existing research materials and clarifies the reasons and context for the resistance to the spread of Buddhism in early Japanese history, especially during the Heian period. Finally, this paper argues that the separation of Shintoism and Buddhism, as a manifestation of anti-Buddhist ideology, although could not be fully achieved due to the increasingly close relationship between Shintoism and Buddhism, provided the soil for the Meiji government’s policy of separation of Shinto from Buddhism and nationalizing Shintoism in the Meiji Restoration.

Keywords: Japanese Buddhism, Shinbutsu Kakuri, Shinbutsu-shūgō, Shinbutsu Bunri.

1. Introduction

The spread of Buddhism in Japan was not all plain sailing but went through collisions and adjustments with various other elements. After Buddhism was introduced to Japan during the reign of Emperor Kinmei, there were multiple conflicts between supporting and opposing Buddhism in the court. After the period of Asuka and Nara, the government vigorously promoted Buddhism, and local shrines began to build “Jingū-ji”, referring to the Buddhist temples built next to Shinto shrines to help kami with its karmic problems. In the local belief system, there was also the “Honji suijaku” theory, which stated that the Japanese gods in Shintoism were incarnations of Buddhist deities also known as “Gongen”. These phenomena promoted the spread of Buddhism in Japan and further integrated Shintoism and Buddhist thought into a new belief system, known as the “Shinbutsu-shūgō”.

Buddhism encountered resistance from Edo neo-Confucianism after centuries of development. In addition to promoting Japan’s own nationalism, the foreign elements of Buddhism itself have also become a point of attack for Kokugaku scholars. This force, combined with the late shogunate’s Sonnoron and Shintoism, formed a new imperial ideology, laying the groundwork for future militaristic tendencies. However, this resistance did not originate during the Edo period but had its roots as early as the Heian period. It was a conscious separation of Shintoism and Buddhism, and an intention to prioritize Shintoism over Buddhism, known as the “Shinbutsu kakuri”. This term was proposed by folklorist Masao Takatorio who studies the evolution of Buddhism in Japan from the Nara period to the Heian period and draws attention to the idea of the separation of Shintoism and Buddhism before the Edo period [1].

Existing research takes a positive perspective and examines the active changes of Buddhism itself or the perspective that is conducive to its dissemination [2]. It mainly focuses on the early and middle stages, including Shinbutsu-shūgō, Honji suijaku, and the popularization of Buddhism. Among them, the research on the Shinbutsu-shūgō is the most mature. At present, researchers in this field are trying to break through the local specific framework, hoping to study the localization of Buddhism rather

than just Japanization from a cross-cultural perspective. Some Chinese scholars have also proposed to study the relationship between Taoism and Buddhism from a new perspective of “mutual learning” [3]. The research topics mainly focus on the later period from a reverse perspective and pay attention to the reaction and even resistance of Japanese local culture to the spread of Buddhism, including the attitude of Edo neo-Confucianism towards Buddhism, the anti-Buddhist ideas and the revival of Shintoism movement, as well as the policy of Shinbutsu bunri and the movement of Haibutsu kishaku during the Meiji Restoration [4].

However, there is a lack of research on the topic of “Shinbutsu Kakuri”. Japanese scholars mostly focus on the separation of gods and Buddhas in palace sacrificial ceremonies, with few English research and zero Chinese research. Therefore, there is an urgent need for systematic research on these topics, which will undoubtedly be of great benefit to the research in Japanese Buddhism.

2. The Origin and Appearance of Shinbutsu Kakuri

In October 552 AD (the 13th year of Emperor Kinmei ‘s reign), King Song Myong of Baekje sent envoys to deliver Buddha statues and several Buddhist scriptures marked the official introduction of Buddhism to Japan. At that time, there was a debate between the acceptance and the abolition of Buddhism. There is still controversy over the authenticity of this record, especially in terms of time [5], regarding the clear statement made by Mononobe no Okoshi and Nakatomi no Kamako: “We have always worshipped the 180 gods of Shintoism and worshipped them all year round. Now that we have switched to worshipping the gods of other countries, it may cause anger among the gods of our own country” [6]. However, it is clear that when the *Nihon Shoki*, which records this book, was written in 720 AD, there was an idea to divide Shintoism and Buddhism into state religions and foreign religions, and to exclude the later one.

As Japanese people gradually realized the different nature of local gods and Buddhist deities, a theory based on Buddhist belief emerged that regards the kamis in Shintoism as objects in need of Buddhist relief for liberation. This theory is called “Shinshin Ridatsu” [7]. Based on this theory, buildings known as “Jingū-ji” appeared in existing Shinto shrines, Jingū, or other places of worship, where monks hold Buddhist rituals in the hope that the kamis can receive the protection of the Buddha. The phenomenon of joint worship of kamis and Buddhas quickly spread throughout the country after the establishment of Kehi Jingū-ji in 715 AD [8], promoting further integration between Shintoism and Buddhism.

However, in this situation, there were still Jingū or shrines that intentionally separate Buddhist factors from Shintoism. This is the origin of Shinbutsu Kakuri, and even conflicts arose between Jingū-ji and shrine. Taking the Ise Shrine as an example, in 766 AD, the court sent an envoy to enshrine a six zhang tall Buddha statue at the Ise Shrine and built the Ise Jingū-ji. However, only six years later, in 772 AD, the Shrine Temple was relocated due to the result of Shinto divination [9]. Not only that, in 775 AD, Oukase-dera, as the Jingū-ji of Ise Shrine, was sued to the court for a conflict between the temple’s monks and fishermen, in which they “defiled” the fish that was to be offered to the Shrine. Oukase-dera was ordered to stop using the title of Jingū-ji and was relocated to another location. During the reign of Emperor Kōnin, although the spread of Buddhism was no longer as fervent as during the previous reign of Empress Kōken, it still had a great influence. However, the Ise Shrine, as a major national Shinto shrine, refused to bow down and maintained a cautious attitude towards the integration of Buddhism.

This conservative and even slightly hostile attitude continued during the Heian period, and the isolation of Buddhist elements expanded to the level of vocabulary. In the *Kōtaijingūgishikichō* made in 804 AD, it was clearly stipulated which words related to Buddhism cannot be said and alternative words were provided. For example, “Buddha”, “temple”, “monk” and “pagoda” were replaced with other words, and it was emphasized that “The above established rules must be followed” [10]. In the later *Jogan Gishiki*, institutionalized regulations were made, clearly requiring that during the Daijosai

and other Shinto ceremonies hold in palace, the court's various departments and the departments of the five provinces in the Kinai prohibit Buddhist activities.

In terms of middle and small ceremonies, regulations were also made for the entry and exit of mourners and monks and nuns [11], which also marked the court's formal recognition of Shinbutsu Kakuri. Although most of the *Jogan Gishiki* has been lost, relevant clauses can still be seen in the later *Engishiki*. For example, "on the days of fasting before and after ceremonies such as Daijosai and Niiname-sai, monks, nuns, and mourners are not allowed to participate; those who live south of the Shimogamo Shrine, even if they are outside the four boundaries, are not allowed to reside, such as 'excessive monks and nuns'." The taboo words previously listed in the *Kōtaijingūgishikichō* are also included [12]. In the following centuries, the imperial family adhered to relevant taboos, and during the Edo period, the rising trend of neo-Confucianism added new strength to the existing separating system [13]. By the Meiji period, the new government officially separated gods and Buddhas, and the imperial ideology based on Shintoism was formally established, which was also influenced by the Shinbutsu Kakuri as a fundamental element.

3. The Reasons for the Phenomenon of Shinbutsu Kakuri

The reason for the phenomenon of Shinbutsu Kakuri, or the establishment of the system of separation between gods and Buddhas, is usually attributed by scholars to the enormous influence of Buddhist forces on politics during the reigns of Empress Kōken and Emperor Kanmu to Emperor Seiwa, which led to vigilance against the gradual integration of Buddhism and Shintoism [11]. The most famous example is the participation of monks in politics during the reign of Empress Kōken. As a monk, Dōkyō entered the political arena after gaining the trust of Empress Kōken, and later began to meddle in the throne, legitimizing his claim to the throne through the Usa Hachimangū oracle incident. Because the empress had no heirs and was involved in the issue of succession to the throne, this immediately stirred up sensitive nerves among all parties in the court and the public. Empress Kōken specially sent his minister, Wake no Kiyomaro, to confirm at the Usa Hachimangū, but received a response claiming that the oracle was false. Empress Kōken and Dōkyō were very angry and demoted him to exile. Afterwards, Dōkyō was unable to make further claims to the throne and was exiled after Empress Kōken's death, ending the monk politics of Kōken's reign.

Although Dōkyō failed, he served as an unbreakable political red line, reminding future rulers of the dangers of monks interfering in politics. After the death of Empress Kōken, examples of monks intervening in the direction of policies still occurred from time to time. When Emperor Kanmu fell seriously ill in his later years, monk Shogu advised him to give up keeping eagles and dogs for hunting. In 830 AD, monk Dōshō was summoned by Emperor Junna while attending Butsumyōe ceremony. The emperor asked, "Which sin is more serious, killing by the king or killing by his subjects?" [14]. Dōshō replied, "The monarch's crime of killing for the sake of his luxurious life is very serious, and there are also people among his subjects who have no choice but to kill for the sake of life. However, the monarch even prohibits this, so the crime of killing by the king is even more serious." Emperor Junna listened. On the one hand, he prohibited killing for luxury and implemented frugality, the ban on hunting in the mountains and wilderness has been relaxed, allowing poor people to obtain food through hunting. After the Dōkyō Incident, the Emperor still listened to the advice of the monks, and Buddhist influence still existed as a significant player in political games.

It should be noted that the Ise Shrine holds a special position in this regard, with its enshrined Amaterasu as the mythical ancestress of the Imperial House of Japan. The Shrine blesses the prosperity of the imperial family and has been closely linked to the authority of the Japanese imperial family and court since ancient times. During the Jogan period, when Korean pirates invaded, the imperial court sent envoys to the Ise Shrine to offer sacrifices, which included the statement "The reason why Japan is called the Land of Gods is because it has the help of gods, but recently there have been military harassment" [15]. This indirectly reflects the "Shinkoku consciousness" of the Jogan period.

In this situation, the Buddhist ceremonies in the palace continued to increase from Emperor Junna to Emperor Montoku. The existing separation policy between gods and Buddhas during the reigns of Emperor Kōnin and Emperor Kanmu is threatened. During the reign of Emperor Seiwa when the *Jogan Gishiki* was formulated, monks such as Shinga (the younger brother of Kukai) constantly contacted the emperor and requested a ban on hunting [16]. As a result, concerns about the excessive involvement of Buddhism in royal and government policies began to emerge, and the necessity of reestablishing the principle of prioritizing divine affairs and separating gods and Buddhas was extremely high. In addition, local shrine forces such as Ise Shrine were dissatisfied with the trend of integrating Buddhism into Shintoism. Therefore, it was inevitable to have the *Jogan Gishiki* that institutionalized Shinbutsu Kakuri. The nature of Buddhism itself as a foreign domain religion cannot be changed, and it has become a target of attack by local Shintoists and later Edo Shintoism revivalists.

In the actual life of shrines, the separation of gods and Buddhas cannot be completely achieved. There are stories of Saigū no Nyōgo offering treasures in temples not far from Saikū during their return to the capital, as well as examples of former Saiō becoming a monk. In other words, due to the inability to completely isolate Buddhism, it is necessary to pay attention to the taboo words mentioned earlier. In the late Heian period, there were also examples of high-ranking clergy such as Negi and Gūji in the shrine giving their status to their successors and then becoming monks [17].

What is even more interesting is that when Ise Shrine explained the reason for the separation of gods and Buddhas later, it cited the Buddhist speech collection *Shasekishū* written during the Kamakura period. At the beginning, it mentioned that Amaterasu came down to investigate because she saw the Buddha's seal on the seabed and encountered Papiyas, Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, who was worried that Buddhism would spread to the land. Therefore, Amaterasu agreed with Papiyas that she would not mention the name of the Three Jewels of Buddhism or approach them, and Papiyas also agreed not to disturb human world [18]. This unexpected result also reflects the close relationship between Shintoism and Buddhism at that time, and Ise Shrine was able to explain the reason for the Shinbutsu Kakuri based on the results of their practice.

4. Conclusion

In summary, during the early spread of Buddhism in Japan, the combination of Buddhism and Shintoism encountered resistance. Under the rule of Emperor Seiwa, concerns about excessive interference of Buddhism in politics led to the institutionalization of the Shinbutsu Kakuri in the *Jogan Gishiki*, which was one of the important reasons for the emergence of the system of separation of Shinto and Buddhas.

Starting from the Edo period, with the spread of Edo neo-Confucianism, the development of Kokugaku studies, and the rise of nationalism based on Shintoism, the influence of anti-Buddhist movements, Shinbutsu Kakuri was also used as a theoretical tool to attack Buddhism's invasion of the "national religion". With the Meiji Restoration, the new government issued the "Shinbutsu Hanzenrei", which forced the separation of gods and Buddhas and adopted the policy of State Shinto, providing soil for Japan's Kōkoku ideology in the future.

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