

# The “Mutual Influence” Between Buddhism and Political Factors in Its Spread and Development in Japan

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**Abstract.** Since Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century – through individual efforts like Sima Da from China’s Southern Liang Dynasty and the official introduction by King Seong of Baekje from the Korean Peninsula – its spread and development in Japan have been closely intertwined with the political environment. Historical events such as the two prohibitions of Buddhism by the Mononoke clan during the Kofun period, Prince Shotoku’s promulgation of *the Seventeen-Article Constitution* that advocated respect for the “Three Treasures” in the Asuka period, the introduction of the clerical system in the Nara period, the division during the Muromachi period, and the implementation of the temple registration system in the Edo period all reflect Buddhism’s fluctuating influence and religious status in Japan. This paper primarily examines the political changes, and regime shifts during key periods, such as the Kofun, Asuka, Nara, and Kamakura periods, to explore how political factors—including government religious policies, socioeconomic conditions, and national political landscapes—impacted the spread and localization of Buddhism in Japan. It further analyzes how Buddhism, in turn, influenced Japan’s political environment, revealing the “mutual influence” between Buddhism and political factors throughout Japanese history.

**Keywords:** Japan, Buddhism, political factors, religious localization.

## 1. Introduction

The spread and development of Buddhism in Japan have a history of nearly 1,500 years, making it one of the most influential and prominent religions in contemporary Japanese society. According to historical records, Buddhism was introduced to Japan through both private and official channels. The private transmission can be traced back to 522, when Buddhist monk Sima Da from China’s Southern Liang Dynasty traveled east to Japan and established temples. The official introduction of Buddhism was primarily driven by Japan’s desire to strengthen ties with Baekje on the Korean Peninsula to address political issues related to the Mimana region, thus allowing the formal entry of Buddhism from Baekje. However, in its early stages, Buddhism faced resistance from the indigenous Shinto beliefs and the powerful Mononobe clan, who strongly advocated the suppression of Buddhism, leading to significant political opposition.

Buddhism’s true rise in Japan occurred after the pro-Buddhist Soga clan, led by Soga no Umako, took control of the government, assassinated Emperor Sushun, and installed the former empress, Suiko, as the new ruler. With Japan entering the Asuka period, both Empress Suiko and Prince Shotoku, who held considerable political power, actively supported the spread of Buddhism through various means, including building temples and statues, issuing the Seventeen-Article Constitution to encourage respect for the “Three Treasures,” and sending envoys to China to study Buddhism. From this point on, the political and social status of Buddhism in Japan steadily increased, setting it on the path to becoming a state religion.

In the subsequent development of Japanese society and history, particularly during the establishment and growth of a centralized legal state and the process of religious localization, Buddhism’s fate became further intertwined with political factors such as government policies and the shifts in national power. In this relationship, Buddhism and political factors did not simply exert one-way influences on each other but rather formed a mutual, interdependent, and adaptive relationship. This dynamic of mutual influence and its evolution persisted across multiple historical

periods, from the late Kofun period to modern times, and represents a significant topic in the study of Japanese political and religious history.

This paper aims to explore the “mutual influence” between Buddhism and political factors in Japan by focusing on key historical periods and analyzing the major political events of those times (primarily referencing records from the *Nihon Shoki*). Through this analysis, the paper examines how this mutual influence manifested and its significance for the development of Japanese historical, political, and cultural contexts, offering a new perspective for research in these fields.

## **2. The Introduction and Development of Buddhism in Japan During the Kofun Period**

### **2.1. Private Transmission: Chinese figure Sima Da and Others Crossed Eastward**

Japan established contacts with China as early as the Han Dynasty. The *Book of Han* (*Hanshu*) states, “In the sea of Lelang, there are the people of Wo, divided into over a hundred countries, who send tribute annually [1].” This is the earliest record in Chinese historical texts regarding the islands of Japan. Due to the powerful strength of the ancient Chinese empire and its capacity for cultural export, along with Japan’s tendency as an island nation to absorb external, especially neighboring, cultural influences from China, Chinese culture often spread rapidly and in large quantities to Japan throughout various historical periods. Based on this, it is not difficult to understand why Buddhism, which had been flourishing in China and becoming a key component of Chinese culture by the late Eastern Han and Three Kingdoms periods, would spread eastward to Japan in the 6th century.

The earliest account of Buddhism’s introduction to Japan in Japanese literature is found in the Buddhist text *Genkō Shakusho*, which describes the private transmission by Chinese monk Sima Da and others. According to *Genkō Shakusho*, Sima Da from China’s Southern Liang Dynasty arrived in Japan during the 16th year of Emperor Keitai’s reign (522 CE) and established a Buddhist statue in Sakatahara, Takichi District, Yamato Province, initiating the spread of Buddhism in Japan [2].

There are slight discrepancies in various historical records regarding the timing and manner of Sima Da’s introduction of Buddhism to Japan. For instance, *Nihon Shoki*, widely regarded as Japan’s first credible “official history,” claims that Sima Da and others conducted Buddhist activities in Japan during the 13th year of Emperor Bidatsu’s reign (584 CE), after the “anti-Buddhist movement,” and with the authorization of the influential minister Soga no Umako, who sought to use Buddhism to expand his clan’s power, appease immigrants from the mainland, and promote social reform [3].

While *Genkō Shakusho* emphasizes the personal agency of Sima Da, *Nihon Shoki* highlights the political influence of key Japanese figures like Soga no Umako in facilitating Sima’s Buddhist activities. This suggests that although Sima’s introduction of Buddhism was a “private transmission” rather than an official exchange between nations, it still relied heavily on the support and influence of prominent political figures in Japan. Thus, even this “private transmission,” seemingly less connected to national policy, involved significant political considerations. The “mutual influence” here can be understood as follows: on the one hand, Soga no Umako, representing political forces, supported Buddhism to expand his clan’s influence; on the other hand, Sima Da, representing the spread of Buddhism, relied on Soga’s power to realize his mission in the face of challenges such as the suppression of Buddhism in Japan.

### **2.2. Official Transmission: Connections with the Korean Peninsula**

In addition to its close ties with China, ancient Japan also maintained significant connections with the Korean Peninsula. From the 4th to the 7th centuries, the Korean Peninsula experienced the “Three Kingdoms Period,” during which Goguryeo, Silla, and Baekje competed for dominance. Baekje had the closest ties with Japan, maintaining long-standing diplomatic relations. Many advanced cultural and technological developments from China, such as the Chinese script, religion, and pottery

techniques, were introduced to Japan through Baekje, while Japan, in return, provided Baekje with resources and military aid to help it resist Silla.

Buddhism's official transmission to Japan occurred within this historical and political context. According to *Nihon Shoki*, in the 13th year of Emperor Kinmei's reign (552 CE), King Seong of Baekje, a devout Buddhist, presented a gilt-bronze statue of Shakyamuni Buddha and other sacred Buddhist objects to Emperor Kinmei, praising the virtues of Buddhism. This is the earliest recorded instance of Buddhism's official transmission to Japan via diplomatic channels.

As an official act between two nations, the transmission of Buddhism carried significant political implications. Both Baekje, as the transmitter, and Japan, as the recipient, had long-term political considerations for this exchange. Buddhism's introduction to Japan was not merely an incidental cultural exchange but a calculated move based on mutual political interests. The "mutual influence" here can be understood as follows: Buddhism, as a religion promoting reconciliation and tolerance, facilitated the improvement of diplomatic relations between the two nations. Although the official transmission of Buddhism was driven by political motivations, it objectively contributed to the spread and localization of Buddhism in Japan.

### **2.3. The Conflict Between the Pro-Buddhist Soga Clan and the Anti-Buddhist Mononobe Clan**

After Emperor Kinmei accepted Buddhist artifacts such as statues and scriptures from King Seong of Baekje, Buddhism gained a foothold in Japan's religious culture. The court officials were clearly divided into two factions: the pro-Buddhist and the anti-Buddhist [4].

The pro-Buddhist faction was led by the "Minister" Soga no Iname and his son Soga no Umako. The Soga clan, which was open to continental culture and closely aligned with Confucian thought, also accepted Buddhism and advocated for its adoption, aiming to elevate its position within Japanese society. As mentioned earlier, the Soga clan's support for Buddhism was largely driven by political considerations—enhancing their clan's status, expanding their influence, and securing the allegiance of immigrants from the continent. They saw Buddhism and its mythological framework as a means to establish a new religious order in Japan, which would, in turn, strengthen their position in both religious and political spheres.

Opposing the Soga clan was the Mononobe clan, represented by Mononobe no Okoshi and his son Mononobe no Moriya. The Mononobe clan derived its power from Japan's native Shinto religious framework, which Buddhism threatened to replace. Since the rise of Buddhism jeopardized the Mononobe clan's political power, they launched a campaign to eradicate the foreign religion.

The first persecution of Buddhism occurred in the 13th year of Emperor Kinmei's reign (569 AD). The Mononobe clan, using the pretext of a plague that they claimed was caused by the worship of "foreign gods," petitioned the emperor to ban Buddhism. Their request was granted, and the Buddhist community faced political suppression, temporarily becoming a taboo. Until the 13th year of Emperor Bidatsu's reign (584 AD), Soga no Umako submitted a request to the emperor for permission to privately practice Buddhism, which was granted. He invited monks from the continent to establish temples and spread Buddhist teachings. This period saw the transmission of Buddhism to Japan by individuals such as Sima Da, as previously mentioned in the *Nihon Shoki*. However, the Mononobe and Nakatomi clans once again petitioned the emperor, blaming Buddhism for ongoing societal issues such as plagues. This led to the destruction of temples and statues, and Buddhist figures like Sima Da's daughter, Zenshin-ni, faced severe persecution. During the turmoil of the anti-Buddhist movement, Soga no Umako once again requested the emperor's permission to practice Buddhism privately, under the pretext of using Buddhist teachings for curing illness. This request was granted, allowing him to preserve the Buddhist influence on the greatest extent possible.

The conflict between the pro-Buddhist and anti-Buddhist factions ultimately culminated in a broader political and military struggle. In 587 CE, after the death of Emperor Yomei, a dispute over the imperial succession reignited hostilities between the Mononobe and Soga clans, escalating into the "Battle of Shigisen." In this military confrontation, Soga no Umako's advocacy for Buddhism played a crucial role. His alignment with continental immigrants, whom he appointed as Buddhist

advisors, won him their support, and many powerful immigrant families allied with the Soga clan. Additionally, the Soga clan controlled advanced metallurgical technologies brought by immigrants, giving them superior weapons and logistics compared to the Mononobe clan. These factors led to the Soga clan's victory, ultimately resulting in the elimination of the anti-Buddhist faction led by the Mononobe.

When examining the conflict between preserving and eradicating Buddhism and the series of disputes it triggered, it is essential to recognize that the struggle between the two clans over religious and succession issues was, at its core, a political power struggle aimed at maximizing clan interests, with Buddhism serving as a medium in this conflict. The dual interaction between Buddhism and political factors is also evident—while the fate of Buddhism was influenced by the rise and fall of the pro-Buddhist and anti-Buddhist factions, Buddhism, in turn, played a role in shaping the political outcomes of these factions.

### **3. Establishing Buddhism as the State Religion During the Asuka Period**

#### **3.1. Prince Shotoku and the Seventeen-Article Constitution**

After Soga no Umako eliminated the conservative anti-Buddhist faction led by Mononobe no Moriya, he became the most powerful figure at court, effectively controlling imperial succession and national policies. Soga no Umako first enthroned Prince Hatsusebe as Emperor Sushun, but soon had him assassinated due to dissatisfaction with the emperor's growing arrogance. He then installed his niece, Princess Nukatabe, as Empress Suiko, with Prince Umayado, known as Prince Shotoku, appointed as regent. With this, the Kofun period ended, and the Asuka period began. Empress Suiko, Soga no Umako, and Prince Shotoku formed a triadic power structure that dominated the early Asuka period. During Prince Shotoku's regency, to address a series of social and political issues caused by the collapse of the *be*-system (a system of hereditary occupational groups), he initiated comprehensive reforms based on the Chinese model of centralized government. In his quest to unify the fragmented clans and strengthen national cohesion, Prince Shotoku needed a highly inclusive and cohesive religion to consolidate the nation's ideology. While Shinto was Japan's indigenous religion, its mythological framework was not as complete or rational as that of Buddhism. As an advanced and systematic religion, Buddhism naturally became Prince Shotoku's tool of choice for unifying national thought, further highlighting the political role of Buddhism as a cultural force.

Prince Shotoku's reform policies are exemplified in the famous Seventeen-Article Constitution, Japan's earliest written legal code. This constitution, centered on Buddhist principles while integrating Confucian and Shinto thought, emphasized loyalty to the sovereign, the importance of decorum, and the strengthening of imperial power. Its core aim was to establish a well-ordered, centralized state. It can be regarded as a manifesto of Prince Shotoku's determination to reform Japan's backward institutions and to learn from advanced civilizations politically, economically, and culturally. The implementation of these policies provided the theoretical foundation for the "Taika Reforms" during Emperor Kotoku's reign, which accelerated Japan's transformation into a centralized bureaucratic state.

Additionally, the Seventeen-Article Constitution explicitly promoted reverence for the "Three Treasures" (the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), establishing Buddhism as Japan's official state religion. This marked a new stage in the development of Buddhism in Japan, laying the foundation for its subsequent integration into everyday life and its trend toward localization. Buddhism also played an effective role in assisting Prince Shotoku and other rulers in unifying clans and consolidating ethnic cohesion. More significantly, the development of Buddhism opened a window for cultural exchanges between Japan and the Sui and Tang dynasties of China. This facilitated Japan's absorption of advanced ideas, cultural practices, political systems, and the establishment of friendly relations between the two countries during this period.

### **3.2. Buddhist Exchanges with China**

After Buddhism was established as the state religion, Japan faced a number of challenges, including an underdeveloped theoretical system and the lack of a standardized monastic code. These issues hindered the further integration of Buddhism into Japanese society and its ability to permeate everyday life, which in turn slowed the process of building a centralized state under the Ritsuryo system. These shortcomings also posed obstacles to the political reforms initiated by Prince Shotoku. Therefore, Buddhist exchanges with China—where Buddhism had long been developed and possessed a mature theoretical and monastic system—became a priority for the Japanese court.

According to the Book of Sui and the Nihon Shoki, in the early 7th century, Prince Shotoku's government and the Sui dynasty in China exchanged several diplomatic missions. Emperor Yang of Sui, eager to promote his country's advanced civilization and display the grandeur of his reign, sent emissaries to Japan bearing advanced knowledge, cultural practices, political systems, and production techniques. At the same time, Japan began to send students and monks to China. The students were tasked with learning the Sui-Tang administrative systems to aid Japan's centralization efforts upon their return, while the monks focused on studying the well-established Buddhist sects and monastic codes. Their goal was to enhance Japan's Buddhist system, solidify its role as the state religion, and increase its influence on society to further unify national thought [5].

Although Buddhism was not the state religion in China during the Sui and Tang dynasties, it was supported by the rulers as a means of ideological control, leading to its flourishing development. Numerous Buddhist sects, each with unique doctrinal frameworks, thrived during this period. Thus, the study monks absorbed a variety of Buddhist teachings, introducing various sects such as the Hosso, Ritsu, and Kegon schools to Japan. This not only facilitated the development of Japanese Buddhism from an initially loose, superficial, and socially disconnected state to one that was more mature, systematic, localized, and secularized, but also laid the groundwork for future interactions and conflicts between different Buddhist sects. These developments also set the stage for Buddhism's increasingly prominent role in military conflicts and social changes.

## **4. Post-Asuka Period: Further Localization of Buddhism and Its Political Ties**

### **4.1. The Six Schools of Nara and Temple Economy**

The Nara period marks a time when Japan's centralized Ritsuryo state was fully established, and its culture flourished under the influence of Tang China. Consequently, the government's management of Buddhism also became more refined.

As early as the mid-to-late Asuka period, following the Jinshin War, Japan implemented the "Sogansho" system, which placed local temples and monks under the unified management of the national Buddhist preceptor (Kokushi), thus integrating Buddhism into the centralized political system. The purpose of this system was to ensure that religion remained subordinate to the state, preventing religious figures from meddling in politics and avoiding internal strife over imperial succession. Buddhism was fully employed as a tool for strengthening ideological control and maintaining social order.

However, during the Nara period, the practical effects of this system did not always align with the intentions of its creators due to the political considerations and personal choices of individual statesmen. Emperor Shomu, a devout Buddhist, promoted Buddhism with unprecedented vigor, elevating it to the status of the "religion for the protection of the state." During this time, Japan strengthened its exchanges with Tang China to absorb advanced Buddhist knowledge. Upon their return, study monks introduced the doctrines, precepts, and teachings of various Chinese Buddhist schools, which eventually coalesced into the six Nara schools: Kegon, Ritsu, Hosso, Sanron, Jojitsu, and Kusha. The state also constructed large-scale temples within cities and granted them exemptions from taxes, fostering the development of a self-sufficient "temple economy" that resembled a Buddhist manor system. Furthermore, the government enacted more detailed Buddhist management

policies, including regulations on the appointment of monks and the granting of ranks, thus enhancing the status and treatment of monastics [6].

Emperor Shomu's use of state resources to protect and promote Buddhism allowed it to further develop along systematic and institutional lines. The intellectual depth and humanistic aspects of Buddhism were also increasingly emphasized. Additionally, Buddhism served as a vital bridge in cultural exchanges between Japan and the Tang Empire, introducing elements of Tang architecture, literature, art, music, and dance into Japan. This ushered Japan into its first cultural golden age during the Nara period, as seen in the vast collection of artifacts preserved in the Shosoin of Nara, greatly enriching Japanese culture. However, it is important to note that the growing economic privileges of large temples inevitably led to the expansion of their power, diminishing the purity of their religious functions and strengthening their political ties.

#### **4.2. From the Heian to Edo Periods: Buddhism's Involvement in Military Conflicts and Its Deepening Localization**

Following the Nara period, in the Heian period, Buddhism had long thrived under imperial protection, leading to inevitable stagnation and even corruption. Scandals of monks flaunting their privileges and living indulgent lifestyles in violation of Buddhist precepts became increasingly common. Some temples even amassed armies of warrior monks (sohei) to protect their assets from the conflicts between nobles and samurai, reflecting Buddhism's entanglement in political and military struggles. However, during this time, figures such as Saicho and Kūkai developed the Tendai and Shingon sects based on their own understanding of Buddhism, marking a deepening trend of localization and nationalization that gradually distanced Japanese Buddhism from its Chinese roots [7].

By the Kamakura period, a more indigenous "New Buddhism" entered a phase of full development. During this era, Minamoto no Yoritomo established the Kamakura shogunate, inaugurating the period of shogunate rule. Although shoguns and other officials greatly revered the Zen sect imported from China, prominent Japanese Buddhist thinkers like Shinran and Nichiren drew from their own culture and interpretations of Buddhist scriptures to create indigenous sects such as Jodo Shinshū and Nichiren-shū. These localized sects, characterized by their "secularization" and "popularization," were more aligned with Japan's cultural psychology and thus gained widespread popularity among the common people, playing a crucial role in uniting and empowering Japanese society at large [8].

At the end of the Muromachi period, Japan entered the Warring States (Sengoku) period, a time of political fragmentation and turmoil. The Shingon and Tendai sects allied with the samurai to seek protection, while the Jodo Shinshū and Nichiren sects further united the lower classes, such as peasants, who were devoted to their teachings. These sects formed highly cohesive "religious kingdoms" during these troubled times, becoming autonomous groups independent of the shogunate, with self-sufficient economic and military systems. The Jodo Shinshū (also known as Ikko-shū) and Nichiren sects even launched armed uprisings such as the "Ikko Ikki" and "Hokke Ikki" to protect their interests, frequently participating in military conflicts. These sects constituted a unique social force, in some respects similar to the Calvinist groups of 16th-century Western Christianity.

During the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate implemented a "closed country" policy, cutting off the channels of foreign exchange for Japanese Buddhism. Simultaneously, it promulgated the "Temple Regulations" and enforced the "Temple and Parish System," which ensured the livelihood of monks and nuns but imposed numerous legal restrictions on the free development of Buddhism [9]. As a result, Buddhism in this era saw little theoretical innovation and made few notable contributions to Japanese politics, society, and culture.

#### **4.3. The New Developments of Buddhism under Political Modernization Since the Meiji Era**

Emperor Meiji overthrew the Tokugawa shogunate and implemented the "Restoration of Imperial Rule," concentrating state power in the hands of the emperor. From the first year of the Meiji era (1868), Meiji began the Meiji Restoration, a sweeping reform aimed at modernizing Japan, which

had fallen behind the Western world due to its isolationist policies. Although the core of these reforms was “total Westernization,” with a heavy emphasis on adopting advanced Western science, culture, education, and political thought, Meiji leaned towards Shintoism in religious matters to solidify imperial authority. In this system, the emperor became the supreme figure, embodying both divine and political leadership.

Shinto regained its status as the state religion, while Buddhism suffered severe repression. Numerous temples, Buddhist statues, and scriptures were destroyed. Nevertheless, despite these setbacks during the early Meiji period, Buddhism, with its over 1,000-year foundation in Japanese society, continued to exert its influence, never straying far from the center of Japan’s historical stage.

At the same time, new characteristics emerged in the relationship between Buddhism and politics. In the 22nd year of the Meiji era (1889), Emperor Meiji promulgated the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, introducing a constitutional monarchy that marked the beginning of Japan’s transition towards a capitalist democratic system and political modernization [10]. After World War II, in 1946, Emperor Showa issued a new constitution, led by General Douglas MacArthur, which, while retaining the emperor and constitutional monarchy, introduced a parliamentary system of responsible government. This fully symbolized the emperor’s nominal status, and Japan, during the “Second Wave of Democratization,” completed its transition to political democracy. With political modernization came the rise of various modern parliamentary political parties.

One such party, the Komeito, was founded in 1964, emerging from the Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, which adheres to Nichiren Buddhism. Komeito’s political ideology reflects strong Buddhist values and promotes the ideology of “Buddhist Democracy.” It is a modern political party with clear Buddhist characteristics [11], representing the transformation of Buddhist groups under modern political systems. Komeito has a strong base of support among the petite bourgeoisie, urban workers, and farmers, and by the late 1960s, it had become the third largest party in Japan’s House of Representatives. Although it has never held power in Japan, the party has often formed coalitions with both the long-ruling center-right Liberal Democratic Party and the short-lived center-left Social Democratic Party, due to Japan’s parliamentary system requiring a majority in the House of Representatives for governance.

Today, Komeito plays an important role as the “third force” in Japanese parliamentary politics. Its Buddhist foundation has also fostered friendly relations with China, making it one of the main pro-China and peace-advocating forces in Japanese politics. The successful development of Komeito illustrates how political modernization reshaped Buddhism, while also showcasing Buddhism’s enduring vitality as it adapted to different political transformations. Moreover, it highlights Buddhism’s significant role in mediating political divisions and fostering national unity.

## 5. Conclusion

For over a thousand years of its development in Japan, Buddhism has almost continuously maintained its connection with politics, with mutual interactions, influences, and even alignments. This characteristic was established when Buddhism, with a clear “political mission,” was transmitted from the continent to Japan in the sixth century. It has deepened through various political transformations throughout Japanese history, becoming an important thread running through Japan’s historical narrative. Buddhism, as a form of social consciousness, arose from a specific social context and, after long-term development within society, has contributed back to that social context, which is a historical inevitability from a materialist historical perspective. Moreover, the prominent manifestation of the “bidirectional effect” between Buddhism and politics in Japanese history is also attributed to the creative interpretations and developments of Buddhism by Japanese Buddhist elites and the key decisions and adjustments made by exceptional political figures during historical turning points.

Japan’s openness as a maritime nation and its proactive national spirit have led to frequent exchanges with foreign countries and active learning from advanced civilizations (primarily China in

ancient times and the West in modern times). This is one of the important reasons for the prominent manifestation of the mutual influence discussed in this paper. When researching Japan's political, economic, and cultural stages from ancient times to the present, attention and analysis of the mutual influence between Buddhism and politics may help researchers clarify the historical development and find new perspectives on related historical events.

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