

The Influence of Tang Dynasty Buddhism on Japanese Buddhism after Jianzhen's Eastward Journey

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Abstract. As a significant bridge for cultural exchange, Buddhism not only fostered deep understanding on a religious level but also exerted broad and profound influence on culture, philosophy, and art. This paper introduces the life of the eminent Tang Dynasty monk Jianzhen, his journey to Japan, and the lasting impacts of this journey. As a high-ranking monk of the Vinaya and Tiantai schools, Jianzhen felt a strong responsibility to spread Buddhist teachings after being invited by Japanese monks and thus resolutely decided to journey to Japan. In Japan, he established the Vinaya school, standardized Buddhist rituals, promoted cultural exchange and integration, elevated the status of Buddhism, and advanced Buddhist education and research. Jianzhen's eastward journey profoundly influenced Japanese religious culture, while also having a broad impact on education, art, architecture, and the diversification of Japanese society and culture.

Keywords: Jianzhen's eastward journey, Tang Dynasty, Buddhism, Japan, Buddhist culture.

1. Introduction

The history of cultural exchange between China and Japan resembles an endless scroll, interweaving the profound bonds between the two countries in politics, economy, and culture since ancient times. Among these exchanges, Buddhism has been a key cultural bridge, fostering not only deep understanding at the religious level but also broad and far-reaching impacts on culture, philosophy, and art. The Tang Dynasty, known as a golden age of Chinese Buddhism, provided a wealth of resources and a deep cultural foundation for Sino-Japanese Buddhist exchange through the maturity of Buddhist thought, the proliferation of sects, and its brilliant artistic achievements. Against this backdrop, Jianzhen's eastward journey became a monumental event in this history of exchange.

Jianzhen, known for his profound Buddhist knowledge and rigorous practice, stood out in the Buddhist community of the Tang Dynasty. His fearless courage and passion for spreading Buddhism made him a cultural emissary between China and Japan. His eastward journey was not merely an extension of his personal spiritual quest but also a cultural expedition that introduced the Buddhist doctrines, cultural arts, architectural techniques, and even lifestyle of the Tang Dynasty into Japan. His influence on the development of Japanese Buddhism and the broader cultural fabric of Japanese society is undeniable. Therefore, studying the influence of Tang Dynasty Buddhism on Japanese Buddhism after Jianzhen's journey not only reveals the depth and breadth of cultural exchange between China and Japan but also offers valuable historical insights for promoting harmonious coexistence between different cultures in the context of globalization today.

Although both domestic and international scholars have made significant progress in researching Jianzhen's eastward journey and its impact, most studies have focused on Jianzhen's personal life and the journey itself [1-3]. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive and in-depth analysis regarding the specific influences of Tang Dynasty Buddhism on Japanese Buddhism in dimensions such as culture, education, and social structure after the journey. Building on previous research, this paper aims to further explore and elucidate the profound impact of Tang Dynasty Buddhism on Japanese Buddhism after Jianzhen's journey, adding new perspectives and depth to the field through meticulous examination.

Using methods such as literature analysis and historical comparison, this paper extensively collects and organizes relevant historical documents, systematically traces the historical context of Jianzhen's eastward journey, and the impact of Tang Dynasty Buddhism on Japanese Buddhism. By employing

comparative analysis, it delves into the mutual influence, reference, and fusion process between Tang Dynasty Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism in cultural exchanges. Structurally, the paper is divided into six sections, ranging from the introduction to Jianzhen's background and journey, the initial status of Tang Buddhism in Japan, Jianzhen's activities and their far-reaching effects in Japan, and concluding with the comprehensive influence of Jianzhen's journey on Japanese society and culture. The conclusion aims to comprehensively showcase the historical significance and cultural value of Jianzhen's eastward journey.

2. Jianzhen and the Background of His Eastward Journey

Jianzhen, an esteemed monk of the Tang Dynasty, was a vivid embodiment of a relentless pursuit and dissemination of Buddhist teachings [2]. Born in the culturally rich city of Yangzhou, he developed a deep interest in Buddhism from an early age, decisively choosing the path of monastic practice. In his quest for Buddhist knowledge, Jianzhen sought out renowned teachers and constantly improved his skills, eventually becoming a significant proponent of the Vinaya school. His firm belief in the principle that "precepts are the foundation of Buddhism" not only influenced his time but also laid a solid foundation for the continuity of the Vinaya school in later generations. Additionally, Jianzhen was a faithful follower of the teachings of Master Zhiyi of the Tiantai school, helping to spread the Tiantai school's doctrines widely across the Jiangnan region, where it attracted numerous disciples.

Jianzhen's decision to journey eastward was the result of a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, his deep sense of mission and responsibility for spreading Buddhism drove him to overcome hardships and bring the teachings of the Dharma to distant lands. Externally, the sincere invitation from Japanese monks made him feel the warmth of cross-border friendship and the anticipation of his arrival, as they hoped his presence would revitalize Japanese Buddhism. Furthermore, Jianzhen's deep concern for the state of Buddhist development in Japan played a crucial role in his decision to embark on this journey [3]. He was well aware of the difficulties and challenges facing Japanese Buddhism, and thus resolved to personally contribute his wisdom and strength to its growth.

3. The Initial Status of Tang Dynasty Buddhism in Japan

The history of Buddhism's introduction to Japan can be traced back to the 6th century, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties of China, when Buddhism had already deeply rooted itself in Chinese society and become a pervasive social phenomenon. As Sino-Japanese exchanges grew increasingly frequent, Buddhism was introduced to Japan and gradually flourished under the support of the royal family and nobility. The Japanese ruling class viewed Buddhism as a tool to stabilize social order and strengthen governance, leading to its rapid spread and development, and establishing it as an indispensable part of Japanese cultural life.

However, during its initial development, Japan's government did not have a consistent attitude toward Buddhism, and there were significant shortcomings in its management. Despite the positive outlook of the royal family and nobility, the government lacked effective regulatory systems and measures to oversee the development of Buddhism, resulting in some confusion during its spread within Japanese society. This lack of governance not only hindered the proper growth of Buddhism but also posed certain challenges to social stability in Japan.

In this early stage, Japanese Buddhism faced several specific issues, the most prominent of which were the incomplete ordination system and the scarcity of Buddhist scriptures. The absence of a comprehensive ordination system made it difficult for Japanese Buddhists to receive proper ordination, severely hindering their spiritual progress. Meanwhile, the shortage of Buddhist scriptures prevented Japanese monks from deeply understanding and grasping Buddhist doctrines and teachings,

thereby limiting the level of development of Japanese Buddhism. These pressing issues needed to be resolved, as they posed a significant threat to the future development of Buddhism in Japan.

4. Jianzhen's Activities in Japan and Their Profound Impact

Upon arriving in Japan, Jianzhen's primary task was to establish the Vinaya school and standardize Buddhist rituals. He personally guided Japanese monks in studying Vinaya texts and imparted knowledge of the precepts, allowing Japanese Buddhists to practice in accordance with proper rituals. This initiative was a milestone for the development of Buddhism in Japan, as it enabled Japanese Buddhists to gain a deeper understanding and practice of Buddhist teachings and philosophy. Jianzhen's efforts laid a solid foundation for the future growth of Japanese Buddhism. Under his leadership, the Vinaya school gradually flourished in Japan, becoming an influential Buddhist sect that played a crucial role in the institutionalization and standardization of Japanese Buddhism.

In addition to establishing the Vinaya school, Jianzhen actively promoted in-depth cultural exchange and integration within Buddhism. He introduced Tang Dynasty Buddhist culture, art forms, and techniques to Japan, which greatly enriched and advanced Japanese Buddhist art. For instance, in the construction of Tōshōdai-ji, Jianzhen incorporated Tang Dynasty architectural styles and techniques, making the temple a symbol of Sino-Japanese Buddhist cultural exchange. This endeavor not only deepened the cultural ties and friendship between China and Japan but also injected new vitality into Japanese Buddhist art, fostering its innovation and development.

During his time spreading the Dharma in Japan, Jianzhen enjoyed significant support from the royal family and nobility. This support not only provided a strong foundation for his teaching activities but also significantly elevated the status of Buddhism in Japanese society. With the endorsement of the royal family and nobility, Buddhism's influence in Japan expanded, laying the groundwork for its further development. This backing also offered Jianzhen a broader platform and more opportunities to influence Japanese society and culture.

Jianzhen was also deeply committed to advancing Buddhist education and research. While teaching the Vinaya at Tōshōdai-ji, he actively promoted the development of Buddhist education by establishing schools where he personally taught students Buddhist scriptures and precepts. Under his careful instruction, a new generation of outstanding Buddhists emerged, equipped with solid knowledge of Buddhism and a strong sense of responsibility to carry forward its teachings. The growth and contributions of these students injected new momentum into the development of Buddhist education and research in Japan, pushing the academic study of Buddhism to new heights.

5. The Comprehensive Impact of Jianzhen's Eastward Journey on Japanese Society and Culture

5.1. Profound Influence on Japanese Religious Culture

After Jianzhen's eastward journey, the relationship between Buddhism and other religions in Japan underwent significant changes. Under his influence, Buddhism's status within Japanese religious culture gradually rose, becoming an essential part of Japan's religious landscape [4]. The introduction of Buddhism not only enriched Japan's religious culture but also injected new vitality and energy into its development. Moreover, Buddhism engaged in fruitful exchanges and integration with other religions, collectively fostering the growth of Japanese religious culture. This interaction promoted mutual understanding and respect among various religions, providing strong support for the diversification and inclusiveness of Japanese religious culture. As a result, Japan's religious environment became more vibrant and multifaceted.

5.2. Broad Impact on Japanese Society and Culture

Beyond its influence on religious culture, Jianzhen's journey to Japan had a wide-ranging and lasting impact on Japanese society and culture [5]. Buddhism's penetration into areas such as education, art, and architecture were particularly evident.

In the field of education, the introduction of Buddhism spurred the development of Japanese educational systems. Buddhist temples became important centers of learning, where many talented monks received high-quality education, eventually becoming prominent figures in various fields of Japanese society. These individuals not only made significant achievements in the realm of Buddhism but also played crucial roles in the cultural, artistic, and political spheres, contributing to the overall progress of Japanese society.

In the realm of art, Buddhist artistic forms and techniques brought new life to Japanese art. Sculptures and paintings in Buddhist temples, with their high artistic value, provided fresh inspiration and creative sources for Japanese artists. These works not only enriched Japan's artistic heritage but also had a lasting influence on the formation and evolution of Japanese artistic styles.

In architecture, Tang Dynasty architectural styles and techniques profoundly influenced Japanese construction practices. The architectural knowledge that Jianzhen brought to Japan was widely applied in the construction of temples and palaces, integrating Tang Dynasty elements into Japanese buildings while maintaining their unique characteristics. This fusion of styles enhanced the artistic quality of Japanese architecture and invigorated the development of Japan's architectural culture.

These influences collectively advanced the development of Japanese society and culture, resulting in a richer, more diverse, and integrated cultural landscape following Jianzhen's journey. His contributions not only deepened the cultural and religious exchange between China and Japan but also provided fresh momentum for the evolution of Japanese society and culture, energizing its growth and transformation.

6. Conclusion

Through this study, we can clearly recognize the profound influence that Tang Dynasty Buddhism, brought to Japan by Jianzhen, had on Japanese Buddhism. Jianzhen not only established the Vinaya school and standardized Buddhist rituals but also fostered deep cultural exchange and integration. His efforts significantly elevated Buddhism's status in Japanese society and actively promoted the development of Buddhist education and research. Furthermore, Jianzhen's journey had a wide-reaching impact on Japanese society and culture, contributing to the development of Japan's religious and cultural landscape.

Future research can further explore the specific mechanisms through which Tang Dynasty Buddhism influenced Japanese Buddhism after Jianzhen's arrival and its role in Japan's historical trajectory. Additionally, taking a broader perspective, scholars could examine the historical and contemporary dimensions of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, especially how to promote deeper exchange and integration in the context of modern globalization. Such studies would not only enhance our understanding of the historical and present connections between Chinese and Japanese cultures but also provide valuable insights for facilitating contemporary cultural exchanges.

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