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DEATH, DISEASE, AND BUDDHIST PATRONAGE IN JAPAN

THE GREAT SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC OF 735

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Smallpox is a highly contagious disease that is transmitted from person to person by infective droplets during contact with an infected individual. Flu-like symptoms, as well as sores and lesions on the body, are physical hallmarks of the disease. While smallpox was eradicated by 1979, the disease had plagued humanity for thousands of years and killed hundreds of millions of people in the twentieth century alone.¹ Smallpox was first introduced to the islands of Japan by merchants and Buddhist missionaries from the Korean kingdom of Paekche in the sixth century CE. Once it reached the shores of Japan, smallpox did not disappear but emerged in waves that were sometimes manageable and were at other times catastrophic. In 735, a second smallpox epidemic afflicted Japan, reducing the population by 30 percent and resulting in labor shortages and declines in agricultural production and tax revenue for the court. A devout Buddhist, Emperor Shomu (r. 701–745) looked to Buddhism as an antidote to alleviate the suffering of his fellow countrymen. By

undertaking one of the most ambitious Buddhist patronage projects in Japanese history with the building of the Todai-ji temple (Great Eastern Temple) and the colossal bronze sculpture of the Vairocana Buddha, the emperor also managed to stabilize the economy and social order.

Today, humanity is afflicted by another pandemic, COVID-19, an infectious disease that has killed over a million people globally in less than one year. Until an effective vaccine is developed, communities all over the world have adopted mask-wearing and physical distancing as preventive measures against further spread of the disease. Yet, as social creatures, we seek opportunities for meaningful and intimate connections. To this end, Todai-ji temple and the Vairocana Buddha have been called upon again to help alleviate the suffering of those afflicted by disease through virtual communal prayer.

This article examines how Emperor Shomu looked to Buddhist patronage as a means to reestablish stability and social order during and after the smallpox epidemic that ravaged his kingdom. Specifically, Emperor Shomu understood the importance of Buddhist merit-making as a mechanism to comfort his citizens and to motivate them—while maintaining his political authority—toward a collective effort to remove the evil spirits that were believed to have brought smallpox to the kingdom. For Emperor Shomu, this meant a nationwide effort to appease the Buddha by constructing a colossal bronze image of the Vairocana Buddha at Todai-ji temple (Figure 2). While the emperor sought medical experts and made proclamations about sanitary measures to stem the spread of smallpox, it was his Buddhist policies that ensured a return to political stability after the disease ran its natural course.

Early Buddhism in Japan

Buddhism is based on the teachings of the historical figure Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in India around the sixth century BCE. Its spread and influence throughout the Asian continent can be attributed to merchants and missionaries who traveled along the Silk Road, introducing Buddhism to China as early as the first century CE. As an important political and religious center in East Asia, China was fundamental in bringing Buddhism to Korea in 372 CE, which would later introduce the religion to Japan.

The earliest evidence for Buddhism in Japan comes from the seventh-century Chinese text, the *Book of Liang*, which notes that in 467 CE, Buddhist monks from the ancient kingdom of Gandhara, in present-day northwest Pakistan and northeast Afghanistan, traveled to the main island of Honshu. However, the *Chronicles of Japan*, considered among the oldest and most authoritative texts on Japanese history—albeit with a royalist prerogative—marks 552 as the official year of Buddhism's introduction to Japan when King Seong (r. 523–554) of Paekche

sent an envoy of Buddhist missionaries, sutras (Buddhist texts), and a sculpture of the Buddha to Emperor Kinmei (r. 539–571).

Buddhism was not initially welcomed among members of the Yamato court and royal family, whose patronage was imperative for its successful foundation and adoption. Their wealth and influence would be needed to construct new temples, to house and feed Buddhist monks, and to pay for the production of Buddhist images. Because of its foreign origins, many resisted Buddhism, particularly those who advocated for the importance of *kami* (gods) worship, which would later become known as Shinto. The root of the struggle was political rivalry. The Yamato court desired to solidify control over the whole of the country at the expense of influential courtiers, some of whom worshipped *kami* and others who practiced Buddhism. As translated by William E. Deal in his essay, “Buddhism and the State in Early Japan,” in 552, the imperial officials Mononobe no Okoshi and Nakatomi no Kamako, both ardent supporters of *kami* worship, were asked by Emperor Kinmei if Buddhism should be adopted. They responded that:

The rulers of our country have always worshipped throughout the four seasons the 180 deities of heaven and earth [*kami*]. If they now change this and worship the deity of a foreign country, we fear that the deities of our country will become angry.²

Another court official, Soga no Inamea, argued that much of the Asian continent had chosen to adopt Buddhism and Japan should also follow suit. Emperor Kinmei granted Soga no Inamea permission to worship the gold and silver sculpture of the Buddha sent as tribute from Korea in order to examine its efficacy. After an unspecified period of time, the chronicle notes that an epidemic of an incurable disease (smallpox) killed many people and that Buddhism was to blame. The *kami* had, apparently, become angered. At the urging of Mononobe no Okoshi and Nakatomi no Kamako, the emperor ordered Buddhist temples to be set on fire and Buddhist statues to be thrown into the Naniwa canal.³ This act appeased the *kami* but angered the Buddha, who was said to have caused a fire in the great hall of the Imperial Palace, and smallpox continued to ravage the country throughout the sixth century. Eventually, the *Chronicles of Japan* explains, the Buddha and *kami* came to live together, and by the end of the sixth century, when Buddhism was largely accepted at court, smallpox is scarcely discussed in the text.

Although there exist many schools of Buddhism in Japan today, it was Mahayana Buddhism, also referred to as the “Great Vehicle,” that took hold in the country. Mahayana Buddhism traveled along the Silk Route from India to various parts of Asia around the second century CE. It became the dominant school of Buddhism in East Asia by the ninth century. The self-appellation of “Great Vehicle” was adopted among Mahayana practitioners to express their

superior knowledge of sutras, their expansive universe, which included many Buddhas and Buddhist deities, and the movement's focus on transporting all sentient beings from the world of suffering toward enlightenment. Its initial adoption and popularity stemmed, in part, from interpretations of the Buddha as a spiritual sovereign whose job was to care for the world and offer salvation to humanity. This especially appealed to rulers who wanted to maintain their power and authority while at the same time offering their citizens spiritual comfort, whether actual or perceived. By the sixth century, various rulers of China, Korea, and Japan had adopted Buddhism. Their decision to do so was often politically motivated, but their adoption of Buddhism nonetheless offered spiritual guidance to those who accepted the teachings of the Buddha. During times of calamity and epidemic, Buddhism proved itself useful in its promise to bring an end to suffering. Ironically, it was through mercantile trade and religious missions that new diseases were spread from one location to another, turning outbreaks into epidemics, and epidemics into pandemics.

A Buddhist Response to the Great Smallpox Epidemic of 735-737

Beginning on August 12, 735 CE, reports of smallpox in Kyushu, the southernmost island of Japan, began to circulate to the court in Nara, nearly 500 miles away on the island of Honshu, in the region of Kansai (Figure 1). The epidemic began at the port of Dazaifu when a fisherman came into contact with a “barbarian ship” that was infested with the disease.⁴ The “barbarians” were thought to be sailors from the kingdom of Silla in Korea. By August 23, the military government of Kyushu submitted a petition to the court, asking for assistance and the relaxation of mandatory rice payments. In their words: “A pestilence characterized by swellings has spread widely in the provinces under our jurisdiction. The whole populace is bedridden. We request exemption from the local products tax this year.”⁵ The court granted the request, but the devastation was far from over. By 737, smallpox ravaged nearly all corners of Japan, and deaths from the disease reduced the population by a third.⁶ These included members of the royal family and high-ranking officials, making the urgency to quell the disease more imperative for the court.

At the height of the epidemic, Emperor Shomu consulted his officials at the Bureau of Medicine. They recommended various remedies and guidelines, including a prohibition against drinking water, an encouragement to eat boiled rhubarb, and a recommendation to apply powdered silkworm cocoons to boils.⁷ When these guidelines did not help to quell the disease, Emperor Shomu ordered Buddhist monks and nuns to read sutras to the afflicted and prayers to kami, whom he interpreted to be deities that were part of the Buddhist universe. Eventually the

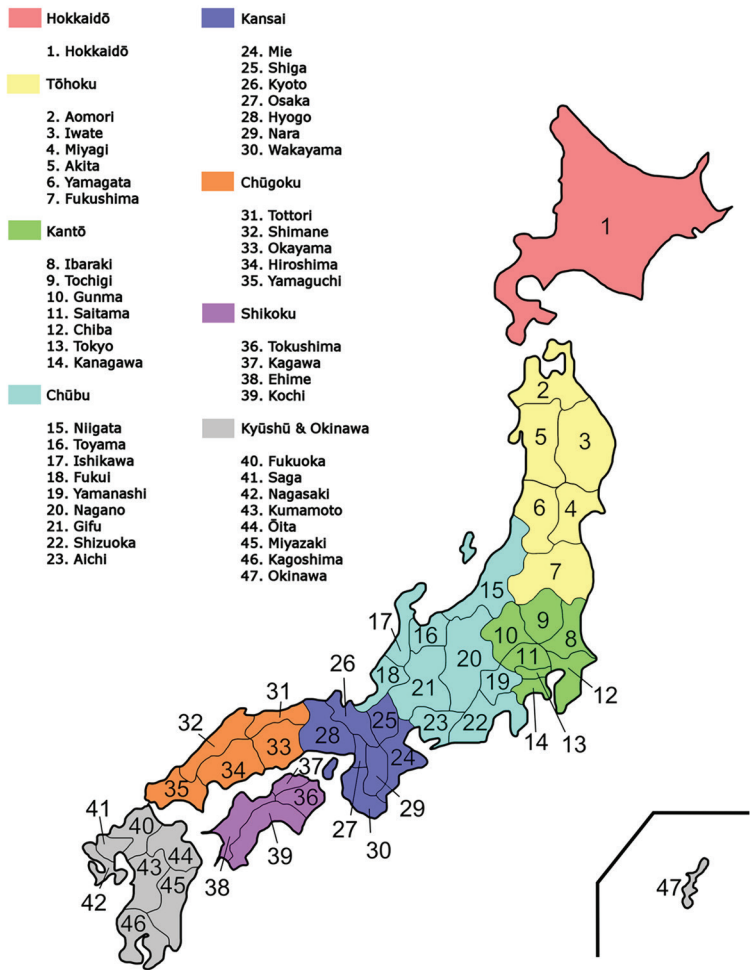


Figure 1: Regions and Prefectures of Japan. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

disease ran its natural course, but it left Japan’s population and economy on the brink of collapse. In 741, Emperor Shomu directed court resources to the building of provincial Buddhist temples (*kokobunji*). This would spur the economy and allow the government to assert greater control over the provinces through a shared religious experience. At the same time, temples would become sites of prayer for the stability and restoration of the country and for all the peoples of Japan. He relied on the Buddhist concept of merit, accumulated through good deeds such as feeding monks and nuns, funding temples, sponsoring the production of Buddhist sculptures, and reading or listening to sutras. The accumulation of merit through virtuous deeds was thought to ensure happiness and prosperity.



Figure 2: Vairocana Buddha at Todai-ji Temple, Nara, Japan, 8th century. Bronze, height approximately fifty feet. Photo by Wally Gobetz/Flickr Creative Commons.

With a population that increasingly came to accept Buddhism, the government saw an opportunity to embark on a nationwide effort of Buddhist merit-making while at the same time consolidating political control. In 743, the emperor issued an edict calling all of Japan to help in the construction of a colossal image of the Vairocana Buddha to be housed at the Todai-ji temple in Nara. The construction of the image was intended to bring peace to Japan and to all of humanity. However, one can argue that having been forced out of Nara in 740 by rebellions, Emperor Shomu's edict to have the image constructed at Todai-ji was a calculated maneuver to return to the old capital and to centralize governmental authority.

Emperor Shomu selected the Vairocana Buddha, also referred to as the Cosmic Buddha, who sits at the center of the Mahayana Buddhist universe and oversees a series of worlds where there is only peace and no suffering. The Vairocana Buddha was chosen not only because of its association with stability and prosperity, but also because the emperor wanted to associate himself with Vairocana's central authority in the Buddhist universe. Ultimately, as a devout Buddhist, Emperor Shomu desired to be seen as the Vairocana Buddha incarnate and remembered as a great Buddhist sovereign.

Standing nearly fifty feet tall, the sculpture at Todai-ji is the largest bronze sculpture of the Vairocana Buddha in the world. In order to build such a colossal image, it is estimated that nearly half of the population contributed by donating

funds, labor, and materials. The court also instituted mandatory tax payments by every citizen, which brought both hardship and political unrest. With its completion in 749, the sculpture—which weighs an estimated 550 tons—used up all the available copper in the country and nearly bankrupted the court. Moreover, the construction of the temple to house the sculpture led to the deforestation of Japan, taking generations to restore.

After successfully undertaking the largest Buddhist merit-making project in Japanese history, Emperor Shomu abdicated the throne and became a Buddhist priest. In announcing his retirement, Emperor Shomu praised the Buddha for restoring peace to Japan and helping the country avoid even greater disaster during the smallpox epidemic. While smallpox was not eradicated from Japan during his tenure as emperor, it did not return to epidemic levels until 763, well after his death. Emperor Shomu did not invent the ritualization of Buddhism and its deployment during a natural disaster and a pestilence. Such rituals had been described and utilized since the foundation of Buddhism. However, his institutionalization of provincial temples (*kokobunji*) in 741, with Todai-ji as the central headquarters, was and continues to be effective.

The Vairocana Buddha and Todai-ji Temple in the Age of COVID-19

Over a millennium has passed since the epidemic of 735–737, and modern medicine has developed vaccines that have eradicated diseases like smallpox. After COVID-19 arrived in Japan, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō slowly enacted policies to limit the movement of citizens, including closing schools and institutions. Eventually, his government issued an emergency order effectively shutting down the entire country on April 16, 2020.

While medical professionals continue to research the disease and develop an effective vaccine, religious leaders and practitioners throughout Japan have found succor in ritual and prayer. Not surprisingly, the Vairocana Buddha at Todai-ji remains spiritually important even today. On April 3, before the official government shutdown of Japan, the chief priest and administrator of Todai-ji, Sagawa Fumon, sent out a virtual call on the temple's home page for all Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and Christian churches to collectively pray for the quick end of COVID-19. On April 24, leaders from Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian institutions came together on the veranda of the Great Buddha Hall at Todai-ji to pray for the end of the pandemic and the suffering it has caused. These leaders explained that while traditional communal rituals could not be conducted because of the infectious nature of the disease, prayer is a collective action that can be accomplished while social distancing. Videos and images of monks and priests at Todai-ji appeared on various digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitter. In one

such video, monks and priests engaged in expiation rituals before the Vairocana Buddha.⁸

As a collective act of Buddhist merit-making, the daily noon prayers can create an incredibly powerful image in the minds of Buddhists of a force field, radiating the latent potential of Buddhahood that exists in all who follow the Buddha's teachings. This field of merit can also be seen as a mechanism to push out the disease and the suffering it has caused. As of the writing of this essay, daily noon prayers continue to take place at Todai-ji, as the Vairocana Buddha watches over the nation and all of humanity, just as Emperor Shomu had intended.

Connections in the Classroom

Although this essay provides a specific example of Buddhist patronage during times of calamity, the Great Smallpox Epidemic in Japan is a useful case study that allows students to make broader connections to religious and governmental responses, both in the past and the present. Specifically, how have non-Buddhist institutions responded to past epidemics and the current COVID-19 pandemic? Or, how have Buddhist institutions and worshippers inside and outside of Asia responded to the pandemic differently? How has the Vairocana Buddha at Todai-ji been used to redirect anxiety into action, and what other icons have similar powers to quell practitioners' fears? Where does its authority come from? Despite the anxiety we are all facing, COVID-19 provides many opportunities for meaningful discussions of these and other such questions.

Notes

¹ World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/13-12-2019-who-commemorates-the-40th-anniversary-of-smallpox-eradication> (accessed on October 11, 2020).

² William E. Deal, "Buddhism and the State in Early Japan," in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 219. For a full English translation of the *Nihon Shoki*, refer to W. B. Aston's text, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 69*, Volumes I and II (London: Japan Society, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Limited, 1896).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Wayne Farris, *Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan, 645–900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1985), 54–55.

⁶ Ibid, 66.

⁷ Ibid, 63.

⁸ KyodoNews, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=20&v=9D7wu33HW7w&feature=emb_logo (accessed June 26, 2020).