

The Past, Present, and Future of the Swastika in Japan

By Todd Munson



Gold Buddhist swastika symbol on the Sensō-ji Asakusa Kannon Temple, Tokyo, Japan. Source: © Paul Brown / Alamy Stock Photo.

Imagine your surprise as a recent arrival to Tokyo, among the world’s most futuristic and globalized cities. Safely ensconced in the Starbucks at Shibuya crossing, you open Apple Maps to plot a day of sightseeing in nearby Kamakura, a locale famed for its rich history and deep connection to Buddhism. Zooming in on the map (Figure 1), the first images to greet your eyes are . . . swastikas? Scattered all over the screen?



Figure 1: Detail of Apple Maps representation of an area in Kamakura, Japan. Source: Screenshot courtesy of the author.

Does the city hide a secret past related to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party? Obviously not, but the presence of these “Nazi symbols” begs better questions: What is perhaps the most reviled graphical symbol in the world doing on a map—and in Japan of all places? Furthermore, what possible connection could there be to an ancient Asian religion of peace and harmony? As the title of this essay suggests, the swastika is a symbol with many meanings; holy in many Eastern traditions, it inspires visceral loathing in the West. Where is it from, and how and why does it hold such radically opposed meanings in this post-globalization age? This essay will

examine the swastika’s history and usage, particularly as it applies to contemporary Japan.

A Diffuse Past

There is no scholarly consensus on the genesis of the swastika, which may be simply described as an equilateral cross, bent ninety degrees at each arm. Various, it may appear as left-facing, right-facing, and/or with the addition of dots or other decorative flourishes. Given its manifold contexts, the symbol has been referred to by many names; the one most familiar to modern English speakers comes from a Sanskrit term meaning “to be fortunate” (*su* or *sv*, meaning “good,” and *asti* or *astikah*, corresponding to “is” or “being”). It is used in many faith traditions besides Buddhism, including Jainism and Hinduism; in India, for example, it may be found on greeting cards, wedding invitations, the opening pages of books, or images of the god Vishnu.

The swastika is among the oldest written symbols, dating back centuries before the development of written language. Examples have been found in South Asia, Mesopotamia, Africa, and in North, Central, and South America. In Western culture, it dates back at least to the Neolithic Period. The swastika was used by Greeks, Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Romans, and in early Byzantine and Christian art, and known by names now perhaps only familiar to Scrabble enthusiasts: fylfot, gammadion, tetraske-lion. Multiple examples exist on heraldry crests, mosaics, cups, pottery, and places of Christian and Jewish worship, to name a few. Whether this diffusion is a product of human migration patterns or independent invention is a question that will likely never be answered. Moreover, in none of these early contexts is the swastika’s referent clear; it may represent the sun



Footprints of the Buddha (Buddhapada). Kushan Period (ca. late first–early fourth century CE). Culture: Indian, Pakistani, Gandharan. Source: Yale University Art Gallery at <http://tinyurl.com/z58loql>.

or other astronomic phenomenon, serve as a fertility symbol, or indicate a connection to some phenomenon now lost to time. Or it may simply be a “good luck charm.”

The genealogy and meaning of the swastika in East Asia is somewhat clearer, as its usage in South Asian religious culture was well-established before the advent of Buddhism around 500 BCE. In earliest forms of Buddhism, there were no representations of the human form, so the first images were stylized footprints of the Buddha decorated with symbols, often featuring swastikas on each toe. As Buddhist art came to embrace the human form in the first century CE, the symbol was often used as a decorative motif on the chest, palms, and soles, and was considered one of the key identifying marks of the Buddha.

As Buddhism migrated to East Asia in the second century CE, so too did its iconography. Along with the Om symbol (ॐ), the stupa/pagoda, and the sacred lotus, the swastika flowed from South Asia to Tibet and China, where it also developed into a symbol in the Chinese writing system (in fact, it may be the only character of clearly foreign derivation).

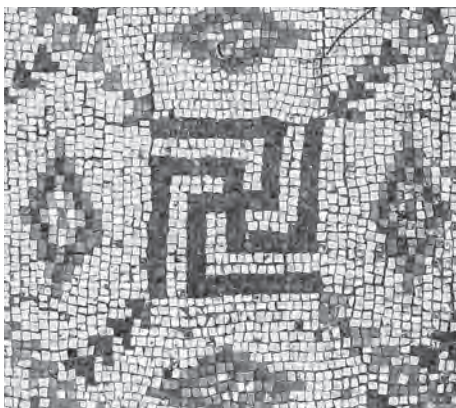
It is said the Empress Wu recognized the swastika as a “source of auspiciousness” as early as 693, and the comprehensive *Kangxi Dictionary* (*Kāngxī Zìdiǎn*), compiled in eighteenth-century China, defines the left-facing swastika, pronounced *wàn*, as a “homophone for myriad [literally ten thousand] . . . used in Buddhist texts.”¹ As both a decorative motif and written character, the swastika migrated to the Korean peninsula and thence to Japan, where Buddhism found favor with the ruling classes as early as the sixth century CE. Over the course of a millennium, the *manji* 卍文 (literally “swastika symbol”) established a permanent home in Japanese temple iconography, but also became an auspicious decorative motif on fabric, lacquer boxes, pottery, ceramics, and even family crests.

The Hooked Cross

Though the swastika enjoyed unbroken usage in Asia for centuries, it was only in the late nineteenth century that the symbol emerged as an iconographic force in Europe. In particular, populist

scholars in Germany who sought the origins of a so-called Aryan “race” (supposed Indo-Europeans, Nordic in appearance and the ancestors of the Germans) sought to establish common roots in Sanskrit and early German, in addition to other purported links. The archeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered swastika patterns at the excavations of Troy and compared them to similar marks on early German pottery—thus merging the ancient Indian symbol with German nationalism, an idea that quickly took hold among like-minded contemporaries.

The symbol soon became a widespread ornamental motif and, curiously, migrated abroad as a common good luck charm. For a brief window in the early twentieth century, the swastika was something of a design phenomenon, utilized as a popular motif across the Western world. In the United States, it was used by Coca-Cola, the Boy Scouts, the Girls Club of America (their magazine was called *The Swastika*), and a host of lesser-known entities—an eBay search will turn up orange crates, good luck tokens, postcards, poker chips, playing cards, and many other items prominently featuring the symbol.



Mosaic swastika in excavated Byzantine (?) church in Shavei Tzion (Israel). Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/h542amv>.



Ancient symbol of auspiciousness, *svastika* in Sanskrit. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/zj6sg7t>.



German National Socialist swastika (1933–1945). Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/jomlbn3>.



Japanese map symbols for Buddhist temple (left) and Shinto shrine (right).
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/o4xrr6h>

The consequent appropriation of the swastika by the Nazi Party is well-known and need not be reiterated here. In brief, a black, right-facing swastika, rotated forty degrees on its axis and set in a white circle, was adopted as official iconography by the Nazi Party in 1920. Known as the *hakenkreuz* (“hooked cross”), the symbol harkened back to the fictitious Aryans as virtuous invaders of lesser races and as a potent symbol for a nation bent on a similar course. The rise of the Third Reich and Germany’s entry into WWII put an end to its popular usage worldwide, and the subsequent Holocaust ensured the swastika would never again be utilized in any benevolent sense in the Western world. In fact, it is illegal to display the symbol in some countries (Austria, France, Germany), and save for a few pre-Nazi era buildings that feature it as an architectural ornamentation, the swastika has remained in exile.

Japan and the Present

This brief survey brings us back to the Starbucks in Tokyo and our traveler’s shock at the screenful of swastikas seen in Figure 1. The original connection of the symbol to Buddhism, or at least to Asian religious traditions, is perhaps clear enough at this point. However, the swastika is not the only Buddhist symbol. Why not represent temples on Japanese maps with a dharma wheel, pagoda, lotus flower, or some other symbolic representation of the religion? Regrettably, it is not known why, or precisely when, the swastika was adopted for this purpose. In fact, myriad symbols were used to represent Buddhist temples from the Meiji to the Taisho Periods, based on a survey of Japanese historical maps found in the David Rumsey collection.² Circles, rectangles, squares, and even equilateral crosses were utilized for this purpose until the 1910s. A left-facing swastika 卍 was first used in this context in the 1880s and over a period of decades became the de facto standard, as it remains today. Though still found across South and East Asia in a variety of religious contexts, Japan is the only country to have adopted the symbol for its current cartographic purpose.

At present, there is no internationally recognized set of map symbols. The International Organization for Standardization does have a set of graphic symbols for certain structures (hotels, airports, restaurants, hospitals), but not places of worship. And while the Unicode Consortium has incorporated many religious symbols into its vast character set, there is no impetus that they be used or followed. It falls to individual cartographic agencies, then, to determine the most appropriate representation for houses of faith. For some, this may be straightforward: for example, Christian churches with a Latin cross (†), synagogues with a Star of David (✡), or mosques with a star and crescent (☾) are generally identifiable. Some faith traditions are less familiar in the Western world, but have the virtue of consistency and exclusivity; Japanese Shinto shrines, for example, have only ever been associated with a symbol depicting a stylized *torii* gate. Other religions, like Buddhism, have never enjoyed an exclusive relationship with one particular symbol. While Japanese cartographers may have settled on the swastika, the rest of the world has not; Western travel guides (*Frommer’s*, *DK*, *Lonely Planet*, etc.) typically eschew the mark, given its connotations, and represent temples with a stylized Buddha, pagoda, or dharma wheel (☸).

In this digital age, of course, paper maps and travel guides pale in relevance to GPS-based smartphone applications, particularly Google Maps and Apple Maps, which together account for the vast majority of users worldwide. Regrettably, Google has never provided a legend or any kind of explanation for its cartographic symbols. Depending on one’s familiarity with world religious traditions, one might be able to recognize the aforementioned Om symbol, Star of David, or the star and crescent. Buddhist temples are represented in Google Maps by a dharma wheel—with one notable, and predictable, exception. In Japan, the swastika prevails, because the Japanese company that provides map data uses the native symbol set (in addition to the swastika, there are a host of other Japan-specific symbols, such as the one used for post offices (〒)). In the case of Apple Maps, the situation is rather different in that houses of faith are represented worldwide by the same symbol used for all notable structures, a small white circle inside a gray circle—except, of course, in Japan! Because Apple also licenses data from a Japanese company, there are two notable exceptions to the gray and white circle: the torii gate for Shinto shrines and the swastika for Buddhist temples. Though not all map applications follow Japanese standards (MAPS.ME uses a dharma wheel for temples, MapQuest a generic religious structure, for example), Apple and Google account for approximately a billion map requests per day. Even if our Starbucks customer represents the very tiniest percentage of users, thousands of people must have the same questions at any given moment about the swastika’s prevalence on Japanese maps. This being the case, should Japan find a symbol more recognizable—and less offensive?


Proposed Change and Backlash

The Japanese government is aware of its country’s cartographic quirks and is very mindful of the need to provide smooth experiences for tourists. In 2015, the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (GSI) conducted research to gauge the ease with which Japanese map symbols were understood by non-Japanese users as part of a larger effort to improve

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Japanese wayfinding systems in advance of the 2020 Olympics. “To build a tourism-oriented nation and ensure smooth implementation of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics,” the report indicated, “. . . it is especially important to disseminate multilingual maps that are easy for foreigners to understand.”³ To that end, the GSI surveyed over a thousand people, such as embassy officials, international students, foreign Japanese-language students, English-language teachers, and tourists, in the Asakusa District of Tokyo. In addition to the swastika, participants were questioned about potentially confusing Japanese symbols for police (ⓧ), the post office (〒), and hotels (H), among others. When given the option between the swastika and a stylized three-story pagoda (Figure 2, from the Japan Geospatial Information Authority of Japan), only 20 percent thought the former was “easiest to understand,” and 51 percent chose the pagoda. Of the Asakusa tourists—notably, the only group visiting Japan for a very short time—a scant 4 percent chose the swastika, while 88 percent chose the pagoda. The survey clearly demonstrated that



Figure 2

tourists, especially those from Western countries, drew virtually no connection between the swastika and its intended referent (and what’s worse, many of those surveyed commented on the troubling association of the symbol to the Nazi Party).

In January 2016, the GSI released a set of sixteen proposed symbols for use in foreign-language tourist maps. Some were new symbols (convenience stores, for example), while others were prospective replacements for preexisting symbols, such as the three-story pagoda. This announcement—in particular, the looming replacement of the swastika—gained a degree of media traction worldwide, and stories soon ran in most major media outlets, such as *The New York Times* and the *BBC*. Even though the modifications were intended only for non-Japanese-language maps, domestic response was quite negative; as one scholar said, “We have been using [the swastika] for thousands of years [sic] before it was incorporated into the Nazi flag, so I believe it would be better for us to keep it on our maps and ask others to understand its true meaning.”⁴

Letters to the editor, tweets, and Facebook posts expressed discontent with the decision, and a *Change.org* petition to “save the manji” received over 5,700 signatures. Ultimately, the pushback against the pagoda appears to have achieved its end. When the GSI quietly released its official list of updated symbols in March 2016, all the proposed changes were adopted—save for the replacement of the swastika. In fact, Buddhist temples were no longer mentioned at all! There has been no follow-up in the media or online, so the swastika—at least through the 2020 Olympics—seems here to stay.

The Future?

Despite the GSI’s recent decision, one can imagine two routes forward for the swastika as map symbol. In an increasingly globalized world, there is certainly merit in a consistent set of international cartographic icons. For example, since a large percentage of the world utilizes H to indicate hospitals, perhaps it was wise for Japan to discontinue using that symbol to indicate hotels—especially since there was no cultural or historical reason to do otherwise. In the swastika’s case, however, there are two issues at play. First, the symbol is only used in Japan and has no obvious correlation with Buddhism for most tourists; second, the correlation the swastika does have is among the worst imaginable. Both are legitimate sources of concern. It is not difficult to argue, then, for the mark’s removal, especially before the arrival of a million Olympic visitors.

The converse argument is equally robust, for several reasons. Were Japan to make map-related changes, would tech behemoths Google and Apple respond to these changes, given that both rely on Japanese companies for their map data? The tourist maps produced by the Japan National Travel Office represent a fraction of those used by visitors to Japan, since



Figure 3. Road signs in Kamakura. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/jmk84uk>.

the hard copy and PDF files they produce are of limited value compared to phone applications native to a digital format. Unless the Japanese government had a means to compel all map data providers to modify their iconography, the proposed change would have a nominal effect. Furthermore, would road signs and other wayfinding devices featuring the swastika remain in place (Figure 3)? Replacing map icons would be a mere trifle in the face of overhauling physical road signs, even were such a project limited to major tourist areas. Finally, what of the countless centuries-old swastikas found in and around temple grounds? Should the most-visited temples cover the symbols, or otherwise remove them from view?

The best response to these concerns, perhaps, is to pose a simple question: whose swastika is it, anyway? To pursue the course described above—altering maps, signs, perhaps temples themselves—is to announce to the world that Western sensibilities are *de facto* global sensitivities and that it is the burden of non-Western cultures to overwrite native cultural norms with those from Europe and America. The issue takes on an added poignancy in a part of the world that strained under the yoke of imperialism—even if Europeans have every right to find the mark abhorrent in their own culture, discarding centuries’ worth of peaceful tradition to avoid offense would not provide a satisfying conclusion to this cross-cultural conundrum. While adoption of the pagoda icon might have alleviated our traveler’s concerns that Kamakura is a Nazi stronghold, the fact remains that the swastika has represented benevolence and good fortune for perhaps 99 percent of its long existence, and will always be a part of Asia’s cultural, historic, and religious heritage. ■

NOTES

1. Therese Tse Bartholomew, *Secret Meanings in Chinese Art* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2006), 263.
2. This fascinating collection may be accessed at <http://www.davidrumsey.com/japan/>.
3. Tomoko Otake, “Japan Revamps Map Symbols that Baffle Tourists,” *The Japan Times*, January 12, 2016.
4. Julian Ryall, “Japan to Remove Swastikas from Maps as Tourists Think They Are Nazi Symbols,” *The Telegraph*, January 18, 2016.

TODD MUNSON is Professor and Director of Asian Studies at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He is the author of *The Periodical Press in Treaty-Port Japan: Conflicting Reports from Yokohama, 1861–1870* (Brill / Global Oriental, 2013), and multiple articles and book chapters on Japanese and American visual culture. He currently serves on the board of directors of ASIANetwork and is the coeditor of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*.