

Pre-Buddhist Notions of the Afterlife in China and Japan:
How the Incorporation of Traditional Interactions with the Dead
Was Vital to Buddhism's Success in East Asia

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Since Buddhism's inception in India, the religion has gone through a plethora of transformations. From bodhisattvas to the Lotus Sutra, from Chan Buddhism to Iconic Buddhism, and more, Buddhism has traversed across Asia and even become global. Each time Buddhism entered into a new country, though, it had to adapt to some of that state's cultural demands before becoming popular. One of the most important cultural notions that affected Buddhism as it transmitted into China and Japan is the living's relationship with the afterlife. In China, the inclusion of funerary rites and ancestor spirit worship was necessary in order to help Buddhism first get its footing there, and in Japan, the understanding of *tama*, spirits, and *kami* was responsible for the later schools of Buddhism that became so popular, their traditions still persist today. Such notions were vital to Buddhism's success because the Chinese and Japanese believed in the afterlife's ability to affect or harm the living. As such, they wanted to do all that was in their power to better their worldly situations in the present and future, and this came through interacting with the dead. If Buddhism had not infused Chinese ancestor worship via ghost festivals, or incorporated the practice of *Nembutsu* as popularized by the Japanese fear of demonic spirits, then Buddhism would not have thrived.

In pre-Buddhist China, funeral rituals were vital to Chinese culture as they upheld the notion of "Chineseness," reflecting that their culture focused more on orthopraxy to reach the end goal of cultural homogenization. In general, rituals were important because they celebrated transformations from one phase of life to the next; as such, the funeral ritual, which expressed the Chinese preoccupation with "performance, practice, and beliefs regarding the dead," was an elaborate and necessary process that all Chinese people, despite their different backgrounds,

participated in.¹ In particular, funerals were important because they allowed the living to manage their relationship with a source of power that was out of their direct control: spirits. Because the Chinese did not believe that death was the end-all-be-all of existence, they thought that a community existed between this world of life and the next of death. Funeral rituals, then, were meant to cultivate the relationship between life and death because the Chinese believed that “controlling, managing, and placating the dangerous aspects of the spirit of the deceased” was necessary to secure their good fortune in the future.² A ghost that was not fed would come back to plague the living, creating an idea of exchange between the living and the dead.³

The Chinese, because they believed in qi and cosmology, believed in greatly the power of spirits, so the threat of a hungry ghost was taken quite seriously; they wanted their ancestors to help their lineages flourish, which is why their understanding of the afterlife was such a vital and foundational part of their culture. Thus, they poured many resources into cultivating this relationship with the spirits of ancestors as a way to help the living accrue safety and good merit, as evidenced by the fact that their funerary rites were typically composed of nine steps, with the fifth step being the creation of a funerary tablet that helped guide hungry spirits back to the lineages that would feed them.⁴ A full, satisfied spirit was one with direction; it had the power to give its lineage on Earth good fortune, displaying that the Chinese preoccupation with death existed as another way to accumulate resources for the living.

Funerary rites not only defined Chinese culture, but also shaped their ideological understanding of death as a force that could strengthen relationships of reciprocity among the

¹ James L. Watson, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, edited by Evelyn Rawski and James Watson. (London: University of California Press, 1988), 4.

² James L. Watson, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, edited by Evelyn Rawski and James Watson. (London: University of California Press, 1988), 10.

³ James, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites,” 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

Chinese. Because of how these practices and notions of the afterlife structured the social world of the living, this factor was one of the most important parts of Chinese culture and still persists today. In pre-Buddhist China, the ruling school of thought was Confucianism, and Confucianism focused heavily on rites, otherwise known as *li*, loyalty, filial piety, and ancestor worship.⁵ As such, Chinese understandings of the afterlife must be incorporated into any ideological school of thought that wishes to succeed in China, and surely enough, this proved true with the religion of Buddhism.

Buddhism first began drifting into China during the Eastern Han dynasty,⁶ a violent period when the Han dynasty was disintegrating, pushing the Chinese to look for answers to their suffering. At this turn of the century, four factions of Chinese nobility had begun to war with one another, wreaking havoc for both the upper class and the citizens of the countryside.⁷ Naturally, the Chinese were no longer satisfied with Han Confucianism, so they began turning towards other schools of thought for answers.⁸ Buddhism was making its way into China at this time via trade routes from India, but there were problems with transmission, such as language and cultural differences, that held back Buddhism from gaining popularity as a religion.⁹ One dissimilarity between Indian Buddhism and pre-Buddhist Chinese culture was their understanding of time: the Chinese thought about time in terms of lifespans and life on Earth while the Hindu thought time and space was infinite.¹⁰ Because Chinese ideas revolved around lifespans, they focused heavily

⁵ Herbert Fingarette, "Human Community as Holy Rite," chap. 1 in *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1972), 4-7.

⁶ Robert H. Sharf, "Introduction," in *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 4.

⁷ Arthur Wright, "The Period of Preparation," chap. 2 in *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford University Press, 1959), 23-24.

⁸ Wright, "The Period of Preparation," 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

on the living, thus creating another philosophical and ethical rift with Indian Buddhism that was the T'ang dynasty's preoccupation with issues lineage and the veneration of ancestors.¹¹

If Buddhism wanted to become an intellectual interest and a popular religion among the masses of China, then it *needed* to address the tensions caused by the clash between Chinese culture and Indian Buddhism, and this was finally done through the creation of the ghost festival, popularized by the story of Mu-lien. At first, Buddhism was viewed as a sect of Taoism, which was the Chinese's first answer to the suffering the collapse of the Han dynasty caused, and it was popular mainly among the elite who could read its literature.¹² The ghost festival, though, effectively tied together traditions of Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture, which is why its adaptation allowed Buddhism to reach new heights all across China. The festival involved the tradition of Chinese lay people providing offerings to the Sangha in order to bring their ancestors closer to salvation as they would receive a better rebirth and more comfortable existence in the afterlife.¹³ The festival included the interests of almost every group of people in China, whether they were monks, households, or ancestors and served as an annual celebration of renewal.¹⁴ As Teiser states, "its ritual and material connections with the monastic community secured its place in Buddhist historiography, while its vital function in the ancestral cult and the local community ensured its survival into modern times."¹⁵ This two-pronged appeal was widely successful because it took traditional notions of Chinese culture, embedded them into Indian Buddhism, and formed the beginnings of *Chinese* Buddhism; essentially, a compromise of ideas were made, pushing Buddhism as a religion forward on the stage of Chinese culture.

¹¹ Robert H. Sharf, "Introduction," in *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 11.

¹² Arthur Wright, "The Period of Preparation," chap. 2 in *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford University Press, 1959), 33-36.

¹³ Stephen Teiser, "Introduction," chap. 1 in *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3.

¹⁴ Stephen, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

Most people learned about the ghost festival through “transformation tales,” with the most popular one about a monk named Mu-lien who saves his mother from the lowest hell, Avīci Hell;¹⁶ the story was appealing because, once again, it includes both practices of Chinese tradition and Indian Buddhism. Mu-lien is a disciple of Buddha who discovers that his mother has passed away. He has the special power to fly through all the different realms of heaven and hell, traversing them in order to find his mother.¹⁷ While on his journey, he sees many awful and gruesome sights of suffering that make him shudder.¹⁸ Finally, he locates his mother, Chi’ng-t’i, in Avīci Hell, observing in horror that her body has been nailed down with forty-nine long metal spikes.¹⁹ The Buddha then intervenes, releasing many suffering souls from their eternal torment in hell, but many of them, including Mu-lien’s mother, turn into hungry ghosts with ravenous appetites,²⁰ and these ghosts have the capability to cause harm to the living. Chi’ng-t’i is especially starved as her throat is needle-thin because of the punishment she received in hell.²¹ Mu-lien tries to feed her through the traditional method of sending a food offering, but this is not enough; when the food is transmitted through the usual means of the ancestral altar, it bursts into flame.²² The Buddha then steps in, instituting the *yu-lan-p’en*, which would go on to become the ghost festival, by telling Mu-lien to feed the Sangha on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. This protocol can save ancestors from hunger and wandering in the afterlife, as it did Mu-lien’s mom, who ended up ascending to the heavens.²³

¹⁶ Stephen Teiser, “Introduction,” chap. 1 in *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 5.

¹⁷ Stephen, “Introduction,” 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

In this story, a Chinese tradition is taken and improved upon, and that improvement comes from Buddhism, hence why the story is so effective in communicating the need for the transmission of Indian Buddhism into China. At its core, Mu-lien's tale is about filial piety, or "politeness to the dead," meaning that elaborates on the importance of reciprocity in relationships between the living and the dead: our ancestors return and love the living, and for the living to not do the same is irreverent and cruel.²⁴ Leaving the spirits in this state could influence them to harm the living, which was what Chinese tradition worked so hard to avoid. Finally, then, the concern of funeral rite practices, lineages, and ancestor veneration was answered by the story of Mu-lien and the ghost festival. At last, the "metempsychosis among the Hindus connected itself with the Chinese sacrifices to the ancestors."²⁵ In conclusion, Chinese Buddhism can be viewed as the sinification of Indian Buddhism as it was altered and "rendered into a Chinese idiom."²⁶ Before Buddhism could take root in China, then, it was vital that the Chinese understanding of the afterlife was assimilated. Without this infusion, later forms of Chinese Buddhism, such as Lotus Buddhism and Chan Buddhism, would never even have had a chance to take hold.

Buddhism's success in China allowed it to spread into Japan, though it took root there via icons. This beginning is different from its beginning in China, but when it comes to the final success of Buddhism, Japanese understandings of the afterlife were just as important in transforming Japanese Buddhism, though their influence was felt later in its life cycle than for Chinese Buddhism. Prior to Buddhism's arrival, the Japanese believed that *tama* was the

²⁴ Juliet Bredon and Igor Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year: A Record of Chinese Customs and Festivals* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1927), 381.

²⁵ Joseph Edkins, *Chinese Buddhism: A Volume of Sketches, Historical, Descriptive, Critical* (London: Trubner and Co., 1880), 288.

²⁶ Robert H. Sharf, "Introduction," in *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 10.

animating spirit of the human body; it was vital to their understanding of nature and the world.²⁷

The Japanese had many traditions through which they interacted with *tama*, such as the recalling and binding of spirits.²⁸ For example, in *Ten Thousand Leaves*, an early anthology of Japanese poetry, a husband writes of “the sleeves [he] wave[s]” in order to spirit-beckon; through this action, he attempts to call his wife’s spirit back.²⁹ Similar to the Chinese, the Japanese also had an interesting, though different, take on death: they believed that death was neither permanent nor irreversible, at least for a short period of time after an individual had passed away.³⁰ The Japanese’s interaction with the afterlife reveals that they focused largely on themselves and their worldly experiences. Many of them did not want their loved ones to pass on as it caused them emotional suffering. Similar to the Chinese, the Japanese were preoccupied with how the dead affected the living.

Ritual practice in Japan was also centered upon the afterlife’s ability to affect the living; the Japanese cultural orientations here were more individualistic than that of the Chinese, focusing on the singular experience of the living. Often, oral lamentations were performed for those who passed away. In another poem from *Ten Thousand Leaves*, Princess Hinokuma expresses her bitterness at her husband’s death.³¹ She performed the poem as an oral lamentation and spectacle of sight and sound, communicating the desolation and disorientation that her prince’s death had caused.³² While paying respects to the dead, the living also conveyed their sentiments and expectations of frustration.³³ Rituals also existed to worship ancestors as the

²⁷ Gary L. Ebersole, “Tama Belief and Practice,” in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, edited by George Tanabe. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 141.

²⁸ Gary, “Tama Belief and Practice,” 141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

³² *Ibid.*, 151.

³³ *Ibid.*, 151.

dead were important for the early religious functions of families.³⁴ After a family dedicated a fixed number of memorials to a spirit, that dead person joined the company of ancestors as a kind of *kami* — *kami* are spirits that are venerated and sometimes godly.

As Japanese understandings of the afterlife, *kami* were the first to incorporate itself into Buddhism. *Kami* worship initially appears in Shintoism, in which worshipping in shrines brought humans in contact with *kami*.³⁵ Two Japanese monks, Kūkai and Saichō, helped carry *kami* from Shintoism into Buddhism, creating a more defined school of *Japanese Buddhism*.³⁶ This was because they observed that Shinto *kami* were being worshipped by the masses in Japan in each locality; infusing this practice into Buddhism would help popularize Buddhism in Japan.³⁷ Eventually, even Japanese Buddhist priests began to believe that Shinto *kami* were incarnations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.³⁸ This led to the rise of a group of worshippers known as the Hijiri; the Hijiri were not necessarily Buddhist, but they travelled deep into the hinterlands of Japan to find caves where *kami* were housed.³⁹ These *kami* were believed to be dangerous, and the masses of Japan were surprised by how the Hijiri stayed safe. They swore by chanting the *Nembutsu*.⁴⁰ *Nembutsu* is the practice of chanting the Amidas Vows and believing that, upon death, one will go to the Pure Land, a perfect heaven created by Amidas.

Around the same time, the idea of “goryō” became popular, and with it, *Nembutsu* practices, leading to the creation of Japanese Buddhist practices that were so successful, they are still relevant today. Goryō were believed to be vengeful spirits who were wronged during their

³⁴ Byron Earhart, “Persistent Themes in Japanese Religious History,” chap. 2 in *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2004), 8-9.

³⁵ Byron Earhart, “Early Shinto,” chap. 4 in *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2004), 38.

³⁶ Hori Ichiro, “On the Concept of Hijiri (Holy-Man),” *Brill* 5 no. 2 (1958): 135.

³⁷ Hori, “On the Concept of Hijiri (Holy-Man),” 135.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

lifetimes, coming back to Earth to haunt the living who they still held grudges against.⁴¹ Even the Imperial Court of Japan feared goryō, attributing famine, illness, flood, drought, and other epidemics to their power.⁴² They did all that they could to try and placate bitter spirits, such as exhuming their bodies' bones to give them better burials.⁴³ In the case of Michizane, he became a goryō after being wronged by the Fujiwara family and would not stop wreaking havoc and harming royals until he was given a shrine, eventually being worshipped there as a God.⁴⁴ The lay people knew that, at some point in their lives, they had wronged at least one other person, boosting their preoccupation with the fear that a goryō would come back to haunt them. What solutions existed, then, to avoid such misery while alive? The Japanese looked towards the *Nembutsu*, using its performances to prevent suffering that a goryō might cause, whether they came back as Gods with the power to injure greatly or even insects with the ability to pester.⁴⁵ For people who might have become goryō, *Nembutsu* was also practiced to keep them from causing harm on Earth and dumping them in the Pure Land.⁴⁶ This practice reflects an individualization of religion and practice that was not seen previously; the Japanese attached individual agendas to goryō, causing them to be even more desperate than the Chinese were when it came to thwarting evil spirits. This exhibits that they, once again, had a large fixation on their experiences while alive, for they were afraid of harmful phenomenon in their daily lives. As such, they wanted to do as much as they individually could to avoid suffering, and if that meant sending a spirit to the Pure Land so they could never come back, then that is what occurred.

⁴¹ Neil McMullin, "On Placating the Gods and Pacifying the Populace: The Case of the Gion 'Goryō' Cult," *History of Religions* 27 no. 3 (1988), 272-273.

⁴² Hori Ichiro, "On the Concept of Hijiri (Holy-Man)," *Brill* 5 no. 2 (1958): 158.

⁴³ Hori, "On the Concept of Hijiri (Holy-Man)," 158.

⁴⁴ David Pollack, "Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court by Robert Borgen Review," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 14 no. 1 (1988): 147-148.

⁴⁵ Hori Ichiro, "Nembutsu as Folk Religion," chap. 3 in *Folk Religions in Japan* (University of Chicago Press, 1880), 123.

⁴⁶ Hori, "Nembutsu as Folk Religion," 123.

Nembutsu started out in Japanese folk religion as a solution to protect the living from the possible wrath from spirits of the afterlife, but it became popular in Buddhism as well, creating many different schools. For example, Genshin, a Tiantai monk, wrote in *Ōjōyōshū* vividly about every Hell that existed for every bad behavior; to avoid Hell, he championed chanting the *Nembutsu* before death so that one was reborn in the Pure Land.⁴⁷ Next, Hōnen, another Tiantai monk, popularized *Nembutsu* as the answer to how one should practice in the Mappō age. He did not know how to reach salvation as the original Buddhist teachings had lost their potency and turned to *Nembutsu*; believing that one must give up all hope in oneself to put all faith into Amidas, he championed chanting the Amidas Vows constantly.⁴⁸ Hōnen is credited with creating the first version of Pure Land Buddhism. The second version is credited to Shinran, who argued that one only needs to chant the Amidas Vows once and believe that that is enough to be saved for the Buddha Amidas to send them to the Pure Land.⁴⁹

The Japanese's concern with spirits and the afterlife popularized the *Nembutsu* practices, and eventually, they became the solution to problems that arose in Buddhism. For Genshin, the *Nembutsu* helped solve the mystery of how one can escape all hells; for Hōnen, it answered the question of how one can practice and be saved in the final age of Buddhism; and for Shinran, it reevaluated understandings of constant faith. The *Nembutsu* gained traction as an individual protection against evil spirits to prevent harm for people still living on Earth, but it was soon also used for achieving individual salvation and sending oneself to the Pure Land. *Nembutsu* and Pure Land Buddhism were so popular during their inception that they have trickled into modern

⁴⁷ Allan A. Andrews, "The Essentials of Salvation: 'A Study of Genshin's Ōjōyōshū,'" *The Eastern Buddhist* 4 no. 2 (1971), 55-58.

⁴⁸ Hee-jin Keel, "The Easy Path," chap. 1 in *Understanding Shinran* (Asian Humanities Press, 1995), 13-15.

⁴⁹ Dennis Hirota, "Plain Words on the Pure Land Way," in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, edited by George Tanabe. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 278-279.

Buddhist and Asian cultural practices today. The *Nembutsu* succeeded largely because it is a simple action and because its results, at least at first, were to save the living from harm caused by a force greater than them. The Japanese pre-Buddhist conceptions of death were addressed by the *Nembutsu* and Pure Land Buddhism, thus directly affecting its success as a Japanese religion.

The Japanese, like the Chinese, had interesting understandings of death and spirits of the afterlife. These understandings shaped both states' cultures and ritual practices prior to Buddhism's arrival. How each culture interacted with the afterlife, though, was important because spirits were an otherworldly force that were believed to possess the capability to either harm or protect the living. Because of their power, both the Chinese and the Japanese, though in different ways, wished to be on the favorable side of spirits. The Chinese and Japanese concern with the afterlife ultimately had to do with *life*, which is why it was an absolute necessity that Buddhism help the people of the two cultures secure their present and worldly futures before transmitting successfully. Thus, Chinese Buddhism could only come to fruition after the introduction of ghost festivals, which meshed ancestral worship with Indian Buddhism, and Japanese Buddhism could only become popular and thrive after it addressed the concern of harm evil spirits could cause. Once Buddhism did these things, though, the possibilities for its growth became nearly endless. Even now, the Chinese burn offerings at funerals and the Japanese chant the Amidas Vows before killing a mosquito. With pre-Buddhist notions of the afterlife deeply embedded into it, Buddhism became one of the world's most popular religions to date.

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