

**Distinctive Features of Japanese Buddhism in the Heian Period under the  
Influence of Chinese Buddhism**

**NHỮNG ĐẶC SẮC CỦA PHẬT GIÁO NHẬT BẢN THỜI HEIAN DƯỚI  
ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA PHẬT GIÁO TRUNG HOA**

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**ABSTRACT:** Buddhism during the Heian period underwent significant transformations in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Under the influence of Emperor Kanmu's religious policies, Buddhism in Japan experienced remarkable development. During this period, Japanese Buddhism was profoundly shaped by Chinese Buddhism in terms of sects, doctrines, and scriptures. Through their journeys to China, the monks Saichō and Kūkai founded two major Buddhist schools in Japan-Tendai and Shingon-which attracted a large number of followers across the country. Moreover, Heian-period Buddhism permeated deeply into the spiritual life and cultural consciousness of the Japanese people, influencing their lifestyles, customs, festivals, and moral conduct. Buddhism became a crucial component of Japan's medieval cultural structure and functioned as a spiritual instrument of the ruling class. Its core values contributed to shaping the personality and character of the Japanese people, forming the spiritual foundation of the nation. The introduction of Buddhism from China enriched and diversified Japan's spiritual life. The syncretism between

Shinto and Buddhism further created distinctive features in the cultural and spiritual life of medieval Japan.

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, history, politics, culture, society.*

## 1. Introduction

Buddhism is one of the most influential elements in the history and culture of Japan. Since its introduction to Japan in the 6th century, Buddhism has not only functioned as a religion but has also become a fundamental foundation in the political, ideological, and cultural life of Japanese society. Among historical periods, the Heian era is considered a particularly significant stage, marked by profound transformations in Buddhist organization, doctrines, and social roles.

Following the relocation of the capital from Nara to Heian (present-day Kyoto) in 794, the imperial court sought to reduce the influence of powerful Buddhist institutions that had flourished in the previous period and to establish a new model of Buddhism. In this context, various new Buddhist trends emerged and developed, most notably the formation of two major schools: the Tendai school founded by the monk Saichō and the Shingon school founded by the monk Kūkai. These schools not only absorbed Chinese Buddhist thought but also adapted it to the socio-cultural context of Japan, thereby creating distinctive characteristics unique to Japanese Buddhism.

In addition, Heian-period Buddhism demonstrated unique features through the prominence of Esoteric Buddhism, the syncretism between Buddhism and the indigenous Shinto belief system, and its profound influence on the political, cultural, and spiritual life of the aristocracy. These developments significantly contributed to the formation of Japan's medieval cultural identity.

## 2. Scriptures and Rituals

The most significant Buddhist scripture in Japan during the Heian period was the *Lotus Sutra (Hokekyō)*, which was brought back from China by the monk Saichō. He adopted its teachings based on the *Sandaibu* (Three Major Treatises) of the Tiantai patriarchs. When the *Lotus Sutra* was introduced into Japan, it was interpreted and

practiced by Japanese monks and lay followers in ways that reflected the distinctive characteristics of Japanese Buddhism.

For the Tendai school, the true meaning of the *One Vehicle* (*Ekayāna*) was of central importance. In fact, the spirit of the *Lotus Sutra* had already been emphasized and promoted among Buddhist clergy by Prince Shōtoku at an early stage. However, during the Nara period, scholars who had traveled to China to obtain Buddhist scriptures devoted themselves primarily to propagating the doctrines of the Hossō school (*Yogācāra*). As a result, the teaching of the *One Vehicle* received little attention before the Heian period. With the arrival of the monk Ganjin, the *One Vehicle* doctrine of the Tendai school was revived and further developed.

The Chinese monk Zhiyi (538–597) played a crucial role in systematizing and promoting the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*, which were later adopted by Japanese monks studying in China, including Saichō:

*“Zhiyi (538–597), a monk from Jingzhou in Hubei Province, was born in the fourth year of the Datong era under the Liang dynasty. At the age of eighteen, he became a monk and later studied the Lotus Sutra under Master Huisi at Mount Dasu in Henan. He attained profound realization of the ‘Lotus Samādhi’ and was instructed in the doctrine of ‘One Mind, Three Contemplations.’ He subsequently became abbot of Waguan Monastery in Jinling (Jiankang), where his lectures on the Lotus Sutra were highly admired by eminent monks of the time”*  
(*Thích Thanh Kiểm, 2001, pp. 152–153*).

During the Heian period, Japanese monks interpreted the *Lotus Sutra* based on the *Sandaibu* (Three Major Treatises) of the Tendai school, thereby reasserting the prominence of the *One Vehicle* doctrine. This teaching became an important ideological foundation for the new political order. At the same time, many immigrants from Korea and China settled in Japan and were gradually assimilated into Japanese society. As a result, new communities were formed in major urban centers, bringing with them diverse customs and ways of thinking.

Emperor Kanmu appointed Saichō as the spiritual leader of Japanese Buddhism. However, as a largely self-taught monk, Saichō aspired to travel to Mount Tiantai in China to resolve remaining doctrinal questions concerning Tendai teachings. He also intended to obtain Buddhist scriptures that were not yet available in Japan. With these legitimate purposes, he received imperial permission to travel to China, promising to return upon the completion of his mission.

Saichō arrived in China in 804 as an official overseas student (*gengakushō*), meaning a scholar sent abroad for study with the expectation of returning home. He returned to Japan in 805. During his stay in China, he not only fulfilled his original objectives but also studied Esoteric Buddhism. Upon his return, he brought back approximately 230 texts (460 volumes) related to the Tendai school (*Tendaishū*) and Esoteric Buddhism (*Mikkyō*), along with treatises on Esoteric rituals (Thich Minh Thanh, 2001).

The core teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* lies in expressing the Buddha's aspiration to "open, reveal, awaken, and lead sentient beings to enter the Buddha's knowledge and insight," with particular emphasis on the realization and internalization of this enlightened awareness as a method of grasping ultimate reality or the inherent enlightened nature within each individual.

In the *Lotus Sutra*, the "Expedient Means" chapter, which belongs to the essential section of the Trace Teaching (*Shakumon*), emphasizes the concept of "revealing." This refers to the process of setting aside provisional teachings associated with the Three Vehicles and manifesting the ultimate truth of the One Vehicle. This is expressed through doctrines such as "revealing the three to manifest the one" (*kai san ken ichi*) and "discarding the provisional to reveal the true" (*kai gon ken jitsu*), which essentially share the same meaning. According to the capacities of different beings, the Buddha expounds appropriate teachings: for the *śrāvakas*, the Four Noble Truths; for the *pratyekabuddhas*, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination; and for bodhisattvas, the Six Perfections. Like a skilled physician prescribing remedies according to specific illnesses, these teachings are considered provisional (*upāya*), intended for temporary use.

The concept of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*) represents the ultimate and absolute truth. Although the three vehicles are skillful means tailored to different capacities, their underlying essence is equal, as “all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature.” Therefore, the One Vehicle is regarded as the true teaching (*jissō*), immutable and absolute. Since the Buddha taught the Three Vehicles prior to the *Lotus Sutra*, they are considered provisional, whereas the One Vehicle is the ultimate truth—hence the doctrine of “revealing the provisional to manifest the real.” The essential philosophical message of the *Lotus Sutra* can be summarized in the phrase “the true aspect of all phenomena” (*sūnyatā / dharmas as they truly are*). These teachings were absorbed and disseminated by Japanese monks among Buddhist followers through sermons and doctrinal instruction.

Thus, the *Lotus Sutra*, as studied and interpreted by Saichō, became the doctrinal foundation of the Tendai school in Japan during the Heian period. In addition, Saichō also studied Esoteric Buddhist teachings and incorporated them into religious practice. Notably, in their reception of Chinese Buddhist scriptures, Japanese monks selectively integrated distinctive elements from various Buddhist traditions.

**As noted:**

*“In terms of Mahāyāna precepts and meditative practices, the Tendai school also utilized the Mahāvairocana Sutra and the Brahma Net Sutra. It further employed the Golden Light Sutra and the Ninnō Sutra in discussions of state protection. Pure Land texts such as the Amitābha Sutra were also practiced. Thus, Japanese Tendai Buddhism was far more complex than its Chinese counterpart” (Thich Minh Thanh, 2001).*

The monk Kūkai and the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism inherited the scriptures of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism. After returning from China in 806, Kūkai founded the Shingon school and organized the teaching and dissemination of major Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, which had been transmitted from China. At that time, various Buddhist schools in Japan

supported the study and propagation of Chinese Mahāyāna scriptures among Japanese followers.

Based on these Chinese sources, Kūkai composed the work *Bunkyō hifuron* (文鏡秘府論) as a means of teaching Buddhist doctrine. This treatise was deeply influenced by Chinese Buddhist texts and intellectual traditions:

*“Kūkai was not only the founder of Esoteric Buddhism-Shingon-in Japan, but was also profoundly influenced by Chinese culture and scriptures. One of the most significant manifestations of this influence was his composition of Bunkyō hifuron, the first theoretical work written in Classical Chinese in Japan. This work functioned as a mirror reflecting the cultural landscape of Japan at the time and was widely consulted by later generations” (Ma Shu De, 2000, p. 103).*

In addition, Esoteric rituals from China were also adopted by Kūkai and incorporated into the liturgical practices of the Shingon school, later becoming widespread within Japanese Buddhism:

*“The Esoteric Buddhism (Mikkyō) that Kūkai studied under Huiguo in Chang’an was not limited to the Mahāvairocana Sutra tradition transmitted by Śubhakarasiṃha, but also included the Vajrasekhara Sutra tradition transmitted by Vajrabodhi. Thus, the Esoteric Buddhism that Kūkai received was comprehensive and complete in three aspects: material elements such as scriptures and ritual implements; orthodox transmission through established ritual regulations; and doctrinal content encompassing both branches of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism” (Thich Minh Thanh, 2001).*

Through the journeys of Japanese monks during the Heian period-especially Saichō and Kūkai-Chinese Mahāyāna scriptures and Esoteric ritual practices were transmitted into Japanese Buddhism. Cultural exchange and interaction represent the process by which societies selectively absorb external influences. Each civilization contributes its unique achievements to humanity while simultaneously adopting and

transforming elements from other cultures, thereby enriching its own cultural and spiritual life (Ngô Minh Oanh, 2005, p. 24).

## 2. Pure Land Thought

One distinctive feature of Buddhism during the Heian period was the flourishing and widespread popularity of Pure Land thought, which had been transmitted from Chinese Buddhism. Prior to the Heian period, devotion to Amitābha Buddha had already existed in Japanese society. Around the 7th century, monks such as Eon (Huệ Ân) and Chikō (Trí Quang) delivered teachings on scriptures such as the *Infinite Life Sutra* and texts of the Huayan tradition. However, these monks mainly focused on doctrinal exposition rather than emphasizing practical cultivation.

The Pure Land path offered a means by which individuals, after death, could be reborn in the Western Pure Land and encounter the Buddhas through the practice of *nembutsu* (念佛), the recitation of the Buddha's name.

In his exposition of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the monk Chikō explained Pure Land practice as follows:

*“There are two types of Buddha-recitation: mental recitation and verbal recitation. Mental recitation also has two forms. The first involves visualizing the physical form of the Buddha, referring to the 84,000 physical characteristics. The second concerns the Buddha's wisdom-body, referring to the power of his great compassion. As for verbal recitation, if one lacks the capacity for mental visualization, one may use the mouth to contemplate the Buddha (i.e., recite his name), thereby preventing the mind from becoming distracted. In this way, one can attain mental concentration.*

*There are three kinds of benefits obtained through constant recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha. First, through continuous recitation, afflictions and various evils will gradually cease to arise, and karmic obstacles from the past will be eliminated. Second, frequent recitation fosters the growth of wholesome roots leading to enlightenment and*

*enables one to plant the seeds necessary to encounter the Buddha. Third, through repeated practice, habitual cultivation will mature, enabling one to maintain recitation at the moment of death.*

*As stated in the Mahā-Dharma Drum Sutra: ‘If one accepts and upholds the name of Amitābha Buddha, maintains unwavering mindfulness, and practices meditative concentration with diligence, recognizing that the Tathāgata eternally abides in the Pure Land, one should continuously recite his name without interruption. By reciting this sutra and practicing for ten days and ten nights with constant devotion, one will certainly behold the Buddha—except in cases of those with extremely grave karmic obstructions’” (Etani, 1976, p. 464).*

The monk Chikō classified the practice of Buddha-recitation into two main types:

*Mental recitation (shinnen, 心念):* Mental recitation refers to meditative contemplation of the Buddha and can be further divided into two forms depending on the object of concentration. The first involves visualizing Amitābha Buddha adorned with his 84,000 distinguishing marks (*lakṣaṇa* in Sanskrit), representing the extraordinary characteristics of the Buddha. The second focuses on contemplating the compassionate nature of Amitābha, whose boundless benevolence continuously works to save all sentient beings.

*Verbal recitation (kunen, 口念):* For those who find it difficult to practice mental contemplation, Chikō recommended verbal recitation—chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha in the form “*Namu Amida Butsu.*” In his view, verbal recitation functioned as a supplementary and secondary practice to meditative contemplation. However, through repeated chanting, practitioners could gradually concentrate their minds on Amitābha and eventually reach a level of focus that enables them to engage in deeper meditative recitation.

Another monk who played a significant role in popularizing Pure Land thought among the broader Japanese population was Kūya (903–972). He was actively involved in charitable activities and taught people regardless of social status. Kūya

promoted the practice of *nembutsu* combined with simple rhythmic movements and music, a form known as “dancing *nembutsu*.” Because of his contributions, he was revered by the people as “Saint Amitābha” or a “folk saint” (Thích Giác Dũng, 2002, p. 145).

During the Heian period, as the Tendai school emerged and developed strongly, its monks advocated the practice of *nembutsu samādhi*. This practice required practitioners to circumambulate a statue of Amitābha Buddha while verbally reciting his name and mentally visualizing his attributes over a period of ninety days. This form of practice became widespread within the Tendai school during the Heian period and was later institutionalized into ritual assemblies lasting seven days and eventually twenty-one days. These assemblies attracted large numbers of devotees and served as important occasions for the Tendai school to disseminate its doctrinal teachings.

The monk Genshin (942–1017), through his work *Ōjōyōshū* (*Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land*), systematized Pure Land thought during the Heian period. The main content of this work can be divided into three parts:

- *Right mindfulness in Buddha-recitation*: including three forms-distinct visualization, general visualization, and simplified or mixed contemplation.
- *Supportive practices*: including observing precepts, performing virtuous deeds, and creating favorable conditions for rebirth in the Pure Land.
- *Terminal recitation*: the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name at the moment of death. Genshin placed particular emphasis on this critical moment, as it determines whether the deceased can attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

The engaged and socially oriented character of Tendai Buddhism during the Heian period became increasingly evident as it penetrated deeply into popular society. The Tendai teachings transmitted from China were simplified and adapted to become more accessible and practical:

*“Although both belong to Buddhism, while the Chinese Tiantai school emphasized ‘principle’ (li)-that is, abstract doctrines often removed from practical concerns-the Japanese Tendai school placed greater*

*emphasis on ‘practice’ (shi), meaning concrete needs and practical effectiveness. In a world that does not prioritize abstract principle, pragmatic utility becomes the measure of action” (Lee O-young, 1996, p. 332).*

Pure Land thought was not only prevalent within the Tendai school but also widely incorporated into the practices of the Shingon school during the Heian period. A representative work reflecting Pure Land ideas within Shingon is the *Kōyasan Ōjōden* (Records of Rebirth at Mount Kōya), compiled by the monk Nyūjaku, which records the rebirth accounts of thirty-eight individuals venerated as saints beginning from the 11th century.

The Shingon school encouraged practitioners to pursue Pure Land practices within their present lifetime:

*“One does not need to undergo countless kalpas of arduous practice; even within the body given by one’s parents, it is possible to attain enlightenment through the performance of the esoteric rituals of Mikkyō. These practical rituals of the Shingon school are known as kaji (empowerment and practice) or kitō (prayer). Such esoteric practices are employed in various situations—to avert disasters, epidemics, theft, and misfortune, and to fulfill aspirations related to the state, the community, or individuals. The Heian period (794–1185) thus became the era of Shingon Buddhism” (Thich Minh Thanh, 2001).*

During the Heian period, although the Shingon school adopted doctrines and ritual practices from Chinese Buddhism, it also developed distinctive features characteristic of Japanese Buddhism. The monk Kakuban—revered in Japan as a “Saint of *Nembutsu*”—explained Pure Land thought from the perspective of Shingon Buddhism through his two major works, *Gorin Kujimyō Himitsushaku* and *Amida Hishaku*, as follows:

*“Mahāvairocana Tathāgata is none other than Amitābha Buddha. The doctrine of ‘attaining Buddhahood in this very body’ (sokushin*

*jōbutsu) is the foundation of Shingon Buddhism; therefore, rebirth in the Pure Land is equivalent to attaining rebirth in the present place. He proposed the practice of the Three Mysteries (sanmitsu): verbally reciting the name of Amitābha, forming ritual mudrās (such as the fundamental secret mudrā and the mudrā of the nine grades of rebirth), and mentally visualizing Amitābha Buddha. Even if these three mysteries are not perfectly unified, the realization of just one can generate the other two through the power of empowerment, enabling the practitioner to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. This is the advantage of Pure Land teaching: an easy path leading to accessible attainment” (Thich Giac Dung, 2002, p. 148).*

In addition, the monk Eikan (1033–1111) further developed Pure Land thought within the framework of the Sanron school. Along with monks from the Tendai and Shingon traditions, he composed works such as *Ōjō Gōin* and *Ōjō Kōshiki* to expound and disseminate Pure Land teachings among Japanese Buddhists of the time. Eikan himself practiced *nembutsu* with great dedication and perseverance. It is said that he continuously recited the name of Amitābha throughout his life; in his old age, when he was no longer able to chant, he continued through meditative visualization. He advised followers that, in order to attain rebirth in the Pure Land, one should diligently recite the name of Amitābha during one’s lifetime to accumulate the necessary karmic conditions for rebirth.

Pure Land thought during the Heian period was widely embraced and practiced by the general population of Japan due to its accessible teachings and relatively simple methods of practice. Spiritual needs encouraged people to turn to Pure Land teachings across different Buddhist schools, all sharing a common aspiration for liberation after the end of worldly life:

*“These schools have continued to exist up to the present day with diverse doctrines. Shinran, the most influential patriarch, produced works that have been widely read and commented upon. He argued that those burdened with wrongdoing are more easily saved than the virtuous; to attain salvation, one need only recite the name of*

*Amitābha Buddha. His teachings were simple and easy to understand, which is why they gained widespread popular support” (Huu Ngoc, 2016, p. 78).*

### **3. The Role of Buddhism in the Historical Development of the Heian Period**

Although Buddhism was introduced into Japan via the Korean Peninsula, it can be argued that it played a crucial role in the historical development of the Heian period in several respects. First, Buddhist thought was employed by the ruling class as a spiritual instrument of governance. Second, the monastic community emerged as an intellectual class and acted as a key intermediary in transmitting Chinese culture to Japan. Third, Buddhism gradually merged with indigenous Shinto beliefs, forming the distinctive syncretic system of *Shinbutsu* (kami–Buddha amalgamation) in the history of Japanese thought.

#### **3.1. The Penetration of Buddhist Thought into Social Life**

After its introduction into Japan, Buddhism began to gain official acceptance by the imperial court in the 7th century. Prince Shōtoku promulgated the Seventeen-Article Constitution, which affirmed the role of Buddhism in the spiritual life of the nation:

*“The spirit of reverence for Buddhism was incorporated into the Seventeen-Article Constitution, a foundational document of the state compiled under the authority of Prince Shōtoku (574–622). In Article 2, the principle of ‘sincere reverence for the Three Treasures’ was explicitly stated as a guiding norm for governance. Subsequently, under emperors of the Nara and Kyoto courts, such as Emperor Shōmu (701–756), along with the importation of scriptures and exchanges with monks from the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism became increasingly institutionalized. However, in its early stages, Japanese Buddhism—particularly with its emphasis on ‘protecting the state’ (chingo kokka) and esoteric elements—primarily served the aristocracy and bureaucratic elite rather than the common people” (Nguyen Nam Tran, 2016).*

Buddhist thought also influenced the intellectual and spiritual life of the ruling class through literary works. Unlike Confucianism-which primarily aims to define the structure of society and prescribe human duties within it-Buddhism focuses on the inner world of the individual, offering pathways to spiritual depth and inner enrichment. From this philosophical foundation, Buddhism left a profound imprint on Japanese literary culture, particularly poetry.

As a result, many works of Japanese literature portray characters who appear outwardly calm and reserved but possess rich inner emotional and spiritual depth. A notable example from the Heian period is the *Man'yōshū*, an anthology of approximately 4,000 poems reflecting the political and cultural life of Japan in the 7th and 8th centuries. Buddhism infused Heian literature with a worldview centered on impermanence (*mujō*) and introspective depth, rather than focusing solely on social norms as emphasized in Confucian thought.

Furthermore, Buddhist ideas were also expressed through the role of monk-poets. Japanese poetry, though diverse in form and content, bears strong influences from Zen and other Buddhist traditions. These poetic works often convey a latent spiritual aspiration, reflecting a calm and detached attitude toward life. This aesthetic sensibility mirrors the broader Japanese cultural ethos-marked by resilience, restraint, and composure in the face of life's hardships and political instability.

This represents a distinctive feature of Japanese literature compared to that of neighboring countries: Japanese poetry often centers on concrete, everyday experiences while simultaneously embodying Buddhist values such as compassion and equanimity. Regardless of genre, Japanese literature is also characterized by a unique stylistic feature-the frequent interweaving of prose and poetry-evident from early mytho-historical works such as the *Kojiki* to later poetic anthologies and essays (Đào Thị Thu Hằng, 2007, p. 21).

The reception of Buddhist thought by the Japanese ruling class has been regarded by scholars as a positive development. Ethical values inherent in Buddhism-such as compassion, benevolence, equanimity, and altruism-contributed to shaping the moral foundation of Japanese society. These values fostered a way of life characterized by

gentleness, composure, and inner restraint, yet also capable of generating strong moral resolve and action when necessary. For the ruling elite, the adoption of Buddhist thought enabled a more ethical and moderate approach to governance:

*“Among the general populace, many adhered to Buddhism not because of a deep understanding of its philosophy, but primarily out of the desire for divine protection and a better life, or at least relief from present hardships. For the ruling aristocracy, Buddhism helped restrain violent and cruel behavior. In general, Buddhism influenced moral conduct more than it contributed to systematic doctrinal understanding” (George B. Samson, 1994, pp. 309–400).*

### **3.2. The Monastic Class as a Mediator of Chinese Cultural Transmission**

Another important role of Buddhism in the Heian period and subsequent eras lies in the activities of Japanese monks who traveled to China for study and subsequently transmitted Chinese culture and civilization to Japan. When the monks Saichō and Kūkai studied in China, they brought back a vast number of Buddhist scriptures, enriching the intellectual and religious landscape of Japan during this period.

Moreover, through their exposure to the Chinese writing system (kanji), they also introduced Chinese literary styles into Japan, including poetic composition based on Chinese models. The influence of the renowned Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi is particularly notable in the transmission of Chinese literary culture:

*“Bai Juyi occupied such a position in Japan that, for a long time, the image of the poet served not only as a model of literary excellence but also as a model of cultivated human character-representing a learned social class” (N. Konnát, 1997, p. 281).*

Another significant influence from Chinese civilization can be seen in architecture. Japanese monks adopted Mahāyāna Buddhist architectural styles in the construction of temples. Structures such as Kondō (Golden Hall), Hōryū-ji, and especially Tōdai-ji, built as early as the 7th century, reflect both the reception of Chinese cultural elements and the early emergence of a distinct Japanese aesthetic:

*“From temple architecture to the sculpting of Buddha statues, the forceful and intellectual qualities of Chinese Buddhism were transformed into something more subtle, restrained, and intuitive—more gentle than intense” (George B. Samson, 1990, p. 173).*

Thus, through the spread of Buddhism during the Heian period, Japanese architecture absorbed artistic and structural influences from Chinese Buddhism. Although the impact of Buddhism on Japanese architecture varied across historical periods, it can be argued that without its contribution, Japanese architecture would lack both diversity and depth. Furthermore, values such as reverence for nature and appreciation of inner human qualities would lack expressive cultural forms. In this regard, Buddhism once again demonstrates its profound role in the historical development of the Heian period, particularly in the fields of architecture and art.

In addition to scriptures and architecture, Japanese monks who studied in China also acted as cultural intermediaries in the transmission of culinary traditions, most notably tea culture. The monk Eisai, after studying in Zhejiang, introduced tea cultivation to Japan and emphasized its medicinal value in his work *Kissa Yōjōki* (*Drinking Tea for Health*). Although the formalized tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) developed in later periods, its foundations were established in the monastic culture of this time, giving rise to a distinctive cultural tradition deeply imbued with Buddhist influence in Japan.

### ***3.3. The Syncretism of Buddhism and Shinto: The Formation of Shinbutsu Belief***

Although Buddhism was a foreign religion introduced into Japan during the medieval period, it was gradually integrated with the indigenous belief system of Shinto, giving rise to the distinctive *Shinbutsu* (kami–Buddha) syncretism characteristic of Japanese religious life. When Buddhism was first transmitted from China and Korea, it was welcomed by both the imperial court and the general population. The syncretic blending of Shinto and Buddhism, as well as Confucian and Buddhist ideas, contributed to the diversification and expansion of ethical values and moral frameworks in Japanese society. The combination of Buddhist rituals with Shinto

practices created new spiritual expressions within the religious life of the Japanese people:

*“It should also be noted that Shinto, when combined with Buddhism, sometimes became a source of popular beliefs that provided hope and consolation to the people” (Hữu Ngọc, 2016, p. 75).*

From another perspective, Buddhism possessed several advantages over Shinto, allowing it to penetrate more deeply into the spiritual life of the Japanese people. While Buddhism offered a relatively systematic philosophical and doctrinal framework, Shinto was primarily based on animistic beliefs. As a result, despite being a newly introduced religion, Buddhism established a strong and enduring presence in Japan. At certain historical stages, it even held a dominant position in religious life.

Although there were periods of tension and conflict between Buddhism and Shinto—often driven by political ambitions—these two belief systems ultimately coexisted and merged, forming a uniquely Japanese religious identity:

*“Throughout their historical development, there were times when Shinto and Buddhism clashed intensely due to competing political interests. However, owing to the generally moderate character of the Japanese people, such conflicts rarely resulted in bloodshed, and the outcomes were not excessively detrimental to either side. Today, the Japanese are often described as religiously dual, as they can simultaneously practice Shinto and Buddhism. Religions in Japan do not seek to eliminate one another but instead reinforce the spiritual faith of the people” (Đào Thi Thu Hang, 2007, pp. 14–15).*

The syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism during this period laid the foundation for the formation of Japanese cultural identity and moral values. The integration of Buddhist thought—especially Zen—with Shinto contributed to shaping key characteristics of the Japanese people, such as courage, resilience, self-respect, and composure in the face of natural adversity. These traits may be regarded as defining features of the Japanese national character, enabling the Japanese people to overcome historical hardships and

reemerge with remarkable determination, as seen in Japan's transformation into a global model of development in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The figure of the samurai in medieval Japanese history exemplifies this synthesis, embodying a combination of Shinto spirituality, Confucian ethics, and Zen Buddhist thought. The ideals of the samurai—loyalty, filial piety, bravery, compassion, propriety, frugality, simplicity, honor, integrity, and an equanimous attitude toward life and death—reflect this integrated philosophical foundation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In summary, the influence of Chinese Buddhism on Japanese Buddhism during the Heian period is clearly evident in the domains of scriptures and ritual practices. Through the efforts of Japanese monks who studied abroad, Chinese Buddhist texts were transmitted and integrated into Japanese religious life. The *Lotus Sutra* and Esoteric ritual traditions introduced by Saichō and Kūkai were enthusiastically received by both the monastic community and lay believers. As a result, Buddhism during the Heian period developed distinctive characteristics and reached a level of flourishing unparalleled in earlier periods.

Moreover, Pure Land thought transmitted from China enriched the doctrinal landscape of Japanese Buddhist schools. Through the promotion of *nembutsu* practice and Pure Land teachings by Japanese monks, followers were provided with a new spiritual path aimed at attaining rebirth in the Pure Land after death. This tradition contributed significantly to shaping moral values and spiritual aspirations among emperors, military leaders (shoguns), and the general population alike.

The transmission of Buddhism also served as a conduit for broader cultural and civilizational exchange. Through this process, Japan adopted new elements in language, literature, painting, architecture, customs, and festivals. Buddhist values became deeply embedded in all aspects of Japanese religious and spiritual life, enriching the cultural heritage of a nation often referred to as the “Land of the Rising Sun.”

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