

**International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation, Fall Semester 2022**

**Series Lectures (8): “Asian Community: The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology”**

**Topic: Japanese Buddhism from the Transformation of Buddhism in East Asia**

For the 8th Eurasia Foundation International Lecture held in the 2022 academic year of Chinese Culture University, Associate Professor Tu, Yu-chan from the Department of Japanese Language and Literature at the Chinese Culture University, was invited to give a lecture entitled “Japanese Buddhism from the Transformation of Buddhism in East Asia.” Professor Tu first introduced the “Global Religious Landscape” published by the Pew Research Center in the United States and the “Yearbook of Religion” published annually in Japan, which describe the current distribution of Buddhist believers in the United States and Japan. Then, Professor Tu stated the characteristics of Japanese Buddhism in terms of the transformation of East Asian Buddhism from three aspects: the spread of Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism and precepts, and the present life and afterlife of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism (or Jōdo Buddhism).

**The Spread of Buddhism in East Asia**

Buddhism was originated in India and spread to the whole world. There were several branches of Buddhism with different spreading routes from India, Theravada Buddhism (from India to the south), East Asian Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism (both from India to the north). Among them, the branch in East Asia, originated from China and spread to Korea and Japan, is called Mahayana Buddhism, also known as East Asian Buddhism. It have maintained the spiritual pillar and friendly exchanges in East Asia for two thousand years and formed the Buddhism of the Chinese character circle.

East Asian Buddhism was based on Chinese translations of classics, and generally rearranges the order of Buddhist scriptures and other canonical texts according to the “the five periods and eight teachings” method established by Zhiyi (智顛) in China, that is, Avataṃsaka Sūtra (華嚴)→ āgama (阿含)→ vaiṭulya-sūtra (方等)→ Prajñāpāramitā sūtra (般若)→ Lotus Sutra and Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (法華涅槃). In terms of precepts, Chinese monks take precepts based on the precepts of Dharmagupta Vinaya (四分律) in the Dharmaguptaka (法藏部) and at the same time accept the Brahmajala Sutra (梵網) precepts of Mahayana Buddhism.

After Professor Tu briefly introduced the situation of spreading scriptures and precepts in China, the origin of East Asian Buddhism, she then explained the characteristics of taking precepts in Japan.

### **Japanese Buddhism and Precepts**

Precepts can be said to be the living conventions of Buddhist Sangha, and it is difficult to establish an Sangha without precepts. The Hinayana precepts regulate the daily life of monks, and the Mahayana precepts, also known as Bodhisattva precepts, can be said to be ideal model for practitioners to control their thoughts of desire.

Chien-Chen (鑑真) in China (688-763) also taught the precepts of Dharmagupta Vinaya (四分律) in the Dharmaguptaka (法藏部) in Japan. However, since Saicho (最澄) (767-822) advocated that Mahayana Buddhism only needs to adopt Mahayana precepts and does not need to adopt Hinayana precepts, the precepts of Japanese Buddhism have become loose, which has become an opportunity for monks of later generations to lead a secular life. Hōnen (法然) (1133-1212) in the Kamakura period advocated that no matter whether one kept or broke the precepts, as long as one recited the Buddha's name (念佛 Nianfo), one could be reborn. In fact, the behavior of ignoring the precepts in Hōnen's Sangha, and even had bad conducts of the so-called "doing evil without hindrance," which once became a social phenomenon problem. After Shinran (親鸞) (1173-1263) were exiled to Echigo Province and defrocked, he took this as an opportunity. Shinran advocated "not being a monk or being a layman." Shinran married his wife which became the characteristics of the Jōdo Shinshū. After the Meiji period, the habit of allowing monks to marry expanded to other branches of Buddhism in Japan and became one of the characteristics of Japanese Buddhism.

### **The Present and World to Come of Japan's Pure Land religion**

Japanese Buddhism is often referred to as Funeral Buddhism (Soushiki Buddhism). Indeed, orthodox Buddhist theory cannot adequately explain the etiquette of the dead in Japanese funeral Buddhism. So, how is the theory of rebirth in the Pure Land after death told? The theoretical and practical systems in the Pure Land Religion literature emphasize the attainment of samadhi in this life; in the beliefs of the people, they attach importance to the possibility of rebirth in the afterlife. So, what is the relationship between obtaining samadhi in this life and being rebirth in the Pure Land in the afterlife?

The "Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra" was the earliest scripture in the existing pure land

Buddhism classics to expound the idea that whoever completed Samadhi can encounter Face-to-Face the Buddhas Amitabha of the Present. This kind of development of the thought that whoever completed “Pratyutpanna-Samadhi” can encounter Buddha, formed the practice method of “Kuan-Fo” (觀佛, viewing Buddha) in Central Asia. Among them, the “Sutra on Contemplation of Amitayus” (shorten as “觀經 (*Kuan Ching*)”) describes the method of “Kuan-Fo” and points out that the main Buddha to view is Amitabha. Moreover, the “*Kuan Ching*” cleverly combines the method of practice of “Kuan-Fo” in the present life with the rebirth in the afterlife.

Hui-yuan (慧遠) and Zhiyi (智顛) of the Sui Dynasty interpreted the “*Kuan Ching*” in terms of “Li-Kuan (理觀, the concept of absolute truth).” “Li-Kuan” is to consider “Amitabha” and “pure land” as internal things in our heart. In contrast, Shan-Tao (善導, 613-681) of the Tang Dynasty regarded the pure land as “the west” existing outside of our mind. Accordingly, Shan-Tao considered that there are concrete and real appearance of Amitabha Buddha and pure land.

Because Shan-Tao’s explanation was easy to understand and practice, it has gained explosive popularity in popularizing it to the public. But the influence of Shan-Tao only lasted for a while, and soon the practice of Li Guan was revived. In later generations of Chinese Buddhism, the mainstream is the Zen-Pureland Syncretism, advocating practicing Zen meditation and Buddha-recitation at the same time, which formed a complex form of hoping to be born in the pure land in the afterlife.

In Japan, the aspect of rational “Kuan-Fo” has obviously weakened after Hōnen. Hōnen claimed he was “according to Shan-Tao,” and further advocated that all practices other than reciting Buddha’s name are miscellaneous practices and should be discarded. In this way, Hōnen denied the awareness of encountering Buddha in this life, and only paid attention to the afterlife, thus creating a new dimension. In addition, Hōnen’s disciple, Shinran, further advocated “Heizei Gojo” (平生往生, meaning, any person must complete preparation for rebirth in heaven while he is still alive), and believed that Amitabha Buddha has already helped us to cultivate the practice of rebirth for ordinary people. What an ordinary person has to do is to believe in Amitabha Buddha, to repay his kindness and to recite Buddha’s name. Shinran’s concept of Buddha Recitation has changed the practice method of Buddha Recitation from a practice of seeking enlightenment to a practice of redemption.

In modern times, the idea of an afterlife has declined rapidly. It is believed that the afterlife that cannot be proved by science is just pre-modern superstition, and the tendency to ridicule Buddhism's stubbornness and judgment is getting stronger and stronger. The Japanese Buddhist community responded to this by thinking that Buddhism originally seeks enlightenment in this world, and the theory of the afterlife is only an expedient measure. In response to such claims, Professor Tu stated that it is necessary to rediscover the things of the afterlife, and to establish new ideas in the tension between this world and the afterlife.

(Web link: <https://eurasia.pccu.edu.tw/index.php>)

(Written by: Tu, Yu-chan, Associate Professor, the Department of Japanese Language and Literature)