International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation, Fall Semester 2022
Series Lectures (13): "Asian Community: The Construction and Transformation of East Asiaology"
Topic: State and Religion in Medieval Japan

In the 13th lecture of the Eurasia Foundation International Lecture of 2022 at the Chinese Culture University, we invited Professor Fumihiko Sueki (末木文美士), Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo, to give a lecture entitled "State and Religion in Medieval Japan." During the speech, Professor Sueki introduced Kinkaku-ji Temple and Mibu-dera in Kyoto on the first and last pages of the PPT, and mentioned the story of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu building Buddhist temples and traditional Buddhist activities.

In ancient times, Buddhism was more dominant than the emperor, which can be easily seen from Emperor Shomu who built the Great Buddha, and Emperor Koken (Emperor Shōtoku) who supported the Dokyo (道鏡). However, since Emperor Kanmu revived Shinto, Buddhist temples were no longer built in Heian-kyo. Professor Sueki said that the Medieval Japan period corresponded to the period from the end of Heian period to the Muromachi period, that is, from the 11th century to the 15th and 16th centuries. The characteristics of Japan's traditional national structure were basically determined in the early Medieval Japan period (10th to 13th centuries) and have sustained until the Edo period.

Secular state power (Monarchism, seen world) and sacred religious power (god and buddha, unseen world) have a cooperative structure while confronting each other. The monarchy was not concentrated on the Emperor alone, but was controlled by the regent, kanpaku (関白) and the Emperor Emeritus. After the second half of the 12th century, the samurai regime emerged, forming a confrontational structure between the imperial court centered on the emperor and the shogunate centered on the shogun. While the shogunate was in power, the emperor was charged with a mission centered on culture. In China, there are Book of Rites that record many etiquettes that should be observed. In Japan, although the laws and regulations were completed in the 7th and 8th centuries, because it could not keep up with the changes of the times, there was no need to maintain etiquette except to follow the research on so-called Yusokukojitsu [有職故實, ancient government posts, court ceremonies, old customs and manners]. In addition, formally appointing generals was also the responsibility of the emperor. These positions remained largely unchanged until the first half of the nineteenth century.

Moreover, in Shinto and Buddhism, although the power of Buddhism has overwhelmed the power of the local gods, the power of the gods has gradually risen. Under the influence of Shinto-Buddhism, the theory of honchi suijaku [本地垂迹 Indian Buddhist deities choose to appear in Japan] prevailed until the Medieval Japan period. However, Shinto became popular around the 13th to 15th centuries and gradually became independent from the Shinto-Buddhism. Around the 18th to 19th centuries, Hirata Atsutane was systematized Shinto thought.

This horizontal dual structure of confrontation between Monarchism and gods and Buddhas was unique to Japan. It was different from the vertical unitary structure in China in which Confucianism was the center and excludes Buddhism and Taoism from the state system, and it was also not like Thailand's vertical dual structure in which Buddhism was placed above secular Monarchy.

This dual structure in Japan was transformed after the great social change of the Meiji Restoration (1868). The decree on the separation of gods and Buddhas was the symbol of changes. The power structure in modern era was a unified structure centered on the emperor, and religion had also been changed to serve the emperor. This structure continued until the defeat in World War II (1945).

So what is the theoretical basis for this dual structure in the Medieval Japan period? The most noticeable one was Saicho (766/767~822) of Tendai school of Buddhism. Saicho went to Tang China to seek the Dharma, and promoted the Tiantai school in Japan. In his later years, Saicho intended to establish a Mahayana precept (Brahma's Net precept) according to the "Brahma's Net Sutra." Saicho applied to the imperial court to legitimacies his method, though had not approved until after his death. The Brahma net precepts, which are also used in China, are positioned as the Mahayana Bodhisattva spirit that is capable of becoming a monk and can be used at home. The precepts of monks are upasampadā precepts based on the "Vinaya in four parts." Saicho believed that the upasampada precepts were Hinayana precepts, and denied it, arguing that monks only need to accept the Brahma net precepts.

Saicho believed that the Brahma's Net precept were applicable for both monks and laymen, i.e. "Shinzoku Ikkan [真俗一貫]," and give them highly complimentary remarks. Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist world are equivalent to a man of virtue in the secular world, and the system of cooperation between the two is regarded as an ideal system. The supreme leader of the Buddhist world is called a national treasure. As the spiritual leader, he is responsible for creating an ideal world together with the secular leader, the king (the emperor). Buddhists next to national treasures are called teachers of the state, and they become the spiritual leader of each region, guiding people with the altruistic spirit of bodhisattvas.

The ideal of Saicho may not be realized as expected, but based on this, a dual structure in which Monarchism and Buddhism competed and cooperated with each other was formed in medieval Japan. Such a structure was neither the integration of Monarchism and Buddhism, nor its disintegration, but two rounds of social structure. Such a social structure sustained until the middle of the 19th century. Nonetheless, at the end of the Tokugawa period in the face of the requirements of opening the country to the foreign countries by Europe and the United States, the multiple and dual power structure was threatened; hence it was unified.

On the other hand, in the Buddhist circle, Japanese monks were not recognized as monks, but as religious novice, when they wanted to study in China because they had not received full precepts. Therefore, in the Edo period there were so-called "false precepts" issued.

Even so, the structure of Monarchism and Buddhism helping each other in a balanced way, compared with the current situation where secular power is violent and no one can help stop it, it is really necessary to think about this structure again. Professor Suegi concluded that such an idea has a deep connection with the Charter of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.