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Patricia A. Gnadt

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HEIAN JAPAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCE

by Patricia A. Gnadt

Although a written language, the Buddhist religion, a bureaucratic government structure, and land division/tax institutions came to Japan from China, when applied in Heian Japan they were transformed into distinctly Japanese institutions. As broad as the influence from China might appear to be, I also see at least three aspects of the Japanese culture which did not undergo sinification. These are the spoken language, Shintoism, and the basic Japanese social structure, first in the nature and achievement of status and power, and second in the position of women in Japanese society.

Long before the Chinese became influential in Wa, the Japanese people had developed their own spoken language. As described in Schirokauer, the Japanese language is “agglutinative,” that is, the words are formed by adding elements and endings to change the meaning, tense and number (132), whereas Chinese is “positional,” a language wherein the position of the word determines its function (11). When Chinese was introduced into Japan, educated people continued to speak their native tongue but learned to write in Chinese. As time passed, Schirokauer tells us that the Japanese utilized a mixed written style, wherein Chinese characters were used for their intrinsic ideographic meanings as well as their phonetic representations (146). By the Heian Period, Chinese characters and calligraphy have been synthesized to form the Kana syllabary. The Kana suited Heian tastes for beauty of form, while at the same time, because it is a phonetic representation, the Kana easily replaced the Chinese characters in the writing of Japanese poetry and prose.

Prose was a literary form that was uniquely Japanese. As evidenced in “the world’s first psychological novel, ‘The Tale of Genji,’ [wherein the author] Lady Murasaki was as interested in the thoughts and feeling of her characters as in their tastes and talents” (174), the Heian Japanese were very appreciative
of literary vehicles for “mono-no-aware, a word... for ‘that power inherent in things to make us respond not intellectually but with an involuntary gasp of emotion’” (174). Though Japanese men continued to write Chinese poetry using Chinese characters, “Chinese loan-words were meticulously excluded from poetry written in the Japanese language” (172). The Japanese poem was “a message from the heart to the heart: genuine feelings expressed in the right words” (172). The poems in Japanese were “enriched by the resonance of their verbal music, suggestive overtones arising from a richness of shared associations, and by double meanings and plays on words. The result is a poetry which, even more than usual, defies translation” (172). Tang poetry, though using symbolic devices, often strove to convey the serenity of the enlightened Buddhist by utilizing scenes that were visual but empty (118). Some Tang poetry, like that of Du Fu, was written in highly regulated styles with “elaborate rules governing tone and rhyme as well as verbal parallelism” (121). Throughout the Heian Period, the Japanese oral language remained “un-sinified,” while at the same time providing a vehicle through which the Chinese written language was “nipponized” in Japanese literature.

Another aspect of Japanese culture which resisted Chinese influence was Shintoism. A set of practices rather than a religion, Shinto beliefs and closeness to nature are so deeply entwined with Japanese thought as to be inseparable. From the first introduction of Buddhism to Japan, up to and including the introduction of Shingon Buddhism, the kami have had to be appealed to and accommodated in order for the Buddhist schools to be accepted. For instance, although in Shingon Buddhism “no provision was made... for Shinto, ... the name Dainichi (Great Sun) invited identification with the Sun Goddess, and Shingon also proved hospitable to Shinto deities through its concept of duality” (169). Time after time, the Japanese adopt and layer other religious beliefs over the Shinto, without Shintoism losing either its inherent qualities or its influence on Japanese life and thought.

The basic social structure of Japan evolved from the Shinto ideas of
the supernatural origins of the Japanese islands and people. Early うじ often traced their ancestry to Shinto “deity,” with the leaders of each clan acting in the capacity of both head priest and patriarchal ruler (141). There existed in Japan, then, the うじ, beneath whom were the common people and, at the bottom, a few slaves. This concept was expanded, as Japan developed a centralized government and added the more complex bureaucratic structure of the Chinese government to the うじ system.

The Buddhist ideas of karma and rebirth gave added justification for birth as a status from which one did not freely move. In applying the working Chinese governmental model to Japan, the Japanese adopted the Chinese ideal of the Mandate of Heaven as the legitimization of the Emperor’s rule and deleted the Mencian concept of the right of the aristocrats and/or people to overthrow the Emperor if he failed to keep the good of the people in mind. Thus, the Emperor retained the inherently Japanese idea of the inherited right to rule that had been held by うじ leaders from the beginning. The acquisition of true power in Japanese society resulted not only from one’s birth within the royal family but also resulted from being born into a family which over the years had gained land, money, and, ultimately, influence through intermarriage in the court of the Emperor. Whereas in China dynasties rise, prosper and then fail and fall, in Japan the Imperial line appears “unbroken,” going back to the supreme deity, the Sun Goddess.

Whereas the Emperor of China holds absolute power that is balanced by the right of the people to overthrow him, in Japan the Emperor is, in essence, primarily a figurehead who is manipulated by the powerful families rather than supplanting by them (156). In China, Buddhism’s insistence on the loyalty of the individual to Buddhist ideals and not the Emperor created tensions between church and state. In Japan this was not so. The Shinto concept of connection, between the leaders of that which is spiritual and that which is temporal, eventually allowed for the evolution of the Heian practice of Emperors abdicating the throne to become Buddhist monks who still
maintained an influential position in the decisions of the new Emperor. Instead of conflict arising between Buddhism and the Emperor, the two became identified, one with the other, in the minds of the Japanese. Thus, the Japanese transformed Chinese institutions within the Japanese social structure.

The last aspect of “un-sinified” Japanese culture which I wish to address is the position that women held in Japanese society. In China, women were at the bottom of the Five Confucian Relationships. They held little or no power and were considered to be burdens, needing to be raised, married and sent off to live with their husbands’ families, just when they reached the age when they could contribute to the welfare of their own families. They were held to be of little value except in their capacity to produce sons. Ban Zhao describes the value of women as lying primarily in their obedience, humility, industriousness and chastity (Ebrey 75). In Japan, on the other hand, aristocratic women may hold property and receive its income. They may be educated, that is, taught to read and write Japanese, and are free to make their own decisions. They have ample spare time which they use to write love notes, prose and poetry, receive visitors, and take lovers. When they are married, they remain with their own families, and their husbands come to live in their fathers’ houses. Families welcome daughters because it is through the marriage of daughters that families can advance their social status and power. Neither the Chinese nor the Confucian thought that came into Japan affected the position held by Japanese women in society.

In summary, beginning in the late seventh century C.E. with the Yamato Period and peaking in the eighth century C.E during the Nara Period, the influence of Chinese ideals, institutions and culture in Japan is very evident. From the literary, artistic and technological to the political and religious, the Chinese influence was imported, often via Chinese and Korean Buddhist monks, and used in Japan. However, Japan did not become a “little China,” as one might expect when a developing country borrows so freely from the “superior” culture of its ancient neighbor. Instead, by virtue of the
cultural autonomy which had already developed in Japan prior to the influx of Chinese influence and by reason of its geographic location and topography, Japan was able to retain those aspects of its culture that were intrinsically Japanese and transform foreign aspects into typically Japanese institutions. This process of “nipponization,” as I call it, began in the late eighth century when Emperor Kammu moved Japan’s capital city from Nara to Kyoto. As Schirokauer points out, “the move was epochal . . . because in Kyoto the process of acquiring continental ideas gave way to that of transforming them into something Japanese” (154).

Works Cited
