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JAPN 305: Japanese Culture and Civilization

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2019/02/14

Writing Response 3

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The Major works of Kūkai

During the Nara and Heian periods within Japan, there was a three religious ideologies that had influence on many, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. We will be focusing on the early advocacy of Kūkai (774-835 CE), a famous buddhist monk, civil servant, scholar, and artist. Kūkai advocated for Buddhist thought to be adopted by the contemporary culture of Japan, often criticizing Taoism and Confucianism, as we can see in *The Major works of Kūkai*. We will cover the buddhist virtues, detachment from other religions and discuss why popularity of Buddhism was growing.

After introducing Taoism and Confucianism in the *The argument of Kimō* and *The argument of Kyobu*, Kūkai then presents the beggar character, who is called Kamei-kotsuji. The beggar's story is one of suffering and sorrow, hunger and thirst, and having “applied himself to the realization of Buddhism” he was able to free himself from the grips of the mundane world (p. 121). When the Kamei was called for not respecting his body that his parent gave him, the beggar explained Buddhism also respects Filial Piety, a cherished confucianist ideology, however it takes it beyond a physical labor and into a more spiritual cadence, “As long as one conforms the right way, it is not necessary to demand of him minor things... [Those who do not follow Buddhism] know only how to serve others and how to bow low to render homage” and continued to say “My parents have reared me with the utmost care... When I reflect upon them, I feel that their merits are as high as the five mountains... [and] this though penetrates skin and bone” (p. 125-126). When asked where Kamei resides, he responds “In the triple world” a world of desire, form, and non-form, “there is no permanent residence; there is no fixed place in the world of transmigration” (p. 129). This emphasizes the insignificance of the physical world, similar to the mysticism of Taoism, however not focused on immortality. Instead the focus is on how the “[Buddha

and his disciples] devote themselves to the salvation of sentient beings” , and through salvation can people begin to reach Nirvana (p. 130). However the beggar explains “Only the bodhisattvas who are destined to be Buddhas in the next stage can obtain and enjoy [Nirvana].” (p. 134). This emphasizes the need to practice Buddhism as a monk, in a non-secular setting. Kūkai narrative ends the discussion of comparing the three ideologies by stating “[It should be evident through buddhism] that the petty seeking longevity of Taoism and that dusty breeze of the secular world, Confucianism, are not worth of comparison. They are not worthy to be spoken in the same breath with Buddhism” (p. 138).

Through setting up the other religious ideologies Kūkai describes what their main points are, and how they can focus on superficial values. Confucianism, as described by Kūkai, states that “All men born inherit something of both heaven and earth...there are very few who are wise and good and many who are stupid and wicked” (p. 105) and even if one is born wise they may become dumb, and the Confucianist advocacy character, Kimō, says to the cousin of Tokaku, the host which all three spokesman are gathered, to “focus on filial piety, loyalty, and a high rank in government... even a commoner can rise to the three highest positions in government... even a descendant of the emperor may become a common man” (p. 106). After a lot of analogies to the great figures of China and explaining to Tokaku and Tokaku's cousin that if they follow confucianism it will lead them to greatness politically and socially.

As for Taoism, as described by the character Kyobu, the “divine techniques for prolonging your life and attaining immortality” are the main aspirations of Taoism (p. 116). Kyobu then argues against Confucianism by stating “[Those who follow Confucianism, their] ears are weakened by music, eyesight dulled by the brightness of brocade and embroidery” (p. 117) alluding to the fact that by seeking a high rank, following filial piety, and losing oneself to greed forgets the mysticism and longevity the earth has to offer. Kyobu also slants that many of the good comings of Confucianism is built from violence, subtly saying “in battle they, [Confucianists], piled up corpses as high as a tall building” (p. 117). Taoism preaches abstinence and Kyobu pleads to “refrain from killing the insects that come near you... physically, abstain from worldly pollutions; mentally, get rid of greediness... [and] when you see a beautiful girl with a slender waist, think of her as a devil or ghost... [and to remember] Grains are

poisonous... Spices are like a poisonous bird... liquors are swords... pork and fish are halberds... beautiful women are axes..." (p. 117-118). Taoist ideals also called for the using of natural medicines and to abstain from bad mundane desires, and "after you follow these practices... you will be able to see through the earth and walk on water" (p. 118). In the Taoist mindset heaven and earth are connected and those who walk on the earth can touch the heavens and the land of the immortal.

While Kūkai's story and many allegorical connections very clearly dissuade the legitimacy of Taoism and Confucianism, many of his claims are pretty weak in my personal opinion. While at the time Kūkai's reputation alone was enough for people's ideologies to be sway towards Buddhism, I think Kūkai could of done a better job describing why Buddhism was better, without saying the other religions are simply superficial. As we have discussed in class Buddhism's rise to popularity was due to court presence of Buddhist monks and abbots, public funding of temples, and was used to present Japan's legitimacy to divine descent and gave a heavenly mandate to Japan which challenged that of China's. Another key reason for the adoptance of Buddhism and the other religions, was Japan's use of melding cultures and religions into each other, for instance even though filial piety isn't a core Buddhist ideology in Kūkai's narrative it was made a relevant focus to combine these ideologies and moral codes. Another example of how Buddhism was folded into the fabric of culture, was the comparisons of various Bodhisattvas to pre-existing figures in Japan's culture, such as the Sun-Buddha and Amaterasu. As we discussed in class, many figures were also fitted into the idea of kami, spirits, and ghosts. Overall *The Major works of Kūkai* used poor ad hominem, straw man arguments, and hasty generalizations to advocate his own ideas, which was a successful method of persuasion at the time.