

Changing Narratives of Buddhism and Its Dynamic Relations with the State in Imperial  
Japan

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## Introduction

Modern histories often study narratives on wars from perspectives of geopolitics and international relations. However, the two world wars in the twentieth century were so pervasive in their impact on the world that no part of the human society had really escaped their deadly touch. For this reason, in this paper, I would like to attempt to explore the issue from a different angle by analyzing the changing narratives of Buddhism (or in fact Buddhisms) in Imperial Japan on militarism and nationalism and its relations with the state. The significance of native Japanese religious experiences and interpretations of the events leading up to the end of the second World War, which I believe are a key element in understanding Japanese struggle for its modernization in the early twentieth century, deserves a closer examination.

The relationship between religion and war is a delicate matter that often involves large amount of controversies. Japanese Buddhism is no different in this respect. Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (and to a lesser degree its successor *Zen War Stories*) is a provocative work that contributes to the rethinking of Zen Buddhism's relationship with the Imperial

Japanese state in the first half of the twentieth century especially during the Second World War by bringing to the front stage the fervent support of Zen Buddhism for nationalism and militarism in Imperial Japan. *Zen at War* spares no criticism in exposing Buddhism's ideological justification and political and military mobilization for the imperialistic expansion and military aggression of Japan, in which even D.T. Suzuki, the key figure behind Zen Buddhism's popularity in the Western world, has been brought under keen scrutiny for his role in supporting Japan's imperialism and militarism. Of course, Zen Buddhism was not the only denomination of Buddhism in Imperial Japan that supported the government's promoted ultra-nationalism and war efforts. Joudou Shinshuu (Shin Buddhism), another major Buddhist branch in Japan, had also been active in the shaping of Japanese nationalism since the early days of the Meiji era. Thus, this paper will place focus on these two schools of Buddhism.

It might seem to be a curious thing on the surface that Buddhism, a generally perceived pacifist religion, would have been so closely associated with war, militarism and imperialistic expansion. Precisely because of this seeming contradiction, the Buddhist perspective on war is essentially interesting. One of the core doctrines of Buddhism is nonkilling and nonviolence due to its belief that all life forms are equal. To the Buddhist, the taking of even an insect's life is a violation of this universal equality. However, when the need arises, a Buddhist will not shy away from fighting demons both figuratively and literally. In addition, Buddhism preaches that life is filled with constant suffering but salvation/liberation from such suffering is achievable through the practice of Buddhist teachings. In a world devastated by war where even the loss of life is a common occurrence, this seems to be particularly relevant and appealing. Less well known but no less important is the fact that Buddhism also preaches its version of the coming of the end of the world.

Certain schools, such as the Pure Land and Nichiren, specifically emphasize on this issue. When the invention and application of nuclear weapons made the theory of apocalypse a real possibility that threatened all humankind, Buddhist perception of war may be worth extra exploring too.

Due to its unique features resulted from historical circumstances, Japanese Buddhism is especially deserving of a careful analysis. Buddhism has been present in Japan for over 1500 years since its arrival from the Korean peninsula in the sixth century.<sup>1</sup> It had become the dominant religious form in the Japanese society by the Edo period with over 400,000 Buddhist temples in the 1800's. Some even argue that it was the effective "state religion" of Japan at the time because of its close relationship with and the political support it had received from the state authority.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the long history, the arrival of Buddhism also coincided with many important cultural imports such as the introduction of the writing system and literary tradition. Therefore, its entangling relationship with the formation of Japanese culture cannot be ignored. Despite some early struggles with the native religious thoughts, Buddhism flourished in Japan for a price of being adapted and transformed into a special syncretic form that encompassed both Buddhist teachings and the native Japanese *kami* worship.<sup>3</sup> While new elements of Buddhism continued to arrive from the East Asian

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<sup>1</sup> Tamura, Yoshiro, and Hunter, Jeffrey. *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*. (Tokyo: Kosei Pub., 2000), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria, Daizen. *Zen at War*. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Tamura, 33.

mainland, it never stopped being localized. The Kamakura period saw some of the most important developments of Japanese Buddhism in the premodern times. Both the Zen and Pure Land schools, two of the most popular forms of Buddhism in Japan, were introduced to Japan and had their respective native evolutions during this period. Shin Buddhism, an offshoot of the Pure Land school, would become instrumental in establishing many of Japanese Buddhism's institutional changes later.

### **Buddhism and Nationalism**

Meiji Restoration is a key turning point in Japanese history as it is for Japanese Buddhism. Some even claim that Buddhism in Japan had suffered the “most severe blow” during the Meiji Restoration since its early confrontation with the *kami* worship traditions in the sixth century with the introduction of the imperial edict that proclaimed the separation of Shintoism and Buddhism (Shinbutsu Bunri).<sup>4</sup> Meiji Restoration marked the beginning of Japanese modernization. In its early stages, one of the most important methods to embrace modern “civilization” is through imitation of the Western countries in every aspect of the social life. In terms of religion, Japan, modeling after the practice of establishing a state religion in many western countries, also attempted to create its own version of a state religion. Buddhism was not an option because, as an ultimately nationalistic movement, the result of it had to be natively Japanese, which eventually lead to the construction of the state

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<sup>4</sup> Ienaga, Saburo. *Contemporary Religions in Japan*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Nanzan University: 1965),

Shintoism as Japan's official state religion that is supposed to have been the foundation of the Japanese nation.

Prior to this point, Shintoism (if the term can be used in this anachronistic manner) and Buddhism had been inseparable in practice for many a century (Shinbutsu Shuugou). Like any other major religions in the world, the spread of Buddhism involved absorption and adoption of local religious thoughts. The arrival of Buddhism in East Asia from day one was heavily influenced by native religious thoughts. The two schools that I have specifically mentioned in this paper, namely Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, were very Chinese-oriented in their origins. When they arrived in Japan, they had been further "localized." As discussed in the previous section, the earliest arrival and survival of Buddhism in Japan was accompanied by its confrontation and adaptation with local religious thoughts and customs.<sup>5</sup> The result was a syncretic form of native Shinto beliefs and assimilated Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> One of the most characteristic features of Japanese Buddhism as a result of such localization is its subjugation to the state authority in order to win the court's support as a foreign religion.

Therefore, although nationalism is a rather modern concept, Japanese Buddhism's reliance on and support for the state authority is a much older tradition that can be traced to its very origin on the islands. While the early forms of Buddhism had already manifested its institutional subservience to the state as a necessary means for survival and prosperity,<sup>7</sup> its later development had more to do with negotiation and compromise between the religious and secular powers. By the Edo period, the shogunate required each household to be

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<sup>5</sup> Tamura, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Ienaga, 4.

affiliated with a Buddhist temple. This policy had led to the rapid expansion of Buddhist temples in Japan. At the same though, such expansion came with its own price that is that the temples, while growing in numbers, diminished its independence from the state and had been reduced to the status of “government functionaries” acting on behalf of the state to control the population.<sup>8</sup>

Another example of the state influence is the hierarchy of organizational structure of the Shin Buddhism being appropriated by the government. The fifteenth century Shin Buddhist leader, Rennyo, had reorganized the Honggajin home temple as the heart of a network of affiliated temples sprawling across Japan with a clear power structure. Such hierarchical structure had enabled Shin Buddhism to better organize and mobilize its controlled resources and manpower, which eventually led to the creation of its own state during the chaotic Sengoku Jidai. This hierarchical way of organizing temples would later be adopted by the Meiji government so that every temple had to belong to a network and be responsible to answer to a superior further solidifying state control over Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, ideological justifications by native Japanese Buddhist schools further reinforced such political tendencies. Early leaders of Shin Buddhism, such as Kakunyo and Rennyo, are believed to have preached ideals of “placing priority on the King’s Laws (oubou ihon).<sup>10</sup> D.T. Suzuki has also been cited of promoting “total obedience to government” in twentieth

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<sup>8</sup> Victoria, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>10</sup> Yoshida, Tomoko. "Kuroda Toshio (1926-1993) on Jōdo Shinshū: Problems in Modern Historiography." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33, no. 2 (2006), 386.

century.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the strong organizational structure of Shin Buddhism and the threat it posed to the authority would result in the split of Honganji, the home temple and headquarters of the Shin Buddhism, by the Tokugawa government into two that were pitched against each other.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, it is no surprise that during the Meiji era, when Buddhism once again was under attack, its survival was believed by the Buddhist leader to be closely associated with its reconciliation with the state. In response to the new Meiji policy to marginalize Buddhism, the two Honganji's, instead of protesting, sought to lend monetary support to the newly formed and financially troubled Meiji government in order to "soft influence" its attitude. At the same time, they also sought to divert the hostility manifested in the new nationalistic narratives from Buddhism to the more foreign religion, namely Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the Buddhist-lead political movement had succeeded in alleviating its status from on the brink of being outlawed to that of state sponsorship.

Japanese Buddhism's support for the imperial state also manifested in its support for colonial expansion. Zen Buddhist missionaries arrived in Korea, its newly gained colony in the early twentieth century, to "civilize" the local population.<sup>14</sup> Even though the Koreans also had their own Buddhism (and in fact, Buddhism came to Japan from here), it was

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<sup>11</sup> Victoria, 54

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Hur, Nam-Lin. "The Sōtō Sect and Japanese Military Imperialism in Korea." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1999): 128.

considered primitive and backwards and needed to be transformed by the more enlightened version of Japanese Zen.<sup>15</sup> Notice how this is uncharacteristic of traditional Buddhism's non-conversion doctrine, but more resembles Christianity, which can be an indication to one instance of Christian influence. In addition, the Buddhist missionary work in the colonies was not just a matter of religious conversion but more important that of political and cultural conversion, i.e. to facilitate the process of *kominka* (transforming into imperial subjects).<sup>16</sup>

However, at this point, it would be very misleading to assume that all Buddhist denominations were acting along the nationalistic and imperialistic lines. Even at the height of Japanese ultra-nationalism during the 1930's, some schools exhibited anti-nationalism sentiment in their teachings. A notable example is the Shinko Bukkyo Seinen Domei (Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism) founded by Senou Girou, a former Nichiren Buddhist priest.<sup>17</sup> As a form of new religion, the Youth League was heavily influenced by and committed to socialism and Marxism. Consequently, it was preaching for internationalism while against nationalism, militarism and imperialism.<sup>18</sup> However, its fast growth and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Shields, 333. Victoria, 66. Powles, 436.

<sup>18</sup> Shields, James Mark. "A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution: The Radical Buddhism of Seno'o Girō (1889–1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012): 338-9.

outspoken criticism brought upon it the forceful suppression by the government. By 1942, its organization was eradicated.<sup>19</sup>

## Buddhism and Militarism

Even in the premodern times, a case can be made for the relationship between Buddhism and militarism in Japan. Historically, Zen Buddhism had been largely associated with the samurai class due to the supposed compatibility of the Zen teachings and the way of the warrior or Bushido. Dougen, the founder of the Japanese Soudou school of Zen Buddhism, was a highly regarded guest at the court of Houjou Tokiyori, the effective military ruler of Japan of his time. Another Kamakura shogunate leader, Houjou Tokimune, under whose leadership Japan successfully resisted the Mongol invasions, was instrumental in the spreading of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Similarly, Shin Buddhism, with its leadership roles in the fierce peasant rebellions during the Sengoku Jidai, was not exactly known for its pacifist manners. The bloody *ikko-ikki* movement that consisted of mostly Shin Buddhists produced one of the most striking war-inspiring religious slogans: “march forward to the paradise; retreat back to the hell.”

Historical connections aside, the modern fusion of Buddhism and militarism came after the Meiji Restoration for similar reasons that involve the interaction between Buddhism and the state which we have talked about in the above section about nationalism. As early as the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, Buddhists in support of imperialist expansions had

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<sup>19</sup> Victoria, 73.

already proclaimed pro-militarism narratives.<sup>20</sup> Pure Land Buddhists even formed organizations that were specifically in services of military personnel and their families.

Ideologically speaking, war-time Buddhism justified Imperial Japan's aggressions on the other countries, particularly China, on two foundations. It was Japan's responsibility as the leader of Asia to preserve the Asian civilization and protect it from the encroachment by the Western imperialist powers. Second, as a successfully civilized and modernized nation, the imperial government was the only capable choice to deliver the Asian peoples from their own corrupt leaders who stood no chance against the invading Western great powers. In order to realize the goal of uniting the greater Asia under one banner and the leadership of non-white, the deployment of large scale violent means including wars could be justified for the greater good.<sup>21</sup> In these Buddhists' narratives, when it became inevitable, the killing of one person so that others could live a better life should be considered compatible with benevolence and compassion of Buddhist teachings.<sup>22</sup> Again, one could argue that there is clearly traces of Christian influence in terms of the concept of "just war" at play in such narratives.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Victoria, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Kisala, Robert. *Prophets of Peace: Pacifism and Cultural Identity in Japan's New Religions*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 31 – 32.

A further step that Zen Buddhism took in the post-Meiji era is its attempt to fuse the ideals of Zen Buddhism and those of Bushido.<sup>24</sup> For example, the simplicity of Zen teachings could match perfectly with Spartan lifestyle of a true warrior. The most fundamental of all Buddhist teachings is the concept of emptiness, which when applied to the notion of an empty self naturally leads to the warrior spirit of selfless sacrifice. Instead of looking to the future reincarnations, the search of liberation in Zen Buddhism is rooted in the present life and this world, which aligns with a warrior's patriotic spirit and loyal service to the current emperor.<sup>25</sup>

The imagination of Zen in military terms coincided with the reimagination and revival of samurai culture in the post-Meiji Japan decades after the samurai classes disappeared. Since the distillation of Bushido in the modern times constituted the construction of a true Japanese spiritual essence as represented by the samurai culture, the merge of Zen ideals with Bushido in turn alleviated Zen Buddhism as representing the very essence of Japaneseness. In a time when not too long-ago Buddhism was denounced as being not Japanese enough, it was a crucial protection mechanism that could prevent Buddhism from being excluded from the Japanese society again.

What came next was the creation of the Imperial Way Zen. However, a closer look at its teachings should reveal that they are a combination of an array of Japanese traditional values that are molded to fit the extreme nationalistic narratives which may or may not have direct relations with the actual teachings of Buddhism at all.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the Imperial Way

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<sup>24</sup> Victoria, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 118.

Zen, rather than being a real form of Buddhism, had merely served as a tool in legitimating nationalism and militarism that needed support from the Japanese “history and traditions.”

Again, the imperial military aggressions did not gain universal support from all Japanese Buddhists. Aside from the Youth League that has been mentioned in the above section, many an individual also displayed their disdain towards immoral and inhumane wartime policies. In response to the “just war” theory concocted by some Zen Buddhists, a Pure Land priest is said to have quoted Benjamin Franklin that “there never was a good war or a bad peace.”<sup>27</sup> However, the dissident Buddhists seem to have focused their concerns only on matter involving wartime atrocities instead of on militarism itself. Even so, such opposition was rare and had no substantial impact on the Japanese war time policies.

Much of the above criticism of Zen Buddhism’s involvement in promoting militarism comes from Brian Victoria’s two books. However, his overt critical stance towards wartime Zen Buddhism did not go unchallenged. Scholars have since tried to offer different perspectives into the events that don’t portray the Zen Buddhists as the major perpetrators of war crimes.<sup>28</sup> Most notable is Kemmyou Satou’s response to Victoria’s book where he cites long passages from D.T. Suzuki’s publications at various points in time to argue that the portrayal of Suzuki as a warmonger is misleading and distorting historical facts.<sup>29</sup> This

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 73 -74.

<sup>28</sup> I have cited Lobreglio in a later section.

<sup>29</sup> See Sato, Kemmyo Taira. "D. T. Suzuki and the Question of War." *Middle Way*, 2010.

Victoria, Brian Daizen D. "The "negative Side" of D. T. Suzuki's Relationship to War."

*Eastern Buddhist* 41, no. 2 (2010): 97-138.

triggered a series of debate between Satou and Victoria who heatedly cited primary sources and argued about the controversial image of D.T. Suzuki.

### Reasons for the diverging views of Buddhism

As we have shown above, unlike early studies that tend to assign a simplistic label on Japanese Buddhism's support for ultra-nationalism or militarism, recent scholarships have shown a more complex picture where the view of Buddhism in Japan on such matters was much more ambivalent. In the following section, I would like to explore a few factors that may have contributed to the diverging views.

One obvious factor is of course the differences in doctrines of various Buddhist branches. Buddhism is by no means a singular and unitary religion with a single authority on its creed. A study on new religions affiliated with Buddhism, although conducted in the post-War Japan, can still be used as a useful indication as to how differences in doctrinal leanings affected the believers' political views.<sup>30</sup> For example, a survey that asked about respondent's attitude towards the position of the emperor shows that, while the result of total percentages showed no surprising numbers with the majority (69%) favoring a status quo where the emperor remains to be the symbol of the unity of the Japanese nation as written in the constitution, the distribution of these numbers among different sects varied wildly. Noticeably the Nipponzan Myouhouji, well known for its anti-war peace movement, showed a majority (57%) favoring the abolishment of the imperial system.<sup>31</sup> As for the pre-

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<sup>30</sup> Kisala, 189 -210.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 198.

War Japan, despite the effort made by the Imperial Japanese government to control and regulate religions through centralizing measures, Buddhism itself remained a diverse religion with many different branches that focused on various teachings. The imperial government's controls were largely confined within the administrative realm and could not entirely direct the religion's doctrinal development. Thus, it could not fully control the resultant different views at any given time.

Secondly historical circumstances played an important role in influencing Buddhism's attitudes towards nationalism and militarism, or any other ideologies for that matter. The shift in the general political environment both domestically and internationally from the Taishou to the Shouwa period inevitably affected Buddhism as well. A good example to illustrate this would be that following the end of World War I, many of the Buddhist "moderates" were not in full support of militarism and nationalism. On the contrary, some of them were even pushing for progressive changes internationally. However, the result of the Paris Peace Conference as dictated by the imperialist Western powers had negatively changed the political prospect of such efforts.<sup>32</sup> The Japanese had hoped to include a clause of "equality of races" in the Treaty of Versailles but the British and American opposition had thwarted the attempted proposal.<sup>33</sup> The Buddhist press in Japan fully covered the events around the Paris Conference and was greatly disappointed. The mistrust of West powers grew rapidly among the Buddhists and some even "argued that the

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<sup>32</sup> LoBreglio, John. "Dashed Hopes: Japanese Buddhist Perspectives on the Paris Peace Conference" *Asia after Versailles*. (Edinburgh University Press: 2017), 145.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 167

seeds of another war had already been sown.”<sup>34</sup> Although this should not absolve Japanese Buddhists’ responsibility in their support for war, it does offer an alternative to explaining their varying attitudes.

More importantly, the fundamental social changes brought about by the Meiji Restoration and that they continued in the following century were inevitably accompanied with rapid and intermittent changes in the religious thoughts which sometimes came into conflicts with each other.<sup>35</sup> Buddhism was brought into this struggle of the “old” vs the “new” from the very beginning of the Meiji Restoration. What had exacerbated the conflicts is the fact that Meiji Restoration itself, while being an attempt to modernize, is ironically enshrouded in this old vs new conflict as well, as evidenced by the appearance of many anachronistic features. Even the term “Meiji Restoration” itself illustrates such irony. The Japanese term “*ishin*” literally means changing for the new and is often used in the sense of reforms, which is the exact opposite of the English translation of “restoration.” Of course, the bases for the political reforms in the Bakumatsu period were supposed to be the restoration of the ancient imperial authority which had not been a reality except in the very distant past. Even more so, the very term *ishin*, with such a connotation of striving for the new future, comes from the almost three-thousand-year-old Chinese classic work, the *Book of Songs*. This is just a small indication, in the most literary form, to the fact that the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 165 – 166

<sup>35</sup> Kiyota, Minoru. "Buddhism in Postwar Japan: A Critical Survey." *Nippon Bunka Shiso/Monumenta Nipponica* 24, no. 1-2 (1969), 131 – 32.

modernization process following the Meiji Restoration had already been torn between the old and the new.

Like the conflict between the restoration of an ancient power and the embrace of the Western modernity, Buddhism itself was caught in between. We have already mentioned the creation of the new Japanese national identity relied on the old religious and cultural traditions. In fact, it could even be said that the constant struggle of the old vs new narrative is almost inherently part of Buddhism in Japan. From the earliest struggle between the “new” Buddhism and the “old” *kami* worship to the “old” schools of Tendai and Ritsu and the “new” schools of Zen and Pure Land. The cycle had reversed in the Meiji Restoration where the “new” Shintoism is one step towards the creation of a new Western-like civilization whereas Buddhism is the “old” that needs to be gotten rid of or at least reformed<sup>36</sup> (and in the same manner the reformed new Japanese version of Zen also had to take up the responsibility to civilize the old and backwards Korean Zen Buddhism). The ambivalent attitudes could just be a reflection of the ambivalent role Buddhism had played in all this time.

Closely related to the changing roles that Buddhism played is the fact that such changes in its narratives on nationalism and militarism and its relations and interactions with the state could bring about material benefits or at least secure its own position to survive by revolutionizing itself and remodeling its doctrines to fit with narratives of the new age. In fact, this is not only true regarding the points of nationalism and militarism in Imperial Japan. In terms of new religions, Senno’s teachings for the Youth League showed a deep

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 116 – 117.

commitment to Marxism as having been mentioned early, which is certainly a response to the trends at the time.<sup>37</sup>

This point could be even better illustrated by the post-War trends in Buddhist narratives. In post-War Japan, new schools and new forms of Buddhism started to embrace liberal ideas such as democracy and etc.<sup>38</sup> The centuries old ideals of Buddhism were once again reconciled with the latest development in Japan as it did at various previous points of time in history. Immediately after the War, D.T. Suzuki changed his stance to cut ties with his previous promotions of militarism and assigning blames to the abandoned values and systems.<sup>39</sup> An even more current example is the present Shin Buddhism's opposition of the Fundamental Law of Education in 2003, in which Shin Buddhism has fully embraced the values of equality and peace and even shows a positive approach towards globalization.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

When I first started this research project, I was interested in finding out about Japanese Buddhism's view on World War II and its associated devastation especially in relation to and as a result of the atomic bombings because I thought that given Buddhism's pervasive influence in the Japanese culture and its teachings that are interestingly pertinent to

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<sup>37</sup> Shields, 348

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 336.

<sup>39</sup> Victoria, 147 – 149.

<sup>40</sup> Dessì, Ugo. "Shin Buddhism, Authority, and the Fundamental Law of Education." *Numen* 56, no. 5 (2009), 536 – 537.

the ideas of war and suffering, I would gain some unique perspectives on these matters. In the end, I did gain much valuable insight into the history and historical narratives of Buddhism in the pre-War Japan but in a very unexpected way than I had imagined. In fact, I have failed to reach a unitary and cohesive conclusion of “the Buddhist perspective” on these matters because, as it turned out, there wasn’t one. I have realized that instead of a static and unchanging view, Buddhist narratives, its relations and interactions with the historical events and even Buddhism itself were ever evolving in response to the circumstances. The dynamism and fluidity are fascinating.

To be sure, there is certainly a continuity in the Buddhist narratives as evidenced by the appearance of historical precedences of most ideological justifications Buddhist leaders cited or at least imagined during this time period. But the desired and achieved end results were inevitably rooted in the contemporary circumstances. One of the major themes of this era, as repeatedly mentioned, was Japan’s desperate attempt to embrace modernization. But what entails modernity is still worth considering. We have talked about how Buddhism was seen as representing the old and reactionary in the early Meiji reforms. In the meantime, the new idea of nationalism needed support from historical precedence and Buddhism was quickly transformed to be an integral part of the Japanese spirit, even the very essence of Japaneseness.

One cannot help but wonder if such contradictions are inherent in Buddhism. When discussing religion, Max Weber notes that one of the inherent incompatibilities of religion with modernity is that religion requires faith, but the modern world is supposed to have built on rationality. Rationality is essentially the opposite of blind faith. Therefore, religion would be inherently incompatible with the modern world. However, even within Weber’s own theoretical system, this observation does not stop him from arguing for the instrumentality

of Protestantism in the making of modern capitalism. Indeed, Buddhism itself has embodied a pair of contradictions that are the simultaneously entangled “old” and “new.” When Buddhism first arrived in Japan, it was the new while the *kami* worship was the old. During the Kamakura period, the Ritsu and Tendai schools were the old but the Zen and Pure Land were the new. During Meiji Restoration, the state Shinto was the new, but Buddhism was the old. And the list goes on.

Another pair of contradictions lie in nationalism. Buddhism, as other major world religions, has been transnational in nature, which makes its fervent support for nationalism particularly curious. In fact, that Buddhism, for its foreign origin, was constantly under attack when there was a social crisis was no strange phenomenon in East Asia. Japanese Buddhism had its fare share of struggle in the early days. And it was almost entirely expelled following the Meiji Restoration. But the fact is that not only Japanese Buddhism made it back and flourished, the supposedly opposing ideology of modern nationalism had also successfully made use of Buddhism to the end of strengthening itself. Nationalism taking advantage of Buddhist narratives is indeed not unique in Japan.<sup>41</sup> But for Japanese Buddhism to become nationalistic and even racist is an entirely different matter as we have seen in the case of Zen Buddhist missionaries in Korea.

Thus far, I have shown that the recent history of Buddhism in Japan is a series of struggles between different identities and the reconciliation of such identities placed against the larger international and historical background. It does not constitute a singular and

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<sup>41</sup> Bowie, Katherine A. "Of Buddhism and Militarism in Northern Thailand: Solving the Puzzle of the Saint Khruubaa Srivichai." *J3*, no. 3 (2014): 711-32.

unitary narrative. As Ienaga summarizes when he describes Japanese Buddhism's relations with the state authority: "even in Japanese Buddhism, which generally was subservient to the ruling class, there undeniably existed a tradition of its being an anti-authoritarian faith that shuns power and preaches encouraging messages for the underprivileged masses."<sup>42</sup> That is the reason why I have put the two Japanese Buddhist phrases on my opening page because I think it best summarizes my point.

Finally, unlike most schools of Buddhism in China and India, Buddhists of Imperial Buddhism believe that they were unique in accepting social engagements as opposed to withdrawal from the society.<sup>43</sup> The claim may or may not be true, but it has significant implications for the future world. Richard Madsen has shown his book *Democracy's Dharma* that religious organizations' participation in constructing modern Taiwan's social warfare system and democracy. This is relevant to Japan because the organizational structure of the Taiwanese Fo Guang Shan monastery system is clearly inspired by that of Shin Buddhism. If the Buddhist institutions in the Old Japan had wronged in terms of its support for militarism and imperialism, what can we make of the future roles that Buddhism can play in this new era?

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<sup>42</sup> Ienaga, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Victoria, 104.

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