

At temples of the Zen sect of Buddhism, it is common to encounter scenes of quiet meditation.



INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCUMENTS

Despite its relatively isolated location on the rim of Asia, Japan has been the heir to both physical and cultural migrations from the mainland.

Between the 6th and 9th centuries A.D., the Japanese eagerly sought out and adopted major elements of Chinese culture. For example, the Taika reforms of the 7th century and the development of Buddhist philosophies were inspired by Prince Shotoku's admiration for Chinese culture. This importation of Chinese culture did not replace Japanese traditions, however. Rather, the new ideas were tested against the old; those that fit were kept while those that did not were cast aside. In the end, the cultural borrowing enabled the Japanese to make their own distinct contributions, especially after they evolved their own system of writing in the 10th century.

In the documents that follow, you will see how the Japanese adapted and transformed what they had borrowed from China in these early centuries.

DOCUMENT 1 MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

This excerpt is from the Vimalakirti Sutra. (A sutra is a Buddhist dialogue or sermon.) It is an example of Mahayana Buddhism, also referred to as the "Greater Vehicle," one of the two principal divisions of Buddhism. In contrast to Hinayana Buddhism, or the "Lesser Vehicle," Mahayana Buddhists not only look on Buddha as a god but also believe that all living beings can attain Buddhahood. Implicit in this school of Buddhism is the messianic mission of helping others achieve salvation.

At that time, there dwelt in the great city of Vaishali a wealthy householder named Vimalakirti. Having done homage to countless Buddhas of the past, doing many good works, attaining to acquiescence in the Eternal Law, he was a man of wonderful eloquence.

Exercising supernatural powers, obtaining all magic formulas, arriving at the state of fearlessness,

Repressing all evil enmities, reaching the gate of profound truth, walking in the way of wisdom. . . .

Residing in Vaishali only for the sake of the necessary means for saving creatures, abundantly rich, ever careful of the poor, pure in self-discipline, obedient to all precepts,

Removing all anger by the practice of patience, removing all sloth by the practice of diligence, removing all distraction of mind by intent meditation, removing all ignorance by fullness of wisdom;

Though he is but a simple layman, yet observing the pure monastic discipline;

Though living at home, yet never desirous of anything;

Though possessing a wife and children, always exercising pure virtues;

Though surrounded by his family, holding aloof from worldly pleasures;

Though using the jewel ornaments of the world, yet adorned with spiritual splendor;

Though eating and drinking, yet enjoying the flavor of the rapture of the meditation;

Though frequenting the gambling house, yet leading the gamblers into the right path;

Though coming into contact with heresy, yet never letting his true faith be impaired;

Though having a profound knowledge of worldly learning yet ever finding pleasure in things of the spirit as thought by Buddha. . . .

Teaching [nobles] patience when among them as the most honorable of their kind;

Removing arrogance when among [priests] as the most honorable of their kind;

Teaching justice to great ministers when among them as the most honorable of their kind;

Teaching loyalty and filial piety to the princes when among them as the most honorable of their kind;

Teaching honesty to the ladies of the court when among them as the most honorable of their kind;

Persuading the masses to cherish the virtue of merits when among them as the most honorable of their kind. . . .

—Thus by such countless means Vimalakirti, the wealthy householder, rendered benefit to all beings.

SOURCE: Tsunoda, Ryusaku, W. T. De Bary, and Donald Keene, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1, pp. 100–103.

What ethical guidelines does this sutra establish for members of the court? How do these guidelines reflect both Buddhist and Confucian thought?

DOCUMENT 2 PRINCE SHOTOKU TEACHES CONFUCIANISM

Setting an example for the court, Prince Shotoku learned to read and write Chinese and carefully studied Chinese literature, especially Confucian philosophy. Shotoku encouraged the Japanese to adopt Confucianism as the source of political and familial ethics as these excerpts from his writings indicate.

I. Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided. Everyone has his biases, and few men are far sighted. Therefore some disobey their lords and fathers and keep up feuds with their neighbors. But when the superiors are in harmony with each other and inferiors are friendly, then affairs are discussed quietly and the right view of matters prevails. Then there is nothing that cannot be accomplished!

III. Do not fail to obey the commands of your Sovereign. He is like Heaven, which is above the Earth, and the vassal is like the Earth, which bears up Heaven. When Heaven and Earth are properly in place, the four seasons follow their course and all is well in Nature. But if the Earth attempts to take the place of Heaven, Heaven would simply fall in ruin.

IV. The Ministers and officials of the state should make proper behavior their first principle, for if the superiors do not behave properly, the inferiors are disorderly; if the inferiors behave improperly, offenses will naturally result. . . .

V. Deal impartially with the legal complaints which are submitted to you. If the man who is to decide suits at law makes gain his motive, and hears cases with a view to receiving bribes, then the suits of the rich man will be like a stone flung into water, meeting no resistance, while the complaints of the poor will be like water thrown upon a stone. In these circumstances the poor man will not know where to go, nor will he behave as he should.

VI. Punish the evil and reward the good. This was the excellent rule of antiquity. Therefore do not hide the good qualities of others or fail to correct what is wrong when you see it. . . .

XV. To subordinate private interests to the public good—that is the path of a vassal. Now if a man is influenced by private motives, he will be resentful, and if he is influenced by resentment he will fail to act harmoniously with others. If he fails to act harmoniously with others, the public interest will suffer. Resentment interferes with order and is subversive to law. . . .

SOURCE: Hyman Kublan, *Japan: Selected Readings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 30–34.

What Confucian values did Prince Shotoku seek to introduce to Japan?

EMBASSY TO SHIRAGI

The Manyoshu (One Thousand Poems) is one of the earliest anthologies of Japanese poetry. Written in 736, after the introduction of Chinese literature as well as Buddhism, these poems reflect Japanese culture during the 7th and 8th centuries. The poem below recalls the sorrow that a Japanese family feels when a loved one leaves on an embassy to China.

Embassy to Shiragi

When I am parted from you, my dearest,
Who fold me as with wings,
As a water bird its chick on Muko Bay
On the sand-bar of the inlet—
O I shall die of yearning after you.

Could my great ship take you in,
I would keep you, beloved,
Folding you as with wings!

When mist rises on the seashore
Where you put in,
Consider it the breathing
Of my sighs at home.

When autumn comes we shall meet again;
Then how would you raise such sighs
That they would mist the shore!

Wear yourself not out
With yearning after me,
In the month when the autumn wind blows
We shall meet again.

For you, who journey to Shiragi,
I will, in purification, wait,
Longing to see your eyes again,
To-day or to-morrow.

Unaware that the ships must wait
For high tide,
I have parted, to my grief,
From my love so soon.

SOURCE: *The Manyoshu*, Translation of "One Thousand Poems" by The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 242-243.

Why might a young Japanese in the 8th century have chosen to go to China despite the loneliness of leaving family and friends?

THE TALE OF GENJI

About 1000, at the height of the Heian period, several great ladies at court chronicled the events of the day. These women did not write in Chinese as the men of the court did; instead, they used the symbols that the Japanese had adapted from the Chinese to fit their own language. Among the best known works of this period are *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon and *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki. The latter, which has been called the world's first novel, recounts in leisurely fashion the adventures of Prince Genji, a son of the emperor. Through Murasaki's descriptions, we gain insight into the ceremonies and rituals of court life.

Though it seemed a shame to put so lovely a child into man's dress, he was now twelve years old and the time for his Initiation was come. The emperor directed the preparations with tireless zeal and insisted upon a magnificence beyond what was prescribed. . . . The ceremony took place in the eastern wing of the Emperor's own apartments, and the Throne was placed facing towards the east, with the seats of the Initiate-to-be and his Sponsor (the Minister of the Left) in front.

Genji arrived at the hour of the Monkey [3 P.M.]. He looked very handsome with his long childish locks, and the Sponsor, whose duty it had just been to bind them with the purple fillet, was sorry to think that all this would soon be changed and even the Clerk of the Treasury seemed reluctant to sever those lovely tresses with the ritual knife. The Emperor, as he watched, remembered for a moment what pride the mother would have taken in the ceremony, but soon drove the weak thought from his mind.

Duly crowned, Genji went to his chamber and changing into man's dress went down into the courtyard and performed the Dance of Homage, which he did with such grace that tears stood in every eye. And now the Emperor, whose grief had of late grown somewhat less insistent, was again overwhelmed by memories of the past.

It had been feared that his delicate features would show to less advantage when he had put aside his childish dress; but on the contrary he looked handsomer than ever.

His sponsor, the Minister of the Left, had an only daughter whose beauty the Heir Apparent had noticed. But now the father began to think he would not encourage that match, but would offer her to Genji. He sounded the Emperor upon this, and found that he would be very glad to obtain for the boy the advantage of so powerful a connection.

SOURCE: Lady Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Arthur Waley (New York: Modern Library, 1960), pp. 18-20.

How can a novel such as *The Tale of Genji* serve as a historical document? What are its limitations as a document?

TIME LINE FOR JAPAN AND THE WEST

JAPAN

- 400 *Yamato clan begins to extend military control over Honshu, neighboring Japanese islands, and parts of Korea*
- 552 *Buddhism introduced into Japan*
- 604— *Prince Shotoku establishes a constitutional monarchy; opens relations with Sui dynasty in China*
- 629
- 645 *Taika reforms instituted—power of central government strengthened; tax-collecting system improved*
- 794— *Heian period begins. Capital moved to Heian (Kyoto); contacts with China become infrequent; power of emperor declines*
- 1185
- 1000 *World's first novel—Tale of Genji—written by Lady Murasaki*
- 1185— *Feudal period. Shogun dynasties rule Japan; emperor becomes merely a ceremonial figure*
- 1868
- 1926 *Emperor Hirohito begins his rule*

THE WEST

- 476 *Collapse of the Roman Empire in the West; Germanic invasions*
- 528— *Justinian briefly reconquers western territories of Roman Empire*
- 565
- 622 *Beginning of expansion of Islam to North Africa and western Europe*
- 732 *Charles Martel stops Moslem advance at Tours*
- 800 *Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman emperor*
- 840 *Carolingian empire declines; feudalism emerges throughout western Europe as Viking, Magyar, and Moslem invasions begin*
- 1096— *First Crusade*
- 1099
- 1385 *Canterbury Tales written by Geoffrey Chaucer*
- 1453 *Constantinople falls to Turks; end of Byzantine Empire*