

Cultures of Sound: Lineages of Sutra Recitation in Medieval Japan

In the early centuries CE, Central Asian monks rendered the Buddhist scriptures into a host of languages, including Chinese. These monks chose to translate some terms while deciding to transliterate others. For instance, the Sanskrit word *śūnya* ('emptiness,' as related to the interdependence of all phenomena) is often translated into the Chinese *ku* ('empty,' 'open,' or, as a noun, 'sky'), whereas *pāramitā* (the 'perfections' of an enlightened being) generally is transliterated as *boluomiduo* (four symbols whose basic meanings are, respectively, 'wave,' 'silk gauze,' 'honey' and 'many'), which enters the Sinitic lexicon as a loan word. It is one of the great curiosities of East Asian Buddhism that, even into the modern era, the sutras thereafter remained, by and large, in the language of Classical Chinese, despite an awareness of both the presence of Sanskrit originals and the advantages of translation into local languages like Japanese. This historical peculiarity raises questions about how clerics and lay devotees conceived of and accessed the scriptures.

The recitation of sutras has a long history in Japan, well-attested in any number of treatises, most of which were composed by highly educated clerics in close communication with the aristocratic capitals of pre-modern Japan. Though practices of sutra recitation were largely uncodified in the early centuries of Japanese-Buddhist interaction, clerics and aristocrats associated with the court of Emperor Goshirakawa (1127-1192, r. 1155-1158) began to solidify rules of pronunciation in the late 1100s. His successors Emperors Gotoba (1180-1239, r. 1183-1198) and Gosaga (1220-1227, r. 1242-1246) continued to shape the development of sutra reading aesthetics and to sponsor the training of monks, many of whom were the underemployed and ambitious younger sons of large aristocratic families. By the thirteenth century sutra reading (Jp: *dokyō*) had become a recognized art form (Jp: *michi*), requiring extensive training and affiliation with a lineage of oral tradition.

In this talk, I sketch the contours of recent Japanese scholarship on the musical recitation of sutras in and around the Japanese court, and I engage directly with a number of recently discovered musical treatises. I argue that medieval acoustic and performance-based practices – and their attendant literature of codification (manuals, secret transmission records, and so forth) – open an inter-lingual space in which the tones of Chinese are dropped, without syntax being altered to fit Japanese semantic norms, such that meaningful sound in Chinese is derailed without meaningful sound in Japanese becoming entrained. This, however, is not an emptying out of meaning. Rather, by dwelling on, swelling out, breaking through, and melismatically extending the sound of each phoneme, the incommensurability of language with meaning becomes the object of an extended, vocalized meditation which itself becomes appropriated, as cultural capital, by the imperial court.

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