

Nihon Ryōiki: Bridging Belief and Story

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Nihon Ryōiki, compiled by the monk Kyōkai in the early Heian period (794-1185), stands as one of Japan's earliest collections of Buddhist setsuwa tales. This paper explores the religious, cultural, and literary significance of Nihon Ryōiki, examining its role in the dissemination of Buddhist doctrine and the syncretism between Buddhism and native Shinto beliefs. Through an analysis of its narrative structure, thematic content, and historical context, the paper argues that Nihon Ryōiki serves as both a didactic text and a reflection of the spiritual anxieties of early Japanese society.

The collection is divided into three volumes, each containing a series of short stories that illustrate the workings of karma, divine retribution, and miraculous events attributed to the Buddhist faith. By narrating these supernatural occurrences, Kyōkai aimed to reinforce the moral principles of Buddhism among the common people, who were often illiterate and relied on oral traditions for religious instruction. The tales also reveal the early stages of Japan's unique blend of Buddhist and Shinto practices, highlighting the fluid boundaries between these two religious traditions.

This paper further situates Nihon Ryōiki within the broader context of early Japanese literature, comparing it with other contemporaneous works to underscore its distinct contributions to the development of a Buddhist literary tradition in Japan. By examining its enduring influence on subsequent Japanese literature and culture, the paper concludes that Nihon Ryōiki not only served as a foundational text for Buddhist teachings but also played a crucial role in shaping Japan's literary and religious landscape.

Nihon Ryōiki remains a vital resource for understanding the complex interplay between religion, culture, and literature in early Japan, offering insights into the historical evolution of Japanese spiritual and literary traditions.

Keywords: *Nihon Ryōiki, Japanese literature, karma, oral tradition, religious doctrine*

Introduction

Nihon Ryōiki (日本靈異記), often translated as *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan*, is a seminal work in early Japanese Buddhist literature. Compiled by the monk *Kyōkai* during the early Heian period (794-1185), this text is a collection of Buddhist Setsuwa (説話), or anecdotal stories, that document supernatural occurrences attributed to the influence of Buddhist faith and practice. The work is considered the earliest extant example of this genre in Japan, and it provides valuable insights into the religious and cultural milieu of the time.

The *Nihon Ryōiki* is more than just a compilation of miraculous tales; it reflects the deep integration of Buddhism into the daily lives of the Japanese people during the Nara period (奈良時代) and early Heian period (平安時代). The stories are imbued with themes of karmic retribution, the benefits of pious actions, and the perils of neglecting Buddhist practices. These narratives were intended to educate the populace on Buddhist principles, reinforcing the moral and ethical standards of the time.

Kyōkai's work is not merely a religious text; it is also a crucial piece of literature that bridges the gap between the oral traditions of the early Japanese people and the written records that followed. The *Nihon Ryōiki* serves as an invaluable historical document, offering a glimpse into the concerns, beliefs, and values of early Japanese society. It also reflects the syncretism of Buddhist and indigenous *Shintō* beliefs, showcasing the unique spiritual landscape of ancient Japan.

Historical Background of *Nihon Ryōiki* and Its Author

Nihon Ryōiki was compiled during the early Heian period, a time of significant transformation in Japan's religious and cultural landscape. This era marked the consolidation of Buddhism as a dominant force in Japanese society, influenced by the Buddhist doctrines and practices. The early Heian period also saw the rise of temple complexes as centers of religious, educational, and political power.

Monk *Kyōkai*: The Author

The monk *Kyōkai* (景戒), attributed as the compiler of *Nihon Ryōiki*, was a Buddhist cleric of the early Heian period, although specific details about his life remain largely obscure. *Kyōkai* is believed to have been affiliated with the influential temple of Yakushi-ji (薬師寺) in Nara, one of the most important religious centers of the time. Yakushi-ji was originally constructed in the late 7th century by Emperor Tenmu (天武天皇) and was dedicated to Yakushi Nyorai (薬師如来), the Buddha of Medicine, reflecting the temple's association with healing and protection.

Kyōkai's connection to Yakushi-ji would have placed him in an environment deeply embedded with Buddhist learning and practice. The temple was a hub for the *Hosso* school of Buddhism, which emphasized the study of the mind and consciousness, themes that are subtly reflected in the moral and spiritual lessons of *Nihon Ryōiki*. *Kyōkai's* work can be seen as part of the broader mission of Buddhist monks at the time to educate and convert the populace through accessible means, such as the storytelling found in *Nihon Ryōiki*.

Yakushi-ji

Yakushi-ji, located in Nara, played a critical role in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings throughout Japan. As a significant temple of the *Hosso* school, *Yakushi-ji* was involved in scholarly activities, the copying of sutras, and the training of monks. The temple's role extended beyond the religious; it was a cultural and intellectual center where ideas about morality, cosmology, and the nature of existence were explored.

Kyōkai's affiliation with *Yakushi-ji* is particularly relevant in understanding *Nihon Ryōiki* as a reflection of the temple's mission. The stories in *Nihon Ryōiki* are didactic in nature, often illustrating the consequences of karmic actions and the benefits of Buddhist devotion. This aligns with the *Hosso* school's emphasis on understanding the workings of the mind and the nature of reality, which were key components of the teachings propagated at *Yakushi-ji*.

The Historical and Cultural Context

The early Heian period was characterized by the gradual shift of political power from the imperial court in Nara to the emerging aristocracy in Kyoto. This transition also influenced the religious sphere, as Buddhism became increasingly intertwined with the state, leading to the construction of grand temples and the spread of Buddhist teachings as a means of maintaining social order. *Nihon Ryōiki* was written against this backdrop of growing Buddhist influence, serving both as a religious text and a tool for moral instruction.

The tales in *Nihon Ryōiki* often highlight the consequences of moral and immoral actions, reinforcing the concept of karma and the Buddhist path to enlightenment. These stories were not just meant for monks or the literate elite but were intended to be accessible to the broader population, helping to spread Buddhist teachings among all social classes.

The historical background of *Nihon Ryōiki* and its author *Kyōkai* is deeply intertwined with the religious, cultural, and intellectual currents of the early Heian period. *Kyōkai's* connection to *Yakushi-ji*, a prominent temple of the *Hosso* school, likely influenced the themes and purposes of *Nihon Ryōiki*, making it a key text in the dissemination of Buddhist thought in Japan. The work serves as a testament to the role of Buddhist temples not only as religious centers but also as cultural and educational institutions that shaped the moral fabric of early Japanese society.

Structure of the Stories in *Nihon Ryōiki*

The stories are organized in a way that serves didactic purposes, aiming to reinforce Buddhist teachings and moral principles among the readers. The structure of these stories generally follows a consistent pattern that can be broken down into several key elements;

1. Introduction (序)

- ⇒ **Setting the Scene:** The stories typically begin with a brief introduction that sets the scene, including the time and place where the event occurred. This part often mentions the historical period or the reign of a specific emperor, providing a temporal and geographical context for the tale.
- ⇒ **Character Introduction:** The main characters, often ordinary people such as farmers, monks, or members of the aristocracy, are introduced. The introduction may also

include a description of the character's moral or religious disposition, hinting at the outcome of the story.

2. The Moral or Religious Issue (問題提起)

- ⇒ **Presentation of the Problem or Action:** The central issue or action that drives the narrative is presented. This could be an act of piety, a moral transgression, or a situation that calls for divine intervention. The actions of the characters, whether virtuous or sinful, set the stage for the ensuing miraculous event.
- ⇒ **Connection to Buddhist Teachings:** The story often subtly or explicitly connects the issue at hand with Buddhist doctrines, such as karma, the cycle of rebirth, or the power of Buddhist prayers and rituals.

3. The Miraculous Event (奇跡)

- ⇒ **Supernatural Occurrence:** The heart of the story revolves around a miraculous event, often attributed to the intervention of Buddhist deities, bodhisattvas, or the power of faith. This event typically serves as the turning point of the narrative, where the consequences of the character's actions manifest.
- ⇒ **Description of the Miracle:** The miracle is described in vivid detail, emphasizing its supernatural nature. This could involve healing from an illness, a divine vision, or a remarkable change in fortune. The narrative often highlights the immediate impact of the miracle on the characters and those around them.

4. Resolution and Moral (結末と教訓)

- ⇒ **Outcome of the Event:** The story concludes with the resolution of the central issue, often resulting in the reward of virtue or the punishment of sin. The characters experience the direct consequences of their actions, reinforcing the Buddhist principle of karmic retribution.
- ⇒ **Moral Lesson:** The story typically ends with an explicit or implied moral lesson, underscoring the importance of adhering to Buddhist teachings. This part serves the didactic purpose of the tale, reminding the audience of the spiritual and ethical implications of their actions.

5. Conclusion (結論)

- ⇒ **Generalization or Reflection:** Some stories conclude with a generalization or reflection that ties the specific tale to broader Buddhist concepts. This might involve a commentary on the workings of karma, the transient nature of life, or the efficacy of Buddhist rituals.
- ⇒ **Encouragement for Devotion:** The conclusion often serves to encourage the audience to cultivate Buddhist virtues, engage in religious practices, and maintain faith in the power of Buddhism to influence their lives.

Example of a Typical Story Structure

A typical story from *Nihon Ryōiki* might begin by introducing a monk who diligently recites sutras at a temple (Introduction). However, he is troubled by doubts about the effectiveness of his practices (The Moral or Religious Issue). One night, he has a divine vision in which a bodhisattva appears and assures him of the merit of his actions (The Miraculous Event). The monk wakes up with renewed faith, and his temple becomes a place of healing for the sick, who flock to receive his blessings (Resolution and Moral). The story ends by extolling the virtues of unwavering faith and the miraculous power of Buddhist devotion (Conclusion).

Variations in Structure

While the general structure remains consistent, some stories in *Nihon Ryōiki* may deviate slightly, especially in terms of length and emphasis. Some tales might focus more on the miraculous event, while others may spend more time exploring the moral implications of the characters' actions. Despite these variations, the core structure aimed at delivering a clear moral lesson remains central to the text.

Conclusion

The structured nature of the stories in *Nihon Ryōiki* reflects *Kyōkai's* intent to create a text that is both instructional and accessible to a wide audience. By adhering to a consistent narrative formula, the stories effectively convey Buddhist teachings while also engaging the reader with dramatic and miraculous events. This structure not only serves to entertain but also to instill a deep understanding of Buddhist principles in the hearts and minds of its audience.

Literary and Religious Significance of *Nihon Ryōiki*

Nihon Ryōiki, compiled by the monk *Kyōkai* in the early Heian period, is a work of profound literary and religious significance in Japanese history. As the earliest extant collection of *setsuwa*, or anecdotal tales, *Nihon Ryōiki* occupies a unique position at the intersection of literature, religion, and cultural history. The text not only serves as a crucial document for understanding the development of Japanese Buddhism but also provides invaluable insights into the social and cultural values of the period.

The Genesis of Japanese *Setsuwa* Literature

Nihon Ryōiki is widely regarded as the earliest example of *setsuwa* literature in Japan, a genre that would become highly influential in subsequent centuries. *Setsuwa*, or "spoken stories," are short narratives that often blend elements of history, folklore, and religion. These stories were traditionally passed down orally before being recorded in written form. *Nihon Ryōiki's* compilation marks the transition from oral tradition to written literature, preserving these tales for future generations.

The text's influence on later works is evident in collections such as *Konjaku Monogatari-shū* (今昔物語集), compiled in the late Heian period, which continued the tradition of combining religious teachings with entertaining stories. *Nihon Ryōiki* set the precedent for how moral lessons and religious doctrines could be conveyed through engaging narratives, a literary tradition that persisted in Japanese literature for centuries.

Narrative Structure and Style

The narrative structure of the stories in *Nihon Ryōiki* is simple yet effective, following a pattern that begins with an introduction, followed by the presentation of a moral or religious issue, the occurrence of a miraculous event, and a resolution that imparts a moral lesson. This formulaic structure was well-suited for the text's didactic purposes, ensuring that the stories were easily understandable and memorable for a wide audience.

Kyōkai's style in *Nihon Ryōiki* is characterized by its clarity and directness. The language is accessible, designed to appeal to both laypeople and the religious community. The vivid descriptions of supernatural events and the straightforward moral conclusions contribute to the text's effectiveness as a tool for religious instruction. Moreover, the stories often contain elements of suspense and wonder, which would have captured the attention of listeners or readers, making the teachings more impactful.

Integration of Oral Tradition and Written Text

Nihon Ryōiki plays a crucial role in the preservation of oral traditions, many of which would have been lost if not recorded. The transition from oral to written culture in Japan during the Heian period is reflected in this text, which captures the essence of oral storytelling while adapting it to the written form. This preservation of oral narratives is essential for understanding the cultural history of Japan, as it provides a glimpse into the beliefs, values, and fears of the people during that era.

Religious Significance

The religious significance of *Nihon Ryōiki* lies in its role as a didactic tool for spreading Buddhist teachings among the Japanese populace. The text serves as a testament to the ways in which Buddhism was adapted to the Japanese cultural context, reflecting the syncretism of Buddhist and indigenous beliefs.

Promotion of Buddhist Doctrine

Nihon Ryōiki was compiled with the explicit purpose of promoting Buddhist doctrine among a broad audience. The stories in the text emphasize the principles of karma (因果) and the concept of retribution (応報), where good deeds are rewarded, and sinful actions are punished. This focus on karmic retribution is central to the didactic purpose of the text, reinforcing the idea that one's actions have direct consequences, both in this life and in future rebirths.

The stories also illustrate the power of faith, devotion, and the efficacy of Buddhist rituals, such as chanting sutras or making offerings. For example, tales of miraculous healings or visions granted to devout believers serve to encourage piety and adherence to Buddhist practices. These narratives were intended to foster a deep sense of faith among the Japanese people, convincing them of the tangible benefits of following the Buddhist path.

Syncretism of Buddhist and Indigenous Beliefs

Nihon Ryōiki is also significant for its portrayal of the syncretism between Buddhism and indigenous *Shintō* beliefs. During the early Heian period, Buddhism was still in the process of being integrated into Japanese society, which was deeply rooted in *Shintō* traditions. The stories

in *Nihon Ryōiki* often reflect this blending of religious traditions, where Buddhist deities and bodhisattvas interact with kami (神), the spirits or gods of *Shintō*.

For instance, some tales describe kami who convert to Buddhism or assist in Buddhist endeavours, highlighting the harmonious relationship between the two religious systems. This syncretism is a defining feature of Japanese religious practice, where Buddhism and *Shintō* coexist and complement each other. *Nihon Ryōiki* provides early evidence of this process, illustrating how Buddhist teachings were adapted to resonate with the existing spiritual landscape of Japan.

Reflection of Popular Religious Beliefs

The stories in *Nihon Ryōiki* also offer valuable insights into the popular religious beliefs of the time. The text reflects the fears, hopes, and concerns of the common people, who were often preoccupied with issues of health, longevity, and the afterlife. The miraculous events described in the stories, such as the curing of illnesses, the averting of disasters, or the receiving of divine protection, would have resonated strongly with the audience, providing reassurance that their faith and actions could influence their fate.

Additionally, the text's emphasis on the power of prayer, the merit of building temples or donating to monasteries, and the importance of observing Buddhist precepts reveals the ways in which Buddhism was practiced and understood by ordinary people. *Nihon Ryōiki* thus serves as a valuable resource for understanding the lived religion of the time, offering a window into how Buddhism was experienced and interpreted by the wider populace.

Influence on Japanese Buddhism

Nihon Ryōiki had a lasting impact on the development of Japanese Buddhism. The text contributed to the popularization of Buddhist teachings, particularly among those who may not have had access to more scholarly or esoteric religious texts. By presenting Buddhist doctrines in a relatable and engaging format, *Nihon Ryōiki* helped to embed these teachings in the collective consciousness of Japanese society.

Moreover, the text's emphasis on karmic retribution and the miraculous power of faith laid the groundwork for later developments in Japanese Buddhism, including the rise of Pure Land Buddhism (浄土宗) and the focus on Amida Buddha's (阿弥陀仏) salvific power. The stories in *Nihon Ryōiki* helped to shape the moral and spiritual framework within which later Buddhist movements would develop, making it a foundational text in the history of Japanese religion.

Conclusion

Nihon Ryōiki is a text of immense literary and religious significance, serving as both a foundational work in the development of Japanese setsuwa literature and a crucial document in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Its narratives, while simple in structure, carry profound moral and religious messages that have resonated with generations of readers. By blending Buddhist teachings with elements of indigenous belief and popular culture, *Nihon Ryōiki* not only helped to spread Buddhism throughout Japan but also contributed to the creation of a uniquely Japanese religious and literary tradition. Its influence can be seen in the continued popularity of setsuwa literature and the enduring importance of Buddhist principles in Japanese cultural life.

Nihon Ryōiki stands as a remarkable work in the canon of Japanese literature and religious history, representing the intersection of Buddhist teachings and Japanese cultural identity during the early Heian period. Compiled by the monk *Kyōkai*, this collection of *setsuwa*, or anecdotal tales, transcends its role as a mere compilation of miraculous events. It emerges as a vital text that offers deep insights into the religious, social, and moral fabric of early Japanese society, reflecting the ways in which Buddhism was both adopted and adapted within the Japanese cultural context.

The literary significance of *Nihon Ryōiki* cannot be overstated. As the earliest extant example of *setsuwa* literature, it laid the groundwork for a genre that would profoundly influence subsequent Japanese narrative traditions. The text's simple yet effective narrative structure, characterized by the presentation of moral or religious dilemmas followed by miraculous resolutions, made it an accessible and powerful tool for conveying Buddhist teachings. The formulaic approach of these stories ensured that they were not only memorable but also pedagogically effective, embedding Buddhist concepts such as karma and retribution deeply into the consciousness of the Japanese people.

Furthermore, *Nihon Ryōiki* serves as a crucial link between the oral traditions of early Japan and the written records that followed. In capturing the essence of these oral narratives, *Kyōkai* preserved a wealth of cultural and religious knowledge that might otherwise have been lost. The stories provide a valuable snapshot of the concerns, beliefs, and values that dominated the lives of ordinary people during the Nara and early Heian periods. Through its preservation of these narratives, *Nihon Ryōiki* contributed to the continuity of Japanese cultural and religious traditions, ensuring that the wisdom and teachings of the past would inform future generations.

Religiously, *Nihon Ryōiki* played a significant role in the dissemination of Buddhist doctrine across Japan. By illustrating the principles of karmic retribution and the power of faith through engaging and relatable stories, the text made complex religious concepts accessible to a broad audience. The tales in *Nihon Ryōiki* reinforced the moral and ethical standards of the time, encouraging piety, devotion, and adherence to Buddhist practices. The text's emphasis on the tangible benefits of Buddhist devotion, such as miraculous healings and divine protection, served to deepen the faith of its readers and listeners, further entrenching Buddhism as a cornerstone of Japanese spiritual life.

Moreover, *Nihon Ryōiki* is significant for its portrayal of the syncretism between Buddhism and *Shintō*, reflecting the harmonious blending of these religious traditions in Japan. The stories often depict interactions between Buddhist deities and *Shintō* kami, illustrating how these two belief systems coexisted and complemented each other. This syncretism is a defining feature of Japanese religious practice, and *Nihon Ryōiki* provides early evidence of this integration, showcasing the dynamic and evolving nature of Japanese spirituality.

Nihon Ryōiki is more than just a collection of miraculous tales; it is a profound cultural artifact that embodies the religious and literary spirit of early Japan. Its impact on the development of Japanese literature and Buddhism is undeniable, as it not only preserved vital aspects of Japanese oral tradition but also helped to shape the moral and spiritual landscape of the nation. Through its compelling narratives and enduring teachings, *Nihon Ryōiki* continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike, offering timeless lessons on the nature of faith, morality, and the human experience.

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