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Sovereignty in East Asian Buddhism:

A Talk by Prof. Mikaël Bauer (November 9, 2017)

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On November 9th, 2017, Professor Mikaël Bauer delivered the talk “Buddhism and Sovereignty in East Asian Buddhism” in the senior common room of Birks Building at McGill University. Throughout his lecture, Prof. Bauer inquired into the way in which Buddhism was an integral part of the major political discourse, rather than the antagonist Other of the ruling class in Japan. Professors and students from McGill’s School of Religious Studies (SRS), the Department of East Asian Studies (EAS), and Department of Philosophy attended the talk. Co-organized by CREOR, SRS, and EAS, the [“Buddha and the Other”](#) lecture series hopes to promote interdisciplinary studies of Buddhism.

To investigate the interactions between religion *qua* Buddhism and state *qua* politics in Japan, Prof. Bauer focused on the development of Buddhism first in the Nara period (710-794) and then in the Heian period (794-1185). During the Nara period, Japanese emperors championed Confucianism, further making Confucianism the state ideology and setting the tone for political discourse at the time. In this socio-political climate, Buddhism continued to spread in Japan, in subordination to the Confucian ideology. To illustrate the interactions between Buddhism and politics, Prof. Bauer utilized the chronicle of Kamatari 鎌足傳. Interest-

ingly, the chronicle presented the life story of Fujiwara no Kamatari 藤原鎌足 (614- 669), the founder of the Fujiwara Clan and a pious Buddhist devotee, who patronized Kōfukuji 興福寺 and initiated the ritual of Yuima-e 維摩會, in a standard Confucian narrative. As the chronicle unfolded, Kamatari's ancestors were portrayed as the ones in charge of rites of Heaven and Earth, Kamatari himself as a gentleman 君子 who embodied benevolence and filial piety.¹ When Kamatari passed away, the emperor complimented his virtue by comparing him to the King Wen of Zhou. Articulated as such, the chronicle complied with Confucian values to justify the legitimacy of the Fujiwara clan starting from Kamatari.

Buddhism gradually surpassed Confucianism and rose to prominence during the Heian period. No longer living under the shadow of Confucianism, Buddhism became a living tradition, penetrating and prevailing all walks of the society. Against this backdrop of the rise of Buddhism, Prof. Bauer foregrounded the doctrines articulated by Kūkai 空海 (774-835), the eminent master who was said to introduce esoteric Buddhism to Japan. In his writings, Kūkai developed a set of Buddhist accounts of language devoid of Confucian features, further rendering Buddhism competent enough to replace Confucianism. Towards the latter half of the Heian period, Japan transformed into a “genuinely” Buddhist state.

Prof. Bauer also directed the audience's attention to another fascinating phenomenon in Heian Japan, that is, the retired emperors. He detailed how Buddhism became the means for these emperors to regain power from regents of the Fujiwara clan. Upon stepping down from the throne, retired emperors would enter Buddhist monasteries and become

¹ Mikaël Bauer, “The Chronicle of Kamatari, Kamatari den 鎌足傳. A Short Introduction to and Translation of the First Part of the History of the Fujiwara House,” *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 71, no. 2 (2017): 477-96.

ordained. Afterwards, they built their own temples that remained outside the control of the Fujiwara family. Further initiating their distinct rituals, retired emperors fused monastic line with imperial ones for the purpose of ensuring their heirs' right of becoming resident abbots of the temples on the one hand, and of competing with the Fujiwara clan on the other. Prof. Bauer defined this separate system created by retired emperors as that of the "extra-ritsuryō 律令," to be contrasted with the "intra-ritsuryō" that was established earlier in the Nara period—these two systems were constantly in contest for land, power, and wealth.²

To end his talk, Prof. Bauer highlighted the interplay between Buddhism and political power in Nara and Heian Japan. Instead of evolving into the antagonist Other of state power, Buddhism, its doctrine and institution, served as *the theatre of the state*, further furnishing us with a perspective to examine the relationship between monastics and politics. The next lecture in the Buddha and the Other lecture series will be delivered by Professor Jeehee Hong who will examine the relationship between Buddhism and Art History.

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² Mikael Bauer, "Conflating Monastic and Imperial Lineage: The Retired Emperors' Period Reformulated," *Monumenta Nipponica* 67, no. 2 (2012): 239-62.

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