

ORIGINALITY OF CENTRAL COLUMN IN JAPANESE PAGODA

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Introduction

The Japanese word 'tou', means 'tower', is derived from 'stupa' in the ancient Indian language, Sanskrit. A stupa is a Buddhist pagoda. Buddhism has been part of Japanese culture since the 6th century and was transmitted to Japan from India through China and the Korean peninsula (Table 1). There are about two hundred and ten wooden pagodas in Japan, and almost all have. However, it has no structural purpose. It is surrounded by a small room situated between it and the 'roban' which is the lowest part of the 'sohrin' (Fig. 1). Therefore, it is not joined to another part of the surrounding structures [1]. The pillar is not an element of the building, but is symbolic of something. We can see pillars all around the world still now. In Japan, it is thought as a source of space, and used as counting gods unit. The purpose of this paper is to list pagodas and pillars in related countries, and to clear the needs researches. This is the groundwork for the final investigation. My final goal is to elucidate the reason for the wooden central column in Japanese pagodas.

Previous research

Studies from a variety of fields, e.g., philosophy, religion, archaeology, and history, have been done on the shim-bashira. There are also studies on the structural effect of pagodas in general. However, little is known about the architecture of the shim-bashira or central column itself.

Method

I investigated examples and the literature as well as discussing with researchers at the Japan National Museum of Ethnology on this subject. I have extracted features of pagodas and pillars in related countries, and searched for information on ceremonies and festivals held around pagodas.

Findings

1. Historical changes of pagoda and pillar

(1) India

In Rig-Veda, one of the oldest most important sacred texts, the Vedas(1200 BC), there is the praising pillars poet. The pillars were named 'Yupa', they were used to tie livestock to be sacrificed [2]. The pillars themselves were simply logs. We can see one with a height of 1.3 m, in Thailand now. In 6th century BC, King Asoka, who reigned from 268-232 BC, made about thirty pillars with a declaration of national governance. Asoka pillars were made of a single stone, and have a height of about 13 m. We can still see only sixteen stone pillars

including the remains which consist of only the top of pillars (Fig. 3). It is clear that the design of the top of pillars was influenced by Greek architecture, because there are plants and animal sculptures. However, Asoka pillars were made of a single block of stone but ancient Greek pillars were made by stonemasonry (Fig. 4). [3]. This is a distinctive feature of Indian pillars. Stupas were hemispherical structures (Fig. 2) and were constructed as burial sites for Buddha's ashes. These structures do not have a central column, but the top is similar to the top of the pagoda in related countries. They were not decorated because they were regarded as Buddha himself, and people decorated only the fence and gates around stupa about his life. The Sanchi first stupa is surrounded by four gates. There is Buddha foot prints sculptures on the side of the north gate pillar. Therefore, Buddha was symbolized as pillars [4].

(2) China

The oldest existing pagoda is in the Songyuesi Temple (AD 523) which is a brick structure. There is no central column, and the inside is empty (Fig. 5). A large number of brick pagodas were built in the Sui and Tang period. Buddhism took about 500 years to be transmitted to China (AD 2) from India. We have no definite information on pagodas in this period. During the prosperous year of 300 BC, Taoist literature described stories of how the xianren (3), immortals, liked to live in many storied buildings in Taoism. While further investigation is needed, this may have influenced the design of Chinese pagodas. It is clear that wooden pagodas existed at that time because the lowest part of the central column in the remains of the burned pagoda can be seen. Furthermore, there are stone pillars which imitate the wooden pagoda at Yungang Caves (Fig. 6). The only wooden pagoda remaining today is the Sakyamuni Pagoda (Fig. 7). There is no central column, and Buddhist statues are at its centre (Fig. 8). Visitors can take stairs to the upper floors and view the scenery. It should be also be added that there are some brick pagodas like this. This shows the influence of multi-storied buildings. Historically, pillars are wooden ones built for the funerals of civil war heroes and the pillars were changed to stone after five years(567~570) (Fig. 9)[5].

(3) Korean peninsula

The only current wooden pagoda is P'alsangjon Hall. There is a central column although it is too recent to be compared with a Japanese one. The pillar, *tokan*, is found in the temple garden (10–20 m in height). Its style is derived from that of northern nomads [6]. There are pair of 1.5-m-high wooden pillars at entrances of villages form gates, symbols of man and woman too [7]. They are remade every year.

(4) Japan

The first pagoda was in Asuka temple and built in 585. At that time people set Buddha's ashes in the top of the central column in *Nihonshoki* [8]. Later on various pagodas were built as the five storied pagoda in Horyu-ji temple (Fig. 10). It has a shim-bashira, but no staircase. The parts around the shim-bashira are merely for decoration. The Chinese pagodas are designed for viewing the surroundings, but the Japanese ones are designed as objects to be viewed in their own right.

2. Japanese pillar and central-column

(1) References in Kojiki ('Record of Ancient Matters')

Here, 'pillar' is used as a unit which counts spirits from ancient times. The description in Kojiki says that first of all, two spirits found out a pillar [9], and this is thought to be the start of world. Therefore, pillars have a special meaning for the Japanese.

(2) On-bashira festival

The Suwa Grand Shrine has a well known on-bashira. It is a festival in which people take large logs from the mountain and stand them as pillars on the corners of square in the shrine

area every seven years. There are two shrines in the Suwa-grand shrine: one in the south shrine, kamisha, and the other in the north, shimosha. People deify the mountain as the spirits of kamisha, and the large tree is deified as the spirits of the shimosha [10]. An interesting question is the purpose of the square. Hayashiya describes the square as an ancient shrine form, and even when the buildings of the shrine were built up on it, the square is kept as symbol of sanctuary [11].

(3) Shim-no-mi-hashira at Ise shrine

The central column of shrine is called Shim-no-mi-hashira. Ise shrine is rebuilt every twenty years alternating between two adjacent sites (Fig.11). It is unknown when the shrine was first built. The central column is under the floor of the main shrine. It is thought to be the resting place of the spirit. The offering ceremony at the main shrine is done under the floor. However, there is no a shim-no-mi-hashira at the Aramatsuri-no-miya shrine in Ise. Kuroda describes how the shim-no-mi-hashira has a degenerated central column to support the ridge beam, and its purpose is as a marker for rebuilding work [12].

(4) Shim-no-mi-hashira at Izumo-grand-shrine and Kamosu-shrine

At both shrines, the columns' gable sides support the ridge beam (Fig.12, 13), but the central column only reaches the beam. Inagaki describes the shim-no-mi-hashira as a structure that merely symbolizes spirit, as part of the style of grand shrines which deify the spirit at the center of a room [13].

Conclusions

1-(1) First stone pillars were built in India, the establishment of Maurya dynasty same stupa. It is very interesting that the gate pillar is symbolized as Buddha. Only the top of a stupa is similar to a pagoda in other countries with Buddhism backgrounds. The pillar is thought of as a symbolizing something valuable. Future research will be to compare them and show that the design of Japanese pillars is indeed original.

1-(2) Chinese pagodas differ from Indian ones as follows. Brick or wood structure, empty interior (no central column) and some pagodas have staircase leading to upper floors.

1-(3) Wooden pillars have been remade at the front of the entrances of various villages. Furthermore, the "tokan" is a pillar in the gardens of temples in Korea, and are influenced by the traditions northern nomads. Therefore, there appears to be another route of pillars propagation. This needs future research.

1-(4) The Chinese Pagodas are designed for viewing the surroundings, but the Japanese ones are designed as objects to be viewed in their own right. A Indian stupa was regarded as Buddha himself, and thus depictions of Buddha's life appear on only the fence and gates around a stupa. The shim-bashira is not joined with another part of the stupa and the surrounding parts are decorations of the shim-bashira. Thus, the center is the most important part. People set some of Buddha's ashes at the top of the shim-bashira at the pagoda in the Asuka temple. Later on other parts of his ashes were buried under the shim-bashira of the pagoda in the Horyu-ji temple. Inagaki describes similarities in belief about the meaning of the top of the central column, i.e., that spirits were present at its top [14].

2- (1) The pillar is used as a unit with which to count spirits. It is thought that the pillar has existed before the start of the world. Pillars have special meaning for the Japanese.

2-(2) The four pillars make a square area in the Suwa Grand Shrine. The square as an ancient shrine form, and even when the buildings of the shrine were built up on it, the square is kept as symbol of sanctuary

2-(3) In the Ise shrine, there is a central column under the floor of main building. The reason for this position has not been clarified

2-(4) The central column at the shine in Izumo and the one in Kamosu do not support the ridge beam. They are thought to be symbolized spirits. There are differences in the meaning of shim-bashira which remain to be investigated.

Figures

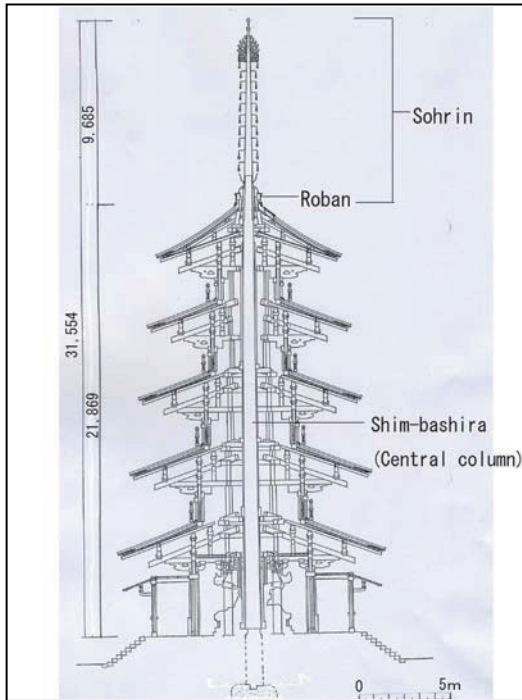


Fig. 1: Section of Horyu-ji Pagoda



Fig. 2: Stone Pillars

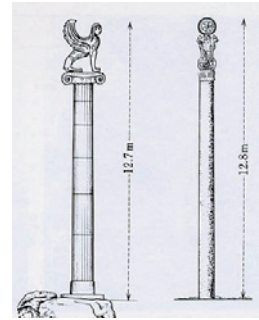


Fig. 3: Greek pillar (left) and Asoka pillar (right)

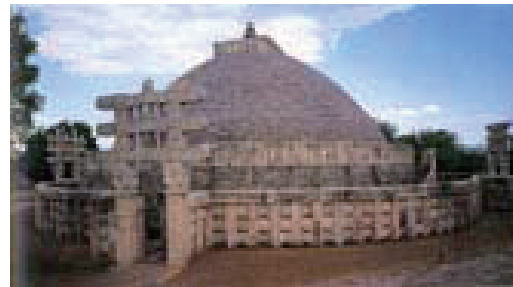


Fig. 4: Sanchi first Stupa



Fig.5 : Pagoda
Songyuesi Temple



Fig.6: Central Pillar
Yungang Caves



Fig. 7 and 8: S'akyamuni pagoda (1056)

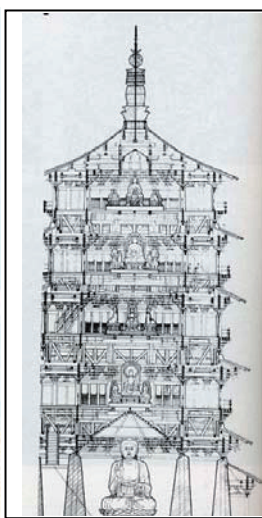


Fig.9:Yicahui, Stone pillar



Fig. 10: Horyu-ji pagoda

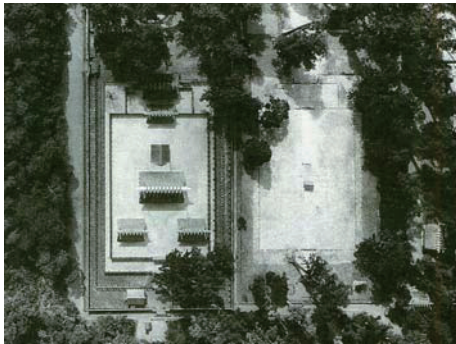


Fig. 11: Two sites of Ise shrine



Fig. 12: Kamosu shrine

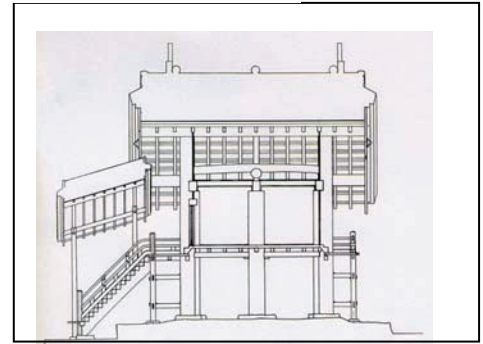


Fig. 13: Section of Kamosu shrine

Notes

- 1) Here, the term 'column' is a part of a building or pagoda, and the term 'pillar' is cylindrical structure. Articles on pillars appear in the two most ancient Japanese texts, Kojiki and Nihonshoki.
- 2) 'Shim-bashira' refers to the central column in a Japanese pagoda.
- 3) Xianren is thought of as being an ideal, immortal in the ancient Chinese belief system of Taoism.

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Table 1: Chronology of existing pagodas

| 200 | 100 | BC, AD.0 | 100 | 200 | 300 | 400 | 500 | 600 | 700 | 800 | 900 | 1000 | 1100 | 1200 | 1300 | 1400 | 1500 | 1600 | 1700 | 1800 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| <table border="1" style="width:100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width:30%; text-align: center;">マカリア時代 Maurya</td> <td style="width:30%; text-align: center;">南北朝 南朝</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">隋 Tang</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">唐</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">宋 Song</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">元 Yuan</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">明 Ming</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">清 Qing</td> <td style="width:10%; text-align: center;">1800</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Samhi Suet 13BC ~ AD 1c 2c前半</td> <td style="text-align: center;">新 南漢 xin qianhan</td> <td style="text-align: center;">五胡十六國 wu wu shi wu guo</td> <td style="text-align: center;">南北朝 南朝</td> <td style="text-align: center;">北朝 bei chao</td> <td style="text-align: center;">五代十國 wu dai shi guo</td> <td style="text-align: center;">北宋 bei song</td> <td style="text-align: center;">南宋 nan song</td> <td style="text-align: center;">元 yuan</td> <td style="text-align: center;">明 ming</td> <td style="text-align: center;">清 qing</td> <td style="text-align: center;">民國 min guo</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1949</td> </tr> </table> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | マカリア時代 Maurya | 南北朝 南朝 | 隋 Tang | 唐 | 宋 Song | 元 Yuan | 明 Ming | 清 Qing | 1800 | Samhi Suet 13BC ~ AD 1c 2c前半 | 新 南漢 xin qianhan | 五胡十六國 wu wu shi wu guo | 南北朝 南朝 | 北朝 bei chao | 五代十國 wu dai shi guo | 北宋 bei song | 南宋 nan song | 元 yuan | 明 ming | 清 qing | 民國 min guo | 1949 |
| マカリア時代 Maurya | 南北朝 南朝 | 隋 Tang | 唐 | 宋 Song | 元 Yuan | 明 Ming | 清 Qing | 1800 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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