

Ancient Aristocracy and Buddhism

— With Special Reference to the Fujiwara in the Nara Era —

As a clue to investigating into the realities of aristocrats who played a conspicuous part in the formation of Japanese culture, I should like to take up the Fujiwaras, who were typical aristocrats in the Nara era, and consider how they accepted Buddhism and how they believed in it. Thirty-one persons of the Fujiwaras went into the Cabinet from the period of their first founder Kamatari to the end of the Nara era. And they were always the leaders of the Government. Therefore we should give them a careful consideration when we deal with their policy toward Buddhism in those days.

Generally speaking, they accepted Buddhism more actively than other aristocrats of the same era such as the Otomos: they constructed more temples and pagodas, and made more images of the Buddha and copied more sutras. Especially they looked up to the Kobokuji temple as the guardian temple of their clan. Belonging to the same clan, members of the Fujiwaras competed with one another in building pagodas, or in holding memorial services for their ancestors. Relative clans of the Fujiwaras such as Muchimaro, Uona and Tamaro practiced asceticism themselves not only indoors but also in the mountains, and turned their own houses into temples. We could say that their belief like this in this era was steady, but in the Heian era the Fujiwaras became ritualistic and pleasure-seeking.

Moreover, when we consider the attitude of the members of the Fujiwara clan such as Kamatari, Fuhito, Nakamaro, Momokawa and Nagate as statesmen toward Buddhism, who established the Government under the Ritsuryo (statute) Institution and pushed it forward, we can say briefly that they styled themselves as the clerks of the Government. Indeed they were devotees of Buddhism, but they held their rule over the Buddhist temples and priests and nuns by statute, as an object of their dominion to the last. Besides, they took upon themselves to protect the nation and to

secure her well-being. So the Buddhist priests and nuns were always held under the Government's rule. On the other hand, sham priests, who were not officially registered, were suppressed. Such a policy of the Fujiwaras toward Buddhism remained unchanged in the main, even though there were at times some differences in emphasis, and continued as such for a century till the end of the Nara era.

Osamu Katata