

Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism

Volume II:
Lives

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Jianzhen (Ganjin)

Jianzhen (鑑真; 688–763), better known by the Japanese reading of his name, Ganjin, was revered not only for his extraordinary journey to Japan to spread Buddhist teachings but also as an emblem of the exchanges between Tang China and Nara Japan in the 8th century. Between 743 and 753, he made six attempts, finally arriving in late 753, by which time he had lost his eyesight. Already known in China as a master of the Buddhist Vinaya (monastic precepts), Jianzhen was invited to Japan to reform the ordination practice, as the Japanese clergy knew Japanese practice had grown piecemeal and was lacking an authoritative foundation. Upon his arrival, he directed the building of an ordination platform at the Tōdaiji (東大寺) in Nara, and performed an ordination for the retired monarch Shōmu (聖武; 701–756, r. 729–749), his consort →Kōmyō (光明; 701–760), the reigning sovereign Kōken (孝謙; 718–770, r. 749–758), and some four hundred clerics. He was given land on which to build his own monastery, which became known as the Tōshōdaiji (唐招提寺). Subsequently, he was honored as the founder of the Vinaya School (Jpn. Risshū [律宗]) in Japan.

Biographies of Jianzhen were written during his lifetime or shortly after his death. Beginning in the 6th century, Chinese Buddhists started to compile biographies of eminent monks and nuns to commend those whose lives had illumined the Dharma and exemplified Buddhist piety. This practice was derived from an established genre in China, namely, the biographies that were a standard element in dynastic histories from the very inception of historical writings in Han (206 BCE–220 CE) times. Jianzhen's biographers were very conscious of this tradition of "hagiography" or "sacred biography," and their goals were to honor the master's spiritual qualities, and to commemorate a life deemed paradigmatic of the values of the Buddhist community. They were the first in a long line of such hagiographies in Japanese religious culture.

The first biography of Jianzhen was written by his close disciple Situo (思託; 722–809), who accompanied him on all six of his attempts to travel to Japan. Known as the *Da Tang chuanjie shi seng ming ji Da heshang Jianzhen zhuan* (大唐傳戒師僧名記大和上

鑑真傳, Biography of the Great Monk Jianzhen, the famous record of the Great Tang master who transmitted the Vinaya), only fragments now remain (Wang, 2000, 301). Soon after Jianzhen passed away, Situo commissioned Ōmi no Mifune (淡海三船, a.k.a. Mabito Genkai [真人元開]; 722–785), a Japanese nobleman and literary figure who had studied with Jianzhen, to write a second biography. Completed in 779, this biography became known as the *Tō Daiwajō tōseiden* (唐大和上東征傳, Account of the Expedition East by the Great Master; hereafter *Tōseiden*, T. 2089 [L1] 988–995; trans. Bingenheimer, 2003; 2004). There are indications that Situo's own writing was not very polished, so his request that Ōmi no Mifune write the official biography may have been an attempt to preserve Jianzhen's memory and present his deeds in the best possible light. Subsequently Situo wrote a third biography, collected in the *Enryaku sōroku* (延曆僧錄, A Record of Monks of the Enryaku period [782–806]); completed in 788, this was the first such collection of biographies of eminent monks in Japan (DNBZ 1922, vol. CI, 65–66; Wang, 2005). Yet again, only fragments of this text survive.

Modern studies have primarily focused on Ōmi no Mifune's *Tōseiden* (Takakusu, 1928–1929; Andō, 1960; Kuranaka, 1976; Wang, 2000; Bingenheimer, 2003, 2004; Hao, 2004), which is generally considered to be a credible account of Jianzhen's life given that both Situo and Ōmi no Mifune knew the master in person. Nevertheless, it is hardly surprising that it also contains a number of hagiographic elements. A native of Yangzhou (揚州), Jianzhen spent his early years studying and training in monasteries in Chang'an (長安) and Luoyang (洛陽). Later he returned to Yangzhou to practice at the Daming si (大明寺). By the time he received the invitation to go to Japan he had already achieved considerable fame as a Vinaya master. The invitation came from two Japanese monks, Yōei (榮叡; d. 749) and Fushō (普照; d.u.), who had arrived in China in 733 as *kentōshi* (遣唐使, members of an embassy to the Tang). The first monk they invited was Daoxuan (道璿, Jpn. Dōsen; 702–760), a Vinaya master at Dafuxian si (大福先寺) in Luoyang, who arrived in

Japan in 736 accompanied by the “Indian” monk Bodhisena (Chn. Putixianna [菩提僊那]; Jpn. Bodaisena; 704–760). The party was housed at the DaiANJI (大安寺) in Nara (see below). Yōei and Fushō stayed behind in China, and in 742 traveled to Yangzhou to invite Jianzhen. There has been much speculation as to why they decided yet another Vinaya specialist should be invited; some have suggested it was because Daoxuan lacked the prestige and authority that Jianzhen was known to possess (Sakuma, 1994; Zhou, 2016).

According to the account in the *Tōseiden*, Jianzhen is said to have referred to a precedent: the story that the Tendai patriarch Huisi (慧思; 515–577) of Nanyue (南岳) had been reincarnated in Japan as Prince Shōtoku (→Shōtoku Taishi [聖德太子]; c. 574–c. 622) in order to help spread Buddhist teaching. He also mentioned the case of Prince Nagaya (長屋王; 684–729), one of the contenders for the Japanese throne in the early decades of the 8th century, who had made a gift of one thousand robes for Chinese monks with a poem embroidered on the hem of each. This reference was an embellishment added, of course, by the biographers and their circle, which included the Japanese monk Dōji (道慈; d. 744) (Andō, 1960, 317; Bingenheimer, 2004, 13–14; Barrett, 2009). Dōji was a Japanese scholar-monk who had been in China from 702 to 718. He was highly esteemed as a Buddhist intellectual and rose to the rank of Preceptor (*risshi* [律師]) in the official institution of monastic affairs. Because of his strong stance on precepts, he was seen as the driving force behind Japan's efforts to invite a Chinese Vinaya master to ensure the transmission of orthodox practice. He was also known for his knowledge of monastery design and architecture, and was charged with the rebuilding of the DaiANJI, which was dedicated in 742. The DaiANJI, together with Jianzhen's Tōshōdaiji, became hubs for émigré monks and cosmopolitan literary, artistic centers in Nara in the middle and latter parts of the 8th century (Wong, 2018).

The *Tōseiden* chronicles in detail Jianzhen's six attempts to cross the ocean to reach Japan. Soon after the Japanese monks' invitation in 742, the group prepared for the first journey, but it was almost immediately aborted because one of Jianzhen's disciples informed the Tang authorities, resulting in the temporary arrest of the two Japanese monks. Undaunted, the group tried again. Jianzhen gave Yōei and Fusō 80 strings of cash to buy a military ship and provisions for the trip. As soon

as the ship sailed beyond the mouth of the Yangzi, however, it encountered strong winds and high waves that broke it up and ended the endeavor. The third trip commenced in the 12th month of 743, but soon it too encountered storms and went aground. The fourth trip was planned in 744, and again it was aborted because one of Jianzhen's disciples reported it to the authorities out of concern for the master's safety. In 748, Jianzhen and his entourage made a fifth attempt. Strong currents carried the boat far south and the group only just managed to survive, eventually landing on the island of Hainan (海南).

Since they had landed so far south, it took three years before they managed to return to Yangzhou, during which time Yōei died and Jianzhen lost his eyesight. When Jianzhen finally returned to Yangzhou in 751, he was already 64 years old. Two years later, officials of the 12th *kentōshi* mission came to present yet another invitation to Jianzhen. Initially, the Japanese officials made the request directly to Emperor Xuanzong (玄宗; 712–756), but when the emperor insisted that a Daoist priest accompany them back to Japan, they demurred, agreeing only to allow five of their party to stay behind to study Daoism. As a result the official invitation to Jianzhen had to be withdrawn, but he agreed to travel with them regardless. It is not known quite why Jianzhen was so determined to travel, but perhaps he read the emperor's demand as a sign that it would be of greater merit to insure the correct form of Buddhist practice was established in Japan than to stay in China (Barrett, 2000).

On this sixth trip, Jianzhen was accompanied by an entourage much smaller than that of his earlier attempts: 24 monks and followers, including three nuns. After making a stop in the Ryūkyū Islands, the ship arrived in southern Japan toward the end of 753. In early 754, Jianzhen and his group traveled north and arrived in Nara, where they were housed at Tōdaiji. Immediately the master set about building a temporary ordination platform in front of the Daibutsuden (大佛殿, Great Buddha Hall) of Tōdaiji, and performed an ordination for Shōmu, Kōmyō, Kōken, and some 440 clerics.

In 758, the court gave Jianzhen land to build his own monastery, the Tōshōdaiji. The principal buildings at the Tōshōdaiji took about half a century to complete. The ordination platform was located to the west of the main buildings, and installed inside the Main Hall were three large statues: Vairocana (Dainichi [大日]; 3.39 m tall), flanked by

the Thousand-Armed →Avalokiteśvara (Kannon [觀音], 5.36 m tall) and the Medicine Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru (Yakushi [藥師], 3.7 m tall), all made in dry lacquer. In the spring of 763, one of Jianzhen's disciples dreamed that the balcony of the Lecture Hall had collapsed, and took this as a premonition of his master's imminent death. A portrait of Jianzhen was made by his disciples, which not only captures the likeness of the master but imparts to the viewer his inner spiritual strength and determination (see Nara National Museum and Tōshōdaiji, 2009, pl. 1). Considered the first true portrait sculpture in East Asian art, Jianzhen's statue is installed in the Mieidō (御影堂, Founder's Hall), located in the north of the monastery complex.

The portrait sculpture of Jianzhen and the Vairocana statue in the Main Hall were both fashioned in the clay-core dry lacquer technique (*dakkatsu kanshitsu* [脱活乾漆]), a technique that had been popular in China and Japan in the 7th and the early part of the 8th century. The statues of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara and the Medicine Buddha, completed in the second half of 8th century, were made of a wood core covered in dry lacquer (*mokushin kanshitsu* [木心乾漆]). This newer technique, along with the single-block carving method (*ichiboku zukuri* [一木造り]) used for a group of wood sculptures at the Tōshōdaiji, were introduced by the disciples and craftsmen who came with Jianzhen. Together with the heavier figural style that they also introduced, these new techniques and styles anticipated later developments in Heian period (平安; 794–1185) Buddhist art.

The *Tōseiden's* account leaves behind an invaluable resource from which we can reconstruct not only Jianzhen's life but also many aspects of the period's history, geography, culture, and ethnography. It describes many of the Buddhist monasteries that the group visited, including the Ayuwang si (阿育王寺) in Mingzhou (明州, present-day Ningbo [寧波], Zhejiang province), and the Faquan si (法泉寺) in Guangzhou (廣州), where the group saw the true-body image of Huineng (惠能; 638–713), the legendary Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. The biography also vividly portrays the cosmopolitan character of the southern port city of Guangzhou in Tang times.

In documenting the group's preparation for the journeys, *Tōseiden* also provides insights into how not only Buddhist doctrine and rituals were transmitted but also the technology and artistic

expertise required for building Buddhist monasteries, and fashioning icons and ritual implements. Accompanying Jianzhen on his second, aborted trip were as many as 85 artisans, including jade-workers, painters, sculptors of wooden buddha-images, wood and metal engravers, artisans who could cast statues and ritual implements, embroiderers, scribes, and stonemasons. Although the entourage for the sixth and final trip was smaller, it nevertheless included skilled craftsmen, such as Rubao (如寶, Jpn. Nyohō; d.u.) a man of Central Asian origin, who was later responsible for the completion of Tōshōdaiji's architecture and sculptures.

The objects the group brought to Japan included Buddhist texts and ritual objects essential to Jianzhen's teachings and practice. Among the texts was a copy of →Daoxuan's (道宣; 596–667) *Guanzhong chuangli jietan tujing* (關中創立戒壇圖經, T. 1892, An Illustrated Text for the Ordination Platform Erected in Guanzhong [Chang'an]), which provided a blueprint for building an ordination platform. There were also Buddhist images, a painted maṇḍala, the relics of the Buddha, and a miniature Aśoka stūpa, affirming the centrality of the worship of images and relics in Buddhist practice. The subjects of these artworks were in accordance with the latest developments, including worship of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara. They also brought medicine, for Jianzhen was known for his medical expertise, Sasanian glass, and calligraphic artworks that were intended as gifts for the Japanese court (Wong, 2014).

The *Tōseiden* also became the source for rekindled interest in the monk in later times, most notably in a 13th-century pictorial biography, the *Tōseiden emaki* (東征傳繪卷, Illustrated Scroll of the Account of the Expedition East). Production of the picture scrolls was undertaken by the monk Ninshō (忍性; 1217–1303), who had been trained in the Vinaya School under Eison (叡尊; 1201–1290) at Saidaiji (西大寺) in Nara. The artist mainly responsible was Rengyō (蓮行; fl. 1293–1298), while Ōmi no Mifune's text was translated from classical Chinese into Japanese (NET, vol. VI). In 1298 the scroll was offered to Tōshōdaiji in honor of the school's founder.

Produced in the context of founder worship that emerged in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the *Tōseiden emaki* affirms the vitality and continuity of the Vinaya tradition that Jianzhen had established, while the pictorial format provides vivid imagery to illuminate Jianzhen's mission. His reception of the



Fig. 1: Main Hall of Damingsi, designed in Tang-style architecture by Liang Sicheng, 1973.

Japanese delegation in 753 is shown in a dignified fashion (see Nara National Museum and Tōshōdaiji, 2009, 81), and care is taken to show how Jianzhen was eventually aided by supernatural intervention, his boat being guided to shore by four large white fish (see Nara National Museum and Tōshōdaiji, 2009, 77).

In 1963, Buddhist communities in both China and Japan commemorated the 1,200th anniversary of Jianzhen's death, and the then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來) gave his blessing to plans drawn up by the architectural historian Liang Sicheng (梁思成), to rebuild the Daming si in Tang style. The main hall was eventually completed in 1973 (Fig. 1), and in 1980, the dry lacquer sculpture of Jianzhen was transported from Tōshōdaiji to be exhibited. This "return" of Jianzhen in the form of his statue was meant to symbolize a renewal of Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges, and the thaw in political relations endorsed by the Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平). This was preceded by the popularity of Inoue Yasushi's (井上靖) historical novel *Tenpyō no iraka* (天平の薨, 1957), which was widely read, and translated into Chinese, English, German, and French. Inoue Yasushi's fictionalization is largely faithful to the account in the *Tōseiden*, although the emphasis is on the heroic efforts of the Japanese monks whose task it was to make sure that Jianzhen reached Japan. The story is cast against the backdrop of Sino-Japanese exchanges in the 8th century when Japan was avidly acquiring various facets of

Tang civilization, epitomized by the enormous capital the government invested in dispatching the *kentōshi* missions. In this cultural milieu, Jianzhen represented the last great 8th-century figure to convey Buddhism and cosmopolitan Tang culture to Japan, for soon after came the An Lushan (安祿山) Rebellion (755–763), which brought disruption and discord. Inoue Yasushi uses the image of a damaged roof tile from the Tang, which finally reaches Japan after Jianzhen's arrival, to suggest the decline both of Tang civilization and of Buddhism in China. The novel further spawned a movie (1980), as well as serial TV dramatizations in both China and Japan.

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