

Contribution Of Buddhism To Japanese Society ¹

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ABSTRACT

The scope of the research will be confined to the relationship between Buddhism and Japanese culture: the politics, philosophy, society, art and literature, morality, and ethics etc.,. It will illustrate the evolution of the impact of Buddhism on Japanese society. Since the Japanese are so smart that they can Japanize whatever they are interested, accordingly, the Japanese Buddhism at present is much different from the former.

However, it is undeniable to say that if Buddhism is eliminated from Japan, Japan will be definitely left as a deserted land.

INTRODUCTION

I. General History of Buddhism in Japan

According to Nihonshoki, Buddhism came to Japan on October 13, 552 A.D. in the reign of Emperor Kimmei. But, we must keep in mind first that it came with the political innovation of the King of Paekche (a kingdom in old Korea) who needed the Japanese help to fight against his foes. The king of Korea presented the emperor with a gold - plated bronze image of Sakayamuni Buddha, sutras, pennants, etc. Of course the Japanese were struck first by the solemn beauty of the Buddhist image and the virtue as said in the letter and sutras since the folk belief, Shinto, which had been in Japan had no such articles to worship.

Undoubtedly, Buddhism in Japan grew rapidly under the support of the emperors and powerful aristocrats in order to be used politically to consolidate the land and the people. Empress Suiko and her prince regent, Prince Shotoku were said to be the devout followers of Buddhism and famous temples and images were built, by them, for example, the Horyuji Temple. The year 594 of "The Imperial Ordinance for Upholding the Three treasure" (Lord Buddha, the Law, the Monks) showed the firm step of Buddhism in Japan. Buddhism in Japan is the kind of Mahayana which lays the emphasis on the enlightenment of many rather than one and also explains practices to achieve this end.

During the Nara Period, Buddhism boomed and the erection of provincial temples (kokobunji) was commanded in 741 A.D. Such case demonstrated that Buddhism became the state religion of Japan and it developed the six well-known Buddhist-sects : the Sanron, the Hossō, the Kegon, the Ritsu, the Kusha, and the Jōjitsu. At the end of the Nara Period, the Buddhist sects grew in influences that people would become monks for the purpose of fame, glory, and profit. Thus, in the Heian Period, Emperor Kammu escaped the cohesive influence of the six sects of Nara to establish a new capital, Heian (or Kyōtō at present). Then it developed a new feature of Buddhism. The famous monk - leaders preferred to have their temples built on sacred mountains after having been to study Buddhist scripture in China. Saicho established the Tendai sect on Mount Hiei, and Kūkai established the Shingon sect on Mount Kōyō. These two places became the centers of great learning. It was also said that the two chief monks helped the invention of the Japanese syllables, the Kana. Accordingly Buddhism came to be the commoners' faith instead of being kept among the privileges. Its attraction came from aesthetic beauty. Though, Buddhism was opposed strongly by the Confu-

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cianism in Japan, it flourished.

In the twelfth century, the warrior clan came to political power. Through the period, several clans became the leader one by one: the Taira, the Minamoto, the Hojo, and the Ashikaga. It was then the long period of civil-wars. Even all temples kept their monk-warriors for both self protection and invasion. People thus thought that the “Mappō” or the Closing Age, according to the Buddhist saying had come. And it was in this Kamakura Period that the Heian Buddhism which was esoteric in nature became the cult of the warriors who were unsophisticated but firm, simple but clear, with the spirit of independence. Thus, Buddhism also came to a new life. The religions reformists started preaching a simple gospel of faith to the common people in cities and villages.

There were three main sects in the Kamakura Period:

The Pure Land Sects: The pioneer of this sect was the monk Genshin (942-1017 A.D.) whose popular work *Ojō Yōshū* (Essentials of Salvation) depicted the horrors of hell and contrasted them vividly with the bliss of the Western Paradise where the sun sets and rests peacefully. People then sought the enlightenment by being born in the Pure Land or the Paradise where those ill fated were only saved by Amida's compassionate vow. The faith was formulated by Hōnen (1133-1212 A.D.), called the Pure Land or the Jōdōshū, it was strengthened and made much easier to practice by Shinran (1173-1262 A.D.), the founder of the Jōdoshinshū. This faith puts the emphasis on the dependence on the power of the other (Amida) and denied dependence on one's own strength. Only through firm faith in Amida Buddha, one can be accepted in the Pure Land.

Zen Buddhism: While the samurai or the warriors, trained by upbringing and self-reliant, could not feel comfortable in the teachings of the Pure Land sects, it then developed a spiritual training in the newly formed Rinzai and Sōtō sect of Zen Buddhism. The Zen believes that each individual has a Buddha nature within him, thus it is self-understanding rather than scriptural or other external authorities, that is the key to enlightenment. Then, the Zen was serious and opposed the Jōdo school because it advocated the self-restraint and was much more spiritual. There were two methods to reach the enlightenment (or “satori”): the *kōan* which consists of a question and an answer between the master and his disciples. This belongs to the Rinzai school founded by Eisai (1141-1215 A.D.). The other is called “Zazen” or “sitting is meditation”, called the Soto school, founded by Dogen (1200-1253 A.D.).

Zen was appreciated by the nobles and the warriors as well. The Chinese scholars at that time came to Japan to spread the Zen and also Chinese culture. There developed Japanese gardening, Chinese literature, calligraphy, flower-arrangement, tea ceremony, and painting, etc. Those culture was adapted to the Japanese taste and became the mixture between Buddhistic art and Japanese folk-art.

Moreover, in contrast with the easy way of the Pure Land which went among the commoners, the Zen school called for solemn practice and high culture.

Nichiren School : The founder was Nichiren (1222 - 1282 A.D.) himself. He was firstly accustomed to various Buddhist sects. Later, he denounced all the others and laid stress upon the faith in the Hokekyo. He also worshipped the sun-goddess who was said to be the ancestor of the Japanese emperors and the Great Kami. Thus Nichiren was well-known to be nationalistic since he even dared to appeal to the Kamakura government to return the power to the emperor. His headquarter is the Kuonji temple on Mount Minobu in the Yamanashi

prefecture. Today, the Nichiren sect is one of the great Buddhist organization in Japan. It also gave birth to the present and famous Soka Gakkai sect.

However, Buddhism in Japan declined its influence during the Muromachi Period since the great leaders as Oda Nobunaga (1534 - 1582 A.D.) Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536 - 1598 A.D.), the Buddhist sects were gradually suppressed. Accordingly, Mount Hiei, the Buddhist center was destroyed since it was considered to be the threat to the security of the capital cities for centuries.

During the next Tokugawa period, the Shogunate government exercised strong control over the temples. The temples acted as the local government all over Japan. Thus, the monks had no time to devote to the Buddhist teaching or spread the Buddhist doctrine. Buddhist monks were then forced to enter the secular life mostly during the Meiji period which developed the sense of strong nationalism.

At present, the study of Buddhism is undertaken in the academic and cultural views. It represents Oriental philosophy. There is also the development of Japan's new Buddhist sects. The most popular is the Soka Gakkai which derives from Nichiren because of its personnel and problem solving mechanism provided for individual needs. Moreover, through their pursuits in the spheres of politics, arts, publishing business, education, welfare services, etc., and remaining in close contact with other organization, religious and secular, they can be effective pressure groups, or a medium through which members voice their opinions.

II Significance and Distinctive Features of Japanese Buddhism

Since Buddhism has taken its root on the Japanese soil more than one thousand and three hundred years, it is undeniable that its deep influence must lay the strong foundation in the Japanese society both culturally and religiously. Evidently, Buddhism has been modified in some degrees depending on the uniqueness of Japanese characteristics.⁸ Such most interesting traits are as follows :

2.1 The original Buddhist regards an individual as possessing potentialities. But on the contrary, Japanese tradition denies such idea. The highest virtue is considered to be the sacrifice of the self for the sake of the nation, the emperor, the family, or the group solidarity. To the Japanese monks, the welfare of state is their main concern and the doctrine to which they all adhere is reduced to a secondary.

2.2 In Japan, there has been a strong sense of filial piety or ancestor-worship. Thus, when the Indian or original Buddhism taught about the body born of parents as merely a fetter of the Soul and according to the law of karma, the Japanese Buddhism holds instead that the Buddhahood in him is identified with filial devotion, and to follow the way of filial piety is Buddhahood. Japanese Buddhism then has broadened its sphere as a popular religion when it links up with the native custom of ancestor-worship. This is the origin of the "butsudan" or Buddhist altar in almost every house. Moreover, funerals and memorial services, such as the Bon festival are the two most important functions of Buddhism in Japan at present.

2.3 The teaching of Buddhism which denies the castes and social disparity has to adapt itself to the Japanese hierarchy system. The Japanese build temples not mainly for the sake of their own merit and charity but for expressing their gratitude to the benevolence of the emperors and parents. Buddhism is then meaningful to the Japanese. In fact, the original Buddhist concepts and sutras tend to be altered in order to satisfy the native fondness of the rank system. For example, the Buddhist concept of the transmigration of the soul influenced

the Japanese servant to kill himself after the master's death in order to be born as his servant again in the next world.

2.4 The original Buddhism is indifferent to the monarchs. Instead the monarchs must serve and take good care of their people. Traditionally, the Japanese regarded their emperor as the divine beings. Thus, they then preferred Mahayana to Hinayana because the former allowed them to advance a theory that a monarch is "a son of divine beings" (tenshi devaputra), and their kami are also Bodhisattava.

2.5 In general, Indian and Chinese Buddhism are focused on the vision of truth after meditation and faith is merely the first step toward entering to the innermost heart of the religion. But when such Buddhism came to Japan, faith came to be the very essence of the religion : first, in a certain real person as a founder, second, in an ideal person as a specific Buddha or Bodhisattva according to their preference. Such is due to their tradition of absolute devotion and obedience to a specific individual. Then, the Buddhist research in Japan has been conducted in a narrow scope.

2.6 In contrast with the Chinese Buddhism and idea, the Japanese concept of the divinity of the emperor turned to "the world is one man's". They even praise the "ten virtues" of the emperor as being said in the Buddhist teaching. The emperor is often called "Master of Ten Virtues" and his authority has been supported by most Japanese to be superior to those nine virtues of the Buddha.

2.7 Due to the traditional clanishness, the Japanese Buddhism for the most part is not the universal creed, rather emphasized the specific religious order or school, depending on each founder's preference. Such trait gave birth to the system of allotting families to each particular temple. Moreover, during the Tokugawa period, each individual's religious faith had to be guaranteed by his selective temple.

2.8 In the Japanese way of thinking, the use of force often has the concept of respect for military power. They are proud of being called the people of the country of the warriors. Thus, Buddhism, which regards benevolence and forbearance and has an important precept of not killing lives, was utilized to achieve the social demands, especially, during the civil wars. For example, in Japanese literature, we have found "The sharp edged sword of Amida Buddha" which is a mere figure of speech intending to kill the human lust, but the Japanese took advantage of it as if Amida Buddha really used the sword to punish the wicked. Then the act of killing in combat is here justified by the Japanese Buddhism. Quite common, the Zen temples of the middle ages became the schools for training the fighting skill of those samurai.

2.9 The Japanese Buddhism lay emphasis on the secular life while the original Buddhism denounces the worldly life which is full of suffering. The Japanese pioneer of such idea was Shinran, a Buddhist monk who advocated becoming a Buddhist as a layman, and put it into practice by himself when as a monk he had a family and lived on a secular life, only had a strong faith in Amida Buddha. Also the Japanese Zen held an opinion that even monks should perform religious practice in the midst of secular life or the busy city-life. Warriors then practice meditation in the battle-field. Nichiren again had the idea that Buddhism should serve as the foundation of the secular life to turn the land into the worldly paradise.

2.10 It is strange in Japan that the idea of the salvation of the wicked is firmly established in theory. Such attitude could be explained that the Japanese regarded "sin" as a kind of material entity which could be easily wiped out by means of a ritual purification. It

meant that men were born pure but they were later damaged by the environment. The lack of sin-consciousness in the real sense of Buddhism is noticeable in present-day Japan. However, the Japanese are sensitive in "shame-consciousness" because they are concerned with whether or not they conform to the mores of their particular social pattern of behavior.

2.11 The robe of Japanese Buddhism in relation to magic depends of their petitions for the solution of their worldly problems. They pay on attention to the past-life or the next life.

III The Buddhist Ethics in Japanese Society

3.1 Compassion

And in that place there is no difference between gods and men, save that under the splendor of Amida even the gods must bend ; and all sing the hymn of praise beginning, "O Thou of Immeasurable Light :

The above statement is praising the Amida Buddha's boundless compassion. During the long period of the civil wars in the middle age of Japan along with the suffering of the people, it is undeniable to say that Buddhism alone has sown the seed of feeling compassionate to each other and is the only relief of human suffering. All of the Buddhist leaders in Japan always preach that men should be kind to each other ; love and not condemn each other ; and forgive each other. We often find such a compassionate spirit in all of Buddhist literature. Such can be illustrated by the Ten Good vows, preached by Onkō (1718 - 1804 A.D.) of the Shingon sect :

...love and save all living creatures with a heart of benevolence ; do not deprive anyone, from the highest officials down to common men, of his proper due but let him be in his proper place ; observe decorum in man-women relationships ; do not utter a falsehood ; do not use flowery words, which impair the virtue of adults and go against the way of heaven and earth ; do not insult others : do not be avaricious ; do not yield to anger, which nullifies all good deeds ; do not have a wrong view.

Evidently Onko solely emphasizes the moral teachings for the immediate use in everyday life. Being compassionate to each other then enables people to spend their lives amidst the daily trouble.

3.2 Honesty

The word "honesty" in Japan was originally adopted from Buddhism since the Nara Period. (710 - 814 A.D.) It was adopted along with the word "sincerity". It was highly praised by Shinran, Nichiren, and Shōsan Suzuki who was a Zen master. The Japanese then recognize that the virtue of honesty originated from Buddhism and it became the foundation of the Japanese way of life until today. Both Shintoists and Buddhists in Japan attached the great importance to "honesty" which had appeared in the Buddhist texts and finally it is regarded as the central virtue of Japanese ethics in general.

3.3 Endurance

Buddhism lays an emphasis on preaching people to realize that life is suffering and encourages them to overcome those in order to attain the nirvana which is the extinction of all illusions and the elimination of all causes of rebirth. There are eight kinds of suffering, called *Hakku* : pain of birth, old age, sickness, death, separation from be loved ones, meeting with hated ones, unfulfilled desires, and attachment. Thus people must endure those worldly suffering. Endurance is then an important theme of the Buddhist teachings. And also because of the law of impermanence, people must learn to bear their suffering and disappointment bravely.

The Japanese always encounter the hardship during wartimes and natural disasters. Thus, the Buddhist preaching of “endurance” or “patience” is strengthened to be the trait of the Japanese race. And endurance is always followed by self-control which becomes one of the Japanese traits being known by all the others.

A good example is the well-known lives of the Japanese Buddhist preachers who hardly avoided severe endurance. Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren, in holding their religious faith, were all exiled to the remote areas, deserted land, but they never succumbed to the authority. Especially the Zen school is said to devise lots of hard and severe lessons to try the “Unsui” or its trainee. No matter how difficult the test may be, the new monks must endure it.

3.4 Diligence

Endurance is naturally followed by the ethic of hard working or diligence. It is the duty of the Buddhist monks to teach people to be diligent. The famous Zen emphasizes the daily tasks by saying “Meditation in movement has value thousand times more than meditation in stillness”, and “A day without work is a day without food”. Then comes the respect of labor resulting in a high esteem for things produced : each item of foodstuff should be called with honorable prefix “*Ō*” as *Ō - kayu* (rice gruel). Endurance along with diligence then became the most important of the Japanese traits.

3.5 Compromising Spirit

Though the foothills are full of roads,
They all give view to one moon in the sky.

Such famous statement of the Zen monk, Ikkyū clearly shows the spirit of compromising among several Buddhist sects in Japan.

While it is said that Buddhism’s compassion is unlimited, the Buddhists have then taken various forms as an object of faith and all beings are equally the objects of salvation. In connection with compassion, there are thus compromise and tolerance characteristics of Buddhism. For example, Buddhism has to mix with Hinduism in India, with Taoism in China, and with Shintoism in Japan.

In Japan, Buddhism has learnt to compromise with Shintoism. The Shinto kami were said to have the title of “bodisattva” since the Heian Period. And people accepted the concept without doubt. In each house until now, people often have both kamidana (kami altar) and butsudan as the family altars.¹⁴

The character of “compromising” or “harmony” has introduced into the Japanese society the gentleness of spirit (*yawaragi*) which is the foundation of our life on earth. The Japanese are then skilful in negotiating any matter. Even in the realm of art, the ideal type of art performance is solely the spirit of harmony, for instance, harmony is the tea ceremony.

3.6 Simplicity

Simplicity has been one of the favorite traits of the Japanese art and way of living. Since Buddhism had penetrated into the masses in the Kamakura Period, it was much simplified for the uneducated. This was illustrated by Shinran’s theory of salvation. His Jōdo sect only required the faith in Amida’s Compassion and uttering his name, “Name Amida Butsu”, the believer then was said to be born in the Amida’s Pure Land. Especially, Zen Buddhism which became the craze of all classes of people, its uniqueness of simplicity was the people’s fashion. We can also see its spirit of simplicity under the name “sabi” in various artistic departments of life, such as landscape, gardening, the tea ceremony, painting, flower

arrangement, dressing, furniture, the mode of living, No - dancing, and poetry, ect.

Attached closely to the simplicity is the sense of loneliness, solitary, and tranquillity.

3.7 Aesthetic Buddhism

The Japanese people, of course, are naturally fond of nature. Moreover, the Buddhist monks since the Heian Period had chosen the mountainous areas to be their headquarters on temples. Such added and strengthen the craze of it by their poetic spirit because such places are closer to the nature.

Though Shintoism appraised Nature and has many natural gods, it is undeniable that the Buddhist works, both in art and poetry introduce and strengthen the Japanese worship of the beauty and sacredness of Nature. The great contribution of aesthetic Buddhism is the Zen Buddhism. Zen respects Nature in the sense that Nature lives in us and we in Nature. In this respect, Zen aesceticiam advocates simplicity, frugality, straightforwardness, virility, making no attempt to utilize Nature for selfish purposes.

3.8 Purity

Buddhist simplicity and love of nature inevitably have brought about the new concept of purity to the Japanese mind. Originally, purity had its Shinto's practical concept of physical cleanliness. Buddhism then added it with spiritual concept. According to Buddhism, purity means keeping body, speech, and mind clean and pure in any occasion.

Purity is then contributed to Japanese mentality. The famous tea ceremony which has became the Japanese craze since the middle ages requires fresh water from the garden which is naturally kept clean and free from dust and dirt, along with the conceptual spirit of cha - no - yu which is to clean the six senses from contamination.

IV Buddhist Influences on Politics and Social Welfare

4.1 Buddhist influences on the Politics

As having been said, Buddhism was introduced to Japan with the political innovation and the rulers made use of it to consolidate the country. In addition, after Paekche had been defeated, numbers of Korean refugees who were Buddhist artists and artisan fled to Japan including Chinese Zen masters because of the Mongol invasion during the Kawakura period.

Prince Shotoku had found in Buddhism a universal basis for the relationship of the ruler and the ruled. We found a member of the Buddhist teaching in his the Seventeen-Article Constitution.¹⁸ His inspiration helped in achieving national unity and in subduing the clanish spirit. Thus, in the beginning, Buddhism was regarded as a guardian religion of Japan. It also played an important role in the Joei Code and the Rokuhara Code of the regent Hōjō family who aimed at the relief of the poor and the good of the people.

The Buddhist role for the state protection was said in the Sutra of the Golden Light. Accordingly, in Japanese Buddhism, prayer and worship are generally directed to the Buddha, not for the sake of all peoples, but for the country as a whole and for the society, using such statement as "protecting and strengthening the country by the true Dharma".²⁰

Nationalism was also the important goal of worshipping Buddhism in Japan which is different from other countries. Especially when Buddhism from China developed to become Japanese Buddhism in Heian Period, Saicho of the Tendai school frequently said, "To cause the Dharma to abide eternally is to protect the nation." Kukai of the Shingon school also advocated the principle that Buddhism pacifies and preserves the nation. Both schools were the Mikkyo or the Esoteric Buddhism which had a status of being the state religion. Buddhism in

the next Kamakura Period again played a role of serving the state. However, Nichiren is the best example of a nationalist. He called Japan the Divine Land and always prayed for the peace of the land and the tranquillity of the state. And after the Meiji Period, in 1881, lots of Buddhist schools, especially, the Soka Gakkai, a branch of the Nichiren has determined to be the only state religion and has the object of suppressing all other religions, due to the spirit of Nichiren nationalism.

4.2 Buddhist Influences on Social Welfare

It is unquestionable that Buddhism has played the important role as the supporter of social welfare since the introduction of Buddhism to the Japanese society when it is especially regarded as a protector and the helper of the poor.

In Japan, Buddhism stepped into a vacuum that had been created by Shinto's abhorrence of disease, physical mutilations, blood, and death. Moreover, Buddhist monks from the mainland brought the knowledges of Chinese medicine (medical herbs) and the temples were then a kind of the hospital which could make enough income until today. Such is illustrated by the head of Buddha Yakushi who is famous as the "Buddha of Medicine." As well, the Sutra of the Golden Light reveals the Buddha as the great healer.

Kukai was also well-known for his work as a social worker. His well-known work for the society was the engineering work. And later, during the Kamakura Period, all chief monks devoted their lives to the social welfare during the cruel civil-wars. The most famous were the Zen's social activities. The market place is where a Zen trained himself to be qualified for public work.

During the Tokugawa Period, an order called for the social service from the temples to act as a local government. Monks were busy in safety and artifice so much that they had no time to study and broaden their knowledge about Buddhism.

V. The Impact of Buddhism on the Japanese Art and Culture

To the Japanese, art means more than it does to the other peoples. But it is impossible to speak of Japanese culture or art apart from Buddhism. There are in fact no departments of Japanese culture which have not experience the Buddhist influence so much that the Japanese are subconscious of it. A Zen master, D.T. Suzuki even uttered that Japan without Buddhism would be like a deserted land.

The earliest period of Buddhist culture is the Asuka Period under the patron of Empress Suiko (593-628) and Prince Regent Shotoku. The influx of the Chinese and Korean architects helped the Japanese build up images, temples, and other Buddhist decorations such as sculpture and paintings. The most famous of today is Horyuji, now a museum of the early Buddhist art.

The Nara period of the eighth century is the golden age of the Buddhist art under the influence of the Tang's Buddhist art. It developed the age of architecture in bronze and clay, paintings, and crafts.

The Heian Period saw the esoteric Buddhism of the Tendai and the Shingon introduce Japan a special art. The attractiveness lay precisely in its mysteriousness. Most art was made in plain wood because of the mountainous location of the esoteric monasteries and it was shown in dramatic positions such as the mudra and the mandala and the hell and paradise imagination.

The samurai class introduced a new Japanese art in the Kamakura Period. The most important cultural development was the faith in the salvation by means of Amida Buddha's

compassion of the Jodo sects. This was expressed in the Buddhist scroll in Yamato-e style. However the rule of the samurai also affected architect profoundly along with the influence of Zen Buddhism which developed the simple style of the art and architecture.

The most influential inspiration of the Japanese art and culture has been the work of Zen Buddhism which became the official religion in the Muromachi Period. The Shogun often sent the Zen monks as emissaries to China in charge of religious, cultural, diplomatic and economical affairs. Then, it brought about Japanese typical culture and art: the tea-ceremony (Cha-no-yu), the sumiye (black and white painting), the calligraphy (the art of hand-writing), the flower arrangement (ikebana), the Japanese gardening, the swordmanship, the haiku (the poetry of 17 syllables), the No drama, the ritual and ceremony, the ceremony for the dead, and even the education, etc.

In the field of education which helped lay the strong foundation of the Japanese uniqueness, the Buddhist temples were over a thousand years, the center of culture. Temples gave primary education to town and village children. They were called "terakoya" in the Tokugawa.

CONCLUSION

There is a saying in Japan: "The Tendai is for the royal family, the Shingon for the nobility, the Zen for the samurai, and the Jodo for the masses. This illustrates that Buddhism has penetrated into the Japanese way of life since the beginning and in every classes. Though, the Japanese at present pay no much attention to Buddhism due to the administration since the Tokugawa, no one can refuse the impact of Buddhism in their art and culture even they have no knowledge at all in the Buddhist doctrine or teaching.

Nevertheless, there is now a sign in the movement of the Buddhist activities in Japan that, Japan will return to Asia for ethical and political unity and reexamine Buddhist teachings which have for the most part influence her art, culture, and society in general since the ancient times.

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