

Distribution of Buddhist Denominations in Japan

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I. Introduction

Spatial distribution of religions is one of the research themes in which religious studies and geography of religion have long been interested. It is, however, unpopular among recent Japanese scholars, though we do not precisely know how religions and denominations are distributed in Japan. No atlases of Japan carry distribution maps of religions, nor does *The National Atlas of Japan*, the greatest official atlas compiled by the Geographical Survey Institute (1990). In the meantime, distribution of religions and denominations in Europe and the United States has been researched and mapped by local scholars. It must be because the regional difference of religion is more remarkable than in Japan, and statistical data are available. The author has been interested in the Japanese case, and already published an article on the distribution of Christianity in Japan (Oda 1999). In this paper, the spatial distribution of Buddhism is the study subject.

II. Preceding studies

To begin with, the preceding studies about this theme should be reexamined. There are four papers that discussed the distribution of Buddhism all over Japan, except for the studies in a small region such as a prefecture, the unit of local administration in Japan. The first one is the prewar study by a geographer Mochizuki (1930), which is probably the first academic paper on the geography of religion in Japan. The second and the third papers are written by religious scholars, among whom the central figure is Fujii (Fujii *et al.* 1963; Fujii 1963). The fourth study is the analysis of a geographer Kitamura (1994).

Firstly, this paper focuses on the materials which the past researchers used for grasping the Buddhist distribution. They mainly depended on statistical data published by the governing authority such as the Education Ministry (文部省) and the Cultural Affairs Agency (文化庁). Mochizuki

analyzed *Research Materials of Religious Systems* (宗教制度調査資料) compiled by the Education Ministry in the 1920s, which this paper uses later. Fujii *et al.* were based on *The Numbers of Religious Corporations by Prefecture* (都道府県別宗教法人数) published by the Education Ministry in 1959. Kitamura used *The Yearbook of Religion* (宗教年鑑) compiled by the Cultural Affairs Agency every year and *The Directory of Temples in Japan* (全国寺院大鑑) by a private publisher, Hozokan (法蔵館), in 1991.

However, there are other prewar materials that can be used for the study of Buddhist distribution. *Statistical Report of the Interior Ministry* (内務省統計報告), *Annual Report of the Education Ministry* (文部省年報) and *The Statistical Yearbook of Imperial Japan* (日本帝国統計年鑑) carry data by prefecture and by denomination every year. Although they are well-known statistics of Japan, strangely, no researcher has paid attention to them. Since the present official statistics like *The Yearbook of Religion* carries no denominational data by prefecture, these materials are precious. By utilizing these data, we can make clear the prewar distribution of Buddhist denominations, compare it with the results of the preceding studies, and observe the historical change until now.

Secondly, we should consider the index of Buddhist distribution, which is, however, determined by available materials. Generally speaking, the distribution density of religion can be measured by the number of religious buildings or facilities like temples and churches, and the number of adherents. Past papers mainly used the number of temples or religious corporations as the index, because in Japan the number of religious adherents is harder to grasp than that of the religious facilities or religious corporations. However, *Research Materials of Religious Systems* that Mochizuki (1930) analyzed includes adherents' data by prefecture and by denomination. It is an interesting theme to compare them with the temple data.

Thirdly, we notice the two levels of the analysis through the review of past discussions. One is the study of the distribution of the whole Buddhism

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in Japan. We can point out some regional difference of the distribution density. It is worthwhile to note that there are hardly any Buddhists in Okinawa Prefecture. However, the fact that many of the people are Buddhist almost everywhere in Japan does not stimulate geographical interest.

The other level is the study of the distribution of Buddhist denominations¹⁾. Compared with the distribution of the whole Buddhism, we find the denominations regionally situated with various spatial patterns. Past discussions at this level aimed at two goals. One is the regional classification of Japan, which is also the object of this paper. Fujii *et al.* (1963) were engaged in this task about forty years ago and drew a classification map cited by another scholar later, but with many problems pointed out below. The other goal is the classification of the denominations. The denominations are divided into some categories based on their distribution patterns. As a geographer, the author is more interested in the regional classification.

The study of Fujii *et al.* (1963) has the following problems.

In the first place, there are many errors in calculation. According to the author's recalculation, about 19% of the numbers in the table in their paper are shown to be mistakes. This means that the distribution maps they made may need to be modified.

Secondly, the way of expression on the map is not correct. Fujii *et al.* (1963) marked the denomination group that was the greatest number in the respective prefecture, but in some prefectures the second and the third denomination groups were shown together, when the predominant group did not exist. The problem is that it is not clear in which case the second and the third were also marked. In other words, the criterion measure of the difference is not fixed between the top and the second/third when the latter is shown on the map. An alternative way of expression, which this paper suggests and takes, is not to show the second and the third on the map in order to make the figure simple.

Thirdly, the range of the analysis has to be reexamined. Fujii *et al.* (1963) analyzed only sixty denominations picked up from all the 170 Buddhist denominations under the jurisdiction of the Education Ministry that appeared in the research material they used. In other words, the remaining 110 denominations were excluded from their calculation. It is probably because

they attached great importance to the denominations existing since the prewar period. However, the denominations established after the war are also Buddhist, and they deserve to be observed.

This paper divides all the Buddhist denominations into five groups, that is, Tendai and Shingon (so-called esoteric Buddhism), Jodo (Pure Land Buddhism), Zen, Nichiren, and other (mainly Nara Buddhism such as Shingon-risshu, Risshu and Hossoshu). This classification is according to *The Yearbook of Religion* compiled by the Cultural Affairs Agency.

III. Drawing Maps

This chapter tries to draw some regional classification maps by Buddhist denomination groups.

The research material is *The Numbers of Religious Corporations by Prefecture* in 1959 that Fujii *et al.* (1963) used. The numbers and percentages of the temples in five denomination groups are calculated in all 47 prefectures in another way than Fujii *et al.* (1963), though the source lacks the data of Ishikawa and Okinawa Prefecture. It is the Jodo group that has the greatest number all over Japan with about 40%, and the second is the Zen group with a little under 30%. The share of the Tendai/Shingon group is a little over 20%,

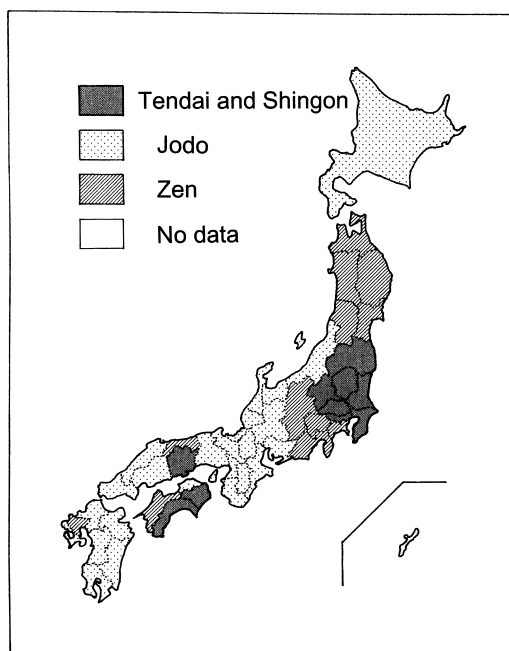


Fig. 1 Regional classification by the number of the temples in 1959

and the Nichiren group occupies a little less than 10%.

The greatest denomination group in the respective prefecture is marked on the map with each pattern. The result is shown as Fig. 1, the regional classification map by the Buddhist denomination groups. The data of Ishikawa Prefecture is cited from Fujii *et al.* (1963) and Okinawa has no data. The Jodo group is predominant in Hokkaido, Hokuriku, Tokai, Kinki, western Chugoku and Kyushu regions. The Zen group is found more in Tohoku and Chubu regions, and the Tendai/Shingon group is rather situated in Kanto and southern Shikoku regions. The Nichiren group is not predominant in any prefectures, so that it does not appear on the map. Although the regional classification map in Fujii *et al.* (1963) was based on many errors in calculation and the range of the analysis was narrower, Fig. 1 somehow appears almost the same.

While the postwar distribution of the denomination groups is mapped like this, the distribution before the war is examined secondly. As for the prewar regional statistics by prefecture on Buddhism, data from 1888 through 1939 are available from *Statistical Report of the Interior Ministry*, *Annual Report of the Education Ministry* and *The Statistical Yearbook of Imperial Japan* mentioned earlier. This paper takes up the data in 1888 and 1937 and makes an analysis. The way of calculation is almost the same as in the case of the material in 1959 mentioned above. The denominations are categorized into five groups, though the classification of the two small denominations is different in the source, but this is a small problem.

The results are Fig. 2 for 1888 and Fig. 3 for 1937. As for the total all over Japan, the order of the denomination groups is the same as in 1959, that is to say, the Jodo group is still the top and the second is the Zen group. However, in some prefectures the greatest denomination group changed between 1888, 1937 and 1959. Such prefectures are Aomori, Tokyo, Wakayama, Kagawa, Ehime, Kochi and Okinawa. The regional classification map in Fig. 1 made from the data in 1959 as well as the map in Fujii *et al.* (1963) is found inapplicable to the prewar period.

While the number of the temples has often been used as an index of the distribution of Buddhism as mentioned above, regional and denominational data of the number of the adherents have been hard to obtain and scarcely used for the study. It could not be ascertained that the adherents are

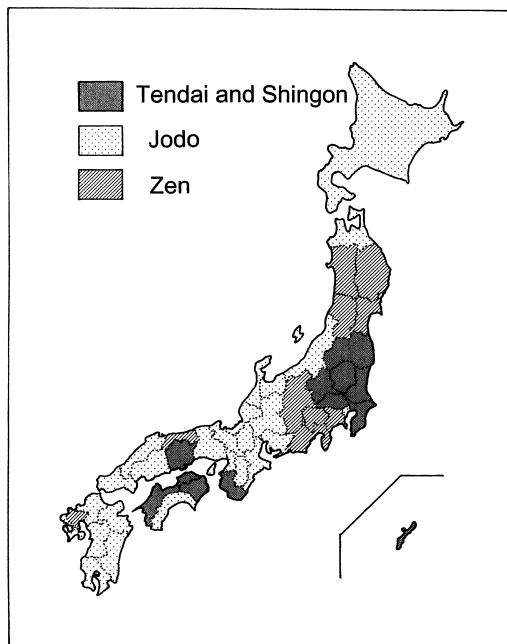


Fig. 2 Regional classification by the number of the temples in 1888

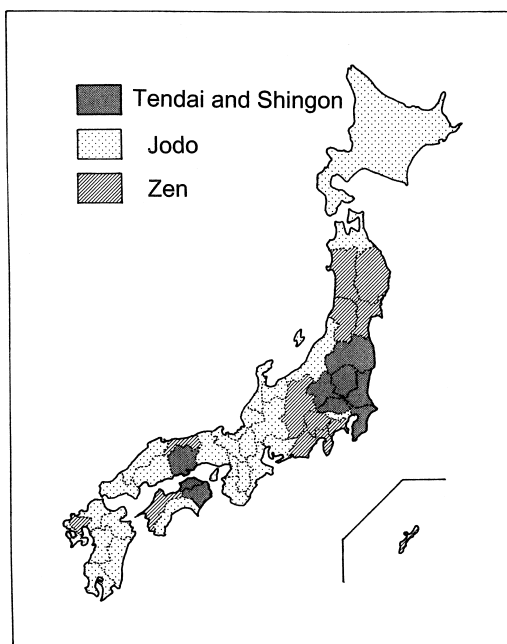


Fig. 3 Regional classification by the number of the temples in 1937 and 1922

distributed with the same pattern as are the temples. Fortunately, *Research Materials of Religious Systems* compiled by the Education Ministry in

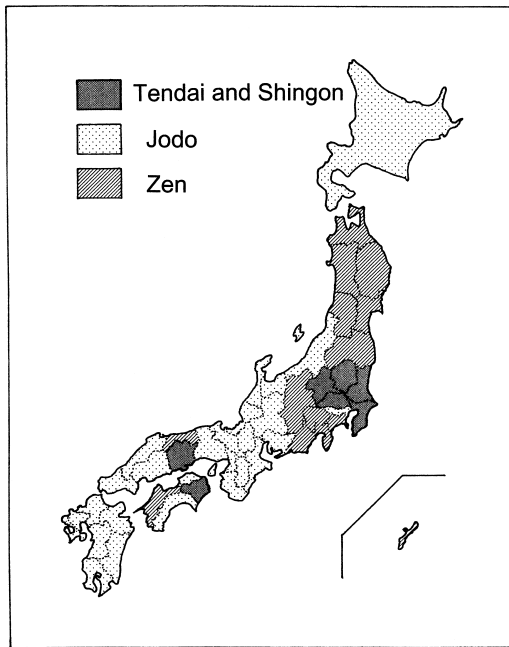


Fig. 4 Regional classification by the number of the supporting families in 1922

1922 which Mochizuki (1930) used includes not only the data on the number of temples but also the number of supporting families of the temples, a kind of parishioner (*danka* in Japanese) by prefecture and by denomination. This paper utilizes it as another index of Buddhist distribution. The way of calculation is the same as above.

The result is shown as Fig. 4 for the number of the supporting families in 1922. The classification map by the number of the temples in the same year of 1922 is the same pattern as Fig. 3 in 1937. When comparing these two maps, four prefectures are found different in the greatest denomination group. For example, in Aomori Prefecture the Jodo group is the top in the number of temples, but the Zen group is predominant in the number of supporting families. The other cases are seen in Fukushima, Kagawa and Saga Prefectures.

Lastly, this paper proposes to set up the Buddhist-denominational regions and show them on the map, although the regional classification is found to be a little different according to the year and the index. The base map here is the regional classification map by the number of supporting families in 1922 (Fig. 4), because the adherent is thought to be more appropriate as the index of the distribution of religion than the religious build-

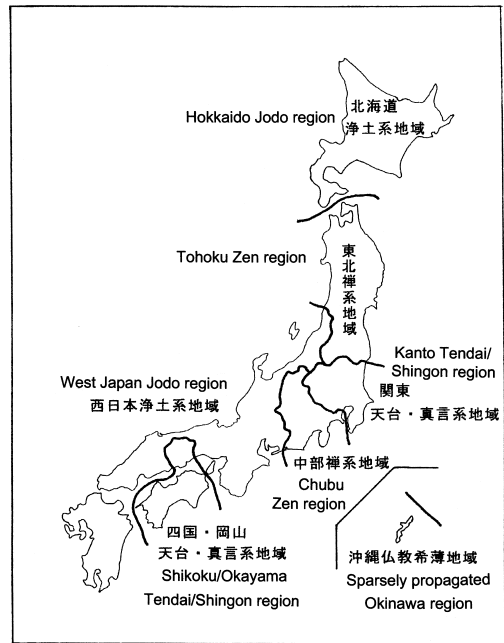


Fig. 5 Buddhist-denominational regions

ing. In order to divide the whole of Japan into as small a number of areas as possible, one area should be composed of plural prefectures except for Hokkaido where the area is by far the largest and Okinawa where Buddhists are hardly found. To be concrete, Tokyo, Tottori, and three prefectures in Shikoku are set into the respective region of the second largest denomination group. In these cases, when calculating together with (a) neighboring prefecture(s), the second denomination group becomes the largest.

The result is shown as Fig. 5, where Japan as a Buddhist region is divided into seven denominational areas, that is, from the north Hokkaido Jodo region, Tohoku Zen region, Kanto Tendai/Shingon region, Chubu Zen region, West Japan Jodo region, Shikoku/Okayama Tendai/Shingon region, and sparsely propagated Okinawa region.

IV. Future tasks

This paper has drawn some regional classification maps of Japan by the Buddhist denomination groups and proposed seven Buddhist-denominational regions.

Statistical materials used in this paper carry the data by individual denomination like Shinshu-otaniha (真宗大谷派) or Shingonshu-chizanha (真言宗智山派) and so on. *Research Materials of Reli-*

gious Systems in 1922 includes data by city. By utilizing these materials, it is possible to make a more detailed research. However, there are other materials that can/must be used for research on the distribution of Buddhist denominations. It is necessary for us to search further for adequate research materials, consider their merits and demerits, and make use of them.

Another big and difficult task in future is the elucidation of the reason why the denominations are so distributed. In a country like Japan where religion is not closely related with ethnicity, its regional variation cannot be explained by ethnic geography. In order to answer this question, we have to refer to the historical propagation process of the respective denomination. As this is not a work that one geographer can make in a short time, we must ask religious scholars, above all, students of Buddhist history for assistance.

Note

This article is a modified version of my paper prepared for the 19th World Congress of IAHR (the International Association for the History of Religions) held in Tokyo, March 2005. For more details, please refer to Oda (2003) which took a closer look at the subject of this article in Japanese.

- 1) The author uses the term “denomination” for the Japanese word “*shuha*,” though it is often translated as “sect.” It is because the term “sect” connotes negative meaning under some circumstances.

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