Organization of the Knowledge of Japanese Ancient Times, and Buddhist Literature and Chinese Books: Examination of the Catalogue of Additionally Requested Chinese Classic Books and Commentaries on Han Buddhist Scriptures

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The Shosoin Archives have a book catalogue (register) dated the tenth day of the sixth month in the year Tenpyo 20 (748) and titled “Catalogue of Additionally Requested Chinese Classic Books and Commentaries on Han Buddhist Scriptures” (hereinafter the “Catalogue”). It contains a total of 172 books ranging from Buddhist literature (translated guides and commentaries on Han Buddhist scriptures) to Chinese books (secular books). Through a brief examination of the production process and content of the Catalogue, this article discovers part of policies to organize thoughts and knowledge in ancient Japan in the mid-eighth century.

The Catalogue includes some of the books belonging to Shinsho, who studied in Silla in the first half of the eighth century. After his death, the collection of books was managed by Hyosho, a disciple of Shinsho and a member of the initial Kegon sect. This Catalogue is a precise copy of the original catalogue of the books of Shinsho which the Dairi (Imperial Palace) borrowed from the monastery of Hyosho. It was made by the monastery and submitted to the Shakyojo (Sutra Copying Office) when asked by Sogo (Buddhist ecclesiastical authority) for the purpose of making a complete inventory and inspection.

Many of Shinsho’s books came from Silla. His Buddhist literature consisted of commentaries written by Silla scholars and monks such as Gangyo (Wonhyo). Before the Shakyojo started copying Buddhist guides and commentaries, Shinsho’s books were lent to the Dairi for years. Especially, commentaries on Kegon sutras were used for lectures given by the Kegon sect, the leading sect of the six sects of Nara, as well as for determination of the amount of donations. On the other hand, Shinsho’s Chinese book collection included a wide range of topics, such as the then latest books of the Tang Dynasty, ancient books after the Nan-Bei Chao period, and military tactics books, which reflected the turbulent situation of East Asia at that time. These books were also borrowed by the Dairi and used for policies to advance arts and sciences.

In the mid-eighth century in Japan, the ancient imperial authority promoted national policies to establish and develop thoughts and knowledge centered on the Buddhism based on the Kegon Sutra. At that time, since they had difficulties acquiring intellectual resources directly from the Tang Dynasty
due to the given international conditions, a collection of books obtained through exchanges with Silla, including those in the Catalogue, played a certain important role.

Key words: Shinsho, Kegon sect (Lotus sect), the six sects of Nara, Chinese books, Silla