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The Successful Integration of Buddhism with Chinese Culture: A Summary

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Cover Page Footnote

To Craig Benjamin: for his significant input on the improvement of this work, as well as the role he played as mentor and teacher

The Successful Integration of Buddhism with Chinese Culture: A Brief Look at the Forces of Their Amalgamation

The penetration of Buddhism into China and its subsequent amalgamation with the native religious culture formulate an interesting enigma. The only 'foreign' religion to embed itself into the hearts and minds of the Chinese masses, Buddhism has gained unprecedented success in comparison to the numerous other religions—Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam—that were likewise spread along the Silk Roads to China. Certainly, many culminating factors must have played a role in the acceptance of a wholly new religion into an already sophisticated culture. The unstable social and political environment following the collapse of the Han Dynasty allowed for a chink in the traditional Chinese faith, through which Buddhist thought found entrance. The strategic transformation and dissemination of Buddhism in the early half of the first millennium provided the disillusioned Chinese with a new hope for salvation.

During the final years of the Han Dynasty, peasant uprisings along with corruption and political infighting between the eunuchs, clans of the empresses, and Confucian officials shattered what was left of the already fragile power structure. After the last Han emperor was forced to abdicate the throne in 220, China was not to be unified again for three and a half centuries.¹ This tumultuous 'Age of Disunity' prepared a psychological foundation for the introduction of Buddhism. The Chinese people were quickly losing faith in their core philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism to solve their problems.² Buddhism offered salvation to all people; the seeking of nirvana, peace and other non-violent Buddhist doctrines would have appealed to people at a time when China was a brutal and dangerous place. The universal creed even gained popularity with the warlords, who as foreign and relatively uneducated rulers, would have been devalued to the lower echelons of Chinese culture by Confucian standards.³ The doctrines of

¹ Mike Edwards, 'The Han Dynasty', *National Geographic*, 205.2(Feb. 2004), p. 2

² Jeffery Hayes, 'History of Buddhism in China', (2008),
<http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=94>

³ Craig Benjamin, 'Intellectual Developments in China during an Age of Disunity',
Lecture 11B, (11/16/11)

Buddhism held a universal appeal to almost every class of people: from peasants to the elite.

Interest in Buddhism also grew as Silk Road trade stimulated an interest in exotic merchandise. The great caravan roads allowed for interchange of ideas as well as of goods. The transmission of Buddhism from India to China paralleled an active trade between the two countries. As luxury trade goods like coral, pearls, perfume, and incense came flooding in from India, Buddhism accompanied it.⁴ The first Buddhist monks arrived with shaven heads, begging bowls and robes at a time when the only people in China that dressed and acted in such a manner were criminals and beggars. The deference with which some of the Silk Road merchants treated the monks must have shocked Chinese traders. Buddhism eventually caught the interest of Han Emperor Ming, who sent an envoy to India. Around 67-68 CE, Buddhist scriptures and two Indian monks arrived at the emperor's request, and they began the translating of Buddhist texts. So began the official establishment of Buddhism in China. By the end of the first century CE, there was a Chinese Buddhist community in the Chinese capital of Loyang.⁵

In the beginning, the translations of Buddhist terminology and text were very vague and confusing. The various forms of Buddhism that were introduced by importation of missionaries from various countries—also belonging to multifarious schools—created a formidable challenge.⁶ Adding to the perplexity, people could hardly tell the difference between Buddhism and Taoism. The first Buddhist text, *Sutra in Forty-two Sections*, was translated during the Eastern Han. This sutra, like similar Taoist texts, taught people to purify their minds and to reduce their desires.⁷ The early translators had some difficulties finding the exact words to explain Buddhist concepts in Chinese, so they often used Taoist terms in their translations. This interweaving of the two religions,

⁴ Jagdish P. Sharma, 'Review of *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges, A.D. 1-600* by Xinru Liu', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Feb., 1991), p. 230

⁵ Ian Mabbett, 'The Beginnings of Buddhism', *History Today*, Vol. 52 Issue 1, (Jan., 2002), p.6

⁶ Latika Lahiri, 'Interpretation of Buddhist Terminology at the Background of Chinese Traditional Thoughts', <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha180.htm>

⁷ Jiahe Liu and Dongfang Shao, 'Early Buddhism and Taoism in China (A.D. 65-420)', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 12, (1992), p. 35-36

one foreign and one native, was perhaps a benefit to the spread of Buddhism. It would appear less foreign to the Chinese. The Chinese people's apprehension of foreign ideas is demonstrated in the persecutions of Buddhism later on in China's history, the first notable one between 424-452CE.

The form in which Buddhism entered China differed from the form that originally emerged in India. The Indian ideology was a result of sectarian splinters. It was not originally meant to be a religion. The Mahayana school of Buddhism that developed later deified the Buddha. The movement of proselytizing began after the appearance of icons.⁸ Once Buddhism entered China, the further transformations it underwent seem strategic. Having already linked Buddhism to the established school of Taoism, Buddhist missionaries also found ties to Confucianism. The *Sutra of Forty-two Sayings* was wisely cast in a Confucian mold. Each paragraph begins after the manner of the Analects, "Thus saith the Master," and most of the more controversial things of Buddhism were omitted.⁹ Issues concerning filial piety are addressed. As if to disarm criticism, the Sutra goes on to suggest a sublimated family life; "if the monk meets women he is to treat the young as sisters or daughters, and old as mothers."¹⁰ It also states that if one achieves enlightenment, then one's family is saved from suffering as well.

Buddhism changed not only in the manner of presentation, such as the wording of the sutras, but also in objective. It was once intended to offer only the truly devout individual a chance at salvation, but it eventually became a vehicle of salvation for all. It abandoned extreme doctrines of denial and philosophical understanding in lieu of pietism and practical insight into oneself.¹¹ The strict monastic form of the religion did not attract large numbers of followers. Many people chose only to sacrifice small parts of their life; it became known as the 'Middle Way'¹². There is an important shift in authority from the clergy to the layman himself. People could feel a closer connection to the Bodhisattvas; they began keeping the icons by them, and praying for things like a son, or good luck.

⁸ Sharma, p. 165

⁹ Kenneth J. Saunders, 'Buddhism in China: A Historical Sketch', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Mar. 1923), p. 160

¹⁰ Saunders p.160

¹¹ Wing-Tsit Chan, 'Transformation of Buddhism in China', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4 (Oct. 1957), p. 115

¹² Benjamin, Lecture 11A

This ritualistic practice could have been seen as a replacement for the long tradition of ancestor worship. Emperors since the Zhou Dynasty (1045 BCE-256 BCE) had been making sacrifices to their ancestors. Under Buddhist rituals, “humane sacrifice”, which usually included a vegetarian meal, would suffice.¹³ It is easy to see how a shift can be made from sacrificing to an ancestor to sacrificing to Buddha or Bodhisattvas. Buddhism had found a niche that was somewhat ingrained in the people already.

One of the most intriguing motifs in the history of Buddhism is the official use of its ideas to sanction and strengthen imperial power. There was a tendency to make a divinity of the reigning emperor as Buddha or Bodhisattva. For example, Fa-kuo made a proposal in the early fifth century that the Northern Wei ruler is the Tathagata and should be honored as such by the clergy. A second instance was a clerical suggestion to the Empress Wu that she was an incarnation of Maitreya. The use of divinization or sanctification is used in two different ways here. Fa-kuo’s suggestion was to build up the emperor as a Buddha incarnate, which was accepted for a time by the northern clergy, but never by those south of the Yangtze. The second relies on a comparison to a lay patron whose generosity is modeled on that of a Bodhisattva.¹⁴ Similar to the Mandate of Heaven, these claims served to give the rulers legitimacy in the eyes of the people. It reflects the movement of the general belief system towards Buddhism, then, that they chose to use Buddhism above the other philosophies to secure their throne.

The growth of Buddhism reached a peak during the late fifth to early sixth century. The rise in the number of temples in Loyang—from 500 in 509 CE to 1,367 in 534 CE—reflected the rapidly rising Buddhist activity at least among the upper class.¹⁵ Records further show that by then, the Buddhist church had built more than 9000 temples across China, and had more than 150,000 nuns and monks.¹⁶ In the course of the eighth century, however, the social structure of China changed once more. Buddhism was on the decline. “There emerged new classes of farmers and farm workers”¹⁷; as the social

¹³ Saunders p.162

¹⁴ Arthur F. Wright, ‘A Review of *The Economic Role of Buddhism in China* by Jacques Gernet’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (May, 1957), p. 408

¹⁵ Wright p. 410

¹⁶ Benjamin, Lecture 11B

¹⁷ Wright p. 410

relations became more and more towards those of employer and employee, and as a money economy tended to develop, classes became isolated from each other. Buddhism developed its following through a universal appeal to all levels and groups of Chinese society. Thus, the segregation of the Buddhist people into classes would have a diffusing affect on the appeals of Buddhism—mainly its universality. The decline of Buddhism can also be attributed to the revival of Confucianism. As with most social change, there is most likely a multi-causal explanation.

The breakdown of the existing social structure following the collapse of the Han Dynasty created a receptive atmosphere for a religion that rejected class. The monks and missionaries that spread Buddhism across China did so in a strategic manner; Buddhism evolved to fit the needs of the Chinese. It made allowances where contradictions existed with preexisting beliefs. The Buddhism in China, more successful than its younger Indian model, is arguably as much a creation of the Chinese people as Taoism or Confucianism.

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