

ENGAGING BUDDHISM: MAKING THE RELIGION OF THE “WESTERN REGIONS” CHINESE

The Buddhist account is that Buddhism’s arrival in China was heralded in a dream of a “golden man” by Emperor Ming in 65CE, who immediately dispatched an imperial envoy to the West to bring back images and teachings of the Buddha—a light-emitting immortal.

- Buddhism as “teaching of images”
 - earliest extant Buddha images seem to have served as new tutelary deities and are found in tombs alongside Daoist and popular religious deities
 - e.g., the Daoist Queen Mother of the West
- the earliest documentation: Central Asian Buddhist adepts known for ritual expertise and mantic power

Buddhist teachers and teachings first became notable in China toward the end of the Han dynasty in the early to mid-2nd century CE, centered initially in the capital, Louyang. Han culture and society were organized around Confucian and, to a lesser extent, Daoist repertoires of ritual and conceptual practices, an extensive body of authoritative texts and commentaries, and a cosmology of self-organizing correlations among the celestial, human and terrestrial realms.

- the arrival of Buddhist repertoires of practice, supporting texts, and a dramatically expansive cosmology coincided with a period when the “celestial mandate” (*tianming* 天命) of the Han dynasty was unravelling
- the Parthian monk/prince, An Shigao, and other monks from Kushan translated hundreds of works, including sūttas/sūtras, commentaries, ritual texts

Over next 4 centuries, Buddhist traditions woven into the fabric of Chinese life—including Chinese politics—to such an extent that China could with justification be called a Buddhist land.

- Buddhism offered a conceptual scheme and ritual technology, known to be valid across Eurasia, that supported a socio-political vision of universal rule
 - Northern Wei and monumental Yungang Grotto complex—232 caves, 50,000 images/sculptures over 18,000 sq m = a massive political statement of right rule
 - 47 “great state monasteries,” 839 among imperial elite, 30K built by commoners
 - Sui reunification of China in 589 CE and Emperor Wen’s mandate to construct 111 relic temples as protection network [4,000 major monasteries]
- by the 6th CE > 2,000,000 ordained = 1 out of every 25 people in population of 50M
 - meditation retreats and vegetarian feasts for up to 5,000; “no barriers” festivals that under Emperor Wu (464-549) of the Liang dynasty = 50,000 people
 - during 7th CE, a system of “inexhaustible treasuries” developed across the empire offering interest-free loans of donated cash/goods from both the poor and elites
 - Confucian critique: ≈70% of imperial wealth in Buddhist institutions (untaxed)

There have been two major approaches to understanding this process.

- the “conquest” of China by the Indian religion, Buddhism
- the “transformation” of Indian Buddhism in China through a process of extended intercultural dialogue

Both are misleading. The first conjures visions of massive and militant missionary activity, but in fact the number of foreign Buddhists in China at any time was exceedingly small, seldom numbering more than several dozen. The second posits the existence of system of Indian Buddhism that was transformed by Chinese. But, in fact, Indian Mahayana traditions were evolving over the period that Buddhism took firm root in China and what took root were hybrids developed by almost wholly Chinese teams of translators/practitioners addressing Chinese interests and concerns.

- Robert Sharf: Chinese Buddhism via *intracultural* dialogue in Chinese among Chinese

The arrival of Buddhist practices and textual traditions precipitated the “predicament” or being at once *in* a culture and forced by the experience (N. Sakai) of cultural difference to be critical *of* it.

- English “culture”: originally processes of nurturing and cultivation associated with plant and animal domestication; later denotes (and ranks) characteristic modes of material, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development that distinguish different “peoples”
 - cf. Raymond Williams entry on culture in *Keywords*
- Chinese *wenhua* combines the characters for “(inscribing) the literary/civil/artistic tradition” (*wen* 文) and “transformation” (*hua* 化)
 - *wenhua* thus refers to the *communicative* and *progressive elaboration* of semantic, somatic and aesthetic practices aimed at extending the Dao or natural order
 - *Analects*: “it is the human that extends the Dao, not the Dao that extends the human”
 - *Mencius*: only an “infinitesimal difference” between the human and the animal
 - R. Ames and “enchanted the ordinary”
 - *Daxue*: personal-cultivation *xiushen* 修身 key to all things, not as work on oneself as an individual *human being*, but rather as an intergenerational, socially-embodied *human becoming*
 - culture = what distinguished Chinese from other peoples

Buddhism introduced to China an alternative *cultural matrix*: a new *literary corpus* and alternative semantic, somatic and aesthetic practices for cohering (*li* 理) with others and elaborating new meanings of consummate personhood and community—opening new horizons for extending the Dao (*dao* 道).

- figuring out what Buddhism meant to guests from “Western regions” vs what Buddhism might mean for Chinese themselves
- in contrast with the Jesuits in 16th century Japan, Chinese engage Buddhism as a new method (*dao* 道) for critically expanding their own cultural/religious repertoire
 - Song Emperor Xiaozong (r. 1162-89): 3 teachings as the legs of a *ding*

3rd CE *Sutra in 42 Sections* and the 10th CE *Discourse Record of Chan Master Linji*

I. From Buddhism in China to Chinese Buddhism

A generation ago, the prevalent theory explaining Chinese interest in Buddhism was that Buddhism introduced a complex psychology and cosmology, as well as techniques for bodymind training and the transformation of consciousness that had previously been lacking in China. These have proved to be problematic claims.

- a history of relative indifference to the complexities of Indian Buddhist “theory of mind” and cosmology; fairly sophisticated indigenous techniques for bodymind training
 - e.g., fate of Abhidharma and Yogācāra literature

Instead, what seems to have attracted the deepest and most abiding Chinese interest were Buddhist conceptions and ideals of *intergenerational personhood* and *community*.

- early Buddhist orthopraxy: personal freedom-from *samsāra*: a path beyond the sufferings of endlessly revolving birth-and-death
 - in China: inextricably bound up with issues of familial fortunes and fate
 - Han model: separation of *hun* 魂 (wandering spirit) and *po* 魄 (dwelling spirit)
 - a journey, perhaps to paradise vs a new residence in subterranean bureaucracy
 - neither “destination” implied a “destiny” with moral/ethical valence
 - questions about one’s “lot in life” (*ming* 命) and one’s “allotment of life” (*fen* 分)
 - non-negotiable: a fixed quantity of *qi* 氣 or life force meted out by *tian* 天
 - negotiable: one’s destiny is associated with an “inherited” burden that one “carries in one’s arms” *chengfu* 承負
 - *Taiping Jing*: astrological determinism + moral cultivation
 - Buddhist teachings of impermanence, interdependence and karma → no need for *tian* or *qi* as explanatory concepts; no need for any “judge”
 - results of actions follow us “like an echo follows sound or like shadows follow objects” (Sutra in 42); yet changing how and why we act will alter what “follows”
 - early texts: reduce desire (for sex, food, fame, fortune) and cultivate equanimity, compassion, loving kindness and sympathetic joy
 - later traditions: reading of karma in light of bodhisattva ideal of *compassionately responsive relational virtuosity*

A. Phase of Accommodation. From the 2nd to 6th CE, Buddhism placed itself within typically Chinese sensibilities along three dimensions: writings, rituals, remarkable persons

Writings (*wen*): First translations of Buddhist texts established the “eminence” of Buddhism in light of Chinese convictions re the *authority* and efficacy of writing as the performance of relationship between celestial and terrestrial (*tian/di*) [oracle bones in Shang]

- early: building conceptual and practical bridges between Buddhism and indigenous traditions and their strategies for addressing suffering
 - *Mou-tzu li-huo lu* “Master Mou’s Treatise on Removing Doubts” (likely 2nd CE)
 - a response to the “discomfort” of experiencing cultural difference (N. Sakai)
 - *Ti-wei-bo-li jing*, “Sutra of Trapusa and Bhallika” by Tanjing (5th CE)
 - 5 precepts=5 Conf. virtues: *ren* 仁=not taking life; *yi* 義=not stealing; *zhi* 智=not becoming intoxicated; *li* 禮=not having illicit sex; *xin* 信=not lying
- later: refining translation/deepening scholarship → reflexive concerns about doctrinal and experiential authority, and *critical engagement* with indigenous Chinese thought
 - text-based traditions: commentarial (Madhyamaka and Yogācāra) and scriptural or textually-defined schools of Buddhism
 - Consciousness-Only (*Weishi zong* 唯識宗); Heavenly Terrace (*Tiantai zong* 天台宗); Pure Land (*Jingtu zong* 淨土宗); Flower Ornament (*Huayan zong* 華嚴宗)

Ritual technology (*li* 禮): resonated with Confucian ancestor veneration and care across generations:

- making merit (*fu* 福): 1] building temples, statues; 2] relic veneration; 3] visiting sacred mountains and pilgrimage sites; and 4] public repentance and bodhisattva precepts rituals
- primary practice for laity: offering [*dāna pāramitā* Ch: *bushi boluomi* 布施 波羅蜜]
 - field of merit; field of compassion

Remarkable persons. Monks/nuns as real/ideal persons capable of extraordinary conduct

- *asceticism*: living beyond the norms in terms of sex, food, clothing, bodily care
- *paranormal abilities*: healing/protecting; generating “sympathetic resonance” (*ganying* 感應) and affecting history (altering courses of military campaigns; Wei reunification)
- *scholarship*: memorizing Chinese/Buddhist canons; exegesis and literary flair; debate

B. Phase of Advocacy. By the 7th century: distinctively Buddhist concepts/practices as superior in responding to the Chinese problematic of change: stress on karma (*ye* 業)

- karma: with sufficiently sustained attention, it becomes evident that there is a direct relationship between patterns among our own values-intentions-actions and the patterns of outcome/opportunity that we experience
- Zongmi (780-841): Confucian and Daoist failures to understand ‘mind’ and ‘karma’ or the irreducibly dramatic or narrative nature of human temporality
 - “Origins of Humanity” *Yuan-ren lun*: the inadequacy of appeals to *qi*, *ziran* or *ming* as origins of humanity (a direct counter to Wang Bi and Guo Xiang)
 - Confucianism: continuity as cultural conservation via ritualized relations *li* 禮
 - primacy of the ancestral; *youwei* 有為 = doing
 - Daoism = continuity via spontaneous (*ziran* 自然) attunement to natural *dao* 道
 - primacy of the natural; *wuwei* 無為 = allowing
- bodhisattva vow: extending the scale of responsibility to qualitatively transform the interdependence of all things, exemplifying horizonless commitment to realizing a *liberating future* for all sentient beings
- Chinese apocrypha “Raising Mahayana Confidence” (Awakening of Faith *Dasheng qixinlun* 大乘起信論): mind *xin* as “True Suchness” *zhenru* 真如 (Skt. *tathatā*): presence as awareness w/o subject or object
 - “one mind” (*yixin* 一心) of ultimate reality has two aspects: *ti* (體) “embodied structure” and *yong* (用) “function”

Over the 6th to 8th centuries, three concepts assume crucial importance.

- ***upaya*** (*fang-bian* 方便) “skillful means” as key concept in Mahayana texts and audience-specific teachings: improvisational virtuosity as the key characteristic of bodhisattvas
 - “unconstrained conduct” (*wu'ai xing* 無礙行) (e.g., Vimalakīrti, bars/brothels)
- ***nonduality***: an implication of the emptiness and interdependence of all things
 - Fazang (643-712): interdependence entails interpenetration; nonduality as *shared functioning* of each thing or being as a distinctive *cause of the totality* of the real

- metaphor of traditional, timber-framed building and relations among roof tiles, rafters, beams and columns
- **Buddha-nature:** (*fo-xing* 佛性) “buddha-nature” (Chinese neologism that interprets Indian concepts of *tathāgatagarbha* and *alayavijñāna*)
 - India: answers metaphysical questions about individual karma, consciousness and the *possibility of enlightenment*
 - China: answers questions about situational/relational transformation, establishing the *promise of enlightenment*
 - Buddha-nature: *original responsive disposition for liberating interdependence*
 - a *common essence* vs relational dynamic in which all have *contributory share*

In China: *upāya*, *non-duality* and *buddha-nature* combine to foster seeing *enlightenment as embodied and socially situated relational virtuosity*: something to demonstrate

- cp. Diamond Sutra and *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi* = no attainment
- came to be epitomized by Chan quintessentially “Chinese” Buddhism

II. Chinese Buddhism after the Tang

A longstanding “truism” is that the heyday of Chinese Buddhism was during the “cosmopolitan” Tang dynasty and reached its zenith during the 9th century with the empire-wide embrace of Chan teachers and teachings. After this, Buddhism went into a long, but steady decline. We now know better. Buddhism did not fade away after the Tang in either elite or popular circles.

Source of “truism”: Emperor Wuzong (r. 840-46) purge of foreign religions, including Buddhism—the so-called Huichang Suppression of 842-845.

- 4,600 temples/monasteries destroyed; Buddhist libraries burned; 250,000 monks/nuns returned to lay life; monastic lands/wealth (esp. metals) turned over to government
 - demise of “text-based” Huayan, Tiantai and Zhenyan or “True Word” schools
- only Chan and Pure Land traditions survive in ethnic Han areas; Zhenyan traditions survive in Western China (and Japan); Huayan in Korea; Tiantai in Japan and Korea

Chan and Pure Land traditions continued to evolve throughout the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960-1127; 1127-1279) and remained vibrant for the rest of dynastic China and into the Republican era. But esoteric or tantric Buddhism also spread from non-Han areas on the periphery of the empire back to the center in two politically-charged waves—during the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and again during the Manchu-ruled Qing (1644-1912).

“Esoteric” Buddhism: *Vajrayāna*

At roughly the time that Chan was developing in China, in northern India/Pakistan from 6th to 8th centuries hybrids of Mahayana teachings and tantric practices begin emerging that challenged Vedic distinctions of pure/impure or transcendental/mundane: advent of *Vajrayāna* Buddhism

- “vajra” = a legendary “thunderbolt” of the Vedic god, Indra, and an indestructible “diamond-like” substance
 - emphasis on “magical” efficacy of esoteric ritual and language

- ideal of *mahasiddha*
- texts, meditation and “technologies of transgression” → realizing no-self
- spread to China (Zhenyan), Korea and Japan (Shingon/Tendai); Southeast Asia (Borobudur and Khmer kingdoms at Angkor); Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan
 - in Tibet/Mongolia/Bhutan: a complex system incorporating full range of Buddhist texts combined with esoteric, tantric practices

Of particular importance for Buddhism in China was the embrace of Buddhist traditions on the Himalayan or Tibetan plateau.

- conventional Tibetan history: Songtsen Gampo (d.649) consolidates an empire that reaches to Chang’an; marries Tang princess Wencheng and later a Nepali princess Bhrikuti Devi; commissions Tibetan script to translate Buddhist texts

Current scholarship: Tri Detsukten (704-755) ascends the throne at age 6, married to Wencheng’s “niece,” Jincheng (d.739), who was a strong advocate of Buddhism and invited Khotanese monks to establish a Tibetan sangha. Their son, Tri Songdetsen (740-798) converts to Buddhism in 762.

- in 763 taking advantage of An Lushan rebellion, overruns Chang’an, negotiates truce
- calls Padmasambhava to tame/convert (*dulwa*) Tibet’s native gods
- declares Buddhism the state religion and builds Tibet’s first monastery at Samye (779)
 - Chinese Chan had been transmitted into Tibet via Sichuan by Master Kim or Wuxiang (684-762), a proponent of *wunian* or non-thinking, and around 792 Tri Songdetsen arranges a debate between Mohoyen and Kamalaśīla
 - “orthodox” clerical Buddhism defeats “heterodox” Chinese Chan
- Vajrayāna traditions filter in and → large communities of Nyingma lay practitioners

Tri Songdetsen’s heirs maintain the Buddhist polity/empire he had established, and in the reign of Rapalcan (r.815-838) the famous treaty of 821/822 between Tibet and Tang China establishes their relative borders and political/familial ties as uncle and nephew.

- Langdarma purges Buddhism, killed → infighting and 877 collapse of Tibetan empire
 - 150 years of turbulence → demise of clerical/scholarly Buddhism and an underground transmission via hereditary lay tantric practitioners and oral teachings
 - Nyingma *dzogchen* or “Great Perfection” = sudden enlightenment, irreducibility of Buddha-nature, interpenetration/interdependence of all things
 - reminiscent of “banned” teachings of Chinese Chan and Huayan

From 11th to 14th centuries, clerical Buddhism begins to revive with influx of Indian/Kashmiri teachers, eventually resulting in 4 major traditions of Tibetan Vajrayāna and the ascendance of clerical Buddhism over lay Nyingma traditions in the context of intense tribal/local politics.

- **Kadampa** founded by Atisha (982-1054), invited from near Vikramsila Univ. near Nalanda: stressed philosophy and strict adherence to monastic rules, but Atisha also transmitted the “unexcelled yoga” = scholastic/monastic tantra
- **Kagyupa** founded by Tilopa (late 10th to 11th) included Naropa, Marpa (Tibetan born) Milarepa and Gampopa...yoga tantra with a more “devotional” slant
- **Sakyapa** founded by Khonchok Gyelpo (1034-1102) traced to Indian tantric adept Virupa (once abbot of Nalanda): the path is the fruit (*margaphala*)

- **Gelugpa** founded by Tsongkapa (1357-1419) who establishes the “Big Four” monasteries of central Tibet (Ganden, Sera, Drepung and Trashilunpo) and argues for restoration of importance of celibate practice, stress on scholarly preparation for tantric practice, and the lack of difference between conventional reality and ultimate reality.

In 1240, Mongol attack of Tibet by Godan Khan (son of Ogedei) results in “invitation” to have high lamas resume tribute connection

- 1247, Sakya Pandita arrives, impresses Godan who converts → appointment of Sakya Pandita as religious/political leader of Tibet
- nephew Chogyal Phagpa and Kublai Khan formalize the Tibet-Mongol relationship as one of *ch’od-yon* or *patron-priest*
 - Sakya effectively rule Tibet until fall of Mongols in 1354

15th–16th centuries in Tibet = sustained, sectarian civil war fueled by tribal alliances and regional rivalries in league with Buddhist schools

- Gelugpa leader Sonam Gyatso allies with and converts Mongol Altan Khan (1575) and is given the title of Dalai Lama, “Great Ocean Lama.” In deference to his Dharma predecessors, he comes to be referred to as the 3rd Dalai Lama.
 - reincarnation of Chogyal Phagpa who converted Kublai Khan
- Altan Khan’s grandson, Prince Sechen Chokhol has a child, born in Mongolia, who is identified as the 4th Dalai Lama
- in 1642, the Mongol Gushri Khan provides military support to Gelugpa and 5th Dalai Lama (1617-82) crushes opposition and assumes control of unified Tibet

Meanwhile, north of the Ming empire, the Manchu were using a history of universal Buddhist rule to qualify alliances being made with other Mongol and Tibetan leaders, along with economic incentives and military expeditions. The founding Qing emperors Nurhaci (r. 1616-26) and Abahai (1626-43) both cultivated close relationships with Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs and invoked the patron-lama relationship.

- Qing as the “successor state” to the Buddhist Mongol empire of the Yuan dynasty; Qing emperor as universal Buddhist ruler
 - instrumental vs sincere use of Buddhism
 - shift of Yuan connection with Sakya tradition to Gelug tradition of the Dalai Lamas
 - Dalai Lama = incarnation of Avalokiteśvara; Qing emperor = Manjuśrī
- Kangxi (1654-1722) and Qianlong (1711-99) both strongly invested in Tibetan Buddhism including (with Qianlong) several important tantric initiations from Panchen Lama
 - Panchen Lama visit in 1779 = 5,000 monks, 100 soldiers, 1,000 servants and clerks, and replicas of Potala and Tashilhunpo monastic residences in Chengde
 - commissioned translation of Buddhist canon into Manchu
- Qing established over 1,000 monasteries and temples in Mongolia, Xinjiang and other regions on Chinese imperial periphery as a centralized state institution
 - 30% of Mongol males during Qianlong reign were monks
 - in Han China, some 80,000 monasteries and temples