

Buddhism's Effect on China's Development

“How did the spread of Buddhism impact China and conflict with other native chinese philosophies?”

World Religion

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Introduction

In this paper I will be addressing the question “How did the spread of Buddhism impact China and conflict with other native Chinese philosophies.” The purpose of this paper is to investigate Buddhist theology, the spreading of Buddhism in China, and the impact it had on the followers of other religions. I will be discussing the origins and teachings of Buddhism (specifically Mahayana Buddhism with reference to Theravada) and how they relate to Taoism and Confucianism, two major philosophies that existed in and originated in China prior to the spread of Buddhism. Along with researching and discussing Buddhism’s reception in China, I will also be analyzing how Buddhism changed because of its spread through China and how Buddhism shaped and changed China as a nation, managing to now be the largest foreign religion in China today.

Who was Buddha?:

The origin of Buddhism can be traced back to a single man, Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha was born into a large clan called the Shakyas in Kapilavastu (which is now the border of modern day India and Nepal), around 550 B.C.E. Siddhartha was the son of the king of the tribe. Siddhartha was secluded from the world and was raised with no understanding of human hardship and religion by his father who didn’t want his son to witness the suffering going on in the world.¹ He lived a sheltered life of ignorance toward what life was like outside of his palace’s walls. In his late twenties he ventured outside of his palace and finally saw what was going on around him; the sickness, the death, and suffering. After seeing the world for what it was, it

¹Levenson, Claude B. *Symbols of Tibetan Buddhism*. Symbols of Religion. New York: Assouline, 2004.

encouraged him to take more journeys. On one of his journeys he encountered a sick man, an old man, a corpse being conveyed to the pyre, and a religious nomad. Seeing this, Siddhartha decided that he wanted to seek the cure to the inevitable evils of human existence. The day after seeing this, Siddhartha left his wife, child, and sheltered life to devote himself to this quest.²

After years of deprivation passed without result, while meditating under what will be come to be the sacred Bodhi Tree, Siddhartha awakened to his Buddha (the “Enlightened One” in Sanskrit) state. From that day forward Siddhartha went on to teach the Four Noble Truth and the ways to overcome them.³ While wandering and teaching, Siddhartha acquired many followers who also helped to spread his word. Siddhartha died circa 478 B.C.E in Kushinagar, at over seventy years old. His disciples declared that he had reached Nirvana (the release of the constant suffering called Samsara, reached through spiritual awakening).⁴ From that point on, millions of people came to adhere to his word and follow his teachings. After his death, Buddhism began to travel north from India into upper Asia. From his original teachings many sects of buddhism have evolved.

Religion and Philosophy in China:

Buddhism spread to China toward the end of the Han Dynasty (circa 150 CE). When Buddhism arrived in China Taoism (aka Daoism) and Confucianism were the two most popular philosophies in China. Taoism and Confucianism both originated in China. Taoism can be traced back to Laozi, a chinese philosopher (c. 500 BCE). During the Western Han era (206 BCE - 24AD), the religion of Taoism developed and became China's major indigenous religion.

²KINGSLAND, JAMES. SIDDHARTHAS BRAIN: unlocking the ancient science of enlightenment. NEW YORK: WILLIAM MORROW, 2017.

³ Vail, Lise F. "*The Origins of Buddhism.*" Asia Society. Accessed April 05, 2017.

⁴Harvey, Peter. An introduction to Buddhism teachings, history and practices. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013.

Confucianism, unlike Buddhism and Taoism, is not an organized religion but a way of living and thinking. Confucianism was developed by Confucius in 551-479 BCE.

Confucius did not consider himself the founder of the philosophy. He claim to merely be a transmitter who tried to teach old ways to benefit the future.

After the fall of the Han Dynasty there was a period of religious instability from 220-570 CE. In this time there were many mixed feelings about Buddhism. While some of China viewed Buddhism as a positive way to establish control and order as Taoism and Confucianism did in the past. Many however, believed Buddhism to be poisonous to Chinese culture and undermine confucianism teachings.

Body

Anti-Buddhist Persecution in China

There are multiple recorded times of anti-buddhist persecution in China, the first one beginning in 446. Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei was a devout Taoist who was fighting a Xiongnu rebel named Gai Wu. While campaigning, weapons were discovered in buddhist temples, resulting in Emperor Taiwu believing that the buddhists were against him. Backed by prime minister Cui Hao, Emperor Taiwu ordered that Buddhism be abolished under penalty of death. This resulted in the slaughter of many buddhists throughout the Guanzhong region where Gai's rebellion was based. The ban continued through Emperor Taiwu's reign, relaxing in his later years. The ban formally ended in 452, when Emperor Wencheng of Northern Wei (Taiwu's grandson and a buddhist) took the throne.

The second Anti-Buddhist movement in China was attempted two separate times, first in 574 and the second in 577. During this time, Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou banned both Buddhism and Taoism. He believed that the two religions had both become too wealthy and powerful. With this belief, Emperor Wu ordered that monks of Buddhism and Taoism return to civilian lifestyles in order to add to the economic growth of China. The exact time that this ban ended is not fully known but it has been assumed that it was over by the time Emperor Xuan of Northern Zhou took the throne in 578.

One of the largest anti-buddhist persecutions was in 845 and was initiated by Taoist Emperor Wuzong of the Tang Dynasty. This has become known as the Great Buddhist Persecution. During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was flourishing greatly and monasteries were not taxed. In 843, China was at conflict with Uyghur tribes. The army ultimately won the battle, but as a result China was nearly bankrupt. Emperor Wuzong's solution to the nation's economic problem was to acquire the wealth gained by Buddhist monasteries. In 845, Emperor Wuzong closed many buddhist shrines and confiscated their land.

There were also social reasons for the Great Buddhist Persecution. Many Confucian philosophers disliked Buddhism, claiming that it undermined the social structure of China. As Buddhism encourages its followers to follow an enlightened path such as becoming a monk or nun. This was very different than Chinese culture which was based on family loyalty, for example taking care of elderly parents, and starting a family. Many also opposed Buddhism because they did not view nuns or monks as economically useful seeing as they didn't participate in economically beneficial activities such as weaving or farming. The goal of this persecution was to return monks and nuns to the working class to contribute economically to society.

Emperor Tang was infamous for his prejudice against Buddhists. During his campaign he destroyed buddhist temples and forced monks and nuns to return to tax-paying commoners. Buddha statues were melted and cast into coins or tools. Practicing Buddhism in private was also outlawed, if a Buddha statue was found in a home the family would be punished.⁵ According to historical records, during the fifth year of his reign “more than 4,600 temples and monasteries were torn down, 260,500 Buddhist monks and nuns were forced to renounce their beliefs, and more than 40,000 refuges and hermitages were destroyed.”⁶ Less than 2 years following the beginning of the Great Persecution, Emperor Wuzong died at the age of 33. Wuzong’s uncle, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, succeeded him to the throne and revived buddhism in China. Buddhism in China never recovered completely from the great persecution of 845. It did maintain much of its heritage, however, and it continued to play a significant role in the religious life of China.⁷

The final anti-buddhist persecution in China occurred in 995, and was led by Emperor Shizong of the Later Zhou Dynasty.⁸ Emperor Shizong ordered that all property belonging to Buddhist monasteries be confiscated and Buddhist practices were banned. It has been said that this persecution started from a need for copper. Shizong ordered that Buddha statues be melted so that the copper could be used for mint coins. However, traditional historical account of this persecution differ on whether buddhist practices or doctrines were intended to be suppressed. The

⁵Zhai Jing, "Emperor Tang Wuzong Died One Year after Initiating the Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution," Falun Dafa - Minghui.org, April 14, 2015, accessed December 26, 2017,

⁶ Zhai Jing, "Emperor Tang Wuzong Died One Year after Initiating the Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution," Falun Dafa - Minghui.org, April 14, 2015, accessed December 26, 2017

⁷ "The Buddha and Buddhism: China.," The Buddha and Buddhism: Historical development: CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA: China., , accessed January 07, 2018.

⁸Naomi Standen, Demystifying China: new understandings of Chinese history (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013).

Old History of the Five Dynasties claims that there was an order to destroy Buddhist temples, and that monks and nuns whose parents did not approve of their decision were forced to return to civilian lives. The New History of the five Dynasties suggests that there was no suppression of either buddhist doctrines or practices. Both these writing also lack evidence of massacres, but many historical accounts claim that buddhist nuns, monks, and lay persons were executed during this persecution. Emperor Shizong's ban on Buddhism was lifted by Emperor Taizu, the founder of the Song dynasty.

What is Mahayana Buddhism?

As Buddhism began to grow in China, many different branches began to form, the most popular being Tiantai (“heavenly terrace”), Avatamsaka (Huayan, “flower garland”), Pure Land (Jingtu), Chan Buddhism, and Esoteric Buddhism. Most of these forms were drawn from Mahayana Buddhism.⁹ The branch of Buddhism closest to what some of the first Buddhist followed was Theravada Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism is currently most present in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia. Mahayana talks a lot about the bodhisattva (an enlightened being who is able to reach nirvana, but delays doing so to be able to teach others how to reach enlightenment) as being the ideal way for a Buddhist to live.¹⁰ Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism share the same core beliefs, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.¹¹ Mahayana promotes the idea that an aspirant should not just seek personal enlightenment but the

⁹ Williams, Paul. *Mahayana Buddhism: the doctrinal foundations*. London: Routledge, 2010.

¹⁰ "Differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism | ." *Biography Online*. Accessed October 12, 2017. <https://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/buddhism/theravada-mahayana.html>

¹¹ Rahula, Walpola Sri. "The Noble Eightfold Path: Meaning and Practice." *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Accessed October 13, 2017. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/noble-eightfold-path/>.

enlightenment of all beings. Unlike Theravada, Mahayana meditate with emphasis on mantras and chanting.¹²

Buddhist Holy Books

The Tripitaka (said as Tipitaka in Pali) is the earliest collection of Buddhist teachings and the only texts recognized by Theravada Buddhists as genuine.¹³ Tripitaka translates to "three baskets," because of the way it was first written. The text was originally written on narrow, long leaves, which were then sewn at the edges and grouped into bunches and stored in baskets. The Tripitaka was initially taught orally, but was written down in third century B.C.E. According to Buddhist teachings, the contents of the Tripitaka were decided by the First Buddhist Council, shortly after the death of Siddhartha.¹⁴

The Vinaya Pitaka (which translates to Discipline Basket) was written by a monk named Upali. The Vinaya Pitaka includes 227 rules for monks, regulations for nuns, and guidelines for the interaction between the sangha (practicing monks and nuns) and the laity (lay people). Most of these rules stem from Siddhartha's responses to specific situations and interactions in the community.¹⁵

The Suttaṅta Pitaka (which translates to Discourse Basket) was recited by Ananda, Siddhartha's cousin and closest companion. It contains Siddhartha's teachings on dogma and behavior, and heavily focuses on meditation techniques.¹⁶

¹²"Differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism | ." Biography Online. Accessed October 12, 2017. <https://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/buddhism/theravada-mahayana.html>

¹³ "Tripitaka or Pali Canon." ReligionFacts. October 29, 2016. Accessed October 12, 2017. <http://www.religionfacts.com/tripitaka>.

¹⁴ "The Origin of the Pali Canon," Pali Canon Online, , accessed January 10, 2018, <http://www.palicanon.org/>.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

The Abhidhamma Pitaka (translated as the Higher Knowledge or Special Teachings Basket) was recited by Mahakashyapa, Siddhartha's successor. It is a collection of miscellaneous writings, poetry, songs, and stories of the Buddha and his past lives. Its most prevalent subjects are Buddhist psychology and philosophy. A major part of the Abhidhamma Pitaka is the Dhammapada (Dharmapada in Sanskrit), a popular Buddhist text. The Dhammapada is made up of quotes by the Buddha and simple discussions of Buddhist dogma based on Siddhartha's daily life.¹⁷

Both the Theravada and Mahayana forms of Buddhism follow the three baskets. While Mahayana Buddhism honors the Tripitaka as a holy text, they also acknowledge a total of 2184 sacred writings, most of these being called Sutras.¹⁸ The Sutras were written sometime between 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE, during that time the split between Theravada and Mahayana developed. Focussing on different teachings, Mahayana Buddhism developed in different directions and separated into different forms depending on which Sutras they use and emphasized. However, despite the many writings, very few are key to Mahayana Buddhism's development and thought.

A key Sutra in Mahayana Buddhism is the Lotus Sutra. It portrays a sermon by the Buddha (Siddhartha) to an assembly of Bodhisattvas (a person who is able to reach nirvana but delays doing so out of compassion in order to save suffering beings), Buddhas (those who have reached enlightenment) and other followers to who he teaches the basis of Mahayana Buddhism. It emphasizes the goal of becoming a Bodhisattva and the idea of realizing one's own Buddha-nature. The Lotus Sutra is used heavily in many forms of Mahayana and Vajrayana (a

¹⁷ibid

¹⁸ibid

branch of Mahayana) Buddhism, and is even the primary text for one strand of Mahayana, Nicheren Buddhism.¹⁹

The Acceptance and Transformation of Buddhism in China

By the Tang Dynasty many Buddhist temples and Shrine had expanded across China. During this time came the action of laity making donations to monks and temples to secure spiritual and earthly rewards. In addition, they could receive both practical and spiritual benefits through charity, the support of public works (for example repairing a local temple), donating land or property, and providing money and resources for artwork such as a statue, or cave shrine, or production of a set of Buddhist texts.²⁰

People who chose to convert to buddhism and follow a monastic were shunned from society, specifically strict followers of Confucianism. This was because monasticism did not go well with long-time Chinese beliefs and culture since Buddhist monks would sacrifice one's family name, cut their hair, give up the possibility of offspring, and embrace living in poverty. Regardless of the persecutions and difficulties it had accommodating itself in a foreign land, Buddhism thrived in China even more so during the Song Dynasty.

Following Emperor Shizong's persecution against Buddhism, the Song Dynasty revived and funded new translations of Buddhist texts.²¹ During the Song Dynasty, an organization called the Institute for the Translation of Sutras (later known as the Institute for the Transmission of the Dharma) was created to find and translate new buddhist texts. This institute housed some of the

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ "Buddhism in the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) Dynasties," Asian Art Museum | Education, , accessed January 02, 2018

²¹ Naomi Standen, *Demystifying China: new understandings of Chinese history*

leading Indian monks in the Song China, and Chinese monks trained in Sanskrit. Between the year 982 and 1037, the Institute produced 263 translations of Buddhist texts.²² It was during this time that Buddhism became one of the most popular foreign religions in China.

Chinese Buddhist art also developed. It was also during this period that the development of sculptures and other religious architecture came about. There have been Buddhist objects have been discovered from the Tang and Song dynasties such as freestanding marble statues, stone steles, and sandstone. Not many large metal statues from the Tang or Song Dynasty have been recovered as during Buddhist persecution many large statues were melted for hard currency. There are also many ways that Buddhism changed Chinese culture. Though there is no direct evidence, many historians argue that China's increased consumption of tea during the Tang Dynasty can be accredited to Buddhism, along with the increased use of chairs, and wearing cotton.²³

Buddhism's Effect of Taoism

When Buddhism was first introduced into China during the Han Dynasty, Taoism was not yet a religion but a philosophy. It can be argued that Buddhism was able to be successful in China is due to Taoism. When Buddhism arrived to China, in order to help the Chinese understand Buddhist concepts, Buddhists used ideas from Taoism via the Chinese language.²⁴ Both Buddhism and Taoism benefited from this exchange as buddhists found a way to teach their traditions and

²² Naomi Standen, *Demystifying China: new understandings of Chinese history*

²³ "Buddhism in the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) Dynasties," Asian Art Museum | Education, , accessed January 02, 2018

²⁴ Foy, Geoff. "Buddhism in China." Asia Society. Accessed January 07, 2018.

<https://asiasociety.org/buddhism-china>.

Taoist were able to structure their monastic ways more efficiently. Many of the early Buddhists in China also followed Taoism, and Taoism made a deep and positive influence on Buddhism.

Taoism and Buddhism both have some very similar teachings, for example bodhisattvas in buddhism and sages of Taoism. While the similarities between the two allowed for Buddhism to be taught more efficiently to the Chinese, many Taoism adherents found Buddhism to be a cheap mimicry of Taoism. Over time Taoist began accepting the presence of Buddhism in China, and began getting more intrigued by it. From Buddhism, Taoist began making statues and art of important Taoist figures and transformed from a philosophy to a religion. Many Taoists accepted Buddhist teaching along with Taoist ones.

By the sixth century, Buddhism was very popular in China and rivaled Taoism in political influence as well. It was also during this time, until around the end of the ninth century, that the major schools of Buddhism in China were formed. The two schools that still retain their influence today are Pure Land Buddhism and Chan Buddhism (also known as Zen Buddhism). Even though religion was often suppressed by the government in mainland China, there were still practitioners of both Pure Land and Zen Buddhism.²⁵

Buddhism's Effect of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism

When Buddhism was introduced in China, many Confucian people found fault with it. Buddhism promoted an emphasis on other-worldliness and monasticism, while Confucianism focuses on level-headedness and social responsibility. Regardless of Confucius beliefs Buddhism continued to grow in China for many centuries.

²⁵Geoff Foy, "Buddhism in China," Asia Society, , accessed January 07, 2018, <https://asiasociety.org/buddhism-china>.

During the Song Dynasty, Chinese Confucian scholars became concerned that Confucian teaching were being lost due to Buddhism. In attempt to convert more people to early Confucianism, the intellectual movement known as Neo-Confucianism was created. Neo-Confucianism became an powerful tool for spreading and preserving Confucian doctrines of loyalty, conformity, and social responsibility as a traditional way of life.²⁶ By this time, Buddhism had already become strongly integrated into Chinese culture, therefore it was impossible for Neo-Confucianists to fully replace Buddhism with their teachings. In the teaching of Neo-Confucianism, Neo-Confucianists used Buddhist way of teaching in order to get their point across to those following Buddhism. After the Song Dynasty, the Neo-Confucian movement included many speculative philosophers, painters, poets, doctors, social ethicists, political theorists, historians, local reformers and government civil servants.²⁷

Who is Budai?

As Buddhism grew in China the religion itself did as well. An example of this can be seen in modern Buddha art. One common depiction of Buddha is a fat man with a smile, in western culture he is commonly confused with Gautama Buddha. This statue is of Budai (also known as Hotei), an incarnation of Maitreya (a bodhisattva who will arrive to earth in the future). Budai traditionally depicted as a fat, bald man wearing a robe and prayer beads. His Figure appears throughout chinese culture, representing contentment and abundance. Chinese Buddhist traditions claim that he is a buddha or a bodhisattva. It is common to find statues of him is Buddhist

²⁶ Pratoom Angurrohita, *Buddhist influence on the neo-Confucian concept of the sage* (Philadelphia, PA: Department of Oriental Studies, University of Pennsylvania, 1989).

²⁷ "Neo-Confucian Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, , accessed January 07, 2018, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/neo-conf/>.

households and places of business. It is said that he would travel, giving candy to poor children and asking for a penny from monks or lay persons he would meet. For this reason it is common to find Budai statues adorned in coin from those who have passed by, who have left the coins for good luck. Another popular folklore of Budai is that rubbing his belly will bring forth wealth, prosperity, and good luck. Budai is one of the most common statues of Chinese Buddhism and has become a common figure in Buddhism.

The Development Current Chinese Buddhism

During the Great Buddhist Persecution in the mid-19th century many monasteries and buddhist schools were destroyed. Although the persecution only lasted for a short of time, the Buddhist faith in China suffered greatly. Following the destruction of monasteries and the dispersal of scholarly monks, many of the schools of Buddhism in China ceased to exist as separate institutions, and were instead absorbed into the Chan and Pure Land schools which survived. This resulted in the emergence of a new form of Chinese Buddhist practice in the monasteries. Along with practicing Chan meditation, Buddhist also recited the name of Amitabha Buddha and studied Buddhist texts, this is the form of Buddhism which is still practiced in China today.²⁸

²⁸ "The Spread of Buddhism Among the Chinese," Buddhist Studies: Mahayana Buddhism: Chinese, accessed January 07, 2018, <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/china-txt.htm>.

Conclusion

Buddhism has had a very large impact on China. When it arrived in China, Taoism and Confucianism were the two main followed philosophies, and many of the follower of these philosophies disagreed with buddhism. Along with common people, multiple emperors disagreed with Buddhism, leading to many Buddhist persecution movement. Overcoming this, Buddhism became the largest foreign religion in China, and became one of the three largest religions in China as a whole. Buddhism heavily influenced China and has shaped it into the nation it is today. Through the spread of Buddhism, other philosophies in China have also changed and developed. Adopting the Buddhist way of paying homage through art, Taoist art began being created and China developed its architectural culture.

Buddhism also changed in China. Buddhist schools were established and ideas from Confucianism and Taoism both became integrated into Buddhism. Because of Buddhism's migration into central Asia, China gained a lot of the culture that it has today and Chinese Buddhism has transformed into its own branch separate from its original form. This research is valuable in understanding how and why China is the way that it is and how it developed. Religion plays a large part in the forming of culture and this research confirms that.

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