

How Buddhism came to China

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Buddha statues stand in Zhou Park, China. Chinese Buddhism has shaped Chinese culture for centuries. Photo by: Pixabay.

Buddhism is a complex system of beliefs that developed around the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or “the Enlightened One.” The Buddha lived in India between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.

For the first 200 years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism stayed just in India. Starting in the third century B.C., it began to spread outside India's borders.

According to tradition, Buddhism was introduced into China after the Han emperor Mingdi (58–75 A.D.) had a startling dream. In his dream, the Buddha appeared to Mingdi as a flying golden god. Convinced this was a sign and that the Buddha was communicating with him directly, the emperor sent a group of men to India. They returned to China with the holy texts of Buddhism.

In fact, Buddhism entered China slowly and in stages. It was introduced at first primarily via Central Asia, and later by way of Southeast Asian trade routes. Around the first century A.D., trade between India and China brought Indian people and ideas into China.

In the third century the Mahayana sutras, key texts on the teachings of the Buddha, were translated into Chinese. Buddhism became the major faith of China in the fourth and fifth centuries. It reached its peak in China in the seventh century.

The early centuries

While China was ruled by the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), Buddhism in China was deeply affected by ideas borrowed from Chinese Taoism. Both religions, Taoism and Buddhism, were taught according to similar ideas. It was widely believed that Laozi, the founder of Taoism, had been reborn in India as the Buddha. Many Chinese emperors worshiped Laozi and the Buddha on the same altar.

After the Han period, Buddhist monks were often used by non-Chinese emperors in the north of China because they supposedly were skilled in magic. At the same time, in the south, more scholars became interested in Buddhism. One of the most important contributions to the growth of Buddhism in China during this period was the work of translation from the Indian language Hindi to Chinese.

During the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., Buddhist schools from India were opened in China. New Chinese schools also began to be formed. Buddhist monasteries sprang up everywhere, and Buddhism became established among the farmers and the poor. During the Sui dynasty (581–618 A.D.), Buddhism became an official religion of the dynasty.

Developments during the Tang dynasty

The golden age of Buddhism in China occurred during the Tang dynasty (618–907 A.D.). Although the Tang emperors were usually Taoists themselves, they favored Buddhism, which had become extremely popular. Under the Tang, the government extended its control over the Buddhist monasteries.

During this period several Chinese schools developed their own distinctive approaches to Buddhism. There was also a great expansion in the number of Buddhist monasteries and the amount of land they owned. Many scholars traveled to India during this period as well. They returned with texts and inspiration that greatly stimulated the growth of Buddhism in China.

However, Buddhism was never able to replace Taoism and Confucianism. In 845 A.D. the emperor Wuzong began a major persecution of Buddhists. According to records, 4,600 Buddhist temples and 40,000 shrines were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were forced to give up their roles.

Buddhism after the Tang

After the great persecution of 845, Buddhism was never again the same in China. It did maintain much of its heritage, however, and it continued to play a significant role in Chinese religious life. New Buddhist religious texts were produced, such as recorded sayings of famous Buddhist teachers. However, Buddhism began to mix with Confucianism and Taoism, the two other main religions.

The Buddhist traditions that retained the greatest strength in China were the Chan, or Zen, school and the Pure Land tradition. The Chan school was noted for its emphasis on meditation. Pure Land Buddhism emphasized prayer.

The Chan school was most influential among the cultured elite, especially through the arts. During the Song dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), Chan artists had a major influence on Chinese painting. Artists painted landscapes with flowers, rivers and trees, using rapid strokes to suggest how life is temporary.

The Pure Land tradition was most influential among the population as a whole and was sometimes associated with secret societies and peasant uprisings.

During the early 20th century, a movement aimed at reviving Chinese Buddhism came about. However, this effort was severely hindered by the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the establishment of a communist government in China in 1949. The communist government in China thought that religion spread false ideas about the world.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, which was an attempt to rid China of non-communist elements, Buddhism was severely repressed. Throughout China, Buddhist temples and monasteries were destroyed.

Once the Cultural Revolution ended, the Chinese government began to pursue a more tolerant policy toward religion. Buddhism soon showed new life, though it remained under a great deal of government control.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "The early centuries."

After the Han period, Buddhist monks were often used by non-Chinese emperors in the north of China because they supposedly were skilled in magic. At the same time, in the south, more scholars became interested in Buddhism. One of the most important contributions to the growth of Buddhism in China during this period was the work of translation from the Indian language Hindi to Chinese.

What conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph above?

- (A) Emperors who came from outside of China were more interested in Buddhism than the Han emperors.
 - (B) Buddhism grew more rapidly in the south because scholars taught people about the religion.
 - (C) Buddhist monks helped non-Chinese emperors expand their rule across the country.
 - (D) Scholars helped to expand Buddhism by providing Chinese versions of key texts.
- 2 Which section from the article BEST explains which dynasty most actively supported Buddhism?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-5]
 - (B) "The early centuries"
 - (C) "Developments during the Tang dynasty"
 - (D) "Buddhism after the Tang"
- 3 Which of the following was MOST responsible for the decline of Buddhism in China?
- (A) the government demand that there be one official religion
 - (B) the rise of secret societies and peasant uprisings
 - (C) the establishment of a communist government
 - (D) a return to Confucianism and Taoism

- 4 According to the article, which of the following MOST ACCURATELY characterizes how the expansion of trade across Asia affected Chinese culture?
- (A) It contributed to the gradual spread of new ideas and religious beliefs.
 - (B) It expanded the role that scholars played in the exchange of ideas.
 - (C) It changed how common people felt about traditional religions.
 - (D) It challenged the authority of ancestral religious beliefs.