

Buddhism in China: A Historical Overview

According to traditional accounts, Buddhism was introduced in China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) after an emperor dreamed of a flying golden man thought to be the Buddha. Although the archaeological record confirms that Buddhism was introduced sometime during the Han dynasty, it did not flourish in China until the Six Dynasties period (220-589 CE). During the tumultuous years after the fall of the Han dynasty, Buddhism's emphasis on personal salvation and its rejection of worldly ties led to its growth in popularity. Many Chinese Buddhist beliefs built upon and adapted Indian Buddhist beliefs that had been shared by missionaries, traders, and diplomats who had traveled the Silk Roads. For example, while Indian Buddhists stressed the renunciation of family ties, Chinese Buddhists promoted the doctrine of filial piety in accordance with the Chinese tradition of ancestor worship. During the 4th-6th centuries CE, many dynasties adopted an all-or-nothing approach to the religion: some declared Buddhism the official religion while others prohibited its practice, considering it a destructive foreign religion. Despite uneven royal patronage, the 5th and 6th centuries saw the establishment of a number of Indian and Chinese Buddhist schools and monastic complexes. When the Sui dynasty (581-618) reunified China in 581, it established Buddhism as the state religion.

The golden age of Chinese Buddhism took place during the Tang dynasty (618-907). By this time, Buddhism was extremely popular among all levels of society. Although many of the Tang emperors were Daoist, most favored Buddhism and were patrons of Buddhist temples and monasteries that were controlled by the Tang government. As a result, Buddhist monasteries and temple complexes grew by accruing more and more land. During the Tang dynasty, many scholars also made pilgrimages to India, returning with Buddhist texts; meanwhile, several Chinese Buddhist schools systematized a large corpus of Buddhist texts and teaching. In 845, due to social and economic factors, Emperor Wuzong (r. 840-846) began to persecute Buddhists; many Buddhist temples and shrines were destroyed, while monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life.

After the Tang dynasty, Buddhism never completely restored its highly-regarded status in China. However, new Buddhist forms and traditions continued to develop. Different aspects of Buddhism were combined with Confucian and Daoist traditions to form Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty (960-1279), and religious elements from all three traditions continue to impact religious practice in China today. Chan (better known by its Japanese name, Zen) and Pure Land Buddhism in particular continued to be major sources of inspiration in Chinese art and elite culture and were often closely linked. Yuan (1279-1368) and Qing (1644-1911) patronage of Tibetan Buddhism also contributed to the development of later Buddhism and Buddhist art in China. Although the Buddhist community was again severely persecuted during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), China has seen an upsurge in Buddhist practitioners and temple construction since the 1990s.

