The Sinification of Buddhism

The historical process of Buddhism's entry into China has been analyzed in detail and in its entirety by Wright and Zurcher. As one can imagine, Buddhism entered China at a time when the Chinese were still unfamiliar with this foreign culture. During the Han Dynasty, Buddhism was in its early stages of transmission and people lacked understanding and knowledge of Buddhism. Moreover, ancient China did not have a religious tradition of renunciation like that of Buddhism. Instead, religious superstitions and beliefs in immortal techniques were prevalent during the Han Dynasty. Therefore, people at that time often used the ideas of immortal occult techniques to understand or explain the foreign Buddhism, treating it as something similar to our own Huang-Lao practices. Moreover, many texts during the Indian period were already quite confusing, and the texts that were introduced to China were also incomplete. In addition, due to the lack of Sanskrit knowledge among the Chinese at the time, local cultural or terminological expressions were often used to explain the classics. For example, the term "*futu*” 浮屠 was just a transliteration of the Sanskrit term of Buddha, and the concept of "Nirvana" was often understood through Laozi's "quiet and inaction." Similarly, the Mahayana concept of emptiness and prajna corresponds to Laozi's concept of nothingness 虚无.

In the context of Confucianism, people often used Confucian beliefs about ghosts and deities, as well as the concept of retribution for good and evil, to interpret Buddhism. This made it easier for Buddhism to spread on Chinese soil, as it seemed to have a basis in traditional Confucian classics. However, overall, Buddhism in its early days in China constantly faced resistance and attempts at reform from Chinese traditional culture. Some attempts at integration were not very successful, because fundamentally, there were many differences and conflicts between Buddhism and traditional Chinese culture. Firstly, Buddhism emphasizes renunciation and the pursuit of Nirvana, while traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the responsibilities of family, society, and nation. Secondly, there are many concepts and habits in Buddhism that come from Indian culture and language, which do not exist in Chinese culture and language. Therefore, it was difficult for Chinese people to accept and understand them. Finally, the introduction of Buddhism also brought many heretical views, which were considered incompatible with traditional Chinese culture and were therefore resisted.

At that time, a classic *Mouzi lihuo lun* appeared, and the whole book answered the prejudices and questioning of Buddhism by Confucianism, tried to solve the "dispute between Yi and Xia", and finally fell on the view that Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism were the consistent. Mouzi was trying to defend the spread of Buddhism in China, but, unavoidably, he misunderstood certain Buddhist doctrines, and the arguments failed to break through the barriers of the time because people still could not fully comprehend Buddhism at the early time.

From the aspect of society, there were records about the emergence of Buddhism in early Pengcheng, and later Luoyang was an important center for the spread of Buddhist culture. Regarding the way Buddhism was introduced, there was a legend that Emperor Ming of Han Dynasty sent someone to the West to look for clues because he had a strange dream, and he found a monk who brought back the Forty-two Chapters Sutra. Later, a Buddhist temple was built in Luoyang City for this monk to live in, called "White Horse Temple". Of course, there are many proofs of the authenticity of this legend, but the historical facts of the specific introduction of Buddhism are no longer available. Historically, Buddhist temples were the equivalent of universities today, and their purpose was to promote education. The temple had a scripture collection building, which served the purpose of a public library today, and this reflected a process of integrating Buddhism into Chinese culture.

Politically, in the upper class of the Han, the Confucian literati gradually lost power due to the corruption of imperial power and the rise of eunuchs and nobles. To oppose these corruptions, they formed new groups, but this competition with each other led to a split in the Han socio-political order, where the moral and political systems of the past were undermined and questioned, and a mood of uncertainty and doubt arose in the upper classes. In this context, religion became a means of consolation and resistance to oppression. The disintegration of the peasant class increased social unrest, such as the Yellow Turban Rebellion. In order to suppress the rebellion, various regions began to form their own armies. Even though the rebellion failed, it was difficult for the nation to recover. Ultimately, this led to the formation of the Three Kingdoms period. During this period, Confucianism was questioned and secondary schools of thought, such as Taoism and Legalism, gradually emerged as representatives of new ideas and institutions. Resistance was gradually replaced by escapism, and qingtan gradually became popular. The breakup of the Han Dynasty paved the way for the emergence of new ideas and institutions.

Among the more famous translators of this period were An Shigao and Zhilou Jiachen. In contrast to An Shigao's translations, which were basically Hinayana Buddhism, the translations of Zhilou Jiachen were almost entirely about Mahayana. It is natural that Zhi became the founder of the translation and dissemination of Mahayana Buddhism in China. However, in general, the translations of An Shigao and others of this period were still of a relatively poor standard, and Wright thinks that imperfect translations suggest that the scattered communities of Chinese believers were not interested in doctrine but in the practices leading to salvation.

Three Kingdoms period

There is a saying that goes "The Buddhism of the Han and Wei dynasties was weak, and it began to flourish in the Jin". Due to wars, division, and the invasion of ethnic minorities, Buddhism did not thrive in the Han and Wei dynasties. However, with the prevalence of Xuanxue or metaphysics in Wei and Jin, it provided important ideological conditions for the rise of Buddhism. At this time, Laozi and Zhuangzi's Xuanxue talked about nothingness, and Mahayana Buddhism talked about emptiness, which complemented each other. Buddhists began to use the Xuanxue to understand and explain the Buddhist teachings of Prajna and emptiness, forming the convergence of Buddhist and Xuanxue thoughts. During this period, "geyi" became a popular doctrine, which is to use Xuanxue language to explain Buddhist teachings, making Buddhism more widely spread. In the later period of the Western Jin Dynasty, there was the Yongjia Rebellion, in which the Xiongnu defeated the defenders of Luoyang, and looted and killed on a large scale. After the rebellion, almost all of the Western Jin's royal family members were killed. The remaining nobles and the royal family mostly fled to the south, and a large number of people, including many monks, migrated southward as well.

The relationship between Confucianism and Daoism, or the relationship between the teachings of the names 名教 and the nature 自然, was an important topic in the Xuanxue of Wei and Jin Dynasty. Representatives of Xuanxue during this time, such as He Yan and Wang Bi, put forward the idea that the teachings of the names were rooted in nature. The teachings of the names and Xuanxue were often mixed together. Wang Bi and He Yan focused on explaining the ontological questions of "you" (being) and "wu" (non-being), and they established the view that all beings have their roots in wu, while Guo Xiang emphasized "you". This discussion was in line with the concept of emptiness in the Prajnaparamita Sutra at that time.

At that time, after the introduction of Prajna teachings into China, the combination of different philosophical and religious academic schools combined with the prevalent Xuanxue were called the "Six Schools and Seven Sects". The most influential representatives of the "Six Schools and Seven Sects" included Venerable Dao An and Sengzhao. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, the flourishing of Prajna Buddhism marked the beginning of an independent path for Chinese Buddhism. It was different from both Indian Prajna thought and traditional Chinese thought, but it was the absorption and interpretation of Indian Prajna thought by the Chinese through their own understanding. On the one hand, it marked the convergence of Indian Buddhism with Chinese thought, and on the other hand, it played an important role in the later development of Chinese Buddhism.

Dao An attached great importance to the study of Prajna, and Dao’an's studies have made him a model for combining Mahayana Buddhism with Xuanxue. In addition to this, he paid great attention to precepts, carefully studied the precept books, and was also very knowledgeable about Chan Buddhism. He made many commentaries on the Chan texts translated by An Shigao. Doan studied obscure Buddhist writings, and specialized in collecting and cataloguing Buddhist texts. Since Dao'an integrated Buddhist thought from previous generations, such as Prajna, Chan Dharma, and precepts, he was able to present a more complete picture of the originally scattered Buddhist thought. Therefore, Dao'an is considered to be the great master of Buddhist thought. Dao An emphasized the belief in Maitreya and gradually ritualized this belief. During his life, he trained a large number of disciples, and his disciple Huiyuan, also had a profound influence on later generations of Buddhism.

Hui Yuan lived in the Donglin Temple on Mount Lu. He never left Mount Lushan for the second half of his life, keeping his distance from the outside world. Although Huiyuan had contact with politics, but remained neutral. He cultivated a large number of lay disciples, and he had organized a Lotus Society here to promote chanting for rebirth, in which many famous Buddhists participated, and later generations honored him as the first Patriarch of the Pure Land Sect. Hui Yuan and Kumarajiva also exchanged and corresponded, and discussed academic issues from time to time.

During this period, the fusion and conflicts between Confucianism and Buddhism were partly manifested in the aspect of ethical and moral theories. Confucianism emphasized individual responsibility and obligations in the context of human relations, while Buddhism focused on individual transcendence and enlightenment. In terms of other-worldly ideals, Buddhism stressed liberation and transcendence, while Confucianism valued filial piety and loyalty in the present world. Moreover, there were different views on death and reincarnation between the two religions. The debate between Huiyuan and Hengxuan attracted widespread attention. Huiyuan advocated respect for Buddhism, emphasizing its sanctity and wisdom. He once wrote a letter titled "On Monks Disrespecting Kings," expressing the view that monks did not need to bow to kings. On the other hand, Hengxian held opposing views, arguing that Buddhism showed disrespect for kings and formed a privileged class of monasteries, which would affect social order.

There were various voices against the Buddhist authority. Some argued that many monks in temples were from the social outcasts, which not only undermined the purity of Buddhism but also increased the burden on the state's social stability and economic taxation. Since the Wei and Jin dynasties, the strength of Buddhism has continued to grow, and the dispute between Buddhism and Taoism has become increasingly sharp. This was particularly evident with the completion of the Laozi huawu jing (Laozi's Conversion of the Barbarians). This series of classic texts have always been one of the focal points of the "Buddhism-Taoism Dispute." In response, Buddhism argued that the Taoist Wang Fu’s work as a way for Taoism to denigrate Buddhism, hence they also proposed corresponding arguments, such as the "Three Saints Go East."

Buddhism in the South and North

After the Jin dynasty was expelled to the south, the north and south were divided, and there were many differences between the religious, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of the north and the south during this period. As to this period of time, Zurcher wrote about the concept of " Gentry or Literati Buddhism" in his important work "The Buddhist Conquest of China".

During the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, due to national turmoil and other factors, the wish for seclusion among the literati and nobles increased, and they were more inclined towards spiritual dependence such as religion. Against this background, the contact between literati and monks gradually increased, forming a new way of communication. Literati were usually familiar with fields such as literature, art, and philosophy, and monks often appeared in wealthy or knowledgeable families, expressing Buddhist thoughts through conversation. We can also call it " Metropolitan Buddhism", and it became fashionable for monks to enter the palace to give lectures to the nobles, and there were also letters between them, and the nobles would build temples and pagodas and often visit temples or inquire about divination. Such exchanges facilitated rich spiritual, intellectual, and cultural exchanges. During this period, the layman Vimalakirti became a perfect image of an awakened layman, receiving pursuit from the society of laypeople at that time. These laypeople often did not have to become monks and could cultivate themselves in their daily lives as laypersons. Monks also interpreted this image, conveying concepts such as filial piety, loyalty to the emperor, rationalizing the life of family, and the redemption of the soul. These explanations reconciled the conflicts between Confucianism and Buddhism and reflected the interaction of thought between Confucianism and Buddhism. At the same time, due to the obscurity of the Sanskrit classics, they translated Buddhist classics into Chinese, making Buddhism more easily accepted by the literati, which gradually created the phenomenon of Buddhism among the literati.

With a deeper understanding of Buddhism, people gradually abandoned the previous "literal interpretation" or geyi approach. They were able to understand the meaning of Buddhist scriptures more accurately, and paid attention to translating, researching, and promoting certain Indian Buddhist scriptures or doctrines. This gave rise to the various schools and sects with a system of lineage and transmission of teachings. Some of the more famous masters include the Nirvana masters, Chengshi masters, and Sanlun masters, etc. Although different from the sectarian Buddhism of the later Sui and Tang dynasties, this flourishing Buddhist research laid the foundation for the full development of Buddhism in later generations.

During this period, the theory of Buddhahood and the theory of sudden enlightenment into Buddhahood gradually became popular. Venerable Dao Sheng analyzed that since all sentient beings have Buddha nature, and Icchantika 一阐提 is also sentient being, he can certainly become a Buddha. Although it was not accepted by people at that time, it was finally confirmed by the scripture. The doctrine of sudden enlightenment considered that there was no stages of cultivation, and some scholars believe that this was somewhat related to the Taoist doctrine of the Comprehending the Tao 体道. Therefore, in general, there was both controversy and communication between Buddhism and Taoism during this period.

The northern region was in a state of turmoil and division, which provided the pavement for the spread and integration of Buddhism in the north. Buddhism was spread among different classes, and the rulers controlled the population by supporting the institutionalization of Buddhism. At the same time, the common people sought Buddhism for spiritual consolation, while the gentry class learned about Buddhism through contact with foreign missionaries, and translation projects developed. Preachers in the villages acted as mystics and exorcists, providing relief and refuge for the people, contributing to the domestication of Buddhism among the populace. Later, with the unification of the country, the northern and southern regions began to merge, and Buddhism gradually unified and developed in the process.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism became more integrated into Chinese society, and a distinctive feature was the emergence of sectarian Buddhism. During this period, Chinese monks integrated the doctrines of various Indian schools of Buddhism and established their own theoretical system of Buddhist sects. Among them, the main ones include the Tiantai School, the Three Treatises School, the Only Consciousness School, the Huayan School, etc. After An Lushan's rebellion, the decline of the Tang dynasty caused a certain degree of damage to Buddhism and gradually formed a situation where only a few sects such as Chan and Tiantai were popular.

Scholar Guang Xing, analyzes the topic of Sinicization of Buddhism from an overall perspective. Chinese culture has developed into a system by uniting the three religions into one with Confucianism at the center supported by Daoism and Buddhism. For over 2,000 years, Buddhism has interacted with all levels of Chinese culture such as literature, philosophy, morality, arts, architecture and religions. As a result, Buddhism has successfully integrated into the traditional Chinese culture and has become one of the three pillars. In terms of the local soil, the local culture, especially Confucianism, emphasize on harmony and unity, and Buddhism also has enough inclusiveness to absorb Chinese cultural elements. The inclusiveness of the three religions provides the philosophical foundation for Buddhism to integrate into Chinese culture and thought. Guangxing concludes Buddhist impact on Chinese culture from the following points:

Philosophy and Moral Education

The introduction of Buddhist philosophy had a profound impact on Chinese philosophy and moral education. During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism developed into eight sects, and many Confucian literati also accepted Buddhist ideas. In the Song Dynasty, the emergence of Neo-Confucianism was also influenced by Buddhism. In addition, the Buddhist teachings on karma, death, hell, and the universe rapidly spread and were widely accepted in Chinese society, while also emphasizing the idea of equality for all people. It can serve as a supplement to Confucian culture in Chinese society.

Religion and Folk Beliefs

Taoism gradually began to adopt and imitate the systems and content of Buddhism, such as the Tripitaka cannon, monastic system, and religious rituals, gradually forming an organized religious system, in which the concept of hell in Taoism has a distinct influence from Buddhism. This borrowing and integration promoted the mutual influence and communication between Buddhism and Taoism, while also accelerating the development of Taoism. Buddhist scriptures and figures in Buddhism became the objects of many popular folk beliefs in China, such as Guanyin, who gradually changed from a male figure to a female one, on which Yu Junfang has a special discussion. There is also the popular image of the Maitreya Buddha as a laughing Buddha or bandage monk in history. In folk beliefs, the Ullambana Festival is also a festival formed by the fusion of Buddhism introduced to China and the local Zhongyuan Festival, which is in line with the local filial piety concept. Terser's work has a special discussion on this.

Language and Literature

A large number of Buddhist scriptures had a profound impact on Chinese language and literature. Buddhist scriptures introduced many new ideas, concepts, and theories, such as the vocabulary of "world" 世界 and "heart-to-heart transmission"心心相印. These new ideas and concepts had a wide influence in Chinese literature, inspiring the development of Chinese romantic literature, and promoting the dissemination of emptiness thought, Chan Buddhism, or Chan poetry in literature. Worth noting is the appearance of apocrypha, such as the "Sutra on the Profound Kindness of Parents," or the sutra with a prophecy that Wu Zetian became an emperor.

Art and Architecture

Buddhist images became an important form of Chinese painting and art, such as most themes in Dunhuang murals being related to Buddhism. Buddhist pagodas and temples became an important part of ancient Chinese architecture.

In summary, the introduction of Buddhism to China had a broad and profound impact on Chinese culture. Chinese indigenous culture is not a fixed idea, system, or concept but has the ability to absorb foreign cultures. Thus, Buddhism gradually became Sinicized, reflected in philosophy, religion, and literature, and also involved in various fields of Chinese culture, becoming an important part of Chinese culture.