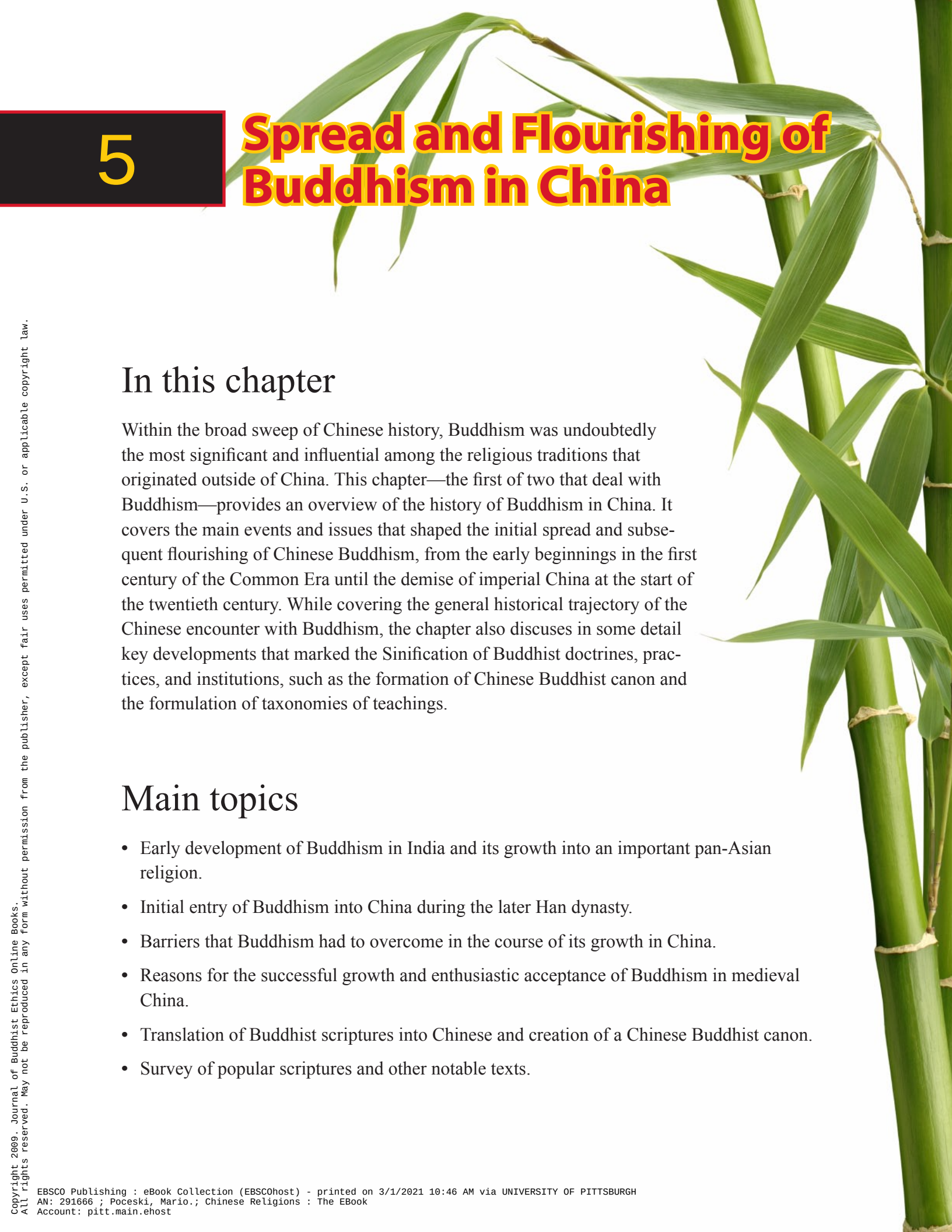
5 Spread and Flourishing of Buddhism in China



In this chapter

Within the broad sweep of Chinese history, Buddhism was undoubtedly the most significant and influential among the religious traditions that originated outside of China. This chapter—the first of two that deal with Buddhism—provides an overview of the history of Buddhism in China. It covers the main events and issues that shaped the initial spread and subsequent flourishing of Chinese Buddhism, from the early beginnings in the first century of the Common Era until the demise of imperial China at the start of the twentieth century. While covering the general historical trajectory of the Chinese encounter with Buddhism, the chapter also discuses in some detail key developments that marked the Sinification of Buddhist doctrines, practices, and institutions, such as the formation of Chinese Buddhist canon and the formulation of taxonomies of teachings.

Main topics

- Early development of Buddhism in India and its growth into an important pan-Asian religion.
- Initial entry of Buddhism into China during the later Han dynasty.
- Barriers that Buddhism had to overcome in the course of its growth in China.
- Reasons for the successful growth and enthusiastic acceptance of Buddhism in medieval China.
- Translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese and creation of a Chinese Buddhist canon.
- Survey of popular scriptures and other notable texts.

- Chinese appropriations of Mahāyāna philosophies and formulations of doctrinal taxonomies.
- Emergence of Buddhism as the major religious tradition in medieval China and its golden age during the Tang dynasty.
- Status and positioning of Buddhism vis-à-vis the imperial state.
- Buddhism in late imperial China.

Buddhism as Pan-Asian Religion

Tracing its origins back to the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who lived and taught in what is now Northern India some twenty-five centuries ago and came to be popularly known as the Buddha (the Awakened One), over the centuries Buddhism developed into a major pan-Asian religious tradition. After the initial consolidation of its doctrines, development of the monastic order and codification of its rules, and broadening of its institutional presence in the land of its birth, Buddhism gradually spread throughout much of Asia, including China. In the process of its historical growth and evolution in India and elsewhere, Buddhism underwent profound changes as it adapted to local cultural norms and responded to changing sociopolitical predicaments, developing an astounding variety of teachings and traditions. With its lack of central authority and decentralized ecclesiastical structures, Buddhism came to encompass diverse and at times seemingly conflicting theoretical templates, rich arrays of ritual expressions, comprehensive ethical systems and monastic institutions, innumerable texts written in a variety of languages and genres, and a lush tapestry of popular beliefs and practices.

During its long and prominent history in China, Buddhism developed interlinked assemblages of doctrines, practices, traditions, and artistic expressions, and exerted far-reaching influence on various aspects of Chinese society and culture. The transmission of Buddhism into China involved extensive introduction and diffusion of initially alien systems of ideas and institutions that in their scope and impact were unrivaled in Chinese history, at least until the modern period. The Chinese adoption of Buddhism opened up new intellectual horizons, distinct avenues of spiritual engagement, and novel esthetic sensibilities that enriched Chinese civilization and substantially expanded its contours.

In the course of their mutual encounters and multifarious interactions, which were not without occasional tensions and conflicts, Buddhism and Chinese traditions were each challenged and transformed. Buddhism added new features to Chinese civilization and contributed to the ongoing evolution of native cultural norms and expressions. On the other hand, in the process of its Sinification, which entailed adaptation to China's social ethos and cultural milieu, Buddhism underwent significant changes that reflected distinctively Chinese worldviews and

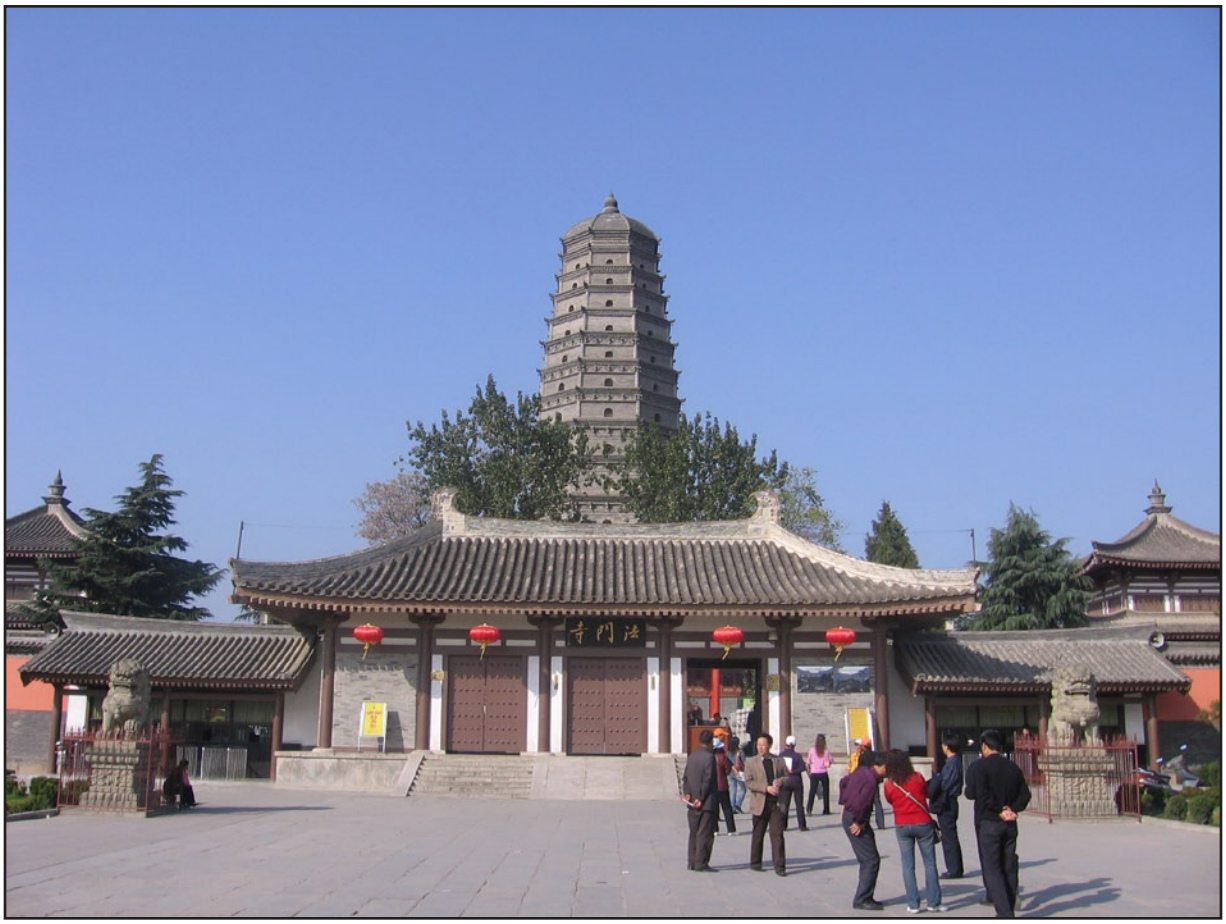


Figure 5.1. Entrance of Famen monastery, Shaanxi

spiritual predilections. That made it into a multifaceted tradition that was perceived as both foreign and domestic, incorporating complex mixtures of alien and native elements and practices, which over the last two millennia has been a prominent and integral part of China's multifaceted religious landscape.

Initial Entry of Buddhism into China

Buddhism initially entered Chinese territory during the early part of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), approximately at the beginning of the Common Era. The first Buddhist followers and missionaries arrived in the land of the Han people through the empire's northwestern frontier, accompanying merchant caravans. They came along the so-called Silk Road, the famous network of trade routes that linked China with Central Asia and Persia, with auxiliary roads that branched into South Asia and further west leading all the way to the Mediterranean world. By that time Buddhism already had a well-established presence in Central Asia, which

contained a number of smaller kingdoms whose merchants, some of whom were Buddhists, controlled much of the trade along the Silk Road.

Early literary evidence of Buddhism's entry into China comes from the official Chinese histories, which link the foreign religion's initial arrival into the Middle Kingdom with the Han monarchy and the ruling elites. Such connection is explicit in the well-known story about Emperor Ming's (r. 58–75 CE) dream about a golden deity coming to his palace from the West, which afterwards his court advisors identified as the Buddha. That supposedly precipitated the emperor's sending of a western-bound expedition that brought back to China the first Buddhist text. According to later embellished versions of the story, the imperial expedition also brought back two distinguished monks, the first known missionaries to enter China. According to legend, the foreign monks took up residence in a monastery that was built in the imperial capital Luoyang, White Horse monastery (Baimasi), which is still a major Buddhist establishment in the area (see figure 5.2).

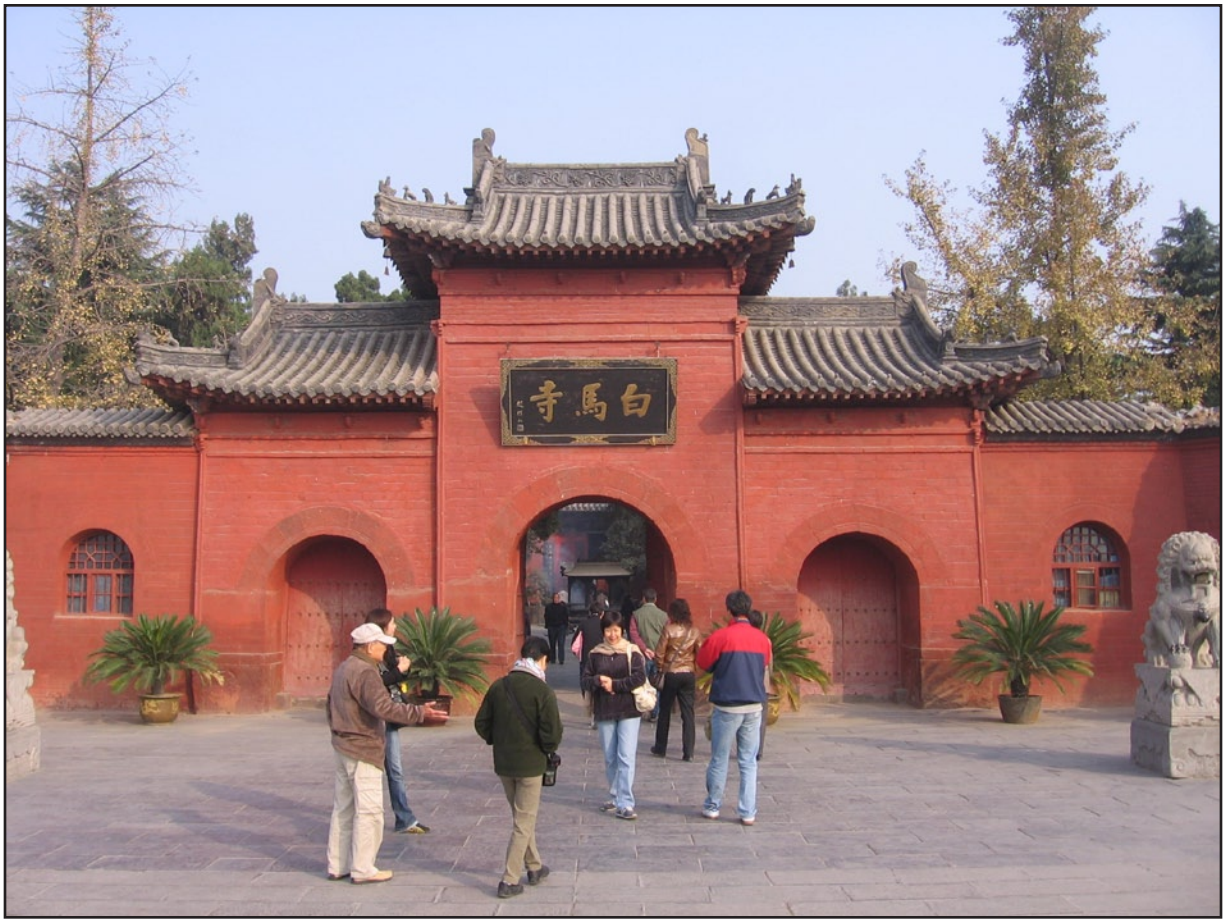


Figure 5.2. Main entry gate of White Horse Monastery, Luoyang

When we take into consideration the court-oriented perspective of official Chinese historiography, the stated focus on the emperor's role in the arrival of Buddhism evidenced in Emperor Ming's story should come as no surprise. However, in light of the prevalent patterns of trade and cultural exchanges between China and the lands beyond its northwestern frontier during this period, it seems probable that Buddhism had already entered China by the time of Emperor Ming's reign. The first Buddhists to come into China were probably anonymous merchants and travelers who left no records of their presence or activities. Moreover, there are other historical records that indicate there were already established Buddhist communities in other parts of China around the time of Emperor Ming's reign. That suggests that there was some Buddhist presence in China around the middle part of the first century at the latest, possibly even earlier.

The foreign missionaries who transmitted Buddhism into China were predominantly members of the monastic order (*saṅgha*). For the most part, they did not come straight from India. Reflecting the influence of geography, as well as the prevalent patterns of trade and movements of people, a majority of the Buddhist missionaries were Khotanese, Kushans, Sogdians, and other Central Asians. Accordingly, more often than not the transmission of Buddhism did not involve the forging of a direct link between India and China. Instead, the teachings, rituals, and practices brought into China were often mediated or influenced by Central Asian varieties of Buddhism. The early Buddhist missionaries entered a somewhat weakened but still powerful empire with an entrenched sense of cultural superiority, which perceived itself as the center of the world. Han China had highly evolved and fairly stable social customs and political institutions, in conjunction with established intellectual and religious traditions. Accordingly, Buddhism was not readily welcomed as a vehicle for the importation of key aspects of a superior foreign culture, as have happened in other places throughout Buddhist history. However, in important respect the timing was opportune, as the gradual weakening and eventual collapse of the Han order made the Chinese elites more reflective about their cultural traditions and receptive to new ideas and worldviews.

Most of the Buddhist monks who entered China were associated with the Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) tradition—a self-styled designation invented in order to distinguish it from the earlier Buddhist schools, which were pejoratively labeled as Hīnayāna or Small Vehicle—and that became the predominant orientation of Chinese Buddhism. As it gradually developed a few centuries after the Buddha's lifetime, the Mahāyāna tradition highlighted the bodhisattva ideal, at the core of which were compassionate concern for the wellbeing of all beings and single-minded pursuit of the path to Buddhahood. It is worth mentioning that as Mahāyāna beliefs and practices were being transmitted into China and increasing in popularity, the Indian tradition was still undergoing creative doctrinal and textual developments.

Over the early centuries of the Common Era, major paradigm shifts in Indian Buddhism resulted in the formulation of novel doctrines, which were explicated and popularized by the introduction of new scriptures and treatises. The early growth of Chinese Buddhism thus ran paral-

lel with the evolution of Mahāyāna and its growth as a major tradition of Indian Buddhism. The steady stream of new doctrinal systems and canonical texts—which at times seemed incompatible with each other—occasionally caused confusion and consternation among the Chinese. Nonetheless, that was also a great source of vitality, as well as a harbinger for new developments that became hallmarks of Chinese Buddhist thought and praxis.

Incisive Critiques and Cultural Barriers

In the course of its initial entry and subsequent growth in China, Buddhism elicited a variety of responses, which ranged from enthusiastic acceptance to benign indifference to outright rejection and trenchant criticism. The earliest Buddhists were predominantly found among the immigrant communities from Central Asia and elsewhere, and during the first century or two Buddhism had limited impact on Chinese life and values. The situation changed with the growing popularity of Buddhism, as increasing numbers of Chinese became followers of the religion. That translated into increased support for the monastic order, which was open to both genders and incorporated separate communities of monks and nuns.

The shift towards increased acceptance of Buddhism coincided with the protracted collapse of the Han order and the ensuing period of social instability and political fragmentation. With the passage of time the monastic order came to include an ever-increasing number of native Chinese. Eventually foreign-born monks became a distinct minority, which marked a successful process of domestication and assimilation of Buddhism into the social fabric of medieval China. The situation was similar among the lay followers and supporters, who were much more numerous than the monks. The laity came from varied backgrounds, covering the whole spectrum of medieval Chinese society, from peasants to emperors.

With the greater visibility and importance of Buddhism, segments of the Chinese elites began to voice negative reactions and opinions. Some of them argued that the foreign religion was at odds with cherished cultural attitudes and prevalent social norms. A major sticking point and cause of consternation was the institution of monasticism. Monks and monasteries were central to Buddhism and were an integral part of the Indian religious landscape. However, they were without religious and intuitional analogies in the Chinese context, because of which they were seen as something alien and unusual. The monastic order's stress on ascetic renunciation, deliberate distancing from societal norms, and adherence to its own code of discipline went against the grain and were foreign to the Chinese. Key aspects of monastic mores and practices, such as the monks' observance of celibacy and mendicancy, were perceived as an oddity that clashed with Confucian-inspired customs that infused Chinese culture and were safeguarded by the imperial state and the aristocratic elites.

In response to the gradual spread of the alien religion, some among the Chinese officials and literati articulated a set of explicit critiques of Buddhism that drew attention to supposed areas of conflict between it and the prevalent Confucian-based ideology. Many of their criticisms centered on the monastic order, which had a visible institutional presence and was widely perceived as a symbol of the Buddhist religion. Buddhist monks were accused of not being filial—a major transgression from a Confucian or Chinese point of view—because their celibate vocation meant they did not produce heirs and thus failed to secure the continuation of their families' ancestral lineages. Other criticisms against the monastic order were based on economic and political foundations. Monasteries and convents, along with individual monks and nuns, were accused of being economically unproductive, thereby placing unwarranted financial burden on the imperial state and the general populace.

In the political sphere, the traditional monastic emphasis on religious freedom and independence from secular authorities clashed with basic tenets of Chinese imperial ideology, according to which nothing and nobody was outside of the purview and direct control of the emperor, whose power (in theory at least) was deemed absolute. Buddhist notions about the independent status of the monastic order were thus perceived as undermining the traditional authority of the emperor, which led to charges that Buddhism subverted the established sociopolitical order. In addition, some Chinese intellectuals critiqued Buddhist teachings and practices for being primarily concerned with individual salvation and transcendence of the world of everyday affairs, at expense of an ingrained Confucian emphasis on human interactions and the fulfillment of social obligations. The quest for otherworldly salvation, while as we have seen was not without parallels in other Chinese traditions, went counter to the pragmatic trust of prevalent Confucian norms and teachings, with their emphasis on the maintenance of rigid social order and political stability.

Buddhism was also dismissed by some of its detractors as being unsuitable for the Chinese on account of its foreign (or "barbarian," in traditional Chinese parlance) origin. Since China already had great sages such as the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, they argued, why is there any need to worship a strange foreign deity? According to this xenophobic point of view, with their rich history and superior culture the Chinese did not need to bother with a religious system that was developed by culturally inferior people, especially if that meant going astray from their native traditions. All of these critiques were articulated relatively early and were brought up throughout the subsequent history of Chinese Buddhism. They were repeated time and again even long after the religion had became thoroughly acculturated, all the way up to the present.

In addition to these misgivings, foreign missionaries and native adherents alike had to contend with formidable linguistic and cultural barriers that influenced their ability to understand and communicate the teachings of Buddhism. There was a formidable language gap that impeded verbal communication between the two groups, which was exasperated by the great differences between Chinese and the Indic languages in which Buddhist scriptures were written,

with Sanskrit, the classical language of India, functioning as the principal canonical language. Two languages could be hardly more different than Chinese and Sanskrit. Chinese uses logographs and is monosyllabic, terse, uninflected, and has relatively simple grammar. In contrast, Sanskrit is written in a variety of alphabets and is polysyllabic, verbose, highly inflected, and has complex grammar as well as rich grammatical tradition. Consequently, the linguistic gap necessitated experimentation with ingenious translation strategies and necessitated the gradual formation of highly technical Chinese Buddhist vocabulary.

The language barrier was compounded by the substantive divergences between Chinese and Indian cultures and worldviews, especially as they related to religion. The humanistic, this-worldly, and family-focused character of traditional Chinese culture, especially as expressed in its Confucian form, was fundamentally at odds with the exuberant flights of religious imagination emblematic of Indian ways of thinking. That was especially the case with the Buddhist variants of Indic religiosity that set transcendence of the everyday world as the final goal of spiritual life, which also featured expansive depictions of supernatural realms populated by arrays of celestial beings.

As we already saw, there was of course more to traditional Chinese culture than Confucian-inspired ethical humanism and this-worldly pragmatism. Nonetheless, Indian notions about a quest for personal liberation that culminates in transcendence of a cycle of births and deaths, which also involves rejection of established social norms and familiar cultural frames of reference, called for extensive intercultural translation and negotiation. Accordingly, it took the Chinese an extended period of ingenious interpretation and selective appropriation before they could claim mastery of the full range of Buddhist beliefs, doctrines, and practices. Nevertheless, when that was eventually accomplished, the stage was set for the establishment of uniquely Chinese forms of Buddhism.

Enthusiastic Reponses and Broad Acceptance

Notwithstanding the qualms and impediments surveyed above, by the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE Buddhism managed to obtain a footing among the Chinese, and its growth accelerated during the subsequent period of disunion (311–589). That was an age of social dislocation and political fragmentation, as non-Chinese tribes established empires that ruled the northern parts of the former Han empire, while the south was governed by a series of native Chinese dynasties. Although the social changes and political upheavals led to occasional warfare and had negative impact on the aristocrats and common people alike, the fluid and unsettled circumstances actually encouraged the growth of Buddhism. In the eyes of many members of the Chinese elites, the collapse of the Han imperial order brought about a crisis of cultural confidence and stimulated a more reflective mood. That led many of them to question the tenability of old values and institutions, especially those linked with the prevailing Confucian ideology.

With the intellectual vacuum brought about by such uncertain and open-ended predicament, there was a sense of receptiveness to new ideas, including innovative religious paradigm and foreign traditions such as Buddhism.

During the period of disunion Buddhism was attractive to the non-Chinese rulers in the north, who were eager to use its universalistic teachings to fortify their authority and successfully rule over mixed populations. Buddhism thus became a potent tool in their quest for political legitimacy, although undoubtedly the official support for Buddhism, which became increasingly prominent as time went on in both the north and the south, was also influenced by the personal faith of individual emperors. Another contributing factor that facilitated the spread of Buddhism was the growing interest in religious and philosophical Daoism, which was also undergoing a period of significant growth and development. Many upper-class Chinese familiar with Daoist texts and teachings were drawn to Buddhism's sophisticated texts and doctrines, as well as to its colorful rituals and arrays of practices, including meditation.

Buddhist doctrines evoked comparison with aspects of Daoist philosophy, while Buddhist practices bore reassuring (if often superficial) resemblance to some of the spiritual disciplines of religious Daoism. In elite and popular circles alike those similarities facilitated the appreciation and acceptance of Buddhist teachings, as they could be related to native intellectual templates and understood as exotic variations of familiar religious themes and practices. On the other hand, as the Chinese achieved better understanding of Buddhism, gradually the lines of demarcation and the finer points of distinction between the foreign and native traditions became less blurred. With the increased familiarity with Buddhism, the Chinese became better equipped to interpret and approach the imported religion on its own terms, albeit within the delimiting context of their culture. As they became actively engaged with Buddhist teachings and practices in ways that were personally meaningful and culturally agreeable, many Chinese turned to them as sources of religious truths and values, eventually making Buddhism the main form of organized religion throughout much of China.

While historical exigencies and utilitarian considerations aided the growth of Buddhism, its great success in becoming a major Chinese tradition—which some scholars called the Buddhist conquest of China—was principally based on the appeal of its teachings and its ability to meet deeply felt religious needs. Buddhism brought new elements to Chinese religious life and culture, including unique intellectual perspectives, imaginative approaches to spiritual growth and personal transformation, and engaging answers to questions about ultimate values. It also engendered creative avenues for artistic expression, along with instituting a plethora of cultic practices and other techniques of spiritual cultivation.

The historic growth of Buddhism was further enhanced by the openness and adaptability of the Mahāyāna traditions that were imported into China. The favorable reception of Buddhism into China was helped by its ability to avoid rigid dogmatism and be responsive to native cultural norms, sociopolitical realities, and spiritual predilections. Buddhist monks and lay

followers effectively negotiated the necessity to adapt their traditions and practices to native Chinese cultural norms and social situations on one hand, with the need to retain fidelity to the basic principles of their religion on the other hand. As they established Buddhism as a major presence and force in Chinese religious life, they also expanded and enriched the contours of Chinese civilization.

Translation of Scriptures and Canon Formation

During the early stages of the transmission of Buddhism into China a principal concern for the foreign missionaries and their native collaborators was the production of dependable and readable translations of the Buddhist scriptures and other related texts. The task of translating the Buddhist canon was monumental because of its sheer size, being one of the largest collections of sacred texts ever compiled. Moreover, the Mahāyāna canon was open and was constantly expanding, so steady streams of new texts composed in India and elsewhere were in due course brought into China. The aforementioned linguistic differences between Sanskrit and Chinese also posed serious challenges, along with the frequent lack of bilingual expertise among the foreign missionaries and the native clergy, exacerbated by the Chinese difficulty and reluctance to learn foreign languages. Due to these circumstances, the translation of the Buddhist canon into Chinese was a vast and complex undertaking that spanned the first millennium of Chinese Buddhist history.

During the early period many of the translations of Buddhist texts were small collaborative undertakings, typically led by a foreign monk who recited the scriptures—often from memory—and was aided by native assistants in rendering them into classical Chinese. At times the selection of texts to be translated by the early missionaries reflected a tendency to render into Chinese the kinds of texts that would appeal to native audiences, even if they were somewhat peripheral within the Buddhist tradition and did not deal directly with to the essential elements of Buddhist doctrine. Cases in point were texts concerned with respiratory exercises, which reflected popular Chinese interest in these kinds of yogic exercises, especially in certain Daoist-influenced milieus.

Many of the early translations also exhibit a tendency to render Buddhist concepts and ideas by recourse to terminology derived from native Chinese thought, especially from Daoist sources. Such translation strategy was a mixed blessing. On one hand, it facilitated broad diffusion and more ready comprehension of Buddhist texts and teachings among the educated Chinese, at a time when most Chinese were ill equipped to deal with the nuances of Buddhist concepts and struggled to grasp doctrinal complexities. On the other hand, the recourse to Chinese philosophical and religious vocabulary—which had multivalent connotations and was imbedded in native conceptual grids and worldviews—obscured the precise meanings of central Buddhist ideas and easily led to doctrinal misunderstandings.

For instance, some Chinese translators used the well-known Daoist phrase *wuwei* (lit. no action) to render Buddhist technical terms such as Nirvana and the unconditioned (*asamskrta*). That inevitably confounded the situation, as it led to mixing-up of the different senses these terms had in their original contexts and respective traditions. In a similar vein, the Daoist term for immortals (*xianren*) was used to refer to Indian saints, both in the Vedic and Buddhist traditions, including various Buddhas. Such usage glossed over the fact that the Daoist and Buddhist conception of religious life and its ultimate goal diverged in significant respects, and that the pursuit of immortality was not part of the Buddhist soteriological system.

This method of pairing technical Buddhist terms with select Chinese expressions, customarily labeled as "matching the meaning" (*geyi*), was criticized by eminent Chinese monks such as Dao'an (312–385) as an impediment to the proper understanding of Buddhist doctrine. That reflected a growing awareness that Buddhism had to be understood and approached on its own terms, rather than via native systems of values and templates of meaning. The situation with the translation of sacred texts changed considerably during the early fifth century, in large part because of coming of Kumārajīva (344–409/413). Although there were other influential translators before him who produced high quality works, Kumārajīva became the most famous and influential translator in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Born in Kucha, Kumārajīva arrived in Chang'an in 401 at an invitation of the imperial court, after a lengthy journey that included an extended period of captivity. He was warmly welcomed by the imperial family, which offered him extensive support and facilitated the creation of a large translation bureau to help his translation work.

Kumārajīva's fame attracted many brilliant Chinese monks, who came to study with him and serve as his assistants. With the help of his aides, Kumārajīva produced a large number of readable translations of key Mahāyāna scriptures and treatises. His prodigious efforts were celebrated as huge success and his renditions of canonical texts came to be considered as benchmarks for subsequent translators. Because of their readability and superior styling, most of the texts he translated remained standard versions throughout the history of Buddhism in East Asia, even after later translators produced alternative versions that in some cases were more philologically exact. Kumārajīva also taught a number of talented disciples about the fine points of Mahāyāna doctrines, especially the Mādhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy of Nāgārjuna, of which he was a leading exponent.

A number of influential translators followed in Kumārajīva's footsteps, including Paramārtha (499–569), whose translations of Yogācāra texts served as a catalyst for the considerable Chinese interest in the doctrines of this Indian school of Mahāyāna philosophy (see below). One of the last great translators was the famous Tang monk and pilgrim Xuanzang (ca. 600–664). His celebrated pilgrimage to India began in 629, when as a young monk he illegally sneaked out of China, intent on making a dangerous pilgrimage to the birthplace of Buddhism. His primary motivation was to seek answers to queries he faced in his early study of Buddhist doctrines, especially those of the Yogācāra tradition with which he came to be associated.

After a treacherous overland journey, he finally reached India and for many years studied at prominent centers of Buddhist learning. Xuanzang returned home triumphantly in 645, becoming a widely admired cultural hero (see figure 5.3). He was enthusiastically welcomed by the emperor and his court in Chang'an, which offered him generous support and facilitated his translation work.

Figure 5.3. Statue of Xuanzang in front of the Great Wild Goose Pagoda, Xi'an

Xuanzang spent the last two decades of his life translating the numerous manuscripts he brought back to China. He also wrote exegetical treatises and a travelogue of his study-pilgrimage in India, which remains a major source of information about ancient Indian and Central Asian religion, culture, and history. His work was undertaken under imperial auspices, with the help of numerous assistants that included leading Buddhist scholars. Despite their superior styling and greater philological accuracy, Xuanzang's translation did not achieve the same widespread acceptance and popularity as Kumārajīva's earlier translations, in part because they were more technical and difficult to read.

Xuanzang was the most famous in a series of monks who made the arduous journey to India in search of Buddhist texts and teachings. His predecessors and contemporaries included illustrious pilgrim monks such as Faxian (ca. 337–418) and Yijing (635–713). Faxian was the first Chinese monk to leave a record of his travels abroad. He left Chang'an in 399 in order to procure texts about monastic discipline (Vinaya), which at the time were not yet available in China. He traveled via land to India; after visiting various holy sights and studying there, he moved to Sri Lanka. He eventually returned to China via sea route after an arduous journey, and went on to translate the texts he brought with him, as well as write an account of his journey.

Xuanzang's younger contemporary Yijing left China in 671. In contrast to the land routes taken by most of his predecessors, he decided to travel by boat. His first stop was at the island of Sumatra (now in Indonesia), then a stronghold of Buddhism. He then proceeded to travel in India, where he studied at Nalanda, the famous monastic university. After returning to China in 695 he had a productive career as a scholar and translator. He translated a variety of canonical texts, including scriptures and texts on monastic discipline; he also wrote exegetical treatises and reference works, and compiled a record of his travels that contains depictions of the Buddhist practices he observed overseas.

Popular Scriptures and other Texts

The canonical texts translated by the foreign missionaries and the Chinese pilgrims included many popular Mahāyāna scriptures that left indelible imprint on Chinese religious life. Arguably the most popular canonical text in China and the rest of East Asia is the *Lotus Scripture*, which proclaims to contain the ultimate teaching of the Buddha. The scripture's main ideas and its potent imagery served as foundations for philosophical systems, ritual and cultic practices, and wide-ranging forms of artistic expression. The texts asserted the superiority and universality of its teachings under the rubric of One Vehicle of perfect Buddhahood, which supposedly was the supreme expression of the Buddha's wisdom that subsumed all other Buddhist teachings (see quote box).

Within the *Lotus Scripture's* conceptual scheme all other teachings were relegated to the category of "expedient means"—a central concept in the text that became immensely influential in Chinese Buddhism—introduced by the Buddha in response to the diverse spiritual capacities and predilections of his audiences. The text unequivocally proclaimed the universality of Buddhahood as the final religious goal to be realized by all. It also asserted that the Buddha is eternal, not subject to becoming and constantly preaching the truth, told a number of stories that captured the popular imagination, and served as foundation for cultic beliefs and practices, especially the Guanyin cult (see next chapter).

The One Vehicle of the *Lotus Scripture*

All the Buddhas, honored by the world, appear in this world because they wish to enable all living beings to open up to the knowledge and vision of the Buddha, to cause them to attain purity…. The Buddhas preach the [true] doctrine only by means of the one Buddha vehicle; there are no other vehicles, neither two nor three.

From the "Expedient Means" chapter, *Lotus Scripture*; cf. Watson 1993: 33

Another significant canonical text that elicited wide range of philosophical and devotional responses was the *Huayan* (*Flower Adornment*) *Scripture* (see quote box). A composite text of encyclopedic proportions that is replete with potent symbolisms and evokes striking visual images, the scripture communicates a cosmic vision of boundless realm of reality, which functions as an illimitable causal matrix that incorporates infinite number of perfectly interfused worlds. The scripture's unobstructed realm of reality, in which each thing is causally related to everything else in the universe, is symbolically presided over by Vairocana, its central Buddha, who is presented as the cosmic embodiment of the Buddha's body of truth and symbol of ultimate reality. The scripture also provides detailed explanations of the practices and stages of the bodhisattva path. Besides being seen as a rich repository of abstruse doctrines, the text achieved broad appeal and inspired various pious acts and cultic practices, such as purification rituals, vegetarian feasts, chanting, and copying by hand. The scripture also stimulated rich artistic traditions, evident for instance in the numerous statues and painting of its central deity Vairocana Buddha (see figure 5.4).

The Buddha Wisdom according to the *Huayan Scripture*

There is not a place where the wisdom of the Buddha does not reach. Why? There is not a single living being that is not in full possession of the wisdom of the Buddha. It is only due to their false thinking, fallacies, and attachments that beings fail to realize this. If they could only abandon their false thoughts, then the allencompassing wisdom, the spontaneous wisdom, and the unobstructed wisdom [of the Buddha] will clearly manifest themselves.

From the "Manifestation of the Tathāgata" chapter, *Huayan Scripture;* trans. adapted from Poceski 1993: 105.

Other immensely popular scriptures included the *Amitābha Scripture* and the *Vimalakīrti Scripture.* The first depicts the paradise of Amitābha Buddha and offers the prospect of being reborn there, which became focal points of popular devotion and cultic practice. The *Vimalakīrti Scripture* was also named after its main hero, a rich layman with wisdom and preaching skill superior to those of the other disciples of the Buddha, who became an inspirational role model for Chinese lay Buddhists. The text also contains a number of memorable passages that explicate important Buddhist doctrines and tenets.

Besides the translations of canonical texts from Sanskrit and other languages, there was a large body of apocryphal texts composed in China. The native origins of the Chinese apocrypha were concealed by presenting them as translations of Indian canonical texts. They incorporated a wide range of topics and orientations, from sophisticated explorations of doctrinal themes to popular recasting of prevalent beliefs or practices. Commonly used apocryphal scriptures reflected native Chinese concerns and sentiments, covering diverse areas such as ethical norms and moral principles, eschatological and messianic beliefs, ritual procedures and cultic practices, and depictions of celestial realms and supernatural powers.

The apocryphal scriptures sometimes crossed the ambiguous lines of demarcation that separated Buddhism from popular religious beliefs, which made some of them an occasional subject of critique by members of the monastic elite. On the other end of the spectrum were apocryphal texts concerned with doctrinal issues and subjects, which exemplified native appropriations of Mahāyāna teachings that were shaped by Chinese intellectual concerns and spiritual predilections. The problematic provenance of the apocryphal scriptures and treatises was occasionally noted by medieval cataloguers, but still a number of them attained broad acclaim and became integral parts of the Buddhist canon.

Figure 5.4. Giant statue of Vairocana, Longmen, Henan

In addition to texts translated from Indian languages, the Buddhist canon also came to contain a large number of texts written or compiled by Chinese authors. Composed in different genres and adopting a broad range of perspectives, these texts provide a wealth of information about diverse beliefs, doctrines, practices, historical developments, and institutional structures central to Chinese Buddhism. They include exegetical works, especially commentaries on important scriptures, and systematic expositions of doctrinal systems such as those articulated by the Huayan and Tiantai traditions (see the next chapter). Buddhist authors also composed collections of biographies of eminent monks, texts dealing with monastic regulations and practices, meditation and ritual manuals, encyclopedias and other reference works, and historical works.

The voluminous Buddhist literature composed in China also includes many popular tracts and other non-canonical works that reflected prevalent Buddhist beliefs and practices. Examples of such texts are the various collections of miracle tales and the "transformation texts" (*bianwen*) discovered among the Dunhuang manuscripts, which contain popular stories that were told in the context of elaborate public performances. The transformation texts are the earliest models of vernacular writing in China and exerted considerable impact on the subsequent development of the performing arts and vernacular fiction. Buddhist themes and ideas can also be found in secular literary works, especially the poems and other writings of major Chinese poets and writers. Notable cases in point from the Tang era are the poetry of Wang Wei (701–761) and Bo Juyi (772–846), while comparable examples of the infusion of Buddhist themes and imagery from the Song period can be found in the writings of Su Shi (1037–1101).

Philosophical Systems and Doctrinal Taxonomies

In the course of its historical development Chinese Buddhism absorbed the range of Buddhist doctrines explicated in the scriptures and treatises of the Mahāyāna tradition. The first doctrinal system of Indian Mahāyāna appropriated by Chinese monk-scholars was that of the Madhyamaka or Middle Way tradition. The central Madhyamaka teaching was the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which explicated the absence of substantive self in both person and things. Also important were the related doctrines of the conditioned origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) of phenomena, according to which the temporal existence of all things depends on the coming together of diverse causes and conditions, and the two levels of truth, absolute and relative. These concepts became popular in China in large part through the influence of the famous translator Kumārajīva and his disciples.

During the sixth century there was a shift in interest towards the teachings of the Yogācāra (Practice of Yoga) school. Yogācāra texts imported into China provided sophisticated analyses of different types of consciousness and explored the mind's role in the construction of phe-

nomenal reality. They also contained elaborate explanations of the stages of meditative practice and the process of actualizing enlightenment. Before long they attracted the attention of leading Buddhist scholars in China, whose creative intellectual and religious responses led to the production of a large volume of learned treatises and elaborate exegetical works.

Chinese appropriations of Yogācāra thought were accompanied with growing interest in the related doctrine of Buddha-nature, along with the closely related notion of the tathāgatagarbha (variously explained as the womb or embryo of Buddhahood). The tathāgatagarbha and Buddha-nature theories occupied relatively minor positions in Indian Buddhism and never achieved status compatible to the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra traditions, but they became prime doctrinal tenets and key articles of faith within Chinese Buddhism. The Buddha-nature doctrine stressed the mind's essential purity, the immanence of enlightenment, and the universality of Buddhahood (see "Buddha Wisdom" quote box above). It postulated that everybody is endowed with a luminous, true mind of suchness, which is primordially enlightened and pure. Although the pure mind is originally present in each person, due to accumulated karma and ingrained misapprehension of reality it is covered with defilements such as greed and anger. Accordingly, ordinary people are ignorant of their true nature and are unable to experience spiritual freedom and liberation, although through the practice of Buddhism they can redress their regrettable predicament and gradually go beyond their self-imposed limitations.

The assimilation of these ideas into the basic doctrinal and soteriological frameworks of Chinese Buddhism had profound ramifications for the subsequent history of Buddhism throughout East Asia. The Buddha-nature doctrine's overly optimistic outlook on human perfectibility resonated with entrenched Chinese notions about the basic goodness of human nature, including those articulated by Mencius some centuries earlier. In it Chinese Buddhists found a compelling theory that validated the everyday world as the arena where spiritual practice and realization took place. Accordingly, its popularity signaled the growth of Buddhist perspectives that were distinctly Chinese. On the other hand, popular Chinese interpretations that reified the Buddha-nature and ascribed to it some sort of substantive existence also signaled a move away from established Buddhist orthodoxies, as they conflicted with the basic Buddhist creed of no-self. That highlighted a perennial problem of interpreting diverse Buddhist doctrines and relating them to each other. When different doctrines were linked together into a coherent whole, that necessitated the coming to terms with a host of seeming conceptual or theoretical incongruities.

Chinese Buddhists believed that the numerous scriptures and the systems of doctrine articulated in them all went back to the Buddha. But how could the Buddha teach so many doctrines, especially considering the fact that often they appeared to be mutually contradictory? Faced with the vast body of texts contained in the canon and the disparate teachings they received from India, Chinese Buddhist scholars developed strategies for organizing the huge body of Buddhist literature and doctrine into coherent classificatory schemes known as doctrinal

taxonomies (*panjiao*), which were carefully constructed in accord with preset hermeneutical principles.

The creation of doctrinal classificatory schemes exemplified a prevalent concern for order and conceptual clarity that was typical of the worldview of medieval Chinese intellectuals. The various doctrinal taxonomies presumed organic relationships among disparate doctrines, based on the premise that all Buddhist teachings are integral parts of an all-inclusive whole. However, they also had polemical character and functioned as control apparatuses. By instituting preset hierarchies of meaning and validity that supported specific truth-claims, the taxonomies ascribed fixed ranks of authenticity and legitimacy to the various doctrines included in them. In that sense, they advocated specific points of view and promoted distinctive protosectarian agendas.

The authors of various doctrinal taxonomies typically relegated competing teachings to lower levels, and placed at the top those advocated by them or by the school of Buddhism they were affiliated with. That is evident in the influential hierarchical nomenclature developed by the Tiantai school, which can be traced back to the writings of its founder Zhiyi (538–597). Zhiyi approached the problem of ordering and classifying the teachings of Buddhism from a variety of perspectives. He came up with three separate taxonomic schemes, each of them based on different classificatory principles. The basic premise underlying them all is that the various Buddhist teachings are all expressions of ultimate truth—that in the final analysis is ineffable and beyond conceptualization—adapted to the spiritual aptitudes and intellectual abilities of the Buddha's audiences, and in tune with the specific circumstances under which they were preached.

Five periods of the Buddha's preaching according to the Tiantai school

- Preaching of the *Huayan Scripture* just after the Buddha's enlightenment.
- Twelve years of preaching Hīnayāna doctrines.
- Eight years of preaching mixed Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna doctrines.
- Twenty-two years of preaching the perfection of wisdom scriptures.
- Eight years of preaching the *Lotus Scripture*, followed by the final preaching of the *Nirvana Scripture.*

Known as the "eight teachings and five periods," the three taxonomic schemes developed by the Tiantai tradition organized the texts and teachings of Buddhism into: (1) four teachings according to their doctrinal content, (2) four teachings according to the means of instruction employed by the Buddha, and (3) five periods of the Buddha's public ministry and preaching (see box). By instituting this complex taxonomic model, Zhiyi was able to avoid narrow dogmatism and adopt an ecumenical stance by incorporating all Buddhist teachings—albeit in an ahistorical fashion that glossed over the problematic provenance of various Mahāyāna texts and doctrines—while also highlighting the superiority of the *Lotus Scripture* and its teachings, and by extension of the Tiantai school that based its doctrines on it.

In contrast to Tiantai's valorization of the *Lotus Scripture*, the Huayan tradition placed its principal canonical text, the *Huayan Scripture*, at the top of the fivefold taxonomic scheme developed by its famous philosopher Fazang (643–712). In this prominent doctrinal taxonomy the lowest level is represented by the Hīnayāna teaching, while the tathāgatagarbha doctrine is placed above the two primary systems of Indian Mahāyāna doctrine, those of the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka traditions. At the apex of the taxonomy is the "perfect teaching" that reveals the whole truth in all of its respelled glory and is solely contained in the *Huayan Scripture* (see box).

Fazang's classification of Buddhism in terms of Five Teachings

- Hīnayāna teaching.
- Elementary Mahāyāna—Madhyamaka and early Yogācāra teachings.
- Advanced Mahāyāna—tathāgatagarbha doctrine.
- Sudden teaching (that abandons words and concepts).
- Perfect teaching of the One Vehicle—the Huayan tradition.

Emergence of Buddhism as a Major Religious Tradition

During the period of division, namely from the early fourth until the late sixth century, political and cultural fragmentation contributed to the emergence of different characters and growth trajectories for Buddhism in the northern and southern parts of China. Buddhism in northern China was characterized by close connections between the clergy and the state, which was controlled by ethnically non-Chinese rulers who adopted Chinese political institutions and culture. Other salient features of Buddhism in the North were interest in thaumaturgy, asceticism, devotional practice, and meditation. Buddhism during this period was also marked by remarkable artistic creativity, as inspired expressions of fervent faith were cast in striking materials forms, such as those of the statues and reliefs found in the expansive complexes of cave art at Longmen and Yun'gang, which are among the greatest artistic achievements of Chinese civilizations.

In contrast, in the southern kingdoms during this period there was an emergence of so-called "gentry" Buddhism, which was infused with a sense of intellectualism and elitism. Members of the southern upper classes with interest in metaphysical speculations were attracted to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, as presented in the perfection of wisdom scriptures, which they often conflated with Daoist concepts and ideas about reality. There was also deeply ingrained fascination with Buddhist rituals, such as the complex repentance rituals formulated at the court of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (r. 502–549), who is known as one of the most fervent supporters of Buddhism among all Chinese emperors. During this period the socioreligious milieu in the South was characterized by close connections between literati and Buddhist monks, many of whom shared the same cultural upbringing and gentry background.

During the era of disunion Buddhism suffered temporary setbacks in the form of two persecutions, during the 446–454 and 574–577 periods, which covered only parts of China. Despite those stumbling blocks, by the sixth century Buddhism had extensive presence and strong roots throughout the whole territory of China, permeating the societies and cultures of the northern and the southern dynasties. During this era Buddhism was also exported to other parts of East Asia that were under China's cultural influence, first to Korea in the fourth century and then to Japan in the sixth century. Before long Buddhism became the predominant religious tradition in both Korea and Japan, and during the subsequent centuries continued to serve as a potent vehicle for the importation of varied elements of Chinese culture into the two neighboring countries. Over the centuries numerous Korean and Japanese monks went to study in China, and Buddhism played an important role in the flow of people and ideas between China and its neighbors. That resulted in the creation of a pan-East Asian religious network, with Chinese Buddhism at its center, that predated the present-day globalization of religion by many centuries.

Golden Age under the Tang Dynasty

The reunification of the Chinese empire under the Sui dynasty (589–618) initiated a new phase in the historical growth of Chinese Buddhism. Under the pro-Buddhist Sui regime, Chinese Buddhism reached great heights of intellectual creativity, religious vitality, and institutional vigor. The two Sui emperors were both pious Buddhists and they were keen to use Buddhism as a unifying force in their efforts to recreate a consolidated empire after centuries of deep divisions. The pattern of remarkable flourishing and ingenious development continued during the succeeding Tang dynasty (618–907), a prosperous period marked by unprecedented dynastic power and extraordinary cultural effervescence that is widely considered the golden age of Chinese civilization. Throughout the Sui-Tang period, Buddhism was widely accepted throughout the vast empire and was practiced by members of all social classes, from poor peasant to aristocrats and the royal family.

During the Sui-Tang period Buddhism was undoubtedly the most powerful and influential religious and intellectual tradition in the Chinese empire. To a large degree Buddhism eclipsed Confucianism and Daoism, although the other two traditions also flourished during this period, which was marked by cultural openness and imaginative embrace of religious pluralism. The main schools of Chinese Buddhism surveyed in the next chapter were also formed during this era, representing the formation of uniquely Chinese systems of Buddhist philosophy and methods of spiritual praxis, which were accompanied by new forms of literature and art. These developments represent culmination of the Sinification of Buddhism, which involved the formulation and wide diffusion of Buddhist beliefs, doctrines, practices, and institutions that were uniquely Chinese. In light of these developments, the Sui-Tang period is often recognized as the apogee of Buddhism in China, which coincided with the most glorious epoch of China's long history.

The influence of Buddhism and the resilience of its institutions were put to a harsh test during the reign of Emperor Wuzong (r. 842– 845), who initiated the most devastating anti-Buddhist persecution in the history of imperial China. The emperor decreed wholesale destruction of virtually all monasteries in the empire, appropriation of their lands and other property by the government, as well as mass and forcible laicization of the clergy. The onset of the persecutions was shaped by several factors, including the influence of the emperor's Daoist officials and confidants, along with economic considerations. The emperor and his advisors were also able to tap into feelings of dismay over monastic corruption and dormant anti-Buddhist sentiments among some Confucian officials. The persecution was short-lived and Buddhism quickly rebounded, as the next emperor rescinded the anti-Buddhist policies and offered generous support to the religion. However, many scholars see the persecution as a turning point in the history of Buddhism and a beginning of its protracted decline.

Relationship with the State

As Buddhism gradually increased in popularity and became a major religious tradition, Buddhist monasteries and the monastic order grew in size and influence. By the early sixth century the capitals of the various northern and southern dynasties were filled with numerous monasteries, temples, and chapels; many Buddhist establishments, large and small, also mushroomed all over the rest of China, in urban centers and in mountainsides. Many Chinese emperors offered lavish patronage to Buddhism, as expression of personal piety as well as out of political expediency. The aristocracy and the general populace also extended their generous support, donating land and making openhanded contributions to the buildup and upkeep of monasteries and shrines.

As a result of such circumstances, Buddhist monasteries became an important part of the Chinese economy. In addition to the regular donations from the faithful, for whom religiously-inspired giving was a key way of securing spiritual merit, the monasteries also had extensive lands, which were farmed by servants or tenant farmers. Certain monasteries also operated various commercial enterprises, such as mills, oil presses, and pawnshops (for details, see Gernet 1995). Some of the funds obtained from donations and commercial activity were diverted to charitable undertaking, such as providing aid to the poor and the ill, by means of which Buddhism provided valuable social services.

In addition to providing operating funds for certain officially-designated monasteries, the imperial state extended limited privileges to legitimately ordained monks and nuns, who were exempt from taxes, corvée, and military service. That made the monastic vocation attractive to many who were not influenced by genuine piety. The clergy compensated by bolstering the reigning regime and offering a veneer of religious legitimacy to imperial rule and ideology. With their prayers and rituals, the clergy also accrued merit and secured supernatural protection for the reigning dynasty. In light of these circumstances, it is not surprising that the number of Buddhist establishments grew into the thousands (or even tens of thousands, according to some sources), while the numbers of monks and nuns by the sixth and seventh centuries reached into the hundreds of thousands (see Gernet 1995).

The support extended to Buddhism by the imperial state was accompanied by efforts to control the religion. Various emperors and government officials were eager to harness the power and prestige of Buddhism to bolster their authority and achieve specific political ends. From early on there was an underlying tension between the state and the monastic order, as the government made concerted efforts to assert its control over Buddhism, while the monastic order struggled to safeguard its independence. These frictions were often expressed in symbolic terms, like in the case of the long-lasting debates about whether monks should be required to bow to the emperor and their parents, as was deemed proper by Chinese custom and Confucian ideology.

In the long run, the efforts of prominent Buddhist figures such as Huiyuan (334–416), the famous monastic leader and proponent of seeking rebirth in the pure land of Buddha Amitābha, to secure a semblance of independence for the monastic community were largely a losing proposition. Huiyuan's courageous stand, along with the influence of his personal charisma, scored symbolic victories for Buddhism. At the time, the emperor backpedaled and rescinded his earlier decrees, which aimed to limit the size of the monastic order and force monks to bow to the ruler (see Ch'en 1964). However, in the long run the Chinese state was able to wrestle extensive control over Buddhism.

The manner in which Buddhism provided Chinese rulers with a valuable source of legitimacy, which bolstered their political authority, is aptly illustrated by the case of Empress Wu Zetian (r. 684–705), the only female monarch in Chinese history and one of the greatest patrons of Buddhism. The rise to power by the empress was unprecedented in the annals of Chinese history. In her machinations to secure absolute governmental control, she had to contend with a prevalent Confucian-based ideology that was unabashedly patriarchal and precluded the possibility of a female ruler. She went around that by turning to Buddhism, the most prevalent religious tradition among her subjects, as a key source of political legitimacy (although she also did not shy away from using Daoism and popular religion for the same purpose, when opportunities presented themselves). The pious yet shrewd empress publicly proclaimed herself an incarnation of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. She also widely publicized a prophecy about the imminent coming of a righteous female monarch, which was presented in an obscure apocryphal scripture that was conveniently brought to her attention by some of her close cronies.

Notwithstanding the latent tensions noted above, the early rapprochements between Buddhism and the imperial state evolved into a close and stable relationship between the two. As Buddhism became firmly integrated into the social fabric, the economy, and the political system of late medieval China, its fortunes became increasingly tied to the changing attitudes of individual emperors and dynasties, as well as the prevalent patterns of patronage among the socioeconomic elites. The state asserted its right to control key aspects of religious life, including the bestowal of monastic ordinations, the building of monasteries, and the allocation of abbacies. Overall control of the religion was assigned to one of the governmental bureaus; while some prominent monks were given nominal official titles, on the whole the overarching administrative authority was in the hands of civil officials (or eunuchs during certain periods). The governmental control went even so for as to extend to the selection of new texts to enter into the Buddhist canon. On the other hand, the state was not overly concerned with micromanaging everyday life in the religious communities, as long as it did not directly impinge on its interests. Consequently, for the most part Buddhist monks and the laity had relative freedom to practice their religion.

Buddhism in Late Imperial China

Late imperial China—the period from the Song (960–1279) era until the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911)—can be seen as a distinct late phase in the history of Chinese Buddhism. This period was marked by consolidation of mainstream doctrines and practices, amidst a prevalent sense of religious and institutional conservatism. The history of Buddhism during this era, especially from the late Song period onward, is usually told as a narrative of protracted decline devoid of significant changes, punctuated by sporadic attempts at reform and efforts to revive the tradition's ancient glories. During this long period there was little in terms of radical changes or major paradigm shifts that resulted in new schools of Buddhist doctrine or innovative paradigm of practice. There was also a slow decline in the status of Buddhism and its influence on Chinese society and culture, especially when compared with the grandeur of bygone eras. Even so, throughout this period Buddhism remained a permanent fixture and major presence in the Chinese religious landscape.

Lately some scholars (mostly in North America) have argued that the negative characterization of post-Tang Buddhism does no justice to the religious and institutional vitality of Buddhism during subsequent eras, especially the Song period. It is unquestionable that under the Song

Figure 5.5. Forest of pagodas, Songshan, Henan

Buddhism remained influential and attracted large followings among the members of all social classes. The religion continued to enjoy state patronage and the monastic vocation attracted many individuals. Many of the basic features that still characterize Chinese Buddhism—including specific patterns of monastic life and systems of meditative practice— were fully formulated during the Song era. Buddhist influence on Chinese culture during this period was also pervasive, as can be observed in the literature and visual arts of the period. At the same time, there were signs of creeping decline, especially in terms of intellectual creativity, notwithstanding innovative developments in Tiantai scholasticism or Chan literature and praxis.

The intellectual decline of Buddhism was manifest in the lack of compelling and effective responses to the formidable challenge brought about by the Neo-Confucian revival, which started with the Song era. The gradual shift of interest away from Buddhism and towards Confucianism among the Chinese elites was given a major boost when Neo-Confucianism was officially instituted as state orthodoxy during the fourteenth century (see chapter 8). For the rest of the imperial period Buddhism continued to exist as a notable religious presence, but in diminished capacity when compared to the glories of the Tang and Song eras, often finding itself on the margins. A noteworthy development during this period was the growing presence of Tibetan forms of tantric Buddhism in China, which were patronized by the Mongol rulers of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1367) and the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). But these alien traditions exerted little impact on Chinese Buddhists, who for the most part assumed a conservative stance and were disinclined to adopt new influences or initiate significant paradigm shifts.

Key Points

- Prior to its entry into China Buddhism already had half a century of development, during which it branched into a number of traditions and emerged as a major religion that was on the way to becoming pan-Asian in scope.
- Initial records about the transmission of Buddhism into China take us back to the first century CE, when the earliest Buddhist missionaries arrived in China via the merchant routes popularly known as the Silk Road.
- In the course of its growth in China, Buddhism had to content with criticisms, typically voiced by Confucian literati, that its teachings and institutions were at odds with Chinese norms and mores, and that it was not suitable for the Chinese on account of its foreign origin.
- During the period of disunion Buddhism attracted many followers across China and emerged as an influential religious tradition, with its doctrines, beliefs, rituals, and prac-

tices stirring the imagination and devotion of people from all walks of life, from peasants to emperors.

- The spread and acculturation of Buddhism was closely related to the translation of the Buddhist canon, which was undertaken on a large scale and was led by preeminent monks such as Kumārajīva and Xuanzang.
- A number of influential Mahāyāna texts such as the *Lotus Scripture* became immensely influential in China, and they were complemented by numerous texts composed by Chinese monks.
- Chinese Buddhist intellectuals mastered a wide range of doctrinal systems of Indian provenance, which they correlated with philosophical models developed in China and organized into doctrinal taxonomies.
- During the period of disunion Buddhism developed different features and growth trajectories in the northern and southerner parts of China, as it gradually emerged as a major religious tradition.
- Chinese Buddhism reached the peak of its growth and influence during the Tang era, which is often cited as the golden age of both Buddhism and Chinese civilization.
- Although during the early period Buddhist monks strived to establish the independence of the monastic order from secular authorities, the Chinese state was able to bring Buddhism under its control; by the late medieval period Buddhism was securely integrated into the established sociopolitical order and the cultural mainstream.
- The history of Buddhism during the late imperial period is often described in terms of a gradual decline, especially when compared with the glories of the Tang (and even Song) eras, although there were occasional reform movements and other noteworthy developments.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the barriers and criticism that Buddhism had to overcome in the course of its growth in medieval China, and what the critiques directed towards the monastic order tells us about the nature of Chinese society at the time?

2. What was the scope and significance of the translation of the Buddhist canon into Chinese, and what were the key issues faced by the translators?

3. At what time did Buddhism assume the status of the main religious tradition in China and what were the key factors that contributed to its rise to preeminence?

Further Reading

See also the reading suggestions for chapter 6.

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