

BUDDHISM IN CHINA

Although the Communist Party that governs China today is officially atheist, many people in the country practice one or another religion. The state recognizes only five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Taoism. Of these, Buddhism is the largest with an estimated 294 million adherents in a nation with a population of 1.4 billion people. But Buddhism did not originate in China. How did it reach such prominence there?

The religion of Buddhism began in the ancient subcontinent of India around the 6th century BCE. It spread throughout Asia over the next several centuries. It began in the life and teachings of a man named Siddhartha Gautama (around 563 to 483 BCE). He became known as the Buddha, which means “Enlightened One.”

The Buddha taught that craving things leads to suffering. Suffering traps people in a cycle of death and rebirth. But people can find the way out of suffering through finding enlightenment, which brings one into the final spiritual state of nirvana.

In its first few centuries, Buddhism focused on the historical person of the Buddha. Emperor Ashoka, who ruled in the Mauryan Empire in India in the 3rd century BCE converted to Buddhism as an adult. He sent Buddhist missionaries as far as Egypt, Macedonia, Greece, and the Seleucid Empire, which spanned from modern-day Afghanistan to the Mediterranean Sea.

Later, different branches or sects based on interpretations of the Buddha’s teachings emerged. Some treated the Buddha like a god, while others treated him like a wise teacher. Mahayana Buddhism stressed that anyone, not just the Buddha himself, could become a buddha, meaning an enlightened person. This would become the main kind of Buddhism in China.

Buddhism Arrives in China

Historians are not certain exactly how Buddhism spread into China. The leading theory is that Buddhism spread through Buddhist traders and missionaries along the Silk Road trade network during the Han dynasty in China (207 BCE to 220 CE).

A group of Buddhist monks living together in 65 CE was the earliest recorded Buddhist community in China.



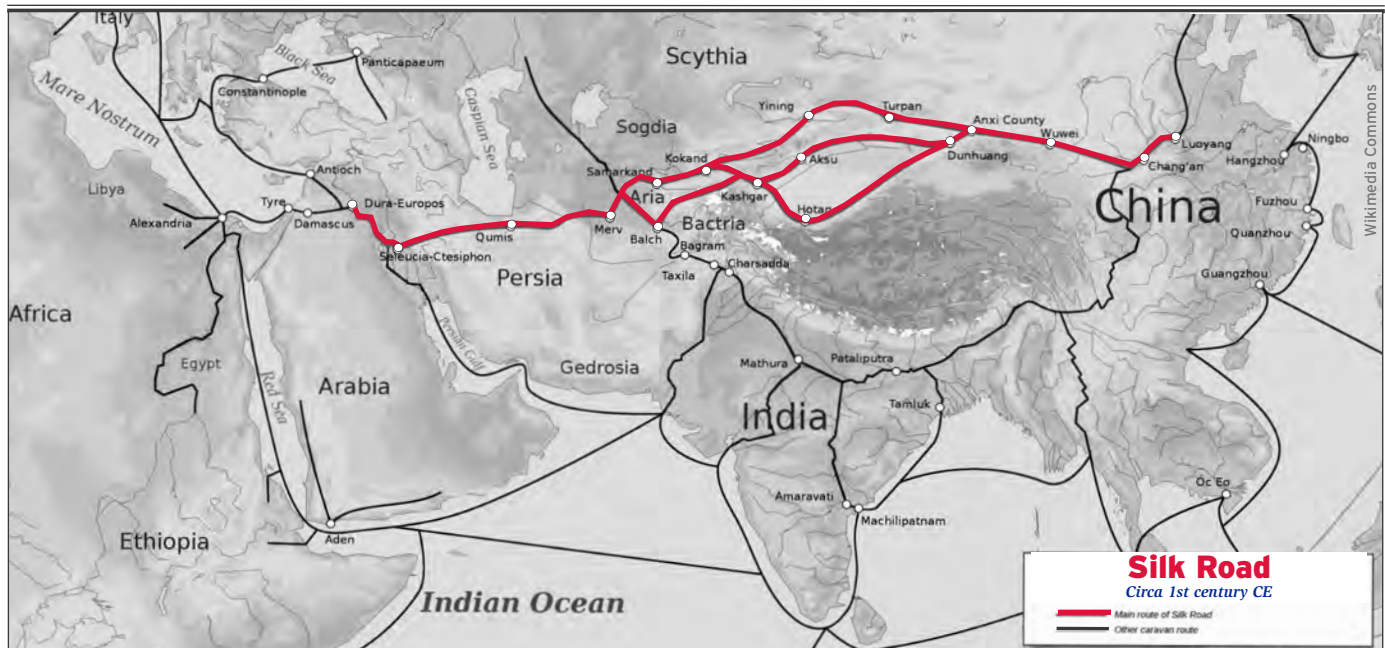
Statue of the Buddha in a temple in Shanghai, China. The Buddha’s right hand is shown gently touching the ground. In the story of the Buddha, he touched the earth at the moment of his enlightenment while sitting under a tree called the Bodhi Tree.

They lived under royal patronage (financial support) in Jiangsu Province in northeastern China. Over the next few centuries, more and more Buddhist monks would enter China, resulting in more and more Chinese people adopting Buddhism as their religion.

The Han dynasty’s state ideology was Confucianism, which was based on the ideas of Confucius (c. 551 to 479 BCE). Confucianism was an orderly ethical system. Some scholars call it a religion, while others call it a philosophy. Confucianism taught that each person should live a virtuous life to bring about harmony in society. Fulfilling duties to family was vitally important. And rulers were to lead by example above all.

Most people in Han China practiced the religion of Taoism. The term Tao roughly translates as “The Way,” as in the way of nature or the universe. According to the Tao Te Ching, the central text of Taoism, the Tao is mysterious. It cannot adequately be described in words. But people can attain the Tao through *wu wei*, which means “nonaction” or “effortless action.”

Taoists developed physical movements, breathing exercises, and dietary rules to help practitioners get in touch with the Tao. Many know these physical exercises



today as Tai chi and Qigong (pronounced “chee-gong”). These played a role in Chinese Buddhism, too.

Generally, different religions coexisted easily in ancient and medieval China, despite periods of strife. Buddhism in many forms flourished among the Chinese people alongside Taoism and Confucianism.

For example, a person could follow Confucianism to deal with questions about family life or governance. At the same time, that person could follow Taoism to deal with questions about health and humans’ place within nature.

Gaining Popularity

After the Han dynasty fell in 220 CE, China began to fracture. From 385 CE, it divided into North China and South China. The North was invaded by Huns and Turks. Dynasties rose and fell in all of China between the 3rd through 6th centuries.

Buddhism gained in popularity in these centuries. Buddhists within China often borrowed Taoist ideas and terms to make Buddhism more appealing to a greater number of people. Buddhism also presented a way to ease people’s fears in this period of instability. By the Liang dynasty in the 6th century, Buddhism became as popular as Taoism in China.

Like Taoism, Buddhism also gained political influence. Emperor Wu of Liang’s reign lasted in South China from 502 to 549 CE. He maintained Confucian values in government but also spent time in Buddhist monasteries. He eventually proclaimed himself a Buddhist. He promoted Buddhism among the people, funding new monasteries and temples. To some Buddhists, he became known as the “Chinese Ashoka.” Several emperors who followed him also embraced Buddhism.

Over the centuries of cultural exchange between Taoists and Buddhists, Buddhism in China evolved from its early Indian cultural roots. New distinctly Chinese

schools of Buddhism emerged, with the Pure Land and Chan schools becoming predominant.

Pure Land and Chan

One way that missionaries spread the word about Buddhism was to recite from sutras, which are sacred written teachings often attributed to the Buddha himself. Beginning in the 2nd century CE, missionaries began to bring sutras into China that described something called the “Pure Land.” The first monk known to translate a Pure Land sutra in China was An Shih-kao, who originally came from the Parthian Empire in ancient Iran.

Pure Land Buddhists believe salvation will come to those who chant or recite the name of a buddha called Amithaba. Those who devote themselves properly to Amithaba believe they will be reborn after death in a paradise called the Pure Land. This sect had greatest popularity in the general public, as it does today in China.

Sometime around 475 CE, a Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma arrived in South China. Accounts conflict whether he was Indian or Persian. When he arrived, Southern China already had 2,000 Buddhist temples and 36,000 Buddhist clergy members. Northern China had around 6,500 temples and 80,000 clergy members. Bodhidharma had entered a thriving Buddhist culture. Within 50 years of his arrival, a census revealed around two million Buddhist clergy members in North China.

Around 520, Emperor Wu of Liang met with Bodhidharma. According to legend, the emperor asked Bodhidharma if building monasteries and temples would bring the emperor good rebirths in the afterlife. Bodhidharma answered that it would, but also that it would not make the emperor enlightened. He taught the value of direct, sudden enlightenment. His teachings would be known as Chan Buddhism.

“Chan” translates as “meditation.” Chan Buddhists therefore emphasized meditation practice. Meditation involves silent attention to one’s breathing, usually while sitting. But Chan Buddhists also used the breathing and movement techniques of Taoism. And they chanted, too, like Pure Land Buddhists.

Chan Buddhism is an example of syncretism. Syncretism is the combination of different faith traditions into one that is new and unique. Chan Buddhism’s emphasis on direct experience, for example, mirrored Taoism’s emphasis on wu wei. The Tao itself was almost identical to the Chan concept of buddha-nature, which is the authentic spiritual character of each person and of the universe itself.

The Tang Dynasty and Beyond

Buddhism experienced what many historians call its “golden age” in China during the Tang dynasty (618 CE to 907 CE). The Tang emperors completed the reunification of North and South China. Most Tang emperors were Taoists. But Buddhism was so popular that the early Tang emperors tolerated and even promoted it. Buddhist monasteries acquired more land; engaged in agriculture and industry; and founded schools for children throughout China.

During this time, Tang China opened sea trade with countries as far away as Egypt. Pure Land and Chan missionaries were also able to travel from China into other countries in Southeast Asia. First arriving in Vietnam, Chan was then brought to Korea and Japan. In Japan, it became known as Zen, which is a more well-known term in the United States.



Stone carving of Bodhidharma at the Shaolin monastery in China. Tradition credits Bodhidharma with teaching the monks at Shaolin exercises that became the martial art of kung fu.

As Buddhism gained popularity, Taoist priests and Confucian scholars felt threatened. They described Buddhism as a “foreign” influence on China. Also, Buddhist monasteries (for monks and nuns alike) paid no taxes. During his short reign from 840 to 846, the Taoist Emperor Wuzong persecuted Buddhists as a result. Thousands of Buddhist temples were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were forced to leave monasteries and pay taxes.

Through the centuries after the Tang period, Buddhism would have sometimes greater, sometimes lesser influence on the government. In the 10th century, the dynastic rulers suppressed Buddhism, much like Emperor Wuzong had. Buddhism in China never quite recovered. But Mongol rulers in the 13th and 14th centuries adopted a form of Tibetan Buddhism.

Today, Buddhism seems to be thriving in China, with 38,000 registered temples alone and nearly 300 million known adherents.

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. What factors eased the spread of Buddhism in Chinese society?
2. Describe the religious innovations of Chinese Buddhism. Which innovations reflect syncretism?
3. Why do you think Buddhism is the largest of the recognized religions in China today?

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ACTIVITY: Digital Buddhism

- A. Working in groups of three to four students each, use the article “Buddhism in China” and conduct independent research to create a digital presentation (usually with slide show software) on a specific topic from the list below or on a related topic approved by your teacher. A slide show should include (a) at least three slides with images, and (b) a separate script written for the presentation of 40-50 words per slide.
 - 1) **Religious Studies Presentation.** Sample topics: Pure Land Buddhism; Chan Buddhism; Taoism’s influence on Chinese Buddhism; Buddhist monastic life in ancient China.
 - 2) **Geography Presentation.** Sample topics: The Silk Road in the Han dynasty; China’s UNESCO World Heritage sites related to Buddhism; ethnic groups and religion in contemporary China.
 - 3) **World History Presentation.** Sample topics: Xuanzang (602-664 CE), Chinese Buddhist monk and traveler; the spread of Buddhism from China to Vietnam, Korea, or Japan; Buddhist emperors in Chinese history; treatment of Buddhist groups in China since the 1949 Communist revolution.
- B. Each group presents its slide show to the class.

Activity based on a lesson idea by Jennifer Jolley, M.A., National Board Certified Teacher in Social Sciences.

Standards Addressed

The Senate Filibuster: Abolish, Keep, or Reform?

National Civics Standard 15 (McREL): Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power. **High School Benchmark 2:** Understands how the legislative, executive, and judicial branches share power and responsibilities (e.g., each branch has varying degrees of legislative, executive, and judicial powers and responsibilities).

National Civics Standard 21 (McREL): Understands the formation and implementation of public policy. **High School Benchmark 4:** Understands why agreement may be difficult or impossible on issues such as abortion because of conflicts about values, principles, and interests.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.4: Students analyze the unique roles and responsibilities of the three branches of government as established by the U.S. Constitution. (1) Discuss Article I of the Constitution as it relates to the legislative branch . . .

California History-Social Science Framework (2016), Chapter 17, page 440: What can Congress do? Why is it so hard to get a law passed? Who gets elected to Congress, and who does not? Who has power in Congress? Besides members of the House and Senate, who else can affect the legislative process? Which house of Congress is the most democratic? Which house is the most effective? How can individual citizens actually participate in the legislative process? They may consider how a topic is affected through the committee system, lobbying, the media, and special interests.

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National U.S. History Standard 6: Understands the causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in shaping the revolutionary movement, and reasons for the American victory. **Middle School Benchmark 2:** Understands contradictions between the Declaration of Independence and the institution of chattel slavery.

California History-Social Science Standard 8.1: Students understand the major events preceding the founding of the nation and relate their significance to the development of American constitutional democracy.

California History-Social Science Framework (2016), Ch. 12, p. 243: With careful guidance from the teacher, students can speculate on the question What were the long-term costs of slavery, both to people of African descent and to the nation at large?

Common Core State Standards: RH.6-8.4, RH.6-8.10; RL.8.10; WHST.6-8.10.

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Calif. HSS Framework (2016), Ch. 11, p. 204: Next, students examine the question **How did Buddhism spread and change over time?** Buddhist missionaries and travelers carried Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia and then to China, as well as to Southeast Asia, during this period. At the same time, Christian and Muslim missionaries were also spreading their religions. As it moved outside the

Indian subcontinent and became a universal religion, Buddhism changed. In 600 BCE, Buddha was a sage, a wise man; but by 300 CE, his followers were worshipping the Buddha as a god. Nirvana changed from “nothingness” or “extinction” to a kind of heaven for believers in the afterlife.

Calif. HSS Framework (2016), Ch. 11, p. 209-210: Buddhism spread widely and gained many followers in China during the Tang period and began to alter religious life in neighboring Korea and Japan as well. Students return to the question **How did Buddhism spread and change over time?** In China, Buddhist ideas intermingled with those of Daoism, a Chinese religion emphasizing private spirituality, and Confucianism, the belief system that stressed moral and ethical behavior. At its height in the ninth century, Buddhism had 50,000 monasteries in China. As Confucian scholar-officials and Daoist priests felt threatened by this “foreign religion,” the Tang emperors reversed their earlier acceptance of Buddhism and began to persecute it. One result of this persecution is that Buddhism did not become the official religion of China. Instead, Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist beliefs and practices fused together in China to form a syncretic popular religion, emphasizing moral living, daily ritual, and dedication to family and community.

California History-Social Science Standard 6.6. Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of China. (8) Describe the diffusion of Buddhism northward to China during the Han Dynasty.

California History-Social Science Standard 7.3. Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of China in the Middle Ages. (1) Describe the reunification of China under the Tang Dynasty and reasons for the spread of Buddhism in Tang China, Korea, and Japan.

National World History Standard 12 (McREL): Understands the Imperial crises and their aftermath in various regions from 300 to 700 CE. **Middle School Benchmark 2:** Understands how the spread of Buddhism and Christianity influenced different regions.

National World History Standard 14 (McREL): Understands major developments in East Asia and Southeast Asia in the era of the Tang Dynasty from 600 to 900 CE. **Middle School Benchmark 2:** Understands how Buddhism was introduced from Tang China to Korea and Japan.)

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