Buddhism was introduced to China from India during the first century CE. Since then the religion has been gradually adapted to Chinese culture and society. The long process of cultural interaction and assimilation also has resulted in distinctively Chinese Buddhist schools. Today, especially in Taiwan, Buddhism continues to play a significant role in people’s spiritual and religious lives.

Buddhism in China underwent a long process of sinicization during which the imported Indian religion was adapted to the indigenous cultural milieu and became an integral part of Chinese life. In the process Buddhism gained patronage from the ruling elite and support from the common people. It also contributed significantly to Chinese culture and thought. At the same time Buddhism was profoundly transformed by Chinese culture, as can be seen in the development of the distinctively Chinese Buddhist schools and the subordination of the Buddhist sangha (monastic community) to state control and regulation. Buddhism in China, in short, represents one of the most fascinating cases of acculturation in world history.

Arrival

Buddhism arrived in China during the first century CE during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). The Silk Roads between China and central Asia were an important route for transmitting the religion. Dunhuang, the frontier town on Han China’s northwestern border, became a great Buddhist center; many Buddhist scriptures, sculptures, and wall paintings from that period are preserved. Buddhism also reached central China via Nepal and Tibet, southwest China via Burma (Myanmar), and south China by sea from India.

At the time of Buddhism’s arrival China had already developed a highly advanced culture with sophisticated religious traditions and philosophical systems. Its two main indigenous religious traditions were Confucianism, the teaching of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE), and Daoism, the teachings of the legendary Yellow Emperor (mid-third millennium BCE) and the Chinese philosopher Laozi (sixth century BCE).

The Han imperial state sponsored Confucianism, which emphasized family values, social responsibility, and the virtues of filial piety and loyalty. Buddhism, with its emphasis on monasticism, celibacy, and withdrawal from society, ran counter to Confucian ethics and therefore met resistance among the Confucian ruling elite, who saw it as subversive to the Han imperial order.

Daoism, on the other hand, although not yet a formal religion, was popular among the Chinese people because of its ideals of longevity and immortality. To help practitioners to maintain health, achieve a long life, and even become immortals, Daoism further developed many meditative techniques and respiratory exercises. It was through its alliance with Daoism that Buddhism was able to take root in China. Indeed, many of the Buddhist texts that were translated during this early stage were on the
subjects of meditation, and most of those people who helped the foreign monks translate Buddhist scriptures were Daoist practitioners.

One significant device used for translating the Buddhist scriptures from Pali and Sanskrit was called *geyi* (matching the meaning)—that is, rendering Buddhist teachings by borrowing the indigenous Chinese, mostly Daoist, concepts and vocabulary. For example, *dao* (way) was used to translate the word *dharma* (divine law), *shouyi* (guarding the One) for Buddhist meditation, and *wuwei* (nonaction) for nirvana (the final beatitude that transcends suffering and is sought through the extinction of desire and consciousness). Another result of the Buddhist-Daoist alliance was the theory of *huahu* (converting the barbarians). Accordingly, Laozi, after leaving the Western Gate on the Chinese border, went to India,
where he converted the barbarians and became the Buddha. Because the Buddha was but an incarnation of Laozi, it was acceptable for the Chinese to worship the Buddha and practice Buddhism.

Some Chinese converts wrote treatises to explain Buddhist teachings in a more accessible way and, on the other hand, to defend against Confucian accusations of Buddhism’s foreign origin and monastic lifestyle. The *Mouzi lihuo lun* (Master Mou on Disputing the Doubts [about Buddhism]), dated around the second century, is a good example of the Chinese Buddhist apologetic writings during this early stage.

**Expansion**

Buddhism offered people solace during the period of disunity that followed the fall of the Han empire. In the north the non-Chinese rulers were impressed by Buddhist culture and gave Buddhism their full support. In the south members of the elite found consolation in Buddhist religious messages, and many of the elite became interested in Buddhist metaphysics. The “Learning of Mystics” (*xuanxue*) emerged during this period as a result of the mixture of philosophical Daoism and the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. Important Mahayana scriptures such as the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (Scripture of the Layman Vimalakirti), the *Prajna Sutras* (Scriptures of the Perfection of Wisdom), and the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* (Lotus Sutra), were translated and widely circulated among Chinese intellectuals. Kumarajiva (344–413 CE), a native of Kucha in central Asia, was the most important translator of his day.

Aside from scriptural translation, apocryphal texts (*weijing* or *yijing*) were composed in an attempt to increase the acceptance of Buddhism. Indian or central Asian origins were claimed for these apocryphal texts, but in fact they were produced by native Chinese. The *Dasheng qixin lun* (Treatise on the Awakening of Faith According to the Mahayana), for instance, is a suspected Chinese apocryphal composition of the sixth century; its discussion of mind exerted a great influence on many of the Chinese Buddhist schools, such as Huayan 華嚴 and Chan 禪.

On the popular level the Buddhist theory of karma (the force generated by a person’s actions and held to perpetuate transmigration and to determine the nature of a person’s next existence) and doctrine of impermanence gained acceptance among the common people. Many Chinese men and women joined Buddhist monastic orders, which offered a haven to those who wanted to escape wars, conscription, and corvée (unpaid) labor. By the time China was unified in 589 under the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), Buddhism had pervaded the realm.

**Maturity**

The period of the Sui and Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties is often viewed as the golden age of Chinese Buddhism, characterized by intellectual vitality and creativity. The most famous translator was Xuanzang (d. 664), who made a pilgrimage to India and brought back to China hundreds of Buddhist scriptures. He later founded the Faxiang (Characteristics of the Dharmas or Mind-Only) school, corresponding to Indian Yogacara Buddhism. The esoteric (Tantric) forms of Buddhism were also introduced to China and flourished briefly. However, the most significant development during this period was the

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*An historical block-print image of the Buddha.*
formation of distinctively “sinicized” Buddhist schools: Tiantai 天台, Huayan, Chan, and Pure Land (Jingtu 淨土) all emerged with great creativity and prominence.

During this period the state also assumed control over the Buddhist sangha. The government took charge of almost all Buddhist activities; it sponsored translation projects, regulated ordination procedures, and controlled the size of the clergy through clerical examinations. Meanwhile, the monasteries were also deeply involved in local community projects, commercial activities, and charitable programs. The “transformation texts” (bianwen；stories drawn from the Buddhist scriptures) and “transformation illustrations” (bianxiang) discovered in the Dunhuang area are surviving examples of contemporary efforts to reach the Chinese people on a grassroots level.

During the late Tang dynasty, however, the expansion of the Buddhist monasteries, the growth of the clerical population, and the increasing accumulation of tax-free temple lands and wealth eventually prompted the court to suppress Buddhism. The Huichang Suppression (842–845 CE), which occurred during the reign of Emperor Wuzong (reigned 841–846), brought empire-wide destruction of temples and shrines, confiscation of temple lands, and laicization (to put under the direction of or open to the laity) of Buddhist clergy. Although the Huichang Suppression was not the first such incident in Chinese Buddhist history (two earlier incidents occurred in 446 CE and 574–577 CE), it was the most severe, marking a turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Some argue that Chinese Buddhism entered into an age of decline at this point, whereas others say that in the following centuries Chinese Buddhism took a new direction to retain its vitality and popularity.

A strong tendency toward syncretism was evident in Chinese religions from Song times onward. It was reflected in the advocacy of harmony among the various Buddhist schools and also in the promotion of “the Unity of the Three Teachings” (in other words, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). Tantric Buddhism, the Tibetan form of which flourished under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1912), held little appeal for the Chinese common people in general. Lay Buddhism, a Buddhist movement that became popular in the Song dynasty, rose to prominence under the leadership of the Ming monk Zhuhong (1535–1615) and continued to be active through the end of the nineteenth century.

### Syncretism

After bringing an end to a century of domination by military warlords, the Song dynasty (960–1279) established a new civil order under a centralized government. The Emperor Taizu (reigned 960–975 CE) issued an imperial decree integrating Buddhism into the state’s civil order, and the first Chinese edition of the Tripitaka (the Buddhist canon) was printed in Sichuan Province from 972 to 983. Four other editions were also published during the Song dynasty.

Although the Song dynasty did not witness the emergence of new Buddhist schools, it was a period marked by doctrinal developments, institutional growth, and a tendency toward syncretism (the combination of different forms of belief or practice). After a period of decline Tiantai was revived through the editing of old texts and the composing of new ones. Tiantai also consolidated its institutional foundation by gaining imperial recognition and local support. Huayan, although it ceased to be an independent school, influenced Tiantai and Chan teachings. Pure Land Buddhism was popular among people of all social classes. Chan developed its unique identity and became the dominant form of institutional Buddhism, enjoying prominence both within clerical circles and among the secular elite.

### Buddhist Schools

Huayan, Tiantai, Pure Land, and Chan were the most significant Buddhist schools in China. Whereas both Chan and Pure Land focused on practice, Huayan and Tiantai were doctrinal schools. Both Tiantai and Huayan built their theories of universal salvation on the doctrine of tathagatagarbha (Chinese: rulai zang, “embryo of the Tathagata [Buddha]”), or the doctrine of the Buddha-nature. The Tiantai school was named after Mount Tiantai in Zhejiang, southeast China, where its founder, Zhiyi (or Zhikai, 538–597 CE), resided. The basic text of the Tiantai school was the Lotus Sutra. Zhiyi’s most significant contribution to Chinese Buddhism was his theory of “doctrinal classification” (panjiao). He divided
the Buddha’s divergent and often contradictory teachings into chronological periods based on the Buddha’s life in an attempt to integrate them into a complex and coherent scheme. In this way Zhiyi established an eclectic school that recognized all forms of Buddhist teachings and ranked them in a hierarchical order.

Tiantai emphasizes mutual identification between all things and the absolute on the basis of the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness. The whole universe is present in a grain of sand or a drop of dew, and the wisdom of the Buddha is present in every individual’s mind.

The Huayan (garland) school was named after its scripture, the Avatamsaka Sutra (Chinese: Huayan jing). Like Tiantai, Huayan was a purely Chinese product, with no Indian counterpart. Huayan’s third patriarch, Fazang (643–712 CE), and fifth patriarch, Zongmi (780–841 CE), were the most significant masters. Fazang, who was often considered to be the real founder of the Huayan school, systematized Huayan teachings into a well-coordinated system. Zongmi synthesized Chan and Huayan teachings, and his theory of sudden enlightenment versus gradual enlightenment had significant impact on the development of Chan.

Like Tiantai, Huayan is concerned with the relationship between absolute reality and things in the phenomenal world. The entire universe is seen as a single nexus of conditions in which everything simultaneously depends on and is depended on by everything else.

Chan, the school of meditation, claims that its teaching was a silent, mind-to-mind transmission directly from the Buddha. The transmission eventually came down to Bodhidharma, who allegedly traveled from India to China around 520 CE and founded the Chan school. Chan emphasizes self-enlightenment, that is, realizing one’s inherent Buddha-nature by sitting in meditation and by practicing gong’an (public case). The
Linji school, well known for advocating *gong’an* meditation, and the Caodong school, well known for teaching “silent-illumination Chan” (*mozhao chan*), were the two most prominent Chan sects.

Pure Land Buddhism, on the other hand, teaches that faith in Amitâbha Buddha can lead one to be reborn in his happy land after this life and finally enter nirvana. Mindfully reciting Amitâbha’s name (the ritual is known as *nianfo* in Chinese) has been the most popular practice among the Pure Land devotees.

**Chinese Culture**

Buddhism introduced many terms to the Chinese vocabulary and led the Chinese to invent devices of phonological and grammatical analysis to deal with foreign languages. Buddhism as an organized system of religion stimulated the organization of religious Daoism into an institutional entity with its own canons, doctrinal system, and priesthood. In addition, Buddhism exerted a great influence on neo-Confucian theories of lineage transmission, mind cultivation and concentration, and attainment of sagehood, the ideal goal for neo-Confucians through spiritual cultivation and moral perfection. The Buddhist concept of karma and retribution became a dominant theme in Chinese vernacular literature, and images of Buddhist deities and figures such as the bodhisattva (deity) Avalokitesvara (Guanyin) and arhats (*lohan*, Buddhists who have reached the stage of enlightenment) were common subjects of artistic expression.

Nonetheless, to assume that Buddhism developed in China as an independent entity is to ignore the long, complex process of acculturation between Buddhism and indigenous elements. The feminization of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and the transformation of Maitreya...
(milo fo), the Future Buddha, into a fat, laughing monk show how Indian deities evolved in the context of Chinese popular religious beliefs and practices.

**Contemporary China and Taiwan**

During the early twentieth century the monk Taixu (1889–1947) led a reform movement to organize the Buddhist clergy, promote social engagement and popular education, and propagate Buddhist studies among intellectuals. Under the leadership of Taixu a number of Buddhist institutes were established in the early 1920s, and the Chinese Buddhist Society was founded in 1929. The movement, however, was hindered by the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) and the civil war between the Communists and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) (1946–1949).

After the Communist victory in 1949 Buddhism suffered from official denunciation and periodic suppression. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) Buddhist temples were closed, and monks and nuns were sent to work in fields and factories. After the Cultural Revolution, however, with the aid of government grants, Buddhist monasteries and nunneries have been restored, and the damaged Buddhist statues, images, and temples are being repaired. The government has also helped organize provincial and regional Buddhist associations. The Chinese Buddhist Association in Beijing, which was founded in 1953, has now resumed its national leadership. It sponsors the publication of Buddhist journals, establishes training centers for monks and nuns, and promotes Buddhist studies. The association is eager to extend its network to an international level, and it sends delegates to Buddhist conferences in south Asian countries, the United States, and Europe.

Whereas Buddhism suffered a serious blow under the Communists, it flourished in Taiwan (milo fo), the Future Buddha, into a fat, laughing monk show how Indian deities evolved in the context of Chinese popular religious beliefs and practices. Meanwhile, the government has increasingly granted autonomy to civic organizations, and, as a result, many Buddhist communities and organizations have risen to prominence. Most importantly, women play a significant part in all kinds of Buddhist activities. The lineage of bhiksuni (fully ordained nuns) in Taiwan has become the main source of legitimacy for Buddhist women who aspire to receive full ordination.

The two most prominent Buddhist organizations in Taiwan are the Ciji (Compassion Relief Foundation), founded in 1966 by the nun Zhengyan (b. 1937), and the Foguangshan (Mountain of Buddha’s Light) Monastic Order, founded in 1967 by the monk Xingyun (b. 1927).

Ciji is the largest civic organization in Taiwan, currently claiming more than 5 million members worldwide. It has its own hospitals, medical school and university, journal, research center, and satellite television channel. Zhengyan started Ciji with one single goal: “To help the poor and educate the rich (jipin jiaofu).” By mobilizing lay volunteers, Ciji raises relief funds and enacts welfare reform. Recently the foundation has expanded its charitable work into the fields of bone marrow donation and environmental protection.

The Foguangshan Monastic Order likewise offers social services in addition to preaching the Buddhist teachings. It has a worldwide network of diversified operations, including temples, foundations, publications, libraries, charity services, and a satellite television channel. Xingyun particularly promotes the notion of “Humanistic Buddhism” or “Buddhism in the Human Domain” (renjian fojiao). The core ideal of Humanistic Buddhism is that salvation is achieved not in the other world but rather in the here and now and that all Buddhists should strive to build a Pure Land on Earth.

Both Ciji under the nun Zhengyan and Foguangshan under the monk Xingyun have demonstrated the capacity to adapt to a new age. Both are able to respond to the new political and economic situations in Taiwan, adopt modern technology to spread Buddhism, and modify old Buddhist teachings to meet the new religious needs of people. Under the influence of Zhengyan, Xingyun, and other Buddhist leaders, Buddhism in Taiwan has moved to a new stage of social engagement.

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Further Reading


