

CHINA AND BUDDHISM

A. Making Buddhism Chinese

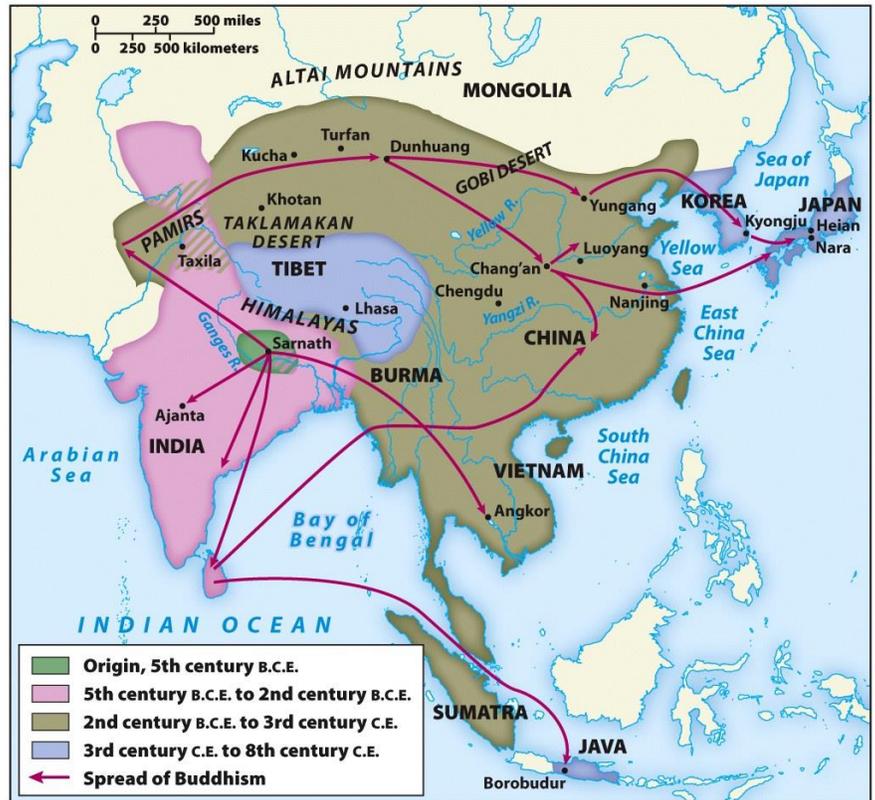
1. **Foreignness of Buddhism:** When Buddhism first came to China via the Silk Roads during the Han dynasty, it was perceived as too foreign and un-Chinese. The emphasis on individual salvation and withdrawal into monasteries conflicted with the Confucian emphasis on the family and social obligations to be engaged in making the world a more harmonious place. Buddhists' discussions of infinite time fell on deaf ears to a culture that measures time by generations and dynasties.

2. **Social instability and Buddhist comforts:** Once the Han dynasty began to crumble and then collapse, Buddhism quickly made inroads into Chinese society as Confucianism was discredited and the world became an unstable and dangerous place. While Buddhist teachings gave meaning to a world in chaos and explained suffering as a part of life, monks provided shelter for travelers and refugees. Soon Chinese from all levels of society turned to the Buddha's message, and elite Chinese began to sponsor monasteries and other institutions.

3. **Translating words and concepts:** Buddhist monks also made a concerted effort to translate the terms and concepts of the faith into a meaningful and acceptable message for Chinese society. For example, there was a greater emphasis on patriarchy.

4. **Mahayana and the Pure Land School:** With its emphasis on relics, rituals, and deities, the Mahayana branch of the faith spread in China. A popular form of Buddhism was the Pure Land School, which taught that simply repeating the name of an earlier Buddha, Amitabha, would lead to rebirth in a land of paradise. Salvation by faith rather than intensive meditation or study made Indian Buddhism a popular and more Chinese faith.

5. **Sui emperor Wendi and state support:** Under the Sui dynasty, emperor Wendi built monasteries at China's five sacred mountains and used it as a rationale for his reign and military campaigns. With state support, monasteries became important commercial enterprises and amassed great wealth. The state supervised the exam system for entry into the monkhood and kept other forms of state control over the Buddhist institutions.



Map 9.2 The World of Asian Buddhism
Chapter 9, *Ways of the World: A Brief Global History with Sources*, First Edition
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B. Losing State Support: The Crisis of Chinese Buddhism

1. **Resentment of wealth, withdrawal, and foreignness:** Many resented Buddhism for a variety of reasons. The tax-exempt wealth that the monasteries amassed due to their commercial activities drew jealousy from many quarters, not the least the state, who saw lost revenues. Others did not like Buddhist ideas about withdrawing from society and celibacy as they conflicted with Confucian emphasis on the family. Others disliked the foreign origins and nature of the faith.

2. **An Lushan rebellion (755–763):** The rebellion against the Tang dynasty was led by a general of foreign origin and increased Chinese xenophobia.

3. **Han Yu's Confucian counterattack (819):** He launched a scathing counterattack on Buddhism, telling the emperor that the Buddha spoke a foreign language, not that of the Chinese kings.

4. **Imperial persecution (841–845):** A series of decrees ordered hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns to return to a normal, tax-paying life. Temples and monasteries were destroyed or taken over by the state, and Buddhists could not use precious metals and gems in their art work.

5. **A Confucian thinking cap, a Daoist robe, and Buddhist sandals:** This Chinese proverb held that all "black haired sons of Han" had elements of all three ideologies within themselves, assimilating Buddhism into other Chinese thoughts and practices.