

Lecture one: Introduction of Buddhism to China

Reading:

- Ch'en, Kenneth. *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964. pp 18-53.
- Fung, Yu-Lan. "The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy," *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. (ed. Derk Bodde). New York: Macmillan, 1966. pp1-15.

Highlights:

- Buddhism was introduced to China from central Asia.
- Taoism and Buddhism in Han Dynasty.

Question:

Why could the Han Chinese accept Buddhism when they already had advanced religions such as Confucianism and Taoism?

Introduction

Indian Buddhism

The development of Buddhist thought in India may be chronologically described as:

- different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings that gave rise to the Buddhist schools.
- Followers of those early Buddhist schools, except the Sautrantikas, can be called Ābhidharmikas because all of them believe in the theory of dharmas, and have their own Abhidharma literatures.
- The Mahāyāna schools arose in the process of reacting to and opposing the interpretation of dharmas by the Abhidharma schools. The Mahayanists call those Abhidharma schools as Hīnayāna.

Chinese Buddhism

The earliest form of Chinese Buddhism was introduced to China via central Asia; the doctrines were mainly those of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma and the early Mahāyāna literatures.

In the development of Buddhist thought in China, the meditation texts were first translated into Chinese adopting the prevalent Taoist and Confucian terms. The early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature such as the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the works of Nāgārjuna were introduced into China at the early stage.

When the translations were made by Kumārajīva, the Chinese started to understand the Indian thoughts more accurately. There were no more readings of Taoist and Confucian notions into the Buddhist texts. The early Chinese schools, such as the Kusha (Sarvāstivāda), the Pure Land, the San Lun (Madhyamaka), the Tian Tai (based on Madhyamaka, the Prajñā and the Lotus Sūtra respectively), and the Hua Yan (Avataṃsaka) schools were developed by the Chinese.

Subsequently, in the Tang Dynasty, with the new translations made by Xuang Zang, the Chinese Fa Xiang (Yogācāra) School was formed. Later, the Zhen Yan (Tantra) school became popular among the Tang court of China.

Following the advent of the Chan School and neo-Confucianism, academic activities declined in the tradition of Chinese Buddhism. It may be said that the historical development of Buddhism in China is a history of translation of the Indian Buddhist texts. These texts came to exert much influence on the development of Chinese Buddhist tradition.

The Division of Chinese Buddhism

Division into five main periods by Erik Zürcher:

- 1) The embryonic phase (from the first appearance of Buddhism in China in the mid-first century CE to c. 300 CE). Roughly from Eastern Han to Three Kingdoms.
- 2) The formative phase (c. 300-589 CE). Eastern Jin to the end of South & North Dynasties.
- 3) The phase of independent growth (coinciding with the second era of imperial unification during the Sui and Tang dynasties, 589-906 CE). Sui to Tang Dynasties
- 4) Buddhism in premodern China (from the tenth to the nineteenth century). Song to Qing Dynasties.
- 5) Buddhism in modern and contemporary China (c. 1880-present).

Division of Four Periods by Michihata Ryoshū (道端良秀) and Kamata Shigeo (鎌田茂雄)

- 1) Introduction and absorption (from Han to three Kingdoms)
- 2) Development and consolidation (from Eastern Jin to South and North dynasties)
- 3) Completion and climax (Sui and Tang dynasties)
- 4) Practice and permeation (Song, Yuan and afterwards)

Accordingly, we can divide Chinese Buddhism into the following five periods:

- (1) The beginning of Chinese Buddhism: the early introduction of Indian and Central Asian Buddhism (from Eastern Han through three Kingdoms to the end of Eastern Jin, mid-first century CE to c. 317 CE);
- (2) The emergence of Schools of thought (學派): the formation of many different short-lived schools based on various Chinese translations of Buddhist texts (from the end of Eastern Jin to South and North dynasties, c. 317-589 CE);
- (3) The independent growth: distinctive Chinese Buddhist schools formed (宗派) (Sui and Tang dynasties, 589-906 CE);
- (4) The syncretism of Chinese Buddhism: syncretism of Buddhist schools of thought and other religions (Song to Qing Dynasties, tenth to nineteenth century).
- (5) Buddhism in Modern times (Started from the period of Republic of China).

Buddhism in Central Asia during the first few centuries CE



King Asoka (third century BC) of India sent out nine delegations to spread the Dharma after the third council and amongst these delegations, several went to Central Asia.

Bactrian Kingdom

The *Milindapañha* and the *Nāgasena Bhikṣu Sutra* (那先比丘經) both record that the King Menander (second to first century BC) conversed with Nāgasena on the problems of Buddhist metaphysics and philosophy. Menander is an Indo-Greek king of Sakala (Sialkot in the Punjab) and Nāgasena is a Buddhist monk in his kingdom. Menander was converted and popularised Buddhism in his kingdom; he constructed a monastery called Milinda-Vihara and offered it to Nāgasena.

In ancient Chinese literature, Central Asia is referred to as the Western Region (西域) where there existed about thirty six small oasis kingdoms. Amongst these, the following are

eminent: Parthia (Persia 安息), Scythia (月支), Sogdiana (康居), Khotan (于闐 or 和闐) and Kuchā (龜茲 or 庫車).



Rawlinson, H.G. *Bactria, the History of a Forgotten Empire*, London: Probsthain & Co., 1912.

Buddhism under the Kushanas

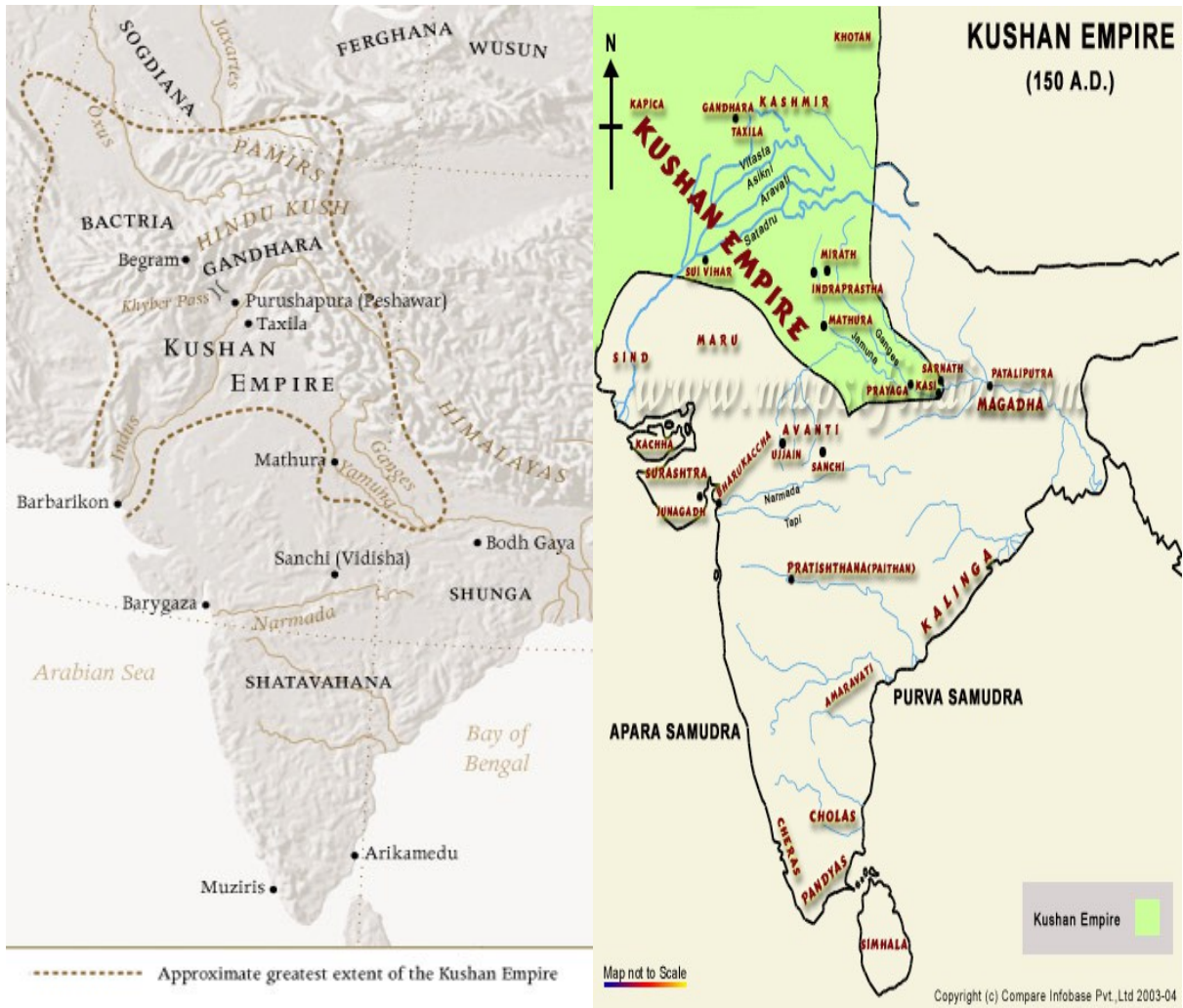
The Kushanas belonged to the group of the great Scythia race of North-west China. The Kushanas established their kingdom in the first century CE by Kadphises who declared himself as the first king (CE 15-65). He also conquered the Eastern Parthian kingdom and Kapisa therefore became monarch of a vast empire extending from the frontiers of Persia to the Indus.

The greatest king of Kushanas is Kanishka who became a Buddhist and supported Buddhism in his kingdom.

According to the Sarvāsitvāda tradition, under the patronage of Kanishka, the fourth Buddhist council was held and the *Mahāvibhāṣā* was compiled, a great commentary of the Sarvāsitvāda school.

Gandhari Buddhist texts from the Kushana empire seem to have been amongst the first Buddhist literature which reached China in the first or second century CE. Scholars have suggested that some of the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist texts are from originals in Gandhari, and the early translators working in China include a significant number said to be of Kushana origin.

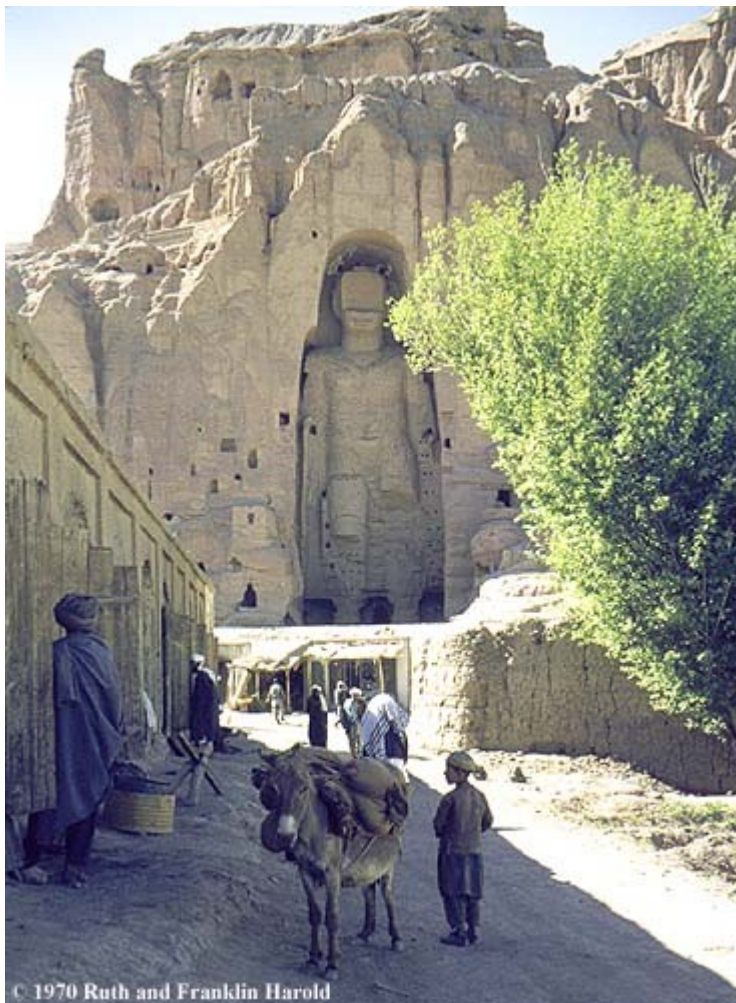
A Kharosthi Buddhist inscription in Luoyang, the one-time capital of China in the North-east, shows that how far the transmission of Buddhism in the Gandhari language reached inside of China.



Bamiyan Valley



Bamiyan Valley with the giant Buddhas



The giant Buddhas



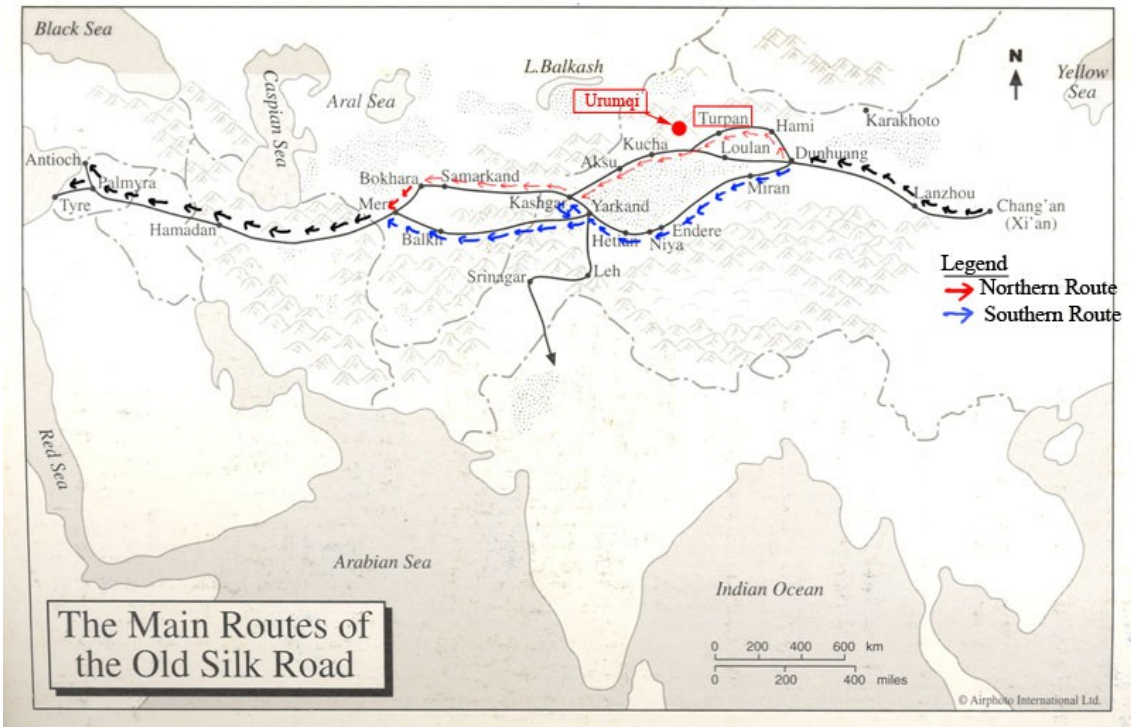
Remains of paintings near the Buddha statue



Auldara Stupa, 4th c. or earlier

All the above pictures from Silk Road Seattle

<http://www.depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/index.html>



The Buddhism of Khotan (于阗 or 和阗)



Khotan was on the trade route between North-west India and China, which was also the primary route for the Tibetans when they made their incursions into Central Asia. This position ensured Khotan's importance in the transmission of Mahayana Buddhism from India to China and Tibet.

Inscriptions in the Kharosthi script indicate that Buddhism first arrived in Khotan from the West, over the Pamirs, helped by the flourishing of trade along the Silk Road and the growing power of the Kushana empire in the second and third centuries CE.

The Buddhism of the first period would have been Hīnayāna (early Buddhist schools). However, all of the surviving Khotanese Buddhist literature dates from a later period, from the seventh to tenth centuries CE. These manuscripts, written in the Brahmi script, contain

both Sanskrit texts and translations into the local language of Khotan. This body of literature is Mahayana, and reached Khotan through a different route, via Gilgit in Northern India.

Faxian wrote: "*The country is prosperous and the people are numerous; without exception they have faith in the Dharma and they entertain one another with religious music. The community of monks numbers several tens of thousands and they belong mostly to the Mahāyāna..*" 在道一月五日,得到于闐。其國豐樂,人民殷盛,盡皆奉法,以法樂相娛。眾僧乃數萬人,多大乘學,皆有眾食。彼國人民星居,家家門前,皆起小塔,最小者可高二丈許,作四方僧房供給客僧。

The *Prajñāpāramitā* 若波羅蜜多經, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeṣa* 維摩經 and the *Sukhavativyuha* 阿彌陀經 were among the sutras translated into Khotanese.

Mokṣala 無叉羅 from Khotan (291) translated one of the important *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, the 放光般若經.

Buddhism in Kucha (龜茲 or 庫車)

Kucha has been one of the most important territories in the Tarim basin owing to its geographical position and the role it has played in Buddhist art and civilization.

Kucha was an oasis on the northern Silk Road (see map), populated by people of Indo-European origin. During the time of the Kushana empire, the Kuchans adopted Buddhism, and by the third century CE, Kucha had become one of the most important Buddhist sites in Central Asia. Travellers were impressed by the number of monasteries and stupas which had been built by the Kuchans.

The Buddhism of Kucha influenced other states along the northern Silk Road and Kuchan Buddhist missionaries travelled further eastward, some of them reaching China.

Kumārajīva, one of the greatest translators of Buddhism into Chinese, came from Kucha. By the eighth century CE, under pressure from the Chinese and the Turks, Kucha was no longer active as a Buddhist centre.

Sogdiana (康居)

The state of Sogdiana existed on the western end of the Silk Road, just north of Gandhara (see map). The Sogdians were successful merchants, often dominating the trade in silk between the third and seventh centuries CE.

In their religious life, the Sogdians were above all Zoroastrians, but minority religions were tolerated. Initially, due to influences from the south, the Gandhara; the Sogdians adopted Hīnayāna Buddhism, and later, in the eighth century under the influence of China, there was a brief flourishing of Mahayana Buddhism.

Elements of Buddhism were often combined with Zoroastrianism and with elements of other religions like Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity. In the eighth century CE, the Sogdians were conquered by the Arabs, and from the middle of the century onwards, Islam became the dominant religion of the area.



Languages of Central Asia

According to the *Biography of Eminent Monks*, Dharmakṣa was well versed in the languages of the thirty-six kingdoms of the western region. How many languages existed once there in Central Asia we do not know, but from the Buddhist archaeological evidence and Buddhist literature, there are Kharosthi 佉盧文 used in Gandhara area 犍陀羅, Tukhara 吐火羅語 used in Kucha, Khotanese used in Khotan and others.

A Gandhari version (Kharosthi) of the *Dharmapada* was discovered in 1892 in the Khotan area, and a fragment of a Gandhari *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (Early Buddhism) was discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although few of the Kharosthi manuscripts from the Silk Road are Buddhist, but many administrative documents mention Buddhist monks and a Buddhist monastic community. Tukhara was used by the Indo-Scythians and in Xinjiang, there were found many Tukhara manuscripts in Dunhuang.

Khotanese texts also were found in the library cave in Dunhuang, indicating links between Khotanese Buddhists and the Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist communities further east.

The beginnings of Buddhism in China

With the gradual expansion of Buddhism under the patronage of the Kushan rulers (northwest India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) into the oasis states of Central Asia, it became inevitable that Buddhism would be introduced into China from about 100 BCE by foreign merchants, but **the first reliable notice of it in Chinese sources is dated 65 CE.**

In a royal edict of that year, we are told that a prince administering a city in what is now northern Jiangsu province “recites the subtle words of Huang-Lao, and respectfully performs the gentle sacrifices to the Buddha.” He was encouraged to “entertain *upāsakas* and *sramanas*,” Buddhist lay devotees and initiates.

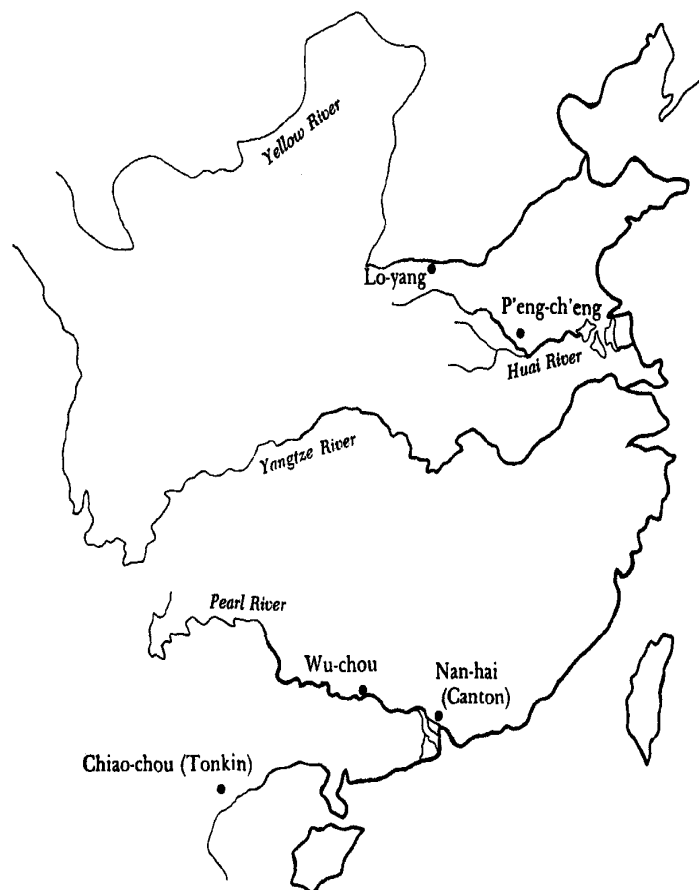
In 148 CE, the first of several foreign monks, An Shigao, settled in Luoyang, the capital of the Latter Han. Over the next forty years he and other scholars translated about thirty Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, most of them from pre-Mahāyāna traditions, emphasizing meditation and moral principles.

By about 185 CE, three Mahāyāna *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) texts were translated as well.

In 193–194 CE, a local warlord in what is now Jiangsu erected a Buddhist temple that could hold more than three thousand people. During ceremonies in honor of the Buddha’s birthday, thousands came to participate.

By the end of the second century, there were at least two centers of Buddhist activity, Luoyang in the north and an area in the southeast.

BUDDHIST-TAOIST MIXTURES OF THE HAN PERIOD



Spread of Buddhism in the Han Dynasty (1st-2d century A.D.)

The newly introduced Buddhist faith being accepted as part of the Taoist system. This might be the reason why Buddhism was not mentioned separately in the dynastic history during those years. (Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, p. 48ff.)

Several factors were responsible for the Buddhist-Taoist mixture:

- First, there were certain external similarities. Both systems practiced worship without sacrifices. Both emphasized concentration and meditation, control of respiration, and abstinence from certain kinds of food.
- The Buddhists taught the indestructibility of the soul and rebirth in the Brahma heavens; the Taoists believed in the land of the immortals in the Eastern Seas, or sought immortality in the Heaven of Grand Purity.
- The Chinese who assisted in the early Buddhist translation were usually drawn from among the Taoists. This can be seen in the choice of texts translated and in the terminology used.

In the eyes of the Han Chinese, Buddhism was but another aspect of Taoism, since its practices and tenets were akin to those of the Taoists.

To the Taoists, Buddhism was a new method of obtaining immortality. They felt that the Buddhist nirvana was no different from the Taoist salvation, the arhat-like Taoist zhen-ren 真人, or pure man.

The Taoists coined the term hua-hu, the conversion of the barbarians. According to this doctrine, Lao tzu, after disappearing in the west, went all the way to India, where he converted the barbarians and became the Buddha.

As a result of this alliance, the Han emperors placed deities of both religions on the same altar and worshiped them together. Ministers and the common people also regarded the two systems as one.

If contacts with India had ceased at the end of the Han Dynasty, Buddhism might have become absorbed into Taoism, and disappeared from the scene.

By the end of the Han Dynasty a new spirit of independence was developing; within Buddhism; it no longer accepted the close connection with Taoism.

At the end of the Han Dynasty two different trends had already developed in Buddhism. One was the Dhyana School, with its emphasis on control of the mind, concentration, and suppression of the passions. This school was based mainly on the translations of An Shih-kao.

Opposed to this was the Prajñā School. The popularity of the Prajñā School brought about two results: first, the spread of Mahayana sutras in China, and, second, the development of closer relations between the Buddhist monks and the Chinese literati who embraced the Lao-Chuang school of thought.

Features of Buddhism in Han dynasty

1. In the first several centuries, Buddhism existed in China as a popular religion rather than as a philosophy.
2. People cannot differentiate the difference between Taoism and Buddhism
3. Breathing exercises were adopted and emphasized by the Buddhists because of their affinity to the Taoist practices, which had already been in vogue among Taoist circles.
4. Under Neo-Taoist influence, early Buddhist schools in China all engaged in discussions on being and non-being.
5. In the early stage, monks and nuns lived in cloisters that cannot properly be called monasteries until a few centuries later.
6. Leadership of the Chinese clergy was provided, first by Central Asian monks; then by naturalized Chinese of foreign descent; later by Chinese themselves by the fourth century.

Appendix:

A Brief Chinese Chronology

First Qin Emperor (221-210 BCE)

Han Dynasty

-Western Han 206 BCE-24 CE

-Eastern Han 25-220 CE

The Three Kingdoms period (CE 220-265)

Western Jin (265-316)

Eastern Jin (317-420),

Northern Dynasties (386-581)

- Northern Wei (386-534)

- Western Wei (535-556) and Eastern Wei (534-550)

- Northern Zhou (557-581) and Northern Qi (550-577)

Southern Dynasties (420-589)

- I. Liu-Song , 420-479, duration 59 years

- II. Southern Qi, 479-502, duration 24 years

- III. Liang, 502-557, duration 56 years

- IV. Chen, 557-589, duration 33 years

Sui Dynasty 581-618

Tang Dynasty 618-907

Song (960~1279)

Yuan (1279~1368)

Ming (1368~1644)

Qing (1644~1911)

A Brief History of Chinese Buddhism

- 221 BCE the foreign monk Shih Li-fang, one of the missionaries dispatched by Asoka, arrived in China with Buddhist sūtras.
- 67 C.E Indian Buddhist missionaries arrive at the court of Emperor Ming (r. 58–75 CE) of the Han dynasty (206 BCE.–220 CE).
- 148 The Parthian **AN SHIGAO** arrives in the Chinese capital of Luoyang; he translates The Sutra of forty-two scriptures.
- 366 Construction of Buddhist cave shrines at DUNHUANG begins.
- 399 Chinese scholar–pilgrim FAXIAN (ca. 337–ca. 418) departs for INDIA in search of Buddhist teachings.
- 401 KUMĀRAJĪVA (350–409/413) from Kucha, arrives in the Chinese capital of Chang’an.
- 402 HUIYUAN (334–416) assembles a group of monks and laymen before an image of the Buddha AMITĀBHA on Mount Lu and vows to be born in the Western Paradise of Sukhāvati, starting the PURE LAND SCHOOLS of Buddhism.

- 460 The Northern Wei (386–534) begins to construct Buddhist cave sanctuaries at YUN'GANG and LONGMEN.
- ca. 520 BODHIDHARMA, the founder of the CHAN SCHOOL, arrives in China from India.
- ca. 585 ZHIYI (538–597) systematizes the Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhism, providing a distinctively Chinese conception of the Buddhist Path in such texts as the MOHE ZHIGUAN (Great Calmness and Contemplation).
- 601 The Sui (581–618) court distributes the Buddha's relics throughout the country and begins a wave of pagoda construction.
- 645 XUANZANG (ca. 600–664) returns from his journey to India with twenty horse-loads of Buddhist texts, images, and relics and begins epic translation project.
- 699 FAZANG (643–712) lectures at the Wu Zetian court on the newly translated HUAYAN JING (Avataṃsaka Sūtra), signaling the prominence of the HUAYAN SCHOOL.
- 720 The arrival of Indian masters Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra in the capital cities of China leads to a surge in popularity of the MIJIAO (ESOTERIC) SCHOOL.
- 745 Shenhui (684–758) arrives in the Eastern Capital and propagates the sudden-enlightenment teachings of HUIYEN (638–713), the putative sixth patriarch of the CHAN SCHOOL.
- 845 Emperor Wuzong (r. 841–847) initiates the Huichang suppression of Buddhism, one of the worst PERSECUTIONS in Chinese Buddhist history.
- 972 The Song dynasty initiates a national project to prepare a woodblock printing of the entire Buddhist canon (completed 983).
- ca. 1150 ZONGGAO (1089–1163) formalizes the GONGAN system of Chan MEDITATION.
- 1270 The Mongol Yuan dynasty (1234–1368) supports Tibetan Buddhist traditions in China.
- ca. 1600 ZHUHONG (1532–1612) seeks to unify Chan and Pure Land strands of Chinese Buddhism.
- 1759 A compendium of Buddhist incantations in Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan is compiled during the Qianlong reign (1736–1795) of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911).
- 1929 TAIXU (1890–1947) leads the Chinese Buddhist Association as part of his reform of Chinese Buddhist institutions.
- 1949 The communist victory in China forces many Buddhist MONKS, such as YINSHUN (1906–2005), to flee to TAIWAN.
- 1965 The Cultural Revolution is initiated by communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976), leading to widespread destruction of Buddhist sites in China.
- 1978 Buddhism starts to recover...