Buddhism in China: How Confucianism Unexpectedly Paved the Way

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"It is often said that, aside from the impact of Marxism on twentieth-century China, the only other time when the Chinese looked beyond their own borders for intellectual sustenance was during the period when Buddhism was absorbed from India" (LaFleur 23). Why did this religion appeal to the Chinese when they disregarded so many other external influences? After all, being tied to the rest of the world by the Silk Road meant they were constantly inundated with novel concepts from far and wide. The answer must lie in how Buddhism interacted with the other faiths already established in the country, namely Confucianism and Daoism (sometimes spelled Taoism). While at first glance it may appear that Confucian China would be the last place Buddhism would find a niche, it was in fact the combination of Confucianism and Daoism that laid a foundation at least slightly receptive toward this new faith from India. This paper will focus mainly on the interaction between Buddhism and Confucianism.

Buddhism made it to China over land in the first century C.E. from the northwest and by sea in the second century C.E. The main influence, however, came from the northwest via the Silk Road (Zuercher 415). In fact, Buddhism's main avenue of expansion was along trade routes throughout Asia. According to Jason Neelis, trade as a vehicle for the expansion of Buddhism is reflected in the fact that the religion spread in an irregular pattern unlike typical diffusion (Neelis 7). It was the Theravada branch in particular that has been associated with trade. Mahayana, on the other hand focused on the more settled, agricultural lifestyle. Ironically it is this branch that took hold in China. Once trade brought the religion within China's borders, the country's

geography influenced the development of Buddhism there, with the north and northwest logically being hubs where the most missionaries settled and wrote Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures (Zuercher 415). The political turmoil and the ebb in Confucianism's popularity that resulted from the fall of the Han Empire in 220 C.E. gave Buddhism its foothold in Chinese society and culture after almost two centuries of marginal existence in the country (Zuercher 416).

China's acceptance of the religion was actually a boon for Buddhism because, while Indians were not much concerned with writing down their scriptures or historical accounts, the Chinese copied down and translated their received teachings with meticulous care (LaFleur 21). In fact, when Mahayana scriptures were brought to China, it was the Chinese who sifted through the contradictory sutras to make sense of the new branch's teachings as they translated them from Sanskrit (LaFleur 24). Many early writers of Buddhist texts in China also worked hard to make their works appealing to Confucians, who were a tough crowd to impress.

Ku-fa-lan and She Moteng (also known as Kasyapa Matanga), who were missionaries from India, wrote the *Sutra of Forty-two Sayings* for the Chinese Emperor Ming-Di in 67 A.D. They wrote in a more Confucian manner, and excluded contentious Buddhist material. For example, even though this "handbook of moral teaching" considers family ties to be fetters, it says a monk should treat all women as female relatives, that is, he should view young females like sisters or daughters and older females like mothers (Saunders 159-160). This qualification of Buddhist ideas appeals directly to the Confucian idea of filial piety.

About a century later, "Parthian Prince" Anshikao spent twenty-two years translating the Pali canon. He is also responsible for introducing Amitabha—called Amitofo by the Chinese—teachings into China (Saunders 161). These teachings would later develop into Pure Land

Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana that holds huge appeal for lay practitioners thanks to its promise of rebirth in a pure land where one can achieve enlightenment. Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, was also introduced to China around this time. The Chinese would call him, or her since the Chinese frequently depict the deity as female, Guanyin or Guanshiyin. These names are rough translations of the Indian meaning "the god who hears the cry of man" (Saunders 161). Access to a deity who, unlike the Buddha, actually answers prayers would certainly have appealed to laypeople.

The *Ullambana Sutra* was another development that helped Buddhism hold its own in China. This text directly addresses the issues of how Buddhism relates to Chinese rituals for the dead, ancestor worship, and filial piety. The masses and ceremonies in this sutra are still used in China today, where roughly 300 million dollars are spent annually on death rituals. Thanks to the *Ullambana Sutra,* it is common for monks to participate in these masses (Saunders 164). While this text defended Buddhism's take on filial piety and death, it took other developments for the faith to truly take hold in Confucian China.

When Buddhism was first introduced into China, the country was based almost entirely on Confucianism, which is not exactly a religion in the narrowest sense of the term. "Confucianism [...] is a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life" (Ames and Weiming), but not quite a religion because it has no formal church or priesthood. Confucius, the father of this philosophy, is viewed in much the same way Buddhists view Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. Neither man is thought of as a divine being, nor did either man claim to be anything more than an ordinary human. Confucius is revered only as a great sage and Buddha as a human with supernatural powers similar to those of gods without

actually being a god himself. It was probably in part this similarity in beliefs that led the Chinese people to accept Buddhism alongside their own belief system.

Not only are the ideas about each religion's patriarch similar, but the structure of the scriptures also have much in common. Both in Buddhism and Confucianism, written teachings open with a phrase like "I have heard it said" or "The master said." Thus, when Buddhist missionaries wrote for a Confucian audience, they already had a part of the necessary formula for appeal: a structure that alludes to a very wise man of long ago. The filially pious Chinese probably would be drawn to this wise man, and perhaps automatically feel they should respect him as their elder, their spiritual superior if for no other reason than that Confucius had taught them to do so.

Confucianism was largely a belief system of the elite, and these Confucian elite disapproved of Buddhism because its doctrines were so contradictory to an already solidified Chinese culture. Because Confucianism is a highly patriarchal morality supported by ancestor worship, the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness conflicts with its deep respect of ancestors (Zuercher, LaFleur). To suggest that all things in the universe, even one's most esteemed ancestors and the emperor himself, are empty of inherent existence, that they have no "self" and no souls, is a horrifyingly disrespectful claim that completely undermines Confucian filial piety (LaFleur 22, 81). Celibacy and the ideal of monastic life also conflict with the Confucian idea that having a family is a show of respect to one's ancestors. Indeed, the Buddhist belief that family leads to attachment and is thus a hindrance along the path toward enlightenment

> was bound to come into conflict with the very basis of Confucian morality, according to which man's primary duty lies in fulfilling his obligations toward his family: the cult of his ancestors, the observance of filial piety toward his parents, and marriage and the

> engendering of male offspring in order to ensure the continuity of the family. (Zuercher 416)

Confucians surely felt threatened by Buddhism's rejection of the very doctrines that perpetuate Confucianism and structure Chinese society. Furthermore, because they felt that every person was an essential cog in the wheel of society, and that one could only attain perfection by living the perfect life of productivity and procreation within society, Confucians viewed the world-renouncing isolation of monastic life as not only counterproductive, but parasitic (Zuercher 416).

Traditionally, Buddhist monks were not allowed to engage in physical labor, and were only allowed to eat what was given to them by laypeople. In the Confucian mind, however, this meant that monks were little more than free-loaders shamelessly leaching resources from hard-working contributors to society. The Chinese eventually resolved this discrepancy by allowing monks to work in fields and generally participate in physical labor. This shift led to the development of a new pattern in Buddhism: monks attaining nirvana while laboring at some physical task (LaFleur 61-62).

In general, Confucians were displeased with monks' exemption from the rules of proper society. It particularly irked them that monks claimed to not have to bow to the emperor. This was a common and perfectly acceptable practice in India, but for the Chinese it was unheard of (Zuercher 416). The emperor is not only the political head of the country, but also, in the hierarchy of filial piety, a father figure of sorts to all his citizens who look up to and respect him as such.

Another difficulty for Confucians to puzzle through was the Mahayana Buddhist practice of vegetarianism. Confucians are not only perfectly okay with eating meat, but actually encourage it as a human display of power and superiority over animals (LaFleur 57). Mahayana

Buddhists, however, believe that all sentient beings—including all animals and, according to some, even all plants—have a Buddha nature and thus the potential to attain enlightenment in a future lifetime when they are reincarnated as humans. Such an idea suggests that if one's ancestor led a particularly ignorant life, he or she could be reborn as an animal; how horridly impious for one to consume the flesh of a possible reincarnation of one's ancestor! The Chinese eventually accepted vegetarianism, and many soy-based meat substitutes as well as other meals made from protein-rich plants come from Chinese monasteries (LaFleur 22).

More specifically, two Confucian scholars in particular actively opposed Buddhism in China. Gu Huan lived roughly from 390 to 453 A.D., and he was afraid that the rest of the world would stop taking the Chinese seriously as a result of what he viewed as Buddhists' fanatic behavior. He pointed out the loose-fitting robes of Buddhists as contrary to the "neatly girded clothing" worn by Confucians (LaFleur 59). He also felt Buddhist prostration set the practitioners equal to animals in a way that Confucian bows and salutes did not. The most understandably disturbing acts of the Buddhists, however, were their rejection of clothing, money, work, and home and most of all their acts of self-mutilation with fire. To burn off one's hair or even one's finger undermines the Confucian notion that an individual's body is a gift from his or her ancestors and as such is to be treated with respect (LaFleur 59). This belief runs counter to the Buddhist conviction that one must let go of worldly attachment; the acts that Confucian scholars found so atrocious were actually the Buddhists' demonstrations of their non-attachment to the material world.

Han Yü agreed with his forbearer Gu Huan that Buddhist practice was disturbing to say the least, and in 819 he wrote a letter, "A Memorial Concerning the Bone of the Buddha," to the emperor expressing his concerns. In his letter, Han Yü responded directly to the emperor's own

worship of a Buddhist relic: a finger bone of Siddhartha Gautama, kept at Fa-men Temple just outside Chang-an, the country's capital. The emperor had this bone brought to his palace, presumably so that he might worship it in the privacy of his own home. Han Yü feared that Chinese culture would shift to be based entirely on Indian values rather than Chinese values and that Chinese Buddhists, by virtue of their fanatic acts, must be crazy. However, his concerns probably never reached the emperor. Palace officials objected to the letter and had its author exiled to the south. A year later, though, Han Yü was allowed to return to the capital where he died in 824 (LaFleur 56-60).

Twenty years after Han Yü's complaint, China really did decide against Buddhism for a time. This anti Buddhist movement led to the confiscation of "wealth and property of monks and nuns" by the government, defrocking of monastics, forced closure of temples, and the destruction of 4,600 monasteries. It was during this downturn that the Chinese adapted Buddhism more toward their culture and needs. This included the abovementioned shift in monastic life that allowed monks to perform physical labor, as well as more focus on lay practitioners and further development of Chan, or Zen, and Pure Land Buddhism (LaFleur 61-62).

The Mahayana concept of the bodhisattva as an individual who has renounced personal enlightenment in favor of helping all other sentient beings in the universe attain nirvana helped Buddhism gain popularity in China. Bodhisattvas are believed to work more successfully incognito, so sages, gods, or other holy figures of Confucianism and Daoism came to be understood as bodhisattvas in disguise. Eventually, the notion of a bodhisattva melded with the Daoist concept of a "holy man as a delightful, sometimes crazily delightful, childlike being at play in nature or society," (LaFleur 84) hence the idea of renouncing enlightenment out of pure compassion being a joyful act.

Buddhism in general came to be understood as a spiritual and metaphysical balance against the "pure reason" of Confucianism (Shien 264) and the more mystic and naturalistic Daoist teachings:

> because Confucianism was almost exclusively directed toward the ordering of state and society, it could be argued that Buddhism would serve as a kind of metaphysical complement to the social and political teachings of the Sage [Confucius], just as it could provide the Taoist Way with the higher (but complementary) goals of Enlightenment and nirvana … the Buddhist clergy by its prayers and rituals could provide a magical protection for the dynasty, the state, and society. In spite of these positive factors, however, it remains true that even when Buddhism reached its zenith in Sui and T'ang times, China never became a "Buddhist country" in the true sense of the word. (Zuercher 416)

In this way, the Chinese mixed together the three traditions and began to call them "*San Chiao,* the 'three which are one'" (Saunders 158). Mauzi, a Chinese defender of Buddhism, claimed that the Indian belief system was more complete and made more sense than Daoism and Confucianism alone. He considered the concept of impermanence superior to the Daoist goal of longevity and felt that Confucianism, while excellent for organizing a state, was not a complete religion. Mauzi felt that "Buddhism faces the fact of life, yet offers mystical satisfaction to the yearnings of the human heart" in a way that Daoism and Confucianism did not, could not, achieve on their own (Saunders 163). Indeed, in Chinese art Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi are often depicted together as the three patriarchs of China and Chinese culture and religion, each with a distinct facial expression that reflects the individual's teachings.

Laozi, and Daoist teachings have much more in common with Buddhism than what is shared by Confucianism and Buddhism. According to Okakura, "Confucian China would never have accepted the Idealism of India had not Lao-tze and Taoism toward the end of the Chow dynasty prepared a psychological foundation for the development of both these extremes of Asiatic thought" (qtd. in Saunders 157). Even when one considers the meditation practices of Buddhism next to the breathing exercises of Daoism, one can hardly tell the difference (Shien 263). While Daoists do these breathing exercises to command the flow of blood (Shien 263), Buddhists meditate, sometimes by focusing on breathing, to control the winds flowing through the 72,000 channels in the body that convey consciousness (Powers 284). As mentioned above, the Mahayana concept of the bodhisattva as a joyful being, and the Daoist concept of the holy man as a delightful and playful individual are highly similar.

Though it may seem that Buddhism is too different from Confucianism to find a place in China, it actually seems to be the case that Daoism and Confucianism together laid the groundwork to include Buddhism as a third, complementary faith. Buddhism came to China mostly via the Silk Road and spread out from the northwest into the rest of the country. The missionaries who worked in the northwest wrote Buddhist texts in such a way that they would appeal to the Confucian Chinese, and these texts often contained material that Daoists were drawn to. Over time, Buddhism went through booms and ebbs, depending on who was in power and which faith they preferred. China may never have become a completely Buddhist nation, but it has accepted the Indian religion as a part of a trio of faiths that work together to structure the society politically, morally, spiritually, and metaphysically. The *San Jiao* of China have developed into a truly unique system of religions.

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