

## 9: BUDDHISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHINESE HIGH CIVILIZATION (10/87; 7/89, 10/94, 8/95e, 8/96e)

*a. What were the fundamental assumptions and doctrines of the Buddhist religious tradition? How did these differ from the assumptions and doctrines of the religions that underlay Confucianism and Daoism? Why did Buddhism's vision of Heaven become dominant in China when it did, rather than before or after that time?*

*b. What were the most important secular influences Buddhism exerted on the Chinese state, social order and economy? In what ways were Christian influences on the Medieval European state, social order and economy similar?*

### A. Fundamental Assumptions and Doctrines of Buddhism

#### 1. An Indian World-Historical Religion

##### a. East & West Eurasian Messianism

The cluster of faiths we label Buddhism belongs to the same stage of development as the cluster of religions comprising post-exilic Judaism and its two sister faiths, Christianity and Islam. We might characterize these two clusters as Eastern and Western Eurasian Messianism. This analogy suggests that Hinayana, Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism are as different from each other as Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Nevertheless, the six individual religions comprising both clusters share some key traits. Savior figures—messiahs—dominate both clusters. Through these figures Heaven, which had become distant from Earth by late antiquity, was perceived as intruding back down onto Earth and radically transforming it.

Historians sometimes call the faiths

comprising both clusters “world-historical religions” because they moved the peoples who embraced them to the next higher stage of civilization. The roots of each cluster first appeared or were greatly transformed during the first stage of high civilization. But each of these faiths transcended that stage's limits to create the framework for a second stage of high civilization, more or less independently at opposite ends of Eurasia.

Perhaps the reason they could constitute the matrix out of which the second stage grew was because they were themselves the products of the first stage of high civilization, rather than of early civilization. In this respect the world-historical religions differed from the pagan faiths of both the West and East. Greek and Roman religion, ancient Zhou ancestor worship, and the Chu fertility cult, all went back to the early civilized stage.

The world-historical messianic faiths also proved capable of transcending the borders of the civilizations that gave rise to them. Perhaps this was because the salvation promised by their messiah figures was intended to be granted to all men everywhere.

This knack of transcending cultural borders may also have been the result of the historical accident that both Western and Eastern Messianism arose along the borders between two separate civilizations—between Greco-Roman and Semitic-Persian in the case of Western Messianism and between Indo-Persian and Dravidian<sup>1</sup> civilization in the case of Eastern Messianism.

It also helped that almost from the beginning these faiths were independently instituted rather than diffused into existing institutions (family and state). When the time came, carriers of these faiths could abandon existing socio-political institutions and carry their faith wherever it seemed appropriate to go.

##### b. the Buddhist cluster of faiths

Two main branches of Buddhism evolved—Theravada and Mahayana—and a third late branch of the latter,

called Tantrism. The earliest of them, Theravada, is analogous to post-exilic Judaism and the earlier forms of Christianity. Like the latter, Theravada could spread outside the original South Asian boundaries of the region of its birth, but only just barely.

Mahayana Buddhism corresponds to the later forms of Christianity that crystallized out as the ruling faith of the Roman Empire and its successor states in Europe. Both Mahayana Buddhism and Catholic Christianity spread far beyond their original regions of birth into drastically different centers of civilization.

Tantrism, like Islam, budded off from its predecessor last of all, but it has not spread as widely as Islam, nor is it considered as respectable. Offshoots of Tantrism are now mainly practiced in Tibet, Mongolia, and California. Certain Californians are attracted to the sexual practices of some forms of Tantrism.

##### c. its genesis in northeastern India

Like its Western analogs, Buddhism originated during the transition into the first stage of high civilization. It was both product and cause of that transition. It arose through the clash of an invading Indo-European language speaking people, the so-called Aryans who had migrated from the region east of the Black Sea down through eastern Persia, with the local native people of the northern third of the Indian subcontinent. The latter, sometimes called the Dravidians, had already created an early civilization on the Indian subcontinent.

The Aryans were the easternmost wing of a much larger group of Indo-European language speaking peoples who perhaps originally lived in West Central Asia. As a consequence of a minor ice age that peaked out at around 2,500 BC in the central part of Eurasia, these people fled out of that region to the west, the south, and the southeast.

The refugees who headed west became the Greeks, the Latin-speaking, German-speaking and Slavic-speaking peoples of Europe. The refugees who headed south became the Persians. The group moving to the southeast passed through eastern Persia, southern Afghanistan into northwestern India. They

<sup>1</sup> Dravidian is the name applied to the first early civilization of northwest India. It is also used loosely (as here) to refer to early native Indian civilizations in general.

became the Aryans, a people in the Indian subcontinent speaking languages related to Sanskrit and its successor languages, such as modern Hindi.

Prince Gautama, the future Lord Buddha, was born some time between the 7th and 5th centuries BC in north central India. His birthplace straddled the cultural frontier that existed then between the Aryan and Dravidian peoples. Gautama himself was from the ruling family of a small, Aryan-dominated local state just behind this frontier.

Gautama's mother died giving birth to him. He was brought up, sacred books written down much later tell us, in a luxurious environment, deliberately shielded by his doting widower father from the harsh realities of the lives of the Dravidians over whom the Aryan elite ruled.

The gods, however, had another destiny in store for the young prince. They so arranged things that, despite his father's precautions, one day he saw for the first time an old man on the road. When he returned to the palace he caught his favorite concubine looking ugly and old while she slept. Thereafter he could no longer endure the sight of even the most beautiful of the women in his harem, because he knew that they too would someday become old and ugly.

Then the gods took Gautama outside the palace again and revealed to him a person hideously sick as only someone can become sick in the tropical climate of India. Thereafter, Gautama could no longer bear even to look upon the gilded youths with whom his father surrounded him, because they too would someday become sick.

Finally, the gods showed him a bloated corpse lying in the ditch. Thereafter he could no longer even bear to contemplate his own existence, because he knew that he too would one day also become such a mass of rotting flesh.

Even worse, since both Aryans and Dravidians were beginning to believe in the doctrine of reincarnation, he had every reason to believe he would have to go through this depressing cycle of old age, sickness and death again and again, forever.

Unable to endure the prospect of this awful bodily fate and the disjunction

between this and what he could feel his soul to be, Gautama was paralyzed with despair. At just this moment he saw a mendicant monk belonging to one of the many native Dravidian faiths. He decided to take up a similar life as a religious seeker, determined to cast away all the luxuries of his upbringing and find true enlightenment through a life of extreme asceticism. It would seem that the early civilized Dravidian vision of Heaven had triumphed over the Heaven of the Aryans.

Gautama quickly discovered, however, that the more he eschewed wealth, and even food and clothing (though both are easier to cut down on in India's hot and enervating climate than in central Eurasia), the more he became obsessed by the very thought of them. He could not heal that split between body and mind his first observations of the world had revealed to him. So worn out by this effort at a South Asian style of ascetic life did he become, that one day he sat down under a pipul tree in utter exhaustion, and in spite of himself, gave up the struggle.

#### **d. enlightenment & its institutionalization**

Giving up the struggle turned out to be the key. Once he did so, he suddenly realized what he had been doing wrong. He realized that his asceticism—his ardent denial of the things of the flesh—was itself just another way of lusting for those things, simply because the denial was itself so ardent. Only now, too exhausted to lust even after the denial of lust, was he finally free of such lust.

He then realized that even the lust for things was itself merely one aspect of the sensing of and thinking about every thing that might be sensed—i.e. the whole created world.

Even to sense that world, Gautama now understood, was to lust after it. To lust after these objects of the senses was inevitably to leave one's self open to the eternal cycle of sickness and old age and death. This insight represented the beginnings of a kind of synthesis between the Dravidian and Aryan visions of Heaven.

The next step was for Gautama to realize that because he now fully under-

stood the nature of this dependency on the senses, he had in some sense freed himself from it. He was free even from sensate awareness of himself as well as from the whole of creation. In some sense, creation as such, including the now enlightened Prince Gautama, had actually "disappeared." It did not exist! It had become "no-thing."

When confronted with the preceding statement, an unenlightened person might simply think that after achieving such enlightenment one should just disappear in the literal sense of being gone, with nothing there any longer.

Apparently, however, after one has disappeared and become "no"-thing, in some sense, "some" thing is left. After negating your initial false positive, you can then negate your first negation. That is, after rejecting thing for no-thing, you reject no-thing too. What you have then and where it is (i.e. no-where) you can not quite talk about, except by piling up sequences of negations and negations of negations. This was a trick that the Buddhists eventually learned how to turn into a rigorous form of logical discourse, though one bewildering to the uninitiated.

Gautama's new ideas quickly attracted a number of disciples from both sides of the Aryan-Dravidian cultural divide who had been puzzling over the same dilemmas as he had. To them Gautama had become Buddha (Sanskrit for "Enlightened One"). These disciples abandoned normal society to follow this Lord Buddha, adopted as a standard uniform a saffron-colored robe, literally separated themselves into a separate community (though one dependent on the charity of secular society) and constituted the core of the independently instituted order of monks.

Buddha's sister demanded that women too be permitted to form monastic communities. Somewhat grudgingly (women, after all, must have done something bad in a previous existence to not have been reincarnated as men), Buddha permitted her to form the first order of Buddhist nuns.

The Buddha elaborated on his initial insights as he preached to the proto-monastics who gathered around him. Eventually, the one-time Aryan prince died, or perhaps just "dis"-appeared—

transcending to the level where there is no-thing and whatever thing there is that is the negation of no-thing.

The monks and nuns, and the laypersons who supported them, were neither surprised nor discouraged. They were all the more determined to live his kind of life until they too could become enlightened.

They did not, however, regress back into the sort of religion considered the norm during early civilization and thus far during the first stage of high civilization. The members of the order of monks and their patterns of behavior did not “diffuse” themselves once more into the institutions of family and state. These institutions were too deeply ensnared into what the modern psychologist William James called “the booming buzzing confusion” of sensate life.

Instead the surviving disciples formalized their groups into an independently instituted religion, a religion with its own separate corps of personnel. The monks, soon led by abbots, lived and worked in urban temples and rural monasteries separate from ordinary buildings used for earthly functions.

These monks wore saffron colored robes to distinguish themselves from everybody else. They got the laity to support them through charitable contributions while they sought their salvation through practice of a form of contemplation imitating that of Gautama as he sat under the pipul tree. This tree, which long survived the Buddha, was now called the Bodhi Tree, or Tree of Enlightenment.

## 2. Buddhism's transformation under the Mauryan Empire

### a. north to Persian influence

After another few hundred years, this new religion of the Aryan-Dravidian borderlands became the guiding faith of a hybrid Aryan-Dravidian culture which spread south through the Indian subcontinent. Eventually it provided the guiding vision of Heaven for the first South Asian universal state—the Mauryan Empire.

The Mauryan Empire was roughly contemporaneous with the first universal states in China, Qin and Han. It came a

bit later than and was somewhat influenced by Alexander's universal state in the west. Alexander had brought Greek culture into the same region of central and southern Afghanistan into which the Mauryans later spread.

Buddhism underwent a marvelous “sea change” (or perhaps it would be better to call it a “land change”) as the Mauryan rulers spread it north from its original homeland in northern India into southern Central Asia.

There Buddhism picked up the Greek iconographic tradition. More fundamentally, it encountered and absorbed substantial parts of the Persian religious tradition. What we now call Afghanistan even now still receives much Persian cultural influence, and the Persian religious tradition was especially strong there during late antiquity.

The ancient Persian religion went back at least in outline to the prophet Zoroaster, who lived either in the 7th or 12th century BC. The faith that grew out of his teachings was a dualistic religion, called Mazdaism in one of its versions. It had two gods—Ahura Mazda, the god of light, and Ahriman, the god of darkness—who warred for the souls of men and for possession of this earth.

Dualism was then and still remains a very powerful religious idea, though one with a whiff of heresy about it for monotheists like Jews and Christians. If the Persian version of dualism seems dimly familiar to you, it is because my ancestors, the ancient Jews, may have stolen a few hints about a conflict between God and the Devil from Mazdaism during and just after the Babylonian Captivity, when the Jews became prisoners of the Persians. This was after the latter moved out of Persia to conquer Babylon (in modern Iraq).

These hints of Persian religious dualism first showed up among the Jews in the Book of Isaiah. Ahura Mazda there became transformed. He became the model for the Old Testament's first references to the Messiah. The god of darkness, Ahriman eventually evolved into the Devil, the bad lesser divine being who contended with the Messiah for men's souls and for control over Earth.

A few centuries later and at the eastern end of the Persian culture area, Mazdaism rubbed up against Buddhism

in Afghanistan, and Ahura Mazda there became transformed into the prototype of the Bodhisattva—Enlightened One.

Many Bodhisattvas exist at different sensate and non-sensate levels of existence. However, they all choose, out of an all-encompassing charity, to postpone their transcendence into the realm of “no-thing.” Instead, they voluntarily remain at some lower level of existence where they can help everybody else, indeed all sensate beings to attain salvation.

These Bodhisattvas are the Buddhist equivalents of the Judeo-Christian Messiah figure, and have some of the same religio-intellectual ancestry.

### b. Bodhisattvas & Job's dilemma

Just as did belief in the Jewish Messiah, belief in the Buddhist Bodhisattva solved one of the toughest problems posed but not really solved by the philosophers of the first stage of high civilization. This dilemma is exemplified in the West by the fate of Job, the righteous man who nevertheless suffered bitterly.

In the *Book of Job* the righteous man's suffering results from a kind of sucker bet God makes with Satan over how firm Job's faith will remain in the face of adversity. God takes away all Job's property, kills off Job's family and inflicts hideous illnesses on Job himself. Job never quite loses his faith, but finally he accuses God of acting unrighteously.

This is when the morally unsatisfactory part begins. God gets mad, sarcastically points out how powerful He is compared to Job. He tells Job not to be so presumptuous as to judge God's motives. Job humbly accepts God's criticism. To show there are no hard feelings, God restores Job's property, cures his illnesses and gives him a new family.

Though it is a fascinating folk tale, the *Book of Job* is somewhat unsatisfactory in metaphysical terms. Toward the end, the God of the Old Testament almost seems morally inferior to Job. Some of the later messianic Jews and Christians both argue that only through the evolution of the ancient Judaic vision of Heaven into the hybrid post-

exilic faith evoking the saving grace of the Messiah can Job's dilemma be resolved.

The earliest Chinese incarnation of Job's dilemma was less spectacular than the Old Testament version. Confucius in Job's role merely had to reconcile his failure to persuade the rulers to hire him with the ideas Heaven had placed in his head.

Eight hundred years later, the section of the *Lie Zi* attributed to the Daoist Yang Zhu sardonically made the same point. It pointed out that the sages' bodies rotted just as thoroughly after their deaths as did the carcasses of the evil rulers the sages labored so bitterly to put down. Since the evil rulers had more fun while they lived, they were better off net than the sages. This is at least as entertaining as the Job story, and perhaps a bit more wicked.

The problem of how to reconcile the existence of evil with the existence of an omnipotent and good deity could not be resolved at either end of Eurasia until the Western Messiah and Eastern Bodhisattva became available. Only they could overcome Earthly evil at the transcendent level and allow revelation of that Heavenly solution to ordinary men on Earth.

### c. Mahayana dominance

This new, Bodhisattva-centered form of Buddhism granted a larger role to the laity. Having picked up the Bodhisattva from the Persians, it also quickly became very willing to steal ideas from any culture into which it subsequently penetrated. As a consequence, it spread widely and became Buddhism's dominant form.

Its proponents came to call it the Mahayana—the Greater Vehicle. They called the old original Buddhism “Hinayana”—the Lesser Vehicle. Of course the proponents of this older Buddhism did not want to be called a “lesser vehicle,” and so they called themselves the practitioners of the Theravada—the True or Elder's Path.

Theravada practices drifted south toward Ceylon, and eventually into peninsular and insular Southeast Asia.

Mahayana Buddhism spread north, then east through Zone A to China, Ko-

rea and Japan. Its Tantric variant, which adjusted more fully to the native religions of Tibet and Mongolia, budded off from the main branch of Mahayana after the middle of the first millennium AD.

Within the last century or so, sects from all three major branches of Buddhism have spread to Europe, New England, and finally to California (where they have sometimes gone through the same sorts of eccentric transformations as has Californian Christianity).

## B. Buddhism's Differences from the Religions Which Underlay Confucianism and Daoism

### 1. A world-denying religion

#### a. comparison with world-affirming faiths

Buddhism's roots in South Asia's transition into high civilization caused it to differ fundamentally from the early civilized religions of East Asia (northern ancestor worship linked to Confucianism and southern fertility cult linked to Daoism). These gave rise to Confucianism and Daoism respectively as their philosophical offshoots during China's transition into high civilization.

One big difference was and is that Buddhism is a fundamentally world-denying religion. In the most profound sense, the world does not exist for a truly enlightened Buddhist. The world is an illusion we conjure up by sensing it, and immediately lusting after the things that our senses seem to be delivering to us. Though he remains aware of what his senses are telling him, the truly enlightened person remains quietly unmoved by their misleading testimony. It is almost an exaggeration to call him a “denier” of the world. The world does not exist for him, and so need not even be denied.

By contrast, Confucianism and Daoism and the religious traditions that underlay them were originally what one might call naively world-affirming. In this respect they did not differ from the

religions of West Eurasia, including pre-exilic Judaism.

A world-affirming religion takes it for granted that the world we sense is actually there. Its practitioners cannot believe that a truly supreme deity would play tricks on them. If asked to demonstrate the world's existence, the impulse of a believer in such a faith would behave as did the 18th century Tory Anglican, Sam Johnson. When arguing with his friends in a coffee shop against the idealist philosopher Bishop Berkeley's skepticism about whether or not we can know the world exists, Johnson simply kicked the table. This demonstrated to his satisfaction that the world is not only actually there, but that we are aware of the fact and can communicate it.

Long before Johnson's time, however, more subtle ways than kicking the table existed to affirm the world's existence.

Christianity and post-exilic Judaism became what one might call *sophisticated* world-affirming religions. The world is really there for the believing Jew and Christian of the second stage of high civilization. The world is the arena created by the Transcendent within which man is expected to work out his salvation. It also either has already been or is destined to be visited by the literal embodiment of the Transcendent so as to lead men to their salvation.

For the Theravada Buddhist, the world does not count at all, except as the gorgeous but misleading bundle of booming and buzzing illusions that constitutes the chief obstacle to the individual working out his own salvation.

Partly because of the Persian influences it shares with them, Mahayana Buddhism sometimes comes much closer to the position embracing the world taken by the Western faiths. Mahayana's embodiment of the transcendent, the Bodhisattva, like the Messiah, also enters the world to interact with and save men.

In principle, even Mahayana nevertheless remains much closer to Theravada's denial of the world than to the Western religions' affirmation of it. The Bodhisattva enters the world precisely so as to rescue men from it and its senseless temptations by showing it to be an

illusion.

### **b. world-denial and tolerance**

Important consequences follow from the differences between sophisticated world-denying and sophisticated world-affirming faiths.

Denying the world helps make Buddhism fundamentally a tolerant faith. After all, the things of this world are not important enough to be worth being intolerant about. Under Buddhist influence, the naive realists of East Asia became somewhat more tolerant than they had been in ancient times. Buddhism's beginnings as a synthesis of Aryan and Dravidian religion may also have encouraged tolerance.

By contrast, even (or especially) the most sophisticated world-affirmers at our end of the world until recently have always been, on principled grounds, intolerant. The world was too important for believers to risk tolerating heresy and untruth, since these might interfere with the salvation that can only come to the sinner in this world in this one life.

Intolerance, like tolerance, has both good and bad sides. The tolerant Buddhists have all too often let themselves be pushed around by their rulers, but the Jews and the Christians have not, generally, put up so easily with such treatment. The Buddhists may, therefore, be too tolerant for their own and their societies' good.

Judeo-Christian intolerance, however unpleasant its immediate manifestations often are, at least established the autonomy of the spiritual realm and of the individual who was capable of perceiving that realm himself.

The unwillingness of Judeo-Christian prophets and popes to put up with any nonsense from secular political authorities preserved not only key spiritual prerogatives for the people as well as the clergy but also carried over to the secular level to inhibit interference by even very strong rulers to compromise the liberties of their subjects.

Since the wars of religion ended in stalemate in 1648 Euro-Americans have grudgingly backed into religious toleration. Perhaps not coincidentally, states have grown ever stronger and religions ever weaker since then, culminating in

the 20th century's holocausts against Western religions which had grown as tolerant as Buddhism. These holocausts were conducted by states become more totalitarian than Qin ever dreamed of being.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Buddhism's ability to cross civilizational lines**

Unlike the native Chinese faiths and Judaism (but like Christianity and Islam), Buddhism, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, has always been able to cross the frontiers into other, drastically different, civilizations and interact with these alien civilizations in creative ways.

When Buddhism picked up or reinforced the germ of the idea of the Bodhisattva from the Persians, it also adopted the style of its early iconography from the artists Alexander the Great left behind in Afghanistan. The statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas which Mauryan artists began to sculpt all have Greek noses (except for the nostrils) and the draping of their clothing resembles archaic or early classical Greek statuary drapery.

Its tolerance has always encouraged Mahayana missionaries to receive ideas from as well as give ideas to other civilizations and their religions. They have been willing to make such exchanges overtly, and without necessarily insisting upon a predominant position for themselves.

In China, for example, Mahayana monks eagerly turned even Confucius into a kind of Bodhisattva. Since there were already so many Bodhisattvas by the time Buddhism hit China, one more would hardly make a difference theologically.

By contrast, the native religions of East Asia, lacked the ability to cross civilizational or even subzonal boundaries. China's main religions could not even cross regional boundaries between north and south. Buddhism crossed such regional lines right from the beginning. It expanded across northern India, then

south into the many different cultures inhabiting the Indian peninsula and southeast Asia, and finally north into southern Central Asia. Even Christianity did not have to cross quite so many cultural frontiers into so many drastically different cultures comparably early in its history.

Buddhism, also like Christianity and post-exilic Judaism, was and still is an independently instituted religion. While that made it even more alien-seeming to regions still attached to diffused religions, and therefore probably delayed its acceptance by them, these independent institutions also allowed it greater mobility when it began to cross cultural frontiers.

Though they may not have seemed so important when they first appeared, independent religious institutions may have been one of the key innovations of the first stage of high civilization.

Precisely because they had independent institutions, the world-historical faiths could separate these independent institutions from their culture of origin. Their specialized personnel (the monks) could transform themselves into missionaries and carry their faiths' ideas and the institutions embodying them across the borders to the lands of other first stage high civilizations. These host cultures could then cross the threshold into the second stage. The Buddhist missionaries could even help early civilizations like those of the pastoral-nomads, Koreans and Japanese of Zone A jump over the threshold to the first stage of high civilization.

## **C. How Buddhism Entered China and Became the Dominant Religious Tradition of China's Second Stage of High Civilization**

### **1. China's crisis of civilization**

For all we know, Buddhism may have entered China as early as Western Han times, at least by the 1st century BC. We have little written evidence for this, since only the ruling class wrote of

<sup>2</sup> Lest you think I exaggerate, I know of a Zen Buddhist monk in California who practices intolerance exercises as an antidote to what he (coached by some Jesuit friends) perceives as the bad effects of tolerance on the vigor of Buddhism.

such matters, and apparently Buddhism's initial appeal was to visiting foreigners and non-ruling class Chinese.

It was technically possible for foreigners to have brought Buddhism in by the 1st century BC. China was settling down into its Zone A empire by then, and its power extended well out into Central Asia. The Chinese knew of India's existence thanks to the 2nd century BC Chinese explorer Zhang Qian, though even he never actually reached India.

So the odds are good that some Buddhism-carrying merchants wandered into and out of China by then. Zone A Buddhist soldiers might have enlisted in the Chinese frontier forces.

However, the Chinese ruling class simply would not have noticed the religious practices of such people. It was still enamored of one or the other of the native Chinese faiths and their philosophical offshoots, and was still trying to make some synthesis of these workable as the faith for the ruling class of a universal state.

We have already seen how that attempt failed; how Dong Zhongshu in the 2nd century BC made an intellectually serious attempt to integrate Confucianism with Daoism on Confucian terms, and how his epigoni in the 1st century BC inadvertently turned Confucius himself into a kind of Daoist magician retroactively, and thereby made themselves and their key idea system, Dong's reformist Confucianism, into a laughing stock.

We have also seen how, midway through the Han period, at the turn of the Christian era, the usurper Wang Mang used a kind of fundamentalist Confucianism to inadvertently reduce state interventionism to its logical and absurd extreme.

With both its hard and soft variants discredited, Confucianism went somewhat out of fashion by the time Wang Mang's usurpation was overturned in favor of a Han restoration in 23 AD.

In the course of the next couple of centuries, the resulting philosophical vacuum was filled by what my generation is tempted to call the "hipster" (hipsters being the bloody-minded hippies of the late 1950s, who preferred making war to making love) version of

the hard Daoist movement. Hard Daoism was discredited by the thwarted career of the usurper of Han power, General Cao Cao, and by the unsuccessful



rebellions by Daoist sectarians failing to violently establish the Great Peace Heavenly Kingdom on earth.

Even before these movements failed, men of merit disillusioned with the

**Main hall of the Yungang cave-cathedral complex. (On-site postcard, 1977)**

earthly order were turning to the softer model offered by the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" during the 3rd century AD. This amusing set of eccentrics and decadents—hippies rather than hipsters—completed the reduction of soft philosophical Daoism to its logical and hence absurd extreme.

In the end, Daoists of that sort quite literally stopped going to the office. They merely stood by watching (often in a drunken stupor) as the Han Dynasty went to pieces. The fragments of empire were taken over, if only transiently, by more sober but also much more cynical Daoist hipsters. A retired official in the tradition of the Seven Sages composed the cynical lament attributed to Yang Zhu about the sages living less happily than the villains that I characterized above as the most vivid Chinese equivalent of the lament of Job.

As a consequence of the despair of

its own intellectual leaders, by the 3rd century AD, the niche that Chinese high civilization had previously reserved for a guiding high philosophy underpinned

by a religion had been emptied of both Confucian and Daoist content.

Buddhism could flow into this now empty niche to influence and finally be noticed formally by the Chinese ruling class. By the early 4th century, not long after the barbarian invasions of the north got under way in earnest, it was clear that not just barbarians, but Chinese aristocrats and commoners were also becoming adherents of the new religion.

## **2. Buddhism's conquest of China**

From that time on, we not only possess paper records of Buddhism kept by the ruling class, but we also have evidence from the living rock. The new states of the Northern Dynasties went into what (by analogy with Christianity later on) we must call their "cathedral building" stage.

They constructed great cave temples, really cave-cathedrals, such as the one at Yungang outside the modern town of Datong, just within the Great Wall at the northern end of subzone B2. Yungang was one of the first of these cathedrals.

Modern tourists can still see the

remnants of these great temples. Their wooden facades have, in most cases, long since decayed, but the carved living stone of the bluffs constituting the inner walls and great stone Buddhist figures of these enormous cathedrals are even more impressive exposed to the natural light.

Tourists are as awed by these as they are by Chartres (which belongs to the latest rather than the earliest stage of cathedral building in Medieval Christendom). Both Yungang and Chartres are enormous, massive symphonies in stone, of incredible scale and complexity. Both are equally the products of ages of universal faith.

By the late 5th and 6th centuries, such cave temples were being built further south, in Loyang in the fulcrum zone, for example. They even began to appear in the Yangzi valley among the Southern Dynasties. This shows that the great mass of the Chinese people, both south and north, as well as their rulers, had deeply absorbed the Buddhist faith.

At least among the ruling class, however, southerners for a long time seemed to retain a more overt allegiance to Han Dynasty Confucian political philosophy in addition to Buddhism. By the middle of the 6th century, however, even in the north, a still more archaizing pre-Han style of Confucianism came to dominate the court, if not the countryside (which remained Buddhist) of Northern Zhou. This last of the Northern Dynasties unified all of north China.

Northern Zhou's successor, the Sui Dynasty, finally restored a universal state in the 580s. Buddhism became the main legitimizer for this state. Even though the Sui was mostly run by native Chinese, and its ruling class also included a large number of sinified barbarians, most members of the ruling class were fervent Buddhists. The army was overwhelmingly so.

Hence, the Sui founder used as the main part of his "campaign platform" to win men's loyalties the claim that he was the "Chinese Asoka." Asoka was the ruler of the Indian Mauryan Dynasty who nearly ten centuries earlier first spread Buddhism north into Afghanistan from its original home in India to start its globe-encircling spread.

It is a measure of how much China

had changed since the fall of Han nearly four centuries previously that the Chinese dynastic founder of Sui not only had a Zone A barbarian Buddhist hen-pecking wife but was eager to identify himself with a still more exotic ancient Hindu ruler, a "blue-eyed barbarian" to xenophobic native Chinese sensibilities.

The Buddhist vision of Heaven could overwhelm even China's well-nourished sense of xenophobia.

## D. The Secular Influences of Buddhism on China

For the last fifteen centuries, Buddhism has retained enormous spiritual influence in China. Many genuinely pious Chinese Buddhists remain, not just on Taiwan or elsewhere in Overseas China, but within the ranks of the mainland Chinese. Buddhism has revived after every persecution, including the half-century persecution by the Communists since the late 1940s. Like Confucianism and even the independently instituted version of religious Daoism that evolved in imitation of it, Buddhism appears to have outlived the Marxist material determinist vision of Heaven.

China also remains a Buddho-Confucian country in the same secular sense with which we often apply the term "Judeo-Christian" to our own civilization. Right from the beginning, Buddhism has influenced and even created some of the most worldly of China's institutions. It has done so in ways that you might find surprising, unless you have read something of the influence of church on state and market in the medieval and modern West.

### 1. Buddhism and economic life

#### a. linear time and time preference

The nature of time-awareness, for example, changed drastically under Buddhism's influence. Before Buddhism, most people in China, particularly commoners (like such men of first

stage high civilizations elsewhere), seem to have had only what one might call a "circular" sense of time rather than the linear sense of time that we now consider normal.

The great mass of the people could understand the round of the seasons, and the natural cycle from birth through maturity to death. However, only the ruling class, and only for certain purposes, could understand that time was also linear—that it ran from beginnings through middles to ends, including ends that might transcend life on earth.

Ancestor worship probably suggested this linear time sense to the ruling class. The gods gave rise to the rulers' first ancestors. The ancestors gave rise to descendants moving linearly through time, generation following generation.

Apparently, however, the ruling class did not apply this linear time sense to anything beyond placing spirit tablets in ancestral temples and writing chronicle histories. They seem not to have applied it to economic life in any deep or systematic way.

We can be fairly certain that the Chinese (and for that matter the other first stage high civilizations) did not systematically apply linear time to economic life, since there is no evidence for anything beyond rudimentary credit institutions or credit moneys in ancient China or elsewhere. Even for the rulers of antiquity, the most common way to save wealth was to put it in a box and then bury the box rather than to lend it to someone who would use it to produce more wealth.

For banks and pawn shops to have appeared and for credit money (paper money, for example, as opposed to hard, commodity money) to have come into general use, time preference would have had to have been widely appreciated. That is, large numbers of people would have had to be conscious of the possibility of comparing the value of having fewer goods "now" with more "later" and deciding to give or ask for credit depending on which they preferred. The receipts issued by credit institutions for such credit transactions would have evolved into the earliest paper moneys.

A less abstract way of looking at this "time market," would be to imagine

someone first appraising his present and future desires (perhaps by extrapolating into the future from a conscious vision of the past). Such a person might say to himself, “Well, I prefer to consume goods now rather than later. In fact, I would settle for fewer goods now over more goods later. If necessary I will borrow the money to let me consume now, and will pay a premium, called interest, for that privilege. I recognize that paying back the principal in the future, along with the interest, will reduce my future consumption. So what. I will settle for fewer goods now and let you have more goods later.”

There would, of course, also have to be a complementary group of people who say, “Well, we would prefer to consume rather more in the future and will settle for consuming less in the present to do so. We insist on being paid by you a premium of an agreed upon amount, called interest, in the future for making this sacrifice now so that you can consume now.”

Once people get used to operating in time markets, enough credit will be passed about to make it profitable to develop some formal credit institutions like banks, or at least pawn shops to serve as intermediaries.

Since there is no evidence for large scale credit institutions in ancient China, even though people like me have been searching diligently through the records for such evidence for quite a while, we can only conclude that the ancient religions (the source, through “re-presentation” of early civilization’s Heaven, of all complex ideas on Earth) had not yet evoked such a time sense amongst most of the people.

What might account for this delay? In the case of China, it may have been partly because the great mass of the people, especially in the south, still practiced various forms of fertility religion. For them, circular time was actually preferable, since it emphasized the circular recurrence of birth, maturation and death.

Though China’s rulers possessed the sense of linear time, they had little incentive to go beyond their initial association of it with ancestor worship religion. Predominantly aristocratic and meritocratic, the Chinese ruling class

still got most of its income in kind through transfer payments by way of the state rather than directly in money via the market, the only place where linear time might usefully have been turned into time preference.

Hence even as late as Han times, secularization of the sense of linear time so as to create time preference and apply it in markets via the systematic making and taking of loans was only just getting under way.

This undeveloped sense of linear time may have been one of the reasons why Wang Mang’s fiat moneys all failed. A fiat money (one whose value is created by the command or fiat of the sovereign) usually arises when the sovereign counterfeits a private credit money—a certificate which represents a legitimate promise to pay a certain amount of hard money a certain time in the future. But absent a wide sharing of a sense of linear time, such certificates would be rare or altogether absent. Wang Mang would have had no credit money to counterfeit.

Then, soon after Wang Mang’s fall in 25 BC, Buddhism’s influence began to be felt, and it began to induce a linear time sense even among the masses. Buddhism dealt with a much more complex, differentiated cosmos than had the old religions. When it re-presented that cosmos onto Earth, it did so not just to a ruling class, but to everybody. Enlightenment was potentially available to every person and eventually to all sentient creatures. To aim only at the salvation of a social elite would have been to betray the all-encompassing charity at the core of the being of the Bodhisattvas.

The Bodhisattvas frequently appeared on earth at specific times, and the historical Buddha at least once, like the Messiah of the West, to carry out their work of salvation for all sentient beings. Some of the later Mahayana faiths in particular made much of this incarnation of the sacred. They self-consciously unwrapped circular time into a line along which all created beings moved toward salvation.

Some of them explicitly divided that time line into three contiguous segments: the period before the coming of the historical Buddha, the time when the

Buddha’s teachings spread through all mankind, and the *mofa* (Japanese *mappo*) 末法, the last stage of the law, after which stage not just linear time, but all sensate creation will come to an end. At the end of the third age, all will be judged according to the degree of their enlightenment, with the unenlightened losing all chance of gaining enlightenment or even reincarnation as the sensate world winks out.

With that much at stake, not just the ruling class, but everyone else within the orbit of Buddhism, developed a sense of linear time within just a few centuries of Buddhism’s spread amongst them.

### **b. the first credit institutions and ongoing state-free markets**

Of course it may have been a coincidence, but ongoing markets outside state controls, credit institutions and credit money all appeared and quickly multiplied within a few centuries after this Buddhist religious transformation. Most of them first emerged in and around Buddhist religious establishments.

Once the ancient states finally realized that markets had evolved, the rulers made sure to place them inside administrative cities, erected extra walls around them to control ingress and egress, and charged “gate taxes” at the gates piercing the walls. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (4th-6th centuries), the markets began to use Buddhism to escape from such limits. Unlicensed and often unwallled markets sprang up in the courtyards of temples and monasteries.

Pawn shops and proto-banks began regularly making loans during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. It may not be a coincidence that the Buddhist monasteries set up the earliest pawn shops and proto-banks on the grounds of the monasteries.

It is tempting to surmise that these “coincidences” were actually causes and effects. First came the monasteries and temple courtyards. The markets and credit institutions might well have been viewed as public conveniences by the monks.

It is certain that Chinese pawnshops began as monkish charities. The monks used their resources to lend goods or

money to the peasants during the late winter and growing seasons to tide poor farmers over until the crops matured. In addition to taking objects as security, the monks eventually began to charge interest so as to keep up the size of the pawnshops' revolving lending funds.

Banks or depository houses evolved out of the practices of traveling merchants in sparsely settled regions. In such places the local monastery, located at some economic chokepoint, might be the closest approximation of a town or an inn (and in fact towns later often grew up around them). As a matter of convenience, the monks would allow merchants to vend their goods in the monastery's courtyard. As acts of charitable goodwill, the monks would let the traveling merchants keep their goods and their money safe in the monastic storehouse as they toured the neighborhood's other local markets.

Unconsciously, at least, the Buddhist monks recognized the link between interest and time preference, and hence the moral innocuousness of some forms of interest. They did so more clearly than did the early Christians, distracted as the latter were by the vivid image of Christ driving the money lenders out of the temple. Though Buddhism sanctioned setting limits on the amount of interest, it did not flatly ban the taking of interest at all as Christianity sometimes and Islam more often did.

Buddhism not only created the first credit institutions, but at least indirectly inspired the first credit moneys. Surprisingly, the Buddhists apparently did this through the outward forms given to prayers by certain Buddhist sects.

By the 3rd or 4th centuries AD, in some sects which believed that multiplying the number of prayers would multiply their effectiveness, pious Buddhists were writing out many copies of prayers. A century or so later they began to make multiple copies by placing inked impressions from carved woodblocks onto paper. The monks forwarded these printed prayers up to higher regions of the cosmos by burning them at an altar. This is the first evidence we have for the use of printing not just in China but in the world.

At least by the 6th and 7th centuries, merchants were doing something quite

similar. They were depositing hard cash—strings of square-holed copper coins—with government bureaus at the capital in subzone B1. They received filled out printed checks in return, which they might then stuff up their sleeves and carry perhaps as far away as one of the new commercial towns of subzone B4. There they would turn in these checks to the local subbureau of the ministry that issued them and receive hard cash in exchange.

The government bureaus may have copied this method for forwarding cash without actually transporting heavy strings of coins by observing similar practices of contemporary private merchants who in turn might have been inspired by the strikingly analogous and still earlier Buddhist method for getting prayers to Heaven.

### c. the monastic order and the secular corporation

The Buddhist monasteries aimed to operate at the purely spiritual level. These orders of monks sought out their salvation collectively because that removed them from earthly temptations. Viewed from a secular perspective, however, they were independent earthly corporate entities, held together by what amounted to articles of incorporation. Adherence to these corporate rules allowed outsiders to distinguish one group of monks from another, and all monks from the laity in general.

As the states grew larger and stronger they often registered these monkish corporate charters and charged fees to the monks for issuing them. In exchange for payment of such fees, the monks might subsequently also enjoy various tax avoidance privileges or the right to exclusively provide certain services to the government or its agents. This was not so different from the prerogatives enjoyed by wholly secular corporate bodies later.

By Tang times rich landlords might sometimes take a monastery over and use it (much as modern “foundations” sometimes are used by unscrupulous millionaires) as a device to dodge taxes on lands the rich man only nominally assigned to the monastic foundation but continued to consume the revenues

from.

By Song times the government openly granted similar tax avoidance privileges to non-Buddhist corporations modeled on monastic foundations. These were formed to further the interests of great extended families and certain privileged lineage members who managed these corporations, nominally for their brethren. Confucian ancestor worshippers of particular lineages used this Buddhist form of organization to collectively own land and businesses, the profits from which would support the clan's ancestral temple and provide scholarships for its bright but poor younger members. The corporation could also provide salaries for the corporation's officers.

We should not, therefore, be surprised that the monastic corporations also eventually became the matrix out of which evolved the wholly secular East Asian version of the joint stock company—i.e. the modern corporation—during the last couple of centuries.

The modern word for “corporation” in Chinese (*gōngsī* 公司) was coined by Overseas Chinese during the 19th century as they secularized clan corporations and fellow-townsmen societies they organized along similar lines.

The name *gongsi* itself retains more of the aura of pious collectivity even than does the archaic synonym “joint stock company” in English. The syllable *gong*, meaning “collectivity” in the Chinese word for corporation, is also shared with the word for “commune” (as in the late Chairman Mao's “People's Communes” *rénmín gōng shè* 人民公社). It originally meant “duke,” the highest rank for a feudal vassal. Even now, many of the Overseas Chinese business corporations are only thinly disguised versions of extended family corporations, even when their stock is publicly traded.

The creation of the joint stock company also presupposed continued possession of some of the notions that earlier first made possible the institutionalization of credit. When you buy a share of stock in a company, in some sense you become a creditor of the company as well as one of its part owners. You have purchased an expectation of a flow of *future* revenue from the firm

in exchange for giving up *present* income. So you must already possess a sense of linear time even to become a shareholder.

## 2. Influences on the state

### a. Double-mindedness

The secret of Buddhism's success in middle period China (like that of Christianity in the Medieval West) was its ability to unite Earth and Heaven in new and more complex ways. In ancient China, neither Confucian nor Daoist philosophy, nor the ancestor worship and fertility cult religions that the two philosophies rested upon, had succeeded in linking Earth to Heaven in any very complex way. At least they could not do so for both north and south China in ways that simultaneously satisfied both sorts of philosophers.

Perhaps the very foreignness of Buddhism helped it to transcend this ancient fault line. It could offer salvation to both north and south, and do so in a way that was both uniform, and yet embraced the old truths of both Confucians and Daoists, ancestor worshippers and practitioners of fertility cult.

In this sense, right from the beginning of its dominance in China, Buddhism seemed to contain "two minds." The new second stage of high civilization that it eventually inaugurated might fairly be described as "double-minded"—capable of subsuming Heaven and Earth, including all the old Heavens and regional Earths of its native Chinese predecessors, within the same large system of new beliefs.

There is no question but that the purportedly universal states from Sui on were mostly bigger and invariably more complex in their internal structure than were the pre-Buddhist universal states of Qin and Han. There may be satisfactory partial explanations for this change which rest on some analogy to the assumption of biological evolution that, regardless of external influences, things tend to get bigger and more complex over time. And yet an equally good case can be made for religion having to get bigger and more complex before the state does. After religion becomes bigger and double-minded, it can then

cause similar changes to occur in the state as well as the economy.

Re-presentation of this double-mindedness onto mental life in general also seems to have made possible greater intellectual complexity during the second stage of high civilization outside the political and economic levels.

It may be no coincidence that this was the stage during which both Western and Eastern mathematicians finally learned how to solve quadratic equations in theoretically elegant ways, and economists began to juggle theoretical situations during which two variables get maximized or minimized, or one maximized and the other minimized simultaneously.

Double-minded people tend to think of doing such things. Even the brightest of ancient philosophers did not regularly do so. Ancient mathematicians influenced by neither the Mohists nor Greece's Sophists could solve quadratic equations.

### b. karma and the template of merit

Just as the Buddhist-inspired sense of linear time preceded and helped cause the creation of credit institutions, another aspect of Buddhist double-mindedness both preceded and perhaps helped cause the creation of a more sophisticated meritocracy. This new kind of meritocracy could run a bigger state, one comprising much larger chunks of all three major zones of East Asia right from the start of the second stage of high civilization.

The Emperor of Sui himself acknowledged the role of Buddhism in holding his universal state together. Even he, however, may not have realized how subtly Buddhism was acting to make so large a universal state possible for the first time.

Fairly early on during the second stage of high civilization in China, the rulers devised methods more abstract than those routinely used during Qin and Han for applying a detailed template of merit to candidate meritocrats. The Chinese began to use formal, written examinations consistently for the first time in the history of the planet. All written examinations, not just in medieval China, but even those you take in

this course after every four text chapters, can be traced back to these 7th century Chinese written exams created to select men of merit.

The concept of merit was certainly present among the ancient Chinese philosophers, beginning with Confucius himself. It is merely that they could not quite separate the concept they had invented from the much more ancient practice of identifying the rulers from their present or former familial links to the gods.

However, another and clearer idea of merit came in with Buddhism. A conceptual separation of meritocracy from aristocracy could finally be achieved, even while maintaining the aristocratic principle.

The Buddho-Hindu notion of *karma* began to serve as the Heavenly basis for the formal written examination on Earth. *Karma* may be defined as the logical consequences of one's acts. These determine at what level of existence one will be reborn, or if one has finally succeeded in transcending the obligation to be reincarnated.

*Karma* is so similar to the concept of an earthly "template of merit" that we can easily imagine the metaphysical idea of the Heavenly record of one's *karma* being re-presented onto earth by pious Buddhist meritocrats as written civil service examinations and periodic written evaluations. Pious Buddhists of Song times periodically evaluated their own moral progress on printed grid forms not unlike those used as checklists for annual and triennial written evaluations of civil servants working for the Song government.

It took some time for *karma* to be fully re-presented into the political institutions as a more complex template of merit. In its first incarnation, during Sui and Tang times, the Chinese examination system merely selected the most meritorious among the aristocrats. Reaching down below the aristocracy in a systematic way only became common after Tang. By late Song times (13th century), however, China's ruling class was becoming almost exclusively meritocratic.

After another six centuries, and after crossing another cultural frontier, the principle of the written examination,

shorn of both its East and South Asian connections, helped create the modern Western meritocracy (and ultimately served to help ruin college students' weekends with regularly scheduled written quizzes every Friday).

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If you have not yet read much European history, you may think that such an evolutionary process as the one I have sketched out in the preceding few pages is not only peculiar in itself but peculiar to China, but I assure you that it is not peculiar in any sense, but rather is the norm for all the world-historical religions.

Among others, the medievalist Christopher Dawson has demonstrated in his *Progress and Religion* (1929) and *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (1950), that the same sort of path was taken by Christianity during Europe's medieval epoch. There too the local world-historical religion inspired a sense of linear time that helped inspire the invention of credit and credit institutions. A feudal process re-presented from the Christian vision of Heaven encouraged the beginnings of bureaucracy. The Christian monastic orders in the late ancient and medieval West served as the matrix out of which evolved the European version of the joint stock company.

Christianity and its monastic orders played a role in the development of complex economic, social and political institutions in the medieval and modern West closely analogous to that played by Buddhism in the medieval and early modern history of the East.

The limitations the feudal process placed on European, age of disunion Chinese and post-Heian era Japanese state power also allowed independent market institutions to break loose from their ancient limits and flourish in ways that led to the early industrial level of development in all three cultures. (see chapter 11.)

It would be hard to imagine the still later modern Western world of bureaucratic states and large modern economies having come into existence without Christianity and its monastic orders.

It might be objected that, unlike feu-

dal Europe, second stage of high civilization China was still organized as a universal state. However, Chapter 10 will argue that the dynasties from Sui and Tang on were at best only universal states *manqué*—phony universal states. Their increasingly meritocratic ruling classes needed to define the Chinese state as universal as part of their enlarged template of merit, and that state (unlike Europe's Roman Empire, which shrank and then disappeared) did indeed grow bigger than its ancient incarnation, but Buddhism spread to so many places which could become first and eventually second stage high civilizations. These new daughter cultures were too far away and too civilized for China to effectively incorporate them into its state. Hence one can argue that Buddho-Confucian East Asia, like Western Christendom, produced a multi-state second stage of high civilization.