

The Spread of Buddhism in Tang China

Introduction

The spread of Buddhism from its origins (beginnings) in Sarnath, India, throughout Asia was a major event in history. There were a number of reasons why Buddhism spread.

Religious Reasons

Buddhism spread in China for religious reasons. A Chinese monk named Xuan Zang traveled to India and returned with over 500 crates of books and materials. In China he spent years translating Buddhist documents into Chinese and promoting (spreading) his faith. The desire to read Buddhist texts also led to the development of wood-block printing. Buddhism also attracted interest because of its morals or teachings and its promises of a better life. Married and pregnant women sought help by praying to Guanyin the Bodhisattva (an enlightened being) of Mercy. The mixing of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism also helped Buddhism to spread. Finally, many people saw Buddhism as a way to escape the suffering from all of the problems in China.

How might this have led to the spread of Buddhism in Tang China?

Political Reasons

Buddhism spread due to political reasons. The leaders of the Tang Dynasty made Buddhism a big part of life in China. Emperor Taizong gave money to monasteries, sent representatives to India to collect Buddhist texts, and had Buddhist paintings and statues built across China. Another Chinese leader, Empress Wu, ordered many Buddhist temples to be built and sculptures to be created around China and gave more power to monks. She also invited scholars to come to China to spread Buddhist teachings. In addition, Empress Wu made a law saying that Buddhism was more important than other belief systems in China.

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Economic Reasons

Economic factors helped Buddhism to spread in China. The traders and merchants who were involved with trade on the Silk Road helped to spread Buddhist teachings as they traveled. In China, Buddhist monasteries (religious communities) conducted banking services and loaned farmers money. Merchants gave their money and goods to monasteries for safe-keeping, making the monasteries like banks and warehouses. Wealthy people often donated their money or land to monasteries as well, making those communities major landholders with a lot of power and influence.

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Social Reasons

Social factors also played a role in the spread of Buddhism. Buddhist temples and monasteries provided medical care, ran schools and mills, pressed oil, and provided seeds to farmers in need. Travelers stayed in monasteries during their journeys. Buddhist missionaries taught that giving one son to a monastery would benefit ten generations of his relatives. Buddhist stories were spread by monks who would show pictures and tell stories to audiences who could not read. Buddhist leaders and monks played a significant role in Chinese society.

How might this have led to the spread of Buddhism in Tang China?

Which two categories of reasons do you think were the most important? Why?