

# *Examining the Successful Dissemination Buddhism along the Silk Road into China Against the Political Backdrop of the Southern and Northern Dynasties*

Zimeng Huang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, 518000, China

a. s20035.huang@stu.scie.com.cn

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Nowadays, it is easy to take for granted the connection between Buddhism and Chinese culture. However, Buddhism was originally from India, and passed into China as a foreign religion. One particular period that Buddhism began to blend with Chinese culture appeared to be the Southern and Northern dynasties. The active nomadic activities during this period introduced both the possibility and need of Buddhism as a part of Chinese society. After this period, Buddhism truly gained momentum in Chinese history. This paper will examine Buddhism's unique means of propagation, specifically how Buddhism managed to wield both interpretive and political power as important tools. Such observations could yield insight into the dynamics of political interactions in ancient China, as well as how such a structure incorporated religions and common culture into its reign. The paper hypothesizes that Buddhism's ability to build connection with Chinese society was due to its unique power of flexibility and persuasion, which suited the political backdrop of the Southern and Northern dynasties well. This paper will discuss and seek to validate this thesis through three lenses: royal support, governance, and translation. The discussion will involve interpreting scrolls written by the ancient Chinese, to signify the contemporary political and intellectual importance of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, nomadic rulers, translations, political power

## 1. Introduction

The ancient Chinese society, with a firmly rooted tradition embracing Confucianism and Daoism, accepted the foreign religion of Buddhism during the early centuries AD. Later, Buddhism became a major belief during the turbulent period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties. The importance of Buddhism for Chinese during this period, and the fact that various other religions failed to have such influence, have aroused some research and debate. Existing research mainly examined the cultural and psychological need of Chinese society, and the flexible nature of Buddhist monks, to be the reasons for a Buddhist prosperity. However, little has been done to look at the influences of political needs, particularly that of nomadic leaders, which contributed to the foundations of such prosperity.

In the work, we observed the political backdrop for Buddhism to anchor its roots in Chinese soil during the Southern and Northern Dynasties. From the three aspects of royal support, governance, and translations, we seek to understand how Buddhism provided a solution to the problems political

leaders faced. Such observations, combined with analyzing the significance of political power, might help to understand why did Buddhism prosper during the Southern and Northern Dynasties.

## 2. Research

The Silk Road, a loose term coined by 19th century scholars to define the phenomenon of an intensification of human activities across Eurasia during the Han Dynasty, a period marked by more convenient transport spurring cultural and economic interactions, provided a backdrop for the dissemination of many major religions. Most religions—Zoroastrianism, Christianity, or Islam, for instance—either died down on their way to the empires of the East, or had relatively little impact. Conversely, the spread of Buddhism from India to China was a success, establishing mutually supportive relationships with the Chinese court. Current studies on the dissemination of Buddhism into China are concentrated on diplomacy and commerce, while Buddhism's penetration into the largely xenophobic country has been poorly studied by Western scholars. Thus, this paper will examine the merits of the following thesis: Buddhism's dual strategy of intellectual and political dissemination set the ground for its success in spreading to China. This paper will evaluate this thesis under the context of the Southern and Northern dynasties through three lenses: royal support, governance, and translation.

The needs of royalty largely provided the foundation for Buddhism's ultimate political acceptance in ancient Chinese society. The leaders of the states of the Northern and Southern dynasties desired a way to establish their legitimacy of rule among the minds of the general populace. This was especially true for the Northern Dynasties rulers as they were originally nomadic peoples who migrated to China due to poor grazing conditions in their homelands, then seized the opportunities to become leaders of a foreign ethnicity. During the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420 CE), the state lacked a proper army, and thus filled this vacancy by employing nomads. This period was also marked by a cold and dry climate globally, when average temperatures throughout the year reached below 9 degrees Celsius. The globe suffered a cold snap compared to previous ages [1].

The growth of plants on the grasslands of Mongolia and Central Asia were strongly affected, and thus the pastoral economies of the nomads of those regions were severely disrupted. These nomads, comprised of proto-Mongolic confederations such as the Xiongnu, Xianbei, and Qiang, along with possibly proto-Tibetan or proto-Turkic peoples such as the Jie and Di, were pushed to move south in order to find suitable grazing for their animals. This led to an increased intensity of activities of nomads in central China. As the Eastern Jin empire collapsed, some groups raised armies and created their own regimes, thus forming the Northern Dynasties. The seizure of power by the rulers of the Northern Dynasties was thus a product of instability and relatively inhospitable climatic conditions. This backdrop shaped the attitudes of the ruling elite towards Buddhism, a foreign religion which promised to bring stability.

As a result, nomadic rulers largely welcomed Buddhism with vigor. Yao Xing, the ruler of the state of Later Qin, was recorded in the Three Treasures of the Past Dynasties as being "greeted [Kumarajiva] with the rite of the Master Teacher for the King" because the stars foretold that "there should be a sage assisting the Chinese midlands, and who wins him over will be the King [of all states in China]." [2]. Yao Xing also enjoyed the presence of "three thousand virtuous monks settled at one place, all under the patronage of Yao, the King of Qin." [2]. Yao Xing's devotion to Buddhism serves as a potent example of the major trend amongst the nomadic rulers of the northern states. The devotion of the rulers was due to both psychological and practical reasons. On the one hand, the idea of reincarnation—that life and power has cycles—and the "Spotless Land of the South" caught the rulers and enriched their psychology during a turbulent period when rulers had to face constant threats both from outside and within the state. On the other hand, the nomads saw in Buddhism an opportunity to solve their own political problems.

The need for political establishment emerged due to the northern state leaders' relative unfamiliarity with their subjects, and the unfamiliarity of the people with their rulers. The nomads were essentially seen as invaders by the people they sought to rule, and thus social discontent was often high. Buddhism offered a potential solution. Transmitted to China via missionaries from the prosperous Kushan empire of the West, Buddhism's position as a foreign yet complex systematic belief was already well perceived by the people of China due to the active cultural interactions emerging from the Silk Road and reaching China. The nomadic rulers found themselves resonating with Buddhism: both were powerful yet foreign. These rulers realized the opportunity to use Buddhism as a medium to better communicate with and ultimately pacify the masses. Moreover, the idea of a rise and fall of power inherent in the doctrines of Buddhism was important for the nomadic rulers as it helped them to justify their action of taking over as the leaders of central China. Buddhism's image also had an element of intellectualism. This impression formed from the vast quantities of sutras and the necessity of subsequent translation work. In such a way, Buddhism's provision of moral guidance and intellect resonated with the already-appreciated and widely-followed Confucianism. Rulers such as Yao Xing actively studied Buddhist texts and supported monks to construct a solid image of the intelligence and morality of such texts while simultaneously ensuring the monks did not paint a picture of them as being subject to Chinese rituals. Therefore, the nomadic rulers were more inclined to utilize Buddhism to convey their power and good qualities to the common people of central China. Indeed, this is apparent in the huge prevalence of Buddhists in the northern states, as before the second prosecution of Buddhism performed by Emperor Zhou Wu, the Northern Dynasties had approximately 3 million monks while the Southern dynasties never had more than 100,000 monks [3].

As for the episode in the Three Treasures of the Past Dynasties, despite the untruthfulness of the prophecy that the sage [Kumarajiva] would help to unite China, Yao Xing himself gained a reputation as a gracious and wise ruler that has subsequently been passed down throughout history. His demonstration of supreme respect given to the Buddhist monks by his strong faith in the prophecy and the courtesy to welcome Kumarajiva earned him the good name of a moral Buddhist king. Meanwhile, Buddhism also gained the unwavering support of Yao Xing. Kumarajiva and the other virtuous monks were perceived as 'upper classes' of the society. Therefore, the patronage also built a solid foundation for Buddhism in the state. The monks translated Buddhist sutras, while the rulers spread them amongst Chinese citizens. Yao Xing and other rulers also built monasteries, creating networks of Buddhism in China. The monasteries, with their ownership of land masses, established their own political and economic spheres of influence [4]. Therefore, by meeting the political demands of the state rulers, Buddhism earned itself the possibility of permeating throughout different aspects of Chinese society.

Apart from its role as a propaganda tool that served both the interest of monks and elites, Buddhism was also used in more tangible ways such as governance. The idea of redemption and retribution is an important aspect of Buddhist belief. This belief was initially encountered with skepticism and even negligence in China. As Qiao Wang Shu comments on Confucianism: "Buddhism suggests that sins and blessings, causes and effects have an influence. [...] However, from the Kings and Emperors of ancient times, Zhou Wen, Zhou Wu, Zhou Gong and Confucius, had a coherent version of instructions and precedents. There isn't any that directly mentions the three lives and the Karma." [5]. Chinese society had deep-rooted inclinations that regarded wise emperors and thinkers of the ancient times as divine beings. Zhou Gong, for example, was a repeatedly-mythicized figure, exalted to the point of being regarded as an immortal who led various mythical creatures in a legendary war. The legacies of these thinkers were the basis of Chinese societal values and ethical instructions. Therefore, the unfamiliar and foreign notion of Karma [6], in which one person's accumulative sins and kindness of one life will determine his or her fate in the next life, initially faced strong resistance among the

Chinese masses. This notion also led to heated debates among ancient Chinese scholars, most concluding that Buddhism was heretical. The ancient Chinese inclination to prefer more familiar notions made the infiltration of foreign religions into ancient China extremely difficult. However, the upholders of Buddhism didn't capitulate. They immediately addressed the issue with seriousness, popularizing arguments that Confucius did suggest notions similar to that of equal returns of causes and effects. The elasticity of Buddhist upholders and the general support of monarchs propagating Buddhism throughout Chinese society ultimately caused the resistance to this particular notion to die down.

This element of Buddhism expanded quickly and was soon applied to the legal system. The Song Shu records: "The prince's General of Right Defence [...] [he] compelled the district officers to a highest ritual in the Lotus Sutra performed by the Bodhisattvas to offer the Buddha, when his people commit a crime, [he] makes them venerate the Buddha, with easily thousands of bows and prayers each time." [7]. The use of governance stresses the significance of governmental support, as there is an identifiable pattern of the use of Buddhism to pass down decrees from the top. Here, Buddhism is essentially implanted into the psyches of the people through the legal enforcement of a higher officer. The implantation can be credited in part to the great power the Chinese political system granted to the royal family, who acted as representatives of the country as supreme rulers. The tendency of Buddhism to first find its place in the royal family, then the legal system, and then to permeate down throughout wider society no doubt made the penetration of this religion much more effective compared to others.

Although incongruous with Chinese traditions, the idea of redemption did provide a way to 'morally re-educate' criminals, which was in line with Chinese notions of morality and respect. Historical records in the Southern Dynasties also signify that, although not as prominent as in the Northern Dynasties, the ruling class of the Southern Dynasties also recognized the importance of Buddhism. The Southern and Northern dynasties both suffered from constant unrest and power changes. Therefore, managing the population and maintaining a stable form of governance was important. Applying Buddhism in governance could allow officials a moral footing to punish criminals with physical work, and to play a role in moral instructing. The leaders who applied this could display themselves as being benevolent governors, appealing to the Chinese philosophers' definition of a good and wise leader. Therefore, despite its controversy, Buddhism was implanted into Chinese society, and played a significant role in defining the legal system.

However, due to Buddhism's controversy in ancient Chinese society, its over-reliance on 'Supreme Rulers' in the first place, while vital in its spread, also proved to be fatal in some instances. While rulers including Yao Xing were happy to embrace Buddhism, others such as Emperor Tai Wu remained steadfastly against it. Despite the fact that Emperor Tai Wu was a ruler of Wei, previously a major Buddhist state, he brought about the near-extirpation of Buddhism within his realm. He made "claims [that] the monks are very strong, therefore abolishing their religious role and forcing them to be regular citizens, so as to make them join the army." [8]. The persecution of Buddhist monks had mixed reasons. First was the growing population of Buddhist devotees. Records before the extermination campaign were unclear, but even after persecution, there were still approximately 30,000 monks in Northern Wei [9]. Due to the devotion to Buddhism exhibited by the previous rulers, monks sometimes enjoyed privileges such as tax levies and could not be conscripted. This contributed to social issues, such as a lack of army conscripts and discontent among regular citizens who did not enjoy such privileges. Buddhist monks also believed they should not be engaged in physical affairs in order to attain enlightenment. Therefore, the monks abstained from marriage, which contributed to low birth rates and a declining population. These social costs as a result of the expansion of Buddhism outweighed Buddhism's benefits as a propaganda tool for the rulers of Wei. The rulers were also wary of the growth of monasteries as power centers. The monasteries formed complex ecosystems

around themselves, thus heavily influencing local politics and economies. The translating monks also possessed great power in influencing the thoughts of commoners. The growth of the monasteries and their power to shape society around them increasingly became a concern for rulers. This is reflected in the geography of persecution—such reactionary episodes happened more frequently in the Northern Dynasties where Buddhism was more prominent. Moreover, Emperor Tai Wu himself was a fervent upholder of Confucianism. His discovery of monks smuggling wine and having affairs with women undermined any respect he had, if any at all, for Buddhism. As a combination of these factors, Emperor Tai Wu considered Buddhism to be a great threat to his own belief system and political authority. The sanctity of political, religious, and legal authority were essential for rulers of the Northern and Southern dynasties since any instability might easily lead to the collapse of the state during this chaotic time period.

Emperor Tai Wu carried out one of the severest persecutions of Buddhism in Chinese history. His policies limited the quantity of monks in Northern Wei, thus undermining the social sway of monks while also disassembling multiple monasteries. As a result, the power of Buddhism crumbled under his rule. The supreme power of the ruler, in this case, was harmful to Buddhism, containing its growth and re-adjusting its previously-ascendant position within ancient Chinese society. Monasteries declined precipitously in number under the extermination campaign, as did Buddhism's political power. Yet Buddhism was able to swiftly recover. By the collapse of Northern Wei, approximately two million monks resided within the state [10]. Buddhist upholders were able to exploit the empathy of the masses. Due to the previously-established implantation of Buddhist ideas, Buddhism came back to favor relatively quickly. Buddhism's strategy of spread, by using political power to disseminate Buddhism, was backed by its unique character of continuous intellectual outpouring. The upholders of Buddhism, generally monks, did the important works of translating sutras and explaining Buddhism to followers. Their work quieted much of the controversy and resistance regarding Buddhism. If political power was the platform, intellectual power was the tool. Such has been the way Buddhism made itself malleable and able to survive through the millennia to deeply embed itself within Chinese heritage.

Since its establishment in China, the interpretive power of Buddhism also played an important role in making Buddhism acceptable to Chinese society. Among the first influential Buddhist monks were Kumarajiva, who was under the patronage of Yao Xing. He translated some of the most important sutras for Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Among them were the Lotus Sutra, for which Kumarajiva's edition is widely regarded as the original Chinese language adaptation. Yet Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra was actually the second edition, adding on top of the first one with several more chapters, including the *Devadatta*. Because of the lack of communication between the first missionaries, the translations of Buddhist sutras prior to Kumarajiva painted only a vague and incoherent picture of Buddhism. At the time of its earliest entry into China proper, Buddhism was not properly understood by the Chinese masses. Kumarajiva and his 3,000 patrons were able to assemble Buddhist ideas, sometimes intentionally modifying to make them more palatable to the general public. Kumarajiva, a devoted student of Karma, displayed a creative mind in his translations. In chapter twelve of the Lotus Sutra, he tells the story of the Dragon Girl:

“At that time the dragon girl had a precious jewel worth as much as a thousand-millionfold world of which she presented to the Buddha. [...] The girls said, ‘Employ your supernatural powers and watch me attain Buddha-hood. It shall be even quicker than that.’ At that time the members of the assembly all saw the dragon girl in the space of an instant change into a man and carry out all the practices of a bodhisattva, immediately proceeding to the Spotless World of the south, taking a seat on a jeweled lotus, and attaining impartial and correct enlightenment.” [11].

The story, along with this whole chapter, served the purpose of emphasizing that everyone has the potential to gain Buddha-hood. The girl and Devadatta were representations of females and sinful

people, who were commonly not included in legitimacy for Buddha-hood. Their attainment described as “impartial and correct” acts as a moral instruction to the Buddhists, calling for the idea that everyone has the impartial right to attain enlightenment. By inserting this story, Kumarajiva strongly suggests the universality of Buddhism. This stressed idea can be applied to the idea of Redemption, suggesting that every devotee can have their sins redeemed and can attain the ultimate enlightenment. The suggestion that everyone can find shelter in a world of hostility reinforced Buddhism’s appeal to the Chinese. Kumarajiva’s royal patronage made his works and ideas widespread and impactful; thus, Kumarajiva was vital for realizing the feasibility of adapt Buddhism with translations and adaptations, conforming its doctrines with Chinese ideas and traditions.

Kumarajiva’s setting of Dragon Girl was also an intentional appeal to Chinese traditions. The dragon is a traditional Chinese mythical figure, which the imported religion of Buddhism wouldn’t be expected to contain. Kumarajiva translated the figure as ‘Dragon Girl ’with an intention: “ ‘Daughter of dragon’ in Chinese[...]can be traced back to the very beginning that, when translating Buddhist texts into Chinese, translators used the indigenous term *lóng* to correspond with the Indian word *nāga*. ’[12]. Such adaptations effectively addressed the issues with Chinese unfamiliarity with Buddhist concepts. The perception of religion in the Chinese population can be perceived as a process of gradually decoding the vague and perplexing ideas of the original sutras. Using Chinese mythical figures is a part of the general attempt by Buddhist translators, called the *Ge Yi*, to use traditional myths to decode the ideologies of Buddhism for the general Chinese masses. The extent of success by this method is shown when “from the Wei-Jin [...] period the cultural image of ‘dragon ’ underwent a significant change and entered people's daily life. In particular, the personification of ‘dragon ’ came into use for the first time.” [12]. The concept of the dragon was initially praised by the royal family, which is possibly another reason why Kumarajiva chose to refer to such imagery. As the Buddhist scripts that referred to dragons gained popularity, the concept entered people’s daily lives. From this we can see the effects of Buddhist propagation, as through its permeation of the Chinese society, it was able to influence the heritage of its subjects. The major stance that Buddhism took was to embrace Chinese influences and then re-implant them into Chinese society. Such ways of cultural engagement were unique to Buddhism, because the religion contained an abundance of sutras, many of which introduced vague and ambiguous ideas, and thus were able to be adjusted to embraced attitudes inherent to Chinese heritage. Moreover, royal support provided a strong foundation for Buddhism’s propagation. Like Buddhism, the nomadic royal families also need to merge themselves with traditional Chinese society. Their overriding political power combined with Buddhism’s own interpretive power, allowed the unique strategy through which Buddhism took root.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, on top of the opportunities to spread east provided by the Silk Road, Buddhism’s dissemination via its unique strategy of political and intellectual appeals allowed it to successfully enter China. During the Southern and Northern dynasties, Buddhism went through an initial struggle when it was viewed as contradictory to Chinese culture. However, its interpretive and political character, when intertwined with each other, implanted Buddhism firmly in Chinese society. Research from this paper also indicates there were mixed attitudes to Buddhism, which could potentially make this strategy of adoption dangerous to adherents. However, further endeavors indicate the validity of the thesis, as rulers such as Yao Xing fully appreciated the power of Buddhism, and cooperated with some of the most important translators of Buddhist texts. By examining Buddhism’s successful methods of dissemination, this paper also implies the patterns of religious dissemination across the Silk Road: nomadic rulers were prone to acceptance of imported religions, and their political power was important for the establishment of religions. However, this paper does not reveal the whole truth for religious dissemination under a political backdrop, because it draws from ancient sources which

are potentially incoherent and scattered. For further research on the topic, future papers can explore the pattern of Buddhist dissemination in the lower classes of Chinese society, thus drawing comparison with the political establishment. Lastly, this paper hopes to challenge the accepted view that Buddhism has always been an accepted part of China by revealing the various methods it used to engage with politics and permeate itself across Chinese society.

## References

- [1] Hui Chang, W. (1996) *Chinese Northern nomadic groups southward migration and climate change*. *Scientia Geographica Sinica.*, Vol 16: Scroll 3.
- [2] Chang Fang, F. (Sui Dynasty) *Three treasures of the Past Dynasties*. [M].
- [3] Xin, Z. (2018) *An Analysis of the number of monks and nuns in the Northern and Southern Dynasties*. China People University Press. <https://www.sinoss.net/c/2018-05-06/558170.shtml>
- [4] Xiu Wei, J&Yi Hui, X. (1984) *On the Economy of the Temple Landlord in the Northern and Southern Dynasties*. *Academic Monthly.*, Vol 84: Scroll 1.
- [5] You, S. (2013) *Greetings with ShiDao*. (Eds.), *Chinese Classics: The Anthology of HongMing*. Chung Hwa Book Company, limited, Bei Jing.
- [6] Ven. Dapane Chandaratana. (2021) *Kamma in the Buddhist perspective*. Binksu University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350266563\\_Kamma\\_in\\_Buddhist\\_perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350266563_Kamma_in_Buddhist_perspective)
- [7] Yue, S. (1974) *The Story of Zhang Chang*. (Eds.), Song Shu. Chung Hwa Book Company, limited, Bei Jing.
- [8] Shou, W. (2007) *Stories of the past generations*. Zi Zhi Tong Jian. (Eds.), Wei Shu. Chung Hwa Book Company, limited, Bei Jing. pp. 3867.
- [9] Xin, Z. (2018) *An Analysis of the number of monks and nuns in the Northern and Southern Dynasties*. China People University Press. <https://www.sinoss.net/c/2018-05-06/558170.shtml>
- [10] Shou, W. (2014) *Explaining the coming of age*. (Eds.), Wei Shu. National Library Publisher, Bei Jing.
- [11] Burton, W. (1993) *Devadatta*. (Eds.), *The Lotus Sutra*. Columbia University Press, New York. pp. 128-137.
- [12] Qing Zhi, Z. (2015) 18: *Kumarajiva: A great contributor to the creation of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese Culture*. In. Shashi. B (Eds.), *Kumarajiva: Philosopher and Seer*. Indira Ghandi National Centre for Arts, New Deli. pp. 255.