

The Reunification of China and the Spread of Buddhism

Why did Buddhism spread during the era of the Tang dynasty in China?

Confucianism was the “official” belief system in China under the Han dynasty, which ruled China from 206 BCE to 220 CE. When this dynasty fell, however, many people became disillusioned (disappointed) with Confucianism. It did not seem to work to keep order in China. There was much suffering throughout China because the once-unified empire was again broken into smaller pieces, and almost constant fighting occurred during the next 400 years. People naturally began to embrace Buddhism, a new religion that promised an end to suffering.

Political reasons

Several other events caused Buddhism to spread in China. One was the political reunification (making whole again) of China. The person who did this was Emperor Wendi. He started a new dynasty called the Sui (pronounced “sway”) in 581 CE. He became a Buddhist and promoted the spread of Buddhism in China. For example, he sent statues of the Buddha to Buddhist temples throughout China. Those statues had an inscription saying that all people could reach enlightenment. Emperor Wendi was a clever ruler: he kept Confucianism as the “official” belief system to help remind the Chinese of the old, strong, and long-lasting Han empire.

Geographical Reasons

Another cause of the spread of Buddhism in China was that, as the Sui and Tang dynasties expanded China, they seized new lands to the west. Many of the people living there were Buddhists, and they spread their religion as they traveled throughout China. The Sui dynasty, however, did not last long. Despite the wisdom of Wendi, other leaders fought expensive wars to try to gain more land at the same time that they undertook great projects like the 1,200 mile Grand Canal, which connected northern and southern China. The Sui dynasty was overthrown in 618 CE and replaced by the Tang dynasty. The Tang period was a “golden age” for China as it kept the land united and strong for almost 300 years, from 618 to 907 CE.

Chang’an, the capital of the Sui and Tang dynasties, became one of the largest cities on earth. It had a diverse population of more than one million people from many parts of the world. Also, since Chang’an was a key staging center for the silk road caravans, it was a city of trade, culture, and wealth, and a center for the spread of Buddhism far and wide in China.

Economic and Social Reasons

Many Buddhists, even some Chinese emperors, gave money and land to build Buddhist monasteries and temples where monks could live and pray. These temples and monasteries also provided numerous social services in China: they ran schools, took care of the sick, helped the poor, and gave travelers a place to stay. They even played important economic roles in China. For example, they acted as banks to loan people money for business. The Buddhist monasteries ended up owning much land and becoming powerful.

Intellectual and Religious Reasons

As interest in Buddhism grew, especially among the Tang rulers, many of whom were Buddhists, Chinese travelers went to India to bring back holy Buddhist writings and translate them into Chinese. When Buddhist writings became more available to people in China, however, they also caused a split in how this religion was practiced. Two main groups formed that did not follow the style of Buddhism practiced in India. One group (called Zen Buddhism in Japan) focused on self-discipline and meditation. The other group, called Pure Land Buddhism, focused on attaining “Western (Indian-style) Paradise” through chanting words over and over again.

The Spread of Buddhism to Korea and Japan

Buddhism spread through much of East Asia because most governments and people there looked up to China as the “mother culture” and as the most powerful government in the region. The other governments in Asia wanted to adopt the types of cultural practices that made China strong. Buddhism spread to these regions and the rest of Asia especially during the Tang era because China was going through a golden age of power and culture. It was the Chinese forms of Buddhism, notably “Pure Land” and “Zen,” that spread to Korea and Japan, and not the type of Buddhism practiced in India.

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1. What were some of the most important reasons why Buddhism spread in China during the Tang dynasty period? _____

2. What were some of the **political** reasons why Buddhism spread during the Tang era?

3. What were some of the **geographical** reasons why Buddhism spread during the Tang era?

4. What were some of the **economic** reasons why Buddhism spread during the Tang era?

5. What were some of the **social** reasons why Buddhism spread during the Tang era?

6. What were some of the **intellectual** reasons why Buddhism spread during the Tang era?

7. What were some of the **religious** reasons why Buddhism spread during the Tang era?

8. What were the **three most important reasons** why Buddhism spread during the Tang era and why do you think they were so important? _____
