

Multiple Voices VI

Buddhism in China: Acceptance, Rejection,
and Accommodation

BACKGROUND

Following branches of the Silk Road out of northwest India, Buddhism traveled through Central Asia and into the heartland of northern China, reaching the Middle Kingdom at least as early as the first century C.E. Initially, Buddhism made little progress in China because some of its principles and practices ran counter to key Chinese values. In the time of troubles that followed the collapse of Later Han in 220, however, Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana form, achieved its own place in China as a religious doctrine offering comfort in the face of affliction. Even though it became an imperially sponsored religion in the first two centuries of the Tang Dynasty (618–906) and its monasteries became major centers of economic and political power, Buddhism did not lack detractors and enemies. Eventually, they were successful in orchestrating an attack on Buddhist monasteries in the mid ninth century that resulted in the shutting down of thousands of these centers of worship and the secularization of numerous monks and nuns.

As severe as this blow was, Buddhist beliefs and practices were not eradicated. The religion remained strong at the popular level, especially in a form of Mahayana devotion known as the *Pure Land Sect*, which centered on devotion to *Amitabha*, the Buddha of Infinite Light, who presided over the Western Paradise, and his chief Bodhisattva, Guanyin (sources 32 and 33). Moreover, Buddhism increasingly merged with folk magic, Daoism, and Confucianism to become part of a uniquely Chinese religious complex. In essence, China assimilated Buddhism's basic concepts, deities, rituals, artistic motifs, and festivals into its everyday culture and even into the ways of thought and behavior of its educated elites and in the process made these once-alien elements fully Chinese. Indeed, under the Ming emperors (1368–1644), Chinese Buddhism would enjoy a new era of imperial patronage. But that is another story.

THE SOURCES

Our first source, contained in a collection of sixty-five biographies of eminent Buddhist nuns who lived between the fourth and sixth centuries, illustrates the inherent tension between traditional Chinese social principles and Buddhist beliefs. It also shows us how Buddhist missionaries were able to accommodate Mahayana Buddhism to China's prevailing values.

The nun *An Lingshou* lived 200 years before Shi Baochang completed his work in or around 516. Because of the time gap and because of the compiler's avowed

purpose to offer these holy women as models of Buddhist virtue, we would be naive if we did not wonder about the authenticity of the story, or at least the truth of its details. Yet there are aspects of the story that ring true. Even if the reported debate between An Lingshou and her father never took place, it certainly reflects opinions that were voiced during this era of Buddhist infiltration.

Chinese Buddhism reached its first high point of popularity and influence during the early years of the Tang Dynasty. However, because so many aspects of Buddhism were at variance with the traditional culture of China, especially Confucian values, conflict was almost inevitable. One of the leaders in the Confucian counterattack on Buddhism was the classical prose stylist and poet Han Yu (768–824), who in 819 composed a polemic against Buddhism, which is presented as our second source. Offered as a memorandum, or *memorial*, to Emperor Tang Xianzong (r. 805–820) on the subject of the emperor's veneration of a relic of the Buddha's finger, Han Yu's elegant and witty essay so enraged the emperor that initially he wanted to execute the author. Eventually, the emperor contented himself with banishing his impudent civil servant to a frontier outpost.

A champion of rationalism, Han Yu wished to suppress not only Buddhism but also Daoism, which had evolved into an organized religion that promised physical immortality through magic. Ironically, it was due to the influence of Daoist priests that Emperor Tang Wuzong (r. 840–846) initiated a policy of state suppression of a number of foreign religious establishments in 842, culminating with his *Proclamation Ordering the Destruction of Buddhist Monasteries* in 845, our third source. The emperor died seven months after issuing the order, and with his death the full force of the edict was relaxed. But substantial damage had already been done to the institutional structures of Buddhism, and Chinese Buddhism never fully recovered the economic and political power that it had enjoyed under the early Tang emperors, but it did not die out.

Through an already centuries-long process of adaptive adoption, which we call *syncretism*, Buddhist beliefs and values had increasingly become deeply embedded in Chinese society — too deeply to be rooted out — but the story did not end there. Beginning in the eleventh century, a school of moral philosophy, which was later known as *Neo-Confucianism*, fashioned a cosmology that offered intellectuals a metaphysical *alternative* to Buddhist transcendentalism, even as it borrowed from Buddhist spirituality. In essence, Neo-Confucians placed humanity into a full spiritual and cosmological context while simultaneously rejecting all notions of human immortality and salvation. Neo-Confucians asserted that there is an infinite Moral Principle (*li*) that pervades and energizes the universe and everything and everyone within it, but that Principle is knowable and intimately connected to physical reality.

The greatest and most influential Neo-Confucian was *Zhu Xi* (1130–1200), who created a body of thought that became the basis of the entire educational system of China in the fourteenth century and remained so into the early twentieth century. This philosophy traveled to Korea and also found a home in Japan. Early in the seventeenth century, Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa shogun, adopted and patronized Neo-Confucianism as an ideology to buttress his reorganization of Japanese society.

Long before Zhu Xi's teachings were canonized into official state orthodoxies in China and Japan, his students wrote down and collected their master's conversa-

tions. In 1270 Li Jingde compiled and published the *Conversations of Master Zhu, Arranged Topically*. Our fourth source, which is taken from that book, presents a sampling of Master Zhu's statements regarding how one is to read and use books.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. According to the story of An Lingshou, what was the classic Chinese objection to Buddhism? How did Buddhists answer this objection?
2. What was there about Buddhism, and maybe especially its Mahayana forms, that attracted women and provided support for female monasticism?
3. In Han Yu's mind, what are the social, cultural, and political dangers of Buddhism?
4. Compose Han Yu's rejoinder to the story of the nun An Lingshou.
5. On what ideological basis did Emperor Wuzong order the suppression of monasteries and temples? Is there any evidence to suggest that there might also have been political and economic reasons for closing down and confiscating these establishments?
6. Whereas many Buddhists hoped to reach Enlightenment through the Holy Eightfold Path (source 16) and, if they were Mahayanists, through the agency of Bodhisattvas, Neo-Confucians sought the Moral Principle through study. Notwithstanding that difference, do you find anything in Zhu Xi's educational theory that suggests Buddhist influence?
7. Using these sources as fully as possible, compose an essay titled "Buddhism in China: Acceptance, Rejection, and Accommodation."

I ▼ Shi Baochang, *LIVES OF THE NUNS*

An¹ Lingshou's secular surname was Xu. Her family was originally from Donghuan.² Her father Xu Chong served the non-Chinese dynasty of Latter Zhao³ as an undersecretary of the provincial forces.

When she was young, Lingshou was intelligent and fond of study.⁴ Her speech was clear and beautiful; her nature modest and unassuming. Taking no pleasure in worldly affairs, she was at ease in secluded quiet. She delighted in the Buddhist teachings and did not wish for her parents to arrange her betrothal.

Her father said, "You ought to marry. How can you be so unfilial?"

Lingshou said, "My mind is concentrated on the work of religion, and my thought dwells exclusively on spiritual matters. Neither blame nor praise moves me; purity and uprightness are sufficient in themselves. Why must I submit three times before I am considered a woman of propriety?"⁵

Her father said, "You want to benefit only one person — yourself. How can you help your father and mother at the same time?"

¹Her religious surname, An, indicates that she traced her spiritual lineage back to a Parthian Buddhist missionary.

²In northeastern China.

³Literally, "the illegitimate dynasty of Latter Zhao." Between 304 and 431, sixteen kingdoms, largely dominated by foreigners of Mongol and Turkic ethnicity, emerged and vied with one another in northern China. Latter Zhao,

which lasted from 319 to 350, instituted a reign of terror (see notes 12–14).

⁴High-born women in Han and for centuries thereafter tended to be well educated.

⁵Submit first to her father and elder brother, then to her husband, and after his death to her son.

Lingshou said, "I am setting myself to cultivate the Way exactly because I want to free all living beings from suffering. How much more, then, do I want to free my two parents!"

Xu Chong consulted the Buddhist magician monk⁶ from Kucha,⁷ Fotudeng,⁸ who said, "You return home and keep a vegetarian fast, and after three days you may come back to see me again." Xu Chong obeyed him. At the end of the three days, Fotudeng spread Xu Chong's palm with the oil of sesame ground together with safflower. When he ordered Xu Chong to look at it, Chong saw a person who resembled his daughter dressed in Buddhist monastic robes preaching the Buddhist teachings in the midst of a large assembly.

When he told all of this to Fotudeng, the monk said, "This is a former incarnation of your daughter, in which she left the household life and benefited living beings — such were her deeds. If you consent to her plan, she indeed shall raise her family to glory and bring you blessings and honor; and she shall guide you [to Nirvana] on the far shore of the great ocean of suffering known as the incessant round of birth and death."

⁶A number of Buddhist missionary monks in China enjoyed reputations as healers, magicians, seers, interpreters of dreams, and miracle workers.

⁷An oasis city that was the center of a Central Asian kingdom along the Silk Road.

⁸Zhu Fotudeng (232–348) was a Central Asian of Indian ancestry who arrived in northern China in 310. His disciples are considered the founding parents of Chinese Buddhism.

⁹Buddhist monastic rules mandated parental consent for minors and young women who wished to enter the *Sangha*, or monastic community.

¹⁰The subject of the first biography in this collection, Zhu Jingjian (ca. 292–ca. 361), whose secular name was Zhong

Xu Chong returned home and permitted his daughter to become a nun.⁹ Lingshou thereupon cut off her hair, discarded secular ornaments, and received the rules of monastic life from Fotudeng and the nun Jingjian.¹⁰ She established Founding of Wisdom Convent, and Fotudeng presented her with a cut-flower embroidered vestment, a seven-strip monastic robe,¹¹ and an elephant-trunk-shaped water ewer that Shiluo, first emperor of the Latter Zhao Dynasty, had given him.¹²

Lingshou widely perused all kinds of books, and, having read a book through only once, she was always able to chant it by heart. Her thought extended to the depths of the profound; her spirit intuited the subtle and divine. In the religious communities of that time there was no one who did not honor her. Those who left the household life because of her numbered more than two hundred. Furthermore, she built five or six monastic retreats. She had no fear of hard work and brought her projects to completion.

The Emperor Shihu,¹³ nephew of the late Emperor Shiluo,¹⁴ honored her and promoted her father Xu Chong to the official court position of undersecretary of the Yellow Gate and administrator of the Qinghe Commandery.

Lingyi, was a well-educated widow. She is credited with founding China's first female Buddhist monastery, Bamboo Grove Convent, in 317 in the city of Chang'an.

¹¹Traditionally, a garment made out of rags and scraps that symbolized rejection of worldly wealth.

¹²Shiluo reigned 319–333. Fotudeng's magical powers gained him entry to the court of Latter Zhao, and he was able to use his influence to ameliorate somewhat its brutality (see note 3).

¹³Reigned 335–349, he had a reputation for psychopathic viciousness.

¹⁴Shihu gained the throne by killing off Shiluo's son.

2 ▼ Han Yu, MEMORIAL ON BUDDHISM

Your servant submits that Buddhism is but one of the practices of barbarians which has filtered into China since the Later Han. In ancient times there was no such thing. . . . In those times the empire was at peace, and the people, contented

and happy, lived out their full complement of years. . . . The Buddhist doctrine had still not reached China, so this could not have been the result of serving the Buddha.

The Buddhist doctrine first appeared in the time of the Emperor Ming¹ of the Han Dynasty, and the Emperor Ming was a scant eighteen years on the throne. Afterwards followed a succession of disorders and revolutions, when dynasties did not long endure. From the time of the dynasties Song, Qi, Liang, Chen, and Wei,² as they grew more zealous in the service of the Buddha, the reigns of kings became shorter. There was only the Emperor Wu of the Liang who was on the throne for forty-eight years. First and last, he thrice abandoned the world and dedicated himself to the service of the Buddha. He refused to use animals in the sacrifices in his own ancestral temple. His single meal a day was limited to fruits and vegetables. In the end he was driven out and died of hunger. His dynasty likewise came to an untimely end. In serving the Buddha he was seeking good fortune, but the disaster that overtook him was only the greater. Viewed in the light of this, it is obvious that the Buddha is not worth serving.

When Gaozu³ first succeeded to the throne of the Sui,⁴ he planned to do away with Buddhism, but his ministers and advisors were short-sighted men incapable of any real understanding of the Way of the Former Kings, or of what is fitting for past and present; they were unable to apply the Emperor's ideas so as to remedy this evil, and the matter subsequently came to naught — many the times your servant has regretted it. I venture to consider that Your Imperial Majesty, shrewd and wise in peace and war, with divine wisdom and heroic courage, is without an equal through the centuries. When first you came to the throne, you would not permit laymen to become monks or nuns or Daoist priests, nor would you allow the founding of temples or cloisters. It constantly struck me that the intention of Gaozu was to be fulfilled by

Your Majesty. Now even though it has not been possible to put it into effect immediately, it is surely not right to remove all restrictions and turn around and actively encourage them.

Now I hear that by Your Majesty's command a troupe of monks went to Fengxiang⁵ to get the Buddha-bone, and that you viewed it from a tower as it was carried into the Imperial Palace; also that you have ordered that it be received and honored in all the temples in turn. Although your servant⁶ is stupid, he cannot help knowing that Your Majesty is not misled by this Buddha, and that you do not perform these devotions to pray for good luck. But just because the harvest has been good and the people are happy, you are complying with the general desire by putting on for the citizens of the capital this extraordinary spectacle which is nothing more than a sort of theatrical amusement. How could a sublime intelligence like yours consent to believe in this sort of thing?

But the people are stupid and ignorant; they are easily deceived and with difficulty enlightened. If they see Your Majesty behaving in this fashion, they are going to think you serve the Buddha in all sincerity. All will say, "The Emperor is wisest of all, and yet he is a sincere believer. What are we common people that we still should grudge our lives?" Burning heads and searing fingers by the tens and hundreds, throwing away their clothes and scattering their money, from morning to night emulating one another and fearing only to be last, old and young rush about, abandoning their work and place; and if restrictions are not immediately imposed, they will increasingly make the rounds of temples and some will inevitably cut off their arms and slice their flesh in the way of offerings. Thus to violate decency and draw the ridicule of the whole world is no light matter.

¹Han Mingdi (r. 57–75 C.E.).

²Five fairly short-lived dynasties of the troubled fourth through sixth centuries. The Wei, who were foreign conquerors, apparently used Buddhism's universal message as an ideological buttress for their rule.

³Literally "high (or great) ancestor," an honorific title bestowed posthumously on several Chinese emperors. This high ancestor was Li Yuan, the first Tang emperor.

⁴The Sui Dynasty (581–618) reunited China in 589 and began a period of expansion that some characterize as the *Second Chinese Empire* (589–ca. 755).

⁵A western city.

⁶Han Yu.

Now the Buddha was of barbarian origin. His language differed from Chinese speech; his clothes were of a different cut; his mouth did not pronounce the prescribed words of the Former Kings;⁷ his body was not clad in the garments prescribed by the Former Kings. He did not recognize the relationship between prince and subject, nor the sentiments of father and son. Let us suppose him to be living today, and that he come to court at the capital as an emissary of his country. Your Majesty would receive him courteously. But only one interview in the audience chamber, one banquet in his honor, one gift of clothing, and he would be escorted under guard to the border that he might not mislead the masses.

How much the less, now that he has long been dead, is it fitting that his decayed and rotten bone, his ill-omened and filthy remains, should be allowed to enter in the forbidden precincts of the Palace? Confucius said, "Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep away from them."⁸ The feudal lords of ancient times, when they went to pay a visit of condolence in their states, made it their practice to have exorcists go before with rush-brooms and peachwood branches to dispel un-

lucky influences. Only after such precautions did they make their visit of condolence. Now without reason you have taken up an unclean thing and examined it in person when no exorcist had gone before, when neither rush-broom nor peachwood branch had been employed. But your ministers did not speak of the wrong nor did the censors call attention to the impropriety; I am in truth ashamed of them. I pray that Your Majesty will turn this bone over to the officials that it may be cast into water or fire, cutting off for all time the root and so dispelling the suspicions of the empire and preventing the befuddlement of later generations. Thereby men may know in what manner a great sage acts who a million times surpasses ordinary men. Could this be anything but ground for prosperity? Could it be anything but a cause for rejoicing?

If the Buddha has supernatural power and can wreak harm and evil, may any blame or retribution fittingly fall on my person. Heaven be my witness: I will not regret it. Unbearably disturbed and with the utmost sincerity I respectfully present my petition that these things may be known.

Your servant is truly alarmed, truly afraid.

⁷The legendary predynastic Sage Emperors.

⁸From the *Analects* (source 20).

3 ▼ PROCLAMATION ORDERING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BUDDHIST MONASTERIES

We learn that there was no such thing as Buddhism prior to the Three Dynasties, i.e., Xia, Yin, and Zhou.¹ After the dynasties of Han and Wei, the Image-Teaching² gradually began to flourish. And once established in that degenerate age, this strange custom prevailed far and wide, and now the people are soaked to the bone with it. Just now the national spirit begins to be

spoiled unconsciously by it; and, leading the heart of the people astray, it has put the public in worse condition than ever. In the country — throughout the nine provinces, and among the mountains and fields as well as in both the capitals³ — the number of priests is daily increasing and the Buddhist temples are constantly winning support.

¹China's first three dynasties (see Chapter 1). *Yin* is another name for the latter years of the Shang Dynasty.

²Buddhism, which used statues and images for veneration and instruction (see source 33).

³The main capital was Chang'an (present-day Xi'an); the auxiliary, or eastern, capital was Dongdu (present-day Luoyang).

Wasting human labor in building, plundering the people's purse by golden decorations, neglecting both husband and wife by their vigil-keeping, no teaching is more harmful than this Buddhism. In breaking the laws of the country and injuring the people, none can surpass this Buddhism. Moreover, if a farmer neglects his field, many suffer the pangs of starvation from his negligence; if a woman neglects her silk-worm culture, many suffer the calamity of being frozen to death through her negligence. Now there are at present so many monks and nuns that to count them is almost impossible. They all depend on farming for their food, and upon silk-worms for their clothing!

"The public monasteries and temples, as well as private chapels and shrines, are innumerable; and all of them so gigantic and imposing that they vie with the Imperial Palace in splendor! In Dynasties Jin (317–420 C.E.) and Song (420–476 C.E.), Qi (479–501 C.E.), and Liang (502–557 C.E.), the resources of this Empire were exhausted and the country gradually declined, while its manners and customs became flippant and insincere, solely because of this Buddhism.⁴

"Our Imperial ancestor Taizong⁵ put an end to confusion and disorder by his arms, and built up the glorious Middle Kingdom and governed his people by his accomplished learning and culture. The right of 'the pen' (i.e., peaceful rule or civic administration) and 'the sword' (i.e., war) belongs to the State, and they are the two weapons wherewith to govern the Empire. How dare the insignificant Teaching of the Western Lands compete with ours? During the periods of Zhen-guan and Gaiyuan,⁶ things were bettered once for all, but the remnants were smouldering, and poverty began to grow bigger and wider and threatened to set the country ablaze!

"After closely examining the examples set by our Imperial predecessors, We have finally decided to put an end to such conspicuous evils. Do you, Our subjects at home and abroad, obey and conform to Our sincere will. If you send in a Memorial⁷ suggesting how to exterminate these evils which have beset Us for many Dynasties, We shall do all We can to carry out the plan. Know that We yield to none in fulfilling the laws of Our predecessors and in trying to be helpful to Our people and beneficial to the public.

"Those 4,600 monasteries supported by the Government shall be confiscated and, at the same time, 260,500 nuns and priests shall return to the secular life so that they may be able to pay the taxes. We shall also confiscate 40,000 private temples with the fertile and good lands amounting to several tens of millions of acres; and emancipate 150,000 slaves and make them into free, tax-paying people. Examining into the teaching from the foreign lands in the Empire, We have discovered that there are over 3,000 monks from Daqin⁸ and Muhufu;⁹ and these monks also shall return to the lay life. They shall not mingle and interfere with the manners and customs of the Middle Kingdom.

"More than a hundred thousand idle, lazy people and busy bodies have been driven away, and numberless beautifully decorated useless temples have been completely swept away. Hereafter, purity of life shall rule Our people and simple and non-assertive rules prevail, and the people of all quarters shall bask in the sunshine of Our Imperial Influence. But this is only the beginning of the reforms. Let time be given for all, and let Our will be made known to every one of Our subjects lest the people misunderstand Our wish."

⁴Compare Han Yu's charges against Buddhism.

⁵Tang Taizong (r. 626–649), the second Tang emperor and the true founder of Tang imperial power. He actually became a generous patron of Buddhism after 645.

⁶The throne names of Tang Taizong (see note 5) and Tang Xuanzong (r. 712–756), the dynasty's two greatest rulers.

⁷Memorandum.

⁸Syria — a reference to Nestorian Christianity (see source 44).

⁹Persia — a reference to Zoroastrians and Manichaeans.