

# History of Buddhism in China: The First Thousand Years

1–1000 CE

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Updated June 25, 2019

Buddhism is practiced in many countries and cultures throughout the world. Mahayana Buddhism has played a significant role in China and it has a long and rich history.

As Buddhism grew in the country, it adapted to and influenced the Chinese culture and a number of schools developed. And yet, it wasn't always good to be a Buddhist in China as some found out under the persecution of various rulers.

## The Beginning of Buddhism in China

Buddhism first reached China from India roughly 2,000 years ago during the [Han Dynasty](#). It was probably introduced to China by [Silk Road](#) traders from the west in about the 1st century CE.

Han Dynasty China was deeply Confucian. [Confucianism](#) is focused on ethics and maintaining harmony and social order in society. Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasized entering the monastic life to seek a reality beyond reality. Confucian China was not terribly friendly to Buddhism.

Yet, Buddhism slowly spread. In the 2nd century, a few Buddhist monks -- notably Lokaksema, a monk from [Gandhara](#), and the [Parthian](#) monks An Shih-kao and An-hsuan -- began translating Buddhist sutras and commentaries from Sanskrit into Chinese.

## Northern and Southern Dynasties

The [Han Dynasty fell in 220](#), beginning a period of social and political chaos. China splintered into many kingdoms and fiefdoms. The time from 385 to 581 is often called the period of Northern and Southern Dynasties, although the political reality was more complicated than that. For purposes of this article, though, we'll compare north and south China.

A large part of north China came to be dominated by the Xianbei tribe, predecessors of the Mongols. Buddhist monks who were masters of divination became advisers to rulers of these "barbarian" tribes. By 440, northern China was united under one Xianbei clan, which formed the Northern Wei Dynasty. In 446, the Wei ruler Emperor Taiwu began a brutal suppression of Buddhism. All Buddhist temples, texts, and art were to be destroyed, and the monks were to be executed. At least some part of the northern sangha hid from authorities and escaped execution.

Taiwu died in 452; his successor, Emperor Xiaowen, ended the suppression and began a restoration of Buddhism that included the sculpting of the magnificent grottoes of Yungang. The first sculpting of Longmen Grottoes can also be traced to Xiaowen's reign.

In south China, a kind of "gentry Buddhism" became popular among educated Chinese that stressed learning and philosophy. The elite of Chinese society freely associated with the growing number of Buddhist monks and scholars.

By the 4th century, there were almost 2,000 monasteries in the south. Buddhism enjoyed a significant flowering in south China under Emperor Wu of Liang, who ruled from 502 to 549. The Emperor Wu was a devout Buddhist and a generous patron of monasteries and temples.

## New Buddhist Schools

New schools of [Mahayana Buddhism](#) began to emerge in China. In 402 CE, the monk and teacher Hui-yuan (336-416) established the White Lotus Society at Mount Lushan in southeast China. This was the beginning of the [Pure Land school of Buddhism](#). Pure Land eventually would become the dominant form of Buddhism in East Asia.

About the year 500, an Indian sage named Bodhidharma (ca. 470 to 543) arrived in China. According to legend, Bodhidharma made a brief appearance at the court of Emperor Wu of Liang. He then traveled north to what is now Henan Province. At the Shaolin Monastery at Zhengzhou, Bodhidharma founded the Ch'an school of Buddhism, better known in the West [by its Japanese name, Zen](#).

[Tiantai](#) emerged as a distinctive school through the teachings of Zhiyi (also spelled Chih-i, 538 to 597). Along with being a major school in its own right, Tiantai's emphasis on the [Lotus Sutra](#) influenced other schools of Buddhism.

[Huayan](#) (or Hua-Yen; Kegon in Japan) took shape under the guidance of its first three patriarchs: Tu-shun (557 to 640), Chih-yen (602 to 668) and Fa-tsang (or Fazang, 643 to 712). A large part of the teachings of this school was absorbed into Ch'an (Zen) during the T'ang Dynasty.

Among the several other schools that emerged in China was a [Vajrayana](#) school called Mi-tsung, or "school of secrets."

## North and South Reunite

Northern and southern China reunited in 589 under the Sui emperor. After centuries of separation, the two regions had little in common other than Buddhism. The emperor gathered relics of the Buddha and had them enshrined in stupas throughout China as a symbolic gesture that China was one nation again.

## The T'ang Dynasty

The influence of Buddhism in China reached its peak during the T'ang Dynasty (618 to 907). Buddhist arts flourished and monasteries grew rich and powerful. Factional strife came to a head in 845, however, when the emperor began a suppression of Buddhism that destroyed more than 4,000 monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines.

This suppression dealt a crippling blow to Chinese Buddhism and marked the beginning of a long decline. Buddhism would never again be as dominant in China as it had been during the T'ang Dynasty. Even so, after a thousand years, Buddhism thoroughly permeated Chinese culture and also influenced its rival religions of Confucianism and Taoism.

Of the several distinctive schools that had originated in China, only Pure Land and Ch'an survived the suppression with an appreciable number of followers.

- Tiantai flourished in Japan as Tendai.
- Huayan survives in Japan as Kegon.
- Huayan teachings also remain visible in Ch'an and Zen Buddhism.
- Mi-tsung survives in Japan as [Shingon](#).

As the first thousand years of Buddhism in China ended, the legends of the [Laughing Buddha](#), called Budai or Pu-tai, emerged from Chinese folklore in the 10th century. This rotund character remains a favorite subject of Chinese art.