

Religion Under the Tang Dynasty

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Learning Objective

- Analyze why the emperors of the Tang dynasty were interested in the promotion of certain religions

Key Points

- Taoism was the official religion of the Tang; it is a native Chinese religious and philosophical tradition, based on the writings of Laozi.
- Taoism was combined with ancient Chinese folk religions, medical practices, Buddhism, and martial arts to create a complex and syncretic spirituality.
- Li Yuan, the founder of the Tang dynasty, had attracted a following by claiming descent from the Taoist sage Laozi.
- Buddhism, originating in India around the time of Confucius, continued its influence during the Tang period and was accepted by some members of the imperial family, becoming thoroughly sinicized and a permanent part of Chinese traditional culture.
- The prominent status of Buddhism in Chinese culture began to decline as the dynasty and central government declined during the late-8th century and 9th century, and many Buddhists experienced persecution.
- The Tang dynasty also officially recognized various foreign religions, such as the Nestorian Christian Church.

Terms

Chan Buddhism

A school of Mahayana Buddhism that originated in China during the Tang dynasty, was strongly influenced by Taoism, and later became Zen when it travelled to Japan.

Confucianism

A Chinese humanistic religion that teaches that human beings are fundamentally good, and teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal

endeavors, especially self-cultivation and self-creation; focuses on the cultivation of virtue, maintenance of ethics, and familial and social harmony.

Taoism

A religious or philosophical tradition of Chinese origin with an emphasis on living in harmony and accordance with the natural flow or cosmic structural order of the universe.

Taoism

Taoism was the official religion of the Tang. It is a native Chinese religious and philosophical tradition with an emphasis on living in harmony and accordance with the natural flow or cosmic structural order of the universe commonly referred to as the *Tao*. It has its roots in the book of the *Tao Te Ching* (attributed to Laozi in the 6th century BCE) and the *Zhuangzi*. The ruling Li family of the Tang dynasty actually claimed descent from the ancient Laozi.

Taoism has had a profound influence on Chinese culture, and clerics of institutionalized Taoism usually take care to note distinctions between their ritual tradition and the customs and practices found in Chinese folk religion, as these distinctions sometimes appear blurred. Chinese alchemy, Chinese astrology, Chan Buddhism, several martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine, feng shui, and many styles of qigong have been intertwined with Taoism throughout history.

During the Tang dynasty, the Chinese continued to combine their ancient folk religion with Taoism and incorporated many deities into religious practice. The Chinese believed the Tao and the afterlife were a reality parallel to the living world, complete with a bureaucracy and an afterlife currency needed by dead ancestors. Funerary practices included providing the deceased with everything they might need in the afterlife, including animals, servants, entertainers, hunters, homes, and officials. This is reflected in Tang dynasty art and in many short stories written in the Tang about people accidentally winding up in the realm of the dead, only to come back and report their experiences.

Buddhism

Buddhism, originating in India around the time of Confucius, continued its influence during the Tang period and was accepted by some members of the imperial family, becoming thoroughly sinicized and a permanent part of Chinese traditional culture. In an age before Neo-Confucianism and figures such as Zhu Xi (1130–1200), Buddhism began to flourish in China during the Northern and Southern dynasties, and became the dominant ideology during the prosperous Tang. Buddhist monasteries played an integral role in Chinese society, offering

lodging for travelers in remote areas, schools for children throughout the country, and a place for urban literati to stage social events and gatherings such as going-away parties. Buddhist monasteries were also engaged in the economy, since their land and serfs gave them enough revenue to set up mills, oil presses, and other enterprises. Although the monasteries retained “serfs,” these monastery dependents could actually own property and employ others to help them in their work, and could even own slaves.



Tang period Bodhisattva. A Tang dynasty sculpture of a Bodhisattva, a being who, motivated by great compassion, has generated bodhicitta, a spontaneous wish to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The prominent status of Buddhism in Chinese culture began to decline as the dynasty and central government declined during the late 8th century and 9th century. Buddhist convents and temples that had been exempt from state taxes were targeted for taxation. In 845 Emperor Wuzong of Tang finally shut down 4,600 Buddhist monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines, forcing 260,000 Buddhist monks and nuns to return to secular life. This episode would later be dubbed one of the Four Buddhist Persecutions in China. Although the ban would be lifted just a few years later, Buddhism never regained its once dominant status in Chinese culture.

This situation also came about through a revival of interest in native Chinese philosophies, such as Confucianism and Taoism. Han Yu (786 - 824)—who Arthur F. Wright stated was a “brilliant polemicist and ardent xenophobe”—was one of the first men of the Tang to denounce Buddhism. Although his contemporaries found him crude and obnoxious, he foreshadowed the later persecution of Buddhism in the Tang, as well as the revival of Confucian theory with the rise of Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty. Nonetheless, Chan Buddhism gained popularity amongst the educated elite. There were also many famous Chan monks from the Tang era, such as Mazu Daoyi, Baizhang, and Huangbo Xiyun. The sect of Pure Land Buddhism initiated by the Chinese monk Huiyuan (334 - 416) was also just as popular as Chan Buddhism during the Tang.

Christianity

The Tang dynasty also officially recognized various foreign religions. The Assyrian Church of the East, otherwise known as the Nestorian Christian Church, was given recognition by the Tang court. In 781, the Nestorian Stele was created in order to honor the achievements of their community in China. The stele contains a long inscription in Chinese with Syriac glosses, composed by the cleric Adam, probably the metropolitan of Beth Sinaye. The inscription describes the eventful progress of the Nestorian mission in China since Alopen's arrival. A Christian monastery was established in Shaanxi province where the Daqin Pagoda still stands, and inside the pagoda there is Christian-themed artwork. Although the religion largely died out after the Tang, it was revived in China following the Mongol invasions of the 13th century.



Nestorian Stele. The Nestorian Stele, erected in Chang' an 781.

Religion and Politics

From the outset, religion played a role in Tang politics. In his bid for power, Li Yuan had attracted a following by claiming descent from the Taoist sage Laozi (6th century BCE). People bidding for office would have monks from Buddhist temples pray for them in public in return for cash donations or gifts if the person was selected. Before the persecution of Buddhism in the 9th century, Buddhism and Taoism were accepted side by side, and Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712 - 56) invited monks and clerics of both religions to his court. At the same time Xuanzong exalted the ancient Laozi by granting him grand titles and writing commentary on him, set up a school to prepare candidates for examinations on Taoist scriptures, and called upon the Indian monk Vajrabodhi (671 - 741) to perform Tantric rites to avert a drought in the year 726. In 742 Emperor Xuanzong personally held the incense burner during a ceremony led by Amoghavajra (705 - 74, patriarch of the Shingon school) reciting "mystical incantations to secure the victory of Tang forces."

While religion played a role in politics, politics also played a role in religion. In the year 714, Emperor Xuanzong forbade shops and vendors in the city of Chang' an to sell copied Buddhist sutras, instead giving the Buddhist clergy of the monasteries the sole right to distribute sutras to the laity. In the previous year of 713, Emperor Xuanzong had liquidated the highly lucrative Inexhaustible Treasury, which was run by a prominent Buddhist monastery in Chang' an. This monastery collected vast amounts of money, silk, and treasures

through multitudes of anonymous people' s repentances, leaving the donations on the monastery' s premise. Although the monastery was generous in donations, Emperor Xuanzong issued a decree abolishing their treasury on grounds that their banking practices were fraudulent. He collected their riches and distributed the wealth to various other Buddhist monasteries and Taoist abbeys, and used it to repair statues, halls, and bridges in the city.