

Buddhist Transmission along the Silk Road: The Propagation of the Sarvāstivāda School in China



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ABSTRACT

The Silk Road was historically one of the most influential network of trade routes for business, cultural and religious exchanges between East and West. Buddhism has entered into China during Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE.) via Silk Road. The Chinese Emperor Ming (58-75 CE.), second ruler of the Ming Dynasty, is credited as an early sponsor supporting the spread of Buddhism to China (Feng, 1966). Early scriptures found in archeological and scholarly works document the spread of four major Buddhist philosophical schools along the Silk Road: Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Vijñānavāda and Madhyamaka, or Śūnyatāvāda. Amongst the four aforementioned schools, Sarvāstivāda School was one of the most influential monastic group, flourished throughout Northwest India, Northern India, and Central Asia, which is currently known as Silk Road. The purpose of this paper is to explore the transmission and propagation of the Sarvāstivāda tradition along the Silk Road, and its impact on the development of Buddhism in China.

Keywords: Silk Road, Buddhism, China, Buddhist Schools, Sarvāstivāda.

Buddhist Transmission over the Silk Road

Buddhism was propagated through the Southern Indian Silk Road in Kasmir, Gandara and Bactria. From here, Chinese businessmen and famous Indian and Chinese Bodhisattvas transmitted its tenets to China. Buddhism has first entered into China during Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE.) via Silk Road. According to the Chinese account, the first documented Buddhist teachings (with Chinese translation) entered into China in the 2nd century CE under the influence of the expansion of the Kushan Empire into the Chinese territory of the Tarim Basin under King Kanishka (Dhammadipa, 2015).

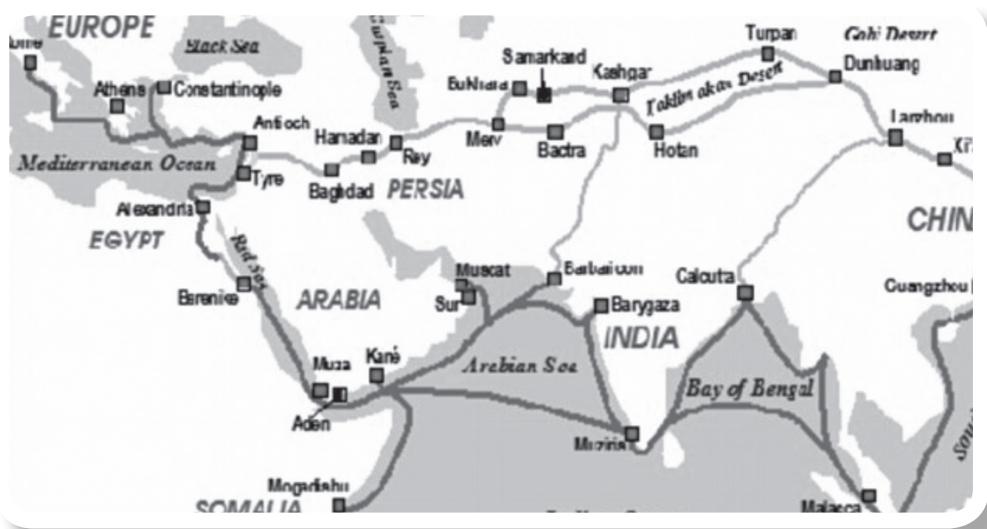


Figure 1: The Silk Route

The transmission of Buddhism from India to China occurred with its complete scriptural canon, doctrines, moral directives, and its own ancient culture. It was brought to China along the Silk Road by traders and Buddhist Monks during the later Han dynasty in the 1st century CE. Since Han Dynasty accepted Buddhism, the Indian Buddhist transplantations into China flourished in the fourth century through hundreds of translated series of Buddhist canon from Indian and Central Asian languages into Chinese.

Historical Background of Early Chinese Buddhism

Though Buddhism was at first a foreign religion in China, the Chinese dynasties accepted it probably due similarity with Chinese thought of Confucianism and Taoism. Historians trace early translations of Buddhist texts from Indian languages to Chinese from the middle of the second century to the first decade of the third century. In the beginning of this period, two foreign translators – An Shigao and Lokakṣema arrived at Luoyang. An Shigao (around 148 CE) translated Hīnayāna literature; and Lokakṣema around this time translated Mahāyāna literature (Daňková, 2006). An Shigao is thought to have come from the Parthian Empire, though this is uncertain. The Parthian Empire is from an area of what is now called Iran. Lokakṣema came from Gandhara, which is in an area of what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gandhara at the time was heavily influenced by the Greeks, having been invaded by the famous Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great. It is worth mentioning that some of the inhabitants of Gandhara were of Greek ethnicity. Lokakṣema's birth, but not his ethnic background is known.

Buddhist scholars in China translated both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna texts that existed side by side as they did in India. The use of Taoist terms for Buddhist beliefs and practices not only helped in the difficulty of translation but also brought Buddhist scriptures closer to the Chinese people. However, the traditional Taoist vocabulary and thought is not sufficient to understand Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, many Chinese Buddhist generations misunderstood some important Buddhist doctrines. The doctrines of Laozi and Zhuangzi were used as a bridge for understanding Chinese and Buddhist philosophies. Lokakṣema (who lived between 147 and 188 CE) came to China to translate some important texts of Mahāyāna literature. During the second half of the third century, Dharmarakṣa was considered as the greatest Buddhist translator prior to Kumārajīva and translated several Mahāyāna Sūtras (Daňková, 2006).

The first period of Chinese Buddhism came to an end with two well-known Chinese Buddhist monks, Daoan (312-385 CE.) and Huiyuan (337- 417 CE.). Daoan rejected the syncretistic method of Geyi and exegetical strategy that mixed mundane literature and Buddhist scriptures. Huiyuan combined Buddhist and Taoist elements in meditational practice. Then, the arrival of Kumārajīva marked the second period of Chinese Buddhism. Kumārajīva founded and headed a good translation institute; numerous Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna works were translated into Chinese within eight years.

A Brief History of Chinese Buddhism

A brief overview of Chinese Buddhism from medieval period to modern day are as follows:

| Year | Remarks |
|---------|--|
| 221 BCE | The foreign monk Shih Li-fang, one of the missionaries dispatched by King Ashoka, arrived in China with Buddhist inscriptions. |
| 67 CE | Indian Buddhist missionaries arrive at the court of Emperor Ming (58-75 CE) of the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 222 CE) |
| 148 CE | The Parthian (An Shigao) arrives in the Chinese capital of Luoyang; he translates the sutras of forty-two scriptures. |
| 366 CE | Construction of Buddhist cave shrines at Dunhuang begins. |
| 399 CE | Chinese scholar-pilgrim Faxian (337-418 CE) departs to India in searching of Buddhist teachings. |
| 401 CE | Kumarajiva (350 – 09/413 CE) from Kucha arrives in the Chinese capital of Chang'an. |
| 402 CE | Huiyuan (334-416 CE) assembles a group of monks and laymen before an image of Buddha Amitabha on Mount Lu and vows to be born in the western paradise of Sukhavati, starting the Pure Land schools of Buddhism. |
| 460 CE | The Northern Wei (386-534 CE) begins to construct Buddhist cave sanctuaries at Yun'gang and Longmen. |
| 520 CE | Bodhidharma, the founder of the Chan School, arrives in China from India. |
| 585 CE | Ziyi (538-597 CE) systematizes the Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhism, providing a distinctively Chinese conception of the Buddhist path in such texts as the Mode Zhiguan (the great calmness and contemplation). |
| 601 CE | The Sui (581 -618 CE) court distributes the Buddha's relics throughout the country and begins a wave of pagoda construction. |
| 645 CE | Xuanzang (600- 664 CE) returns from his journey to India with twenty horseloads of Buddhist texts, images, and relics and begins an epic translation project. |

| Year | Remarks |
|---------|--|
| 699 CE | Fazang (643-712 CE) lectures at the Wu Zetian court on the newly translated Huayan Jing (Avatamsaka Sutra), signaling the prominence of the Huayan School. |
| 720 CE | The arrival of Indian masters Vajrabodhi and Amonghavajra in the capital cities of China leads to a surge in popularity of the Mijiao (esoteric) school. |
| 745 CE | Shenhui (684-758 CE) arrives in the Eastern capital and propagates the sudden-enlightenment teachings of Huineng (638-713 C.E.), the putative sixth patriarch of Cha'n School. |
| 845 CE | Emperor Wuzong (841- 847 CE) initiates the Huichang suppression of Buddhism, one of the worst persecutions in Chinese Buddhist history. |
| 972 CE | The Song dynasty initiates a national project to prepare a woodblock printing of the entire Buddhist canon, which was completed in 983 CE. |
| 1270 CE | The Mongol Yuan dynasty (1234 -1368 CE) supports Tibetan Buddhist traditions in China. |
| 1600 CE | Zhuhong (1532-1612 CE) seeks to unify Cha'n and Pure Land strands of Chinese Buddhism. |
| 1759 CE | A compendium of Buddhist incantations in Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan is compiled during the Qianlong reign (1736-1795 CE) of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 CE). |
| 1929 | Taixu (1890-1947 CE) leads the Chinese Buddhist Association as part of his reform of Chinese Buddhist institutions. |
| 1949 | The communist victory in China forces many Buddhist monks, such as Yinshun (1906-2005), to flee to Taiwan. |
| 1965 | The cultural revolution is initiated by communist leader Mao Zedong (1893-1976 CE), leading to widespread destruction of Buddhist sites in China. |
| 1978 | Buddhism starts to recover. |

Moreover, the entire history of Chinese Buddhism can be divided into five stages:

- i. The beginning of Chinese Buddhism: the early introduction of Indian and Central Asian Buddhism (from Eastern Han through three Kingdoms to the end of Eastern Jin, mid-first century CE to 317 CE).

- ii. The emergence of Schools of thought: the formation of many different short-lived schools based on various Chinese translations of Buddhist texts (from the end of Eastern Jin to South and North dynasty, c. 317-589 CE).
- iii. The independent growth: distinctive Chinese Buddhist schools formed (Sui and Tang dynasty, 589-906 CE).
- iv. The syncretism of Chinese Buddhism: syncretism of Buddhist schools of thought and other religions (Song to Qing Dynasties, tenth to nineteenth century).
- v. Buddhism in Modern time (started from the period of Republic of China) (Ch'en, 1973).

The Propagation of Sarvāstivāda Buddhism in China

After the Buddha's demise (*Mahāparinibbāna*), it is scholarly believed that Buddhism split into eighteen sects, which are eventually developed into four main doctrinal schools, namely, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Vijñānavāda and Madhyamaka or Śūnyatāvāda. In brief, the four great school's philosophical viewpoints are as follows:

- (a) *Bāhyartha pratyakṣhavāda* of Sarvāstivādins or Vaibhāsikans. The philosophical position was that the external object can be perceived through direct perception.
- (b) *Bāhyartha anumeyavāda* of Sautrāntikans. The philosophical position was that external objects can be inferred to exist, but cannot be perceived directly.
- (c) *Bāhyartha śūnyavāda* known as Vijñānavāda. The philosophical position is that external objects are ultimately empty and lack of inherent existence.
- (d) *Ubhayārtha śūnyavāda* known as Mādhyamika. The philosophical position is that both external and internal phenomena are empty of inherent existence (Barua, 2016).

Sarvāstivāda Buddhist tradition spread through and developed along the Silk Road, including to such lands as Kushana, Kashmir and Gandāra. The Kushanas were people of the Scythia race, and nomads who spread and conquered lands through northern China, central Asia, Siberia and the Black Sea. The greatest king of Kushanas is Kanishka who became a Buddhist and spread Buddhism throughout his kingdom. According to the Buddhist tradition, under the patronage of Kanishka, the fourth Buddhist council was held and the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, a great commentary of the Sarvāstivāda school, was compiled. Buddhism

of the Kushanas derives from the Buddhism of Northern India. No traces of Mahāyāna Buddhism have been found in ancient Gandhari literature. Gandhari Buddhist texts from the Kushana empire seem to have been among the first Buddhist literature which reached China in the first or second century CE. Scholars have suggested that some of the earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist texts are from originals in Gandhari, and the early translators working in China include a significant number said to be of Kushana origin. A Kharosthi Buddhist inscription in Luoyang, the one-time capital of China in the North-east, shows how far the transmission of Buddhism in the Gandhari language reached inside of China.

Conclusion

The Silk Road played an important role to conduct cultural exchange between India and China. Buddhist thought along with commerce entered China, brought by businessmen and monks. The Han dynasty accepted Buddhism and propagated it. Buddhist monasteries and educational institutions spread throughout China. This included the spread of the Sarvāstivāda School due to its in-depth Abhidharma doctrines. Whereas mainland India lost Sarvāstivāda Buddhist tradition, China still preserves Abhidharma texts in classical Chinese languages. Subsequently, the transmission and propagation of the Sarvāstivāda tradition along the Silk Road had great impact on the development of Buddhism in China.

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