

Influence of Buddhism on Chinese Civilization: A Soft Power Tool of Modern Diplomacy

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Abstract

The integration of Buddhism in China and Chinese Civilization could be traced back to the development of the 'Silk Road.' From the reign of modern-day since the reign of various families, history also has a rally with development and expansion of activities. The rise and downfall of Buddhism in China are witnessed during the changes in the regime. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), China does not recognize religion. However, After the end of the Cultural Revolution and China's Economic Reform and Opening Up, China loosens the practice of religious activities. This paper will analyze how Buddhism has influenced the Chinese civilization. With a comprehensive analysis of history and literature, this paper finds that Buddhism is a part of Chinese Civilization and a manifestation tool of Chinese Diplomacy.

Keywords: Buddhism, Chinese Civilization, Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

As human civilization started to grow, it also migrated from one place to another, from one nation to another, with human migration. Humans started to migrate from one place to another for trade. The largest route for trade from ancient history is the Silk Road. The transcontinental trade route that connects Asia to Europe is the Silk Road.

Along with trade in goods and crafts, the Silk Routes significantly spread philosophies and faiths throughout Central Asia, the Near East, and Europe (Strathern, 1993). While Christianity and Islam evolved and were spread through trade, pilgrimage, and military conquest, Buddhism originated in the Indian subcontinent and spread throughout northern Asia, Mongolia, and China via the Silk Road. The legacy of this can still be seen in the literary, architectural, and aesthetic traditions of the Silk Road civilizations. During the Han Dynasty, was first brought to China (202 BCE–220 CE) and turned to the young religion Buddhism. Buddhism was the first preaching religion in history, and missionaries disseminated its teachings worldwide. Buddhism's growth was directly influenced by long-distance trade. The lay followers who provided financial support for these institutions were frequently businessmen on the move as Buddhism gained popularity and the custom of roaming ascetics led to the establishment of monasteries (Foltz, 1999).

Along with commerce, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam all came to China along the Silk Road, but they all either disappeared or remained minor religions. Buddhism was the only religion that had assimilated into Chinese society and continued to impact Chinese culture and civilization (Foltz, 1999). Ancient Buddhist temples, earthen tombs, and stone markings are all examples of the Silk Road's heritage. As modern China revives the ancient Silk Road for its modern diplomacy, the influence of Buddhism in its civilizations and diplomacy will shed light on Chinese Religious diplomacy.

This paper will tend to answer how Buddhism was incorporated into Chinese Civilization and how it is utilized as a tool of diplomacy in modern China. With comprehensive literature analysis, this paper adopts qualitative approaches to the Study.

2. Buddhism in China

The introduction of Buddhism to China and the subsequent blending of it with the local religious tradition create an intriguing puzzle. In contrast to many other religions, Buddhism is the only "foreign" religion to penetrate the hearts and minds of the Chinese people successfully. Buddhist thinking was able to enter traditional Chinese belief due to the tumultuous social and political climate that followed the fall of the Han Dynasty (Ou, 2012).

Reading and hearing the explanation of Buddhist sutras was a major way that Chinese people learned about Buddhism (Yü, 2020). In the four hundred years since the Buddha's birth, Buddhism had experienced significant changes by the time it first arrived in China during the second half of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 BCE). The Buddha's teachings were passed down orally until they were recorded in *Pali Scripts* sometime in the second century BCE. By that time, numerous schools of Buddhism had emerged, each with unique doctrines. Between 150 BCE and 100 CE, a new movement known as Mahayana (Great Vehicle) emerged. The Mahayanists dubbed the previous form of Buddhism Hinayana to set themselves apart (Small Vehicle). According to legend, there were 18 Hinayana Schools; Theravada is the only one that has survived, and its followers are concentrated in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, except for Vietnam. The Mahayana tradition is practiced in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam (Yü, 2020).

As discovered by Faxian, the well-known Chinese Pilgrim who visited religious sites and monasteries in India about 399 and 412, Mahayana monks did not establish a separate community rather than lived side by side in monasteries alongside non-Mahayana and committed to the same Vinaya or monastic regulations (Yü, 2020). As the Mahayana teaching gained more widespread, they separated into their schools and sent out missionaries to Central Asia and ultimately China.

The central teaching of the Lotus Sutra from the Mahayana Sutras became the most popular in China. Kanishka I, the third ruler of the Kushan Dynasty, was a great patron of Buddhism. His conquests and support for Buddhism were crucial to the establishment of the Silk Road and the movement of Mahayana Buddhism from Gandhara to China over the Karakoram Mountains (Falk, 2001). Buddhist missionaries received royal backing while he was in power, and as a result, city-states along the Silk Road converted to Buddhism.

In China, from the beginning of the Eastern Han dynasty in the first century A.D., Buddhism and Taoism emerged as distinct religions practically simultaneously. It was first challenging to distinguish between Buddhism and Taoism (Liu & Shao, 1992). During the regime of the Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han dynasty, he sent a mission to India to study the Buddha (Zürcher, 1959). The mission returned to China with two foreign missionaries Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna. They were kept in a monastery first built in China at Luoyang—the White Horse Temple, the first monastery in China, currently standing in Luoyang, Henan.

The first recorded mention of the Buddha is found in an edict issued by Emperor Ming in 65 AD, which offered amnesty to those facing the death penalty in exchange for a set quantity of silk rolls as ransom. Thirty rolls of silk were donated by Chu's Prince Ying as restitution for some wrongdoing he had done. Emperor Ming turned down the silk and commended the prince for his veneration of the Buddha, the Yellow Emperor, and the deified Laozi. Prince then prepared a vegetarian feast for Buddhist monks and city dwellers using the ransom money. At court, the Buddha was revered alongside the Yellow Emperor and Laozi (Yü, 2020).

The royal family supports Buddhism in Northern China. Buddhism's dedication manifests itself in concrete ways, such as the enormous rock carvings at Yungang Cave near Datong and Longmen Cave near Luoyang, the capital of the Northern Wei region (Yü, 2020). By the Tang Dynasty, many Buddhist temples and shrines had expanded across China.

In the period of Emperor Taizong of Tang, Buddhist Monk, scholar Chen Hui, known as monk Xuanzhang, travelled to India for 17 years and returned with 657 Buddhist texts. This Chinese travelogue *Dà Táng Xīyù Jì* (Great Tang Records on the Western Regions) is widely used as the source of Buddhism developed in China (Gosch & Stearns, 2008). Chinese novelist, poet, and politician during the Ming Dynasty Wu Cheng'en authored the novel 'Journey to the West,' one of the Classic Chinese Novels inspired by Xuanzhang's journey to India (Shibang, 2006).

3. Buddhism in Chinese Culture, Art and Literature

Throughout imperial China's history, people have followed Buddhism. People perform rituals to worship Buddha and Bodhisattvas, tell tales, perform plays, and create poems and novels about them (Yü, 2020). Buddhism is sometimes called the religion of images since such worship is fundamental. Confucianism and Taoism, two indigenous religions, helped Buddhism grow and evolve. A mystic philosophy called Taoism stood in stark contrast to Confucianism. Taoism is a pantheistic, austere religion. Buddhist thought is sometimes viewed as an ascetic ideology emphasizing seclusion from the outside world (Lahiri, n.d.).

Both Confucianism and Taoism had their beginnings in China. Contrary to Buddhism and Taoism, Confucianism is not a formal religion but a way of life and thinking. Following the fall of the Han Dynasty, the previous social order collapsed, opening the door for a religion rejecting class flourishing. Buddhism in this era changed to accommodate Chinese demands (Ou, 2012). All facets of Chinese culture, including literature, philosophy, morals, the arts, architecture, and religion, have intermingled with Buddhism. Buddhism has successfully assimilated into traditional Chinese culture and has come to represent one of its three foundations (Guang , 2013).

Buddhism provided Chinese people with benefits that Confucian teachings did not. Buddhism attracted many Chinese people to its teachings by offering alternative perspectives on how to live and the ability to have more control over one's own life, particularly in the circumstances of women (Englehart, 2015). Like Taoism and Confucianism, Buddhism was seen by many Chinese as a useful tool in establishing social control and order.

Chinese history can observe anti-Buddhism feeling in the history of China too. Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei ordered the destruction of Buddhist temples. Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou forbade Taoism and Buddhism as well. Emperor Wuzong of the Tang Dynasty started the most severe anti-Buddhist persecutions. Emperor Wuzong of Tang was notorious for his persecution of Buddhists. Over 4600 monasteries were rejected, and 260 500 monks were made to surrender their religious convictions. However, Emperor Xuazong, Wuzong's uncle, revived Buddhism in China after Emperor Wuzong passed away at the age of 33 (Jing Z. , 2015).

The Incorporation of translations of Buddhist scriptures (along with Taoist and Confucian works) into a Chinese Buddhist canon are influential in Chinese society. Chinese Buddhism also

introduced several distinctive schools of Buddhist doctrine and practice, such as Tiantai, Huayan, Chan, and Pure Land Buddhism. Chinese folk religion as well as native Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Taoism, have had an impact on Chinese Buddhism since its inception.

One of the most prosperous periods for Buddhism in China was the Tang era. The Tang dynasty is typically regarded as the pinnacle or mature era of Buddhism in China. Buddhism was completely "Sinicized," or Chineseized, during the Tang period (Asia for Educator, n.d.). Many works of literature from this time frame contain Buddhist themes, including those by well-known poets like Wang Wei (701–761) and Bo Juyi (772 – 846). The numerous creative complexes from this time, including the Longmen Grottoes, also provide evidence of the aesthetic vitality of Chinese Buddhism at the time. Empress WuZetian (r. 690–705) was a well-known supporter of Buddhism during the Tang era and is most remembered for her advocacy of the Longmen cave complex. She portrayed herself as a bodhisattva as well (China.org, n.d.). China is where the global history of book printing began. The oldest dated printed book in human history is the Mahayana Buddhist sutra, known as the Jingang jing (Diamond Sutra), produced during the Tang Dynasty (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

4. Buddhism and the Practice of Diplomacy

The Buddhism in Tibet is also connected to the Tang Dynasty. The princess of the Tang Emperor Wencheng was married as the first wife of King Songtsen Gampo of the Tibetan Empire. The Tang Emperor's most beloved daughter, Princess Wencheng, received a valuable dowry with a priceless statue of Sakyamuni and thousands of Buddhist texts (Wang & Cedain, 2020). Together with Songtsen Gambo's other wife, Princess Chizun (Bal-Mo-Bzavd, Bhrikuti in Nepali), from Balbovi-yul (the Tibetan name for ancient Nepal), Princess Wencheng helped Songtsen Gambo with domestic issues and made a vital contribution to the growth of Buddhism in Tibet.

The Statues of the Sakyamuni, (8 years old and 12 years old) were brought as the dowry to Tibet. 12 years old Buddha statue, from Princess Wencheng, and, 8 years old from Nepal by Princess Bhrikuti. These also present evidence that the diplomatic relations of Tibet with the Central Empire of China and Nepal were based on Buddhism.

The princess of Nepal Bhrikuti Devi daughter of Amshuvarma, also known as 'Harit Tara (Literally mean Green Star)' the reincarnation of the "Tara" brought homage of Buddhism in Tibet (Tenzin & Dhondup, 1982). A significant turning point in the political and cultural history between Nepal, Tibet, and China as well as for the propagation of Buddhism was the marriage of Princess Bhrikuti. Bhrikuti played a significant part in conveying Nepal's essence to its neighbors. She built the first 13-story edifice of the 999-room Potala Palace while bringing 80 Nepali artisans with her. Two of the Palace's original chambers from the seventh century are still present today (Sakya, 2021). The struts, pillars, sculptures, and arches in the Jokhang temple are clear examples of Nepali architecture's influence.

Sakyamuni and Pancha Buddha sculptures that Bhrikuti brought as part of her dowry inspired Tibetans to switch from the Bon Po (an indigenous shamanistic and animistic religion) to Buddhism. The Princess Bhrikuti brought many Buddhist statues. Therefore, the Jokhang temple was initially constructed to hold them all. The temple is faced to the west (towards Nepal) in respect of the Bhikuti along with the sculptures, the princess brought numerous Buddhist texts that detailed Vajrayana Buddhist doctrine and practices. The temple also has more than three thousand images of the Buddha. Carbon dating has proven that the wooden rafters and beams are authentic, and the Newari door frames, columns, and finials, which date to the seventh and ninth centuries, were imported from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley (Mayhew, Kelly, & Vincent, 2008). The Newari arts are based on the Buddhist Culture. According to Bhrikuti's instructions, Nepali craftsmen erected the Potala Palace in Tibet. *Samaya and Chenresig* statues were created by a Nepali artist. It all shows the practice of soft power diplomacy connecting Buddhism.

In Chinese Buddhism, it is known with its enduring cults- Maitrey, Amitayus or Amitabha, Sakyamuni, Medicine Buddha and Gunyin. Believers observed rites in which the Buddha was bathed to commemorate his birth, and in China, pagodas were built to honor the Buddha's death or nirvana. Pagodas are still a crucial component of Chinese monastic architecture today. Wherever a pagoda or a statue of the Buddha is, Sakyamuni is still present (Yü, 2020). The seated Buddha with his legs crossed, known as Maitreya, is a sign of friendship. Additionally, it is portrayed as a gracious visitor in popular culture. When you enter a Buddhist temple, the "Laughing Buddha (Maitreya)" is the first thing you notice. The artwork can be seen in Chinese restaurants and souvenir shops. He serves as a fortunate welcome sign for guests. Buddhist art is a significant

component of China's cultural legacy. It is a treasure trove of varied iconographies and influences that are gorgeously portrayed, especially in rock architecture and art.

The oldest Buddhist pagoda in China is Miaoying Temple (*Miàoying Sì*), also known as White Stupa (*Báit Sì*) was constructed by the Anige (Arniko in Nepali). It is a significant historical and cultural site protected by the government. Scholar Anning Jing has underlined how the religio-political developments at Kublai Khan's court may have prompted him to seek painters from Tibetan Buddhist traditions. In a paper, Anning Jing recognized two portraits of Kublai Khan and his spouse Chabi as potentially Aniko's works. One indication of Khubilai's (sic) embrace of Sa-sakya teaching—which was greatly influenced by the initiative of his wife Chabi—was his orders [to construct the stupa]. According to a Tibetan source on the sect, Chabi is described as an ardent Buddhist credited with convincing Kublai to select Phags-pa as his teacher among the competing Tibetan monks of other sects (Jing A. , 1994).

5. Buddhist Pilgrimage for Chinese People

Chinese people once traveled to the holy locations where the bodhisattvas resided. Chinese people make a sacred pilgrimage to the four well-known mountains. Wenshu calls Mount Wutai of Sansi home. Puxian lives on Mount Omei in Sichuan, Guanyin lives on Mount Putuo in Zhejiang, and Dizang lives on Mount Jihua in Anhui (Wen, n.d.). The Four Spiritual Mountains are renowned for their exquisite Buddhist architecture, cultural relics, and rare Buddhist libraries. They draw tourists and followers of Buddhism from all over the world.

Chinese people commemorate the three most important Chinese holidays—Chinese New Year, the Lantern Festival, and the Ghost Festival—in monasteries with Dharma gatherings and sutra chanting. These festivals are closely related to Buddhist customs. All the monks competed with one another by exhibiting lanterns of various colors and shapes on the evening of the first full moon of the new year, which fell on the fifteenth day of the first month.

The New Year and Lantern Festival have become increasingly secularized as they have lost their Buddhist connotations. However, the Ghost Festival, Buddha, and Guanyin's birthdays have retained their religious significance and are still commemorated (Yü, 2020).

Famous temples and monasteries in China include the White Horse Temple in Luoyang, the Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai, the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, the Lama Temple and Miaoying Temple in Beijing, the Shaolin Temple in Zhengzhou, the Famen Temple in Baoji, the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an, and the Guiyan Temple in Wuhan.

6. Buddhism as Tools for Modern Chinese Diplomacy

In the history of China, anti-Buddhist justifications have been raised from ancient times to modern times. Though China is a major land for Buddhism and its development, it has faced criticism repeatedly. It has repeatedly encountered opposition and persecution throughout history, from emperor-ruled China to the People's Republic of China and from Confucian officials. Many Buddhist Temples were transformed into government buildings and barracks once the Republican government was established in 1912 (Yü, 2020). The suppression of religious activity began in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established. All religions, including Buddhism, were declared to be "feudal superstitions" during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976.

Following Leader Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, restrictions on religion were loosened. Certain religious activities and practices were recognized as lawful in Document No. 19, published by the CPC in 1982 and titled "The Basic View-point and Policy on Religious Affairs during the Socialist Period of Our Country."

The religious question, however, will continue to exist over a long period within certain limits, will continue to have a definite mass nature, to be entangled in many areas with the ethnic question, and to be affected by some class struggle and complex international factors. This question, therefore, continues to be one of great significance which we cannot ignore. The question is this: can we handle this religious question properly as we work toward national stability and ethnic unity, as we develop our international relations.

-The Document No. 19, The Basic View-point and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period.¹

¹ See full text of the Document in https://www.globaleast.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Document_no._19_1982.pdf Retrieved in 2022/12/28

The Lin Biao-Jiang Qing Clique, an anti-revolutionary group, accepted the "leftist errors" during the Cultural Revolution in the document. The CPC third Plenary Session of the 11th Party Central Committee corrected the guiding principle and policy toward the religion question and allowed Buddhist and Daoist temples and other religious sites to reopen following the dissolution of the antirevolutionary clique. Scholar Chün-fang Yü, Ph.D in religion specializing in Chinese Buddhism, has pointed out four anti-Buddhist arguments in China in her book "Chinese Buddhism: A Thematic History."

1. Political discourse. The monastics' actions go against social norms and are detrimental to the stability and prosperity of the state.

2. Arguments from economics Farmers and weavers are not monastics. They are useless to society and unproductive. In fact, they are a drain on the state because they do not pay taxes and are exempt from forced work.

3. Moral justifications The five Confucian essential human relationships—loyalty to the ruler, filial piety toward parents, conjugal harmony between husband and wife, fraternity among brothers, and reliability among friends—are violated by monastics who live celibate lives separate from society. The bond between fathers and sons is the one that critics focus on out of the five. Monks are unfilial because they live celibate lives.

4. Chauvinistic justifications Buddhism is a foreign religion, and the Buddha is a "barbarian." Ancient sages made no mention of Buddhism. It might be appropriate for barbarous foreigners, but not for Chinese.

Though China has dealt with anti-Buddhism in history, it has always considered Buddhism a tool of diplomacy. As the 19 document states, "Our policy is to forge friendly worldwide religious ties while firmly resisting attempts by adversarial foreign religious forces to infiltrate our society." China takes Buddhism as an advantage in practicing its modern diplomacy. Buddhism serves as a competitive tool in China-India diplomacy, with China using it tactically and India incorporating spiritual elements, but China may shift to long-term normative use in international socialization scenarios (Scott D. , 2016).

In expanding Chinese diplomatic ties with other nations, Buddhism has played a significant role. International relations between China and Singapore were aided by Buddhism. Buddhism served as a weapon for informal diplomacy between Singapore and China before establishing diplomatic ties and the lack of official diplomatic channels between the two countries. Thus, it is possible to view Venerable Hong Choon's religious tours as a type of informal diplomacy intended to strengthen ties between the two nations via Buddhism. He traveled to China eight times between 1982 and 1990 (Chia, 2008). Buddhism plays a major role in influencing international relations and China's foreign policy strategy, making it a valuable "soft power" source in China's foreign policy (Ponka, 2017). Buddhism has significantly impacted modern China, especially in attempts to make Buddhist and Marxist ideas compatible (Yu, 2016). Through transregional and global processes of influence and conflict, Buddhists and Buddhist-inspired practices and ideas have played a significant role in modern China.

By utilizing religious legacies to foster collaboration and trust beyond conflict, Buddhist contacts in China throughout the 1950s and 1960s contributed to the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations after the war. (Scott G. &, 2019). In 1966, the Chinese Buddhist Association hosted a dinner to greet Japanese Shingon Buddhists under the leadership of Juncho Onozuka, who had conducted religious rituals at Peking's main monastery (Welch, 1969). Buddhist religious and cultural legacies were mobilized to foster collaboration and confidence outside of the bloodshed of imperial conflicts, which helped normalize relations between Japan and the PRC (Scott G. &, 2019).

7. Conclusion

A historical development in Chinese culture is Buddhism. Its cycle of emergence and evolution is unique. Buddhist feelings, ceremonies, and religion are all products of the society's past. In China, Buddhism has a history dating back more than 2000 years. Buddhism continues to have a significant impact today on the Han race. Many people practice Buddhism throughout China's entire population, notably among the Han race, which comprises most of the country's population. Given that the great temples are recognized in CPC documents as cultural institutions with significant historical worth, China is currently safeguarding its cultural assets as a source of historical treasure.

Buddhism is currently being developed and preserved in China as a culture, an art form, and a body of work. Buddhism is also employed in "International Relations" as a tool. As with India, the historical basis of relations between Nepal and China is Buddhism. Buddhism is widely practiced in South and Southeast Asian countries, including Japan.

Since Buddhism was first introduced to China 2,000 years ago, the country has a long history of using faith to advance its "soft power" and become a significant role in the world economy. China, a growing global power, is attempting to increase its "soft power" by using different religions for diplomatic ends. This chapter will examine China's use of faith diplomacy throughout its premodern history before examining it in the present day as a component of China's soft-power strategy. The historical emergence of Buddhism and its growth, along with Confucianism and Taoism, as a tool of "soft power" throughout the many stages of Chinese civilization—from pre-imperial times to the present.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

The author did not receive any financial assistance from any institution.

Notes on Author

Bidhur Dhakal is a seasoned journalist who has made notable contributions to various media outlets in Nepal and has served as a diplomatic correspondent. He is a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) at East China Normal University (ECNU) in Shanghai, China. His doctoral research focuses on the "Hedging Strategy of Small States from the Lens of Schizoanalysis." Dhakal's research interests span a wide range of global topics, including global politics, foreign affairs, geopolitics, Nepal-China-India Relations, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Media. His commitment to understanding and analyzing these areas demonstrates his dedication to contributing valuable insights to international relations.

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