

How Did the Silk Road Help Buddhism Spread from India to China and Its Influence from 5th Century CE to 10th Century CE ?

Ziwen Wang

Harrow Appi International School, Hachimantai, Japan
ziwen.wang27@harrowappi.jp

Abstract. This work examines how the Silk Road functioned not only as a trade route but also as a cultural and religious network that enabled the spread of Buddhism from India to China between the 5th and 10th centuries CE. By analyzing historical records, pilgrim accounts, and archaeological evidence, this paper shows how monks, merchants, and rulers played vital roles in translating, adapting, and embedding Buddhist teachings in Chinese society. In this work, particular attention is given to key figures such as Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing, as well as to significant sites including the Mogao Caves, Kizil Caves, and Bezeklik Caves. These sources demonstrate the dynamic process of cultural adaptation in which Indian Buddhist traditions were blended with Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, and political structures. The findings reveal that Buddhism not only spread geographically but also transformed into a uniquely Chinese form, deeply integrated into literature, art, and governance. This research highlights the Silk Road's importance as a medium of cultural transformation and shows that Buddhism's spread was a process of active negotiation and adaptation rather than passive diffusion.

Keywords: Silk Road, Buddhism, Cultural exchange, Translation, Archaeology

1. Introduction

In the fifth through the tenth centuries AD, Buddhism moved from its birthplace in India to emerge as a significant religious force in China. This process is complex and dynamic due to its geography, political, and religious adaptation. The major way of Buddhism expanding into China was the Silk Road, a complex web of trading routes connecting East Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia together. The Silk Road was well known for all the important goods [1,2] that each country traded with each other, such as silk, spice, etc. However, it also played an important role in the transmission of culture and religions, including Buddhism.

2. Historical transmission of Buddhism

2.1. Pilgrims and textual transmission

The reason why these religious ideas are able to spread around is due to the presence of monks, merchants, and pilgrims who spread these religions by the provision of sacred texts, culture, art, and philosophical concepts to new areas from their origin, and so did the spread of Buddhism from India to China in the 5th to 10th century. Also, while these religions travel to other places, it with undergo a process of metamorphism; these religious ideas may be understood differently by the monks, and they may be adapted differently in different places, due to their interaction and combination with local tradition and culture.

The first-hand accounts from Buddhist pilgrims gave us the essential clue to follow this discrepancy of these religions. However, unlike religious postmen, they bore a much more vital missionary role and significance as interpreters and translators in the course of Buddhism's adaptation to new cultural spaces. The earliest were like one Faxian, a Chinese monk who made the journey there between 399-414 CE. His *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* is a description of the first-hand account of the areas traversed by him, which includes the major oasis kingdom of Khotan. The king of Khotan "is a great lover of Buddhism, and has erected many monasteries, endowing them liberally with their necessities" Faxian, trans. 1886 [3]. Here in this brief account, politics played a major role in supporting Buddhism in frontier places, thus enabling it to grow in the cultures around the Silk Road. At the same time, Faxian's narrative also mentions the arduous conditions that devotees faced while crossing mountains and passes. Consequently, distress brings out devotion and difficulties while transmitting Buddhism from miles and miles.

Almost two hundred years later, the Tang dynasty saw the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang's almost impossible expedition from 629 to 645 CE. His famous narrative, *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, provides precise accounts on geographical location, cultures, and Buddhist practices in Central Asia and India. He would describe Nalanda University as "a great seat of Buddhist learning, where thousands of monks gather to study scriptures and teach the dharma" [4]. It has been said that Xuanzang brought back over six hundred Sanskrit scriptures and then initiated translation into Chinese, which was nothing less crucial in bringing Chinese Buddhism to its culmination and change while expanding and further enriching it. Besides bringing in a myriad of Sanskrit scriptures during this period, India also witnessed a change of the religious scenario through other achievements made in the text section. This involves a wealth of translations from a variety of Sanskrit texts he brought back with him.

Yijing, who trekked through the peninsula in the latter half of the seventh century, in his *Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea*, detailed his significant reflections upon monastic discipline. He portrayed the stringency of observance of the Vinaya--monastic rules--in contrast with Asia's less assiduous discipline. "The monks in India observe the Vinaya rule with strict discipline, often denied in many monasteries," the passage reads as Yijing's voice [5]. His appeals for reform clearly suggest that the transmission of Buddhism was not solely textual and doctrinal, being also an institutionalization of continental customs and expectations.

The travelers' writings demonstrated that the Silk Road was not just a trade corridor but a vibrant space in which Buddhism was actively transmitted, translated, and metamorphosed. Religious devotion, scholarly motivation, and the imperative of translation goad travelers to transform and adapt Buddhism through his or her vocation as an agent who moves from one culture into another.

But that web was quite harrowing, ran through brutal deserts, over high mountains, winding around oases . Buddhism found its main heart in places such as Dunhuang, Khotan, or Turfan. The

very heart of Buddhism was expressed in the paths of the Silk Road. In such an ethnically diverse community, cultures had to merge under the banners of Buddhism. The ethnicity and languages appropriated were more in Sogdians, Tocharians, and others, making Buddhism a strong ultra-ethnic and multilingual religious culture.

2.2. Role of translation and adaptation

Also in the religious arena the Silk Road took a pluralistic form, housing several other religions along with Buddhism-Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and local beliefs among them. All of this served as a kind of adversarial counter as well as a promise of interaction, pushing Buddhism to adapt in order to be advantageous for an audience. One of the most important reasons Buddhism was able to spread into China was the process of translation. In the beginning, Buddhist texts were written in Sanskrit and sometimes in other Indian languages. Over time, these texts were translated into Chinese by the monks. This process made the teaching of Buddhism more understandable to people outside of India; the translators who worked on these texts are eminent monks such as Kumarajiva and later Xuanzang. They did more than simply convert words from one language to another; instead, they tried to reexpress the religious ideas in the Buddha's teachings in ways that made sense to the Chinese people. In order to do this, they drew on familiar Chinese traditions, connecting Buddhist ideas with Daoist and Confucian philosophy. Because of this translation, Buddhism did not feel like a foreign religion forced onto China. Instead, it became more natural and easier for Chinese society to accept. This blending of Indian religious ideas with Chinese cultural traditions was a key factor in the successful integration of Buddhism into China.

Therefore, the Silk Road was not only a physical route to trade goods, but also an intellectual and cultural network where Buddhism was both directly changed and adapted in a number of new contexts. Through the travels of pilgrims and monks, Buddhism was translated to China from India and took root in the heart of Chinese culture from the 5th to the 10th centuries CE.

3. Archaeological and artistic evidence

These physical remains of Buddhism trace the historic dispersal and transformation of the religion throughout this time period most convincingly, that is, along the length of the pilgrimage routes stretching across Asia. While the itineraries and thought patterns of the pilgrims elucidate the detailed journeys, the caves, murals, sculptures, and manuscripts present at the archaeological sites highlight the adaptation of Buddhism to prevailing and prevailing artistic and cultural forms. What survived in a material form necessarily bore the traces of the encounter between Buddhism and the inhabitants of any given place and, oftentimes, between Buddhism and those holding political power. It spoke volumes for the fact that Buddhism is very much alive and dynamic, and how it functioned within the Middle Asia frontier.

3.1. Mogao Caves and the diamond sutra

The Mogao Caves [6] in Dunhuang are probably one of the most notable archaeological sites discovered along the Silk Road. Their position is at a crucial intersection of the northern and southern Silk Road routes, and they have about 500 caves; these range from residing at cliffs with beautiful murals, statues, and sometimes thousands of manuscripts. It used to be both a place for worship and a center for learning religions. The art found in these sites had a rich blend of influences like those coming from India, Central Asia, and China. These symbols reflected the way

in which the Silk Road enabled cross-cultural exchange. The early art of the Mogao Cave's mural reflects the taste of the Gandharan tradition from India: naturalistic human figures and hellenized features like drapery. These changes in art styles from other cultures result in a new Chinese art style. This simple shift from hard work to more mild brushwork and from more pronounced expressions to the subtle tone of color is in itself a commentary on the integration of Buddhism into its Chinese context.

One of the most noted seasonal finds in the Mogao Caves [6] was the diamond Sutra manuscript found closed in Cave 17, to 868 AD, dating it precisely. This book is now considered the world's oldest-dated printed material. The Diamond Sutra puts central Mahayana Buddhist doctrines most tersely, about emptiness and the impermanent nature of phenomena. The text presents how the study and transmission of Buddhist literature thrived on the Silk Road and thus brought it to Dunhuang. The murals contained here illustrate scenes of the sutra, Jataka tales concerning Buddha's past lives, and the images of Bodhisattvas who stand as embodiments of compassion and wisdom. They paid more attention to the murals, even though they were not just to make the environment more decorative, as didactic instructors who teach moral lessons as lessons of belief from diverse members of the community. The inscriptions found in these caves also stand to show that there were many languages written-possibly in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese-for the various groups that frequented this religious center.

3.2. Kizil Caves and early murals

Further on west of this region is located Xinjiang, which can now be noted as a very important transitional stage of the earliest Buddhist transmission. Dating from the 3rd to 8th centuries CE, the Kizil murals [7] provide a visual record of the earliest extant Buddhist cave paintings in Central Asia. Their style reveals obvious paradoxes too: heavily Indian Gupta features of sensuously elongated figures and detailed narrative scenes have, besides that, distinct elaborated connections with a Buddhist scriptural source. Yet the backgrounds and ornamental motifs depict Central Asian geometric patterns, revealing how artistic traditions blended together. These caves were lavishly funded by local rulers so that the caves had some force to be maintained and given a royal luster, symbolizing the legitimization of power of Buddhism in administering the regimes and also bringing together ethnically heterogeneous groups in people like Tocharians, Turks, and Sogdians, who resided in the same region.

3.3. Bezeklik Caves and religious diversity

Beyond Turfan, the grottoes at Bezeklik [8] provide an example of both religious diversity and interaction between art that characterized the environment of the ancient Silk Road. The Thousand Buddha Caves of Bezeklik [8] date back to the 5th and 14th centuries CE and explore the new fusion of Buddhist art and architecture of India, art of Iran, and the art of China. Buddhism is dominant, but a few cave paintings mingle this religion with other ideas and represent Manichaeism or Nestorian symbolism, underlining all that religious diversity in one place. This particular openness to native religious ideas and aesthetics is one reason why Buddhism managed to survive in this varied space.

Manuscripts and inscriptions discovered at these sites provide another layer of evidence. Thousands of Buddhist texts in multiple languages were found at Dunhuang, including sutras, commentaries, prayers, and ritual manuals. Their multilingual nature attests to ongoing translation efforts and the coexistence of different Buddhist traditions. The presence of prayer scrolls and

charms indicates Buddhism's penetration into daily life and popular belief systems. Inscriptions on statues and cave walls often record the names of donors and their offerings, reflecting the extensive patronage networks that sustained Buddhist institutions and involved rulers, merchants, and ordinary people alike.

Archaeological finds show Buddhism wasn't just brought into China but underwent creative modification through interaction with local cultures. Art styles evolved, with forms that more suited Chinese aesthetics, departing clearly from Indian prototypes. For example, the figure of Avalokiteshvara, a compassionate Bodhisattva, was gradually transformed in Chinese art to Guanyin, often portrayed as a female effigy embodying mercy and courtesy, deeply resonating with the indigenous cultural values of the Chinese. The swelling of cave temples along with monastic centers also sums up the growth of Buddhism as an institution, through which monasteries emerged as centers for religious life, education, charity, and cross-cultural exchange.

Yet there is something reparative about these archaeological sites and charismata. They give historical testament to a religion that was always being re-created and reformulated in virtue of the demands of new environments, new peoples, and new political circumstances. This substantiates and enforces the reported travel accounts of pilgrims, which in fact testify that the transfer of Buddhism was more of a process of cultural dialogue and transformation than of mere diffusion.

4. Political and cultural context

Also, the arrival of Buddhism in China was greatly shaped by the socio-political constraints of both the regions the Silk Road passed through and the Chinese imperial courts. Buddhism was closely related to the presence of political patronage, cultural negotiation, and institutional development, and by the end of this period, it had become the religious and social fabric of China. Far from settling in boldly as an import from an alien culture, Buddhism was enmeshed in society through mixed interactions with elite ruling groups, local cultures, and philosophical traditions.

4.1. Patronage of oasis states

Oasis states like Khotan and Turfan were crucial to this political-religious nexus. The rulers of these states intertwined Buddhism with their own faith and underlined it as a claim to power and an implied unification of their diverse populations. From inscriptions and other documents carved and carted away from the regions, it is understood that minor kings patronized the constructions of monasteries, stupas, and cave temples, signifying piety as well as political authority. Patronage kept frontier Buddhism laid in such contexts that had a mixture of both ethnicities and cultures. For example, from archaeological evidence from Khotan was found royal donations of built upon monastery walls, possibly in the Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts, attesting the support over centuries. By promoting Buddhism, the rulers were able to spread a common ideology that surpassed ethnic divisions among Tocharians, Sogdians, and the local people.

4.2. Tang dynasty and imperial support

The Tang dynasty (CE 618-907) was critical for Buddhism's flowering into the larger imperial context of China. The emperors of the Tang generally had a positive and appreciative view of Buddhism as a means of moral guidance and social cohesion. Translation projects, construction of temples, and support of monastic education were funded by the court. This incorporation of Buddhism in the imperial bureaucracy is evidenced by the statements made by the Emperor Taizong

concerning Buddhism in the Old Book of Tang [9] and the support he extended to accomplished monks, for example, Xuanzang. The proof of the endorsement of what Buddhism represents in itself lies in the involvement in these schools, in the way these monasteries would gain land and means essential in the process of being integrated into the bureaucracy, which would enable the sites to develop as significant social institutions, essential for education, welfare, and even diplomacy.

4.3. Conflicts and persecutions

Sometimes, the two made each other rather uneasy by these relationships being so close. As Buddhism grew in wealth and power, other scholars had much to say against it, confessively because it harked back to alien roots and threatened economic power. The clearest evidence of this is the Great Persecution of Buddhism in 845, led by Emperor Wuzong; the result of this measure was the closure of numerous monasteries and the confiscation of richly endowed monasteries throughout the realm. Despite such oppression, the roots of Buddhism in Chinese society have been too deep to reverse.

5. Cultural integration and legacy

Translation and adjustment of Indian teachings to Chinese thoughts have been part of the incorporation of Buddhism into Chinese culture. This was achieved by translators and thinkers like Kumarajiva and Xuanzang. They translated Sanskrit in elegant Chinese and explained their teachings in a way that made them consonant with Daoist and Confucian thought. An example of such a creative adaptation is the various spectrums of Chinese Buddhism itself, such as Chan. Chan Buddhism stood out among them, in as much as its somatization was given to meditation and direct realization over the study concerning a text, so that its realization may become comparable with spontaneity and naturalness of Daoism. There was, thus, a particular appeal of Buddhism to the intelligentsia and the elite.

Buddhist monks were centers of cultural as well as social life. Now they make it part of the duties of educational system context and medical care and charity to poor. Friendly contacts and trade with China and adjacent areas were also carried on among the Chinese and the monks. And that kind of thing also established the place of Buddhism in ordinary so-called quotidian life beyond strictly religious practice.

5.1. Chinese aesthetics and Buddhist art

Chinese aesthetics in Chinese Buddhist sculptures, paintings, and structures go together with Indian styles, revealing, through artistic means, the cultural transformation brought about by Buddhism. For example, the representation of Avalokiteshvara as Guanyin, as revealed through many images reflecting the mild facial features. On a bigger scale, the imperial court greatly demonstrated this religion through the construction of temples like Longmen and Yungang, where huge Buddha statues really showing religious power engendered by Buddhism.

5.2. Influence on literature and philosophy

The influence that Buddhism had on Chinese literature and philosophy [10] was also a seasoning that molded them to themes familiar with impermanence, suffering, and enlightenment. It is this cultural aftermath that made Buddhism part and parcel of the intellectual and popular life of China.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the 5th to 10th centuries, the spread of Buddhism from India to China was an exciting story emboldened by movement, adaptation, and transformation through the vast networks formed by the Silk Road. This ancient commercial nexus was more than just a place for merchandise to move; it was the spirited lane of ideas, religions, and customs. And some heroic people like Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing carried the faith of the Buddha over mountains and deserts. Their writings, with an abundance of references, have provided eyewitness accounts of Buddhist communities and various meanings. In the physical evidence of a very rich archaeological heritage in sites like Mogao Caves [6], Kizil Caves, and Bezeklik [8] Caves cultural and artistic evolution of Buddhism can be seen as very representative of the recombination of Indian, Central Asian, and Chinese influences [11,12].

References

- [1] Whitfield, Susan. *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004.
- [2] Foltz, Richard. *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010.
- [3] Faxian. *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms (Fo Guo Ji)*. Translated by James Legge. In *The Buddhist Records of the Western World*, vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886.
- [4] Xuanzang. *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions (Da Tang Xiyu Ji)*. Translated by Samuel Beal. London: Trübner & Co., 1884.
- [5] Yijing. *A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea (Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan)*. Translated by Liang. 7th century. Reprinted in *Buddhist Monastic Traditions*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr., 1995.
- [6] Dunhuang Mogao Caves. *Archaeological reports and collections of manuscripts and murals dated from 4th to 14th centuries CE*. Dunhuang Academy, Dunhuang, China.
- [7] Kizil Caves. *Archaeological excavations and studies of murals and sculptures from 3rd to 8th centuries CE*. Xinjiang Autonomous Region Museum, Urumqi, China.
- [8] Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves. *Archaeological site near Turpan, Xinjiang, with murals and inscriptions from 5th to 14th centuries CE*. Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology, Urumqi, China.
- [9] *Old Book of Tang (Jiu Tang Shu)*. Compiled by Liu Xu and others, 945 CE. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975.
- [10] Sharma, Arvind. "The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Thought." In *Buddhism and Chinese Culture*, edited by Arthur F. Wright, 1973.
- [11] Snyder, Geoffrey. *Buddhism in Central Asia*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1985.
- [12] Beckwith, Christopher I. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.