CHAPTER 4

Buddhism, Aristocracy, and Alien Rulers:
The Age of Division 220–589

The centuries that separated the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 and the reunification of China by the Sui dynasty in 589 were marked by political division and governments unable to gain firm control of their territories. After several decades of rivalry among three contenders (the Three Kingdoms, 220–265), China was briefly reunified by the Western Jin (265–316). After the Jin fell to internal squabbling, non-Chinese tribes entered the fray, and China entered a prolonged period when the north was controlled by alien rulers and the south by a transplanted court of emigré aristocrats. The weak governments of this period rarely tried to curb tendencies towards social inequality, and during these centuries aristocracy developed at the top of society and personal bondage expanded at the bottom. Confidence in the Confucian view of the social and political order declined and people in all walks of life found hope in religions promising salvation and transcendence, not only Daoist cults but also the newly introduced Buddhist religion, which vastly expanded China's intellectual and religious imagination.

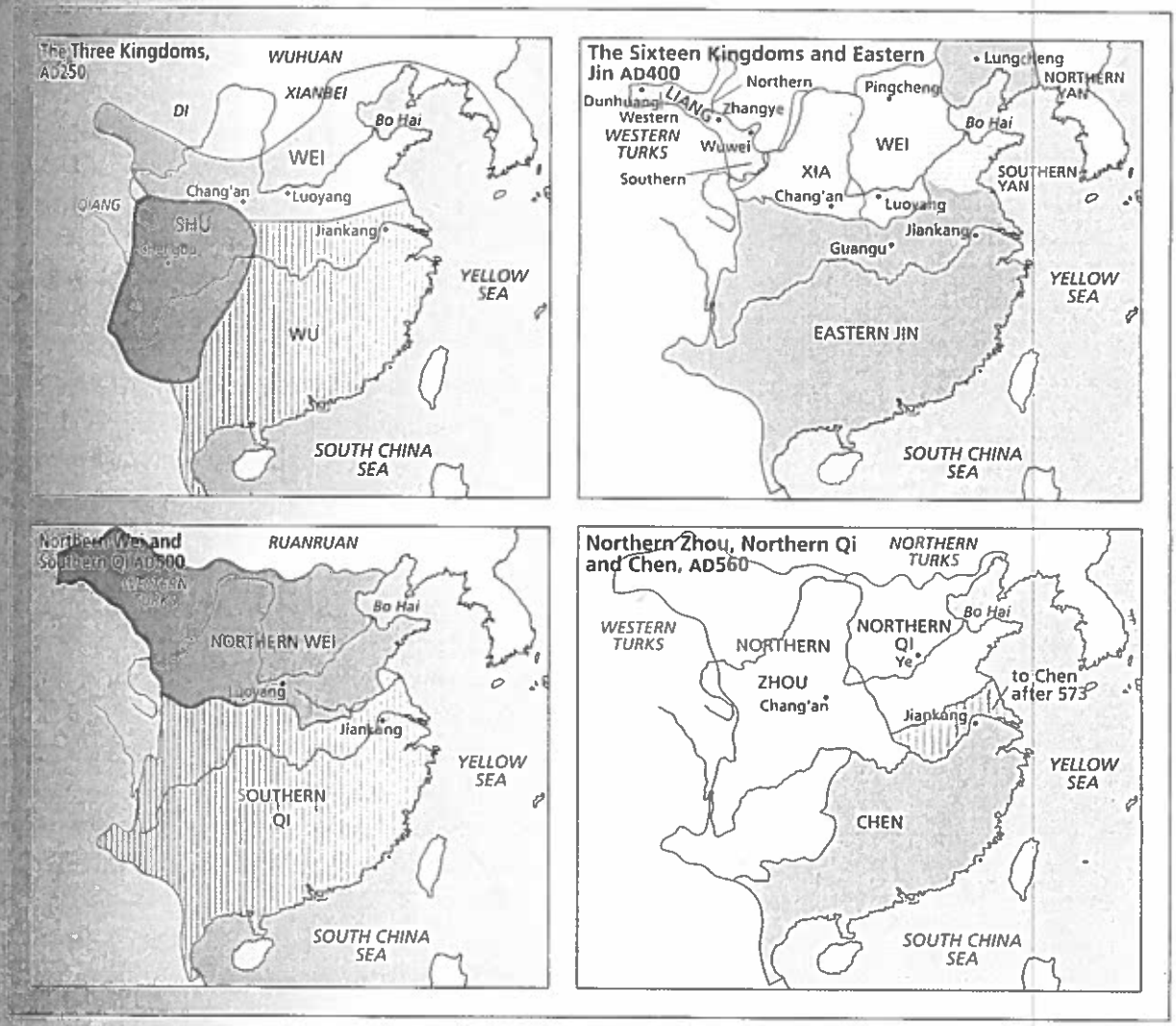
THE THREE KINGDOMS AND JIN DYNASTY

During the period between the Han and Tang dynasties, short-lived courts were the norm, and even these courts never had the degree of control over society that the Han or Tang did at their heights. Tendencies of Chinese social organization and culture that strong governments usually curbed were able to develop with relative freedom – for better and for worse.

The political history of these three-and-a-half centuries is one of the most complex in Chinese history. It began when the generals assigned by the Han government to put down the rebellion of the Yellow Turbans became stronger than the throne and fought among themselves for supremacy. By 205 the poet–general Cao Cao had made himself dictator of north China. Instead of trying to curb the growth of hard-to-tax local magnates, Cao Cao developed alternative ways to supply his armies. He carved out huge state farms from land laid waste by war and settled landless poor and captured rebels to work them and thus made the state the greatest of all landlords. He also established military colonies for hereditary military households whose men would both farm and fight. For his cavalry, Cao Cao recruited Xiongnu tribesmen in large numbers, settling many in southern Shanxi. After his death in 220, his son Cao Pei formalized the family's dominance by forcing the abdication of the last Han emperor and founding the Wei dynasty at the old Han capital of Luoyang.

Two rival claimants to the throne had sufficient local power to thwart Cao Cao's and Cao Pei's efforts to build a government on the scale of the Han. In the central and lower Yangzi valley and further south, the brothers Sun Ce and Sun Quan established the state of Wu, supported by the great families that had settled in this frontier region, which was still heavily populated by indigenous peoples. West in Sichuan a distant member of the Han imperial family, Liu Pei, established a stronghold, aided by the brilliant strategist, Zhuge Liang. Because Wei had more than twice the population of either of the other states as well as the largest army, it is not surprising that it eventually prevailed, defeating the Han state in Sichuan in 263. Two years later, however, the son of the victorious general forced the Wei emperor to abdicate in his favour, founding the Jin dynasty (later called Western Jin, 265–316). In 280, after a major naval campaign, the southern state of Wu was defeated. The Jin dynasty had thus succeeded in reunifying China,

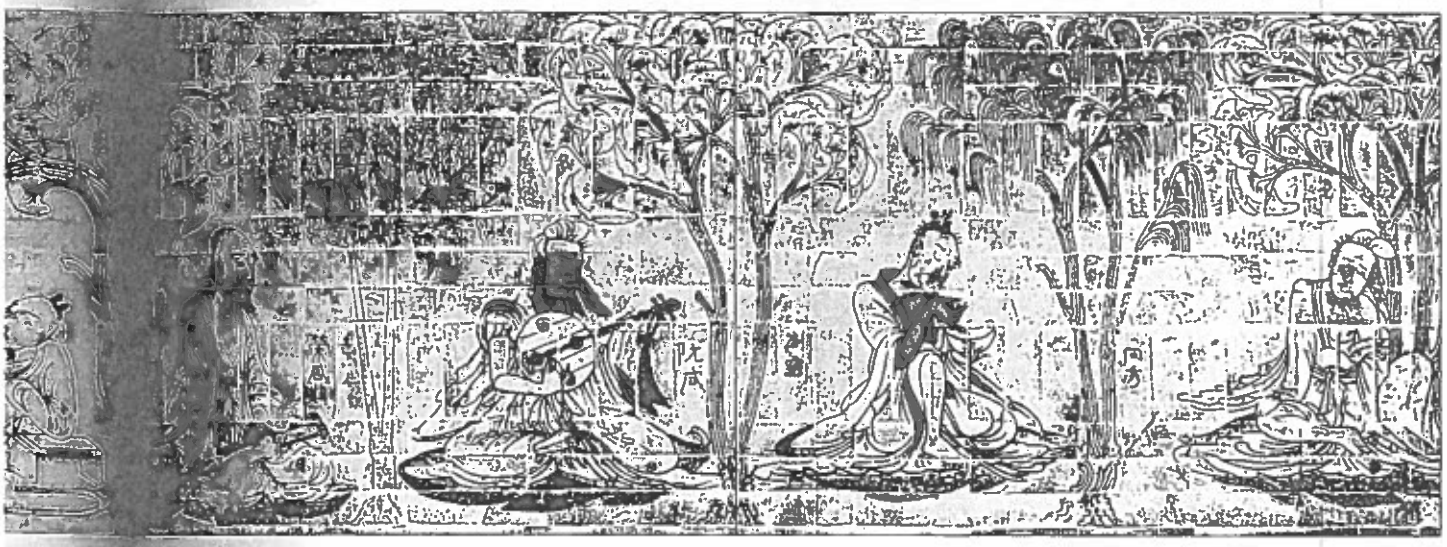
China was fragmented for most of the three and a half centuries after the fall of the Han, but no set of boundaries ever lasted very long. The states established in the south, while nominally holding huge territories, never had the military might of the strongest northern states, and before the end of the sixth century China was reunified by states originating in the northwest.



and for a brief interlude it seemed possible that the glories of the Han dynasty could be reattained.

During this century of military struggles, an atmosphere of alienation and personal indulgence pervaded elite circles. Confucian ideals of public service lost much of their hold, as the educated and well-off vied instead in extravagant and often unconventional living. 'Study of the Mysterious' captured the interests of the philosophically inclined. Books like the *Book of Changes*, the *Laozi*, and the *Zhuangzi* were reinterpreted, arguments swirling over metaphysical questions such as the meaning of 'nonbeing' and its relationship to 'being'. Clever repartee, called 'pure talk', was much in style, especially pithy characterizations of prominent personalities. Rather than participate in the often vicious clique struggles at court, many men expressed an abhorrence of political life with its elaborate conventions. A search for 'naturalness' and 'spontaneity' led to a burst of self-expression in the arts, especially poetry. Cao Cao, his successor Cao Pei, and Pei's younger brother Cao Zhi were all remarkable poets, important for developing the lyric potential of verse in lines of five syllables. Among the sophisticated aesthetes of this period were a group of gifted poets later immortalized as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. One of them, Ruan Ji, shocked his contemporaries by wailing in grief when an unmarried neighbour girl died, but eating meat and drinking wine on the day of his own mother's funeral. He summed up his attitude when someone rebuked him for talking to his sister-in-law: 'Surely you do not mean to suggest that the rules of propriety apply to me?' Such behaviour outraged conservative Confucians and autocratic rulers, and in 262 one of the Seven Sages, Xi Kang, was executed for perversion of public morals.

Although it had unified China, the Western Jin never succeeded in establishing an autocratic imperial institution, that is, one capable of preserving



Within a century of their deaths, the 'Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove' had come to be celebrated as prime exemplars of the individualistic and idiosyncratic artist. This rubbing of two sections of the bricks lining a fourth-century tomb excavated near Nanjing, Jiangsu province, depicts them engaged in conversation.

ultimate power for the emperor and preventing dissension and power struggles. The imperial family's power was threatened by the families of empresses, especially the Jia family, who were suspected of arranging the assassination of the previous empress and her family as well as more than one heir to the throne. Nor was it possible for the emperors fully to control the civil service. The system of recruitment to government posts that had been instituted by the Wei – the 'Nine Rank System' – had degenerated from a system of local assessments of character and talent into a procedure for assigning places in the bureaucracy according to the standing of the candidate's family. The Jin dynasty allowed further erosion of centralized imperial control by their policy of parcelling out enormous tracts of land to imperial princes. Gaining such resources spurred the princes' fratricidal instincts and culminated in a series of bloody struggles over succession. Each prince sought out allies, including generals and non-Chinese chieftains with their troops, and full-scale civil war raged in and near the capital between 291 and 305.

THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN DYNASTIES

The dissolution of the Jin into internecine war invited non-Chinese chiefs to stage a rebellion. During the second and third centuries, hundreds of thousands of Xiongnu and other northern peoples had been settled within China's political frontiers as an alternative to defending against their raids. Often recruited as soldiers or used as auxiliary troops, these formerly nomadic peoples, now generally settled pastoralists, were not easy to govern or assimilate. In 304 the sinified Xiongnu chief Liu Yuan declared himself king of Han. His son went on to sack the Jin capital at Luoyang in 311, sending its inhabitants fleeing in terror. Another Xiongnu leader assaulted Chang'an in 316, and less sinified chiefs, such as Shi Le and Fu Jian, soon joined the fray. For a period of over a century (known as the

Opposite
The introduction of stirrups, at first used mainly to make mounting a horse easier, in time greatly enhanced the mobility of mounted warriors. This 9-inch-tall ceramic tomb figurine, unearthed at Shashi in Hunan province, shows a horseman not taking full advantage of the stirrup.

Armour was worn by infantrymen, cavalrymen, and war horses in the frequent battles that marked the Age of Division. Its use is illustrated in this sixth-century battle scene on a wall of cave 285 at Dunhuang in Gansu province.

'Sixteen Kingdoms', 304–439), north China was a battleground and Chinese civilization seemed seriously threatened.

As warfare brought in its wake banditry and famine, rural communities all over north China built forts and organized self-defence forces, with power devolving to the local level even more than it had in the waning years of the Han. The commercial economy suffered and the circulation of money declined. A couple of million residents of north China packed up what movable property they had and fled southwards across the Yangzi. Even the wealthy and high-ranking, facing depredations and the unknown peril of alien rule, made the trek in huge numbers. At Jiankang (modern Nanjing) leading officials set a Jin prince on the throne, creating a government in exile. This Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) was followed by four other dynasties that ruled from Nanjing – the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen, collectively called the Southern Dynasties (420–589). These four short dynasties were all founded by generals who proved capable of holding the government together during their lifetime but not of assuring a successful transfer of power to their heirs. They possessed the desire to create imperial institutions but not the ability to concentrate power.

Part of the difficulty these rulers faced can be traced to the emergence of a hereditary aristocracy that entrenched itself in the higher reaches of officialdom. Much more so than in the Han period, these families judged themselves and others on the basis of their ancestors, and would only marry with other families of equivalent pedigree. They even compiled lists, complete with genealogies, of the most eminent families. By securing near automatic access to higher government posts through the Nine Rank system, the aristocrats were assured of government salaries and exemptions from taxes and labour service. Many were also able to build up great landed estates worked by destitute refugees from the north who were settled as serf-like dependants. At court, the aristocrats often set themselves at odds with the 'upstart' rulers, doing what they could to frustrate these emperors' efforts to appoint or promote whom they wished. But the aristocrats should not be looked on as foes of Chinese civilization. The men in these families saw themselves as embodying Chinese civilization, maintaining the high cultural accomplishments of the Han dynasty and the tradition of the scholar-official. The solidarity of these cultivated families provided a centre around which Chinese culture could adhere during a period when no state could serve that function.

Constructing a capital south of the Yangzi had a beneficial effect on economic development of the south. When Luoyang fell in 311, the south probably had only about 10 per cent of the registered population of the Jin (which did not include non-Chinese, indigenous people of the south who paid no taxes). To pay for an army and to support the imperial court and aristocracy in a style that matched their pretensions, the government had to expand the area of taxable agricultural land, whether through settling migrants or converting the local inhabitants into tax-payers. The south, with its temperate climate and ample supply of water, offered nearly unlimited possibilities for such development.

The courts at Nanjing repeatedly had to deal with challenges to their authority. The most destructive uprising began in 548, initiated by a would-be warlord from the north, Hou Jing, who gathered a huge army of the disaffected and set siege to the capital. By the time the city fell four months later, many members of the great families had starved to death in their mansions. Although a general soon declared a new dynasty (Chen), his control over outlying areas amounted to little more than the privilege of confirming local strongmen as his governors.

Meanwhile, the north was following a different trajectory. In the fourth century, rival warlords of many different ethnic groups fought for control, ousting each other whenever they could. The first to secure their position by finding ways to draw on the wealth of China's settled agriculture was the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei who established the (Northern) Wei dynasty (439–534). Originally from southern Manchuria, by the early fourth century the Xianbei occupied land in northern Shanxi province, which they used as a base to raid other tribes and Chinese settlements, bringing back captives, horses, cattle, and sheep. As they expanded into Chinese territory, they forced massive relocations of population to

bring deserted land back into cultivation and to supply the capital they built. In their desire to preside over the whole Chinese world, they turned to educated Chinese as experts in statecraft. It was expedient for them to employ Chinese officials and adopt the institutions they proposed, because the total number of Xianbei and other northern tribesman in their confederation could not have been more than a couple of million, but the Chinese, over whom they were trying to maintain military control, numbered twenty or thirty million or more.

It was on Chinese advice that in 486 the Northern Wei government undertook a major overhaul of its fiscal system, instituting an 'equal field' system reminiscent of Han efforts to tax individual cultivators and Cao Cao's military colonies and state lands. The Wei system was based on the premise that the state owned all land. Individual families were to be assigned 20 *mu* of permanent, inheritable land for growing mulberry and other trees plus lifetime allotments of crop land, the amount depending on their available labour; for instance 40 *mu* was allocated per able-bodied man (including slaves) and 30 per ox. Larger landholdings were only to be allowed for the families of officials. The memorial proposing this 'equal field' system argued that it would 'ensure that no land lies neglected, that no people wander off, that powerful families could not monopolize the fertile fields, and that humble people would also get their share of the land'. Even if the powerful were usually able to manoeuvre around the law, the government had asserted its power to assign and tax land, a key step towards building a fiscal base for a more intrusive form of government.

A few years later, Emperor Xiaowen (r.471–99) decided to transform his state into a true Chinese dynasty on the model of Han and Jin. In the 490s he moved the capital more than 300 miles south to the ruins of Luoyang and built a splendid new city there; he gave Chinese surnames to the Xianbei, taking the name Yuan ('origin') for the imperial house; he ordered the use of the Chinese language and Chinese dress at court, even by Xianbei; and he encouraged intermarriage between the Xianbei and Chinese elites. Within twenty-five years Luoyang had become a magnificent city with half a million people, vast palaces, elegant mansions, and over a thousand Buddhist monasteries. Many members of the Xianbei nobility became fully versed in Chinese cultural traditions, at home among the leading Chinese families.

The stability of this Luoyang-centred sino-foreign hybrid regime was brief. The Xianbei soldiers assigned to the northern frontier garrisons to fend off incursions by new occupants of the steppe such as the Ruanruan and Turks came to hate the sinified Xianbei aristocrats leading what seemed to them self-indulgent lives in the thoroughly Chinese atmosphere of Luoyang and in 524 they rebelled. Civil war ensued as those sent to suppress the rebels took to fighting each other. When Luoyang was sacked, some 2,000 officials were slaughtered.

After a decade of constant warfare, two principal rivals emerged, each controlling a claimant to the Wei throne. In 552 the fiction of Wei rule was abandoned in

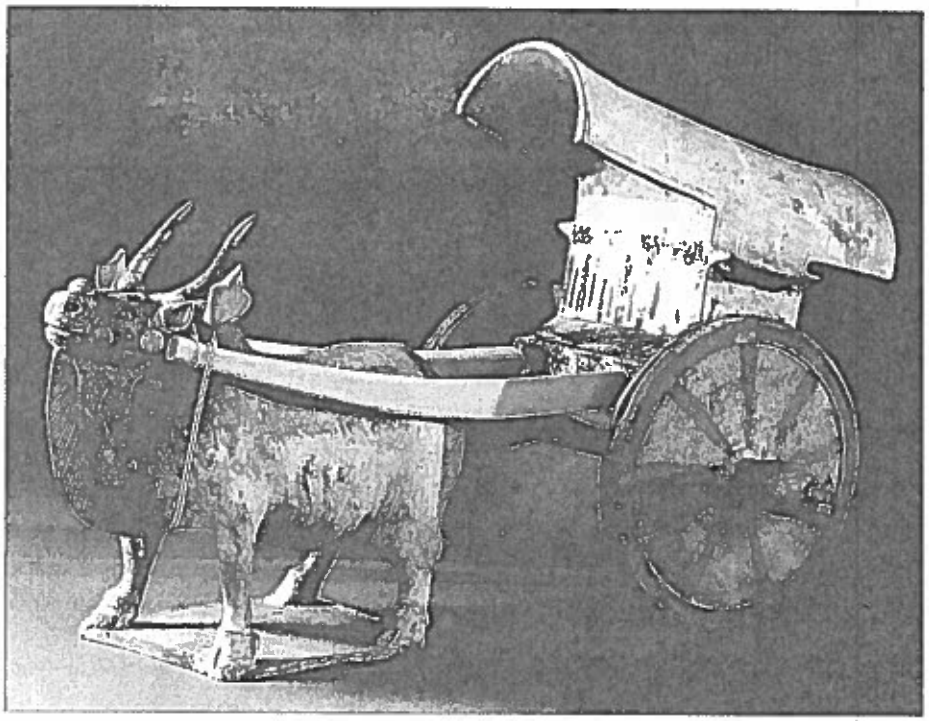
west and the (Northern) Qi dynasty (552–77) was established; in 557 the eastern powers followed suit and declared the (Northern) Zhou dynasty (557–81). Both courts suffered from ethnic tension between the sinified Xianbei, Chinese aristocrats, and unsinified warriors. In the northwestern court, not only was the law requiring Xianbei to take Chinese names rescinded, but Chinese officials were given Xianbei names. In 553 the northwestern court conquered Sichuan, until then held by the south. In 575 the Zhou court, through clever diplomacy, got the southern court of Chen to join in invading Qi. Qi was destroyed in 577, most of its territory going to Zhou, thus reunifying the north. The Zhou throne was in its turn usurped in 581 by one of its generals who declared the Sui dynasty. Before long he destroyed Chen to unify all of China (see Chapter 5).

Reunification was made possible by the introduction of a new military institution that allowed for expansion of the army without bankrupting the state. This was the divisional militia, an army of volunteer farmer-soldiers who served in rotation in armies at the capital or on the frontiers. By the 570s this divisional militia had been expanded to about 200,000 soldiers. Equipping soldiers had become quite expensive because cavalrymen needed not only horses but also armour for the men and horses to protect against arrows fired from powerful crossbows. Cavalrymen carried light crossbows that could shoot arrows 1,000 feet and infantry used ones with a range of 1,500 feet. Those defending or attacking city walls used larger, more powerful crossbows with a range of over 3,000 feet. The cavalrymen of the divisional militia had to provide their own horses, and presumably came from families that had long served in the military, while foot soldiers were recruited from better-off peasant families who supplied them in exchange for exemption from taxes. The cost of this army was also kept down by having the soldiers farm when not called up for training or campaigns. The divisional militia was also easier to co-ordinate and command than the military forces it replaced, most of which had been loyal only to their own officers.

CLIENTS, RETAINERS, SERFS, AND SLAVES

The Qin and Han dynasties had extracted the bulk of their revenue directly from agricultural producers. It followed that these governments continually had to strive to keep land and people from falling off the tax registers. The weaker governments that followed the Han were even less able to stop the poor from fleeing debt and tax collectors or the rich and powerful from amassing land and dependent labourers. The Age of Division thus witnessed an increase in the proportion of the population occupying servile statuses.

Demeaned status was not in itself new. By the late Zhou period a broad distinction was commonly made between ordinary 'good' people and base or ignoble people, the latter including those who had undergone mutilating punishments for crimes and those condemned to slavery as part of the punishment of a close rela-



Ox carts became a common means of transportation, an economical alternative to horse-drawn carriages. This ceramic model was excavated from a mid-sixth-century tomb in Taiyuan, Shanxi province.

tive condemned to death for a heinous crime. In addition, in late Zhou and Han times, those desperately impoverished might sell their wives and children to be household slaves or bondservants. The law codes, however, imposed severe penalties for kidnapping 'good' people and selling them as slaves. Perhaps few people thought the aborigines in the south counted as 'good' people, for in the Han and later they were a major source of slaves.

With the appearance of great landed estates and the creation of private armies from the Later Han period on, a whole variety of client statuses emerged. Many people voluntarily became dependants, despite the loss of status, because rich patrons could provide protection. Clients of local strongmen might till their land and turn out to help during battles; others were essentially private soldiers. Already in the third century the government gave some recognition to the widespread existence of such dependants by trying to limit acquisition of them to officials. The Jin government decreed that the highest-ranking officials could have a maximum of forty households of dependants free from taxation and labour service, and lower-ranking officials proportionally fewer, down to a minimum of ten households. These limits never seem to have been effectively enforced, however. During the Southern Dynasties, serf-like dependent households grew in number because many refugees accepted the status when they settled on estates.

The customs of the northern pastoral tribes reinforced the tendency towards increased incidence of serfdom and slavery. It was traditional for tribes to have both full members and slaves. When one tribe or confederation defeated another,

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such as karma and reincarnation. In this world view,

the source of their suffering; because they became enmeshed in the web of their attachments, their lives were inevitably filled with disappointments and anxieties. The way to put a stop to this process, he preached, was to live an ethical life (abstaining from the taking of life, for instance) and engage in spiritual exercises that enhance concentration and insight. Those who progress along this path can eventually escape the cycle of rebirth and enter nirvana, though it may take many lifetimes to reach that ultimate goal. Shakyamuni's most committed early followers left their families and made the quest for salvation the prime activity in their lives. After Shakyamuni's death, his disciples passed down his sermons orally, though after a few centuries these sermons were recorded, forming the basis of a huge corpus of scriptures called sutras.

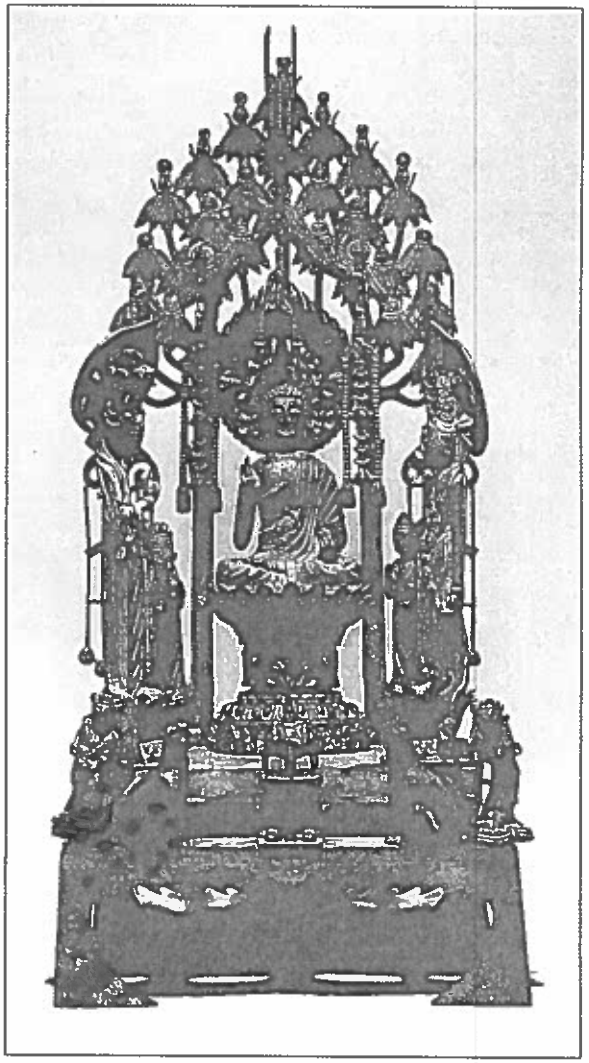
Buddhism arrived in China along with commercial goods, following trade routes from northern India through the Buddhist kingdoms of Central Asia such as Khotan and Kucha. At first the new faith was mostly a religion of foreigners. What Chinese encountered in the second, third, and fourth centuries was not a single creed, but an extraordinary array of ideas and practices, ranging from monastic discipline to magic, the worship of statues and relics, and techniques of meditation and ecstasy. Mahayana ('Great Vehicle') Buddhist philosophy was developing just as Buddhism was being introduced to China, and the Chinese learned of earlier and later theories at the same time. Mahayanists argued that pursuing the goal of nirvana was selfish compared to becoming a bodhisattva, a being of advanced spiritual standing who postponed entry into nirvana in order to help other beings.

By the end of the Western Jin, members of the upper levels of Chinese society had begun to be attracted to Buddhism. Those who decided to become monks had to give up their surname and take a vow of celibacy, thus cutting themselves off from the ancestral cult that tied the dead, the living, and the unborn. Yet many made this decision, and Buddhist philosophy came to be widely discussed in aristocratic circles. The alien rulers in the north also found Buddhism appealing. Devoted missionaries from Central Asia were quite willing to use feats of magic to convince these rulers that Buddhism was a more powerful religion than the shamanism they had traditionally practised. But Buddhism had other advantages to alien rulers; its universalistic claims did not put them at a disadvantage in relation to the Chinese in the way Confucian theories did, and thus offered a basis for unifying an ethnically mixed population.

To many Chinese, Buddhism seemed at first a variant of Daoism, which was understandable since Daoist terms were used by early translators to convey Buddhist ideas. For instance, the Mahayana concept of the fundamental emptiness of phenomena was identified with the Daoist notion of non-being. A more accurate understanding of Buddhism became possible after the eminent Central Asian monk Kumarajiva (350–413) settled in Chang'an and directed several thousand monks in the translation of thirty-eight texts. Chinese also began in this period to

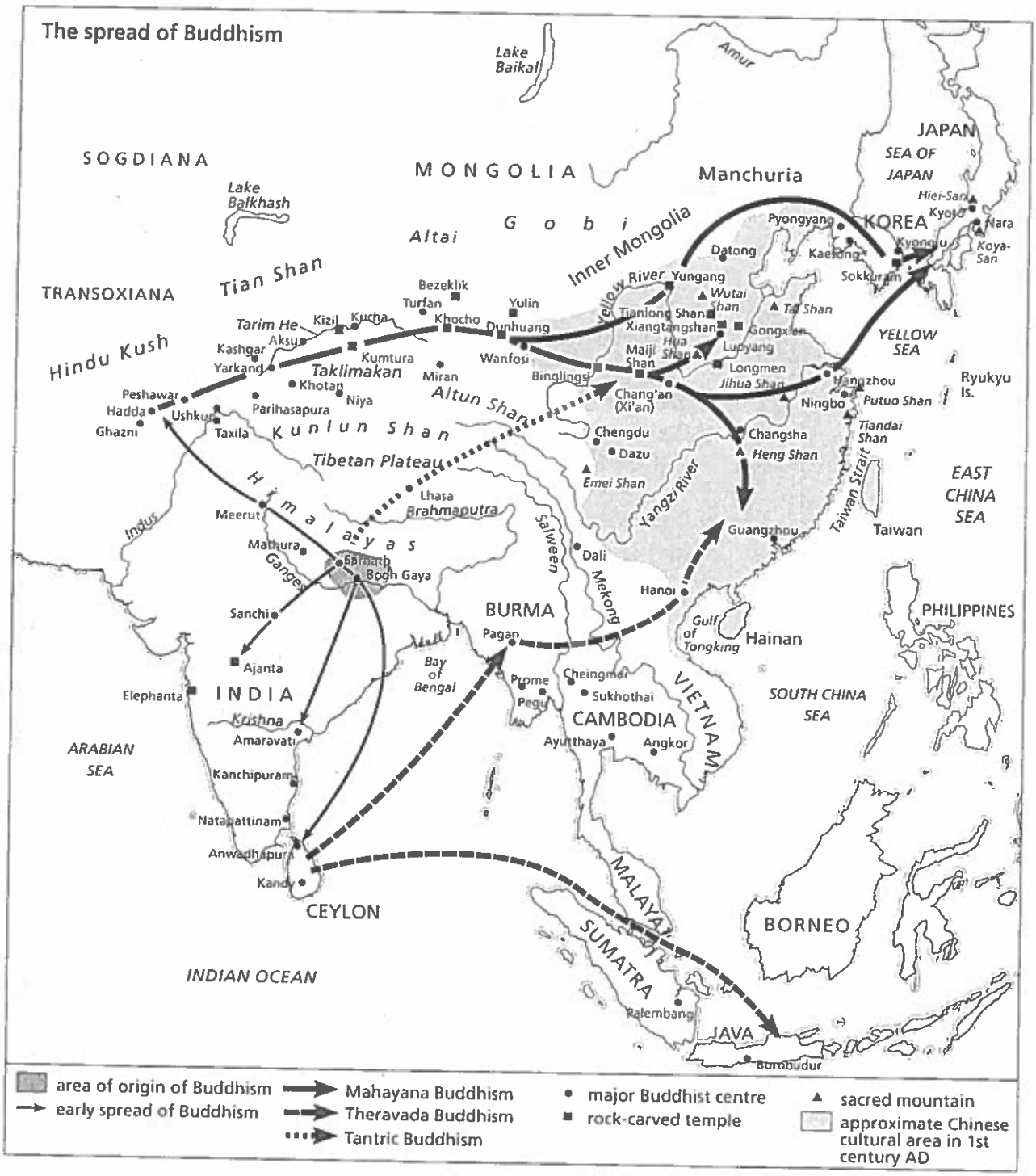
undertake the arduous journey to India to discover for themselves what might have been lost in translation. The first to leave a record of his trip was the intrepid Faxian, a monk who went to India overland in 399 via Kucha and Khotan, returning by the sea route via Sri Lanka and Sumatra in 414.

The steady adaptation of Buddhism to China can be illustrated through the career of the great teacher Huiyuan (334–417). Born in the north, in the period of greatest disorder, he still managed to get a basic education in Confucian and Daoist texts. It was hearing a sermon by a Chinese monk (himself a disciple of a Kuchan missionary) that led Huiyuan to decide to 'leave the family' himself. Eventually he moved to the south, founding a monastery on Mount Lu in Jiangxi province. He kept up a learned correspondence with Kumarajiva on points of doctrine but also interacted with lay followers whom he taught concentration techniques involving visualizing Buddhas. In 402 he assembled a group of both monks and lay people in front of an image of Pure Land, the western paradise of the buddha Amitabha. Buddhism thus was well on its way to becoming a religion of universal salvation with appeal to all the faithful. Two years later, in 404, Huiyuan wrote a treatise entitled *On Why Monks Do Not Bow Down Before Kings*, asserting the political independence of the Buddhist church. He also tried to assure the ruler that Buddhism was not subversive, arguing that lay Buddhists make good subjects because their belief in the retribution of karma and desire to be reborn in paradise make them act circumspectly. 'Those who rejoice in the Way of the Buddha invariably first serve their parents and obey their lords.'



Bronze altarpiece, depicting the Buddha Amitabha seated on a lotus throne and accompanied by disciples and attendants. The inscription indicates that it was commissioned in 593 by a group of eight older women (who identify themselves as mothers of named men) as a way to earn merit for members of their families.

Before the end of the Age of Division, Buddhism had gained a remarkable hold in China. It appealed to people in China above all because it addressed questions of suffering and death with a directness unmatched in native Chinese traditions. It offered a fully developed vision of the afterlife and the prospect of salvation, promising that all creatures might one day find blissful release from suffering. Its code of conduct, including the injunction against the taking of life, seemed to many to carry the principle of compassion to its logical extreme. Retreating to a monastery or nunnery offered a new alternative to the world-weary, one especially attractive to high-born widows. Indeed, Buddhism had particular appeal to women. Although incarnation as a female was considered lower than incarnation as a male, it was also viewed as temporary, and women were encouraged to



In its transit from one country to the next, Buddhism absorbed local ideas and art styles and passed them on in transmuted forms. Thus Greek-influenced art forms reached China in the form of Buddhist artistic traditions developed in the region of Afghanistan. In a comparable way, Chinese understandings of filial piety and ancestors reached Japan as part and parcel of sinified Buddhism with its 'merit ceremonies' for the salvation of ancestors.

pursue salvation on nearly equal terms with men. Moreover, Buddhism held out for women some androgynous symbols unlike anything in native Chinese traditions; bodhisattvas were conceived as neither male nor female, transcending differences of gender in addition to differences of class and ethnicity.

The landscape of China, too, was transformed by Buddhism as temples and monasteries were built in towns and remote mountains. The Buddhist church in north China reportedly had 6,478 temples and 77,258 monks and nuns by 477; south China was said to have had 2,846 temples and 82,700 clerics some decades later. The beauty of Buddhist art and architecture (see pages 106–7) appealed to people of all levels of education. Buddhism helped transcend class differences; inscriptions on Buddhist statues and temples show that Chinese and non-Chinese officials, local notables, commoners, and Buddhist clergy often all contributed to a project, working together. The scale of contributions was enormous; pious lay believers donated tracts of land and serfs in the conviction that donation of worldly wealth to the monastic community was an especially effective way to gain merit and to fulfil filial obligations to fathers and mothers. The most generous imperial patron was Wudi of Liang (r. 502–549), who banned meat and wine from the imperial table, built temples, wrote commentaries on sutras, and held great assemblies of monks and laymen, one of which attracted 50,000 people. To raise money for Buddhist establishments, he had himself held 'hostage' until those at court raised huge sums to get him freed.

Not everyone, of course, was pleased by the many-faceted success of Buddhism. Resentful Daoists and Confucians denounced many Buddhist ideas and practices as immoral or unsuited to China. Monks' practices of shaving the head and cremating the dead they decried as violations of the body, not allowed in Confucianism. Even worse was celibacy, for Mencius had stated that the ultimate unfilial act was failure to provide one's ancestors with an heir. The refusal of monks to pay homage to the ruler, as well as their failure to contribute to the tax rolls, were depicted by critics as threats to the well-being of the state. Such critics argued that the great sums spent on construction of temples, statues, and ceremonies were a drain on the economy, impoverishing the people and thus indirectly the state. To rebut such criticisms, and to overcome resistance on the part of potential converts, Buddhist apologists argued that their religion was basically compatible with Chinese values. It was the utmost expression of filial piety, they argued, to free a parent from the suffering of purgatory by performing pious acts in his or her name. By praying for the welfare of the ruler and the population, they argued, monks were aiding the state, not injuring it.

Even rulers who accepted these arguments saw some need to set rules for the Buddhist establishment, since it took so much land off the tax registers. Rulers generally consented to making monastic lands inalienable and free from taxation and to exempting monks from labour service, but in return they wanted guarantees that monks were indeed pious and learned, not just tax-evaders. Twice

Tao Yuanming and the art of Chinese poetry

The classical Chinese language, with its tones and abundant rhymes, was well suited to rhymed verse. The Chinese script is similarly conducive to poetry-writing because it stimulates visual associations in ways that purely phonetic scripts do not. Perhaps for these reasons poetry was from early times the central literary art in China. During the age of Confucius, envoys and philosophers alike quoted the *Book of Songs* in their speeches and essays, not only to demonstrate their education but also to make their points more effectively. During Han times the scholarship surrounding this classic emphasized the connection between poetry and the expression of emotion. Poetry is what happens when emotions are stirred, commentators explained, and a sensitive reader of poetry can perceive through a poem the state of mind of the writer. The art of poetry reached great heights in the aesthetically inclined aristocratic society of the period of division, and poets came to play a distinctive cultural role as exemplars of the complex individual, moved by conflicting but powerful emotions.

Tao Qian, better known as Tao Yuanming (365–427), was one of the first poets to create such a persona. From the south (modern Jiangxi province), Tao had an inconsequential political career, never holding any post very long. Once, it is told, he quit his post rather than entertain a visiting inspector, objecting, 'How could I bend my waist to this village buffoon for five pecks of rice!' On some occasions he expressed fierce ambition, at other times a desire to be left alone to follow the dictates of his heart. By the age of forty he quit government service altogether and supported himself by farming.

Tao's extant corpus includes more than 100 pieces, many of which could be considered philosophical, tinged with such Daoist sentiments as 'excessive thinking harms life', 'nothing is better than to trust one's true self', or 'propriety and conventions, what folly to follow them too earnestly'. Although he celebrated the quiet life, Tao was not a hermit who withdrew from friends and family. In his poems he expressed his enjoyment of books, music, and wine. 'I try a cup and all my concerns become remote. / Another cup and suddenly I forget even heaven. / But is heaven really far from this state? / Nothing is better than to trust your true self' (from 'Drinking Alone in the Rainy Season'). Tao Yuanming

northern rulers were swayed by the more virulent anti-Buddhist rhetoric to initiate persecutions of Buddhism. In 446–52 and again in 574–79, orders were issued to close the monasteries and to force Buddhist monks and nuns to return to lay life. No attempt was made in these or subsequent persecutions to suppress private Buddhist beliefs, however; the state never sponsored any sort of inquiry into people's beliefs, nor did it ever insist that its officials renounce Buddhism. Moreover, both of these persecutions lasted only to the end of the reign, and the next occupant of the throne made generous amends.

DAOIST RELIGION

The development of Buddhism in China as a higher religion – a religion with a body of sacred texts and a clergy expert in them – coincided with and helped stimulate the emergence of Daoism as a higher religion. Daoist religion drew inspiration from the quietistic Daoist philosophy of the Zhou period, but was not simply an extension of it. It drew as well from folk religion (worship of local gods along with exorcistic and mediumistic techniques for dealing with them) and from elite traditions related to the pursuit of longevity and immortality. Daoism as an organized communal religious movement began in the second century AD, when the

also idealized the farming life, describing its pleasures as a genuine alternative to public service. In 'On Returning to My Garden and Fields', he portrayed himself as a contented rustic:

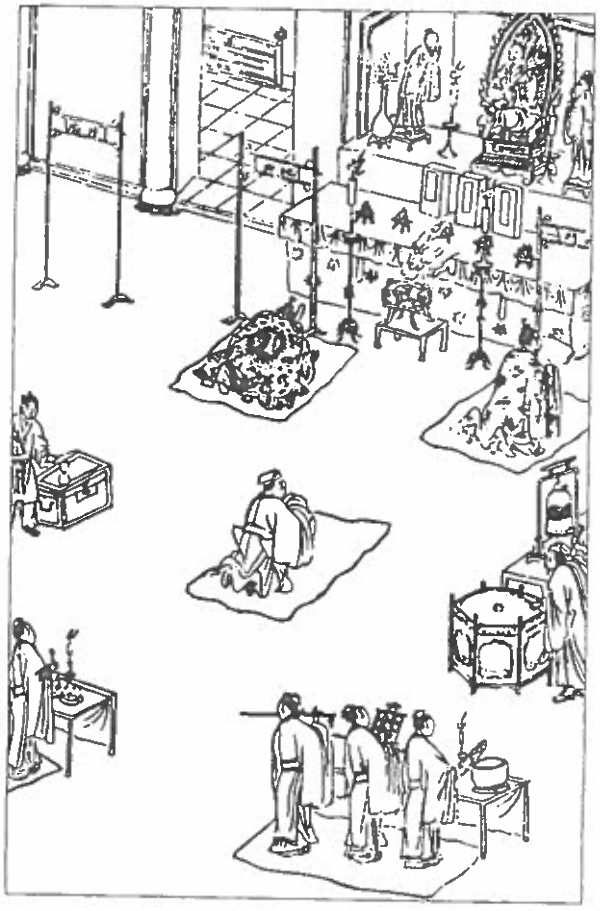
> Since youth I have not fit the common mould,
> Instinctively loving the mountains and hills.
> By mistake I fell into the dusty net
> And was gone from home for thirty years.
> A bird in a cage yearns for its native woods;
> A fish in a pond remembers its old mountain pool.
> Now I shall clear some land at the edge of the
> southern wild
> And, clinging to the simple life, return to garden
> and field,
> To my two-acre lot,
> My thatched cottage of eight or nine rooms.

Chinese painters over the centuries frequently depicted Tao Yuanming, finding in his life a potent symbol of the individual able to withdraw from active political concerns and find satisfaction in simple pleasures. Painting on silk by Chen Hongshou (1599–1652).

Han order was losing its hold in the countryside. Two religious leaders, Zhang Jue, the leader of the Yellow Turbans, and Zhang Daoling, the first Celestial Master, were able to harness popular yearnings for a new and better age into major religious movements. Operating in different parts of the country, both built up followings as faith healers and set up organizations of subordinates to supervise their adherents. Zhang Jue and his followers were crushed soon after they revolted in 184, but Zhang Daoling and his sect survived in Sichuan.

The strand of Daoism related to the pursuit of immortality was already very old at the end of the Han. The First Emperor of Qin and the Han emperor Wudi had both consulted experts in the arts of extending lifespans. The Daoist pursuit of longevity was phrased in terms of enhancing the body's yang energy, thus reversing the natural flow towards death. Through special techniques (such as breath control, restricted diets, sexual techniques, and the use of elixirs, herbs, and talismans) a person could collect and refine the yang energies in the body, transforming a heavy mortal body into a light immortal one.

During the Age of Division, Daoism acquired a body of scriptures that rivalled the Buddhist sutras. During the years 364–70 two men, father and son, had a series of visions of a group of immortals from the heaven of Supreme Purity, a



Daoist religion continued to flourish in later dynasties, and Daoist priests frequently conducted grand ceremonies. This illustration from a 1618 edition of a novel shows a Daoist priest performing a ceremony before an altar with statues, candles, and incense burners. Musicians are in attendance, and the man who commissioned the ritual is kneeling in the centre.

realm loftier than any with which the Celestial Masters had communicated. They learned from these immortals that demonic forces would cleanse the earth of evildoers to prepare it for the descent from heaven of a new universal ruler. Some of the revealed texts show a thorough familiarity with Buddhist thought, including notions of predestination and reincarnation; they also contain much alchemical lore. Within a few decades, other revelations resulted in the Lingbao scriptures, these ones containing elaborate liturgies for rituals. Then in 415 in the north, Kou Qianzhi, a Daoist priest in the line of the Celestial Masters, received revelations from Laozi himself. Laozi charged him with the task of reforming Daoism, eliminating sexual rites and other practices offensive to the high gods. The huge canon of scriptures that Daoism acquired in these ways was generally kept secret from the uninitiated, unlike the widely circulated Buddhist sutras.

Over the course of the Southern dynasties, Daoism developed institutions similar to Buddhist monasteries. By the end of the Age of Division, Buddhism and Daoism were in competition with each other for the patronage of ordinary Chinese in the cities and the countryside. In this competition, Daoists claimed that they had better spells, more potent hygiene techniques for achieving immortality, and more control over malevolent local gods. Buddhists claimed that they had loftier principles and better techniques for attaining salvation and helping deceased loved ones achieve better rebirths. Both religions tried to accommodate popular belief and tended to accept local deities as lesser figures in their pantheons but rejected the practice of making offerings of meat to gods of any sort. In this period and for centuries to come, more Chinese would become Buddhist clergy than Daoist clergy, and more Buddhist temples were constructed than Daoist ones, but both religions developed through interaction with each other and with Chinese political authorities and lay society.

DIFFERENTIAL REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By the mid sixth century, China had been politically divided north and south for over two centuries, a situation that allowed society and culture in each region to go their own ways.

The aristocratic families in the north and the south developed distinctive styles. In the north, eminent Chinese families, generally well entrenched in the countryside in places they had lived for centuries, put emphasis on their preservation of Confucian learning and their embodiment of Confucian traditions of

family ethics and rituals. They sought substantive posts in the government not only out of a Confucian sense of duty but also because such service offered prestige, power, and connections to elite families from other parts of the country. They spent much of their careers in the provinces, often starting near home where access to entry-level positions was nearly automatic, then rising to posts like prefect that required commanding troops. At court, however, northern aristocrats were expected to exhibit mastery of the classics and histories. Many were quite learned, like Wei Shou, the scion of an eminent northeastern family, whose 114-chapter history of the Wei dynasty provides full accounts of both the Xianbei and the Chinese leaders and even an astute history of Buddhism and Daoism.

The practical experience of these high-ranking Chinese families made them a valuable asset to the northern rulers intent on state-building. In the south, by contrast, the families of highest prestige were ones who had settled there as homesick refugees nostalgic for the cultural life of the Wei and Western Jin eras. With government salaries nearly guaranteed, they were free to cultivate the arts. Witty conversation, wine, and poetry were all characteristic of the cultural life of the aristocrats in Nanjing. The 'pure talk', which in its early stages had concentrated on the analysis of individuals' characters, had gradually been extended to include probing the essential features of literary, artistic, and philosophical works. Literary criticism flourished in an environment where taste was a matter of much importance. In about 530 a prince of the Liang dynasty compiled an anthology, the *Selections of Literature*, containing carefully selected examples of thirty-odd genres of prose and verse. Calligraphy and painting similarly benefited from the concern with individual expression and aesthetics. Wang Xizhi, taken by many to be the greatest calligrapher of all time, drew inspiration from Daoism with its emphasis on the natural and spontaneous. His younger contemporary, Gu Kaizhi, became a master of figure painting. Interest in mountains where immortals dwelled – as well as general Daoist interest in nature – led to the beginning of landscape painting. Xie He, in the early sixth century, enunciated standards by which paintings should be judged, such as the degree to which they are imbued with vital force and the strength of the brushwork employed. Thus painting and calligraphy came to be seen as carrying intellectual content in a way not true of the decoration on ceramics, lacquerware, or textiles.

To northerners, southern aesthetes seemed effete. And even some southerners saw how the pursuit of aesthetic values could deteriorate into an empty preoccupation with style. Yan Zhitui complained that many young men in aristocratic families knew how to perfume their garments and powder and rouge their faces, but could not compose a poem for a court feast. In his view their vacuity stemmed from too sheltered a life; they could live off official salaries and never know anything about how grain was grown. His portrayal of the Nanjing aristocracy makes it sound not unlike the aesthetically inclined aristocracy of medieval Japan depicted in the *Tale of Genji*.

The political separation of north and south, thus, was not inimical to cultural advance, and may even have helped foster the maturation of Buddhism. The centres of Buddhist learning in the north were in closer contact with Central Asia, and awareness of the foreign origins of Buddhism was kept alive through the active and earnest efforts at translation. In the south, which had no direct overland connection to Central Asia, effort was directed instead toward the sinification of Buddhism and the interpretation and elaboration of Buddhist ideas within the framework of traditional philosophy and religion. With the reunification of China under the Sui and Tang dynasties, these two strands were able to cross-fertilize each other and strengthen the hold of Buddhism in Chinese society.

In a comparable way, Chinese political theorizing was stimulated by political division, as supporters of one regime or another tried to construct convincing claims to the status of Son of Heaven and successor to the Han dynasty. In the north much was made of geography, of controlling the region of the Zhou and Han capitals, the land where all the places sacred or memorable in Chinese history were located, including the tombs of all earlier monarchs. Much also was made of preserving the political traditions of the Zhou and Han. One of the northern successor regimes took the name Zhou and evoked the heritage of the Zhou by renaming government offices according to the nomenclature listed in the ancient *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhou li*). Chinese at the southern court could not make similar claims to geographical centrality, but they could point to the ethnicity of their rulers – indisputably Chinese. They also elaborated a theory based on the rituals of succession, on the abdications that linked one ruler to the next in an unbroken succession of Sons of Heaven. Thus, because the Han had turned over the imperial seal to the Wei, the Wei to the Jin, and the Jin to the Song, it was the rulers in exile in the south who were the legitimate Sons of Heaven.

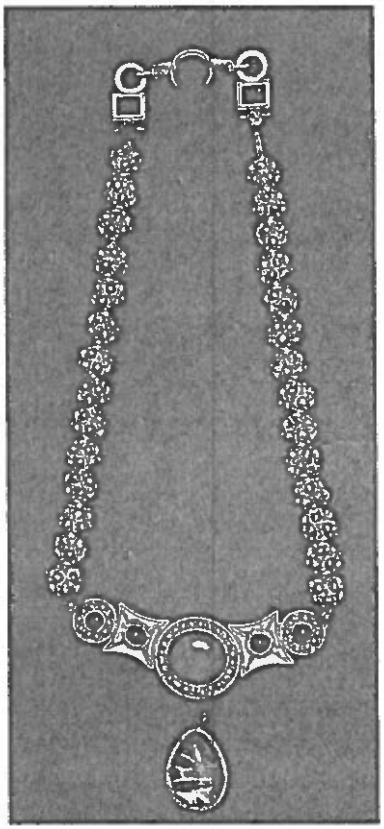
North and south were not, of course, evolving independently of each other, but rather in contact and competition with each other. The Chinese elite in both areas were literate in the same language and read the same books. There was much travel back and forth, some of it coerced, some voluntary. Thus distinctive identities were fostered as much by contact as by isolation.

To Chinese historians in subsequent ages, none of the rulers of the Age of Division fulfilled the central role of Son of Heaven, namely to establish a cosmically correct and harmonious order for All-Under-Heaven. Thus this period was treated as significant primarily as a negative example: the disorder and dislocation, the ethnic hostility and bloody court struggles, the tyrannical rulers and enslaved captives all demonstrated why powerful, intrusive, unified, centralized, imperial governments were necessary. Yet much that enriched Chinese culture was given a chance to flourish in this period when the state was unable to penetrate very deeply into society, and both ordinary people and the elites absorbed themselves in less state-centred systems of meaning.

Westerners and modern Chinese familiar with the course of western history have often labelled the Age of Division 'medieval' because of its similarities to Europe in the period after the fall of Rome. In both instances, a great empire broke up, barbarian tribes who had been used as auxiliary military forces gained the upper hand, and the old urban economy suffered. In both places a foreign religion with claims to universality rapidly gained adherents and the intensity of religious fervour led to vast expenditure on monumental art. Intriguing as these correspondences are, they should not deflect our attention from the equally important differences between the experiences of China and Europe. Although north China was in great disarray for over a century after the collapse of the Western Jin, state-building efforts were well underway by the middle of the fifth century. Perhaps because Chinese statesmen all knew the history of the Zhou dynasty – when bonds of fealty between vassals and lords led eventually to the emergence of separate states – empire-builders sought a strongly centralized, bureaucratically administered political order, and not a decentralized, feudal one.

In China, moreover, the barbarian influx had much less impact on culture and consciousness. Chinese continued to be the spoken language of north China, Xianbei eventually disappearing. Charlemagne could not deny or obscure his Germanic heritage and was restrained by it from acting out the part of a Roman emperor. By contrast, neither the Sui nor the Tang emperors had any difficulty presenting themselves and their ancestors as descended from ancient Chinese stock. The sense of disjuncture, of moral and emotional separation from the classical past, thus, was not nearly so great in China as in the west.

Equally important, education and scholarship never went into eclipse in China. The aristocracies in both the north and south were fully literate, and the intellectual atmosphere in the south was as conducive to literary and artistic experimentation as any in Chinese history. Leading men of letters were in no sense less sophisticated than their Han counterparts centuries earlier. Indeed, the encounter with Indian civilization – a civilization much more on a par with China than any China had encountered before – stimulated intellectual inquiry and self-reflection. Struggling with ways to convey the sounds of the Sanskrit language, for instance, led to the first analysis of the tones in the Chinese language. Even the commercial economy was not hit as hard in China as it was in the West. Trade was certainly disrupted in the fourth century and the use of coinage, for instance, declined. Still, the commercial economy had begun to revive by the late fifth century and even trade between north and south grew to a considerable level.



Trade with Central Asia continued through the Age of Division, and aristocrats in north China in particular remained willing to import luxury items from distant lands. This necklace of gold, pearl, and lapis lazuli, dating from the late sixth century and possibly made in Persia or Afghanistan, was among the objects unearthed from the tomb of a nine-year-old girl from a noble family.

Buddhism had an enormous impact on the visual arts in China, especially sculpture and painting. The merchants and missionaries from Central Asia who brought Buddhism to China also brought ideas about the construction and decoration of temples and the depiction of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this way Greek and Indian artistic influence reached China, travelling via the Buddhist kingdom of Gandhara (in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) through the Buddhist centres along the Silk Road to Dunhuang and later to central China.

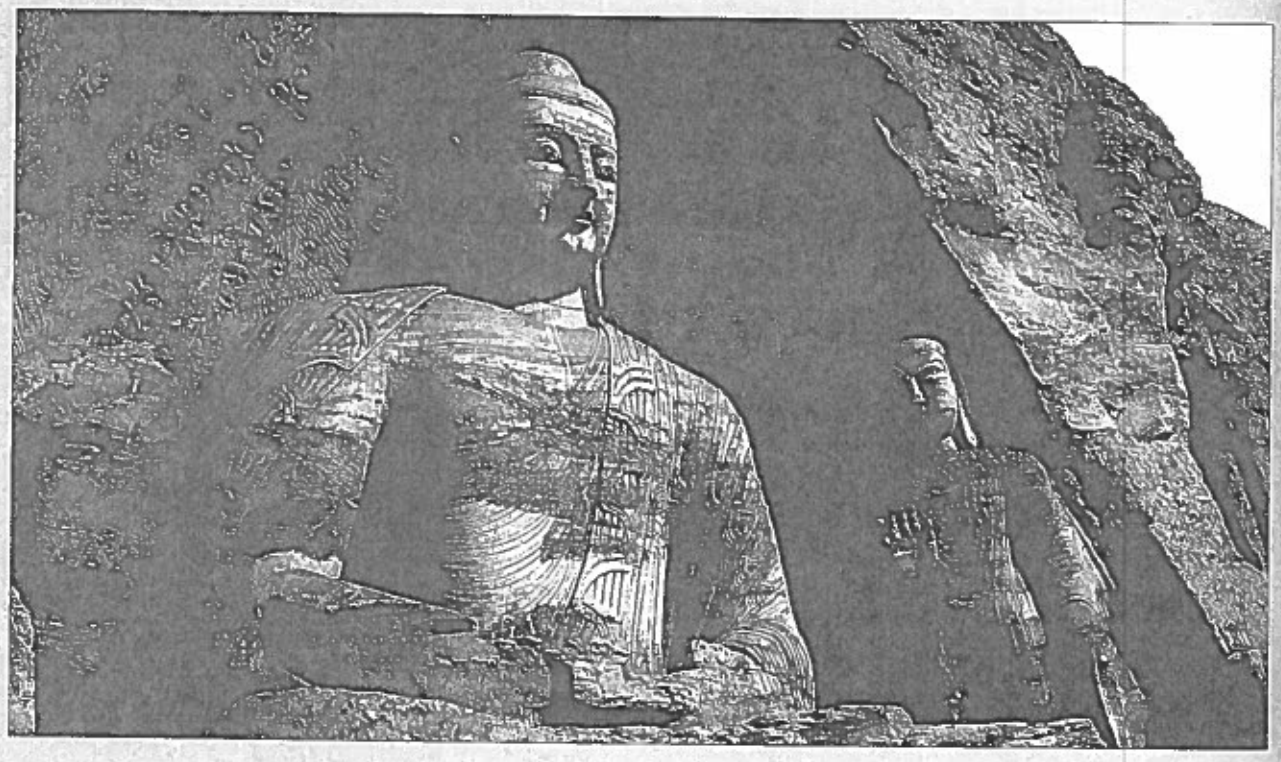
The most extensive surviving early Chinese Buddhist art is found in the cave temples at Dunhuang and Yungang, spared during the political persecutions which destroyed the temples in urban centres. The cave temples at Dunhuang in western Gansu province were probably begun by 400, initiated by local monks; work continued on them over a period of several centuries. A large proportion of the residents of Dunhuang in this period were probably not Chinese, and it is therefore not surprising that the decoration of the early caves at Dunhuang shows strong connections to the Buddhist art at other oasis towns further west, such as Kucha and Khotan.

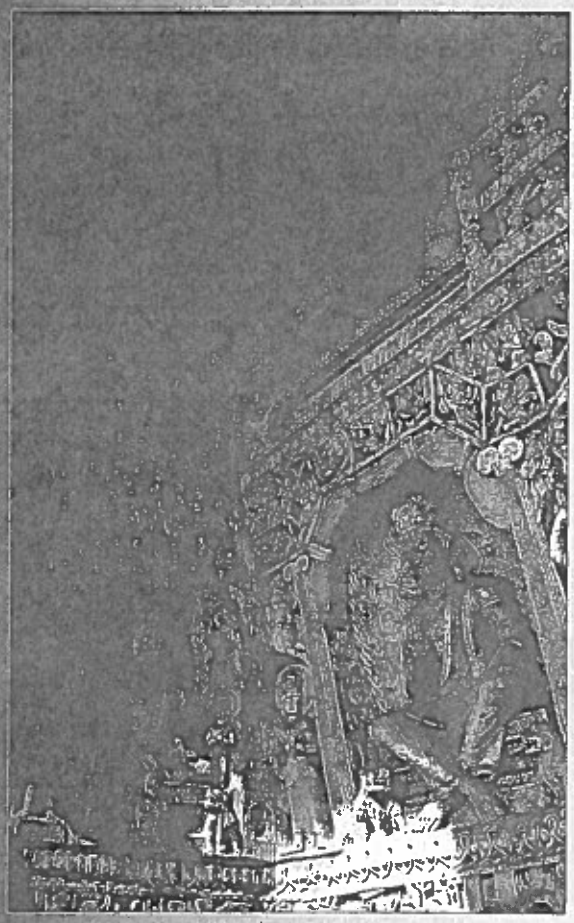
In 460 the Northern Wei court commissioned the carving of cave temples at Yungang, near its early capital in northern Shanxi. Most of the fifty-three caves there were carved out before the Wei moved their capital south to Luoyang in 494. The five earliest caves contain huge Buddha figures in stone, the tallest a standing Buddha about 70 feet high.

Pre-Buddhist Chinese shrines had not contained statues or paintings of deities, but Buddhists used images both to teach Buddhist doctrine and provide a focus for devotional activities. Much of the early cave sculpture and painting portrayed the events in the life of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. Buddhas were often shown in a state of meditation, with masklike faces that betray no emotion. Their faces bore distinctive marks derived from Indian tradition, notably elongated ear lobes and cranial bumps. By contrast, the accompanying bodhisattvas were mortals, adorned with armlets and earrings, standing in more varied poses. In the sixth century Chinese artists gradually refined the ways they portrayed Buddhas and bodhisattvas, making them more slender and less angular, reflecting stylistic preferences seen also in secular Chinese painting.

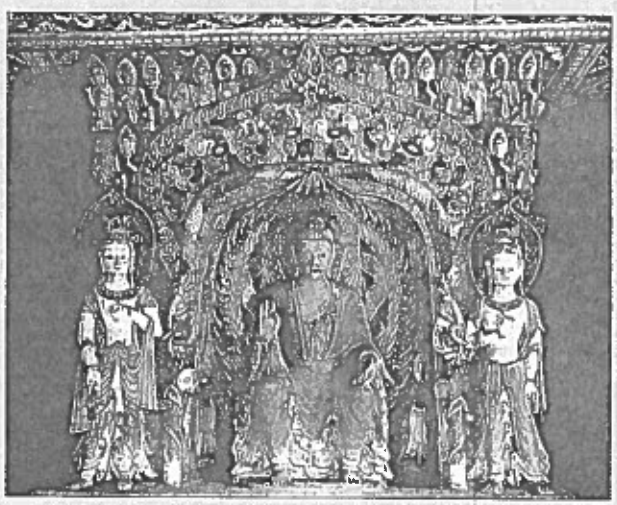
Although the cave temples of Dunhuang and Yungang, along with the slightly later ones at Longmen near Luoyang, contain the bulk of surviving fifth- and sixth-century Buddhist art, at the time they constituted just a small fraction of Buddhist sites. The many temples and monasteries in cities, towns,

This huge Buddha at Yungang (c. 490), about 45 feet tall, was probably inspired by the colossal Buddha images at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. It is the most massive of some 51,000 Buddhist images carved into the surface of a cliff, which extends for over half a mile.





The walls of cave 9 at Yungang are decorated with standing or seated Buddha images surrounded by bodhisattvas, adoring heavenly beings, musicians, and flying apsaras. The lowest register carries a series of reliefs illustrating the life of Shakyamuni.



Central altar in Cave 432 at Dunhuang, Western Wei period, with painted clay statues of a Buddha flanked by a pair of bodhisattvas, each about 4 feet tall.

and material riches provided sensual stimulation of many sorts: the fragrance of incense; the sound of chanting; and the visual beauty of lush walls and towering pagodas whose walls were covered with paintings of the heavens or the lives of the Buddha and his main disciples. Yang Xuanzhi was so dismayed by the destruction of the temples and monasteries in Luoyang in the civil war beginning in 524 that he wrote an account of their glory. According to him, Jingming monastery had been the most magnificent. On the seventh day of the fourth month, all the Buddhist statues in the city, over a thousand altogether, were brought to this monastery, and the emperor would come to pour water flowers on them as part of the Great Blessing ceremony. The gold and the flowers dazzled in the sun, and the jewelled canopies floated like clouds; there were forests of banners and a fog of incense, and the Buddhist music of India filled heaven and earth. All kinds of entertainers and trick riders performed shoulder to shoulder. Virtuous hosts of famous monks came carrying their staves; there were crowds of the faithful, holding flowers; horsemen and carriages were packed beside each other in an endless mass.'

The grief of the Buddha's disciples at his death is captured in this painting from the west wall of Cave 428 at Dunhuang, painted in the early sixth century.