

# Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade

Review >  
India - China

Until recently, pre-modern and early modern China was thought to have been culturally and politically isolated outside East Asia. The Middle Kingdom, in fact, engaged with Central, South, and Southeast Asia through cultural, religious and economic ties through most of its documented history.

By Hasan Karrar

In keeping with this new emphasis in Sinology, San Tansen makes important contributions to our body of knowledge by exploring Sino-Indian relations between the years 600 and 1400. Covering a span of close to a millennium, this bold study will be of interest to scholars of China, South Asia, Central Asia, Buddhism and cross-cultural interaction in Eurasia.

## Silk Road trade

Chronologically, Tansen's study begins where Liu Xinru's earlier study on ancient China and India ends. In *Ancient India and Ancient China*, Liu explored the economic and cultural relations between the two civilizations, arguing that Buddhism was crucial to the development of trade from the beginning of the Common Era to the year 600. Demonstrating that the role of foreign luxury goods was inseparable from the growing popularity of Buddhism in China, this little known study made an important contribution to the specialized literature on Silk Road trade in the pre-Tang era.

In the present study, Tansen sees Sino-Indian relations as going through two distinct phases. In the first, which lasts till the eighth century, Buddhism was an important component in Sino-Indian relations. By the ninth century, the emphasis on Buddhist transmission from India diminished, as China began to be seen as an important centre for Buddhist learning in its own right.

## Mount Wutai

From the beginning to the middle of the seventh century, India was considered the centre of Buddhist learning while China suffered from what Tansen describes as a 'borderland complex'. Scores of Chinese monks made the arduous journey to India in search of scriptures and to visit the land where Buddhism originated. By the eighth century, this equilibrium began to shift. With the revival of Brahmanism, and to a lesser degree, the encroachment of Arab power on the Indian subcontinent,

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the role of Buddhism in India's cultural and social life declined. Simultaneously, China rapidly overcame its borderland complex with the growing popularity of Manjusari and the development of Mount Wutai as a place of pilgrimage (including pilgrims from India). No doubt the transmission of Buddhism from China to other parts of East Asia also contributed to the increasing perception of China as a genuine centre of Buddhism. With pilgrims from India and other parts of East Asia now making the journey to China, the Middle Kingdom became the centre of the Buddhist world.

## State sponsorship

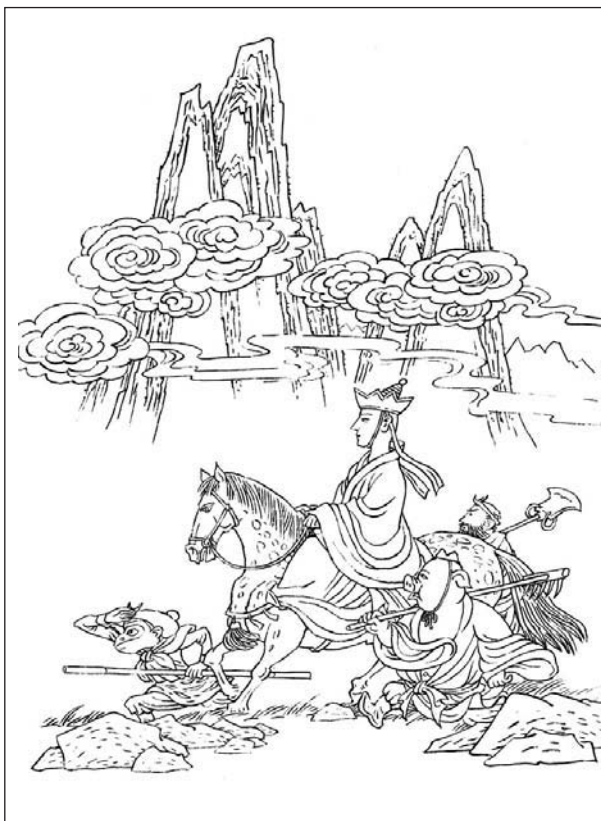
After the eighth century, Buddhism began to play a diminished role in Sino-Indian relations, though its role by no means disappeared. Now largely localized within East Asia, Buddhism survived the fall of the Tang dynasty at the beginning of the tenth century and, as Tansen convincingly demonstrates, remained influential during the Song dynasty, though this is probably more true for the Northern Song. Under the Northern Song, the state continued to sponsor the study of Buddhism and employ Sanskrit scholars. The influx of Inner Asian peoples into first, the periphery, and then into the heartland of China with the establishment of the Liao, the Jin, and the Xi Xia dynasties, ensured continuing interest in Buddhism. For a while, China was an important source of Buddhist documents for kingdoms such as the Liao. But the encircling of China by Inner Asian kingdoms was detrimental to China; besides the obvious military threat the Inner Asian kingdoms posed, the Song dynasty was now cut off from South Asia.

At this point, Tansen's historical chronology falters. The fall of the Song dynasty and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty are given little treatment even though these events fall within Tansen's timeframe. Also, during the Yuan dynasty, Buddhism, albeit Tibetan Buddhism, reached new levels of popularity in China and amongst Mongols on the steppes. More could possibly have been said about this. The nexus of Buddhism, diplomacy and trade continued, though to be fair to Tansen, it was reoriented away from its earlier Sino-Indian domain.

## A world system?

Towards the end of his study Tansen attempts to place his study within a world systems perspective by drawing on the influential works of Janet Abu-Lughod and Andre Gunder Frank. In their studies, Abu-Lughod and Frank argue that the Eurasian landmass was highly interconnected through trade prior to the advent of European hege-

mony in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century. Abu-Lughod argues for the presence of a world system dating back to 1250; Frank suggests that the presence of such a world system may have its roots yet further back in history. While these scholars have pioneered in developing our understanding of cross-cultural linkages in pre-modern Eurasia, this reader is uncertain whether this discussion adds much value to Tansen's study. Eurasia was economically integrated not only from the year 1250, but from at least the beginning of the Common Era as historians of the Silk Road have long



By Fan Jianping

shown. Indeed, this comes across in Tansen's study too.

Pilgrimage to the West

Tansen's study at times suffers from unevenness when providing detail. Specialists may find not enough in certain areas, on Buddhist doctrines, for example. Non-experts may find parts of the book difficult to follow, such as the discussions on the Central Asian city-states and their role on the Silk Road. These caveats notwithstanding, most scholars will welcome Tansen's effort. Given his broad scope and his sound understanding of the issues under consideration, Tansen has made an important contribution to our understanding of cultural and political ties between China and India. This is indeed a noteworthy achievement and a significant addition to the field. <

- Sen Tansen, 2003. *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: the realignment of Sino-Indian relations 600-1400*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and Association for Asian Studies, ISBN 0-8248-2593-4, pp 388.

## References

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# Encyclopedia of

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Reference

'What is Asia?' ask the editors David Levinson and Karen Christensen in the preface of the Thomson/Gale *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, a massive six-volume work published in 2002. Their answer: 'There is no single historical or modern feature that defines or unites all of Asia.' Still, the thirty-three nations that comprise East, Southeast, South, Central and West-Southwest Asia (including Turkey, Iran and Iraq) are covered in this work that contains over 2,600 entries, 1,300 illustrations, 90 maps and 2.2 million words.

By Hendrik E. Niemeijer

Some eight hundred scholars address economics, religion, technology, politics, education, the family, the arts, environmental issues, international relations, the development of sciences and so forth – a massive work achieved in an amazingly short time by one of the largest publishers in the USA. The encyclopedia gives plenty of space to the diversity of modern, that is, twentieth-century Asia. Sometimes this diversity is explained historically, in so far as earlier events have continuing impact. The emphasis on interactions and relationships serves as the 'defining feature of our meaning of modern'. The encyclopedia also aims 'to describe and explain Asia as Asians see and experience it', thus promising fresh insights to students and non-specialist readers.

General topics have been defined to cover the sub-regions and nations: Ethnicity, Marriage and Family, Significant People, Religion and Philosophy, Government, Politics and Law and so on. Apart from this, there are some pan-Asian articles on environmental issues, organisations such as the IMF, and pan-Asian trends such as AIDS.

## Quick information

Although the encyclopedia's organizing principles are defensible, it is more eclectic than systematic or scientific. This becomes clear with the Reader's Guide within each of the volumes, which can be used together with the good, detailed index at the end of Vol. 6. Let us take a few samples. When looking under Southeast Asia, Government, Politics, and Law, Indonesia, one finds several topics not relevant to Modern Asia, for instance the Amboina Massacre of 1623. Looking (again: Southeast Asia) at Peoples, Cultures, and Society, Philippines, one only finds Godparenthood. The article on Godparenthood can be found in Vol. 2 where compadrazgo is explained. Is that all on Philippine Peoples, Cultures, and Society? No, one better goes directly to Vol. 4 where one can find a series of interesting articles on Philippine Languages and several composite articles: Philippines – Profile, Philippines – Economic System, Philippines – Education System, Philippines – History, to mention the most important. The Profile articles are to the point and helpful for getting quick information.

## Where is the Buddha?

If these composite articles are useful to the general reader, how useful are the articles on the main topics? Let's take another sample: Buddhism? The index promises much information on Buddhism. The articles on Buddhism (Vol. 1 pp. 333-369) cover Central Asia, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Theravada) of which – curiously enough – only Vietnam is dealt with separately. Although the articles are informative on the historical backgrounds, beliefs and practices, one learns practically nothing about Buddhism in modern China, while Myanmar and Thailand are incorporated into a general article on Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately the section on Southeast Asia, Religion and Philosophy, Myanmar, only offers articles on Christianity, Islam and Spirit Cults. Perhaps Thailand? Under Thailand – Profile (Vol. 5 pp. 453-454) we finally find two meagre lines beginning with the sentence 'About 95 percent of the Thai people are Buddhists.' The index at the end of Vol. 6 does not bring us any closer to Buddhism in these two important Buddhist countries – a serious omission. A few lines on Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) by another Western scholar makes us realize that this encyclopedia would have looked very different if Asian scholars had written on a topic like Buddhism. At this point, Buddhist Asia certainly does not look like Asia 'as Asians see and experience it'.

It is easy to trace omissions in an encyclopedia which is the result of a rapid and digitized business. A quick appearance on the worldwide market then prevails over scrutiny. But the