The study of Chinese Buddhism is largely a study in acculturation. It deals with the various ways in which a huge and heterogeneous body of foreign beliefs and practices, itself subject to constant accretion, change and diversification, came to be incorporated into the even more complex fabric of Chinese culture. The process of adaptation probably had started already in the second century CE, when a number of primitive translations of Buddhist scriptures were produced by the first “mixed” translation teams, and it went on even after the last fresh impulses from abroad had ceased. In some respects it is still going on today.

In all its aspects—religious beliefs and practices, monastic organization, attitude towards the temporal authorities, relations between clergy and lay believers, philosophical speculations and scholastic studies, literary expression, economic and welfare activities, material culture and art—Buddhism was deeply influenced, and in some sectors completely transformed, by a great variety of forces, tensions, attitudes and orientations that were part of the Chinese cultural environment. Taken as a whole, Chinese Buddhism can be regarded as a classical illustration of the process of cultural transmission and adaptation, as it shows all degrees and varieties of response, ranging from total absorption of some elements (even to the point of practically losing their Buddhist identity) to total rejection, with all intermediary types of selective adoption, adaptation, hybridization, amalgamation, compartmentalization and restructuring.

In this paper I shall not attempt to present a chronological survey of the integration of Buddhism into the ethical, political educational, economic and social life of the Chinese. Nor shall I venture into the tricky and somewhat fruitless subject of periodization, mainly because in dealing with such an extremely complex and articulated phenomenon evolving in time, it is virtually impossible to devise a scheme of periodization that will hold good for all parts of the complex. Thus, if we want to define the first major turning point in the history of Chinese Buddhism, we could
opt for 311 CE (the occupation of northern China by barbarian invaders and the beginning of a long period of disunity and regional growth) if we want to focus on geographical diversification; doctrinally, we should prefer the activities of Kumārajīva and his school in the early fifth century; and economically, the most obvious watershed would be the outburst of large-scale clerical landholding coupled with industrial and financial enterprises in the early Tang, say around 600 CE.

In this paper I shall concentrate on the cultural environment, the Chinese matrix in which Buddhism came to function. I have chosen this approach because it seems to fit the nature of a symposium devoted to the study of Buddhism in a comparative framework. In such a perspective, little would be gained by a mere juxtaposition of descriptive accounts dealing with Buddhism in various regions of Asia. The varieties of Buddhism may become more significant if we place them in their respective contexts, and try to compare the ways in which Buddhism functions in various types of societies. The underlying assumption is, of course, that there is such a thing as a typology of political and socioeconomic systems, and that, in other words, a number of essential features of Chinese Buddhism in the pre-modern period are not just due to random development, fate, or the “genius of the Chinese people”, but that they can be related to the basic orientations of a pre-modern, agrarian-based, centralized bureaucratic empire with a dominant élite of scholar-officials and a universalistic state ideology. Of course such a correlation should not be seen as a simple, mechanistic, one-to-one correspondence. In some cases the relations are obvious and direct: thus the typical Tang institution of bureaucratic control of the Buddhist clergy through the Bureau of Sacrifices, an organ of the Ministry of Rites, can be directly associated with some well-known traits in the political system. In other cases the link is more tenuous and somewhat speculative: the strong emphasis on the realization of the transcendent Buddha-nature may have been stimulated by the deep-rooted notion of the perfectibility of man, which in turn is the individualized counterpart of one of the basic assumptions in the traditional ideology: the perfectibility of human society. But even if we can assume that this Confucian assumption provided a certain stimulus, or at least created a certain familiarity with the ideal of moral and spiritual self-cultivation, it is obvious that the whole orientation of the Buddhist ideal is fundamentally different. The ideal of perfect man has, so to speak, become de-socialized, and that was precisely the reason why it was attacked by Neo-Confucian thinkers as anti-social and therefore useless. In the same way, it may