THE IMPACT OF BUDDHISM ON CHINESE CULTURE
IN AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

I. The Geographical Setting and Its Consequences

Transmission through Central Asia

From earliest times, the Chinese have been deeply aware of the fact that Buddhism, unlike the indigenous traditions of Confucianism and Daoism, was a doctrine (jiao 教) or a method (fa 法) of salvation that had been brought to China from the outside, from regions far beyond China's cultural frontiers. To Buddhist believers, it led to the concept of India as a holy country—a centre of spiritual authority outside China (which, incidentally, constituted a major innovation in Chinese thought). To the opponents of Buddhism, it was an argument to brand the foreign doctrine as a ‘barbarian’ Fremdkörper, adapted to the intellectual level of primitive natives, and therefore unfit to become part of Chinese civilization. Thus, the factor of geographical distance between China and the homeland of Buddhism created a lasting, basic polarization: from the very beginning, being a Buddhist (and, even more explicitly, becoming a monk) implied the willingness to accept patterns of belief and behaviour whose non-Chinese origin were never forgotten, just as anti-Buddhist attitudes have always been coupled with a clear sense of Chinese superiority and exclusivity, and consequently have reinforced the tradition of Sino-centrism.

In fact, the geographical situation in which the diffusion of Buddhism in China from the first to the early eighth century took place is far more complex than this single opposition ‘China versus India’ would suggest. Buddhism had reached China through Central Asia, after having spread through the oasis kingdoms that had sprung up along the ‘Silk road’ since the beginning of our era, and its propagation was deeply affected by the conditions prevailing both in the transitional zone and at either end of the transcontinental caravan route.

The Silk Road constituted the link between an ever-changing configuration of states and empires. In its earliest phase—which coincides with the first two centuries of the diffusion of Buddhism into China up to the late third century—the western reaches were dominated by three major
impact of Buddhism on Chinese culture

At the other end of the Silk Road, the process may have been stimulated by the periodic expansion of Chinese power far into Central Asia, but we should not overestimate the importance of this for our subject. The waves of Chinese imperial expansion were sporadic and never long-lasting: two periods of Chinese military overlordship in the first century BCE and in the early second century CE; a period of Tuoba-Wei dominance in the late fifth century; and Chinese military rule in the first half of the Tang dynasty. To some extent, Chinese rule may have facilitated travelling, but in general our sources show that the influx of Buddhism went on as a steady process, which also took place in periods when there was no question of Chinese rule in the ‘Western Regions’.

However, it was always a minimal influx through a single channel fed by very different sources. In India and its adjoining regions, Buddhism had typically spread by ‘contact diffusion’: once a local sīmā (‘alms circuit’) had been established and grown to its optimal size (corresponding to the number of mendicant monks that could be borne by a local productive community), monks would move on to establish new vihāras in adjoining territories. Thus Buddhism branched out from an ever-increasing number of centres, filling the territory in a homogeneous way. In China, sheer distance and physical geography combined to produce a completely different type of diffusion. In the first place, it was an immensely slow process: Buddhism ‘filtered in’, and it took some four centuries to spread to all major regions of China and to penetrate at all social levels. It was not