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# New Buddhist Silk Roads

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## **Fourth World Buddhist Forum**

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### **New Buddhist Silk Roads**

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#### ABSTRACT

As China embarks on its One Belt, One Road Initiative it is recreating not only the economic Silk Road of the past but incorporating a Buddhist-based regionalism that stretched from Eurasia to maritime kingdoms in the southern seas. It was a mandalic world of trade and a dharma of easy communication between cultures and religions.

After outlining China's One Belt, One Road Initiative, this paper provides the historical setting of silk road regionalism with its Buddhist contribution, and then moves to the possibility of a new silk road mandala. The paper concludes with a Buddhist geopolitics of peace. Here Buddhism's philosophical, diplomatic and normative powers are tapped for a better understanding of how the new Buddhist silk roads are advancing the spiritual conduits of regional cooperation.

## **New Buddhist Silk Roads**

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As China embarks on its ‘Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road Initiative’ (or One Belt, One Road) it is recreating not only the economic Silk Road of the past. The geopolitical process parallels an earlier Buddhist-based regionalism that stretched from continental Asia to the Southeast Asian Archipelago and west to Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. It was a mandalic world inscribed by trading kingdoms and a dharma of easy communication between cultures and religions.

This was the time when Sino-Indic cultures communicated at a profound cultural level in that Buddhism came from India to China and then created a criss-cross exchange of religious learning via Central Asia, Sumatra and other epistemic centres. This paper explores the depth of Buddhism’s contribution to China’s identity and interaction with neighbours near and far – a process which will receive a further boost with the resurrection of Silk Road connectivity for 21<sup>st</sup> century development. What does this development entail? It is more than road, rail and port infrastructure in conjunction with enhanced communications technology. Though these are vital to improving people’s living standards, 21<sup>st</sup> century development also entails provision of the societal foundations for dynamic peace; a peace which recognises the finer points of development pertain to spiritual and cultural ‘technologies’.

This paper begins with an outline of China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative, provides the historical setting of silk road regionalism with its Buddhist contribution, and then moves to the possibility of a new silk road mandala. The paper concludes with a Buddhist geopolitics of peace. Here Buddhism’s philosophical, diplomatic and normative powers are tapped for a better understanding of how the new Buddhist silk roads are advancing the spiritual conduits of regional cooperation.

### **1. One Belt, One Road Initiative**

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s announcement in 2013 of the One Belt, One Road Initiative refers to the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

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(See Appendix 1 for a map of these routes.) The ‘Belt’ he announced in September 2013 at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan and the ‘Road’ a month later before the Indonesian Parliament, during his official visits to these countries.

As explained in the government document, ‘Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ (2015):

. . . When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Central Asia and Southeast Asia in September and October of 2013, he raised the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (hereinafter referred to as the Belt and Road), which have attracted close attention from all over the world. At the China-ASEAN Expo in 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang emphasized the need to build the Maritime Silk Road oriented towards ASEAN, and to create strategic propellers for hinterland development. Accelerating the building of the Belt and Road can help promote the economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, and promote world peace and development. It is a great undertaking that will benefit people around the world.

The Belt and Road traverse three continents, two seas and two oceans. The continents are Asia, Europe and Africa, with the Middle East connecting all three. Their maritime counterparts are the South China Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean’s southern sector. As the ‘Vision and Actions’ document continues:

. . . The Belt and Road run through the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end and developed European economic circle at the other, and encompassing countries with huge potential for economic development. The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China’s coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China’s coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other.

At the Boao Forum for Asia held on China’s southern Hainan Island in March 2015, Chinese officials elaborated on the financial and other dimensions of the Belt and Road. These were reported as including the following:

- Financing is expected to draw from a variety of sources. The China-led multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is expected to begin operations later this year with \$100 billion in capital, a government-backed \$40 billion Silk Road Fund and the New Development Bank set up by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa get a mention.
- It isn’t all about roads, rails and ports. The plan calls for the construction of oil and natural-gas pipelines. Fiber-optic networks are also to get funding, as are information technology, new energy and bio-technology. Customs and other regulations that might inhibit trade and investment are to be smoothed out.
- The Mekong River region in Southeast Asia, which China has previously identified for economic cooperation, gets a shout out [sic], but so does almost every other regional economic plan of recent years. The China-Pakistan and China-India-Bangladesh-Myanmar economic corridors are also mentioned.

- China's ports, cities and hinterlands feature prominently. Fifteen ports, from Tianjin in the north to Haikou in the south, are earmarked for upgrading. The Shanghai and Guangzhou airports are slated to become logistics hubs. Inland, largely poor provinces are supposed to see a boost too ('China Lays Out Path to Silk Road' 2015).

As is evident from the foregoing, the One Belt, One Road Initiative is designed to be inclusive and multilateral. President Xi Jinping himself emphasised this point when he said at the Boao Forum that the Belt and Road program and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank were "open to all"; welcoming "friends from every continent" ('China: Xi Jinping opens Boao Forum' 2015). International commitment was evident on 29 June 2015, when 50 countries signed the charter of AIIB at the Great Hall of the People – and another seven signing at the end of 2015 with the bank's opening. The positive mood was reflected by a comment by the CEO of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Kate Carnell, who said: "AIIB's \$100 billion capital base will go some way toward bridging the region's infrastructure gap, particularly if it uses those funds to leverage private-sector support for projects" (Carnell 2015). Summing up China's role, its finance minister, Lou Jiwei, said of AIIB: "This is China assuming more international responsibility for the development of the Asian and global economies" (Wildau & Clover 2015).

While the One Belt, One Road Initiative and the AIIB mark a significant milestone in China's commitment to development and transregional cooperation, they did not appear in a vacuum. In 2010, for example, the *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (2010), reported on China's "plan to build a high-speed railway network across Asia and Europe through Central Asia" that "comprises three major routes linking Kunming in China with Singapore via South Asia, Urumqi and Germany through Central Asia, and Heilongjiang with Southeastern Europe via Russia". Also, the existing economic corridors of China–Pakistan and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar were incorporated into the Silk Road Economic Belt. Meanwhile, in what could become a Sino-Indian silk and spice route, India's own Mausam and Spice Route projects may link up with One Belt, One Road planning. India's projects are of a similar sentiment to China's:

The Mausam project aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean Region, enhancing understanding of cultural values and concerns. The Spice Route project meanwhile focuses on an India-centered linkup of historic sea routes in Asia, Europe and Africa (Gupta 2015).

From 2014 an improved China-India dialogue has sought to mobilise shared civilisational legacies, specifically Buddhism as one of its conduits (Mohan 2014). Though others have seen Buddhism as being used competitively for influence with neighbours such as Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, soft power need not work as a zero-sum game (Bhaumik 2013). Indeed, Buddhism is more suited to building cultural bridges and providing a shared platform for protecting Asian cultural legacies (Ramachandran 2014). This leads to consideration of earlier 'silk road' regionalism when China, India and others – including Russia with its Steppe Road – traded in goods and ideas.

## 2. Historical Setting of Silk Road Regionalism<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese empire's interaction with non-Han peoples across Central Asia had developed from the second century BCE through to the 15<sup>th</sup> century along the continental trade routes collectively known as the Silk Road. Linking the continents of Asia and Europe, caravans transported Chinese silk and other luxury goods westward, while in the opposite direction cosmetics, amber, carpets and other products made their way. With goods came exchanges of religious culture (from Buddhism to Islam) and technology (such as the production of paper and glass). Explorers along the Silk Road region included Chinese, Indians, and even Europeans whose most famous merchant-explorer, Marco Polo (circa 1254-1324 CE), set forth from Venice. This city on the Italian coast is now the planned terminus of the new land and sea silk roads (see the map in Appendix 1).

The old Silk Road was not the only evocative name for trade and travel across Eurasia. Its companion on the map north of the Caspian Sea was known as the Steppe Road. Also called the Sable Road, it traded expensive furs into Russia, Byzantium and Europe (Christian 2000, p. 7; Brobrick 1992, p. 68). It is thought that the earliest silk and steppe routes go back to 2000 BCE; eventually linking the Afro-Eurasian region through population movements, trade, and technological flows that included the compound bow, crossbows, the stirrup, gunpowder, printing and papermaking (Christian 2000, pp. 1, 4, 10).

The long route between East and West was in sections difficult and dangerous. There were deserts to traverse – the Gobi and Taklamakan, the Karakum and Kyzyl Kum (Rashid 2001, p. 34) – and mountains, notably the Tian Shan and Pamirs, that added to the arduousness of the journey. Moreover, the route with its flows of silk from China to Rome was politically segmented. The Huns, followed by the Turks and then the Persians controlled key sectors of the trade route, followed by the Mongols and the Mongol-Turkic empire of Timur (Puri 1987, pp. 11-16). China reasserted strong control of the eastern section of the route between 630 and 658 CE, with the defeat of various Turkic tribes and renewed control over the Tarim Basin and Eastern Turkestan (Puri 1987, p. 48). This would later become the Qing Dynasty's New Territory or Xinjiang, which to this day remains restive. From the seventh century onwards the Chinese empire faced two powerful enemies in this region: the Tibetans from the south and Persians from the west, and for a time in the late ninth century a locally powerful Uighur kingdom.

Products, ideas and religions flowed in both directions. Art and music were also diffused, with Indian, Persian, Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur influences detectable in Central Asian paintings. Silk, though the most valuable of trade items, especially when it reached the West (Rome and Constantinople), was in fact one among many on offer. To name but a few, gold, textiles, and coral travelled east, while furs, cinnamon and bronze weapons went west. Eventually, the secret of silk production from silk worms could not be kept within China, and

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of this section have integrated research (Ferguson 2007) from one of the paper's authors.

sericulture spread to Khotan, and later into Byzantium (Ma 1984) – though China always remained a leading supplier of high quality silk.

### *Buddhism on the Silk Road*

Historically, Buddhism was the official religion within its homeland, India, during the Mauryan Empire (321–185 BCE), Pala Empire (750–1174 CE) with its famed Nalanda Buddhist university, as well as the Kushan Empire which encompassed northern India and parts of Central Asia from the first to the third centuries CE. Within imperial China, it was adopted in varying degrees by the Sui (589–618 CE), Tang (618–907 CE) and Yuan (1271–1368 CE) dynasties. Buddhism was followed by many across the overland Silk Road network in Central Asia, as well as across the Indic states of Southeast Asia. For example, it was dominant in Funan (within today's Cambodia) by the fifth century CE and the Sukhothai Kingdom (today's Thailand) in the 13th century. The Indonesian archipelago, through which the maritime pilgrimage trail passed, was Buddhist during the pre-Islamic period when Java and Sumatra hosted powerful Buddhist empires. These included the Sailendras who built the famous Borobudur Buddhist monument in 778–824 in Central Java; and the Srivijayan empire with its Muarajambi Buddhist university complex in Sumatra. This was the 'alma mater' of Atisa who brought esoteric Buddhism (Vajrayāna) to Tibet in the 10th century. Such "monastic-University complexes", as Zhang (2012) calls them, played an important role in the expansion of Buddhism and "attracted students from Greece, Persia and other parts of the world" (Zhang 2012: 15). Kushan provides an example of such a site in that it was visited by Mani (216–276 CE), the founder of Manichaeism (Zhang 2012: 15).

Khotan, too, was an important centre of learning along the Silk Road and is regarded as a key transmitter of Buddhism into both Tibet and China. Buddhist culture, in turn, proved influential in unifying Tibet and contributing to Mongolian culture. By the second half of the third century monks and scholars such as Chu-she-hing and Moksala were busy compiling Buddhist texts, translating them into Chinese, and sending them on from Khotan into China (Puri 1987, p. 61). Indeed, monastic-University complexes were crucial to the flow of learning from India into China, with itinerant monks bringing back Buddhist texts. One such monk, Xuanzang (600-664) spent 16 years travelling to India. At the Tang emperor's request, he wrote about the lands he saw on his journey – an account now known as the 'Record of the Western Regions'. The Tang monk was the inspiration for the character of Xuanzang in the later Ming Dynasty novel, *Journey to the West*, also known as *Monkey*.

The Chinese traveller Fa Xi'an visited Khotan around the year 400. Even by then the small city was worthy of note:

The Chinese pilgrim found Buddhism in Khotan in a very flourishing condition and describes the glories of its monastic establishments in some detail. The monks numbered several thousands, most of them being students of Mahayana. There were hospitable arrangements in the Sangharamas for the reception of travelling monks, and he notices the custom of erecting small stupas in front of each dwelling family. The Gotami monastery, the residence of the pilgrim and his companions, alone contained 3000 monks of the Mahayana school. He also refers to Buddhist celebrations with the taking out of images in the fourteen great monasteries, more than thirty cubits high (Puri 1987, p. 55).

Other cities in Central Asia were also involved in the transmission and adoption of various forms of Buddhism, including centres such as Kashgar, Osh, Kucha, Yarkand, Balkh and Bamiyan. Within China, the Silk Road continued eastward from the three branching paths near the Tarim Basin, leading to one of the most important artistic centres for Buddhism in the world: the Grottoes of Dunhuang with hundreds of paintings on religious and secular themes. From here the main trade route continued eastwards to Chang'an (modern Xi'an).

Buddhism was largely pushed out of Central Asia by the arrival of Islam (as also occurred in maritime Southeast Asia), with small pockets surviving in Russia and Siberia. The vigorous spread of Buddhism is attested by the large number of literary texts, monuments and art works at the eastern end of the Silk Road. Buddhism also spread into current-day Afghanistan, after being influenced by patterns of Indian and Greek artistic styles (Gandhara art). One of the major centres for Buddhist statuary and paintings was to be found in central Afghanistan at Bamiyan, but in March 2001 it was subject to the destructive wrath of an extremist form of Islam as developed under the Taliban. The intentional destruction of these Buddhist statues, and much other representational art in Afghanistan, occurred in spite of worldwide protests – including efforts by Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to stop this “cultural terrorism” (Moore and Constable 2001; Menon 2001). The United Nations General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, delegations from Japan, and protests from the Russian Foreign Ministry and Russian Buddhist groups had little effect in stopping this destruction (ITAR/TASS 2001). In reality, this was part of an ongoing problem of neglect, destruction and illegal sales of artefacts out of war-torn Afghanistan for over two decades (Lewis 2000).

The Silk Road was never fully destroyed but came under specific pressures that displaced its trade and communicative functions. The route around the south of the Tarim Basin was partially lost due to shifting rivers that led to the abandonment of centres such as Miran, Endere, Niya and areas around Khotan (Puri 1987, p. 259). Likewise, once Islam displaced Buddhism in the region, this would change the geopolitical orientation and art of the region. Economic forces would also weaken the long-distance trade along the route as the Ottoman Turks took control of the western end of the route and as the Portuguese and then the Spanish began extending ocean trade routes between Europe and Asia. After World War II, the region was largely divided under the fracture lines created by the Cold War, with armed borders restricting trade and influence along both east-west and north-south axes. With the Cold War gone and cooperative regionalism taking its place, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, new Silk Road thinking has emerged – with the One Belt, One Road Initiative attempting to further integrate this effort.

### **3. A New Silk Road Mandala?**

Such integration lends itself to a metaphor familiar to Buddhism: that of mandala. A mandala represents an inter-relational whole, a cosmogram composed of concentric forms. While the word comes from Sanskrit to denote a sacred circle, the appearance and experience of



mandala is universal – and universalising. Because of its culturally universal characteristics – mandalas are a cross-cultural phenomenon<sup>3</sup> – mandala thinking would resonate at a personal as well as civilizational level.

The term is commonly used to describe a cosmogram used for spiritual contemplation, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism (see Tucci 1961; Snodgrass 1985, p. 125). It is also a specialist term employed by scholars to denote traditional South and Southeast Asian political formations (notably Coedès 1968; Tambiah 1976; Mabbett 1978; Wolters 1982; Higham 1989; Stuart-Fox 1996). Early political application may be found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* or *The Science of Means*, a third century BCE Indian text (Kautilya 1967), while the repoliticisation of the mandala concept began after the Cold War and with the impact of globalisation (Dellios 1997, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Grey 2001, 2005, 2007; Ferguson 1994). Thus the term mandala can refer to: (1) a spiritual-cum-philosophical concept; and (2) a political-cum-international model. These may occur either separately or together, depending on whether the investigator's concerns are sacred or secular.

### *Codependent Origination*

In considering the prospect of a New Silk Road Mandala the sacred and secular converge. Here, Buddhism's doctrine of 'codependent origination' may be applied to the 'deterritorialised' character of globalisation. Codependent origination stresses the interdependent existence of all phenomena; that they are empty of their own existence and therefore contingent. The pivotal Buddhist term, 'emptiness' (Sanskrit: *sunyata*), is a simplified form of codependent origination (see Grey 2005). A Buddhist-inspired model of regionalism would see the borderless world as also a cosmological world. Just as market values are no longer constrained within national borders, providing a secular cosmology, so too thriving cosmological communities may be found in the 'growth religions' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Buddhism and Islam,<sup>4</sup> as well as a revival of Confucianism and Daoism both within China and abroad.

Thus a mandalic region in the global age is also part of a local-global interaction. It displays spatial and relational features that give rise to the notion of 'regional place in global space'. Mandala is an apt metaphor for the global age because, like globalisation, it represents a compression of a wider field of experiences. Its contours are a symbolic rendering of the complexity that co-arises. Mandala as a cultural technology may be equated with 'tantra', a term used to refer to a body of Hindu and Buddhist practices that hinge on the macrocosm-microcosm interaction.

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<sup>3</sup> As noted in Dellios (2007), the mandala design is evident “. . . in the Mexican 'Great Calendar Stone' or a stained-glass window of a Christian cathedral. The mandala metaphor also subsumes architectures - Borobudur and Angkor Wat are mandalas in stone; mandala is equally an object of impermanence (mandalas of coloured sand) as it is, in Jungian understanding, a dormant or active presence of the human psyche. Its pervasiveness suggests an ease of application within culturally specific sites.”

<sup>4</sup> The problem of how a Buddhist is defined makes it difficult to compare worldwide population figures with Islam but estimates range from 300 million to 1.2 billion, the latter being the approximate figure for Islam. See also Appendix 2: Buddhism in China.

The region as the unit of analysis deserves particular attention as it is on this (mandalic) platform that global macro forces are moderated to address the security of the microcosms of state and individual. Regional governance through multilateral cooperation becomes a significant factor in development and hence security – for China, development is the best form of security (see *People's Daily Online* 21 May 2014, cited in Cohen 2014) – down the scale to states and citizens as well as up to the global level. The region is no mere transmitter of civilizational values but also transformer, when seen through the mandala metaphor which is dynamic.

## **Conclusion**

From a Buddhist perspective, the New Silk Road trans-regionalism may benefit from the mandala as cross-cultural technology for activating the 'map' of One Belt, One Road connectivity. By employing the mandala as a metaphor and model of a conceptual artefact indigenous to many parts of Asia, it is possible to understand how global development and cultural dialogue can be constituted without discriminating against the 'parts' that make up the 'whole'. This is helped by the fact that the mandala, while Indic in name and ritual development, is a universal symbol that can be found in Islam and Christianity, as well as in indigenous belief systems. In view of Asia's re-emergence as the geopolitical and economic heartland, mandala is also an apt choice of symbol in what must constitute, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a Buddhist geopolitics for peace. China's plans to build 'silk roads' of development from Asia through to Africa, the Middle East and thence to Europe benefit from this historical Buddhist component.

More than this, however, trading networks have long carried ideas, values and religion alongside goods and wealth. The impact of large scale economic transformations can also be negative in subsuming or destroying local means of livelihood and fragile sub-cultures, as demonstrated by the earlier phases of European imperial expansion. It is crucial, therefore, that a way or *dao* of complementary development and mutual understanding be generated alongside the 'One Belt, One Road'. Buddhism, with its wide pan-Asian footprint and sophisticated models of human and natural interdependence, can provide an essential role in a new mandala of Indo-Eurasia civilisations.

## Appendix 1: Xinhua Map of China's Silk Road Plan



Source: 'New Silk Road, New Dreams', Xinhua News Agency, 8 May 2014.

The map shows the overland New Silk Road beginning at:

Xi'an in central China before stretching west through Lanzhou (Gansu province), Urumqi (Xinjiang), and Khorgas (Xinjiang), which is near the border with Kazakhstan. The Silk Road then runs southwest from Central Asia to northern Iran before swinging west through Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. From Istanbul, the Silk Road crosses the Bosphorus Strait and heads northwest through Europe, including Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Reaching Duisburg in Germany, it swings north to Rotterdam in the Netherlands. From Rotterdam, the path runs south to Venice, Italy — where it meets up with the equally ambitious Maritime Silk Road (Tiezzi 2014)

Meanwhile, the map shows Quanzhou in Fujian province as the planned starting point of the Maritime Silk Road. From there it goes to:

Guangzhou (Guangdong province), Beihai (Guangxi), and Haikou (Hainan) before heading south to the Malacca Strait. From Kuala Lumpur, the Maritime Silk Road heads to Kolkata, India then crosses the rest of the Indian Ocean to Nairobi, Kenya (the Xinhua map does not include a stop in Sri Lanka, despite indications in February that the island country would be a part of the Maritime Silk Road). From Nairobi, the Maritime Silk Road goes north around the Horn of Africa and moves through the Red Sea into the Mediterranean, with a stop in Athens before meeting the land-based Silk Road in Venice (Tiezzi 2014).

## Appendix 2: Buddhism in China

Like so many aspects of Chinese life, the post-1978 Dengist reforms saw a revival of Han Mahayana Buddhism. The exact number of lay Buddhist followers cannot be known as Chinese Buddhists do not necessarily belong to only one ‘religion’ and, moreover, becoming a Buddhist does not require conversion rituals (Ji 2013: 10). This problem of how a Buddhist is defined is also evident when determining the worldwide population of Buddhists, with figures ranging from 300 million to 1.2 billion (Zhang 2012: 5, 44).

Citing a number of surveys between 2003 and 2008, undertaken by Chinese and non-Chinese investigators, Zhe Ji has concluded that “there should be 200 to 300 million Chinese who are more or less sensitive to (some elements of) the Buddhist cosmology and at least occasionally participate in festivals and rituals of Buddhism”. This makes Buddhism the most popular of China’s five officially recognised religious affiliations: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Among the Buddhists, according to 2003 figures, the majority are Han Mahayana Buddhists, followed by Tibetan and Theravada Buddhists (Ji 2013).

While it is difficult to estimate the numbers of lay Buddhist followers, the clergy or *sangha* poses no such difficulties in view of their having been ordained or at least having embarked upon monastic life. The government’s 1997 white paper, *Freedom of Religious Belief in China* (Information Office of the State Council of People’s Republic of China), states: “Currently China has 13,000-some Buddhist temples and about 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns. Among them are 120,000 lamas and nuns, more than 1,700 Living Buddhas, and 3,000-some temples of Tibetan Buddhism and nearly 10,000 Bhiksu and senior monks and more than 1,600 temples of Pali Buddhism.” Zhe Ji (2013: 12) infers from these numbers “the size of the Han Buddhist clergy is around 70,000”. Figures for 2009, based on “incomplete statistics”, estimate the presence of “about 200,000 Buddhist clerics altogether, over 80,000 of which are Han Chinese” (Ji 2013: 13, citing Chen 2009).

Matching its geographic dispersion was Buddhism’s universalism which, like Christianity and Islam, accepted adherents irrespective of ethnicity or other affiliations. This has made it attractive to multi-ethnic nations like China and to a range of socio-economic groups. Moreover, Buddhism has historically served as a refuge for oppressed groups, including women living within the confines of patriarchal social systems. Empresses Wu and Wei provide historical examples of unorthodox female leaders who employed Buddhist symbolism and support to gain greater authority than could be derived from the Confucian order.

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