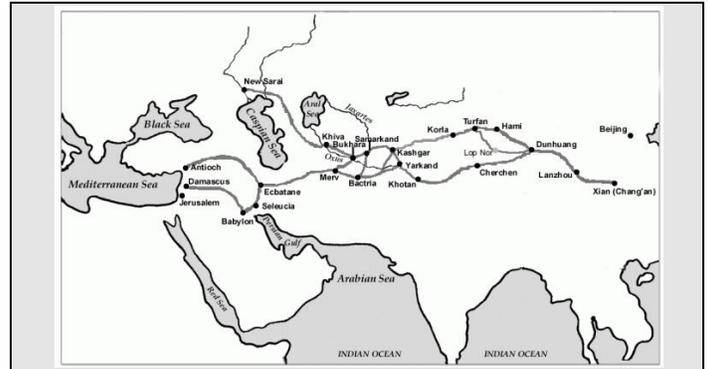


Buddhism and Cultural Exchange along the Asian Silk Road

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Winding through the deserts and high mountain passes of Central and Inner Asia, the network of caravan routes collectively called the Silk Road linked China to the Middle East and Europe. From the second century BCE on, it was a major conduit for moving people, ideas, and goods. Monuments such as the towering fifty-three-meter (175 feet) high Buddha at Bamiyan in Afghanistan (destroyed by the Taliban in 2001) and the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas in northwest China bear witness both to the importance of the Silk Road and to a once flourishing Central Asian Buddhist culture.



The transmission of Buddhism from India to China (and from there to Korea and Japan) is perhaps the most significant of the cultural exchanges that took place along the Silk Road. Brought from India by missionaries and merchants, Buddhism was established in the oases of Central Asia by the first century BCE. From there it traveled to China, again along the Silk Road. The earliest evidence for Buddhism in China dates from 65 CE and, by the year 148, the first translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese was probably in residence at the capital of Luoyang.

Chinese Buddhists also began to make pilgrimages to India, in spite of hunger, thirst, bandits, wild animals, and some of the world's most difficult desert and mountain terrain. The monk Xuanzang (circa 596-664) was the most famous of these pilgrims. In 629, he set out alone for India to study, collect texts, and visit sacred sites.

The Buddhism that spread to East Asia was called Mahayana (Great Vehicle). It developed in India during the first centuries of the Common Era and later set down roots in China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and Tibet. In Mahayana doctrine, the Buddha and other sacred beings take on god-like qualities. Rather than being an earthly human teacher, the Buddha is regarded as an eternal being who is the embodiment of universal and cosmic truth. He was not born and did not die. Instead, he lives from eternity to eternity.

Also central to Mahayana belief are bodhisattvas (*bodhi* is wisdom, *sattva* is being), beings who remain in the world, delaying their entrance into Nirvana in order to help others reach enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are depicted wearing worldly robes and elaborate ornaments, said to symbolize this connection to the material world.

Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other sacred personages have the power to answer prayers and save all living things from suffering. This doctrine of universal salvation is central to Mahayana Buddhism's appeal. It was no coincidence that Buddhism became part of Chinese culture during a particularly violent and unsettled historical period. Between the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 and reunification under the Sui in 589, China was politically divided and plagued by warfare, famine, and disease.

The arts are central to the transmission of the Mahayana Buddhist message. Images were created according to elaborate systems of proportion and made sacred through ritual. New statues were consecrated in ceremonies where the pupils of the eyes were painted in; relics, scriptures, magic spells, or textile models of human organs would be put within special hollowed-out places. All this served to endow images with sacred life and power. Art was not only part of ritual and worship, but also served to transmit religious ideas, design motifs, and artistic styles between cultures.

Over the centuries, Indian culture exerted varying degrees of influence on Chinese Buddhist art. Early Chinese Buddha images relied heavily on Indian prototypes, especially for the appearance of the face, robes, and body. During periods of active exchange, travelers, texts, and sacred objects flowed freely into

China. By contrast, when the Silk Routes were unsafe, Chinese artistic styles developed more independently. By the twelfth century, when Buddhism had ceased to exist as an organized religion in India, this influence came to an end.

Examining Images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas

Today, much of the world is linked by air travel, telephone, television, the Internet, and global marketing. Cultural exchange seems, at least on the surface, to be instantaneous and ongoing. By contrast, pre-modern cultural exchange took long periods of time and advanced in slow stages. On the Silk Road it was propelled by horse, camel, and human footsteps. This activity explores visual artifacts as both evidence of the past and as transmitters of ideas and artistic styles. Examine the images of the Buddha and a bodhisattva and answer the questions.

		
<p>1. Colossal Standing Buddha, Bamiyan, Afghanistan (ca. 4th-5th century). Sandstone. Height: approx. 175 feet. This gigantic image of the Buddha was destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. Its great size had a tremendous impact on travelers and it is possible they took smaller reproductions back to China.</p>	<p>2. Seated Buddha Altarpiece, China (ca. 420-479). Bronze. Height: approx. 11 inches. Depicts the Buddha seated in a meditating pose before a flaming halo. This style developed in northwest India during the 2nd century. Portable bronzes helped spread the Buddhist doctrine of compassion and salvation.</p>	<p>3. Tang-Dynasty China Bodhisattva (ca. 8th century). Limestone. Height: approx. 60 inches. Buddhism offers its followers the spiritual means to escape the suffering of human existence. This serene and relaxed image inspired followers to pursue the path toward enlightenment by eliminating all material desires.</p>

Questions and Activities

1. What might attract a Silk Road traveler to the Bamiyan Buddha (figure 1)?
2. In your opinion, what is the purpose of the Seated Buddha (figure 2) and the Bodhisattva (figure 3)?
3. In your opinion, how might these objects have contributed to cultural diffusion?
4. Select a modern-day artwork, object, or monument that can be compared to figures 1, 2 or 3. It could be anything that represents some aspect of reproducible culture that can be passed on to others: postcards, compact discs, etc.
 - a. Identify the ideas it symbolizes or represents.
 - b. Indicate how it is able to spread these ideas.
 - c. Explain how these ideas might change in meaning when transported to another culture.

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