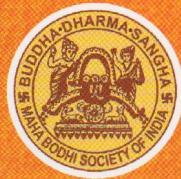


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Dynamics of Early Buddhist Dissemination on the Foreign Soil of China -- A Critical Study

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the earliest dissemination of Buddhism from the heartland of its origin to lands distant, is perhaps one of the most fascinating events related to the developmental history of the religion. That which grants significant importance to the entire dissemination process, is the proceeding of the same against the backdrop of an ever changing complex matrix, interwoven with intricacies and complexities, inclusive of almost every aspect of civil society that modern scholarship is equipped to deal with.

In the following study we intend to demystify certain conventional beliefs, which have for decades now accompanied the understanding of the process involving the transplantation of Buddhism into the foreign socio-cultural, political, religious and economic matrix of China. The overt simplistic portrayal of the Dharma, as having been transmitted from India to China through intensive efforts of monks and missionaries only, needs to be fast done away with, in order to make further progress in the rationalistic study of Buddhist dissemination as a complex phenomenon.

2. Objective of the Study

The foremost objective of the study is to substantiate with proper evidence that, Chinese Buddhism can in no way be perceived solely as a monolithic system of monastic tradition or genre, but more so as a heterogeneous system with far reaching social, political and cultural

influence against the Chinese context. Due to constraint of space, this study focuses on the period in time in history between the first and the fifth centuries CE.

The paper first studies the earliest impact of Buddhism upon three major sections of pre-modern Chinese society - the aristocracy, the common masses and the Chinese intelligentsia. Second, it reads through all the complexities involved in the dissemination of Buddhism in each of the afore mentioned segments of pre-modern Chinese society, thereby projecting the complex perception of Buddhism in the eyes of China's diverse social members.

At the very outset, we would like to share our broad understanding of pre-modern Chinese society as being analogous to a pyramidal structure, comprising of three main segments. Lying at the apex of the pyramid as well as of the power structure had been the limited, influential aristocratic house and the officialdom, lying at the very base, had been the commoners while the middle of the pyramid was held by the in-betweens, who we have designated, in the course of our study, as the Chinese intelligentsia.

3. Observation

3.1 Influence of Early Chinese Buddhism on the Officialdom

3.1.1 Archaeological Evidences

The first of our archaeological evidence is related to the earliest Buddhist imagery surviving at an area about 30 miles from Pengcheng. To

the south west of
Lianyungang in Jian
engraved on the b
images of the Bud
parinirvana postu
were also found
various secular fig
Jataka tales and tra
bearing distinct Dao
by Buddha images
have for long been
Zurcher, as he
amalgamation of
Chinese motifs. Ha
in Sichuan and Gian
discern the much po
ideas. The engraving
Buddhist imageries,
traditional Chinese
toad,² also testify to
of synthesis.

Most interesting
Buddhist imageries,
of intending to deli
visual art forms to
aristocracy, any f
philosophical conce
opines, the early im
in China had in fact
Buddhist teachings b

The second set of
depiction of Buddhist
the one discovered,
upper door lintel of
in Mahao, Sichuan⁴ a
relief discovered at
speaking of the Bud
western region, end
power of granting imm
Hung perhaps is also
in concluding that
testimonies of Buddha