Aufklärung
Revista de Filosofia
AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18012/arf.v13i1.77800
Recebido: 15/05/2025 | Aceito: 30/09/2025

The sinicization of Buddhism from the early common era to the Sui-Tang period

[Filosofia Oriental e Religião: A sinização do budismo do início da Era Comum ao período Sui-Tang]

Nguyen Thi Lien Nhi [1]
Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam

Abstract: Buddhism entered China in the first century CE and underwent profound transformation to become an organic component of the spiritual culture of the Chinese nation. By the Sui–Tang period (581 to 907), the Sinicization of Buddhism was essentially completed, manifested through three prominent characteristics: integration, diversity, and simplification. This article analyzes the content of this process across three historical stages, elucidates the core characteristics, and evaluates the extensive influence of Buddhism on customs and rituals, literature, art, and thought among the Chinese people. The findings demonstrate that Buddhism was not merely localized but also contributed significantly to shaping Chinese cultural identity, establishing a triadic balance among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.
Keywords: Sinicization of Buddhism, Sui–Tang period, integration, diversity, simplification, Chinese spiritual culture

Resumo: O budismo entrou na China no primeiro século EC e passou por uma profunda transformação para se tornar um componente orgânico da cultura espiritual da nação chinesa. No período Sui-Tang (581 a 907), a sinização do budismo estava essencialmente concluída, manifestando-se através de três características proeminentes: integração, diversidade e simplificação. Este artigo analisa o conteúdo desse processo ao longo de três estágios históricos, elucida suas características centrais e avalia a ampla influência do budismo nos costumes e rituais, na literatura, na arte e no pensamento do povo chinês. Os resultados demonstram que o budismo não foi meramente localizado, mas também contribuiu significativamente para moldar a identidade cultural chinesa, estabelecendo um tríplice equilíbrio entre confucionismo, budismo e taoísmo.
Palavras-chave: Sinização do budismo; período Sui-Tang; integração; diversidade; simplificação; cultura espiritual chinesa

1. Introduction

Buddhism, one of the largest systems of thought and religion in human history, emerged in India around the sixth to fifth centuries BCE through the enlightenment of Sakyamuni Buddha. With its core philosophy of dependent origination, non-self, impermanence, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path, Buddhism is not merely a religion of faith but also a profound doctrine of human existence, emphasizing self-liberation from suffering through wisdom and compassion. From the first century CE, Buddhism began to enter China via the Silk Road, marking one of the most significant cultural exchanges in Asian history. The event in which Emperor Ming of the Han invited the monks

1 *Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam. Email: nhintl@huit.edu.vn*

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna to Luoyang in 67 CE, resulting in the construction of the White Horse Temple, the first Buddhist monastery in China, is regarded as the official starting point of the process of reception and transformation of Buddhism in this country (Ounephaivong, 2024).

However, upon entering China, Buddhism confronted a civilization with a long history and a firmly established intellectual system: Confucianism, with its emphasis on loyalty, filial piety, ritual propriety, self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world pacification, prioritizing social order and secular responsibility; and Daoism, with its concepts of non-action, naturalness, yin–yang and five phases cosmology, immortality, and harmony with the cosmos. These two indigenous intellectual traditions not only dominated spiritual life but also shaped ethical, political, and social norms among the Chinese people (Mou and Tian, 2023). Buddhism, with its world-renouncing character, doctrine of non-self, and abandonment of family and society in pursuit of individual liberation, was initially perceived as alien, even antithetical to Confucian ethics (unfilial behavior, destruction of the state and family) and the world-affirming spirit of Daoism. Many Confucian scholars of the Han to Jin period severely criticized it, labeling Buddhism the "three destructions doctrine" (destroying the state, destroying the family, destroying the self), arguing that monastic tonsure, celibacy, and failure to venerate ancestors violated filial piety and feudal order.

Nevertheless, Buddhism was not completely rejected; instead, it was gradually accepted, adapted, and transformed to suit the cultural and social context of China. This process is known as the "Sinicization of Buddhism", a long-term, dialectical development spanning nearly a millennium from the Later Han to the Song dynasty, but reaching its peak and essential completion during the Sui–Tang period (581 to 907). This was the phase in which Buddhism not only survived but flourished spectacularly in terms of quantity (tens of thousands of monasteries, hundreds of thousands of monastics), organization (a fully developed monastic hierarchy with Sangha controllers and registrars), doctrine (the formation of independent schools such as Tiantai, Huayan, Chan, Pure Land, Faxiang), and cultural influence (deep penetration into all social strata, from emperors to peasants). The research questions are as follows: How did the Sinicization of Buddhism unfold from the early Common Era to the Sui–Tang period? What was the specific content of this process across historical stages? Which core characteristics enabled Buddhism not only to survive but to become an integral part of Chinese culture? Finally, in what ways did Buddhism profoundly influence the spiritual and cultural life of the Chinese people, from customs and rituals, literature, and art to philosophical thought? (Liu, 2024)

Studying this issue holds significant academic and practical importance. Academically, it clarifies the mechanisms of cultural exchange and integration between two great civilizations (India and China), demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of religious and philosophical systems in divergent cultural contexts. Practically, the study illuminates the cultural identity of China, a civilization that has always absorbed foreign essences to enrich itself, and provides deeper understanding of Buddhism's role in shaping ethical values, aesthetic sensibilities, and spiritual outlook among the Chinese over thousands of years. To this day, that legacy

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

remains vividly present in festivals, language, art, and philosophy of life among contemporary Chinese people. The research focuses on the period from the early Common Era to the Sui–Tang era, the pivotal phase that determined the success or failure of the Sinicization process. Through historical, philosophical, and cultural analysis, the article elucidates the content, core characteristics (integration, diversity, simplification), and extensive influence of Buddhism on Chinese spiritual life, thereby affirming that Buddhism was not merely "Sinicized" but also actively contributed to shaping Chinese cultural identity, giving rise to the unique model of "harmonious unity of the three teachings" in the history of human thought (Xiqin, 2024).

2. Literature Review and Research Method

The issue of Buddhism's transmission to China and its Sinicization has attracted sustained attention from scholars both domestically and internationally across historical periods. From an international perspective, foundational Western works such as Erik Zürcher's The Buddhist Conquest of China provide detailed accounts of Buddhism's transmission from India to China, emphasizing the role of the Silk Road, foreign monks (An Shigao, Kumārajīva), and initial adaptation through "concept matching" (geyi). Zürcher frames the process as a form of reverse "cultural conquest", in which Buddhism had to struggle for survival amid the highly developed Chinese civilization. Kenneth K.S. Ch'en's Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey further analyzes the organizational development, sectarian formation, and social influence of Chinese Buddhism, particularly highlighting the Northern and Southern Dynasties and Sui–Tang periods as the stage of "complete Sinicization". Subsequent studies, such as those by Arthur F. Wright and Stanley Weinstein, focus on the relationship between Buddhism and state power, arguing that Tang court patronage was the decisive factor in Buddhism's zenith in China.

In China, research on the Sinicization of Buddhism bears a distinctive imprint of historical materialism. Modern scholars such as Tang Yongtong, with his History of Buddhism during the Han, Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties and History of Buddhism during the Sui and Tang, systematically chronicled the development of Buddhism across periods, emphasizing its integration with Confucianism and Daoism. After 1949, under the influence of Marxist–Leninist thought, numerous works applied historical materialism to analyze Buddhism as a form of social consciousness reflecting the economic and social base of feudal society. Scholars such as Xiao Zuoliang, Fang Litian, and researchers from the Institute of Religious Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences regarded Sinicization as the inevitable outcome of class contradictions and spiritual needs within a crisis-ridden feudal society. Recent works, including the collective History of Chinese Buddhism and studies by Li Xiaohong and Wang Bangwei, stress the dialectical nature of the integration of the three teachings, particularly the role of Chan and Pure Land schools in simplifying doctrine to penetrate the masses.

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

Nevertheless, certain limitations persist in existing scholarship. Many international studies concentrate on transmission routes and translation activities, with less in-depth analysis of the socio-economic factors driving Sinicization. Meanwhile, some Chinese studies, although employing historical materialism, occasionally exhibit dogmatism and fail to fully elucidate the subjective creativity of eminent monks and the two-way interaction between Buddhism and indigenous culture. This article seeks to address these shortcomings by applying historical materialism and dialectical materialism to comprehensively analyze the Sinicization of Buddhism from the early Common Era to the Sui–Tang period, clarifying specific historical content while highlighting core characteristics (integration, diversity, simplification) and profound cultural influence.

The research methodology is grounded in two fundamental principles of Marxist–Leninist philosophy: historical materialism and dialectical materialism.

Historical materialism views social phenomena, thought, and religion as products of specific economic and social conditions, determined by the economic base (relations and forces of production) and reflective of class contradictions within society. In studying the Sinicization of Buddhism, this method is applied as follows: Buddhism is not regarded as a supra-historical, immutable ideology but as a form of social consciousness reflecting the conditions of feudal Chinese society across periods. During the Later Han to Western Jin, relative social stability coexisted with emerging class contradictions (land concentration, peasant hardship), creating demand for spiritual consolation. Buddhism entered and was accepted as a form of "new Daoism". During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, incessant warfare, territorial division, and profound social crisis led to Buddhism's rapid expansion as a spiritual refuge for the masses and a political stabilization tool for regimes. During the Sui–Tang, territorial unification, economic prosperity, and controlled class contradictions enabled Buddhism to reach its zenith through court patronage aimed at consolidating power and mitigating social inequality. The method also analyzes the historical inevitability of Sinicization: Buddhism could only survive and flourish by adapting to the feudal economic and social base of China, integrating with Confucianism and Daoism to become part of the ideological superstructure, serving both ruling-class interests and the spiritual needs of the laboring masses.

Dialectical materialism emphasizes motion, internal contradictions, and quantitative-to-qualitative transformation in all phenomena. Applied here, it clarifies that the Sinicization process is dialectical: from initial contradiction (Buddhism's world-renouncing nature versus Confucianism's world-affirming orientation) to struggle (debates over "monks not bowing to rulers", "immortality of the spirit") to integration ("concept matching", doctrinal adjustment) to qualitative transformation (formation of schools with distinctly Chinese character). This transformation culminated in the Sui–Tang period, when Buddhism shifted from a foreign religion to an organic component of Chinese culture. It also highlights the unity of opposites: Buddhism was simultaneously world-renouncing (individual liberation) and world-affirming (compassionate salvation, filial gratitude, social stabilization); simultaneously philosophically profound (Tiantai, Huayan) and practically simple (Chan, Pure Land). This unity forms the

basis for its diversity and enduring vitality in China.

3. Research Results

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

3.1 Introduction and Overview of the Sinicization Process of Buddhism

Buddhism emerged in India around the sixth to fifth centuries BCE under the leadership of Sakyamuni Buddha, carrying a profound philosophical system aimed at liberating human beings from suffering: dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), non-self (anātman), impermanence (anicca), the Four Noble Truths (suffering, origin, cessation, path), and the Noble Eightfold Path. This philosophy is not only religious but also a deep doctrine of human existence, ethics, and epistemology, emphasizing self-awakening and universal compassion to save all sentient beings. From the first century CE, Buddhism began to enter China via the Silk Road, primarily through Indian and Central Asian monks such as Kasyapa Matanga, Dharmaratna (67 CE, during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Later Han), An Shigao (from Parthia), and Zhi Loujiachan (from the Kushan Empire). The White Horse Temple in Luoyang is regarded as the first Buddhist monastery in China, marking the beginning of a cultural exchange process that lasted nearly a millennium (Dayanidhi, 2025).

Upon initial entry, Buddhism encountered a highly developed civilization with a firmly established intellectual system: Confucianism, which emphasized ritual propriety, loyalty, filial piety, social order, self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world pacification; and Daoism, which valued naturalness, non-action, yin-yang and five phases cosmology, immortality, and harmony with the cosmos. Initially, Buddhism was misunderstood as a branch of Daoism or an immortality technique. The Buddha was viewed as an immortal sage, nirvana was equated with Laozi's "non-action," and rebirth was explained through the theory of "the immortality of the spirit." The method of "concept matching" (geyi) was widely used: Buddhist concepts were interpreted using Lao-Zhuang terminology to make them accessible to the scholar-official class (for example, "emptiness" was rendered as "non-being," "dependent origination" was approximated as "naturalness," and "suchness" as "the Way"). The primary recipients were aristocrats and merchants in urban centers such as Luoyang and Chang'an, while Confucian scholars strongly opposed it, arguing that monasticism was unfilial and destructive to social order ("destroying the state, destroying the family, destroying the self").

The Sinicization of Buddhism spanned nearly a millennium, but the decisive phase occurred from the early Common Era to the Sui–Tang period (581 to 907). This was the era in which Buddhism not only survived but achieved spectacular development in quantity (tens of thousands of monasteries, hundreds of thousands of monastics), organization (a fully developed monastic hierarchy with Sangha controllers and registrars), doctrine (the formation of independent schools), and cultural influence (deep penetration into all social strata). This process was not passive reception but

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

a dialectical interaction between foreign thought and the spiritual, political, and economic needs of feudal Chinese society (Palumbo, 2022).

The process of Sinicization can be divided into three main stages:

Stage 1 (Later Han to Western Jin, 67 to 317): transmission, scripture translation, and initial establishment amid a relatively stable society but with strong prejudices from Confucian scholars. Stage 2 (Western Jin to Northern and Southern Dynasties, 317 to 581): philosophical development, institutional consolidation, and deep integration with indigenous thought amid continuous warfare, territorial division, and profound social and spiritual crisis. Stage 3 (Sui to Tang, 581 to 907): maturation and zenith, the formation of schools with distinctly Chinese character amid territorial unification, economic prosperity, and strong state patronage.

The success of the Sinicization process stemmed from diverse and complex causes. First, feudal Chinese society frequently experienced crises: incessant warfare (Three Kingdoms, Five Barbarians' chaos, Northern and Southern Dynasties), natural disasters, class inequality, land concentration in the hands of landlords, and peasant hardship. These conditions created an urgent demand for an ideology that could explain suffering, promise liberation, and provide spiritual consolation, something Confucianism (focused on reality and ritual) and Daoism (focused on naturalness but lacking specific explanations of suffering) could not fully satisfy. Buddhism, with its Four Noble Truths and doctrine of karma and rebirth, filled this gap.

Second, Buddhism possessed high flexibility and did not directly conflict with Confucianism (which emphasized social order) or Daoism (which valued naturalness and non-action), making integration easy. Chinese monks actively adjusted doctrine: emphasizing "compassionate gratitude" to align with Confucian filial piety, using "non-action" to explain nirvana, and transforming "immortality of the spirit" into a bridge with folk beliefs (Mou, 2023).

Third, feudal dynasties (especially during the Tang) recognized the political benefits of utilizing Buddhism: stabilizing society, mitigating class contradictions, and consolidating power (the emperor was viewed as a "wheel-turning sage king" or "Dharma king"). Emperors such as Sui Wendi, Tang Taizong, Wu Zetian, and Tang Xuanzong vigorously patronized Buddhism by constructing monasteries, establishing translation bureaus, and dispatching monks to India to seek scriptures.

Fourth, the tireless efforts of Chinese eminent monks played a decisive role: Huiyuan, Sengzhao, Daosheng (Northern and Southern Dynasties), Zhiyi, Fazang, Xuanzang, Huineng, Shandao (Sui–Tang) interpreted and creatively adapted doctrine to suit Chinese psychology and needs, thereby giving rise to independent schools with distinctly national character.

By the Sui–Tang period, Buddhism was no longer a foreign religion but had become an organic component of Chinese culture, forming with Confucianism and Daoism the "harmonious unity of the three teachings", a distinctive model of thought characteristic of ancient and medieval China. This process not only transformed Buddhism but also enriched the spiritual life of the Chinese people, profoundly influencing customs and rituals, literature, art, and philosophy. It is vivid proof of the Chinese nation's capacity for absorption, integration, and cultural creativity.

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

3.2 The Content of the Sinicization Process across Three Stages

Stage 1 (67 to 317) was the formative period and initial establishment. Buddhism spread primarily through scripture translation by foreign monks. An Shigao (from Parthia) translated Hinayana texts on meditation and the Four Noble Truths (Anban Shouyi Jing, Si Di Jing, Zhuan Falun Jing), emphasizing breath control and desire restraint. Zhi Loujiachan (from the Kushan Empire) focused on Mahayana Prajnaparamita texts (Bore Boluomiduo Jing). By the year 300, Luoyang and Chang'an had approximately 180 monasteries and 3,700 monastics, a modest number but one that laid a solid foundation for later development.

At this time, Buddhism was widely misunderstood: the Buddha was viewed as an immortal sage, nirvana was equated with Laozi's "non-action," and rebirth was explained through the theory of "the immortality of the spirit." The method of "concept matching" (geyi) was prevalent, borrowing Lao–Zhuang terminology to interpret Buddhist doctrine (for example, "emptiness" was rendered as "non-being," "dependent origination" approximated as "naturalness," "suchness" as "the Way"). The primary recipients were aristocrats and merchants in urban centers, while Confucian scholars strongly opposed it, arguing that monasticism was unfilial and destructive to social order ("destroying the state, destroying the family, destroying the self"). Several intense debates occurred, such as those between Du Shouxin and Kasyapa Matanga, and between Zhang Yu and Kang Senghui. Nevertheless, Buddhism gradually gained acceptance thanks to its compassion, equanimity, and ability to provide spiritual consolation amid the turmoil of the late Han (DAI and Jamnongsarn, 2023).

Stage 2 (317 to 581) took place amid the division of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, continuous warfare (the Five Barbarians' chaos), and the suffering of the people. This was the period of Buddhism's vigorous development in both quantity and quality. Translation work advanced dramatically thanks to Kumārajīva (translations of the Lotus Sutra, Madhyamaka-karika, Diamond Sutra, Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra), Dharmaksema (Mahaparinirvana Sutra), Buddhabhadra, Gunabhadra, and others. Key Mahayana scriptures were introduced, laying the foundation for later schools. Notably, Faxian (fifth century) traveled to India to seek dharma, brought back numerous texts, and wrote Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, the first Chinese Buddhist travelogue.

In terms of organization, the number of monasteries and monastics surged: the Liang dynasty had 2,846 monasteries and 82,000 monastics; the Northern Wei had up to 30,896 monasteries and 2 million monastics. The Buddhist monastic community took shape with positions such as Sangha Controller, Sangha Registrar, and Sangha Supervisor. Organizations such as Huiyuan's White Lotus Society (on Mount Lu) were precursors to structured monastic orders. Early schools emerged: the Satyasiddhi school (based on the Satyasiddhi-sastra), Abhidharma school (based on Abhidharma texts), Nirvana school (based on the Mahaparinirvana Sutra), Samgraha school, and Dasabhumika school. Notably, the Chan school began to take shape with Bodhidharma (arrival in China around 520) and the principle of "a separate transmission outside the teachings, not relying on written words, directly pointing to the human mind, seeing one's nature and attaining

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

Buddhahood."

Eminent monks such as Huiyuan (integrating Prajnaparamita with Xuanxue, advocating "monks need not bow to rulers"), Sengzhao (using Lao–Zhuang to explain "non-true emptiness" and "things do not move"), and Daosheng (advocating "even icchantikas possess Buddha-nature" and "sudden enlightenment to attain Buddhahood") carried out the initial integration of Buddhism with indigenous thought. They not only translated but also creatively reinterpreted doctrine to suit Chinese psychology, laying the foundation for deeper Sinicization in the subsequent stage. Despite two major persecutions (Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei in 446 and Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou in 574), Buddhism recovered strongly thanks to popular support and certain dynastic policies.

Stage 3 (581 to 907) was the period of maturation and zenith. Emperor Wen of Sui revived Buddhism after the two persecutions, constructing numerous monasteries and allowing free ordination. The Tang dynasty provided vigorous patronage: Emperor Taizong established translation bureaus and dispatched monks to India; Wu Zetian proclaimed herself an incarnation of Maitreya; Emperor Xuanzong built magnificent monasteries. Xuanzang (600 to 664) traveled to India for 17 years, translated over 1,300 fascicles of scriptures, and founded the Faxiang–Weishi school (based on the Yogacarabhumi-sastra and Cheng Weishi Lun). Zhiyi (538 to 597) established the Tiantai school (based on the Lotus Sutra, proposing "one thought contains three thousand realms"). Fazang (643 to 712) founded the Huayan school (based on the Avatamsaka Sutra, proposing "dependent origination of the Dharma realm" and "perfect interpenetration without obstruction"). Huineng (638 to 713) completed the Southern Chan school with "sudden enlightenment to attain Buddhahood" and "originally not one thing." Shandao (613 to 681) developed the Pure Land school with the practice of nianfo for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Other schools included the Vinaya school (Dao Xuan) and Esoteric school (Subhakarasimha, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra).

The number of monasteries exceeded 40,000, with approximately 300,000 monastics; monastic estates owned tens of thousands of qing of land. Buddhism penetrated all social strata, from emperors and aristocrats to peasants and merchants, becoming an indispensable part of Chinese spiritual life. This was the period when Chinese Buddhism achieved complete independence in doctrine and organization, bearing a distinctly national character.

3.3 Core Characteristics of the Sinicization Process

The first characteristic is integration (ronghe), the dialectical blending of Buddhism with indigenous culture. Buddhism was not completely rejected but actively merged with Confucianism and Daoism. With Daoism, Buddhism borrowed concepts such as "non-action," "naturalness," and "immortality of the spirit" to interpret nirvana, rebirth, and "suchness." With Confucianism, monks adjusted the notion of "unfiliality" (leaving home and celibacy) by emphasizing "compassionate gratitude," "filial piety across

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

lifetimes," and "caring for parents as great merit." Eminent monks such as Huiyuan (in his treatise on monks not bowing to rulers, yet stressing karmic retribution to align with ethics), Sengzhao (using Lao–Zhuang to explain "non-true emptiness" and "things do not move"), Daosheng (advocating "even icchantikas possess Buddha-nature" and "sudden enlightenment"), Zhiyi (integrating "one thought contains three thousand realms" with Xuanxue), Fazang (using "perfect interpenetration without obstruction" to explain Huayan), and Huineng (using "originally not one thing" to explain "seeing nature and attaining Buddhahood") all employed Lao–Zhuang and Confucian thought to interpret Mahayana doctrine. The result was the emergence of schools bearing distinctly Chinese characteristics: Chan with "sudden enlightenment," Tiantai with "one thought contains three thousand realms," Huayan with "perfect interpenetration," and Faxiang with "consciousness-only dependent origination" reinterpreted in a practical direction.

The second characteristic is diversity (duoyang). Chinese Buddhism did not follow a single line but developed into multiple schools, each suited to different social strata, psychological tendencies, and spiritual capacities. Intellectuals with deep philosophical interest turned to Tiantai (Zhiyi's system of "five periods and eight teachings"), Huayan (Fazang's "dependent origination of the Dharma realm" and "ten profound gates"), and Faxiang–Weishi (Xuanzang's detailed analysis of eight consciousnesses and three natures); the common people, needing simple practices, turned to Pure Land (Shandao's nianfo for rebirth); those seeking direct realization without complex theory turned to Chan (Huineng's "directly pointing to the human mind, seeing nature and attaining Buddhahood"). Other schools included Vinaya (Dao Xuan, emphasizing precepts) and Esoteric (Subhakarasimha, emphasizing ritual and mantra). This diversity enabled Buddhism to adapt to all social strata: from emperors (patronizing Esoteric and Tiantai), aristocrats (favoring Huayan and Faxiang), scholar-officials (preferring Chan), to peasants and merchants (following Pure Land). By the Tang, eight major schools (later ten) had emerged, creating a "hundred flowers blooming together" in Chinese Buddhism, in stark contrast to the relative uniformity of Indian Buddhism.

The third characteristic is simplification (jiandan), far removed from the complexity of Indian Buddhism in philosophy (detailed Abhidharma analysis) and ritual (elaborate and ornate). The Chan school advocated "not relying on written words, a separate transmission outside the teachings, directly pointing to the human mind, seeing nature and attaining Buddhahood", no need for prolonged seated meditation, extensive sutra recitation, or complicated rituals; only the realization of the originally pure mind, "originally not one thing." Huineng emphasized "the ordinary mind is the Way," "carrying firewood and water is also the Way," and "putting down the knife that kills is immediate Buddhahood." The Pure Land school simplified practice to the point that single-minded recitation of "Namo Amitabha Buddha" suffices, relying on Amitabha Buddha's other-power for rebirth in the Western Pure Land, no need for profound sutra study or strict precept observance. This simplification aligned with the pragmatic, reality-oriented, and anti-speculative character of the Chinese people, enabling Buddhism to penetrate deeply into the masses and become a popular religion.

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

It was precisely this simplification that made Chan and Pure Land the two dominant streams, enduring to the present day.

These three characteristics are inseparable and mutually reinforcing: integration provides the foundation for Buddhism's survival and growth; diversity creates richness and meets varied needs across social strata; simplification ensures long-term vitality, allowing Buddhism to penetrate the masses and become the religion of the majority of the Chinese people.

4. The Influence of Buddhism on the Spiritual and Cultural Life of the Chinese People

Buddhism exerted profound and enduring influence on Chinese customs and rituals. The Ullambana Festival (fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month) became a widespread folk custom, expressing filial piety toward parents and ancestors through offerings to hungry ghosts and requiem services. The Buddha's Birthday (eighth day of the fourth lunar month) was celebrated grandly with rituals of bathing the Buddha statue, processions, and floating lanterns. The fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Buddha's Parinirvana (fifteenth day of the second month), and Enlightenment Day (eighth day of the twelfth month) all became major communal festivals. Vegetarianism (especially on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month and during the seventh month) and animal release spread widely, rooted in the precept of non-killing and universal compassion. Tea drinking flourished due to monks' need for alertness during meditation, Lu Yu of the Tang wrote The Classic of Tea, elevating tea to an art of living and influencing Chinese culinary culture. Rituals for peace, requiem, funerals, praying for children, and seeking wealth became daily needs, closely intertwined with family and community life. Many folk customs such as star worship for averting misfortune, New Year peace prayers, and floating lanterns on the fifteenth of the first month all bear the imprint of Buddhism.

In literature, Buddhism provided rich inspiration and transformed the landscape of Chinese literature. Transformation texts (bianwen), precious scrolls (baojuan), and narrative preaching developed from sutra exposition in rhymed prose, becoming precursors to folk storytelling and drama. Mythological novels such as Journey to the West (Wu Cheng'en) and Investiture of the Gods (Xu Zhonglin) drew heavily from Buddhist scriptures (Lotus Sutra, Surangama Sutra) and concepts of karma, rebirth, and supernatural powers. Many characters (Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie) bear traces of bodhisattvas and arhats. Tang poetry (Wang Wei, Bai Juyi, Liu Zongyuan, Hanshan) is imbued with Chan flavor and Chan landscapes, blending scene and emotion to create a distinct Chinese poetic style characterized by stillness, depth, and non-self. Many modern Chinese terms originate from Buddhism: equality, awakening, world, reality, affinity, liberation, affliction, pure land, other shore, koan, enriching the Chinese lexicon and expressive capacity.

In art, Buddhism drove remarkable development across multiple fields. Monastery and pagoda architecture adopted Chinese characteristics: curved roofs, wooden pillars, symmetrical layout, triple gates, and magnificent

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800

Buddha halls (Dayan Pagoda, Daxiong Hall, Lingyin Temple). Pagodas evolved from Indian stupas into multi-tiered, multi-eaved structures distinctive to China. Cave temple sculpture at Dunhuang (Gansu), Yungang (Shanxi), and Longmen (Henan) became world heritage sites, combining Indian techniques with Chinese aesthetics in thousands of vivid, exquisite Buddha and bodhisattva statues. Buddhist painting reached its peak with artists such as Wu Daozi (temple murals), Zhang Sengyou, and Yan Liben, paintings of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, and heavenly beings full of vitality. Buddhist ritual music blended court and folk music, creating a distinctive Buddhist musical tradition characterized by distant, tranquil, and profound tones (sutra chanting, Ullambana music). Buddhist plastic arts (Buddha statues, reliefs, murals) not only held religious value but also represented the pinnacle of ancient Chinese fine arts.

In thought, Buddhism supplemented aspects lacking in Confucianism and Daoism: explaining suffering (Four Noble Truths), promising liberation (nirvana), and emphasizing compassionate equality (all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature). The integration of the three teachings created a distinctive model of thought in ancient China, influencing later Song–Ming philosophy (Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism and Lu–Wang School of Mind both drew from Chan and Huayan).

4. Conclusion

The Sinicization of Buddhism from the early Common Era to the Sui–Tang period is a monumental cultural phenomenon, demonstrating the exceptional capacity of the Chinese nation for absorption, integration, and creativity. From a foreign religion, Buddhism became an inseparable component of Chinese spiritual culture, forming with Confucianism and Daoism the "harmonious unity of the three teachings", a distinctive model of thought characteristic of ancient and medieval China. Across three historical stages, Buddhism transformed from passive importation to active integration, from complex philosophy to practical simplicity, from elite minority to popular majority. The three core characteristics, integration, diversity, simplification, served as the key to Buddhism's survival and spectacular development, reaching its zenith in the Sui–Tang period with a complete system of schools and profound influence across all social strata. The Sinicization of Buddhism is not merely the story of receiving a religion but vivid proof of the vitality and cultural creativity of the Chinese nation. Buddhism became the "spiritual offspring" of China, contributing to the shaping of national cultural identity over thousands of years of history, leaving a deep imprint on the spiritual life of the Chinese people to this day.

References

DAI, L., & Jamnongsarn, S. (2023). A study of the philosophical implications and functions of Han Buddhist music from the perspective of the three realms of music (Doctoral dissertation, Srinakharinwirot University).

http://ir-ithesis.swu.ac.th/dspace/handle/123456789/2655
Dayanidhi, A. (2025). Buddhism: Traditional continuity or a new beginning? Lumbini Prabha, 10, 61–71. http://ijmer.in.doi./2022/11.10.82
Jingyi, X., & Jiangli, Z. (2024). Religion, culture, and identity: The generational evolution of identification with Buddhism from the perspective of young Chinese Indonesians. International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 29(3–4), 103–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2024.2380253
Liu, Y. (2024). Sacred resurgence: Revitalizing Buddhist temples in modern China. Religions, 15(5), 627. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050627
Mou, Z. (2023). Profound theoretical integration of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and the climax of theoretical innovation (The Song, Liao, Jin, Western Xia, Yuan, and Ming dynasties). In Z. Mou, M. Yang, & P. Tian, A brief history of the relationship between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (pp. 309–407). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7206-5_6
Mou, Z., Yang, M., & Tian, P. (2023). A brief history of the relationship between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-7206-5
Ounephaivong, S. (2024). Indian Buddhism compositions revealed to the world. BUDDHO, 3(3), 13–24. https://so13.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Buddho
Palumbo, A. (2022). Buddhism in premodern China and its periodization: In search of a new narrative. In Chinese Buddhism and the scholarship of Erik Zürcher (pp. 304–389). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004522152_012
TE, H. (2022). Study on building a China–South Asia community of shared future under the context of mutual learning among civilizations. Journal of Peace and Diplomacy, 5(1), 56–73. https://doi.org/10.59111/JPD.005.01.056
Xiqin, S. (2024). Study on building a China–South Asia community of shared future under the context of mutual learning among civilizations. Journal of Peace and Diplomacy, 5(1), 1–23.

AUFKLÄRUNG, João Pessoa, v.13, n.1, Mai., 2026, p.1-12 / e. 77800