

## **CHAPTER FIVE – POST-HAN CHINA: POLITICAL DIVISION AND BUDDHISM**

### POLITICAL DIVISION AND THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

China's four centuries of unification under the Han Dynasty were followed by four centuries when division prevailed. This period of division began with a stalemate among the rivals to succeed the Han, resulting in the Three Kingdoms.

In 280, China was reunited by the Western Jin Dynasty, but peace was short-lived. After 300, Jin degenerated into civil war. For the next two and a half centuries, north China was ruled by non-Chinese dynasties while the south was ruled by a sequence of four short-lived Chinese dynasties, all of which were centered in the area of the present-day city of Nanjing. Although Buddhism gained a remarkable hold in both north and in the success of Buddhism. If earlier philosophies laid the foundation for Chinese society, what was the effect of the spread of fundamentally different religions? In the north, despite frequent ethnic conflict, a hybrid culture emerged that drew from Chinese traditions of government administration and the military traditions of non-Chinese rulers. In the south, although military men repeatedly seized the throne, high culture thrived among the aristocrats, especially the literary and visual arts. The northern dynasties of this age mark the first time in Chinese history when a large part of China proper was ruled by non-Han Chinese. Thus, scholars of this period have been particularly interested in issues of ethnicity and sinification. In what contexts did the Xianbei rulers promote or discourage adoption of Chinese ways? Another central issue in the understanding of this period is the adoption of foreign ideas?

### THE THREE KINGDOMS (220-265) AND THE WESTERN JIN DYNASTY (265-316)

The Han Dynasty began to fall apart in 184 C.E. when the followers of a Daoist (or Taoist) religious cult called the Way of Great Peace staged a major insurrection. In their efforts to seize power, hundreds of thousands of followers across the country simultaneously attacked local government offices. Although the original uprising was suppressed within a year, other groups preaching similar doctrines rose up elsewhere in the country. To respond to these uprisings, the Han court gave generals and local officials considerable autonomy to raise their own armies. In these unsettled conditions, they found no shortage of willing recruits among refugees and the destitute. Larger armies were formed by absorbing smaller armies and their leaders. The top generals, once they no longer had rebels to suppress, turned to fighting each other, ushering in several decades of civil war.

By 205, the warlord Cao Cao had made himself the dominant figure in northern China even though he retained the Han emperor as a puppet. After Cao Cao's death in 220, his son Cao Pi forced the last Han emperor to abdicate and proclaimed the Wei Dynasty. The old Han capital of Loyang was retained as the Wei capital. Cao Pi wanted to reconstruct an empire comparable to the Han, but never gained control over all the territory the Han had once held. In the Yangtze valley and farther south, the brothers Sun Ce and Sun Quan established the state of Wu. A third kingdom, Shu, was established in the west, in Sichuan province, by a distant member of the Han imperial clan named Liu Bei. He was aided by one of China's most famous military strategists, Zhuge Liang. Wei was the largest and strongest of these Three Kingdoms, and several of the institutional measures Wei adopted remained important for the next several centuries. Wei made the status of a soldier hereditary: when a commander or a soldier was killed or unable to fight any longer, a son or brother would take his place. Soldiers' families were

classified as "military households" and treated as a group separate from ordinary commoners. These children of these families were required to marry into other military households. For cavalymen, like the Han before them, Wei recruited Xiongnu in large numbers and settled them in southern Shanxi. Because Wei had twice the population of Shu or Wu, it was able to field a much larger army and eventually prevailed. The Wei general Sima Zhao defeated Shu in 263. Two years later, however, the general's son Sima Yan forced the Wei emperor to abdicate in his favor, and he established the Jin Dynasty. This was the first of many dynastic transitions in this period that began with a military coup. In 279, the Jin state sent a fleet of ships down the Yangzi river from Sichuan to overwhelm Wu forces and reunify China. However, hope that Jin would be able to restore the glories of the Han dynasty did not last long. Although Jin now held almost all the former territory of the Han, it did not have the Han government's administrative reach. The census of 280 only registered 16 million people, evidence that many of those who had fled from war, famine or poverty had not been registered where they settled. In Loyang, the Jin Dynasty suffered from internal strife among the families of empresses.

By 290, eight different princes controlled regional armies of their own and before long, their bloody struggles for dominance degenerated into full civil war. By the early 4th century CE, the princes in the north were incorporating more and more non-Chinese in their armies. In 306, an army of Xianbei warriors took Chang An, reportedly slaughtering twenty thousand residents. By this point, the Jin state was little more than a name. Only one of the original princes still survived, and banditry was endemic. The door was open for non-Chinese peoples to assume control of northern China.

#### NON-CHINESE DOMINANCE IN THE NORTH

Xiongnu and other northern auxiliary troops had been settled within China proper since Han times. Most of these groups retained their tribal social structure and pastoral way of life, but settled into a specific territory. After Cao Cao defeated the Wuhuan in 207, he moved many of them into interior counties and incorporated many of their men into his armies. Jin followed similar policies, in 284-285 moving about 130,000 surrendered Xiongnu to the interior. The non-Chinese soldiers were often dissatisfied with their conditions, and ethnic friction was not uncommon. In some areas of northern China, the non-Chinese came to outnumber the Han Chinese. As disorder worsened in the first years of the fourth century, uprisings of tribal Xiongnu, Di and Qing peoples occurred in scattered sites. The most threatening of these was the uprising of the Xiongnu chieftain Liu Yan in 304. His armies plundered their way through Shanxi and reached the gates of Loyang in 308.

Another important non-Chinese chieftain was a Jie tribesman named Shi Le. Originally allied with Liu Yan, it was Shi Le's forces who captured and plundered Luoyang in 311. In 319, Shi Le broke with the Liu family and proclaimed himself king; within a decade he successfully destroyed Liu forces. The regimes established by Shi Le, the Liu Yan family and other tribes drew sharp distinctions between Chinese and non-Chinese. In essence, the non-Chinese were the rulers and the soldiers, while the Chinese were the subjects, who were expected to grow grain, pay taxes and provide labor service. Not surprisingly, most of the Chinese population saw these regimes as illegitimate and ethnic tensions were at a high point. During these decades, Chinese in the north faced a leadership crisis. Some scholars estimate that 60 percent of the elite government officials and landowners fled south between 311 and 325, taking their relatives and retainers with them.

By 400, the rising power in the north was the Northern Wei state, founded by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei. From its base in northern Shanxi, Northern Wei defeated the other states set up by other tribal clans, and in 439 unified all of northern China after more than a century of constant conflict. The policy of keeping Chinese and Xianbei separate was abandoned by emperor Xiaowen. Born to a Chinese mother, Xiaowen wanted to unite the Chinese and Xianbei elites, and beginning in 493, he initiated a radical program of sinification. He banned the wearing of Xianbei clothes at court, and required all officials below the age of thirty to speak Chinese at court, and encouraged intermarriage between Chinese and Xianbei elites. He changed the imperial surname to the Chinese name Yuan. The court itself was reverted back to the ancient Han capital of Loyang. Within twenty-five years, Loyang became a magnificent city again, its population filled with Chinese families from the south. Members of the Xianbei nobility became culturally dual, fully proficient in Chinese cultural traditions and comfortably interacting with the leading Chinese families.

## THE SOUTHERN DYNASTIES

Among those who fled the confusion that followed the sacking of Loyang in 311 and Chang An in 316 were members of the Jin royal house. At Nanjing, these refugees created a government in exile. This second phase of the Jin Dynasty is called the Eastern Jin (because Nanjing is east of the original capital at Loyang). The Eastern Jin was followed by four short dynasties that ruled from Nanjing - the Song, Qi, Liang and Chen, collectively termed the Southern Dynasties, who ruled from 420-589. The Yangzi River was the great battlefield of the south, with flotillas of ships sailing from the middle Yangzi to attack forces holding Nanjing, or vice versa. None of these successive Southern Dynasties were able to keep its military commanders under control, even when they were imperial relatives. One dynasty after another was founded when a general seized the capital and installed himself as emperor. These generals were strong enough to hold their states together during their lifetimes but not able to concentrate power in ways that would ensure successful transfers of power to their heirs. Yet despite the constant military conflict, the south experienced considerable economic development during this period, as new trade networks were opened. Trade with countries in the South Seas expanded, especially the states of Funan and Champa in today's Cambodia and Vietnam. Chinese merchants also developed contacts with India and even farther west. The most outstanding emperor in the south was Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, who reigned from 502-549. He was not only a major patron of literature and the arts, but also a major patron of Buddhism, a tradition which his sons and future emperors would uphold.

## THE BUDDHIST CONQUEST OF CHINA

Although there were no forced conversions to Buddhism, this Indian religion found many adherents in China in the three centuries after the fall of the Han Dynasty. Moreover, several basic Buddhist teachings ran up against long-established Chinese customs. In particular, becoming a monk involved giving up one's surname and the chance to have descendants, thus cutting oneself off from the ancestral cult. Yet Buddhism also had something to offer almost everyone. It offered learned Chinese the intellectual stimulus of subtle cosmologies, and rulers a source of magical power and a political tool to unite Chinese and non-Chinese. In a rough and tumultuous age, Buddhism offered everyone an appealing emphasis on kindness, charity, the preservation of life and the prospect of salvation. The monastic establishment grew rapidly after 300, with generous patronage by rulers and other members of the elite. By 477, there were said to be over 6000 Buddhist temples in the north and almost 3000

temples in the south. Devotional groups were often organized around particular scriptures, such as the Lotus Sutra or the Pure Land Sutra. Women turned to Buddhism as readily as men did. Joining a nunnery became an alternative for women who did not want to marry or did not want to stay with their husband's families in widowhood. Buddhism had an enormous impact on the visual arts in China, especially sculpture and painting. Earlier Chinese had rarely depicted gods in human form, but now Buddhist temples were furnished with a profusion of images. The great cave temples at Yungang, sponsored by the Northern Wei rulers in the fifth century, contain huge Buddha figures in stone, the tallest standing about seventy feet high. Buddhism also provided the Chinese with a new reason to travel. Chinese monks made pilgrimages to India to see the holy places of Buddhism and seek out learned teachers. The first pilgrim to leave a record of his journey is Faxian, who left Chang An in 399, when he was already over sixty years old. His trip west was overland, through Kucha, Khotan and Kashgar, into the Indus Valley and then the cities of the Ganges Valley. On his return, he took ship in the Bay of Bengal, then stopped in Sri Lanka and Sumatra (then part of the Srivijaya Kingdom), reaching Guangzhou in 412. By 414, he was back in Nanjing, where he began to work on translating the sutras he had carried back with him. Yet not everyone was won over by Buddhist teachings. Its critics labeled it as immoral because it severed family ties and posed a threat to the state, because monks performed neither labor service nor military duty. Twice in the north, orders were issued to close monasteries and force monks and nuns to return to lay life, but these attempts at suppression did not last long, and no attempt was made to suppress private Buddhist belief.

Many of the early Buddhist teachings were introduced to China using Daoist (or Taoist) terminology, yet Daoist borrowings from Buddhism did not lead to reconciliation of the two religions. To the contrary, each engaged in bitter polemics against the other throughout this period. Moreover, Daoist masters helped instigate some of the anti-Buddhist persecutions. As an answer to Buddhist claims of superiority, Daoist masters asserted that the Buddha had been merely a manifestation of Laozi, who had preached to the Indians a debased form of Daoism, which naturally China did not need to reimport.

#### SUMMARY

Between the third and sixth centuries, China did not become more populous or larger, but it changed in other fundamental ways. Buddhism gained wide acceptance among people of all social levels and transformed the landscape with its temples and monuments. Because of the popularity of Buddhism, Chinese civilization became much more closely tied to other parts of Asia. Daoism (or Taoism) responded to Buddhism's challenge, and itself acquired a larger body of texts and monastic institutions. Although warfare disrupted many people's lives, this was an era marked in many ways by advance. The capacity of poetry, calligraphy and painting to express personal and collective societal feeling flourished under state patronage. The great migrations of nomadic peoples from the north meant that more land in the south became settled by Han Chinese, which put pressure on non-Han indigenous people to withdraw or assimilate. The absorption of tribal peoples into northern China complicated the notions of Chinese identity. Non-Chinese rule did not dim the memory of the greatness of the Han Dynasty, but it showed that non-Chinese rulers could establish strong states within China itself.

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## SUMMARY

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Chinese civilization became much more closely tied to other parts of Asia. Daoism (or Taoism) responded to Buddhism's challenge, and itself acquired a larger body of texts and monastic institutions. Although warfare disrupted many people's lives, this was an era marked in many ways by advance. The capacity of poetry, calligraphy and painting to express personal and collective societal feeling flourished under state patronage. The great migrations of nomadic peoples from the north meant that more land in the south became settled by Han Chinese, which put pressure on non-Han indigenous people to withdraw or assimilate. The absorption of tribal peoples into northern China complicated the notions of Chinese identity. Non-Chinese rule did not dim the memory of the greatness of the Han Dynasty, but it showed that non-Chinese rulers could establish strong states within China itself.

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(McGill University)