**Key Concept 2.3 Emergence of Transregional Networks of Communication and Exchange**

The large empires that emerged in the classical age created massive amounts of goods and became markets for imports. Several prominent trade systems developed that linked the empires together in a complex network of exchange that greatly exceeded that of the foundational and River Valley civilizations. Luxury goods and raw materials traveled in caravans and on boats to distant markets. Traveling with them were belief systems, ideas, technology, culture and diseases. Globally, these transregional networks were limited to Eurasia and Africa in this time period. Trade networks that developed in Oceania and the Americas remained localized for the time being.

**I. Land and water routes became the basis for transregional trade, communication, and exchange networks in the Eastern Hemisphere.**

A. The major networks of trade that developed in the classical age were influenced by economic, cultural, environmental, and geographic factors. You should be familiar with the following examples of trade networks:

* **The Silk Roads**

The Silk Roads were made up of an indirect chain of separate transactions through which goods crossed the entire land area of Eurasia. Rarely did merchants themselves travel the length of these routes; in fact, few of them knew the complexity and breadth of the Silk Roads. Merchants primarily engaged in local instances of "relay trade" in which goods changed "hands many times before reaching their final destinations."Because the Silk Roads crossed land it was much more expensive and dangerous to move goods. Consequently, trade focused on luxury items that would bring a nice profit making the greater risks worthwhile. Particularly important were luxury items with a high value to weight ratio.

The Silk Roads had their origins in Asia as nomadic and settled people exchanged goods. In part, it began because of environmental conditions. The soil in China lacks selenium, an deficiency that contributes to muscular weakness, low fertility, and reduced growth in horses. Consequently, Chinese-raised horses were too frail to support a mounted soldier rendering the Chinese military weak in the face of the powerful cavalries of the steppe nomads. Chinese emperors needed the superior horses that pastoral nomads bred on the steppes, and nomads desired things only agricultural societies could produce, such as **grain**, **alcohol** and **silk**. Even after the construction of the Great Wall, nomads gathered at the gates of the wall to exchange items. Soldiers sent to guard the wall were often paid in bolts of silk which they traded with the nomads. Silk was so wide spread it eventually became a currency of exchange in Central Asia.

Oasis towns became stepping stones of cultural dissemination and luxury goods were not the only things that moved across the Silk Roads. Merchants became agents of cultural diffusion. The **oasis towns** that connected segments of trade became nodes of cultural exchange, especially Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism spread rapidly, leap-frogging from oasis town to oasis town. The process was facilitated by these towns which often built beautiful Buddhist temples to attract Buddhist merchants abroad. Nestorian Christianity also spread across the Silk Roads into China. Not surprisingly, silk took on a sacred meaning in Buddhist and Christian rituals. Merchants also carried disease. The **disease epidemics** that devastated the classical civilizations were spread across large ecological zones via the Silk Roads. The volume of trade increased dramatically as the classical empires formed. The Romans, Gupta, and Han were centers of production and huge markets for goods. Moreover, the laws and legal systems of these empires provided security for merchants, encouraging them to take more risks. As always, the primary items of trade were luxury goods, and nomadic people continued to play an important role; their movements sometimes served as important connections between segments of trade, buying in one place and selling in another. Some nomads became settled people and made their living off of trade. Nevertheless, the volume of trade on the Silk Roads was connected to the strength of the classical civilizations during this period and declined when they fell into ruin.

* **Mediterranean Sea Routes** Another major trade network during the classical period developed in the Mediterranean Sea. **Maritime trade** routes, unlike land-based routes such as the Silk Roads, were better suited for heavy and bulky items. Wine, olive oil and grain were mainstays of this network. Other items of trade included timber, marble, glassware, perfumes, silver, spices and silk.

Like the Silk Roads, the Mediterranean trade network went through major changes during the classical period. In its early stage, merchants trading on these sea lanes were predominately from the city states of Phoenicia and the Greek peninsula. The **Phoenicians** were sea-faring people who traded widely across the Mediterranean area, especially in the era before the classical age. They established a network of colonies across the region, the most famous of which was **Carthage**. After Phoenicia was defeated by Persia, Carthage went on to create its own empire in the Mediterranean, eventually clashing with Rome in the **Punic Wars**. The most lasting legacy of the Phoenicians was the diffusion of the first truly phonetic **alphabet**.

As the Phoenician presence in the Mediterranean declined, the Greeks became more involved. In order to feed their people, Greek cities created a network of colonies throughout the Mediterranean. Grain poured into the city-states of Greece from the colonies, for which they in turn traded olive oil and wine, products much better suited to Greek soil. A major consequence of this trade was the diffusion of **Greek culture** across the

Trade reached a high point in this era when the entire Mediterranean region was united under Roman civilization.

The most significant change in Mediterranean trade occurred when Carthage fell to Rome and the entire rim of the Mediterranean Sea was controlled by the Roman government. Roman laws were now enforced across the region, providing a consistent legal system. The wide spread use of Latin facilitated trade. Piracy on the Mediterranean Sea was controlled by the Roman navy. During this **Roman period**, trade reached its peak. Engulfed by Roman civilization, the Romans referred to the Mediterranean as *mare nostrum* ("our sea," Latin).[[5]](http://www.historyhaven.com/APWorldipedia/index.php?title=Key_Concept_2.3_Emergence_of_Transregional_Networks_of_Communication_and_Exchange#cite_note-5) Like the Greeks before them, the Romans depended on massive grain imports to feed their urban centers, while silk was imported to satisfy the demands of the upper class. The Romans exported copper, tin, glass, wine and olive oil.

* **Indian Ocean Trade** Although Indian Ocean trade would reach its heyday in the post-classical period it was an important trade network during this time, particularly for the Gupta Dynasty. **Pepper**, **cotton textiles**, and **dye** became lucrative commodities on this maritime network. A unique feature of Indian Ocean trade was its dependence on the weather. Each **monsoon season** brought with it predictable patterns of winds, which reversed six months later. Merchants had to time their departures with these cycles of winds in mind.
* **Trans-Saharan Trade**

Trans-Saharan trade was another network that would reach its peak in the post-classical age (600 to 1450) when Islam comes to the region. Nevertheless, merchants carried goods across these routes during the classical age, facilitated by the domestication of the **camel**. Many of the items that were exchanged between Egypt and Nubia in the previous period continued across the Saraha (slaves, gold, and ivory.) One of the most important items that merchants carried to sub-Saharan Africa from North Africa was **salt**, a needed commodity before refrigeration.

**II. New technologies facilitated long-distance communication and exchange.**

Camel

A. Land trade increased when people learned to use the power of animals for their benefit. The **camel**, originally a herd animal, was domesticated in the Middle East for its use in the incense trade. Camels extended the scope and volume of trade in the arid Arabian climate. They carried military supplies for the Assyrian armies under the command of Sargon II. These uses of the camel were made possible by the development of a saddle which allowed the animal to be loaded with much cargo. Camels could carry up to 50 percent more cargo than other pack animals, could go longer without water, and lived longer than most of them as well.

Horse

In Central Asia nomads domesticated the **horse** and became expert trainers, so much so that the Han dynasty traded silk with them for their horses. The invention of the **stirrup**, a small ring or strap that holds the feet of rider, allowed for much greater control of the animal. With new technologies such as the stirrup and saddle, pack animals permitted humans to greatly increase their ability to trade, travel, and communicate.

Lateen Sail

B. Advances in technology aided maritime trade as well. On the Indian Ocean merchants were recognizing the seasonal patterns of monsoon winds and they began adapting their voyages to harness these winds. New technologies helped them adapt more efficiently to the dynamics of this trade route. The Dhow, a long slender boat with a **lateen sail**, became a common vessel for Indian Ocean trade. Although its origins are not completely clear, the Chinese, Arabs, and Indians were certainly involved in its creation and/or modification. The dhow was used for heavy items that were not as fit for land-based trade. One of its primary characteristics was the lateen sail which allowed sailors to tack against the wind. The dhow and lateen sail did for maritime trade what the saddle and stirrup did for land trade: they helped people widen networks of trade and communication thus accelerating the diffusion of goods, ideas, and culture.

**III. Alongside the trade in goods, the exchange of people, technology, religious and cultural beliefs, food crops, domesticated animals, and disease pathogens developed across far-flung networks of communication and exchange.**

A. **Cotton** is indigenous to South Asia and has a long history of cultivation in India. The *Laws of Manu* mentions cotton, and it appears in the *Enquiry into Plants* by the Greek writer Theophrastus, a contemporary of Plato and Aristotle. As transregional networks of exchange expanded, cotton spread out of India into the Middle East where it placed strains on the agricultural systems there. In Persia, for example, wheat and barley could be planted in the Fall, remain dormant over winter, and left to sprout in the Spring, thus avoiding the terribly hot summer months of the Iranian piedmont. Cotton, on the other hand, is a summer crop, planted in April and harvested in the Fall. Consequently, much of Persia (modern day Iran) was initially too hot and dry to accommodate this important crop. The solution to this problem was the introduction of a new irrigation system known as the **qanat system**.

The Qanat used hydraulic and gravitational force to extract water from the ground without the use of any energy at all. By linking vertical shafts and gently sloping horizontal passages, water was drawn from the aquifer and released to the agricultural fields at a lower level. This system not only allowed for the cultivation of cotton, but was applied to other crops as well. The effect was profound. Qanats *doubled* the amount of available water for irrigation and urban use in Iran. Persia was able to enjoy larger surpluses of agriculture thus increasing urbanization and social stratification. The qanat system spread throughout the Middle East and as far as China.

**Rice** was another crop that spread during this time period. First cultivated on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, it spread from China across the caravan routes of the central Asian steppes. Because Buddhist monks were vegetarian and avoided the meat-based diets of pastoral nomads, they would carry rice with them on their journeys across the steppes. Indeed, a Buddhist text called the *Aggañña Sutta* states that "rice grows as long as Buddhism spreads."

**Sugarcane** likewise spread during this time. It was first grown in India and probably spread through the Khyber pass, into Afghanistan, and then diffused across the central Asian caravan routes.

B. TheNote the limited spread of sugarcane before the coming of Islam.

transregional movement of people and goods also facilitated the spread of **disease pathogens**. When Roman troops moved into Mesopotamia in the second century, a major epidemic of smallpox broke out among the soldiers stationed in Parthia. By 166 B.C.E. it spread across much of the Roman Empire, reaching the city of Rome itself. Enduring for 15 years, probably 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire, about 5 million people, perished from disease. Worse epidemics were to come. Merchant ships on maritime trade routes and pack animals on caravan routes introduced the Roman Empire to devastating epidemics. Horses, upon which Roman expansion and trade depended, were often the culprits for carrying diseases to humans. Most historians consider these devastating epidemics a key factor in the fall of the western Roman Empire.

Disease pathogens ravished Chinese civilization as well. Smallpox probably first arrived in China with the Huns around 250 B.C.E. Contact with Roman civilization along the Silk Roads continually reintroduced China to smallpox and in the third and fourth centuries C.E., the disease destroyed half the population of northern China. After the fall of the Han Dynasty, bubonic plague spread from Constantinople to China, and Buddhist monks subsequently spread the plague to Japan. As with Rome, each devastating epidemic weakened the foundations of civilization. It meant fewer men to be called up for military service, thus decreasing security. With fewer people to work in agriculture, food surpluses dropped, and with them, the basis for a complex society. Lastly, a sharp drop in the population deprived the government of taxpaying peasants making it difficult to fund the basic functions of the state.

C. Trade routes not only diffuse the things merchants carry on their animals; they also spread the ideas and beliefs they carry in their heads. As major world religions spread from one area into another they adapted to local circumstances and preexisting traditions. Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism all spread across trade routes far from their places of origin and all were modified in the process.

**The Spread and Transformation of Religions: Case Studies**

* **Christianity** From its humble origins in first century Palestine, Christianity gradually spread across the vast domain of the Roman Empire. As with Buddhism, missionaries were instrumental in the diffusion of the faith. Using Rome's infrastructure of roads and trade routes, missionaries like **St. Paul** preached Christianity in Greece, Anatolia, and the city of Rome itself. It survived persecutions by several Roman Emperors. Although most converts were initially from the middle classes, the religion gained an occasional convert in the higher ranks. There were a number of reasons why it appealed to average Romans. Unlike the polytheistic religions of the Empire, Christianity promised eternal rewards for ethical behavior, a belief that gave meaning to everyday choices and actions. Individuals could now participate in an unseen world of cosmic importanceand were taught a way to secure life beyond the grave. Also, where Roman religions recognized social status and citizenship, Christianity taught that all people are equal before God.

Despite its early gains, by the beginning of the 4th century Christianity was still a minority belief comprising perhaps only 5 percent of the Roman population. By the end of that century it would be the official religion of the empire. The most important event in this dramatic change was when Roman Emperor **Constantine** converted to Christianity and, through the **Edict of Milan**, gave it official acceptance. Later in 392, Emperor Theodosius made it the official religion of the empire; he banned pagan ceremonies, shut down temples to Roman gods, and ordered idols destroyed. Now that Christianity was connected officially to the state, it grew wealthy. The Church solicited donations from the rich and could own land. The empire constructed churches and dispatched missionaries. Christianity spread to new areas of Eastern Europe, in part, because two Byzantine missionaries created the **Cyrillic** alphabet for the Slavic spoken language. Christian morality was reinforced by the state through the **Code of Justinian**, which fused Christian teachings with Roman law. Supported by the Roman state, Christianity was propelled into a significant role in world history.

As it benefited from imperial patronage Christianity returned the favor by endowing the state with religious legitimacy. The very model of Christianity--one God reigning supremely over the universe through a network of angels and saints--was complimentary to the model of Constantine ruling the empire through a centralized bureaucracy; the empire mirrored the hierarchical cosmology of Christianity. Constantine represented himself as one who ruled on God's behalf, not only performing the normal functions of political rule but making appointments to prominent church offices and intervening in doctrinal disputes. This union of political and religious authority under one ruler was called **caesaropapism**. The Roman Empire now reordered as a community of belief and union of church and state, laid claim to supernatural support.

Although the political development of the fallen western half of the Roman Empire was much different than the eastern (Byzantine) half, Christianity became the religion of choice for kings there as well. As the Roman Catholic Church grew in power and prestige, Germanic kings converted to Catholicism in order to reinforce their political power. When **Clovis I** of the **Franks** converted to Catholic Christianity, it set him apart from other kings vying for power and put him in alliance with landholding elites of the former patrician classes.

In the eastern Byzantine Empire the best example of a politician using Christianity to legitimize authority was Constantine, particularly evident in the dedication of Constantinople in 330. Forty days of ceremonies, both Christian and pagan, surrounded this event. The **Column of Constantine** which was erected for this dedication was a repository of relics both Christian and pagan. The figure of Constantine at the top (no longer there today) held an orb containing a piece of the cross on which Jesus died. The base of the column held the ax used by Noah to build the ark, a surviving basket of bread from when Jesus fed a crowd, and Mary Magdaline's jar of ointment used to anoint the feet of Jesus. But the figure of Constantine was clearly a model of Apollo, complete with rays of light emanating from his head in traditional Roman fashion. Alongside the Christian relics in the base were pagan items as well, such as the Palladium, a relic thought to bring the protection of the Roman gods upon whatever city possessed it. This blending of pagan and Christian symbolism made the new religion seem less threatening to traditionally minded Romans. But the statue of Constantine towering above both pagan and Christian symbols left no doubt as to who had absolute power.

Discovered in 1625, the Nestorian Stele shows that the Tang Emperor recognized Christianity.

Based as it was upon the Christian religion, the empire could not afford to tolerate alternate opinions about important Christian doctrines. Most divisive among these doctrines was who exactly Jesus was. Was he a man who became God, a God who became man, or a combination of the two simultaneously, and if so, how did the divine and human natures relate to each other? To settle these theological issues Constantine called the **Council of Nicaea** (325 C.E.) which outlined the empire's position on such issues. These "official" beliefs of Christianity, called **orthodoxy**, were enforced by the state. **Heresy**--any belief that deviated from orthodoxy--was condemned and suppressed within the boundary of the empire. This actually led to the diffusion of Christianity, as those whose Christian beliefs were condemned sought refuge outside the empire. For example, in 431, Nestorius--the patriarch of Constantinople--was condemned for his views about Jesus and Mary. His followers, called Nestorians, formed Christian communities in the Persian Sassanid Empire to escape persecution in the Roman (Byzantine) lands. From Persia they made their way to the Silk Roads which became their routes across Eurasia. **Nestorian Christianity** went as far as China where they established communities in the early 7th century. The famous Nestorian Stele, erected in the Chinese capital of Chang'an in 781, documents the early Christians who took their faith to China, as well as some basic Christian teachings.

As it traveled the Silk Roads, Christianity adopted local practices and blended with local beliefs. Such adaptations aided its spread by "camouflaging its newness" before potential converts. For example, Turks in Central Asia converted to Christianity because the practices of the Nestorian priests were nearly identical to that of their own shamans. The Christian cross was used as a charm to bring good weather and ward off evil spirits and disease. There were some mass conversions which have led scholars to speculate if the converts merely took Christianity as another form of "shamanism" that had demonstrated greater power. Although Christianity did not have the same success in China as Buddhism did, it merged there with other beliefs as well. A Christian monument in the Chinese capital of Xi'an included Daoist symbols of yin and yang along with the Buddhist lotus flower. Nestorian Christians in China preached the "Eight Cardinal Virtues," which were basically a restatement of the Buddhist Eight Fold Path. The message of Jesus became *The Way* (or the Dao) and saints were referred to as buddhas.

The Silk Roads were not the only trade route upon which Christianity spread. Through maritime routes, it made its way to Egypt and Axum and formed the **Coptic** Church. A kingdom in northern Ethiopia converted and retained a unique form of Christianity distinct from Catholic and Eastern Orthodox forms. Across the English channel, monks took Christianity to the British Isles where it was prone to Celtic influences. In short, Catholic and Orthodox forms of Christianity spread inside the borders of the Roman Empire while Nestorian and Coptic versions went beyond them. In all areas it absorbed influences from its host culture.

* **Hinduism** We saw in [Key Concept 2.1](http://www.historyhaven.com/APWorldipedia/index.php?title=Key_Concept_2.1_The_Development_and_Codification_of_Religious_and_Cultural_Traditions#vedic) that during the Vedic era Brahmin priests rose to the top of society in South Asia. The complex rituals and sacrifices they conducted were thought necessary to ensure good harvests and healthy herds of animals. As a privileged elite, they paid no taxes and grew wealthy collecting large fees for their services.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the warrior Arjuna prays to Krishna to spare him the agony of killing people in battle. Krishna tells him to carry out the duties of the warrior caste in which he belongs. This is dharma.

The writings known as the **Upanishads** signaled a “grassroots” reaction against the strict system of the Brahmins and their sacrifices. The title means “one who sits at the feet of the master” and implies that people were seeking answers to life’s deepest meaning from wandering mystics and teachers rather than the official religious system. Even though they offered a religious path around the official priests, the ways taught in the Upanishads were hard. According to one of them, achieving cosmic awareness is "as hard as walking barefoot over a razor's edge."

During the Mauryan Dynasty, the active role played by Ashoka in promoting Buddhism put Hinduism on the defensive. Brahmin priests resisted his efforts, and after the fall of Ashoka's Dynasty India experience a Hindu revival. Buddhism began to recede. Further diminishing its appeal was the invasion of the Kushans from the north. The Kushan king had converted to Buddhism, an act that decreased its popularity in India “by associating it with foreign rule.” When the Gupta brought dynastic rule back to India, they directly supported Hinduism. The ironic result of these trends is that Buddhism did not keep a significant presence in India, the place of its origin.

Buddhism's decline in India was accompanied by the rise of a popular and devotional form of Hinduism. Transformed by its competition with Buddhism, popular Hinduism emphasized the teachings of the **Bhagavad Gita** rather than the rituals of the Vedas or the philosophical musings of the Upanishads. As such, the new Hinduism stressed that a deep spirituality was available to any person by "selflessly performing the ordinary duties of their lives." Hindus at at any level of society could make spiritual progress by mechanically carrying out the dharma of their caste in a detached and emotionless way. As the Bhagavad Gita puts it:

*Action alone should be your interest,*

*Never its fruits.*

*With discipline perform actions,*

*Abandoning attachments,*

*and indifferent to success or failure.*

This emphasis on action meant that members of the merchant caste, for example, were performing their religious duty by carrying on the activities of trade. Shorn of complicated rules and dependence upon sacred rituals, religious activity--once the exclusive domain of priests--was now open to anyone. This devotional form of Hinduism became extremely popular with the masses. To some degree, the new practice of Hinduism took on some of the characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism. As merchants spread their Hindu faith it became hard to tell the two apart.

This is particularly true with a branch of Hinduism called **bhakti** which emerged in southern India and spread to the north.. Intensely passionate, this form of Hinduism stressed intense emotions directed at specific Hindu gods, most popularly Vishnu and Shiva. Despite the reputation Hinduism has of being a non-missionary religion, there is strong evidence that certain sects of Hindus actively sought to spread the religion. Through missionaries and merchants, the bhakti faith made its way to Southeast Asia and spread alongside Buddhism. Here the two religions blended to such an extent that believers often didn’t distinguish between them at all. Hindu temples, Buddhist stupas and monasteries blended the symbols and practices of both religions. One attraction of Hinduism was that people did not have to give up their traditional gods to practice it. As an inclusive religion, Hinduism readily absorbs the gods and practices of other belief systems. It is a belief system about all belief systems. Interestingly, there is no term for the process of conversion in the religion of Hinduism.

* **Buddhism** As we have seen, Buddhism began north of India (in Nepal) and, like Christianity, saw limited acceptance in the first few centuries after its founder's death. The way of life originally taught by the Buddha was not easy. Although he had rejected both the life of pleasure and the life of extreme deprivation, the Buddha called his followers to renounce friends, family, and belongings in the quest for enlightenment. Absolutely central to this spiritual calling was a monastic life and the rejection of all possessions, except a modest robe and a begging bowl. This call to austerity did not fit well with the values of most people, particularly merchants on the caravan routes.

Debates raged about how literally the strict message of the Buddha was to be taken. Under the Mauryan Emperor **Ashoka**, who had come to accept Buddhism, the Third Buddhist Council was held in 247 B.C.E. to resolve some of these tensions. [[](http://www.historyhaven.com/APWorldipedia/index.php?title=Key_Concept_2.3_Emergence_of_Transregional_Networks_of_Communication_and_Exchange#cite_note-38)As a result, Buddhist texts were translated to appeal to a much wider audience. A sect of Buddhism called **Mahayana** (the Greater Vehicle), which was much more accommodating of the lifestyles of ordinary people, gained wide acceptance. In this school of "easy" Buddhism, Nirvana was state of awareness open to anyone in any walk of life. Mahayana Buddhists elevated Buddha to the level of a god. Salvation was much easier with the help of **Bodhisattvas**, individuals who postponed enlightenment to share their surplus karma with average people trying to attain nirvana. This is to be contrasted with the **Theravada** sect, which maintained the strict teachings about the monastic life and sacrificing possessions and family in the quest for nirvana.

Freed from the stricter interpretation of the Buddha’s teaching, Mahayana Buddhism permitted a new acceptance of worldly values. This can be seen in the *Jatakamala*, a Buddhist text of the second century C.E. which depicts the Buddha helping merchants with their voyages.

*[The Buddha] possessed every quality desired in a ship's pilot. Knowing the course of the [stars] he was never at loss with respect to the regions of the ship. . . . So being skilled in the art of taking a ship out and bringing her home, he exercised the profession of one who [takes] the merchants by sea to their destinations.*

Mahayana Buddhism became identified with Silk Road trade more than any other belief system. Monasteries and the routes between them formed the network through which valuable goods flowed. Its close connection with trade made conversion to Buddhism an attractive option for the Hindu Vaishya caste. This merchant caste believed that buying and selling was their dharma, or religious duty. Converting to Buddhism and benefiting from its commercial advantages allowed them to better perform their dharma. More generally, Buddhism delivered people from the harshness of the Hindu caste system. As a self-styled religious practice, Mahayana Buddhism was a liberating alternative to the strict system of sacrifices presided over by the Brahmin priestly caste.

In addition to the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, Ashoka’s rule had other direct effects on the spread of Buddhism. He sponsored Buddhist monks and missionaries and commissioned the building of Buddhist monasteries. He used his stone edicts to spread the word of his conversion and to diffuse Buddhist teachings. Ashoka sent one of his sons to preach Buddhism on the island of Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka), where it today still has a major presence.

During Ashoka’s reign a cult of relics developed in Buddhism. A **relic** is an object connected to an important religious person, such as the ashes or belongings of a well known Buddhist monk. The most sacred relics were those from The Buddha, most commonly a piece of his garment, wood from the tree under which he found enlightenment, or even a bone from his finger. For many Buddhist, those in possession of a relic were thought to have the religious authority of the Buddha himself. Relics gave legitimacy to those in possession of them. According to legend, Ashoka divided and sent out 84,000 relics to the same number of locations. He built **Stupas**—houses of meditation used to hold relics—for each of them. In a religion with no centralized bureaucracy or official priesthood, relics legitimized the status of monasteries and monks. Managing and dispensing them was a prominent force in the spread of Buddhism after Ashoka’s rule.

Ashoka was not the only king to support Buddhism. After the fall of the Gupta, the northern plains of India and much of Central Asia was a patchwork of small kingdoms. One of the most difficult challenges for these kings was trying to bind people of different language and ethnic identities into a loyal group. In that regard, kings found Buddhism a useful tool. Like Christianity, Buddhism is a universal religion. Not limited to a single tribe or location, it describes a condition of humanity that is true in all places and times. Because Buddhism appealed to a universal human condition it could help bridge "kinship or ethnic differences." It made sense to people no matter where they were and gave kings the ability to appeal to those outside their domain. By funding distant monasteries and bestowing them with lavish gifts, kings could gain wide prestige. They could also extend their influence.

After Buddhism became wide-spread in China, the political advantages it could leverage were not lost on Sui emperors. In 583, a monk at a government sponsored monastery translated a Buddhist text to imply that Emperor Wen was a reincarnated bodhisattva. A few years later, this emperor claimed that the Buddha himself had entrusted him with the authority to rule China. Buddha, it would seem, was now the source of the Mandate of Heaven.

As it gained ground in China Buddhism experienced profound changes. The monastic life was particularly offensive for Chinese because it ran contrary to Confucian notions of proper human relationships. In China, for example, **filial piety**--goodness and care shown to one's parents-- is central to a properly functioning society. How was the life of the solitary monk to be reconciled with the obligations of filial piety? Through syncretism. In Chinese Buddhism the monastic life came to be understood as a way to generate karma for one's family and ancestors. Thus, living in a monastery could satisfy the Confucian requirement of filial piety; it was a means to care for parents and elders by earning karma for them. Much of the transformation of Buddhism in China occurred because Buddhist texts had to be translated. Indian terms did not have exact equivalents in Chinese so translators chose familiar Chinese terms to take the place of Buddhist words. For example, the Chinese word wu-wei, which means to allow events to unfold naturally, replaced the Sanskrit word Nirvana. Likewise, the Buddhist word for Dharma was translated into the Chinese texts as The Dao. The meanings of these important terms thus shifted into ideas already deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Buddhism did not seem as foreign as it actually was. The transformation of Buddhism in China (and elsewhere) allowed people to convert without having to completely reject previous beliefs and practices.

Source:

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