

How buddhism affects chinese culture history essay

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INTRODUCTION: Buddhism is the name given to a religion and philosophy encompassing a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices, which are largely based on teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, commonly referred to as the Buddha. Buddhism began to gain its strength and popularity in China in the fourth and fifth centuries.(P. 416)Buddhism has played an enormous role in shaping the mindset of the Chinese people, affecting their aesthetics, politics, literature, philosophy and medicine. The influence of Buddhism on Chinese culture is profound, not only in terms of religion, but also literature, art and traditional customs.(P 420)The Chinese before the advent of the introduction of Buddhismthe people were accustomed to Confucian and Daoism religions and philosophies. Upon the successful penetration of Buddhism teachings in China this brought in the third religion in the Chinese population and like any other religion it came with various teachings which had effect on their culture. This change in culture is attributable to the philosophical doctrine of the ' Four noble truths' majorly upheld by the Buddhists.(P. 417)The four truths teach that; all life is inevitably sorrowful, this sorrow is caused by craving and can only be avoided by putting an end to the craving and lastly all this can be achieved by leading a life characterized by discipline, meditation and concentration such as that of the Buddhism monk. Further the Buddhist school of thought characterized the world and its nature as being one that is filled with sorrowing, short-lived and bleak and which are derived from the fundamental noble truths of life earlier mentioned.(P 417)Buddhism has two major schools of thought these are: the Theravada practiced mainly by the South tip of India and the Mahayana which is the form of Buddhism in East Asia and this includes china. (p. 483).

One school of thought referred to as the Pure land sect whose main emphasis was laid on the faithful attaining salvation by entrenchment of faith in their spiritual belief and was the most wide spread in China. (p. 481). The other school of Buddhism also known as the meditation sect which was more appreciated and accepted by the intellectuals and the scholars in china.(p. 481). Both schools of Buddhism interacted with society and helped shape up and steer the direction taken by the doctrines and teachings of Buddha in china. (p. 481). The Buddhist of china strongly believed that pursuant to Amita's eighteenth vow, assertion or supplication in the name of Buddha (Amita) was one of the commonest and simple practice of attaining freedom and relieve from the sufferings caused by the world. (p. 482).

EFFECT OF BUDDHISM TO CHINESE CULTURE: The introduction of Buddhism exerted subtle influence on Chinese people's view on family life and the further spreading of family religiousness which made people go after virtues and pay respect to other people, generally resulting to a society of amicability. Buddhism teaching engrave the principle of bad deeds, as well as good, being capable of being rebound upon the doer a principle which is deeply rooted in the society, causing people to do good deeds in order to pursue a better afterlife.(P 500)Chinese literature did not go untouched by the effects of Buddhism.(p 428). These were evidenced in the subsequent publication and production of novels, lyrics and even artistic creation they are evidenced to have very close interrelationship with translated Buddhist sutra. The translation of Buddhist scriptures enriched the Chinese vocabulary and grammar and improved the literary style and writing technique. The Chinese classic " Journey to the West" is an example of the effect of

Buddhism on Chinese writing. The origin of this is from the fact that many Chinese literature experts loved reading sutra so as to derive inspiration in their imagination and writing skills, which imposed direct influence on the development of Chinese literature. Buddhism also had adverse effect on the ancient Chinese architecture, resulting to exquisite and magnificent structures, especially borrowing the architectural ideas from Buddhist temples as were originally built by the primitive Buddhists of India.(p. 487). Further, the Chinese artists adopted from Buddhism the development of sculpture, painting and murals and the new practice as borrowed from Buddhism grew due to the prosperity of Buddhism in China at the time. Before the introduction of Buddhism the main religions dominant in China were Confuciusim which emphasized mainly on the aspect of living one day at a time, while Buddhism verily insisted on leading a monastic lifestyle that entailed leading a life beyond reality.(p 418). The other religion Taoism was in a way similar to Buddhism in terms of similarities and practices. Hence upon adoption of Buddhism as part of the great religions in China it brought in the aspect of meditation, way of dressing of the clergy resembled that of the Buddhist monks and nuns. Buddhism also had an effect on how traditional Chinese medicine was conducted and administered to patients. Since Chinese traditional medicine was predominantly preventive treatment for both internal and external illnesses. Traditionally a patient was either suffering from internal illness which was believed to be caused by emotional and mental imbalance or external suffering which was caused by external agents. Buddhism introduced meditation as one way of administering treatment to the body and soul reassuring the mind and controlling their

breath. (p. 482). The philosophies behind the practice of meditation are that during meditation one gets to calm their minds and prevent diseases. There are different types of meditation techniques that the Buddhist practiced but all of them had a major rationale that of, exercising the mind to abide in a natural state of tranquility and the breath to regulate in a natural state of harmony, and advocated for it since it was an important therapeutic practice for health and enhance longevity of the human life. However in addition to the medicinal aspects of meditation it was also more of spiritual especially on the monks and nuns it helped with ensuring that they remained focused and duly spiritual so as to avoid falling into sins of the world which was against the objectives of enrolling in the religion. There was also effect of Buddhism on the Chinese economy. The economy of China was changed in both positive and negative ways through various aspects of Buddhism's societal role. One of the most direct influences was the change in the traditional economy due to the creation of Buddhist monasteries by the government. Most of the emperors of the fifth and sixth centuries, including emperors who otherwise appeared to hold Buddhism in a low esteem, spent large amounts of time, money and resources to building extravagant monasteries. These monasteries become historical treasures that brought in tourists earning revenue for the Chinese government. However the spending on the Buddhists monks and monasteries was very expensive at was regarded as way of 'eating' into the economy of china this was because the construction of monasteries and temples cost China lots of money and natural resources. Many of the privileges that they enjoyed, such as tax exemption, and government funding for the construction of Buddhist

monasteries, had profound impacts on Chinese economy. The teachings insisted of the aspect of people especially the monks and nuns living a simple lifestyle and the duty of maintaining their livelihood majorly fell on the society to encourage focus and seriousness on prayer and meditation. The monks and nuns were expensive to maintain since they did not labour and the numbers of monks enrolling into monasteries were constantly increasing. Buddhism's effect on the Chinese government can be clearly seen during the T'ang dynasty.(P. 490). During this time period Buddhism was on the rise. The government's view of Buddhism during the T'ang varied from emperor to emperor; however, most of the T'ang emperors worked to keep the Buddhist clergy passive because they did not wish for the church to hold great power in the government. Although they did not give any direct control over decisions to the Buddhist clergy they did make allowances and compromises in favor of the church. They modified the penal code to incorporate the Buddhist laws for monks and nuns as outlined in the Vinya. However, some emperors, specifically Emperor T'ai-tsung, made the punishments for crimes stricter than Buddhist doctrine specified. Monks and nun who broke the law were often excommunicated and returned to lay life. Expulsion from the Buddhist order was the harshest of penalties and called for by the Vinya, and was only used in the case of a monk or nun violating one of the four offences. These included: " fornication, murder, theft and pretending to be liberal." T'ang emperors, though, especially Emperor T'ai-tsung, enforced expulsion from the Buddhist order for much smaller offences such as wearing silk, engaging in drunken fighting and telling fortunes. Although regulations kept on the Buddhist clergy were strict, the clergy

were afforded certain privileges that made up for the restrictions. Clergy were required by law to live up to a higher moral standard than that of laymen since the former enjoyed privileges, one of the biggest privileges was that monks and nuns were not required to pay taxes. Although this law was neither universal nor constant, it was enough to drive dishonest men into monastic life, just for the benefit of forgoing taxes. The idea behind the exemption from tax was that because under the Buddhist law they were not allowed to own anything they therefore could not be required to pay tax on that which was not theirs. By looking at the laws of T'ang China it is clear to see that the Buddhist clergy had an effect on the emperor's decisions. The influence of the clergy on the government may have been indirect, however it was still significant. For instance the Buddhist monks and nuns were exempted from bowing their heads to the throne but to their parents only unlike other lay people who were required to bow their heads to the throne and their parents compulsorily. (P 491-510) CONCLUSION: Buddhism as a religion is not only based on religious ideologies but also relies heavily on the philosophies drawn from the teachings of Buddha. These teachings were translated into Chinese by Chinese scholars and it slowly got integrated into the Chinese cultural realm. It was a religion that unlike the Confucius, it recognized all levels of people and advocated that its followers lead a meek life. Ironical to this was the fact that they built very expensive monasteries and statues of Buddha. This affected the economy of China negatively. Despite this adverse effect the religion gained rapid popularity among the Chinese people. It changed their way of living as they lived in a way that was acceptable even after they passed on. They meditated as a way of traditional

medicine that had preventive effects on their bodies. They have become a religion in society that heavily relies on the teachings of Buddha. They have had teachings on the issue of karma and are very watchful on the type of lives they lead having in mind of having a bad or good karma following them even after their death. They also believe of incarnation and hence they insist that the living ought to live lives that when they reappear again they are reborn as good people in the society. Hence in a nutshell, Buddhism in China affected the government, the economy of China, the religious beliefs and options, traditional medicine practices and generally the Chinese civilization.