

The Story of
**CHINESE
ZEN**

by Nan Huai-Chin
translated by Thomas Cleary

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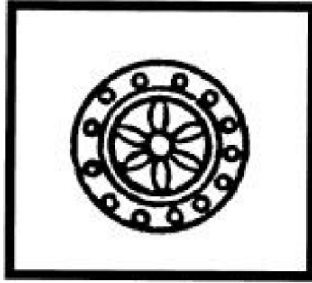
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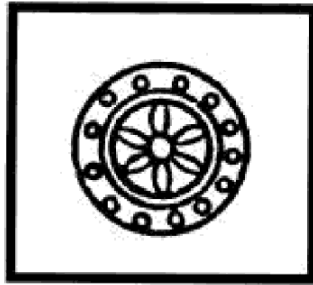
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About the Author

Zen Master Nan Huai-Chin was born on March 18, 1918, to a scholar-class family in Luo Ching, in China's Zhejiang province. During his childhood he was extensively tutored in the Chinese classics, and by age seventeen had mastered both Confucian and Taoist works. Although the imperial examination system had been by that time abandoned, the surviving examiner remarked that his literary essays would have ranked him among the top three candidates in the exam.

In his youth, Nan Huai-Chin studied the Chinese martial arts, including swordsmanship, and at eighteen became the provincial martial arts champion. His studies at that time also included Chinese literature, poetry, and calligraphy, as well as the *I Ching* and Chinese medicine. To this day, he remains one of the world's few experts skillful at diagnosing and correcting imbalances of the body revealed through meditation exercises. Master Nan continually sought out a variety of Buddhist, Taoist, and other masters when young, and studied under a total of thirty-two major masters as well as many minor adepts. Following Chinese

tradition, much of the great knowledge he received was never written, but only handed down orally from masters to worthy students.

At age twenty-one, Nan became a military commander in the border regions of Szechuan, Yunnan, and Sikang, responsible for over ten thousand men. In 1942, at age twenty-four, he met his enlightened teacher, Zen Master Yuan Huan Hsien, and gave up his military position, with its accompaniments of money, fame, and power, to devote his energies fully to meditation and the search for answers about the questions of life and the universe. Under his teacher's guidance he achieved awakening and later went into retreat for three years at Mount O-Mei in Szechuan Province. During this time he remained secluded in a room, his back to a cliff, and verified his experiences against the entire Buddhist canon, which normally takes many years to read.

In 1945, Nan traveled to Tibet to learn further from the masters of the Esoteric school of Buddhism. There, the Hutukto (Living Buddha) Kung Ka of the White Sect also verified his Zen enlightenment and gave him the additional title of Esoteric Dharma Master. This marked him as one of the few multidisciplinary experts on the cultivation schools of Confucianism, Zen, Taoism, and Esoteric Buddhism, and his writings have therefore often been compared with those of the Great Masters of the Ming and T'ang dynasties. What particularly shows through Nan's writings is his lifelong striving to verify the findings of the sutras and sages. Due to his vast learning, personal experiences in meditation, and interaction with countless Zen practitioners, he has much wisdom to relate to the modern audience.

Master Nan settled in Taiwan in 1947 and was sought out by many students from all walks of life who appreciated his nonsectarian approach to self-cultivation. He has been a teacher, publisher, professor of philosophy at Furen and other Taiwanese universities, philanthropist, and sometimes hermit. His first book,

The Sea of Zen, was published in 1956, and his *Confucian Analects* is often used in Taiwanese schools as the basic textbook on Confucius. Altogether he has published over thirty books on Zen, Confucianism, Taoism, history, military strategy, and traditional Chinese culture, and over one million copies of his works have been sold in mainland China alone.

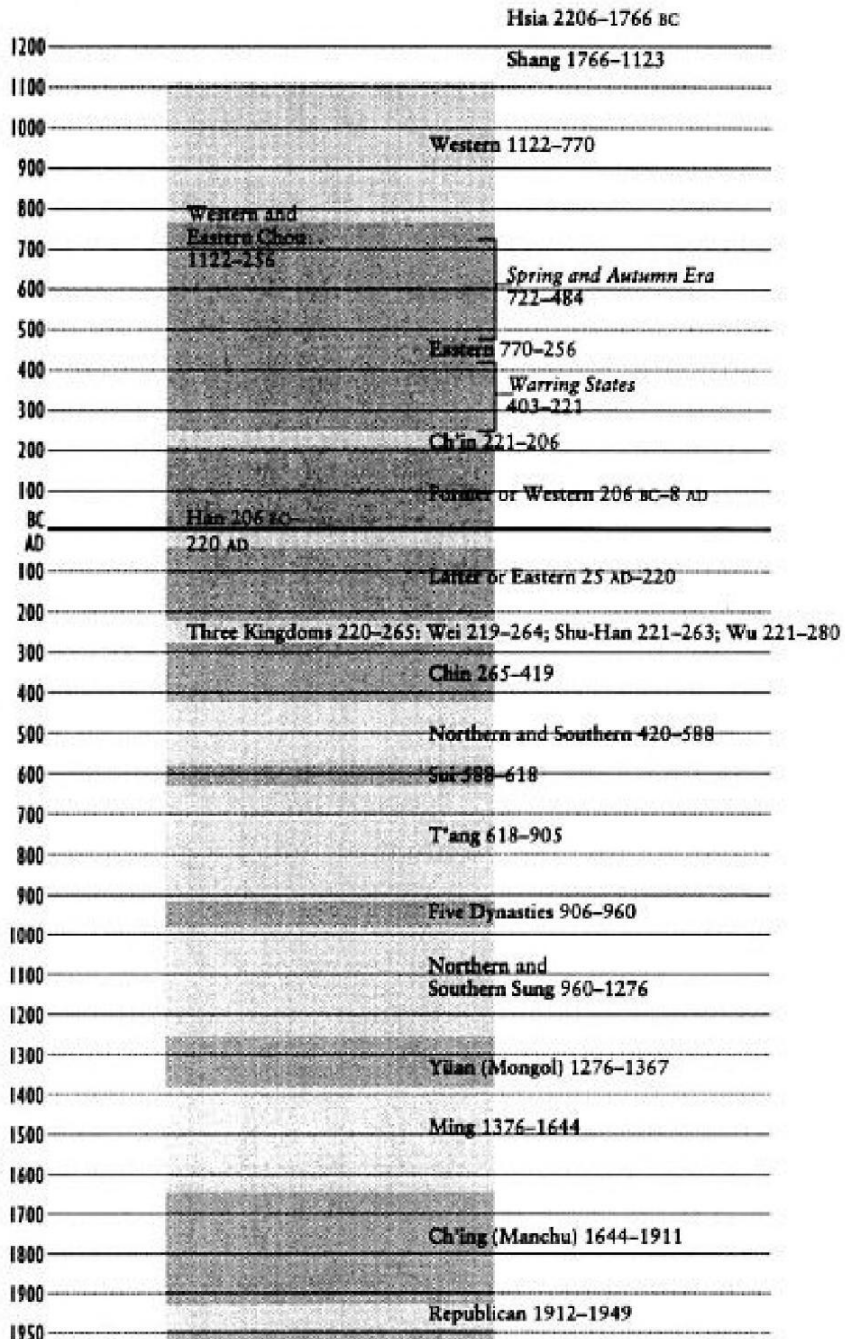
Master Nan now resides in Hong Kong where he is involved in various business affairs, such as directing the construction of the first private railway in China, as well as with efforts to reintroduce into China cultural concepts previously destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. Only a few of his books are available in English. This volume, selected and translated by Thomas Cleary, comprises the first half of his Chinese work *Zen and Tao*.

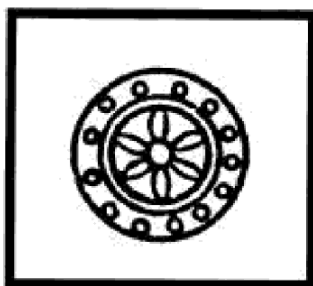
Bill Bodri
Editor



PART I
Background

A Chronology of the Chinese Dynasties





CHAPTER 1

Connections between Buddhism and historical Chinese Culture

When we talk about the relationship between Buddhism and the history of Chinese culture, we should first discuss the general outline of Chinese cultural development, which can be divided into three general stages.

The first stage is from around the time of the three prehistorical emperors, Fu Hsi, Shen-nung, and Huang Ti, in approximately the third millennium B.C. Traditional Chinese culture has its remote roots in Fu Hsi's invention of the eight trigrams and the establishment of the cultural thought of the *I Ching*, which embodied concepts on the meeting point of heaven and humanity. The thoughts embedded in the *I Ching* therefore became the basic foundation of Chinese culture.

This primitive culture was simple and unaffected, scientific yet philosophical. It originated from the influence of the three legendary emperors, but further developed under the successive influence of the three imperial dynasties of Hsia (2206-1766 B.C.), Shang (1766-1123 B.C.), and Chou (1122 B.C.-256 A.D.).

During this period the Chinese developed philosophies on the interaction of the celestial and the human centered on concepts found in the *I Ching* and the *Book of Etiquette*.

The second stage in cultural development came about as a diversification of the traditional culture. The transitional period between the Chou and Ch'in dynasties (sixth to third centuries B.C.) produced the scholarship and philosophies of many thinkers with mutual differences and similarities. Chinese culture received this influence and then passed through various developments and changes due to the Ch'in and Han dynasty periods (late third century B.C. to early third century A.D.). During this time there gradually evolved the particular forms of three schools of thought: Confucianism, Taoism, and Mo-ism.

The third stage of Chinese cultural development resulted from its passing through the influences of the Wei, Chin, and the Northern and Southern dynasties (third to sixth centuries A.D.). These produced a phase during the Sui and T'ang dynasties (late sixth to early tenth centuries A.D.) and thereafter in which Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism stood separately, changing with the times and alternately flourishing and declining.

From this point on, when we talk about Chinese culture through the Sung (960-1276), Yuan (1276-1367), Ming (1367-1644), and Ch'ing (1644-1911) dynasties, it is mainly represented by the three philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism acting in concert. This phenomenon is like the river basins of Chinese geography: in the north there is the Yellow River, in the center there is the Yangtze River, and in the south there is the Pearl River Basin.

The interweaving of the Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist systems has similarly irrigated and enriched the cultural life of China, so it really will not do to talk about any one of these schools in isolation. For those of us who are Chinese, it is all the more imperative that we understand what our own culture is

really like. In particular, we have to note that the philosophical thought of China is basically very different from that of Western cultures. If we say that China has philosophical thought, that does not mean that it is an independent specialty, such as it is in the West. In Chinese culture, literature and philosophy have always been inseparable, literature and history are inseparable, and theory and application are inseparable.

Therefore, it goes without saying that in researching Chinese philosophy or Buddhism, from start to finish it is not possible to separate either topic from the four fields of history, literature, philosophy, and politics. The fact that these fields are inseparable is equivalent to the inextricable relationships found among Western philosophy, religion, natural science, and political science. This complex interrelationship is a marvelous example of "different songs sung equally well."

Based on the foregoing points, if you really want to understand the relative ups and downs of Confucian and Taoist doctrines and thought during and after the Ch'in and Han dynasties, as well as the causes and results arising from the importation of Buddhist culture into China, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind the evolution of thought and scholarship in the two Han dynasties: the Former or Western Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 8) and Latter or Eastern Han (A.D. 25-220). The scholarship and thought of both Han dynasties consisted entirely of two realms of thought—Confucian and Taoist. Mo-ist thought had already merged itself into a subsidiary of these two realms by the early part of the Han period, so it had no independent domain at all.

Because of government leadership and social trends, it was Taoist thought that was most popular in the first part of the Western Han period. In the historically famous reigns of Emperor Wen (179-156 B.C.) and Emperor Ching (156-140 B.C.), the whole cultural tendency leaned toward the Huang-Lao arts of Taoism, which were a combination of the teachings of Lao Tzu

and the Yellow Emperor Huang-ti. This was due to the needs of the times, and in principle was an inevitable trend in early Han politics.

From this point onward, Taoist learning and thought formed a regular pattern in Chinese history. Whenever disorder or rebellion arose, it has always been necessary to use the guidance of Taoist learning to restore peace. When peace returned to the land, the governing strategy was to use Huang-Lao (Taoism) inwardly while making an outward show of the arts of Confucianism. Since the time of the Western Han period, because of the popularity of Taoist learning and thought, the schools of Legalism, the schools of Yin and Yang, and other schools of thought (such as the Syncretists) all sought rapprochement with the Taoists, gradually flourishing by cleaving to it like parasites. Then, as a product of the degeneracies that built up, an atmosphere of superstition was created in the Western Han period, centered on the concepts of the five elements advanced by the Yin-Yang schools and the practice of divination (fortune-telling). For instance, the rebellion of Wang Mang, who briefly overthrew and supplanted the Han dynasty in the early first century A.D., the restoration of Han rule by Emperor Kuang-wu (r. A.D. 24-57), and the events around the end of Han period and the era of the Three Kingdoms (219-264 A.D.), without exception embodied the psychological elements of political order and disorder formulated in the context of concepts of divination.

Thus it came about that eremitical thinking arose among Taoists at the close of the Han dynasty, which, combined with ideals of chivalry derived from Mo-ism, produced the fledgling forms of Taoist religion. Religious Taoism and Buddhist learning then tried to push each other aside, yet they also absorbed each other's influence. At the same time, the learned thought of the two Han dynasties had transformed the thinking deriving from Confucius, Mencius, and Hsun-tzu into the world of the Han classicist Confucians. This occurred due to the policy of

"dismissing all other philosophies and only honoring Confucianism" advocated by Emperor Wu of Han (r. 140-87 B.C.) and the Confucian Tung Chung-shu. As a result, the custom of glossing, annotating, and specializing in one classic tradition filled the courts and countrysides of China.

Because of the interaction of the intellectual authorities, the teachers of classics, and doctors of philosophy with the system of meritocracy, the late Eastern Han dynasty witnessed a growing decadence deriving from hereditary elitism. This led to intrigue, with court eunuchs plotting against scholars, causing learning and thought to interact with political elements in such a way as to foster the development of sources of disorder within the government and society.

The early Han dynasty followed the chaos of the Warring States era and the Ch'in regime, so its culture and education were already thoroughly corrupted, but the Western Han work of transmitting the classics and annotating them was really very important. However, from late Eastern Han times, the annotation and transmission of Chinese classics had already become fragmented and tedious. Henceforth, the purpose of learning was to obtain honors, so it became just a tool; if you really wanted to investigate the inner meaning and thought of the culture of the celestial and human, you would find it was already like a listless arrow shot from a spent bow, without even the force to pierce a sheet of paper. Therefore, when the scholarship of the two Han dynasties reached the stage of the Three Kingdoms era, it was already quite lifeless and dull. However, it was precisely at this time that Buddhist scholarship and thought flowed into the country, bringing with it a remarkable new philosophy of profound depth. The forms of scholarship and thought of the Wei (219-264), Chin (265-419), and Northern and Southern dynasties (420-588) took their shape because of this profound influence.

Now as concerns the degeneration and cause of new cultural movements in the Wei, Chin, and Northern and Southern

dynasties, ordinarily historians put most of the blame on the sudden upsurge of interest in the Three Arcana (Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, and the *I Ching*) and the decadence of the fashion of Pure Conversation, an attempt to talk about the light aspect of matters in an ultrarefined manner. In reality, however, if you understand the evolution of the historical culture of the two Han dynasties, when you address the question as to why people wanted to study the Three Arcana and engage in Pure Conversation, you cannot attribute the fault to a few scholars such as Ho Yen and Wang Pi who emphasized this style.

In Chinese history, when it came to taking a leading role in the evolution of learning and thought, a small number of intellectuals could certainly start a fashion, but those who really exercised the power were always members of the political leadership. When Confucius promoted reverence for the ancient sage leaders Yao, Shun, Yu, T'ang, Wen, Wu, and the Duke of Chou, this was surely the case; and the question of whether or not the direction of leadership in later ages was correct can be no exception either.

The rulers and ministers of the early T'ang dynasty (618-905), taking the lead in learning and thought, are the ones who opened the way for the development of the Buddhist and Taoist religions in China. The rulers and ministers of the early Sung dynasty took the lead in promoting Confucianism to give birth to the Study of Inner Design school of thought. The same thing also happened later in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. In all cases, it was the support from the rulers and ministers that made possible the evolution of Chinese culture. So if you say that the changes in scholarly fashions are due to one or two people, you can be sure that this is not something that can be done by men of idle words who sit around holding discussions in endless conferences.

In sum, when we look closely at the history of the development of the Three Arcana studies and the fashion of Pure Conversation in Wei and Chin times, we find that their

imbalances were not the fault of the philosophies of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu; nor were they errors of Buddhist *prajna* teachings that discuss emptiness and subtlety. From a close reading of history, one discovers that these imbalances were actually due to the influence of the literary sentiments of Emperor Wu of Wei (Ts'ao Ts'ao) and his sons. As to Ho Yen and Wang Pi, who delved into the Three Arcana studies, both were young aristocrats used to privilege and were arrogant and haughty: they could not pursue a kind of scholarship that involved purity and quietude, precision and subtlety, and they could not practice the kind of mental work that produced penetrating comprehension and far-reaching knowledge. Yet they used the stylish exterior of the Lao-Chuang philosophy to annotate the Three Arcana.

This was an inevitable result, both literarily and philosophically; so if we look at the thought of the Wei, Chin, and the Northern and Southern dynasties from the standpoint of pure philosophy, with the exception of Buddhist studies we find that the so-called study of the Three Arcana was only literary and philosophical. This study of mystical arcana turned into the fashion of Pure Conversation, and Pure Conversation produced the idea of the "use of uselessness," relegating all affairs of state to the status of mere scenery of the passing seasons. This was an inevitable result of the trend of events.

As for Buddhist learning and thought at this same time, during the Eastern and Western Chin dynasties and the Northern and Southern dynasties, Central Asian people rose up and entered the central plain of China, competing among themselves for hegemony. This allowed the great flow of Buddhism eastward to continue unbroken, thus establishing a foundation for Chinese Buddhism and the development of Chinese Buddhist doctrine in the Sui (588-618) and T'ang dynasties that occurred afterward.

Some consider the importation of Buddhist doctrine into China during the Northern and Southern dynasties to have been based on the armed invasions of Central Asian peoples, in the

same way that Western religions proselytized in China at the end of the Manchurian-ruled Ch'ing dynasty. However, this issue is very clear in Chinese historical materials: the two situations cannot be equated. In reality, when Central Asian peoples invaded China during the Northern and Southern dynasties, their cultural base was too shallow and slight, and they basically had no culture or philosophy to speak of. They had no concern with religion and politics; they were just a bunch of ignorant, barbaric plunderers.

Later, however, the deeds of the likes of Shih Yen and Yao Ch'in were somewhat restrained in their wantonness and destructiveness entirely because they were affected by the influence of Buddhist teaching. Another example is the situation under the Northern Wei dynasty, which absorbed Confucian and Taoist culture as a result of Buddhist influence. This is clearly documented in history, so there should be no argument about it.

In sum, the Buddhism of the Northern and Southern dynasties, by merging with Confucian and Taoist culture, set the stage for the culture of the Sui, T'ang, and subsequent dynasties as well as the upsurge of Buddhist learning in China. Distinguished monks coming to China from Central Asia, people such as Fo-t'u-teng and Kumarajiva, were all men of outstanding brilliance who devoted their energies to Buddhist cultural work throughout their lives. Their contributions to Chinese culture and thought have all been of lasting merit, which no one can deny.

Another person of note was Shen Yueh, who is famous for discovering the science of phonetics and rhyme in China, which came about through his involvement in Buddhist scriptural translation projects. Then there was Liu Hsieh, who developed the science of grammar through Buddhist translation and wrote the famous treatise "Sculpting Dragons in the Heart of Writing." Also, the stone caves at Yun-kang and the T'ang dynasty murals at Tun-huang, as well as music, poetry and song, fine arts, and other developments, all had some connection with Buddhism.

However, it must be remembered that from the time of the Eastern Han dynasty to the Sui and T'ang eras, Indian Buddhist thought was absorbed to produce the characteristics of Chinese Buddhist culture and went through many trials and tribulations, an intricate and complex process taking about four or five hundred years before it finally developed into the culture of the T'ang dynasty. So being familiar with the old and knowing the new, when we modern people want to talk about the interpenetration and fusing of Chinese and Western cultures, even though the times have changed and conditions are different (and also taking into consideration the development of modern science and technology) we must realize that in no way can this fusion happen within a short period of time; it may take a century for it to be consummated. Therefore, young Chinese intellectuals should be alert and even more diligent in facing up to trends in their culture in the near future, as well as to the responsibility they personally bear for the country, its people, its history, and its culture.

As to the development of the presentations of Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist learning from the Sui and T'ang dynasties onward, this naturally had its own historical background. The remote causes behind this development are as I have already set forth above, but the proximate causes show an additional facet.

First, because of the connection with the Li clan, which was the ruling house of the T'ang dynasty, from the time of the T'ang Emperor T'ai-tsung (r. 627-649) Taoism became officially established as the national orthodoxy, honoring Li Lao-chun as the founder of the religion. Thus Taoism was established on the foundation of the polity and education of the T'ang dynasty.

Second, the rulers and ministers of the T'ang dynasty were deeply interested in Buddhism, even though they honored Taoism. Thus, in reality Buddhism and Taoism were both respected, and distinctions were made only in terms of the ranking of their personnel, that is all.

Third, from the beginning, many of the generals and ministers involved in founding the T'ang dynasty were students of the school of the literatus Wang T'ung, whose teaching took after the best in the doctrines and philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism without drawing boundaries between them. Because of this, the general run of literati, the Confucian intellectuals, mostly held philosophies in which Confucianism and Buddhism were not divided, and Confucianism and Taoism were not distinguished.

So it was that after the mid-T'ang dynasty period, although the master calligrapher and famous essayist Han Yu (who was considered an orthodox Confucian) stirred up a notorious anti-Buddhist affair, in reality the pros and cons of this case were exaggerated by people of later times. Upon careful reading of Han Yu's anti-Buddhist writings as well as investigating the historical facts, we find that at that time he was just dissatisfied with the Buddhist institution and a certain type of Buddhist; he did not attack Buddhism itself very much.

Furthermore, after Han Yu, the most powerful reason why the Confucians of the schools of Inner Design during the Sung, Yuan, Ming, and Ch'ing dynasties repudiated Buddhism was their claim that Buddhism rejected social norms due to its monastic system, in which neither familial nor political authority are recognized. Other than this, there were a few criticisms concerning Buddhism, but all of them were the uninformed opinions of outsiders and are not worthy of serious consideration.

From a more profound point of view, Han Yu's historical repudiation of Buddha caused no loss to Buddhism, so very few of the eminent monks and Zen masters of the time came forward to speak on the matter. We should note here that those who really strike criticism at the very being of a religion are often themselves originally members of that religion. That is the rule, past and present, in China and elsewhere: people of all religions should examine it deeply.

The upsurge in Buddhist studies during the T'ang dynasty influenced every aspect of Chinese culture, later reaching Japan and the countries of the East. There were three main reasons for this. First, the land was at peace and society was stable; talented Buddhists were therefore able to appear one after another to found the doctrines and principles of the various schools of Chinese Buddhism, thus influencing all of Chinese culture and education in the T'ang dynasty.

Second, the fashions of the Zen schools—the Southern school of sudden enlightenment and the Northern school of gradual enlightenment—spread everywhere, expanding vastly. Like honey in water, like salt adding flavor, the literature and cultural studies of the T'ang dynasty became everywhere filled with the living potential of Zen consciousness. At the same time, Zen Master Pai-chang established the communal monastic system in China, causing the ten schools of Buddhist studies to take shelter under one order. This established the special character of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese Buddhist studies, which set a shining example for all times and all nations.

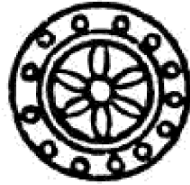
Third, Dharma Master Hsuan-tsang returned to China from his studies in India. The influence of his work translating Buddhist scriptures for China, and the completion of the translation of Buddhist literature on the doctrines of Consciousness Only and phenomenal characteristics, enabled the religious and philosophical thought within Chinese culture to firmly establish a comprehensive system of thought. Thus Buddhism could get along with Confucianism and Taoism, absorbing and recasting the best of all philosophies, forming the particular characters of the three great streams of Chinese culture. These are the three reasons why Buddhism spread widely during the T'ang dynasty.

When beings peak in power, they wane; when things come to an extreme, they change. Therefore, the transformation and change in the direction of Buddhist studies and the Zen schools

Ming dynasty were trapped within an atmosphere characterized either by Inner Studies of crazy Zen, or by crazy Zen of Inner Studies.

Even though Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) appeared and founded the genuinely practical doctrine of innate knowledge and innate capacity, nevertheless, because it was neither Confucianism nor Buddhism but something in between, great problems still remained. This caused the great Confucians of the late Ming period to scorn Wang Yang-ming's teaching and hurl the criticisms that "Sages fill the streets," and "Under ordinary conditions they sit quietly and talk about the essence of mind; when they face a crisis they simply die to repay the ruler of the nation," and so on. There certainly was a reason for this criticism; it was not purely an emotional reaction. Although a genuine revival of Buddhist studies and the Zen school occurred in the beginning of China's Ch'ing dynasty, they still were not able to recover from their fall and could not become powerful because the established national policy was to use the foreign cult of Lamaism to control the western and northern borderlands.

To sum up, this simplified and compact introductory exposition should give one a general understanding of the important points in the causes and conditions of the cultural history of Buddhism and China. This synopsis is extremely terse, with many details and explanations absent because we are only introducing the flavor of overall trends. Don't be disheartened if the names of dynasties, personalities, and philosophical movements seem a little too much at present. To become a specialist in the history and influence of the Zen school in China would require deep familiarity with all of this material, but for the general reader this overview is sufficient.



PART II

*A Brief Introduction to
the Contents of Buddhist Study*

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