Chapter 4

Many Chinas: The Three Kingdoms, the Wei, Jin and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589 AD)

Key ideas:
This chapter is a brief investigation of a confused, momentous and neglected period. It addresses the main issues, namely the southward shift of the centre of gravity of China in terms both of population and culture and the introduction of Buddhism. In addition, less prominent developments that contributed to the reshaping of China are discussed, such as the formation of medieval aristocracy, the increasing seaward orientation, as well as the formation of southern lifestyle familiar with boats, waterways rice fields and lush vegetation.

The period from the fall of the Han to the reunification of China proper by the Sui dynasty is one of the least understood periods of Chinese history. Often dismissed as a period of political disunity it appears merely as a gap between the early and the middle empire.

The period is referred by various designations, none of which is particularly satisfactory. It is characterized as a period of political disunity (implying that cultural coherence survived); or also simply as the Six Dynasties (referring to the six states traditional Chinese historians canonized as the legitimate inheritors of the mandate of heaven among the many states of the period); or subdivided into the periods of the Three Kingdoms (which arose from the fallen Han empire) or the Wei (the most powerful of these three states), the Jin (which briefly unified large parts of China), and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (a period of unstable states and an established division between North and South) – an enumeration that is quite short and handy in Chinese: 魏晋南北朝 Wei-Jin-Nanbei chao.

Medieval China
For armoured mounted warriors, see a mural illustrating a robber story, Mogao Cave 285 at Dunhuang cave, Western Wei period: http://www.hwjyw.com/zhwh/ctwh/zgfs/ld/200705/t20070521_1102.shtml

The disintegration of central authority, the succession of short-lived dynasties, invasions an dominance of Northern non-Chinese peoples
in the North and colonization in the South make it difficult to draw clear outlines of state and society, while religion appears to have been the only aspect of culture that flourished. The analogy with the European Dark Ages appeared obvious. On top of structural similarities, we also encounter armoured warriors who strongly remind us of medieval knights. Nevertheless, the general acceptance of the term “medieval” to refer to this period in Western sinology reflects our need for general classification and periodization rather than providing much of a framework for understanding.

For, if we want to use the comparison, the Chinese Middle Ages were at most half as dark as their European counterpart. At closer look, the similarities that inspired the transplanting of the name from the European to the Chinese context, also attract our attention to the differences.

**The collapse of populations**

First and very generally, the end of the Han was a prolonged catastrophic event. The ravages of war, insecurity and instability caused the death of millions and the dislocation of even greater numbers of people. However, it did not amount to the breaking-off of a civilization, of the idea of dynastic empire, or of the written tradition.

**Foreign invasions and the dislocation of society**

Second, over the subsequent centuries, China experienced a general southward shift in populations, involving movements of former northern frontier peoples into Northern China and a Chinese colonization of the South. However, by comparison with the sudden appearance of total outsiders in Europe, the displacement of whole populations, and the breakdown of state structures, the migrations in China appear almost well-ordered and the invaders already familiar and acculturated frontier people. Comparatively speaking, that is. Naturally, Han Chinese also felt overrun by barbarians. The difference was that they had the South to retreat to – there to initiate another wave of displacement and transformation – and that their invaders were not as alien not to have any notion of the advantages of state-building.

**Religion and the formation of Buddhist and Daoist churches**

Third, the period was a deeply religious age. China was not less transformed by Buddhism than Europe by Christianity. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind a crucial difference: No religion in China developed structures truly outside state control or even above the state, or, for that matter, even formulated claims that challenged the cosmic role of imperial rule. Monasteries as religious communities, new homes for monks and nuns, and often quite powerful economic players grew into a parallel social structure within the state. As Buddhism developed into a church, it triggered a similar movement

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109 The analogy was established by Etienne Balazs in his *Etudes sur la société et l’économie de la Chine médiévale.*
Nevertheless, the coexistence of several belief systems and the absence of absolute claims in the main religions meant that the state ultimately remained in control of administration and authority.

In this chapter, we will investigate the main fields of change in the period of the Six Dynasties. We look at the confused political situation and the resulting intensity of legitimation issues, at the Southward shift and its consequences for culture and economy, at the formation of new northern structures, and at the Buddhist transformation of China.

The North and the South
The North

For much of the period, the North and the South, separated roughly along the Huaihe-Qinling line, experienced different histories. It was the North that suffered most from the ravages of war during the second and third centuries. It experienced the severe dislocation by raids, in-migration and rule by invading peoples from the Northern frontier. As drier and colder steppe conditions prevailed well into the depopulated North China plain, pastoral husbandry replaced farming in many regions.

The new northern conquerors were mostly pastoral peoples immigrating from Manchuria, described sometimes as pre-Turkic, sometimes as pre-Mongol, who established their rule over captive agrarian populations, which were Chinese, Xiongnu, Korean, or other sedentary Northerners. Their initially relatively small states were beset with the problem that their agricultural serfs disappeared, fleeing to the south, becoming independent cultivators, or turning pastoral themselves. With alien elites gradually adopting to sedentary, agricultural life or the administration of a mainly

110 For the influence of Buddhism on the formation of religious Daoism, see e.g. Bokenkamp (2001). “Lu Xiujing, Buddhism, and the First Daoist Canon.”

111 From the end of the Han to the early 6th century average temperatures are estimated to have fallen about 1° below the present temperatures. While this seems a minor difference, in fact it means a massive change, shortening the vegetation period, implying lower rainfall and more severe frosts. See Liu Zhaomin (1992). Zhongguo lidai shang qihou zhi bianqian, pp. 86-99.
agricultural economy, ethnic and cultural boundaries becoming blurred both ways, states increased in size and in the degree of organization.

The extent of economic change may be gathered from the fact that former core regions of the Han empire reverted to a de-monetarized barter economy. Population and economic recovery set in from the early 4th century and could be maintained for the next one-and-a-half centuries. Much simplified, we could describe the northern society as characterized by dislocation, foreign domination and gradual assimilation.

The South

For an archaizing painting showing nymph on a boat, probably a copy from a painting attributed to Gu Kaizi: http://85274285a.blog.163.com/blog/static/743131422003412103522754/

Meanwhile, the South with the core regions of Sichuan and the middle and lower Yangzi regions, but also extending to the Guangzhou region in the far South remained comparatively peaceful. They were the main destination of fugitives from the North. The migrant from the North did not move into empty land, but were accommodated into existing societies or dislocated the indigenous population. While an assessment of population figures of indigenous peoples is impossible, general indications of low population density and the relatively smooth settling down of the migrants suggest that Han Chinese constituted a clear majority. It was thus a colonial society in which the colonialists dominated. They encountered little resistance and gained impressive wealth from trade and the naturally rich environment, yet development was slow. By the end of the period, the population in the Old South had at most doubled from the Eastern Han, despite the immigration of millions of Northerners. It seems that the different environment required much adaptation.

The South, traditionally called the “water land” (shuixiang 水乡), to Northerners was an alien world. Forested and swampy instead of open and cultivated, rich but threatening. Farming technologies of
the millet agriculture had to be adopted to growing rice, fields had to be created by building irrigation and drainage systems. While this certainly was a long and arduous process, we need to take into account that it were Northern agriculturalists who had developed irrigated rice paddies and are credited with having spread this efficient technology to the South. From the 4th century, scattered evidence indicates major improvements in the cultivation of new, early ripening types of rice.\textsuperscript{112}

It would appear, that the adaptation of lifestyle and technology provides only a partial explanation for the stagnation of population figures. Even more important may have been the subtropical and tropical diseases, to which northern immigrants had little resistance. Formerly unknown diseases, mostly referred to as caused by “miasmas” (\textit{zhangqi}, probably first of all malaria, shortened life-spans and inhibited Chinese colonization for a long time. Robert Marks has shown, that biological adaptation to the southern climate took about a millennium, with Han Chinese population growth taking off only from the 14th century.\textsuperscript{113}

\textit{Political history}

\textit{From the Three Kingdoms to the Jin}

For a map of the political geography from the Three Kingdoms to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, see http://www.arte-tv.com/static/c1/030201p_chine/cartes/fr_3.html

The collapse of Eastern Han was accompanied by wars and uprisings that led to the establishment of three separate kingdoms: the Kingdom of Wei (魏, 220-265) in the North, led by the Cao 曹 family;


\textsuperscript{113} For the history of Han Chinese settlement in the Far South in the context of malaria, its effects on human populations in general and Han colonization and eventual changes by Han Chinese agriculturalists in the 12th century AD, see Marks (1998), \textit{Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt}, pp. 52-66.
the Sichuan Kingdom of Han, or Shu Han (蜀汉, 221-263), founded by Liu Bei 刘备 (161-22); and the Kingdom of Wu (吴, 222-280), founded by Sun Quan 孙权 (182 - 252). The Wei armies, led by a general of the Sima 司马 clan, conquered the Shu Han in 263 AD, and two years later the Sima clan seized power at Luoyang and founded the Jin dynasty (晋, 265-316). It was not until 289 AD that the new empire took control of the Wu territory, and reunited the Yangzi valley with the rest of China proper.

From the Jin to the Southern and Northern Dynasties

A clan by the name of Jia 贾 attempted to usurp the power of the Simas, which led to instability that lasted from 291-305, and ended in a civil war known as the “Rebellion of the Eight Princes.” As imperial authority faltered, various nomadic tribes living in the north and north-west of China proper began to form independent political units: a proto-Tibetan Di 狄 clan founded the Kingdom of Cheng Han 成汉 in Sichuan in 304; in the same year the Xiongnu 匈奴 tribe of southern Shanxi founded a dynasty that was initially called Han 韩, and later renamed Zhao 赵. When Luoyang fell to one Xiongnu chieftain in 311, and Chang’an to another in 316, the Jin empire effectively ceased to exist. But some members of the Sima 司马 clan moved south, accompanied by an entourage of courtiers and commoners, and established a new Jin dynasty in the Yangzi valley with the capital at present-day Nanjing in 317.

The Southern Dynasties

This second Jin dynasty, which controlled a considerably smaller territory than the first, became known as the Eastern Jin, to distinguish it from the original Jin dynasty which is now known as the Western Jin. The Eastern Jin became just one of the many short-lived dynasties based in the Yangzi valley that became known as the Southern dynasties. These were: the Eastern Jin (东晋 317-420); the Liu Song (刘宋 420-479); the Southern Qi (南齐 479-502); the Liang (梁 502-549), and the Chen (陈 557-589).

It should be noted that the Chen did not follow the Liang directly. In 548 a general in the service of the northern Wei dynasty by the name of Hou Jing 侯景 (?) - 552 offered his services to the Liang but later rebelled and marched on the capital. The ensuing years until his death in 552 came to be known as the “Rebellion of Hou Jing.” The Western Wei launched several attacks against the Liang, occupied Sichuan in 553 and advanced into Western Hubei. They installed a prince of the Liang family they had captured, and established the so-called Later Liang. This dynasty remained a puppet of the dynasties based in the Weihe 渭河 valley: the Western Wei (西魏 535-557), the Northern Zhou (北周 557-581), and the Sui (随 581-618), who annexed it in 587. The Chen dynasty was established in the Yangzi valley, but only several years after the Wei invasions.

The Northern Dynasties
The situation in Northern China was even more complicated. The revolts of non-Chinese peoples resulted in a complete territorial division and a succession of small kingdoms, ruled mostly by non-Chinese elites. Between 304, when a family of proto-Tibetan Di 狄 established the kingdom of Cheng Han 成汉 (304-327) in Sichuan and the Xiongnu of southern Shanxi proclaimed the Kingdom of Han (later changed to Zhao), and 439, when the Xianbei Tuoba 鲜卑 拓跋 clan united all of northern China, a total of sixteen kingdoms emerged on the territory stretching from the eastern coastal oases of Central Asia to Shandong and from Manchuria to Sichuan.

The most powerful of the barbarians who ruled in northern China, however, were the Tuoba tribe of the Xianbei. Their tribal chief received the title of Prince of Dai from the Eastern Jin in 315. The Tuoba were allowed to settle in parts of northern Shaanxi and eventually took control of all the lands from the Ordos to the northeast of present-day Beijing. In 386 they established their capital at Datong 大同, adopted the dynastic name Wei 魏, and started a gradual expansion into China proper, eventually taking control over the whole of Northern China in 439.

The Wei dynasty ended in 523, with the rebellion of the armies that were protecting its northern borders. This was followed by civil war (523-534), and the establishment of two rival regimes: the Eastern Wei/Northern Qi, with its capital in Ye 东魏/北齐, 534-577), and the Western Wei/Northern Zhou, with its capital in Chang’an 西魏/北周, 535-581). In 577, the Northern Zhou annihilated the Northern Qi, only to fall itself to the Sui 隋 dynasty in 581. The Sui then conquered the southern Chen and finally united the whole of China proper in 589, ending the long period of division between north and south.

*Legitimation of rule*

Throughout the period of political division and instability, in fact in response to the political volatility of the age, issues of legitimacy were a great concern to founders of dynasties, as well as to their contestants, and to historians.

As it were, many self-proclaimed emperors could provide little if any formal legitimation. Sun Quan, who set up the first southeastern state of Wu (222-280), was a known as a brutal warlord who had gained control over the region during the failing years of the Han. During the great wave of incursions from the north, Xiongnu, who had already been settling in Shaanxi and Shanxi since the late second century, took and burned the Han capital Luoyang. The Xiongnu leader, Shi Le 石勒 (274-333), who later set himself up as the emperor of the Later Zhao dynasty in Luoyang, spoke Chinese but was illiterate, and though from a noble Xiongnu family had been enslaved in his youth. In accordance with the Chinese tradition of legitimate rule, these men’s claim to the throne could hardly be justified.
As it were, it were the historians who had the last word. And they denied these warlord states the mantle of legitimate successors to the Han. In a long-drawn process of historical interpretation, they settled on a system called zhengtong 正统, translatable as “correct and unified [succession].” This system prescribed a single unbroken line of rulers of China. Such a norm naturally caused great problems in a period of political disunity. Although several states existed alongside each other, only one of them could be legitimate. For the period considered here, the Northern Wei, the Jin, and the four short-lived Southern Dynasties were accorded the status of legitimate imperial dynasties. All more or less barbarian Northern states were thus discredited as illegal. We may note, however, that the zhengtong succession, while providing an – almost – unbroken line of rulers, says little about the actual or perceived qualification of the men on the throne or about the respective dynastic houses.

The insistence on ordering history according to the ideal of unified empire even through a period when not even the claim to unified rule could be upheld, and even though it meant relegating the core cultural region of the Central Plains officially to a barbarian state, is important not for its explanatory value but for its symbolic meaning. It testifies to the power of the universal worldview bequeathed upon educated Chinese by the Han period.

The mandate of Heaven, power, and omens

In the struggle for imperial restoration during the last decades of the Han and through the period of relative political instability down to the founding of the Sui and Tang, courts and rulers in-the-making appear preoccupied with symbols and omens that indicated that a man was chosen by Heaven for rule, or, conversely, that announced a dynasty’s loss of the mandate of heaven. These had become highly diversified and complex and “science” of interpretation had evolved around them. They included celestial phenomena such as solar and lunar eclipses, natural events such as favourable weather or calamitous rain, earthquakes and other disasters, supernatural apparitions such as dragons, popular songs, preferably nonsensical children’s ditties that unwittingly carried a deeper meaning, announcements through dreams, and special physiognomic features.

All these omina appear in earlier periods, but from the 3rd to the 7th centuries they appear with much greater density. We may think it funny that it was thought to be a sign of the destiny to rule if a man had arms so long that “his hands hung below his knees.”115 However, while we may notice a certain inflation of omens and may


safely assume that some would have been concocted at useful moments, we cannot discard the whole phenomenon as propaganda war by pseudo-religious means, fit only to fool the gullible. Power-politics notwithstanding, omens were a serious matter for those concerned and recorded with awe. The fact that they carried conviction to people at the period reflects the spirit of the age. We will encounter a fascination with numinous powers, with the limits of human experience and understanding, with religious and metaphysical issues again at many instances in Six Dynasty’s culture.

The aristocratic society

For a retinue reproduced as figurines for a noble grave (early Tang), see http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/407/tomb-retinue-dignitary

The society of the period from the third to the 8th century was radically different from preceding and later Chinese societies: it was shaped by a small aristocratic elite that was linked to political structures but not dependent on them.

Patricia Ebrey summarises them as follows:

In the second and third centuries A.D., as China entered a prolonged period of political disunity, there appeared an aristocracy composed of a few dozen families and a few thousand individuals. These families, their position assured by wealth, hereditary privilege, and the prestige of their names,

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dominated much of public life for the next three centuries. Their power was never absolute; in varying degrees throughout this period they were kept in check by emperors, court favourites, generals, and new men who rose through talent or luck. In the sixth and seventh centuries, the court and bureaucracy were strengthened and China reunified. Yet for nearly another three centuries, through the Tang dynasty, members of the same old families filled many of the most influential social and government positions.117

These aristocratic houses were huge extended clans. They were much more stable than the political structures of the time. Their leading role in society can be conjectured from the fact that at least half of the commoner population no longer appeared on the tax rolls of the states they lived in. They had become clients attached to manors. Society became aristocratic when birth became more important than office, when scions of the leading aristocratic houses were free to take or reject office and refused to regard men of lower birth as equals even if they held the highest positions at court.

Most aristocratic houses had their origins in the Eastern Han, when they had emerged as local magnates, who possessed extensive tracts of land with large numbers of tenants but usually held no official position. As central power waned, their landholdings grew and fugitives from natural and man-made disasters swelled the ranks of tenants reduced almost to serfs. While the central government formally insisted that peasants were free men and that all imperial subjects were to be registered, in fact a growing proportion of the Han population disappeared from the population and tax registers. At the end of the Han, it appears that the manorial seigneurs were the most efficient organizers of local defence strategies, setting up fortified settlements or migrating south. As a result, their power and the bondage ties between aristocrats and their retinues increased further. A formal recognition of social stratification is attributed to the Cao’s (Cao Cao 曹操 155-220 and Cao Pi 曹丕, 187-226), who held power in the north toward the end of the Han and subsequently founded the Wei dynasty. A new system of pre-selection for official positions ranked all families into nine ranks. The ranking was carried out by a local arbiter, i.e. himself a locally eminent person. Thus the ranking was a system of cooptation to officialdom and elite status, reinforcing fixed hereditary status.

The Southerners

While the families remaining in the North weathered the subsequent centuries as local, sometimes rather rustic magnates with little politic involvement, those who moved to the south were clustered in the capital area of Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing 南京), set up the Southern court and remained intensely involved in court life. The

117 Ebrey (1978), The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China, 1f.
relatively few indigenous southern families, by contrast, were mostly clustered in the region of modern Suzhou and enjoyed less political influence.

Through the 4th and 5th century, a few great émigré lineages dominated Southern society and culture. Southern aristocrats combined refined interests in poetry, calligraphy, and metaphysics, were patrons of Buddhists and Daoists, undertook the literary discovery of southern (modern Eastern Chinese) landscape and invented the recluse or hermit, who rejected involvement in power, the intrigues of politics, and the lavish lifestyle at the capital, and made the boat into a means of elegant travel.

Gradually, however, political sway slipped from them. Lacking local power bases and militarily impotent, the dynasty they had set up remained weak. Military strongmen came to dominate the court, and the four Southern Dynasties from 400 onward were founded by generals from middling or obscure backgrounds. These upstarts had the military clout to dominate court and capital for a time, but were unable to assert administrative power over aristocratic landholdings. The aristocratic social system thus was one reason for the weakness of the Southern Dynasties that could hold out against the north mainly because the Yangzi provided a natural barrier that protected them.

Meanwhile, the North was gradually reunified under the Tuoba Wei from the late 4th to the mid-5th century. Over a period of a century, the alien regime transformed itself into a Chinese state. When the capital Pingcheng was set up at modern Datong in 398, 460,000 people from the North China Plains, presumably mostly Chinese, were forcibly resettled in the region as farmers and artisans. While the measure of abducting newly conquered populations into captivity was nomadic practice, it appears obvious that the new dynasty conceived of agriculture as the necessary basis of a state’s core region. Society changed and the Tuoba elite became sinicized. A unified aristocracy composed of old families, refugees, and the Xianbei elites emerged. When the capital was moved to Luoyang in 490, Xianbei language and clothing were forbidden at court, while the highest Chinese and Xianbei aristocracies became centered at the capital and nearly unified through intermarriage.

In the 6th century, a new force arose, the Northern garrison forces. Xianbei and Chinese who had acquired Xianbei culture from the Northern garrisons rose in rebellion and defeated the Northern Wei. The rebels came to dominate politics, and the founders of the Sui and Tang were members of these relatively new Northern aristocratic houses. However, while distrustful of the established Wei aristocracy and denigrating their Chineseness, the Northern aristocrats chose to identify themselves as branches of old Han lineages. Their
A conception of society and pedigree clearly was shaped by Chinese aristocratic imagery as well.

“Equal fields” and the restoration of state

During the second half of the 5th century, the Xianbei rulers adopted a series of policies designed to strengthen the state. To promote agricultural production, they adopted a system to distribute land to peasants. By this system, called “equal field” (juntian 均田), the state reclaimed the ownership of all land. Fields of a fixed, “equal” size were given to adult men, and smaller plots to women, adolescents and old people. In return, the farming population provided taxes in kind and corvée service. All ordinary fields were in the use of farmers for their lifetime only, with their death they would return to the state for redistribution. A small proportion of land was set aside for mulberry plantations for silk production and similar uses of land that required many years of cultivation before regular harvests could be obtained. These plots were to remain in the family perpetually.

The system was a normative ideal, a novel form of direct control that drew on the ancient concept that all land ultimately was the king’s. Under the Wei, it probably was implemented only on certain tracts of land, where state power was strongest. Nevertheless, the system gradually contributed to strengthening the state’s tax base and control over society. In addition, in combination with attracting leading aristocratic families to the capital, thus weakening their hold on their estates, it gradually curbed their power.

As a result, the figures of the registered, and thus directly taxed population of the Wei state rose significantly, while the registers of the Southern dynasties remained largely stable, i.e. fictive and minimal. Though generally poorer and more rustic, it therefore comes as no surprise that the reunification was undertaken by a northern state, the Sui.

The Buddhist transformation

The introduction and naturalization of Buddhism is the most striking development of the period. It is all the more remarkable for being a peaceful penetration by an entirely different system of thought. In the late Eastern Han, the new religion had made first inroads as a creed of foreign merchants and a new form of metaphysical speculation. By the time of the Sui reunification, China had become a Buddhist country.

For the Longmen Grottos, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longmen_Grottoes

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It seems quite strange that Chinese adopted a religion that ran counter fundamental values of ancestral cult and of Chinese centrality. The Indian belief in rebirth and Buddhist monastic life unhinged ancestor worship and filial piety (孝, i.e. “loving and always looking up to one’s parents”). Could you honour your forbears who meanwhile were living elsewhere in different shape and form? What could be more unfilial than leaving home for monastic celibacy, depriving your parents of support in this world and of grandchildren to continue the family line and worship their memories? The cosmic order of the Han world with the emperor at the apex of civilization implied that the further removed a region was from the centre, the more barbarian it must be. India at the fringes of the known world surely could only possess an inferior civilization.

As it were, these solidly Confucian arguments were regularly raised by critics of Buddhism. On the whole, however, even the most rabidly xenophobic rhetoric could not stave off the gradual transformation of China and Chinese culture, eventually changing Confucianism itself. Chinese Buddhists professed their filiality by merit gained from pious deeds to their parents, thus to help them
along on the way towards nirvana. Also, without challenging China’s political centrality, pilgrims travelled to India to visit holy places and to find holy scripts in a spiritual quest. By the year 600, Buddhism was the largest religion in China, its landscape dotted by thousands of monasteries.

What was it, then, that enabled Buddhism to “conquer” China? By looking more closely at the conditions present in Chinese culture and in Buddhism at the time, we may find some answers. Linking points were social commitment and both this- and other-worldly personal welfare, the reverence for scriptures, meditation, and philosophical explorations beyond the human sphere.

Buddhism as it first reached China around the beginning of the Christian era possessed two features that were crucial for it growing into a major religion and into an acceptable “teaching” (jiao 教, “teaching, thought system”) in China: It was a religion that possessed scriptures and was open to lay believers. Both the formation of a written tradition and of a new, socially inclusive form of Buddhism roughly coincided with the introduction of the creed to China and both were crucial for its adoption here.

The founder of Buddhism, Buddha Śākyamuni (ca. 560-490 BC, chin. Shijiamoni 釋伽牟尼), was a contemporary of Confucius. For about five centuries his teachings were transmitted orally, before the Sanskrit written tradition of Buddhism began. In would appear that when educated Chinese became interested in Buddhism gaining access to a hitherto unknown body of texts by a wise man soon became a major fascination. Out of habit, we refer to the Chinese monks who travelled to India as “pilgrims.” This designation, however, carries somewhat misleading connotations, for the main motivation of their quest was not to set their eyes on a holy site but to “receive sutras” (qu jing 取经) and to take them back to China for translation. Linking up with the Han tradition of study, exegesis and canonization of classical texts, Buddhism raised the status of the written text still higher to become a holy embodiment of the wisdom it carried, created the new discipline of translation and enriched the exegetic tradition.

Mahāyāna (Greater Vehicle, chin. dacheng 大乘) Buddhism, which rose about this time, emphasised both wisdom and compassion and required those who had achieved salvation to help others rather than to pass on into nirvāṇa (chin. niepan 涅槃). The religion thus gained a social orientation and became accessible to believers who were not prepared to reject the world and worldly pleasures entirely (or at all).

Further developing the this-worldly orientation of Mahāyāna, Chinese Buddhists produced two uniquely East Asian forms of Buddhism, Pure Land (jingtu 净土) and Chan (禅, Zen in Japanese). Pure Land gave laypeople simplified ways to gain salvation: Calling upon the
name of the Buddha Amitābha (an important Mahāyāna Buddha distinct from the historical Buddha Śākyamuni 阿彌陀佛) in order to be reborn in his heavenly Pure Land. Chan, by contrast, was based, at least in spirit, on the ancient Hinayāna (“Smaller Vehicle,” chin. *xiaocheng* 小乘 – this actually is a disparaging name coined by Mahāyāna practitioners). It was an exclusive individual quest for spiritual insight by monks. Nevertheless, it combined this with practical, this-worldly pursuits, such as gardening, nature observation and arts. Chan practitioners were looking for insight in this world. Rather than despising the visible world, they came to be closely and lovingly attached to the landscapes they inhabited.

In addition, meditative practices and certain philosophical explorations were easily linked. Although extreme ascetics were not present in China, meditative and ecstatic practices contained components that could readily be integrated into Buddhist meditation and monastic or ecstatic ascetics. The philosophical school we term Daoism appeared to have close affinities with Buddhism. Both pursue a quest of understanding world and cosmos through disregard of worldly matter and social status. Contemporaries of the period initially tended to lump the two together. This is reflected in the reliance on Daoist terms in early translations of Buddhists texts.

**Buddhism, the silk road and the sea routes**

The arrival of Buddhism in China was a quiet event. It came with merchants following the Silk Road from Central Asia and along the sea lanes of Southeast Asian trade. So quiet, in fact, that earliest mentionings of Buddhists at the Eastern Han capital, probably mostly foreign merchants, and of a prince in the Southeast who maintained a large Buddhist retinue seem to appear out of the blue.119 Who were these Buddhists and where did they come from?

Xuan Zang 玄奘, one of the most famous Buddhist pilgrims of China, 9th cent. Mural in Dunhuang: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xuan_Zang.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Xuan_Zang.jpg)

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119 For the Han prince, see chapter 3, “Turning towards religion: Religious customs, new ideas and millenarian movements.”
For a long time, research mostly concentrated on the Silk Road, emphasising the work by important, highly educated monks from Central Asia and lesser numbers of Chinese monks who travelled to the West. These collectors and translators of scripture, often attracted or taken to courts of rulers who acted as patrons of monasteries and translation projects, created the Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Kumarajiva (344-413, chin. Luoshi 罗什), of Indian background, brought up in Kucha (chin. Guici 龜兹), kidnapped and taken to Gansu, arrived in Chang’an in 401. At that time, tens of thousands of monks and nuns lived in the numerous monasteries of the city. The Later Qin (Houqin 后秦, 384-417) sponsored a huge translation project headed by Kumarajiva and involving hundreds of monks. The translation of great numbers of Sanskrit texts set the standard for rendering Sanskrit terms in Chinese.

While the Silk Road as a region of long-standing contacts in general and Central Asian monks from multi-lingual backgrounds in particular played a crucial role in shaping the high Buddhist tradition, we need to be aware that the focus of history writing on courts and capital means that we simply know much more about events at capitals than about those away from the centre unless they presented a threat.

A considerable number of Buddhist sites in eastern China suggest that Buddhist proselytising also proceeded along the sea route. A an ancient, holy site Kongwangshan 孔望山, near the coast south of the Shandong peninsula, is an ancient holy site with a tradition going back to Confucius and beyond. From perhaps 80 AD onward, it also
became a Buddhist site. The earliest rock carvings of Buddha images in China were discovered on these rockfaces, which once overlooked the sea. However, they remain silent witnesses of early Buddhist presence, unmentioned in the written records. Their location suggests, however, that the new religion reached the Eastern coast by the sea route. From the third century onwards, we have travel accounts of Chinese pilgrims who took the sea route to India, which by that time obviously existed. The Chinese pilgrims also mention Buddhist communities in Southeast Asian ports, suggesting that along the coasts of South and Southeast Asia, as along the Silk Road, Buddhism spread as a merchant religion.

While we have no means of knowing the relative importance of the two routes, but bearing in mind that the coastal and southern zones are neglected in official history writing, it appears as well to allow for the possibility of relatively intensive exchange along the coasts of South and Southeast Asia despite poor documentation.

Buddhist patronage in the Northern and Southern states

Although Buddhism apparently spread quietly as a popular belief from the first century AD onwards, it was through the patronage of courts and aristocrats that it became a high religion. Why, however, should elites support this foreign creed? Surprisingly, it was indeed attractive to both Northern invaders and Southern aristocrats. To new dynasts and elites of the North, it provided an opportunity to sponsor a religion that, like themselves, came from the West. Buddhist patronage provided legitimacy independent from Chinese cosmology that would have relegated the newcomers to barbarians. The famous grottos of Datong and Luoyang bear testimony to the great extent of state and elite support Buddhism enjoyed in the Wei dynasty.

In the South, the attraction was somewhat different. Here, Buddhist rejection of the world, its exoticism, and perhaps even its link to trade were welcomed into the worldview of an elite that felt uprooted, both for having had to escape to the strange southern lands and for having lost its purpose in the service of a strong empire. In Southern elite society, it became fashionable to reject political involvement and cultivate the newly invented image of the recluse. Patronage of Buddhism provided both a new philosophical pursuit combined with detachment from lowly affairs of the world and new ways of social involvement, such as in philanthropic work that created local community and was independent of state structures.

The transformation of religious thought and life

We stated above that China was a Buddhist country by 600. But what did this imply for society? First of all, it meant that a significant number of men and women “left home” (chujia 出家) to enter monastic life. The Chinese term implies that leaving one’s family was the hardest decision and most far-reaching for devout Buddhists who
wanted to devote their life to the religion. Leaving home meant leaving the established patterns of human society. On the other hand, it provided an alternative to an established trajectory of life. Rather than getting married, supporting one’s parents or serving one’s in-laws, to receive one’s own children’s support in later life, one could opt out to become a mendicant monk or join a large, well-organized monastery as a monk or nun.

The effect of the change on society by introducing an alternative path of life to men and women can hardly be overestimated. A reflection of the concerns arising from the transformation that disrupted the ideal of universal marriage and accountability of imperial subjects can be gathered from aggressive anti-Buddhist rhetoric and short-lived, politically motivated suppressions of Buddhism in the late Tang.

The transformation of material culture

In the almost four centuries of political disunity social, political and religious structures were transformed. Much else besides changed as well. A few key changes we will briefly discuss here concerned horsemanship, boats and books.

Horse riding and chivalry

In the Han period, horses, chariots and great roads had been hallmarks of elite lifestyle and imperial vigour. Without maintenance, the roads soon deteriorated and wheeled transport became difficult. The new steppe elites of the North certainly cherished horses as much as the Han, but they were riders. Riding itself had been known and practiced in China since the Warring States period. However, it had remained a military activity practiced by cavalrymen and border guards. The adoption of riding by the elite transformed the physical requirements of elite life. Chariots had been steered by drivers, horse-riding was a skill that needed considerable practice and fitness. It enhanced class distinction as it was not an accoutrement a rich merchant, for example, could buy and possess as Eastern Han merchants had done with chariots. At the same time, horse-riding remained a martial skill, reinforcing a military orientation of the elites.

Furthermore, the intensification of mounted warfare gave rise to a new type of warrior: the heavily armoured knight. While horses and horsemanship were largely a northern phenomenon, it was the South that apparently contributed a major technical innovation.

The stirrup

The southern climate being unsuitable for horses, riding became a skill only very few could afford to practice. The lesser skill appears to have given rise to a device that initially eased the mounting of a horse: the stirrup. Earliest stirrups were found in Eastern Jin graves.

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Early stirrups did not come in pairs but were single metal loops hung off the saddle on one side. The discovery of the usefulness of the stirrup to give a rider better balance and free his hands remains unclear. It seems to have been in place by the Tang. Although the stirrup was not a necessary precondition for riding armour, as large saddles with shafts on both sides of the leg could also provide sufficient stability, it eventually became the standard outfit of mounted warriors and sportive riders.

Boats

Other major developments of material culture we now consider as “typically Chinese” happened in the South. Taking to waterways combined with major advances in shipbuilding and sailing technology constitute a technological transformation that opened up the South to Chinese. Boats, though an important means for the transport of goods since time immemorial, had not been considered an efficient means of communication during the Han. At the time of the downfall of the Han, it was still recorded with a measure of bewilderment that the southern warlord Sun Quan “used boats as carts,” i.e. had his troops employ boats as aptly and naturally as carts would be used in an ordinary Han war.\(^\text{121}\)

By contrast, in the early 4\textsuperscript{th} century the naturalist and poet Guo Pu (郭樸 276-324) wrote a prose poem on the Yangzi river:

> Drifting along as flying clouds, great ships in convoy, bow touching stern, ten-thousand Li of masts touching each other, upstream and downstream, fishermen, merchants, hastening to exchange and to gain profit, relying on the waves' depth.\(^\text{122}\)

Poetic hyperbole of “ten-thousand Li of masts touching each other” aside, the description clearly reflects that boats had become a common and even an admired means of transport on the Yangzi. Important technological innovation in fact goes back to the southern outpost Guangzhou in the Eastern Han. A clay model found in a grave shows a perfect house boat with an axial rudder for steering. The appearance of boats as burial gifts in Hunan, Hubei and the Guangzhou area documents that in these regions the boat had become a means of status display. Indeed, the Guangzhou clay boats looks rather inviting for a comfortable trip.

Further advances probably also originate in the Far South: The efficient lugger sail is first mentioned in a description of strange Southern things observed in Guangzhou. Combined with large rudders or steering oars this sail allows sailing close to the wind and even tacking against the wind. Large boats and ships took to the open waters of the lower Yangzi and the sea.\(^\text{123}\)

\(^{121}\) Guo Songyi and Zhang Zexian (1997), \textit{Zhongguo hangyunshi}, pp. 29f.
In the last chapter, we have presented the Han as a culture of the open plains, focussed on – agriculturally or otherwise usable - land and fascinated by horses – for swiftness, mobility and the ability to reach all corners of empire.

At the fringes, however, we can already discern a less landward orientation. Thus, we become aware that coastal shipping and overseas contact reaching out from Shandong and the South China coast were in existence, though we remain ignorant as to who these seafarers were and how they travelled. Eastern Han burial objects show that boats were becoming an acceptable and even luxurious and prestigious means of transport. A clay model found near Guangzhou presents us with a fully formed house-boat! At the same time, while we tend to focus on the silk road as the main route along which contacts with other parts of the Eurasian continent developed, seaborne trade along the Asian coasts provided at least equally important routes along which people, goods and information travelled.

A fascinating piece of information is recorded for the year 166 AD. An embassy claiming to have been sent from king Andun from Da Qin reached the Han empire from the southern seas, presenting elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns and tortoise shells. Da Qin was the name commonly used for Rome, where Marcus Antonius ruled from 161 to 180. On account of the tribute goods presented, the “ambassadors” almost certainly came from South or Southeast Asia. Yet the note provides a glimpse on routes of trade and information spanning the coasts from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea. At the same time, it reflects a lively interest on the part of Han Chinese in exotic lands, for the pretending ambassadors would not have claimed to come from the end of the known world, had not Chinese been known to welcome men and goods from far away.

For the period of the 3rd to the 6th centuries, we know from pilgrims’ accounts and the presence of goods that overseas contacts and trade were well established. Pilgrims mentioning that they travelled on ships that accommodated some 200 merchants and recordings of embassies from what are now southern Vietnam and Cambodia which presented elephants and rhinoceroses to the Chinese courts at Nanjing give an indication of the great size of ships and navigation skills available along the Southeast Asian coast.

It is hard to establish, however, who the seafarers were. Older Western works mostly assume that Chinese did not master the open seas until the Song period.
argue that a major technological breakthrough took place in the 4th and 5th centuries and that Southern Chinese merchants came to dominate the Southeast Asian trade by the time of the Sui reunification. We may reconcile the two interpretations by confirming technological advances while taking into account that during the period, it would still have been Yue people who were the most active seafarers on Chinese (and Vietnamese) soil, but would still be regarded as foreigners by those who considered themselves descendents of the Han.

Books and lettered culture

If horse-riding in the north and boats in the south transformed mobility and the feel of life, books changed lettered culture. While paper was invented in the late Han, as a cheaper and more convenient medium for writing than silk or wooden strips, both materials remained in use and the form of the scroll continued to be the standard for longer texts. The developments of a new form, the bound book, and a great proliferation of written texts took place in the subsequent centuries. John Kieschnick has shown that Buddhism played a crucial role in both developments. The binding of sheets of paper into a booklet originally was an imitation of the Indian booklet made of palm leaves. Eventually, especially with the invention of page numbers, it became a considerably more convenient form for reading matter and very gradually replaced the scroll.

The great increase in the production of written text can be related to the Buddhist notion of merit and its veneration of the written holy text as numinous in itself. The copying of sutras created merit and as this merit was valued especially high, for it amounted to the recreation of a holy work. Consequently, it enjoyed great popularity. Large-scale production of paper and other materials needed for the production of manuscripts and the interest in creating more merit through the reproduction of the same text in large numbers would eventually lead to the invention of printing in the high Tang about 700.

Even while writing on paper and producing written texts as books was being adopted, it had a profound influence on lettered culture. It made it easier and less costly to produce and reproduce texts. As texts became more available, the hold of specific schools centred upon a transmitted text and its exegesis was loosened, while cheaper materials encouraged scholars to put into writing what may not have been considered worthy of such effort before.

The rise of the use of paper and of the book therefore was the material condition for scholarly development and diversification of the period. In literature, we encounter new forms including stories of encounters between this and the nether world and poetry in a quite

personal vein as well as efforts at assembling and ordering the literary tradition in the earliest anthologies. Painting and calligraphy were elevated from a craft to an arts worthy of scholarly dedication and came to use paper and ink as their artistic medium. Medicine and natural observation were much advanced, and research results were preserved in specialized works.

State formation in Korea and Japan

For a map of Korea in the Three Kingdoms period, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Three_Kingdoms_of_Korea_Map.png
For a map of Yamato Japan, see http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/YAMJAPAN.HTM

130 Knechtges (2001), „Culling the Weeds and Selecting Prime Blossoms: The Anthology in Early Medieval China.”
131 Zhu Dawei. Liuchao shilun. 64-78.
In the period from the 3rd to the 8th century, states adopting Chinese political and administrative structures formed in Korea and Japan. Although first contacts go back to the Han period, when parts of northern Korea were occupied and transformed into military commanderies, state formation in Korea and China took place in the centuries after the fall of the Han. The three earliest Korean states Goguryeo (also transcribed Kogurŏ), Baekje (also transcribed Paekche) and Silla as well as the Japanese state Yamato were the results of "secondary state formation," self-consciously modelled on Chinese ideology and institutions.

It is remarkable, however, that this state formation took place not only in the absence of active Chinese influence, but actually at a time when none of the Chinese dynasties radiated much authority beyond its borders. When we take a closer look at Korea, it appears particularly striking that it was Baekje in the West of modern South Korea rather than Goguryeo, the state closest to China and incorporating the old Han commanderies, that was most advanced, used writing most extensively, and maintained closest contacts to Chinese states. This seemingly illogical pattern of the spreading of Chinese culture needs to be explained in the context of Korean dynamics, with the competition between the larger and war-oriented Goguryeo and the smaller, more agriculturalist Baekje, which made Baekje elites turn intensively to Chinese models in order to enhance their administrative efficiency and their cultural pedigree. Besides, it were the Southern dynasties rather than the northern ones that were attractive to Koreans, for the northern states were established by peoples the inhabitants of Korea knew from their northern borders.

The patterns of cultural exchange fall into place when we take seafaring and Buddhism into consideration. The high frequency of missions especially from Baekje and Goguryeo, and in lesser numbers from Silla and Yamato to Northern and especially to Southern dynasties' courts in 4th to the 6th centuries, attest to lively overseas contacts and good seamanship. Many emissaries were monks. In fact, Buddhism, the adoption of writing and state-building proceeded roughly parallel in the four states. Clearly, in Korea and Japan, much like in China, Buddhist monks formed an educated, highly mobile elite that was instrumental...
in integrating East Asian culture into a Buddhist oikumene while contributing much to the dissemination of Chinese state structures and ethics.

**Conclusion**

A tour de force of four centuries, which at first glance appeared dark due to the relative shortage of sources and of focussed research, gives us glimpses of great catastrophes, changes and developments. In many cases, it is impossible to nail down the specific time and location of events and new beginnings. From more general contexts, however, we are able to reconstruct general outlines of transformation. On the basis of our insights from this exercise, we will see that the great age of the Tang dynasty from the 7th to the mid-8th centuries was a consummation of developments of the Southern and Northern dynasties rather than a break to a new age.
Further reading:

For a lively account of major intellectual and political events, with a strong emphasis on Buddhism.

For the political and social history of the period 190-581.


For the seriously interested, the following works provide well-written studies on more specific issues:

for an investigation of the aristocratic society and the status of bondsmen.

for the economic history of the South.

for a study of aristocratic clans.

for an example of the politics of establishing legitimacy in the case of the coup d'état replacing Western Wei with Later Zhou.

for the interaction and mutual influence in the Buddhist transformation of medieval China, an exploration using the example of stele.