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The Influence of Imperial Power on the Introduction of Religions via the Silk Road

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Abstract: The Silk Road, as an important ancient route connecting the East and the West, served not only as a major artery of commerce but also as a geographic conduit for cultural transmission, civilizational encounters, and integration. The regions along the Silk Road, including Central and Western Asia, became the stage for exchanges and fusion among Chinese, Indian, Persian, Arabic, and ancient Greek civilizations. The transnational spread of religions in antiquity represented a key form of regional cultural expansion beyond their local cultural spheres, as well as an expression of the soft power of their respective regimes. The political environment and the intentions of ruling elites were among the decisive factors that determined whether interactions among civilizations would lead to conflict and opposition or to convergence and synthesis. This paper focuses on the transmission of religions along the Silk Road, exploring the role of imperial authority in the dissemination of culture within ancient regional units.

1. Introduction

The term "Silk Road" was first proposed by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in his 1877 publication China (in German: China. Ergebnisse eigener Reisen und darauf gegründeter Studien). Sometimes abbreviated simply as "Silk Road," the term has been in use for over a century. Richthofen referred to the trade route that extended from Chang'an (modern Xi'an) to the regions between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty (127 BCE-114 BCE), where silk trade served as the medium of exchange. The route later extended to Syria and the distant West, and is now widely recognized by the global academic community.

The Western Regions (Xiyu) of China, as a vital hub of the Silk Road, served as a meeting point of Eastern and Western civilizations. Ancient states in this area successively adopted various religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism. Among them, Khotan (Yutian) in southwestern central Asia was the largest settlement and a crucial center for the transmission of religions into the Western Regions.

Around 200 CE, Buddhist monks first arrived there from India. Over the following eight centuries, Buddhism continued to spread eastward and eventually became the most significant religion in the Central Plains. During this period, Khotan remained an important center for Buddhist study and translation. Historical records describe fourteen large monasteries and numerous smaller

temples in Khotan. The Chinese monk Faxian and his companions resided in one of the large monasteries, where an annual grand procession was held featuring a four-wheeled chariot carrying a Buddha statue over seven meters tall, adorned with jewels and colorful banners. The Buddha and accompanying Bodhisattva statues were crafted of gold and silver.

Although Faxian occasionally exaggerated the number and devotion of Buddhists, the monasteries of Khotan were indeed wealthy, sustained by generous donations from the Khotanese king and other patrons. Supported by royal patronage, Khotanese monks could devote themselves entirely to study and ritual practice. For centuries thereafter, Khotan remained a center of Buddhist scholarship.

In the early seventh century, Khotan became a vassal state of the Western Turks. When Xuanzang arrived at Nalanda Monastery in 630 CE, Khotan was still part of the Western Turkic confederation. Within two decades, Emperor Taizong of Tang (r. 626-649) wrested control of Central Asia from the Western Turks. The Tang army captured Gaochang in 640 CE, and in 648 the king of Khotan submitted to Tang authority. From 777 to 788, Khotan was governed by Tang officials. The Tang conquered Dunhuang in 786, and from 789 to 792 fought the Uyghurs in the Western Regions before eventually subjugating Khotan by 796.

The Uyghurs had adopted Manichaeism as their state religion. In 840 CE, the Kirghiz overthrew the Uyghur Khaganate, prompting part of the Uyghur population to migrate westward from Mongolia to the Western and Ganzhou regions, where they established two small Uyghur khanates. After 840, a new tribal confederation emerged-its rulers, known as "Khans" or "Kaghans," are referred to by modern scholars as the Karakhanids to distinguish them from other Turkic peoples. Their leader, Satuq Bughra Khan, converted to Islam before 955 CE, and his successors continued his campaign to unite Turkic tribes under Islam. Muslim sources record that around 960 CE, "200,000 tents of Turkic people" embraced Islam[1].

While the Karakhanids converted to Islam, other oasis states in the Western Regions did not. The Uyghur rulers of Kucha and Turfan supported Manichaeism and Buddhism at different times. The Western Xia, which controlled Ganzhou and Dunhuang, as well as regions east of Khotan along the southern Silk Road, continued to practice Buddhism[2]. By the twelfth century, Eastern Christianity had also gained influence across central Asia[3].

Since the Han dynasty, the Silk Road had gradually taken shape as the main route connecting China and Rome. Starting from Chang'an, the Han and Tang capitals, the route extended westward through the Hexi Corridor, splitting into three branches across central Asia-the southern, central, and northern routes along the Tianshan Mountains-and continuing across the Tarim River and the Pamirs into Western Asia. Alongside merchants and exotic goods, religious and cultural ideas traveled eastward.

According to available sources, the major foreign religions introduced into China through the Silk Road included Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Judaism. Among these, Buddhism achieved the most extensive spread, becoming deeply localized and later re-exported across the Sinographic cultural sphere. Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in China displayed patterns of pragmatic, state-oriented diplomacy, whereas Islam's spread was characterized by a distinct top-down transmission process.

2. Buddhism's Flourishing Despite Changes in Imperial Power

2.1 Both the Endpoint and the Starting Point

Buddhism has exerted a profound influence on the Sinosphere, and its impact in Asia even surpassed that in its Indian homeland. The Central Plains, as the final stop on the overland Silk Road, served both as the terminus of the Silk Road's Buddhist transmission and as a new starting

point for the dissemination of Buddhism after its localization in the region. The promotion of Buddhism in China relied on imperial support, and its successful secondary dissemination through China was based on the strong soft power of ancient China within the region.

Buddhism was founded in India in the 6th century BCE and was introduced to Khotan in central Asia around the 1st century BCE. After Zhang Qian's diplomatic missions to the Western Regions, knowledge of Buddhism reached the Yuezhi. With the opening of the Silk Road and the gradual intensification of Sino-Western interactions, Buddhism was progressively introduced into the Central Plains. The classification and timeline of its transmission can be found in the "Buddhist Transmission Timeline." A comparison of the "Buddhist Transmission Map" and the "Silk Road Route Map" reveals that the main routes of Buddhist propagation coincided with the Silk Road, traveling from India along the Silk Road before ultimately reaching the Central Plains.

2.2 Buddhism's Establishment in the Central Plains

Among the six known religions transmitted to China via the Silk Road, Buddhism was introduced relatively early. Its channels of transmission included both folk and official dissemination. Official transmission refers to envoys' visits and itinerant monks spreading the doctrine, while folk transmission involved Buddhist merchants who acted as proselytizers, influencing the surrounding populations. This process occurred around the first and second centuries CE, when Buddhism reached the oasis states of Central Asia via the Silk Road. Once local rulers and the common people became aware of and accepted this Indian religion, they invited monks from the merchants' homelands to serve as teachers, thereby establishing Buddhist belief systems.

From the Han Dynasty onward, the promotion of Buddhism in China followed a top-down pattern led by imperial authority. In 68 CE, Emperor Ming of Han established the White Horse Temple (Baima Si). During the Northern Dynasties, Buddhism reached its peak in China. In the intellectual realm, traditional Confucianism and Daoism absorbed Buddhist doctrines, gradually forming a philosophical landscape in which Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism coexisted, debated, and borrowed from one another. In the realm of art and culture, Buddhist art was introduced on a large scale into Chinese society. Buddhist culture represented the first large-scale influx of foreign civilization into China. After its arrival, it was quickly transformed and assimilated by indigenous Chinese culture, becoming an integral component of traditional Chinese civilization.

Furthermore, the transmission of Buddhism within China exhibited a diverse character, primarily reflected in its routes of dissemination. Broadly, there were four major routes: the Indian Eastern Transmission, the Yuezhi Eastern Transmission, and two branches of the Parthian Eastern Transmission. The Buddhist culture received along different routes was filtered through different cultural contexts, resulting in variations in content. Therefore, for the people of the Central Plains, the Buddhism they encountered from the outset was inherently diverse, laying the foundation for the subsequent spread of Mahayana Buddhism.

2.3 Reasons for Its Enduring Legacy

Buddhism was not the only religion transmitted to China via the Silk Road; however, it has exerted the most profound influence among all foreign religions. The reasons for this are as follows.

First, Buddhism possessed an existing audience base. During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Central Plains were characterized by continuous internal imperial struggles and strong external military forces. Social instability and turbulence left people feeling powerless and disillusioned with reality. Buddhism, with its concepts of past and future lives, reincarnation, and karma, offered a vision of the future world, providing a form of spiritual solace.

Second, a decisive factor in the spread of Buddhism was imperial support. The recognition of monks as legitimate religious figures, the establishment of dedicated venues for propagation (temples), and the backing of the royal and noble classes provided a material foundation for Buddhist development. Under imperial patronage, literati, scholars, and cultural elites interpreted Buddhist thought and scriptures through their own erudition, mastery of Chinese literary arts, and philosophical insights. This process not only localized Buddhism and enhanced its moral and educational significance but also made it accessible and appealing across social classes. Through this domesticated interpretation, Buddhism satisfied the imperial need for moral guidance and governance while also resonating with the spiritual demands of the nobility and the populace alike.

Third, Buddhism's survival across successive Chinese dynasties can also be attributed to the political environment of relative separation between religion and the state, which provided foreign religions with a relatively free and tolerant space for development. Since religions were not directly involved in political power allocation, China's environment was more permissive compared to Western societies where church and state were often united. This allowed Buddhism the opportunity to successfully localize and fully integrate into Chinese culture. Even when Buddhism faced suppression by imperial authority, such as the anti-Buddhist edicts in the late Tang Dynasty, or competition from other religions, such as the rise of Islam during the Yuan Dynasty, these challenges did not prevent the continuation of Buddhism, which had already become deeply intertwined with the culture of the Central Plains.

3. The Flourishing of Islam alongside the Rise of the Mongol Empire

The spread of Islam in Asia was closely tied to the rise of steppe empires. Although the Mongol Empire did not follow the Western model of a theocratic state, the propagation of Islam in Asia was carried out under the protection and patronage of Mongol political authority. Its widespread dissemination was grounded in the Mongol Empire's military and political dominance over regional power struggles.

3.1 The Eastward Expansion of Islamic Culture

In January 630 CE, Muhammad captured Mecca, compelling its elite to accept Islam. After his death on June 8, 632, his successors, known as caliphs, continued to expand Arab power through military conquests, establishing an unprecedented empire. In Tang China, the Arab Empire was referred to as Dashi. The Arabs' eastward expansion began in earnest during the reign of Caliph Umar (634-644 CE), extending beyond the Arabian Peninsula after the conquest of Persia. By 674, Arab forces crossed the Amu Darya into the Sogdian heartland, and by 705, the governor of Khorasan, Qutayba ibn Muslim, captured the strategic city of Balkh. Between 713 and 715, Arab forces advanced to the Syr Darya, posing a direct threat to Tang frontiers. By the early eighth century, the Arab Empire had reached its peak, spanning from the Atlantic Ocean to China's borders and covering parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa-one of the largest empires in world history.

3.2 Diplomacy and Alliance as a Foundation for Friendly Relations

The Tang-Arab military alliance laid the foundation for diplomatic goodwill, creating favorable conditions for Islam's entrance into China without imperial suppression. Records such as Du You's Tongdian and the Old and New Tang Histories note that in August 651 (the second year of the Yonghui era), the Arab Empire sent its first embassy to the Tang court. Tang foreign policy during Xuanzong's reign (712-756 CE) faced competing powers in the Western Regions, including the Tang, Turkic, and Arab forces. The alliance with the Arab Empire weakened the Turkic threat,

allowing Tang focus on tubo while maintaining friendly relations with Arab powers.

Arab and Persian merchants facilitated Islam's entry into China. Trade routes included overland routes via central Asia along the Silk Road to Chang'an and Luoyang, as well as maritime routes from the Persian Gulf around the Malay Peninsula to China's southeastern ports. Historical records indicate that Arab and Persian merchants, with Tang and Song permission, lived and operated in cities including Guangzhou, Yangzhou, Quanzhou, Hangzhou, Chang'an, Kaifeng, and Luoyang. Known as Fan-ke or native-born Fan-ke, they maintained their religious and cultural practices, built mosques and cemeteries, intermarried with locals, and gradually established early Muslim communities in China.

Even today, numerous ethnic groups in northwest China continue to practice Islam, reflecting the eastward diffusion of Islam along the steppe Silk Road, and forming part of the broader historical process of Islamization in Central Asia. Among foreign religions, Islam, alongside Buddhism, had a significant and enduring influence on Chinese society.

3.3 The Mongol Empire and the Islamization of China

By the seventh century, Arab expansion prompted eastward migration of Persian-speaking populations, leading to the Persianization of the Sogdian regions formerly dominated by Eastern Iranian groups. The Islamization of the Western Steppe and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty provided favorable conditions for the eastward transmission of Islam. The Yuan and Ming dynasties marked a period of broad propagation and consolidation of Islam in China.

During the late Song, the Mongol khanates conquered Central and West Asian Islamic states and peoples. Following the 1258 fall of the Abbasid Caliphate, captured Arabs and Persians were incorporated into Mongol military units, such as the Tammaji Chari Army, participating in the Mongol conquest and unification of China. After the Mongol occupation of the Central Plains, a substantial influx of Central Asian and Arab merchants occurred. These newcomers, along with descendants of Tang and Song-era Arab and Persian migrants, were collectively referred to by the Chinese as Huihui or Musliman . Many settled permanently in China, considering the Central Plains their home, and by the Yuan dynasty, Muslims were widely distributed across the empire, as noted by travelers such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta.

3.4 The Ambiguous Position of Judaism in China

From the Yuan dynasty onward, records concerning Jews in China became increasingly frequent. Chinese sources of the Yuan period referred to Jews as Shuhu, Zhuhu, or Shuhu Huihui, classifying them socially as Semu people. In Hebrew, Jews are called Yahudi, a term adopted by Arabs and Persians as Yahud. It is likely that the Chinese heard the term Yahud through speakers of Kipchak Turkic, whose dialect rendered the initial semi-vowel y- as j-, leading to the Chinese transliteration Shuhu.

During the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the term Huihui did not exclusively denote Muslims; it was almost synonymous with "Western Regions." Due to the similarity of many Jewish customs to Islamic practices, the designation Shuhu Huihui emerged. Archaeological evidence of Jewish presence along the Silk Road predominantly dates from the 7th to the 14th centuries. However, rabbinical literature records references to silk trade as early as the 2nd century CE.

Additionally, Pei Ju's Records of the Western Regions (Xiyu Tujing, Sui dynasty) documents westward routes from China, stating: "Departing from Dunhuang, there are three main paths to the Western Sea, each with subsidiary routes. The northern route passes through Yiwu, through the Bulaihai Tiele tribe, reaches the court of the Turkic Khagan, crosses the Beiliu River, and finally arrives at the region of Fulin (Byzantium) and the Western Sea"[4]. This record highlights the early

and sustained connection between China and the western regions, providing historical context for Jewish and other foreign communities in China.

Scattered references to Chinese Jews can also be found in Yuan dynasty Chinese and foreign sources. However, the earliest systematic attention to the issue of Chinese Jews was paid by the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in the early seventeenth century. Ricci arrived in southern China in 1582, during the 10th year of the Wanli reign of the Ming dynasty. In 1601, he reached Beijing. In late June 1605, a Chinese Jew visited Ricci in Beijing, reportedly having heard some information about him. This individual was named Ai Tian. According to Ricci's report, Ai Tian provided the following information:

"There are 10 to 12 Jewish families in Kaifeng, Henan. There is also a Jewish synagogue there, which preserves the Torah written on parchment, with a history of five to six hundred years. Ai Tian further stated that there were more Jewish households in Hangzhou, where another synagogue exists. Jews could also be found in other regions, but without synagogues. The Jewish families in Hangzhou are likely descendants of the 'Zhu Hu' (Yahudi) people who served as officials in the Yuan dynasty Sugar Bureau"[5].

Because Jews, like the Hui people, did not eat pork, most Han Chinese could not distinguish them from Hui Muslims. Kaifeng had many Hui inhabitants, but Jews generally did not associate with them. Ai Tian identified himself as "Yi Si Le Ye" (Israel), indicating that he and his community were unaware of the name "Jew," but knew that Jacob (Ya'aqov) was their ancestor. He also narrated some stories from the Old Testament and knew that Israel consisted of twelve tribes following Moses. Ai Tian told Ricci that his visit to Beijing was partly out of curiosity and partly for recognition, as he was in the city to take examinations. Three years later, in 1608, Ricci sent a Chinese Catholic to Kaifeng to verify Ai Tian's account and to bring back copies of the first and last sections of the Torah. The ancient Torah manuscripts preserved in Kaifeng were written in consonantal Hebrew, without vowel markings, representing an older textual tradition that corresponds closely to the Hebrew Bible printed in Antwerp, Belgium, in the sixteenth century by Christoper Plantin.

4. Religious Transmission under the Shadow of Imperial Authority

4.1 Nestorian Christianity at the Margins of Power

Christianity's spread along the Silk Road originated from the failure of the patriarch of the Eastern Roman Empire in internal power struggles, resulting in his exile. Its propagation to China similarly relied on imperial support, while its decline in China was due to prohibition by imperial authority.

Broadly defined, Christianity refers to the monotheistic religion originating in first-century Palestine in West Asia, believing Jesus to be the Son of God and the sole savior of humanity. It encompasses three major branches-Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism-along with numerous sects. In modern Chinese usage, the term "Christianity" often refers narrowly to Protestantism, which became the state religion of the Roman Empire in 392 CE (17th year of the Taiyuan era under Emperor Xiaowu of the Eastern Jin).

In 395 CE, the Roman Empire split into the Western Roman Empire, centered in Rome, and the Eastern Roman Empire, centered in Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Religious divisions followed political ones, resulting in Western Christianity (Catholicism) and Eastern Christianity (Orthodoxy, commonly referred to as the Greek Church). Nestorian Christianity emerged as a branch of the Greek Church, also known as the Nestorian sect. Its founder, Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople in 431 CE, was exiled by the Roman court for advocating the dual nature of Christ and subsequently established a patriarchate in Persia, hence the Nestorian designation.

In the early seventh century, during the reign of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, foreign exchanges were encouraged, and all religions were treated with tolerance. It was under this policy that Nestorian Christianity entered China from Central Asia, known as "Daqin Nestorianism." According to the Nestorian Stele, in 635 CE (the ninth year of the Zhenguan era), the Persian bishop Alopen arrived in Chang'an, receiving imperial favor from Emperor Taizong. During the suppression of Buddhism in 845 CE (the fifth year of the Huichang era), Nestorianism and other sects experienced a decline. Approximately thirty Nestorian scriptures were translated in China, and five to six manuscript copies have been discovered in the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, representing important surviving documentation. Although Nestorianism disappeared from China, its transmission represents the earliest cultural exchange between China and the Christian world and holds significant historical value.

4.2 Zoroastrianism Expelled by Imperial Authority

The transmission and decline of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in China were closely tied to political dynamics. Zoroastrianism declined in China as a result of its involvement in internal political struggles and its subsequent failure; moreover, with the eastward expansion of Islamic civilization, Zoroastrianism gradually faded as the Sogdians disappeared.

The spread of Zoroastrianism benefited greatly from the itinerant trading activities of the Sogdians, who were known as the "Jews of the East." Lacking a state of their own, Sogdians began learning commerce from their families as early as the age of five and were driven purely by profit. After accumulating sufficient capital, they often supported particular political forces in exchange for privileges that facilitated their commercial enterprises. However, due to their participation in the An Lushan Rebellion, the Sogdians were later suppressed by imperial authority and gradually expelled from the Central Plains. Consequently, the transmission of Zoroastrianism in China declined correspondingly.

Zoroastrianism, founded in the 6th century BCE by the Persian prophet Zarathustra, is therefore also known as the Religion of Zarathustra. Because its adherents revered fire, the Byzantines referred to it as the "Fire-Worshipping Religion." In 226 CE, it was established as the state religion of the Sasanian Empire in Persia and rapidly expanded, flourishing especially in Central Asia. According to scholarly research, the religion was introduced into China via the Silk Road in the early 6th century CE. During the reign of Empress Dowager Ling of Northern Wei (516-527), all other forms of worship were abolished, and only Zoroastrian practices were retained. In the Northern Qi and Northern Zhou periods, people still "served the Hu Heaven" and "worshipped the Hu Heaven," with "Hu Heaven" referring to the Persian Zoroastrian deity. This indicates that by the early 6th century, the religion had already spread among various social strata in northern China.

Beginning in the Sui and Tang periods, Zoroastrianism reached its height due to the commercial mobility of Sogdian merchants. The Sui dynasty established the sabao office to manage Zoroastrian communities. In Tang Chang'an, five Zoroastrian temples were recorded. The earliest, located in Buzhengfang, was established in 621 and contained the sàbǎo office responsible for overseeing Zoroastrian rituals. Additional temples were located in Liquan Ward, Puning Ward, Jinggong Ward, and Chonghua Ward. In Luoyang, Zoroastrian temples were found in Huijie Ward, Xuande Ward, and the West Market South Ward. Liangzhou also housed Zoroastrian shrines. Regulations required that sabao officials be selected from among the "Hu" peoples, and Zoroastrian temples in both capitals and western prefectures were required to conduct seasonal sacrifices; however, Han Chinese were prohibited from participating in such rites.

As the Sogdians constituted the principal group of Zoroastrian adherents, their expulsion following the An Lushan Rebellion led to a concurrent decline of the religion. With successive

changes in dynasties and territorial configurations, Zoroastrianism never again achieved widespread transmission in China.

4.3 Manichaeism's Decline alongside the Uighurs

Manichaeism's spread in China exhibited a distinctly pragmatic and diplomatic character. Initially propagated top-down, Manichaean missionaries were received personally by Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. However, the religion was later deemed heretical and prohibited. Subsequently, due to the military alliance between Tang and the Uighurs, Manichaeism-officially the Uighur state religion-was once again recognized in China, and Tang imperial support reflected the diplomatic ties with the Uighurs. After the Uighur state was destroyed, these diplomatic ties ceased, and Manichaeism was again banned.

Manichaeism, founded in the third century by the Persian Mani, integrated elements of Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Buddhism, promoting a dualistic doctrine of light versus darkness. According to Central Asian manuscript fragments, Manichaeism entered China in 675 CE. In 732 CE, Emperor Xuanzong prohibited it. In 762 CE, the Uighur khan Denglu assisted Tang forces in suppressing Shi Chaoyi's rebellion, retaking Luoyang and bringing back four Manichaean monks. With the khan's support, Manichaeism became the Uighur state religion. Given the special relationship between Tang and the Uighurs, a large Uighur community resided in Chang'an, and in 768 CE, Tang officially permitted Manichaeans to establish temples and propagate their faith. Among foreign religions, aside from Buddhism, Manichaeism was the most widely practiced during the Tang Dynasty. After the Uighur state fell in 840 CE, Tang decreed in 843 CE the confiscation of all Manichaean temple property, effectively banning Manichaeism in the Han Chinese regions.

5. Conclusion: Imperial Choices-The Eternal Pursuit of Power

Cultural cognition varies across civilizations, and clashes between them are often inevitable. The acceptance of new cognitive frameworks requires both temporal consolidation and processes of localization. The promotion of such localization-and the successful dissemination of foreign culture-depends not only on favorable historical circumstances but also on active support and facilitation from ruling authorities. The historical development of religions introduced into China via the Silk Road illustrates that whether encounters between civilizations led to conflict or integration largely depended on the relationships among imperial powers within the region.

The spread and decline of Buddhism, Islam, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism in China were all closely tied to state endorsement or prohibition. Buddhism is unique in having successfully localized in the Central Plains, becoming deeply integrated into Chinese culture and exerting a lasting influence. Islam expanded eastward under the aegis of steppe powers, its propagation facilitated by the political and military dominance of the Mongol Empire, but it receded regionally alongside the decline of that empire. Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism were all prohibited in 848 CE (the fifth year of the Huichang era), when Emperor Wuzong, following the counsel of the Daoist Zhao Guizhen, suppressed Buddhism; over time, these religions gradually disappeared from China.

These cases demonstrate that the initial propagation of foreign religions in the Central Plains relied on imperial sanction. Their subsequent rise or decline was contingent on shifts in imperial authority and the intentions of rulers. Moreover, the successful localization of foreign religions required sufficient temporal and institutional space, safeguarded from coercive interventions. Premature imperial suppression-exemplified by Nestorianism, Zoroastrianism, and Manichaeism - prevented their sustained development unless top-down promotion was reinitiated, and even then, only in contexts where no other dominant religion had already consolidated.

The reception of foreign cultures by regional authorities was further conditioned by inter-imperial relations. The policies of local rulers were influenced not only by whether the foreign culture could serve governance objectives but also by the broader geopolitical alignment. For instance, the Tang dynasty's alliances with the Abbasid Caliphate and the Uighurs fostered diplomatic goodwill, encouraged trade, promoted cultural tolerance, and permitted the settlement of foreign communities-demonstrating that political alignment directly shaped cultural accommodation.

In summary, the cross-border transmission of culture in ancient China could occur spontaneously through human mobility, but the intentions of local imperial authorities and the dynamics between regional powers played a decisive role in determining the trajectory and impact of such transmissions. The choices of imperial rulers reflect principles akin to modern realist international relations theory: once political stability and security were ensured, the acquisition of additional power-including territorial control-was prioritized. China's separation of religious and political authority, combined with its emphasis on moral governance, created a comparatively tolerant environment for foreign cultures. Yet this tolerance was conditional, exercised only when the stability of imperial rule was not threatened. In other words, freedom was relative, and the pursuit of power remained a constant imperative.

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