

the West. The Han regime dominated eastern Asia from Korea to Turkistan and from the Gobi Desert to Vietnam. At the time Buddhist missionaries arrived, the national creed was Confucianism (see Chapter 8), which emphasized social rankings according to intellectual status, a rigid family structure, and a moral code based on humanity and the practice of perfect virtue for its own sake.

Tradition has it that the White Horse Temple, reputedly the first Chinese Buddhist monastery, was founded as a consequence of a manifestation of Buddha, in the form of a golden deity, in a dream of Emperor Ming (58–76 CE). The earliest historical reference to a Chinese Buddhist community dates from 65 CE, and by the middle of the second century, Buddha was being worshiped in the imperial palace, along with other deities.

Incursions by Turkish and Tibetan tribes into northern China produced a social climate ripe for Buddhism, for by becoming Buddhist monks, Chinese adherents could avoid military and labor service, as well as taxation. Also, the invaders of the northern territories came to embrace the Buddhist faith in order to consolidate their conquests and ensure continued prosperity. Meanwhile, social uncertainty and frustration in southern China favored the growth of metaphysical speculation. Taoists (see Chapter 8), predecessors of Confucians, considered “inactivity” as virtue and “nonbeing” as the origin of all things. These beliefs seemed to mirror the basic Buddhist ideal of *nirvana*, and a sympathetic dialogue developed between Buddhist monks and the Taoist literati, whose influence enabled Buddhism to gain converts among royalty and the rich.

The philosophical foundation of Chinese Buddhism was laid by a few eminent monks during the fourth century, a period in which cave

temples were carved out of hills to serve Buddhist traveling monks and native believers. These cave temples served as centers of devotion and pilgrimage for the next thousand years, and as repositories of Buddhist art to this day.

Two great events marked the turn of the fifth century. In 399, Fa-hsien became the first Chinese Buddhist monk to complete his pilgrimage to India, during which he survived great hardships to reach sacred Buddhist sites along the Ganges and to study Buddhist teachings at the source. After visiting Sri Lanka, he returned to China in 414. And in 401, the Buddhist monk Kumarajiva, captured by a Chinese raiding force, traveled from Kucha in northwestern India to the Chinese capital of Ch’ang-an, where he remained for the rest of his life. Under his direction, approximately three hundred scholars rendered into Chinese some of the most important of the Mahayana scriptures.

By that time, northern China was unified by a Turkic tribe whose emperors identified themselves with Buddha. These emperors encouraged the erection of Buddhist images and temples and invited Buddhist monks to be their advisors. In 446, however, one of these potentates issued a draconian edict calling for the destruction of all Buddhist temples, shrines, paintings, and scriptures and the summary execution of all monks. The storm was brief: eight years later, the destroyer’s successor pronounced himself to be the reincarnation of Buddha and restored Buddhism to his realm.

A second persecution of Buddhists occurred in 574, when Emperor Wu sought to advance Confucianism by charging Buddhism with fostering disloyalty and breaking down filial piety. Before Emperor Wu died in 578, tens of thousands of temples were appropriated by the imperial family and the aristocracy and more than 1 million monks and nuns were defrocked.

## Buddhism

