CHAPTER 4

Regional Regimes:

Buddhism, Aristocracy, and Northern Rulers 220–589

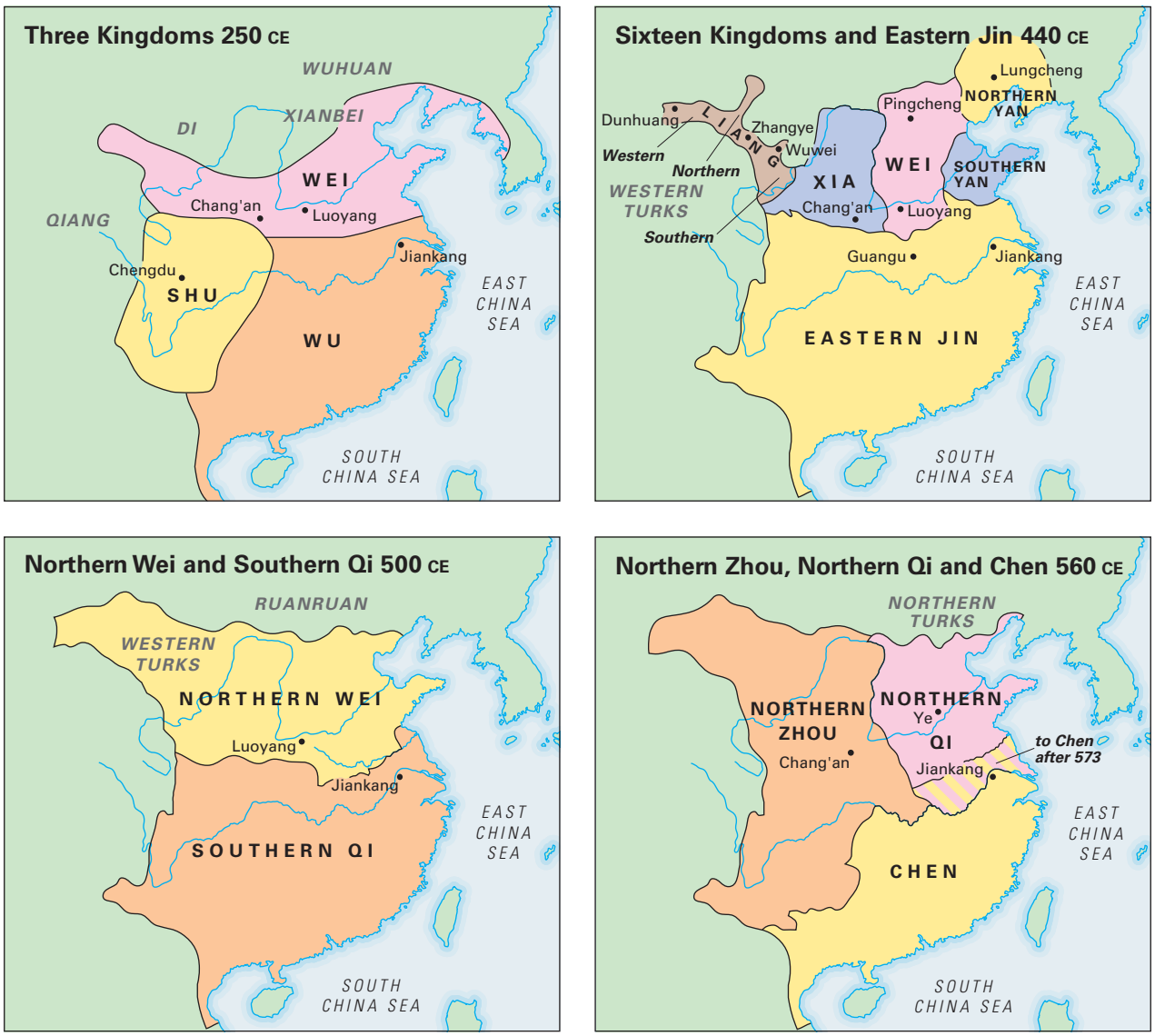
The centuries that separated the Han and Tang dynasties were marked by multiple regimes, incessant warfare, and governments that struggled to gain firm control of their territories. After several decades of rivalry among three contenders (the Three Kingdoms, 220–265), the Western Jin (265–316) briefly rejoined the regions. After the Jin fell to internal squabbling, non-Chinese peoples entered the fray, and China entered a prolonged period when the north was under the control of foreign rulers and the south ruled by Chinese courts. Each was prey to its own internal conflicts and the border between them regularly shifted in accordance with the fortunes of war. The governments of this period had little success in curbing tendencies toward social inequality, and during these centuries aristocratic tendencies developed at the top of society and personal bondage expanded at the bottom. Confucianism lost some of its hold and people in all walks of life found hope in religions promising salvation and transcendence, above all the newly introduced Buddhist religion, which vastly expanded China's intellectual and religious imagination.

KEY DATES

220–265	Three Kingdoms (Wei, Wu, and Shu Han)
266–316	Western Jin, capital Luoyang
280	Western Jin defeats Wu
291–305	War of the Eight Princes
304–439	Sixteen Kingdoms in north
317–420	Eastern Jin, capital Jiankang
376	Fu Jian controls all the north
386–534	Northern Wei state of the Tuoba Xianbei
399–414	Faxian travels to and from India
401	Kumarajiva arrives in Chang'an
420–489	Northern and Southern dynasties
460	Work begins at Buddhist cave temples at Yungang
471–499	Reign of Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei
486	Introduction of the equal-field system
493–495	Northern Wei moves capital to Luoyang
502–549	Reign of Wudi of Liang
523	Rebellion of the Six Garrisons in the north

The Three Kingdoms period and the Jin dynasty

During the period between the Han and Tang dynasties, short-lived courts were the norm, making the political history of these three-and-a-half centuries one of the most complex in Chinese history. It began when the generals assigned by the Han government to put down the rebellion of the Yellow Turbans became stronger than the throne and fought among themselves for supremacy. By 205 the poet-general Cao Cao had made himself dictator of north China. Instead of trying to curb the growth of hard-to-tax local magnates, Cao Cao developed alternative ways to supply his armies. He carved out huge state farms from land laid waste by war and settled captured rebels and landless poor to work them and thus made the state the greatest of all landlords. He also established military colonies for hereditary military households whose men



would both farm and fight. For his cavalry, Cao Cao recruited Xiongnu tribesmen in large numbers, settling many in southern Shanxi. After his death in 220, his son Cao Pi formalized the family's dominance by forcing the abdication of the last Han emperor and founding the Wei dynasty at the old Han capital of Luoyang.

Two rival claimants to the throne had sufficient local power to thwart Cao Cao's and Cao Pi's efforts to build an empire on the scale of the Han. In the central and lower Yangzi valley and further south, the brothers Sun Ce and Sun Quan established the state of Wu, supported by the great families that had settled in this frontier region, which was still heavily populated by non-Chinese indigenous peoples. West in Sichuan a distant member of the Han imperial family, Liu Bei, established a stronghold, aided by the brilliant strategist, Zhuge Liang. The

SHIFTING DIVISIONS
China was fragmented for most of the three and a half centuries after the fall of the Han, but no set of boundaries ever lasted very long. The states established in the south, while nominally holding huge territories, never had the military might of the strongest northern states, and before the end of the sixth century China was reunified by states originating in the northwest.

competition between these three rival states is one of the best-known episodes in Chinese history, immortalized in a later work of historical fiction, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi*).

Because Wei had more than twice the population of either of the other states as well as the largest army, it is not surprising that it eventually prevailed, defeating the Han state in Sichuan in 263. Two years later, however, Sima Yi, the son of the victorious general, forced the Wei emperor to abdicate in his favour, founding the Jin dynasty (later called Western Jin, 265–316). In 280, after a major naval campaign, the southern state of Wu was defeated. The Jin dynasty had thus succeeded in reuniting north and south, and for a brief interlude it seemed possible that the glories of the Han dynasty could be reattained.

While military men were focused on armed struggles, an atmosphere of alienation and personal indulgence pervaded elite circles. Confucian ideals of public service lost much of their hold, as the educated and well-off vied instead in extravagant and often unconventional living. 'Study of the Mysterious' captured the interests of the philosophically inclined. Clever repartee, called 'pure talk', was much in vogue, especially pithy characterizations of prominent personalities. Rather than participate in the often vicious clique struggles at court, many men expressed an abhorrence of political life with its elaborate conventions. A search for 'naturalness' and 'spontaneity' led to a burst of self-expression in the arts, especially poetry. Cao Cao, his successor Cao Pi, and Pi's younger brother Cao Zhi were all remarkable poets, important for developing the lyric potential of verse in lines of five syllables. Among the sophisticated aesthetes of this period were a group of gifted poets later immortalized as the 'Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove'. One of them, Ruan Ji, shocked his contemporaries by wailing in grief when an unmarried neighbour girl died, but eating meat and drinking wine on the day of his own mother's funeral. When someone rebuked him for talking to his sister-in-law, he responded: 'Surely

Within a century of their deaths, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove had come to be celebrated as prime exemplars of the individualistic and idiosyncratic artist. This rubbing of two sections of the bricks lining a fourth-century tomb excavated near Nanjing, Jiangsu province, depicts them engaged in conversation.

you do not mean to suggest that the rules of propriety apply to me?' Such behaviour outraged conservative Confucians, and in 262 one of the Seven Sages, Xi Kang, was executed for perversion of public morals.

Although it had conquered the south, the Western Jin suffered from internal weaknesses. The family of Empress Jia was suspected of arranging the assassination of the previous empress and her family as well as more than one heir to the throne. The system of recruitment to government posts that had been instituted by the Wei – the 'Nine Rank System' – had degenerated from a system of local assessments of character and talent into a procedure for assigning places in the bureaucracy according to the standing of the candidate's family, making members of the elite less dependent on the state for prestige and social standing. The Jin dynasty allowed further erosion of centralized imperial control by their policy of parcelling out enormous tracts of land to fifty-seven imperial relatives. Gaining such resources spurred the fratricidal instincts of eight princes and culminated in a series of bloody struggles over succession. These princes sought out allies, including generals and Xiongnu chieftains with their troops, and full-scale civil war (War of the Eight Princes) raged in and near the capital between 291 and 305.

Climate change deserves some of the blame for the ensuing disorder. North China entered a relatively cold and dry period. Some regions suffered such severe drought that the Yellow, Han, Luo, and Yangzi rivers shrank so much that at places people could wade across them. In 334, 335, and 336, the ocean froze between the Liaodong and Shandong peninsulas, letting armies march across them, something no one could remember ever happening before. These climatic conditions also put pressure on occupants of the steppe and the northern tribes that had been settled south of the Great Wall during the second and third centuries. Often recruited as soldiers or used as auxiliary troops, these formerly nomadic peoples, now generally settled pastoralists, were not easy to govern or assimilate.

In 304, as the War of the Eight Princes dragged on, the sinified Xiongnu chief Liu Yuan declared himself king of Han. His son went on to sack the Jin capital at Luoyang in 311, sending its inhabitants fleeing in terror. North China became a battleground.

Regimes in the south

With the fall of Luoyang, hundreds of thousands of residents of strife-torn regions packed up what movable property they could and fled in several directions, primarily south. Even the wealthy and high-ranking abandoned their property to seek safety, often bringing with them large groups from their home region. At Jiankang (modern Nanjing) leading officials set a Jin prince on the throne, creating a government in exile. This Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420) claimed to be the legitimate government and welcomed refugees, creating special prefectures for them and giving them tax exemptions. Its military men made several serious attempts to reconquer the north but were unable to hold onto their gains. In 362, when a southern general recovered Luoyang, many of those at court declined to move back, saying they had become used to the south.

After surviving a major rebellion in the coastal region led by Daoist practioners (the Rebellion of Sun En, 399–402), the Jin began to crumble. A leading general built his own power base and eventually usurped the throne, founding the first of four dynasties that ruled from Jiankang – the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen, collectively called the Southern Dynasties (420–589). These four short dynasties were all founded by generals whose powerbase was a network of military men. They proved capable of holding the government together during their lifetime but not of assuring the successful transfer of power to their heirs. Military powerholders, not placing a high priority on the throne passing to the pick of the previous ruler, would back rival candidates, resulting in bloody succession struggles.

The Southern Dynasties depended on commercial taxes for much of their revenue. In part this reflects failure: the government was too thin to fully register the population, making it difficult to raise enough money for their armies from land taxes. But in part it also reflects success: constructing a capital south of the Yangzi had a beneficial effect on economic development of the south. When Luoyang fell in 311, the south probably had only about 10 per cent of the registered population of the Jin (which did not include non-Chinese, indigenous people of the south who paid no taxes). With the movement of so many people south and the fiscal needs of the government, much new land was brought into cultivation. The south, with its temperate climate and ample supply of water, offered nearly unlimited possibilities for such development. Trade was also favoured by convenient water transport of the south, with its abundant rivers and canals.

Aristocratic attitudes were strong among the émigré families in and near the capital and the long-established great families of the region with whom they intermarried. Much more so than in the Han period, these families judged themselves and others on the basis of their ancestors. They compiled genealogies of the most eminent families and chose marriage partners from families of equivalent

Tao Yuanming and the Art of Chinese Poetry

The classical Chinese language, with its tones and abundant rhymes, was well suited to rhymed verse. The Chinese script is similarly conducive to poetry-writing because it stimulates visual associations in ways that purely phonetic scripts do not. Perhaps for these reasons poetry was from early times the central literary art in China. During the age of Confucius, envoys and philosophers alike quoted the *Book of Songs* in their speeches and essays, not only to demonstrate their education but also to make their points more effectively. During Han times the scholarship surrounding this classic emphasized the connection between poetry and the expression of emotion. Poetry is what happens when emotions are stirred, commentators explained, and a sensitive reader of poetry can perceive through a poem the state of mind of the writer. The art of poetry reached great heights in the aesthetically inclined aristocratic society of the period of division, and poets came to play a distinctive cultural role as exemplars of the complex individual, moved by conflicting but powerful emotions.

Tao Qian, better known as Tao Yuanming (365–427), was one of the first poets to create such a persona. From the south (modern Jiangxi province), Tao had an inconsequential political career, never holding any post very long. Once, it is told, he quit his post rather than entertain a visiting inspector, objecting, 'How could I bend my waist to this village buffoon for five pecks of rice!' On some occasions he expressed fierce ambition, at other times a desire to be left alone to follow the dictates of his heart. By the age of forty he quit government service altogether and supported himself by farming.

Tao's extant corpus includes more than one hundred pieces, many of which could be considered philosophical, tinged with such Daoist sentiments as 'excessive thinking harms life', 'nothing is better than to trust one's true self', or 'propriety and conventions, what folly to follow them too earnestly'. Although he celebrated the quiet life, Tao was not a hermit who withdrew from friends and family. In his poems he expressed his enjoyment of books, music, and wine. 'I try a cup and all my concerns become remote. / Another cup and suddenly I forget even Heaven. / But is Heaven really far from this state? / Nothing is better than to trust your true self' (from 'Drinking Alone in the Rainy Season'). Tao Yuanming also idealized the farming life, describing its pleasures as a genuine alternative to public service. In 'On Returning to My Garden and Fields', he portrayed himself as a contented rustic:

> Since youth I have not fit the common mould,
> Instinctively loving the mountains and hills.
> By mistake I fell into the dusty net
> And was gone from home for thirteen years.
> A bird in a cage yearns for its native woods;
> A fish in a pond remembers its old mountain pool.
> Now I shall clear some land at the edge of the
> southern wild
> And, clinging to the simple life, return to garden
> and field,
> To my two-acre lot,
> My thatched cottage of eight or nine rooms.

pedigree. By securing near automatic access to higher government posts through the Nine Rank system, the scions of great families were assured of government salaries and exemptions from taxes and labour service. Many were also able to build up great landed estates worked by destitute refugees from the north who were settled as serf-like dependants. At court, the aristocrats often set themselves at odds with the 'upstart' rulers, doing what they could to frustrate these emperors' efforts to appoint or promote whom they wished.

But the aristocrats should not be looked on as foes of Chinese civilization and its literary traditions. The men in these families saw themselves as maintaining the high cultural accomplishments of the Han dynasty and the tradition of the scholar-official. Literary criticism flourished in an environment where taste was a matter of

much importance. In about 530, a prince of the Liang dynasty compiled an anthology, the *Selections of Literature*, containing carefully selected examples of thirty-odd genres of prose and verse. Calligraphy and painting similarly benefited from the concern with individual expression and aesthetics. Wang Xizhi, taken by many to be the greatest calligrapher of all time, drew inspiration from Daoism with its emphasis on the natural and spontaneous. His younger contemporary, Gu Kaizhi, became a master of figure painting. Interest in mountains where immortals dwelled – as well as general Daoist interest in nature – led to the beginning of landscape painting. Xie He, in the early sixth century, enunciated standards by which paintings should be judged, such as the degree to which they are imbued with vital force and the strength of the brushwork used. Thus painting and calligraphy came to be seen as carrying intellectual content unlike the decoration on ceramics, lacquerware, or textiles.

Culture was not the only concern of the courts at Jiankang. They repeatedly had to deal with challenges to their authority. The most destructive uprising began in 548, initiated by a would-be warlord from the north, Hou Jing, who gathered a huge army of the disaffected and set siege to the capital. By the time the city fell four months later, many members of the great families had starved to death in their mansions. Although a general soon declared the new Chen dynasty, his control over outlying areas amounted to little more than the privilege of confirming local strongmen as his governors.

Regimes in the north

In the north, during the period known as the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439), rival warlords of many different ethnic groups fought for control, ousting each other whenever they could. As warfare brought in its wake banditry and famine, rural communities all over north China built forts and organized self-defence forces, with power devolving to the local level even more than it had in the waning years of the Han. The commercial economy suffered and the circulation of money declined.

Ethnicity in this period was fluid and groups frequently shifted alliances and incorporated those they defeated. Some of those who gained sway in the early decades belonged to Xiongnu, Jie, and Di tribal groups. Some leaders had lived in China as hostages and were fully conversant with Chinese norms. Others, from further away, moved closer to the Chinese heartland as opportunities opened and climatic conditions worsened. Ethnic hostility sometimes grew violent. In 349, Ran Min, a man of Chinese descent who had been adopted into the Jie family of Shi Hu, briefly seized power and incited anti-foreign slaughter on a huge scale.

In the end, the most successful state-builders were various Xianbei groups, thought to speak a proto-Mongol language. The Xianbei first appear in Han times and during the Three Kingdoms period were a power north of the Great Wall. They saw themselves as several distinct groups, the most prominent of which were the Murong and later the Tuoba. The Murong quickly gained control in southern Manchuria (Liaoning), where they attracted Chinese fleeing from the disorder in the north China plain and established a state known as Former Yan (337–370). They

encouraged agriculture and established schools, appealing to both Chinese and non-Chinese subjects, and were able to expand into the north China plain. After being defeated by Fu Jian in 370, tens of thousands of their subjects were forcibly moved west to the region of Chang'an. When that state collapsed, new Murong states were established in the northeast.

The Tuoba branch of the Xianbei established a base further west, in northern Shanxi (the Dai region). Their Northern Wei state (398–534) early on expanded west into the Ordos region. They absorbed the armies of Xiongnu they defeated and captured 4 million head of cattle and sheep from them. Their royal house intermarried with the Murong royal house but also fought them, by 398 wresting much of Hebei away from them, and relocating several hundred thousand Murong subjects, both Chinese and Xianbei, to their new city of Pingcheng (modern Datong). Xianbei tribesmen remained predominately pastoral, with large herds of cattle, sheep, horses, and camels. All through the fifth century, Xianbei dominated army and government posts, and Xianbei was the language of the army. Some of their practices seemed very alien to Chinese: to limit the influence of maternal relatives, the Tuoba killed the mother of whichever son was designated crown prince, a practice continued through seven generations.

Excavated in Inner Mongolia in 1981, this hat ornament is one of several that can be identified with the Xianbei. Made of gold, the leaf-shaped pendants hang from animal antlers. Similar ornaments with pendants have been found across the Northern Zone and into Korea.

A key figure in Northern Wei state building efforts was Empress Dowager Feng, regent for a child emperor during the 470s and 480s. Until her time, the government was funded by irregular local tribute and officials were not paid salaries. She introduced measures to improve local administration and tax collection. The centrepiece was the equal-field system, introduced in 486. Reminiscent of Han efforts to tax individual cultivators and Cao Cao's military colonies and state lands, this system was based on the premise that the state owned all land. Individual families were to be assigned 20 *mu* of permanent, inheritable land for growing mulberry and other trees plus lifetime allotments of crop land, the amount depending on their available labour; for instance 40 *mu* was allocated per able-bodied man (including slaves) and 30 *mu* per ox. Larger landholdings were allowed only for the families of officials. The memorial proposing this equal-field system argued that it would 'ensure that no land lies neglected, that no people wander off, that powerful families could not monopolize the fertile fields, and that humble people would also get their share of the land'. Even if the powerful were usually able to manoeuvre around the law, the government had asserted its power to assign and tax land, a key step toward building a fiscal base for a more intrusive form of government.

A few years later, Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99) took government reform further in explicitly Chinese directions. He had been educated in Chinese and was said to 'love to read'. In the 490s, he moved the capital more than 400 miles (nearly 700 km) south to the ruins of Luoyang and built a splendid new city there; he gave Chinese surnames to the Xianbei, taking the name Yuan ('origin') for the imperial house; he ordered the use of the Chinese language and Chinese dress at court, even by Xianbei; and he encouraged intermarriage between the Xianbei and Chinese elites. Behind what appear to be pro-Chinese measures may well have been a new ambition to conquer the south. Xiaowen welcomed defectors from the south such as Wang Su who was put to work on the reorganization of the government. To make southerners feel more at home, they were served tea rather than the yogurt drinks consumed in the north.

Within twenty-five years Luoyang had become a magnificent city with half a million people, vast palaces, elegant mansions, and over a thousand Buddhist monasteries. Many members of the Xianbei nobility became culturally dual, fully versed in Chinese cultural traditions, at home among the leading Chinese families. Enough southerners settled there that they had their own quarter with a fish and turtle market.

Elite Chinese families who had stayed in the north thrived in this period. In contrast to the aristocratic families in the south, they had put emphasis on their preservation of Confucian learning and their embodiment of Confucian traditions of family ethics and rituals. They sought substantive posts in the government not only out of a Confucian sense of duty but also because such service offered prestige, power, and connections to elite families from other parts of the country. Many were quite learned, like Wei Shou, the scion of an eminent northeastern family, whose 114-chapter history of the Wei dynasty provides full accounts of both the Xianbei and the Chinese leaders and even astute accounts of Buddhism and Daoism. The practical experience of these high-ranking Chinese families made them a real asset to the northern rulers intent on state-building.

The stability of this Luoyang-centred, Sino-foreign hybrid regime was brief. The Xianbei soldiers assigned to the northern frontier garrisons to fend off incursions by new occupants of the steppe such as the Ruanruan and Turks came to hate the sinified Xianbei aristocrats leading what seemed to them self-indulgent lives in the thoroughly Chinese atmosphere of Luoyang and in 524 they rebelled. Civil war ensued as those sent to suppress the rebels took to fighting each other. When Luoyang was sacked, some 2,000 officials were slaughtered.

After a decade of constant warfare, two principal rivals emerged, each controlling a claimant to the Wei throne (known as the Eastern and Western Wei, with capitals in Ye and Chang'an). In 552, the fiction of Wei rule was abandoned in the east, and the (Northern) Qi dynasty (552–77) was established; in 557 the western powers followed suit and declared the (Northern) Zhou dynasty (557–81). Both courts suffered from ethnic tension between the sinified Xianbei, Chinese aristocrats, and unsinified warriors. In the northwestern court, not only was the law requiring

Xianbei to take Chinese names rescinded, but Chinese officials were given Xianbei names. In 553, the northwestern court conquered Sichuan, until then held by the south. In 575, the Zhou court, through clever diplomacy, got the southern court of Chen and the Turks to join in destroying Qi, thus reunifying the north in 577. The Zhou throne was in its turn usurped in 581 by one of its generals who declared the Sui dynasty. Before long Sui destroyed Chen to unify all of China proper (see Chapter 5).

Armies and warfare

In a way reminiscent of the Warring States period, the existence of multiple regimes meant military conflict was frequent in this era and states had to devote the bulk of their resources to maintaining large armies.

In the south, the armies were concentrated along the shifting northern border, especially the region between the Huai and Han Rivers and the Yangzi River, an area heavily settled by refugees, many of whom were recruited into the armies stationed there. This was the south's best region for raising horses and these armies were the best prepared to fight the northern cavalry. There were some early victories, with southern armies recovering for brief periods Luoyang and Chang'an and in 383 turning back a major attempt to conquer the south by Fu Jian. Over time, however,

Armour was worn by infantrymen, cavalrymen, and war horses in the frequent battles that marked centuries of regional regimes. Its use is illustrated in this sixth-century battle scene on a wall of Cave 285 at Dunhuang in Gansu province.

hope of recovering the north faded, especially after the north was unified by the Northern Wei. Early on the acute need for soldiers led to filling the ranks with impressed indigenous people, vagrants, and convicts, but eventually a more stable system of hereditary military households was established. Where the southern regimes excelled was in naval warfare and their dominance of the Yangzi River was a crucial factor in their survival. Jiankang was on the river's southern bank, protected by naval forces.

The southern military also was involved in frequent skirmishes with local mountain men called 'Man', a term loosely translated as 'Southern barbarians', though there were also reports that Chinese would join the Man to avoid paying taxes. In other parts of the country there were other non-Chinese ethnic groups who also came into conflict with the southern states as they tried to expand their areas of control. It is difficult to estimate what proportion of the population in the various parts of the south belonged to non-Chinese ethnic groups, but it cetainly was substantial.

In the north, non-Chinese horsemen very largely dominated the armies. In this period stirrups became common and both men and their horses were armoured to protect against arrows fired from powerful crossbows. After 450, when the Northern Wei devoted more energy to campaigns south, they recruited Chinese to serve as infantry and trained them to shoot the powerful crossbows used to defend and

The Han River Valley and the Man

The Han River is a tributary to the Yangzi, flowing east and south from southern Shaanxi through Hubei to join the Yangzi at modern Wuhan. With the fall of Chang'an and Luoyang in the early fourth century, its river valley became a place of refuge. The Jin government established many émigré prefectures and counties on both its northern and southern banks.

The largest city and administrative centre in the Han River valley was Xiangyang. In 379 it fell to the forces of Fu Jian after a year-long siege, and a large number of its inhabitants were carted off. The Eastern Jin recovered the region within a few years and heavily garrisoned it.

Even though this region was north of the Yangzi River, in this period it still had a large population who were considered unassimilated native people, referred to as Man, the general term for 'southern barbarians' used since the Zhou period. As the number of Chinese migrants increased, the Man retreated to the hills, hunting and fishing and practising swidden agriculture. The southern courts tried to extract revenue from them but did not tax them as heavily as regular subjects. The garrisons at Xiangyang repeatedly waged war against the Man, probably in part to capture men to force into their armies as hereditary soldiers, which they did by the tens of thousands. In a punitive expedition against the Man from 449 to 450, the general Shen Qingzhi took 28,000 captives. The commander-in-chief at Xiangyang often had the title 'Commandant of the Man' or the 'Commandant for Pacifying the Man'.

We have no sources giving the Man view of their world or even a way to know if they considered themselves a single group or spoke a common language. In about 345, an aide-de-camp of Huan Wen, then Commandant of the Man, had learned some Man words from working with Man soldiers.

Chinese sometimes joined the Man as a way to avoid taxes. They could join for other reasons as well. After his high-ranking father was executed by the founder of the Liu Song dynasty, the young Xuan Dan found refuge among the Man and learned their ways. In the 490s he led 80,000 of them north to fight for the Northern Wei, which welcomed them.

attack city walls. Chinese soldiers, however, rarely rose to command levels in the northern armies.

From time to time, the Northern Wei campaigned south of the Yellow River, hoping to enlarge their territory. In 422, however, they had to retreat when a third of their soldiers died from disease in the warmer climate. Disease also as a factor in their campaign in 450. Their greatest victory was in 466 to 469 when they pushed the southern regime further south, fully recovering Shandong and the territory north of the Huai River.

The northern armies also had to be prepared to fight on the steppe against groups that had replaced the Xianbei after they moved into north China, first the Ruanruan and then the Turks. Early on they were quite successful in their campaigns into the steppe, often returning with valuable booty. It was to protect against raids from the steppe that a line of garrisons was set up along the northern border. The soldiers of these armies saw their status decline as convicts were sentenced to serve there and as the Xianbei elite moved to Luoyang.

The final victory of the forces from the northwest has long been attributed in part to their introduction of a new military institution that incorporated more Chinese soldiers, raised soldiers' status, and allowed for expansion of the army without bankrupting the state. This was the divisional militia (*fubing*), an army of volunteer farmer-soldiers who served in rotation in armies at the capital or on the frontiers. By the 570s this divisional militia had been expanded to about 200,000 soldiers. The cavalrymen of the divisional militia had to provide their own horses and presumably came from families that had long served in the military, while foot soldiers were recruited from better-off peasant families who supplied them in exchange for exemption from taxes. The cost of this army was also kept down by letting the soldiers farm when not called up for training or campaigns. The divisional militia was also easier to co-ordinate and command than the military forces it replaced, most of which had been loyal only to their own officers.

Clients, retainers, serfs, and slaves

The Qin and Han dynasties had extracted the bulk of their revenue directly from agricultural producers. It followed that these governments continually had to strive to keep land and people from falling off the tax registers. The weaker governments that followed the Han were even less able to stop the poor from fleeing debt and tax collectors or the rich and powerful from amassing land and dependent labourers of servile status.

Demeaned status was not in itself new. By the late Zhou period a broad distinction was commonly made between ordinary 'good' people and base or ignoble people, the latter including those who had undergone mutilating punishments for crimes and those condemned to slavery as part of the punishment of a close relative condemned to death for a heinous crime. In addition, in late Zhou and Han times, those desperately impoverished might sell their wives and children to be household

slaves or bondservants. The law codes, however, imposed severe penalties for kidnapping 'good' people and selling them as slaves. Perhaps few people thought the non-Chinese in the south counted as 'good' people, for in the Han and later they were a major source of slaves.

With the appearance of great landed estates and the creation of private armies from the Later Han period on, a whole variety of client statuses emerged. Many people voluntarily became dependants, despite the loss of status, because rich patrons could provide protection. Clients of local strongmen might till their land and turn out to help during battles; others were essentially private soldiers. The Jin government tried to limit such dependents to officials, the highest-ranking officials allowed a maximum of forty households of dependants free from taxation and labour service, and lower-ranking officials proportionally fewer, down to a minimum of ten households. These limits never seem to have been effectively enforced, however. During the Southern Dynasties, serf-like dependent households grew in number because many refugees accepted the status when they settled on estates.

The customs of the northern pastoral tribes reinforced these tendencies. It was traditional for tribes to have both full members and slaves. When one tribe or confederation defeated another, the victors often enslaved the losers. In its battles against the Southern Dynasties, the Northern Wei armies would enslave captives, sometimes in the thousands. Generals who had been granted captured soldiers might incorporate them into their own armies, but high officials who received dozens or hundreds of captives made them into household servants or settled them to work on the land. The Northern Wei government supported the use of slaves in agriculture through the provision in the equal-field system that slaves be counted in allotting land.

Captives made into slaves were sometimes freed or redeemed. In the mid fifth century, a southern official offered 1,000 bolts of cloth to redeem his sexagenarian wife who had been captured and made a palace slave. Once a northern officer was sent to the south to offer 1,000 horses in exchange for 50 men captured in a military campaign. When the Northern Zhou captured the city of Jiangling from the Liang in 554, more than 100,000 civilians were said to be enslaved. The general Yu Jin was granted 1,000 slaves, and 200 were given to one of his sons. Some of the captives were redeemed by friends and relatives or freed by their new masters within a few years. In 577, those still in slavery were freed by an imperial rescript, with the provision that if they wished to remain with their master, they would be promoted to the less ignominious but still mean rank of bound retainer.

Among those captured in Jiangling was twenty-four-year old Yan Zhitui (531–591). From an official family that had moved south with the Jin court, he had become a court attendant for a Liang prince while still in his teens. When Hou Jing rebelled, the prince and his entourage fled to Jiangling, where they set up a rival court. After their capture, Yan was taken to Chang'an, but two years later escaped and made his way east, where he was given employment by the Northern Qi

government. In the book of advice he wrote for his sons he drew on his experience to impress on them the importance of literary education. Men with inferior educations who had been taken captive with him had ended up doing farm work or tending horses even though their ancestors had served in office for generations.

Buddhism

In this period when it was difficult to place much faith in civil governments, a religion whose reach extended way beyond any known government was spreading across Asia. As knowledge of Buddhism filtered into China during these centuries, Chinese learned a radically different way of conceiving of life and death, humanity and the cosmos.

Bronze altarpiece, depicting the Buddha Amitabha seated on a lotus throne and accompanied by disciples and attendants. The inscription indicates that it was commissioned in 593 by a group of eight older women (who identify themselves as mothers of named men) as a way to earn merit for members of their families.

Gautama Siddhartha, the historical Buddha ('Buddha' means enlightened one), was the son of a ruler of a small state in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains at about the time of Confucius. He naturally took for granted the basic concepts of Indian cosmology, such as karma and reincarnation. In this world view, men, women, animals, heavenly beings, hell dwellers, and other sentient beings pass through an endless series of lives, moving up or down according to the karma, or good and bad deeds, that they have accumulated. The optimistic interpretation of this cycle of births is that people could improve their lot in the next life by acting righteously. The pessimistic view is that life is a treadmill, a relentless cycle of birth and death.

According to Buddhist accounts, the Buddha left home at the age of twenty-nine, troubled by the suffering he saw around him. After trying the path of the wandering ascetic, he eventually reached enlightenment after meditating under a bo tree in Bodh Gaya. He began teaching that people's disappointments, anxieties, and sorrow result from their desires and attachments. People can take steps to free themselves by living an ethical life (abstaining from the taking of life, for instance) and engaging in spiritual exercises that enhance concentration and insight. Those who progress along this path can eventually escape the cycle of rebirth and enter nirvana, though it may take many lifetimes to reach that ultimate goal. For forty-five years the Buddha travelled through north India, spreading his message, refuting adversaries, and attracting followers. After the Buddha's death, his disciples passed down his sermons orally, though after a few centuries these sermons were recorded, forming the basis of a huge corpus of scriptures called sutras. His followers who left their families to make the quest

for salvation the prime activity in their lives formed the first communities of Buddhist monks and nuns.

With the help of the Indian King Ashoka (r. 268–232 BCE), Buddhism spread through India and to adjacent regions, including Central Asia. Buddhism arrived in China along with commercial goods, following trade routes from northern India through the Buddhist kingdoms of Central Asia such as Khotan and Kucha. At first the new faith was mostly a religion of foreigners. What Chinese encountered in the second, third, and fourth centuries was not a single creed, but an extraordinary array of ideas and practices, ranging from monastic discipline to magic, the worship of statues and relics, techniques of meditation and ecstasy, and sacred texts in foreign languages. Mahayana ('Great Vehicle') Buddhist philosophy was developing just as Buddhism was being introduced to China, and the Chinese learned of earlier and later doctrines at the same time. Mahayanists argued that pursuing the goal of nirvana was selfish compared to becoming a bodhisattva, a being of advanced spiritual standing who postponed entry into nirvana in order to help other beings. With Mahayana, the devotional side of Buddhism grew more elaborate. The Buddha became deified and placed at the head of an expanding pantheon of other Buddhas and bodhisattvas, depicted in painting and sculpture and treated as objects of veneration. Especially prominent in Chinese Buddhism were the Buddha Amida (Amitabha) and the bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokitesvara).

As Buddhist texts were translated, members of the upper levels of Chinese society began to be attracted to Buddhism. At first Buddhism seemed a variant of Daoism, a reflection of the difficulties of translation. For instance, the Mahayana concept of the fundamental emptiness of phenomena was identified with the Daoist notion of non-being. A more accurate understanding of Buddhism became possible after the eminent Central Asian monk Kumarajiva (344–413) was brought to Chang'an in 401 and began directing several thousand monks in the translation of thirty-eight texts. Such translations often were collaborative, with one person reading the Indian text, another translating it orally into Chinese, a third writing it down in literary Chinese, and perhaps yet another polishing the translation.

Many of the non-Chinese rulers in the north found Buddhism appealing. Devoted missionaries from Central Asia, like Fotudeng, were quite willing to use feats of magic to convince these rulers that Buddhism was a more powerful religion than the shamanism they had traditionally practised. Fotudeng, for instance, won the conversion of Shi Le after he made a blue lotus flower emerge from a bowl of blue water.

Another attraction of Buddhism for foreign rulers is that its universalistic claims did not put them at a disadvantage in relation to the Chinese in the way Confucian theories did, and thus offered a basis for unifying an ethnically mixed population. Buddhism also had an undogmatic side, tolerating local practices and local gods even when judging them of little value toward the greater goal of escape from the cycle of rebirth.

Chinese also began in this period to undertake the arduous journey to India to discover for themselves what might have been lost in translation. The first to leave a

In its transit from one country to the next, Buddhism absorbed local ideas and art styles and passed them on in transmuted forms. Thus Greek-influenced art forms reached China in the form of Buddhist artistic traditions developed in the region of Afghanistan. In a comparable way, Chinese understandings of filial piety and ancestors reached Japan as part and parcel of sinified Buddhism with its 'merit ceremonies' for the salvation of ancestors.

record of his trip was the intrepid Faxian, a monk who in 399 set out overland via Kucha and Khotan to India, where he visited many sites connected to the life of the Buddha before returning by the sea route via Sri Lanka and Sumatra in 414 and settling in Jiankang. His detailed descriptions of places in India presented it as a society as civilized as China.

The steady adaptation of Buddhism to China can be illustrated through the career of the great teacher Huiyuan (334–417). Born in the north, in the period of greatest disorder, he still managed to get a basic education in Confucian and Daoist texts. It was hearing a sermon by a Chinese monk (himself a disciple of a Kuchan missionary) that led Huiyuan to decide to 'leave the family' himself. Eventually he moved to the south, founding a monastery on Mount Lu in Jiangxi province. He kept up a learned correspondence with Kumarajiva in the north on points of doctrine but also interacted with lay followers whom he taught concentration techniques involving visualizing Buddhas. In 402, he assembled a group of both monks and lay people in front of an image of the Pure Land, the western paradise of the Buddha Amida, accessible to all who called on his name. Buddhism thus was well on its way to becoming a religion of universal salvation with appeal to all the faithful. Two years later, in 404, Huiyuan wrote a treatise entitled *On Why Monks Do Not Bow Down Before Kings*, asserting the political independence of the Buddhist church. He also tried to assure the ruler that Buddhism was not subversive, arguing that lay Buddhists make good subjects because their belief in the retribution of karma and desire to be reborn in paradise make them act circumspectly. 'Those who rejoice in the Way of the Buddha invariably first serve their parents and obey their lords.'

In both the north and the south, the Buddhist establishment grew quickly. Even though becoming a monk meant giving up one's family name and celibacy, thus cutting oneself off from the family line, many men joined the clergy. North China reportedly had 6,478 temples and 77,258 monks and nuns by 477; south China was said to have had 2,846 temples and 82,700 clerics a few decades later. Before the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, sutras were being written in Chinese ('apocryphal sutras'). China was also developing its own sacred sites, such as Mount Wutai, in the north, said to be the abode of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjusri. It became a major pilgrimage site.

The appeal of Buddhism was multifaceted. It addressed questions of suffering and death with a directness unmatched in native Chinese traditions. It offered a fully developed vision of the afterlife and the prospect of salvation, promising that all creatures might one day find blissful release from suffering. Its code of conduct, including the injunction against the taking of life, seemed to many to carry the principle of compassion to its logical extreme. Retreating to a monastery or nunnery offered a new alternative to the world-weary, one especially attractive to high-born widows. Indeed, Buddhism had particular appeal to women. Although incarnation as a female was considered lower than incarnation as a male, it was also viewed as

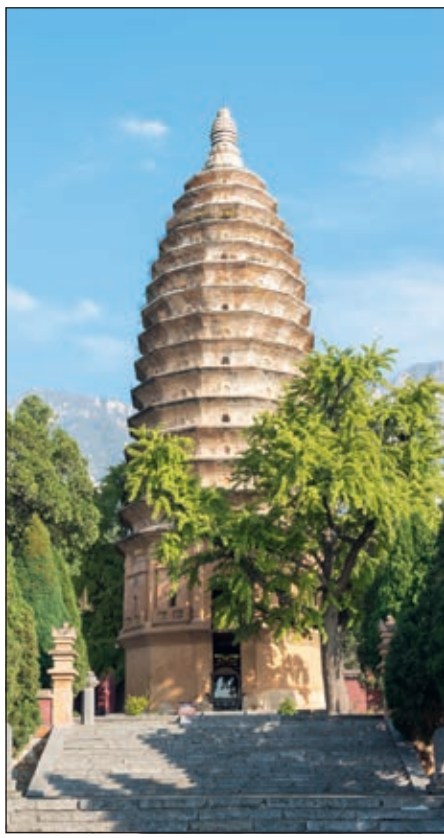
temporary, and women were encouraged to pursue salvation on nearly equal terms with men. Moreover, Buddhism held out for women some androgynous symbols unlike anything in native Chinese traditions; bodhisattvas were conceived as neither male nor female, transcending differences of gender in addition to differences of class and ethnicity.

Buddhism also appealed to the senses (see pages 108–109). Temples provided sensual stimulation of many sorts: the fragrance of incense; the sound of chanting; and the visual beauty of huge halls and towering pagodas whose walls were covered with paintings of the heavens or the lives of the Buddha and his main disciples. The destruction of the temples and monasteries in Luoyang in the civil war beginning in 524 dismayed Yang Xuanzhi so much that he wrote an account of their glories. According to him, Jingming monastery had been the most magnificent. On the seventh day of the fourth month, all the Buddhist statues in the city, more than 1,000 altogether, were brought to this monastery, and the emperor would come in person to scatter flowers on them as part of the Great Blessing ceremony:

> The gold and the flowers dazzled in the sun, and the jewelled canopies floated like clouds; there were forests of banners and a fog of incense, and the Buddhist music of India shook heaven and earth. All kinds of entertainers and trick riders performed shoulder to shoulder. Virtuous hosts of famous monks came, carrying their staves; there were crowds of the Buddhist faithful, holding flowers; horsemen and carriages were packed beside each other in an endless mass.

Buddhism also helped transcend social differences; inscriptions on Buddhist statues and temples show that Chinese and Xianbei officials, local notables, commoners, and Buddhist clergy often worked together on a project, all making contributions. The wealth involved was enormous; pious lay believers donated tracts of land and serfs in the conviction that donation of worldly wealth to the monastic community was an especially effective way to gain merit. The most generous imperial patron was Wudi of Liang (r. 502–549), who banned meat and wine from the imperial table, built temples, wrote commentaries on sutras, and held great assemblies of monks and laymen, one of which attracted 50,000 people. To raise money for Buddhist establishments, he had himself held 'hostage' until those at court raised huge sums to ransom him.

Not everyone, of course, was pleased by the many-faceted success of Buddhism. Resentful Daoists and Confucians denounced many Buddhist ideas and practices as immoral or unsuited to China. Monks' practices of shaving the head and cremating the dead were decried as violations of the body, not allowed in Confucianism. Even worse was celibacy, for Mencius had stated that the ultimate unfilial act was failure to provide one's ancestors with heirs. The refusal of monks to pay homage to the ruler and their failure to contribute to the tax coffers were depicted by critics as threats to the well-being of the state. Daoists also tried the alternate tactic of



The 131 foot/40 m-tall pagoda at Songyue Monastery, built in 523, has twelve sides and is constructed of brick.

Early Buddhist Art

Buddhism had an enormous impact on the visual arts in China, especially architecture, sculpture, and painting. Pre-Buddhist Chinese shrines had not contained statues or paintings of deities, but Buddhists used images both to teach Buddhist doctrine and provide a focus for devotional activities. Ordinary people learned about Buddhism not only by listening to monks tell stories and deliver sermons, but also by looking at images of Buddhist deities and seeing pictures that helped them recall Buddhist stories.

Most of the Buddhist temples built before the seventh century of wood or brick are long gone, but one brick pagoda still stands at Mount Song, not far from Luoyang. Pagodas were based on the Indian tradition of stupas built to house relics of the Buddha, but developed distinctly Chinese forms. Taller than any traditional Chinese buildings, they could be seen from a considerable distance.

Early temples were sometimes embellished with stone images of Buddhas in the form of steles, and some of these have survived from the fifth and sixth centuries. From these steles we can see the development of Buddhist iconography, of traditional ways to depict different Buddhist subjects. Most steles were less than 6 feet (1.8 m) tall and showed the Buddha seated, with his legs crossed or hanging down; his hands could be joined or gesturing. Usually he was depicted with a topknot and elongated earlobes. Other Buddhas had distinctive postures: the Buddha Maitreya, for instance, was generally shown seated with crossed ankles. Also important in Buddhist art is the lotus, symbolic of the individual's journey up through the 'mud' of existence to blossom with the help of Buddhist teachings.

Above
The walls of Cave 9 at Yungang are decorated with standing or seated Buddha images surrounded by bodhisattvas, adoring heavenly beings, musicians, and flying apsaras. The lowest register carries a series of reliefs illustrating the life of Shakyamuni.

Left
This huge Buddha at Yungang (*c.* 490), about 45 feet (14 m) tall, was probably inspired by the colossal Buddha images at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. It is the largest of some 51,000 Buddhist images carved into the surface of a cliff, which extends for more than half a mile (800 m).

Even more early Chinese Buddhist art survives in the cave temples at Dunhuang and Yungang. Carving temples into cliffs began in India and was further developed in Central Asia. Sometimes huge Buddhas were carved out of rock, perhaps meant to convey the overwhelming power of the Buddha.

The cave temples at Dunhuang in western Gansu province were probably begun by 400, initiated by local monks; work continued on them over a period of several centuries. A large proportion of the residents of Dunhuang in this period were probably not Chinese, and it is therefore not surprising that the decoration of the early caves at Dunhuang shows strong connections to the Buddhist art at other oasis towns further west, such as Kucha and Khotan.

In 460 the Northern Wei court commissioned the carving of cave temples at Yungang, near its early capital in northern Shanxi. Most of the fifty-three caves there were carved out before the Wei moved their capital south to Luoyang in 494. The five earliest caves contain huge Buddha figures in stone, the tallest a standing Buddha about 70 feet (21.5 m) high.

At both cave sites, much of the sculpture and painting portrayed the events in the life of the historical Buddha. Buddhas were often shown in a state of meditation, with mask-like faces that betray no emotion. By contrast, the accompanying bodhisattvas were mortals, adorned with armlets and earrings, standing in more varied poses. In the sixth century, Chinese artists gradually refined the ways they portrayed Buddhas and bodhisattvas, making them more slender and less angular, reflecting stylistic preferences seen also in secular Chinese painting.

Above
In 1996, more than one hundred purposely smashed stone Buddhist sculptures were discovered buried at the site of the ancient Longxing Temple in Qingzhou, Shandong province. Dating to the sixth century (*c.* 520–570), they may have been destroyed as a result of the brief persecution of Buddhism in 577 and the military antagonism between Northern Zhou and Northern Qi.

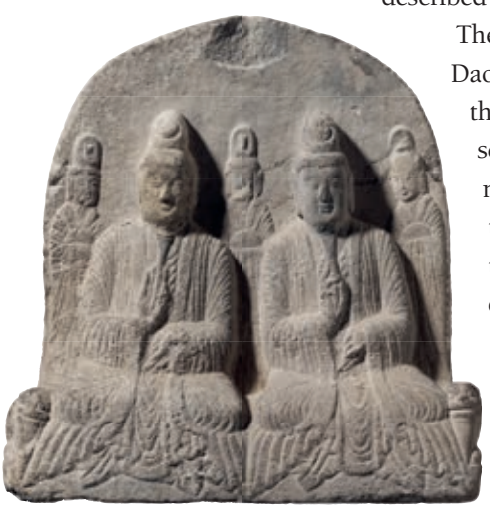
Left
The grief of the Buddha's disciples at his death is captured in this painting from the west wall of Cave 428 at Dunhuang, painted in the early sixth century.

claiming that Laozi had gone to India where he transformed himself into the Buddha, making Buddhism an inferior off-shoot of Daoism. To rebut such criticisms, and to overcome resistance on the part of potential converts, Buddhist apologists argued that their religion was basically compatible with Chinese values. It was the utmost expression of filial piety, they argued, to free a parent from the suffering of purgatory by performing pious acts in his or her name. By praying for the welfare of the ruler and the population, they argued, monks were aiding the state, not injuring it. Twice northern rulers were swayed by the more virulent anti-Buddhist rhetoric to initiate persecutions of Buddhism. From 446 to 452 and again from 574 to 579, orders were issued to close the monasteries and to force Buddhist monks and nuns to return to lay life. No attempt was made in these or subsequent persecutions to suppress private Buddhist beliefs, however; the state never sponsored any sort of inquiry into people's beliefs, nor did it ever insist that its officials renounce Buddhism. Moreover, both of these persecutions lasted only to the end of the reign, and the next occupant of the throne made generous amends.

Daoist religion

The development of Buddhism in China as a religion with a body of sacred texts and a clergy expert in them coincided with and helped stimulate the emergence of Daoism as a religion with similar attributes. This religion had many roots: the elite pursuit of immortality; popular religious movements evident at the end of the Han such as the Celestial Masters; and the model of Buddhism with its clergy and scriptures.

The Daoism of elite devotees was generally an individual practice aimed at bodily immortality through diet, visualization of gods, gymnastics, and alchemy, with roots going back to Zhou times. Through such special techniques a person could collect and refine the yang energies in the body, transforming a heavy mortal body into a light immortal one. Ge Hong (283–343) promoted breath control, sexual hygiene, talismanic charms, and alchemy. He offered a recipe for a gold cinnabar elixir and described methods for raising the dead and walking on water.



This small stone image, about 11 inches (28 cm) tall, has an inscription on the back dating it to 515. It is believed to depict the deified Laozi and the Jade Emperor, two central figures in the Daoist pantheon. The way they are depicted shows the influence of Buddhist art on Daoist artistic practice.

The fall of Luoyang and the retreat of the court to the south brought northern Daoist practitioners into contact with local traditions of esoteric learning in the south. A series of revelations led to the writing down of a large body of scriptures, coming to rival the Buddhist sutras. Between 364 and 370 two men, father and son, had a series of visions of a group of immortals from the heaven of Supreme Purity, a realm loftier than any with which the Celestial Masters had communicated. They learned from these immortals that demonic forces would cleanse the earth of evildoers to prepare it for the descent from Heaven of a new universal ruler. Some of the revealed texts show a thorough familiarity with Buddhist thought, including notions of predestination and reincarnation; they also contain much alchemical lore. Within a few decades, other revelations resulted in the Numinous Treasure scriptures, these ones containing elaborate liturgies for rituals.

Then in 415 in the north, Kou Qianzhi, a Daoist priest in the line of the Celestial Masters, received revelations from Laozi himself. Laozi charged him with the task of reforming Daoism, eliminating sexual rites and other practices offensive to the high gods. The huge canon of scriptures acquired by Daoism in these ways was generally kept secret from the uninitiated, unlike the widely circulated Buddhist sutras.

At the local level, Daoist masters would organize ceremonies for their parishioners. Music, incantations, and the expression of penance and remorse would bring the collective elimination of sins, which were seen as the main cause of sickness. According to the reports of outraged Buddhist adversaries, Daoist ceremonies lasted days and nights and involved men and women mixing indecently.

By the end of Northern and Southern Dynasties, the two religions of Buddhism and Daoism had brought wide-ranging social and cultural change. There were new elites – the Buddhist monks and Daoist priests; new categories of texts – scriptures; new forms of architecture – pagodas; new types of rituals – recitation of scriptures, fasting, ordination rites, relic worship; and new forms of social organization – monasteries and religious societies. In the competition between Buddhism and Daoism for the support of ordinary people, Daoists claimed that they had better spells, more potent hygiene techniques for achieving immortality, and more control over malevolent local gods. Buddhists claimed that they had loftier principles and better techniques for attaining salvation and helping deceased loved ones achieve better rebirths. Both religions tried to accommodate popular belief and tended to accept local deities as lesser figures in their pantheons but rejected the practice of making offerings of meat to gods, long a standard practice. In this period and for centuries to come, more Chinese would become Buddhist clergy than Daoist clergy, and more Buddhist temples were constructed than Daoist ones, but both religions developed through interaction with each other and with Chinese political authorities and lay society.

Trade with Central Asia continued during the Northern Dynasties, and aristocrats in north China in particular remained willing to import luxury items from distant lands. This necklace of gold, pearl, and lapis lazuli, dating from the late sixth century and possibly made in Persia or Afghanistan, was among the objects unearthed from the tomb of a nine-year-old girl from a noble family.

To Chinese historians in subsequent ages, none of the rulers during the centuries between the Han and the Sui fulfilled the central role of Son of Heaven, namely to establish a cosmically correct and harmonious order for All-Under-Heaven. Thus this period was treated as significant primarily as a negative example: the disorder and dislocation, the ethnic hostility and bloody court struggles, the tyrannical rulers and enslaved captives all demonstrated why powerful, intrusive, centralized, imperial governments were necessary. In this reading, unity becomes the natural state of the Chinese subcontinent and division a perturbation.

Is an alternative reading possible? Could the separate northern and southern regimes of this period have become the norm? The geography of the two regions was quite distinct, leading to differences in their agricultural systems and means of transport. Spoken language differed considerable from place to place, especially in the south. Foreign connections also differed. In the north, commerce along the Silk Road remained active and there was quite a bit of contact with those from

the steppe. The south had no overland access to Central Asia, but was connected by sea to Korea, Japan, and many societies in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Three centuries of separate northern and southern states would seem to prove that such a situation could be relatively stable. The development of Buddhist and Daoist religions shows that multiple governments need not be an impediment to cultural flowering.

In this period both north and south claimed to be the true centre, the heir to the traditions of the Han dynasty. In the north much was made of geography, of controlling the region of the Zhou and Han capitals, the land where all the places sacred or memorable in Chinese history were located, including the tombs of all earlier monarchs. One of the northern successor regimes took the name Zhou and evoked the heritage of the Zhou dynasty by renaming government offices according to the nomenclature listed in the ancient *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhou li*). Chinese at the southern court could not make similar claims to geographical centrality, but they could point to the ethnicity of their rulers – indisputably Chinese. They also elaborated a theory based on the ritual abdications that linked one ruler to the next in an unbroken succession of Sons of Heaven. Thus, because the Han had turned over the imperial seal to the Wei, the Wei to the Jin, and the Jin to the Song, it was the rulers in the south who were the legitimate Sons of Heaven. Neither in the north nor the south did individuals articulate an alternative vision of how the world should be ordered, one legitimating separate, independent regimes pursuing their distinct destinies.

To put these issues into world historical context, consider the contrast with what happened in Europe in the same centuries. Those familiar with the course of

Panels from the screen surrounding the funerary couch of the Sogdian merchant An Qie, excavated in the northern suburbs of Xi'an in 2000. An epitaph, written in Chinese, reveals that he died at the age of sixty-two in 579 and held a military post. Elsewhere in the tomb are images that reflect his Zoroastrian religion.

European history have often labelled this period 'medieval' because of its similarities to Europe in the period after the fall of Rome. In both instances, a great empire broke up, barbarian tribes who had been used as auxiliary military forces gained the upper hand many places, and the old urban economy suffered. In both places a foreign religion with claims to universality rapidly gained adherents and the intensity of religious fervour led to vast expenditure on monumental art. In both locations, state building was a long, slow process. This comparison underlines the obstacles to re-establishing an empire on the scale of the celebrated earlier one.

Intriguing as these correspondences are, they should not deflect our attention from the equally important differences between the experiences of China and Europe. Perhaps because Chinese statesmen all knew the history of the Zhou dynasty – when bonds of fealty between vassals and lords led eventually to the emergence of separate states – empire-builders aspired to a strongly centralized, bureaucratically administered political order, and not a decentralized or tributary one. In China, moreover, the mixing of peoples had a different impact on culture and consciousness. Xianbei was the language of the Northern Dynasties' armies, but Chinese continued to be the spoken language of north China, and Xianbei eventually disappeared as a language. Charlemagne could not deny or obscure his Germanic heritage and was restrained by it from acting out the part of a Roman emperor. By contrast, neither the Sui nor the Tang emperors had any difficulty presenting themselves and their ancestors as descended from ancient Chinese stock even though their families had extensively intermarried with elite Xianbei families. The sense of disjuncture, of moral and emotional separation from the classical past, thus, was not nearly so great in China as in Europe.

Equally important, education and scholarship never went into eclipse in China and both people and ideas flowed back and forth between north and south. The Chinese great families in both the north and south were fully literate, and the intellectual atmosphere in the south was as conducive to literary and artistic experimentation as any in Chinese history. Leading men of letters were in no sense less sophisticated than their Han counterparts centuries earlier. Indeed, the encounter with Indian civilization – a civilization much more on a par with China than any China had encountered earlier – stimulated intellectual inquiry and self-reflection. Struggling with ways to convey the sounds of the Sanskrit language, for instance, led to the first analysis of the tones in the Chinese language. Even the commercial economy was not hit as hard in China as it was in the West. Trade was certainly disrupted in the fourth century and the use of coinage, for instance, declined. Still, economic growth in the south was substantial and in the north the commercial economy had begun to revive by the late fifth century. Even trade between north and south grew significantly. Of course, no one in the south asked to be conquered – military strength was ultimately responsible for reuniting north and south. But the cultural ties between the two regions undoubtedly helped make it an eventual success.