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PART ONE

**THE BUDDHIST CHURCH DURING THE
FIRST HALF OF THE T'ANG (618–762)**

Introduction

When Li Yüan proclaimed the establishment of the T'ang dynasty in 618, some six centuries had already elapsed since Buddhism first appeared in China. Starting out primarily as a religion within the foreign merchant communities in the larger cities, Buddhism gradually gained a following among native Chinese.¹ Some were attracted by the new philosophical ideas found in the Buddhist scriptures then being translated into Chinese – concepts such as impermanence and non-substantiality, only vaguely hinted at by late Chou philosophers, which were expounded with great precision in the sūtras. Others were drawn to the religious side of Buddhism, with its impressive rituals, its promise of rebirth in a glorious heaven, its talk of a return to this world at some future time, and, above all, its mystical incantations and rites that were believed capable of averting all conceivable disasters.

From roughly the fourth century onward Buddhism began to permeate all sections of Chinese society from the court and the aristocratic families to the peasantry and city-dwellers. Monasteries, often endowed by powerful patrons with extensive tracts of land, were established throughout China in increasing numbers. Tradition-minded Confucian officials, alarmed at the rapid growth of tax-exempt lands, were soon urging their rulers to take steps to curb the great wealth being amassed by the Buddhist church. The often repeated assertion by eminent monks that the clergy, being super-mundane in its concerns, did not owe obedience to either the state or the family likewise outraged Confucian-oriented bureaucrats and scholars who warned that Buddhist monasticism would undermine the foundations of Chinese society if left unchecked. But so overpowering had the intellectual and emotional appeal of Buddhism become that few rulers during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (317–589) could bring themselves to take repressive measures against the church. On the two occasions when an actual suppression was ordered – first, between the years 446–452,

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during the reign of Emperor T'ai-wu of the Northern Wei, and then again between the years 574–578 during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Northern Chou – the popular reaction in favor of Buddhism was so strong that in each case the next emperor to ascend the throne thought it prudent to rescind the anti-Buddhist legislation of his predecessor. Although these two attempts to eliminate the Buddhist religion occurred under alien Northern dynasties, it would be erroneous to assume that the non-Chinese rulers of the North were generally hostile to Buddhism. It should be remembered that it was the Northern Wei dynasty that sponsored the magnificent statuary carved in the rocks and caves of Yün-kang and Lung-men. Yet despite the unquestionable piety of the majority of Northern rulers, they insisted that the church be subordinate to the state and retained for themselves the prerogative of appointing the hierarchy of the church. In the South, however, the complete autonomy of the church and the right of the clergy not to bow before the emperor or any other lay person had been explicitly recognized since the middle of the fourth century.² So intense had the devotion of Southern emperors become by the sixth century that high-ranking ministers on a number of occasions had to go through the motions of paying a huge ransom to the Buddhist church to return to lay life an emperor who had made a vow to become a servant of the clergy.³

When Yang Chien, the founder of the Sui dynasty, finally achieved the unification of the empire in 589, he was quick to see the potential value of Buddhism as an ideological force capable of bringing together the country which had been divided for two and a half centuries.⁴ Yang Chien, born in a monastery and raised by a nun, was undoubtedly sympathetic to Buddhism from his youth. He had witnessed the suppression of Buddhism initiated in the year 574 by the Northern Chou and saw for himself the deep resentment that it had provoked among the peoples of the North who, for the most part, were devout adherents. Yang Chien lost no time in establishing himself as a firm supporter of Buddhism. One month after assuming the throne in the year 581 he ordered the construction of a Buddhist monastery at the foot of each of the five sacred mountains.⁵ Later in the same year he issued a decree that five additional monasteries should be built at sites closely associated with the fortunes of the imperial family.⁶ He also took the extraordinary step of dropping all restrictions on ordinations.⁷ To encourage the spread of Buddhism each household was required to make a contribution toward the cost of casting images and copying sūtras, causing a Confucian historian to lament that 'the number of Buddhist sūtras circulating among the common people exceeds the Confucian classics many thousand-folds.'⁸ Two years later Yang Chien gave permission for the restoration

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of all monasteries destroyed by the Northern Chou⁹ and probably during the same year issued another edict ordering that a state-supported monastery and convent should be built in each prefecture and county (*chou hsien*).¹⁰ In 585 Yang Chien decreed that a Ta hsing-kuo ssu, 'Monastery for the Prosperity of the Empire', be erected in each of the forty-five prefectures that he had visited before ascending the throne.¹¹ His desire to placate the clergy and win the support of the Buddhist masses can be seen from his decision in the year 590 to legitimize the status of the several hundred thousand monks and nuns who had previously been ordained without government permission and to extend official recognition to every 'mountain temple' with one or more monks in residence.¹² During his twenty-four year rule Yang Chien is said to have authorized the ordination of 230,000 monks and nuns, the construction of 3,792 monasteries, the copying of 132,086 rolls of scripture, and the production of 106,580 images.¹³

Unlike the rulers of the preceding dynasties, the T'ang emperors for the most part did not exhibit much enthusiasm for Buddhism. Although the first two T'ang emperors tended to view the Buddhist religion with disdain,¹⁴ they were sufficiently shrewd to recognize that it had a devoted following on all levels of society and hence could not be totally ignored by the state, much less suppressed, without stirring up great opposition, as was the case with the ill-fated attempts to do away with Buddhism under the Northern Wei in 446 and the Northern Chou in 574. As we shall see, these early T'ang emperors, on the one hand, adopted a policy of conciliating the Buddhist masses by sponsoring the construction of a number of monasteries, especially at the sites of major battles where many soldiers had fallen, and by holding services for the dead – particularly for those who gave their lives in the imperial cause – as, for example, the seven-day mass conducted in the Imperial Palace jointly by sixty-nine Buddhist and sixty-nine Taoist monks during the sixth month of the year 618, when the founding of the T'ang was proclaimed.¹⁵ On the other hand, these same T'ang emperors consistently sought to extend state controls over the Buddhist church and reduce its material power as manifested in both the size and privileges of its clergy as well as in the number of its monasteries. Expedient patronage accompanied by increasingly restrictive curbs characterized the T'ang policy towards Buddhism before the An Lu-shan rebellion in 755.¹⁶

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The T'ang is notable as the first dynasty to give precedence to Taoism over Buddhism. In what may have been an attempt to compen-

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sate for its relatively low standing among the prestigious clans of North China, the T'ang imperial family claimed, on the basis of its surname, Li, that it was descended from Lao-tzu, the legendary founder of Taoism, who was believed to have had the same surname. During the period that Li Yüan (the future Emperor Kao-tsu) was plotting to seize power, he maintained close relations with Taoist priests who encouraged his political ambitions. One of these, Wang Yüan-chih, persuaded Li Yüan that he (Li) was now the recipient of the Heavenly Mandate, implying that the time was ripe for Li to assert his claim to the throne.¹ It is difficult to say how seriously Li Yüan took Wang's assurances, but two years after ascending the throne, he conferred upon him the honorary title of *ch'ao-san ta-fu* and as a token of appreciation presented him with a gilt-embroidered cap and purple mantle.² That the T'ang attached at least symbolic importance to the event can be seen from the fact that three successive rulers, T'ai-tsung, Kao-tsung, and Empress Wu, heaped honors on Wang.³ Throughout his campaigns against the Sui, Li Yüan continued to draw encouragement from Taoist oracles and prophecies. One such instance occurred in the year 617, when Li Yüan, then engaged in a struggle with the Sui general, Sung Lao-sheng, ordered his army to begin a retreat because of a shortage of supplies due to heavy rains. Suddenly 'an old man in white robes,' who claimed to be a messenger sent by the god of Mt Huo, appeared at Li's headquarters and told the would-be emperor that the rains would end during the next month, at which time the god of Mt Huo would come to the assistance of Li's army. Believing that the old man spoke the truth, Li resumed his campaign against Sung, whom he subsequently defeated and had executed.⁴

The following year (618) Li Yüan is said to have received yet another revelation. A certain Chi Shan-hsing proclaimed that he had met an old man at Mt Yang-chiao (in present-day Shansi province) swathed in white robes and wearing a crown of gold on his head. The man, who was astride a white horse with a red mane – clearly a sign of his divine mission – instructed Chi to inform Li that he (Li) had attained the Principle of Sageliness (*sheng-li*) and that if Li built in Ch'ang-an a Taoist temple (*kung*) enshrining images of the Taoist divinities (*tao-hsiang*), his empire would endure for ages to come. Through the good offices of Li Shih-min (the son of Li Yüan and future Emperor T'ai-tsung) Chi was granted an audience with Li Yüan, who, elated by the prophecy, bestowed an honorary title and various gifts on Chi. In a subsequent meeting with Li Yüan, Chi announced that he had received a further revelation from the god of Mt Yang-chiao, who now identified himself

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as T'ai-shang Lao-chün (Grand Lord Lao), the chief divinity of Taoism and apotheosis of Lao-tzu. In the revelation conveyed to Li Yüan, T'ai-shang Lao-chün declared that he was the 'Supreme Immortal (Wu-shang Shen-hsien) surnamed Li ... and the ancestor of the Emperor,' i.e. Li Yüan. After the T'ang forces crushed the rebel Liu Hei-t'a in 623, which had been foretold in the revelation, Li Yüan expressed his gratitude toward his illustrious ancestor by converting Lao-tzu's memorial hall in Po-chou (Lao-tzu's reputed birthplace) into a Taoist temple appropriately named Ch'ing-T'ang Kuan (Temple for Celebrating the T'ang).⁵

The question of what policy the newly established T'ang state should adopt toward Buddhism came to the fore in 621, only three years after Li Yüan had proclaimed himself emperor, when the grand astrologer (*t'ai-shih ling*) Fu I presented an eleven-point memorial to the throne calling for the extirpation of Buddhism.⁶ Fu I, who had been trained as a Taoist priest and who had served in the T'ung-tao Academy set up after the suppression of Buddhism by the Northern Chou, had been held in high esteem by Li Yüan ever since the latter had held the post of magistrate of Fu-feng under the Sui. After Li Yüan proclaimed the establishment of the T'ang, he appointed Fu I deputy grand astrologer and shortly thereafter promoted him to the office of grand astrologer. The arguments against Buddhism that Fu I advanced in his memorial were largely part of the stock and trade of the anti-Buddhist polemicists of the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties: Buddhist monks and nuns were economically unproductive and evaded payment of taxes; they showed reverence to neither the throne nor their own parents; they did not give allegiance to the state and were often in rebellion; they were a harmful influence on society and hastened the downfall of those dynasties that patronized their religion; and they were proponents of an alien philosophy.⁷ Fu I accordingly urged the new emperor to disband the clergy forthwith and to put the monasteries to uses that served the needs of the state. Kao-tsu promptly transmitted Fu I's criticisms of the Buddhist clergy to a group of monks for rebuttal. A spate of apologies followed, the most famous being Fa-lin's anti-Taoist polemic, the *P'o-hsieh lun (The Refutation of Error)*.⁸ Between the years 621 and 626 Fu I is said to have memorialized the throne seven times, urging the suppression of Buddhism.⁹

Some traditional Buddhist historians have argued that Li Yüan was at first well disposed toward Buddhism because of an auspicious prophecy that he had received from a Buddhist monk, Ching-hui, before launching his rebellion.¹⁰ In their view, his attitude began to change as a result

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of Fu I's persistent memorials. Yet, as we have noted, Li Yüan was an admirer of Fu I before the establishment of the T'ang, and on assuming the throne promptly appointed him to high office. This would indicate that the anti-Buddhist views of Fu I were well known to Li Yüan before he became emperor and that they did not constitute a barrier to Fu I's immediate promotion to a position of great responsibility. During his campaign to pacify eastern China in 621, Kao-tsu issued his first repressive edict against Buddhism, ordering that no prefecture in areas of turmoil should be allowed more than one monastery with the maximum number of resident monks set at thirty. All monks in excess of this figure were to be returned to lay life.¹¹

Fu I's steady stream of memorials as well as the polemics and counter-polemics that they touched off between the Buddhists and Taoists led Kao-tsu in 626 to bring the entire matter before the court for consideration.¹² There could be no misunderstanding of Kao-tsu's own feelings regarding the relative status of Buddhism, since in the previous year he had already issued an edict on the occasion of his participation in a Confucian service at the National College (Kuo-hsüeh) in which he pronounced Taoism and Confucianism to be the twin pillars of the state, whereas Buddhism was to be relegated to the status of a foreign religion.¹³ Kao-tsu decreed that Taoism would henceforth be accorded first place among the three teachings, Confucianism second place, and Buddhism last place, thereby revoking the privileged status that Buddhism had enjoyed during the three preceding centuries. In the debate that ensued at the court, Kao-tsu's ministers were unable to reach agreement, some endorsing Fu I's proposals, while others, notably Hsiao Yü, came to the defense of Buddhism.¹⁴ Kao-tsu, apparently irritated by the incessant squabbling between the partisans of Buddhism and Taoism, issued an edict in the fifth month of 626 nominally chastizing both Buddhism and Taoism.¹⁵ While the title of the edict, *Sha-t'ai Fo Tao chao* (*Edict to Purge Buddhism and Taoism*), suggests that its purpose was to treat both religions equally, it is in fact almost exclusively concerned with cataloging the real or imagined sins of the Buddhists: monks are arrogant; they evade taxes; they illegally tonsure themselves; they are insatiable in their demands; they accumulate property; they engage in commercial activities in competition with ordinary householders; and so forth. In striking contrast to the detailed listing of the sins of the Buddhists Kao-tsu's criticism of the Taoists is limited to a single sentence: 'Their involvement in worldly affairs is in sharp contradiction to the tenets of their school.' A simple character count shows that twenty-five times more space is devoted to the attack on Buddhism than to the criticism of Taoism.

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At the end of the edict Kao-tsu asserts, no doubt with an eye to placating the religious sensibilities of his subjects, that the real intention of the purge that he is ordering is to protect and promote religion! To do this, he explains, it is necessary to separate 'the jade from the pebbles.' Henceforth those monks and nuns, both Buddhist and Taoist, who are able to adhere faithfully to the rigorous demands of the precepts should be moved to large monasteries where they will be fully supported by the state. However, those persons unable to cope with the hardships imposed by the religious life should be laicized and compelled to engage in productive labor. Lest there be any misunderstanding about the ultimate size of the monastic establishment that he envisioned, Kao-tsu stipulated that there should be no more than three Buddhist monasteries and two Taoist temples in the capital cities and only one Buddhist monastery and one Taoist temple in each of the prefectures; all other monasteries were to be closed down.¹⁶ Once again the impression is created that Buddhism and Taoism are being subjected to equal, if harsh, treatment. The fact, however, is that the blow would have fallen heavier on the Buddhists than on the Taoists, because the former possessed a far more extensive monastic establishment. According to a mid eighth-century historian, in the year 605 there were 120 Buddhist monasteries in the capital city, Ch'ang-an, as against only ten Taoist temples.¹⁷ Thus, in Ch'ang-an at least, the Taoist church would be reduced to one-fifth its original size – a reduction drastic enough – whereas the Buddhist church was to be shrunk to one-fortieth of what it had been. Fortunately for the Buddhists Kao-tsu was forced to yield the throne to his second son, Li Shih-min, known subsequently as Emperor T'ai-tsung, one month after he had issued his call for a purge. The new emperor, recognizing the importance of securing the support of the Buddhists for his seizure of power, immediately had his father's decree rescinded.¹⁸

Although Kao-tsu's plan to reduce the power and influence of the Buddhist church misfired, he did succeed in further weakening its autonomy. Since the early years of the fifth century the Buddhist church, under both the Northern and Southern dynasties, was nominally headed by a single monk appointed by the state.¹⁹ Under the Northern Wei this monk, successively designated controller of the religious (*tao-jen t'ung*), controller of monks (*sha-men t'ung*), and controller of the Office for the Illumination of Mysteries (*chao-hsüan t'ung*), was in charge of a governmental agency established c. 396 called the Office for Overseeing Meritorious Works (Chien-fu ts'ao) – renamed c. 460 the Office for the Illumination of Mysteries (Chao-hsüan ts'ao) – which had jurisdiction over activities relating to the Buddhist church.²⁰ The Northern Ch'i raised

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the status of the Office for the Illumination of Mysteries to that of a court (*ssu*), but treated it as distinct from the nine courts that comprised the major branches of government. Headed by a monk who bore the title grand controller (*ta t'ung*), the Court for the Illumination of Mysteries (Chao-hsüan *ssu*) was staffed by a full complement of ecclesiastical officers and their lay secretaries.²¹

In addition to the clerically dominated Court for the Illumination of Mysteries the Northern Ch'i also created a Bureau for Monastery Administration (Tien-*ssu shu*) with a subsection known as the Department for the Buddhist Clergy (Seng-ch'i *pu*) run by a lay official.²² Despite the establishment of this new civil bureau, which was one of several attached to the Court for State Ceremonials (Hung-lu *ssu*), the body that had responsibility, *inter alia*, for the conduct of foreign relations, the actual control of the church seems to have remained in the hands of the hierarchs in the Court for the Illumination of Mysteries. Under the Sui the Court for the Illumination of Mysteries was deprived of its semi-autonomous status, lowered in rank, and redesignated the Bureau for the Veneration of Mysteries (Ch'ung-hsüan *shu*), becoming one of the three constituent bureaus of the Court for State Ceremonials, where it replaced the dormant Bureau for Monastery Administration.²³

Kao-tsu retained the Bureau for the Veneration of Mysteries established by the Sui, appointing as its director a relatively low-ranking official who was given authority over the Buddhist and Taoist clergies.²⁴ To bring the monasteries under closer governmental scrutiny, the Bureau for the Veneration of Mysteries placed an overseer (*chien*) in each Buddhist monastery and Taoist temple.²⁵ Resentment against the presence of an outsider in the monasteries, however, led T'ai-tsung to abolish the overseer system. In an apparent attempt to curtail still further the nominal independence of the church, Kao-tsu, ignoring a two-hundred-year-old tradition, abolished the ecclesiastical post of grand controller.²⁶ Instead of allowing a single monk to stand as the primate of the Buddhist order, he instituted a novel system of collective leadership by appointing ten eminent monks, designated the Ten Monks of Great Virtue (*shih ta-te*), to administer church affairs and control the clergy.²⁷ Although the official histories do not refer to this new institution, Tao-hsüan's *Hsü kao-seng chuan* (*Biographies of Eminent Monks: Second Series*), completed in 664, provides us with a number of interesting details. Of the ten monks appointed by Kao-tsu, only seven can now be identified from their biographies in the *Hsü kao-seng chuan*.²⁸ These seven monks, significantly, share a number of characteristics: six of the seven, for example, were exegetical scholars as opposed to specialists in

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meditation.²⁹ The schools represented by the exegetes were all pre-Sui in origin; the T'ien-t'ai, which was founded under the Sui and lavishly supported by it, was not represented,³⁰ nor were popular movements such as the Pure Land faith or the Three Stages school. The fact that five of the six monks whose geographical origins are known were Southerners suggests that Kao-tsu, a Northerner, felt the need to placate the powerful southern clergy, as had Yang Chien, the founder of the Sui. Given the respect accorded to senior monks, it is not surprising that only aged monks were selected for this office. Of the six monks whose ages are known, one was eighty-one, three were in their seventies, one was sixty-nine, and one was sixty-one. Only one of these six monks, Ming-chan, lived beyond the reign of Kao-tsu, dying in the year 628. T'ai-tsung, who succeeded to the throne in 626, did not fill any of the vacancies that occurred during his father's reign, thereby allowing the institution of the Ten Monks of Great Virtue to peter out. Henceforth no single monk or group of monks was to be accorded primacy over the Buddhist church either in name or in fact; control was to be vested solely in the hands of lay officials appointed by the government.

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As we have noted, Kao-tsu's plan to curtail the power of the church in 626 was frustrated because of the *coup d'état* engineered by his second son, Shih-min, who played a crucial role in the establishment of the T'ang. In the sixth month of 626 Shih-min assassinated the Crown Prince and another brother who stood in his path to the throne. Although his major opponents had been eliminated by this single stroke, he no doubt was aware of the risks of alienating the support of the Buddhist community as his father had done.¹ It is not surprising, then, that his first act, after becoming Crown Prince following the murder of his brothers, was to rescind his father's edict ordering a purge of the clergy and reduction in the number of monasteries. By coming to the rescue of the church at a time when its power and prestige were being threatened, Shih-min may have wished to appear as a defender of the faith, from which position he felt he could count on the support of the Buddhist clergy in his attempt to depose his father.²

Although little information is available to show Shih-min's attitude toward Buddhism before he compelled his father to relinquish the throne in the eighth month of 626, it seems safe to assume that in fact he was no more sympathetic to Buddhism than his father. When, for example, his armies occupied Lo-yang in 621, he ordered the dismantlement or destruction of the imperial palaces as an indication of his