Outline Lecture Thirteen—Existential Crisis in Post-Han China

Key Focus:
1) What historical and cultural preconditions paved the way for Buddhism’s assimilation into post-Han China?
2) What challenges did early Buddhist apologists encounter in their attempts to reconcile Buddhist teachings with Confucian and Taoist values?

I) The Late-Han Upheaval
a) Discrediting of Han Confucianism in 2nd century C.E.
   i) Two-tiered peasant-based society
   ii) Rampant corruption and palace maneuverings
   iii) Logic behind Han Cosmology—Theory of Correspondence
b) Yellow Turban Rebellion
   i) Taoist inspired grass-roots rebellions from 184 to 189
   ii) Disintegration of the empire into Three Kingdoms in early 3rd century
   iii) Subsequent loss of the north to Taba Huns in 311

II) Neo-Taoist Escapism
a) Displaced and disillusioned literati in the 3rd century
   i) Example of Tao Yuanming’s “Peach Blossom Spring”
   ii) Seeking refuge from the existential crisis
   iii) “The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove”
      (1) E.g. of Xi Kang (Hsi K’ang) and Liu Ling
   iv) Birth of an aesthetic consciousness
b) Search for the Immortal Life
   i) Xi Kang or Hsi K’ang—“Discourse on Nourishing Life”
      (1) Maintain harmony between body and qi
      (2) Premature aging and illness not a “natural” phenomenon
   ii) Immortality—not in this life, but in eternal salvation, not in the body, but in the soul

III) Preconditions for Assimilation of Buddhism
a) Spiritual and Philosophical Vacuum
   i) Taoism an “escape” not a solution
   ii) What Buddhism could offer to the Chinese:
b) Mediating Role of Neo-Taoism
   i) Early Sinocentric conflations of Buddhism
      (1) Buddha as Huang-lao Fo-tuo
      (2) Laozi Huahu Jing—“The Sutra of Laozi Transforming the Barbarians”
   ii) Tradition of qingtan or “pure conversations”
   iii) Practice of Geyi (matching concepts)
      (1) Problems of conflation

c) Cultural and Social Reconciliation
   i) Epistemological impediments
   ii) Apologetic writings
      (1) Example of Hui Yuan’s “A Monk Does not Bow Down Before a King”
IV) Formation of Chinese Buddhism
   a) Difference between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism
      i) Theravada: “Way of the Elders”
      ii) Mahayana: “Greater Vehicle”
         (1) The intercession of bodhisattvas and Buddhas for guidance
         (2) Subitism: Possibility for sudden attainment of enlightenment
   b) South vs. North
      i) “Gentry Buddhism” in the south
         (1) Popular among the gentry or literati class
            (a) Appeal in the figure of Vimalakirti
         (2) Patronage by certain rulers
            (a) e.g. Emperor Wu of Liang (502-549)
         (3) Appeal of Monastic Retreats
      ii) “Caesaropapism” in the north
         (1) Buddhism fully integrated in the service of Taba Hun political rule
         (2) Preferred alternative to Confucianism as state ideology
         (3) Imperial Patronage in Northern Wei
            (a) Cave temples like Yungang and Lungmen
            (b) Services provided by monasteries and temples
         (4) Failed Backlash