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) Inadequate rationale for a two-tiered peasant-based society
   ii) Rampant corruption and palace maneuverings
   iii) Social crisis exacerbated by a series of famines and droughts in 2nd century
      (1) Logic behind Han Cosmology—Theory of Correspondence
b) Yellow Turban Rebellion
   i) Taoist inspired grassroots rebellions from 184 to 189
   ii) Disintegration of the empire into Three Kingdoms in early 3rd century
      (1) Cao Cao, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, Zhuge Liang, etc.
   iii) Loss of the north to Taba Huns in 311

II) Neo-Taoist Escapism
a) Withdrawal of disillusioned literati from the public life of politics
   i) Example of Tao Yuanming’s “Peach Blossom Spring”
   ii) Retreat to Taoist preoccupations
      (1) “The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove”
      (2) E.g. Xi Kang (Hsi K’ang) and Liu Ling
b) Aesthetic pursuits
   i) Rise of an aesthetic consciousness
      (1) Gu Kaizhi—“transmitting spirit” through portrait”
      (2) Wang Xizhi—capturing spirit through calligraphy
      (3) Guqin music—contemplation of silence—the “negative space” of sound
   ii) Infused Chinese art with an unprecedented aesthetic/metaphysical dimension
   c) Search for the Immortal Life
      i) Xi Kang or Hsi K’ang—“Discourse on Nourishing Life”
      (1) Maintain harmony between body and qi
      (2) Theories on longevity

III) Preconditions for Assimilation of Buddhism
a) Spiritual and Philosophical Vacuum
   i) Need for a more universal ideology of salvation
   ii) What Buddhism could offer to the Chinese:
   b) Mediating Role of Neo-Taoism
      i) The Buddha as “Huang-lao Fo-tuo”
      ii) Laozi Huahu Jing—“The Sutra of Laozi Transforming the Barbarians”
      iii) Metaphysical interests of Neo-Taoists
         (1) Tradition ofqingtan or “pure conversations”
(2) Practice of *Geyi* (matching concepts)

c) Cultural and Social Reconciliation
   i) Epistemological impediments
   ii) Apologetic writings
      1. Matters of greatest anxiety and contention inspired most rigorous defense
      2. E.g. of Hui Yuan’s “A Monk Does not Bow Down Before a King” in 4th century

IV) Formation of Chinese Buddhism
a) Difference between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism
   i) Theravada: “Way of the Elders”
   ii) Mahayana: “Greater Vehicle”

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. The foreign Taba Huns established the Northern Wei
         a) Buddhism as source of political legitimacy and social cohesion
         b) Attractive alternative to Confucianism as state ideology
      2. Imperial Patronage in Northern Wei
      3. Services provided by monasteries and temples
         a) Prayers and rituals for the welfare of the state
         b) Source of aid relief in rural areas
      4. Failed Backlash