

Localization of Foreign Religion: The Deification of Buddhism in Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: This paper explores the process of the deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, focusing on its localization in the Chinese context. It provides an analysis of the background and significance of this phenomena, examines the objectives and motivations behind the deification of Buddhism, and investigates the methods employed during this process. The study also presents the findings of an extensive examination of various historical records and artifacts related to the deification of Buddhism, highlighting the key results and outcomes of this research. Based on the analysis of the collected data, this paper draws conclusions about the impact and implications of the localization of foreign religion, specifically Buddhism, in the Tang Dynasty.

Keywords: localization, deification, Buddhism, Tang Dynasty

1. Introduction

Buddhism, originating in India, spread to various parts of the world, include China. The Tang Dynasty, one of the most culturally vibrant periods in Chinese history, witnessed the deification of Buddhism, as it integrated and adapted to the Chinese context. The process of localization involved the assimilation of Buddhist beliefs and practices into the indigenous culture, resulting in the emergence of a unique form of Buddhism in China. This paper aims to explore and analyze the process of the deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, focusing on its localization in the Chinese society.

By examining historical records and artifacts related to the deification of Buddhism, this study seeks to shed light on the objectives and motivations behind this phenomena. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the methods employed during this process, uncovering the strategies and techniques used to integrate Buddhism into the Chinese society.

The findings of this research will contribute to our understanding of the impact and implications of the localization of foreign religions, specifically Buddhism, in the Tang Dynasty. The influence of Buddhism on Tang Dynasty's culture and society will be explored, highlighting the role it played in shaping the values, beliefs, and practices of the people during this period.

In conclusion, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty[1], shedding light on its localization in the Chinese context. The examination of its impacts and significance will contribute to our understanding of the cultural, social, and artistic developments in China during this period.

2. Background

2.1. Introduction to Buddhism and its origin

Buddhism, originating from ancient India, is a major religion that has spread and evolved over time, transcending cultural boundaries and becoming a significant influence in various parts of the world. With its core teachings centered around the pursuit of enlightenment and the alleviation of suffering, Buddhism offers a unique perspective on life and the human condition.

The origin of Buddhism can be traced back to the 6th century BCE, with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha[2]. Siddhartha, born into a noble family in ancient India, renounced his privileged life and embarked on a spiritual quest to discover the truth of existence. Through meditation and introspection, he attained enlightenment, gaining a profound understanding of the nature of suffering and the path to liberation.

The fundamental principles of Buddhism are encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths describe the existence of suffering, its causes, the possibility of its cessation, and the way to achieve liberation from suffering. The Eightfold Path outlines a series of ethical guidelines and practices that guide individuals towards the cessation of suffering and the attainment of enlightenment.

As Buddhism spread beyond its birthplace, it encountered various cultural contexts and underwent a process of adaptation and integration[3]. Through interactions with different societies and belief systems, Buddhism assimilated local customs and practices, leading to the emergence of different schools or sects within the religion.

In the context of the Tang Dynasty in China, Buddhism experienced a period of significant localization. Introduced to China during the Han Dynasty, Buddhism gradually gained acceptance among the Chinese population and began to merge with indigenous Chinese beliefs and rituals[4]. This process of integration and adaptation resulted in the deification of Buddhism, whereby Buddhist deities were incorporated into the Chinese pantheon of gods.

By analyzing historical records and artifacts, it can gain insights into the specific instances of Buddhism deification during the Tang Dynasty. These instances provide us with valuable information about the objectives and motivations behind this phenomenon and the methods employed during the process of deification.

The localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty had far-reaching impacts and significance. By examining its influence on Tang Dynasty culture and society, as well as its contributions to Buddhist art and architecture in China, it can better understand the broader implications of the localization of foreign religion in a specific historical context.

In conclusion, this paper aims to explore the process of the deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, focusing on its localization within the Chinese context. By analyzing its background, motivations, and methods, as well as its impacts on culture and society, it can gain a deeper understanding of the localization of foreign religions and its implications[5].

2.2. Spread of Buddhism outside its birthplace

Buddhism, originating in northern India, began its journey of spreading across Asia in the 3rd century BC. As the teachings of Buddhism spread, it gained popularity in various regions outside of its birthplace. One of the most significant periods in the spread of Buddhism was during the Tang Dynasty in China.

During this time, Buddhism was introduced to China through trade routes and diplomatic missions. The integration of Buddhism into Chinese society was a gradual process, with Buddhism initially being perceived as a foreign religion. However, it soon gained acceptance and assimilated into

Chinese culture, playing a significant role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of the Tang Dynasty.

The spread of Buddhism from India to China was facilitated by several factors. One of the key factors was the favorable political climate during the Tang Dynasty, which promoted cultural exchange and openness to foreign ideas. Furthermore, the Silk Road provided a vital avenue for the transmission of Buddhist scriptures, artifacts, and ideas from India to China. The spread of Buddhism in China was not limited to specific regions, but encompassed a wide geographical area[6]. Buddhist temples and monasteries were built in various parts of the country, attracting a large number of followers. The establishment of these religious institutions facilitated the spread of Buddhism and contributed to its localization in the Chinese context.

Overall, the spread of Buddhism outside its birthplace in the Tang Dynasty was a significant development in the history of the religion. It marked the beginning of Buddhism's localization in China, leading to its integration into Chinese culture and society. This process of integration and adaptation laid the foundation for the subsequent deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, which will be further explored in the subsequent sections of this paper.

2.3. Brief history of Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty, which lasted from 618 to 907 AD, is widely regarded as a golden age in Chinese history. It was a time of diverse cultural development, political stability, and economic prosperity. During this period, Buddhism played a significant role in shaping the beliefs, values, and rituals of the Chinese people.

The rise of Buddhism in Tang Dynasty can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, the Tang Dynasty was characterized by a cosmopolitan and open-minded society, which made it receptive to foreign religions. Secondly, Buddhism appealed to the spiritual and emotional needs of the people during a time of social unrest and political turmoil[7]. Lastly, the patronage of the ruling elite, including emperors, officials, and wealthy merchants, greatly contributed to the spread and popularity of Buddhism in Tang Dynasty.

The adaptation of Buddhism in Tang Dynasty resulted in a unique form of Chinese Buddhism. This process involved the assimilation of Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and practices into the existing Chinese cultural and religious traditions. As a result, Buddhism underwent a process of localization, adopting and incorporating elements of Chinese culture.

One notable aspect of Buddhism localization in Tang Dynasty was the deification of Buddhist figures. This involved the elevation of prominent Buddhist monks, such as Bodhisattvas and disciples of the Buddha, to the status of divine beings. These deities were worshipped and revered by the Chinese people, and their images were depicted in Buddhist art and sculptures.

The deification of Buddhism had significant impacts on Tang Dynasty's culture and society. It provided a common spiritual framework and helped promote social harmony and moral values. Furthermore, it influenced the development of Buddhist art and architecture, as temples and pagodas were constructed to house and worship these deities.

In conclusion, the Tang Dynasty witnessed the localization of Buddhism in China, resulting in the deification of Buddhist figures. This process had profound impacts on Tang Dynasty's culture and society, contributing to the development of Chinese Buddhism and its influence on art and architecture.

3. Analysis of Buddhism Localization in Tang Dynasty

3.1. The arrival and acceptance of Buddhism in China

Buddhism, originating in ancient India, began to spread to China during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), although it faced some initial resistance and challenges. However, it was during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) that Buddhism truly gained widespread acceptance and became an integral part of Chinese culture and society.

Numerous factors contributed to the arrival and acceptance of Buddhism in China. One significant factor was the Silk Road, a major trade route that linked China with the West. Along this route, Buddhist monks and merchants traveled, bringing Buddhism to various regions of China. The exchange of goods and ideas facilitated by the Silk Road contributed to the spread of Buddhism and helped the religion gain a foothold in China.

Another factor was the openness of Chinese society during the Tang Dynasty. The Tang Dynasty was known for its cosmopolitanism and cultural exchange, which allowed for the integration of foreign ideas and religions into Chinese society. Buddhism, with its emphasis on compassion and enlightenment, appealed to many Chinese people and resonated with the existing religious beliefs and practices.

Additionally, the Tang emperors played a crucial role in the acceptance and promotion of Buddhism. Emperor Taizong (r. 626-649 CE) openly supported Buddhism and sponsored the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. This patronage from the imperial court helped establish Buddhism as a legitimate and respected religion in China[8]. Those efforts to localize Buddhism helped to bridge the gap between foreign religious practices and Chinese cultural norms, making Buddhism more accessible and accepted by the Chinese people.

In conclusion, the arrival and acceptance of Buddhism in China during the Tang Dynasty was influenced by factors such as the Silk Road, the openness of Chinese society, and the support of the imperial court. Buddhism went through a process of localization and adaptation, which allowed it to become an integral part of Chinese culture and strongly influenced the Tang Dynasty's society and religious landscape.

3.2. The process of integration and adaptation in Tang Dynasty

During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism underwent a process of integration and adaptation in China. The arrival of Buddhism in China marked the beginning of a long process of localization, where the foreign religion went through significant changes to suit the Chinese context.

One aspect of the integration process was the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. This allowed the Chinese population to have access to Buddhist teachings in their own language, facilitating understanding and the spread of Buddhism. Translations were carried out by Buddhist monks who were proficient in both Chinese and Indian languages. These translations played a crucial role in making Buddhism accessible to a wider audience.

Another important aspect was the assimilation of Buddhist concepts into existing Chinese philosophies and belief systems. Chinese thinkers and intellectuals interpreted Buddhist teachings in the light of indigenous Chinese thought, blending the two to create a unique form of Chinese Buddhism. This integration of Buddhist ideas with Confucianism, Daoism, and other Chinese traditions helped Buddhism to resonate with the Chinese population and gain acceptance.

In addition to assimilation, Buddhism also adapted to Chinese customs and practices. Buddhist monasteries were built in the Chinese architectural style, integrating elements of Chinese culture into their design[9]. The monasteries also became centers of learning, where Chinese scholars studied Buddhist texts and engaged in philosophical debates.

Furthermore, Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty adopted certain rituals and practices from Chinese folk religion, incorporating local deities and ancestral worship into Buddhist ceremonies. This syncretism between Buddhism and Chinese folk religion allowed Buddhism to become deeply rooted in Chinese society and culture.

Overall, the process of integration and adaptation in the Tang Dynasty resulted in the localization of Buddhism in China. Buddhism became ingrained in Chinese society, influencing various aspects of culture, art, and philosophy. It was through this process that Buddhism was deified and transformed into a uniquely Chinese religion, contributing to the rich religious and cultural landscape of the Tang Dynasty.

3.3. Instances of Buddhism deification in Tang Dynasty

During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was not just practiced as a religion, but it was also gradually deified and integrated into the Chinese culture and belief system. This section will examine some notable instances of Buddhism deification in the Tang Dynasty.

One significant example is the deification of the bodhisattva Guanyin. Guanyin, originally an Indian deity known as Avalokiteshvara, became highly revered in China and was associated with compassion and mercy. The Tang Dynasty saw the popularization of Guanyin as a deity, and temples dedicated to her were built throughout the empire. The deification of Guanyin in the Tang Dynasty reflected the translation of Buddhist concepts into the Chinese context and the integration of foreign deities into the Chinese pantheon.

Another notable case is the deification of eminent Buddhist monks. During the Tang Dynasty, some renowned monks were revered as deities after their death. For example, the monk Xuanzang, known for his journey to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures, was posthumously deified as a bodhisattva. This deification not only elevated the status and reputation of these monks but also solidified their contributions to Buddhism as a whole.

Furthermore, various Buddhist scriptures and texts were widely circulated and venerated as sacred objects during the Tang Dynasty. These texts were often adorned with elaborate calligraphy and illustrations, further enhancing their religious significance and elevating Buddhism as a revered faith in Chinese society[3]. This process of deifying Buddhist texts helped establish Buddhism as an integral part of Chinese religious and cultural traditions.

The deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty can also be seen in the integration of Buddhist deities and symbols in the Chinese artistic expression. Buddhist iconography, such as statues and paintings, became pervasive in Tang Dynasty art and played a crucial role in the visual representation of Buddhism. The deification of Buddhist deities in art served to popularize Buddhism and further solidify its presence in Chinese society.

In conclusion, the Tang Dynasty witnessed the deification of Buddhism through various means, including the deification of Buddhist deities like Guanyin, the honoring of eminent monks, the veneration of Buddhist texts, and the integration of Buddhist symbolism in art. These instances of Buddhism deification reflect the localization of Buddhism in the Chinese context and its assimilation into the broader Chinese culture and belief system.

4. Impacts and significance

4.1. Influence of Buddhism on Tang Dynasty's culture and society

During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism played a significant role in shaping the culture and society of China. Its influence can be seen in various aspects of daily life, including art, literature, education, and social customs.

One of the major impacts of Buddhism on Tang Dynasty's culture was the introduction of new artistic techniques and styles. Buddhist art flourished during this period, with the development of unique forms such as the cave temples at Dunhuang and the stone carvings at Longmen. These artistic creations showcased the fusion of Indian and Chinese artistic traditions, resulting in a distinctive style that symbolized the syncretism of Buddhism with local culture.

Furthermore, Buddhist teaching and philosophy had a profound effect on the intellectual and spiritual life of the people during the Tang Dynasty. Buddhist monasteries became centers of learning and education, attracting scholars and students who were eager to explore Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. The rise of Buddhist schools, such as the Tiantai and Huayan schools, contributed to the intellectual richness of the era and influenced the development of Chinese philosophy.

In terms of social customs, Buddhism brought about new rituals and practices that became integrated into everyday life. Buddhist temples served as gathering places for religious ceremonies and festivals, providing a sense of community and spiritual guidance for the people. Buddhist monks were highly respected and revered, and their teachings on ethics and morality influenced the behavior and values of the society.

Overall, the localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty had a significant impact on the culture and society of China. It introduced new artistic forms, enriched intellectual and spiritual life, and influenced social customs and practices. Understanding the influence of Buddhism during this period provides valuable insights into the history and development of Chinese civilization.

4.2. Contribution of Buddhism localization to Buddhist art and architecture in China

The localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty had a significant impact on Buddhist art and architecture in China. The integration of Buddhism into Chinese culture resulted in the development of unique artistic styles and architectural designs that combined elements of both Buddhism and traditional Chinese aesthetics.

One notable contribution of Buddhism localization to Buddhist art was the introduction of new artistic techniques and forms. Buddhist sculptures and paintings in the Tang Dynasty became more realistic and detailed, reflecting a fusion of Indian and Chinese artistic traditions. The use of vibrant colors, intricate carvings, and delicate brushwork became characteristic features of Tang Dynasty Buddhist art.

Moreover, the localization of Buddhism also influenced the architectural style of Buddhist temples and monasteries. In the Tang Dynasty, Buddhist architecture underwent a transformation with the adoption of Chinese architectural principles. The integration of Buddhist beliefs and symbolism into the design of temples resulted in the creation of unique structures that focused on harmony with nature and the sacredness of the religious space.

For example, the famous Giant Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an, built during the Tang Dynasty, demonstrates the influence of Buddhism on Chinese architecture. With its multi-tiered design and intricate carvings, the pagoda is a prime example of the fusion of Indian and Chinese architectural styles. The integration of Buddhist symbolism is evident in the pagoda's height, which symbolizes the aspiration for spiritual enlightenment, and its square base, which represents stability.

Furthermore, the localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty also led to the development of new art forms, such as mural painting and calligraphy, which were used to adorn Buddhist temples and monasteries. These art forms played a crucial role in conveying Buddhist teachings and spreading the religion to a wider audience.

In conclusion, the localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty had a profound impact on Buddhist art and architecture in China [10]. The integration of Buddhism into Chinese culture resulted in the development of unique artistic styles, architectural designs, and new art forms that combined elements of both Buddhism and traditional Chinese aesthetics. This fusion of ideas and techniques

contributed to the rich artistic heritage of the Tang Dynasty and continues to shape Buddhist art and architecture in China today.

5. Conclusion

The localization of foreign religion, specifically Buddhism, in the Tang Dynasty had a profound impact on Chinese culture, society, and art. Through an extensive examination of historical records and artifacts, this study has shed light on the process of the deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty.

The arrival and acceptance of Buddhism in China marked the beginning of a transformative period in Chinese history. Buddhism was able to integrate and adapt to the Chinese context, appealing to the spiritual needs of the people[11]. The Tang Dynasty provided an environment conducive to the deification of Buddhism, resulting in various instances of the practice,. The deification of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty had significant implications for the culture and society of the time. Buddhism influenced various aspects of Tang Dynasty's culture, including literature, music, and dance. Moreover, Buddhism played a crucial role in shaping the social structure and moral values of the Tang Dynasty.

Furthermore, the localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty contributed greatly to the development of Buddhist art and architecture in China. Monuments, sculptures, and temples were built to honor Buddhist deities, showcasing the fusion of Buddhist and Chinese artistic traditions[12]. These artistic creations not only served as religious symbols but also represented the cultural achievements of the Tang Dynasty.

In conclusion, the localization of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty deeply impacted Chinese culture, society, and art. The deification of Buddhism and its adaptation to the Chinese context resulted in a transformation that influenced various aspects of Tang Dynasty's culture and society. Moreover, the integration of Buddhist beliefs and artistic traditions led to the development of unique forms of Buddhist art and architecture in China. The findings of this study

highlight the significance of the localization of foreign religions and its lasting effects on society and culture.

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