

Unity in Diversity: China as the Custodian of Buddhist Diversity and Vinaya Traditions: A Sinological Perspective

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Introduction

Buddhism originated in India during the sixth century BCE and gradually spread across Asia through missionary activities, trade networks, pilgrimage routes, and sustained cultural exchanges. As Buddhism entered different regions, it adapted to local historical, political, and cultural environments, giving rise to diverse religious traditions while preserving its fundamental teachings. Among these, *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna* remain the three principal living traditions of Buddhism. Although Buddhism flourished for centuries in major centres such as *Gandhāra*, *Kashmir*, *Khotan*, and *Kucha*, it gradually declined or disappeared from many of these regions owing to political, religious, and social transformations.

In contrast, China not only received Buddhism from India and Central Asia but also became one of the most significant centres for preserving Buddhist traditions after their decline elsewhere. Over nearly two millennia, China protected an extraordinary range of Buddhist scriptures, philosophical systems, monastic institutions, and disciplinary traditions. It also provided a cultural environment in which different Buddhist traditions continued to coexist while maintaining their distinctive identities. Consequently, China occupies a unique position in Buddhist history as the only major civilisation where the three surviving Buddhist traditions and the three extant Vinaya lineages continue within a single cultural sphere.

Furthermore, China's contribution extends beyond religious practice. The preservation of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, the continuity of both Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī ordination lineages, and the transmission of Buddhist traditions throughout East Asia demonstrate China's enduring role in safeguarding Buddhist civilisation. Despite the historical importance of these achievements, relatively few studies have examined them collectively from a Sinological perspective. This study therefore argues that China should be understood not merely as a recipient of Buddhism but as one of the principal custodians of Buddhist diversity, institutional continuity, and textual heritage.

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Objectives

This study aims to:

1. examine China's contribution to preserving the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions;
2. analyse the historical continuity of the Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya lineages within the Chinese cultural sphere;
3. evaluate China's role in preserving the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī ordination traditions; and
4. assess China's contribution to safeguarding Buddhist textual heritage through the formation and transmission of the Chinese Buddhist Canon.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design based on textual, historical, and comparative analysis. Primary historical sources relating to the transmission of Buddhism in China are examined together with contemporary Sinological scholarship on Chinese Buddhism, Vinaya traditions, Bhikkhunī ordination, and the Chinese Buddhist Canon. Comparative analysis is employed to evaluate how China preserved Buddhist traditions, monastic institutions, and textual heritage after Buddhism declined in many of its original centres. The study interprets these developments within the broader framework of Chinese civilisation to demonstrate China's historical contribution to the continuity and diversity of Buddhism across Asia.

Results

The findings demonstrate that China represents a unique civilisational framework in which the three surviving Buddhist traditions and the three extant Vinaya lineages have been preserved simultaneously. Unlike many of the early centres of Buddhism that gradually disappeared, China maintained institutional continuity while allowing different traditions to coexist within a single cultural sphere.

Theravāda Buddhism has survived in Yunnan Province, particularly among the Dai communities of Xishuangbanna, Dehong, Pu'er, Lincang, and Baoshan. Long-standing religious and cultural exchanges with Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos enabled Theravāda monastic institutions to preserve their

educational systems, festivals, ethical practices, and religious identity. This continuity demonstrates that the Chinese Buddhist world extends beyond the Mahāyāna tradition commonly associated with East Asia.

China also became the principal centre for preserving *Mahāyāna* Buddhism following the decline of Buddhism in many parts of Central Asia. The translation activities of Kumārajīva, Xuanzang, and Yijing transformed China into one of the world's leading centres of Buddhist scholarship. Major schools, including Tiantai, Huayan, Chan, and Pure Land, developed within China before spreading throughout Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. At the institutional level, East Asian Buddhism preserved the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, ensuring the continuity of one of the three surviving monastic disciplinary traditions.

The study further shows that Vajrayāna Buddhism continued to flourish through the Tibetan Buddhist tradition within China. The *Mūlasarvāstivāda* Vinaya has been preserved continuously together with a rich body of ritual, philosophical, and scholastic literature. Consequently, China remains the only major cultural sphere where the Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya traditions continue to exist within one political and cultural framework. Another important finding concerns the preservation of the Bhikkhunī ordination lineage. Historical sources indicate that Sri Lankan Bhikkhunīs participated in a dual-Saṅgha ordination ceremony for Chinese nuns in 433 CE. This event is widely regarded as a significant milestone in consolidating the continuity of the Bhikkhunī ordination lineage in China. Although the lineage later disappeared in many Buddhist countries, it continued uninterrupted in China and subsequently spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. This continuity later contributed to the modern revival of Bhikkhunī ordination in several Theravāda countries, including Sri Lanka.

The study also demonstrates China's decisive contribution to preserving Buddhist textual heritage. Through one of the largest translation movements in world history, thousands of Buddhist scriptures were translated from Sanskrit and other Indic languages into Chinese. Many original manuscripts were subsequently lost, while their Chinese translations survived within the Chinese Buddhist Canon. As a result, China preserved an extensive body of Buddhist philosophy, monastic law, and doctrinal literature that continues to serve as an indispensable source for contemporary Buddhist scholarship. Collectively, these findings support the argument that China's historical contribution extends beyond the transmission of Buddhism to the preservation of its doctrinal diversity, institutional continuity, and textual heritage.

Discussion / Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that China's historical significance extends far beyond its role as a recipient of Buddhism. Following the decline of Buddhism in many of its early centres, China became the principal environment in which diverse Buddhist traditions, monastic institutions, and textual heritage were preserved and transmitted across generations. The coexistence of the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, together with the Theravāda, Dharmaguptaka, and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya lineages, illustrates a unique model of religious continuity within a single civilisation.

The study further demonstrates that China's contribution extends to the preservation of Buddhist institutional heritage. The uninterrupted continuity of both the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī ordination lineages distinguishes China from most other Buddhist regions. Historical sources indicate that Sri Lankan Bhikkhunīs participated in a dual-Saṅgha ordination ceremony for Chinese nuns during the fifth century CE. This event represents an enduring example of transnational Buddhist cooperation and is widely regarded as a significant milestone in consolidating the continuity of the Bhikkhunī ordination lineage in China. It has also influenced the contemporary revival of Bhikkhunī ordination in several Theravāda countries, including Sri Lanka.

China's preservation of Buddhist textual heritage is equally significant. The Chinese Buddhist Canon safeguarded numerous scriptures and philosophical works whose original Indic versions were subsequently lost, thereby ensuring the survival of an important part of Buddhist intellectual history. Consequently, the Canon continues to serve as one of the principal sources for the study of Buddhism worldwide.

From a Sinological perspective, China should therefore be recognised not merely as one of the great Buddhist civilisations of Asia but as a principal custodian of Buddhist diversity. By preserving multiple traditions, Vinaya lineages, monastic institutions, and textual heritage within a single cultural sphere, China offers an important historical model for understanding how religious diversity and institutional continuity can be sustained across centuries.

Keywords - China, Sinology, Buddhist Diversity, Vinaya Traditions, Bhikkhunī Ordination

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