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8.9 Buddhism and neo-Confucianism

In this section we'll briefly discuss Buddhism and neo-Confucianism.

Buddhism

Buddhism was introduced into China at the end of the Han Dynasty, which was about 200 A.D., and we can think of it as the first invasion of an Indo-European strand of thought into China, that is, a way of thinking that has the two world **supernatural-natural** split.

(Of course, Buddhism is a rather special form of this split, because although it comes from a supernatural background, Buddhism is often thought of as a sort of Hindu atheism. It had the supernatural mind-body conceptual structure, but was struggling to reject it the way the West does today.)

Buddhism spread in China for a period of about 800 years: a long period of assimilation, absorption, then dominance, and eventually Buddhism declined in the face of another wave of scholastic Confucianism.

Chinese Buddhism

The Daoists mediated the assimilation of Buddhism and shaped the way it was understood in Post-Han China. This eventually produced a distinctively Chinese form of Buddhism blended with Daoism. It was less pessimistic and more naturalistic—focusing on everyday life. Chinese forms of Buddhism tended to deny any fundamental dualism like **Nirvana** vs. **Samsara**, or **enlightenment** vs. **ordinary consciousness**.

They used Zhuangzi-lik examples of the meditative state accompanying the flow of skilled behavior. The total focus takes us away from metaphysical concerns about the ultimate meaning of life.

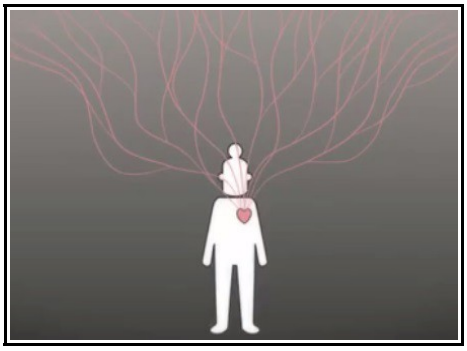
This system of Buddhism in China is called 禪 (pronounced “Chan” in Mandarin Chinese and “Zen” in Japan). Its focus on every-day activities, the tea ceremony, flower arranging etc. is well known.

Neo-Confucianism

The next extended period was another revival of Confucianism with some influences from Buddhism. Despite the long period of Buddhist domination, Confucianism had remained the moral core—then tended to think of Buddhism as amoral—too concerned with other worldly salvation and issues.

Confucianism began to reassert itself near the the Tang dynasty—another long lasting dynasty. The success of the political model tends to accompany resurgences of Confucianism. The form that emerged, however, rejected Xunzi and made **Mencius** the orthodox expression—for his implicit metaphysics of human nature.

Mencius and the flood-like 氣 qì



You may recall Mencius's discussion of the “flood-like qi” which links the heart's reactions to the outside world. It enables a person to feel the moral path for him, sense disturbance and resore harmony anywhere in the world with more accuracy than language can.

The neo-Confucians turned this into a metaphysical conception of morality. Morality infuses **氣 qì** with a structure that one school calls **理 lǐ** –another path metaphor. It also structures the heart's processing, linking us with moral reality. The sage embodies this moral path in all his processing hence knows precisely what to do.

Two versions of this Mencian Confucianism

The conservative school: emphasizes learning, especially studying ancient texts to internalize **理 lǐ**.

The radical Mencian school: emphasizes that everyone has immediate access to guidance; one doesn't need a sophisticated training to know what to do. “Be your knowledge”, i.e., there can be a **blending of action and knowledge**.