

Religion in Shen Zhou

Buddhism, Taoism, and faith in the Heavenly Court exist in relative harmony in Shen Zhou, with little conflict seen on the surface between the clergy. This was not always the case. So far as historians are able to ascertain, Buddhism first came to prominence in Shen Zhou in the time of the Emperor Han Ming-ti, with the establishment of the White Horse Temple. Legend has it that the monk Xuanzang was the primary proponent of the scriptures, assisted by Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and Sha Wujing. While Xuanzang was a strict pacifist, his disciples were astonishingly accomplished masters of both magic and the fighting arts; indeed, all three were purported to be members of the Heavenly Court. Sun Wukong in particular established an epic body of myth and story.

Buddhist and Taoist monks and monasteries enjoy a level of freedom from overt political interference in Shen Zhou that seems enviable to their counterparts in the West. The secret of this relative freedom is both worldly and spiritual; with Xuanzang (purportedly) came the secret of feeding the Gold. This may be why the Emperor Ming-ti called the Buddha the "Golden God". Taoists eventually developed methods of feeding the Gold themselves once they had been shown it was possible (though these methods never quite equaled those of the Magadha Buddhists), as did the mystery cults of the West. Taoists had long trained warriors and magickers in their temples, a tradition the Buddhists soon copied, despite the doctrine of pacifism. Indeed, this doctrinal conflict triggered the split between Magadha Buddhism and Shen Buddhism. Historically Shen Buddhist and Shen Taoist gangs, temples and armies have occasionally fought one-another, with the Emperor's loyalists acting as a third force to try to keep the peace. This has led to the rough balance that exists to this day, with the Emperor's forces unable to press too hard outside of their centers of power for fear of losing the support of the temples and the common people, and the Buddhist and Taoist temples in wary and sometimes strained alliance against the less personally powerful but far more numerous (and, it must be said, tactically sound) forces of the government. The imperial family has carefully cultivated blood ties with the more powerful Buddhist and Taoist temples since the time of the Kangxi Emperor, who took the then unprecedented step of giving his sister in marriage to Wei Xiaobao, a peasant who had risen to become the most powerful mystical warrior of the age.

The common people of Shen Zhou do not concern themselves with political maneuvering. They are content to know that the Emperor and Temples provide security both physical and spiritual, and that the Celestial Emperor reigns above all.

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