

Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar
Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond
Session on 'Converting Environments'
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MAX DEEG (University of Cardiff)
"Conversion to Buddhism in early Medieval China"

Abstract

"Conversion" (to Buddhism) in an East Asian cultural environment – in this paper the wider region will be restricted to China – will be dealt with under the working hypothesis that the Chinese approach to religion before and after the advent of Buddhism was, as far as the sources reflect it, an "inclusivistic" (Hacker) one in the sense that various religious traditions, were more or less, at least officially, tolerated and borrowed ideas and institutional concepts from each other. The term for conversion used in Buddhist texts is *hua* 化, "to change", or *jiaohua* 教化, "to change by teaching", and it thereby takes over an old Chinese terminology which is rather connected to the concept of "cultivation" and conviction rather than doctrinal, rhetoric and physical force that is found in the Western context. Buddhism infiltrated Chinese society via the trade along the Silk Road at a time when there was no institutionalised religion of its own size and kind (monasticism, clearly defined practices), but met with a strong cultural identity which led to the adaptation of Chinese ideas and values and to an apologetic self-projection.