

## Selection from Emperor Wuzong's Edict on The Suppression of Buddhism: The Edict of the Eighth Month

### **Introduction**

Buddhism was a fundamental part of the culture, religiosity, and even the skyline of Tang China. As such, it is not surprising that Tang emperors should have had ambivalent feelings about Buddhism, both as a religion and, even more so, as an assemblage of institutions and people — temples, monasteries, monks and nuns — which held substantial wealth in land and other resources but which did not pay taxes. The following edict from Emperor Wuzong (r. 841-846) is indicative of the seriousness with which Tang emperors regarded Buddhism. The fact that Emperor Wuzong was a fervent Daoist and anxious to seek a Daoist elixir of immortality and thus heavily under the influence of Daoist priests adds another twist to the plot.

### **The Edict of the Eighth Month**

We have heard that up through the Three Dynasties the Buddha was never spoken of. It was only from the Han and Wei on that the religion of idols gradually came to prominence. So in this latter age it has transmitted its strange ways, instilling its infection with every opportunity, spreading like a luxuriant vine, until it has poisoned the customs of our nation; gradually, and before anyone was aware, it beguiled and confounded men's minds so that the multitude have been increasingly led astray. It has spread to the hills and plains of all the nine provinces and through the walls and towers of our two capitals. Each day finds its monks and followers growing more numerous and its temples more lofty. It wears out the strength of the people with constructions of earth and wood, pilfers their wealth for ornaments of gold and precious objects, causes men to abandon their lords and parents for the company of teachers, and severs man and wife with its monastic decrees. In destroying law and injuring mankind, indeed, nothing surpasses this doctrine!

Now if even one man fails to work the fields, someone must go hungry; if one woman does not tend her silkworms, someone will be cold. At present there are an inestimable number of monks and nuns in the empire, each of them waiting for the farmers to feed him and the silkworms to clothe him, while the public temples and private chapels have reached boundless numbers, all with soaring towers and elegant ornamentation sufficient to outshine the imperial palace itself.

Having thoroughly examined all earlier reports and consulted public opinion on all sides, we no longer have the slightest doubt in our mind that this evil should be eradicated. Loyal ministers of the court and provinces have lent their aid to Our high intentions, submitting most apt proposals that We have found worthy of being put into effect. Presented with an opportunity to suppress this source of age-old evil and fulfill the laws and institutions of the ancient kings, to aid mankind and bring profit to the multitude, how could We forbear to act?

The temples of the empire that have been demolished number more than 4,600; 26,500 monks and nuns have been returned to lay life and enrolled as subject to the Twice-a-Year Tax; more than 40,000 privately established temples have been destroyed, releasing 30 or 40 million *qing* of fertile, top-grade land and 150,000 male and female servants who will become subject to the Twice-a-Year Tax. Monks and nuns have been placed under the jurisdiction of the Director of Aliens to make it perfectly clear that this is a foreign religion. Finally, We have ordered more than 2,000 men of the Nestorian and Mazdean religions to return to lay life and to cease polluting the customs of China.

Alas, what had not been carried out in the past seemed to have been waiting for this opportunity. If Buddhism is completely abolished now, who will say that the action is not timely? Already more than 100,000 idle and unproductive Buddhist followers have been expelled, and countless of their gaudy,

useless buildings destroyed. Henceforth We may guide the people in stillness and purity, cherish the principle of doing nothing, order Our government with simplicity and ease, and achieve a unification of customs so that the multitudes of all realms will find their destination in Our august rule.

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*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 585-586. © 1999 Columbia University Press.