Buddhist Monasteries, Dissent and Rebellion in T’ang China
Max Brandstadt ‘13

My research this summer explored the thesis that the spread of Buddhism and Buddhist monasteries stimulated dissent and rebellion in medieval China (ca. A.D. 300-900). This initial thesis was founded on the conjecture that Buddhism’s emphasis on abandoning society and the family to join the Buddhist monastic community, or sangha, undermined Chinese morality’s focus on the family and Chinese society’s traditional hierarchy, and thereby laid the groundwork for revolutionary challenges to the regime. This seemed especially plausible given the perennial association, throughout Chinese history, of religious organizations and rebel movements.

This thesis provided a good jumping off point, and my research does indicate the presence of a powerful subversive element in medieval Chinese Buddhism. Several rebellions were incited or led by Buddhist monks, and in one case a monastery was used to store rebel weapons. In addition, frequent imperial edicts restricting the movement of monks testify to the government’s suspicion of certain facets of Buddhism. However, the situation cannot be boiled down to a simple equation of Buddhism and monasteries with subversion. Successive imperial regimes sponsored the translation of Buddhist texts, the building of magnificent temples to house ‘relics of the Buddha,’ the chanting of prayers and sutras for the protection of the dynasty, and the construction of large numbers of monasteries. A massive a phenomenon like Buddhism generally subsume a broad swath of attitudes towards the status quo—some subversive, some uncontroversial—so I did not find this surprising.

What did surprise me, however, was the position of monasteries in that spectrum of subversive to conformist. In contrast to my expectation that monasteries would be a locus of dissent and opposition to the regime, it appears that the government vastly preferred monastic Buddhism to diffused non-monastic Buddhism. It required monks to be registered with a monastery, each of which had an overseer who reported to a government bureaucracy in charge of Buddhism. During periods of heightened government concern about the power of the Buddhist church, the regime’s first measure was generally the forced laicization of monks unaffiliated with a monastery. Thus, the regime used monasteries as a means of control.

That is not to say, however, that the government looked on all monasteries with equal favor. It generally supported large monasteries, while it severely curtailed the construction of small monasteries. In the course of my research, I have begun to get an idea of the logic behind the government’s varied policies. By A.D. 300, Buddhism had become, alongside Daoism and the Confucian ritual system, an acknowledged source of religious power in China, and the imperial government consistently attempted to tap into this power for itself while minimizing Buddhism’s potential for social disruption. Essentially, this meant addressing three problems: the spread of itinerant monks (often linked with crime and rebellion); the use of the monastic community as a means of evading punishment or taxation; and the increasing concentration of land, money, and metal in the hands of the monasteries.

Aspects of the government’s policy that might seem contradictory, such as its sensitivity to the movement of monks and its patronage of monks at court, or its hostility towards small monasteries and its sponsorship of large ones, can ultimately be addressed by reference to these four problems. The government sought to tap the monks’ perceived religious power without allowing them undue contact with lay-people (which sometimes led to unrest), and therefore restricted their movement. Sponsorship of large monasteries was a favored way to demonstrate imperial largesse, but the building of small monasteries by the wealthy laity was often used as a tax-dodge, and thus the construction of small monasteries was severely curtailed. I hope to further address issues like this in the coming months as part of an independent study, and eventually produce an Honors Project offering a portrait of monasteries’ role in the social, economic, and political life of medieval China. The Martha Reed Coles Fellowship has given me an invaluable head start on this process.

Faculty Mentors: John Holt, Christopher Heurlin, Songren Cui
Funded by the Martha Reed Coles Undergraduate Research Fellowship