

THE KUSHAN/KUSHANA DYNASTY

A Chinese nomadic tribe known as the Yuzhi founded the Kushan Dynasty. The Kushan Dynasty lasted from approximately 20-225 AD (Smith: 248). The Yuzhis have many variations for their name, which includes Yueh-chih and Yueh-chi and they lived on the northern steppe of agricultural China (Liu: 264). Some of the Yuzhi were farmers but most were known as traders. They often were involved in the long distance trading of jade and horses to the rulers of agricultural China (Liu: 286). The Yuzhi were one of the stronger tribes in China but did, however, live near an extremely aggressive nomadic tribe called the Xiongue (Liu: 265). According to the *Shih-chi* text, the Yuzhi people took their Xiongue neighbors lightly thinking they were non-threatening. The consequences of this carelessness was devastating to the Yuzhi as the Xiongue attacked and overthrew the Yuzhi, and proceeded to kill the Yuzhi king making a drinking vessel out of his skull (Pulleyblank: 154). The date of this event is disputed but it can be placed at around 200-100 BCE (Christian: 201). As a result of this defeat, the Yuzhi were forced to migrate westward in search of fresh pastures (Smith: 248).

The Yuzhi migration was one of mass proportions. Some scholars believe that their migration of people comprised of one to two hundred bowmen and the group at large ranged from half a million to a million people of all ages and genders (Smith 1999: 248). In their westward search for adequate agricultural land the Yuzhi encountered numerous hostile groups. The first of these groups, the Wu-san, were located along the basins of the Ili River (Smith 1999: 248). It is believed by some historians that the Yuzhi slew the Wu-san chief and continued westward (Smith 1999: 249). A small group of Yuzhi, known as the Little-Yuzhi, separated from the main group, the Great Yuzhi (Smith 1999: 249). Some scholars believe that the Little-Yuzhi settled in the Turfan region (Christian 1998: 211). The Great Yuzhi continued traveling westward and met another group, the Sakas. This group, who had a larger number of individuals than the Wu-san, and also tried to defend themselves but fell to the mass fighting force of Yuzhi. The Yuzhi then settled in the prosperous agricultural region occupied by the Sakas (Smith 1999: 249).

The Yuzhi remained in this agricultural region for fifteen to twenty years (Smith: 249). The Yuzhi's ancient enemy, the Xiongue, along with the son of the slain Wu-san chief, who the Xiongue had protected and raised, forced the Yuzhi further westward (140 BCE) (Smith: 250). The Yuzhi continued their march westward and settled in the valley, Oxus where they conquered the Ta-hai who had lived there (Smith: 250). Over one or more generations, the Yuzhi lost their nomadic habits and settled down to become a territorial nation, occupying the land to the north and Bactria lands to the south (Smith: 250). Over the course of this time, the Yuzhi formed five distinct tribes, or yabghus (Christian: 211). Some scholars believe that not all five of these tribes were Yuzhi, but had leaders that were appointed by the Yuzhi, in order to maintain control in these regions. This was the case as this specific structure of government was not present until the Yuzhi settled in the Bactria (Yu: 72). This system of government lasted somewhere between 15-50 CE where the leader of the main yabghus, Kujula Kadphises or Kadphises

I, defeated the four tribes and set a unified empire in Bactria (Christian: 212). This event marks the beginning of the Kushan Dynasty.

The Kushans under the power of Khadphises I, began to expand their empire. Khadphises I began by attacking the Parthians, a group from what is now northern Iran, and his empire expanded from the frontiers of Indus to Persia. Khadphises also attacked and suppressed the Indo-Greeks, an expansion of ancient Greece, and both the Greeks, and Parthians, to the west of Indus, were expelled (Smith: 252). At the age of 80, Khadphises I, died and his reign was given to his son. Vima Takto, known as Khadphises II, began his reign around 45 CE (Christian: 212). Khadphises II began his reign by continuing to do his father's work, expanding the Empire. He first conquered northern India (Christian: 213). Which was extremely important for the Kushan dynasty, as it gave the Kushans control of an important branch of the Silk roads that led along the Indus valley and gave the Kushans the port of Barygaza, where ships could sail to Egypt, bypassing Parthia (Christian: 213).

The Kushans began trading with the Romans using this route around 100 CE (Christian: 213). The Kushans traded precious items such as silks, spices, gems and dyestuffs in return for Roman gold coins. Roman coins were used along this route and Khadphises imitated Roman coinage by making his own coins with his own depiction on them (Christian: 213).

The successor that ruled after Khadphises II was Kaniska, and his reign started around 78CE (Smith: 252). While some scholars believe that Kaniska was the son of Khadphises II, others believe that he was just a relative (Christian: 213 & Smith: 258). The Kushan dynasty was at the peak of its power during the ruling of Kaniska (Christian: 213). Kaniska, like his predecessors, continued to expand the empire. His expansion continued into regions that include modern Tajikistan, parts of Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and north and east parts of India. Kaniska also moved the capital of the empire from Bactra to Purushapura (Christian: 213). The new capital was a guarded city, situated along the main road from the Afghan to the Indian plains (Smith: 261). Later on Kaniska moved the capital city again, to Mathura on the river Yamuna.

As Kaniska aged he became a devote Buddhist and during his reign, Kaniska erected an enormous relic (Smith: 261). The relic was believed to be carved out of wood and reached approximately 400ft high and was surrounded by an iron pinnacle (Smith: 261). This relic was burned down three times and was repaired after each time and stood until about the 8th century (Smith: 262). Kaniska also built a great monastery next to this relic. The monastery served as a flourishing place for Buddhist education (Smith: 262).

The next two successors of Kaniska were Husvishka and Vasudeva I. Along with Kaniska; these three rulers are generally regarded as the 'Great Kushans' (Christian: 213). Their power can be credited to ruling during a time when Parthian power was declining (Christian: 213). The Kushan dynasty ended around the end of the third century with Vasudeva I being the last king.

All of the kings of the Kushan Dynasty had a major role of shaping the political, social and religious aspects their empire. The Kushans were known for taking ideas from different cultures and incorporating them into their own. The Kushan pantheon included Iranian, Greco-Bactrian and local deities along with Buddhist gods and influences from Jainism and Vaisnavism (Christian: 213). Kaniska as indicated was an avid Buddhist and had set up the fourth and final Buddhist Councils (Hunter: 175). His council comprised of five hundred monks that made commentaries on the Buddhist faith (Hunter: 175). The council produced many works; one of such is the *Mahavibhasha* (Smith: 268). Kaniska devoted hours of his time under the guidance of a monk to studying Buddhist texts (Smith: 267). The Kaniska Council at one point made Buddhism the state religion (Hunter: 148). Some scholars believe that the Kushan kings adopted Buddhism because the kings believed that Buddhist propaganda and the patronage would help in political and religious areas. The Kushan rulers gave themselves the title of 'Son of God' or 'Son of Heaven' in order to solidify their legitimacy. The divine rulers made use of imagery in order to attempt to assimilate all of the different cultures into one distinct society (Aldrovandi: 307).

The population structure of the Kushan was quite diverse; it ranged from small villages and towns, to cities and mountain communities (Christian: 216). The land in the small villages and towns was owned mostly by the elites, while city land was mostly owned by merchants (Christian: 216).

The Kushan Empire was successful for many reasons including such things as achieving political stability over a wide area, creating vast trade networks, and royal support of irrigation (Christian: 217). Agriculture that needed irrigation was the main income system of the Kushan Empire (Christian: 217). One large scale irrigation network that was created was the Khorezm system. Scholars believe that this system needed approximately 15 000 laborers to complete the work and some 6000 -7000 laborers to maintain the system. Cereals, cotton, fruits and poppies were the different types of crops that grew using the water from this system (Christian: 217). The population grew substantially in the Kushan Dynasty because of its large amounts of agriculture and trading (Christian: 217).

The Kushans played an important role in the spread of Buddhism to Parthia, Central Asia and in China (Christian: 215). The first Buddhist texts to reach China were given by the Yuzhi as a gift (Christian: 215). This form of Buddhism that spread out of the Kushan Dynasty was not the same as the Buddhism preached by the Buddha. The Kushan Dynasty Buddhism was influenced by other religions including Hellenism and went through centuries of social and economic change before it was expanded (Liu: 284). The spreading of Buddhism is correlated to the vast amount of goods and ideas that constantly traveled along the trading routes of the Silk roads (Christian: 284).

The role that the Kushans had in trading with other nations had a huge effect on formulating the culture in the Kushan Empire. The Yuzhi were known for being great traders in their former land of China, where they constantly were trading their resources,

which included such things as jade and horses (Liu: 285). According to Sima Quin, an ancient historian, the Yuzhi may be considered as the people that initiated the trading along the Silk Roads. He also adds that the Yuzhi started the horse for silk transactions, and thus gave fame to the Chinese silk products (Liu: 278). Perhaps another important legacy of the Kushan Dynasty is the expansion of the Buddhist religion in central Asia. The Kushans also affected Hinduism negatively in their empire as another religion, Buddhism, was spread and became the state religion.

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<http://www.grifterrec.com/coins/kushan/kushan.html>

http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/kush/hd_kush.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kushan_Empire

http://www.4to40.com/discoverindia/index.asp?article=discoverindia_kushan

<http://www.advantour.com/uzbekistan/khiva/history/005.htm>

<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/kushans/bottom.html>

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