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PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF CHINESE BUDDHISM¹

By E. ZÜRCHER

If I, first of all, may express my gratitude to the Royal Asiatic Society for its decision to institute this lecture in memory of Paul Demiéville, please believe that this is more than a ritual gesture. He, indeed, was a person to be remembered both as a man and as a scholar. I shall not speak about his human qualities, for it is impossible to do justice to them in a few words. As a scholar, he was a man of astonishing breadth of vision, as is shown by the many different fields which he covered: Chinese philosophy, Chinese literature; historiography; Sino-Indian studies; the history of Chinese Buddhism, to mention only his main fields of interest, all of which were based on a truly stupendous erudition. For in his case breadth was always combined with depth, accuracy, and utter reliability; with the patient and painstaking labour of philology. Needless to say that, faced with the task of giving a lecture that bears his name, I feel both honoured and embarrassed, for I know that I, at best, can only do justice to one of the fields he covered, the study of Chinese Buddhism – an area in which he made his most outstanding contributions. It is true that in doing so he worked in line with a great tradition in French sinology, alive ever since the heroic times of Stanislas Julien, that had also been carried on by his teacher Édouard Chavannes and his elder colleagues Paul Pelliot and Henri Maspero. However, it remains true that, also in this field, no other scholar has equalled Paul Demiéville in scope and depth, for his studies cover almost the whole field, from the earliest treatises on *dhyāna* to late Chinese Buddhist iconography; from the most sophisticated products of Buddhist philosophy to popular Buddhist literature, and from the most rational type of scholasticism to the utter irrationality of those early Ch'an masters that were so dear to him. His works constitute a vantage-point from which we can overlook the field, and plan future inroads; and if to-day we see some new perspectives, we can only do so by standing on his shoulders.

But even from that vantage-point my view is limited, and the title of this lecture too presumptuous. I merely want to develop one perspective and I shall mainly confine myself to the medieval period, covering what Arthur F. Wright has called the periods of Domestication and Independent Growth,² i.e. from the 4th century, when Buddhism penetrated into the higher strata of society, to the 8th century, when it had become firmly established at all social levels, and had developed various typically Chinese schools or movements of great originality.

Let me present the gist of what I have to say in the form of three paradoxes. First, that our view of Chinese Buddhism as a historical phenomenon is greatly *obscured* by the abundance of our source materials. Second, that if we want to

define what was the normal state of medieval Chinese Buddhism, we should concentrate on what seems to be *abnormal*. Third, if we want to complete our picture of what this Buddhism really was, we have to look outside Chinese Buddhism itself.

Let us start with what is most basic, and have a critical look at our source materials. Apart from information from secular literature, and the data yielded by epigraphy and archaeology, the bulk of those materials is contained in that vast body of texts known as the Chinese Buddhist Canon. Buddhist scholars have, with understandable professional pride, commented on the immensity of its size and the rich diversity of its contents; and they are right. The Chinese Buddhist Canon is, indeed, an enormous collection of all kinds of texts: earlier and later translations of works belonging to various schools and trends; indigenous Chinese commentaries and scholastic treatises; collections of monastic discipline of at least five Indian schools; Chinese polemic treatises; pilgrims' travelogues and geographical works; biographies; bibliographies; the collected sayings of Ch'an masters, and so on. About two-thirds of this corpus consists of translations, dating from the 2nd century on. Closely related to this section are Buddhist catalogues compiled through the medieval period; some of these are huge *catalogues raisonnés* that are among the best products of traditional Chinese bibliographical science — since early times a major field of interest in that book-centered civilization. A third major category concerns the Chinese exegesis of Buddhist scriptures, and other scholastic works belonging to the schools of Chinese Buddhism.

The production of translations and the Chinese interpretation of Buddhism on the basis of such texts have always been regarded as the two main pillars of Chinese Buddhism. It is not without reason that the categories *i-ching* 譯經 “translators” and *i-chieh* 義解 “exegetes” form the first and by far the largest sections in Buddhist biographies. Later historians likewise have devoted most of their attention to those two most prestigious activities of the Chinese Buddhist church: the role of the great foreign missionaries and translators and their Chinese entourage; and the development of Chinese schools of scriptural exegesis and scholastic speculation. The picture is completed by information from two other types of sources: the Buddhist bibliographies that provide the introduction of Buddhism through translated texts with a chronological framework, and the mass of data furnished by Buddhist biography. Let us, then, have a closer look at the nature of those basic materials. How were they produced? By whom and for whom?

It appears that in the earliest period, when Buddhism had not yet penetrated into the élite, translation was a matter of private enterprise. The foreign missionary was surrounded by a group of Chinese followers, both monks and laymen, of moderate literary education, who assisted him in producing the rather crude Chinese versions; the whole thing was an informal affair, sponsored

by local believers, to whom we owe the hundreds of archaic Chinese versions³ that we still find in the Canon.

However, around A.D. 400 this situation started to change, for as Buddhism by that time had begun to penetrate into the highest circles, including the court, the sponsoring of translation enterprises (a meritorious work *par excellence*) started to become monopolized by the ruling powers. The first grandiose manifestation of this shift was the huge “translation project” carried out by the Kuchean master Kumārajīva, under the auspices of the ruler of a proto-Tibetan state in northern China. After his arrival in 402, at imperial invitation, Kumārajīva was supplied with a large team of assistants, and the work was done within the palace precincts.⁴ Around that time we see the same shift take place in other political centres, both in the north and in the south. In the far north-west, in present-day Kansu, translations were made at the instigation and under the patronage of a local non-Chinese dynasty.⁵ In the south, the two great translators of the early 5th century, Guṇavarman and Guṇabhadra, both undertook their work at imperial invitation, and they were “placed” by the emperor in one of the great, state-sponsored monasteries at the capital.⁶ This development is continued in the 6th century, when state-sponsored Buddhism flourished both in the northern empire of the Toba Wei, and in the southern territory of Liang. Nearly all the important translators were directly associated with the court, working in a restricted number of top-class monasteries; Paramārtha is the only exception. The size of the project sometimes was quite impressive: the great translator Bodhiruci was assisted by a staff of 700 monks.⁷

We observe the same trend in two related fields: the compilation of bibliographies, and the formation of collections of scriptures. The earliest catalogues were made in the 4th century by members of the first generation of “scholar-monks” on their own initiative, inspired by a mixture of religious zeal and scholarly curiosity. But the matter was soon taken over. The *Ch’u san-tsang chi-chi* 出三藏記集, completed in A.D. 515 by the prominent Vinaya master Sēng-yu — himself clearly a member of the clerical establishment — appears to have been the last bibliography compiled on a private basis. But around the same date two other works had been compiled by imperial order, and, in fact, contained a description of the palace collection of Buddhist scriptures.⁸ In the north we observe the same shift from private and informal to state-sponsored and official.⁹

After the reunification of the empire under the Sui, this shift was completed, both in the field of translation activities and in that of bibliography. Almost all translators of the Sui and T’ang directly worked under court sponsorship, which also meant government supervision, in accordance with the rather strict principles of T’ang religious policy.¹⁰ They are formally invited to do their work; to that end they are installed in some of the major metropolitan temples, usually official state temples established to perform rituals for the benefit of

state and dynasty; or even inside the palace.¹¹ Teams of assistants, occasionally even including officials,¹² are assigned to the work. Still later, in the second part of the 10th century, the first Sung emperor ordered a last, artificial outburst of translation activities, and at that time bureaucratization had become complete: the scriptures were produced by a bureau, staffed with clerical and non-clerical officials of various ranks. But already in T'ang times there is an interesting connection between the translation work and the "official" collection of canonical works, for we repeatedly are told that a certain Chinese version, once produced, was scrutinized before it was *ju tsang* 入藏, "entered into the Canon".¹³ We see the same connection in our bibliographies, all of which are, since Sui times, official compilations made by clerical committees, and respectfully submitted to the throne. Now what conclusion can we draw from all this? A picture starts to emerge, and that picture is none too encouraging for anybody who would like to get an impression of Chinese Buddhism in its totality: a tiny clerical establishment is working at imperial order in a handful of top-level official monasteries; they are charged with the production of texts, obviously as a magical protection for state and dynasty; the production of those texts is to some extent regulated; their inclusion into the Canon (apparently an imperial prerogative) certainly is. The texts are subjected to clerical censorship under imperial supervision — and, as we shall see, it could at times be most effective. All this takes place in an extremely narrow circle, both socially and geographically.

But that is not all, for if we return to the other "pillar", that of the Chinese exegesis and the Chinese scholastic systems, much the same picture arises. The subject is very complicated. Without going into details, it may be said that also in this sector we again find the combination of (i) a very small élite of highly educated monks; (ii) an important role played by imperial sponsorship; and (iii) a concentration of activities in a limited number of large, richly-endowed monasteries.¹⁴

We must conclude that very much of what we know about Chinese Buddhism, and especially about those sectors that always have been regarded as its very essence, actually only reflects an extremely small fragment of the whole. Biographical sources will hardly help us out, for they too show the same extreme limitation: the compilations containing the lives of "Eminent Monks" *kao-sêng* 高僧 or "Illustrious Monks" *ming-sêng* 名僧 are, as their titles imply, almost totally devoted to the *faits et gestes* of the same clerical élite; they are largely meant to be works of religious propaganda, showing the respectability and high connections of the *saṅgha*. They, too, are mainly concerned with the tiny tip of a submerged iceberg.

How small the sample is becomes apparent if we turn to some known census figures. On the basis of such figures we can assume, at a very rough estimate, that China (north and south together) in the 6th century contained some 10,000

monasteries and temples, peopled with some 150,000 monks and nuns. The figures suggest a steady growth till A.D. 845, when the numbers had increased to 44,600 monasteries and 260,000 monks and nuns. Even if the average circulation period within the *saṅgha* is completely unknown, we must conclude that, even in the early medieval period alone, at least two million persons must have had clerical status. If we compare such numbers with our available biographical information the result is very sobering. Even if we include data from epigraphical sources and from secular literature, for the whole medieval period we may reach a total of some 1,500 members of the *saṅgha* about whom we have any information at all, which means that our sample consists of, at most, one-twentieth of one percent of the Chinese *saṅgha*. The same holds good for monastic institutions: most of our information concerns a limited number of prominent monasteries, a few dozens of privileged centres, bases of learning, monastic discipline and distinguished social contacts, that only formed an infinitesimal fraction of the about ten thousand monasteries that seem to be the minimum number to be reckoned with. In other words: our picture of Chinese Buddhism as a historical phenomenon is not merely unbalanced, it is distorted beyond all proportions, and the question arises whether we can do something about it; whether we can devise any ways to get at least some glimpses of that huge body that is hidden from our view. Chinese Buddhism as presented by our sources is representative of the Great Tradition within medieval Chinese Buddhism, and that Great Tradition, however impressive, was less than skin-deep. It was carried on by a very small, highly literate élite within the clergy; their theories and teachings represented Buddhism at its highest level of sophistication; they were very closely linked up with the worldly establishment, notably the imperial court; they worked in a very limited number of rich, often state-sponsored monasteries, very often at the capital. What about the vast body of innumerable little traditions – local manifestations of Buddhist life as it existed among the people, far removed from that world of texts, treatises, learned doctors, impressive rituals and rich endowments? What can we expect to find at those lower levels? Let me just start abruptly, with a few reports of remarkable happenings.

In A.D. 499, strange things started to happen in the household of a certain Chiang Pi 江泌, who served as a Scholar of Wide Learning at the present-day Nanking. His eight-year old daughter fell into a trance-like state, during which scriptures were supernaturally transmitted to her. Details are given by a contemporary, the famous Vinaya master and bibliographer Sêng-yu 僧祐 (444–518): “At times she would sit down in meditation with closed eyes, and then she would recite those scriptures. In some cases she said that she had ascended to heaven, in other cases she claimed that (she received the texts) with the help of spirits. She spoke very fluently, as if it had been an ingrained habit, and she let people write out (the texts). And then she would suddenly stop again”.¹⁵

In this way the girl recited 21 scriptures, the titles of which have been preserved,¹⁶ between her 8th and 15th year of age. The young medium created quite a stir at the capital. She was even interrogated by the emperor, but then she behaved quite normally. Eventually she entered the female order as Sister Sêng-fa 僧法, and she died in Green Park Nunnery Ch'ing-yüan ssü 青園寺 in A.D. 505, the last year of her revelations, only 15 years old. The family wanted to hide the texts, but amateurs *hao-shih-chê* 好事者 had already got hold of copies, and the girl's uncle also believed them to be genuine and had them collected and copied, and so these texts started circulating. Sêng-yü, who definitely did not like such things, has included them in his section on "doubtful and spurious" texts — but with some hesitation, for he mentions a historical precedent. In the early 3rd century, a certain Lady Ting 丁 of Chi-yin 濟陰 suddenly was seized by what looked like a disease. In that state she spoke barbarian language, and when she was given paper and brush, she wrote some foreign script. Finally a monk from the western regions identified her writing as a "separate (version of?) a scripture" *pieh-ching* 別經.¹⁷

A parallel story is reported in the *Ming-hsiang chi* 冥祥記, a 6th-century collection of notes about strange happenings. It contains more supernatural elements, and may illustrate the way in which this theme of "spirit-writing" was reflected in popular imagination. Around the middle of the 4th century, when Ting Ch'eng 丁丞 was magistrate of Ning-ying 寧陰, it was reported to him that a woman, after having met a foreigner "with long nose and deep-set eyes", had been seized by a mysterious disease. During the attack she talked in a strange tongue and wrote a text in horizontal, hook-like script. There also was a boy who could read it, and after that they would dance and sing. But when summoned and interrogated by the magistrate, the woman claimed that she had not known what she was doing. When shown to a foreign monk at the Monastery the writing was identified as the missing part of a Buddhist scripture.¹⁸

Neither Sêng-yü nor the *Ming-hsiang chi* explicitly suggest that in those cases of spirit-writing and *hierolalia*, evil powers are at work. But the connection with possession and exorcism is clearly made in a curious incident reported in the biography of the famous early 6th-century psalmodist Sêng-lang 僧朗. For some time a completely uneducated nun had been possessed by a demon who enabled her to explain the most difficult *sūtras*; and she had a large following of admirers. Sêng-lang, who realizes that she is possessed, goes to the lecture hall of the convent where the nun is preaching. He shouts: "Little slave! Since I have come, why don't you step down?" The nun breaks down *pêng-hsia* 崩下; she leaves the hall and stands facing Sêng-lang, completely immobilized, from early morning till well into the afternoon, silent, and wet with perspiration. The crisis lasts about a hundred days, after which she is cured.¹⁹ Here the cure is undoubtedly exorcistic. A more rational approach to such pathological

phenomena is found in another interesting case, this time situated in the North. According to the biography of the mid-6th-century monk Tao-fêng 道豐, who had a great reputation as an alchemist, physician, and soothsayer, a Ch'an monk at the Stone Cave Monastery *Shih-k'u ssü* 石窟寺 was visited by a luminous image, and by a nightly voice that told him that he was a Buddha. His whole behaviour changed: apart from "brutalizing" his fellow-monks, he shouted incoherently and his eyes had strange-coloured pupils. Tao-fêng interrogated him; concluded that he was dangerously insane, and successfully cured him by means of acupuncture — three needles sufficed.²⁰

In these cases the phenomena led to investigation, and sometimes also to attempts to "cure" the medium; the attitude is one of suspicion mixed with amazement and apprehension. However, sometimes such practices could have far more serious consequences. In A.D. 510 there was an ascetic monk in Ying-chou 鄭州 (present-day Wuhan), named Miao-kuang 妙光, who by deluding the crowd had recruited a following of *aficionadas* among nuns and old women who extolled his teachings as the Sainly Way *shêng-fao* 聖道. When about to be expelled from the Order, he fled to present-day Yang-chou where he started a curious movement, apparently together with his father, his younger brother, and his nephew, to whom he had given fancy Indian names. He preached an apocryphal text, no doubt pretending to have "received" it, entitled "The *Sūtra* of the Adornment of Sarvajñata and his Family" *sa-p'o-jo-t'o chüan-shu yen-ching* 薩婆若陀眷屬嚴經, and he soon was surrounded by a large crowd of devotees. The text itself apparently also functioned as a sacred object: written on a screen and covered with red silk gauze, it was venerated with offerings of incense and flowers. This heresiarch was assisted by a man called Lu Yen 路瑛 who took care of the editing of the text. However, this heterodox movement was discovered by the authorities; Miao-kuang and his aide were arrested, transported to the capital, and thrown into jail. The charge was "cunning tricks of deceit" *ch'iao-cha* 巧詐, and the verdict submitted was death by decapitation for Miao-kuang, and ten years' banishment to a frontier region for his accomplice. The emperor thereupon ordered an official investigation of the case by a committee of 20 prominent clerics who, after having interrogated the unfortunate Saint and having obtained his full confession, forthwith expelled him from the *saṅgha*. By a special act of imperial grace, Miao-kuang's life was spared, but since it was feared that he would resume his "delusive and disturbing" (*huo-luan* 惑亂) activities elsewhere if he were set free, he was condemned to perpetual imprisonment. More than 20 copies of his scripture, as well as the screen, were confiscated and burnt by official order. But, Sêng-yu sadly adds, other copies still are circulating, as a potential source of future disturbance.²¹

We have seen how in this strange world, so far removed from the Great Tradition of Chinese Buddhism, the text itself comes to play a supernatural role. It is transmitted in supernatural ways; "revealed"; miraculously written

down; and, in the case of Miao-kuang and his sect, the text itself, the physical object, is venerated as a divine thing. It is a theme that is found several times in Chinese Buddhist apocrypha, e.g. in the spurious "Consecration Scripture", *Kuan-ting ching* 灌頂經, a probably 5th century collection of exorcistic texts and spells that forms a veritable panorama of early Chinese popular demonology.²² According to its introductory section, 600 years after the *Parinirvāṇa*, when the world will be steeped in sin, there will be a pious monk named P'u-chi 普濟 who practices *dhyāna* in various mountain caves. On one of his peregrinations he will discover a beautiful grotto, and there he will find a precious box containing a copy of this scripture, written with gold script on finely carved slips of sandalwood. He will adore this divine text and propagate it again in the world, that all may be saved.²³ It will be a potent weapon against all evil powers and dangers. The text itself will act as a protective charm, even for those who cannot read: they should carry it in a silk pouch on the chest or at the girdle, and all evil spirits will be powerless.²⁴ However, much resistance is to be expected, for many traditionalist monks will reject it as spurious and heretical, with terrible karmic consequences to themselves.

The study of early Chinese Buddhist apocryphal literature constitutes a vast and intriguing field of research, the exploration of which has barely begun. Apocryphal texts are Buddhist works produced in China by (obviously anonymous) Chinese; they pretend to be "translations" of non-Chinese texts, and, being such, to be part of the authentic Buddhist tradition. They generally are short texts, written in a primitive and rather incoherent language, with little doctrinal sophistication, and full of references to ideas and beliefs that are not of Buddhist origin but are part and parcel of the Chinese indigenous tradition such as the Confucian standard virtues; or *yin*, *yang* and the Five Elements; and, indeed, they not seldom specifically refer to China itself. In some cases such works somehow have found their way into the Buddhist Canon itself, perhaps because they were not recognized as fakes, or, if they were, they may have been regarded as harmless. But in many other cases, these works were considered heretical, unorthodox, morally subversive, or even politically dangerous, and such works had to be suppressed.²⁵ Miao-kuang's sacred text on the screen looks like such a heretical scripture, around which a sectarian movement could grow up, and we have seen how the clerical and the temporal establishment joined hands to suppress it. Buddhist bibliographers, by way of warning example, have listed the titles of hundreds of such proscribed, false scriptures — but in most cases that is all that is left of them.

It should, therefore, be stressed that the Buddhist Canon is the final product of many centuries of clerical censorship. There has been a constant process of expurgation (or even wholesale destruction) of such "heretical" texts. In this respect the Tun-huang manuscripts are invaluable: they constitute an uncensored body of materials, containing many dozens of Buddhist apocrypha, and they

allow us to get an impression of the popularity and wide distribution of such texts that were excluded from the official canon.

Let us then return to the complex of beliefs and practices that I have illustrated with some examples — the complex of “inspiration, spirit-writing, possession, and the revelation of sacred texts”. It is clear that this complex lies outside the Great Tradition of Chinese Buddhism. The representatives of that Tradition — the prominent translators and their Chinese assistants, the learned exegetes and scholastic experts — definitely do not engage in this kind of practice, and ecclesiastical historians only rarely touch upon them. Prominent clerics may have visions of divine beings, but those do not lead to the production of sacred texts. The translation of scriptures — one of the central elements in the Great Tradition — is of course a highly meritorious work that benefits all those who take part in it, as well as its sponsors, but it is described in rather down-to-earth terms. Chinese versions are “produced” (*ch'u* 出); they are in no way supernaturally revealed, or found in mountain caves. Because phenomena like these are so marginal to the sphere of interest of the clerical élite, and, consequently, are so rarely mentioned, we might easily dismiss them as a kind of freakish anomaly; and, indeed, as long as we view Chinese Buddhism in the perspective of the Great Tradition, they would seem to be of minimal importance.

Their real significance is only revealed if we place them in the wider context of indigenous Chinese religion. We then see that they are by no means haphazard aberrations; they fit into a pattern of beliefs and practices that is familiar to any student of Chinese religion: trance and ecstasy; possession combined with dancing and singing; “spirit-writing” either in Chinese or in some incomprehensible script; the text as a supernatural object, revealed to adepts or found in inaccessible places; the remarkable role of women. In other words, the phenomena described here exactly fit into the general pattern of early medieval Chinese religious lore; within that lore, they form part of a well-defined cluster of beliefs. Instead of dismissing them as atypical and exceptional, I believe we should rather single them out and pay special attention to them, as very valuable glimpses we get of deeper layers of Chinese Buddhism — those deeper levels at which Chinese Buddhism merged with indigenous popular religion, and to which our clerical authors only rarely descend.

Once we read our sources in this perspective, it is possible to define other complexes of this type, that may serve as other shafts sunk, as it were, into the body of the iceberg that is submerged and hidden from our view. I may, first of all, mention a complex of ideas and beliefs that loomed large in Chinese apocryphal literature: the eschatological-messianic complex, i.e. the belief that this sinful world will perish in the foreseeable future; that the end will come with cosmic disasters and apocalyptic war; that a messiah will come to save the virtuous minority, and that thereafter there will be a perfect world of

everlasting happiness. Since this is a subject that I am treating in greater detail elsewhere, I shall here confine myself to a few remarks.²⁶

In the first place, we know that the belief that the world is about to enter (or, in fact, already has entered) its last phase of degeneration — that of the *mo-fa* 末法 or final disappearance of the Doctrine — was very much alive in Chinese Buddhist circles at that time; especially in the 6th century such expectations were rampant. It is also clear that the whole complex, at least in its most radical form, again lies outside the sphere of the Great Tradition and was even opposed to it. This type of eschatology was based on the conviction that the *saṅgha* itself and the worldly government had degenerated beyond repair; and that the Saviour was soon to appear, ready for the big clean-up. Needless to say that neither the clerical nor the temporal establishment could appreciate such ideas, to say the least. They only could accept the *mo-fa* conception in its most mitigated, harmless forms; its more radical popular expressions were condemned as heretical and subversive, and successfully suppressed.

And here, again, we see that this complex exactly fits into a pattern found in indigenous Chinese religious lore. A number of elements are borrowed from Mahāyāna beliefs, such as the cyclical destruction of the universe at the end of a cosmic era; the notion of a succession of future Buddhas of whom Maitreya is the first one to come; the saving power of Bodhisattvas, etcetera. However, it was Taoist messianism and eschatology, as found in a whole range of Taoist prophetic scriptures, that provided the model, the grid, that was filled out with Buddhist materials. In the prophetic Buddhist apocryphal texts of this type (parts of which have survived among the Tun-huang manuscripts), there is a complete merger of Buddhist and Taoist ideas, and in view of what we found in the case of our first complex that is precisely what we should expect at a popular level.

A third complex that could lead us to the deeper layers of Chinese Buddhism is of a more general nature. It has to do with the way the people viewed the Buddhist priest as a source of spiritual power. I would define it as the complex of “charisma, purification, and hidden saintliness”. Let me again start with some typical examples, which at first sight seem incoherent, marginal, or even bizarre.

(1) The 5th century itinerant monk P'ei-tu 杯渡 carries a raft with him wherever he goes; he also carried a huge basket full of mysterious things. He is reported to have strange powers: he can walk at an incredible speed; he revives dead animals and transforms white stones into buffaloes, and he cures diseases with miraculous means. In addition, he breaks all the rules of normal monastic life.²⁷

(2) Another popular itinerant monk, Pao-chih 寶誌, waives the rules completely, drinking wine, wearing long hair, and behaving unconventionally in every way. He also carries things about: in his case a monk's staff, to which are attached a mirror, a razor, and strips of silk. He speaks in oracular language,

in prose as well as in verse. It is said that he once showed his "real form" *chên-hsing* 真形, complete with halo.²⁸

(3) The 4th-century hermit Chu T'an-yü 竺曇猷 renders wild animals tame and friendly by his presence;²⁹ the same is said of many other monks; in other cases the animals disappear when the monk settles somewhere, as do other evil powers.³⁰ The exorcist Sêng-lang has no fixed abode, nor even any fixed itinerary. He always walks behind his dog and his monkey; the monkey riding on the dog's back and Sêng-lang following them wherever they choose to go, like a bizarre Chinese counterpart of the immortal trio from Hector Malot's *Sans famille*.³¹

Examples could be multiplied, and other themes could be added, but this may suffice.

Needless to say that here I am not concerned with the question of historical accuracy. I am concerned with beliefs and images, with a certain *conception of sanctity*. In hagiography we find such a conception of sanctity, as it were, in concentrated and exaggerated form. But as is always the case in hagiography, we may expect that such ideas, brought down to human proportions, played a role in defining the attitude of the people towards the Buddhist monk as a person charged with a special kind of charismatic power.

In order to recognize the structure underlying this whole mass of seemingly out-of-the-way and marginal beliefs, and to see their real significance, we again have to turn to the Chinese indigenous religious tradition where this complex is by no means marginal, but rather forms the heart of the matter.

If we try to analyse the seemingly incoherent mass of Chinese Buddhist hagiography and to define the basic concept underlying those stories, this appears to be *hua* 化: "transforming power", "transforming influence". In its widest sense, "transformation" refers to the processes of Nature, conceived as regular and continuous change, operated by Heaven and Earth through the various agencies of *yin* and *yang* and the Five Elements. The Confucian Sage, at a rational level, has a profound insight into these processes and their consequences, and therefore he knows the ups and downs of Destiny. However, in the religious world-view the approach is different. Transformation is everywhere, and may take the most surprising forms: animals changing into each other; human-like beings that actually are the "essence" (*ching* 精) of objects such as stones, trees, or stars; women that actually are foxes and foxes that actually are women, and who change their forms at will. In this world-view, and particularly in the tradition of religious Taoism, the Saint is one who by the power of his spiritual and bodily exercises has identified himself with Nature to such an extent that he is able to manipulate the forces of transformation. In the first place this affects himself: he "purifies" his mortal body, in order eventually to transform it into the ethereal shape of an Immortal. But he will also transform his surroundings by his beneficial influence: those who associate with him

will be magically protected; wild animals will be tamed; he purifies the world by his mere presence. However, just like the forces of Nature that do their work silently and without any publicity, his saintliness generally is hidden; the world at large does not recognize him, and it should not. Some connoisseurs may recognize him by the supernatural stigmata of his body, or by his use of some symbolic object, or by understanding the deeper meaning of his oracular statements. But he does not show his eminence — on the contrary. He may be a wineseller on the market-place, or a tramp, or even a sinner, and both his outward form and his behaviour may be crude or even grotesque. He can perform miracles: move as fast as the wind, multiply his body, evoke wind and rain, etcetera, but this is not regarded as “forcing” Nature in any way. On the contrary, such “transformations” are the result of his complete unison with Nature, by which he can evoke “responses” (*ying* 應, another key-term), and, preferably, “auspicious responses” (*juí-ying* 瑞應): the appearance of lucky things such as auspicious animals, divine objects, and timely rain.

Here we see again how all those stray elements that we find dispersed throughout our texts fall into a coherent pattern once we place them in the context of traditional Chinese beliefs. In this case I think that we even can go further. As I said before, hagiography is not just fantasy; it does not come out of a cultural void. It is the hyperbolic expression of existing ideals and attitudes. Since we again are dealing with a complex that, by and large, lies outside the main stream of the Great Tradition, and that takes us down to more popular levels, would it not be possible to discern, behind the veil of pious fantasy, the contours of popular attitudes towards the “saintly man” on a human scale? The basic elements obviously are spiritual power, coupled with the knowledge of certain techniques, magical purification and protection, and a charisma that does not depend on outward things like learning and disciplinary behaviour, and that even may be hidden under the most boorish or freakish appearance. Translated into terms of everyday life this would be something like regarding the monk primarily as somebody who is endowed with a special kind of power. He does not need to be a Master of the Law, or even a strict disciplinarian. By performing his rituals, or even by his mere presence, he will exert a purifying, transforming influence upon his surroundings, and be a source of “good luck” to the community. Even if we have no direct evidence, I believe that this is as near as we can come to the image of the priest as it lived among the millions of simple believers, who were served by those hundreds of thousands of low-level monks, most of whom no doubt were hardly literate, or even hardly ordained in a regular way.

I could mention other complexes that appear to afford us some more glimpses of what the bulk of Chinese Buddhism must have been like, but I would rather pass on to another extremely valuable source of information that has hardly been tapped yet. It is to be found in the scriptural literature of

the closest companion and greatest rival of Chinese Buddhism throughout the whole medieval period: the tradition of religious Taoism. From the late 4th century onward, Taoism absorbed elements from Mahāyāna Buddhism on an ever-increasing scale. Its terminology became permeated with Buddhist expressions, and Taoist scriptures more and more adopted the style of Buddhist *sūtras*. However, much more was borrowed than terminological and stylistic features. Whole clusters of Buddhist ideas were absorbed into religious Taoism, such as fundamental notions concerning time and space; the basic rules of morality, coupled with the Mahāyāna ideals of universal compassion and the transfer of merit; the concept of strictly individual guilt, and, most important, the whole complex of *karman*, rebirth, and retribution. When I, some time ago, made an analysis of such Buddhist loans in early medieval Taoist scriptures,³² I was struck by the importance of such texts for the study of Chinese Buddhism itself, at a level clearly below that of the Great Tradition. The choice of elements borrowed, their content and frequency, can give us an impression of what ideas in Chinese Buddhism were most alive in those circles where Buddhists and Taoists met — i.e. mainly at the level of lay believers; what ideas were, in fact, so forceful that they became part of the rival tradition, there to live on and to further develop in a Taoist context. In a way, we could say that besides flowing on in its own river-bed, Chinese Buddhism developed a parallel channel of propagation through Taoism. I am convinced that we still have much to learn about early Chinese Buddhism by further developing the very promising field of comparative Buddhho-Taoist studies.

I realize that the perspective which I have presented leaves many questions unanswered, and that it only represents one kind of approach. It is an attempt to get away from the view that early Chinese Buddhism is a more or less homogeneous whole, presented to us by the thousands of texts that we have at our disposal, and to replace that view by a more critical approach stressing the stratified nature of Chinese Buddhism, and the fact that we know too much about too little. Secondly, it attempts to get away from the tendency to overstress the identity of Chinese Buddhism as a clear-cut, independent tradition different from other types of Chinese religion. Here again, I believe that we are led astray by the fact that our materials are focused upon the very top, the products of the clerical élite, the level at which Buddhism was most articulate, and its unique identity as a system of religion and philosophy was most clearly expressed. It can be demonstrated that, as soon as we go below that top level, quite another picture emerges, in which Buddhism loses much of its sharp contour, as it is absorbed into the surrounding mass of Chinese indigenous religion. Thirdly, it is an attempt to redress the balance, not by underestimating the value of the study of the Great Tradition (for it evidently contains the most admirable products of Chinese Buddhism), but by developing, in addition, ways and means to penetrate further down — to sink shafts into the hidden body

of the iceberg. I have indicated two channels of information: (i) the study of those elements that appear to be out-of-the-way and aberrant, but that, once placed in the context of Chinese religion at large, appear to be part of well-known indigenous complexes of ideas, and (ii) the study of popular Buddhism as reflected in Taoism.

I admit that this approach does not make matters easier, on the contrary: it requires more work, a considerable broadening of the field to be covered, and it undermines the clear-cut image of Chinese Buddhism — the outlines become blurred, and sometimes even fade away altogether. In addition to the usual philological ones, other critical questions have to be posed for each individual text: “at what level was it produced; by what kind of people; under what kind of sponsorship; for what kind of public?” In this perspective, the study of Chinese Buddhism will no doubt become more complicated, and less clearly defined, less tangible. But that may also mean that we are getting somewhat nearer to historical truth, and to life itself. And in that case we shall certainly be acting in the spirit of the great man whose memory we honour to-day.

NOTES

¹ This paper was first delivered as the Paul Demiéville Memorial Lecture at the Society's meeting of the 14th May 1981.

² cf. Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, Stanford, 1959, ch. 2 and 3.

³ I use this term of what in Chinese Buddhist bibliography is called *ku-i* 古譯, denoting Chinese versions produced before the introduction of a more sophisticated translation idiom and the elaboration of a much more diversified technical vocabulary in the last quarter of the 4th century.

⁴ According to his biography (*Ch'u san-tsang chi-chi* 出三藏記集, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (=T) 2145, ch. 14, p. 101^b, reproduced in *Kao-sêng chuan* 高僧傳, T 2059, ch. 2, p. 332^b), Kumārajīva was lodged in the Hsi-ming Pavilion 西明閣 in the imperial Hsiao-yao Park 逍遙園 “in order (there) to translate and produce the scriptures”; this is confirmed by colophons and introductions to versions made by Kumārajīva and his team, 17 of which are stated to have been translated “in the Hsiao-yao Park”.

⁵ In the territory of the Northern Liang 北涼, ruled by the Hsiung-nu house of Chū-ch'ü 沮渠. Both Chū-ch'ü Mêng-sun 蒙遜 (r. 401–433) and his son and successor Chū-ch'ü Mu-chien 牧犍 (r. 433–439) sponsored the activities of various translators, the most important among whom was Dharmakṣema who at the request of Chū-ch'ü Mêng-sun produced, *inter alia*, the so-called “Northern version” of the *Mahā-parinirvāna-sūtra* in A.D. 414–419 (cf. preface and colophon reproduced in *CSTCC*, T 2145, ch. 8, p. 59^c and p. 60^a).

⁶ Guṇavarman was invited by the Liu Sung emperor Wên all the way from Java; after his arrival at Chien-k'ang in A.D. 431 he was lodged in the Jetavana Monastery Ch'i-huan ssü 祇洹寺 in the capital (cf. *CSTCC*, T 2145, ch. 14, p. 104^b; *KSC*, T 2059, ch. 341^a). This was also where, in A.D. 435, Guṇabhadra was made to stay after he had been escorted from Canton by a special imperial emissary (*CSTCC*, ch. 14, p. 105^c; *KSC*, ch. 3, p. 344^a). The Jetavana Monastery had been founded by the courtier Fan T'ai 范泰 in A.D. 420 (cf. *KSC*, ch. 7, p. 368^c and *Sung-shu* ch. 60, biography of Fan T'ai, p. 1623) for the priest Hui-yi 慧義, who only a few years earlier had supported the dynastic claims of

the future founder of the Liu Sung, Liu Yü, by providing the latter with "auspicious objects" revealed to Hui-yi by the "spirit of Mt. Sung" *sung-kao ling-shên* 嵩高靈神 (in A.D. 417; for this curious story cf. *KSC*, loc. cit.). It was Hui-yi himself who had designed the lay-out of the Jetavana monastery, which under the Liu Sung flourished as an important centre of Buddhist activities. The status of Hui-yi, and the fact that after the Liu Sung the monastery is hardly ever mentioned any more, suggest that this institution had a special relation with the ruling family.

⁷ *Hsü* 續 *KSC*, T 2060, ch. 1, p. 428^a. Cf. the analogous treatment given by the Northern Ch'i emperor Wên-hsüan to Narendrayaśas when the latter arrived at the capital Yeh 鄴 in A.D. 556 (ibid., ch. 2, p. 432^c).

⁸ In A.D. 515, Sêng-shao 僧紹 had compiled a "Catalogue of scriptures kept in the Buddha-hall in the Hua-lin Park" *Hua-lin fo-tien chung-ching mu-lu* 華林佛殿眾經目錄 at the order of emperor Wu. Since the emperor was not satisfied with Sêng-shao's work, he again commissioned the famous scholar-monk Pao-ch'ang 寶唱 to produce a better catalogue. Pao-ch'ang thereupon compiled his *Li-tai chung-ching mu-lu* 歷代眾經目錄, which he submitted to the throne in A.D. 518 (Cf. *Hsü* *KSC*, T 2060, ch. 1, p. 426^c; *Li-tai san-pao chi* 歷代三寶記, T 2034, ch. 11, p. 94^b; P. Pelliot in *T'oung Pao*, XXII, 1923, 257ff.). Throughout the Six Dynasties period, the Hua-lin yüan was a famous imperial park in the northern outskirts of the capital. It originally had been a hunting-park of the rulers of Wu. Since the late 5th century it had housed a court-sponsored Buddhist temple that especially under the Liang emperor Wu became the most prestigious centre of upper-class Buddhism. It was here that the pious ruler organized the gorgeous Buddhist rituals and preaching-sessions in which he himself took part, and that were attended by thousands of monks and laymen.

⁹ The first Buddhist catalogue made in the north by imperial order was a (now lost) *Chung-ching mu-lu* 眾經目錄, compiled between 500 and 534 by the layman Li K'uo 李廓 (cf. *Hsü* *KSC*, T 2060, ch. 1, p. 428^c). The work appears to have been a list of the imperial collection of Buddhist texts that existed before the Wei capital was moved from Lo-yang to Yeh in A.D. 534.

¹⁰ No less than 25 out of the 33 known foreign and Chinese translators of Sui and T'ang times are explicitly stated to have worked under imperial sponsorship. Among them we find all the more prominent and productive translators of that period: Amoghavajra, Bodhiruci, Jinagupta, Narendrayaśas, Prabhākaramitra, Śikṣānanda, Subhākarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, Hsüan-tsang, and I-ching. In a number of cases such masters were expressly summoned to the capital in order to engage in translation activities (e.g. Narendrayaśas and Jinagupta in 582; Prabhākaramitra in 627; Bodhiruci in 693, and Śikṣānanda in 695).

¹¹ In Sui and T'ang times, the bulk of Buddhist translations was produced in only a few centres. In Ch'ang-an, translation activities were virtually concentrated in three famous court-sponsored temples: the Ta hsing-shan ssü 大興善寺, founded by the Sui emperor Wên in 582, and of paramount importance throughout Sui and T'ang times; the Ta tz'ü-ên ssü 大慈恩寺, established in 646 and made famous by the activities of Hsüan-tsang and his translation team, and the Hsi-ming ssü 西明寺 founded in 657 by emperor Kao-tsung. In Lo-yang there had been a short period of translation activities in the early 7th century. After the Sui emperor Yang had moved the capital from Ta-hsing to Lo-yang, he ordered the establishment of a translation bureau (*fan-ching kuan* 翻經館) with a clerical staff of foreign and Chinese experts; it was here that the Indian master Dharmagupta produced a number of Chinese versions. The second period of large-scale translation activities in Lo-yang covers the last years of the 7th and the early 8th century, notably under the reign of empress Wu. At that time the most important centre of translation was one of empress Wu's favourite Buddhist institutions, the Fo shou-chi ssü 佛授記寺.

¹² e.g. the translation team that was set up by imperial order in A.D. 629, and which, apart from 19 monks with specialized tasks in the actual work of translation, also included three high officials charged with final editing and general supervision (cf. *Hsü* *KSC*, T 2060, ch. 3, p. 440^{a-b}).

¹³ For a survey of texts officially "admitted to the Canon", and the lists of such texts (*ju tsang lu* 入藏錄) that form part of almost all Buddhist catalogues since early Sui

times, see Ono Gemmyō 小野玄妙, *Bussho kaisetsu daijiten* 佛書解說大辭典, *betsu-kan* 別卷, Tokyo, 1936, 423ff.

¹⁴ For our purpose it may suffice to point out that in the formative phase of the school-traditions (*tsung* 宗) in Chinese Buddhism the leading masters all belonged to the clerical élite. Without exception they operated at the highest social level and enjoyed imperial patronage. This holds good for all the “founding fathers” and their most illustrious successors: Chi-tsang 吉藏 (549–623) and Fa-lang 法朗 (507–581) of the Three Treatises (*san-lun* 三論) School; Chih-i 智顛 (538–598), Kuan-ting 灌頂 (561–632) and Chan-kan 湛然 (711–782) of the T’ien-t’ai (天台) School; the Hua-yen (華嚴) “patriarchs” Chih-yen 智儼 (606–668), Fa-tsang 法藏 (643–712) and Ch’eng-kuan 澄觀 (737–838); Hsüan-tsang 玄奘 (602–664) and K’ui-chi 窺基 (602–682) who established the Fa-hsiang (法相) School; Tao-hsüan 道宣 (596–667) of the Disciplinary (lǜ 律) School, and the Pure Land (*ching-t’u* 淨土) masters T’an-luan 曇鸞 (476–542), Tao-cho 道綽 (562–645) and Shan-tao 善導 (d. 662, var. 681). In spite of its alleged “popular” or “anti-conventional” character, the earliest propagators of Ch’an Buddhism in its northern and southern variants, the masters Shen-hsiu 神秀 (600–706) and Shen-hui 神會 (668–760), clearly belong to the same clerical élite. The social and political background of the school-traditions would deserve a detailed study, along the lines indicated by S. Weinstein in his important article “Imperial patronage in the formation of T’ang Buddhism”, in A. F. Wright and D. Twitchett (ed.), *Perspectives on the T’ang*, New Haven, 1973, 265–306.

¹⁵ *CSTCC*, T 2145, ch. 5, p. 40^b.

¹⁶ *CSTCC*, loc. cit., lists 21 titles of works totalling 35 *chüan*. Some titles are identical with those of certain well-known Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Lotus sūtra*, *Fa-hua ching* 法華經, the *Śrīmālā-devī-simhanāda-sūtra*, *Shēng-man ching* 勝鬘經, and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdesa*, *wei-mo ching* 維摩經. In most cases the titles do not correspond to any known authentic scriptures, but they clearly are patterned after Buddhist examples, making use of conventional Buddhist terms like “Pure Land” *ching-t’u* 淨土, “*Prajñā*” *pan-jo* 般若, “*Anāgāmin*” *a-na-han* 阿那含, “Lion’s Roar” *shih-tzū hou* 師子吼, etc.

¹⁷ *CSTCC*, T 2145, loc. cit.

¹⁸ *Ming-hsiang chi* by Wang Yen 王琰, quoted in *Fa-yüan chu-lin* 法苑珠林, T 2122, ch. 18, p. 417^a.

¹⁹ *Hsü KSC*, T 2060, ch. 25, p. 650^c–651^a.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 649^{b-c}.

²¹ *CSTCC*, T 2145, ch. 5, p. 40^{b-c}.

²² T 1331, wrongly attributed to the 4th-century *dhāraṇī*-specialist Śrīmitra.

²³ T 1331, ch. 1, p. 497^c–498^a.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 501^b.

²⁵ The best general survey of Chinese Buddhist apocryphal literature is to be found in the introductory part of Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮, *Gikyō no kenkyū* 疑經の研究, Kyōto, 1977, 1–95.

²⁶ For a more detailed treatment of the subject cf. my article “Prince Moonlight – messianism and eschatology in early medieval Chinese Buddhism” in the forthcoming *T’oung Pao*, and, for a shorter outline, “Eschatology and messianism in early Chinese Buddhism”, in *Leyden Studies in Sinology*, Leiden, 1981, 34–56.

²⁷ *KSC*, T 2059, ch. 10, pp. 390^b–393^b.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 394^c–395^a.

²⁹ *ibid.*, ch. 11, p. 385^b.

³⁰ For some other early examples, cf. my *Buddhist conquest of China*, 145–6.

³¹ *Hsü KSC*, T 2060, ch. 25, p. 650^c.

³² “Buddhist influence on early Taoism: a survey of scriptural evidence”, *T’oung Pao*, LXVI, 1980, 84–147.