CHAPTER TWO

AN HISTORICAL SURVEY

from the first to the beginning of the fourth century AD.

Fourth century Chinese Buddhism, and especially the characteristic type of gentry Buddhism which at that time flourished on Chinese territory south of the Yangzi and which forms the main subject of our study, was the final stage of a process which actually must have started as soon as Buddhism made its first converts among the Chinese intelligentsia. We do not know when this happened. As we have said before, the first clear signs of the formation of an “upper class” Chinese Buddhism, of the activities of gentlemen-monks and of the penetration of Buddhism into the life and thought of the cultured higher strata of society date from the late third and early fourth century, and there are several reasons to assume that this movement as a whole did not start long before that time.

However, this does not mean that this subject can be studied without constant reference to the earlier phases of Chinese Buddhism, and to the little we know about the period of incubation when Buddhism started to take root in Chinese soil, tolerated and hardly noticed as a creed of foreigners, or adopted, in a Daoist guise, as a new road to immortality. In this chapter the reader will be confronted with the main facts of the earliest phases of Chinese Buddhism. On this subject much has already been said by others, for it is a curious fact that in Chinese Buddhism no period has been studied more thoroughly than the one about which almost nothing can be known. Whenever possible, we have referred to or paraphrased the opinions and conclusions of previous scholars in this field; most of all we are indebted to Tang Yongtong who in the first chapters of his Han Wei liang Jin Nanbeichao fojiao shi has treated this period in his usual masterly fashion. This survey merely serves as an historical introduction to the later chapters; it goes without saying that it only contains the outlines of a development which lasted more than two centuries. Some aspects, like the earliest Buddhist “dhyāna” techniques in China in their relation to analogous Daoist practices, and the extremely complicated bibliographical problems connected with the earliest translations of Buddhist scriptures will only be mentioned in passing; an adequate treatment of these subjects would require much more space than can reasonably be allotted to them in an introductory chapter of this kind.

Buddhism in secular historical works.

It is an unfortunate circumstance that for reliable information concerning the earliest period of Chinese Buddhism (apart from translation activities) we have to rely mainly upon Chinese secular historical literature; as we shall see presently, Buddhist accounts of the introduction of the Doctrine into
China are of a definitely legendary nature. This circumstance is unfortunate because no kind of literature could be less suited to this purpose. Chinese historians are as a rule not interested in religious affairs as long as they have no direct relation to politics or to government circles, and even less in the religious practices of foreigners on Chinese soil.

This means that the few passages about Buddhism which occur in early Chinese historical works are, so to speak, casual remarks made by the historiographer in the course of his narrative. Apart from a few phrases in the *Hou-Han ji*, a fourth century history of the Later Han dynasty, none of these passages were written or included with the intention of saying something about Buddhism *itself*. In one case, Buddhism happens to be mentioned in an edict of 65 AD, this edict being quoted by the compiler of the *Hou-Han shu* in connection with the dealings of an imperial prince. In another case it is alluded to in a memorial criticizing the dissolute behaviour of the emperor. A third time an extremely interesting description is given of the building of a Buddhist temple by a Chinese magistrate, but here again the story is inserted by the historian in order to stress the reckless squandering of money and labour by this magistrate, and it is definitely not intended to picture the building of a Buddhist sanctuary as such. The whole passage about Liu Ying’s Buddhist activities in 65 AD turns around the central fact of his voluntary redemption of an imaginary punishment and the imperial reaction to this virtuous gesture; if in that year the possibility of redemption of punishment would not have been opened by imperial decree, the official history would certainly have been silent about Liu Ying’s religious zeal, and in that case Han Buddhism would have begun for us one full century later, in the middle of the second century AD!

It follows that we must take care not to overestimate the importance of these passages. They certainly do not indicate the beginning of Buddhism in China, nor are they in any way representative of the spread of Buddhism at the time they were written down. They are important as symptoms of conditions which, by a fortuitous combination of external circumstances, *happen* to have been recorded. The one conclusion of primary importance which they allow us to make is that even at this very early period Buddhism had in some way or other made contact with the upper strata of society, as is proved by the very fact of its being mentioned in Chinese historical literature.

*Apocryphal stories and traditions.*

In later times the introduction and earliest history of Buddhism in China became a favourite theme of Buddhist apocryphal literature. Many of these stories obviously had a propagandistic function: they served to enhance the prestige of the Buddhist Church either by telling tales of its triumphant entrance at the imperial court and the immediate conversion of the Chinese emperor, or by demonstrating the early existence of Buddhism on Chinese soil.

We propose to treat this subject in another connection (see below, ch. V); here we shall only say a few words about those traditions the apocryphal character of which is less obvious, and which sometimes have been actually accepted as historical facts by modern scholars. We shall mainly confine ourselves to an enumeration of the traditions in question, the sources, and the conclusions reached by previous investigators.

(a) The arrival of a group of Buddhist priests, headed by the śramaṇa