HAN BUDDHISM AND THE WESTERN REGION

I. Han Buddhism as a Composite Phenomenon

Thirty years ago, the study of Han Buddhism seemed to have reached its saturation point. The historical and pseudo-historical data had been collected, sifted and interpreted by dozens of scholars; reliable evidence was scanty and fragmentary, and every drop of information appeared to have been squeezed out of it. Some specific areas, such as the linguistic and stylistic analysis of the archaic Chinese versions of Buddhist texts, still awaited exploration, but they concerned philology rather than history. Only new discoveries could substantially add to our knowledge about the embryonic phase of Buddhism in China that roughly coincides with the Eastern Han period.

Since the early 'seventies, such new discoveries have been made, notably in the field of material culture. Before that time, only very few material relics of Han Buddhism (or, more vaguely, of Buddhist influence on Han representational art) were known, and they did not show any coherent pattern: a mutilated Prākrit inscription in Kharoṣṭhī script, probably from Luoyang,¹ a seated Buddha carved into the upper door-lintel of a Han tomb at Mahao 麻濠 (Sichuan),² and a fragment of a Han relief from Tengxian 滕縣 (Shandong).³ Since then, archaeology has yielded many more examples of Buddhist elements in the context of Han religious art; together they have added a new dimension to our perception of the way in which Buddhist themes became part of the répertoire of Chinese religious lore in the second and early third centuries CE, and in some cases they have led to a better understanding of certain aspects that so far only could be studied on the basis of textual evidence.

As a result, we are now able to approach Han Buddhism in a more analytical way. We have come to realize, more clearly than we did, that

³ Yu Weichao, op. cit., p. 74; Wu Hung, op. cit., p. 272.
Han Buddhism was a composite phenomenon, consisting of at least three well-defined sectors: first, a hybrid cult centered upon the court and the imperial family; secondly, the first nucleus of “canonical” monastic Buddhism, and, in the third place, the diffuse and unsystematic adoption of Buddhist elements in indigenous beliefs and cults. Since this article is not devoted to Han Buddhism as such, we shall here just present these three sectors in bare outline, without referring to the many studies that have been written about almost every item in the list.4

(1) Hybrid Court Buddhism

It is a striking fact that the earliest references to Buddhism in Chinese sources in some way or other all are related to the “centre of authority”: the emperor and his entourage, courtiers and court ceremonials. Let us very briefly survey the evidence.

(a) A tradition (of doubtful historical value) according to which a Yuezhi envoy to the Chinese court in 2 BCE transmitted one or more Buddhist scriptures to a student of the imperial academy.5

(b) The famous story of the “official” introduction of Buddhism as a result of emperor Ming’s prophetic dream, around 65 CE: no doubt a pious legend, probably not older than the beginning of the third century.6 The tradition may have some historical value, because in spite of all legendary traits the story possibly contains a memory of Buddhist activity at Mingdi’s court (cf. below, sub (d)).

(c) The first “hard evidence”: in 65 CE an imperial edict praises Liu Ying 刘英, the King of Chu, for the way in which he practices the cult(s) of Huang-Lao and the Buddha, and he is exhorted “lavishly to entertain the lay believers (yipurai 伊蒲塞) and monks (sangmen 桑门) at his court at Pengcheng 彭城 (N. Jiangsu).7

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4 In this list, each item will only be accompanied by an indication of its earliest occurrence in the Chinese sources, and by a reference to the relevant passage(s) in my Buddhist Conquest of China, Leiden, 1959 (henceforth BC).
6 Earliest version in the anonymous “Preface to the Sūtra in 42 Sections” (probably mid-3rd century CE), in Chu sanzang ji ji 出三藏記集, j. 6, T 2145, 42b; BC p. 22 and p. 325, notes 20–22.