Any attempt to compare Chinese Buddhism during its formative phase (from the 4th to the 6th centuries CE) and 17th-century Chinese Christianity as propagated by Jesuit missionaries might at first sight appear vain and artificial. Doctrinally, the two religions are hardly comparable for, even if they can be put together under the general term “doctrines of salvation”, the fact that in the two systems the very notion of salvation is formulated in entirely different and even incompatible terms makes any effort of comparative analysis fanciful.

From one point of view, which could be called quantitative, the contrast is even more obvious. In the course of the 4th to the 6th centuries, China was truly conquered by Buddhism and the foreign religion became firmly entrenched in all parts of China and at all levels of society, both in the North, which was then occupied by invaders of “barbarian” origin, as in the South, where autochthonous dynasties succeeded one another. In 589 CE when, after centuries of division, Chinese territory was reunified under the Sui, Buddhism had become the most important and the most creative current in Chinese civilization. The absorption and digestion of this Indian doctrine of salvation had led to the rise of various indigenous “schools”; thousands of Buddhist temples and monasteries dotted the landscape, and there were hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns and millions of lay believers. In comparison with this “success story”, 17th-century Christianity in China was an absolutely marginal phenomenon. It was just a few dozen Jesuits, surrounded by groups of literati attracted by the religion coming from Europe. The movement of conversion started shortly before 1600 and had already begun to decline during the 18th century. At its height, it counted at most some 300,000 converts out of a total population of about 140 million—less than one quarter of one percent.

It may be asked, however, whether the importance of a historical phenomenon should always be judged by its size. After all, it constituted the first encounter, on a high intellectual level, between China and European culture at the dawn of the modern era, or rather, between China and the Jesuit interpretation of certain elements of that culture, a particular pre-
sentation of Catholic doctrine adapted to Chinese needs, combined with certain elements of European science, technology and art. But what is most interesting about such an encounter is that through it cultures as well as individuals express and reveal their moral and intellectual presuppositions. It allows what would otherwise have remained concealed to be made explicit. Even before Christianity, Buddhism had already played this revelatory role. In recent years, attention has been drawn to these matters in several studies, among which special mention is to be made of the brilliant work of Jacques Gernet, *Chine et christianisme, action et réaction [China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures]*. It presented, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of these contacts, mainly as seen from the Chinese side.

Whoever seeks to examine the history of the penetration of Buddhism during the 4th to the 6th centuries together with that of the undertaking of the first Jesuit mission in the 17th century is bound to be intrigued by a crucial question: why did Buddhism become a permanent force in Chinese culture, whereas Christianity never became more than a temporary and marginal phenomenon?

This question becomes even more baffling if we look at the context of these two encounters of China with foreign religions and if we compare these visitors from another world: on the one hand, Buddhist monks from Central Asia and India, on the other Jesuits coming from nearly all Roman Catholic countries of Europe. No contrast could be deeper: there were basic differences in their social level, education, selection as missionaries, and contact with the homeland.

The Buddhist monks came from many different centres, from various parts of the Buddhist world. Their number is not known, as the sources only mention the most eminent among them.1 In the course of their itinerant lives, they arrived in China, travelling through Central Asia behind the caravans, or they disembarked in some port in southern China, having come across the sea, or sometimes they were even taken as booty in a

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1 In our biographical sources, most notably the large collections of “Lives of Eminent Monks” (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 and its sequels), information about foreign monks is exclusively confined to the category of “translators of canonical texts”. On the other hand, all Chinese literature of this period abounds in passages in which “barbarian monks” (*huseng* 胡僧) are mentioned in several roles, and often those of magicians or prophets endowed with supernatural powers. On the limitations of the genre of the Buddhist biography, cf. our remarks in “Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Buddhism”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1982.2, pp. 161–176.