NEW PREFACE TO THE BUDDHIST CONQUEST OF CHINA

Reading this book more than thirty-five years after its publication has been a somewhat frustrating experience for the author; it probably is the best way to realize how much has been written in the meantime about almost all aspects covered by it, and how much new information should be integrated into a revised version. Of course the production of a Japanese translation would ideally have been the opportunity to do so, but the task of updating The Buddhist Conquest would have been so exacting and time-consuming, that the publication of this Japanese version would have been delayed by several years. Therefore the book has been translated as it stands, merely adding this introduction.

Needless to say that even a lengthy introduction would not suffice to present a survey of the relevant studies written by scholars in east and west in the course of the last decades. Its main purpose is to identify certain important lacunae, and to indicate how these gaps would be filled up in a hypothetical revised edition. In doing so I shall have to stress a few items on which I have done some research, and so I may excuse myself for referring primarily to articles of my own which I have published, or that are now in the course of publication. This will at least give the reader an idea of the way in which I would treat some topics that I now consider underexposed, or modify statements made in the text.

The book was intended to treat “the formative period” of Chinese Buddhism, starting in the first century CE, and with the first decades of the fifth century as its lower limit. Like all schemes of periodization, this definition is debatable, especially in the case of the early medieval period, when Buddhism simultaneously developed in the different states in north and south China. As a result, the lower limit of the period is not uniform for the different centres. In the guanzhong 關中 area—the ancient metropolitan region of Chang’an—the period is concluded with the many-sided activities of Dao’an in the years 379–385 CE, under the patronage of the ruler of the Former Qin, because at that time a state of maturity was reached in terms of religious ideas, monastic organization, and translation work. For that reason the activities of Kumārajīva and his school at Chang’an in the first decade of the fifth century have only been summarily
treated, for in spite of the momentous importance of Kumārajīva and his Chinese disciples, they could build upon the foundation already laid by Dao'an and his imperial patron. For central China, the lower limit had to coincide with the passing away of Huiyuan (416 CE), under whose leadership the community on Mt. Lu had become the most flourishing centre of both monastic and lay (elite) Buddhism. In that context, some attention still had to be paid to the contacts with Kumārajīva and other masters at Chang'an. Finally, in view of the very close connections between Buddhism in the Lower Yangzi region and the court at present-day Nanjing, it seemed logical to let the lower limit for that region coincide with the fall of the Eastern Qin dynasty in 420 CE.

However, it should be quite clear that all these arguments for the periodization adopted here are based upon a plainly ‘elitist’ approach to early Chinese Buddhism: the development of Buddhism in its formative phase is described in terms of (on the religious side) prominent masters and well-known translators, and (on the lay side) the reactions, both positive and negative, of a tiny elite of rulers, courtiers and scholar-officials.

This approach has been unavoidable because of the extremely one-sided nature of our source materials, all of which have been written by literati and by members of the small emerging elite of scholar-monks within the saṅgha. In general they were interested in what happened on that level, with a well-defined range of interests: the relations between the saṅgha and the highest strata of society; the production and exegesis of written texts, and the interpretation of Buddhism for a highly educated Chinese public. As I have argued at several occasions,1 we are dealing with the tip of an iceberg, about which we are reasonably well-informed, and we know next to nothing about the submerged body which may have been a thousand times larger, and in some ways more interesting.

Every bit of information which we can get, directly or indirectly, is therefore precious, and they should have been given more attention in the book. In order to get at least some glimpses of how Buddhism developed on the middle-class and popular levels, I would suggest the following five lines of inquiry:

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