The Rise of Buddhist Learning in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Sui, and Tang

Editor’s note: The first part of this text appears fragmentary. A record of one of Mou’s lectures as taken down by a student, it seems to have lost some of the smoothness of Mou’s actual speech in transcription. It is worth noting that Mou’s rural Shandong accent made his speech difficult to understand, so that even his own graduate students needed a period of acclimation.

Part I: Phases in the Development of Chinese Culture

I plan to deliver this course as neither a specialist on Buddhism nor a Buddhist disciple, but rather from the standpoint of the history of Chinese philosophy. In the history of Chinese philosophy, one of the periods is that of the Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Sui and Tang, and as far as philosophy goes, its intellectual focus was on Buddhism. Thus this stretch of history is not to be ignored, otherwise there is no way to give a continuous history of philosophy; it will be left inexplicable. However, this period in the history of philosophy is normally very hard to get straight, because doing so requires absorbing a whole new cultural system. That is speaking broadly. Putting it more narrowly, it requires absorbing a whole new great teaching (da jiao 大教), and this teaching’s scriptures are vast and complex and also full of technical vocabulary, and the unfamiliarity of all these varieties of technical vocabulary makes them difficult to understand.

How then are we to make sense of this period in the history of philosophy? First let us reflect on a few phases in the development of Chinese culture.

The Pre-Qin: The Original Model of Chinese Culture

It suffices to say that, if we talk about Chinese culture from its beginnings, then the pre-Qin phase forms the original model.

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2 Together, these dynasties cover the period from 420 to 907 C.E.
3 That is, up to the late 3rd century B.C.E.
2 The Han: Classical Studies

The classical learning of the two Han dynasties\(^4\) inherited the Confucian classics of the pre-Qin and coordinated it with *yin-yang* thought to build the great empire of the Han dynasty. Thus Han learning was a kind of scholarship which involved learning the classics for practical purposes. On this point we need not tarry longer.

3 The Wei-Jin: Xuan Metaphysics

Han classical learning created the Han empire, but by the end of the Eastern Han it could go no further and so it was necessary for “the path to switch back up the mountain,” so to speak, and this switchback first took the form of the “*xuan* metaphysics” of the Wei-Jin.\(^5\) In the development of history, the spirit it manifested was one in which “the rain waters were spent and the ponds cold and clear.”\(^6\) In marrying pre-Qin Confucian classics to *yin-yang* theory to build the Han empire, Han classical learning had already completed its historical mission. But it also had a very vulgar and eclectic air to it, so that by the end of the Eastern Han it could go no further. Therefore a switchback was needed, a sort of purgation, and the *xuan* metaphysics of the Wei-Jin acted as the purgative.

1) Pure Criticism → Pure Conversation → Wei-Jin Xuan Metaphysics\(^7\)

This purgative medicine, *xuan* metaphysics, first emerged in scholarship by way of the Pure Criticism\(^8\) of the late Eastern Han, as expressed in the “disaster

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4 The period from 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E. In Chinese it is common to refer “the two Han dynasties (*liang Han* 兩漢)” because an interregnum lasting from 9 C.E. to 25 C.E. separated the original dynasty, subsequently dubbed the “Western Han,” from the “later” or “Eastern Han.”

5 A period named after two of the successor kingdoms that emerged after the dissolution of the Han empire. There is more than one way of reckoning the boundaries of this period, but for our purposes we can take it as lasting from 220 C.E. to 420 C.E.

6 *lao shui jin er han tan qing* 潮水盡而寒潭清. The image is of late autumn, with the streams drying up and the weather growing cold with the approach of winter. Mou is quoting from Tang poet Wang Bo’s “Farewell at Prince Teng’s Tower” (*Teng Wang ge xu* 聆王閣序).

7 This heading and other laconic headings like it may be notations of what Mou wrote on the chalk board.

8 *qingyi* 清議. A protest movement of scholar-officials, schooled in Confucian classics, to stem the abuses of the court eunuchs. Though it was put down, it is considered the forerunner of the “Pure Conversation” of the Wei. See Alan K.L. Chan, “Neo-Daoism,” 304, in Bo Mou, ed., *History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).