Abhidharma in China: Reflections on ‘Matching Meanings’ and Xuanxue

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1 Buddhism Entering a Confucian World

The earliest direct reference to the introduction of Buddhism in China is the well-known account that relates how Emperor Ming 明 (r. 58–75 CE) of the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) in a dream saw a golden deity flying in front of his palace. When Fu Yi 傅毅, one of his ministers, had explained to him that this deity was the Buddha, he is reported to have dispatched two envoys – Zhang Qian 張騫 and Qin Jing 秦景 – abroad to learn more about this sage and his teachings.1 Although this account is now recognized as apocryphal, during the reign of this Emperor Ming, a Buddhist community of (foreign) monks and Chinese layman must indeed have been present in the region of Pengcheng 彭城, the most important city of the country of Chu 楚, south of the Yellow River. This can be deduced from a decree Emperor Ming issued in 65 CE in which the Buddha is mentioned with respect to the king of this country of Chu, i.e. Liu Ying 劉英, one of the sons of Emperor Guangwu 光武 (r. 25–58 CE), Emperor Ming’s predecessor.2 As Buddhism had been brought to China in the first century BCE by merchants and pilgrims who traveled over the land routes that crossed Central Asia into China, this decree has to postdate the actual introduction of Buddhism in China with about one and a half centuries.3 This means that Buddhism entered and traveled through China in a period in which Confucianism was the official doctrine that was adhered to by the literati class.

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1 See Zürcher, 2007: 22; Ch’en, [1972] 1973: 29–30; Nattier, 2008: 35. The accounts of the dream of Emperor Ming derive from the “Preface to the Sutra in Forty-two Sections” (Sishi’er zhang jing xu 四十二章經序) which was, in the sixth century, incorporated in Sengyou’s 僧祐 Chu sanzang ji ji 出三藏記集 (T.55.2145: 42c15–19). As noted by Storch, 2014: 25, “The authorship and the date of this sutra have been debated since the beginning of the twentieth century”. For a first major study on this legend: See Maspéro, 1910. For more legends concerning the introduction of Buddhism in China: see Ch’en, [1972] 1973: 27–29.
The variant of Confucianism that had been elevated to the status of state orthodoxy in 136 BCE was an interpretation of the early doctrine that was highly influenced by numerological and ‘Daoist’ concepts. This highly syncretistic form of Confucianism was called *Jin wen jia* 今文家 (New Text School Confucianism). The importance of this peculiar type of Confucianism as orthodoxy for the development of Buddhism in China is twofold. A first element of importance is that this doctrine developed to be a part of Chinese self-identification. By the time of the Zhou 周 dynasty (1046–256/221 BCE), a hierarchical feudal order headed by the ‘Son of Heaven’ (*tianzi* 天子) had developed in the central plains (*zhongyuan* 中原) along the Yellow River. This ‘Son of Heaven’ was thought to rule by divine mandate (*tianming* 天命). When Confucianism was established as state doctrine, this Zhou concept of rulership was given a Confucian interpretation: the now Confucian rule was seen as a divine undertaking, and ‘governing’ was interpreted as ‘maintaining the harmonious order between Heaven, Man and Earth’. This is clear from the explanation of the character for ‘*wang*’ 王, ‘ruler’ (generally translated as ‘king’) given in Xu Shen’s 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147) *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字, the oldest extant etymological dictionary of the Chinese language, dated 100 CE. Here we read that, according to Dong Zhongshu who had been a major exponent of the development of New Text School Confucianism, it is so that “when depictions (*wen* 文) were created in olden [times], three strokes that were connected through the middle were called *wang*. The three are Heaven, Earth and Man, and the one who connects them is the ‘ruler’ (*wang*)”. This concept also

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4 Dull, 1994: 3 remarks that the reign of Emperor Wu 武 (140–87 BCE) of the Han dynasty is the period in which Confucianism for the first time was recognized as the ‘ism,’ “to the exclusion of all others, that was to be acceptable to the state and was to become the object of study for those who hoped for official careers”. Schwartz, 1985: 377 calls Emperor Wu of the Han the ‘Constantine of Confucianism,’ who followed the momentous advice of Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) and others to establish the ‘five classics’ of Confucianism as the foundation of all official education and to proscribe all “unorthodox” doctrines. The term ‘*daojia*’ 道家, ‘Daoist school’ only started to be used in the second century BCE. See Cheng, 1997: 103.

5 On the element ‘*jia*’ ‘school’: see further and p. 11 note 48.

6 According to Michèle Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens, [2008] 2009: 302, although the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*) had not been taken into account before Emperor Chengdi 成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE) or as full-fledged theory before the time of the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 5–23 CE), the concept had been operative even before the first century BCE.

7 Yu, 2005: 34 remarks that the politico-religious narrative of Confucianism, in fact, builds on the system that was developed already in the Shang 商 dynasty (trad. 1766–1122 BCE), when ancestors were transformed from kin to symbols of divine power.