
In this small but thought-provoking volume Dr. Antonino Forte deals with a curious enigma that has escaped the attention of practically all historians of early Chinese Buddhism (including the present reviewer): the mystery surrounding the identity of An Shigao 安世高, the first known Buddhist missionary on Chinese soil. Virtually all studies that so far have been devoted to this patriarch of Chinese Buddhism have been based upon biographical and bibliographical data of Buddhist origin: the largely legendary accounts of his life (or rather “lives”) in the early sixth century collections Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳 (GSZ) and Chu sanzang jiji 出三藏記集 (CSZJ), a few early colophons and prefaces, and the list of titles of 34 texts that were attributed to An Shigao in Dao’an’s 道安 catalogue of AD 374 (preserved in CSZJ, j. 2, pp. 5c–6b). On the basis of those materials a few data have become generally accepted: An Shigao originally had been a crown-prince in Parthia (Anxi 安息); when his father had died he renounced the throne and became a monk. He travelled to China and arrived in Luoyang in AD 148, where he translated a great number of Hinayana texts. An Shigao is the earliest known member of a group of foreign missionaries and translators that constituted the nucleus of a small Buddhist community. The few still extant translations in the Chinese canon that may safely be attributed to him bear the stamp of such pioneering: the idiom is archaic, chaotic, and sometimes incomprehensible. Some forty years after his arrival, around AD 189, he is said to have left the capital. The GSZ account also informs us about his subsequent peregrinations in central and south China, but that part of the biography is clearly legendary.

In this study, Dr. Forte confronts the reader with a different set of data that on some essential points contradict the accepted story; they are found in secular sources, and, as the author points out with some well-justified irony, that information was by no means hidden in obscure texts. Only one source (the funerary inscription in the tomb of the 7th-century general An Yuanshou
An 元, published in 1988) is really new: all the other texts have been available for many decades, and, in the case of dynastic histories and genealogical compendia, for centuries. The author rightly attributes our failure to make use of them to the lack of communication between scholars working in the fields of genealogy, epigraphy and Buddhist studies.

The secular materials explored here belong to different types: (1) data contained in dynastic histories (biography of An Tong 安同 and his son An Yuan 安原, of the 4th–5th centuries AD, in Wei shu 29 and Bei shi 20; genealogical table of the 8th-century Grand Minister Li Baoyu 李抱玉, alias An Chongzhang 安重璋, in Xin Tang shu 75B); (2) the Yuanhe xingzuan 元和姓纂 of 812 and later genealogical compendia; (3) rhyme dictionaries; and (4) the funerary inscriptions relating to three Tang-time members of the An family who traced their pedigree back to An Shigao: An Yuanshou (607–683), An Zhongjing 安忠敬 (661–726) and An Lingjie 安令節 (645–704).

A careful analysis and integration of all the available data has enabled the author to identify no less than 55 members of the An lineage, and to reconstruct its main branch in an uninterrupted filiation of twelve generations, from the early 4th to well into the 8th century (genealogical chart, p. 109). Some interesting bits of information serve to shed light upon the vicissitudes of that Iranian family living in medieval China. On the one hand, some members of the An family gained high positions in government (mainly civil during the early Tuoba Wei; mainly military under the Tang), which would suggest a high degree of acculturation. On the other hand, An Tong (died AD 429) is said to have engaged in (probably long-distance) commerce; and An Yuan’s grandson An Nantuō 雳陀 (early 6th century) and even the latter’s grandson An Pansuoluō 盤娑祅 or Panpoluo 盤娑祅 still bore outlandish (sanscriticized?) names. Moreover, both were active as sabao 薩寶 (Skt. sārthavāha, “merchant chief”, or “caravan leader”). Usually sabao was a religious title granted to an Iranian who was appointed, in a semi-official function, to act as a controller of Zoroastrians in China. However, the Indianized names of these two individuals suggest that they were Buddhist rather than Mazdean devotees, and the author is probably right in concluding that in these cases the title sabao only refers to their involvement in the caravan trade, and does not have any religious connotation.

In Tang times we find no more such signs of ethnic identity; the