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BUDDHISM IN CHINA

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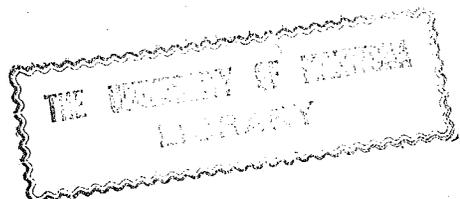
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I.

THE HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM INTO CHINA

In his "Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio," Pu Sung-Ling relates how two Buddhist priests, having arrived from the West, one went to Wu Tai hill, while the other hung up his staff at Tai Shan. Their clothes, complexions, language and features were very different from those of our country. They further said they had crossed the fiery mountains, from the peaks of which smoke was always issuing as from the chimney of a furnace; that they could not travel after rain, and that excessive caution was necessary to avoid displacing any stone and thus give a vent to the flames. They also stated that they had passed through the river of sand in the middle of which was a crystal hill with perpendicular sides and perfectly transparent; and that there was a defile, just broad enough to admit a single cart. Its entrance was guarded by two dragons with crossed horns. Those who wished to pass prostrated themselves before these dragons, and on receiving permission to enter, the horns opened and let them through. The dragons were of a white color and their scales and bristles seemed to be of crystal. Eighteen winters and summers these priests had been on the road; and of the twelve who started from the West together, only two reached China. These two said that in their country, four of our mountains are held in great esteem, Tai, Hua, Wu-Tai, and Lo-Chia. The people there also think China is paved with yellow gold, that



Kwamyun and Wen-Shu^a are still alive and that they have only come here to be sure of their Buddhahood and immortal life. Hearing these words, it struck me that this was precisely what our people think and say about the West,^b and that if travellers from each country could only meet half way and tell each other the true state of affairs, there would be some hearty laughter on both sides and a saving of much unnecessary trouble.*

Whether or not this be an authentic little story, we cannot say. We do learn, however, from Chinese history and other sources,¹ that the tribes of nomads, who threatened the Western and North-Western portions of China at the time of the Emperor Chung (also called Shi-Whang-Ti) B. C. 246-221, were turned, by the erection of the great wall, to seek an opening for their warlike tastes elsewhere.

A portion of these tribes, called by the Chinese, Ue-Chi, had been driven away from the North-Western province of Kan Su by a horde of new invaders called Hiung-Nu. These Hiung-Nu, it is believed, were Turks, and became a terror to the Chinese empire. The energy and ability of the Emperor Wu-Ti (B.C.140-86)², broke their power; but the consequence of the pressure they exercised on the Ue-Chi, caused them to encroach on the Tochari (or people of the country of Tchia), who had just broken up the Greek Bactrian kingdom. They drove out the Sus from the borders of the Pamir and its eastern slopes and settled there. But in their early migration a portion of them, the little Ue-Chi, or White Huns, had already entered Thibet and penetrated into North India and the Punjab. We find them at Vaisali and other towns bordering on the Ganges Valley at an early date (middle of the

1: MacGowan, "Imperial History of China", pp 78-79; Underwood, "Religion of Eastern Asia" pp 194-202; Beal, "Buddhism in China," pp 42-50.

2: MacGowan, "Imperial History of China," pp 97-102; Beal, "Buddhism in China," p 49,*Translated from Chinese into English by Herbert A. Giles.

a: Kwamyin is the Buddhist goddess of Mercy; Wen Shu is the god of wisdom.

b: The West probably refers to India.

second century B.C.?). The others remained stationary on the North bank of the Oxus. Gradually they separated into lesser tribes and pushed farther West, where, in all probability, they became known as Goths. The remaining portions finally coalesced after the dismemberment of the Hiung-Nu confederation by the Chinese, and a few years before the Christian era, they marched in a body, led by the chief of the Gushan horde, to invade India and the entire Indian frontier. This was accomplished. And at the time of Kanishka, who reigned at, or shortly after, the beginning of the Christian era, the whole of North India and the portions of Central Asia between Parthia and China were brought under their power.

It is this Kanishka who became a Buddhist, and who built the vast towers and Topes, which still remain in a ruined state throughout portions of Afghanistan and Cashmere. Thus the Northern tribes of barbarians, as we call them, are seen to play a conspicuous part in the history of the early dissemination of the Buddhist doctrine. For it seems to have been through them that the first knowledge of Buddha reached China. And it is through them, and their zeal in spreading the knowledge of their books, that the system of Buddhism came eventually to be patronized and established in the Empire.

But it was not until the reign of the Chinese Emperor Ming-Ti (58-76 A.D.), that Buddhism was definitely introduced into the Empire!¹ The Capital at that time was at Lo-Yang and it was here that for many years afterwards the great Buddhist centre of work lay. The Emperor Ming-Ti had probably heard of the progress of Buddhism among the tribes bordering on China and India. The Emperor, at any rate, is said to have had a dream in 64 A. D., in which he saw a golden figure flying from heaven and hovering over his palace. His head was surrounded by a glory equal to that of the sun and moon.

1: See the following: MacGowan, "Imperial History of China", pp 117-118
Hackman, "In Chinese Recorder," December 1910
Beal: "Buddhism in China," pp 51-53 also p 90
Underwood: "Religion of Eastern Asia," p 195
De Groat: "The Religion of the Chinese," pp 178-179

Being moved by his dream to enquire as to its meaning, one of his ministers, Fu-Yih, told him that he had heard there was a divine person born in the West, and probably this dream was connected with that circumstance. The Emperor, however, was induced to send an embassy to the Western country in search of tidings, books and all information regarding this mysterious personage. We are told in the annals that the Embassy, numbering in all eighteen men, arrived in India and came as far as the country of the Ue-Chi. Here they collected books and relics. . In time, they, being accompanied by two Buddhist priests, returned homewards and arrived at the capital, Lo-Yang in 67 A. D. The Emperor appears to have lent a ready ear to the instruction of the foreigners and caused a temple to be built in which the books (sacred scripture, etc.) and relics might be stored. The temple was called after the name of the "White Horse" on which the books, etc. had been brought from the West.

But it is not until 148 A. D. that we get the great Buddhist propaganda in China. This was headed by a Prince of Parthia named Anshikao, who had resigned his throne in order to become a monk. From this date, for five-hundred years following, a succession of Buddhist monks or priests continued to arrive in China. They brought with them their books, which by the order of various sovereigns, were translated and placed in the monasteries. The Buddhist movement and a knowledge of the Sanscrit books grew rapidly. By the year 335 A. D., the Chinese were allowed to take monastic vows themselves and as many as forty-two convents had been built in Lo Yang alone. Not only so, but Chinese priests undertook pilgrimages to India, in order to collect there the sacred writings and bring them to China. Among the most famous pilgrims are Fah-hien who entered upon his journey in 399 A.D.; Sung-Yun, whose travels took place between 518 and 522 A.D.; and I-Tsing, who lived from 634 to 713; but particularly renowned is Huen-Chwang, who was absent from home from 629

to 645 A. D. No less than 2213 translated works on Buddhism are mentioned in the oldest catalogue of the year 518 of our era; 276 of these are still in existence. Thus, despite much opposition, Buddhism, by the beginning of the sixth century of the Christian era, had made itself felt in all parts of the Chinese Empire.

II.

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHINA IN THE COMING OF BUDDHISM

But the advent of Buddhism upon Chinese soil had a profound religious significance, and in order to appreciate this religious significance, it is needful that we review, in outline from the more ancient times, down to and including the first century of the Christian era, the religious history of the Chinese people.

But how shall we begin at the beginning of this task? The folk-lore of the ancient Chinese, from which we should expect much knowledge, has long since been lost, if any ever existed in literature. The probability is that it was obliterated by Confucius when he edited the classics. Hence the only source open to our study is the classics in their present form. There seems to exist no "sacred book" outside of the classics that embodies the ancient religious ideas and beliefs of the race.¹

There is a common feeling among Westerners, and even among some writers about things Chinese, that if the Chinese people ever did have a conception of a Supreme Being, that conception was either Pantheistic or Naturalistic. But the majority of Sinologues today are of the conviction that in the far distant past, the early Chinese were worshippers of one Supreme God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things.²

In the classics there are indications that the ancient Chinese were sensible of the existence of some Superior Power to which they owed respect and gratitude; respect for the natural forces which they perceived working in the universe,

1: See "Chinese Recorder" June & July 1911, article on "Religious Beliefs of Ancient Chinese," by Francis C. M. Wei of Boone University, China.

2: Dr. James Legge, "The Religions of China", Lectures I, II, IV.
~~Usually translated as "The Religions of China".~~

and gratitude for the blessings which they received in various forms, as the warmth of the sun, the light of the moon, the wealth of the mountains and rivers. But their imagination was not strong enough to carry them one step further in order to realize this superior power with a clear-cut vision.

The development of this vague and implicit idea of the existence of a superior power into the conception of a personal and spiritual Being was brought about by a different course, not by imagination, but by the logical reasoning of the Chinese mind. The ancient Chinese lacked the imaginative power of the Greek mind, but they possessed, to a great extent, the sense of law and order of the Roman people. The regularity of the seasons, the order of the movements of the heavenly bodies, and the general harmony of the universe, - these could not be accounted for except by the existence of a controlling power which had the government of all. This gave rise to the idea of Shang-Ti (God), the Supreme Lord. The name of Shang-Ti for the Supreme Being is frequently used in the ancient classics, although it is rarely found in the later literature. According to the Book of Rites, it was to Shang-Ti that the Son of Heaven should pray for grain in the first month of the year. This is most suggestive. Rain and soil are essential elements for a plentiful crop in China. Yet the record is that the ancient Chinese made their prayers to Shang-Ti, not to the "God of Rain" or the "God of the Soil." Again, a catastrophe on a mountain or the drying up of a river was often recorded in Chinese history as a calamitous sign. But it was interpreted not as the wrath of the spirits of the mountains and rivers but as a warning from Shang-Ti.

What then is the nature of this Shang-Ti of the ancient Chinese? Is he a personal deity like Jehovah, or is He considered merely as equal to nature in the manner in which a pantheist would regard his deity? The answer to

this question is in the classics. But just here we must pause to discriminate carefully the various senses in which the word "Tien" (天^a) is used in ancient Chinese literature in order to attain a definite and clear conception of the idea of the ancient Chinese concerning the Supreme Being.

In the first place "Tien" is used to signify the visible firmament overspreading the earth. Secondly, it is used to indicate nature itself. Thirdly it is used as equivalent to fate, as when Confucius exclaimed, "Heaven rejects me." Finally "Tien" is employed as a denomination for the Supreme Being. e. g. "Heaven is going to use the Master as an Alarm Bell," says a friend of Confucius. And Confucius himself is reported to have used the word in this latter sense, when he said emphatically to his vainglorious disciple: "Shall I deceive Heaven?"

With these distinctions in mind, we may proceed to enquire what attributes the ancient Chinese assigned to the Supreme Being, whom they worshipped and served as Lord of the Universe. The first point that impresses the student of the Chinese classics is that the ancient Chinese conceived of God (Shang-Ti) entirely as an invisible Being. But Shang-Ti being invisible, is not the "infinite blank", entirely unthinkable, as is the doctrine of the neo-Platonist. The ancient Chinese were not mystics. Though invisible, Shang-Ti is not unthinkable. He was conceived of as majestic and glorious. e. g. "Great is ~~the~~ Supreme Lord, beholding the lower world in majesty" or again, "The bright and glorious Lord Supreme, will in them give us a good year."¹

Further, - the idea that Shang-Ti is simply a master machine who, having finished his work and endowed it with forces by putting into it the necessary springs and by winding them properly, is now far away from the world and has no concern with mortals - finds no parallel in the Chinese classics. According to them Shang-Ti is "beholding this lower world." e. g.

a: Usually translated Heaven.

1: Book of Odes.

"The Lord Supreme is with you; have no doubt in your heart."² Again, was this Shang-Ti a personal deity or merely an impersonal blind power, like unto the God of the pantheist? According to the ancient Chinese, Ti or Lord, implies, distinctly, personality, e. g. "The fame of him (King Wan) ascended up to the Supreme Lord, and the Lord approved."³ This undoubtedly has in it the idea of personality.

In regard to the nature of Shang-Ti, the ancient Chinese emphasized most His justice and impartiality. "The way of the Supreme Lord is not invariable (for He will reward or punish a man according to his actions.) On the good doer He sends down all the blessings, and on the evil doer, He sends down all miseries." But His love and mercy were not passed unnoticed. He was said to love the people. "Heaven loves the people." "Heaven compassionates the people, and what the people desire, Heaven will be found to give effect to."³ Neither is Shang-Ti represented as revengeful. He is ready to punish the evil-doer, but in doing so, He is merely enforcing the moral laws. e. g. "It is not the Supreme Lord that has caused this evil time, but it arises from Yin's not using the old ways."⁴

We shall pass on to the consideration of the relation of Shang-Ti to the people, and in this we shall begin by quoting a passage from a speech delivered by Tang (B.C.1766-1753), the first sovereign of the Shang dynasty, which is thus recorded in the Book of Historical Documents: "The Great Supreme Lord has conferred even upon inferior people a moral sense, compliance with which would show their nature invariably right." In the Book of Odes, also, the same idea is expressed: "Heaven in producing mankind gave them their various faculties and relations

2: Book of Odes.

3: The Book of Historical Documents.

4: Book of Odes.

with their specific laws," We meet the same idea again at the opening of the Doctrine of the ^eMan: "What Heaven has conferred is called the nature; an accordance with this nature is called the Path of Duty; the regulation of this Path is called Instruction." Thus Heaven or the Supreme Being is the source of man's moral sense. He bestows upon man His nature and to act in accordance with this nature is the fulfillment of His Will.

Finally Shang-Ti is the ruler of mankind: "Vast is the Supreme Lord, the ruler of Mankind."¹ ~~To the ancient Chinese.~~ To the ancient Chinese, the Supreme Lord is the ruler of mankind in the literal sense of the term. Government is actually thought to be from Him. In His hands is the supreme guidance of the state. On earth, however, the sovereign is appointed to be His vice-regent. e. g. "Rulers and instructors are appointed in order that they may be able to assist the Supreme Lord and secure the tranquility of the four quarters of the Empire."² The ruler of the ancient Chinese reigned by divine right. He owed his position only to the appointment of Shang-Ti. "The rulers have no other divine right to their positions but that which arises from the fulfillment of their duties. The dynasty that does not rule so as to secure the well-being of the people, has forfeited its right to the throne. Heaven loves the people, and the rulers should reverence this mind of Heaven."³ As soon as the ruler fails to discharge his duties as shown above, he ceases to be the ruler of the people. "If within the four seas there be distress and poverty, your heavenly conferred reverence will come to a perpetual end."³

Another point worthy of mention is that Shang-Ti does not appear to be merely a tribal God of the Chinese. He was regarded by the ancient Chinese as their governor, but his

1: Book of Odes.

2: MacGowan "Imperial History of China" pp 423-45

3: Historical Documents.