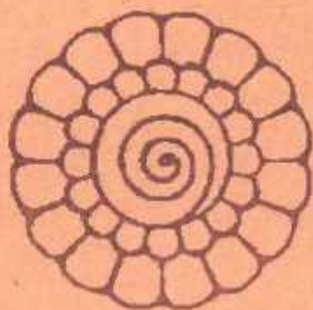


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Chinese Buddhism: A Fine Example of Exquisite Indigenous Craftsmanship

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The two ancient civilizations of India and China, have over the past few millennia set precedents in the world community, of peaceful co-existence, despite occasional flaring up of misunderstandings and conflicts of interest. Intellectuals on either side of the frontier have maintained comprehensive faith in each other's capabilities of harmonious existence, and in the hope of an ever-lasting bilateral relation based on cooperation and mutual trust.

One among many of such eminent personalities with enormous contributions in this confidence building initiative between India and China, had been our very own Indian poet, thinker, philosopher, reformer Rabindranath Tagore. He was assisted in his endeavour by his senior Chinese contemporary Liang Qichao and a young esteemed Chinese poet and Tagore's confidant Xu Zhimo.

Gurudeva and the Buddhist Connection— Relocating Ancient Lost Ties between India and China

As much as had the subtle philosophical tenets of Buddhism struck the emotional and psychological chords of Tagore's heart, the selfless contributions made by hundreds and thousands of Indian and Chinese Buddhist monks travelling across the inhospitable terrains of present day Xinjiang Province (PRC), the Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, Pakistan and northwest India, in founding a common ground of brotherhood through the teachings of the Bauddha Dharma for over almost a millennium, did not also escape his attention.

Though many such names (both in India and China) are involved in bridging the temporal and spatial gap between the complex matrix of ancient Indian Buddhism and the Chinese indigenous system in which it was transmitted, could not find way to the codified versions of Chinese dynastic historical annals or Buddhist literature, the collaborative efforts meted out by each such inspiring souls, still emerge as the key inspirational force in reaffirming the essence of history of friendship and brotherhood between our brother nations of India and China. Tagore had been among the first few intellectuals in the country to have envisioned the need for making comprehensive efforts in attempting to know closely one's neighbour. Avenues of Sino-Indian

Buddhist interchange therefore featured among his most serious issues of research and contemplation.

The following study is a homage to the outstanding receptive, congenial genius of our very own Gurudeva, who, in utmost sincerity felt deeply touched by the suffering of our Chinese brothers and sisters during their lonesome struggle against foreign imperialism and domestic feudalism in the modern period of Chinese history (1840-1949). Where was then the Indian hand to render support to her long time neighbour during these troubled times? It was heart breaking for Gurudeva to find that centuries of friendship shared by the two nations was long forgotten amidst modern age struggle against colonial oppressor forces. As means of reaching out to the people of both the countries and reminding them of each other's historical friendship, Gurudeva had time and again emphasized the importance of Buddhist connections in reaffirming friendly bilateral relations with China.

Gurudeva's conviction stands reflected in the academic establishment of Cheena Bhavana at Visva-Bharati, the first such institution to be established in the whole country as early as 1937, as a centre for Buddhist and Chinese Studies. The role that Cheena Bhavana was envisioned to play was to bring to life the silent efforts of these Buddhist pilgrim-monk-scholars, for people of both countries, in order to realize what the driving force between our two nations had been, whether it had been material or spiritual or both?

Objective of the Study

Cheena Bhavana being the author's alma-mater, the following study bears the obligation of re-evaluating Buddhist ties between India and China, and sharing its essence with the readers here.

The study here would focus on the complex evolutionary process of the dissemination of Buddhism in China and its emergence, in due course, as Chinese Buddhism through the first five centuries of the Common Era, highlighting some of the outstanding indigenous inputs fed into this process by few of the Buddhist masters in China during the aforementioned period.

Observation

One of the most fascinating features of Buddhism is the phenomenal phenomenon of its transmission to lands distant from the heartland of its origin (India), followed by its skilful adaptation and assimilation into each of those newly 'penetrated' diverse socio-cultural realms with centuries of existent mature, well developed, divergent socio-economic, religious, political systems.

The product which resulted out of such open, unconstrained yet at times consciously controlled admixture of ideas and notions, was not only coloured with variance but also enriched constantly with regional intellectual input. Buddhism as it emerged in regions away from the heartland of India, transgressed the well defined contours of the former with sufficient ease, in order to make it emerge as being more region specific.

To have successfully permeated into an already complex social system as that of China, the infiltrating Buddhist concepts, ideas, notions had all to be modified and adapted to suit the indigenous recognizable tendencies, in forms such that the Chinese masses could unconditionally relate to. This meticulous exercise of adaptation, reorientation and assimilation was partly conscious and partly spontaneous. Crafted intelligently over a sufficient period of time at the hands of some of the most vibrantly cosmopolitan intellectuals that China has ever produced, Buddhist concepts finally transgressed the features of their conservative Indian counterpart and became 'sinified' or 'sinicized'.

It is beyond all possible means to determine when Buddhism had infiltrated into the complex alien socio-economic, cultural and religious matrix of China. Buddhism had never been preached consciously at the very initial phase of its permeation into Chinese society. The process had been spontaneous and slow, agents being diverse as much as the catalytic factors, a view that holds substantiation from the fact that the very first preliminary teachings related to Buddhism had been incoherent, fragmented and richly diverse, with no clear indication of affiliation to any specific school or sect. Centuries of easy penetration in a guise that could easily be made to seem analogous to the prevalent Daoist and other indigenous Chinese systems of thought, could only have been possible through the relentless efforts meted out by members of the intelligentsia in early and medieval China, of both Chinese and non-Chinese ethnicity.

Testimonies in the form of archaeological and textual evidences have been extensively researched upon by scholars from across the world, especially during the post 1970 era, with major academic progress reported in the field of Sinology. We have therefore arrived at some very significant understanding about the rudimentary phase of Buddhist dissemination in China.

It had primarily been through the trading channels and commercial networks scattered across Central Asia, Myanmar, and the maritime routes from Southern India, through Southeast Asia to China, that Buddhist ideas in rather distorted, unassorted, fragmented versions, had paved their way into China. Initially the foreign religion had lived on among the ethnically non-Chinese

immigrant families, with a supposed unplanned, un-systematized introduction of the same to the Chinese lay devotees, dwelling in and around such foreign immigrant colonies and in supposed regular interactions with them. The first encounter of foreign settlers in China with Buddhism is, as a matter of fact, too complex an issue, and too wide ranging in scope, to be dealt with in this study. However, there are hints of certain obvious signs of connection between the commercial nexus operative between China, the central Asian oasis states and north western India, and the inflow of Buddhist ideas in moderate but regular intervals via the aforementioned overland and maritime routes. At this initial period of incubation, as Zurcher prefers to call it, Buddhism went unnoticed as a mere creed of foreigners or as a foreign religion worthy of tolerance, owing to its projected analogy to Daoist concepts. Textual evidences extant in the form of Buddhist bibliographical and biographical literature partially substantiate the contents of the earliest disseminated Buddhist concepts. These ranged from teachings on suffering, actions (*karma*), retribution, to ones based on the popular Buddhist notion of continuous birth, with a regular ongoing process of uninterrupted adulteration with indigenous ideas and local beliefs.

The first two centuries in the history of Chinese Buddhism had witnessed some of the earliest pioneers in the field of Buddhist studies, to have contributed immensely in rendering some of the fundamental Buddhist concepts into Chinese. Most interestingly, these intellectuals of Chinese and non-Chinese origin had been known to have possessed ambiguous identities. Whether Buddhist monks or masters or itinerant merchants, they were able to reproduce the fragmented teachings of the *Dharma* in China through perhaps narrative skills.

From about the mid-second century C.E., through the latter part of the third, there had been recreated in Chinese, quite a considerable amount of Buddhist literature. These were inclusive of both Mahayana and non-Mahayana *sutras*, birth stories of the Buddha (*jataka*), biographies of the Buddha, *abhidharma* texts and scriptures on meditation. Literature related to Buddhist monastic discipline (*vinaya*) had been an exception which began to be rendered in their entirety, only from the beginning of the fifth century C.E. and onwards.

The most prominent of the first generation members of such potentially vibrant intelligentsia, who had been consciously shouldering the responsibility of bringing about the first round of Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures had been An Shigao, An Xuan and Yan Fotiao, each with multiple identities. From information, surviving in some of the most reliable Chinese textual

sources, the *Gaoseng zhuan* and the *Chu sanzang jiji*, most of them were either members of merchant families, or Royal Houses, or lay people who had become versed in the *Dharma*, and eventually introduced core teaching areas like the system of mental exercises, known by the common appellation *dhyana* (Sanskrit, *chan-chinese*) and the explanation of numerical categories, very much an intrinsic part of the Indian Buddhist tradition, enumerating the six *ayatanas*, the five *skandhas*, the four *rddhipada*, the five *bala*, the four *smrtyupasthana*, and so on.

Presuming a low receptivity quotient of the Chinese masses to any doctrine that was foreign, attempts had been made to present Buddhist ideas in a Daoist guise. Thereupon was triggered the process of adaptation, reorientation and assimilation. Classic examples of such adaptation hold true for some of the *dhyana* practices, outwardly resembling certain respiratory techniques related to prevalent Daoist practices.

The methodology employed by An Shigao's chief collaborators, An Xuan and Yan Fotiao as well as some of the second generation of translators, Zhi Loujiaqian (Lokaksema), Zhi Qian and Zhi liang have revealed through intensive investigations the fact that, each had designed a unique way of representing Indic Buddhist ideas in a Sinitized version. Zhi Qian and Kang Senghui were of the habit of employing indigenous religious ideas to express Buddhist ideas, using terms like *hun* and *po* to mean spirits, specifying *Mt. Tai*, as the final abode of the dead, while An Shigao and Lokaksema consciously avoided going into detailed depiction of the meanings of Buddhist terms. Some preferred to transcribe the sounds rather than producing a faithful translation of the meanings hidden in the words. The chief translator who had this genre as his trademark had been Lokaksema. It was this particular trait in the rendition of Buddhist terms that had yielded some of the foregoing expressions in Chinese Buddhism that have continued to rule Chinese Buddhist terminology for centuries to come. The most popular ones being *boluomi* for *paramita*, *Xubuti* for *Subhuti*, *dasa'ajie* for *taihagata* and *ohējusheluo* for *upayakausalya*. Running in contradistinction with the aforementioned trend, emerging parallelly, had been the popular tendency of translating not only Buddhist terms but also proper names. Therefore emerged the translated version *Wenwu* for *Sravasti*, and *Jingshou* for *Manjusri*, lined amidst honest translation efforts of An Xuan and Yan Fotiao.

The first three centuries of the Common Era had elapsed in preparing the ground for the newly permeated Buddhist ideas to gradually strike roots. From the third century onwards, we do have evidences suggestive of the

unfolding of Buddhist assimilation amidst the upper class gentry and this gradually set into motion the striking connections of Chinese Buddhist monastic community with the Chinese officialdom and the bureaucratic class.

Chinese society, in the medieval period of history might well be perceived, most simplistically as having been a multi-layered pyramidal structure, with the bureaucratic class occupying the apex, the commoners forming much of the base and the intelligentsia comprising Chinese and non-Chinese Buddhist masters lying between the two aforementioned distinctive divisions of Chinese social segments. One of the leading personages, who can safely be accredited for having sown the seeds of Buddhist conversion in north and north east China, had been the immigrant monk Fotudeng (d. 348 C.E). Though initiated by Fotudeng, the tradition of improvising upon disseminated Buddhist ideas with their respective traditional Indian background and yet keeping alive the spirit of turning to the roots to have the purest original version of the same for a point of intensive reference, had reached its zenith with Daoan (312-385 C.E), the most worthy follower of the former.

Shi Daoan's contributions have perhaps spanned the most wide ranging area of serious Buddhist studies, inclusive of both scholasticism and monasticism. Possessing an equal expertise on 'contemplation' (*dhyana*), 'emptiness' (*sunyavada*) and 'wisdom' (*prajna*), Shi Daoan might as well be seen as having been the first and the most cosmopolitan of all distinguished Chinese Buddhist masters, receptive to all forms, traditions and genres of Buddhist concepts and innovative enough to extract the relevant, before finally crafting it into a new, practical mould of its own. Shi Daoan has been recognized for having set in the trend of adaptation, reorientation and assimilation of Indic Buddhist concepts, which in the form of orally disposed or codified versions had seeped into the Chinese socio-cultural milieu, in order to make them well suited for the Chinese monastic community. He had been one of those very few yet most influential cosmopolitan personages, in the history of Chinese Buddhism, who exhibited a maturity, rightly mature enough to justify the need of tailoring dogmas in accordance with the needs of the time and the people. The era he belonged to, had not quite witnessed the availability of complete, authentic Indic versions of Buddhist monastic disciplinary rules (*vinaya*). Piecemeal information on the fundamental ritualistic practices, related to ordination ceremonies, had been seeping in through the initiation, effected by wandering scholars, from in and around the Buddhist dominated Central Asian oasis states, north western India and even as distant as from Central India, either through oral disposition or through the fragmented codified versions that they carried

along. However, the problem posed in this case was by far too complex to be resolved. This was primarily because monk-scholars visiting China at different periods of Chinese dynastic history, themselves belonged to diverse Buddhist schools or sects, trained in equally diverse traditional genres. At the same time which they intended was to provide the Chinese audience with a more generalised view on Buddhist dogmas, whether they be related to the teachings of the Buddha (*sutra*), the codes of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) or treatises on the philosophical reinterpretations of the teachings of the Buddha (*abhidharma*) genre of teachings. That which resulted out of this exercise, was a highly syncretic version of the Indic Buddhist ideas, adapted with utmost intelligence and understanding to ensure effective assimilation of the same into the broader segment of Chinese society.

Shi Daoan had designed a stream lined set of codified regulations, by making a comparative study of all relevant materials on Buddhist monastic disciplinary codes (*vinaya*) that had been available until then, in their fragmented versions, lying scattered across China, with the objective of making them readily adaptable against the indigenous situation in China. Shi Daoan's well formulated monastic codes for Buddhist communal living has earned him the recognition of being 'the pioneer of *Sangha* regulations' in China. It might then, time and again be reiterated that Chinese Buddhism did not simply confine itself to the parameter of Indian Buddhism but took steps ahead, with the genuine intention of accomodating indigenous Chinese requirements. Not only were innovations reflected in the known areas of Buddhist philosophical interpretation, but experimentation with the mixing of ideas continued to be something that Chinese Buddhist scholars took adequate interest in.

One of Daoan's contemporaries, Zhi Dun (314-366 C.E) had aspired to bring along synchronization between the Daoist philosophy of 'Dark Learning' (*xuanxue*), much popularly dominant during the waning years of the Han dynasty with Buddhist *prajna* talk.

Buddhist monastic disciplinary rules which are fundamental to the phenomenon of institutionalization of the *Dharma*, emerged in China through the adapted versions of Buddhist masters. Therefore, adaptation took place greatest in the field of assimilation of Buddhist monastic disciplinary codes (*vinaya*). Daoan's able disciple Huiyuan's remarkable craftsmanship of *vinaya* rules had been regulated more closely than ever by the political pressure of the times. Towards the end of the 4th century, the Chinese Buddhist monastic order had been confronted with severe incidents of purging, by Huan Xuan (369-404), of the Eastern Jin dynasty with the mission of singling out those

monastics in particular who were under the tendency of ingratiating themselves to the royal house to win favour and patronage. While on one hand, the aforementioned incident had made Huiyuan voice out his opinion strongly against all kinds of government intervention, on the other it had made him contemplate over years of shortcomings that Chinese Buddhist fraternity was facing, ultimately necessitating formulation of renewed principles. Thereupon Huiyuan embarked upon the journey of an editor and compiler, studying intensively a wide range of regulations that had appeared in Chinese monastic tradition before him and finally incorporating the best of them all into a set of well formulated regulations. The most authentic, extant Buddhist catalogue, *Chu sanzang jiji* that Huiyuan enlisted as the editor of *Fashe jiedu* (Regulations for the Dharma Association), has *Waisiseng jiedu* (Regulations for Monks from Outside), and *Biqiuni jiedu* (Regulations for Bhiksunis). These are collectively known as Huiyuan's Regulations (*yuangui*).

While there had been genuine contenders for bringing out the best designed version in practices related to *Vinaya*, there had been many more who had been using the pretext of the troubled times to intercept the authentic codes and bring out their own supplementary rules.

Chinese Buddhism for almost over two millennia, has set precedents of fine tuning philosophical theories, doctrines and notions in accordance with the changing times. Stagnancy has never been an element in any of its characteristic features. Fresh inputs, new perspectives, renewed interpretation of the initially transplanted Indian Buddhist elements have all along been the pivot around which the Chinese Buddhist masters have worked relentlessly. It therefore suffices here to say that this could have been one of the reasons as to why this religion has continued to live on in China, against the backlashes of Confucianism as well as that of authoritarian Communism.

Gurudeva always envisioned a Sino-Indian bilateral relation that would be based upon the spirit of renewed friendship and this, he knew, could possibly be effected through the process of re-identification of the lost threads of Buddhism that had for years bound the two ancient civilizations of India and China together, but at the very same time long forgotten. Study of Buddhism, research on Chinese culture and excavating those lost beads of mutual understanding had been pointed out as the most daunting task awaiting the present and future generation of both of our countries. This study has attempted to provide a few glimpses of the massive, selfless endeavour of Chinese intellectuals, to make Buddhism their very own.

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