

SYNCRETISM RECONSIDERED:  
THE FOUR EMINENT MONKS AND THEIR SYNCRETISTIC STYLES

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The coexistence of and dynamic interactions between the three major Chinese religious traditions have molded distinctive characteristics of Chinese Buddhism in no less a way than the latter has indelibly influenced Confucianism and Daoism.<sup>1</sup> After the Song Dynasty (960–1276), with the philosophical maturation of Neo-Confucianism in particular, a plethora of relentless inter-religious vilifications on the one hand, and passionate defense of the inherent harmony of the three religions on the other, became some of the most prominent features on the Chinese religious landscape.

The apparent similarities between the religions notwithstanding, the self-awareness of one's unique lineage paradoxically and increasingly asserted itself in the Song dynasty, when sectarian self-consciousness in both Buddhism and Confucianism gave rise to notions of distinct "schools" and "lineages" on an unprecedented scale. The conception of an inviolably intact transmission of Confucian orthodoxy (*daotong* 道統) was echoed in the Buddhist flurry to construct their sectarian "lines of patriarchs" (*zupu* 祖譜).<sup>2</sup>

Most religious syncretists devised a dialectic strategy that assumed both the positions that all religious traditions are inherently compatible, and that at the same time their own tradition is still the

<sup>1</sup> Wing-tsit Chan even went so far as to remark that the very Chinese character is one that is predominantly represented by Neo-Confucianism modified by Buddhism and Daoism. See *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. ix. Robert Sharf, too, in his Introduction to *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, argued that the confluences and interactions between these religious traditions were so pervasive that the very idea of independent, autonomous entities of religious traditions is quite problematic.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the notion *daotong*, see Julia Ching, "Truth and Ideology: The Confucian Way (Dao) and Its Transmission (Dao-T'ung)."

most efficacious and/or the most comprehensive in scope. While avoiding claims to religious exclusivity, they nevertheless retained allegiance to a primary religion despite their universalistic propositions, using that religion as an interpretive frame of reference through which the other religions were polemically assessed or ecumenically appreciated. One of the earliest syncretists compared Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism to the “sun, moon, and the five stars,” respectively, and praised their celestial luminosity.<sup>3</sup> What appeared to be a gesture at illustrating the resplendent merits of all three was really not an equitable treatment of them at all, if we consider the relative brilliance of these heavenly bodies and the partiality implied in that order.

We could see many examples of such “unequal ecumenism” in the works of the so-called Four Eminent Monks of the Wanli Era (Wanli si gaoseng 萬曆四高僧 – Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清,<sup>4</sup> 1546–1623; Daguan Zhenke 達觀真可 1543–1603; Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏<sup>5</sup> 1535–1615; Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 1599–1655), whose syncretistic styles will be the primary focus of this paper: Zhixu maintained that both Buddhism and Confucianism advocat filial piety,<sup>6</sup> but that this virtue was fulfilled to the greatest extent only in Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Zhuhong, too, pointed out that all three religions promote the ideas of “commiserating with” and “protecting” living creatures,<sup>8</sup> but when it comes to the universality and thoroughness of compassion, no religion can be on par with Buddhism.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Edward Ch’ien, *Chiao Hung and the Restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in the Late Ming*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Hanshan’s life and syncretistic efforts, see Sung-pen Hsu, *A Buddhist Leader in Ming China: The Life and Thought of Han-Shan Te-Ch’ing*.

<sup>5</sup> Zhuhong’s life and contribution to Buddhist revival movement in Ming is covered in detail in Chün-fang Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ouyi dashi wenxuan*, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146–147.

<sup>8</sup> *Lianchi dashi ji*, p. 91–92.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* He also argued the same thing about the precepts or moral codes of the three religions, with that of Buddhism to be the most outstanding.

Many scholars in comparative religions have failed to differentiate a genuine synthesis or fusion of religious ideas from syncretism because they did not fully take into account the two-pronged dialectic. It should be kept in mind that one of the most important elements in the exegetical and syncretistic exercises on the part of both Buddhists and Confucians had been their insistence on the uncompromising distinctness of their own traditions. The ensuring of the unparalleled uniqueness of one's religion, always the primary agenda in genuine syncretistic schemes, was never lost amidst the ecumenical paragons, which often were just a subsidiary device serving the former. As we will see, the simultaneously donning a tolerant posture while claiming the overriding-ness of one's religion was in fact a distinct phenomenon from what could be called "synthesis," and has in actuality characterized many syncretistic endeavors in Chinese history.<sup>10</sup>

If Buddhism and Confucianism were represented as being situated on the two opposite ends of an imaginary ideological spectrum, both can be described as working consciously or unconsciously closer to the middle in the course of their interactions. Timothy Brook, among many others, had described what in scholarship now is almost a truism, namely, that there was a division of labor between Buddhism and Confucianism before the Song, with Buddhism specializing in the metaphysical and Confucianism in the ethical.<sup>11</sup> Let us entertain this generalization for heuristic purposes just for now, and it would seem that the advocates of both traditions had consistently tried to expand their "sphere of specialty" into the other's purported "turf," by actively incorporating those elements that they felt were in short

<sup>10</sup> Some have argued that the Confucian Taizhou (台州) School was attempting synthesis instead of mere syncretism. However, it did so largely through the hermeneutical frame of Confucianism and with the intention of expanding the scope of Confucianism. Genuine, unreserved synthetic movements that resulted in the emergence of a distinct new religious organization were very rare. Some have argued that the best example was the "Sect of Three as One" (*Sanyi jiao* 三一教) formed in the late Ming, though I still have reservations about calling it truly synthetic. For a discussion on this Millenarian sect, see Judith Berling, *The Syncretistic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, and Edward Ch'ien, *Chiao Hung and the Restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in the Late Ming*, p. 11–15 & 21–22.

<sup>11</sup> *Praying for Power*, p. 15–16.

supply in their own tradition.<sup>12</sup> In this case, the Confucian's most urgent task was to construct a metaphysical system strengthened in sophistication and coherence, coupled with a systematic and workable approach for personal spiritual cultivation, worthy of challenging Buddhism's near monopoly and undisputed appeal in these arenas.<sup>13</sup>

And this they went to great length to accomplish much. In fact Confucians were so successful in their endeavor, some scholars attributed the consequent decline of Buddhism and Daoism to the Confucian self-strengthening in precisely these regards. One of these scholars observed that "by incorporating into it the best that was in Daoism and Buddhism ... [Neo-Confucianism] succeeded in stealing the thunder from its rivals, weakening them so much that they never recovered."<sup>14</sup> This could not have taken place without the accurate diagnosis of the perceived weaknesses in Confucianism by the Confucians themselves. Even the most staunchly sectarian of Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) – one of the most

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the Confucians retrofitting itself in various metaphysical aspects such as the mind's status, Frederick Mote has also observed that Confucian "efforts were made to supersede Buddhist primacy in philanthropy, as in the maintenance of orphanages, in providing primary education, in medical services and famine relief, in maintaining homes to care for old people who had no family, and in offering free burials for the indigent." *Imperial China 900–1800*, p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor in *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* explored the soteriological aspects of the said "religion" and maintained that they existed from its inception. However, I must point out that the spiritual elements that pertained to personal cultivation and the attainability of sagehood (comparable to the Buddhist idea of *mārga* and Buddhahood) were not nearly as developed and emphasized before Confucianism's exposure to Buddhist ideas. (Even though its nascent form was present in, say, Mencius' ideas. See Tu Wei-ming's *Humanity and Self-Cultivation*, in the chapter "On the Mencian Perception of Moral Self-Development.") Liu Wu-chi's observation that Neo-Confucianism "disposed of the last few religious elements that had strayed into the K'ung system" (*A Short History of Confucian Philosophy*) suggested a resultant sterilely rationalist Neo-Confucian tradition that simply did not correspond to historical reality. Though some, for the lack of better term, "religious" elements had been ferreted out by the Neo-Confucians intent on reifying their tradition, the elements being "disposed of" were primarily the ritualistic and shamanistic aspects of pre-Han Confucianism along with the tendency to deify Confucius. As for the "religious" elements that involved notions like the attainment of enlightenment and sagehood through a systematic soteriological/cultivational scheme, they definitely remained a key feature of Neo-Confucianism.

<sup>14</sup> Liu Wu-chi, *A Short History of Confucian Philosophy*, p. 164.

outspoken critics of Buddhism – was keenly aware of certain deficiencies on the part of Confucianism that gave Buddhism an uncanny appeal over his fellow co-religionists:

There are many adepts nowadays who turned to the heretic religions [Buddhism and Daoism]. Why is that? It has to do with the fact that their endeavors in our own tradition were flawed and proved fruitless, and that they could find no viable means to set to peace their disquieted minds. They also thought that the [theories of] our own tradition sounded barren and simplistic and provided no good remedies to relieve their feelings of helplessness. The teachings of the [Buddhist] Chanists, on the other hand, were touted to be expedient and easy to put into practice, how could [these practitioners not be tempted] to follow [the Chan teachings]? 今之學者，往往多歸異教者何故？蓋為自家這裡功夫有欠缺處，奈何這心不下沒理會處。又見自家這裡，說得來疏略，無個好藥方，治得他沒奈何底心。而禪者之說 ... 說得恁地見成捷快，如何不隨也？<sup>15</sup>

Propelled by the same logic to cover one's weakest bases, the Buddhists, in response to the most common invectives traditionally pilloried at them, also had to address the ways in which Buddhism could become, or at least represented to be, more socially responsible and less antinomian and eremitic in outlook. The Buddhists, too, had indeed put much effort in steering themselves away from those reviled stereotypes. Just as Confucianism was building up its soteriological and philosophical arsenal to the ends of eschewing the impression that it was primarily concerned with secular establishment and therefore decidedly less spiritual, Buddhism also tried to underscore its more kataphatic and world-engaging doctrines in order to appear less out of place amidst the supposedly pragmatic-natured Chinese. Dahui Zonggao's 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) equation of the Buddhist enlightened mind with the secular virtue of loyalty and righteousness, and Zibo Zhenke's urging of his fellow Buddhists to compassionately participate in the government, were all examples in this regard. This shift towards the "middle" on the part of both religions was a logical maneuver to avoid being intransigently pigeonholed in a negative light, all the while to appeal to what was deemed the most sensible values to the Chinese audience.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Jiang Yibin, *Songru yu fojiao*, p. 269.

The surge of syncretistic literatures after the Song could be seen as partly a reaction towards the enmity and magnified contradictions engendered by the Neo-Confucian controversy and its state-sponsored exclusive truth-claim. Most Ming Buddhist scholars of prominence who spoke of the subject of inter-religious relationship did so in reference to the Song Neo-Confucians – an evidence of the far-reaching impact of the purist legacy and their divisive propositions. Though some scholars had characterized the Confucian criticism of Buddhism as primarily based on ethical arguments, since the Song dynasty Neo-Confucians had in fact mounted attacks from philosophical, nativistic, soteriological, and other angles, the Ming Buddhist apologists had to match the vigor and breadth of the Confucians' standard-setting aspersions in a similarly comprehensive manner.<sup>16</sup>

Edward Ch'ien outlined two historical justifications that Chinese syncretists used for asserting the fundamental congruence of the three religions. One was based on the argument that the "Three Teachings" shared "one source" (*sanjiao tongyuan* 三教同源). The other was based on the idea that "different paths" lead to the "same goal" (*shutu tonggui* 殊途同歸).<sup>17</sup> Based on my examination of syncretistic literature of the Four Eminent Monks, I would like to propose two more grounds on which the argument that the three religions are inherently compatible can be presented. (Indulge me to use literary Chinese idioms as Ch'ien did for continuity and rhetorical purposes). One is that "the division of labor constitutes mutual complement" (*hufu gongcheng* 互輔共成), and the other justification appeals to the notion that different religions not only accomplish the "same goal," but also do so through comparable soteriological venues (*yiqu tonggong* 異曲同工).

The first category of justification – that all three religions are of the same historical or spiritual provenance – was probably initially

<sup>16</sup> Zhu Xi's multi-pronged attack on Buddhist epistemology, ontology, and meditation theories, for example, were unique but not singular. See some of the criticisms he directed at Buddhism in Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 646–653.

<sup>17</sup> Chiao Hung and the Restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in *The Late Ming*, p. 3.

employed by Daoists. In a spurious text that the Daoists composed to besmirch Buddhism, Laozi Huahu Jing 老子化胡經, Laozi was re-created to be the teacher of the Buddha (who was the “*hu*” barbarian – in this case).<sup>18</sup> Ironically, this pejorative recast of Buddha’s historical status was used by later Daoists as a syncretistic strategy to point to the same source of Daoism and Buddhism in the person of Laozi. Interestingly, in the Ming, the “same-provenance” argument was also put forth by the Buddhists for syncretistic purpose, except that this time, the initially purported teacher-disciple relationship was reversed. The legend of Laozi retiring himself to an identified westward destination was reinterpreted as a deliberate measure on his part to go west, that is, to India, to receive higher training from the Buddha, who was historically roughly contemporaneous. Despite the vagueness of the term “western region” used in the original mythological account, which covered a broad geographical region that sloppily included everything west of China, Deqing was unequivocally convinced that Laozi indeed went to India:

Laozi yearned for India, which was why he rode his blue ox [to travel westward] ... He was humble and subdued-in-self, content with little and fully observing moderation. He mingled with the ordinary while concealing his brilliance, and his real age was known to none. It was therefore that his nature was praised [by Confucius]<sup>19</sup> as resembling that of a dragon. [老子] 緬懷西竺, 纔駕青牛 ... 謙道無我, 知足知止, 混俗和光, 莫知其紀, 故稱猶龍.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Laozi, being a person of the Central Kingdom, arrived at profound insights without the benefit of knowing Buddhism; he surely can be called a person of exceptionally keen faculty. If he had had the chance to meet our Lord the Buddha on even one occasion, and allowed the Buddha to verify his experience and resolve [his remaining doubts], it would be conceivable that Laozi would have instantaneously attained the genuine<sup>21</sup> realization of the ‘non-production [of all *dharma*s].’ My opinion is that his journey westward

<sup>18</sup> See Robert Buswell, “Introduction,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> This fabled encounter of Confucius with Laozi was also initially a conjured-up tale by the Daoists.

<sup>20</sup> *Hanshan dashi mengyou ji*, vol. iii, p. 1879.

<sup>21</sup> Deqing seemed to want to emphasize that the outlook of Daoist teaching may resemble that of the Buddhist “emptiness,” but it was still not the “genuine” (*zhen*) experience.

into the desert was not without [such ulterior] reason. 且老，乃中國之人也。未見佛法而深觀至此，可謂捷疾利根矣。借使一見吾佛，而印決之，豈不頓證真無生耶？吾意西涉流沙，豈無謂哉？<sup>22</sup>

What might seem like laudatory remarks paid to Laozi at first sight was, for all purposes, really a relegation of him to the status of a pupil in comparison to the Buddha. Moreover, the host of virtues by which Laozi was extolled was ostensibly in Buddhist terms – yet another example of how syncretists evaluate other religions through the conceptual framework of their primary tradition. By dissecting and calibrating the rival religion through the presuppositional prism of Buddhist doctrine, Deqing fulfilled the dual-goal of showing how both Buddhism and Daoism were grounded on compatible logic and values, and of how Daoism, being the tradition of lesser scope and profundity, could be fully gauged by and assimilated into the greater Buddhist culture.

Zhenke provided another illustration of the “same provenance” argument, in which all the various spiritual traditions were said to have drawn from the same source of spiritual inspiration:

There was something that existed prior to the inception of the body and mind, which was also something beyond the body and the mind, and was utterly pristine and self-abiding (possibly referring to the Buddha-nature). It was through the comprehension of this that [the sage] Fu Xi was inspired to draw the Eight Hexagrams; and through the comprehension of the same thing, Zhongni (Confucius) was moved to write a commentary on the *Book of Change*; Laozi, too, comprehended this thing and proceeded to compose the two Sections [of *Dao* and *De* of the *Daode Jing*]; after realizing the same thing, our Enlightened Lord the Great Ancient One (the Buddha) ‘plucked the flower and smiled to the audience on the Vulture Peak’ (a Chan imagery of the preaching Buddha). (夫身心之初，有無身心者，湛然圓滿而獨存焉。伏羲氏得之而畫卦，仲尼氏得之而翼易，老氏得之二篇乃作，吾大覺老人得之，於靈山會上，拈花微笑).<sup>23</sup>

The second form of justification upon which syncretistic arguments were based pertained to the idea that “all religions lead to the same

<sup>22</sup> *Hanshan dashi mengyou ji*, p. 2431.

<sup>23</sup> *Zibo dashi ji*, p. 6. I have corrected the original punctuation.



end” – what we may call a teleological convergence of all three religions. Zhixu once proclaimed that all religions are but expedient stratagems, like the “willow leaves and empty fists” used to pacify “little children,”<sup>24</sup> and that their ultimate purpose is to help sentient beings “untangle” themselves from “bondages” and “general attachments.”<sup>25</sup> In Deqing’s conviction that “there is not a thing that is not Buddhadharmā, and the [founders of all the] Three Religions were without exceptions perfected sages (一切無非佛法, 三教無非聖人),”<sup>26</sup> he also argued that all of them shared the common goal of helping to rid people of the “attachment to self”:

In response to the fact that everyone in the world invariably suffers from the sickness of ego-attachment ... Laozi had taught that there is no greater [source of] troubles than one’s self. Confucius the Sage was the founding patriarch of a tradition that elaborated on ethical human relations. He therefore [in his discretion] did not dare to casually preach about [the deep meaning of] the eradication of ego-attachment to people of mediocre and inferior qualities (i.e. whose quality reflected the nature of such religious traditions). The only exception was Yanzi (supposedly the brightest of his disciples), to whom Confucius taught about the “restraining of the ego” ... about how not to be stubborn in one’s intentions, how not to be fixated [to anything], and how not to insist on what the self [pleases]. These very teachings are not different from the Buddhist and Daoist cardinal doctrine of ‘no-self.’ 以其世人, 皆以我之一字為病 ... 老子亦曰, 貴大患若身. 以孔聖為名教宗主, 故對中下學人不敢輕言破我執, 唯對顏子, 則曰克己 ... 毋意毋必毋固毋我<sup>27</sup> ... 即此之教, 便是佛老以無我為宗也.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The “willow leaves” (*yangye* 楊葉; the character *yang* could be interpreted to be a variant of the similar character with the wood radical. An alternate reading of the compound could be “the leaves that have been tossed into air” if the *yang* is to be read as it is and either in adjectival or verbal form) resembled the shape of a form of ancient currency and the undiscerning were said to be fooled into collecting them. Whereas the “empty fists” (*kongquan* 空拳) duped unsuspecting kids into believing that enticing toys are held in them. These analogies were often used by Buddhists to refer to the duplicitous but well-intentioned expedient means (*upāya*) resorted to by Buddhist teachers.

<sup>25</sup> *Ouyi dashi wenxuan*, p. 17–18.

<sup>26</sup> *Hanshan dashi mengyou ji*, p. 2416.

<sup>27</sup> The first to take these four Confucian formulations as the equivalent to the Buddhist idea of no-self, was probably Yang Jian (楊簡 1141–1159). A brief description of his *Juesi ji* 絕四記 can be found in Edward Ch’ien, *Chiao Hung and the Restructuring of Neo-Con-*

Even in recognizing a common objective of all three religions the Buddhists did not fail to apply polemical recontextualization. In this case, Daoist and Confucian teachings were reinterpreted through Buddhist semantics. If in its formative periods Chinese Buddhism had to resort to the “matching of meanings” (*geyi* 格義) in order to graft itself onto indigenous traditions, Buddhism in the Ming was assertive enough to reverse the practice in many instances by “matching” the others’ meaning to Buddhist concepts. In this case, Laozi’s lamentation of the troubles physical bodies would bring was read as an explicit description of the Buddhist teaching of “no-self.” It is not clear whether the Chinese character “*shen*” 身 in the original Daode Jing passage refers to the physical body or is used as the reflexive referent “self;” judging from its context, it more likely refers to the corporeal body. In any case, Deqing apparently found it convenient to read it unequivocally in the latter sense.

The third group of Buddhist syncretistic argument was based on the vision that the different supposed functions and specializations of the three religions somehow complement each other and, together, could provide a more holistic regimen for religious life. This usually involved a hierarchical chart where Confucianism was almost consistently ranked as the most elementary of the three religions by the Buddhists. Daoism was either omitted altogether or evaluated as an intermediate training leading to the highest tier occupied by Buddhism. One example of this arrangement was proposed by Deqing:

Confucius was the sage belonging to the ‘Vehicle of the Human Abode,’ he therefore upheld the Heavenly [Way] in instructing the people. Laozi was the sage of the ‘Vehicle of the Celestials.’ He was untainted by desires and had transcended the ‘Human Abode’ to enter the ‘Heavenly Abode.’ The Buddha, in contrast, was the sage who transcended [the duality of] the sagely and mundane altogether. He therefore was capable of [manifesting himself in both the realms of] the sagely and the mundane. As for [the Buddha’s] capability [to manifest himself in both] the sagely and the mundane, how could this be accomplished and matched by [other] sages and mortals? 孔子

*Confucianism in the Late Ming*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> *Hanshan dashi mengyou ji*, vol. iv, p. 2443–2445.

人乘之聖也，故奉天以治人。老子天乘之聖也，故清淨無欲，離人而入天 ... 佛則超聖凡之聖也，故能聖能凡 ... 且夫能聖能凡者，豈聖凡所能哉。<sup>29</sup>

One implication of the “division of labor between the three religions” was that they were perceived to mutually redress excesses and make up for their respective deficiencies. Zhixu implored both Buddhists and Confucians to tap into the other’s spiritual resources in order to deepen their own experiences:

Those who aspire to become genuine Confucians should, as a side quest, also strive to become genuine Buddhists. I have always said that anyone who is less than a genuine Buddhist would be unable to competently regulate the world (traditionally perceived to be a Confucian undertaking). It is a fact that the ‘Three Gems [of Buddhism]’ have the capacity to constantly guard over and aid the [people in the] world; and a true Confucian is also capable of transcending the world (traditionally conceived to be a Buddhist undertaking) ... Those who are in possession of right wisdom, surely can penetrate the meaning [of my words], and understand that this [mutual complementarity] is where the welfare and collective good of the world lies. 有志為真儒者，[應]助成此真釋事業。余每謂非真釋不足以治世。是以一切三寶，常能擁護世間；而真儒亦足以出世 ... 具正眼者，必能深達此意，知世間福田有在矣。<sup>30</sup>

The idea that somehow secular involvement could redress Buddhism’s excessive eremitic proclivities was not a new one. However, the issue of political reform and activism was rarely touched by Buddhist syncretists in the Ming. Zhenke was a notable exception, and he paid dearly with his life for eventually incurring the ire of the political authority. Very few pre-modern Chinese Buddhists broached the possibility of the ideal of a political bodhisattva, let alone lived it. In the turmoil of the political situation of the late Ming when partisan intrigues and malicious conspiracies loomed large, Zhengke envisioned a syncretistic scheme where Buddhism and Confucianism would complement each other in a joint force of righteousness, collectively exerting a purifying influence in the political arena, which Zhengke felt neither religion could accomplish independently:

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 2416.

<sup>30</sup> *Ouyi dashi wenxuan*, p. 149. .

Alas! When corruption ran amuck as people tried to 'institute policies according to the whims of conditions,' it took governance based on principles of benevolence and trustworthiness to rectify the situation. When the rule enacted through benevolence and trustworthiness also became rife with corruption, then governance through wisdom and courage was needed to cure the problem. By the time the rule through wisdom and courage also fell prey to burgeoning corruption, the situation was beyond redemption, which has been our situation for many years. When the Ming Emperor of the Han Dynasty dreamt the propitious dream [of the Golden Buddha], and with the arrival of Mo[teng] and Zhu [Falan]<sup>31</sup> from the West, the [Buddhist] world-transcending teaching was employed to salvage what was previously a unsalvageable situation. That was a logical course of action at the time. For if the world-transcending teaching was not used to balance and supplement the mundane teachings once [the latter] have reached their limit, [the latter] would simply continue to deteriorate without end. [Similarly], if the transmundane path became deviant and excessive, and the mundane teachings were not taken to correct [the former], [the former] would also deteriorate without end ... However, among the Confucians and Buddhists, there are few who have the foresight and vision [to understand this]. My opinion is that if the two religions do not complement each other in checking corruption, their only alternative would lead to the undermining of one another and [political] corruption would surely become more rampant. 嗟乎! 因時布政之弊生, 則仁信之治救焉; 仁信之治弊生, 則智勇之治救焉; 智勇之治弊生, 則莫得而救者, 若干年矣! 至漢明兆夢, 摩, 竺西來, 則以一出世之法, 救莫救之弊, 此理勢然也。蓋世法變極, 不以出世法救之, 則變終莫止; 出世法變極, 脫不以世法救之, 則其變亦終不止 ... 然孔, 釋之徒, 世不多憂深慮遠之人, 所以二氏不得相資而救弊, 則必相毀而弊愈生焉。<sup>32</sup>

By urging a unified front of the two religions, Zhengke tried to divert some of the Confucian criticisms against alleged Buddhist escapism, transforming them into constructive rapprochement. His frequent and highly charged apology that Buddhists could assertively contribute to political amelioration only matched the prevalent Confucian conviction that Buddhism was disassociated from and indif-

<sup>31</sup> For the traditional account involving the Ming emperor of the Han (58–75) and his dream, see Kenneth Ch'en, 29–31. Moteng 摩騰 and Zhu Falan 竺法蘭 were semi-legendary foreign figures who reportedly brought to China the first set of Buddhist imageries and scriptures.

<sup>32</sup> *Zibo dashi ji*, p. 105. I have rearranged the punctuation in Chinese.

ferent to social governance. Wang Yangming was most blunt in stating the point: “Buddhists care about nothing. They are incapable of regulating the world” [佛氏]一切不管，不可以治天下.<sup>33</sup> In response to this kind of diatribe, all four Eminent Monks and many of their Song predecessors advocated a balanced approach to the “functionality” and “calmness” aspects in one’s spiritual training. They were vehement in their insistence that the dimension of “calmness” automatically entailed the potential to spontaneous actions and vitality, which include the judiciousness and impassioned conviction needed for active political participation. Apparently these apologetics were a direct reaction to Neo-Confucians just like Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, who continued to characterize Buddhism as a form of idle quietism, utterly dysfunctional for advancing practical social goods.

The final group of dialectic grounds for syncretism, for our purpose, had to do with the similar outlook, orientation, and focus of the praxis between the three religions. Deqing and Zhixu both pointed to the practice of “tranquility and insight” (*zhiguan* 止觀) to be the hallmark commodity shared by all three religions. As was expressly stated in the following passage, Deqing was convinced that the specializations and spiritual functions of religions might differ *prima facie*, but their respective training was connected by a noticeable common emphasis on the development of mental tranquility (*śamatha*) as a prerequisite to generating insight (*vipāśyana*):

We certainly should know that the teachings of Confucius and Laozi in regard to the mind are not necessarily incongruous. It was due to the [Confucian] need to maintain artificially installed sectarian boundaries and to safeguard and preserve the overriding national status of their religion that they could not help but [insist on their irreconcilable uniqueness]. Confucius focused [his teaching] on managing the temporal affairs, Laozi’s [teaching] focused on becoming obliviously carefree from worldly worries, while the Buddha predominately [taught] the transcendence of the world. Although their ultimate fruitions are different,<sup>34</sup> the entry point [of the three] is all

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Chen Rongjie, *Wangyangming yu chan*, p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that somewhere else in his anthology (p. 2443), Deqing added a stipulation to his universalistic observation: “The respective systems of tranquility and

about doing away with ego-attachment, and their cultivational techniques all begin with the practice of tranquility and insight. 是知孔老心法未嘗不符。第門庭施設。藩衛世教。不得不爾。以孔子專於經世，老子顯於忘世，佛顯於出世。然究竟雖不同，其實最初一步，皆以破我執為主，功夫皆由止觀而入。<sup>35</sup>

The practice of *zhiguan* (tranquility and insight) was a fundamentally Buddhist motif. Moreover, what Deqing was referring to as the Confucian version of “tranquility and contemplation” practice, was from a passage in the Confucian Great Learning taken out of contexts.<sup>36</sup> Deqing explained the relevant passages of the Great Learning in the following way:

Confucius then said, ‘only by knowing tranquility and thereafter would one know about stability.’ He also talked about the ‘elucidation of bright virtue;’ certainly we should understand the term ‘elucidation’ to mean ‘enlightenment.’ 孔子則曰，知止而後有定，又曰明明德；然知明即了悟之義。<sup>37</sup>

Seen in traditional Confucian context, the term “*zhi*” 止 comes from an earlier line in the same section of the Great Learning. It refers to the practitioner’s “abiding” or “staying” in the “ultimate good” once he has accomplished the designated virtue (*zhiyu zhishan* 止於至善). This understanding of “*zhi*” as “residing” or “abiding” is clearly conveyed in Zhu Xi’s and numerous other pre-Song commentaries.<sup>38</sup> Yet it was not only Deqing who read “*zhi*” as denoting a kind of quasi-Buddhist tranquility practice. The greatest irony was that even among Neo-Confucians, especially those of the idealist camp, various attempts were made to interpret it as such, possibly to

insight of the three religions differ in their degree of profundity.” (三教止觀，淺深不同)

<sup>35</sup> *Hanshan dashi mengyou ji*, vol. iv, p. 2446. My emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> One of the great ironies in syncretistic history was that, while the Four Classics were most likely promoted by Song Neo-Confucians to come up with an on-par soteriological system and to reassert their doctrinal integrity, the Four Classics also became a favorite among Buddhist syncretists for use of their own agenda. The Classics became the most fervent ground for the practice of reversed “meaning-matching” as mentioned, and their passages were freely and frequently conflated and recontextualized to the Buddhists’ exploitation. Examples abound in all of the commentaries written by the Four Eminent Monks on these texts.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2443.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, *Sishu Jijie*, p. 6–8.

bolster the soteriological content of the Confucian tradition as we have discussed.

The manipulation of meanings did not stop there. The expression “*ming mingde*” in the context of the Great Learning refers to the Confucians’ desire to edify the world through promulgation of virtues (*ming mingde yu tianxia* 明明德於天下). “*Ming*” (the first of the two *mings*) is a simple verb meaning something roughly like “to make known,” or “to elucidate the meaning of.” Through Deqing’s imaginative reinterpretation, it became the equivalent for the Buddhist idea of “to become enlightened.” The expression “*ming mingde yu tianxia*” was as a whole read by him as “to become enlightened to the [innate] luminescent virtue and then to teach the world about this enlightenment experience.” Finally, instead of treating “luminescent virtue” just as a virtue, Deqing rendered it as the highly Buddhistic “essence of the Mind,” pure and “luminescent” from the beginning of time.<sup>39</sup>

With no more subtlety than Deqing’s play on semantics, Zhixu also participated in this trend of “matching Confucian concepts to Buddhist meanings.” It might seem hypocritical for Zhixu to point out some of the more notorious instances of the misreading of the Great Learning by Deqing – probably in deference to the shrill outcries of Confucian protests following Deqing’s free rendering – only to interject yet another grossly ‘buddhicized’ reinterpretation of the same passage! To understand Zhixu’s free-reading of the Confucian text, a translation of the relevant passages of the Great Learning is in order. The following is the beginning part of the Confucian text, translated as closely as possible to the spirit of Zhu Xi’s standard commentary on the text:

The way of the *Great Learning* lies in the elucidation of manifest virtues ... and it lies in abiding in the Highest Good. Only by knowing how to abide in the highest good one would be able to attain peace ... And only by realizing proper contemplation one would know how to arrive at [the Way of the *Great Learning*].

<sup>39</sup> *Hanshan dashi Mengyou ji*, vol. iv, p. 2377–2378.

Focusing on this passage, Zhixu completely reconfigured its meaning and came up with an interpretation that conformed neatly to the Buddhist doctrinal scheme. Just like Deqing, he read the “manifest virtue” as an ontological entity as expressed in Buddhist notions like the “undefiled, luminescent mind substance” or “Buddha-nature.” By playing with the meaning of the sentence “Only by knowing how to abide in the highest good and thereafter would one know about tranquility,” he infused a distinctively Buddhist ethos in his rendering of the same part:

As for the term ‘zhi’ (止), it merely denotes the very essence of the ‘luminous virtue.’ A point of utmost importance in this piece of instruction is encapsulated in the word ‘zhi’ (知). The *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* taught that, ‘As soon as one realizes the illusory [nature of things, one immediately] transcends [the illusion]. No further effort is required – the transcendence of what is illusory is itself the enlightenment.’ In [the *Great Learning*], zhi (知) is the equivalent of ‘sublime enlightenment,’ while ding, jing, an, and lü (定, 靜, 安, 慮, respectively) constitute ‘sublime cultivation.’ And de (德) refers to ‘sublime attainment’ ... which [has the capacity to] instantaneously transport [the practitioner beyond all] (an expression from the *Śūraṅgama-sūtra* that refers to the ‘sublime function’ derived from spiritual attainment). 止之一字 ... 只是明德本體。此節指點人處, 最重在知之一字。圓覺經云, 知幻即離; 不作方便, 離幻即覺 ... 此中知為妙悟, 定靜安慮為妙修, 得為妙證 ... 忽然超越。<sup>40</sup>

So much loaded ontological meaning was tortuously read into the simple character *zhi* (知), which is simply the verb “to know,” or “to be proficient at.” Yet many Ming Buddhist syncretists indulged themselves in freely associating Confucian concepts with Buddhist ones through elaborately woven arguments. The categories of “enlightenment,” “cultivation,” “attainment,” and “function” that Zhixu employed to arrange the stages of Confucian practice also were extracted directly out of traditional Buddhist soteric schema. The ecumenical claim that different religious venues were of the same orientation and principle was only made after they were already completely reinterpreted and re-presented in Buddhist light. By first demonstrating how Confucian practices could be readily and smoothly translated into comparable Buddhist terms, the syncretists

<sup>40</sup> *Sishu ouyi jie*, p. 9



often would then proceed to argue a posteriori that indeed all the different religious praxis were largely analogous and compatible.

For many Buddhists, the Tathāgatagarbha doctrinal formulation was equally useful for *intra*-religious engagements as well as *inter*-religious ones. In other words, not only was Tathāgatagarbha to a large extent the common currency for post-Tang Buddhist schools, it was the common currency between Buddhism and Confucian idealism – ontological idealism as the hermeneutical frame to polemically assess and interpret other religions was the same one employed for the different Buddhist schools. One may even go so far as to argue that one of the most discernible indication of decline in pre-modern Chinese Buddhist scholasticism coincided with an intellectual culture that was homogenously Tathāgatagarbha in outlook. This doctrinal conformity in the Ming also spelled lack of dissent and self-critique in Buddhist scholarship, as should not be the case in a truly diverse academic culture, and it had led to the observation that the Ming represented an unoriginal and monotonous period in terms of intellectual vibrancy.

One of the distinguishing marks that set Ming Buddhist syncretists apart from their predecessors was their preoccupation with using Yogācāra hermeneutics to classify, subsume, and make sense of Confucian and Daoist practices. The Chinese Yogācāra tradition – the Faxiang School – had been in such a moribund and marginalized state for many centuries, that its sudden rise in scholastic cynosure in the Ming warrants further study. But one of the most obvious reasons for this otherwise inscrutable revival was that the school provided the syncretists with a highly developed theoretical tool to substantiate their syncretistic and *panjiao* outlines (判教 – the traditional Buddhist schemes to classify and rank the different strands of teachings). As so many Ming Buddhists had lamented the abuses and excesses of uneducated clergy, with several even specifically pointing out how government partiality toward Confucianism and the resultant repressive policy had encouraged rampant corruption amid Buddhist circles, many identified the re-establishment of a theoretically robust scholasticism as the only solution to remedy the “hol-

lowed” Buddhist practices.<sup>41</sup> What better candidate was there than the encyclopedic and meticulously technical Faxiang School? Somehow the analytical language, technical taxonomies, and the precise definitions of basic Buddhist tenets and soteric contents of Yogācāra scholarship had come to be viewed as signs of a tradition that was comparatively the least corruptible. While Buddhist Chan practices often fell prey to criticism that they were play of witty words and that Chan masters often postured irrational behavior and flouted conventions to attract attention, in contrast, Yogācāra’s demand for meticulous canonical corroboration and rigorous exercises in the rational seemed a direct antidote to Chan’s degenerate recklessness. What might have at a different time been faulted as excessively cerebral and clumsily pedantic, Yogācāra exegetical literature was upheld by many Ming Buddhists to be the most comprehensive conveyor of the most fundamental teachings – principles badly needed to prop up Chan’s style of subjective and often unbridled spontaneity. It is unrivaled in its meticulous methodologies and unambiguous pedagogical style. It was no coincidence that even in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Chinese Buddhism encountered unprecedented difficulties, Yogācāra was looked upon once again as a corrective for rampant doctrinal ignorance in the clergy and for the harsh ideological challenges coming from outside the religion.

The Buddhist’s nostalgia for the Golden Days of their religious tradition and their grim appraisal of their own times were not completely a groundless fancy, either. The contacts with Indian Buddhist scholarship had abruptly been severed with the Muslim devastation of North Indian Buddhism in the eleventh century, and the transmission of learned Indian treatises to China was already declining several centuries before that.<sup>42</sup> Many scholars understand the weaned Chinese Buddhism as an increasingly self-assured tradition asserting its independence and creativity, which in many respects is a valid

<sup>41</sup> Zhang Zhiqiang has outlined a detail account of the pessimistic assessment on the Ming Buddhists’ part on their own condition, and the political environment that had contributed to that perceived condition. See “Weishi sixiang yu wanming weishixue yanjiu,” especially p. 356–362.

<sup>42</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 162–163.

observation. But at least some of this independence and creativity arose out of necessity rather than out of a deliberate choice to part ways with the Indian host culture. In addition to the aforementioned disruptive Indian factor, the ruthless and methodical persecutions that Buddhism suffered in the late Tang extirpated much of its urban, academic base and propelled the rapid displacement of the so-called “scholastic schools” (*jiaoxia* or *jiao* 教下) by “practice-heavy schools” (*zongmen* or *chan* 宗門; 禪). Contrary to the Chan School’s romantic, self-painted picture of its being *voluntarily* non-reliant on scriptural tradition, it was at least partially due to its having few other options that it consoled its followers with the assertion that theirs was a tradition that could be transmitted “outside the [scholastic] teachings.”

In light of the Ming Buddhists’ diagnosis that the degeneration of their religion was caused by the vacuum left from its weakened scholastic foundation, Yogācāra and its repository of basic Abhidharmic concepts and elaborated stages of spiritual transformations (*mārga*) must have stood out as a matchless candidate for salvaging their plight. The Ming Buddhists saw in the school many useful tools for constructing a doctrinally rigorous and soteriologically reliable system, with the potential to bring substance to especially the Chan practices that were seen as becoming increasingly unrestrained by and deviant from normative doctrines.

This tendency to substantiate the praxis-oriented traditions with the theory-oriented tradition in the Ming was evidenced by the fact that all four Eminent Monks looked to Yogācāra for guideline in their Chan regimens. It is conceivable that the detailed descriptions of meditation and psychology in Yogācāra compendiums had brought more concrete standards of verification and more tangible pointers to the highly elusive, concept-defying Chan experiences. It was out of this consideration that Deqing tried to explain the importance of grounding spiritual enlightenment in rigorous doctrinal learning as that transmitted in the Yogācāra tradition:

“As for the five sense faculties within, and the six sensory objects without, they all belonged to the category of ‘perceived objects’ (of the bipartite distinction between the subject and object) of the Eighth Consciousness. Those who practice Chan must first slough off the body and mind internally,

and eradicate the [attachment to the] world externally, the purpose of which is precisely the extinction of the two divisions [consisting in] ‘perceived objects’ and ‘perceiving subjects’ ... Therefore unfamiliarity with the [Yogācāra’s delineation of] the body, mind, and the external environment would always lead to impediments to [liberation from the cycles of] rebirth.” 內五根，外六塵，通屬八識相分。故參禪必先內脫身心，外遣世界者，正要泯此相，見二分 ... 故身心世界不清，總是生死之障礙耳。<sup>43</sup>

Zhenke in the same vein also commented on the danger of doctrinally unmediated Chan practices and the pressing need to consult Yogācāra scholarship in one’s spiritual experimentations. In referring to a Yogācāra commentary, he said:

“Idle sitting and quietistic introspection are unwholesome [forms of] Chan meditation. [All the more reasons] that one cannot afford not to steep oneself in the ocean of doctrinal learning ... And when one does intend to steep oneself in the ocean of doctrinal learning, shouldn’t this [Yogācāra text] serve as [the best] compass and steering oar for the impending journey?” 枯坐默照為邪禪，非身汎教海不可 ... 若欲身汎教海，則此其舟航維楫乎。<sup>44</sup>

To its Ming proponents, Yogācāra’s usefulness in providing organization and coherence to religious praxis was not confined to Buddhist schools. Its in-depth delineation of stages of spiritual progression, differentiation of nuances between enlightenment and quasi-enlightenment experiences, the rich vocabulary that enabled these functions, in addition to all the other mentioned strengths, was also useful for the Ming Buddhists in their critique, qualification, and mollification of non-Buddhist traditions. The fastidiously construed typologies and hermeneutical structures in Yogācāra meant that Buddhists could polemically assign rival religions on Buddhism’s own clearly delineated hierarchical pyramid (or spectral classification, depending on what kind of hermeneutical structure was used). Deqing gives us an example of how he came to rate the other traditions in such a manner:

In regard to the Eighth Consciousness, heretics and non-Buddhists either [wrongfully] attached to it as their nihilistic refuge, as the [uncaused] Na-

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Shi Shengyan, *Mingmo fojiao yanjiu*, p. 233.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 206.

ture,<sup>45</sup> or as unfolding worldly conditions<sup>46</sup> ... To speak in accord to the truth, those who upheld Confucianism were entrapped in [the notion that the consciousness is simply about] the unfolding worldly conditions; those who upheld Daoism were entrapped in [the notion that it is the same as] the uncaused Nature. In a nutshell, they all failed to transcend from the [epistemic confines of] consciousness,<sup>47</sup> unable to fully penetrate into [the meaning of] the One Mind.” (此第八識，彼外道者或執之為冥諦，或執之為自然，或執之為因緣<sup>48</sup> ... 據實而論，執孔者涉因緣，執老者墮自然，要皆未離識性，不能究竟一心故也)<sup>49</sup>

Just as the Tiantai school revolved its hermeneutical taxonomy (*pan-jiao*) around the rubric of the “Five Periods and Eight Teachings,” the Ming syncretists found an equally, if not more, sophisticated interpretive apparatus in Yogācāra expressions like the “Hundred Categories of Dharmas,” “Fifty Two Stages of Bodhisattvahood,” and the “Eighteen Marks of Buddha’s Wisdom Distinguishing [Him from Non-Buddhists and Heretics].” Indeed, I would venture to say that one of the most original doctrinal reinvention on the part of the Ming syncretists lied in their employment of Yogācāra concepts in classifying and evaluating the teachings of other religions.<sup>50</sup> In all

<sup>45</sup> Deqing is referring to an Indian philosophical tradition that was labeled in the Chinese Buddhist tradition as the “Nature heretics” (*ziran waidao* 自然外道) – probably referring to the Ājīvakas whose thought system was associated with Makkhali Gosāra. For a discussion on these Indian “heretics” during Buddha’s time, see the first chapter of Mizuno Kōgen, *Genshi bukkyō*.

<sup>46</sup> Clearly the term “*yinyuan* 因緣” used here was not the same thing as the Buddhist notion of “conditions” or “conditionality.” Judging from the context, especially by its association with Confucianism, it was most likely referring to secular accomplishments such as those in governance and worldly successes.

<sup>47</sup> Proponents of the Dharma-nature School traditionally faulted the Dharma-characteristics School for dabbling in the doctrine of the [defiled] consciousness rather than being able to realize the higher category of the immaculate Mind.

<sup>48</sup> *Hanshan dashi mengyou ji*, vol. iv, p. 2432–2433.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2435.

<sup>50</sup> The Ming had had a long history of being relegated by scholars as an uninteresting continuation of the Song intellectual developments. Michel Strickmann is among those who insist that the research on syncretism of the early formative periods of Chinese Buddhism is more worthy than the study of syncretism in the Ming. His reason is that “most of the evidence adduced in illustration of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century syncretism can already be found together in scriptural texts written a thousand years earlier.” He therefore

these aforementioned capacities the Ming syncretists truly had outdone their predecessors. Contrary to the prevalent painting of Ming Buddhism as a lackluster continuation of Song legacy, the Ming Buddhists were creative, vibrant, and confident, conscious of the original ways in which they argued for the syncretistic cause. Their originality might not lie in their general conclusion that all religions are compatible while Buddhism stands alone as the most complete and efficacious revelation, but they stood peerless in the pre-modern times in the methods and philosophical arguments employed to prove that end.

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came to the conclusion: "Surely mixtures brewed of the same ingredients after such a lapse of time ... can hardly have quite the same potency as when those [inter-religious] elements first encountered each other so long before." "The *Consecration Sūtra*: A Buddhist Book of Spells," p. 76. His observation that syncretistic maneuvers in the later periods somehow lack originality and are a mere extension of earlier polemical strategies overlooks the development and renovations that took place. The sophisticated hermeneutical system the Ming Buddhists constructed in the rubric of Yogācāra language is but one example of their original approach to syncretism.

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