Chinese Buddhism: A Note about this Course

This course is a continuation of the topic begun last fall, the intellectual foundations of China. In it we discussed the major indigenous strains of thought that arose during the Warring States era (453–221 BCE), a period of enormous intellectual vitality stimulated by the absence of a central political authority or governing ideology to constrain it. Three teachings—Confucianism; *fa-jia*, or the School of Law; and the Daoist thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi—emerged prominently from this period and went on to become perennial elements in Chinese civilization for the next two millennia.[1]

That course ended with an overview of what used to be referred to as the "Han synthesis," a mélange of ethical, political, ritual, and cosmological beliefs collocated under the rubric *Confucian* that were used by the state to justify and legitimize Han rule. It was shortly after this point, sometime during the first hundred years of the beginning of the Common Era, that an exotic new element was introduced into China. Its influence was negligible at first, but within fewer than two hundred years it had become a significant part of Chinese religious life. That element, of course, was Buddhism.

At virtually the same time, popular Daoist elements, fueled by peasant unrest and a burgeoning messianism, gave birth in the second century to two millenarian rebellions, one of which developed into a Daoist *church*, the Way of the Celestial Masters *(tianshi dao).* And if that were not complicated enough, the third century witnessed the development of a type of philosophical inquiry known as *xuanxue* or "Dark Learning." This highly sophisticated trend, popular among the aristocratic refugees fleeing the breakup of the Han, took inspiration from the *Book of Changes*, supplemented by interpretations of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, to engage in speculation and "refined discourse" on the origin and ultimate nature of all things. Amidst the civil and religious turmoil accompanying the breakup of the Han empire in the third century, these various traditions would fertilize and contend with each other for intellectual prominence and political patronage.

Chinese Buddhism or Buddhism in China?

The introduction of Buddhism into China and its interaction with these indigenous schools of thought is where our course begins, but you can immediately see that any exploration of the topic must consider *both* Chinese thought *and* an overview of Indian Buddhism prior to its transmission to China. Without an understanding of the rudiments of early Indian Buddhism it will not be possible to appreciate the extent to which the tradition changed as it became Chinese. As we do so, an intriguing question will present itself: is this a course in Chinese Buddhism or a course in Buddhism in China?

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[1] Representative selections of their writings are available in the repository created for the course. If you would like to review them, please point your browser at https://github.com/mcummingsny/Chinese-Intellectual-History

Although it may not seem so at first blush, the two are not the same. A course in "Chinese Buddhism" will consider the topic principally from the standpoint of Chinese history, reviewing the development of the tradition, the changes it wrought on Chinese society, and the way in which it itself was changed. Those of you who attended the fall class will recognize in this process the powerful forces of Sinicization, that is, the gradual but inexorable process by which new, foreign elements have traditionally become assimilated into Chinese culture.

Whereas a course on "Buddhism in China" will consider the topic principally from the standpoint of *Buddhist* history and will treat its introduction and growth in China as only one part of its larger development and spread throughout Asia and, later, the West. Such an approach might seek to juxtapose the Esoteric Buddhism of the Tang period, for instance, with the contemporary spread of the Nyingma tradition in Tibet or to analyze the Chinese scriptures as derivatives of the "mother" texts written in Sanskrit or other South Asian languages rather than as primary sources in their own right.

Interesting as this approach may be, inasmuch as our course was conceived as a follow-on to the earlier lectures on the foundations of Chinese intellectual history, we will favor the former—Chinese Buddhism—but in doing so we will remain mindful of our obligation to introduce the fundamentals of Indian Buddhism before we venture very far into its history in China. So as you can see, we have a lot of work to do.