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## END OF TIME AND NEW TIME IN MEDIEVAL CHINESE BUDDHISM

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Chinese Buddhism may appear to be an exotic theme given the fact that other articles in this volume concentrate on monotheistic religions of the Western part of the Old World. As an outsider I would like to take this opportunity to offer a few thoughts about the systematic context of apocalyptic thinking from a comparative point of view. These more or less theoretical considerations about time and history will be followed by an example of Buddhist apocalypticism in China. I would like to point out from the beginning that this is a highly specialized field of research, and I do not expect general readers to be familiar with it. I have tried my best to present this topic in a way that is useful to scholars from other fields and to raise some questions of general interest.

Like so many terms used by historians of religion, "apocalypse" originates in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Even if the term is removed from its original context (where it refers to a particular genre of literature in early Christianity and post-biblical Judaism), it seems doubtful that it can be applied to the religious traditions of India and the Far East. Apocalyptic views seem to be connected with a particular understanding of history as a limited span of time, starting with the first day of creation and ending with the fulfilment of time at the last day of history. Only within such a frame of limited time, one might suspect, may ideas about the events occurring at the end of time attain religious and intellectual significance.

This understanding of time is far from being universal. Indian, and to a certain degree also Chinese concepts of time have often and justifiably been characterized as "cyclical" as opposed to "linear". Cyclical concepts of time have the advantage of corresponding to the experience of natural processes, like the cycles of the seasons and vegetation, or to the cyclical motions of heavenly bodies. Linear concepts correspond more closely to human life cycles—from birth to death. It appears that different concepts of time are in some way related to the different ways human beings and cosmic

processes are conceived. It is probably no mere coincidence that in Indian thought even human existence is interpreted as a cyclical process covering an endless sequence of individual lives. Death and any form of termination is not an unique and final occurrence, but rather a junction in the continuous process of existence. Death does not function as a key concept in anthropological thinking because reflections and imaginations about the last day are of minor interest. This applies, needless to say, not only to individuals but also to the world. Eschatological and apocalyptic thinking, therefore, does not occupy a prominent place in Indian intellectual history nor in Indian Buddhism. There are scholastic speculations about the junction of cosmic cycles, the succession of different *kalpas* and the destruction of the present world before a new cycle begins, but they did not evoke apocalyptic expectations in Indian Buddhism.

In traditional China the concepts of time and history were in many respects different from Indian ones.<sup>1</sup> Although cosmological speculations focus on cyclical processes, and the course of history was interpreted as a sequence of dynastic cycles, the concept of history as a linear process beginning with the sage rulers of high antiquity to the present time was also formed. Chinese historians were highly conscious of the changes that had occurred in the course of history. As far as these changes concerned technical or even institutional issues, they were accepted; but there was a strong conviction that in the field of morality the ancient sages had set fixed paradigms. In traditional China the awareness of historical change was combined with the conviction of an unchanging world order. In a metaphysical sense, this order remained always the same. Empirically, however, potential violations of this order—resulting in various kinds of disturbances, from natural disasters to social turmoil and political chaos—could happen. However, as far as the official Confucianist interpretation of history is concerned, these disturbances were seen as only temporal deviations from the preordained cosmic and social order. According to the cyclical concept of time, order will be restored once chaos has reached its climax. In the political arena, old corrupt governments are replaced by new dynasties who begin new cycles. Clearly, this view of history does not incorporate a final destruction

<sup>1</sup> For Chinese concepts of time, see Joseph Needham, "Time and Eastern Man," in his *The Grand Titration. Science and Society in East and West*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969) 218–298.

of the cosmic order or conception of a future end of the world.

Thus, it may be concluded that both the Buddhist and the traditional Chinese understanding of time and history lack one of the basic presuppositions of apocalyptic expectations, i.e. the idea that time is limited and human history, therefore, will come to an end. When I once talked about the subject with a sinological colleague, he did not hesitate to assert that eschatological thinking is completely lacking in Chinese intellectual history. He is certainly right in his view if we confine our perception to the mainstream of Chinese, particularly Confucian thinking. In mainstream Chinese religious life there is hardly a place for apocalypses. However, there are some traditions that did not find the approval of the political and intellectual elites, in which eschatological, and even apocalyptic, thinking did play a role.

The earliest literary evidence of apocalyptic ideas can be found in Daoist tradition. The *Taijing Jing* (*Great Peace Scripture*), an influential text traditionally dated to the second century, notes the threat of a final catastrophe ushering in the end of the world. This calamity will occur if humankind does not cease to violate the heavenly order.<sup>2</sup> During the following centuries such eschatological ideas were transmitted mainly within popular sects that rarely gained the attention of the elites and historiographers, except in cases of rebellion. However, during the fourth and particularly the fifth centuries messianistic hopes, combined with apocalyptic warnings, pervaded large portions of Chinese society. The historical reflection of this messianistic movement were numerous rebellions, and a number of Daoist texts that show the deep influence of apocalyptic ideas on religious life at the time.<sup>3</sup> Although messianistic expectations were occasionally utilized as means of political propaganda, they always remained suspicious to the political elites who were more interested in social stability than in revolutionary changes. Thus, from the beginning apocalyptic thinking in China was linked with sectarian movements that were not only condemned but often persecuted by the political and clerical

<sup>2</sup> See my article "Health and Salvation in Early Daoism. On the Anthropology and Cosmology of the *Taijing Jing*", in Albert Baumgarten, ed., *Self, Soul and Body In Religious Experience*. (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 256–275.

<sup>3</sup> These texts have only recently attracted the attention of scholars. See Christine Mollier, *Une apocalypse taoïste du Ve siècle. Le Livre des Incantations des Grottes Abyssales*. Paris: Collège des France, Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1990 (Mémoires de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises; 31).

establishments. This affinity to heterodoxy is one of the reasons why apocalyptic traditions remained outside the mainstream of Chinese religious history.

The second stage in the history of Chinese apocalypticism developed as Buddhism penetrated all layers of the society including the popular sects during the middle of the first millennium. Popular apocalypticism, which had previously employed Daoist religious symbolism, had now been integrated into the Buddhist tradition where again it was closely connected with heterodox movements. In China apocalyptic thinking never gained a central position in religious tradition. In comparison to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic beliefs, this difference appears to be significant. However, one should not overlook the fact that even in Christianity, where the *Apocalypse of John* is part of the canonical scriptures, religious movements stressing this aspect tended to be marginalized. Although the expectation of the second advent of Christ and the last day belong to the core of the Christian message, mainstream churches seem to be reluctant to stress this aspect of their tradition. Hence, the reluctance of the orthodox traditions in China to embrace apocalypticism may reflect a structural tension that also exists in other cultures.

Before providing some historical details of Chinese Buddhism, it is appropriate to address some terminological questions. As outlined above, the term "apocalypse" has been coined to denote a rather specific literary genre and by extension religious beliefs in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Examining the titles of the papers in this volume confirms the impression that the phenomenon is largely confined to the monotheistic religions originating in west Asia. In comparative usage this term is quite uncommon, whereas other concepts such as *eschatology*, *millenarianism* and *messianism* appear more frequently. Incidentally, the historical origin of these terms is not less rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition than in the case of *apocalypse*. In addition, the semantic field of these different terms is not coextensive with *apocalypse*.

By moving away from the Jewish and Christian world we gain a broader perspective that will allow us to examine the intellectual contexts in which apocalyptic thought may appear. The common denominator of the above terms is the end of the present and the dawn of a new era. This break in the continuous flow of time is expected to happen sometime in the future. This approach not only

places an emphasis on the world and the cosmos *in general*—as in the case of Indian teachings about cosmic ages—but also on the future of *human* history. Belief systems that incorporate eschatological, millenarian or apocalyptic ideas conceive human history as a closed process. Unlike our modern understanding of history, which deals only with the past and not with the future, this approach attempts to provide a complete understanding of history, from beginning to end.

Why are people interested in history? Apart from amateurs and modern scholars they do not conduct research out of mere curiosity. Writing or narrating history is a means to understand and interpret the present. One of the crucial functions of historiography is to define personal and collective identity. The identity of individuals and nations is defined by their continuity in time or by their place in history. If history is to be understood in relation to the past and future, then one's place in history also depends on future events. Therefore, the meaning of the present is contingent upon future events. Any uncovering of the future has a direct bearing on the interpretation of the present. This point will be illustrated in the Chinese examples that will be presented below.

Within this frame of reference the term *apocalypse* can be used as a general concept. Apocalypticism shares with millenarianism, messianism and eschatological speculations its point of reference, i.e. future events. I shall employ this term in the context of Chinese, and particularly Chinese Buddhist, ideas to denote interpretations of history that predict and describe a catastrophic end of time. This preliminary definition is wide enough not to restrict its use within Jewish and Christian contexts. We shall see, however, that there are a number of similarities between Chinese and Near Eastern apocalypticism.

Since Chinese Buddhism does not belong to the standard curriculum of historians of religion, and some readers may not be familiar with its history, it may be useful to provide some background information. Monks from Central Asia introduced Buddhism in China during the first century C.E. The following centuries were marked by its gradual penetration into Chinese society on all levels, from the ruling elites to the common people. During this period an increasing number of Buddhist scriptures were translated from Sanskrit and Central Asian languages into Chinese. This undertaking was one of the biggest translation enterprises in the history of humankind. The

transplantation of Buddhism to China also transformed the Indian religion. As one can easily imagine, Buddhism not only brought many new religious ideas and practices to China, but also it adopted elements of the Chinese cultural heritage and developed distinctive features. The growth of Chinese Buddhist literature, produced also scriptures of purely local origin. These included works that adopted the literary form of *sūtras*, i.e. sayings of the Buddha, that had the highest possible form of scriptural authority. Modern Western scholars usually call this kind of Chinese Buddhist scriptures *apocrypha*, which incidently is another term derived from biblical religions.<sup>4</sup> “Apocalyptic” ideas developed within apocryphical literature, which has been rather popular since the fourth and fifth centuries. Unfortunately, many of the Chinese Buddhist apocrypha are lost, as they were perceived as heterodox by the political and clerical elites. Since these texts were excluded from the Buddhist canon, in most cases we do not know more than their titles which appeared in bibliographical catalogues. Although they were regarded as heterodox, apocrypha were circulated widely in the country at least until the eighth and ninth centuries. A number of apocryphical writings, unearthed in the caves of the Dunhuang oasis at the beginning of the twentieth century, have allowed us to gain some insight into the suppressed tradition of Buddhist apocalypticism in Medieval China.

Describing the contents of this apocalyptic literature is rather difficult as the relevant texts are often enigmatic, and the exact meaning of many passages remains obscure. It is also important to note the fact that various scriptures have different stories and details of apocalyptic events. I shall, therefore, first give a general outline of the basic structure of Buddhist apocalypticism, avoiding the details that are of interest only to the specialists in the field. I would like to raise the following questions:

1. When do the apocalyptic events occur?
2. What happens during that time?
3. What happens after that time?

The historical context in which this kind of apocalyptic thinking occurred, its genesis and social impact, will be discussed at the end of this article.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert E. Buswell, ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

The advent of apocalyptic time in orthodox Chinese Buddhism is not related to the end of the world. This final event has no importance in Buddhism nor in Chinese thought. Apocalyptic time, therefore, does not mark a final time in an absolute sense, but rather in a relative sense. Apocalyptic events, occur at the end of the present age. The present age is a time when the *dharmā*, the truth revealed by the Buddha, prevails. During the present age men know the true teaching and follow it, whereas at the end of time the knowledge of Buddhist truth gradually diminishes and finally disappears.

In China the expectation of the end of the *dharmā* has long occupied the imagination of Buddhist thinkers. The historical origin and development of this idea is a rather complicated matter that cannot be discussed here.<sup>5</sup> Since the fifth century there have been Buddhist scriptures circulating in which Buddha made prophecies about the events occurring in the last phase of the *dharmā*, before its stage of complete oblivion. Some circles expected the immediate advent of the last phase of the *dharmā* (*mofa*) or were even convinced that it had already been entered. A general decline of morality and a lack of adherence to true Buddhist teachings characterizes this last phase of the *dharmā*. In the *Sūtra of the Annihilation of the Dharma* (*Fo shuo fa miejin jing*, T 396), the Buddha predicts that at that time evil teachings will appear and devils will become monks to destroy the true doctrine. The monks will engage in all kinds of sinful activities, monasteries will fall into disrepair and the Buddhist precepts will not be followed any more. When this decline of Buddhism has reached its climax the apocalypse occurs as a huge deluge that will destroy the sinners. Only a few virtuous people, who withdraw into the mountains, survive. Then the bodhisattva Yueguang (“Moonlight”) appears and renews Buddhist teaching once again for a period of fifty-two years, after which the *dharmā* is completely annihilated and Buddhist scriptures disappear from the world. However, this annihilation of the *dharmā* is just a temporary disappearance from the world. The *sūtra* concludes with the prophecy that after ten million years the future Buddha Maitreya will appear to inaugurate a new age of the True Teaching. It will be a time of peace and prosperity when people will live for eighty-four thousand years and achieve salvation.

<sup>5</sup> The topic has been exhaustively treated by Jan Nattier, *Once upon a Future Time. Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*. (Berkeley, CA: Asia Humanities Press, 1991) (Nanzan Studies in Asian Religions; 1).

Although this text deals with apocalyptic motifs—the catastrophes occurring when the *dharmā* vanishes from the world—it has no millenarian or messianistic message. The apocalypse is not the prelude to the coming of a new perfect time but to a degenerating world oblivious to the saving knowledge of the *dharmā*. However, after a time of unimaginable length the *dharmā* will be renewed and humankind will enjoy complete happiness and salvation. Obviously, this scenario could not inspire hopes for an imminent coming of a saviour. The new perfect time is nothing that people of the present can expect to enjoy, except after countless reincarnations. The apocalyptic events are placed in a cosmological context of cyclical decline and renewal rather than in an eschatological context of imminent complete transformation.

In the *Sūtra of the Annihilation of the Dharma* apocalyptic events are described in a rather moderate way. This *sūtra*, considered to be an authentic scripture, was not regarded as an apocryphical text. However, it contains the basic structure of Chinese Buddhist apocalypticism, and above all it explains that the apocalypse happens when Buddhist teachings disappear from the world.

What happens during the apocalyptic time? To answer this question I shall use two other texts that have not been included into the Buddhist canon, *Zhengming Ming* or *Sūtra of the Realization of Understanding preached by the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* (*Puxian pusa shuo zhengming jing*, T 2879) and *Shouluo Jing* or *Scripture of the Monk Shouluo* (*Shouluo biqu jing*, T 2873). Both of these works, found in the caves of Dunhuang, probably originated in the sixth century.<sup>6</sup> In both scriptures the plot is somewhat different from the *Sūtra of the Annihilation of the Dharma*. Buddha Śākyamuni himself does not teach, but rather other buddhas and bodhisattvas reveal prophecies.<sup>7</sup> Without going into details it should be noted that the literary form of the two apocalyptic scrip-

<sup>6</sup> For bibliographical details see Erik Zürcher, “‘Prince Moonlight’, Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism”, *T'oung Pao*, 68 (1982) 1–751 especially 34 f. This is the most substantial study of Buddhist apocalypticism in China. See also Erik Zürcher, “Eschatology and Messianism in early Chinese Buddhism”, in W.L. Idema, ed., *Leyden Studies in Sinology*. (Leyden, 1981) 34–56.

<sup>7</sup> The *Zhengming jing* consists of two parts. The first is a pronouncement of the Buddha in the usual form while the second part consists of pronouncements of several other transcendent beings. A summary of the *Zhengming jing* can be found in Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors and Functions of the Tunhuang Document S 6502 followed by an annotated translation*. (Napoli: Instituto Universitario Orientale, 1976) 271–280.

tures suggests that they are revelations which go beyond the teachings present in ordinary *sūtras*. Authentic *sūtras* are composed as sayings of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, whereas these texts are clearly revelations, and are thus similar to with *apocalypsis* as a literary genre.

The circumstances in which the apocalyptic prophecies are revealed differ considerably in the two texts, but the description of the events shares many common elements. For example, in *Scripture of the Monk Shouluo*, the apocalyptic time will be marked by three scourges: deluge, epidemics and demonic powers. First, floods will rise and destroy most of the sinners. Second, the majority of the survivors will suffer greatly and eventually die from epidemics.<sup>8</sup> Then, finally, thirty-six Great Devils (*damo*, *mārakings*), riding on dragon-horses and brandishing diamond clubs, will invade the world with their hordes. During their destructive rampage they shout “sha!” (“kill”) and nobody is able to withstand them. After the violence, there will be darkness for seven days. During that time all the demonic hosts, the *Yakṣas* and *Rākṣasas*, the *Pisācās* and *Kumbhāndas*, ravage the world and the *Rākṣasas* kill countless people. After these three great disasters the moats and rivers will be filled with blood, and mountains of white bones will cover the earth (*Shouluo Jing*, T 2873, 1356 b/c).

This apocalyptic scenario is only part of the message. The same texts also describe the ways in which this huge catastrophe can be avoided. People can be rescued if they change their hearts and follow the true teachings. The texts give different accounts about this rescue, but they both state that the demonic powers will battle the supernatural forces of truth.<sup>9</sup> Following the apocalypse the virtuous people, who have been saved from eradication, will live in a new world which can best be characterized as a paradise, though Chinese and Western perceptions of paradise do not completely converge. In both texts the saved will live in a transformed city (*huacheng*), i.e. a new supernatural landscape which is described as a world of great splendour.<sup>10</sup> The landscape is made of precious metals and jewels,

<sup>8</sup> Zürcher, “Prince Moonlight,” 38. This opening part of the scripture does not appear in the text of the Taishō Tripitaka but in the manuscript reprinted by Zürcher.

<sup>9</sup> According to the *Shouluo jing* only a *kunāra* (prince) called He Tian from the heaven of the thirty-three gods will be able to resist the thirty-six Great Devils (T 2873, 1356 b).

<sup>10</sup> It is difficult not to compare the motif of the transformed city to the New Jerusalem in the New Testament.

and the inhabitants wholeheartedly practice good deeds and follow the true teachings.

Although the two apocalyptic texts differ significantly in their description of many details of the events, they share the same dichotomical structure of the apocalypse. The horror of the apocalyptic time is paired with the promise of a paradise-like life after the catastrophe. This paradise is of course open only to those who follow Buddhist teachings or more particularly the teachings revealed in these apocalyptic scriptures. Thus, the dichotomy of destruction and paradise is complemented by the dichotomy of the annihilation of the sinners and the salvation of the true followers of the teachings. Furthermore, there is a dichotomy of the supernatural agents in this cosmic battle: On the one hand, devils and demons are ravaging the world and its sinful inhabitants. On the other hand, divine powers, buddhas and bodhisattvas fight to rescue the few that have practiced the true teaching.

Several issues regarding the question, "What happens after the apocalyptic time?" should be addressed. The first point concerns the time perspective. It has been noted that in the canonical literature of Chinese Buddhism the idea of the end of the *dharma* was quite popular, and the description of social decline and moral decadence in the final age of the *dharma* foreshadows the very detailed apocalypses of the apocryphical texts. According to Orthodox Buddhism, the true teaching will vanish and reappear when Buddha Maitreya descends from the Tuṣita heaven. However, the advent of Maitreya was expected after some ten million years, and therefore it was totally irrelevant for the present time. In the above apocryphical texts, this cosmic time perspective has been replaced by a *Naherwartung*, the belief that apocalyptic events and the formation of a new world will occur in the near future, if they have not happened already.<sup>11</sup> Thus,

<sup>11</sup> As far as I understand these texts, there is no concrete date given for the apocalyptic events. The *Zhengming jing* has a somewhat obscure passage saying that seven hundred years after the *parinirvāna* of the Buddha Śakyamuni heaven and earth will experience a great quake, and ninety years later the apocalypse will happen (T 2879, 1366 a). According to the usual chronology this would imply that the apocalypse should have happened already. I cannot explain this calculation. In the *Shouluo jing* it is explicitly stated, "I tell you that the world is about to reach its end" (T 2873, 2357 c). Another passage not included in the Taishō text, but appearing in the manuscript reprinted by Zürcher states that, "Yueguang will soon appear; there will be terrible disasters". (Zürcher, *Prince Moonlight*, 48) It is also noted that those who eagerly engage in good deeds will be able to see the future paradise, and if they rely on this scripture they will see "me", i.e. the saviour. (T 2874, 1358 b, l. 15/16)

the battle between the forces of evil and of truth involves people living in the present time. Depending on their choice, they will either be destroyed or saved. If they are among the chosen people who escape apocalyptic catastrophe, they will enjoy a pure life in the new world. Thus, the cosmic time perspective of traditional Buddhism has been transformed into a very concrete hope for an imminent advent of a new time.

This brings me to the second point about the time after the apocalypse. The advent of the new time is inaugurated by the appearance of a figure who might be called *saviour*, and some scholars would refer to him as *messiah*. The two texts do not fully agree about the identity of this saviour. A further study of the various names, titles and transcendent agents should be done though it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is one point I would like to mention. One of the titles given to the saviour is *Ming Wang*, which can be translated as *King of Light*. The title is used repeatedly in both texts. In *Scripture of the Monk Shouluo* a reference is made to *An Jun*, or *Lord of Darkness*, who controls the evil powers that destroy the world.<sup>12</sup> There is a remarkable symbolism of light throughout the scriptures. The King of Light who will appear after the apocalypse is identified with a bodhisattva called Moonlight (Yueguang). Yueguang does not hold any prominent position in canonical writings.<sup>13</sup> But here he appears as the central figure, the King of Light who will save the world. He will manifest himself "after the end of the Old Moon".<sup>14</sup> This is a very cryptic phrase that cannot be explained on the basis of traditional Buddhist literature. It appears that the Old Moon refers to the forces of darkness, reminiscent of the seven-day complete darkness in which apocalyptic events reach their climax.

Approximately a century after these texts were written, the symbolism of light and a battle between a "King of Light" and a "Lord of Darkness" became recurring motifs in Chinese Manichaean communities. The exact date of the introduction of Manichaeism into China is still a matter of dispute. Although Manichaean teachings were presented to the throne in the late seventh century, their ideas appear to have influenced certain circles of lay Buddhists in China

<sup>12</sup> T 2874, 1358 b.

<sup>13</sup> It should be remembered, however, that in the above *Sūtra on the Annihilation of the Dharma* a bodhisattva, called Moonlight, restores the *dharma* for forty-two years before it will fall into oblivion.

<sup>14</sup> T 2873, 1356 c, l. 3/4. A similar phrase occurs earlier in the manuscript studied by Zürcher ("Prince Moonlight," 48).

and in Central Asia beforehand.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there seems to be a relationship between Manichaeism and the coming of Buddha Maitreya that can be traced back to Parthian sources.<sup>16</sup> Maitreya figures prominently in Buddhist apocalyptic writings, and in the *Shouluo Jing* he is associated with the bodhisattva Moonlight who is called “King of Light.” The title of an apocryphical scripture, listed in a Buddhist catalogue of the early eighth century, indicates that Maitreya was identified with Mani, the founder of Manichaeism.<sup>17</sup> Taken together the available evidence suggests a possible influence of Manichaeism on popular sects and their eschatological beliefs. It should be stressed, however, that this evidence is far from being conclusive.

To avoid any misunderstandings I would like to remind the reader that the texts discussed in this article are definitely Buddhist texts, though they did not belong to what may be called “orthodox” Buddhism. It is very clear that these texts were written with the intent of criticizing the existing forms of Buddhism. There was a strong feeling that the final age of the *dharmā* had been reached: Buddhist monks were perceived as engaging in worldly activities and caring more about the accumulation of riches and political influence than about following the precepts of Buddha.

Not only monks represent the religious ideal described in these scriptures but also pious lay people, especially pious women who will

<sup>15</sup> Most scholars would accept 694 as the date of the introduction of Manichaeism into China. However, others disagree with this opinion and argue that Manichaeism influenced popular religion much earlier. This position has been taken by Japanese scholars and has been argued above all by Liu Ts'un-yan, “Traces of Zoroastrian and Manichaeic activities in pre-T'ang China”, in his *Selected Papers from the Hall of Harmonious Wind*. (Leyden, 1976) 3–58. According to Lin Wushu (*Monijiao ji qi dong jian*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987) 60, the influence of Manichaeism (not the earliest Manichaeic communities!) may be as early as the fourth century.

<sup>16</sup> See Lin Wushu, *loc. cit.*, 56–58 and Liu Ts'un-yan, *loc. cit.*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* (T 2154), 673a. The title of the scripture in question is *Mile Moni fo shuo kaiyuan foxing jing* (*Sūtra on the Buddha Maitreya-Mani who explains the awakening of the Buddha-nature*). Since the text itself is lost, the translation is not unquestionable. The Chinese expression *moni* is the usual phonetic transliteration of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism. However, it is also used as a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *mani*, meaning “pearl” or “treasure”. Thus, the title could also be translated as *Sūtra on Maitreya, the Pearl-Buddha* . . . However, this does not make much sense. In other Buddhist writings the expression *mingyue moni* can be found, which could be translated as “brilliant moon Mani” (cf. *Foxue da cidian*, Beijing 1984, 748), reminiscent of the bodhisattva Moonlight who is also called King of Light and occasionally identified with Maitreya. In any case, even if these expressions are due to Manichaeic influence, it is obvious that it was not more than a very dim reflection of the original Manichaeic teachings.

be the first to be saved from the impending catastrophe. The special attention given to women and lay people is one of the few clues to the social milieu in which such apocalyptic beliefs originated. Obviously these traditions did not originate with orthodox Buddhist monks, but rather within circles of lay Buddhists, with a significant number of female believers, and possibly with the participation of some monks who were dissatisfied with the Buddhist clergy. The criticism of the established Buddhist institutions was certainly not without foundation given the fact that Buddhist monasteries were among the biggest estate owners at the time and a great number of people entered the order for reasons other than religious devotion. The social milieu in which this apocalypticism grew was sectarian in the sense that there was a clear demarcation between the true believers who will be saved, and the “world” dominated by demonic forces that will finally be annihilated.<sup>18</sup> Buddhist apocalypticism was the most extreme form of theological—if I may say so in a Buddhist context—protest against the legitimacy of the then present social order. It was a historical interpretation of the present time, but with a concept of history that included the future. The real meaning of the present is revealed with reference to the future. As in any historical thinking, one's own identity is clarified. History, in this case future history, separates the just from the unjust. The former will stand “east of the bridge,” and the latter “west of the bridge”.<sup>19</sup> Hence, history settles any questions that may be about the present. Although sinners may seem to be on the winning side, future history shows that they are wrong. People should make their choice in view of the events to come.

We have no further information about the social composition of these sects, but we may assume that they recruited their members mainly from the middle classes. The critical remarks of the orthodox compilers of the bibliographies make it clear that apocryphical texts were widely distributed; for example, in her political propaganda Empress Wu Zetian referred to the *Zhengming Jing*.<sup>20</sup> It appears that apocalyptic texts were in no way confined to small and

<sup>18</sup> This *selective* salvation contradicts a basic doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism, i.e. *universal* salvation of all beings.

<sup>19</sup> *Zhengming jing*, T 2879, 85.1365 c; 1366 b. This first passage says east resp. west of the “river” instead of “bridge”.

<sup>20</sup> See Forte, *loc. cit.*, 159–163.

clandestine groups of sectarians but had considerable influence on the common people. Although in the early sixth and seventh centuries there were some cases of rebellion connected with the expectation of the future Buddha Maitreya,<sup>21</sup> the majority of believers did not transform their religious protest into a political one. The criticism of the present time seems to be based on religious and moral convictions rather than on political and economical antagonisms. If we place this Buddhist apocalypticism of the Medieval ages in a wider historical perspective, however, then its political dimension becomes more obvious. Any questioning of the legitimacy of the present order had political implications. The political authorities viewed these religious teachings as heterodox, and the sects connected with the above two apocalyptic scriptures were part of a broad tradition of Chinese millenarianism, which in the case of Buddhism anticipated the future Buddha Maitreya. In fact, the King of Light was obviously identified with Maitreya. The hope for the advent of Maitreya, in conjunction with a reversal of the present condition, became a core element of popular sectarianism. In one of the most famous rebellions in Chinese history in the fourteenth century, which led to the fall of the Yuan dynasty, the expectation of Maitreya as the King of Light was used as a means of ideological propaganda. During the following Ming ("Light") and Qing dynasties, popular sects with apocalyptic teachings on the coming of Maitreya became the most dynamic religious forces in China. They were severely persecuted by the government. Thus, the heterodox Buddhist eschatology and apocalypticism that developed in the middle of the first millennium had lasting historical influence. To my knowledge, the last case of this politically motivated Maitreya belief took place on January 30, 1985, in the Hunan province, when a self-styled Buddha Maitreya was publicly executed.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The sources say nothing about the scriptures used by these rebels, but they probably derived their ideology from sources belonging to the same genre of apocalyptic *sūtras*. We may assume that the broad stream of popular messianism had some extremist branches where it was turned into political action.

<sup>22</sup> *Chinese Journal of Public Law (Zhongguo fazhi bao)*, 11 February 1985, quoted in *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Summer 1989/vol. 21, no. 4, p. 35. Translation by Robin Munro.

## APOCALYPTICISM, SYMBOLIC BREAKDOWN AND PARANOIA: AN APPLICATION OF LIFTON'S MODEL TO THE DEATH-REBIRTH FANTASY

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The present study is concerned with two questions that have long attracted the attention of students of apocalypticism. First, what are the historical conditions that are conducive to the spread of apocalyptic attitudes? Second, what is the message of the apocalyptic to people who embrace its prophecies? It is frequently claimed that apocalypticism thrives in crisis situations, and that its major message is the consolation of suffering individuals.

These answers, however, are inadequate. For example, crises, such as the Black Death, were not followed by a spread of apocalyptic attitudes. At the same time, there are instances of apocalyptic outbursts that were not related to crises, such as the tense anticipation in 1184 England for an eclipse signaling total destruction followed by great well-being.<sup>1</sup> The reign of Henry II (1154–1189), however, was marked by restoration of order and stability to the monarchy.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, a number of scholars hold that in addition to some of the central themes of this phenomenon, consolation<sup>3</sup> is just one factor out of many which give meaning to human anxieties, relating a person's life to a beginning and an end. It is seen as "one way of overcoming what Mircea Eliade called 'the terror of history'."<sup>4</sup> We accept this view, but only as a partial explanation because it overlooks a tormenting terror people may experience in certain periods, namely, the terror of death. This fear has little to do with terror of history.

<sup>1</sup> For a description of the event and its context, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957) pp. 75–76.

<sup>2</sup> It was, however, problematic on the symbolic level; for example, thousands of pilgrims flocked to the murdered Becket's relics. See the discussion below.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the central themes, see below. On the apocalyptic as more than consolation, see Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement: Introduction and Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966); Bernard McGinn, ed. and trans., *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> McGinn, *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, p. 13.