

# Brothers and Sisters: Buddhism in the Family of Chinese Religion

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## Abstract

Confucianism is often referred to as the "Chinese Great Tradition" and hailed for imbuing Chinese civilisation with humanitarian values. Yet its endurance and sustainable power for 2,000 years is in part ascribed to its two sisters, Buddhism and Taoism, which were content for the most part to play a subordinate role. Confucianism acknowledged their vitality but kept them in the wings, conscious always that its privileged position as elder brother not be infringed upon. In this way, periodically encouraged, tolerated, and persecuted, the ecclesiastical personnel and structure of Taoism and Buddhism survived into modern times. Eventually, the sisters no longer asserted themselves, content with the hearts and allegiance of the masses while relegating state power to Confucianism. This paper examines Buddhism's role in the family of Chinese religions as well as the implications of its role in relation to new religions in China.

## 1. Introduction

It is often claimed that Confucius was the greatest and most significant unifying force of Chinese civilisation. In fact, Confucianism (Ju Chiao) is synonymous with what is known as the "Chinese Great Tradition". It was the official philosophy of China for about two thousand years until the birth of the Republic of China in 1911. Through the influential education system, teachers succeeded in inculcating Confucian values into the minds of young people. The term Confucianism embraces education, letters, ethics and political philosophy. The large family system with its special emphasis on filial and fraternal obedience, for example, was heavily influenced by Confucian ideals and continues to be a dominant factor in

Chinese society. Thus, the Chinese outlook on life has been immensely coloured by Confucian ideas, which have been formulated since Confucius' day into a governing code of etiquette and morality.

Although Confucius only claimed to be a transmitter of knowledge, temples have been built in his name. Indeed, his name became a religion among the learned of China who were the officials and the literati and who included scholars waiting for official appointments. The philosophy became in all meaning and purposes a "religion", with its classics its scriptures, its schools its churches, its teachers its priest, and its ethics its theology.

Its endurance and spiritual power may in part be ascribed to its two sisters, Buddhism and Taoism, which were content for the most part to play a subordinate role to their elder brother. Confucianism borrowed their vitality and kept them in the wings, conscious always that its privileged position as elder brother not be infringed upon. Periodically encouraged, tolerated, and persecuted, the ecclesiastical personnel and structure of Taoism and Buddhism survived into the modern day. In time, the sisters no longer questioned this role, as they were able to capture the heart and allegiance of the Chinese masses. The older brother honoured the gods of the sisters and the sisters in turn incorporated many of their brother's principles and priorities. Through the passage of time, Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian gods all came to be united in the same temple and formed one whole. Though they were different in origin and emphasis, they came to view themselves as having one and the same object.

Of the two sisters, this article will focus on the older and foreign one, that is, Buddhism. Buddhism's relationship with Confucianism and Taoism in the religious history of China will be examined. This is of special interest to the Bahá'í Faith because in the Chinese religious trilogy, only Buddhism is recognised as a revealed religion and Buddha, a Manifestation of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authoritative interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's writings state that the Buddha originally established the oneness of God and a new religion.<sup>1</sup> However, he cautions that while Buddha was a Manifestation of God, like Christ, His followers do not

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 165.

possess His authentic Writings.<sup>2</sup> Where Confucius was concerned, Bahá'ís regard him as the cause of civilisation, advancement and prosperity for the people of China.<sup>3</sup> He was a “cause and illumination of the world of humanity.”<sup>4</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also said: “Confucius was not a Prophet. It is quite correct to say he is the founder of a moral system and a great reformer.”<sup>5</sup> In like manner, Bahá'ís do not consider Lao-tzu a prophet.<sup>6</sup>

There is another reason to take a closer look at Buddhism. First, its impact was great enough for Chinese itself to become an essential language of the Buddhist religious canon, since translations have survived where the originals have not. As early as 166 CE, we find a record of Emperor Huan installing statues of Huang-Lao (a god synthesised from the Yellow Emperor Huang-ti, a prehistoric immortal and Lao-tzu) and of the Buddha within his palace. Many Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and other Indic and Central Asian languages have been translated into Chinese and these have been disseminated far and wide in China. Second, stories from the Lotus Sutra are dominant features on the walls of popular temples, while religious preachers, popular storytellers and lower-class dramatists have always drawn on the rich trove of mythology provided by Buddhist narratives. Last but not least, Chinese Buddhism has survived the Cultural Revolution.

## 2. Reasons for the Spread of Buddhism

Many scholars have been puzzled as to the ease and extent to which Buddhism, a foreign religion, has spread to China. Its Chinese reference, *Fojiao* (teachings of Buddha) involves the recognition that this teaching, unlike the other two, (*Daojiao*, teachings of the Tao, and *Rujiao*, teachings of the scholars) originated in a foreign land. While Ru refers to

<sup>2</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand, December 26, 1941. Quoted in H. Hornsby, *Lights of Guidance*, No. 1684.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 476.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 346.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 10. 11. 1939. Quoted in H. Hornsby, *Lights of Guidance*, No. 1694.

a group of people and *Dao* refers to a concept, *Fo* does not make literal sense – it represents a sound, a word with no semantic value – after the Chinese Sanskrit word “Buddha”. Yet Buddhism became widespread not only in China but the surrounding regions and it enjoys a perennial appeal. Many reasons can be established for this unusual phenomenon but only four will be discussed here. They are the Chinese intrinsic interest in gods, Buddhism’s familiarity to the Chinese people, its explanation of the after-life and its ability to acquire state support.

## 2.1 The Interest in gods

The Chinese people have always been intensely interested in things seen and unseen. Where the unseen is concerned, there is a lively interest in myths, which portray a fascination with the riddle of existence. Take for example, the popular and colourful stories of Wang Mu, the Western Queen. Storytellers have vied with one another in fantastic descriptions of the wonders of her fairyland, and the repairing of the heavens by Nü Kua Shih with five-coloured stones and the great tortoise, which supports the universe.

There is evidence to believe that there have been ancient religions practised in China, the details of which we no longer possess. Perhaps this may explain why in China’s long history, we find sacrifices to heaven, the hills and rivers, ancestors and spirits. In traditional Chinese towns and villages, there is an abundance of village and wayside temples and shrines to honour their ancestors. The gods of thunder, rain, wind, grain, and agriculture abound in the lives of peasants. The later emergence of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism added more temples, monasteries, priests, sacrifices and rituals to the Chinese landscape. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, explained that: “The only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic prophets is because their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history... we are taught there always have been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any record of their names.”<sup>7</sup>

A typical Chinese funeral will also bear testimony to the Chinese fascination with the things of the spirit. There is a three-tiered world view:

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<sup>7</sup> Letter by Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 4 October, 1950.

of heaven above, the dead below, and earth, the abode of the living in between. On death, the upper soul (*hun*) rises up to heaven while the lower soul (*p'o*) descends to earth. There are also other festivals, for example, the New Year festival, celebrated with extravagance and grandeur so as to mark a passage not just in the life of the individual and the family, but also in the annual cycle of the cosmos. Last but not least, there is the traditional Chinese practice of consulting a spirit medium in the home or small temples for solutions to some sickness or misfortune. Dream divination and manipulating the hexagrams of the *I Ching* is still practised as a way to allow people to understand the pattern of the universe as a whole and also the concept of Yin-Yang.

## 2.2 The Familiarity of Buddhism

Buddhism took a firm grip on the Chinese mind because many of its subsequent practices form a familiar landscape.<sup>8</sup> For example, Buddhist shrines were very similar to the existing shamanistic shrines to deities. Many of these shrines would contain some icon or relic of a Chinese Buddhist monk and this was something reminiscent of shamanistic and Taoist practices. Buddhist temples, similar to earlier native temples became places where people would meet to celebrate festivals. Buddhism also affirmed values of filial piety, longevity and posterity by, for example, allowing the building of stupas<sup>9</sup> to be a means of preserving the memory of parents. In time, local deities were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon and Buddhist deities incorporated into the existing local pantheon.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, many Buddhist shrines and complexes were so like shamanistic and Taoist shrines that it was hard to tell one from the other. In addition, Taoist ideas and expressions were used in the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, resulting in a blending of Indian and Chinese thought.<sup>11</sup> The first translations of Buddhist sutras into Chinese – namely those dealing with such topics as breathing control and mystical concentration – utilised a Taoist vocabulary to make the

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<sup>8</sup> J. Ching, (1989) argues that this is the main reason why Buddhism survived in China, that is, it did so by essentially serving Chinese goals including Confucian family values. Its monastic life was, however, criticized by the Confucians.

<sup>9</sup> A round domed building erected as a Buddhist shrine.

<sup>10</sup> This was also true of Buddhism in Tibet, Japan and Mongolia.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ching, *Chinese Perspectives*, p. 203.

Buddhist faith intelligible to the Chinese. For example, the Buddhist terms *dharma* and *yoga* were both translated using the Chinese word *tao*; *nirvana* was translated as *wu wei*. This resulted in a fusion of Taoist and Buddhist ideas.

It is pertinent here to note that it is the Mahayana rather than Theravada version of Buddhism which made inroads into China. The Mahayana version was attractive for various reasons. First, there was the teaching of the universal accessibility of Buddhahood. This was very much like the universal accessibility of the goal of sagehood in Confucianism, a concept which was easily understood. Second, the Chinese liked the idea of a bodhisattva (including the lay bodhisattva as in the Vimalakīrti sutra), a saviour figure who refrains from entering Nirvana in order to help more people. This reminded them of the noble Confucian sage who "returns to the people what they have lost" and "helps all things find their nature"<sup>12</sup>. The Buddhist doctrine of compassion (*karuna*) could also be related to the Confucian *jen*, the concept of the ideal relationship among human beings. In addition, the Chinese appreciated the Buddhist explanation of suffering, something which was not expounded in Confucianism and Taoism. While suffering is something to be escaped from in Theravada teaching, in Mahayana teaching, suffering becomes meaningful and is a means of salvation.<sup>13</sup>

Mahayana Buddhism's message of salvation was of great appeal to the masses, many of whom led a life of great poverty and hardship. While Theravada's doctrine is atheistic with no anthropomorphic god, the Mahayana doctrine turned the human Buddha into an eternal and supreme deity presiding over the world and offering salvation to all. The Mahayana version makes it possible for a believer to pray and worship as a means of pleasing God and in so doing, achieving salvation. In addition, there was no necessity to leave the family to live in the monastery or to live an ascetic life.

<sup>12</sup> H. Maurer, *Tao, the Way of the Ways*, chap. 64.

<sup>13</sup> This is similar to the Bahá'í faith in that Bahá'u'lláh teaches that suffering tempers the individual and makes him realise his vulnerability and spiritual needs: "The true lover yearneth for tribulation even as doth the rebel for forgiveness and the sinful for mercy." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Arabic Hidden Words*, No. 49)

Much relief was offered for the masses in the form of Mahayana personalities who had human features. For example, if a bodhisattva vowed to liberate all beings from suffering, that bodhisattva was also the object of devotion. Bodhisattvas such as Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom; Ksitigarbha who, as Jizo, in Japan rescues children, born and unborn; Maitreya, the bodhisattva who will become the next Buddha; and most of all Avolokitesvara, who took the female form as Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan and who in Tibet, takes the human form in the succession of Dalai Lamas. According to Ching (1989), the Bodhisattva Guanyin is probably a response to a popular need for a protectress, one not a mother herself, but who listens and responds effectively to the prayers of would-be mothers.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the intelligentsia was also converted to Buddhism. This is not surprising because once the voluminous scriptures of Buddhism were translated into Chinese, people found in them a depiction of the world incomparably broader than that found in the six Chinese classics. The vivid accounts of human emotion, volition and psychology found in the Buddhist scriptures were also far more complex and richer than that handed down by the sages.

### **2.3 The Accounting of the Afterlife**

One reason for the popular appeal of Buddhism (and religious Taoism) was the irresistible human desire for immortality. Buddhism taught the indestructibility of the soul and the attainment of nirvana as a kind of immortality. The idea was so appealing that a popular Chinese sect, the Pure Land Buddhists, also introduced the notion of rebirth not into heaven or hell, but directly into the "Pure Land of Bliss" established by Amitābha Buddha. These pure lands are described in elaborate detail in certain Mahayana sutras, which tell of the variety of jewels, the streams of water, and soothing breezes. Rebirth in one of these heavenly pure lands (buddhaksetra) is the goal of Buddhist practice in India, China and Japan. Pure lands are not a permanent paradise but a realm devoted to the nurturance of the Buddhist Faith. It is the ideal environment in which to achieve Buddhist enlightenment and eventually, Nirvana.

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<sup>14</sup> See J. Ching, *Chinese Perspectives*.

Buddhist (and Taoist) funeral ceremonies also involve the symbolic transfer of goods, made out of paper to the next world. There is a belief that the physical and spiritual worlds are interconnected. In Chinese mythology, the journey imagery is seen through the cline of existence. Immorality and morality are often blurred, and there are degrees of both states. Spiritual powers attributed to monks and nuns seemed to threaten the core value of the Chinese family system. The interdependent nature of the relationship between lay people and the professionally religious is seen in such phenomena as the kinship terminology – an attempt to recreate family – amongst monks and nuns, lay donors and monastic officials in a wide range of rituals designed to bring comfort to ancestors.

In contrast, for the Confucian literati, the question of whether life exists after death is always carefully left out of the discussion. As Tzu-kung (520-450 BC) said, “We cannot hear our Master’s views on human nature and the Way of Heaven”. In the first century AD Wang Ch’ung, one of the more critical and influential philosophers in Chinese history, wrote a treatise to disprove the existence of spiritual beings. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Fan Chen (450 BC) attacked the Buddhist belief in immortality. Neo-Confucianists, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, have unanimously attacked both the Taoist and Buddhist belief in everlasting life. The main concern for Confucians was not whether man had a soul but rather how to put this distinctively human quality to good use.

## 2.4 State Support

The influence of Buddhism was also due to the fact that it enjoyed state support at certain periods in Chinese history. The conversion of a Parthian prince (c 148-170 CE) named An Shih-kaio, for example, greatly accelerated the growth of Buddhism. Later, in 401 AD, the Chinese court commissioned the Indian monk, Kumārajīva, to do the monumental translations of the Hindu Vedas, the occult sciences and astronomy, as well as to standardize the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras. During the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, new specifically Chinese Buddhist schools began to form. Monastic establishments proliferated and Buddhism became well established among the peasantry.



The collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE caused China to lapse into disunion and to break into small warring states for four centuries. Political disunion caused the political power of Confucianism to collapse and this opened the door to the rapid spread of Buddhist ideas. Many kings of small states became nominal Buddhists and sought to replace Confucian influence with Buddhist influence. This was especially so in the northern Chinese states, which were keen to reject Confucianism, as it represented the regimes they had toppled. During the Sui dynasty (581-618 AD), Buddhism flourished as a state religion.

The Tang dynasty (618-906 AD) was the golden age of Chinese Buddhism. This period witnessed a flowering of translation activity. The most famous was Hsüan-tsang, pilgrim and translator, who brought back to China hundreds of sutras. Although T'ang emperors were usually Taoists, they tended to favour Buddhism, which had become extremely popular and which was similar to Taoism in many of its metaphysical principles. Under the T'ang, the government extended its control over the monasteries as well as the ordination and legal status of monks. From this time onward, the Chinese monk styled himself simply "ch'en" or "subject". During this period, several Chinese schools developed their own distinctive approaches and there was a comprehensive systemization of the vast body of Buddhist texts. This was a period when many monasteries were built. It was also a period when many scholars made pilgrimages to India, heroic journeys that greatly enriched Buddhism in China, both by the texts that were acquired and the intellectual and spiritual inspiration that came with them.

Emperor Wu (c. 502-549) is best remembered by posterity for his lavish patronage of the Buddhist religion.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, he himself was the author of a short treatise entitled *Shen-ming ch'eng-fo I-chi*, which contains some of the standard Chinese Buddhist arguments for the existence of the eternal soul. He was also a fervent student of the *Mahayana Māhāparinirvānasūtra*, having commissioned Pao-liang and Fa-lang of the Chien-yüan temple to compile commentaries for it. To summarise, the Tang period saw unprecedented numbers of ordinations into the ranks of the Buddhist order, the flourishing of the new allegedly "Chinese" school of thought and lavish support from the state.

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<sup>15</sup> See his poem on the three religions, in *Tao-hsuan* (c. 596-667).

### 3. The Relegation of Buddhism to the Background

We come now to an interesting paradox. If Buddhism was so attractive and appealing to both the literati and the masses, why has it adopted a secondary position? Why is the "Great Chinese Tradition" more Confucian than Buddhist? Four reasons can be found to explain this unusual phenomenon: the association of Confucianism with state power, the emergence of Neo-Confucianism, the nature of Sinitic Mahayana Buddhism and the lack of unity among the myriad Buddhist groups.

#### 3.1 Confucianism and State Power

One reason Confucianism lasted as long as it did was because, over time, it became synonymous with state power. Confucianism shaped the bureaucracy which supported the system of absolute monarchy and the bureaucracy itself was the institutional embodiment of the Confucian tradition. The bureaucracy was under the emperor, who was the founder or descendant of a founder whose virtue enabled him to take over from a previous corrupt ruler. He ruled by the principle of the "mandate of heaven" (Tianming), that is, he was conceived as a semi-divine force and carried out the commands of heaven. Over the ages, Confucian moral values have often been politicised to serve an oppressive authoritarian regime. The virtue of loyalty to the state was exploited because it contributed to the social and political ideology, which kept the emperor in power. Emperors found that Confucianism rather than Taoism or Buddhism served their political needs better because of its emphasis on decorum and rationalised orderliness. For example, the five obligations: between the sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother and between friends helped keep peace and order in society.

The bureaucracy was all-powerful in traditional Chinese society. The chief official responsible for a county was a magistrate, selected from a central pool on the basis of his performance in the state examination system. He was responsible for employing lower-level functionaries e.g. scribes, clerks, sheriffs and tax-keepers. He reported to superiors and

followed their orders. He made offerings at a variety of officially recognised temples and to local deified heroes, gave lectures to residents on morality and watched over religious activities especially those whose actions threatened the sovereignty and the prerogatives of the state.

Any religion then that posed a threat to the great power of Confucianism was periodically persecuted. Perhaps the major one was that led by Emperor Wu-tsung in 845 AD. According to records, 4,600 Buddhist temples and 40,000 shrines were destroyed and 260,500 monks forced to return to lay life.<sup>16</sup> There was persecution, not just against religionists but also against philosophers who deferred from the main ideological stream. For example, followers of Mo Tzu were persecuted because Mo Tzuism closely resembled the anthropomorphism of Christianity. In this philosophy, we find Heaven (which was anthropomorphically regarded by Mo Tzu as a personal Supreme Being) creating the sun, moon and innumerable stars. On the other hand, the philosophy of Mo Tzu's contemporary, Mencius, was exalted because the latter's chief concern was to eulogize the doctrines of the great Confucius, and like his master, Mencius preferred to let the origin of the universe look after itself.

### **3.2 The Emergence of Neo-Confucianism**

After a period of decline during the Tang dynasty, the Sung dynasty (960-1279 AD) saw a revival of Confucianism which was sufficiently different from earlier Confucianism to merit the term "neo-Confucianism". The neo-Confucianists realised that the only way to revive Confucianism was to plug its deficiency with regards to its metaphysical foundation. It was in their vested interest after all to preserve and strengthen their bureaucratic office and high social prestige with the formalisation and spread of Confucianism. Accordingly, the neo-Confucianists tried to attain a firm metaphysical basis for its ethical ideas by looking into a scientific theory of the origin of the universe and man. Sung scholars secularised Buddhist and Taoist mystical ideas and used them as starting points to establish a systematic ontology and cosmology as the metaphysical foundation for Confucian ethics.

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<sup>16</sup> See the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* under "Buddhism", pp. 273-4.

To ensure that Confucianism remained the bedrock and that its sister philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism remained as helpers and companions, many temples were built in honour of Confucius. In these temples, the chief disciples and distinguished Confucians of later ages were also honoured. Above the altars were the words, "The teacher of 10,000 generations". Only scholars could take part in the sacrifices. Emperor T'ai-tsu (960-976 AD) of the Sung dynasty made regular sacrifices to Confucius. Emperor Chen-tsung (997-1022 AD) who claimed to have had frequent heavenly visitations set a precedent by prostrating to Confucius at the temple in Lu. In 1012, Emperor Chen-tsung also bestowed on Confucius the title "most perfect sage".<sup>17</sup>

The neo-Confucians also wrote many polemical works against Taoism and Buddhism, especially on the topics of rebirth and karma which found no correspondence in Confucian teachings. Generally, neo-Confucians criticised Buddhism as metaphysically nihilistic and therefore amoral. They felt that sober reason was superior to what was perceived as the superstitious or spiritualistic obsession and imaginative invention of both Buddhism and Taoism. Chu Hsi's (1130-1200) critique of Ch'an Buddhism in particular was devastating. Chu Hsi accused Buddhism of failing to tackle everyday socio-moral problems, which, in his Neo-Confucian judgement, only the Confucian tradition was able to resolve completely and perfectly.<sup>18</sup> There were also attacks on the Ch'an teachings of "sudden awakening" and accusations that Ch'an had completely neglected the importance of the necessary and gradual life-long cultivation of man's moral and social nature.

What was ironical in the neo-Confucian movement was that in its attempts to stem the popularity of its sister traditions, it drew much inspiration from them. Neo-Confucianist, Lu Hsiang-shan (Lu Chiu-yuan), for example, stressed that truth is a result of experiencing "sudden enlightenment", a Buddhist concept. He also argued that the goal of enlightenment is the attainment of the supreme knowledge of self and the

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<sup>17</sup> See N. F. Gier, *On the Deification of Confucius*, *Asian Philosophy*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>18</sup> Chu Hsi may be said to be the most influential Neo-Confucian and he has been compared to a Chinese Spinoza or St. Thomas Aquinas. His interpretation of Confucianism was accepted as official philosophy and served the interests of feudalistic dynasties for over 700 years (from the late Southern Sung (1127-1279) to the end of the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912)).

world of the universal truth. Another famous neo-Confucian was Wang Yang-ming, who was more Buddhist than Confucian. It was reported that he was suddenly enlightened one night and attained a new understanding of the central idea of The Great Learning, which became central to the Neo-Confucianist reformulation of the Confucian classics. He said "the great man is an all-pervading unity, which is one with Heaven, Earth and all things." In his research, Chan Wing-tsit (1989) located more than 40 Buddhist expressions and stories in Wang's treatise, the *Ch'uan-hsi In* (Instructions for Practical living).<sup>19</sup>

Not surprisingly, this period saw tensions arising between Confucianism and Buddhism. To counter Confucianist criticisms, Buddhists viewed themselves as "ultimate cure" (*pi-ching chih*), and characterised Confucianism as a "worldly dharma-medicine (*shih-chieh fa-yao*) which merely provoked a "view of the temporary (*chia-kuan*)."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, this rivalry did not enable Confucianism to defeat Buddhism, because Buddhism (and Taoism) still retained its mass appeal. If one can be certain as to what Confucianism achieved, it would be that it enriched all three spiritual traditions and encouraged their synthesis to a greater degree than ever before. While Confucianism became more Taoist and Buddhist, it also contributed to Taoism and Buddhism. For example, the Ch'an Masters Miao-hsi and Chu-an in the Sung dynasty edited a famous book named *Valuable Instructions in the Forest of Ch'an*, which adopted many of the moral norms of Confucianism.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.3 The nature of Sinitic Mahayana Buddhism

One reason why Sinitic Mahayana Buddhism never overtook Confucianism in terms of its influence was the fact that it was not so much interested in state governance as it was in the pursuit of individual salvation and nirvana. Sinitic Buddhism was more concerned with spiritual realism than the state of governance. Buddhism (like religious Taoism) is ultimately concerned with the problem of life-and-death –

<sup>19</sup> Wang Yang-Ming (1472-1528) may be said to be the most outstanding philosopher of the Ming Dynasty. See W. M. Tu, *Neo Confucian Thought in Action*.

<sup>20</sup> E. T. Ch'ien, *The Neo-Confucian Confrontation with Buddhism*, pp. 347- 370.

<sup>21</sup> Wu Yi, *On Chinese Ch'an in Relation to Taoism*, pp. 131-154.

while Confucianism is committed to the constant moral perfecting of man and society. Sinitic Mahayana Buddhism was basically a popular lay movement that sought to restore Buddha's original compassion through the ideal of the bodhisattva, the person who sacrifices his own welfare in order to lead all to nirvana. It is interesting here that the bodhisattva represented is not so much an inspiration but as a model to be scrupulously emulated. One can think here perhaps of the role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Bahá'í Faith.

Sinitic Mahayana Buddhism taught self-perfection as the supreme good and the final goal. It is a religion of salvation concerned not so much with the world but with liberation from suffering and rebirth. Qualities such as benevolence, liberality, gratitude and tolerance are stressed rather than worldly possessions. The Bahá'í Faith is somewhat similar here -- in the sense that the individual's salvation is a personal journey from him to God. The individual has to develop his spiritual faculties to the fullest in this earthly life so that in the next life, he will be able to attain a higher spiritual station and his soul can move closer to God. The Confucians, on the other hand, were very much involved with the material world and with the faculty of reason in their dealing with life. For the Buddhists, the faculty of reason provided a relatively superficial awareness, insufficient to the task of directly apprehending the truth. All endeavours in the realm of what might be termed "philosophy" were thus theoretically subservient to the greater ultimate goal of enlightenment.

Sinitic Mahayana Buddhism also chose to play a more defensive role. It tended to be metaphysical, transcendental, and above all worldly things. While the religious specialist was a popular and important figure in Chinese culture, there was no self-perpetuating Sangha, and ordination ceremonies were rarely held. This contrasted with the more practical, morally idealistic, and historically minded Theravada form of Buddhism.<sup>22</sup> In Theravada Burma, the Sangha (Buddhist hierarchy) has always been politically active, more so since the military overthrew the civilian government of Prime Minister U Nu in March 1962. Similarly, while Theravada Buddhism does not play a visible role in Thai politics, it nevertheless influences many of its political, economic and social policies.

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<sup>22</sup> See B.L. Suzuki, *Mahayana Buddhism*. See Chapter 1 (pp. 21-35) on the comparisons between Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism.

While there had been Buddhist/Taoist-led messianic peasant rebellions throughout Chinese history, they were essentially non-political as they did not offer an alternative to the civil service.<sup>23</sup> Neither did the uprisings come from ideological opposition to religious Taoism or Confucianism. In contrast to the Confucianist persecutions against Buddhism, which were mainly political and economic, the issues in Buddhist/Taoist-led rebellions were basically economic. The major persecution of 845 AD came about mainly because of economic issues. Many able-bodied men had joined monasteries and thus became unavailable for agricultural production and army or labour conscription, or too much land belonged to the Buddhist church and thus became tax-exempt. Significantly, confiscated images of bronze were made into currency, those of iron into agricultural implements, those of gold and silver turned over to the Treasury and images of wood, clay and stone left untouched.<sup>24</sup> On the whole, Buddhism may be said to possess a distinguished legacy in "search after truth" and has clearly-stated lessons on detachment. More than any other religion, it warns against the perils of blind attachment to religion. There are many images that beautifully express this in Buddhist writings.<sup>25</sup>

It should also be noted that besides the Chinese trilogy of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, there were many other sectarian groups, which were a mixture of these. They were split up into numerous competitive sects with no central organising body. Many of these are syncretic Buddhist and religious Taoist groups. Most are not well defined because syncretic religions have ever-changing combinations. Chinese secret societies range from political, religious, politico-religious and they adapt themselves to changing conditions due to the demands of the people they wish to attract. In the long history of China, these groups have organised uprisings for what may seem to be religious concerns but which are, upon further investigation, economic or political.

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<sup>23</sup> See T. de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism*, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> See W. T. Chan, *The Historical Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism*, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> One such story is the "Parable of the Raft". See A. Khursheed, *Crossing Religious Boundaries*, p. 161.

### 3.4 The Lack of Unity in Chinese Buddhism

Generally in China we can discern five varieties of Buddhism.<sup>26</sup> The following are the main Buddhist groups in China but these are in no way discrete or self-contained for it is possible to find believers embracing features from two or more schools. In addition, each of these schools may, by themselves, be divided into many sub-sects or branches, depending on the varying emphasis on methods and techniques. These sects meant that there was no central ecclesiastical authority of Buddhism in China as there was in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, and this meant that they did not have the power or influence they had in these other countries.

1. T'ien-t'ai (Japanese: Tendai) school named after the mountain where Chih-io (538-97) founded his most important monastery. It preached that sainthood was not the highest aim.
2. Hua-yen (Japanese: Kegon) started before 600 CE. It is associated with the Fa-tsang (643-712) text called the Hua-yen Ching. It envisaged all phenomena as interconnected and likened the world to the famous mythic jewel-net of Indra, a net of jewels in which each one reflects all the others. Those who see this vision with clarity will see the essential Buddhahood of each living being and the presence of the Buddha mind everywhere. It presents an optimistic and beautiful picture of cosmic inter-relatedness.
3. Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) is where Buddhist meditation fused with Taoist mysticism to form the distinct Ch'an School. There is a need for master-pupil transmission rather than learning from scriptures. Monastic life revolves around a meditation hall with rigorous training under a master. In order to attain the spontaneity of enlightenment, people have to work hard. One notes that there are many sects of Ch'an with varying emphasis on various forms of meditation practices.
4. Pure Land and Kuan-Yin. Here, marvels of pure lands (paradise) believed to be presided over by the Buddha Amitābha (in Chinese, *Omitofo*; in Japanese *Amida*) who is assisted by bodhisattva

<sup>26</sup> Y.H. Yeo, *Mahayana Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith* lists eight Mahayana schools.



Avalokitesvara (in Chinese *Kuan-yin*, in Japanese *Kannon*). The Pure Land sutra which has two visions – a lengthier one emphasising the equal importance of faith and devotion to the Buddha as well as good works, and a shorter one (the Amitābha sutra) which says specifically that only faith in the infinite compassion of the Buddha, shown in prayerful and meditative repetition of Amitābha's name, is necessary.

5. Folk Buddhism. There is a belief here in the Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. Maitreya is a well-known figure in Buddhist sutras and represents messianic influences from beyond India, perhaps from Persia. The image of Maitreya undergoes transformation – from a large and heroic figure to the appearance of a wrinkled laughing monk with an exposed potbelly carrying a hemp bag but in a reclining posture, with small children climbing on top of him and surrounding him – an extremely popular devotional cult. Mi-lo (evolved from Maitreya) performs the same function as Kuan-Yin (evolved from Avalokitesvara).<sup>27</sup>

#### **4. The Role of Buddhism in Chinese Culture**

Buddhism gained a foothold in China because of four main reasons: the Chinese intrinsic interest in the spiritual life, Buddhism's ability to adjust and adapt to Chinese culture, its explanation of the after-life and its ability to acquire state support. On the other hand, Buddhism did not become the state philosophy of China because of four main reasons. First, as a predominantly lay movement, it did not enjoy state power. Neither did it endeavour to pursue, capture or maintain such power, being more interested in the pursuit of salvation and nirvana. The neo-Confucianists' efforts to increase their influence at Buddhism's expense also contributed

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<sup>27</sup> One notes that while all schools of Buddhist thought acknowledge and use the name of Maitreya, the name of Buddha Amitābha can only be found in Mahayana scriptures. But the signs and times for their occurrences are similar. Amitābha was made into a purely spiritual phenomenon to be experienced only in a spiritual plane, and by this process, Mahayanists were able to isolate the references regarding time and dates from the phenomenon of Amitābha and settled upon Maitreya as the actual physical Buddha, Who would manifest Himself on earth in accordance with the prophecies – in their Scriptures and the Pali text. According to J. Fozdar, p. 243, Maitreya and Amitābha signify One and the same Person.

towards this end. Last but not least, the numerous Buddhist groups were disadvantaged in not being united in their beliefs and practices and in their lack of a central authority.

This article has also discussed how, despite the predominance of Confucianism in Chinese religion, it was on closer inspection, an official philosophy valued more for its ability to ensure stability and order in society than as a means of spiritual insight or source of inspiration. Its endurance and sustainability for 2,500 years was in part due to its sister-faiths, Buddhism and religious Taoism, which satisfied the spiritual needs of the masses and kept them compliant. The sisters were much more metaphysically in tune than their brother who was often preoccupied with matters of state. While Confucianism was concerned with the moral perfecting of man and society, Buddhism and Taoism became intimately connected with the problem of life, death and immortality. Emerging in China around the same time to fill the spiritual vacuum left by Confucianism, the sisters were similar in many ways. For one, both were completely at home with metaphysical propensities. The Taoist, for instance, had no problem understanding the Buddhist's penchant for solitude, meditation and monasticism. In like manner, Buddhism utilised a Taoist vocabulary to make the Buddhist faith intelligible to the Chinese, especially when dealing with topics such as breath control and mystical concentration.

As elder brother of the Chinese religion, Confucianism guarded its privileged position jealously. While it acknowledged its sisters' contributions to the family, it was determined that they should not overstep their boundaries. Occasionally there were jealousies, disagreements and rivalries. Sometimes it was the brother with one of the sisters, or two of the sisters together; at other times, the two sisters would disagree among themselves and periodic quarrels and squabbles would break out. Whatever the cause, the elder brother would often use the state apparatus to stem the disorder. Most of the time, however, the three lived together in harmony and co-operation. They also borrowed ideas freely from each other in their daily lives. Through the course of history, Buddhism eventually found it prudent to coalesce with Confucian-Neo-Confucian and Taoist traditions to form a complex multi-religious ethos within which all three traditions were more or less comfortably encompassed. This was also the case with religious Taoism which in the

Tang period, incorporated Confucius into its pantheon of gods, a hierarchy which was headed by the Tang Emperor himself! Not surprisingly, after such intimate and intricate liaisons, it was often difficult for outsiders to tell the members of the family apart.

## 5. The Future of Religion in China

### 5.1 Needs of the Chinese people

Archaeological discoveries in China (as elsewhere) have established beyond doubt that from the earliest times, the Chinese people have had an awareness of an Unseen Power. Humanity has instinctively felt "it" inwardly and worshipped "it" outwardly. The Chinese appear to be instinctively intuitive and spiritually receptive. Despite the fact that they had to endure repeated periods of upheaval, oppression and chaos, there is no questioning the close and pervading relationship of religion to the daily lives of the Chinese people. Even when religion was at its ebb during the time of Mao, "Maoism" (much in the spirit of the two sisters) attempted to fill the void. Mao was called "our great helmsman" and "the red sun in the heart of people throughout the world". He was praised for "unlimited wisdom, courage and strength" and for "always being with us". He was also the source of inspiration and the object of devotion in songs and rituals with a strongly religious character.

Today, the overseas Chinese community is perhaps the best example of this religiosity. Chinese religion thrives in the myriad temples in the overseas communities of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had a special compliment for the Chinese people: "The Chinese people are most simple-hearted and truth-seeking... In China, one can teach many souls and train and educate such divine personages that each one of them may become the bright candle of the world of humanity."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps he was thinking of Emperor Ming (58-67 AD) who, having seen Buddha in a dream, sent envoys to India to inquire about the doctrine and whose envoys subsequently returned with numerous sutras and holy objects, as well as two Indian monks to translate the sutras.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in the *Star of the West*, Vol. 13, 185. Note that in this instance the original text of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words is not available.

We may also learn from what the neo-Confucians have realised all along: that for any philosophy or religion to have a powerful and enduring hold on the hearts and minds of the people, it must have a metaphysical foundation. The neo-Confucianists endeavoured to fill the chasm of unfulfilled needs left by the *Analects*, a chasm which enabled ancient shamanistic practices to continue to thrive in Chinese society and which led to the subsequent emergence of Buddhism and Taoism.

In the past, attempts were made to fill this chasm. Confucius was deified 500 years after his death in the later Han dynasty and worship of him was conducted in government schools. Numerous temples were also erected in his honour in the Tang dynasty in 630 AD. This did not stem the growing popularity of the sisters and a further effort was made during the Sung dynasty by the neo-Confucianists to strengthen Confucianism by the infusion of metaphysical principles into it. While their efforts succeeded in stemming the growth of Buddhism and Taoism, it certainly did not succeed in eradicating their influence.

It is apparent from Chinese history that the metaphysical foundation of religion or philosophy must provide answers to the afterlife since a human being is more self-centred than humanitarian. One remembers 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exposition on man: "Self love is moulded into the very clay of man."<sup>29</sup> Human beings are fundamentally spiritual creatures and a part of them is intensely interested in what lies beyond death. This is a much stronger impulse than the fact that they are human. The humanist philosophy has no answer to what lies beyond death and an answer is only provided by religion. Understandably, people are constantly worried about their own survival and what the future holds for them. It can be argued here that humanitarianism as a creed has not succeeded in laying the foundation of any great civilisation such as the Egyptian, Christian, Islamic and Buddhist civilisations. Marcus Aurelius was a humanist but his philosophy did not spread to the psyche of the masses. Communism, a

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<sup>29</sup> Capitalism's success lies in its ability to exploit the self-love and profit motive inherent in man. In this sense it has used an important potential of man mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings. It is stated that "self-love", which in this context may be translated into self-interest "is moulded into the very clay of man". Self-love is the greatest motivational force known to us, and the use of personal reward is a valuable path towards material advancement.

humanitarian creed, which aimed to effect social justice had to be sustained by the barrel of the gun. The most successful humanitarian movement of all – Confucianism – lasted 2,500 years only because it was supported and sustained by its two sisters who were content for the most part to be part of the family of “Chinese religion”.

The composition of Chinese religion also reveals the Chinese as a practical people. This can be seen in the fact that the Chinese religion is not an institutional religion but one that satisfies a range of religious needs. It can be compared to an empty bowl, which can be filled with the contents of religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. Confucianism, for example, fulfilled the Chinese need for a social order, Taoism, the need for the spirit and Buddhism, the need for belief in the afterlife. Confucianism filled the role as the “moral” and “ritual” religion, Taoism the “polytheistic” and “alchemical” and Buddhism, the “devotional” and “mystical”. Their contributions are also distinct: Buddhism and Taoism influenced Chinese art, sculpture, religion, and philosophy of life, Confucianism contributed to government, education, literature, society, and ethics. It is a question of fulfilling needs. In Chinese funerals, this type of functionalism can be seen very clearly. The Chinese family may employ a Buddhist and Taoist monk to perform funeral rituals although they may have nothing to do with one another. After the funeral, they perform the Confucian rites of ancestral worship. On another occasion, they may reach into their shamanistic tradition by consulting a spirit medium to consult about matters of luck.

While it is often argued that Buddhism survived because it acculturated itself,<sup>30</sup> it must also be remembered that its survival was due to the fact that it fulfilled a basic craving left by Confucianism – the need for salvation for all beings and the opportunity for progress to an afterlife.<sup>31</sup> Buddhism provided a spiritual respite from the harsher routines of

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<sup>30</sup> See J. Ching, *Chinese Perspectives*, p. 221. Buddhism adapted so much to Chinese society that Julia Ching has posed the question as to whether it was “the Buddhist conquest of China or the Chinese conquest of Buddhism?”.

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, religious Taoism was more appealing than philosophical Taoism because it was essentially preoccupied with basic concerns, such as life, death and immortality, and pragmatic issues relating to health, wealth, business and marriage. See P.G.L. Chew, *Life, Death and Immortality*, *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, 2, 1, 1997, pp. 69-90.

Confucianism. It gave hope to the masses by teaching that the Buddha-nature is in all of us, that the Bodhisattva lives to help his fellow creatures, and that ignorance can be removed through the attainment of Enlightenment when the Truth of the Highest reality is realised.

Indeed, I would venture so far as to say that the ordinary Chinese person is not concerned much with Confucianism, Taoism or Buddhism even though we hear such names vaunted frequently in their literature. The *real* religion of the ordinary Chinese people is concerned with meeting their immediate needs, that is, the pursuit of worldly success, the appeasement of the dead and spirit, and the seeking of knowledge about the future. On the other hand, the *real* religion of the intellectuals is an ideology that conforms to rationality, order and harmony. To attain a foothold in China, a religion must address these needs.

## 5.2 Addressing Basic Needs: the Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith

In relation to these basic needs, the Bahá'í Faith has specific teachings addressed to the creation of wealth, of the spiritual world and of the future. In terms of worldly success, Bahá'ís are not opposed to the accumulation of wealth. Marxism was attractive to the Chinese because it offered a solution to widespread poverty and proposed as its goal an egalitarian society in which individuals receive benefits according to their true needs. Like the founding fathers of communism, Bahá'ís believe that there must be tyranny somewhere if poverty exists. While wealth is to be encouraged, poverty is to be abolished. Bahá'í teachings stipulate that if an owner has a large fortune, his workmen should also have a sufficient means of existence. In the Bahá'í model, employees are partners and not just wage earners. Bahá'í institutions such as the Huqúqu'lláh, which institutes a 19% tax on profits above a certain level has helped in the equalisation of income.<sup>32</sup>

There are also teachings with regard to the metaphysical. There is a belief in an ultimate goal or Being, the existence of an afterlife and the necessity of performing good deeds in the material world of existence. In line with

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<sup>32</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 14.

Chinese beliefs, Bahá'ís believe that the status of a departed spirit is influenced by the intercession of others through prayers and good works done in their name and that there should always be gratitude towards parents and grandparents for the gift of life.<sup>33</sup>

Last but not least, the Bahá'í Faith is concerned about the future. All of its social principles are designed to enable humanity to exist happily for another 1,000 years. The keyword is unity and the principles are centred on the one-world concept, that is, the promotion of a world language, a world currency, a world tribunal and a world defence force.<sup>34</sup> The Bahá'í world is basically a world without borders where humanity is one and the same everywhere. The Bahá'í recognises a world made one by the revolution in telecommunications and the impracticality and the redundancy of working within man-made political borders. It is a principle aligned to the economic prosperity of humanity since it would mean the eradication of wars – a major disincentive to prosperity.

Where intellectuals are concerned, an attractive philosophy would be one where the principles of rationality, order and harmony, are adhered to. After all, Confucianism was adopted because it was an incarnation of common sense and practical wisdom. It also ties in well with the concept of harmony in the universe. The idea of harmony is an important component of Chinese traditional culture. As early as the last years of the west Zhou dynasty 5,000 years ago, ancient scholars elucidated the brilliant idea of “harmony making prosperity”. Later, Confucius and the Confucian school put forward the proposition of “harmony above all” and established theories on the co-ordination of inter-personal relations, the protection of the natural environment and the maintenance of ecological balance.

Indeed, harmony appears to be the predominant motif in Chinese religion. Confucianism finds supreme harmony in a disciplined and ordered human relationship. Buddhism perceives all reality as interdependent and teaches man to achieve union through the rejection of selfish desires and of a separate ego. Taoism finds harmony in nature and naturalness and dreams of immortality beyond this earthly life. The Bahá'í vision of the unity of

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

humankind and the establishment of a world civilisation based on peace and justice can be an appealing one in this context.

The trilogy of Chinese religion reveals to us the possibility of the peaceful co-existence of religious beliefs. A reason for the harmony of both Taoism and Buddhism is that both converge in the quest for the truth of existence. Where the Chinese perception is always oriented in the triadic heaven-earth-humankind relationship to exhibit the Tao and its manifestation, the Buddhist took the lead from the historical Buddha's insight that led to nirvana. On the whole, the methodological quest for the Tao is similar to the quest for Dharma. Both acknowledge the subtleties of the quest. In addition, the Buddhist idea of "all in one" or "one in all" is an appealing one. During the reign of Empress Wu (684-704 AD), there was an attempt to develop a universalistic view called the Dharmadhatu, which was adopted to promote the spirit of cosmopolitanism, not only in politics but also in religion.<sup>35</sup>

This idea was propagated by the neo-Confucianists and has its source in the *I Ching*: "In the world there are many different roads but the destination is the same. There are a hundred deliberations but the result is one."<sup>36</sup> In line with this idea and in contrast to the Theravada tradition, sinic Mahayana temples usually have many Gods and also an infinite number of future Buddhas.<sup>37</sup>

As the Chinese experience shows, religion becomes viable if it does not attempt to displace and deny the essential truth of all the great religions. Buddhism's incursion into China did not replace the native gods of China. The Bahá'í perspective of progressive revelation will not be too unfamiliar to the Chinese since the traditional attitude was one of tolerance rather

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<sup>35</sup> King Asoka in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC is another good example of a tolerant ruler. As an ardent Buddhist, he made no attempt to suppress other religious groups. On the contrary, he lent them positive aid and encouragement. To suppress Brahmanism would, he believed, depart from the true spirit of Buddhism. See D. Ikeda, *Buddhism in the First Millennium*.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in J. Legge, *The 4 books*, Pt. 2, Ch. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Theravada temples contain only the image of Skyamuni Gautama Buddha and the bodhi tree. In contrast, the Mahayana temples contain a multitude of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which are myriad manifestations of Absolute of which Gautama is only one. Also Amitābha Buddha (Amitufo and the Bodhisattva Avalokitsevara Kuanyin) is more important than that of Buddha. Icons in Mahayana temples are always more numerous and there may be ancestral tablets on the altar as well.



than dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition. One observes in the history of Chinese thought a tendency for wholeness and a sense to look towards the relativity of particulars within the universal totality. There are also other implications for teaching that may be derived from a study of Buddhism in China. The history of Sinitic Buddhism tells us the great importance of good translations. The greatest figure who made Mahayana thought really acceptable and digestible for the Chinese was Kumārajīva, who came to Chang-an in 401. During the 12 years that followed, aided by his able disciples, he translated thirty-five sutras. Although these translations were later criticised by Hsuan-chuang as not scholarly or faithful enough to the original, Kumārajīva knew better – because he aspired to present the sense in such a way and style to be readily understood by his readers. Here, one discerns two schools of translators; the one is scholarly and the other strives to reproduce the spirit. Hsuan-chuang belongs to the former and Kumārajīva to the second.<sup>38</sup> Both are needed of course. Other translators were Paramartha (499-569) who came to South China in 546; Chi-I (538-597 AD) and Chi-tsang (549-623) of the Sui dynasty; and last but not least, Fa-tsang (643-712 AD) the founder of the Avatamsaka School.<sup>39</sup> The importance of good translators able to transmit both the thought and spirit of religious scriptures cannot be lightly discounted.

The success of Buddhism in China tells us that foreign ideologies can take root and develop. The Chinese are eager to learn from foreigners. Presently, they desire to learn from the West. Even Lao-tzu's ideas are not so thoroughly native to the Chinese as that of Confucius. Some scholars think that Lao-tzu derived these teachings from India and while this cannot be historically proven, it cannot be ignored either. The Chinese love for knowledge and learning is legendary. One remembers here that while the Europeans were attracted to India for its material wealth, the Chinese were attracted to India for its spiritual wealth.

If there has been religious persecution in China, the key issue was not whether something was "foreign" or "home grown" but whether it had mass appeal and whether it was a potential threat to the monopoly of state

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<sup>38</sup> See B.L. Suzuki, *Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Chi-I is the founder of the *T'ien-dai* (*Tendai* in Japanese) School whose teaching is the development of the doctrine contained in the *Saddharmapundarika*. Chi-tsang is the principal expounder of the shastras belonging to the Madhyamika School of India.

power. One remembers that although there were religious persecutions in the history of China, these were not prolonged and there was not so much an opposition to the religious doctrine itself as there were grievances with respect to its economic and political implications.<sup>40</sup> The scenario today is no different from the past. Today, Communist China seems determined to maintain control over religion, regardless of the impact on its international relations. In recent years, Beijing has outlawed several Christian groups – as illegal cults. In December 1999 alone, more than 100 Christians were arrested nation-wide while six Protestant leaders in Henan province were sentenced to labour camps for leading “evil cults”.<sup>41</sup> The massive crack down on the fast growing and popular Falun Gong spiritual sect in July 1999 is another example. Reminiscent of past persecutions, one notes that the absolute power of communism is not so much opposed to the spiritual content of the teachings, but are more fearful of its potential threat to state supremacy. It is apparent here that just as the Neo-Confucians were fascinated and fearful of Buddhism’s growing influence in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, so too, there is a simultaneous love-hate, and attraction-repulsion relationship to the incursions of new ideologies into China.

According to the Bahá'í Faith, the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as one where humanity sheds the last vestiges of a troubled adolescence to enter into a more mature and stable adulthood.<sup>42</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has seen the death throes of many political social and economic ideologies as well as unprecedented technological developments and a massive search for a new world order. In 1912 and 1949, in China, Republicanism and Communism respectively filled the political gap but these ideologies seem all too soon to be losing their influence. For one thing, Communism has no metaphysical foundation and its humanitarian ideals are powered by force. Like Confucianism, there is no flight of imagination or soul-stirring religious emotion in its scriptures. Worse, the sisters have been excommunicated, and communism, unlike Confucianism, is perched precariously alone. Time will tell whether the 20<sup>th</sup> century is indeed another axial period in which the essential insights that spawn great cultures take root. Great political, social, economic and spiritual changes often occur during such times. So too, do teachers of great civilisations

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<sup>40</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism*, p. 118.

<sup>41</sup> See *Time*, January 24, 2000, pp. 16-17.

<sup>42</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 1-11.

such as Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed emerge. Whether the 20<sup>th</sup> century is another watershed in human history will only be apparent to later historians.

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