



MANICHEISM VI. IN CHINA

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The following will consider the spread of Mani's teaching in China and its literary achievements. Manicheism arrived in China in the sixth century, but its history in there was little known until the first decade of the 20th century, when a genuine Manichean text in Chinese, known to scholars as the *Traité* (see [PAUL PELLIOU](#)), was discovered in the Cave of Thousand Buddhas in Tunhuang ([Dunhuang](#)). The earlier recovery of Mid. Iranian and Turk. Manichean texts from Turfan had already led scholars to realize the extent of the eastward expansion of Manicheism (see [CHINESE TURKESTAN ix.](#) and [CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS i.](#)). But even then the discovery of a well-preserved Manichean text came as a surprise to many scholars, especially to those Sinologists who believed that traditional China was highly impervious to foreign religious influences other than those of Buddhism and Islam. No account of the gradual diffusion of the religion from the lands east of the Oxus to China proper had come down to us from a Manichean works, but Chinese works mention the sending of a Mo-zak by Te-s, the King of Tokārestān, to the T'ang court in 719, adding that he was well received because of his skills in astrology. The Manicheans in China preserved the tradition that the spread of their religion in the Middle Kingdom was brought about by the earlier arrival of Mōzak during the reign of the Emperor Kao-tsung of the T'ang Dynasty (650-83). His pupil, Mihr-Ohrmazd (*Mi-we-mo-ssu*), who held the rank of *Fu-to-tan* (*Aftādā* 'episcopus'), later also came to China and presented himself to the



royal court where he was granted an audience by the Empress Wu (684-704). According to later Buddhist sources in Chinese he presented to the throne a Manichean work entitled the *Sūtra of the Two principles* (*Erh-tsung ching*, i.e. the the *Šābuhragān*, q.v.), which was to become the most popular Manichean scripture in China. The religion was clearly popular among the Sogdian merchants and there were attempts to win Chinese converts. In 731 a Manichean priest was asked to provide a summary of the main tenets of the religion. Interestingly, the version of the summary (the *Compendium of the teachings of Mani the Buddha of Light*) which was found among the Tun-huang documents brought back by Aurel Stein, already shows clear attempts to depict Manicheism as a form of Buddhism since Mani was represented as an *avatar* (reincarnation or remanifestation) of Lao-tzu, the traditional founder of Taosim in China. Lao-tzu was then believed by many Chinese not to have died but had gone to West where he reappeared as the Buddha. The response of the T'ang government to the *Compendium* was the law of 731, which permitted the practice of the religion by foreigners in China but banned its preaching to the Chinese. By then a substantial number of Manichean texts had already been translated into Chinese from Parthian and/or Sogdian. For instance the text of the *Traité* found in Tun-huang had used a Chinese script, a practice forbidden after the reign of Empress Wu.

A major turning point in the history of Manicheism in China came with the conversion in 762 of Moyu (Bogu) Khan of the Uighur Turks. Since 755, T'ang China had been fatally weakened by the An Lu-shan Rebellion and the Uighurs had become the only effective fighting force in the service of the T'ang government, and their troops garrisoned the sensitive frontier between China and Tibet. The conversion was commemorated by a proclamations. A copy of it inscribed in Old Turkish in runic script accompanied by Sogdian and Chinese was discovered at Karabalghasun at the end of the nineteenth century. It proudly announces the adoption of strict prohibitions such as vegetarianism and the abstention from the alcohol. Under the patronage of the Uighurs, Manichean temples were permitted to be established in the two capitals of China (Ch'ang-an and Lo-yang) as well as in four other major cities in North and Central China. However, the sudden collapse of the Uighur Empire in 840 led to the closure of most of the temples and in the proscription against Buddhism and other foreign religions in 843. Manichean priests were publicly humiliated and executed, and the remnants of the Uighur Turks were resettled in the region round Chotcho. However, Manicheism continued to flourish and was rewarded with productive agricultural lands which were used for the



cultivation of wine-grapes, despite the religion's rules against intoxication. The brief period of foreign patronage probably only lasted a century but it was the period in which most of the Manichean texts recovered by the German Turfan expeditions were produced by highly professional scribes and miniature painters.

The religion had diffused sufficiently in China at the time of the expulsion for it to survive during the period of the Five Dynasties (907-60) and to re-emerge as a popular secret religion in Central and, more particularly, South China. The earlier use of the myth of the Buddha Mani as an *avatar* of Lao-tzu enabled the Manicheans to present themselves as Buddhists or as Taoists. The religion was particularly popular south of the Yangtze and especially in and around the cosmopolitan port-city of Ch'üan-zhou (Zayton). The followers of the religion were sufficiently well connected for some of their scriptures to be accepted into the Taoist Canon in 1019 (later expunged). In 1120, a major rebellion took place led by Fang La, the owner of a lacquer grove in protest against a special impost on luxury goods. It was widely believed by the authorities that many of the rebels were members of secret religious sects and that their meeting places were foci of political protest. This led to widespread crackdowns on unauthorized religious assemblies and the confiscation of non-canonical scriptures. A list of the latter were given in a memorial dated to the fourth day of the eleventh month of the second year of the Hsüan-ho reign period [26 November 1120]:

“The officials say: ‘At the prefecture of Wen and other places are recalcitrant persons who proclaim themselves to be the disciples (*hsing-che* = Sansk. *ācārin*) of the Religion of the Light (*Ming-chiao*).

At present these followers of the Religion of Light set up buildings in the districts and villages of their abode, which they called Vegetarian halls (*chai-t'ang*). In the prefecture of Wen for instance, there are some forty such establishments and they are privately built and unlicensed Buddhist temples.

Each year, in the first (lunar) month, and on the day of *mi* (= Parth. *Myhr* 'Sunday') in their calendar, they assemble together the Attendants [of the Law] (*shih-(fa)-che*), the Hearers (*t'ing-che*), the Paternal Aunts (*ku-p'o*), the Vegetarian Sisters (*chai-chieh*) and others who erect the Platforms of the Tao (*tao-cheng* = *Bēma*?) and incite the common folk, both male and female. They assemble at night and disperse at dawn



The scriptures and the pictures and images of the followers of the Religion of Light have titles such as these:

(1) *The Sūtra of exhortation to meditation (Ch'i-ssu ching)*, (2) *The Sūtra of Verification (Cheng-ming ching)*, (3) *The Sūtra of the descent and birth of the Crown prince (T'ai-tzu hsia-sheng ching)*, (4) *The Sūtra of the Father and the Mother (Fu-mu ching)*, (5) *The Sūtra (or Book) of Illustrations (T'u ching = Ardhang)*, (6) *The Sūtra of the Essay on Causes (?) (Wen-yüan ching)*, (7) *The Gatha of Seven Moments (or Prayers) (Ch'i-shih chieh)*, (8) *The Gatha of the Sun (Jih-kuang chieh)*, (9) *The Hymn of the Moon (Yueh-kuang chieh)*, (10) *The Essay on the (King of) (?) Justice (p'ing-wen)*, (11) *The Hymn for exhorting (virtuous) (?) men (Ts'e-han tsan)*, (12) *The Hymn for exhorting the Verification (Ts'e cheng-ming tsan)*, (13) *The Grand Confessional (Kuang ta ch'an)*, (14) *The Portrait of the Buddha the Wonderful Water (Miao-shui fo cheng)*, (15) *The Portrait of the Buddha the First Thought (Hsien-i fo cheng)*, (16) *The Portrait of the Buddha Jesus (I-shu fo cheng)*, (17) *The Portrait of Good and Evil (Shan-o cheng)*, (18) *The Portrait of the Prince Royal (Tai-tzu cheng)*, (19) *The Portrait of the Four Kings of Heaven (Ssu t'ien-wang cheng)*. These works and the names of the divinities are not mentioned in the Taoist or Buddhist Canons. They are full of false and fantastic sayings and they often cite from texts beginning with (the words): 'Thereupon the Lord of Light ...', which are different from Taoist and Buddhist scriptures.

As for the words [of the scriptures] they are hard to recognize and also difficult to pronounce. In short they demonstrate that these are demented and arrogant people who falsely concoct words and terms to deceive and mislead the uninformed masses and usurp the titles of the 'King of Heaven' (*T'ien-wang*) and of the 'Prince Royal' (*T'ai-tzu*)."

To this memorial is appended an official edict:

"The imperial rescript received orders for the officials of the said localities to make detailed investigations and to pull down the 'Vegetarian halls' and all other such establishments. The leaders of the offenders will be dealt with in excess of the [penalties laid down in the] established laws. A system of rewards should be rigorously set up to enable informers to come forward. From now on, if a similar situation arises and the officials of the prefectures and sub-prefectures conspire to ignore it they will be regarded as having contravened the imperial rescript. Similarly, should the commissioners fail to be vigilant and should the inspectors fail to investigate and prosecute, they



will be similarly punished. (*Sung-hui-yao chi-kao*, fasc. 165, *hsing-fa* (criminal laws) 2.78a-79b).

The list of scriptures shows that the Manicheans in south China still retained scriptures, which were clearly translated in the T'ang era even though new ones might have been added. The officials were particularly concerned about the well-organized sects whom they vaguely labeled as “Vegetarian demon worshippers” (*ch'ih-ts'ai shih-mo*). As one Confucian official would memorialize: “The sect of the ‘demon worshipping vegetarians (*sic*)’ is strictly prohibited by the laws. Even the family members of the offenders who are not privy to their crime are exiled to distant lands and half of the offender’s property would be awarded to the informer and the rest confiscated. Nevertheless the number of followers has increased in recent times. The sect originated in Fukien and spread to the Province of Wen and the two Che Provinces (i.e. eastern and southern Chekiang). When Fang La rose in rebellion, the followers of the sect incited each other to rebel everywhere. It is said that their rules prohibit the eating of meat and the drinking of wine. They do not worship spirits or Buddhas or ancestors. Nor do they entertain guests. When [a member of the sect] dies he is first laid out fully clothed and capped, and then buried naked. Two fellow members of the sect then sit beside the corpse and one of them will ask: ‘Did he come with a cap?’ and the other will reply: ‘No, [he did not].’ They then proceed to take off his cap and in similar fashion they remove one by one his other items of clothing, until nothing is left. One of them will then ask: ‘What did he wear when he first came?’ The other will answer: ‘Placenta [i.e. the clothes of the womb].’ They then put the corpse into a cloth.

One hears it said that those who join the sect later become rich. These common folk are indeed ignorant for they do not realize that abstaining from wine and meat and lavish feasts and sacrifices and elaborate funerals will enable one to accumulate wealth. There are some who were quite poor when they first joined the sect but other members will help them with contributions. By accumulating these contributions, no matter how small, they can earn a comfortable living. When a member of the sect goes to or passes through another place, fellow members will provide him with board and lodging even if they do not know him. Everything is used by any member with no need for prior permission. They speak of themselves as members of one family and hence they use the term ‘An all-covering blanket (?)’ to entice their followers.

Their leader is called the King Demon (*mo-wang*) and his assistants are called



Demon Fathers (*mo-weng*) and Demon Mothers (*mo-mu*). They all engage in luring people [to join the sect]. On the first and fifteenth of each month, each follower pays forty-nine cash pieces as incense money at the place of the Demon Father. The Demon Mother will then collect all the strings of cash and hands them over to the King Demon from time to time. The amount of money collected each year in this way is not inconsiderable.

The followers of the sect also chant the *Diamond Sūtra* and take from it the verse: 'They who see me (i.e. the Buddha) by visible form are following a perverse way (*hsieh-tao*)'. Hence they worship neither spirits nor buddhas but revere the sun and the moon and regard them as real buddhas. When they interpret the verse: 'The Dharma is even and has no gradations,' they would join the word 'no' [through deliberate mispunctuation] to the first part of the verse (i.e. to make it read: 'The Dharma is not even and has gradations'). Such is the way they normally interpret the *Sūtras*.

The word *mo* (demon) is mispronounced by the common people as *ma* ['hemp'] and hence their chiefs are called *ma-huang* (yellow hemp) or some other such term with which they substitute the appellation of *mo-wang* (Demon King). The followers are required to swear solemn oaths at the initiation. Since they regard Chang Chüeh (*fl.* second century CE) as their original founder of the sect, they would not utter the word *chüeh* (horn) even if they were tortured to the point of death. It is said that when Ho Chih-chung was an assistant magistrate second class of the Prefecture of T'ai, the local authorities had arrested some Demon Worshipers but they were unable to make them confess [their crime] even after detailed examination. Someone reminded them that Ho was a native of Lung-ch'üan commandery in the province of Ch'u where there were many followers of the [demon worshipping] sect and he would be able to determine whether the charge could be substantiated. They therefore asked Ho to investigate the case. Ho placed before them a number of miscellaneous items and asked them if they could name them. He placed a horn in the midst of these items. [The accused] named all of them but they passed over the horn in silence. This was how the case was decided.

Their refusal to pay respects to their ancestors and their practice of naked burial are detrimental to public morals. They also assert that human existence is full of misery. Hence, to terminate it by killing is to relieve misery. This is what they call 'deliverance,' and he who 'delivers' many will become a Buddha. Therefore, once their numbers increase, they will take advantage of



political chaos and rise in revolt. Their greatest crime is the pleasure they take in killing. They hate Buddhism in particular because its prohibition of killing is an offence to them.

However, the laws against them are too strict. Every time someone is prosecuted, many others are implicated. When the property of an offender is confiscated and his whole family exiled, the punishment differs little from death. As a result they are united in their effort to resist the authorities. Local officials fear them and dare not press home the charges against them. Thus the proscriptions have the opposite effect of causing their numbers to increase.

My own humble opinion is that the penalties for their crimes should be reduced in severity and the law of confiscation of their property be abolished. However, their leaders should be dealt with severely and in this way they may be subdued. (*Chi-lei-pien*, chung (middle section), 9a-10a).

The Mongol conquest of South China in 1280 brought a century of freedom of persecution for the Manicheans in the region. It is highly probable that the secretive “Christians” whom Marco Polo and his uncle Maffeo encountered in Fuzhou (Fugiu in *il Milione*) were in fact Manicheans. Nestorianism also returned to China as many of the Mongol administrators and military commanders were Turkic-speaking Nestorians. On a bilingual Syro-Turkish and Chinese inscription discovered during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) at Quanzhou we find Bishop Mar Solomon (d. 1313) with the title of “Bishop of the Manicheans and Nestorians of the various circuits of Chiang-nan.” It was under the Mongols that the Manicheans took over a Buddhist temple on Hua-piao (Huabiao) Hill in Chin-jiang (Jinjiang) near Quanzhou and refurbished it as a Manichean temple with a statue of Mani as the Buddha of Light. This statue (see [PLATE 1](#)), which had been recovered from a former Manichean temple in northern China, shows many similarities, especially in the design of its garments, with the famous portrait of a Manichean leader as depicted on a wall painting from Chotcho, which was destroyed in the Second World War. The religion found itself once more under persecution with the ascendancy of a more inward looking Ming Dynasty in 1368. Nevertheless, as late as the fifteenth century the followers of the sect still counted Jesus and the Primal Man among the religion’s chief deities. The religion probably finally died out in the first decades of the Twentieth Century. The temple on Hua-piao Hill, termed by the local worshippers as a *chao-an* (ca’ao-an) i.e. a “thatched nunnery,” is still used as a Buddhist temple where Mani is worshipped as a Buddha with special powers. UNESCO made the site of the Manichean *chao-an*



a World Heritage Site in 1991 as a unique relic of an extinct world religion.

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