

# Writing Times and Spaces Together

## Experiments to Create an Early Sino-Buddhist Historiography

Max Deeg

One of the most interesting kinds of processes in the history of religion(s) is that which occurs when a religion is transferred to a new cultural environment. Numerous theoretical terms of religious studies are used to describe this process: syncretism, adaptation, change of paradigms, inculturation, ethno-religiosity and more. Expressed in these terms is the obvious shift of basic social, cultural, and religious notions that occurs when two cultural entities come into contact. This shift can be almost one-sided if the giving culture has a stronger impact on the receiving culture which has been on a lower cultural level before the contact. This was the case with the European tribal cultures such as the Celtic and Germanic when they came into contact initially with the Roman civilization, and later with Christianity. It is also the case with the peripheral nations of the Sinitic sphere, outstanding examples being Japan and Korea. What happened there is, at least as far as we can judge from the extant sources, that the receiving cultural entities were almost completely drowned and newly (re) shaped by their master-culture(s) in terms of both material and intellectual life.

The case is different, however, when a historically mature culture with strong cultural self-confidence comes into contact with another culture borrowing from its cultural reservoir only selected items as, for example, China's adaptation of Buddhism from the Indian culture. Here it is quite fascinating to see what has been borrowed and how that which was borrowed has been changed or adapted to the already existing environment, a process usually called the "*sinicization*" (Greg-

ory Schopen)<sup>1</sup> or “*sinification*” (e.g. Peter N. Gregory)<sup>2</sup> of Buddhism – the counter-concept, as it were, of Hu Shi’s “*indianization*” of Chinese culture<sup>3</sup>. While it is clear that Buddhism in China in its mature period, beginning with, let us say, the Sui period, has indeed undergone a change that may be described by the terms just mentioned – leading to such typical Chinese schools and “sects” as Huayan 華嚴 and Chan 禪 which never had a direct Indian ancestor or counterpart – it is difficult to trace the earlier transformation of general cultural concepts in the context of both classical Chinese thinking and Buddhist ideas inherited from the Indian motherland of this religion.

Two of these general cultural concepts and elementary categories of human thinking are certainly time and space, belonging to the categories which the German philosopher Immanuel Kant has described as a priori, irreducible and independent. One would expect, therefore, concepts of time and space in different cultures to be similar. I will, however, not deal here with the abstract concepts of time and space that concerned Kant, but I would like to give examples of how concrete historical time and geographical gaps between two cultures were dealt with in early Chinese Buddhism, looking particularly at the fourth and fifth century.

The absolute meaning willingly ascribed by most human beings to absolute dates in the framework of religious and cultural starting points, to temporal fix points like the birth of Jesus Christ, the *hajj* of Muhammad, obscures some problems. Why is it – one could ask – that so many people are excited about a yearly date that is defined by a distance of time to an event in history that is not even accurately dated or determined, and this even though many of these people claim to stand totally outside the religious context that gives this date its meaning, as for instance Christmas in the Christian tradition being the date of the birth of the Saviour? One could also ask whether the global validity of our Western time system is really and universally recognized by other traditions and cultures. And whether there are historical examples of a conflict between two time systems in one and the same culture. To give only one example of such a problematic discussion: some time ago the question was raised in a German-language internet forum that discusses religious matters, of whether there will be more terrorist attacks on

<sup>1</sup> Schopen 1984 (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Gregory 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally written Hu Shih 胡實, (1891–1962); on “indianization” cf. Hu 1936.

9/11 and why this date was chosen at all by the “Islamist” terrorists in 2001, people whom one would expect to have referred to the Islamic calendar.

All these questions may seem to be out of place in the context of Chinese Buddhism, but they are in some way all connected with the problem of how the Chinese, as a people with an ancient historiographical tradition of their own, dealt with Buddhist historical concepts in general, and in particular, concerned themselves with the starting point of this religion, the life of its founder. The questions may generally show us how relative time systems are and have been, and that there is a need to come to terms with them if they come into contact, especially if both or even if one of them claims a higher degree of “truth” as conveyed and legitimized by a religious context. In the example that I will deal with, the main point seems to be that socially and culturally used time systems, which are very often brought into historiographical genres, are manipulated in order to give fixed starting points in the past. The time between these points and later periods is usually filled with a string of events that are then transmitted as “history.”

In the following, I would provisionally like to define historiography as the attempt to structure time and space into a converging line of narration, of writing time and space together. It should be stressed that in the discussion of historiography, space for the most part seems to be a neglected factor. The reason for this is quite obvious for me: usually the “history” of a specified time, culture or social stratum is presented along a line that the text tries to portray as being a constant, flowing stream of time in which the events are to be placed. The spatial, that is, the geographical framework of history is usually well-defined or presumed. However, historiography always has a serious problem when two traditions that do not come from the same cultural and geographical environment, from the framework of the same “cultural memory,”<sup>4</sup> must be harmonized. The problem then consists in closing the obvious geographical gap when parallelizing sometimes entirely contrary time-tables of two or more traditions and in order to get rid of the vexing problem of different time concepts in two different realms of space. To accomplish this goal, often the initial step of the compilers of historical texts is to synchronize the starting points of the respective cultures or traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Assmann 1997.

Before we switch to our direct subject, Chinese historiography, let us first have a short look at a few Western historiographical traditions, be it only for the sake of a comparative view point. The European historiographers of antiquity (Herodot, Thukydidēs, Xenophon, Polybios of Megalopolis, Tacitus, Sallustus, Caesar, Livius) did not need to harmonize different cultural strings<sup>5</sup>; they only portrayed chronology and history in the well-known and accepted pattern of connecting a certain event with a certain important personality, usually a ruler. It was not until old pagan traditions met with the even more powerful Jewish-Christian conceptions that European historiographers met the difficulty of combining the incompatibilities of two traditions. European medieval “universal histories” in Europe (Gioacchino da Fiore, Vincent de Beauvais)<sup>6</sup> were thus primarily concerned with what their authors and readers thought to be world history in the soteriological and eschatological framework of Christianity; they combined events from the Old Testament with subjects of the Greek and Roman antiquity or those of their own cultural antiquity into one chronological line, very often starting from the creation of the world, continuing with the subsequent Biblical history of mankind, jumping to the story of Troy, the founding of Rome and the life of Jesus before finally arriving in their own present. Sometimes the events in the different cultural regions were presented in the form of synchronized annals. The inconsistencies and gaps in such historiographical concepts and patterns, which are obvious for a modern reader, were easily eliminated and filled by a synthesis of Jewish “historiography”, antique culture and Christian soteriology. Ecclesiastic historiography, from Eusebios of Caesarea on, used the antique past, both Occidental and Oriental, to depict the traces of God’s masterplan for the world even in a past not yet Christian. Despite the strong Christian domination, even pagan history was used by Christian authors, as can be seen in the *History of the Goths*, written by the Roman minister of the Germanic-Gothic rulers of Italy, Cassiodorus. Another approach to autochthon history is the *Heimskringla*, the “Circle of the Home (of Mankind),” of the medieval Icelandic Christian author Snor-

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<sup>5</sup> This is especially true for the historiographies of the Roman Empire (cf. Christ 1988), but was not so strict in the case of the Greek historiographers who also inserted geographical and ethnographical material, and sometimes tried to parallelize the information which they gained about foreign nations with their own chronology as traced back to the mythical past of the gods (cf. Gschnitzer 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Keen 1988.

ri Sturluson (1179–1241),<sup>7</sup> in which the mythical past of the Germanic gods and forefathers is – in a similar manner to the stories of Chinese antiquity – presented in euhemerized form, thus dethroning the old Pagan gods in their ancient heavenly abodes and making them rulers on earth; they were even thought to have come from antique Troy as the similarity between its name and that of one of the old gods, Thor, impiled. This history of the kings finally resulted in the Christianization of the Scandinavians.

Similar phenomena of writing beyond cultural boundaries, or better: of combining two cultural histories can be observed in the early historiographical traditions of Buddhist countries such as Tibet, Korea or Japan. Tibetan historiography, paradigmatically represented by works such as the *History of the Dharma* (*Chos 'byung*) by Bu ston written in 1322, or the so called *Blue Annals* (*Bod kyi yul du chos dang chos smra ba ji ltar byung ba'i rim pa Deb ther sngon po, Deb sngon*) by Gos lo tsa ba Gzhon nu dpal, written ca. 1476/78, was from the very beginning linear chronological and Buddhist, starting with the life of Śākyamuni, covering the advent and development of Buddhism in Tibet and continuing up to the days of the authors. In Japan and Korea the oldest historiographies were conceived in two complementary ways: the Japanese *Kojiki* 古事記 (written 712, covering the period of earliest antiquity until the reign of Suiko Tennō 推古天皇, 592–628) and the Korean *Samguk-sagi* 三國史記 (written by Kim Pu-sik 金富軾, 12<sup>th</sup> century) were mythical histories of the countries' past; the Japanese *Nihongi* 日本記 (or: *Nihon-shoki*, written 720, covering the early period up to the reign of empress Jitō Tennō 持統天皇, 690–697)<sup>8</sup> and the Korean *Samguk-yusa* 三國遺事 (Chin. *Sanguo-yishi*)<sup>9</sup> written by the monk Ilyōn 一然 (Chin. Yiran) at the end of the thirteenth century, both start with the pre-Buddhist past of the countries, and then also deal, one more and the other less, with Buddhist history. These Asian traditions of historiography did not have too many problems with the discontinuity of the autochthon and Buddhist tradition because they were either cultivated and dominated by Buddhism, or had to match the achievements of Chinese culture and the introduction of Buddhism with strong secular powers, therefore avoiding an absolute concentration on matters Buddhist even to the extent of excluding the early Indian history of Buddhism.

<sup>7</sup> See Beck 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kato 1990, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ha and Mintz 1972.

Concepts of historiography that are able to jump back and forth in two different cultural traditions and layers without feeling a sort of discontinuity, as was more or less the case in the medieval European and the early Japanese, Korean and Tibetan traditions of historiography, were obviously not possible for Buddhism in China, not least of all because the Chinese, with their classics, the *Shujing* 書經, *Chunqiu* 春秋 and the *Shiji* 史記, already had an orthodox historiography that Buddhism had to deal with when it entered China at the end of the first century CE. The historiographer first had to combine two different strings of chronological and historical traditions together – he then also had to close the geographical gap between China and India, the motherland of Buddhism.

In the early period of Buddhism in China only universalist concepts seemed to be able to compete with and to match the classical Chinese chronological and historiographical model; they were able to show that in a soteriological framework of religion, in our case Buddhism, China and India were part of a common scenario. The Buddhist Jambudvīpa, able to cope with an indo-centric interpretation as well as a wider geographical approach, became the matrix in which spaces were brought together<sup>10</sup>; the Buddhist conception of the two soteriologically important periods, which sandwich the historical present between the age of the Buddha Śākyamuni and the coming *kalpa* of the future Buddha Maitreya, paved the way for a convergence of the time line of traditional China that began in the ancient times of the legendary rulers and the line of time of Buddhist history from the days of the Buddha, not least because they both converged in the future at the climax of the arrival of Maitreya (Mile 彌勒).<sup>11</sup> History was extended beyond the limits of the historical present by the powerful instrument of Buddhist prophecy, Skt. *vyākaraṇa*, Chin. *shouji* 授記.

To give you just one example for the thesis that the bringing together of data from the autochthon Chinese antiquity and the information about the story of the Buddha was crucial for at least one kind of interaction between Chinese culture and Buddhism, I would like to draw attention to the text *Lihuo-lun* 理惑論, the *Treatise of Removing Doubts*, a text incorporated into the Buddhist apologetic collection *Hongming-ji* 弘明記 as its first part. Without entering the discussion concerning the

<sup>10</sup> See Deeg 1999a.

<sup>11</sup> For the complex of Maitreya, see Deeg 1999b.

dating of this text,<sup>12</sup> it can well represent a relatively early example of the contest between ideas seen as being traditionally Chinese and the answers of a Buddhist apologist, Master Mou(zi) 牟(子). The apologist does not really try to harmonize the standpoint of the traditionalist with his own Buddhist one, but the line of argumentation of the debaters very often clearly refers to the mythical and semi-mythical history of China of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 皇帝), as well as to Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius) and Laozi 老子. Mouzi's point and manner of argument frequently consists in showing that the old Chinese traditions are by no means any more reliable than the Buddhist texts. In the seventh chapter of the *Lihuo-lun*, for instance, we find the following dialogue:

A critic asked: If the Way of the Buddha is so eminently respectable and great, why did not Emperors Yao and Shun, or the Duke of Chou 周公, or Confucius practice it? In the Seven Classics one sees no mention [of Buddhist teaching]. ... Mou-tzu said: ... Yao served Yin Shou and Shun served Wu Ch'eng. Tan [i.e., the Duke of Chou] studied with Lü Wang, and Confucius with Lao Tan. Yet none of these persons appear in the Seven Classics! ...<sup>13</sup>

One important feature of the quoted passage is that it clearly shows that apologists of Buddhism had to deal with the historicity of the Buddha and his teaching in the light of the Chinese traditional past. In our example the author is using a well-set example of *argumentum ex silentio*, a counter-proof derived from the silence of the Chinese historical sources.

The thesis presented here is that early Sino-Buddhist non-canonical and non-commentary literature often was a program to combine the two cultural spaces, the Buddhist religious space with that of China's glorious traditional past. The protagonists of this process were so successful in connecting the traditional Chinese space and time conceptions with those of Indo-Buddhism, that the later Buddhist historiographers of the Tang and Song periods could write diachronic sequences in the purely chronological *biannian* 編年 style without serious problems of incompatibility between the two traditions. However, I will not

<sup>12</sup> Zürcher 1972, pp. 13–15.

<sup>13</sup> T.2102.2b.26ff. 問曰。佛道至尊至大。堯舜周孔曷不修之乎。七經之中不見其辭。 ... 牟子曰。書不必孔丘之言。 ... 堯事尹壽。舜事務成。旦學呂望。丘學老聃。亦俱不見於七經也; translated by John P. Keenan in Keenan 1994, p. 79.

deal with this later period, the outlines of which have been thoroughly investigated by H. Schmidt-Glintzer in his work on Buddhist sectarian historiography<sup>14</sup>, but rather will attempt to look for early traces – experiments as I have called it rather provisionally in the title – of Buddhist chronology and historiography and of the religious environment in which these were able to rise.

## Writing Pasts and Spaces Together

The beginning of Buddhist time calculation is usually the date of the physical death or *parinirvāṇa* of Śākyamuni near the north Indian town of Kuśinagara. Thus, Chinese Buddhists, in order to show the historicity and antiquity of their religious tradition from a relatively early period, were preoccupied with the question of when, according to their own Chinese traditional chronology, the Buddha had lived.

It is generally assumed that the historical research of the date of the Buddha was connected to two problems with which the Chinese Buddhists were confronted: The competition with the Daoists, who had come forth with the *Laozi-huahu-jing* 老子化胡經, the *Sūtra of Laozi converting the (Western) barbarians*,<sup>15</sup> forced the Buddhists to prove that the Buddha had actually lived before Laozi, and thus they attempted to trace his lifetime back as far as possible into the past. This kind of calculation stood in a certain contradiction to the ideology of the three stages or ages: that of the true *dharma*, the semblance of the *dharma*, and of the final *dharma* (*zhengfa* 正法 – *xiangfa* 像法 – *mofa* 末法).<sup>16</sup> In this framework Chinese Buddhists wanted to know where their own present position in the soteriological process was: According to the dating of the Buddha into the Chinese antiquity of the early Zhou dynasty and the standard division of the periods into five hundred years of *zhengfa* plus one thousand years of *xiangfa*,<sup>17</sup> Buddhism would have reached the Middle Kingdom under the reign of Han Mingdi 漢明帝 (28–75 CE)

<sup>14</sup> Schmidt-Glintzer 1982.

<sup>15</sup> See Zürcher 1972, pp. 290ff; Kohn 1995, pp. 195ff; Kohn 1998; Deeg 2003.

<sup>16</sup> For the translation of these terms, see Nattier 1991.

<sup>17</sup> As in the *Candragarbhāsūtra*; also 1,000 plus 500 in the *Karunapundarikāsūtra*; in the *Mahāmāyāsūtra* fifteen periods of 100 years: Nattier 1991, pp. 48ff. One may speculate as to whether the 300-year period between *nirvāṇa* and the transmission of the *dharma* to the East has something to do with a system of five periods of 300 years each.



towards the end of the period of the semblance of the *dharma* (*xiangfa*). This led to another trend: the tracing of the arrival of Buddhism back to a past beyond the date given in the traditional, well-known story of Han Mingdi's dream of the Golden Man (*jinren* 金人) and the legend of the advent of the first Buddhist missionaries, Kāśyapa Mātāṅga (She Moteng 攝摩騰) and Dharmaratna (Zhu Falan 竺法蘭), and the first Buddhist scripture in China (the *Sūtra in Forty-Two Chapters*, *Sishier-zhang-jing* 四十二章經).<sup>18</sup> All these attempts or experiments may be described as actions of *writing times together*.

The successful early datings in China of the Buddha's life, his *nirvāṇa* and his birth, were made by a process of compatibilisation of the old Chinese chronicles and the Buddhist scriptures. The *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* reports in all its versions that a heavy earthquake shook the regions in the moment of the "Great Extinction" of the Buddha<sup>19</sup>. The legends about the birth of the Buddha also report that the night was bright when the Great Teacher was born.

What had to be done now was to check the Chinese chronicles for similar kinds of natural phenomena or omnia. These were easily found in the old Chinese records. This way of dating is presented in early historiographical accounts on Buddhism such as Fei Changfang's 費長房 *Lidai-sanbao-ji* 歷代三寶記 (T.2034) from 597 CE, that begins an encyclopedic history with a discussion of the various dates of the Buddha's death; Fei himself supports the date of king Zhuang 莊王 of Zhou (696–682 BCE).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> About other legends of an earlier arrival of Buddhism in China, see Zürcher 1972, pp. 19ff.: e.g. the story of the Indian *śramaṇa* Shilifang 室利防 arriving with other monks and *sūtras* at the court of Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝 (221–208 BCE) as reported in the *Lidai-sanbao-ji*.

<sup>19</sup> The Buddha, in connection with the earthquake at his decision to give up the option for the prolongement of his life, gives eight causes for such earthquakes, the last six of which are – *cum grano salis*: the descent of the bodhisattva from Tuṣita heaven, the birth of the bodhisattva, the attainment of enlightenment, the first sermon, the giving up of the prolongement of life and the final *nirvāṇa*: Waldschmidt 1944, pp. 103f.; for the *nirvāṇa* earthquake see pp. 251f.

<sup>20</sup> This date is also adopted in the well-known chapter *Shilao-zhi* 釋老志 of the *Weishu* 魏書 (translated after Tsukamoto 1990, p. 132): "Śākya(muni) was the son of the king of Kapilavastu (Jiaweiwei) in India (Tianzhu). ... In the night of the eighth day of the fourth month he was born from the right hip of his mother. ... The time when Śākya(muni) was born was the ninth year (of the reign) of King Zhuang of Zhou. (In the) *Chunqiu* is reported that in the seventh year of Duke Zhuang of Lu, in winter, in the fourth month, the fixed stars were not visible, (but nevertheless)

A detailed discussion of all the dates that were usual in Buddhist historiography – including the so-called dotted record (*dianji* 點記) which comes closest to an objectively correct date of 485 B.C. for the *nirvāṇa* – can be skipped because extensive work has been done on this topic in the volumes edited by Heinz Bechert on the *Dating of the Historical Buddha*.<sup>21</sup> In addition, some years ago a very good condensed discussion of the whole complex was published by Hubert Durt.<sup>22</sup>

There is, however, another interesting and early example showing the basic interest that Chinese Buddhists had (and had to have) for this kind of computation. This evidence is – as far as I know – the oldest Chinese source of its kind. It is found in Faxian's 法顯 (337?–422?) *Foguo-ji* 佛國記, the *Report on Buddhist kingdoms*, also called *Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan* 高僧法顯傳 (T.2085). Faxian, after having crossed the Karakorum mountain range (*Xueshan* 雪山, the Snow Mountains),<sup>23</sup> arrived at the upper stream of the river Indus at a place that he calls Tuoli 陀歷 and which has been identified with modern Darel in northern Pakistan. In Tuoli there was a colossal wooden standing statue of Maitreya, made by an artisan who had been taken to the Tuṣita heaven by an *arhat* in order to create an image of Maitreya. As can be seen from other short accounts of Chinese monks who traveled there around the same time such as in the fragments of the *Mingseng-zhuan* 明僧傳 and in the *Gaoseng-zhuan* 高僧傳 (T.2059), the spot was a very popular pilgrimage site to visualize Maitreya. Faxian interpolates an explanation of the historical meaning of the Maitreya statue into his narrative thread of the journey:

The monks [in China] asked Faxian if he knew when the Buddhist dharma had first come to the East. [Fa]xian answered: 'If you ask the people of these countries [that is: northwest India], they all say that there is an old tradition [saying] that from the [time of] the construction of the Maitreya statue there were Indian *śramaṇas* who crossed this river [the Indus].' The statue was made more than 300 years after the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha, [its erection] reckoned as being in the period

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the night was bright. Altogether that makes years until the eighth year of the (era) Wuding (550) of the Wei (dynasty)." Another very popular calculation was that of the Buddha's birth into the reign of King Zhao 昭 of Zhou, respectively the date of his *parinirvāṇa* into the reign of King Mu 穆 of Zhou.

<sup>21</sup> Bechert 1991–1997, articles by Franke, Hirakawa, Chen, Durt, Bhikkhu Pasadika; Durt 1994. Also, see the discussion in: Zürcher 1972, pp. 269ff.

<sup>22</sup> Durt 1994, see esp. pp. 23ff.

<sup>23</sup> On the route from Khotan to Gandhāra taken by Faxian, see Deeg 2000.

of King Ping of the Zhou [dynasty]. The ‘Great Teaching’ started with this statue. Who, other than the great master Maitreya, who will be the successor of Śākya[muni], could spread the Three Jewels [*triratna*] and let the people outside India know the dharma? Because one knows that destiny is not something which men [have under control], there are good reasons that the dream of the emperor Ming of the Han was in fact [as it has been reported].<sup>24</sup>

Important here is that Faxian does not give the usual calculation going straight back to the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha, but gives the date of the transmission of the *dharma* across the river Indus, which signifies the line between India proper and the regions beyond. Thus, geography seems to be just as important for him as mere chronology. The intention of the story of the colossal Maitreya statue seems to be to show that three hundred years after the death of the Buddha, the *dharma* had already reached the Western Regions and, subsequently and unofficially, also China and thus this occurred so early that it still fell into the era of the “true *dharma*” (*saddharma/zhengfa* 正法).

Another striking fact of this report is that Faxian obviously tries to bolster the Chinese computations through Indian traditions: he asked the *people of the region* (*bituren* 彼土人). Obviously Faxian’s intentions are to show that this tradition was not only invented by Chinese Buddhists, but was also to be found in India.

Faxian supports his computation by relating an episode that occurred at the end of his stay in India proper around 410 CE. In Ceylon he had the opportunity to see the procession of the tooth-relic of the Buddha. A man who represented the king and rode on the royal elephant, claimed that 1,497 years had passed from the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddha to the present.<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, no chronology of this kind can be found in any Indian Buddhist source.

If one tries to determine the reason lying behind the dating presented by Faxian one cannot rely, however, on later Chinese sources. The *Lidai-sanbao-ji* mentions Faxian’s report but obviously does not under-

<sup>24</sup> T.2085.858a.11ff. 眾僧問法顯。佛法東過其始可知耶。顯云。訪問彼土人。皆云。古老相傳。自立彌勒菩薩像。後便有天竺沙門。齋經律過此河者。像立在佛泥洹後三百許年。計於周氏平王時。由茲而言。大教宣流始自此像。非夫彌勒大士繼軌釋迦。孰能令三寶宣通邊人識法。固知冥運之開本非人事。則漢明帝之夢有由而然矣。

<sup>25</sup> T.2085.865a.20ff., esp. 26f.: 泥洹已來一千四百九十七年。世間眼滅 (“Since the *nirvāṇa*, 1,497 years have passed [since] the ‘eye of the world’ [the Buddha] has passed away.”)

stand the motivation behind its dating and in turn calculates a slightly incorrect date: “If one calculates the birth date of the Buddha according to the *Faxian-zhuan*, it is the 26<sup>th</sup> year *Jia-wu* of the reign of Wu Yi of the Yin dynasty [1198–1195 BCE]; to today, the 17<sup>th</sup> year *Ding-si* of the first emperor [*kaihuang*: Wendi 文帝] of the Sui [dynasty] [597 CE], 1,681 years have already passed.”<sup>26</sup>

The pattern that I would suggest to interpret these dates is the “writing together of times” of the Buddhist and Chinese history and the incorporation of the meaning attributed to each in the framework of both Buddhist eschatology as well as the traditional Chinese theories of the historical rise and fall of dynasties.

To understand Faxian’s dates I would thus suggest the following: the date of the Buddha’s death counting back from A.D. 410, would be in the case of both years indicated by Faxian: 1.) 300 years earlier than the beginning of the reign of King Ping 平 of Zhou (770–729 B.C.) and 2.) the period of 1,497 years, both numbers indicating the reign of the kings Wen 文 or Wu 武 (1073–1068 B.C.)<sup>27</sup> of Zhou, the traditional liberators from the Shang 商 tyranny and the founders of the Western Zhou<sup>28</sup>. Looking for an omen-filled period in the Chinese past to reflect the life and death of the Buddha and with his death the beginning of the period of the true *dharma* in India, the transfer of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) from the Shang to the Zhou was an appropriate date. Seen from the standpoint of Buddhist teleology, the spread of the *dharma* eastward across the Indus during the reign of King Ping is not less meaningful: The expulsion of the Zhou and the move of the capital to Luoyang 洛陽 under King Ping signifies the beginning of the Eastern Zhou, which is traditionally seen as being the beginning of the end of

<sup>26</sup> T.2034.23a.16. 依法顯傳推佛生時則當殷世武乙二十六年甲午。至今開皇十七年丁巳便已一千六百八十一。In his calculation, Hubert Durt (1994) follows the *Lidai-san-bao-ji* without checking the results, and further takes this to be the date of the Buddha’s *nirvāṇa* rather than Fei Changfang’s computation of the Buddha’s birth. It should be noticed that Fei made a similar mistake, because he calculated the birth date – not the *nirvāṇa* – of the Buddha, arriving at 1084 (the *nirvāṇa* would then have been around 1000).

<sup>27</sup> According to the classical chronology presented by Sima Qian 司馬遷; cf. Nienhauser 1994, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Faxian’s dates, in the first case, would result in the year 1070, and in the second, 1087.

this dynasty<sup>29</sup>. This was, in the Buddhist time-conception as presented by Faxian, balanced on a soteriological level by the eastward move of the *dharma*. Speaking in Buddhist terms of teleology, the decline of the Eastern Zhou corresponded to the decline of the true *dharma* in the second half of its period.

To give one more example for this kind of calculation: the apologetic collection *Guang-hongming-ji* 廣弘明記 (T.2103) of the Tang-monk Daoxuan 道宣 contains a treatise, the *Erjiao-lun* 二教論, the *Dispute on the Two Teachings*, attributed to Shi Daoan 釋道安 – not the famous Daoan of the fourth century, but a monk from the second half of the sixth century – in which he presents us with several chronological calculations including the one preferred by Kumārajīva (343–413):

Further: according to the annual record of dharma-master Kumārajīva and to the inscription of the stone-pillar [?] [the date] is perfectly identical with the Chunqiu-fu: the Tathāgata was born in the fifth year Yichou of King Huan of Zhou, he had left his home in the twenty-third year Kui-wei of King Huan, had attained enlightenment in the tenth year Jiawu of King Zhuang and entered nirvāṇa in the fifteenth year Jia-shen of King Xiang. To today this makes 1,250 years<sup>30</sup>.

This chronology is not any less interesting than Faxian's, because it seems to indicate a different result from a different temporal point of view, although it is grounded on a similar soteriological concept: Pre-supposing 500-year periods, the *mofa* period would be just at its peak around 570, the date the *Erjiao-lun* was written; but it would also mean that Kumārajīva had thought himself to be living in a time when the *mofa* period had just begun (A.D 363: 687 B.C., the date of the enlightenment of the Buddha, plus 1000 years). Speaking in eschatological terms one could argue that the end of the three periods of the *dharma*, be it apocalyptic or not, had been expected to take place at the beginning of the fifth century and that Buddhist timetables were reshaped

<sup>29</sup> As Sima Qian states (*Shiji* 4): "At the time of King Ping the house of the Zhou degenerated and the strong ones among the feudal lords subjugated the weak ones." Cf. Kuhn 1991, p. 194. It may be well possible that the reluctance of the Chinese Buddhist authors to adopt a date of the Buddha falling into the era of the Eastern Zhou had something to do with the negative image of that period.

<sup>30</sup> T.2103.142a.19ff. 又依什法師年紀及石柱銘。並與春秋符同。如來周桓王五年歲次乙丑生。桓王二十三年歲次癸未出家。莊王十年歲在甲午成佛。襄王十五年歲在甲申滅度。至今一千二百五年。 This is also already referred to in the *Lidai-sanbao-ji* (T.2034.23a.19f).

accordingly – as is so often the case when expectations of a near end of the world or a period are not fulfilled – by bringing the Buddha's dates closer to the historical present and by extending the timetables of decay<sup>31</sup>.

Now, to return to the *Foguoji*: The part of Faxian's report which I have just discussed is clearly interwoven with a complex of information belonging to the same framework of ideas: the timetable of the decay of the *dharma* and the advent of Maitreya, and the underlying conception of soteriological history. The number 1,497 is too exact to be without meaning, the meaning certainly being that the *mofa* period would come to an end in only a few years<sup>32</sup>. It also indicates the expectations and hope for the future beyond this eschatological timetable.

### Writing Spaces and Future Times Together

Writing spaces together is a process in early Chinese Buddhism that attempts to imbed and integrate China as a geographical and cultural entity into the Indian Buddhist teleological and soteriological master-plan. Such an attempt can, for instance, be seen in the protoarchaeological discoveries of stupas and inscriptions in China during the reigns of various emperors which were ascribed to the ideal Buddhist ruler, the *cakravartin* Aśoka, thus showing that China was already part of the Buddhist holy geography in the time of the famous Mauryan king<sup>33</sup>.

It is again Faxian who gives us an early report about a tradition which obviously tried to embed China into a soterio-eschatological Buddhist geography and timetable, this time in rather mythological ranges. Faxian reports that, during his two-year stay in Śrī Laṅkā, he heard an Indian monk (*tianzhu-daoren* 天竺道人) sitting on a high chair reciting a *sūtra* about the destiny of the Buddha's alms bowl, the *buddhapātra* (*fobo* 佛鉢), with the following content: the bowl was first in Vaiśālī, then in Gandhāra, where Faxian had seen it in the city of Puruṣapura, the contemporary Peshawar; after successive periods of 1,100 years

<sup>31</sup> Already clear in the *Lidai-sanbao-ji* (T. 2034.23a.21ff.), according to which the periods of *zhengfa* and *xiangfa* last 1,000 years each and the *mofa* lasts 10,000 years.

<sup>32</sup> For general considerations on Buddhist eschatological, millenaristic and apocalyptic ideas, see Nattier 1991; Hubbard 2001, pp. 36ff.; Deeg 1999b.

<sup>33</sup> The notion and function of Aśoka, Ayu-wang 阿育王, and the monuments ascribed to him in Chinese Buddhist and secular writing is a subject upon which more research needs to be done. I have discussed this briefly in Deeg 2001.

each the bowl will go to the country of the Western Yueshi (Rouzhì) 月氏, to Khotan/Yutian 于闐, to Kuča/Quci 屈茨, China/Han-di 漢地, Ceylon/Shizi-guo 師子國 and then back to Middle India (Zhong-tianzhu 中天竺). Then the bowl will rise to the Tuṣita heaven (Doushu-tian 兜術天) to Maitreya, and after seven heavenly days will return to earth, to Jambudvīpa (Yanfuti 閻浮提). The *nāga*-king Sāgara (*Hai-longwang* 海龍王) will keep it in his palace on the ground of the ocean until Maitreya attains enlightenment. After the bowl has disappeared, the *dharma* will decline, the world and mankind will degenerate until men only reach the age of five years and all evil persons will have killed one another. The righteous will again practice a moral life until they again live to the age of 80,000 years. Then Maitreya will come down to the earth.<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that Faxian emphasizes that the recitator had prohibited the spoken text to be written down – Faxian obviously ignored this, but his observation nevertheless leaves us open to speculations about the original form of the *sūtra*.

Here we can see an attempt to extend the historiographical line beyond the present, in this case by again using the tool that seems to be typical for the Buddhist manner of dealing with history: a prophecy.

The first question which I have asked myself is whether such a *sūtra*, with a geographical knowledge about the regions of Central Asia and China and their subsequent incorporation into a soteriological legend or myth, could really have been composed and recited in the southernmost part of the Buddhist *oikumene*, in Ceylon. There is no tradition, whatsoever, in other, autochthonous southern Buddhist sources that would indicate the existence of a legend about the Buddha's bowl. However, in the *Mahāvamsa* (Mhv.), the *Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, there is a report, that Mahinda's companion, the *śrāmaṇera* (Pāli *samaṇera*) Sumana, brought the relics of the Buddha to Ceylon in the bowl of the Buddha<sup>35</sup>, and according to the same source, the bowl would have been on the island at the time Faxian was there, probably under the reign of

<sup>34</sup> T.2085.865c.1ff.

<sup>35</sup> Mhv.17.12; according to 20.13 the bowl was enshrined by king Devānaṃ Piyatissa; 23.48 relates that king *Mahanāga* rescued the bowl from an attack of the Ḍamilas, but that it was taken by them to the mainland (55); 37.192: under the reign of Upatissa the bowl is suddenly back in Ceylon; see also 61.56 and 61 (Jayabāhu I.), 64.30 (Parakkamabāhu), 70.266 and 310 (Gajabāhu), 72.297 (Manabharāṇa), *passim*. The last mention of the bowl is in the middle of the fourth century (Parakkamabāhu IV). The alms bowl is still said to be enshrined in a small *dagoba* near Kandy (Geiger 1986, p. 213). It is important to notice that the bowl, together with the tooth

the King Upatissa and/or King Mahānāma. Despite this, it is also clear that the relic did not have the same value and function in Ceylon as it had in other Buddhist regions.<sup>36</sup>

The legend that Faxian heard seems to originate from the Indian Northwest, from Gandhāra, where we have enough illustrations in works of art to appreciate the importance of this relic<sup>37</sup>. Finally Faxian's report on the bowl in Puruṣapura/Fulousha 弗樓沙 (Peshawar)<sup>38</sup> is the oldest witness for its existence – not mentioning the contradictory statement in Kumārajīva's biography, according to which the bowl should already have been in Kashgar (Shale 沙勒) in Central Asia at that time<sup>39</sup>; in the subsequent two centuries the bowl was also located in Persia,<sup>40</sup> and according to the *Weishu* 魏書, was even brought to China. This capability of the bowl to be in different places, sometimes at the same time, had already caused Huijiao 慧皎, in his? biography of the monk Zhimeng 智猛, to state that relics like the *uṣṇīṣa* and the bowl of the Buddha have supernatural powers.<sup>41</sup> Although we do not have an Indian text on the bowl, the oldest Chinese *sūtra* catalogue, Sengyou's 僧祐 *Chu-sanzang-jiji* 出三藏記集 (T.2145) mentions *sūtras* on the subject which, unfortunately, are now lost. The best example of the bowl going to foreign regions, and maybe as far as to China, is found in the fourth century apocryphal *Fo-miedu-hou-guanlian-zangsong-jing* 佛滅度後棺斂葬送經 (T.392), the *Sūtra of the coffining and cremation of the Buddha after the Nirvāṇa*, in which it is stated that the bowl will fly to the black-haired people and will convert them to the *dharma* and lead them to good conduct. The *Samyuktāgama/Za-ahan-jing* 雜阿含經 (T.99), in

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relic, was a kind of royal talisman, but was never connected to any Buddhist eschatological conception.

<sup>36</sup> As a symbol of buddhaship, cf. Wang-Toutaint 1994.

<sup>37</sup> See Kuwayama 1990.

<sup>38</sup> T.2085.858b.21ff.

<sup>39</sup> Biography of Kumārajīva in *Gaoseng-zhuan* 高僧傳 (T.2059.330b.25) and *Chu-sanzang-jiji* 出三藏記集 (T.2145.114a.3); see also Wang-Toutaint 1990, p. 65.

<sup>40</sup> According to Xuanzang 玄奘. See Wang-Toutaint 1990, p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> T.2059. 343c.7ff. 余歷尋遊方沙門記列道路。時或不同。佛頂骨處亦乖爽。將知遊往天竺非止一路。頂茨靈遷時屈異中翔。故傳述見聞難以例也。 (“I have enquired into the records and the routes of the travelling *śramaṇas* and sometimes they are not the same, and the places, [where] the Buddha's alms bowl [and] his *uṣṇīṣa* [are] are not either. One should know [by this that] there is not only one way to travel to India [and that] the *uṣṇīṣa* and the bowl are miraculously moving and sometimes wander to different places, [and that] it is therefore difficult to make corresponding sense of what has been reported, seen and heard”).



a passage that was probably inserted into the collection later, has the Buddha predict that 1,000 years after his *nirvāṇa*, when the *dharma* declines, the *uṣṇīṣa*, his tooth and his bowl will go to the East. The northwestern origin of such legends around the bowl are indirectly supported by the *Lianhuamian-jing* 蓮華面經 (T.386), the *Sūtra of Lotus-Face*, which was translated in 585 by Narendrayaśas/Naliantiyeshe 那連提耶舍, who came from the northwestern region of India, where at that time theories about the decay of the *dharma* were widely known. A direct indication of such an origin in northwest India is found in a description of the lost *Sūtra of the Buddha's bowl*, *Fobo-jing* 佛鉢經, which was already lost at the time Senyou compiled his catalogue at the beginning of the sixth century. This account is found in the Buddhist encyclopedia *Fayuan-zhulin* 法苑珠林 (T.2122): the *sūtra* was of North-Indian origin, brought to China by the meditation-master Saṅghayaśas/Sengjiayeshe 僧迦耶舍, and it described the voyage of the bowl from India to China. This corresponds well to the facts about the *sūtra* as heard by Faxian in Ceylon.

It is clear from these examples that the pilgrim record of Faxian is structured on references to the same framework of beliefs and ideas: upon entering India Faxian reports on the Buddhist soteriological timetable, and at the point of leaving India via Śrī Laṅkā he refers to the same, entwining them with the help of a calculated number of years. 1,497 years are certainly meant to indicate that Faxian presumed the present in which he lived to be the end of the *dharma*, so that there was only one hope for salvation left: the coming of Maitreya or, as an alternative and option, the ascension to Tuṣita, after death or by visualization, to receive this bodhisattva's blissful teaching.

## Conclusion

Finally let us return to the broader context of early Chinese Buddhism. As I hope to have shown, it was not incidental that Faxian started and ended his report on Buddhist India with references to the synchronology of the Buddha's *nirvāṇa* and Chinese traditional history, and to eschatological concepts concerning Maitreya. My opinion is that Faxian belonged to the inner circle of the master Shi Daoan 釋道安 (A.D. 312–385): his particular interest in the *Vinaya*, which was the reason for his journey, seems to indicate this, but it would also explain his special interest in Maitreya and the legends and prophecies centered around this

figure. This, Faxian would have shared with his presumed master, who in 385 had vowed to be reborn in the Tuṣita heaven near Maitreya<sup>42</sup>. The interest of Daoan in the legend of the Buddha's bowl is shown, again, in the *Chu-sanzang-jiji*, where, in a list of extracts from different *sūtras* for the daily use of the monks, Daoan quotes the *Fo-shou-shibo-luji* 佛受石鉢錄記, *Record of the Buddha receiving the stone alms bowl*, from the Buddha-vita (*Taizi-*)*Ruiying-benqi-jing* (太子瑞應本起經 (T.185) translated by Zhi Qian 支謙 (third century).

The computations of the dates of the Buddha by means of Chinese chronology may go back to Daoan as well. As is well-known, he was the first Chinese cleric with a critical historical sense: he compiled the first *sūtra* catalogue, which is known as *Zongli-zhongjing-mulu* 綜理眾經目錄 and which is preserved in the *Chu-sanzang-jiji*. A definite reason for this interest was the need for a distinction between true teachings and false teachings in the texts in a period in which the *dharma* was considered to be nearly extinguished.

Daoan was also interested in geography, especially that of the peripheries of both China and India, and especially that of Northwest India, exactly the region in which the giant Maitreya was standing as a symbol of the *dharma*-connection between India and the Eastern realms, and also as a reminder that the end of the *dharma* was near. It is not yet clear where the basic motivation for Daoan's famous vow to be born in Maitreya's heaven, Tuṣita, came from, but it seems possible that this – and maybe the compilation of the catalogue – had something to do with the idea that the end of the *dharma*, 1,500 years after the death of the Buddha, would be near the time of his impending death (in 385). This probably presupposed historical calculations of the kind that are reflected in Faxian's account.

What I have tried with my two examples is to show that the early attempts to create a Sino-Buddhist prototype of historiography by parallelizing Chinese and Indian antiquity arose from the pressure to harmonize the Buddhists' own religious past, which was located in India, with the Chinese sense and need for historical credibility. This was reinforced by the belief that the end of the *dharma* was near, and the need, therefore, to determine exactly which period one was living in. In order to achieve this, not only histories had to be combined, but also

<sup>42</sup> Reported in *Gaoseng-zhuan* 5, T.2059.353a.; cf. Tsukamoto/Hurvitz 1985, pp. 753ff.; Zürcher 1972, pp. 194f.

two basically different sacred spaces. It was this need for an inclusivist sacred geography and its actual creation – to embed China into the sacred space of Buddhism – which, ironically, proved to be one of the most successful tools for Chinese Buddhists to emancipate themselves more and more from their Indian motherland.

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