

The Fate of Buddhist Political Thought in China: The Rajah Dons a Disguise

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In political matters the Buddha was, it must be admitted, a bit of a bolshie; for whatever the spiritual significance of his renunciation of palace life, his life story can also be read as a comment on the value of hereditary monarchy as well. Either as a result of their founder's personal rejection of kingship, or because of Buddhism's early development in parts of ancient India where monarchical government was not itself an established institution, the Buddha's later followers for some time seem to have taken a similarly dim view of autocracy. But over the long centuries of the religion's coexistence with Asian autocrats this aspect of Buddhism has, I would suggest, become less self-evident, and as a result has been surprisingly little researched. In 1974 Hubert Durt published in Japan's *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* an article which deserves to be better known on the use of the counting-stick in Buddhism, apparently as a relic of distant times when Buddhist communities decided their affairs on a straight vote. But as far as I am aware, though a connection between Buddhism and democracy had indeed been vaunted yet earlier in research based on a (somewhat problematic) reading of South Asian materials, very little further work has been done in quite this vein, at least on those early Buddhist materials preserved in East Asia.

It therefore came as a considerable shock to me recently when I was able to devote a couple of hours to chasing up references to 'local magistrates' (in Chinese, *hsien-kuan*) in the Chinese Buddhist Canon. Though I cannot claim as yet to have carried out a full survey, it seems quite clear that in Buddhist materials translated into Chinese, from the earliest times onwards, local magistrates are viewed in an extremely negative light. They are indeed most frequently grouped with bandits as a potential threat to property or worse, and the prospect of unjust imprisonment by them appears to have been considered such a high risk that many Buddhist texts or practices (such as invocations to Bodhisattvas and so forth) are recommended as having the effect of a 'Get Out of Jail Free' card. The reason for my shock may perhaps not be so obvious to an Indologist, but in a Chinese historiographic tradition written (as has long been

recognised) almost exclusively by bureaucrats for bureaucrats, the sinologist does not expect to find even a trace of anti-bureaucratic feeling, except in government reports of the beliefs of peasant rebels, which are usually cast in a highly unsympathetic light.

True, negative remarks about magistrates do not feature strongly (if at all) in the *sūtras* most commonly read in China, and one may perhaps surmise that this totally unexpected subaltern point of view on monarchical government barred certain *sūtras* from acceptability with influential patrons. But the materials still exist, and were evidently not subjected to censorship, as for example it has been claimed some texts were for reasons of Confucian prudery when translated from Indian languages. This has encouraged me to bring forward some further evidence which suggests that another Buddhist political belief relating to central rather than to local government was perhaps seen as more threatening, but that materials demonstrating exactly how that threat was countered also still exist in the Chinese Buddhist Canon. But rather than start with the contemporary canon, we should perhaps first take a look at the contemporary Chinese Buddhist monastery.

The title *yüeh-chung* as used in Chinese Buddhism today signifies a monastic office of moderate importance. Holmes Welch, in his classic description of modern Chinese monasticism, finds the closest analogous term in Western monasticism to be ‘succentor’, an office junior to the more important administrative post of ‘precentor’.¹ In former times, however, *yüeh-chung* was one of the terms used in the hierarchy of offices imposed over the years on Buddhism by a succession of Chinese dynasties anxious to provide a level of state control which, as the Chinese pilgrim I-ching (635–713) found to his evident surprise, was quite different from the much less structured arrangements which prevailed in South Asia even at the lowest level of the individual monastery.² But if we consult dictionaries,³ standard historical surveys,⁴ even monographs on the Chinese Buddhist hierarchy,⁵ we are repeatedly told that the term *yüeh-chung*, literally meaning ‘pleasing the masses’, is simply an alternative translation of the Sanskrit *karmadāna*.

¹ Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967, 422–3; some of the duties of this office are described e.g. on 44.

² I-ching, ed. Wang Pang-wei, *Ta-T’ang Hsi-yü ch’iu-fa kao-seng chuan chiao-chu*, Peking, Chung-hua shu-chü, 1988, 113, and n. 20, page 124.

³ Most recently, for example, the *Fo-kuang ta-tz’u-tien*, *Kao-hsiung*, Fo-kuang ch’u-pan-she, 1988, II, 4110.

⁴ Kenneth K. S. Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964, 254.

⁵ Hsieh Ch’ung-kuang and Pai Wen-ku, *Chung-kuo seng-kuan chih-tu shih*, Hsi-ning, Ch’ing-hai jen-min ch’u-pan-she, 1990, 15.

This latter term was certainly well known to the Chinese, since it too was used (in abbreviated transliteration) for one of the other posts in the hierarchy—one now equivalent to Welch’s ‘precentor’.⁶ What is more, the Chinese seem to have known (to their satisfaction, if not to that of the contemporary Indologist) precisely what *karmadāna* meant, since they also translate the term, either as ‘manager of affairs’ or ‘assigner of tasks’.⁷ But the authority for stating that *yüeh-chung* translates *karmadāna*, which it patently does not, derives, as far as I have been able to discover, solely from an assertion on this point by the Buddhist historian Tsan-ning (919–1001) in his institutional history of Chinese Buddhism, the *Seng-shih lüeh*.⁸ It should be pointed out that Tsan-ning, for all his erudition, was never known as a master of Indian languages;⁹ the alleged equivalence between *yüeh-chung* and *karmadāna* can only be put down to simple error.

But what Sanskrit, if any, does this term meaning ‘crowd-pleaser’ translate? The only Indian administrative office known to me which was ever deemed to have such a meaning is that described by A. L. Basham:

“He was called ‘the Great Chosen One’ (Mahāsammata), and he received the title of *rājā* because he pleased the people. The derivation of the word *rājā* from the verb *rañjayati* (‘he pleases’) is certainly a false one, but it was widely maintained and is found even in non-Buddhist sources.”¹⁰

Basham is, of course, summarizing from a well-known passage in the *Dīgha-nikāya* on the myth of the ‘Great Elect’, the primal ruler figure in the Buddhist conception of the contractual origins of kingship.¹¹ More recent writing on this topic has echoed Basham’s summary in stressing the ubiquity of the myth and its attendant etymologising, both in Buddhist sources,¹² and also beyond.¹³ Less

⁶ See the references given above in note 1.

⁷ See for example the explanation given by I-ching, cited in note 2 above.

⁸ Tsan-ning, *Ta-Sung Seng-shih lüeh*, B, 242b, in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 54, no. 2126.

⁹ See Albert Dalia, “The ‘Political Career’ of the Buddhist Historian Tsan-ning”, in David W. Chappell, ed., *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society Honolulu*, University of Hawaii Press, 1987, 146–180, for a brief biography in English.

¹⁰ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 3rd, revised ed., London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1967, 83.

¹¹ Cf. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part III, London, Humphrey Milford, 1921, 88. The *Mahāvastu*, also cited by Basham at this point, has a slightly different etymology.

¹² See John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, 44–5 and notes.

¹³ Note the materials brought forward by Richard Gombrich, on page 174 of “The Buddha’s Book of Genesis?”, *IJJ*, 35, 1992, 159–178, and also page 176, note 9, for another dimension of recent interest in this passage.

has been said about Chinese materials, though Western scholarship has been aware for some time that this myth and the etymology here associated with it were also known in China. Samuel Beal summarizes one such passage as early as 1875, perhaps without fully understanding its purport; his source is in any case too late a translation to bear upon the origins of the term *yüeh-chung*.¹⁴ In 1908 Edouard Huber published a translation of a further passage not alluding to Mahāsammata but explaining the word ‘king’ as meaning one who ‘spreads his benefits in the universe’ (evidently a toning down of the Indian etymology to suit Chinese sensibilities),¹⁵ but his confidence in the ascription of the Chinese translation of his text to the famous early fifth century translator Kumarajīva has not been vindicated by more recent research, which again would suggest that it comes too late to enter into discussion here.¹⁶

More recently, however, Konrad Meisig has dealt with the *Dīgha-nikāya* passage in three Chinese parallel versions,¹⁷ in the course of an attempted reconstruction of the original state of this material—an attempt which has, however, not been universally accepted.¹⁸ While one of his Chinese texts is again far too late to concern us,¹⁹ a *Madhyamāgama* parallel passage does seem to antedate the appearance of the term *yüeh-chung* some time shortly before A.D. 401,²⁰ since the Chinese translation dates to A.D. 400 even in the finished form in which we now have it.²¹ As it stands, however, the direct etymological

¹⁴ Samuel Beal, *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha*, London, Trübner & Co., 1875, 17, based on *Fo pen-hsing chī ching*, 5, 672a in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 3, no. 190. This same text, incidentally, 690c–691a, has Mahāsammata descend from the heavens, producing a hybrid of contractual and divine concepts of the origin of kingship like that found in Tibet: cf. R. A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1972, 48.

¹⁵ E. Huber, *Açvaghosa Sūtrālamkāra*, Paris, E. Leroux, 1908, 421, and cf. index entry, 470, quoting *Ta Chuang-yen lun ching*, 15, 340a, in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 4, no. 201

¹⁶ Cf. Entai Tomomatsu, “Sūtrālamkāra et Kalpanāmandiṭikā”, *JA*, 1931, 135–74; 1931, 245–337.

¹⁷ K. Meisig, *Das Sūtra von der vier Ständen: Das Aggañña-Sutta im Licht sein chinesischen Parallelen*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1988, 144–5, lays out the parallels; his comments may be found on page 25.

¹⁸ See the remarks of Richard Gombrich on this study contained in the article cited above, note 13; both references courtesy of Professor K. R. Norman.

¹⁹ This is because it dates from the Sung period. It is by no means the only later text in Chinese to mention either the origins of kingship, the etymology for king, or both at once. In fact, Mahāsammata was eventually to enter Chinese discourse on kingship via the alien dynasties of conquest: see Herbert Franke, *From Tribal Chieftain to Universal Emperor and God*, München, Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978, 55, 64, 68 n. 137. This study is concerned with the possibility of an admittedly strangely distorted but much earlier impact of the myth.

²⁰ Thus Hsieh and Pai, *Chung-kuo seng-kuan*, 14–15, quoting *Kao-seng chuan*, 6, 363b, in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 50.

²¹ Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1959, 204.

association between kingship and pleasure-giving is obscured in the Chinese by the presence (interpolation?) of other remarks, even if it is detectably present.²² This is more than can be said for the earliest version of Basham's passage translated, the *Ta-lou-hui ching*, dating to about A.D. 300, which gives no etymology for the title rajah in any form.²³

Clarity, however, was not long in coming. The entire *Dirghāgama* (plus another account of Mahāsammata in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*)²⁴ was rendered into Chinese by a translation team by A.D. 411.²⁵ Of the two accounts of Mahāsammata in the former collection, one, already noted by Meisig, quite clearly reproduces the false etymology, even if the term *yüeh-chung* does not occur:

“At that time that one man (Mahāsammata) further with wonderful words consoled the mass of the people (*chung-min*). When the mass of the people heard this they all rejoiced greatly, and all together proclaimed him, saying ‘Wonderful, O Great King! Wonderful, O Great King!’ At this the world then had the title of king.”²⁶

Of the members of the translation team responsible for this passage, Buddhayasas, teacher of Kumarajīva, had only arrived in China in A.D. 408,²⁷ but his partner Chu Foenien had already been hard at work through the late fourth century.²⁸ Given the strong interest in the *Āgamas* during this period, which had (as we have seen) already witnessed the translation of the *Madhyamāgama* (and indeed the *Ekottarāgama*) into finished, revised versions by A.D. 400, it would not be surprising if the content of this portion of the *Dirghāgama* was already known and discussed, and perhaps even translated in draft, well before A.D. 401, even if a finished translation did not appear until over a decade later.

²² The passage in question is in the *Taishō Canon*, vol. 1, p.676a, col.19–22, as Meisig's listing of parallels shows.

²³ *Ta-lou-hui ching*, 6, 308c, in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 1, no.23. The translators involved did attract later false attributions of translations to their names, but this is one of their genuine products, attested in the earliest sources: cf. Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 70, and Tokiwa Daijō, *GoKan yori Sō, Sei ni itaru yakkyō sōroku*, Tokyo, Tōhō bunka gakuin Tōkyō kenkyūjo, 1938, 879.

²⁴ The famous *Ssu-fen lü*, 31, 779a in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 22, no. 1428; note, however, that this text does speak of the ‘Great Elect’ being raised up by the masses *chung*.

²⁵ Tokiwa, *Yakkyō sōroku*, 879.

²⁶ *Ch'ang O-han*, 6, 38b–c, in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 1, no. 1; cf. also 22, 148c in the same text.

²⁷ See Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China*, Madison, Wisconsin, Wisconsin University Press, 1968, 72, which cites the older man's Chinese biography for the friendship between the two, and Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 408, n. 71.

²⁸ Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 202.

But maybe such an assumption is both slightly problematic, and completely unnecessary. Meisig's meticulous glossary of the materials he is interested in shows at any rate that the word *yüeh* is never associated with kingship in his texts: where the pleasure etymology is introduced, entirely different synonyms are always used. But if, following Gombrich, we read the whole myth as a joke, and the etymology as "surely yet another joke",²⁹ then was it not equally surely (in the light of the ubiquity of references to it) a joke on everyone's lips, likely to cross linguistic boundaries without depending on the formal assistance of translation teams?³⁰ If Tsan-ning did not get the joke, then that was either because he did not live in a time and place subject to such strong Central Asian Buddhist influence as Ch'ang-an in A.D. 400, or else (and this is not impossible) because it was simply impolitic for him to understand it.³¹

There remains, of course, the matter of motive in turning the joke back on to the Buddhists by distorting its meaning so utterly. Why press this term into service in constructing a monastic hierarchy? Here we can only resort to speculation, but it has been noted by most historians that Yao Hsing, the local potentate who was Kumarajīva's patron and the sponsor of much of the translation activity of this period, was nothing if not an autocrat, hardly likely to welcome the contractual model of kingship presented in these texts.³² He himself carried the title *t'ien-wang*, literally equivalent to *devarāja*, though the term has been explained as harking back to early Chinese usage associated with a more loosely knit polity, and it may carry Inner Asian overtones too, suggesting a link between rulership and the sky god.³³ The learned monks under his patronage were however in contact with their colleagues living under the Chin dynasty in the South, where the famous Hui-yüan (334–417) was just at this

²⁹ Again, see note 13, above. It is in fact hard to know how to describe such etymologies in English: "joke" makes them sound too casual, and "false etymology" (which I originally wrote above) underplays the deliberateness of their use. The nearest analogy would seem to be the substitution of the word "herstory" for "history": neither a straightforward joke, nor a careless error, but a deliberate modification to make a certain point.

³⁰ Note that this argument for informal translation based on the ubiquity of the myth and the etymology holds good even if by A.D. 400 generations of commentators had been taking them all far too seriously.

³¹ The study cited in note 9 above would certainly support such an interpretation.

³² For Yao Hsing's insistence that Kumarajīva should take part in eugenic experiments, see Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 83. It should perhaps be mentioned that though Yao's dynasty used the Chinese language, the ruling family was of non-Chinese descent.

³³ The sinological interpretation of this title, common during this chaotic period of non-Chinese rule in the north, is espoused by Tanigawa Michio, for example in (*Iwanami kōza*) *Sekai Rekishi*, Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, 1970, vol. 5, 205; on the sky god, see e.g. W. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1952, 92–3.

point articulating his reasons for defending the autonomy of the *saṅgha* against the threat of state control.³⁴ Might it not be that Yao Hsing was prepared to see contractual leadership as part of Buddhism, on the understanding that it applied only within the Buddhist domain of the *saṅgha* itself? Such sleight of hand may even have been encouraged by the fact that the word *chung*, ‘masses’, while clearly referring in translations of the Mahāsammata story to the primeval population of the earth, was often used as a translation for *saṅgha*.³⁵

It is hardly likely that any materials might ever come to hand either to confirm or deny such a hypothesis, but we cannot rule out the possibility that at this extraordinary epoch when the relationships between Buddhist and East Asian political traditions were subject to vigorous debate, the initiative of one particularly unpleasant ruler ensured the survival of the Indian etymology for *raja* in a completely unlikely Chinese context. As we know, the notion of democracy in any sense tends to find powerful enemies in China (even if, ironically enough, Yao Hsing was in contemporary ethnic terms more Tibetan than Chinese); perhaps it is now time for this ‘political prisoner’ detained in monastic confinement to be recognised.

³⁴ Notably the essay translated by Leon Hurvitz, “‘Render unto Caesar’ in Early Chinese Buddhism”, *SIS*, 5.3/4, 1957, 80–114. The contacts between Hui-yüan and Kumarajīva and his circle are covered in Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika*, Chapter IV.

³⁵ For instance in the Chinese version of the *Udānavarga* translated by Chu Fo-nien as the *Ch’u-yao ching*, 701c in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 4, no. 212, to take an example from materials contemporary with those under discussion. It occurs to me on rereading this paper that the term upon which the Chinese “crowdpleaser” might be based could therefore be *saṅgha rāja*, but I am not so far aware of any use of this title known to the Chinese at such an early date, and so hesitate to modify the conclusions given above.