

The Century of the Holy Man in Chinese History (316–439): The Death of Hsuan-Kao¹

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The rise of the holy man to such eminence in the later Empire had long been attributed, in the sweeping and derogatory perspective of many classical scholars, from Gibbons onwards, to the decline of Greek civilization in the Near East.... This impression was reinforced, at the turn of the century, by the influence of a Darwinian theory of evolution that dominated the anthropological study of religion. 'Popular' belief was treated as the belief of populations at a lower stage of moral and intellectual evolution.²

THE CHINESE HAN DYNASTY collapsed in 220 C.E. Civil war followed. The Three Kingdoms period ended when Chin united China in 265, but that was followed by the fratricide of the eight Chin princes. To help fight their private war, Central Asian nomads were drafted into battle. Not always well-treated by the Han Chinese (who considered them "barbarians"), the tribes shook off their sense of inferiority, repudiated the pledge of allegiance, and, seizing an opportunity, mutinied. In quick succession they sacked the twin capitals of Loyang and Ch'ang-an in 311 and 316. What was left of the Chin court moved south to the Yangtze region and took refuge in what was then still regarded as the aboriginal backwaters. China entered the Northern and Southern Dynasties until the Sui ruler united China in 589.

The present essay looks into the early part of the Northern Dynasties, the period between 316 when the nomads invaded China and 439 when the To-pa Wei finally reunited the North. This is the "century of the holy man." Hierocrats or holy men in office dominated northern rule in ways unknown to the contemporary Chinese south and to degrees that would not be seen again in Chinese history. Until recently, this phenomenon has been badly understood. What Peter Brown said of the derogatory interpretation of the role of the holy man in late antiquity applies as well here. With additional Han prejudice, it is still said in many books that Fo-tu-teng, the

first of such holy men, “used magic to bewitch the barbarian Shih Lo,” and gained political influence thereby—as if what Teng did was some slight of hand and as if Shih Lo was as naive as a child. Too often a narrow reading of the Buddhist tradition also leads to the common practice of referring to Northern Buddhism as State Buddhism, and northern hierocrats as some kind of military advisors. All that is said because at one point, the leader of the Sangha, Fa-kuo, supposedly bowed to Wei Emperor T’ai-tsu as the Tathāgata. And that act is judged to be contrary to the monastic rule—as if there is only one way to read the principle of the two Wheels of the Dharma. After what Tambiah has done in reassessing the dialectics of the two wheels—and Mahāyāna is bolder in this regard than the Pāli tradition—we need to take a closer look at the actual workings of state and Sangha relationship in history. We will see how the rendering unto God and the rendering unto Caesar is never that simple. Even the same record remembers how Emperor T’ai-tsu had to lower his head when he visited Fa-kuo at the latter’s hermitage—the gate *just happened* to be too low to receive his royal carriage.

The holy man, Peter Brown finds, was *repraesentio Christ* and deserving of imperial respect. In Syriac Christianity, he especially acted out the role of a rural patron. In this century of the holy man in China, the holy man was a *repraesentio Buddha* (T’ai-tsu actually used the expression “exemplar of the Way”) who also played a key mediative role easing the tension between the barbarians and the Chinese. The holy man had such preeminence in this period in part because the full Buddhist institution was not yet in place. Once the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha had objective embodiments, the holy man tended to recede into the background. He who had helped to build them would also then defer to their authority. For the moment though, the holy man as personal preceptor to ruler and people might help to hold the community together. This social drama began with Fo-tu-teng in 316 in the North.³ It came to an end in 439 when the North was united under the rule of the To-pa Wei. The death of the monk Hsuan-kaio in the Buddhist persecution of 444 only underlined it more. The present essay retraces that century through a number of key landmarks along the way and highlight the career of Hsuan-kaio at the end.

1. The Myth and the Reality: The First Holy Man, Fo-tu-teng

The life of Fo-tu-teng—his biography has been translated by Arthur Wright—is so paradigmatic of the lot of holy men that Teng is rightly credited with setting the style of Buddhist inculturation in the North. It is only that his life told in the *Lives of Eminent Monks* under the prime category of the *shen-i* or miracle-workers is told with such a mix of fact and fiction, myth and ideology, classical prejudice and medieval piety that we

must tease the various strands out—not to throw out the myth (you cannot and should not) but rather to go behind the myth-making process and make the myth reveal the history.

Teng was a regular Moggallāna (the disciple of the Buddha typifying magical prowess). He could produce rain, ease drought, make a dry stream flow again, bid *nāga* dragons to do his will, order gods and ghosts, look afar, and receive divine messages from Brahma or Indra. He made use of such powers to save a village from fire or a general from capture. These feats served the needs of farmers and warlords, the ruler and the ruled. He also alleviated suffering, cured the sick, and raised the dead—a repertoire befitting a Buddhist charismatic. Some of these myths are facts clouded by fiction. For example, it is said that Teng could take out, wash, and then put back into his body, his intestines; this he did by removing some cotton swab from this small hole found under his left breast; from that same hole an inner light would shine to help him read the holy scriptures in the dark. Now a Chinese metaphor for rebirth is “changing bones and renewing embryo.” This plus the metaphors of the Buddha’s “inner (i.e. self-) enlightenment,” his painless birth from out of “the right side of his mother’s body,” and Teng’s own ability to recite sutras at night have been blended together into what we read above. Right had been incidentally substituted with left because the Chinese found the right side to be inauspicious.⁴

For history-making myths though, we should turn to Teng’s political career. He arrived in China at the time of the barbaric revolt and witnessed the massacre of the population at the capital. To aid those suffering, Teng decided, as any monk would, to “civilize the barbarian (Shih Lo of Later Chao [328–352]) with feats of magic.” Towards that end, Teng first attached himself to a general serving Shih Lo, soon proving himself such a flawless war prophet that Shih Lo eventually asked for him. At their first meeting, Teng awed the bloody warrior by drawing magically a dazzling blue-green lotus from out of a bowl of water. Appointed the Great Reverent of the state, Teng indeed “halved the massacre” the Shih’s could have committed. So we are told.

So it has also been repeated in textbooks. Upon scrutiny though, the above reportage can be shown to be distorted. To begin with, Chinese needed converting to Buddhism; Shih Lo did not. Most Central Asian nomads were Buddhists already. What Shih Lo saw was not some magic show but a symbolic reminder, a buddhophany. The lotus rising from the water represented the Buddha; that the water was in a basin (read: the monk’s begging bowl) is noting how the Dharma had long since been entrusted to the Sangha. “Blue-green” (*ch’ing*) lotus should be emended into “pure” (untainted) lotus. In other words, in a classic confrontation between Power and Authority, Shih Lo was not fooled by magic; rather in deference, he bowed to the authority of the Three Jewels. The narrative

gives the impression that Teng sought out Shih Lo, but that is meant to credit him with a proactive compassion. In any Buddhist culture, it is as much the Buddhist general seeking out Teng. Teng was his personal confessor. Now no general would like to part with his personal counsel, but when Shih Lo asked for Teng, it was an offer that the general could also not refuse. We will see later what might happen when such an offer from a ruler was turned down.

As to the war prophecies Teng offered so flawlessly to all his patrons, we should note that all the holy men of this century—Fo-tu-teng, Tao-an, Seng-lang, Kumārajīva, Dharmakṣema—were remembered as war prophets. This is so despite the fact that any Buddhist monk with a minimum knowledge of the monastic rules would know that a monk was prohibited from even being near a battlefield. Yet all the lives of the monks above (except Seng-lang's) read like a mini-history of war efforts. Every time the warrior heeded the holy man, he won his battle. Every time he did not, he lost. For example, Tao-an advised Fu Chien of Former Ch'in (351–394) not to invade the South in 383. Fu Chien, however, ignored his advice, and he was routed at the Fei River. For that, his reign collapsed. All Tao-an probably did was to counsel against such a barbarian invasion of the emigré Chinese court in the South. More fantastic military foresights, however, have been attributed to these holy men. And a critical historian has a right to ask: what is really going on here?

The answer is that these holy lives are “retrospectives” written by Buddhist historians to alert potential ruling patrons to the benefit of the Dharma, not that unlike the compilation of the Hebrew Bible that credits its chosen prophets a near perfect record of foresight and has a lesson to impart thereby. As Tao-an recognized, “In times like this, the Buddhist Law cannot be established without the support of the king.” Not spoken but implied is the reverse: kings could not rule long without compliance with the Dharma either.⁵ Although the Buddha was no warmonger, yet by the time Buddhism spread into northwest India, the Buddha would so deputize old Hindu gods, i.e., the Four Heavenly Kings, to protect his faithful flock. This theme was canonized in the “Four Heavenly Kings” chapter of the *Golden Light Sutra* (ca. 150 C.E.). This occurred around the time of the reign of the Kushan King Kaniṣka III.

The situation in northwest India was not all that different from the Hebraic experience at the time of the rise of the prophets. That is to say, as nomadic tribes rose to becoming kingdoms and were caught up in international conflicts, wars, prophets, and war prophecies rose as royal institutions. Whether it rose more justly (YHWH was a god of war) or less justly (the Buddha was a man of peace), the line of what is just or proper was blurred in the Buddhist case because northwestern India was invaded by foreigners who, not being Indians, did not know or did not observe the late Vedic custom of respecting the *śrāmaṇa*-s as not to involve the renunciate

in wars. The Persian religion did not recognize such exceptions. Holy men were expected to be at and were regularly drafted into royal courts. Northwest India inherited this pattern. And King Kaniṣka was happy to have captured Aśvaghōṣa from his enemy and have this monk serve as his court poet. (Aśvaghōṣa would be remembered later as a Mahāyāna bodhisattva, and well armored Mahāyāna bodhisattvas were regularly featured as counsels to Dharma kings.) Two hundred years after Kaniṣka and further east on the Silk Road, Fu Chien in China would be just as proud that he had captured—freed and released unharmed—the Chinese monk Tao-an whom he would keep close to his side to the very end. (Tao-an, who sent some of his disciples to the Chinese south would die hostages to his patron.)

Now it is doubtful whether Teng ever was a war prophet. As the Great Reverent of the state, Teng did what any chaplains would do: seek divine protection for his flock before it went into battle. Since all victories were attributed to the Buddha's protection—and all losses to the fault of men—so Teng was retroactively credited with a nearly flawless record of war prophecies. Of course, the holy man was holy not because he had the power to work miracles. As Peter Brown would put it, he had such powers because he was holy. Or because as he was perceived as holy, those powers resulted from such acquiescing. And where popular perceptions rule, it really does not matter if the holy man himself *disclaimed* all such powers. They would be attributed to him no less. Tao-an for one was a Confucian literati turned Buddhist who never in any of his writings boasted of having such powers; yet, he was credited with them nonetheless. The case of Seng-lang is even more clear and more telling. To flee from the chaos in the Central Plain, this erudite monk led a remnant of Han elite to find refuge at Shan-tung, himself retiring to a valley at T'ai-shan. He judiciously declined all offers of office. Yet petitions from barbaric rulers kept coming, with all these warring "men of destiny" thanking him for his "divine help" and "prophetic predictions." It is not that Seng-lang ever aided any one of these pretenders to the Chinese throne; it is only that he had such symbolic authority and high standing among the Han people that a nod from him could legitimize a barbarian ruler in the eyes of the Chinese. For that he was courted and honored as a king-maker that he never truly was.

In his role as hierocrat, Fo-tu-teng never forsook the doctrine of the Two Wheels of the Dharma. After all, he tutored Tao-an, who saw rightly that the two wheels needed one another. The two were never meant by the tradition to be utterly separate (or for that matter, unequal). They were to be like the two wings of a bird, ideally coordinated and mutually reinforcing. Even when Teng was supposedly prophesying the fortunes of war, he did so always using a "Twin Wheel" bell (possibly some kind of a *vajra*; this point is missed by Wright's translation). The "double wheel" referred to the dual principles of Righteousness and Rule. So when Shih Hu assassi-

nated the heir apparent to succeed Shih Lo, Teng noted that only one of the bells was ringing, implying that the other had been treacherously silenced or interrupted by the bloody deed. Such subtle hints were not lost to his audience. And Shih Hu was no fool.

Educated by monks since his childhood, Shih Hu, I think, baited Teng by asking about the first rule in Buddhism—knowing too well it was “to not kill”—in order to see how Teng could respond to his need to stage bloody wars. Teng gave a very judicious answer: not any more than what is just and necessary. On another occasion when no amount of prayer to the Buddha apparently helped Shih Hu to win a battle—Shih Hu was hemmed in by enemies on three sides—he openly declared the Buddha to be “no god.” Teng went into hiding to avoid his murderous wrath. The war prophet failed. But as usual, crisis brought out the best from the holy man. Not magic but common sense, for the next day when tempers cooled, Teng held Hu off by saying, “Why blaspheme the Buddha for a [temporary] setback, a daily fare in any war?” And more than common sense, there was karmic theodicy. Teng also knew how to bait Shih Hu—with carrot and stick and a moral truth. Shih Hu was assured that he was destined to be a ruler of China because in a previous life when he was a merchant (a layman), he feasted sixty *arhant-s* (i.e., supported the Sangha). He should continue in that pious way. Teng also chastised Shih Hu by noting an interim rebirth for Shih Hu as a rooster. The rooster, used in cock fights, served as punishment for Shih Hu’s violent ways. With moral authority and popular support on Teng’s side, Shih Hu had enough sense to back off.

2. The Blessed Peacemaker: The Invincible Hui-shih

By his intercession, Fo-tu-teng supposedly halved the massacre that the two Shihs could have committed. That might be cold comfort to the other half, but it does show how, within limits, a Buddhist man of peace did work miracles in taming the man of war. With the same hyperbole, the records would report that overnight half of the population or even nine out of ten households would be so converted by such holy men. This led to the North having a monk Sangha that overall in this period of disunity was ten times the size of the one in the South. Obviously these could not all be true monks. And it is unlikely that these overnight converts knew much about Buddhism and all had a sudden change of heart. Common sense demands that we ask again: what truly happened?

The case of Hui-shih may provide us with the most telling cue to what actually transpired. Hui-shih was a famous yogin, a wayfarer who literally walked the Silk Road from one end to the other: from Tun-huang to Korea. He walked barefoot and was given one of the major extraordinary marks

of the Buddha. His soles stayed lily white, unsoiled by the dust or mud of the world. Master White Feet (as he was known) visited Kumārajīva but, as a true ascetic, stayed outside the endowed community and rested under a tree instead. Kumārajīva was the reigning holy man at Ch'ang-an, a pillar of the state to his patron Yao Hsing, the National Preceptor upon whose war prophecies the affairs of the state—primarily war then—depended. Unlike the holy man as rural patron in Syria, the holy men in North China in this period led such precarious lives that a cult rarely grew around their graves—until Hui Shih's death later. Most rose and fell with the rise and fall of their warring patrons. Warfare so destroyed their physical remains that Kumārajīva's grave was unrecoverable and his descendants—Kumārajīva was forced to pass on his seed—could not be traced.

After Kumārajīva Ch'ang-an suffered a number of sieges. When Ho-li Po-po and his hoard were about to attack this city, more bloodshed was expected. Po-po was the first barbarian ruler to claim to be a living Tathāgata, but in his piety, he had actually observed a Buddhist etiquette of war: he granted safe passage to the monks in the city who were allowed to leave the scene of battle. Po-po became enraged though when he discovered that the citizens had betrayed him. They had allowed his enemy, masquerading as a monk, to escape. For that, his army took revenge upon the citizenry by slaughtering monks and lay alike. What happened next became one of the most retold legends of the time, one known to Korea and Japan too. The Wei dynastic record reported it: a soldier then plunged his sword into his body but it came out leaving Hui-shih unharmed. Surprised, the matter was reported to Po-po. Po-po came and struck Hui-shih with his jeweled blade but it too came out leaving hardly a mark. In fear, he asked for forgiveness and the massacre ended. So it appears that the monks as victors over "life and death" (samsara) were literally immune to the sword.

The story has hagiographical precedents. The Buddha in his past life had withstood the pain of torture with no complaint. All bodhisattvas are to perfect the same superhuman "perfection of patience or forbearance." Myths of severed heads and limbs growing back on the slain bodies are part of this folklore. Master White Feet as *repraesentio buddhi* was only living out his role. He was holding up the Dharma Wheel of Righteousness against the ruthless power of the killer. And in this confrontation of Right against Might, Right won. Behind the hyperbole, there is a simple truth. All Buddhist monks should face death unflinchingly. The first monk of note in China, the Parthian prince turned renunciate, An Shih-kao did. He forgave—attributed it all to karma—a young robber who waylaid him and threatened to take his life. The first Chinese Zen patriarch, Hui-k'o, would later lose an arm that way impassively. At Ch'ang-an when the rest of the world stood in fear of the barbarian's sword, Hui-shih was the one man who was unintimidated. As "exemplar of the Way," the monk is a living

testimony to nirvanic freedom. For that, the holy man also became a one-man institution of peace.

The power of myth lies in the myth of power. The truth is that the Buddhist holy man played an indispensable role as peacemaker in this era of war. The bare fact of ritual is that Ho-lin Po-po felt betrayed while the citizens of Ch'ang-an felt justified to protect one of their own kind. Immovable barbaric force met immovable Chinese resistance. Neither race could trust the other in this impasse. But Po-po could no more afford to kill off all the Han Chinese than the citizens of Ch'ang-an could afford to resist to the last man. Po-po the conqueror needed to be a ruler over living men; and the Chinese needed to live to return and fight another day. Into that world of mutual mistrust and a political vacuum stepped Hui-shih, a Central Asian, foreign yet sinicized, the one man whose renunciate standing both sides could trust. Through him, the two sides could negotiate a settlement. We may never know exactly what happened, but inferring from other patterns in this period, this is what likely happened.

Basically Hui-shih offered himself up as a ransom and as a guarantor who received pledges from both sides. The barbarian promised to be merciful as a Buddhist ruler would; the people promised to be compliant as Buddhist laymen would. The holy man became the ruler's personal counsel ("war prophet" is a misnomer) and functioned as a pillar of state (National Treasure, etc.). The people indebted to his intercession (he stopped the massacre) became in effect his flock (thus the "mass conversion"). The result was peace. Of course, hagiography embellished it more dramatically. From the side of the rulers, we have these tales of flawless war prophecies. From the side of the people, these incredible legends of holy men standing up to a killer and literally defying and surviving death barehandedly—or, in this case, barefoot.

3. Battling over Holy Men: The First Casualty

The story did not end there and not always happily or peacefully ever after. The holy man as the pillar of the state, so indispensable in a three-way pledge as to be unslayable, also became, however willingly, a hostage, a hierocrat who could never resign from office. Tao-an lost his freedom thus. Hui-shih's wayfaring days were over. And as the glue of community and symbol of rule, the holy man also became the prized booty of war. Capture the holy man and you subordinate the ruler that owned him before and you have the allegiance of whole populations pledged to him. Wars were fought over the holy man. Rulers sought out, captured, monopolized, and collected these symbols of rule as they fought for universal control. While all that happened, China did not initiate this practice; she merely inherited it from northwest India through Central Asia. King Kaniṣka had so

captured Aśvaghōṣa in his day and indications are that Kumārajīva could have served as a holy man honored by and mediating Kucha and Kashgar.

It is not necessary—it would take up too much space—to recount the whole history of wars waged over holy man in the North. We have seen how Shih Lo had asked for and got from his general the prized Fo-tu-teng. (The general could not refuse. It was from this general that Teng sought refuge when Shih Hu in his rage wanted to kill him.) After Teng died, his leading Chinese disciple became the prize. Fu Chien developed a huge army to sack Hsiang-yang in 379, and he boasted of capturing only “one and a half men”—Tao-an and an eminent Confucian erudite. (The “one and a half” count is taken from the war with the Tamils recorded in the Sinhalese chronicle: only “one and a half” men were inadvertently killed—a monk and a layman; dead Tamils did not count.) Then Tao-an heard of Kumārajīva’s fame and Fu Chien dispatched a still larger force all the way into Central Asia to seek his release. His general Lu Kuang kidnapped Kumārajīva before Kashgar could send aid to stop it. By the time he brought him back to China, Fu Chien had died. So Lu Kuang kept Kumārajīva to himself at Liang-chou. And it was left to Yao Hsing of the Later Ch’i (384–417; r. 393–410) to again ceremonially “release” the saint. It was alleged that Lu Kuang had abused Kumārajīva. But no sooner was Kumārajīva brought to Ch’ang-an in 401 that the same abuse—forced concubinage—was perpetuated again. But judging from the fact that Kumārajīva was captured along with a Kuchan princess, that concubinage might have started in Central Asia already. Of all the holy men in the North, only Seng-lang managed to stay out of harm’s way by wisely refusing all offers of office. He was a rural patron since a number of villages were fiefed to him to help support his community but this ended after his death when Shan-tung fell to the Wei.

Shortly after Kumārajīva was taken to Ch’ang-an, Dharmakṣema made his home in Pei Liang. The biography of this holy man is nearly as lengthy and as detailed as Kumārajīva’s, written up again as a testimony to his war prophetic power at sustaining the power of the state. There is also an allegation to his being knowledgeable about the secret arts of the male and the female, a possible reference to some early proto-Tantric teaching coming through this prolific translator. But Dharmakṣema would be the first casualty of this warring over holy men. The record is muddled at this point, but this is what I see as having happened. The To-p’a reign was on the ascendancy, and Emperor T’ai-wu had already defeated Yen in the east and acquired the yogin Hui-shih. He was targeting Pei Liang and was putting pressure on its ruler Meng-sun to deliver to him Dharmakṣema. Meng-sun tried to resist and procrastinated. Dharmakṣema had had relative freedom of movement and had left for India before. Possibly as an excuse, T’ai-wu was told that Dharmakṣema had left for India to retrieve the last section of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Regarding this as

a defiance of his order, T'ai-wu demanded the head of the escapee. Meng-sun was pressured to dispatch soldiers after Dharmakṣema and bring back his head.

The saint saw his pending death. When he was killed, Meng-sun lamented his and confessed that "As Dharmakṣema is my preceptor master, it is proper that I should die with him." A Buddhist owes his new life to his preceptor. T'ai-tsu was not placated for long. He took the capital Liang-ch'eng by storm in 439, and was opposed by three thousand monks helping defend the city. Even as the triumphant Wei army returned home with its booty, another monk led a revolt and had to be put down anew. The battle for Liang-chou boded ill for the holy man. Caught in a political tug-of-war, Dharmakṣema died an unsaintly death. This was the beginning of the end of the century of the holy man.

4. The End of an Era: The Strangling of Hsuan-kao

With the fall of Liang-chou, the North was reunited. In 444, Emperor T'ai-wu would accept as true a prophecy offered him by a Taoist hierocrat, the new Heavenly Master K'ou Ch'ien-chih, that he was the True Lord of the Great Peace who had been prophesied to come from the north. The imperial year was changed into the first year of the Great Peace. This was followed by the proscription of Buddhism during which the monk Hsuan-kao was killed. As a yogin, Hsuan-kao was then second to none. He so perfected the meditation on death that even tigers stood in fear of him. But no amount of yogic power saved him from the sword. His death marks the end of the century of the holy man even as his reported resurrection signals a new development. His biography is translated below.

The Biography of Hsuan-kao: A Translation

Shih Hsuan-kao from the Wei family was given the name Ling-yu. He was a native of Wan-nien County, Fung-yu commandery [Shansi province]. His mother, Madame K'ou, followed initially [the Taoist teaching]. After marrying into the Wei family, she bore first a daughter, elder sister to Hsuan-kao. From birth, the baby girl was devoted to the Buddha. On behalf of her mother, she prayed that one day the whole family would believe in the Great Dharma. In the third year of Hung-shih under the barbaric Ch'in rule [401 C.E.], Madame K'ou had a dream in which Indian monks scattered flowers all over her room. When she woke up, she noticed that she was with child. On the eighth day of the second month of the fourth [Hung-shih] year, a baby boy was born. [On that day,] a strange fragrance filled the room and a bright light danced on the wall, not dispersing until the sun rose.

Seeing how the babe was born to such auspicious signs, the mother named him Ling-yu [Miraculously Conceived]. People of the time revered him so highly that he was called Shih-kao [Held in High Regard by the World].

Hsuan-kao already had the aspiration to leave home at age twelve and enter the mountain, but for a long time, he could not secure his parents' permission to do so. One day, a scholar who stayed over at the Wei residence mentioned how he was planning a retirement at Mount Chung-ch'ang. Hsuan-kao's parents then entrusted him to this scholar's care. That night, villagers dropped by to bid him farewell. The next morning, they came again, though. The parents could not help but wonder aloud: why, having come already last night, would you be here again? The villagers asked in turn: "Since we did not know his departure, how could we have come last night?" The parents then realized that the night visitors were divine men. When Hsuan-kao first arrived at the mountain, he asked to be tonsured. The monks of the mountain denied his request, noting that he had not received any permission from his parents who were not yet converted to the Dharma. Hsuan-kao returned home hoping to change his parents' minds. But it was not until he was twenty could he have his wish. Because he had so turned his back to the mundane and gave up everything worldly, he was called Hsuan-kao [Yuan-kao: Originally Aspiring for Heights].

Intelligent and gifted with wisdom, Hsuan-kao learned by direct intuition. At fifteen he was already giving lectures at the monastery. After receiving the full precepts, he devoted himself to precepts and meditation. Hearing that Buddhahadra from Kuan-yu [west of Han-ku pass] was teaching at the Shih-yang temple, he journeyed there to study. Within just ten days, his understanding of meditation so impressed Buddhahadra that the latter said, "Excellent! So deep is your awakening that I would beg to withdraw and not presume to receive your homage as your teacher." Afterwards Hsuan-kao went off alone to western Ch'in and secluded himself at Mount Mai-chi. More than a hundred flocked there to receive instruction from him, admiring his understanding and following him in meditative practice. At the time, an eminent monk in the Ch'in domain, Shih T'an-hung of Ch'ang-an, had also secluded himself at the mountain. They became good friends sharing one calling. By this time, [the Hsien-pei ruler] Ch'i-fo Ch'ih-p'an had occupied Lung-yu, the western border of which touched the domain of [Northern] Liang. There the foreign meditative master Dharmakṣema had come to guide the native, Chinese students in the ways of yoga. As the true teaching of *samādhi* was profound and subtle, few monks at Lung-yu could master it. Hsuan-kao had hoped to bring along his followers to study with Dharmakṣema. After ten days, Dharmakṣema was as much inspired by him in understanding.

At the time there were two monks who were renunciates only in name. At heart these two hypocrites schemed and sought power. With passions

yet untamed, they broke the monastic rules, and were envious of monks with true learning. After Dharmakṣema had turned West to live with the barbarians, they vilified Hsuan-kao, telling [Ch'i-to] Man, the eldest son of the Prince of Honan, that Hsuan-kao was gathering a multitude to the detriment of the state. Trusting the rumor, Man plotted to do Hsuan-kao physical harm but, prevented by his father, he [only] had Hsuan-kao expelled to Mount Lin-yang-t'ang in Hopei. According to ancient legends, this mountain was the home of many immortals. Hsuan-kao and his community of three hundred dwelled there and kept up their practice as before. Their meditation and wisdom further spurred, their sincerity touched off mysterious responses. Many miracles were reported. Mysterious melodies were heard; fragrance of incense rose from out of nowhere; true men and immortals came frequently to visit; and wild beasts were tamed and poisonous insects became harmless. Among Hsuan-kao's disciples, those fluent in mastering the six gates [the senses] numbered more than a hundred. Among them was Yuan-shao from Lung-yu county, Ch'in-chou commandery, who so excelled in meditation and gained such supernatural powers that clear mountain water could sprout freely from his palm, ten times more fragrant and clear than any water in nature. He would offer it to Hsuan-kao for cleansing and rinsing. Yuan-shao could also conjure up flowers and incense not of this world with which he would honor the Three Jewels. There were eleven disciples like him who had such magical powers. Yuan-shao himself later retired to Mount T'ang-shu and freed himself from his body like a cicada shedding its cocoon.

Before this time, Master T'an-hung of Ch'ang-an had retired to the area of Mount Mien and Shu [Szechwan] and propagated the Way at Ch'eng-tu. Hearing of his renown, the Prince of Honan sent an envoy to invite him to come. Knowing how Hsuan-kao had been exiled, T'an-chung decided to clear his name. Despite the danger of journeying through a precipitous trail, T'an-chung accepted the invitation. Following a formal introduction to the Prince of Honan, he told his host: "Your majesty possesses thorough understanding and far-reaching insight. So why would you heed such defamatory remarks and expell the worthy [Hsuan-kao]? I, this poor man of the Way, came a thousand miles in hope of just offering these words of advice." The prince and his son felt ashamed and expressed regret. Acknowledging their fault, they dispatched an envoy with a humble request for Hsuan-kao's return. Ever magnanimous and compassionate, Hsuan-kao bore no anger and accepted the invitation. But when he was about to leave the mountain, wind and storm suddenly rose. Trees were uprooted. Boulders fell. And the way was blocked. Hsuan-kao uttered an incantation, saying, "It has been my vow to spread widely the Way. Can that vow be stopped this way?" The wind stopped and the road was cleared. As Hsuan-kao made his way slowly back, royalty, ministers, and common people waited upon him along the way. Within and without the

court, he was revered as the National Preceptor. After he had proselytized and changed the custom of Honan, he turned to civilizing the Liang domain. Tsu-ch'ü Meng-sun [the ruler of Northern Liang, r. 397–439] deeply revered Hsuan-kao. He gathered a host of talents to listen to his superb teaching. At the time there was among his disciples, a Fen-hui monk from Hsi-hai named Ying. Limited in understanding, he had made some progress but thought that he had realized the full amount. He considered himself an enlightened *arhat*, one who suddenly and totally penetrated the meditative wisdom. In secret Hsuan-kao let Ying see in a trance the various Buddhas of the boundless worlds in all ten directions, and see how all the many teachings of the Buddha could be different. For a whole summer Ying tried to understand fully all that he was made to see. Unable to exhaust it, Ying finally realized the bottomless nature of the sea of *samādhi* and was greatly shamed and awed.

Meanwhile, T'o-pa T'ao of the Wei had seized power and occupied P'ing-ch'eng and was invading the kingdom of Liang. The uncle of T'ao, Tu Ch'ao, Prince of Yang-p'ing invited Hsuan-kao to the Wei capital P'ing-ch'eng. There Hsuan-kao spread the Tao far and wide. The crown prince T'o-pa Huang revered him and served him with devotion as a disciple would his preceptor. Because the prince had once been maligned [by his enemies], he was held suspect by his father. He asked Hsuan-kao for advice: "The charges against me are baseless. How can I extract myself?" Hsuan-kao instructed him to observe the *Golden Light* fast and sincerely confess his transgressions for seven days. [He did.] Consequently in a dream T'o-pa T'ao saw his grandfather and father holding swords in majestic regalia; they inquired: "Why do you believe in the rumor-mongers and suspect the loyalty of your own son?" T'ao woke up suddenly. He summoned his ministers and related the dream to them. They replied: "The crown prince is blameless. The truth is as revealed by the commands sent down with the royal spirits." Thereafter T'ao no longer suspected the crown prince, all thanks to the power of Hsuan-kao's sincere vow.

An edict was issued by T'ao [which read]: "I have inherited the glorious legacy of my ancestors, and have the intention to enlarge that great foundation so it might prosper for ten thousand generations more. Although my military achievement shines bright, I have yet to spread learning and culture, an omission that is hardly the way to uphold the Era of Great Peace. Now that there is peace in the land and prosperity among the people, it is time to set up the institutions that would be the norm of ten thousand generations to come. As there is alternation of Yin and Yang, there is the succession of the seasons. To appoint my son as heir, to select the virtuous to office, and to entrust them with the country's welfare—these are the ways to render rest to the weary. That has been the good rule that is unchanged for ages. My ministers, having worked long and hard, deserve rest and the boon of peace, to live well, nurse their energy, and

enjoy longevity. They still may counsel and petition but they should be spared the hardship of office. So hence let the crown prince be the head of the myriad departments, administer all affairs of state, appoint the righteous, and promote or demote according to merit. As Confucius says: "The young deserve our respect, for who is to tell they would not do better than we?" Thus the officials and the people all pledged their loyalty to the heir apparent and sent memorials to him, separating them from other documents by using white papers.

[The Confucian prime minister] Ts'ui Hao and the [Taoist] Heavenly Master K'ou [Ch'ien-chih] had won the imperial favor from T'o-pa T'ao before. Now they worried that if and when the crown prince Huang was to ascend the throne, they would lose all their influence. With malice they memorialized and alleged that in that affair [of the dream], the crown prince plotted against the ruler; with the help of Hsuan-kao, he had engineered the magical appearance of the imperial ancestors in his majesty's dream. If such machination is not eradicated, they charged, it would result in immeasurable harm. Enraged, T'o-pa T'ao ordered the immediate arrest of Hsuan-kao. Prior to this Hsuan-kao had secretly told his disciples, "The Buddha dharma will soon decline. Master [Hui-]Ch'ung and I will be the first to suffer the consequence." At the time, those who heard that duly grieved. Hui-ch'ung, a monk from Liang-chou, was then the personal preceptor to Han Wen-te, the Imperial Secretary of the Wei state. Second in virtue only to Hsuan-kao he too came under suspicion. In the ninth month of the fifth year of the T'ai-p'ing [Chen-chun] era [444], Hsuan-kao and Hui-ch'ung were arrested and imprisoned. On the fifteenth day of the same month they were executed at the eastern corner of the capital P'ing-ch'eng. Hsuan-kao was forty-three. That happened in the twenty-first year of the Yuan chia era of the Sung Dynasty (concurrent in the South; 444). The day Hsuan-kao was executed, his disciples were unaware of what was happening. At the third watch of the night, a bright light was suddenly seen circling three times the tower that Hsuan-kao used to live in. Then it entered the meditative grotto itself and a voice from within the light announced: "Thus have I died." The disciples then knew that their master had passed away. They wept sorrowfully as if unto death. Later they gathered the body at the southern suburb of the capital. They bathed it and entombed it. Hui-ch'ung's body was similarly taken care of in a different place. The monks and the lay people of the capital without exception grieved in fear.

At the time, Hsuan-ch'ang, a disciple of Hsuan-kao, was at Yun-chung, some six hundred miles away from P'ing-ch'eng. That morning some figure appeared out of nowhere and informed him of what had happened and offered him a horse that could run six hundred miles [a day]. Hsuan-ch'ang flourished the whip and reached the capital that very night. When

he saw the body of Hsuan-kao he could no more control his grief. In tears he addressed his fellow disciples: "The Dharma has suffered a fall. But instead of an eventual revival, better it is that there be a renewed prosperity now. Master [Hsuan-kao], pray sit up, for as your virtue is like no one else's, you can shine forever."

Before the words had died, Hsuan-kao's eyes opened slightly; his pleasant complexion returned; and his body was covered with a sweet perspiration. In no time he sat up and addressed his fellowship: "The Great Buddha dharma undergoes momentous changes according to changing conditions. But the rise and decline affects only the mundane traces. The transmudane Principle remains always the same. I anticipate that most of you would [be persecuted] just like me, except for Hsuan-ch'ang, who should depart for the South. After your deaths, the Dharma would be revived anew. It is best that you all cultivate your minds and not suffer any regret [in facing the dark days to come]." With these words, he lay down again and finally departed. The next morning the disciples were hoping to move the coffin to a crematory site. But because state policy [urged on by the Heavenly Master] had prohibited cremation, the body was buried in a tomb [outside the city]. Monks and laymen wept till their hearts broke.

There was a monk by the name of Fa-ta who was a clerical official. He had long admired Hsuan-kao but had never received any personal instruction from the master. Hearing of his passing, he lamented: "The sage is gone. On what may I hence depend?" For days he would not eat as he pleaded aloud to Hsuan-kao: "Superior Sage, who can thus come and go at will, why would you not show yourself to me?" Hearing the pleas, Hsuan-kao did appear. He was seen floating down from high. Fa-ta bowed deeply and begged to be delivered [from this world] but Hsuan-kao noted, "The weight of your karma is heavy; it is difficult to lift as yet. You should know that from now on, you should practice the Vaipulya [Mahāyāna] rite of penance. If you do so, the karmic retribution [for past evils done] would be lightened." Fa-ta said: "I pray that you can help me so that I may be so delivered from the painful punishment." Hsuan-kao said: "Just do as I instruct and do not forget about it; everything ultimately depends on you."

Fa-ta further inquired: "May I know where you and Master [Hui-] Ch'ung have been reborn?" Hsuan-kao answered: "Because I want to return to this evil world in order to aid all sentient beings, I have already been so born. Master Ch'ung has always longed for peace and quiet (nirvana); he has gained his wish." Fa-ta asked further: "May I know to what level of the bodhisattva stages you have attained?" Hsuan-kao answered: "Among my disciples, there is one who would know." Upon that, Hsuan-kao disappeared. Later Fa-ta secretly visited the various disciples of Hsuan-kao and they all agreed that Hsuan-kao is the Bodhisattva who has attained the stage of perfected forbearance [emptiness wisdom]

that lets the nonarising of reality be, i.e. *anupattika dharmakṣānti*. In the seventh year of the T'ai-p'ing era, T'o-pa T'ao persecuted the Sangha and destroyed the Dharma, just as Hsuan-kaio had predicted.

5. In Retrospect: On the Passing of the Holy Man

The death of Hsun-kaio closed the age of the holy man. No longer was the holy man so indispensable that mythopoetically he could not be killed. He could be. And the reason has to do in part with the changing times. In 335, when the sinocentric Confucian minister Wang Tu foolishly advised his barbarian ruler Shih Hu that a Son of Heaven should not worship a *hu* or barbarian deity, he was rebuffed soundly by Shih Hu who noted that he, Shih Hu, being a *hu* himself, would only be too glad to honor a *hu* god (the Buddha). Buddhism might seem barbaric to the Chinese, but in Central Asia it had been a major civilizing force. It offered the nomadic tribes then emerging into kingdoms an ideology of royal rule their simpler tribal religions could not. It probably also provided these tribes the legal compact—a basic function of *religio*—for creating a multi-tribal confederation. They could easily have used the model set forth in the *Golden Light Sūtra*. Eight or sixteen princes could come together and form what would be known as a “Golden Light Congregation” whereby the members would all pledge to jointly uphold the Dharma and to oppose their common enemies (these were always seen as enemies and violators of the Dharma). The members of the congregation would be protected naturally by the Buddha; their enemies would be justly repelled by his deputies, the Four Heavenly Kings. We have seen how Fo-tu-teng had special access to the Hindu gods. That in the biography of Hsuan-kaio above we see the crown prince making use of the *Golden Light* confessional (a rite of penance) to verify his truthfulness and seek protection from his court enemies only attests to the prevalence of Buddhist ideology and practice among the Central Asian nomads.

It is a truism among Sinologists to hold that barbarian conquerors seeking to become permanent rulers of China must adopt the Chinese ways and that the Confucian bureaucracy would prove indispensable—more so than any institution of the holy man. If so, then indeed the days when holy men could be king-makers were numbered. But that is really putting things too simply. The three religions of China and their institutional forms were ever-evolving. Chinese minds and society were changed by the foreigners even as the foreigners were being so-called “Sinicized.” Now of the two religions or traditions in China, Taoism proved to be the one more receptive to Buddhist influence and more accepting of foreigners. K'ou Ch'ien-chih who headed the “new” Way of the Heavenly Master befriended the Buddhists (he interceded on behalf of and saved the three thousand monks

of Liang-chou whom T'ai-wu would have put to death for opposing his conquering army) and he truly considered To-p'a Emperor T'ai-wu to be the True Lord of the Great Peace, a Taoist messianic ruler prophesied by the *T'ai-p'ing-ching* to rise in the North. Compared with him, Ts'ui Hao the Confucian prime minister was the one less receptive of Buddhists and in his heart of hearts still regarded the T'o-pa's to be "uncivilized." (For writing up an official history of To-pa's that was not very flattering, he would be put to a horrible death by T'ai-wu later.) T'ai-wu was initially sceptical of the Taoist prophecy but Ts'ui Hao convinced him of its plausibility. And it was within that context—the T'o-pa's shift to a Taoist ideology of kingship and the increasing influence of Confucianism at court—that the proscription of Buddhism came about and the death of Hsuan-kao ensued. In both matters Ts'ui Hao was the key instigator.

The biography of Hsuan-kao above however tells of the more complicated details of those changing times. His life was told after the model of the life the Buddha. The holy man is an *imago buddhi*. Hsuan-kao was "miraculously conceived" like the Buddha and was called one "highly respected by the world" (the World-Honored One). His mother followed previously an *ai-tao* (heresy) which we can assume means Taoism. Hsuan-kao was originally given the name Yuan-kao, but Yuan became a taboo word when the ruling To-pa clan later adopted Yuan as their Chinese surname. Since then, the records refer to him as Hsuan-kao. Like the Buddha, Hsuan-kao studied with two leading meditative masters before striking out on his own. And after he died, there was a disciple who despaired of having nothing to rely on—something that also occurred after the death of the Buddha.

Upon a closer look, Hsuan-kao belonged to the category of what the Buddhist tradition would recognize as the "forest monks." Caves can be substitutes for forests, and Hsuan-kao's cave site was at Mt. Mai-chi. This is a spectacular outcrop of a hill. It rose solitarily above the surrounding lowlands and its shape looked like a domed heaven to Taoists and a *stūpa* reliquary to the Buddhists. This desolate hill with bare vegetation on top and sheer cliffs all around still houses bands of cells in its mid-section, a venerable haunt perfect for hermits and immortals. Hsuan-kao's career from that point on illustrates well the fortunes of a forest monk. He was impeached by two city monk types—worldly monks who adjusted to the politics at the center, jealous of his power and influence among the people. Exiled to Hopei, his fame was undiminished and he was recalled when another mountain hermit came to his defense. Forest monks who devoted themselves to meditation and kept pure lives were more loved by the people, and could represent the voice of the periphery in a harsher criticism of the power at the center. This pattern has been detected in the monastic reform movements in the medieval Latin Church; it is still visible today in the politics of Thailand. Hsuan-kao's trip home, made treacherous by

uprooted trees and falling boulders, tells as much about the desire of the locals hoping to keep him in Hopei. But the “center” called and Hsuan-kao would accept the invitation to return. Deference to the holy man had kings always leaving their capitals to welcome the saint. Aśoka so welcomed the Great Tissa and Upagupta. T’ang T’ai-tsung so welcomed Hsuan-tsang.

The century of the holy man passed with the passing of Hsuan-kao. The confrontation of the Lion and the Lamb—ruthless killer and selfless saint—looked increasingly out of place now that court intrigues instead of the exigencies on the battle field seemed to determine political outcomes. The roving warriors were being turned into landed nobility. Conquerors by the sword were becoming rulers by the brush. Peace had, as the edict of T’ai-wu said, replaced war. Culture and not conflict should be the rule of the new era. This is, however, not to say that there were no more holy men after this century of the holy man. There were—but they were holy men of a different style. We cannot go into the next page in the history of Chinese Buddhism here, but we may reflect on the post-mortem miracles reported in the biography above. No such miracles were reported of previous holy men. And no one before Hsuan-kao is known for a reported bodhisattvic rebirth. His resurrection and final entrustment is also exceptional. They are indeed of “biblical” proportion.

The resurrection of Hsuan-kao bespeaks of the survival of his community and a renewal of its faith. As the saint himself prophesied, after the dark days of the persecution, there would be a revival to come. But it is Hsuan-kao coming back to life to assure Fa-ta that truly proved that he was enlightened. He could “(thus) come and go at will” (as a *tathāgata*, the thus-come or thus-gone would). And it is noteworthy that Fa-ta was not present at the initial “pentecostal,” but yet like the outsider Saul that became Paul, Fa-ta had the stronger private vision. There is this hint dropped that a disciple of Hsuan-kao was “in the know” but the text does not identify who this person—this Peter of the Rock—was. Judging from subsequent Buddhist history, it has to be T’an-yao. T’an-yao led the Buddhist revival in the 460s after the persecution was lifted (452). And in one the caves he sponsored at Yun-kang, the martyrdom of Hsuan-kao was graphically depicted.

T’an-yao represented a different stage and type of leadership from the holy men of the 316–439 period. The holy men of old were miracle workers, powerful and singular hierocrats who were companions to and counsels of warrior kings. T’an-yao was not particularly known for any miracle. In an age of peace and prosperity, war prophecies had little or no place. And T’an-yao was no prophet. He worked with committees instead of by some lone charisma or unique power. He ordered men, not gods or ghosts. He was the patient architect that rebuilt the Three Jewels and furnished them with unprecedented glories in an age that the circle of T’an-yao recognized with moderate realism was the time of the Semblance Dharma. And

until renewed crisis in the mid-sixth century led to the rise of the new apocalyptic prophets expecting the End of the Dharma, the rebuilding of objective institutions in the second half of the fifth century was how it should be. That is because in normal times the Buddhist tradition rested on—not some singular holy man; not the person but always in conjunction—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

NOTES

1. An abbreviated version on the “Century of the Holy Man” is in a section of the chapter “The Three Jewels in China,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese*, ed. Yoshinori Takeuchi (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 275–342; the Hsuan-kao material is a recent addition and appended here; nearly all the raw data for the various holy men in this study can be found in Hui-chiao’s *Lives of Eminent Monks* (*Taishō*, vol. 50, no. 2059).
2. Peter Brown, “The Rise and the Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 107.
3. The South had its own new crop of Taoist holy men but they had a different function, and that is another story.
4. In an early Chinese translation of the Bible, Christ is said to be standing to the left side of God instead of the right.
5. It is a common Christian belief too that a God-fearing nation like the U.S. would be so favored by God—and a God-forgetful nation would be duly punished.