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From Kingdom to Empire to Universal Salvation Religion: A History of Paradigm Shifts in Early China

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Del reino al imperio de la religión de salvación universal: una historia de cambios de paradigma en la China primeva

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ABSTRACT: I have long been intrigued by the fact that the Roman and Han empires collapsed at roughly the same time, and that there emerged from the rubble two universal salvation religions—Buddhism and Christianity—that proved indispensable to social and political reconstruction. Knowing only the rudiments of the Western story, I will focus on what I consider to be the ideo-logic of events in China, leaving aside the economic and technological factors of which I am ignorant.

Keywords: Chinese Religions. Ancient China History. Universal Salvation Religions. Buddhism.

RESUMO: Há muito tempo estou intrigado com o fato de que os impérios Romano e Han desmoronaram mais ou menos ao mesmo tempo, e que de seus escombros emergiram duas religiões universais de salvação – Budismo e Cristianismo – que se provaram indispensáveis para a reconstrução social e política. Conhecendo apenas os rudimentos da história ocidental, focalizarei o que considero a ideologia dos acontecimentos na China, deixando de lado os fatores econômicos e tecnológicos que desconheço.

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Palavras-chaves: Religiões Chinesas. História da China Antiga. Religiões de Salvação Universal. Budismo.

RESUMEN: Durante mucho tiempo me ha desconcertado el hecho de que los imperios Romano y Han colapsaron aproximadamente al mismo tiempo, y que de sus escombros surgieron dos religiones universales de salvación, el Budismo y el Cristianismo, que resultaron indispensables para la reconstrucción social y política. Conociendo solo los rudimentos de la historia occidental, me centraré en lo que considero la ideología de los acontecimientos en China, dejando de lado los factores económicos y tecnológicos que desconozco.

Palabras clave: Religiones chinas. Historia de la China antigua. Religiones de Salvación Universal. Budismo.

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From Kingdom to Empire

We must begin the account with the Warring States (481–21 BCE), when the Zhou kingdom (1045–256 BCE) went into terminal decline, finally to be replaced by, first the Qin empire (221–206 BCE) and then the Han (206 BCE–220 CE). This is a period of incessant military and philosophical warfare. The latter involved a determined attack by thinkers of all stripes on the "shamanistic" religious system of the Zhou. In its place they constructed a universal cosmology that would survive to the present. The central concept of this cosmology was the Dao, or Way, itself composed of Yin/female and Yang/male *qi* 氣 (energy): "One Yin, one Yang, that is what is meant by Dao," to quote an early commentary on the *Yijing* 易經 or Book of Changes. Although this phrase puts Yin first, most pairings reversed the order, whether it be in the space of Heaven/earth, the seasonal time of spring-summer/fall-winter, or in patriarchal authority at all levels of society. Like the head/body metaphor in the Pauline epistles, the Yang/Yin order was at once cosmic, political, and social. As such, we may call it a dualistic monism for, if the Dao is the single, transcendent source of—and therefore includes—the "ten thousand things", Yang will increasingly be associated with life and the divine, Yin with death and the demonic. Religiously, this will mean the disappearance of the half-human half-animal hybrid gods of the *Shanhaijing* 山海

經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas) and the emergence of a cult of "immortals" who, being pure Yang, are feathered and "ascend to Heaven in broad daylight."

The Attack on Shamanism

Where shamans, or spirit mediums, had once been both ritualists and doctors, a new *qi*-based medicine led to naturalistic, rationalistic interpretations of shamanistic healing:

> The Yellow Emperor said: "What the Master has told me is what every sick person knows. But if the patient has not encountered perverse energies and has not been frightened and yet falls suddenly ill, what is the reason? Is it because of gods and ghosts?" Qibo replied: "This is because there are old perverse energies which linger without breaking out. Then the mind has something it hates, and then again something it desires. Within, his blood and energy are in disorder, and *yin* and *yang* attack each other. It comes out of nowhere and is invisible and inaudible, so it seems it is ghosts or gods" (Lin 2008, 397–458).

The medical techniques of shamans — using purgative drugs to expel "baleful influences" and saying prayers — have become the object of intellectual contempt: "No one has ever proved that such prayers add so much as a day to anyone's life. For this reason, people despise the shaman-invocators" (Lin 2008, 427).

Shamanistic techniques were recast as "sinister ways (*zuodao* 左道) of black magic (*wugu* 巫蠱)". The term "sinister ways" is still used today to designate "heterodox teachings" (*xiejiao* 邪教). The term here translated "heterodox" is the same as that translated above as "perverse": marginalization is achieved not just by argument but also by labeling and association, as with "hunchbacks" and "foolish women". The theme of women shamans comes up again and again in Lin Fu-shih's chapter, notably in connection with cases involving "the female way of seduction", also referred to as "perverse seduction" (Lin 2008, 454–455).

Gender bias—patriarchy—went hand-in-hand with class prejudice, and the conviction on the part of the male intellectuals that they occupied the moral high ground of orthodoxy. A second-century "Daoist" book was criticized as "full of the miscellaneous sayings of shamans… mad and not canonical"; it "contravened classical knowledge". A slightly later text explaining the interdiction of the "excessive sacrifices" of shamans who "exact fees and requisition goods" states that, "If we are to rule well, we ought to trust to the teachings of the Classics (*jingyi* 經義)". Orthodoxy, in other words, was eminently political, and indissociable from "the Classics". Indeed, it is hard to imagine these appeals to the Classics without referring to the gradual rise to prominence of the Five Classics and their inscription in stone in the year 175 CE (Nylan 2008, 748). As Lin Fu-shih points out (2008, 445), this concern for orthodoxy led to the creation of a "national register of sacrifices" (*sidian* 祀典), from which were excluded "excessive sacrifices" (*yinsi* 淫祀). The term *yin*, often translated as "illicit", originally refers to the "adulterous, unregulated desire" associated with female

seduction. To this pursuit of private pleasure, male thinkers opposed a discourse of virtue and public morality.[1]

The Transcendent Dao

In the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BC), there was an anthropomorphic high god called Di who was only accessible—and that, tenuously—to Shang ancestors. This religious lock on political power was challenged by the Zhou concepts of Heaven and the Heavenly Mandate: when dynastic descendants became immoral, Heaven transferred its mandate to rule to a new clan with different ancestors. Throughout Chinese history, "Heaven", while also increasingly identified with stellar and hence calendrical regularity and law, retained anthropomorphic traits as the moral arbiter who responds appropriately to good and bad behavior and policy. That is why, in the Zhou religious system, Heaven was the object of the highest sacrifice. In making this sacrifice, the king showed himself to be "Son of Heaven" and worthy descendant of the dynastic founders. But most interesting was the association with Heaven of the divine progenitor of the new royal clan. Called Houji, or Lord of Cereals, he received a secondary sacrifice after that to Heaven.

For this sacrifice, two bulls were raised (Levi 2008). Theoretically, strict taboos applied only to the raising of Heaven's bull, but in reality, in case something untoward should happen to it, the bull for Houji had to meet the same criteria. The difference between the two, Heaven and Houji, was made clear by their distinct sacrificial fate: the bull for Heaven was consumed totally by the flames, while that for Houji was cooked, cut up, and then distributed in what Jean Levi calls a "cascade of leftovers" from the highest ministers at court down to lower-ranking but still blood-related lords of fiefs. This sharing of sacrificial meat from top to bottom was to be "repaid" (*bao* 報) from the bottom up by the counter-flow of loyalty. Thus, if political and territorial (horizontal) solidarity were expressed by the ancestral sacrifice, Heaven's (vertical) transcendence was signified by the sacrifice to Heaven: Heaven was beyond the system of political reciprocity, and the Heaven-Son relationship was the model for that of the Son and his ministers and lords.

As, over the course of the Warring States, Heaven came increasingly to be identified with stellar and legal regularity and rationality, the new term Dao came to refer to that "spontaneous", "natural" (*ziran* 自然) cosmic order. Heaven, however transcendent, was as inseparable from Earth as Yang was from Yin, and a concept was therefore required that incorporated these pairs. Still, if Dao was "all and in all", Heaven retained its association with transcendence in the term *tiandao* 天

[1] As I intimate below in remarks about popular religion, the elite attack on shamanism, while it did lead to the elimination of shamanism from government, had no effect whatsoever on its currency among the people.

道, Way of Heaven, a favorite of relentlessly rational philosophers like Xunzi. The "Way of Heaven" acquired its moral significance by way of a new institutional and ritual expression of Sonship: the Mingtang 明堂, or Hall of Lights. In this cross-shaped hall with five rooms—center + 4—and twelve sides, the now imperial Son of Heaven was to circulate and perform monthly rituals which were appropriate to the season. In so doing, he was ritually conforming his behavior to the Heavenly Mandate as expressed in seasonal regularity, and thereby giving to his people a model of conformity to Law. But if his conformity with what we may call "natural law" enabled him to produce a calendar that regulated agricultural work, it also enshrined his exclusive link to the transcendent Way of Heaven and thereby founded his right and duty as sole Lawgiver. This "solitary man" (*guren* 孤人), source of all laws for human society, was himself above these laws.

The association of the emperor with both the Way of Heaven and centralized power is best expressed in a new supreme cult that was first celebrated by the Han dynasty's most powerful emperor, Wudi, in the year 113 BCE. In that year, instructed by "masters of methods" (*fangshi* 方士) associated both with the pursuit of immortality and proto-scientific exploration of all kinds, Wudi worshiped Taiyi, the Great One. Among the multiple ways in which Taiyi was imagined at the time, one made of him an emperor residing in the Palace of Purple Subtlety (Ziweigong 紫微宮), a constellation in the center of the sky. This worship was performed on a three-level tamped-earth platform (*tan* 壇) whose structure expressed the entire divine cosmos, with Taiyi himself occupying the smallest, central square, the five "thearchs" (Wudi 五帝) arrayed around him on the second level, and all the other gods on the third, outer level. This outer level was entered by eight paths, corresponding to the eight trigrams (*bagua* 八卦), situated in the four directions and the four corners. The five thearchs were the divine embodiment of the "five agents" (*wuxing* 五行) which served to spatialize the four seasons plus one, a transitional season at the center of the year, between summer's Yang and autumnal Yin. The phrase "Yin-Yang, Wuxing, Bagua" is still used today to summarize the structure of the "altar" (*tan* 壇) on which Daoist ritual is performed.

Daoism as a religion emerged in the second century CE, just when the Han dynasty was in slow-motion collapse. I personally suspect that its rituals, like its altar, derived from the imperial version of "method master" rituals. The term "Daoism" here corresponds to the Chinese *daojiao* 道教, or Teaching of the (transcendent) Dao. Before being impacted by Buddhism, Daoist ritual was, like what we now call "Chinese medicine", a thoroughgoing expression of the cosmic order of the transcendent Dao.[2] Its exorcisms drove out "perverse energies"; its self-cultivation practices

[2] It has been standard fare in Sinology to say there is no transcendence in China, only immanence, and this view is usually accompanied by another assertion, that China is ontologically monist. If I use below the term "dualistic monism" for Chinese cosmology, it is at once to give a nod in the direction of these standard views and state that they

involved visualizations of the Great One and imbibing the 24 "nodal energies" (*jieqi* 節氣) of the four seasons plus the singular energy of the Center, that is, the 24 + 1 = 25 energies of the five thearchs. In other words, it was in its origins a religion which took just as seriously as the doctors of the time the replacement of shamanistic healing and ordering methods by techniques that adhered strictly to cosmological rationalism. In this system, the gods of popular religion were perverse demonic energies that required exorcism, and the "bright gods" (*mingshen* 明神) embodied the cosmic order. Neither had any autonomy; together they embodied a mechanistic but moral cosmos.

The lack of autonomy of the gods and "demons" is best seen in the manner in which the Daoist religion, in its structure and rites, imitated the bureaucratic empire. The idea that the aristocrats who governed the Zhou should be replaced by officials named by the sovereign originated with the most relentlessly rationalistic and "secular" of the Warring States thinkers, the so-called "school of Law" (*fajia* 法家). In their vision, the One Man should assign specific jobs/goals to the officials he named and hold them strictly responsible for their success or failure. In this manner, the government would function exactly like the Way of Heaven, without ever deviating from immutable and transcendent laws. Jean Levi shows how, in Xunzi, the most influential thinker of the Confucian school in the run-up to empire and then in the Han and Tang dynasties, the key Confucian notion of *li* 禮, ritual, became identical with *fa* 法, law. The bureaucratic empire could come into existence because the three main schools—Confucian (rites), Legalist (laws), and Daoist (Dao)—all thus converged, shortly before the first empire was founded, in the Heavenly Dao represented on earth by the One transcendent Man.

It was an identical universe that was given expression in early Daoist ritual: first, the calendar was built around three "congregational gatherings" (*hui* 會) that took place in the first, seventh, and tenth months, corresponding to the singular Yang (1–6) and the dual Yin (7–12) halves of the year; second, the Daoist priest was an official of the Dao, who sent memorials up the bureaucratic chain to the Most High Lord Lao (Taishang laojun 太上老君), an embodiment of the Dao who, like the Great One, was often pictured as dwelling in the center of the heavens; third, he used the officials (*guan* 官) of his own body to perform this dispatch, and it was they who were then rewarded for their "merit" (*gong* 功) at the end of each ritual. The Daoist master, in short, functioned on the model of the Legalist emperor, embodying the transcendent Dao and governing his officers

are woefully inadequate, first because dualism, as of body and soul(s) and Heaven and earth, becomes ever more palpable as we move through Chinese history and, second, because the Dao, as transcendent category, "occupies the same functional place" as God. See my "Dieu-Père/Dao-Mère : dualismes occidentaux et chinois," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* special issue *The Father in Question,* 2012, pp. 137–57 (p. 144).

with rewards and punishments. We have already seen that his *tan* was also modeled on that of the imperial sacrifice to Heaven. To this should be added that, in accord with the reigning cosmology, in Daoist "theology" all spirits, whether positive (gods) or negative (demons), were just forms of *qi*, and could therefore be managed and manipulated by someone who, "master of methods", knew the system.

From an ideological point of view, the four Han centuries were spent fleshing out and giving ritual and legal expression to this rationalistic cosmology. That it was inadequate to informing and sustaining governance may be seen by the parallel development of state Confucianism, culminating in the carving in stone of the Confucian Classics already referred to. Why was Confucianism indispensable to governing even after its key concept of ritual governance had been incorporated into the Xunzian synthesis? Because, over against the strictly amoral and mechanistic universe of the Legalists and the focus on transcendence and immortality of the Daoists, the Confucians promoted two equally key but ethical concepts destined to play a central role in Chinese society right down to the present day: *xiao* 孝, or "filial piety" (which included the worship of the ancestors), and *zhong* 忠, or "loyalty" to one's superior. These concepts were in turn inseparable from the idea that the Way of Heaven was also a moral way, and that Heaven could be moved (*gan* 感) by good behavior, as by bad. That is, Confucianism was the vehicle for the injection of a moral element in governance, and this moral element already professed that "good people have a good reward, bad people a bad one." That is, the universe is, in the end, just.

But the world people saw around them, especially as the Han went into terminal decline, was not a just one: whole clans were wiped out by epidemics; good people died young, while bad people lived to a ripe old age. How could this be explained? The idea the Confucians came up with to explain this disparity was called "leftover misfortune" 餘殃 and "leftover blessings" 餘烈 (Li 2008, 1134): the merits or demerits of ancestors continued to over-determine the fate of their descendants. That is why Confucians continued throughout Chinese history to insist on the importance of sacrifices to the ancestors.

From Empire to Universal Salvation Religion

There were two basic problems with the Confucian vision of social and political order: first, as stated in the Book of Rites (*Liji* 禮記), "The rites do not go down to the people." That is, the people had no right to sacrifice to ancestors, only to parents and grandparents, because ancestors, starting in the Shang and continuing into Communist China—I refer here to the role of the "princes" (*taizi* 太子) in present-day China—represent political power. The second was that the

sanguine idea of ancestors embodied in the Confucian rites did not correspond to the reality of the role played by the dead in Han society. The dead were more feared than loved, and their presence was not at all desirable. On the contrary, many rites and techniques, including of burial, were developed to ensure that the dead stayed in their world and kept out of ours. But these rites and techniques did not suffice, the dead came back, especially when, as in the declining Han, people were dying like flies in wars and epidemics. These the "unfortunate dead" became "vengeful ghosts" (*ligui* 厲鬼) worshiped by the people—and even by emperors and Confucians—but driven out by Daoist exorcisms. "Ancestors", to borrow from the title of a must-read book by Stephen Bokenkamp, were a source of "anxiety" (Bokenkamp 2007).

There was a further problem that cannot be laid at the door of Confucianism: justice. I personally believe that a desire for justice is as universal as that for liberty, that these are givens of the human psyche which come ever more to the fore as we move through history. Early Chinese thinkers were no more fools in that regard than the Hebrew prophets, and such as Mencius put it in starkly political terms: the sovereign who puts the people's welfare first on his agenda is the sovereign who will capture their hearts and replace the Zhou king. This same Mencius will replace Xunzi as the leading Confucian thinker from the Song on, because he spoke of such things as "the good heart" (*liangxin* 良心) characteristic of all humans, and insisted that every person had in this heart the "four beginnings" (*siduan* 四段) of moral behavior, of which the first and most important is *ren* 仁, benevolence or humaneness.

But at the time of which we are speaking, this tidal shift in Confucianism was still far in the future, and could in fact occur only because Confucianism made its own the Buddhist concern for universal salvation: for the "heart of the Buddha" possessed by all according to some Chinese Buddhist schools, the Song Confucians would substitute "the heart of a Yao and Shun", and in the place of Buddhist "charity" (*ci* 慈) they would put *ren*.

The Buddhist "conquest" of China took place during the Chinese "Dark Ages", from the third through the sixth centuries, when China was first divided into Three Kingdoms and then into North and South. In the "barbarian"-occupied North, one Buddhist dynasty succeeded another, and in the "Chinese" South, to whose dynasties the Confucian historians of subsequent times alone accorded legitimacy, Buddhism almost completely took over the cultural universe of the literate. For those interested in how profoundly Buddhism transformed Chinese elite culture I can do no better than to recommend the article by François Martin, my regretted late colleague from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, in *Early Chinese Religion II* (Martin 2009, 891–952).

While there are multiple reasons for the Buddhist "conquest" of China, I will single out a number of them that I consider essential:

1) The doctrine of karma. The ideas that 1) there is a cosmic justice and that 2) it is individual, not collective (or clan-based) provided radical and apparently plausible answers to the problems of trans-generational (in)justice that neither cosmological rationalism nor Confucian moralism had been able to solve. Few Buddhist ideas had such deep-seated and long-lasting impact on Chinese culture as that of karma: it clearly was something China "needed".

2) The idea of universal salvation (*pudu zhongsheng* 普渡衆生). The pretention to universality of the bureaucratic empire—ruler of all "under Heaven" (*tianxia* 天下)—had no ideological counterpart, for Confucianism was (and still is) fundamentally discriminatory, both as regards class and gender, and the Legalist-Daoist imperium, founded on cosmo-political laws had in fact nothing to offer "the people", not even Confucian "benevolence". I believe that this is the single most important reason that Buddhism proved essential to the founding of the second great unifier of the Chinese oecumene, the Sui (589–617 AD): the emperor was no longer just the Son of Heaven, he was the "living Tathagata". This constituted an ideology far more powerful than the Confucian "divine right of kings": it made the emperor a living Buddha.

It should be noted here that this "solution" to the "problems" posed by Buddhism to the Confucian moral universe was of "barbarian", northern origin, not "Chinese" and southern. In the South, the elite debated whether or not, in not bowing down to the emperor, Buddhist monks were "disloyal", and whether, in having no sons to carry on the ancestor sacrifices, they were "unfilial". In the end they accepted the Buddhist arguments that, by virtue of their prayers for the dead and for the empire, the monks were truly loyal and filial. In the North, the monk Faguo 法果 (fl. 396–409), after bowing down before the reigning emperor, said it was not before an ordinary human being he was bowing but before the living Tathāgata or Thus-Come-One (Lagerwey 2009, 6). I suspect this solution was closer to the Justinian than to the Constantinian solution for church/state relations. Be that as it may, in China it confirmed the Confucian conviction that the "state" must also be the "church", that the religious and the political could not be separated even though they were in fact distinguished after Buddhism, with its roots in the Indian distinction between brahman and kshatriya castes, had brought its institutional and ideological traditions to China.

The early Daoists had in fact also created, in the second century, what may be called a "church" (Kleeman 2016). But when its first historical leader, Zhang Lu, capitulated to the general Cao Cao in the year 215, married his daughter to one of Cao's sons, and accepted fiefs for his own sons, the Daoist church disappeared into the state. Its subsequent role on the imperial level, right

through the Ming dynasty, was to provide divine legitimation by conferring Daoist ordinations on emperors. In return, they gained recognition for their own gods as the high gods of the empire: Taishang Laojun in the Tang; Huangdi 黃帝 (Yellow Emperor) in the Song; Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝 (Emperor on High of Dark Heaven) in the Ming. How thoroughly "Chinese" Daoism is may be seen from the fact that the two great non-Chinese dynasties of subsequent imperial history—the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing—were not Daoist but Tantric, even though they also paid considerable attention to Daoism, the Yuan in particular.

3) Rituals for the salvation of the dead. To this day, death is the greatest generator of taboos and rituals in Chinese society. Very early on, tombs were called "blessed plots" (*fudi* 福地), and it is now a well-established history that these tombs became, during the Han dynasty, microcosmic homes for the dead in which they would have everything they needed, and would not therefore continue to bother the living (Lai 2016). But, if we judge from early Daoist rituals, the dead continued, from the other world, to make "judicial complaints" against the living, necessitating costly and frequent rituals to keep the dead and the living separate. "Replacement figures" were put in tombs both to carry out the corvée labor duties of the dead and to substitute for them as foci of punishment. Such were, among others, the Daoist responses to the problem of the dead, at least until Buddhism stimulated Daoism to imitate its rituals of universal salvation. The so-called Lingbao Daoist rituals of the fifth century took Daoism by storm and turned it into what I call "Mahayana Daoism". This very quickly became the core Daoist ritual tradition—one more illustration of the importance of Buddhist treatment of the dead in Chinese culture.

From at least the Han on, Taishan, the sacred Peak of the East, was the place to which the dead were thought to go to be judged: "The living belong to Chang'an, the dead to Taishan." But what became of them thereafter, unless they had managed to become Daoist immortals or Confucian ancestors, was not clear. Buddhism changed all that with its introduction of paradises (*tiantang* 天堂) and purgatories (*diyu* 地獄). Buddhist "rituals of merit" (*gongde* 功德), done repetitively on the seven seventh days after death, could ensure transfer of merit to the deceased so that they could be reborn more rapidly and felicitously: after karma, reincarnation had the single most far-reaching impact on Chinese mentalities and representations of the dead (Bokenkamp 2007). Gradually, "pure lands" (*jingtu* 净土) will become the happy place to which even the illiterate could go, thanks to a simple, single vow to be "reborn" there; and the Ten Kings of purgatory and their courts will be the way post-mortem judgment, punishment, and reincarnation will be imagined. All of this took centuries, but the end result was that ideas of universal justice and salvation became

integral to Chinese culture. As I often say to my students, especially those from China, if ever China becomes democratic, it will be in large part thanks to Buddhism.

Conclusions

I will conclude by looking at ways in which Buddhism's role in China cannot but remind one of Christianity's in the West:

> It may be useful to summarize the multiple forms and elements of this [the Buddhist] conquest: karma and retribution, heaven and hell, gods, scriptures, statues, relics, monasticism, confession, vegetarianism, merit transfer, processions, religious entertainment, preaching, singing, meditation, devotional societies, festival days, miracle tales, regular public worship, and a parallel economy. In some cases—retribution, heaven and hell, scriptures, confession, vegetarianism, even merit transfer—Buddhism had good native foundations to build on. But even in those cases, so rich and far-reaching is the Buddhist impact that we do best to think of Buddhism as something that happened to China: it steamrollered China, and when China stood up again, it was a radically different place…We know very little of how local and popular religion functioned before Buddhism, but we do know that karma, retribution, statues, devotional societies, festival days that commemorate the "birthday" of a god, processions, miracle tales, and regular public worship are part and parcel of that religion today. Given this multi-faceted debt, it scarcely seems an exaggeration to describe Chinese popular religion as a side-product of the Buddhist conquest (Lagerwey 2009, 46–47).

From this impressive list of Buddhist contributions to Chinese culture I will select two: spirit/matter dualism and popular religion. Since the time of the Warring States, China has always preferred a dualistic cosmological monism (Yin-Yang: Dao) that goes together with a sociological dualism (elite and popular, divided by access to writing and ancestors). Buddhism, like Christianity, has tended to a radical ontological dualism that, in the end, undergirds an apocalyptic vision of universal salvation. In Christianity, this dualism came not from the original Hebrew culture but from the latter's alliance with Greek philosophy in the creation of Christian theology. As already mentioned, Buddhism brought with it the Indian political and social universe in which the priestly was superior to the warrior caste. Translated into Augustinian terms, this gave a contrast between the City of God and the City of Man, between religious and political institutions. (The fact this did not translate into long-term political reality in China has already been stated above.)

But that was not the only form of social dualism introduced by the two universal religions: both also developed monastic institutions where first men and later women as well lived lives of sometimes shocking material austerity in order to focus on spiritual transcendence. Both religions thus produced a spiritual elite that was—and is—in marked contrast to political elites, and the latter turned regularly to the former for help in legitimizing their rule and in dealing with social problems like poverty. That is, both religions used their respective notions of charity to create systems of welfare that the states they were involved with could not do without. Put in other terms, both

promoted a gift economy that ran parallel to—and not infrequently came into conflict with—the statist market economies characteristic of pre-modern empires.

As to the birth of "popular religion", I am referring here to the emergence, within the ambit of cultures characterized by universal salvation religions, of transformed styles of paganism. Robin Fox's description of this religion of the "people of the land" in the Roman Empire (Fox 1987) could quite easily be transferred to pre-Buddhist China, both as regards its role in maintaining local identities and state-local relationships. By comparison, both Buddhism and Christianity were "atheistic", though not for long, as both developed strategies that accepted the push-back of the paganisms they encountered in the societies they were conquering. Without elaborating on the push-back, let me conclude with a few words about strategy: First, as Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) eventually formulated the matter, sacred pagan sites were to be taken over and converted; second, it was accepted that "the people" needed various forms of compromise with the austerities of the elite, that is, that their first concern was not spiritual transcendence but material health and well-being, whence the need for thaumaturgists, miracles, icons or statues, elaborate rituals, preaching that adapts to the audience, and, yes, concrete, even highly colorful imagery of the contrasting destinations of heaven, hell, and purgatory. As a result, both medieval Catholicism and medieval Buddhism can legitimately be described either as atheistic or monotheistic polytheisms, with Buddhist and Christian "saints" and their festivals taking over the role of local gods in paganism. In the West, the Protestant Reformation sought to undo all that, as the Chinese state has sought to do over the last century or so, in both cases with limited success, as secularized versions of these two great universal religions would seem incapable of avoiding the ideological trap of the "prosperity gospel" and the political dead-end of unsustainable Gini factor gaps.

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