Chinese Buddhist Studies: 
Its Character and Established Limits

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Abstract

The study of an entity that we identify as “Chinese Buddhism” started at an early date with the writing of documents that cataloged what came to be the canonic translations and compilations. This focus on the textual tradition and the biographies of those involved in the creation of the Chinese language literature continued to influence study. Over the centuries since those first efforts to establish the identity of the tradition in China, we have seen a variety of approaches to the subject. In every period of time, there have been generally accepted methodologies. These procedures outlined the formalities of study that resulted from custom, tradition, and preferences of scholars. One result of these developments has been the establishment of limits beyond which there was a penalty of rejection both personal and institutional. Subject matter was ranked so that some aspects were subordinated to a less conspicuous place or status in the scheme of studying Buddhism that could be called “Chinese”. In the contemporary world, new technology has challenged the field and newer methods are raising questions about whether the computer is supplanting the older scholarly tasks or amplifying them. The tasks of researchers must include an appraisal of how they define the character of the subject matter as well as recognizing the limits imposed by custom on the ways of active investigation. Questions remain as to whether the study of Chinese Buddhism has been inclusive of everything that is wanted or required for the full picture of the tradition.

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Introduction

When the astronauts lifted out of the earth's atmosphere heading for the moon, one would have expected that they would be anxiously looking toward their destination. It was a surprise to them and to the world that instead they found their interest centered on the view back to the home planet. Later they would call this “overview”. From those available pictures of the “overview”, changes occurred in the way in which we look at the earth. The idea, of how fragile the environment of the earth is, was enforced by this “overview”. What the astronauts found so fascinating was the image of a beautiful blue planet covered with water, clouds, and on the dark side with the lights of habitation. Floating in the vast darkness of the universe, the earth seemed precious but vulnerable. It required this “overview” for humanity to finally recognize the nature of its home.¹

Contemporary study of Chinese Buddhism like space travel is taking place in a totally new environment as a result of technological advances.² We now live and work in a digital environment which has lifted us above the older patterns of reading word by word page by page. Instead, with the digital canon we are like the astronauts of the last century. Our gaze is still on the textual material but now we can search the whole of the canon in seconds. Our view is an “overview”. This lens through which we gaze at texts has shown us new aspects of them. In one sense, we see how fragile the process of copying and transmitting over the centuries has been. The slip of the brush, the wrong interpretation of a sound and changes occurred in the body of the texts, changes that begin to be recognized under the analytic logic of algorithms. What we once took for the “norm” in terms of

¹ For a description of the impact of this see the booklet The Overview Effect will Change the World available on-line through the Overview Institute formed in 2002 at the Annual Conference of the National Space Society.
² The canonic literature in Chinese is available from CBETA, SAT, Tripitaka Koreana.
readings is now subject to question. The acceptance of the digital technology has not been without resistance, especially when it involves analysis based on the logic of algorithms.

In a small way compared with social networks, Chinese Buddhist studies have amassed enough digital material to be seen, in light of the newest buzz word, as “Big Data.” But as analysts are beginning to note, algorithms of search and retrieval from “Big Data” run the risk of producing “Big Error.” If we assume that a result of search and retrieval has been discovery of the “norm,” the error can indeed be “Big.” When Google Flu Trends appeared this year, they were wrong by a wide margin. As the New York Times expressed it:

Google algorithm was looking only at the numbers, not at the context of the search results.

Those of us who work in the Humanities can understand this problem and we find the expression “Long Data” to be more descriptive of our task. It is not enough to see the examples brought by single searches that represent a snapshot of the data in its present digital format. Rather, we believe that we must look back across the entire corpus of the canon and see that the “norm” for word use and occurrence has been complex and ever shifting. Our “Long Data” approach looks to create the context of each result, so that we can understand reasons for

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3 See www.ibm.com/software/data/bigdata/ which gives the information that everyday 2.5 quintillion bytes of data are created. This means that 90% of our digital data has appeared in the last two years.


the examples which are constructed by the search engines. This is the “overview” that we are privileged to have in our time. It is obvious that having the ability to encompass an “overview” of the canonic texts and words is shifting our method of study as much as the “overview” of the earth changed human conception of our planet.

I mentioned that our textual work was being changed by the digital technology and new methods of study. It is the case that the consortium of institutions of higher learning under the sponsorship of Fo Guang Shan is playing an ever expanding role in the new approaches to research. One example of that is the work of Ven. Huifeng, member of your staff here at Fo Guang Shan University. In his dissertation at the University of Hong Kong, he has shown us that the Chinese Buddhist texts have internal structures that have not been previously identified. For example, his analysis of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* brings to light the information that the chapters of the text form a ring composition. This is known as chiastic structure where the rhetoric first lists a series of statements with a shift at the central point. The shift is represented by the appearance of the series of statements in reverse order. As someone who has studied this particular text for many decades including long conversations about it with the major scholars in Europe and Japan, I am humbled by the work of Ven Huifeng. He discovered a pattern that had eluded all of us in the previous generation. The importance of this pattern is the fact that it identifies the major topic which appears at the point where the series of statements are reversed and restated. From his work, we see that it is Chapter 16 of this text that represents the major focus and the topic is *tathatā* not *Śūnyatā* as we have thought before. This type of new research at one level in the

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6 His dissertation is titled: “Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā: Literary Parallelism Connecting Criticism & Hermeneutics in an Early Mahāyāna Sūtra.”
words of post-modernists is “subversive” of the older methodology that rejected structuralism on all levels. I commend a scholar such as Ven. Huifeng who points out that the structure of the chapters is clearly part of the received text. He did not invent it or put down a template over the data. Instead he listened to the data and reports accurately on the findings. This is heartening because it shows that a new generation of scholars is beginning to set new goals and new approaches to the study of Chinese Buddhism.

Historically, the study of Chinese Buddhism could only begin when there was an identifiable “something” to study. That first “something” turned out to be the translations and compilations of texts. The primary documents for research on the earliest form of Buddhism within the sphere that we call “China” were catalogs of known texts along with biographical data on translators and authors as well as various methods for dating the event of the creation of each document. In other words, the earliest “something” of Chinese Buddhism to be studied was the teachings as they appeared in written documents. This “something” could only become a part of language and discourse when it was a named entity. Thus, when we hear of “yi qie jing” (一切經) as a name for the collection of all the volumes of the translations, the “something” of Chinese Buddhism has taken on form and events associated with it create the early accounts of the tradition in the Han environment. This might be called one of the first “overviews” of Chinese Buddhism, when the whole of the existing translations were seen as an entity.

History of ancient times is always a challenge and a work in progress. The Historical Approach has been a methodology that looks for the earliest documented witness of events. From these written sources, we attempt to look back in time and logically conceive and describe what we think must have occurred before the document at hand existed. Our backward look is often
enhanced by archaeology and material artifacts. This is one of the goals of using “Long Data.” If our oldest witness for Buddhism among the Han people and their immediate environs turns out to be translations and catalogs of those translations, can we start from that point and reconstruct a realistic history of Chinese Buddhism? What kind of history will be described from such documents? These two types of early documents, that is the translations being made and the later catalogues of those translations, are at best limited witnesses. First, the texts being translated from Indic sources were descriptions of a tradition of thought in a distant land and from a distant past. These documents do not tell us about ideas being generated among Han readers. It is ironic that these translations open the door to a study of how Buddhism developed over time in South Asia and Inner Asia in a manner that is not possible with the materials still existing in the original languages of those regions. We are excited when we find an ancient fragment of a Sanskrit Buddhist text, but in reality, the Chinese translations from the second century onward are a treasure trove for the study of Indian Buddhism that far exceeds anything available to us in the archaeological finds. At one level then, our witnesses give us information about the history of thought and practice of a place far distant from China. They tell us very little about the situation in China before or during the translation process. Therefore, the story of the translations is not a balanced view of the context of Buddhism. The “overview” of the tradition in its extended reality is lacking from customary use of these types of documents.

Where then are we to find our witnesses to make a study of the earliest form of Buddhism in the Han dynasty? One immediate source would seem to be the dynastic histories and the indigenous documents being produced within the Chinese language sphere. It is unfortunately the case that these dynastic history citations for the early period of Chinese Buddhism are restricted to a
narrow interest from governing bodies about activities within the realm. When we collect all of the data from the Han dynasty, we have only a few scattered references to a foreign religion being supported by resident merchants from Inner Asia in the capital and along the routes of commerce. Unanswered are a host of questions and interests that hold the key to a wider and more comprehensive view of the religion. What were the rituals being practiced? How did the Han involve themselves in the activities? What constituted membership in the local Sangha? How was monastic life maintained and supported? All of these questions and many more involve activities of the earliest Buddhists in China that cannot be adequately described or implied either by use of translations and catalogs or information from the other records of the Han dynasty.

A recent dissertation, at the University of the West by Ven Jue Wei, now on the faculty at Nan Tien Institute in Australia (both institutions part of the Fo Guang Shan program), has provided welcome insight into the early histories. She took the unlikely candidate of the celebration of Buddha’s birthday in the Northern Wei dynasty as a topic to explore the nature of Buddhist activities. Her description of the parade held in the capital opens a window on the size and strength of the religion among the people of that dynasty. The work shows us that a thousand floats were pulled through the city, each with a Buddha image. The event was witnessed by thousands of citizens as well as the royal court. This research reminds us that “Chinese” Buddhism is hard to identify during the period of the Northern and Southern dynasties. Kingdoms ruled by nomadic and Turkic peoples of the steppes had a dedication to Buddhism that was not equaled among the Han people in terms of investment in architecture, art, and monastic...
institutions. It is something of a misnomer to call all of these activities among
the Buddhists of the Northern kingdoms “Chinese”. And yet, much of what we
see in “Chinese” Buddhism was being developed among these non-Han peoples.
It is research such as that of Ven Jue Wei that allows us to accomplish our goal
of understanding the tradition in a much wider context than just looking at the
translation process or the official archival documentation of the courts.

Another source of information about practice, are the many inscriptions
that were inscribed to commemorate special activities and events. These
statements, usually preserved on stones, provide us with an alternative to the
textual sources and thus give a glimpse into the life of the Buddhist communities
that involves a wider range of society. One of the sites for this type of study is at
Fang Shan just to the West of Beijing where we find caves that have been filled
with large stone slabs containing the text of hundreds of Buddhist documents.
Beyond the content on the face of these stones, there is another aspect of them
that gives us information about those who spent so much effort in carving and
storing the “rock-cut canon.” On the edge of many stones, we find the donor
inscriptions. They tell us about groups of lay people who provided the funds
for the preparation of the stones. In addition, the inscriptions give the number
of people involved, sometimes the names, and of great interest, the reason for
the activity. In one sense, we can see that the caves and the carving project
were in response to the Three Stages belief. That is, the idea that the history
of the teaching of Sakyamuni falls into three types based on the period of time
since his Nirvana. It was a stark and confronting theory that the Teaching will
become less known and understood over time. By the time of the Fang Shan
stone inscriptions, the end of effective Teaching as a part of the community,

8 See L. Lancaster, “The Rock Cut Canon in China: Findings at Fangshan,” in The Bud-
was thought to be at hand. We find a stone which once marked the entrance of
one of the caves. It informs readers that the cave only contains texts incised on
stone. The stones are to be left untouched until the Teaching finally disappears
in the last of the Three Stages. At that moment, like a time-capsule, the caves are
to be opened and the Teaching made available once again. In other words, the
future of Buddhism was not seen in the lineages of teachers. The only hope of
preservation was the textual data recorded on long-lasting rock slabs. In addition,
when we analyze the donor remarks on the stones, we find that the main reason
for making the carvings was to assure rebirth of family, officials, and oneself in the
Dharma Realm. Given the later popularity of the Buddha Pure Lands, it comes
as a surprise that in the hundreds of donor inscriptions, only one mentions these
Pure Lands. The focus on rebirth in the Dharma Realm suggests that in that area,
the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (大方廣佛華嚴經) with its teaching of the Dharma
Realm was a dominant influence. In part, this witness for history indicates that
Buddhist practice was regional and it is misleading to assume that there was a
unitary form of the religion throughout the kingdoms or over time.

Another very different approach to the tradition appeared in the Chan texts
of the Tang dynasty. There we do find description of the formation of a lineage
of teaching that was passed from master to master. Based on the enlightenment
available through meditation, this form of Buddhism was immune to the decline
of the Teaching described in the Three Stages. A variety of discourses were
being heard. By the Tang dynasty, we have a growing collection of texts that can
be used to study the internal structure of practice as well as the thought which
accompanied it. For example, alongside the Chan group, there were those who
found hope in the Pure Buddha Lands. While enlightenment might be difficult,
if not beyond the abilities of most people, there was another route to follow. One
could through reliance on the power of *Amitābha* and other Buddhas achieve
a rebirth that would ultimately lead to enlightenment. Concurrent streams of discourse, debates, new ideas, assimilating multiple textual approaches all characterized Chinese Buddhism. The “overview” involves all of the actions, teachings, and agents without purposeful omissions, just as the “overview” of the earth from space is of the whole.

How are we to study these various formations of belief? For most of us who were trained in the 20th century, Japanese scholarship was the prevalent form. Unlike Korea and China where Buddhism was often attacked and marginalized, Japanese Buddhism remained a dominant part of society. As a result, Japanese sectarian and secular universities under the leadership of scholars who were often ordained priests were by far the most advanced centers for the study of both texts and practices. However, they gave the study a particular slant that in the long run held back Chinese Buddhist studies. For the Japanese, China was seen as a part of the system that extended from India to Japan. While India was the “root” of this system, China was a major node in the network and it was from this area that Japan saw the transfer of the tradition to their kingdom. In other words, Chinese Buddhism was seen as a history of how the various sects of Japan had emerged. This gave an over emphasis to the schools of Buddhism in the Chinese region. The justly famous volume by Kenneth Ch’en on the history of Chinese Buddhism followed the Japanese concept and described the development of the tradition in sectarian terms. For example, Professor Ch’en gave two pages to the Kosa School.\textsuperscript{9} If we take an “overview” of Chinese Buddhist history, the study of the Kosa texts was but a miniscule movement and can hardly be given a place as a major influence in the vastness of practice and thought in East Asia. It is time for us to move beyond the Japanese sectarian approach within China. It is important to look at the various sects within the Japanese environment where a form of

hereditary priesthood existed within a system of family ownership and networks. However, there is nothing comparable in China or Korea and using the template of Japanese sects distorts our study.

Chinese Buddhist studies came under scrutiny in the later part of the 20th century as a new focus on Daoism emerged, first among European scholars and subsequently having a major impact in North America. Looking at Buddhism through the Daoist lens provided a new definition of it. From the early centuries of the assimilation of Buddhism into the life and culture of East Asia, so called “Daoism” was a companion tradition. Terms such as “Daoism” are awkward and nearly meaningless since the coinage of the word is an attempt to amalgamate multiple practices under one umbrella. As with all traditions that are given the English suffix “ism” (and this includes “Buddhism”), the variety of practices subsumed under one word may lead to a misleading categorization of local systems of belief. It was the appearance of Buddhism in East Asia that helped give structure to the indigenous traditions; Daoism and Shintoism were both defined through comparison with the new foreign religion and both were named in order to establish their reality as an alternative to Buddhism. It is ironic that centuries later, scholars would turn to Daoism as a way of defining Buddhism and its place within the ethos of the Han people. At one level this emphasis of research on Daoism and popular religion was salutary and we learned a great deal about the context of religion in the Chinese dynasties. Nonetheless, there were aspects of this that can be questioned. The idea that the Buddhist canon was “elitist” was matched against the characterization of the Daoist and folk literary traditions seen to be “popular”. This was a very neat distinction and served as a template for a post-modern appraisal that gave Daoism significance beyond that.

For a detailed reference bibliography to Daoist publications see: http://www.daoist-center.org/bibliography.pdf.
of the elite monastics of Buddhism. In our better moments, we are fully aware that neat distinctions serve well our theories but often fail the test when we use data to see wider contexts. Buddhism was never simply an “elite” tradition and its textual corpus was made up, in part by local compilations done by the “folk” in a specific time and place. Conversely, Daoist identified practices were never simply “popular”, many were reserved for a select group. The interaction between the traditions is decidedly messy and we have only begun the process of sorting out the elements and the connections.

There is one problem that we face in using the Daoist angle for study of Chinese Buddhism. The canonic texts of Daoism have never been fully edited and they have not been digitized for general use. We are unable to have the “overview” of them comparable to what is available for the Buddhist canon. Until the two traditions are available for detailed algorithm generated analysis, our study will be severely limited.

Along with the Daoist focus, there was also increased interest in so called apocryphal Buddhist texts, mainly identified as purporting to be translations from Indic material but in fact showing clear signs of authorship in China. When Paul Pelliot visited Cave 17 at Dunhuang in the early part of the 20th century, he was searching for the rare Buddhist material. He looked only for texts that were unfamiliar and among them were those that were exemplars of works originating in China but no longer extant in received formats. A treasure search was started. Scholars turned their attention to rare volumes containing signs of the indigenous writings of Chinese Buddhists, mixed with local religious patterns and distant from the texts that had Indic origins and little to do with Chinese life. This was a major shift in the target texts. It brought new material to our attention and it was in the spirit of deconstruction that was prevalent a few decades ago. However,
even with the apocryphal and Daoist texts there was a question of the reading audience for them. Were they less “elitist” than the Indian literature that made up the bulk of the translations of the canon and do we know how large their audience?

There was yet another group of texts that made up the literary corpus of Chinese Buddhism, these were the compilations and commentaries that began to appear, many of them with authorship attribution. From the Tang dynasty onward to the present, hundreds of commentaries and compilations have appeared. The size of this group of texts tells us that they were wide spread and had a sizable number of readers and copyists who disseminated such literature. The material has yet to be studied in great detail but we are now able to see many of such texts in digital and searchable form in CBETA. If we trace the word occurrence charts in such material, it becomes one way of documenting the ideas popular among Chinese Buddhists. Some of the words and phrases that became very common in the commentaries had their origin in the compilations that are termed “apocryphal”. It should come as no surprise that the compilations made in East Asia reflected the interpretations being made about Buddhism and its ideas. For example, a new word came into use with the Qixin lun, (大乘起信論) usually translated “Original Enlightenment” 本覺. This was another answer to the Three Stages teaching since it inferred that Enlightenment was existing in every psyche. Over time the expression grew in popularity and it has come to be a dominant teaching of Buddhism throughout East Asia. Because we can see the wide spread use of the term, we know that it had a large audience of readers. At nearly the same time, the interpretation of Buddha-nature took on a new look.

Whereas previous to the compilation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (大般涅槃經) the Buddhists had taught that there are three types of people: some have the nature of a Śrāvaka, others the nature of a Pratyekabuddha and some the nature of a Buddha. This was replaced with an East Asian interpretation that everyone has the nature of a Buddha. This new concept took hold and became a central teaching of Buddhism. These are examples for how we can use our ‘overview’ of Buddhist texts to move beyond speculation to a data driven study of how word occurrence over time reflected the changing landscape of the tradition. In this fashion, the computer has given new life to canonic studies and is allowing us to see both the Indic as well as the Chinese textual contributions in a more realistic fashion.

I return to the question of whether all of these textual studies are sufficient witnesses for a full description of Chinese Buddhism. Even if we limit ourselves to the state of Buddhism in China today, there are serious questions about how much we know and how much we can promise. It is certainly not enough to visit a few important sites in China and return home to extrapolate from that information a normative statement about the religion as it exists today. The complexity of the data is such that we need to have an overview of it all in order to give a reasonable description of the contemporary situation. While I have tried to chart some of the major sites of Buddhist activity in China using the official listing of more than 18,000 recognized centers, it is obvious that our metadata is not yet sufficient to make any coherent conclusions about the trends, activities, and social involvements of these centers. This situation will only be resolved when government data becomes available. No other institution has access to

12 I have a forthcoming article that will detail the explanation for this issue.
13 This work is online at www.ecai.org as the Atlas of Chinese Religions, a research project at the School of Information, University of California, Berkeley.
enough information to meet the needs of scholars. It is surprising to realize that with all of the difficulties of comprehending the “overview” of Chinese Buddhism in the bygone centuries, our contemporary limitations are equally great.

Even with all the problems and barriers, it is an exciting time to be involved in the study of Chinese Buddhism. The piecing together of scattered references, the discovery of an inscription, the complete search for word and phrase in archives, team work between scholars working on the same problem, communication through the internet and the ability to link disparate data are all bringing a new vision to our research. The establishment of this center at Fo Guang University is a welcome addition to this effort and I know it will contribute to a significant advance of knowledge in the future. I am especially pleased to see this development within a Buddhist founded institution. The Buddhist community needs to be involved in the study of their own tradition and centers such as the one we celebrate here make that a reality.
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