

Literary Evidence on Han Buddhism: A Brief Reassessment

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It is an unwritten law of historical scholarship that major narratives and accepted notions should be periodically reassessed, often deflated and, when necessary, eventually jettisoned. A search for new evidence then starts, until a revised narrative replaces the old one. In the process, however, several bits of the traditional picture are left in place unwittingly. Historical criticism will mostly aim at the main target: once the king has been killed, there is little need or wish to go for the pawns.

The study of the beginnings of Buddhism in China, that fateful cultural encounter, has been no exception. We no longer believe that it all began with the dream and embassy of Emperor Ming 明帝 of the Han dynasty – not since Henri Maspéro, back in 1910, showed us that this story bears all the traits of a pious legend.¹ We are also prepared to understand Han Buddhism as a composite phenomenon, duly distinguishing between the hybrid cults of the court, the canonical tradition of the great 2nd century translators, and the apparently haphazard borrowing of Buddhist elements in early funerary iconography.²

Yet many of us are still prone to imagine some kind of Buddhist “mission” behind all this. It may not have been the solemn inception that we read about in the lives of eminent monks, but some penetration of foreign clerics must have taken place off-camera to account especially for the spreading of Buddhist ideas and images. These will have interacted with Chinese beliefs and imagery in a number of ways, whose reconstruction is now largely the task of the archaeologist and the art historian.

In the background, literary evidence seems to have had its day. Current scholarship on Han Buddhism usually pays lip service to what little factual information we can grasp from it – that there was some Buddhism going on in Pengcheng 彭城 around 65 CE, and a monastic community in Luoyang 洛陽 one century later – then swiftly moves on to explore new things.

But what do we know, really? Are we sure that our understanding of the old written sources is conclusive, which means both philologically accurate and analytically thorough? Did we draw all the connections, collate all the variants, did we explore all the alternatives?

¹ See Henri Maspéro, “Le songe et l’ambassade de l’empereur Ming,” *BEFEO* X, 1910, pp. 95-130.

² See Erik Zürcher, “Han Buddhism and the Western Region”, in *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China*, ed. W. L. Idema and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: Brill, 1990), p. 159.

It will be my attempt in this brief talk to show that this is hardly the case, and that a textual archaeology can profitably complement the work of spade, brush and PowerPoint. Traditional narratives may still have something to say, and paradoxically challenge some unwarranted assumptions that linger in our picture of early Chinese Buddhism. Down with the pawns, then, and long live the king!

My testing ground will be the mother of all stories, the very tale of the introduction of Buddhism in China. A number of early medieval sources tell us that Emperor Ming 明 of the Later Han 漢 (r. 57-75 CE), having once dreamed of a golden giant surrounded by a luminous halo, inquired about the object of his weird vision and was answered that it was a god of the West called “Buddha”. A mission was then dispatched to the Western Regions in search of scriptures and images of that god. On their return, the Han envoys brought home two Indian monks, one or more likenesses of the Buddha, and a bundle of sacred texts. Exploring all the details and variants of this tradition would go beyond the scope of this paper, but we can notice immediately that the story accommodates almost ideally native concerns and monastic orthodoxy. From the very beginning, so we learn, Chinese Buddhism was not the outcome of the random appropriation of foreign elements, but the business of Western monks and Han emperors, fully endowed with texts and icons brought from the outer world.

It is intriguing, though, that the oldest secular source to relate the anecdote presents us, at least in its received text, with a somewhat abridged narrative, where no mention is made of the mission to the Western Regions. Let us turn our attention, then, to the ‘Chronicle of the Later Han’ (*Hou Han ji* 後漢紀), which the historian Yuan Hong 袁宏 (330-378) compiled at some time during the third quarter of the 4th century, several decades before the well-known *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (compiled between 433-445).³ The *Hou Han ji* follows the narrative pattern which is proper to the ‘chronicle’ (*ji* 紀) genre and is best exemplified by the famous ‘Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government’ (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑, completed 1084), Sima Guang’s 司馬光 (1019-1086) masterpiece: the account of events mainly unfolds along a chronological sequence, but the timeline breaks here and there to make room for explanatory flashbacks, where the background of the facts is related and sometimes commented upon. These retrospective entries are usually introduced by the adverb *chu* 初, ‘initially’, which could also be rendered as ‘prior to this’. The passage where the story of Mingdi’s dream is

³ See Yuan Hong’s biography in *Jin shu*, 92.2391-99; on his dates see Chen Sanping, “Yuan Hong: A Case of Premature Death By Historian?”, *JAOS* 123.4 (2003) pp. 841-6. In the preface to the *Hou Han ji*, the author is mentioned as “Yuan Hong, Governor (*taishou* 太守) of the Dongyang 東陽 [commandery] of the Jin 晉”, see *Hou Han ji* (*Liang Han ji* 兩漢紀 ed., vol. 2; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), p. 1. According to his biography, Yuan Hong left his office at Jiankang and moved to Dongyang (in western Zhejiang) when Xie An 謝安 (320-385), his patron of the moment, was appointed as interim prefect of Yangzhou 揚州, see *Jin shu*, 92.2398. The latter episode is known to have taken place on June 24, 375, see *Jin shu*, 9.227. If the indication in the preface is original, we may infer that the *Hou Han ji* was completed between the summer 375 and 378, when Yuan Hong died.

reported occurs within this narrative structure. The mainstream episode is in this case a conspiracy against the throne plotted by Liu Ying 劉英, the Prince of Chu 楚, which is recorded under the date Yongping 13. 12 (January 20 – February 18, 71 CE). Immediately after, introduced by the conventional *chu* 初, there is a digression on the personage and the thread of events leading to the main incident. After some concise biographical information on Liu Ying, including mention of the fact that “in his late days he delighted in Huanglao (i.e. Taoism) and practised a worship to the Buddha” 晚節喜黃老、修浮屠祠, Yuan Hong reports the story which Erik Zürcher has defined as the first “hard evidence” of Buddhism in China. In 65 CE, seizing the opportunity of an act of grace, the prince of Chu, who had his court in Pengcheng 彭城 (Jiangsu), offered several bolts of fine silk to the throne in order to atone for some unspecified guilt. But Mingdi returned the gift and reassured his turbulent half-brother with an edict in which Liu Ying was praised for “revering the humane shrines of the Buddha”, and encouraged to entertain “the *upāsakas*” (*yipusai* 伊蒲塞) and the *śramaṇas* (*sangmen* 桑門) at his court.⁴ Here the digression interrupts and the historical narrative returns to the main timeline, describing the circumstances and consequences of Liu Ying’s indictment in 71 CE. The chronicle of the main episode is thereby concluded.

It is at this point that Yuan Hong further inserts a long excursus on Buddhism, which is apparently meant to gloss upon the references to the “Buddha” (Futu 浮屠) in the retrospective portion of the previous account. It is here that the story of Mingdi’s dream is narrated. A major difficulty in the handling of this passage arises from the disagreement that the received text of the *Hou Han ji* shows with integral quotations from it in a number of sources of the Tang, Song and early Ming periods, and precisely:

- A) the commentary to the *Hou Han shu* (hereafter abridged as HHScomm), which was completed in 677 in the name of the Tang prince Li Xian 李賢 (651-684);⁵
- B) the ‘Imperial Reading of the Taiping Era’ (*Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, TPYL), a Song encyclopaedia compiled under the direction of Li Fang 李昉 (d. 996) and completed in 984;⁶
- C) the ‘Comprehensive Discussion of the Annals of Buddhism, compiled in the Longxing era’ (*Longxing Fojiao biannian tonglun* 隆興佛教編年通論, LXBNTL), a chronicle of Buddhism in China by the monk Zuxiu 祖琇 (fl. 1126-1164), completed in 1164;⁷

⁴ On Liu Ying and Buddhism in Pengcheng under the reign of Mingdi cf. Zürcher, *The Buddhist conquest*, pp. 26-27.

⁵ See *Hou Han shu*, 42.1429, commentary. The gloss quoting the *Hou Han ji* is appended to the biography of the Prince of Chu. Li Xian was the son of the Tang emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649-683) and the Heir Apparent from 675 to 680, see his biographies in *Jiu Tang shu*, 86.2831-34; *Xin Tang shu*, 81.3590-92. The commentary, in 100 *juan*, was presented to the throne on January 11, 677, see *Jiu Tang shu*, 5.102; *Xin Tang shu*, 58.1456.

⁶ See TPYL 653:1a7-b7.

- D) the ‘General Chronicle of the Buddha and the Patriarchs’ (*Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, FZTJ) by the monk Zhipan 志磐 (completed ca. 1269), a well-known work of Buddhist historiography;⁸
- E) finally, the ‘Supplement to the Records of Major Events’ (*Dashi ji xubian* 大事記續編, DSJXB), compiled by Wang Hui 王禕 (d. 1373).⁹

In the transcription preceding the translation below, the received text has been collated throughout with the variant readings of the quotations, which are indicated in the footnotes.

Here is the document:

浮屠¹⁰者¹¹，佛¹²也¹³。西¹⁴域天竺¹⁵有佛道焉。佛者，漢言覺¹⁶，將¹⁷悟群生也。¹⁸其教以修善慈心為主，不殺生¹⁹，專務清淨。其精²⁰者號²¹為沙門²²，漢言息²³心²⁴，蓋息意去欲²⁵而歸於²⁶無為也²⁷。又以為人死精神不滅，隨復受形，生時²⁸所行²⁹善惡皆有報應。故所³⁰貴行善修道，以練精神³¹而³²不已³³，以³⁴至無為³⁵而得³⁶為³⁷佛也³⁸。佛³⁹身

⁷ See XZJ vol. 130, 1 218b17-c16. Information on Zuxiu is included in *Yunwo jitan* 雲臥紀談, by Xiaoying 曉瑩 (fl. 1155-1190), completed ca. 1190, in XZJ vol 148, 1 2b1-c9; *Shishi jigu lue* 釋氏稽古略, by Juean 覺岸 (1286-1355), 1355, see T 49 no. 2037 iv 884a17-27. The quotation from the *Hou Han ji* in LXBNTL, including Zuxiu’s own comments, is reproduced integrally in the ‘Comprehensive Records through the Ages of the Buddha and the Patriarchs’ (*Fozu lidai tongzai* 佛祖歷代通載), completed by the monk Nianchang 念常 (1283-1342) about 1341, see T 49 no. 2036 v 514b11-29. On the date of completion of Zuxiu’s annals see T 49 no. 2036 i 691a24-25.

⁸ See T 49 no. 2035 xxxv 330b18-c3. The quotation in the *Fozu tongji* was probably based on that in LXBNTL, which Zhipan acknowledges as one of his sources in the first chapter of his monumental work, see T 49 no. 2035 i 132b12.

⁹ See *Dashi ji xubian*, 10:12b8-14a1 (SKQS ed.).

¹⁰ TPYL reads 圖 instead of 屠.

¹¹ The character 者 is omitted in HHScomm.

¹² TPYL adds 圖 after 佛.

¹³ The first five characters are omitted in FZTJ.

¹⁴ The quotation in DSJXB starts from here.

¹⁵ HHScomm and TPYL add 國 after 竺.

¹⁶ HHScomm, TPYL and FZTJ add 也 after 覺.

¹⁷ HHScomm and TPYL add 以覺 after 將. LXBNTL and FZTJ add 覺 after 將.

¹⁸ TPYL adds 統 before 其.

¹⁹ TPYL adds 類 after 生. The characters 不殺生 are omitted in FZTJ.

²⁰ TPYL adds 進 after 精.

²¹ The character 號 is omitted in HHScomm.

²² DSJXB adds 沙門者 after 沙門.

²³ TPYL adds 自 after 息.

²⁴ DSJXB omits 心; HHScomm reads 也 instead of 心.

²⁵ FZTJ reads 慾 instead of 欲.

²⁶ The character 於 is omitted in TPYL.

²⁷ The character 也 is omitted in HHScomm.

²⁸ The characters 生時 are omitted in TPYL.

²⁹ The characters 所行 are omitted in HHScomm.

³⁰ The character 所 is omitted in HHScomm and DSJXB.

³¹ TPYL adds 練 after 神.

³² The character 而 is omitted in LXBNTL.

³³ The three characters 而不已 are omitted in HHScomm and FZTJ.

³⁴ The character 以 is omitted in DSJXB.

³⁵ HHScomm and TPYL read 生 instead of 為.

³⁶ The characters 無為而得 are omitted in FZTJ.

³⁷ The character 為 is omitted in TPYL.

³⁸ The character 也 is omitted in DSJXB.

⁴⁰長一⁴¹丈六尺，⁴²黃金色，項⁴³中⁴⁴佩日月⁴⁵光。變化無方⁴⁶，無所不入，故能化通萬物⁴⁷而大濟羣生。初⁴⁸，帝⁴⁹夢⁵⁰見金人長大，項⁵¹有日月光，以問羣臣，或曰：「西方有神，其名曰佛，其形長大⁵²。」⁵³問其⁵⁴道術⁵⁵，遂⁵⁶於中國⁵⁷而⁵⁸圖其形⁵⁹像焉⁶⁰。有經⁶¹數千萬⁶²，以虛無為宗，苞⁶³羅精羈，無所不統。善為宏闊勝⁶⁴大之言。所求在⁶⁵一體之內，而⁶⁶所明在視聽之外⁶⁷。⁶⁸世俗之人⁶⁹以為虛誕，然歸於玄微，深遠難得而⁷⁰測。故王公大人，觀死生⁷¹報應之際，莫不矍然⁷²自失⁷³。⁷⁴

*Buw-dō 浮屠 is [the same as] *But 佛 (Buddha). In [the kingdom of] India (Tianzhu 天竺) in the Western Regions there is the Way of Buddha (*Fo dao* 佛道). “Buddha” in the language of Han means “awakened” (*jue* 覺). He leads all the beings to awakening. His teaching regards the practice of goodness and a merciful heart as fundamental. [Its followers] do not kill living beings, and apply themselves to purity and calm. The Best among them (*jingzhe* 精者) are called *śramaṇa* (*shamen* 沙門), [which] in the language of Han means “calming the mind” (*xixin* 息心). This is because appeasing [their] thoughts and expelling [their] desires they revert to non-action. Furthermore they

³⁹ The character 佛 is omitted in TPYL.

⁴⁰ The character 身 is omitted in HHScomm and DSJXB.

⁴¹ The character 一 is omitted in HHScomm.

⁴² FZTJ adds 身 before 黃.

⁴³ DSJXB reads 頂 instead of 項.

⁴⁴ The character 中 is omitted in TPYL and FZTJ.

⁴⁵ The character 月 is omitted in FZTJ.

⁴⁶ TPYL reads 常 instead of 方. The characters 無方 after 化 are omitted in FZTJ.

⁴⁷ The characters 故能化通萬物 before 而 are omitted in HHScomm.

⁴⁸ HHScomm and LXBNTL add 明 after 初. FZTJ reads 明 instead of 初.

⁴⁹ FZTJ adds 感 before 夢.

⁵⁰ The characters 見金人長大項有日月光以問群臣或曰西方有神其名曰佛其形長大 are omitted in FZTJ.

⁵¹ DSJXB reads 頂 instead of 項.

⁵² The characters 其形長大 are omitted after 佛 in HHScomm.

⁵³ Before 問, HHScomm adds 得無是乎於是遣使天竺; TPYL adds 而黃金色陛下所夢得無是乎於是遣使天竺而; LXBNTL adds 因遣使天竺; FZTJ adds 乃遣使天竺; DSJXB adds 而.

⁵⁴ The character 其 is omitted in TPYL and FZTJ.

⁵⁵ The character 術 is omitted in FZTJ.

⁵⁶ DSJXB adds 傳 after 遂.

⁵⁷ The characters 遂於中國 before 而 are omitted in HHScomm.

⁵⁸ The characters before 圖 are omitted in LXBNTL and FZTJ.

⁵⁹ The character 形 is omitted in FZTJ.

⁶⁰ The quotation in HHScomm interrupts after 焉. LXBNTL and FZTJ read 而還 instead of 焉.

⁶¹ TPYL adds 書 after 經.

⁶² TPYL and FZTJ read 卷 instead of 萬. LXBNTL adds 卷 after 萬.

⁶³ TPYL, LXBNTL and FZTJ read 包 instead of 苞.

⁶⁴ LXBNTL and FZTJ read 遠 instead of 勝.

⁶⁵ TPYL adds 於 after 在.

⁶⁶ LXBNTL, FZTJ and DSJXB omit 而 before 所.

⁶⁷ TPYL reads 表 instead of 外.

⁶⁸ TPYL adds 故 before 世.

⁶⁹ LXBNTL and FZTJ add 或 after 人.

⁷⁰ The characters 得而 are omitted in TPYL.

⁷¹ FZTJ reads 視生死 instead of 觀死生.

⁷² LXBNTL and FZTJ add 而 after 然.

⁷³ TPYL adds 也 after 失. LXBNTL and FZTJ add 焉 after 失.

⁷⁴ *Hou Han ji*, 10:5a4-b6 (SBCK ed.). Cf. *Liang Han ji* 兩漢紀 ed., vol. 2; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002, p. 187.

maintain that when a man dies his soul (*jingshen* 精神, lit. ‘essential spirits’) is not destroyed, [but] it receives again a living form in the course of time, and when he is born [again] all the good and evil deeds that he had committed meet their retribution. Therefore the practice of goodness and the religious cultivation (*xiu dao* 修道) which they value is to refine [their] souls unremittingly in order to attain non-action (*wuwei* 無為, *nirvāṇa*) and get to become a Buddha. The body of the Buddha is sixteen feet tall. It is the colour of gold, and the nape [of his neck] is girdled with the light of the sun and the moon. His transformations are limitless, there is no place where he cannot enter. Therefore he can thoroughly transform the myriad things and bring great salvation to all the living beings. Prior to this, the emperor had seen in a dream a golden gigantic being, having a light like the sun and the moon [shining] behind its neck.⁷⁵ When he questioned the Council officials⁷⁶ about this, someone said that in the West there was a god whose name was Buddha, and whose body was gigantic. [The emperor] inquired into the doctrine and practice of that [god]. Then he circulated⁷⁷ them in the Middle Kingdom, and had likenesses (*xingxiang* 形像) of him portrayed. [The Buddhists] have scriptures numbering in the thousands of volumes.⁷⁸ As they posit void nothingness (*xuwu* 虛無) as the principle, they encompass [everything no matter how] coarse or minute, and there is nothing which they do not master. They are clever at making discourses which are magniloquent and overwhelming. What they seek after lies within a single body, but what they understand is beyond the reach of sight and hearing. The profane regard them as false and extravagant, but when one turns to what is abstruse and subtle, nothing hardly compares [to them] as for depth and reach. Therefore all the princes and the noblemen and the grandees, when they beheld that there is [succession of] death and [re]birth and retribution, from first to last were dismayed and amazed.⁷⁹

Here is the story, and here is the problem: while the Tang and Song quotations from the *Hou Han ji* report that Mingdi’s dream resulted in a mission of imperial envoys to the Western Regions, the received text of the chronicle, supported by Wang Hui’s quotation, makes no word of this crucial episode. Which reading is the right one? Starting from Maspéro, and relying upon the sole commentary to the *Hou Han shu*, most scholars have been hitherto considering the latter recension as the correct one, and the received text as defective.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Literally “at the nape of its neck” (*xiang* 項).

⁷⁶ Judging from other occurrences in the dynastic histories, the expression *qunchen* 群臣 is better understood in this case as referring to the ministers and high-ranking courtiers in the emperor’s privy council rather than as a vague designation of ‘all the officials’.

⁷⁷ Reading *chuan* 傳 after *sui* 遂 with DSJXB.

⁷⁸ Reading 卷 for 萬 with TPYL and FZTJ.

⁷⁹ The last sentence echoes a passage in Sima Qian’s biographical account on the pre-Qin cosmologist Zou Yan 鄒衍 (fl. ca. 250 BC): “The princes and the noblemen and the grandees, when they first saw his skills, stared in amazement” 王公大人, 初見其術, 懼然顧化, see *Shiji*, 74.2344.

⁸⁰ “L’édiction moderne est assez médiocre, au moins pour ce passage; et il me semble nécessaire de la corriger à l’aide du *Heou Han chou* qui cite ce passage, mais incomplete,” see “Le songe et l’ambassade”, pp. 110-111.

As a matter of fact, a simple collation of all the variant quotations allows us to settle the issue. The citations and the bulk of the received text are remarkably consistent with one another but for a number of negligible discrepancies, mostly redundant characters which do not affect the meaning of the passage.⁸¹ The one point where the four excerpts are at variance with the standard text is precisely the end of the account of Mingdi's dream (not the whole of it), where it is said that imperial envoys were sent to India in search of the Dharma. That just this climactic handful of characters might have dropped from the block print would be strange at least. In fact, had the reference to the Indian mission really occurred in the original text of the *Hou Han ji*, one would expect to see it consistently quoted in the later sources, as it happens for the most part of the above discussion on Buddhism.

But this is not the case, for each text gives a different wording. The commentary to the *Hou Han shu* puts the words: "What Your Majesty dreamed of, might it be this?" 陛下所夢，得無是乎 on the lips of the anonymous interpreter of the dream, thereby adding vividness to the account. It is no more an impersonal report, but a dialogue to be put in inverted commas. Then Li Xian completes the narrative on the dream and its explanation with the following words:

於是遣使天竺，問其道術而圖其形像焉。

Thereupon [the emperor] dispatched envoys to India to inquire about his (i.e. the Buddha's) doctrine and practice, and portray his likenesses.⁸²

The *Taiping yulan* has the interpreter further specifying that the Buddha's body is the colour of gold, and describes the mission in these terms:

於是遣使天竺而問道術。遂於中國而圖其形像焉。

Thereupon [the emperor] dispatched envoys to India and inquired about [the Buddha's] doctrine and practice, and then likenesses of him (i.e. the Buddha) were portrayed in the Middle Kingdom.

It should be noticed that the syntax of Li Xian's gloss implies that the likenesses of the Buddha were made by the imperial envoys on the spot, in India, while the *Taiping yulan* (here agreeing with the received text of the *Hou Han ji*) apparently points to their being carried out in China.

The *Longxing biannian tonglun* reads close to the received text, without e.g. inserting the question of the interpreter, but the embassy is described much like in the commentary to the *Hou Han shu*:

因遣使天竺問其道術，圖其形像而還。

Therefore [the emperor] dispatched envoys to India to inquire about his (i.e. the Buddha's) doctrine and practice, and portray his likenesses, and returned.

⁸¹ Li Xian's commentary alone skips a couple of phrases, but this is normal in a quotation.

⁸² I translate 'likenesses', in the plural, reflecting the vagueness of the account, but it may well have been question of a single portrait.

Here the portraits of the Buddha and the inquiry into his tenets are made once again in India, the reference to the Middle Kingdom is omitted, and for the first time the return of the envoys is related.

Finally, the quotation in the *Fozu tongji* curiously abridges the first part of the account as it merely states that “Mingdi was touched by a dream” 明帝感夢 while dropping all other details; the last phrase (乃遣使天竺, 問道、圖其像而還) parallels the excerpt in Zuxiu’s book.

The only plausible explanation of this blatant disagreement is that the original *Hou Han ji* made no word of the Indian mission of Mingdi’s envoys. This conclusion is reinforced when we consider the problem in the light of the textual history of Yuan Hong’s work. The text currently available goes back to an edition published by the Ming scholar Huang Jishui 黃姬水 in 1548, which also included the ‘Chronicle of the [Former] Han’ (*Han ji* 漢紀) by Xun Yue 荀悅. Huang in his turn reproduced an edition printed under the Southern Song by Wang Zhi 王錕, a scholar-publisher from Ruyin 汝陰, whose preface has been preserved. In this document, dated June 27, 1142 (Shaoxing 12. 6. *jiazi*), Wang states that the two ‘Chronicles’ had been printed separately in Qiantang 錢唐 during the Dazhong xiangfu 大中祥符 era (1008-1017), but in his days the print blocks had been lost for nearly a century. Therefore he collected a number of transmitted texts (*chuanben* 傳本), collated them, and then published the book anew.⁸³ Wang Zhi may have been faced with some recension of the *Hou Han ji* including some mention of the embassy, but in that case his checking of all the available copies of the book must have led him into rejecting that phrase as interpolated.

On the other hand, Zuxiu, the author of LXBNTL, alleges in a note that the integral text of Yuan Hong’s discussion of Buddhism was seldom seen in his days (袁宏漢紀論佛, 世罕見全篇), and that therefore he had relied on Li Xian’s commentary – very freely, it would seem.⁸⁴ This is curious. Since he was interested in the “complete text” of Yuan Hong, the monk may not have overlooked Wang Zhi’s printed edition circulating in his days. It must be pointed out that Zuxiu and Wang Zhi almost certainly knew each other: in 1132 (Shaoxing 2), the latter had written a preface to an annotated record of the former’s teachings, compiled by two disciples of the eminent cleric.⁸⁵ Yet Zuxiu apparently felt dissatisfied with Wang Zhi’s and other recensions, for he resolved to draw on Li Xian, and quote the *Hou Han ji* second-hand. He does not specify in what regard he found the existing copies to be defective, but it seems a safe bet that his concern was aimed at the mention of Mingdi’s embassy to India, which opens his chronicle of Buddhism in China. This explains his ultimate reliance upon Li

⁸³ See Wang Zhi’s preface in *Liang Han ji* 兩漢紀 ed., vol. 2; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), pp. 597-8.

⁸⁴ *Longxing Fojiao biannian tonglun*, in XZJ vol. 130, 1 218c16-17; cf. T 49 no. 2036 v 514c3-6.

⁸⁵ See T 49 no. 2037 IV 884a23-25.

Xian's commentary to the *Hou Han shu*, whose quotation from the *Hou Han ji*, if far from being faultless, stands out precisely for its mentioning the fateful mission.⁸⁶ The obvious conclusion, once again, is that the latter reference is apocryphal.

Should we also infer that it was the Tang prince Li Xian and his scholarly staff to tamper with the chronicle of Yuan Hong? I do not think so, although the commentary to the *Hou Han shu* may admittedly have added to the fame of the interpolated *Hou Han ji* as an early Confucian source on the story of Mingdi. The questionable habit of "improving" the texts, while relegating the original readings in the endnotes, is still widespread among modern editors of Chinese sources. It is therefore small wonder if, once the legend had become established in its complete form, both lay and Buddhist scholars may have thought it expedient "to emend" the old recension with a record of the embassy; and since from their point of view there was a "gap" in the text, each one managed to fill it as he saw fit.

At a closer look, the whole document – just as it is laid out in the received text – turns out to be intrinsically coherent. In the first part, the reader is given a brief outline of the basics of Buddhism, and a description of the Buddha's appearance; next, in a retrospective formulation, the anecdote of the dream is added to account for the way in which the emperor got informed about precisely these two things, the doctrine and the look of the Buddha, presumably *prior to* his edict of 65 CE. But even if we accept any of the variant readings of the Tang and Song citations, Yuan Hong's account will still look very sober in comparison with the later versions of the story. The dream of the emperor merely results in a query on the foreign religion (which the courtiers are told to be acquainted with) and the making of one or more portraits of the Buddha; not a word is breathed of the coming of foreign monks to the Han capital, the introduction of sūtras, the establishing of monasteries. Put another way, this story does not pose remotely as a record of the inception of Buddhism in China. If we lay aside our wariness against dream tales and the long-standing belief that the tradition is Buddhist in origin, we are left with a prose resembling so many such reports on the nocturnal visions of emperors, which made their way into the dynastic histories. But I will not press further this point, which lies outside the focus of my remarks.

The important information that we can draw from this textual exercise is that, no matter what we make of the *Hou Han ji*'s narrative as a factual account, we now know that a 4th-century historian was prepared, among other things, to describe the making of Buddha-images under the Han as an entirely Chinese business, apparently based on just some knowledge of the "doctrine and practice" of the Buddha, without resorting to unlikely missions to and from

⁸⁶ It is of interest to observe that the *Hou Han ji* is also quoted in Hu Sanxing's 胡三省 (1230-1302) commentary to the *Zizhi tongjian*, which dates from 1285. This would-be citation, which comments upon the record of the beginning of Buddhism under Mingdi in Sima Guang's chronicle, is ostensibly dependent on Li Xian's gloss in that it reproduces all its variant wording and omissions, see *Zizhi tongjian*, 45.1447.

faraway lands. Coming from such an unexpected quarter, this picture of a homegrown Buddhist iconography may give, I think, some food for thought to our discussion.

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