

# How Does a Foreign Religion Thrive in an Indigenous Culture? A Comparative Study of the Spread of Foreign Religions in the Chinese-Speaking Cultural Sphere\*

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## **Abstract**

Religion can be considered, on one hand, to be a human practice dependent on its own culture. On the other hand, religion is also a system of beliefs with a dogmatic character. Because religion has the tendency to preserve its cultural form, it therefore encounters a paradoxical problem of adaptation when it spreads within a foreign cultural area: How can an extending religion retain both its own cultural core as well as be adaptable and modifiable, in order to be accepted by other foreign cultures? Through a comparison of the history of the spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam within the Chinese-speaking cultural sphere before the early 1900s, this essay intends to shed light on the hermeneutic process of the intercultural adaptation of foreign religions.

**Key terms** *religious conversion, hermeneutics, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, China*

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\* Partially translated by Remmon E. Barbaza, with the assistance of Joy Mariano.

## **A** **adaptation as an Intercultural Problem of Religious Mission and Reception**

Viewed from within the study of religion, religion is a human practice. Because all human practices must lie in a specific historical context, which is culturally determined, every religion is dependent on its own culture. That is why the same religious ritual is always presented in a somehow different form in different cultures. Furthermore, the understanding of a religion is also culturally determined because the articulation of a religion must always presuppose a specific human language, in which a culture takes shape. That is why a specific form of religious ritual can be appropriately articulated and understood only in its indigenous language. Thus, one cannot in any way separate a religion from the cultural form in which it is practiced.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, religion possesses a kind of cultural relativity.

On the other hand, religion is also a system of beliefs with a dogmatic character, because its adherents must recognize the religious doctrines of their faith to be true. Otherwise, such a religion would not even be able to attract people as powerfully as a secular ideology does. So religion can be regarded at the same time as a value system of sacred phenomena, which its believers should obey and for which they are expected to sacrifice themselves. Religion therefore has an unconditional authority within its own cultural domain, and its adherents seem to have no right to challenge its core values arbitrarily. It means that every religion holds a kind of absoluteness—even though this seems valid only for people living under the same religious culture.

Of course, religious phenomena cannot be reduced to ordinary cultural phenomena completely. According to Eliade's observation on religious experience,<sup>2</sup> the absoluteness of religion comes from the sacred, which

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Seán McLoughlin, "Religion, Ritual, and Culture," in *Encountering Religion*, ed. Ian S. Markham and Tinu Ruparell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 109–10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

essentially differs from the profane. Sacredness as the nature of religion is so different from the profaneness of culture that it allows religion to transcend cultural relativity and therefore to possess the possibility of spreading itself in foreign cultures. However, sacredness doesn't present itself directly to human beings, but must make use of the profane as its medium. This means that the sacredness of religion always attaches itself to some profane thing and cannot exist alone by itself. In other words, religion cannot but live with and in particular profane cultures; the absoluteness of the former can arise only through the relativity of the latter. Besides, the cultural things to which sacredness has already been attached receive the highest authority and value, and therefore are not allowed to be replaced arbitrarily by other kind of cultural things, i.e., by the profane.

Based on the distinction between the sacred and the profane, we could differentiate two kinds of cultural forms in every human society, namely, the forms with sacredness and the forms without it. But from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology, both forms actually belong to the same culture, because they share a unique system of values, concepts, and linguistic forms, which is regarded as the core of that culture. Because religion has the tendency to preserve its cultural form, it therefore encounters a paradoxical problem of adaptation when it spreads within a foreign cultural area: How can an extending religion retain both its own cultural core as well as be adaptable and modifiable, in order to be accepted by other foreign cultures? This problem of adaptation also arises in the case of religious conversions. One must also modify one's original system of beliefs, if one is to really convert to a foreign religion. This is a double-edged problem in the study of religion.

This essay intends to discuss the abovementioned phenomenon of adaptation in order to discover some possible conditions for the expansion and reception of foreign religions. Our research interest is not in investigating the sacredness of religion, but in observing the possible change of cultural forms of religion when it encounters foreign cultures. To this end, a comparative method will mainly be used. Through the comparison of the history of the spread of three foreign religions—

Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—within the Chinese-speaking cultural sphere<sup>3</sup> before 1911,<sup>4</sup> we can highlight the relevant historical events and at the same time observe how these world religions could endure in the Chinese world. The fact that Buddhism is now already regarded as an “indigenous” religion for a lot of Chinese people means that it has endured the complete process of localization and become an important part of Chinese-speaking culture. Compared to the two other religions, Islam is relatively weak in its ability to infiltrate the Chinese-speaking culture, although it has actually existed in China for a very long time and is still able to exercise a great influence on the Turkish-speaking minority in China. This fact therefore creates for our inquiry an especially beneficial question, which runs like a thread in this essay: Why is Islam not as widely accepted, as Buddhism and Christianity are, by the Chinese-speaking culture? By posing this question, our inquiry can move on from the concrete historical observations of the three world religions in China to the investigation of the abstract theoretical study of principles of intercultural adaptation for foreign religions. At the end of this essay, a possible answer to the question of religious reception will be given.

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<sup>3</sup> Nowadays we regard the Chinese culture as an achievement by the people who speak Chinese. But the language called “Chinese” by the Western people in everyday life is originally only the dialect in *Beijing* (北京)—i.e., Mandarin (北京話)—which belongs to the *Chinese language family*—a group of related language varieties—and is firstly designated as the official language in China since the Ming Dynasty. Actually there are more than seven kinds of Chinese “dialects,” whose internal diversity is as varied as the difference between the Romance languages. Strictly speaking, the Chinese culture is a collective achievement by the whole Chinese language family, and not solely by Mandarin itself, since Mandarin is merely one member of this language family and also not always the official language in China. Before the Ming Dynasty, the official language of the other Chinese dynasties founded by the Han people was for a long time the dialect in *Chang-an* (長安), which is in fact no longer spoken in today's Chang-An—i.e., *Xi-an* (西安)—but its descendants are nowadays still used by emigrants of the Han people in *Fujian* (福建) and in *Taiwan*.

<sup>4</sup> There are two reasons for the restriction at this point in time. (1) After 1911, the Chinese-speaking culture is influenced more and more by what is from the Western, so that today we can see an essential change. (2) Because of the political conflict between China and Taiwan since 1949, the intellectual history of modern China after 1911 was respectively interpreted by each side according to their own political ideologies and therefore is complicated to be studied. It is self-evident that such a complicated problem cannot be answered exhaustively in an essay.

## 1. The Fundamental Religious and Cultural Atmosphere in the Chinese-Speaking World

If one wants to ask about the reception of foreign religions in the Chinese cultural area, one must first of all grasp clearly the basic characters of this culture. Otherwise, some of its characteristics could be mistaken for heterogeneous factors coming from the foreign religions, and as a consequence one could draw a false conclusion about the reception of foreign religions. That is why an outline of the Chinese culture will first be offered here as basis of our inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

For a long time, what the Western world calls “Chinese culture” is actually merely the *culture of the Han people* (漢民族文化), which in a wider sense was formed through the so-called Chinese language family but excludes the cultures of the minority in China. There have always been factors of foreign culture influencing the development process of the Chinese-speaking culture that have become a part of it but could never change its core.

This culture is based mainly on an agricultural society. The exhausting work on the land gives rise to the attitude that one is in a close relationship or even has in a kinship to nature, as well as to respect for the natural environment. Thus, the “earth” always plays a significant role within the culture of the Han people. Moreover, the belief in natural animism is widespread among the whole people, especially the firm belief in the human soul. Because the ghosts of the dead as well as the gods of nature can affect the lives of human beings, the Han people traditionally practiced ancestral cults in private family altars and various divine cults in temples or in public altars, in order to ask, for instance, for good harvest and luck. This popular religious attitude, which is considered to be polytheistic,

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on Chinese history and culture, refer to the “Chinese History and Culture” section of the bibliography.

forms one of the primary grounds for Chinese culture and contributes to the characteristic of its worldview: that the natural world, the ghost world, and the human world are bound to each other.

Ever since Confucianism (儒家) was founded with its ethical approach, it has attempted to interpret the world through the moral order and to change it according to this order. It aims to cultivate human beings to perfection and create harmony in the state. Although there are Confucianists who are critical of the superstitions of popular religion, Confucianism always has the tendency to conform to the latter's claims. That is why it remains to be a controversy today whether Confucianism is a religion or a philosophy. In any case, it has played an indispensable role in the Chinese-speaking culture since the Han Dynasty. In the following sections (see §3.1, §3.2), we will see through the history of the spread of foreign religions that every foreign religion, which was hostile or disrespectful towards traditional morals and customs in China, has always been strongly criticized by Confucianists.

Taoism (道家) is another influential factor in Chinese culture. It has coexisted with Confucianism from the beginning. Its keystone lies in the idea that one, on the one hand, lives harmoniously through *non-action* (無為) in accordance with nature, and on the other hand, and on the practical level, is meant to preserve and prolong his life. With its basically anti-intellectual tendency, Taoism established that life has to be lived without opposition to the *Tao* (道)—the movement principle of nature—as the animals do. Such an approach, however, is theoretically in conflict with Confucianism. This ignited a “controversy over the problem of priority between nature and culture” (自然名教之爭) between these two schools during the Period of Six Dynasties (魏晉南北朝, 221–589 A.D.). This “controversy” between both sides ended with the solution that, ultimately, human culture is also a part of nature because the human being is a being that metaphysically originates from nature. Thus, Confucianism and Taoism are seen as two elements of Chinese-speaking culture that indispensably complement each other.

Besides these two philosophical directions, the *Taoist religion* (道教) arose in the Eastern Han Dynasty. It is indeed named after Taoism and reveres *Lao-tse* (老子) as its spiritual leader, but its religious aspects (e.g., amulets, prayer formulas, emblematic diagrams, etc.) make it essentially different from Taoism.<sup>6</sup> That is why its adherents directed themselves not only to preserve their life by means of special breathing techniques, but in fact even tried to become divine human beings through magical methods. In this case, the Taoist religion is considered as a further development of popular religious beliefs. Because *the priests of the Taoist religion* (道士) possessed ritual knowledge and skills and gradually became the advisers to the cults of ancestors and the gods in place of the Confucianists, they were often able to attend to the everyday life of the Chinese as well as those in power in every Chinese dynasty. Moreover, they valued highly the four virtues that were emphasized by Confucianism, like loyalty, filial piety, humaneness, and righteousness (忠孝仁義), so that they would as much as possible not find themselves in conflict with the Confucian administration. The fact that the Taoist religion contained Taoistic as well as Confucian elements is also a reason for its long existence in China.

The abovementioned characteristics shaped the foundation of the Chinese cultural area. These clearly functioned as internal factors that influenced the religious atmosphere as well as the reception of foreign religions in China.

## 2. Important Epochs and Their Political Atmospheres for the Reception of Foreign Religions in the Chinese Cultural Area

Besides the internal factors mentioned in §1, there were also in China's history many external—in particular, political—factors that had to do with the spread of foreign religions in China. Our inquiry limits itself mainly to

<sup>6</sup> Since Hsu Ti-shan (許地山) has emphasized the essential difference between Taoism and Taoist religion (See: 許地山, “道教史,” 8), the earlier confusion between the two concepts was not permitted in scientific research any more.

four periods, because in my opinion, these would be enough for us to discern how the three great world religions developed under the same political conditions and yet in different ways.

### *2.1 The Tang Period (618–907 A.D.)*

In the heyday of the Tang Dynasty in China, countless foreign envoys and merchants gathered in its big cities. Thus arose in China a tolerant attitude towards foreigners. But the Tang Dynasty was also a period of wars. On the one hand, the emperors tried to expand its territory. On the other hand, the Turks often pressed towards the Chinese borders, even twice in the capital Chang-an (長安). In order to be able to wage war and engage in trade on the restless frontier, the Emperors required more foreign soldiers and translators. Under these circumstances, foreign missionaries of foreign religions were received in an especially warm and hospitable way, because they could either take care of their followers who were hired in the Emperor's mercenary troops, or they could play the role of advisers and translators for the Emperor at the imperial court. That is why there was religious tolerance in the Emperor's palace, although the Taoist religion was designated as the state religion of the Tang Dynasty. An exception was the passing of the decree on the prohibition of Buddhism (as well as other foreign religions) in 845 by the *Emperor Wuzong* (武宗), which, however, was soon lifted by his successor *Emperor Xuanzong* (宣宗).

### *2.2 The Yuan Period (1206–1368)*

The Mongolians were the first foreigners who ruled over the entire mainland China. Because they were a minority in China compared to the Han Chinese, they tried to protect their supremacy over China through a special legislation of nationalities. According to this law, the population in China was divided into four constant classes: (1) the Mongolians; (2) the “*Semu*” (色目人),<sup>7</sup> i.e., the Central Asian people who assisted the

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<sup>7</sup> “*Semu*” means literally different kinds of name.



Mongolians in ruling the people; (3) the “Han people” which actually referred to those who lived in Northern China and thus included not only the real Han people but also the peoples of *Qitan* (契丹), *Jurchin* (女真), *Korea* (高麗), etc.; and (4) the “southern barbarians” who lived in Southern China, including Han people and the other minorities. In contrast to the lower class Chinese, the upper class was very religious. Most of them were followers of *Lamaism* (喇嘛教), a special kind of Buddhism that was formed in Tibet. Therefore, the Lamas enjoyed many political privileges at that time. The Mongolian Emperors nonetheless exercised religious tolerance, because their forefather *Chingis Khan* (成吉思汗) left behind a directive that every religion in the Mongolian kingdom should be treated equally. That is why different religious communities could freely develop.

### 2.3 *The Ming Period (1368–1644)*

In 1368, after the Buddhist monk *Zhu Yuanzhang* (朱元璋) succeeded in founding the purely Chinese Ming Dynasty with the banishment of the last Mongolian Emperor, he passed a law for the restriction of all religions, so that no new rebellion could break out from the temple, just like he had done. The number of Buddhist monks was thereby minimized and exactly determined. The private possession of temples was restricted and charged with a tax. For the humanistic Confucianists, the clergy—both of the Taoist as well as the Chinese Buddhist religions—did not have a good standing, a fact which was ascribed to their laziness of living and intellectual ignorance. Furthermore, because the *Han nationalism* (漢民族主義), responsible for the national uprising against Mongolian foreign rule, was getting ever stronger in China, foreign missionaries were deported. Foreign merchants could ply their trade only to a limited extent in certain areas of port cities. In this period of absolutism, the foreign religions hardly had a chance to spread within such a closed society.

### 2.4 *The Qing Period (1644–1911)*

When the foreign Mandschus ruled China, the nationalist consciousness of the Chinese was already awakened. Nonetheless, in contrast to the Mongolians, the Mandschu Emperor engaged the Chinese

literati at the imperial court in order to help him govern the vast kingdom. Therefore, the greater part of the Chinese gentry soon entered into collaboration with their conquerors. Conversely, the Mandschus were then Sinicized to a certain degree under the influence of these gentry. On the one hand, they adopted many social conventions and political measures, which were handed down from the Ming Period. On the other hand, they learned from the Han people its language and culture, including the Chinese attitude towards religion. For example, they were inclined to treat the religions from foreign cultures as a political matter, and therefore connected Islam with the Turkestan conflicts in the northwest of the country, and Christianity with European imperialism in China.

### 3. Historical Comparison of the Three Religions in China

#### 3.1 Buddhism in China

Because Buddhism came to China much earlier than the other foreign religions, it had already experienced some important processes of mission beforehand. If one fails to consider this and compares the foreign religions only synchronistically, then one ends up disregarding the respective expansion processes of the religions and the necessary stages of development of all religions. Thus, there is still need here to describe two more periods in Buddhism, namely, the *Eastern Han Period* (5–220 A.D.) and the *Period of Six Dynasties* (221–589 A.D.).

Indeed, up to now, the question when Buddhism was introduced in China remains controversial, but certainly in the middle of the first century B.C., there was already a Buddhist community in China, which was composed of Middle Asian merchants. Thus, at that time, Buddhism remained only a religion of the non-Chinese in the abandoned areas near the Chinese borders.

The first-mentioned Buddhist missionary in China was a prince of Parthia named *An Shigao* (安世高), who in 147 traveled from the region of north-eastern Iran to *Luoyang* (洛陽), the capital of the Eastern Han Dynasty. There he was supposed to have translated 35 works of the

*Hinayāna Buddhism* (小乘佛教) into Chinese. Following him later were missionaries most of whom came from Central Asia. Among them was the most famous *Lokakṣema* (支婁迦讖), who came from the state of *Yuezhi* (月支國). Compared to An Shigao, he imparted only a couple of sacred writings, the so-called *sūtras*. But his translations belong predominantly to *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (大乘佛教), which was later developed especially in China.

On account of the problem of language proficiency, the foreign translators could not produce quality work. Their translations were neither readable for the Chinese nor complete works that offered a systematic introduction to the dogmas of Buddhism. This prevented a better understanding of Buddhism and led to its confusion with Taoist religion. Even Buddha was now seen only as a god of the polytheistic folk religion. On the whole, during the Eastern Han Period, the Buddhist missionary work seemed to have been restricted and was full of misunderstanding.

The rise of Buddhism in China coincided firstly with the renewal of Taoism in the Period of Six Dynasties. This Neo-Taoism, which was also referred to as the *Xuanxue* (玄學), attempted to provide a new interpretation of Confucian works like the *I-ching* (易經) or the *Lunyu* (論語) by means of Taoist thought. In the same way, the educated ones among the Neo-Taoists first used a Taoist terminology in explaining Buddhist concepts. They emphasized the similarity between these two spiritual currents and first gave the Chinese translation of Buddhist technical terms a Taoist meaning. In other words, the general understanding of Buddhism at that time was actually taoistic.

This kind of Taoistization of Buddhism—at that time one referred to such a method of interpretation as “Geyi” (格義)—was partly occasioned by the lack of a complete and good translation of Buddhist sacred scriptures. For while indeed the educated and the Buddhist among the Chinese were interested in the idea of *Śūnyatā* or Emptiness (空) in the *Prajñāpāramitā* (般若經), they could not sufficiently understand it within its theoretical system because of the fragmentary translations. Nonetheless, despite its misunderstanding they dared, on the basis of their own interpretations, to debate with each other about the problem of *being* (有)

and *non-being* (無). This free debate then led to the emergence of different approaches, the so-called *Seven Schools* (七宗).

In the 4th century, Buddhism spread extensively in China. Many institutions and systems concerning Chinese Buddhism were founded. One of the decrees issued in 355 in the Eastern Jin Dynasty was that the Chinese were allowed for the first time to become monks. Thereafter, the Chinese monks gradually played an important role in the Buddhist mission. In the face of the controversial understandings of the *sūtras* at that time, the Chinese monks attempted with great zeal not only to compare the existing translations, but also to undertake, with the support of their government, many big translation projects which involved a complex division of tasks, in order to improve the translations of the *sūtras*.

In 401, the monk *Kumārajīva* (鳩摩羅什), who originated from *Kutscha* (龜茲), came to Chang-an. He earned the blessings of Emperor *Yao Xing* (姚興), who came from the Qiang people (羌族), so that he could organize a big translation team which comprised hundreds of people. Because of his excellent knowledge of Chinese and Sanskrit, he would attain unequalled success in transmission. Through his translations, which are of such high quality that they are still used today in the Chinese-speaking world, he introduced the doctrine of *Nāgārjuna* (龍樹) of *Mahāyāna*, such that the Chinese Buddhists can now understand much more clearly the difference between *Hīnayāna* and *Mahāyāna*. After the death of *Kumārajīva* in 409, his disciples spread themselves in Southern and Northern China. Each group developed its own aspect of the philosophy of its master based on its selection of the Chinese translation of the *sūtras*.

Thereafter, Buddhism played an ever greater role in China's political sphere. For example, the Emperor of Southern China liked to encourage religious debates between scholars and monks, with themes that addressed questions such as, whether spiritual Enlightenment happens in stages or suddenly, or whether there are ghosts at all, etc. Such debates reflected an intellectual tendency at that time; the theoretic difference among Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism was systematically emphasized, such that the method of interpretation known as “Geyi” was gradually abolished.

In the Tang Period between 500 and 800, Chinese Buddhism reached its most creative period. All schools of Indian Buddhism had been introduced in China. This religion was now firmly rooted and assimilated in the whole of China. Thus, eight indigenous *Mahāyāna* Schools arose in China: (1) the *Vinaya School* (律宗), founded by *Dào xuān* (道宣); (2) the *Sanlun School* (三論宗), founded by *Jizang* (吉藏); (3) the “*Consciousness Only*” School (唯識宗), founded by *Xuanzang* (玄奘); (4) the *Tantric Buddhism* (密宗), founded by *Amoghavajra* (不空); (5) The *Huayan School* (華嚴宗), founded by *Dushun* (杜順); (6) the *Tiantai School* (天台宗), founded by *Zhiyi* (智顗); (7) the *Pure Land School* (淨土宗), founded by *Shan-tao* (善導); and (8) the *Zen School* (禪宗), which was allegedly founded by *Bodhidharma* (菩提達摩) around 520, but grew only through *Huineng* (惠能). The most important of all Schools is the Zen School. It advocated a radical simplifying of the Way to spiritual Enlightenment and insisted that such an Enlightenment could not be achieved only through studying of the *sūtras*. The wide expansion of the Zen School in China could thus be characterized by a new era of Chinese Buddhism, in which one was no longer dependent on the Authority of Indian Buddhism.

Henceforth, Buddhism further became a permanent element of public life in China. Countless cloisters and temples were seen as public facilities where one could, for instance, celebrate folk festivals.

This notable success of Buddhism resulted in a complex reaction that, paradoxically, led to a political effort to destroy Buddhism between 841 and 846, the so-called “*Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution*” (會昌法難). Considered politically, the flowering of Buddhism threatened, on the one hand, the Taoist religion with the loss of its power in the royal court. Thus, the Taoist priests maligned Buddhism. This further aggravated the conflict on account of the political interests between the two religions. On the other hand, the monks offended the Chinese bureaucracy because they—especially those from the Zen School—refused to show loyalty and respect for the government and their emperor, on the grounds that they had withdrawn from the secular world.

The harshest criticism, however, came from the Confucianists. In his article “The Origin of the Tao” (原道), *Han Yu* (韓愈) claimed that the alien, if not barbaric, origin of Buddhism was opposed to the Confucian spirit. His arguments were as follows: (1) The monks would break the family ties and therefore endangered the social customs; (2) the monks would produce nothing at all and hence contribute nothing to the economy of the country; (3) the Buddhist doctrine of renunciation was not sustainable because even the monks themselves could not forego the everyday necessities of life; and (4) Buddhism would promote baseless superstitions, etc. After Han Yu, such criticisms would be expressed again and again. Nonetheless, Buddhism had taken root in China too deeply to be totally eradicated from it. For example, even the Neo-Confucianists of the Sung Dynasty who criticized Buddhism severely, paradoxically still remained under its influence.

In the Yuan Period, *Lamaism* or *Tibetan Buddhism* also came with the Mongolians to China. It was a synthesis of *Mahāyāna Buddhism* and the esoteric doctrines from Tibet that the Mongolians professed since 1261. The Mongolian Khan marveled at the various magic tricks performed by the Lamas and privileged these Tibetan monks. The *Kublai Khan* (忽必烈汗) designated Lamaism as state religion of the Mongolian Empire and honored the Tibetan Lama *Phags-pa* (八思巴) from the *Sa-skya-pas* sect (薩迦派) as *Imperial Preceptor* (國師). Thus the Lamas took over many magical rituals that were previously performed by the Taoist shamans.

Because the Chinese in the Yuan Period were not allowed by the law of nationality to learn Mongolian language, the problem in linguistic communication made the doctrines of Lamaism hardly accessible to them. They could only superficially observe it from the outside. Since they were used to seeing that the Chinese Buddhist monks were all vegetarians, they considered the meat-eating and alcohol-drinking Lamas as corrupted Buddhists. They were not even interested in trying to find out the reason for such behaviors of Lamas. That is why Lamaism quickly disappeared in China as the Mongolians were driven out of the land.

Compared to Lamaism in the Imperial House of Mongolians, Chinese Buddhism expanded mainly among the people. Around 1000 A.D., only two Schools—the Pure Land School and the Zen School—were prevalent in China because they corresponded best to the pragmatic character of the Chinese people. Now both Schools could freely develop because of the Mongols' tolerant political attitude towards religion. The Mongolian government supported Chinese Buddhist events, the building of temples, or the publication of the *sūtras*. Because of these favorable financial and political conditions, many Chinese laypersons, who were not interested in religion, decided to become monks in order to live without fear and poverty. Even Chinese rebels such like *Zhu Yuanzhang*, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, went to temples to find a place of refuge. This eventually contributed to the lack of discipline of the monks.

In the Ming period, the Buddhism in China declined gradually. On the one hand, since the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the law that controlled religion and the system of *imperial examination* (科舉) prevented excellent intellectuals from devoting themselves to Buddhism. On the other hand, because of the government's lax control over religion after the middle stage of this period, more and more criminals and homeless people became monks in order to withdraw into the protective walls of temples. Thus, there was a lack of outstanding Buddhist masters between the 15th and 16th centuries. At that time the monks had basically a low social standing. They were needed only for matters of custom such as burials and other religious ceremonies. They were paid for these, but were not accorded respect.

Although the Pure Land School and the Zen School were still the major currents, there was practically a complete fusion of different Schools of Chinese Buddhism. One explanation for this is that the monks were probably incapable of concretely distinguishing the Schools because of their ignorance. The popular belief on its part was preoccupied with the Pure Land School, which preached that the mere constant pronouncement of the name of *Amitabha* (阿彌陀佛) is enough to guarantee the reincarnation in his *Pure Land in the West* (西方淨土). Thus Buddhism was simplified. All that one needed for virtue was his faith in *Amitabha*, but not the intellectual understanding of *sūtras*.

In the reign of *Wanli* (萬曆) between 1573–1620, there was a revitalization of Buddhism. We can attribute this to the rise of a Buddhist lay class. The *laity* (居士) were Buddhists educated in Neo-Confucianism. Through their study of the *sūtras* they indeed rediscovered the theoretical system of the *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, which had long fallen into oblivion. But their Confucian interpretation of the same *sūtras* caused a further syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism, and the Taoist religion—the so called “Unity of the Three Doctrines” (三教合一). This fusion became stronger as the Confucianists and Buddhists together criticized the alien Christianity. Since then, Buddhism was no longer held to be alien in China. Nonetheless, the impressive flourishing of Chinese Buddhism came to a swift end at the end of the Ming Dynasty.

At the beginning of the Qing Period, it could already be perceived that the Manchu essentially favored Confucianism over Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, they as foreign rulers were friendlier towards Lamaism than the Chinese, and therefore Tibetan Buddhism appeared once again in the Chinese-speaking area. All these were symptoms of the Recession of Chinese Buddhism and showed that the Manchu Emperor viewed them mainly from a political perspective.

Indeed during the time under the rule of *Kangxi Emperor* (康熙帝 1661–1772) there were over 110,000 monks, but only a few of them were familiar with the theory of the *Mahāyāna Buddhism*. The situation within the circle of the laity was only a little better. Chinese Buddhism reached its lowest point in the period between *Xianfeng Emperor* (咸豐帝) and *Guangxu Emperor* (光緒帝), i.e., between 1850–1908. The *Taiping Rebellion* (太平天國之亂) between 1851–1865 in Southern China devastated countless Buddhist temples, statues, and writings. The situation deteriorated as the proposal of the *Viceroy of Huguang* (湖廣總督), *Zhang Zhidong* (張之洞), was approved in 1889 by the Emperor, that all temples should be confiscated in support of the school reform.

Until the end of the 19th century, the call towards the revival of Buddhism became louder and louder. In 1890, a lay Buddhist, *Yang Wenhui* (楊文會), put up the *Jinling Buddhist Publishing House* (金陵刻經處) in order to reproduce once again the texts of the Buddhist canon that were destroyed



by the Taiping rebels, based on the manuscripts that were still existing in Japan. Then he founded two further institutions: in 1908, a new Buddhist school named “*Zhibeng Monastery*” (祇洹精舍) for the training of monks, and a “*Buddhist Research Society*” (佛學研究會) for the laity meant for the discussion of the *sūtras*. These institutions existed only around two years,<sup>8</sup> but from them came almost all famous Chinese Buddhists, who engaged in research in the next 50 years and kept Chinese Buddhism alive.

### 3.2 Christianity in China

It was at the start of the 7th century that Nestorian Christianity began to be known in China. In 635, a Nestorian missionary *Alopen* (阿羅本) from the Byzantine Empire had come via the northern route of the *Silk Road* (絲路) to *Chang-an* and was brought directly to the imperial court. He was considered as a diplomat from Kunduz and so had close ties to the *Emperor Tai'zong of Tang Dynasty* (唐太宗) and his officials. The emperor found that a good relationship with the Nestorians was important for him, because there was a political cooperation between the Western Turks in Central Asia with the Byzantines against Persia at that time, and those Nestorians might serve as his consultants about the policy towards the West. Three years later, the *Emperor Tai'zong* allowed Nestorianism to be propagated freely, and allowed its church, called “Persian Nestorian Temple” (波斯景教寺), to be built in *Chang-an*. The number of Nestorian missionaries from Persia to China had so far increased to twenty-one. There were also many people from Central Asia living in the territory of the Tang Dynasty and working in a military capacity in many cases. Since some of them were Nestorians, the situation proved to be a favorable opportunity for the spread of Christianity. Because of the constant increase of the Nestorians, in 745, the *Emperor Xuan'zong of Tang* (唐玄宗), at the request of the Nestorians, changed the name of their temple to the

<sup>8</sup> The *Zhibeng Monastery* was closed in 1910 because of financial difficulties, and the *Buddhist Research Society* was closed in 1911 because the conductor Yang Wenhui died that year.

“Roman Nestorian Temple” (大秦景教寺), in order for the Chinese not to confuse Nestorianism with *Zoroastrianism* (祆教), which was found in Persia. In 781—at the heyday of Nestorianism—a Nestorian missionary *Jingjing* (景淨) established in *Chang-an* a stele bearing Syriac and Chinese inscriptions, on which the history of the mission of Nestorianism and its dogmas were carved. This *Nestorian Stele* was supposedly buried in 845, during the *Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution*, and was not unearthed until the Ming Dynasty. Because of the prohibition of all foreign religions, all Nestorian missionaries were forced to leave China in 845. Although this ban was lifted quickly by the *Emperor Xuānzong of Tang* (唐宣宗) in the following year, no more Nestorian missionaries would be sent to China, because the Silk Road would later be closed because of the unrest in Central Asia. The Nestorianism lost its influence in China and finally was forgotten by the Chinese. However, it remained alive in Central Asia.

Because of the emergence of the Mongol Empire, the Silk Road was opened again almost 400 years later, leading to the renewal not only the communication between mainland China and Central Asia, but also that between mainland China and the Christian West. As a result, many merchants as well as Christian missionaries came freely via the Silk Road to China. Most of those missionaries were the Central Asian Nestorians. Christianity grew rapidly in the Yuan period, so that its believers could have numbered more than tens of thousands in some large cities, such as *Hangzhou* (杭州), *Quanzhou* (泉州), *Kunming* (昆明), etc. The official administrative body for Christians was later upgraded in the central government—i.e., from *Chongfu Department* (崇福司) to *Chongfu Ministry* (崇福院)—and from then on was on the same level as the authority for Buddhists and the one for the followers of the Taoist religion. It was noticeable that there were hardly any Chinese among the Christians at that time, but mainly foreign merchants or Mongolian aristocracy.

The first contact of Catholicism with East Asia emerged from a political circumstance. In 1245, a Franciscan friar, Giovanni de Piano Carpini, was sent with an official letter of Pope Innocent IV to Mongolia, in order to request the Mongol Khan to give up his attacks against the Christian nations, and even to become a Christian. He stayed at the

residence of Khan for over three months, before being finally received by the newly crowned Khan. When the Khan had refused the Pope's request immediately, the friar went back home. Five years after his return, the Pope again sent another Franciscan friar, *William of Rubruk*, to the Far East, in order to ally with the Mongol Khan to fight together against the Muslims and to free the Holy Land. Rubruk followed Piano Carpini's travel reports and took the same route to Karakorum, and returned just like his predecessor with failure. Although Rubruk and Piano Carpini had not pushed themselves really forward into China, their travel reports about the Far East fueled the European interest in Asia. So not only merchants, such as the family of *Marco Polo* from remote Venice, but also a Franciscan missionary, *Giovanni de Monte Corvino*, sent by the Pope in 1289, came from Europe to China.

Monte Corvino traveled by ship via India to the Chinese port *Quanzhou*, and arrived at the capital *Cambalich* (now Beijing) in 1294. He quickly baptized many people—mostly Tatars—and built some years later a church in Beijing with the support of an Italian businessman. Because of his achievement, the Pope sent in 1307 seven more bishops to China to appoint him Archbishop of Beijing. But only three of the seven Franciscans finally arrived in China in 1313. *Andrea de Perugia*, one of the survivors, was appointed as bishop of Quanzhou by Monte Corvino. Seeing the growing success of Catholicism, the Nestorians tried to create difficulties for the Roman missionaries and to sow intrigue against them in order to maintain their political hegemony. But they succeeded only partially, because the Mongol Khan was impartial towards all religions. After the death of Monte Corvino in 1328, Catholicism in China seemed to perish for lack of leaders. Due to the request of Catholic Christians in Beijing, the Pope once more sent a Franciscan to China—*Giovanni de Marignolli*. He came to Beijing in 1342, but soon returned, probably due to the political unrest and the repeated revolts against the Mongol authority. Thereafter, no Catholic missionary appeared in China for about two hundred years.

Since the Christian communities at that time, both Nestorian and Catholic, consisted mainly of non-Chinese people, they were actually a

kind of dispersed presence in China and were excluded from the Chinese society. Accordingly, Christianity did not receive any support from the side of Chinese. Therefore, after 1357—at the end of the Mongol Yuan dynasty—Christianity could not survive there very long.

The victory of Han nationalism over the Mongol sovereignty in the beginning of the Ming Dynasty brought about not only a deportation of foreign Christians, but also a systematic destruction of Christian institutions. Since then, China became more and more isolated from the outside world, and developed a xenophobic attitude.

Not until 1555, did a Portuguese Jesuit, *Melchior Nunez Barreto*, come to *Guangzhou* (廣州) and stay there for only two months. After him, other Jesuits, as well as Dominicans, Augustinians, and Franciscans came to China. None of them understood Chinese, so they could not influence the Chinese directly. Furthermore, according to the foreign policy of the Ming Dynasty, the area of their activities was restricted to Macau (澳門). Therefore, none of them were able to successfully initiate missionary work among the Chinese.

In 1582, the founder of the China mission, an Italian Jesuit named Matteo Ricci (利瑪竇), came via India to Macau with his friar Michele Ruggieri (羅明堅), and began to learn Chinese there. In the following years, the two Jesuits received permission from the *Viceroy of Two Guangs* (兩廣總督) to settle down in *Zhaoqing* (肇慶), an inland city of Guangdong Province. There, Ricci built a church in 1585 and called it “*Xianhua Temple*” (仙花寺) after the suggestion of the governor of Zhaoqing. In order to adapt to Chinese society, Ricci at first wore the clothes of the Buddhist monks. But as soon as Ricci recognized that the Buddhist monks were looked down upon in China at that time, he decided to dress himself according to the Confucian model and to keep his distance from the Buddhists. Accordingly, he tried to show, on the one hand, that the dogmas of Christianity could generally be in harmony with the ancient Confucianism. On the other hand, he opened a debate with Buddhists about cosmology, the relationship between man and God, and the concept of *Sangsara* (輪迴), etc. He also translated several texts of the Christian

canon into Chinese and even wrote Chinese books about the doctrines of Christianity in form of dialogues. His goal was to make Christianity accessible to the Chinese as much as possible.

Nevertheless, Ricci soon realized that missionary work “from below” could have little success because of many political restrictions. Therefore, he tried to begin “from above” with the Emperor. He wandered from place to place, and finally succeeded in appearing at the imperial court in 1601. His gifts for the emperor—for example, a cuckoo clock and a violin—aroused the curiosity of the emperor more than his religion did. The emperor allowed his stay in Beijing, where he resided until his death in 1610. Ricci especially exerted himself to attract leading officials to Christianity. He firstly lured them with Western science and technology and then took advantage of their interest in these to convert them to his religion. The most famous example was the baptism of *Xu Guangqi* (徐光啓) and *Li Zhizao* (李之藻), who both worked with Ricci on the translation of mathematical books into Chinese.

We could say that Ricci’s missionary policy—i.e., the so-called “Directives of Matteo Ricci” (利瑪竇規矩)—really met with success. According to his policy, Christianity should be adapted to the Chinese conditions as much as possible, for example, by tolerating Chinese traditional rites, such as kneeling before the emperor, worshipping their own ancestors, etc. But this policy was not completely continued by his Jesuit successor Nicolas Longobardi (龍華民), with the result that a backlash against the Christian missionaries emerged gradually from the Confucianists. Numerous conservative scholars in China characterized Christianity as a heresy and the depravity of mankind. Their critical texts against Christianity were later, in 1639, edited by *Xu Changzhi* (徐昌治) and compiled into a book entitled “Collections of discrediting heresy in the sacred dynasty” (聖朝破邪集). This book contained a memorandum to the *Emperor Wanli* (萬曆帝), written in 1615 by *Shen Jue* (沈惟), an official from *Nanjing* (南京). In this memorandum, Shen slandered not only Christianity as a heresy, but also the Christian church as a rebellious group. For fear of uprising of Christians, the Emperor issued the following year a bid to banish the foreign missionaries from China. Thus the “*Nanjing religion case*”

(南京教案) arose in the latter Ming Dynasty. Nevertheless, through the help from their influential followers at the imperial court, many missionaries could still found secret shelters in China, so they were able to resume their missionary work immediately after the bid was withdrawn by the new emperor in 1620.

During the first two rulers of the Qing dynasty, the Jesuits won the favor of the imperial court because of their excellent knowledge of sciences, especially of astronomy. Some of them, such as *Johann Adam Schall von Bell* (湯若望), were even appointed as *Director of the Imperial Observatory* (欽天監). They were directly associated with the emperors and therefore obtained more privileges than before. The Emperors let these Christian missionaries do their work unobstructed, but pursued their religion with less solicitousness. In any case, more than a hundred missionaries could exert influence in all provinces of China freely. At the beginning of the 18th century—the heyday for the Catholic Mission in China—there were more than 200,000 Christians across China.

Meanwhile, the missionary policy of adaption to the Chinese conditions, founded by Matteo Ricci, received heavy criticism both from inside and outside of the Jesuit Order. Thus, the *Chinese Rites controversy* (中國禮儀之爭) arose, which concerned the question whether the Chinese ritual worship of family ancestors was a kind of superstition or only a secular ritual. When the missionaries began to forbid the Chinese followers from worshipping their own ancestors in accordance with Pope Clement XI's anti-rites decree "*Cum deus optimus*" of November 20, 1704, the *Kangxi Emperor*, who grew out of the Confucian environment was very angry about it. In 1707, the emperor imprisoned the papal legate and Cardinal *Charles-Thomas Maillard De Tournon* (鐸羅) in Macau, who died there in 1710. He also issued an order that only those missionaries who followed the "Directives of Matteo Ricci" could stay in China. In contrast, Pope Clement XI issued the Papal bull "*Ex illa die*" of March 19, 1715, which officially condemned the Chinese rites as incompatible with Catholic belief. It forbade the Jesuitic tolerance of Chinese rites and definitely demanded the practice of Christianity in China to abide by the European form. As a result, the *Kangxi Emperor* banned Christian missions in China in 1721,

although he still allowed some missionaries to stay with him at the imperial court. The irreconcilable gap between the Vatican and Beijing ended with a general prohibition of missionary activity by the *Yongzheng Emperor* (雍正帝). China was closed again, and it was not until the 19th century that the missionaries were able to execute their tasks in China again—with the force of European imperialism.

After the *Opium War* (1840–1842), the missionaries in China—both Catholic and Protestant—could at last come inland from the port cities under the protection of the Western powers. Henceforth, they no longer had to adapt to Chinese conditions anymore. They even condemned the Chinese-speaking culture sharply as uncivilized. Accordingly, the newly baptized Chinese Christians entered a foreign community of religion in which there was no place for Chinese customs. In contrast, the xenophobic Chinese evaluated Christianity in principle only as the political tool of the colonial powers rather than as religious faith. This mutual incomprehension between both sides caused more and more bloody quarrels and was reflected in the difference between northern and southern Chinese people's movements.

In southern China, in 1848, a Chinese named *Hong Xiquan* (洪秀全) began to set up the “Congregation of the God worshippers” (拜上帝會) with the dogmas of Christianity, in the province of *Guangxi* (廣西). In 1851, this community started an uprising—i.e., the *Tai ping Rebellion*—in the form of the peasant movement against the Manchu government and quickly conquered 16 provinces. Hong called the territory under his control the “Heavenly Kingdom” (太平天國) and himself the “younger brother of Jesus Christ.” Since this uprising was linked with the promulgation of Christianity—although quite misunderstood—there was no place for the traditional Chinese “idolatry” of Buddhism and Taoist Religion in the Heavenly Kingdom. Therefore, thousands of temples and monasteries were destroyed and numerous statues and scriptures of other religions were thrown into the fire before the *Heavenly King* died in 1865. In contrast, the so-called “Boxer Rebellion” (義和團之亂) burst out in northern China, in *Beijing* (北京), in 1900. With a tacit permission of the *Empress Dowager Cixi* (慈禧太后), the boxer attacked foreign missionaries and killed them

out of hatred. This uprising ended with the invasion of international troops in Beijing.

Since the 19th century, the task of translating the Bible into Chinese flourished. The Catholic and Protestant missionaries from various orders made their respective versions of the Chinese Bible. It was in the middle of the 19th century that all the missionaries in China attempted to work out a new translation together because of the need for the unity of language in the Chinese Bible and because they felt it necessary to correct the Confucian expressions that have been used since Ricci. But not everyone was happy with this new version, so they decided to form an ecumenical council in *Shanghai* (上海) in 1890 to promote together three standardized versions for the Chinese Bible. Among those translations, there was a famous version in the modern *Mandarin* (北京話), which was completed after 29 years and is still widely used today.

### 3.3 *Islam in China*

Islam came into China for the first time in the Tang period. In 651, the third Caliph *Uthman ibn Affan* sent his envoy to Chang-an in order to convey the dogmas of Islam and the history of the Arabs to the Chinese emperor. The more the Arab kingdom expanded its sphere of influence into Central Asia, the more frequently did its ambassadors visit China—in total, 39 times up to the year 798. Meanwhile, many Arab and Persian Muslim merchants arrived in Chinese seaports. Since the aim of these foreigners was not to promote the Islamic mission but their business, the Han people asked about their exotic religion mostly only out of curiosity.

In 755, a revolt against the *Emperor Xuanzong of Tang* (唐玄宗) broke out from the military governor *An Lushan* (安祿山). The capital of Chang-an was soon conquered by him. At the request of the successor of the *Emperor Xuanzong*, *Emperor Suzong* (肅宗), Uighur and Arabic mercenary troops came to China to suppress the rebels. In 787, the soldiers of these Islamic armies and their descendants were asked by the government to decide whether they would like to stay in China and be subjects of the emperor. Among them there were about 4,000 people who settled down and worked in maritime trade or as civil servants. They used to live in the form of small



and relatively closed communities within Chinese-speaking society and became the first Chinese Muslim population. They were the forefathers of what is now called the *Hui people* (回族). They tried to live according to their Islamic customs and traditions but without conflict with the Chinese culture. With their offspring, Islam began to spread in China. Thus, from the beginning, the manner in which Islam spread in China was a little different from the other two world religions.

It was not until the Yuan period that Islam expanded beyond those Muslim descendants in China. In the beginning of the 13th century, tens of thousands of other Muslim soldiers from West and Central Asia reached China with the Mongol regime. These immigrants, who stemmed from different peoples, were altogether referred to as *Semu* (see §2.2). Since their homes were already conquered by Mongols and they were also nomads like their conqueror, it was not difficult for them to go with troops of the Mogol Empire into China. Their residential areas were distributed to different cities in China, according to the assignment of their troops. These ethnically diverse immigrants were politically and economically more active than the Chinese, because the Mongolian law of nationality gave them a higher social standing. They lived separately from the Han people. In their closed communities, numerous mosques were established. Although they had political privilege, it was not used for a missionary purpose. Their religion usually spread only within their own families and remained unassimilated by the Han people. Besides, those followers of Islam in China spoke mainly Arabic or Persian languages, thus preventing the Chinese-speaking people from understanding their religious belief. Therefore, the Chinese were only able to observe this foreign religion superficially and from a distance through its visible practices. They eventually identified the *Semu* with Muslims and even regarded the latter as one people called the *Hui-hui* (回回). Accordingly, Islam used to be called “religion of Hui” (回教).

At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the social standing of Han people was restored. The Mongols were driven out. “Barbaric” clothing, languages, and names were officially banned in China. Thus, the Islamic Hui-hui who still took up residence in China had to go through

Sinicization and conform in all aspects to the Han culture. The official law also stipulated that the Semu people were not allowed to marry each other in order to assimilate them into the Han people gradually. This policy of Sinicization in the Ming Period was undoubtedly detrimental to the survival of foreign Islam in China. Thus, on the one hand, the Muslims held back their religious lifestyle even more than before. On the other hand, the Muslims, though ethnically diverse, kept together ever more closely because of their Islamic belief and their shared foreignness to the local Chinese society. Eventually, they really banded together and formed a people known today as the *Hui people*.

At this time, the official language Mandarin had become the common language of the Hui people; the Arabic language was used only when reading the Koran. But the more the Hui-Hui spoke Mandarin in everyday life, the less they were schooled in Arabic. Because their knowledge of Arabic language progressively diminished, it led to a crisis of the transmission of Islamic teachings. In view of this crisis, at the end of 16th century, a Muslim scholar *Hu Dengzhou* (胡登洲) established a system of Islamic education in the mosque in the Province *Shaanxi* (陝西), to ensure the continuation of the spiritual legacy of the Hui people. Following Hu's successful example, many Muslim communities followed this system of so-called "*Scripture-Hall Education*" (經堂教育). This kind of Islamic education funded by mosques contained not only learning Arabic, but also the studies of the Quran and Islamic philosophy. With this system, the Sinicized Muslims could retain their faith firmly in their small closed communities by the end of the Qing Dynasty.

On the basis of the Islamic education, a movement for Chinese translations and interpretations of the Islamic canon began to develop at the end of the Ming period, in order to be able to explain Islamic doctrine to their pupils better. Many Chinese Muslims—the most famous ones including *Wang Daiyu* (王岱輿), *Liu Zhi* (劉智), and *Ma Zhu* (馬注)—also tried to interpret Islam systematically with the help of the thoughts of Neo-Confucianism. Those Chinese Muslims who introduced the dialogue between Islam and Confucianism, were also called *Islamic Confucianists*

(回儒). The readers whom their writings addressed were henceforth no longer restricted to Chinese Muslims, but also included those outside this group.

While many Chinese-speaking Muslims—the Hui people—who enthusiastically embraced an eclecticism between Islam and Confucianism in the Province *Yunnan* (雲南) and in Southeast China, the Turkic-speaking Muslims in Northwest China, especially the Uigurs (維吾爾人), constantly rebelled against the government of the Qing Dynasty. Between 1862 and 1877, the *Dungan Revolt* (回變) occurred in China's *Shaanxi*, *Gansu* (甘肅) and *Ningxia* (寧夏) provinces, as well as in the area of today's *Xinjiang* (新疆). It was an ethnic war against both the political and economic colonization by the Manchus and the cultural invasion by the Han people. In order to suppress the uprisings of Muslims, not only were armies of the Manchu emperors deployed in these regions, but Islamic books were also banned in the whole of China. Due to the arrest of Muslim authors who were suspected of propaganda against the government, the movement for the Chinese publication of Islamic teachings faltered for decades. This certainly made the Chinese-speaking Muslims silent about their religion in public life. Thus, once again, Islam retreated into the closed communities of the Hui. Beginning at the end of the 19th century, the Hui tried to work out a complete Chinese translation of the Quran; finally, in 1927, they fulfilled their dream.

#### **4. On the Hermeneutic Conditions for the Reception of Foreign Religions**

When we compare the foregoing history of the spread of the three religions in China, it seems that in all three cases, these foreign religions first entered China through the foreigners themselves founding their own church or their community (see §3.1, §3.2 and §3.3). Undoubtedly, before any indigenous community of a foreign religion came into existence, it must have had some community consisting of foreigners in their vicinity. Those foreign communities in China were the pioneers for their religion; they represent the first stage of religious mission. At this point, it doesn't mean that this foreign religion has already entered the local culture

substantially. Because such religious organizations were allowed to exist only out of the political and economic needs of the emperor in China and were constrained within a limited area, their objective was not necessarily missionary work, but basically the supervision of their members living in this foreign land. These religious communities were usually closed and exclusive communities unknown to the majority of the Chinese people. Even if, by chance, some of the Chinese were to personally encounter such a foreign community, they would barely have understood its religious dogmas and rituals because linguistic and cultural differences. So it is normal and inevitable to find many misunderstandings occurring between missionaries and indigenes at the first phase of religious missions.

At this initial stage, the founding of a foreign Church or community in China does not mean any substantial reception of a foreign religion by the Chinese people, because the foreign religion was not spread among the Chinese. Nonetheless, such religious communities at least proved to be a potential entry point through which their religion could be observed and understood. In another words, a foreign community could build a personal relationship with the local society and thus at least provide an opportunity for indigenes to observe and understand its culture, including—though indirectly—its religion. Without these communities, the indigenes would not even have a chance to misunderstand these religions. The founding of foreign communities is therefore one of the necessary conditions of religious mission.

Besides this point, it is worth noticing that the existence of first religious communities, which consisted of foreigners, was dependent on the political support from the Chinese government. However, when such a religious community began to receive indigenous believers and changed their original manner of life, it would be regarded by indigenes as a threat to their local culture and therefore as something to be removed. Thus, the religious community of foreigners usually sought some political support in order to reconcile its conflict with the local people. When it seemed not only to threaten local culture, but also to offend local authority, it would surely need more powerful support from the government or even directly from the emperor. Without such support, it would be seen as a rebellious

group against the government. Additionally, political support could let the activities of such a religious community proceed more smoothly and thus promote its development in the local society. We can therefore see that political support is also a necessary condition of religious mission.

This doesn't imply, however, that political support can guarantee more converts to a foreign religion. Although it is true that a measure executed exclusively through political power can aid in the development of the missionary practice of a foreign religion, if the political support functions only externally while the followers of this religion still remain foreign to the Chinese people, this religion would quickly disappear from China once the supportive political power is overthrown (see §3.2). In contrast, a foreign religion can still survive under political pressure or nationalistic hostility, if it has already integrated itself deeply within the Chinese people (see §3.1).

Based on these two observations of external conditions above, there doesn't seem to be any sufficient condition for the reception of a foreign religion to be found. In view of this, we now turn our attention to the inner factors in order to find some explanations that delve deeper into the phenomenon of the reception of foreign religions.

As has already been said (see the introductory section), religion is a belief system that is dependent on its cultural roots. Moreover, it is a personal matter that one embraces freely. For this reason, the survival of a foreign religion in another cultural milieu consists in the following: that this religion, on the one hand, should adapt to the local culture as much as possible and, on the other, must win its indigenous believers through its own spiritual influence, and not by force. By contrast, for indigenes, their conversion to a foreign religion means that they understand not only the important doctrines of this foreign religion, but also that they do so in a way that their world-view has passed through an adjustment. And this adjustment of world-view is a Gestalt shift of the conceptual and axiological system of their primary culture. Only when both cultural systems adapt to each other in a certain degree and when both at last no longer seem to be so strange to each other, could the conflicts between both sides at the early stages of religious mission start to ease.

In order to grasp the essential structure of this process of intercultural adaptation, we could go back to analyze the development of Buddhism in China.

Although the first foreign missionary monks tried to translate the Buddhist canon, i.e., *sūtras*, into Chinese, their translations were not only fragmentary, but also incomprehensible to most Chinese. The main problem was the lack of proper expressions to convey Buddhist concepts. In view of this, many Buddhists began to interpret the Buddhist concepts especially through Taoist terms, in order to facilitate the educated Chinese to understand their doctrines more easily. Undoubtedly, this *hermeneutic* method—so-called “Geyi” (格義)—couldn’t convey the Buddhist concepts correctly. But it could at least let Buddhism become more accessible. Buddhism was at that time no longer unknown to most Chinese literati, even though there coexisted alongside understandings of Buddhist theory misunderstandings of it. However, the more Chinese there were who became interested or believed in Buddhism, the less satisfied they became with such a simplified understanding—or more correctly, misunderstanding—of Buddhism. There arose a need for an orthodoxy of Buddha’s teachings, and thus for a complete and competent translation of the *sūtras* (see §3.1). As a result, some big organizations for translation of the *sūtras* were built by governments, and famous foreign monks and indigenous scholars were gathered there to work together on a common enterprise of translation.

The Chinese translations of the *sūtras* played a significant role in the reception of Buddhism in China in many ways. First, such translations were a necessary medium for anyone who wanted to learn more about Buddhism, but wasn’t acquainted with any Buddhist experts. Second, they became foundational texts, upon which the conflict of understandings or misunderstandings between indigenous adherents—and also between indigenous adherents and opponents—could be discussed reasonably, if not solved eventually. Third, they determined the introduction and development of schools of Buddhism in China, depending on which *sūtra* was translated first. Fourth, these translations were themselves the evidence that the conceptual systems of these two cultures have already

reached a state of mutual accommodation, no matter how good the quality of these translations was.

While Buddhism took deeper roots in China, the indigenous cultural structure was shaken accordingly. For instance, many translated Buddhist terms gradually became part of the Chinese language in everyday life. Another indication of how deeply Buddhism had entered China is that more and more indigenes left home to become monks, so that they were harshly criticized by conservative Confucianists as neglecting all their duty to be a son, a husband, a father, a courtier—in a word, their duty as a man. That is why a bitter opposition to Buddhism arose among the conservative groups who felt threatened by it (see §3.1). The conflict between the indigenous culture and the foreign religion appeared at this moment not only as a socio-political conflict in public life, but also a conflict in the conception and value of private life. We can see at this stage of intercultural adaptation a to-and-fro tussle between two cultural horizons. The conflict between both sides was indeed the inevitable consequence of an intercultural encounter, but at the same time also a necessary phase for mutual understanding. This is so, because the process of adaptation is reciprocal in essence. Only when both sides have attained a new dynamic balance can the public conflict disappear.

According to the analyses above, this process of intercultural adaptation is basically a *hermeneutic process*, since the intercultural adaption must presuppose a process of mutual understanding. It begins with conflict, because the two cultures in question are based on different *fore-structures of understanding*. But the common need to understand another culture pushes both sides to keep on communicating with the other. Therefore, we can see that the reception of a foreign religion will always swing to and fro between two extreme cultural horizons, until an appropriate *fusion of horizons* is achieved.<sup>9</sup> At last, a temporal harmony between both sides can

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 1: Wahrheit und Methode* (Unveränderte Taschenbuchausgabe, Tübingen: UTB-Taschenbücher, 1990), 270–312.

exist at this moment. But they both suffer a loss to reach this moment, because neither of them maintains its original state. The fore-structure of their understanding changes itself correspondingly. As a result, the foreign culture will take a new form in order to survive in the local culture. This new form of cultural achievement won't be regarded as essentially strange for both sides at this moment in time. For the foreign culture, this achievement is no longer a kind of distorted misunderstanding, but a localized reproduction of itself. And for the local culture, this achievement no longer signifies a threatening foreignness, but a creative development of itself.

In the case of Buddhism in China, Zen Buddhism is such a result. In order to reach this achievement, more and more satisfactory translations of the *sūtras* are very important, because these are the basis both for developing a traditional understanding of Buddhist doctrines as well as for resolving conceptual conflict between two cultural horizons. Without these, a further creative fusion of horizons such as Zen Buddhism could not have been established.

In short, the reception of a foreign religion is a two-sided hermeneutic process, which must firstly presuppose the public encounter between two cultural horizons. Because of the public nature of the encounter, public conflicts can ensue. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. It is through public conflicts that both sides have a chance to face up to their difference and thus to begin adapting to each other. Otherwise, the difference between both sides would be repressed, and the superficial harmony resulting from the repression of the original difference would merely postpone the inevitable burst of conflict. Without openly acknowledged conflicts, they would not even have experienced the process of adaptation.

The process of adaptation, which takes place within the foreign religion and without, cannot be determined, but can only be supported, by political powers. What is essential for this process is the transformation of the fore-structure of understanding, which is embodied in the translations of a religious canon. Therefore, the process of intercultural adaptation begins



with a necessary misunderstanding and achieves a creative understanding in the end. Only after undergoing the whole process of adaptation can a foreign religion really survive in the local culture.

This hermeneutic process is also partly reflected in the expansion of Christianity in China (see §3.2). It only began with the Jesuit Matteo Ricci in late 16th century. Although Christianity had first come to China in the 7th century, its initial presence in China didn't last long. That is why the first Jesuit missionaries in China were astonished, when they discovered the existence of the Nestorian Stele, which had been erected in 781 and unearthed around 1623. This excavation indicated that their forerunners had failed once. The main reason for the failure of the first Christian mission in China is that its community mostly consisted of foreigners. Even during the second ingress of Christianity into China, this policy of mission remained unchanged. By contrast, Ricci opened a new epoch of Christian mission in China. First, he attracted Manchurian and Han people by teaching them Western scientific knowledge and novelties. Second, he tried to speak and act as the Chinese do in order to cotton to them. Third, he translated some texts of Christianity into Chinese and printed them to make them a more accessible medium for the Chinese to learn Christian doctrines. With these measures, Ricci won many indigenous converts. At the same time, he also roused conflicts not only with the indigenous intellectuals, but also with his church members. This means that his mission policy was not yet completely accepted by both cultural horizons. This phenomenon is normal in the process of intercultural adaptation, as has been said above. And it indicates the need for a deeper mutual understanding, which must depend on a more satisfactory translation of the main Christian canon—the Bible.

Due to the lack of an appropriate medium for understanding, the mutual adaptation process between Christianity and the Chinese culture didn't have a chance to move from the phase of intolerant conflicts to a phase of dynamic balance until the end of the 19th century. The first complete translation of the Bible was published only later, in the 19th century, and its standard version came even later (see §3.2). To some degree, the turmoil of China in the entire 20th century hindered

Christianity from expanding in China. Nevertheless, Christianity exercised its influence on the Chinese ever more strongly. For instance, it played an important role in the debates about “science vs. metaphysics” or about “complete westernization,” etc., at the beginning of the 20th century. Although Christianity is still regarded at this point as foreign religion in Chinese-speaking cultures, it is beyond doubt that the expansion of Christianity in China so far has developed according to the hermeneutic logic.

In contrast, Islam took the hermeneutic process of mutual adaptation even later than Christianity. Although many non-Han Muslims, the Hui, have lived in China over a very long time, it is only in the mid-17th century that the Hui began interpreting the Koran using Confucian concepts and putting them on print (see §3.3). Before that time the teaching of the Koran was spread within the Muslim community only by oral communication; the outsider, therefore, was hardly acquainted with it. These Confucian interpretations of Koran can thus be considered as the first missionary works of the Muslims in China, since now the non-Muslim Chinese could finally read the teaching of the Koran in Chinese. Unfortunately, such missionary work in the form of publication was soon suppressed by the government for political reasons. Because of the political repression, the Chinese-speaking Muslims withdrew again and missed the chance for a spiritual encounter with the Han-Chinese. Islam has stayed in closed Muslim groups in China. A mutual fusion of cultural horizons therefore did not take place. It is therefore easy to understand why Islam, compared with Christianity, had less impact on China. Correspondingly, the Chinese have criticized Islam relatively less. It is not because the Chinese have already accepted Islam, but rather because they have simply disregarded it.

Nevertheless, Islam as the faith of a minority in China has survived longer in China, if we compare it with Christianity. When the Christian missionaries came back to China again in the mid-19th century and were made aware of the existence of the Hui people, they took interest in the Hui people and attempted to inquire as to why Islam, which also professed belief in one God, could remain in a country of polytheists or of

“idolaters,” whereas Christianity was often, though unsuccessfully, driven out of China.<sup>10</sup> To my mind, this can be better answered when considered with another question: Why is Islam, which has survived for a long time in China, not as widely accepted in the Chinese-speaking culture as Buddhism and Christianity?

Without a doubt, the Chinese-speaking Muslims in China have always lived in closed communities. As a minority, they conducted themselves in Chinese society like the Han people, and at the same time hid their religious life within their families. Through their strategy of retreat (as opposed to the offensive or rebellious reaction of Turkish-speaking Muslims in Xin-jiang), the lives of the Hui people did not pose a threat to Chinese society, and accordingly, were not threatened by this society. At the same time, the Hui people had undergone a process of sinicization – of being assimilated into the Han people. It is the sinicization of the Hui people that led to their gradual loss of faith in Allah.<sup>11</sup> Thus we can recognize that although the spread of a foreign religion required a certain self-restraint and adaptability of the missionaries, as Franke has noted,<sup>12</sup> such a requirement should not be taken too far. After all, an excessive adaptation to the indigenous culture could also become a prelude to the slow death of a foreign religion.

## Conclusion

The survival of Islam in China has nothing at all to do with monotheism, but rather with the self-restraining lifestyle of the Hui people. The Hui people whom the Chinese still regarded as foreign did not have any other choice but to keep their religious heritage to themselves if they were to survive within the xenophobic environment of Han nationalism. It

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Imke Mees, *Die Hui – Eine moslemische Minderheit in China. Assimilationsprozesse und politische Rolle vor 1949* (München: Minerva-Publikation, 1984), 44–46.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 279.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Franke, *China und das Abendland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 42.

is therefore not astonishing, that the Chinese-speaking culture took notice of Islam quite late—not until the outbreak of Muslim rebellion on the frontier. It is because the Chinese-speaking Muslims had gone unnoticed for such a long time that they could survive so far. Their strategy of survival was the concealment of their religious life and the avoidance of any public conflicts. This made them safe from political threat but also kept their culture of origin unknown. Such a lifestyle was eventually a one-sided adaptation, since the Chinese-speaking Muslims only tried to adapt to the culture of the Han people in public life and almost didn't acquaint the Han people with the tenets of Islam.

It is now clear that the survival of Chinese-speaking Muslims cannot be equated with the reception of Islam in China. In this case, the survival of a foreign religion is attributed to its believers' one-sided adaptation in public life in order to live under the protection of the indigenous government. But the process of intercultural adaptation, which takes place within foreign religions and without, cannot be determined but only supported by political powers. This means that it is not enough for a religion to survive to rely on political support. Even the Western missionaries of Christianity in 19th century had once missed this point. They thought that the failure of their forerunners consisted in a lack of political support from the indigenous government. Thus they resorted to the military power of the Western governments as a substitute political support. But religious conversion cannot come from external force, but can only be a willing change. That is why we indicate it as a hermeneutic process.

In summary, the indigenous reception of foreign religions is a two-sided hermeneutic process, which demands firstly the public encounter between two cultural horizons. Public encounter here means not only a friendly meeting, but also a violent confrontation with the indigenous culture. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. A process of adaptation without conflict is just like a marriage without quarrels. Without such conflicts, there can't even be a real fusion of horizons. In the fusion of horizons, the fore-structures of understanding from both sides endure a kind of transformation. Without such a Gestalt shift, no foreign religion can successfully survive in another culture.

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