

A Sense of an Ending: Chinese Buddhist Eschatology Reconsidered

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Abstract: In the 1970s, the Cold War was still in full swing, and many had already confronted its possible conclusion in global nuclear annihilation after experiencing the Cuban missile crisis of 1961. Yet in the Anglophone study of Asia, no awareness seemed to exist as to the possibility of reactions to that future that might not be identical to those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In 1976, however, Dan Overmyer published *Folk Buddhist Religion*, a volume that drew attention to the apocalyptic visions of some popular groups influenced by Buddhist conceptions, amongst others, of global disaster. Since then, more has been written in this vein and a considerable literature has grown up, including a certain amount concerning reaction in East Asia to climate change. What have we learned over the past five decades?

Keywords: Decline of the Dharma (*mofa* 末法), kalpa, Late Antique Little Ice Age, Maitreya

November 2022 marked the centenary of a very famous publication, “The Waste Land” by T. S. Eliot, which encapsulated the culturally exhausted conditions following the First World War.¹ It was not until three years later, in “The

¹ I am grateful to Jinhua Chen, Vicky Baker, and all the organisers and participants in the “The Dharma-Ending Age: The Climate Crisis Through the Lens of Buddhist Eschatology, Past and Present” conference hosted by the Yin-Cheng Buddhist Studies Network and the FROG-BEAR Project at the University of British Columbia for allowing me to reconsider my earlier

Hollow Men,” that he turned his thought to the future and spoke of the world ending “not with a bang but a whimper.”² From 1945, his choice came to seem less apt, as my generation grew up under the shadow of nuclear war.³ Thinking back to those days, the black comedy of Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 *Doctor Strange-love* best sums up the shift of outlook, though Nevil Shute’s 1957 *On the Beach* had already provided a fine introduction to the implications of nuclear war. There was plenty more to absorb back then, whether comic, realistic, or even science fictional: in the latter category, I particularly remember John Wyndham’s 1955 post-apocalyptic *The Chrysalids*, with its imagining of the growth of an atavistic Christianity among survivors that in some ways anticipates in its depiction of religion Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.⁴ It might be added that, regrettably, the dystopias I recall from my teenage years do not seem to have diminished in their relevance over time, and that the current global situation renders all such literature, whatever the language of publication, as thought-provoking as ever. What follows here constitutes in one sense a mere historical survey, but unfortunately this same survey also delineates an acute contemporary problem, especially in view of this world’s ever more pressing environmental concerns.

To return, however, to my recent lived experience: somehow we got through the 1950s and 1960s, and in the early 1970s I found myself in North America studying with a man who was a strong admirer of Leon Trotsky. He introduced us to the East Asian Buddhist academic tradition but pointed out that we spent ninety-nine percent of our time studying what was of interest to only about one per cent of past East Asian Buddhists. When he directed us to recent Japanese scholarship on Buddhist popular religion in China, I took the hint and started to read as much as I could, even though my doctoral research lay very much in the “high tradition” direction. As luck would have it, another

forays into this area as a conference presentation. I am grateful to Michael Nylan for also arranging for me to deliver these remarks to an audience with more predominantly historical concerns in Berkeley the following week, and especially to Raoul Birnbaum for his comments on that occasion. Further corrections and suggestions have come from an anonymous reviewer and from Lina Verchery. No one at either venue or in connection with this journal, however, should be held responsible for any misconceptions or misstatements in the content offered here, which are mine alone, especially since one or two additions have now been made following my return to Europe.

² Eliot, “The Waste Land: The Burial of the Dead” and “The Hollow Men,” 59.

researcher, Dan Overmyer, published his *Folk Buddhist Religion* in 1976 and Susan Naquin in the same year put out her *Millenarian Rebellion*, thus placing religion beyond the elite firmly on the agenda.⁵ In reviewing these works I found that Overmyer, in attempting a broad overview, was not as familiar with the Japanese scholarship I had been reading as I had hoped, so I constructed a counter-narrative to his in order to bring in as much of that literature as I could.⁶ But a narrative based solely on the secondary literature is vulnerable to missing important elements concealed in the primary materials, and Barend ter Haar later pointed out that much writing on the topic was vitiated by a failure to observe that the term “White Lotus” (Ch. *bailian* 白蓮) as used by officials was a label implying contravention of the law, but this by no means reflected the usage of the groups so labelled.⁷

Nevertheless, my reading did make me aware of the importance of eschatology in popular thought, and of identifying some indications of messianic expectations, even in the early Han contention that a time of trouble will produce a sage.⁸ This, on further reflection, may be an extension of a thought already in the “Appended Words” of the *Book of Changes* (Ch. *Yi jing* 易經), which assert that they were the product of a “terminal era” (*moshi* 末世), devised by the Duke of Zhou 周公 during the dominance of the evil last ruler of the Shang dynasty.⁹ This “darkest hour comes just before the dawn” understanding of bad times would then not go beyond the cyclical view of good and bad times conventionally seen as the “eschatology” (if one can call it that) typical of the Chinese tradition.¹⁰ But to return to my early career, especially after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the thought that my own understanding of potential cataclysm was shaped by my adolescent experience and bounded by my own cultural horizons—as formed by the creative works I have already

³ Kubrick, dir. *Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Shute, *On the Beach*.

⁴ Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

⁵ Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion*. Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*.

⁶ Barrett, “Chinese Sectarian Religion,” 333–52.

⁷ ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*, 242–46.

⁸ Barrett, “Chinese Sectarian Religion,” 340.

⁹ Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, 93.

¹⁰ Thus, for example, Ishizu, *Shūkyō keiken no kisoteki kōzō*, 328–32.

mentioned—prompted the thought that this topic did deserve further investigation. After all, the influences I named in my opening remarks looked at nuclear calamity from a strictly Euro-American perspective.

In 1983, I was able to return to this area in a survey of eight publications that touched upon this topic directly or indirectly, spanning the first monograph on the Daoism of the late fourth century by Michel Strickmann (1942–1994) through publications on Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism among late imperial rebel groups. I did preface this survey with a few contemporary observations and with reference to a Chinese religious text then in circulation, but on reflection I might have started the chronological survey a little earlier in the third century. At that time emerged the first inklings outside Buddhist texts themselves of the impact of Buddhist cosmological thought and of the notion that the entire terrestrial part of the world system we inhabit will one day be totally consumed by fire, remaining void for long ages. To those who saw themselves as existing within the “good times, bad times” model inherited from the pre-imperial era, these ideas must have been something of a shock. Erik Zürcher (1928–2008) seems to have been the first to pick up a source reflecting this, though in 1968 Fukunaga Mitsuji 福永光司 (1918–2001) saw possible Buddhist influence on the notion of the dissolution of the cosmos at about the same date.¹¹ I did not raise this specifically with Michel Strickmann, but in conversation he was happy to concede that he could have said more about Buddhist models even for the format of the text he was translating. This is not to deny, however, that the apocalyptic element in Daoism probably had purely native roots.

Next to be considered was a matter internal to Buddhism: the relationship of the Huayan 華嚴 philosophy of the interpenetration of all phenomena to the notion of the decline of the Dharma that had come to pervade Chinese Buddhist circles by the seventh century. This was a question of drawing out implicit meanings rather than relying on explicit statements. Could it be that, by collapsing the common-sense structure of time and space, the sense that the Buddha lived long ago and far away could be abolished by this mode of thought, and (it might be added) by Tiantai 天台 thought as well? Both systems of course also involve meditational paths that might further provide experiential validation of their philosophical claims, even if there is nothing to make

¹¹ Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 20; Fukunaga, “Chūgoku ni okeru tenchi hōkai no shisō,” 169–88.

this explicit. Obviously, there is room for disagreement, but approaching the surviving record with a largely historical education, I have always tried to grasp the larger, frequently completely unstated context in which ideas were formed and actions took place, even at the risk of being seen as unduly speculative.

To put it in a nutshell, “Compared to what?” always seems to be a question worth asking, in that it directs us to the bigger picture. This is in line with what I take to be a relatively commonplace methodology. In studying religious phenomena, it is now increasingly common to speak of a marketplace of competing products but, in fact, clear statements of this type of analysis may be already found in China in the mid-nineteenth century. Even earlier, the notion of competition as a motive force in the production of new religious ideas seems to have already been present in eighteenth century Japan.¹² Obviously, reimagining a long-lost market is a tricky project, but in seventh century China at least some thinkers were prepared to speak of their teachings as good options in the face of the decline of the Dharma.¹³ Others seem to have been less worried by the decline of the Dharma as such, fretting instead over what they considered the more immediate problem of a slackening in Buddhist practice.¹⁴ But immediate problems could have been taken as symptomatic of wider ones. Certainly, as Jan Nattier brilliantly demonstrated in her account of early forebodings of the end of Buddhism, dissension within the Saṅgha is seen as pointing the way to disaster in some very influential narratives, signalling a drift towards more talk and less action.¹⁵ Though the tale she tells culminates not simply in quarrels but even in murder, the fracturing of an originally unified tradition would have had resonances within the Chinese heritage: though at times a hundred flowers may have blossomed and a hundred schools of thought contended, this was in itself a matter of regret and proof of decadence to those who yearned for the supposed unity of more ancient times.¹⁶

These points might be kept in mind in evaluating some remarks that I

¹² Barrett, “The Early Modern Origins of Chinese Indology”; Barrett, “Michael Pye, Translating Drunk – and *Stark Naked*: Problems in Presenting Eighteenth Century Japanese Thought.”

¹³ See, for example, Pas, *Visions of Sukhāvātī: Shan-Tao's Commentary on the Kuan Wu-Liang-Shou-Fo Ching*, 141–42.

¹⁴ See the careful arguments on this score in Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy*, 223–36.

¹⁵ Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*, 219–27.

¹⁶ Cf. Barrett, *Li Ao: Buddhist, Taoist, or Neo-Confucian?*, 139–40.

have made concerning the historical situation of Chan 禪 Buddhism. A Chan tradition bearing the ultimate mind to mind message of a chain of patriarchs from India to China might well be seen as an answer to the darkening prospects of the age, for in the darkness, that light—passed from generation to generation—would surely be seen by insiders to the patriarchal transmission as capable of shining on regardless. This suggestion has at least been entertained by one scholar working on that tradition.¹⁷ But, to my way of thinking, the initial problem was simply exacerbated by the heroic achievements of the “Tang Monk,” the pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664). No one could possibly imagine a bolder attempt at reversing the negative tide of history and getting back to the roots of the Chinese Buddhist tradition in India than his, especially since, upon his return to his homeland, he followed this up with epic levels of translation and teaching. Yet all his attempts at creating new norms for Chinese Buddhism had the inevitable effect of creating dissension, the very signal of further decline, and thus a further incentive to look to the assurance of the Chan transmission. This interpretation, too, has gathered some support, even if with some justice it has been described as “still speculative.”¹⁸

From the seventh century, however, I turned to the Ming (1368–1644), specifically to a reading of the Neo-Confucianism of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) as a solution of a slightly different sort to an allied problem: namely, what to do until the Messiah arrives, given that the ultimate cultural regeneration to which Confucians looked required the appearance of a sage, and sages had proved themselves remarkably reluctant to appear ever since the passing of Confucius himself. Meanwhile, however, as a quick look at Ming Buddhist sources revealed, notions of the decline of the Dharma had not faded away; indeed, if one has the notion of an ending not with a bang but a whimper—as the decline of the Dharma or *mofa* 末法 model proposes—then there is plenty of time available to whimper before the end of human life on earth. The discussion of *mofa* among Ming Buddhists proved on my initial reconnaissance to be somewhat unevenly spread, but it was certainly there. Furthermore, in

¹⁷ Morrison, *The Power of Patriarchs: Qisong and Lineage in Chinese Buddhism*, 45–46, draws on publications other than those which I recapitulate here.

¹⁸ See Greene, “The *Dust Contemplation*: A Study and Translation of a Newly Discovered Chinese Yogācāra Meditation Treatise from the Haneda Dunhuang Manuscripts of the Kyo-U Library,” 3, note 8.

the 1610 work *Tianyuan mingkong ji* 天樂鳴空集 [A Collection of Celestial Music Sounding in the Air], published in 1653, by Bao Zhongzhao 鮑宗肇 (early seventeenth century), I discovered a form of what I took to be “realised eschatology,” that is, a denial of the apparent historical reality of decline and an assertion that there is no point in expecting the future Buddha Maitreya (Mile fo 彌勒佛) to arrive at all (though perhaps, as a Pure Land devotee, Bao had his eyes on a more immediate goal).¹⁹ What strikes me most now is that orthodox Buddhism scarcely expects the arrival of Maitreya for millennia, so Bao must have been reacting to the presence of sectarian religion in his immediate environment, not just at the fringes of Ming life.

The bulk of the remainder of my survey then turned to rebel movements of the Qing period (1644–1911), from which reading I merely wish to report that false messiahs promising safety at a time of cosmic collapse to the devout—and especially to those able to substantiate their devotion through financial contributions—will, I fear, always be with us. A brief excursus also looked at images of the declining Dharma in the writings of the perennially fascinating Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841).²⁰ But in bringing my survey as up to date as possible, I also made use of a short work that I had found earlier in a Chinatown supermarket in London, the *Dasheng mojie jing* 大聖末劫經, which I shall provisionally translate as the *Scripture of the Great Sage for the Final Kalpa*. I had no means of discerning the history of this text, as it was unknown to Li Shiyu 李世瑜 (1922–2010), the noted expert on Chinese sectarian literature, to whom I showed it (perhaps indicating that it did not circulate in the North Chinese environment with which he was most familiar). More recently, versions have been published in Taiwan in compendia of morality books (*shan-shu* 善書), in print and online, making it more widely available. Gareth Fisher suggests that a work under this title goes back to the Ming, though if it relates to the text I have then it can only refer to an original core, since it mentions dates in the late Qing and early Republican period, right up to 1951.²¹ My own copy bears the address of a publisher in Hong Kong and a printer in Macau. The English words “PRINTED IN MACAU” also appear on the back cover;

¹⁹ Bao is mentioned in the main directory of prominent Chinese Amidists, see Peng and Gu, comps., *Jingtu shengxian lu* 8.311.

²⁰ Cf. Barrett, “Early Modern Origins of Chinese Indology.”

²¹ See Fisher, “Morality Books and the Regrowth of Lay Buddhism in China,” 59.

other versions online give different Hong Kong addresses. The Great Sage (Ch. *dasheng* 大聖) named at the start of the text is Maitreya, but plenty of other divinities such as the Jade Emperor (Yudi 玉皇) and Guanyin 觀音 also vouchsafe their teachings in the course of the work.

I used the *Scripture of the Great Sage* to make two points. One was that it enjoins a type of pyramid selling: “If there is someone who has this scripture, they are to transmit it to the world; one should transmit to ten, ten to one hundred, one hundred to a thousand times ten thousand. After sheltering through the years of the final kalpa they will reach the ‘days of Yao and Shun’” (若有人將此經，傳于天下，一傳十，十傳百，百傳千萬，躲過末劫之年，到了堯天舜日)—in other words, a utopia. But those who do not pass the text on will suffer ten kalpas and find it difficult to achieve rebirth.²² To my mind, this raised a second point: for all the tribulations mentioned in the text, the destruction of the planet does not appear to be envisaged. It was not until later that I realised that the translation “kalpa,” referencing the etymological connection with Indian thought, grossly overrates the cosmic significance of the word, which means no more than “crisis,” implying severe troubles, but no more. A 1948 survey of the cult of four sacred animals in the Beijing area of those days found that, amongst other examples of animals that might transcend their lowly status through a process of self-discipline, a hedgehog might become a magic hedgehog if only it could overcome its personal kalpa or crisis in the form of an irrational urge to lie down in the path of an oncoming heavily loaded cart.²³ Obviously this usually spells *finis* for one hedgehog, but the cart and the cosmos roll on.

Studies of the sectarian tradition in China and of the Buddhist-influenced cosmologies that they envisage have rolled on, too, throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For a summary slanted towards the modern and contemporary period, even Wikipedia now offers a summary in its entry on “Chinese salvationist religions.”²⁴ The sixth and seventh centuries have attracted less attention, but as it happens, Wikipedia is now teeming with news about the period, much of it provided not by historians but by scientists.

²² *Dasheng mojie jing* 1.3. I passed on a photocopied version to Li Shiyu.

²³ See Li, “The Cult of the Four Sacred Animals in the Neighbourhood of Peking,” 7–8.

²⁴ Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia, “Chinese Salvationist Religions,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_salvationist_religions.

The development in the 1990s of dendrochronology—the science of examining tree rings for distinctive patterns of colder and warmer years to establish a series of dates—uncovered something quite anomalous in 536, suggesting a protracted event, at least in the Northern hemisphere, akin to a nuclear winter.²⁵ Subsequent research incorporating data analysing dust deposits from ice core samples has pinned the blame for this on a massive volcanic eruption, and further identifies a second similar catastrophe from 539 to 540, with perhaps a third in 547. In short, the middle of the sixth century was hit by a double or triple whammy unparalleled in historical times. Throughout Europe and in the Mediterranean world more broadly, the “Plague of Justinian” further added very high levels of mortality from 541 onwards, though the connection between the two events is perhaps just a bad coincidence.

Now, Jan Nattier’s work has alerted us to the deep historical roots of concern over the future in the Buddhist community, but there seems to be no question that these concerns found a new and more urgent formulation during the second half of the sixth century. In the past, the chief author of this innovation has been seen as Huisi 慧思 (515–577), though there is a certain lack of confidence in his actual authorship of the passages in which these concerns are articulated, even if the emergence of new anxieties towards the end of his life seems beyond dispute.²⁶ Accordingly, when invited to give a lecture at Stanford in 2006, I drew attention to the literary parallels between China and Europe at this point, adducing the writings of the British monk Gildas (whose dates are unknown, and who may perhaps have been writing before 536) and Procopius of Byzantium (writing in the 550s) versus Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之 (writing in North China in 547) and Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581), looking back on the mid-century history of the Chinese south.²⁷ All four take a very dim view of the recent past, even if Yang is certainly describing the abandonment of the North Chinese capital before 536. Neither of the Chinese authors writes from a dedicated Buddhist perspective and both would perhaps have been more influenced by native Chinese traditions of contemplating the ruins of once-splendid cities.

²⁵ Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopaedia, “Volcanic Winter of 536,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volcanic_winter_of_536. Also useful is the entry on the Late Antique Little Ice Age.

²⁶ See Stevenson and Kanno, *The Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra’s Course of Ease and Bliss: An Annotated Translation and Study of Nanyue Huisi’s (515–577) Fahua jing anlexing yi*, 86–88.

²⁷ Barrett, “Climate Change and Religious Response: The Case of Early Medieval China.”

The Christian writers in Europe, on the other hand, were probably aware of earlier models such as the Lamentations of Jeremiah.²⁸ Yang does pick up some prophecies of the disappearance of Buddhism from Chinese Buddhists traveling in the northwest of India, but he makes no comment on these references.²⁹ My quartet may perhaps thus be seen as no more than a literary flourish, allowing me to introduce some observations of the type that I have already touched upon here on religion of the epoch.

These sources, all of them available in English translation, also raise a question concerning historiography that is surely also worth considering: namely, how does fear and foreboding about the future, which may well be a powerful driver of cultural change, manifest itself in the written record? I have named the cultural products that influenced me in my adolescence, but they were the creations of twentieth-century mass media. What we have from the sixth century issues from quite different milieux and does not explicitly confirm what the tree rings and ice cores tell us. What is more, some consequences of the climate shocks may well have been hidden from all contemporary observers: I am thinking of factors already raised by scholars, such as the possible curtailing of long-distance trade routes through South and South-East Asia, a development that over time could have undermined the stability of the South Chinese regime in particular.³⁰ It would have been helpful to posterity had someone simply said in a datable inscription that climactic conditions had turned very unpleasant and that their only hope was an early intervention from Maitreya.

As it happens, the belief that Maitreya had put in an early appearance in what was accounted as his first recorded Chinese pre-incarnation in South China does emerge in the late sixth century, though I somehow overlooked this in 2006.³¹ This concerns the historical figure Mahasattva Fu (Fu Dashi 傅大士, 497–569), whose covert status would seem to be already alluded to in his epitaph of 573.³² Though the existence of this source is already attested in 624, it is

²⁸ For the Chinese writers, a model was quite close at hand from the preceding century: see Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*, 58–65.

²⁹ Lourme, *Yang Xuanzhi: Mémoire sur les monastères bouddhiques de Luoyang*, 149, 151, 155. This French translation provides the full Chinese text and draws on earlier English translations.

³⁰ See Barrett, “Climate Change,” 141, note 7.

³¹ Hsiao, “Two Images of Maitreya: Fu Hsi and Pu-tai Ho-shang.”

³² On this epitaph, already cited in 624, see Hsiao, “Two Images of Maitreya: Fu Hsi and

possible that it has been subject to interpolation, for there is every sign that the later cult of this figure generated plenty of textual material attributed to him, including his famous verses on the *Diamond Sūtra* (Ch. *Jin'gang jing* 金剛經) which, according to Edwin G. Pulleyblank, exhibit in the introductory prayers transcriptions of Sanskrit that must be later than the sixth century.³³ Even so, it is perhaps significant that the Mahasattva's remarks on the future demise of Buddhism are couched in language that does not reflect the *mofa* analysis that became so prominent after his lifetime.³⁴

As it happens, we do now have a very thorough study of Buddhist inscriptions of the fifth and sixth centuries which goes into the question of what they reveal about contemporary perceptions of the human condition, from a first-rate Chinese scholar. I refer to the study of North Chinese popular Buddhist inscriptions by Hou Xudong 侯旭東, whose analysis is based on a corpus of one thousand six hundred items, stretching from 400 to 580 CE.³⁵ For the period during and in the immediate aftermath of the two or three climate shocks, however, no change in the rate of production of inscriptions may be detected at all: it would seem that everyone just kept calm and carried on.³⁶ Hou further devotes a section of his study to the stated impact of warfare on the authors of the inscriptions, given how very violent the two centuries of his survey were. In principle, as the Buddhist scriptures available in Chinese attest, the Buddha is a bringer of peace.³⁷ Though he detects some increase in mentions of a longing for a non-violent world (especially from the time that the Northern Wei moved towards its collapse in the third decade of the sixth century), the number of inscriptions that are involved is still very small, a mere 3.6% of the total.³⁸

Our sources may, however, give us a far from complete picture of the experiences of their authors for two reasons. First, the inscriptions surveyed, as Hou establishes, are very formulaic, with little scope in their conventions

Pu-tai Ho-shang," 50–52. For the identification with Maitreya in this source, see her translation, 65–66.

³³ Emmerick and Pulleyblank, *A Chinese Text in Central Asian Brahmi Script: New Evidence for the Pronunciation of Late Middle Chinese and Khotanese*, 14.

³⁴ Hsiao, "Two Images of Maitreya," 118–28.

³⁵ These sources are listed in Hou, *Wu liu shiji beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang*, 354–429.

³⁶ Hou, *Wu liu shiji*, 384–95.

³⁷ See Barrett, "Religion and Violence in China," 350–51.

³⁸ Hou, *Wu liu shiji*, 98.

to introduce new themes in response to new circumstances.³⁹ Secondly, the inscriptions are almost all records of the erection of Buddhist statues. The image of a Buddha in Buddhist eyes establishes the presence of the Buddha; it is a form of relic and, as such, it is an assertion that despite the passing of the historical Buddha long ago and in another country, his presence persists and can be strengthened by the pious activities of his followers in multiplying his physical form. Hou's work is eloquent testimony to the need felt by Chinese Buddhists of the sixth century to shore up the presence of the Buddha against the sense that it might be fading away. Their success on their own terms also garnered eloquent testimony from one group of neutral observers: a group of Turkic ambassadors to the Eastern Roman Empire—a land not lacking in public statuary accumulated over more than a millennium—based on their contacts with North China at the end of the sixth century. These intermediaries summed up the civilisation they saw there with the words “Statues are the cult of this nation.”⁴⁰

There is yet more evidence for the hidden pressure of eschatological doubts on the culture of the sixth and seventh centuries that has emerged from research into the political ideologies of the time. The first scholar to devote a monograph to any aspect of the imperial ideology of this period was Antonino Forte (1940–2006) in 1976, though he was entirely aware of the complexities of the topic and, with exemplary diligence, published an expanded version of his initial work in 2005.⁴¹ The emperors of the Northern Wei had rather crudely projected their image as Buddhas; Emperor Wu of the Liang had more subtly positioned himself as a leading bodhisattva.⁴² But after the reunification of China, the ruler had a much more extended palette of ideological colourings with which to depict him or herself. Forte noted that the female emperor, Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705), was at a critical juncture; in the context of widespread anxiety about the decline of the Dharma, she was equated by her prop-

³⁹ Hou, *Wu liu shiji*, 102–3.

⁴⁰ Whitby and Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, 192. The precise date of the report is a problem that I cannot discuss here, but its accuracy is not in question.

⁴¹ For a summary of Forte's scholarship which gives due attention to this ground-breaking work, see Jinhua Chen's editorial comments in Chen, “Foreword: In Memory of Antonino Forte.”

⁴² Carswell, *Written and Unwritten: A New History of the Buddhist Caves at Yungang*; Janousch, “The Reform of Imperial Ritual during the Reign of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty.”

agandists with Maitreya, while adding a typically nuanced commentary of his own on how this was to be understood.⁴³ Since the passing of this much-loved scholar, a wider background to his findings has become apparent. Thus, N. Harry Rothschild (1969–2021) subsequently undertook a much broader sketch of the astounding array of female divinities that were enrolled to justify the unprecedented rule as emperor by a woman, but concluded this survey with her Maitreyan role, drawing on Forte’s highly innovative research on the topic together with some of his other writings.⁴⁴

In a more recent work by April Hughes, the focus shifts chronologically. She, too, of course draws on Forte’s work for Wu and Maitreya but adds some of her own research on the texts involved.⁴⁵ Beyond this, however, she also shows that the co-opting of the figure of Maitreya by imperial power was not completely unprecedented, in that the propagandists of Emperor Wen 文 of the Sui (r. 581–604) seem to have tied him to another figure linked to Maitreya, Prince Moonlight (Yueguang tongzi 月光童子), another apocalyptic future ruler whose significance was earlier uncovered by another great European scholar, Erik Zürcher.⁴⁶ Apparently, the Dutch scholar had initially intended in his studies of this area to push on to give an overview of *mofa* thought, but he had many calls on his erudition, and it seems that this never happened.⁴⁷ The new study by Hughes, however, opens up many useful perspectives, not least in exploring some of the native sources for the Buddhist-inclined apocalyptic literature of the sixth century. In one of her texts, for example, people are saved by a big bird, in scenes reminiscent of *The Hobbit*, and for this motif she refers not only to earlier Daoist literature but also Han dynasty art, though her Buddhist big bird can carry thousands more people than its antecedents.⁴⁸ She traces other themes forward into tenth century Dunhuang literature and even into the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ That from the late sixth to the late seventh century the politically powerful should have felt under pressure to co-opt the messianic

⁴³ Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century*, 224–33.

⁴⁴ Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities and Dynastic Mothers*, 221–24.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Worldly Saviors and Imperial Authority in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*, 81–85.

⁴⁶ Hughes, *Worldly Saviors*, 61–79.

⁴⁷ See Silk, “Introduction,” 11, in his edited *Buddhism in China: Collected Papers of Erik Zürcher*, and Zürcher’s reprinted studies on 165–257.

⁴⁸ Hughes, *Worldly Saviors*, 36, and 130, note 52.

figures and tropes that she describes is surely ample testimony to their potency.

Before leaving the period from the mid-sixth to the seventh century, a couple of supplementary points need to be made. First, despite the overlap between Buddhist and Daoist ideas that characterise apocalyptic thought, no fully rounded picture of developments is likely to emerge until the fate of the Daoist community, especially in the south, after circa 550 is accounted for.⁵⁰ We know that some revelations attributed to a figure known as Jinming Qizhen 金明七真 are dated to that very period, but the rise and further development of his cult are as yet uncharted, even though a considerable quantity of relevant material survives.⁵¹ Secondly, our understanding of epidemic disease during this period of human history is developing very rapidly, and this may influence our picture of events in China. Most recently, for example, a preliminary report has definitively identified the disease that caused havoc in Europe during the latter part of the reign of the emperor Justinian from materials in a cemetery near Cambridge, England as bubonic plague, but at the same time it has been noted that the associated burials were quite orderly and normal, quite unlike the plague pits associated with the later “Black Death.”⁵² But even the “Black Death” seems not to have had the impact in China that one might have expected, suggesting that it is in any case problematic to extrapolate from the European evidence in discussing disease in China, even if, for example, the role of epidemics in stimulating religious change in the late Han seems beyond dispute.⁵³ As ever, the past is changing before our eyes.

⁴⁹ Hughes, *Worldly Saviors*, 35, and note 48 on 129–30.

⁵⁰ I am indebted to Terry Kleeman for drawing my attention to this problem during my visit to Berkeley. Recently Stephen R. Bokenkamp has pointed out the persistence of apocalyptic themes in literature of Daoist inspiration, noting the early sixth century, and thus in my view raising the likelihood that any experience of calamity from climate events in the 530s would have resonated strongly in Daoist circles then, and indeed thereafter. See Bokenkamp, “Epilogue: Traversing the Golden Porte—The Problem with Daoist Studies,” 241–57.

⁵¹ The most extensive survey I have seen is by Reiter, *The Aspirations and Standards of Taoist Priests in the Early T'ang Period*, 50–55, 180–217.

⁵² Scheib, “A Plague that Wasn’t There: How to Study Pandemics in the Absence of Historical Evidence.” This brief report appeared in the college magazine of St. John’s College, Cambridge.

⁵³ See the survey of recent research on the question of the “Black Death” by Timothy Brook in his *Great State: China and the World*, 53–75. For the Han epidemics and religion, see Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, *Cambridge History of China: The Ch’in and Han Empires*, 221 B.C. – A.D. 220, Volume 1, 876.

In short, the ongoing research into the history of Chinese Buddhist and Buddhist-influenced eschatology that I have encountered over the past half century is still far from having reached anything more than provisional conclusions. At least the advent of the new millennium in the chronology of Western civilisation has drawn some attention to the cultural specificity of much of our attitudes to the future.⁵⁴ My remarks have been desultory and confined to reconsidering my own limited reading and, where possible, correcting earlier misstatements rather than aiming at any broad overview. But a few concluding observations may be worth underlining. First, orthodox Buddhist ideas have always co-existed with what from that standpoint would be considered heterodox ideas, and the orthodox have usually been perfectly cognisant of the existence of the heterodox and have tried to rise to the challenge they present. “Bricolage” the constructs of the competition may seem to us, but in their time, they had immense suasive power.⁵⁵ This makes the notion of Buddhist studies as a separate area of inquiry quite problematic in some circumstances, though I see that current scholarship is in at least some cases alive to this complication, for example in the work of Justin Ritzinger, who does not treat twentieth-century Buddhist dedication to Maitreya in isolation from its less orthodox alternatives.⁵⁶

Secondly, the heterodox and more indigenous or Daoist influences on the concept of cataclysm, even when using Buddhist language, tend to overstate the survivability of catastrophe rather than contemplate the permanent extinction of life on earth, at least from the perspective of one brought up on the notion of “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD for short) in nuclear war. Unfortunately, such destruction is still a possibility and becoming more rather than less likely with nuclear proliferation. It may be argued that a continuity of karma and so of humans carries over from the end of one world system through aeons of emptiness to the start of a new world system, but educated Buddhists were aware that this was not a prospect to relish. I note from Yanagida

⁵⁴ For which see the cogent critique of Cohen, “Time, Culture, and Christian Eschatology: The Year 2000 in the West and the World”.

⁵⁵ See Ownby, “Chinese Millenarian Traditions: The Formative Age,” 1527. This is a very useful review, albeit one that, like my present remarks, keeps almost exclusively to European-language scholarship.

⁵⁶ Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism*.

Seizan's 柳田聖山 monumental concordance to the tenth-century *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 (*Collection of the Patriarch Hall*) that during this particularly dire passage in Chinese history, the minds of the masters as reflected in the sayings of the age seem to have dwelt more than usual on the horror of this spectacle.⁵⁷ They were theoretically expecting a whimper, not a bang, but they were not in the least reassured.

Thirdly, despite my prediction about the continued appearance of false messiahs, it would seem unlikely that anyone of any political importance will be advocating the type of identification with higher spiritual power put forward by the propagandists of the emperors Wen and Wu. But apocalyptic themes would appear to be still present in culture unless, that is, they have faded since the *Scripture of the Great Sage* turned up in Margaret Thatcher's London. "Incursions of foreigners" is certainly one feature of the literature, and fear of foreigners is something that the politically powerful understand and may be tempted to deploy in their own interests, summoning up very ancient demons.⁵⁸

Against this, a fourth consideration is that the record suggests that fear of the future can engender cultural innovation that may turn out to be positive. Regarding the proliferation of statues I have already mentioned, in my 2006 remarks on climate change, I argued perhaps somewhat tendentiously that a desire for Buddha's consoling presence in hard times in the form of relics also prompted the employment of mass printing, capable of multiplying forms of the Buddha's presence in the shape of his words. More unambiguously, it seems plain that following the example of Mahasattva Fu some four centuries later, another visit from Maitreya resulted in the most popular cultural export ever to come out of China: namely, the Laughing Buddha, who to my eye appears to be already present on the mantelpiece in one of Hogarth's eighteenth-century illustrations of "The Rake's Progress," to say nothing of his eastward progress as Hotei 布袋, the Japanese god of good fortune.⁵⁹ And looking at the future from where we are now, we are certainly going to need all the good luck we can get.

⁵⁷ Yanagida, *Sodōshū sakuin*, 847.

⁵⁸ Cf. Barrett, "Religion and Violence," 357–59, 364–66. Ownby, "Chinese Millenarian Traditions," prefaces his remarks by saying that he judged millenarian ideas to be still current in North China at the end of the twentieth century.

⁵⁹ Hsiao, "Two Images," also deals with the historical origins of this preincarnation, though not with Budai's very wide cultural ramifications.

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