

The Sociopolitical Positioning of the Buddhist Sangha vs the Imperial State in Medieval China

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Paper Proposal

The paper will explore certain aspects of the relationship between the Buddhist Sangha and the various imperial states that ruled China during the medieval period (roughly third through tenth century), with a special focus on the points of tension created by the monastic order's efforts to establish a sense of autonomy and its demands to receive special economic, political, or social exemptions/prerogatives on one hand, and the royal imperium's assertion of absolute authority over all subject and its prerogative to arbitrarily impose various kinds of demands on the other hand. That was a crucial period in the transmission and growth of Buddhism into China (and then to the rest of East Asia), during which the initially foreign religion, brought by itinerant monks and Central Asian merchants, became the strongest and most popular religious tradition in China. Among the many important developments that took place during this fascinating epoch was the gradual establishment of many of the basic power relations and legal strictures that came to characterize the church vs state relationship in imperial China.

While in the end the Sangha's efforts to safeguard its independence and ward off the encroachment of the totalitarian state was largely a losing proposition, in the protracted process that involved complex sociopolitical negotiations and shifting religious realignments the Buddhist clergy was able to secure important exemptions from the Chinese rulers' demands—most notably exemptions from certain forms of taxation, military conscription, and forced labor—which helped secure the economic foundations of monastic life and enhance the prominent place of Buddhism in medieval Chinese society. Specifically, the paper will explore, in general terms, some of the key debates that pitted prominent Buddhist monastics, such as Huiyuan (334–416), against key segments of the Chinese sociopolitical elites, many of whom were influenced by a prevalent form of Confucian ideology that was largely inimical to monastic institutions. At their core, these protracted debates aimed at adjudicating the place of Buddhism in Chinese society and setting specific parameters that demarcated the relationship between the Sangha and the imperial state. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that in the Chinese context much of the external focus involved tussles over symbolic issues, such as whether monks should bow to the emperor or pay ceremonial respects to their parents (as an expression of filial piety).

In a broader sense, by looking at some of the specific religious milieus and historical contexts of premodern China, including the professed pieties of individual monarch and the political predicaments they faced, the paper will also make a modest contribution to the critical reassessment of some of the central concept and entrenched paradigm that guide much of popular discussions about church vs state relationships. More specifically, the paper will problematize the basic religious-secular dichotomy, or the supposed opposition that pitted the church (here represented by Buddhism) against the secular state (represented by the various Chinese empires that rose and fell during the medieval period). Notwithstanding the many fascinating parallels with important historical development in Europe and the Middle East, Buddhism does not quite fit neatly into the established category of religion (narrowly defined), which is largely constructed in terms of Eurocentric models and conceptions. In the same vein, notwithstanding the one-sided (and largely misleading) narrative promoted by Confucian ideologues (and their Enlightenment-inspired sympathizers), on the whole the premodern Chinese state was hardly secular, or narrowly Confucian.

Presenter

Mario Poceski, an associate professor of Buddhist studies and Chinese religions at the Religion Department, University of Florida, received a PhD in East Asian Languages and Cultures, with specialization in Buddhist studies, from the University of California, Los Angeles (2000). He has spent extended periods as a visiting researcher at Komazawa University (Japan), Stanford University, the National University of Singapore, and the University of Hamburg (Germany), and has received several prestigious fellowships, including an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellowship (for senior researchers). Poceski's most recent books are *The Records of Mazu and the Making of Classical Chan Literature* (Oxford 2015), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism* (Blackwell 2014, ed.), *Introducing Chinese Religions* (Routledge 2009), and *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism* (Oxford 2007). His publications also include two other books and numerous articles and chapters on various aspects of Buddhist studies.