The Debate and Confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia
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The Debate and Confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia

A Historical Overview

Translated by Jan Vrhovski

Foreword by Jana S. Rošker

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Foreword

Chun-Chieh Huang, the author of the present book, is an extremely prolific writer. He is a Distinguished Chair Professor of National Taiwan University (NTU), and an academic adviser of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at the Academia Sinica in Taipei. He was the National Chair Professor of the Ministry of Education, Taiwan, and the Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the NTU. Over the past 20 years, Professor Huang and his colleagues have edited eight book series in Chinese on Confucian culture, which has been brought to life due to the increasing relevance of these regions on the global level. The present work is a partial translation of his recent Chinese book on the discourse on humanity in the history of East Asian Confucianisms.

Professor Huang has been a leading author in the study of “East Asian Confucianisms.” As compared to the 20th century New Confucians, who studied Confucianism on a “state-centric” basis, Professor Huang and his team have promoted the study of “East Asian Confucianisms” from a transnational, multilingual, and transcultural perspective. This new study of Confucianism in 21st century Taiwan has been very much fascinated with two developments in the history of Confucianisms in East Asia, namely, the first one is the emergence of tensions and fusions between Chinese Confucian values and the specific characteristics of other regions such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam in East Asia, and secondly, the duality of cultural and political identity exhibited within East Asian Confucianisms among non-Chinese Confucians. The study of Confucianism in Korea, Japan and Vietnam explores the inseparability and tension between cultural and political identity in the minds of Confucian scholars in these countries.

In this work, Chun-Chieh Huang takes us on a long and exciting journey through the landscapes of Chinese and East Asian intellectual history, focusing upon an important question that has – for much too long – been overlooked or...
even neglected by the majority of scholars dealing with East Asian history, philosophy and religious studies. As such, this book is elaborating upon the connections and interactions between Confucianism and Buddhism, which represent two of the traditional “three teachings (san jiao 三教)” that have been largely defining the long-lasting development of the so-called “Chinese mind”. The third teaching among these is Daoism, which – in the framework of what is commonly understood as indigenous Chinese thought – mostly served as a complementary antipode to Confucian ethics and philosophy.

When Buddhism came to China toward the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), it was confronted with a rich spiritual and philosophical life that was completely different from its own conceptual and metaphysical paradigms. While Buddhism originally preached a negation of the physical world, including human beings and their individual selves, presupposing their illusionary nature, Confucianism was completely attuned to the world and life itself, embracing and celebrating its positive connotations for concrete people and their societies and cultures. Therefore, it laid stress upon the systematic development of ethics and interpersonal relations, whereas Buddhism was originally inclined to understand morality and ethics as, at the most, one of the many tools on the difficult path that can lead to enlightenment.

This Buddhist view of the empty nature of the world was closer to certain Daoist approaches, which were similarly based upon such concepts as emptiness or selflessness, and which equally laid stress upon the importance of certain mediation techniques. Therefore, in the first centuries during and after the “Buddhist conquest of China” as argued by Erik Zürcher (1928–2008) or the “domestication” of Buddhism in China as Arthur F. Wright (1913–1976) termed it, Daoism was often used as a valuable and important bridge connecting the basic spiritual approaches of Buddhism with the worldly and positively oriented traditional Chinese worldview. In contrast to such linkages, Professor Huang’s book focuses upon the hitherto much less investigated, but nevertheless “eye-catching” phenomenon, namely the long and winding developmental stream of debates and confluences between Confucianism and Buddhism. The author points to the fact that after its arrival in China, Buddhism first found itself in a severe conflict with Confucianism. The resulting controversies reached their climax between the fourth and the sixth centuries CE. After the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), however, Mahayana Buddhism had spread and flourished over all of China.

1 This is a reference to the title of Erik Zürcher’s famous book on the expansion and Sinicization of Buddhism in China, see Erik Zürcher. The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007).
On the surface, the Confucian and Buddhist positions were clearly separated during these periods. On a certain level, Buddhism was even endangering the dominant social and political position of Chinese Confucianism. Constituting the main material of the rigid and static official examination system, Confucian philosophy gradually became too static and formalised to satisfy the intellectual needs of the educated members of society at the time. While they had to learn the Confucian classics by heart in order to climb up their administrative and political careers, they increasingly tended to seek intellectual satisfaction in the endless depths of Buddhist philosophy. These deficiencies of the official Confucian state doctrine were addressed during the developmental course of the Neo-Confucian philosophies of the Song and Ming Dynasties, in which Mengzi was canonised as the most important follower of Confucius. In this period, Neo-Confucian thought, albeit latently and indirectly, integrated numerous conceptual elements of Buddhist thought (and especially of its Sinicised versions) into the newly evolving Neo-Confucian philosophy, which had a lasting impact on Korea and Japan. These indirect, but nevertheless significant elements of Buddhist intellectual legacies later also formed the pinnacle of the Confucian revival in the modern period, i.e. in the intellectual current of the so-called Modern or New Confucianism, which was established in China on the threshold of the 20th century.

Buddhism, on the other hand, was gradually also modified and enriched by numerous elements of originally Confucian ethics, which progressively led to its radical transformation from a world-negating escapism to a positive and ethically fulfilling religion. Therefore, it was understandable that Chinese Buddhism was strongly influenced by Confucian values and principles. Instead of concentrating on escapism and negating concrete life in society, which was a common thread of the original Indian teachings, Chinese Buddhism has instead focused on ways to integrate its practices into people’s life and still enable them to maintain strong familial and political responsibilities.

Hence, it is by no means coincidental that nowadays many people not only in China and Taiwan, but also all over East Asia, see themselves as Buddhist and simultaneously as followers of Confucianism, and such a personal identity does not imply any kind of contradiction.

This is because these dialogues were not limited to the Chinese geopolitical and cultural sphere. They were an important factor in the gradual establishment of a broader East Asian culture, which was based on Sinitic foundations. This is another significant contribution of the present book, for its author offers readers a transparent and easily comprehensible, but simultaneously a highly critical survey over the complex history of Confucian and Buddhist interactions in Korea and Japan. In this way, he manages to posit them into a complex intercultural context, into a network of relations, permeated with various multi-layered his-
torical, political and conceptual dimensions, and defined by the de- and re-
contextualisation of numerous important notions.

Professor Huang, who is a well-known expert in East Asian Confucianisms,
meticulously analyses this process of conflicts, connections and communica-
tions. He starts with an investigation of the social and ideational background of
the spread of Buddhism from China to Korea and subsequently to Japan, and
then centres our attention on the intense debates that arose in Korea in the 14th
and 15th centuries, and later in 17th century Japan. The author introduces this
process, which led from initial mutual negation, exclusion and conflict, to an
ultimate confluence, harmonisation and synthesis between Confucianism and
Buddhism, by making good use of textual analyses and by balancing them with a
brilliant understanding and depiction of the particular historical periods and the
political events that characterised them.

First, the author reviews the origins and development of the above-mentioned
debates between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia. On this basis, he then
analyses the central concepts that emerged in these debates. The work also
comprehensively elaborates upon various developments of these polemics under
the specific social and political circumstances that have defined these regions,
contributing to manifold differences between them. By following the coherent
and well-founded structure of this book, the reader soon discovers that the depth
of research involved in compiling it is outstanding.

After introducing the historical background of the East Asian debates between
Confucianism and Buddhism, the author focuses on the central topics of their
disputes. Proceeding from ethical themes that are derived from the values and
virtues defining interpersonal relations, to the various political and ideological
contradictions, Professor Huang points to the relevance of political ethics. In this
regard, the book focuses on the Confucian and Buddhist discrepancies in their
particular views on the relation between the spiritual development or self-cul-
tivation on the one hand, and social and political responsibilities and power
structures on the other.

Another issue that is subsequently treated in this work is the problem of the
classical Chinese dichotomy between the (allegedly superior) Han Chinese cul-
ture and the “barbarian” societies. Since Buddhism originated in India, it
was certainly understandable that the two discourses collided concerning such
questions. In this context, Professor Huang explains the multifarious reasons for
the fact that this kind of controversies also arose in Joseon Korea, but never
occurred in Tokugawa Japan.

In the next step, the author turns to the philosophical differences between the
two teachings. Here, the central debate between Confucianism and Buddhism
was evolving around the relation between body and soul. In ancient China, people
tended to believe that the soul or human spirit resided in the body, and that after