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THE IMPACT OF BUDDHISM, CONFUCIANISM, AND TAOISM ON EARLY T'ANG POLITICS

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I. INTRODUCTION[1]

Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism had significant impact on T'ang China. The early emperors of the T'ang Dynasty (618-906) were clever in making full use of them religiously, spiritually, socially, culturally and (last but not least), politically while keeping them under state control. The early T'ang emperors (such as Kao-tsu, r. 619-26, and T'ai-tsung, r. 626-49) were pragmatic rulers, wishing to employ religious-cultural influence as an aid in consolidating the empire.[2] They tried to portray themselves as bearers of the religious-cultural traditions. The early T'ang rulers formed their policies, at least in part, to promote their own legitimation, to enhance their prestige and to establish their supremacy. Emperors Kao-tsu and T'ai-tsung sought to control Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, while at the same time encouraging and patronizing them, especially when they provided support for the legitimation and unity of the new dynasty. Indeed, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism contributed much to the consolidation of the newly founded T'ang empire. They were influential in their respective spheres, and they had proved to be especially useful in the process of imperial consolidation in early T'ang. Let us discuss each of them as follows.

II. BUDDHISM IN EARLY T'ANG POLITICS

Buddhism, in early T'ang, had a wide following among the peasants and the élite in north and south alike, a force that the politicians could not afford to ignore. In fact, the whole of the northern society was said to have been suffused with Buddhism, and according to Arthur Wright, Buddhism "penetrated economic life and affected customs at all levels of the society."[3] By patronizing Buddhism, the T'ang emperors presented themselves to the populace as open-minded, cosmopolitan rulers, who also realized that Buddhism had its political function for assuring social stability and unity. Emperor T'ai-tsung in an edict to the monasteries of all provinces in early Chen-kuan (貞觀) period, tried to console families of the dead soldiers by sponsoring the building of Buddhist temples.[4] In 628, the Emperor ordered the Buddhist temples in the capital and other big cities to observe seven days fasting and to hold services of consolation for the dead soldiers. The Emperor also ordered the Buddhist monks to pray for the harvest of the farmers, and to recite the *Jen-huang-ching* (仁皇經) and the *Ta-yün-ching* (大雲經) for the prosperity and stability of the T'ang empire.[5] In 629, Emperor T'ai-tsung ordered the construction of seven stapes and shrines on battlefields where he had triumphed, in memory of his soldiers who were killed in battle.[6] Some historians, such as T'ang

...t'ung (湯用彤), have argued that Emperor T'ai-tsung was exploiting such ...vities for religious effect and political purpose.[7] It reminds me of Constantine's ...tions with Christianity in the Roman Empire (and some Anglo-Norman kings ...). Constantine is described by some historians such as A.H.M. Jones as a cold-...ooded politician, making full use of Christianity as a political tool for consolidating ...e Roman Empire after the civil war.

Buddhism was also used by the T'ang emperors for the psychological conditioning of the soldiers. The Chinese tradition of filial piety and the Chinese concept of the afterlife had a negative effect on martial enthusiasm: the Chinese were unwilling to die disfigured since they believed that the same figure would appear in the afterlife. It was also the son's duty "to return his body intact upon his death and thus to show gratitude to his parents who had given it to him."[8] Hence, Chinese soldiers "had a horror of a disfigured death in battle and of burial far from home."[9] Buddhism helped relieve this psychological knot. According to Wright, "The Chinese Buddhist conception of a soul brought with it a new notion of immortality, and the Sui and T'ang Dynasties made a practice of building battle-field temples at the scenes of major engagements and endowing perpetual services for the repose of the souls of the war dead and their ultimate salvation."[10]

Buddhism was also used by the T'ang rulers as a socio-political tool for knitting together the two very different cultures of north and south China. The elite in the south thought of themselves as having a separate identity from the northerners, whom they despised as semi-barbaric. The northerners were indeed racially mixed and were influenced by Central Asian cultures. On the contrary, the southerners considered themselves as pure Han-blood and preservers of the Han tradition.[11] Indeed, the southerners were highly cultivated, and were renowned for their refined literary style and their sophisticated philosophy. Nevertheless, Buddhism, commonly accepted by both the north and the south, could help bridge the gap between the two. This again reminds me of the Norman Conquest of England. There was a big gap between the highly cultured Anglo-Saxons who were defeated by the semi-barbaric Normans (descended from the pirates – Vikings). Yet the Christian religion and culture helped bridge the gap.

For the first hundred years of the T'ang, Buddhism flourished as never before. According to Wright, the period of T'ang China was "the golden age of Chinese Buddhism."[12] The period of early T'ang witnessed the flowering of eight doctrinal schools of Buddhism.[13] Imperial patronage, though perhaps for political reasons, might be one of the many factors for the flowering. According to Stanley Weinstein, "although the T'ien-t'ai (天台), Fa-hsiang (法相), and Hua-yen (華嚴) schools each had highly complex metaphysical systems, each, in fact, also served a clearly definable political end. Hence, abrupt changes in the political situation immediately affected the standing of these schools. The philosophical schools were not formulated by monks who were immured in remote monasteries, but rather reflected, to a considerable degree, albeit in the recondite terminology of Buddhism, the political needs of their imperial patrons."[14]

The case of Hsüan-tsang (玄奘) may be yet another example reflecting the delicate relations between the T'ang emperors: T'ai-tsung and Buddhism. Hsüan-tsang (600-64) was a Chinese Buddhist monk, who travelled to, and was well-received in, India. On his way back to China, in 645, he wrote to Emperor T'ang T'ai-tsung, apologizing for having left China in 629 without authorization, and describing in detail fascinating accounts of his travels abroad. Hsüan-tsang also mentioned that he had "proclaimed the virtue of His Majesty so as to win the respect and admiration of the foreign people."[15] Emperor T'ai-tsung, perhaps thinking of Central and South Asia, could be useful to the empire in statecraft, welcomed the Buddhist monk in a letter. But when Hsüan-tsang arrived at Ch'ang-an (長安), in 645, the Emperor was Loyang (洛陽), preparing for his forthcoming campaign against Korea.[16] When Emperor T'ai-tsung had time to meet Hsüan-tsang, the Emperor did not ask about Buddhism in India, but about the climate, products, customs, and situation in Central and Southern Asia. Impressed by Hsüan-tsang's oral report, T'ai-tsung asked for a written account of the travel. The Emperor was probably more interested in the information that the Buddhist monk brought back that might have strategic value for the understanding of the western regions than in Buddhism *per se*. We may say that the T'ang Emperor's interest was in the monk's unique knowledge of the geography, customs and politics of India and Central Asia. Emperor T'ai-tsung even tried to persuade Hsüan-tsang to abandon his religious life as a monk so that Hsüan-tsang could advise him at court on political affairs.[17] Nevertheless, Hsüan-tsang refused to return to lay life, but continued undertaking the translation of the major scriptures of the Fa-hsiang (法相) school into Chinese.

Indeed, the early T'ang rulers gave limited patronage to Buddhism. Sometimes, they permitted the ordination of a few thousand priests and nuns. At times, they even dedicated Buddhist temples to offer prayers. Nevertheless, the early T'ang emperors' interests in Buddhism seemed to have been limited to those areas in which they met the political interest of the T'ang empire. With the history of recent dynasties in mind, the T'ang emperors were cautious "to guard against the resurgence of a Buddhist church as *imperium in imperio*."[18] In my opinion, the history of T'ang China witnessed a period when Buddhism became increasingly dependent on the state. In T'ang times, the ceremonies for Buddhists to be converted, monks to be ordained, the building of temples and monasteries and other Buddhist activities were under the control of the government. There were instances that prestigious official positions were given to renowned Buddhist monks, hence some Buddhist monks were attached, to a certain extent, to the secular government.

III. CONFUCIANISM IN EARLY T'ANG POLITICS

Confucianism, like Buddhism, seemed to have flourished in the T'ang Dynasty, too.[19] The case was especially evident in early T'ang. T'ang Kao-tsu and T'ai-tsung made use of Confucianism, according to Howard Wechsler, "for political ends, both sponsored scholarly projects dear to the hearts of all Confucians, and both utilized Confucians in important administrative and advisory capacities."[20]

In general, under the first two T'ang emperors, schools with Confucian

curricula were established in Ch'ang-an (長安) and the prefectures. T'ang T'ai-tsung even founded the Wen-hsüeh Kuan (文學館) and Hung-wen Kuan (弘文館) (private colleges of Confucian scholars), whose members acted as his secretaries and political advisers.

The dominance of Confucians in early T'ang intellectual and political life could be reflected in the Standard Histories of the T'ang. In the *Chiu T'ang-shu* (舊唐書), according to the study of Wechsler, "of a total of 34 Confucians who received biographies of their own ... 16 either embarked upon their careers or served in distinguished positions during the first two T'ang reigns. Indeed, early T'ang Confucians occupy one whole chapter of the two chapters devoted exclusively to Confucian scholars of the dynasty..... The same is true of the *New T'ang History* (新唐書) where .... a total of 19 early T'ang Confucians occupy one of the three chapters devoted to their kind."[21]

According to the study of Wechsler, of the 68 Confucian officials defined/identified in the first two reigns of T'ang (618-49), 18 (or 26.5%) rose to the position of chief ministers. This statistic, seen from another angle, means that of the total of 32 chief ministers for the period, the 18 Confucian chief ministers constituted approximately 56.3%.[22]

Nevertheless, like Buddhism, Confucianism was promoted by the early T'ang rulers because of a complex of reasons. To T'ang T'ai-tsung, his support for Confucianism was probably grounded in a pragmatic concern for what was politically expedient in the situation. T'ang T'ai-tsung seemed to have accepted the advice of Confucians regarding modes of personal conduct. Indeed, the Confucians regularly acted more like a restraining force on the T'ang emperors. This impact was still significant, as Benjamin Schwartz put it, "it may affect reality by precluding the application of energies to opposing goals and values – by its powers of inhibition."[23]

To sum up, Confucianism had not yet accomplished the dominance in government in early T'ang. It still had to compete with Buddhism and Taoism (as evidenced by the *san-chiao* (三教) ["three religions"] debates)[24] and it also had to counter the personal favours of the early T'ang emperors toward Buddhism or Taoism. Nevertheless, the standing of the Confucian tradition was enhanced, and the presence of quite a number of Confucian officials at the early T'ang court probably signified a period of re-emergence of Confucianism in government and in politics. It seemed that at least a rough balance was struck at the core of the T'ang court between the Confucians and other non-Confucian bureaucrats. But this balance between the idealistic Confucians and the pragmatic bureaucrats probably provided the early T'ang rulers a force in consolidating the empire.

IV. TAOISM IN EARLY T'ANG POLITICS

Taoism, like Confucianism, also contributed much to the development of Chinese administrative practice and political thought. Some scholars think that

certain concepts of Taoism might have served as a theoretical base to construct a system of authoritarian rule.[25] According to Arthur Wright, "(a certain) strain of Taoism served to justify and support the absolute power of the monarch."[26] Furthermore, various facets and traditions of Taoism intermingled and influenced the social, cultural and political history of China.[27] Indeed, Taoism had considerable knitting functions in society, since the great and little traditions of Taoism intermingled, thus narrowing the gap between the elite literati and the general population. The Taoist social and political knitting functions definitely operated in early T'ang. The traditional great aristocratic families of north China were still so snobbish that they despised those who came from "the dust," including the Li (李) royal family from the northwestern frontier. The Li royal family had to trace the ancestor back to the Taoist legendary founder Li Erh (Lao Tzu) (李耳 [老子]). If the royal family was descended from Li Erh, the masses would respect the T'ang rulers and the new order of their dynasty.[28] Indeed, the prestige of the royal family was enhanced by the promotion of Taoism. In fact, "the claim to be descended from Lao Tzu was built into the state ideology of the T'ang Dynasty."[29]

The Taoist traditions evidently had a strong foothold throughout the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and in the Sui and T'ang Dynasties, especially in the Kuan-chung (關中) area of north-western China. According to Anna Seidel, Emperor T'ang Kao-tsu "may well have felt himself to be the fulfilment of the messianic Taoist hopes that had reechoed throughout the whole Six Dynasties: a Lord Li, emissary of Lao Tzu, was to be ruler."[30] Actually, in the reign of the Sui Dynasty, when Li Yuan (李淵), the future Emperor T'ang Kao-tsu, was still Duke of T'ang (唐國公), he had already believed in Taoism and performed certain Taoist liturgies.[32] During the civil war before the founding of the T'ang Dynasty, a Taoist priest who was good at facial and palm reading had said of Li Yuan, "the Duke's bones were unusual: he must be the master of the masses in the future."[32] The Taoist myths and prophecies might have inspired and supported the uprising of Li Yuan and his family.[33]

The influence of the Taoist myths and prophecies continued after the founding of the T'ang Dynasty. In 620, Emperor T'ang Kao-tsu visited the Lou Kuan (樓觀) near Ch'ang-an. Kao-tsu summoned all the priests, saying, "my ancestors had descended here. I am now the master of the world. Can there be no construction here?"[34] The temple was then renamed Tsung Kuan (Ancestral Temple) (宗觀). The Emperor probably wanted to remind the public that the Li royal family was descended from the Taoist Sage, Li Erh, and that the Emperor was the *chen-chu* (眞主). Evidently, the T'ang Emperors continued to associate themselves closely with the Taoist myths.

The close relationship of the T'ang ruling house with Taoism could also be seen in some of the activities of the T'ang princesses. For instance, Princess T'ai-p'ing (太平公主) had been a Taoist priestess at the T'ai-p'ing Kuan (太平觀);[35] the Chin-hsien Kuan (金仙觀) and the Yu-chen Kuan (玉眞觀), respectively, were established when Princess Hsi-ning (西寧公主) and Ch'ang-lung (昌隆公主) became Taoist priestesses.[36]

The close relationship continued through the second (and later reigns) of the T'ang Dynasty. In 632, Ch'eng-ch'ien (承乾), the Heir-apparent, was sick. Chin Ying (秦英), a Taoist priest, was ordered to do the praying service for the Heir-apparent. Afterward, the Heir-apparent recovered, and the Lung-hsing Kuan (龍興觀) was built. In 638, services for Lao Tzu were established at Hao-chou (亳州).[37]

On the other hand, the early T'ang emperors were conquerors from the north. Their acceptance of the Mao Shan (茅山) sect of Taoism, which mingled various Taoist sources, could have a certain knitting function. The Mao Shan sect was quite influential in early T'ang politics. Many members of the Mao Shan sect of Taoism became spiritual masters of emperors and aristocrats.[38] One of the founders of the Mao Shan sect, T'ao Hung-ching (陶弘景 , 456-536), earlier continued his influence at court even after his retirement to Mao Shan. One of T'ao's followers: Wang Yuan-chih (王遠知), whose father had been the governor of Yang-chou (揚州), was a good friend of Emperor T'ang T'ai-tsung. Wang later became the abbot of the tenth generation (the first under the T'ang) of the Mao Shan sect.[39] In 635, Emperor T'ai-tsung showed concern for the sect, and ordered that a T'ai-p'ing Kuan be established in Mao Shan, and twenty-seven Taoist priests were ordained.[40] Wang's followers included Pang Shih-cheng (潘師正), Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen (司馬承禎), and Li Han-kuang (李含光)[41], the abbots of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth generations, respectively. These competent leaders expanded their sect which became one of the influential sects of T'ang Taoism.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were all popular, flourishing and influential in early T'ang. Buddhism was significant in many social, cultural and even psychological aspects, and it was, thus, patronized. Confucianism was also used by the early T'ang emperors for political ends. However, Confucianism also acted as a restraining force on the T'ang emperors. Last but not least, Taoism, in addition to many social and political functions, even had the political role of legitimizing the Li royal family, who would be happy to promote the religion. Indeed, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism all played a definite political role in the consolidation of the newly founded empire. Nevertheless, they had to compete among themselves for the favour of the T'ang rulers. Their impact on early T'ang politics seemed to be significant yet rather dependent on the T'ang emperors, who were clever in making full use of them socially, culturally and politically while keeping them under state control. All in all, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were all influential in their respective spheres, especially in the process of imperial consolidation in early T'ang.

NOTES

1. In this study, "early T'ang" is defined as the first two reigns of the T'ang Dynasty, i.e. the reigns of Kao-tsu (r. 618-26) and T'ai-tsung (r. 626-49).

2. S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (Glencoe, Ill., 1963), pp. 58-60; see also Frederick Hok-Ming Cheung, "The Political Role of Religion in Medieval Empires," *Asian Culture Quarterly*, XIII: 3(1985), 35-53; and Robert Somres, "Time, Space and Structure in the Consolidation of the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 617-700)," in *State and Society in Early Medieval China*, ed. by Albert Dien (Hong Kong, 1990), pp. 369-99.

3. Arthur Wright, "T'ang T'ai-tsung and Buddhism," in *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 241-42; cf. *Hsin T'ang-shu* (新唐書), ch. 79, p. 3540; and Ts'en Chung-mien (岑仲勉), *Sui-shu Ch'iu-shih* (隋書求是), (Peking, 1958), p. 364.

4. "Building Monasteries for those who died in battles" *Ch'uan T'ang-wen* (全唐文), ch.5; *T'ang hui-yao* (唐會要), ch. 48.

5. Cf. Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton, 1964), p. 217.

6. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, p. 271; cf. Arthur Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, 1959), pp. 74-75.

7. T'ang Yung-t'ung (湯用彤), *Sui T'ang fo-chiao shih-kao* (隋唐佛教史稿) (Peking, 1982), pp. 14-16); *Tzu-chih T'ung-ch'ien* (資治通鑑) (Chung-hua shu-chu, [中華書局], 1956), Peking, ch. 189.

8. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 74.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., pp. 74-75.

11. Cf. Richard Mather, "A Note on the Dialect of Loyang and Nanking during the Six Dynasties," in *Wen-lin: Studies in the Chinese Humanities* (Wisconsin, 1968), pp. 247-56.

12. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 70.

13. The eight schools were the T'ien-t'ai (天台), the Fahsiang (法相), the Hua-yen (華嚴), the San-chieh (三階), the Ching-t'u (淨土), the Ch'an (禪), the Mi (密) and the Lu (律).

14. Stanley Weinstein, "Imperial Patronage in the Formation of T'ang Buddhism," *Perspectives on the T'ang*, p. 305, and *Buddhism under the T'ang* (Cambridge, 1987).

15. Samuel Beal, *The Life of Hsüan-tsang* (London, 1911), p. 203; cf. T'ang Yung-t'ung, pp. 18-22.

16. Weinstein, p. 294.

17. Ibid., pp. 294-95.

18. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, p. 67.

19. Howard Wechsler, "The Confucian Impact on Early T'ang Decision-making," *T'oung-Pao* LXVI: 1-3 (1980), 1-40; *Mirror to the Son of Heaven: Wei Cheng at the Court of T'ang T'ai-tsung* (New Haven, 1974); "Factionalism in Early T'ang Government," *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 87-120; and *Offerings of Jade and Silk* (New Haven, 1985); and David McMullen, *State and Scholars in T'ang China* (Cambridge, 1988).

20. Wechsler, "The Confucian Impact on Early T'ang Decision-making," p. 3.

21. Ibid., pp. 4-5.

22. Ibid., pp. 11 and 39.

23. Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 13-14.

24. Lo Hsiang-lin (羅香林), "T'ang-tai san-chiao chiang-lun k'ao ([唐代三教講論考])," *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 1(1954), 85-88. In the first debate of 624, Kao-tsu awarded first place to the Taoists, second to the Confucians, and third to the Buddhists. See also McMullen, *State and Scholars in T'ang China*, "Confucian scholars were forced to compete for the emperor's patronage and resou..ces against representatives of the rival teachings of Buddhism and Taoism, the religious appeal of which they could not match." p. 6; see also pp. 33, 45, 74, 179, and 280.

25. H.G. Creel, *What is Taoism*? (Chicago, 1970), vii, 37-38, 70. cf. Ch'en Yin-k'o (陳寅恪), "Ts'ui Hao yu K'ou Ch'ien-chih (崔浩與寇謙之)," *Ch'en Yin-k'o hsien-sheng wen-shih lun-chi* (陳寅恪先生文史論集), II (Hong Kong, 1972), pp. 81-115, and "T'ien-shih Tao yu pin-hai-yu chih kuan-hsi (天師道與濱海地域之關係)," I (Hong Kong, 1972), pp. 141-81; see also T'ang Yung-t'ung (湯用彤) and T'ang I-chieh (湯一介), "K'ou Ch'ien-chih ti chu-tso yu ssu-hsiang (寇謙之的著作與思想)," *Li-shih yen-chiu* (歷史研究), 5(1961), 64-77; Anna Seidel, "Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments — Taoist Roots in the Apocrypha," in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein* (Brussels, 1983), pp. 291-371.

26. Arthur Wright, "A Historian's Reflections on the Taoist Tradition," *History of Religions* 9:2/3 (1969/70), p. 250.

27. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, ed., *Facets of Taoism* (New Haven, 1979); Roger Ames, *The Art of Rulership* (Honolulu, 1983).

28. Sun K'o-k'uan (孫克寬), *Han Yuan Tao Lun* (寒原道論) (Taipei, 1977), p. 72; see also Denis C. Twitchett, "The Composition of the T'ang Ruling Class: New Evidence from Tun-huang (敦煌)," *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 47-85.

29. Wright, "A Historian's Reflections," p. 250; Seidel, "The Image of the Perfect Ruler in early Taoist Messianism," *History of Religions* 9:2/3 (1969/70), p. 244.

30. Seidel, p. 244.

31. Sun K'o-k'uan, p. 72.

32. *Chiu T'ang-shu* (舊唐書) (Peking, 1975), pp. 1-19; see also Sun K'o-k'uan, p. 67.

33 Seidel, 244.

34. Sun, pp. 70-71; it was also apparent that the mixed-blood T'ang emperors felt a special affinity with Taoism, as they bore the same surname, "Li," as their ancestor, thus, proving that they were not semi-barbaric (though their female lines for generations had been Central Asians, that is non-Chinese) but pure Chinese.

35. *T'ang hui-yao* (唐會要) (Peking, 1957), p. 870; *Hsin T'ang-shu* (新唐書) (Peking, 1975), p. 3650.

36. *T'ang hui-yao*, pp. 870-71; *Hsin T'ang-shu*, pp. 3656-57.

37. Sun, p. 69.

38. Chou I-liang (周一良), "Nan-ch'ao ching-nei te ko-chung jen chih cheng-fu tui-tai te cheng-ts'e (南朝境內的各種人及政府對待政策)," *Wei-chin Nan-pei ch'ao shih-lun chi* (魏晋南北朝史論集) (Peking, 1963), pp. 30-93; Michel Strickmann, "The Mao Shan Revelations. Taoism and the Aristocracy," *T'oung Pao*, 63: 1 (1977), p. 14. According to Strickmann, we could by studying the members of the Mao Shan sect of Taoism (who were scholars, calligraphers, pharmacologists, alchemists and spiritual masters), clarify much of "the Taoist penetration of and liaison with the governing elite, and the increasing institutionalization of the religion (Taoism)" (Strickmann, 39).

39. *Chiu T'ang-shu*, pp. 5125-26.

40. *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* (太平廣記) (Taipei, 1962), ch. 23.

41. J. Russell Kirkland, "The Last Taoist Grand Master at the T'ang Imperial court: Li Han-kuang (李含光) and T'ang Hsüan-tsung (唐玄宗)," in *T'ang Studies*, 4 (1986), pp. 43-67.