The History, Philosophy and Aesthetics of Yuan Dynasty Buddhist Art

THE HISTORY

During the Sung Dynasty (960 to 1279) China enjoyed over two hundred years of political stability. The Sung were determined to reunite China, to revive the spiritual tradition that had guided the nation in the past, to encourage artistic and philosophical growth and to rediscover the traditional Chinese wealth of spirit. Often called the "Golden Age of Chinese Painting," the court in Kaifeng welcomed large groups of artists whom the Ch'an (in Japanese Zen) sect of Buddhism developed another school centered around the monks near Hangchow.

For centuries not only the Tartars but also nomadic barbarian hordes had threatened from the northern steppes until in the 13th century Genghis Khan became the leader of the Mongols. The march southward began in earnest. The pressure of his advance forced the Sung to relocate their capitol farther south, to Hangkow (thus the Northern Sung 960 to 1126 and the Southern Sung 1127 to 1279). He had wrested northern China from the Tartar dynasties and by his death in 1234 controlled half of China. It was his grandson, Kublai Khan, who overran the Sung territories in 1279.

This barbarian dynasty, however, had already felt the power of the Chinese spirit. The Chinese had begun to civilize their oppressors upon earliest contact just as Buddhism had gradually become a part of the Mongol culture. As a result, China did not change substantially under Mongol Rule. One man is credited, in great part, with this achievement, Chao Meng-fu, a member of the Sung royal family who remained in the Yuan court as minister and go-between among the new rulers and the old China. As a renowned calligrapher his style was imitated for centuries, and his powerful paintings of horses were greatly admired by the Mongols. A lively school of painting grew up around the court, inspired by the Sung painters but exploring styles from sparse, dryly brushed still lifes to agitated, violent landscapes. In architecture and sculpture the Yuan remained true to the Sung traditions and to the Buddhist faith, constructing temples, palaces in Peking, the opulent imperial halls and gardens, which were later, described with awe by Marco Polo. Though the production of porcelain continued, and the "blue and white" porcelain famous in the Ming Dynasty probably began at this time, the pieces lost much of their delicacy, the Mongols preferring gold and silver containers. Ironically, it was the very civilizing and refining of the Mongols who contributed to their downfall. Having lost their warlike spirit, they failed to put down minor insurrections that led to the decisive revolt in 1368. General Hung-wu returned China to the Chinese and established the Ming Dynasty that was to last for nearly three centuries from 1368 until 1644.

THE PHILOSOPHY

The philosophical underpinnings of the Sung and Yuan Dynasties lie in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, more particularly in the synthesis of these points of view, which became Ch'an Buddhism. As we will see, the Lohan figure plays a central role in this synthesis.

In the sixth century B.C.E. three great philosophies appeared in India and China. In India, where Brahmanism supported a caste system, and in China, where the Period of the Warring States was producing ever increasing political chaos, new voices were being heard.

A wealthy young Hindu nobleman, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, was appalled by the suffering of the poor, gave up his family and wealth, and embarked on a lifelong search for some path to relieve man's suffering. His teachings emphasize meditation and oneness with all nature as a path to enlightenment, and thus an escape from the inevitable Hindu cycle of death and rebirth. Called the Shakamuni Buddha, he gathered many disciples and established a monastic tradition that lost favor in India but later gained strength in China. Gautama Buddha died in 544 B.C.E.

In 6th century China, in the Chou State, roving philosophers offered their advice at the various courts and warring camps. The most famous of these was Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) who advised on matters of statecraft, with an emphasis on moral values, cultivation of knowledge and jen or human-heartedness. His philosophies were widely accepted by the time of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) and continued to be the major influence on Chinese and Japanese political and ethical thought into the 20th century.

Contemporary with Confucius was Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism, who preached a submission not to the state but to the universal principle, Tao. This point of view provided "an alternative to the pompous respectability of Confucianism." Taoism, as described in its major text, Tao te Ching, proposes a mystical, undefined world in which learning takes place not through books but through direct experience of nature. Through the ensuing centuries Taoism gradually degenerated into a vague search for eternal life, promoting superstitions and eventually becoming a popular folk religion.

The development of Buddhism in China also traces the ideas that invested Oriental art. Beginning in the first century B.C.E., through the preaching of wandering Buddhist monks and as Buddhist communities emigrated from India, the groundwork was laid for this new religion. Importantly, not only did the emigrating Buddhists bring Indian art; they also brought their knowledge of Greek art as it had informed the Indian aesthetic through those colonies Alexander left behind in India. With the fall of the Han Dynasty in 220 C.E., the state religion of Confucianism also declined rapidly. Troubled by chaotic political upheaval, the people turned to this new religion of Buddhism to restore their faith, mixing Buddhism's meditative aspects with native Taoist beliefs, and thus during the Wei Period (220-265) Buddhism spread rapidly. New heights of spirituality inspired artists, culminating

in magnificent sculptures of the Buddha and bodhisattvas (beings who have attained enlightenment and choose to remain on earth to help others).

Buddhism was violently suppressed as a foreign influence in the late T'ang Dynasty, and it never again attained its popular force. However, that branch of Buddhism that had absorbed the lessons of Taoism, its quietness and yielding nature, began to gain in influence and popularity, Ch'an Buddhism (in Japanese, Zen). The importance of this melding of Taoism and Buddhism for the growth of the Chinese artistic spirit can hardly be overemphasized. Like so many of those meetings of cultures through the ages that have produced inspired regeneration in art, Ch'an Buddhism provided a powerful synthesis:

It [Ch'an Buddhism] emphasized quietism, self-cultivation, the freeing of the mind from all intellectual and material dross so as to leave it open and receptive to those flashes of blinding illumination when suddenly, for a moment, the truth is revealed. To create the right atmosphere for meditation, the Ch'an monks built their temples in beautiful secluded places where the only sound was the wind in the trees and the rain falling on the stones of the temple courtyard. Their aims and the very techniques by which they were to be realized were almost identical with those of the Taoists. So it was that after Buddhism had been on Chinese soil for nearly a thousand years, it finally came to terms with Chinese ideals.

In seeking a technique with which to express the intensity and immediacy of his intuition, the Ch'an painter turned to the brush and monochrome ink, and with the fierce concentration of the calligrapher proceeded to record his own moments of truth in the outward forms of Buddhas and arhats [Lohans]. (Sullivan, p. 176)

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