

*POLITICAL PROPAGANDA AND IDEOLOGY IN CHINA AT THE END OF THE SEVENTH CENTURY: Inquiry into the Nature, Authors, and Function of the Tunhuang Document S. 6502, Followed by an Annotated Translation.* By Antonino Forte. Istituto Universitario Orientale: Napoli, 1976. xii, 312 pp., 33 plates.

From ca. 683 to 705, China was effectively ruled by a woman, Wu Chao 武曩—the notorious “Empress Wu”. In 690 she officially broke the orderly succession of T'ang rulers by declaring herself emperor and founding her own Chou 周 dynasty. Herself a pious Buddhist, Buddhism provided the ideological cornerstone of her reign. Antonino Forte, Professor of Far Eastern Religions and Philosophies at the Oriental Institute, Naples, has now brought together an impressive quantity of new material on the crucial role of Buddhism and Buddhists at the late seventh century Chinese court.

The first part of Professor Forte's book is a critical study of the basic sources for the Buddhist authentication of Wu Chao's rule. Earlier scholarship, following accounts in the dynastic histories and in the writings of Buddhist historians such as Tsan-ning 贊寧 (author of the *Ta-sung seng shih-lüeh* 大宋僧史略, 977, and the *Sung kao-seng chuan* 宋高僧傳, 988) assumed that the group of Lo-yang monks patronised by Wu Chao had forged a new version of the *Mahāmegha sūtra* (*Ta-yün ching* 大雲經) in her favour. Professor Forte has conclusively demonstrated that no new version of this sutra came into existence. Rather, the work presented to the throne by these clerics and distributed by an edict of 16th August 690 to Buddhist monasteries throughout the empire was an independent composition, a *Commentary* on the prophecy contained in the fourth book of the sūtra. This *Commentary* furnished circumstantial proofs of Wu Chao's right to reign as Cakravartin monarch and Bodhisattva; it is preserved in two Tunhuang manuscripts, Stein 2658 (already published and studied by Yabuki Keiki 矢吹慶輝 in his monumental work on the Sect of the Three Stages, *Sankaikyō no kenkyū* 三階教之研究, Tokyo, 1927; reprinted, 1973; pp. 685–761) and Stein 6502, a more complete text which Professor Forte here publishes and translates for the first time. He is able to show that the *Mahāmegha sūtra* on which the commentators based their work is the fourth or fifth century translation made either by Dharmakṣema or Chu Fo-nien 竺佛念 (T. 987), to which no alterations were made.

Another sutra in the Chinese Buddhist Canon was significantly affected by the events of Wu Chao's reign, however. Professor Forte draws our attention

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to a passage in the first book of the *Ratnamegha sūtra*, as translated by Dharmaruci in 693 (*Pao-yü ching* 宝雨经, T. 660; XII. 284b-c). This passage is not found in any of the three other Chinese translations, or in the Tibetan version (as already shown by Sakurabe Bunkyo 櫻部文鏡 in the *Otani Comparative Analytic Catalogue of the Kanjur*, 1930-32, p. 345; and *Bussō kaisetsu daijiten* x (1935), p. 136b-c). Forte demonstrates that this interpolation is a development of the original prophecy concerning a female monarch, found in book four of the *Mahamegha sūtra*, and that it accords completely with the interpretation of this prophecy given in the *Commentary*. He has thus been able to solve a complex riddle which has long plagued scholars and marred their accounts of Wu Chao's reign. The supposed "new" *Mahamegha sūtra* never existed; the unsuspected *Ratnamegha sūtra* in fact contains a substantial prophetic interpolation; and the key piece in the puzzle is the text of the *Commentary*, of which the precise nature and value have until now been uncertain.

Having thus prepared the ground with scrupulous philological acumen, Professor Forte proceeds to a detailed historical investigation of the circumstances in which these documents came into being. Wu Chao's "heterodoxy" was a byword with later Chinese establishment historians, whether secular or Buddhist. Their charges centered on the dubious figure of Huai-i 懷義, a man of the people supposedly raised to power by Wu Chao owing to his sexual prowess, and ordained a monk simply to facilitate his access to the palace. Leaving aside these tales, Professor Forte systematically demonstrates the true social connexions of the nine monks responsible for the *Commentary* (who thus codified the official Buddhist ideology of Wu Chao's reign). The nine bhadantas, whom in 690 Wu Chao ennobled for their services, were all regularly-ordained clerics who in the course of long ecclesiastical careers had achieved the highest ranks in the largest monasteries of Lo-yang. They were members of the Nei Tao-ch'ang 內道場 and participated in the great works of Buddhist translation underway at the time: the six translations accomplished by Devendraprajñā from 689 to 691, the twenty completed by Dharmaruci in 693, the nineteen made by Śikṣānanda from 695 to 704, and the twenty done by the returned Chinese pilgrim, I-ching 義淨, from 700 to 703. Members of the group were also responsible for the comprehensive catalogue of Buddhist literature completed in 695, the *Ta-chou k'an-ling chung-chung mu-lu* 大周刊定衆經目錄 (T. 2153). This was no cabal of priestly parvenus; the group of nine represented the élite of the regular clergy, and using the texts that they circulated in support of Wu Chao's dynastic pretensions, Professor Forte reveals the complex and subtle

ideology through which they hoped to realise an integrated union of Buddhism with the state. It may well be that the monk Huai-i, whose name heads the list of clerics submitting the *Commentary* to the throne, was no more than a tool of the nine bhadantas, a token representative of the masses on whose favourable response they counted. At all events it is certain that the simplistic and pejorative formulations of later Chinese historians must henceforth be discarded for good and all.

The true facts in the case were as complex as the magnitude of their consequences should lead us to expect, and Professor Forte has not hesitated to follow up the recondite implications of the extensive and difficult dossier of original documents. In studying the conception of Wu Chao's dual destiny as universal ruler and Bodhisattva, he shows that the orthodox Buddhist view of her sovereignty, intended for a learned clerical minority, is set forth in the passage interpolated in the *Ratnamegha sūtra*. Here Wu Chao's earthly destiny is restricted to the acquisition of two of the five positions which are normally barred to women; she cannot become Śakra, Brahmā, or a Tathāgata. However, she will obtain the positions of Avaivartika Bodhisattva and Cakravartin. At the end of her lifetime she will go to the Tuṣita heaven, where she will worship Maitreya until the time of his Buddhahood is at hand. Such exalted prospects might well satisfy anyone's ambitions for power and sanctity, and the subordination of Wu Chao to Maitreya is entirely in keeping with orthodoxy. The *Commentary*, however, was intended for universal distribution and hence was written for a wider and less critical audience. There we find an explicit identification of Wu Chao with Maitreya himself, qualified by a subtle annotation. By playing on the meaning of the Sanskrit word *maitreya*, "the compassionate one," and the female personification of "compassion" found in the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* (T. 475, xiv. 549c4), the authors of the *Commentary* were able to make a superficial identification of Wu Chao with the destined Buddha in whose imminent advent a substantial proportion of the people placed their hopes—yet at the same time, these wily clerics preserved themselves from the taint of heterodoxy by implicitly denying the equivalence. Wu Chao was *maitreya* only by virtue of her compassion, and compassionate in consequence of her femininity. As Professor Forte remarks, such devices are the essence of effective propaganda, and the evidence must consequently be read with reference to several levels of intention.

The second part of the book is devoted to the principal document in the case, the *Commentary*. After a detailed table of the work's contents, Professor Forte presents his fully annotated translation. Passages from the *Mahāmegha sūtra* are

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printed in heavy type, allowing the reader to determine at a glance the full context of the *Commentary's* elaborations. The *Commentary* is rendered particularly thorny by its frequent recourse to prophetic literature, some Buddhist, but mostly deriving from secular and Taoist sources. Otherworldly portents had been a conspicuous concomitant of dynastic legitimation since the interregnum of Wang Mang 王莽 (AD 9–23); in the present context, they well illustrate a striking conflation of Indian and Chinese notions of sovereignty, to which Professor Forte draws our attention. No single example reveals this syncretism more clearly than the assimilation of the ancient ritual centre of Chinese sovereignty, the Ming-t'ang 明堂, to a Buddhist ritual area. It was in her splendid Ming-t'ang, designed by court ritualists, that Wu Chao carried out the Pañcavārsika ceremonies that confirmed her in the role of a Buddhist Cakravartin.

Following the translation, Professor Forte gives a concise analysis of salient points in the structure of the *Commentary*, in which he is able to clarify several aspects of the work's semantic contouring. This is followed by a summary of the *Mahamegha sūtra* itself, and then by a summary of a work on which the authors of the *Commentary* drew very heavily, the *Cheng-ming ching* 註明經 (T. 2879). This vivid apocalypse attained a wide circulation in the seventh century, and doubtless dictated many of the expectations of a public that yearned for the advent of Maitreya as a release from sorrow and suffering. In both these summaries, again, the use of heavy type permits immediate recognition of passages quoted and expanded upon in the *Commentary*. Finally, there are complete photographic reproductions of the two Tunhuang texts of the *Commentary*, now preserved in the British Library (S. 6502 and 2658), as well as scripture colophons from S. 2278 and 523. The translation of the *Commentary* contains running correlations with both manuscripts of the text. The book concludes with a well-furnished bibliography and a very complete index. In addition to his subtle philological and historical analysis, Professor Forte has also given us an exemplary translation of a Tunhuang manuscript. His comprehensive method of presenting an involved exegetical text is admirable. A very large proportion of Chinese Buddhist literature is written in the form of textual commentaries, and it seems to me that Forte has provided a most attractive model for future studies and translations—an urgent task, considering how little has been done in proportion to the imposing mass of materials.

Professor Forte's work makes a very significant contribution to the study of Buddhism's relationship with the Chinese state. It also marks an important

step forward in the general reassessment of Chinese historical sources that circumstances so clearly demand. In studying Chinese history, it should no longer be acceptable to follow blindly the pronouncements of official historians, or to parrot their anecdotal banalities. Critical scrutiny of the sources is all the more necessary where religious matters are concerned; religion was a notorious mote in the eye of official chroniclers. One reason for the often uneasy relationship between the state and religion was the eschatological promise which both Buddhism and Taoism held out to the faithful. This might at times be interpreted as constituting a rival claim upon the mandate of heaven, by which Chinese sovereigns were thought to rule. By the fifth century at least, Chinese monarchs had learned to capitalise on the resources of organized religion, and documentary proofs of celestial authorisation were henceforth developed for the benefit of imperial patrons not only in the government bureaux specialising in omen lore, but in the foyers of Buddhist and Taoist masters as well. The *Commentary* translated by Professor Forte reveals these diverse strands of the web of imperial fatality in subtle interaction; thanks to his work, we have now been guided further than ever before into the quintessential arcana of medieval Chinese sovereignty. The eschatological aspect of Chinese Buddhism has long demanded thorough study, and Forte's work should stimulate research both in the earlier, pre-T'ang sources, and in the texts of the later millenarian movements that have until now been somewhat better known. I have no doubt that this is the most important Western language book on medieval Chinese Buddhism to be published in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Other studies by Prof. Forte are: "La prima opera buddhista delle fonti giapponesi," *Il Giappone* x (1970), pp. 43-52; "Il P'u-sa cheng-chai ching [菩薩正齋經] e l'origine dei tre mesi di digiuno prolungato," *T'oung Pao* LVII (1971), pp. 103-134; "Deux études sur le manichéisme chinois", *T'oung Pao* LIX (1973), pp. 220-253; "Il Monastero dei Grandi Chou a Lo-yang," *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, n.s. xxiii (1973), pp. 417-429; "Un pensatore Vijñānavādin del VII secolo: Hsüan-fan [玄範]," *Gurudjamañjarikā, Studi in onore di Giuseppe Tucci*, Napoli, 1974, pp. 559-570; "Divākara (613-688), un monaco indiano nella Cina dei T'ang," *Annali di Ca' Foscari* xiii.3 (1974), pp. 135-164.