

# HUI YUAN & THE TRANSFORMATION OF BUDDHISM IN CHINA

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PART 2 OF A 2 PART ARTICLE

*Editor's Note: This is the final installment of a 2 part article. The previous journal (Autumn 2014) contains part 1 as well as the complete Translator's Notes which provide additional background information.*

*Translator's Note:* This English translation is rendered from the original Chinese text entitled '慧远与佛教中国化'. Master Hui Yuan (316-416) was a very important figure in the early development of Buddhism in China. Although records show that by the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, Buddhism was known in the court of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), the exact date that Buddhism arrived in China is still a matter of dispute.

The emphasis upon seated meditation practice appears to have begun in China through the work of masters Dao An and Hui Yuan, as both advocated extended periods of disciplined sitting, with Hui Yuan in particular, designing his temple on Mount Lu to accommodate the Dharma method of meditation. This is believed to be the first time that a Buddhist temple had been built solely to facilitate this practice, and Hui Yuan's innovations concerning design and practice, have served as ideal models to emulate down through the generations.

It is interesting to note that given that the date of Bodhidharma's arrival in China (from India) is traditionally believed to be around 520 CE, (that is 104 years after the death of Hui Yuan), it is clear that the practice of 'meditation', or 'Ch'an' was already established in China before the official founding of the Ch'an School. This may explain the close historical

association between the Ch'an School and Pure Land School, as the 12<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of the Ch'an lineage—Asvaghosa—advised his students to strive for rebirth in the Pure Land, apparently echoing Hui Yuan's emphasis upon extended hours of seated meditation, coupled with the faith-based practice of chanting the Buddha's name. This association continued with Nagarjuna (the 14<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Ch'an), and Vasubandhu (the 21<sup>st</sup> Patriarch of Ch'an), as well as modern Master Xu Yun (1840-1959), all of whom advocated the integration of Ch'an with Pure Land practice.

—Adrian Chan-Wyles, 15.7.14

## 4. BUDDHIST THEORY AND THE CHINESE WAY OF LIFE

Hui Yuan was concerned throughout his life with the task of developing correct understanding with regard to Buddhist theory. Hui Yuan taught that the basic principles of Buddhism should be known and understood with confidence—particularly with regard to the his concept of the 'Immortal Spiritual Essence Theory' (神不灭论—Shen Bu Mie Lun) [which he equated with the Buddha-nature, or Dharmakaya], and his use of the 'Karma Theory of Cause and Effect' (因果报应论—Yin Guo Bao Ying Lun). Hui Yuan, through correct study, sought to integrate the theories of Indian Buddhism with the traditional (Daoist and Confucian) concepts of Chinese cul-



ture. This process of careful assimilation allowed the concepts of Indian Buddhist philosophy to develop within Chinese culture, in a manner that was relevant and suitable to Chinese thinking.

Hui Yuan's many contributions toward the understanding of Buddhist theory in China included his creative explanation (and integration) of the commonly held belief in the 'Existence of a Spiritual Essence Theory' into Buddhist thought. Hui Yuan studied with Dao An (道安) for many years and excelled in 'Prajna Studies' (般若学—Bo Re Xue), and then became proficient in the 'Pi Tan' (毗曇) teaching—an Abhidhamma text that brought all the essential teachings of Buddhism together—and which Hui Yuan held in great esteem. The Prajna Studies taught that the true nature of existence is 'empty', empty of self, and empty of any permanent substance. This is in complete agreement with the Pi Tan teaching—as each of these two Buddhist texts supports one another in content.

Hui Yuan had a sharp mind, and always considered problems from two distinct possibilities. This is how he approached the subject of the development of Buddhist studies. If there was a problem to be solved, he would gather information from different sources and seek out a consistent thread of knowledge. By developing a body of correct Buddhist thought, Hui Yuan used the theory of the existence of gods and spirits (as found within Confucianism and Daoism), as a means to explain and convey the intrinsic foundation of Buddhist theory in relation to the existence of gods and spirits. Hui Yuan quotes from his text entitled the 'Complete Description of the Immortal Spiritual Essence Theory' (形尽神不灭论—Xing Jin Shen Bu Mie Lun), the following:

"The classic book entitled the *Zhuangzi* (庄子), in the section entitled 'Great Ancestors' (大宗—Da Zong), there is a discussion on the 'Profound Mystery' (玄—Xuan) which states: "My body is supported by it; whilst my life is spent in cultivation of it." If in life there is no proper practice of restraint, then this is a rebellion against truth. This is known to be a great evil, and damaging to that which lives. In the classic book entitled *Wenzi* (文子), the Yellow Emperor said: "The ever changing appearance of outer physical form is unlimited, and is an infinite manifestation of the underlying (or 'inner') spiritual essence." The *Zhuangzi* also



says: "The special quality about existence is that the essence of humanity is entrapped within physical form, and is expressed through a multitudinous (万—Wan) variation on the material plane." This awareness of the unfolding of endless physical existence manifests simultaneously with that of underlying, original nature (反真—Fan Zhen). This is a unified theory with two distinct aspects. This must be studied diligently and fully comprehended.'

It also says in the *Zhuangzi*: "Those human beings who practice restraint whilst alive, will surely merge with the original nature (反真—Fan Zhen) upon death", and the *Wenzi* says: "The myriad forms are expressions of the underlying spiritual essence." It is through these Daoist principles that Hui Yuan presented Buddhist philosophy to the people of China. The Daoist 'immortal', or 'underlying' original nature was equated with the Buddhist notions of 'emptiness' (sunyata), and 'no-soul' (anatman), etc. In reality, the 'original nature' of Daoism was re-interpreted as the 'Buddha-nature', or even the 'Dharmakaya'; both synonyms for the realization of 'emptiness' through meditation. The Daoist teachings provided an important source for the transmission of Indian Buddhism into China during the Wei-Jin Period. A basic principle of Indian Buddhism is that of 'no permanent self' (人无我—Ren Wu Wo), which is also referred to as 'emptiness of self' (人空—Ren Kong), however, Hui Yuan preferred to emphasize the concept of a 'permanent self' (人我—Ren Wo), or in other words, he taught that a 'spiritual essence' (神—Shen) existed. This represents a subtle shift in emphasis away from what Hui Yuan considered to be the 'negative' emphasis, found within the early Indian Buddhist teaching upon the doctrine of 'no self',



toward the positive notion of the 'existence' of a spiritual essence. This single adaptation facilitated the entry of Indian Buddhism into mainstream Chinese cultural thought and belief systems, as all indigenous spiritual traditions within China assume the existence of a permanent spiritual essence. For Hui Yuan's interpretation of Buddhism, the human 'self' was 'real' and not empty. This change in emphasis had important theoretical and practical ramifications for the ongoing process of the development of Buddhism in China.

On the basis of the existence of a permanent spiritual essence, Hui Yuan developed a distinctly Chinese interpretation of the 'Nirvana Theory' (涅槃论—Nie Pan Lun), which he called the 'Ideal Realm Theory' (理想境界论—Li Xiang Jing Jie Lun). Hui Yuan believed that human beings possessed a permanent spiritual essence, and that this essence survived the transition between physical death and the creation of a new life during the continuous and ongoing rebirth process. Due to emotion turmoil experienced in the mind, the individual undergoes the continuous process of rebirth which involves much suffering. When agitation and anger are permanently removed from the mind, the state of nirvana is finally achieved. Based upon this understanding, Hui Yuan said:

*"When returning to the original essence, a practitioner must seek the correct ancestral path. A life lived with no awareness of the spiritual essence, accumulates obscuring layers of ignorance that prevent spiritual unity from occurring. If these obscurations are eradicated by the practitioner, then nirvana can be achieved through a deep cognisance of the spiritual essence, so that the practitioner and the spiritual essence become as 'one'. This unity is the state of nirvana."*

Actively seeking the spiritual essence with a sense of profound and deep respect, results in the achievement of non-attachment, in the beyond-knowing state. If obscurations caused by agitation exist in the mind, then there is an 'impasse' that constitutes a barrier to development. However, by focusing upon, and uniting with the spiritual essence, a state of nirvana is achieved that transcends all inner and outer difficulties. The equating of the Indian Buddhist notion of nirvana with the Chinese (Daoist) concept of a spiritual essence, (神—Shen), is clearly an inno-

vative development formulated by Hui Yuan.

Hui Yuan understood that it was the duty of ordained Buddhist monks to train their minds and refine their bodily habits, and that the general task of Buddhism was to assist deluded beings to realise enlightenment through discipline and self-cultivation. To this end, Hui Yuan emphasised the doctrine of karma when teaching the secular world how to develop from the deluded position of continuously producing bad thoughts and actions, into producing good thoughts and actions that assist the realisation of full enlightenment. To assist in this task, Hui Yuan authored the texts known as the 'Three Retribution Theory' (三报论—Three Retribution Theory), and the 'Bright Judgement Theory' (明报应论—Ming Bao Ying Lun), which are premised upon the idea of the existence of a spiritual essence. These texts elaborate a comprehensive and systematic explanation of the theory of karma. Hui Yuan emphasised past, present, and future lifetime periods (三世—San Shi) and that the karma judgement theory of Buddhism should always be applied to each existence. This modified the traditional belief in China of living only a single lifetime (一世—Yi Shi), but on the other hand, Hui Yuan retained the traditional Chinese belief in the existence of a spiritual essence—which runs counter to the teachings found within early Indian Buddhism. This synthesis of Indian and Chinese philosophical concepts created a new interpretation of the theory of karma which was accepted within China, and which has served as a guiding light ever since the time of Hui Yuan.

#### **5) INTERNAL-EXTERNAL— DELUSION VERSES ULTIMATE REALM**

During the development and promotion of Buddhist theory in China, (that is whilst Buddhism was being promulgated in the external world), Hui Yuan concentrated upon the development and explanation of the inner teachings of Buddhism. During Hui Yuan's lifetime, the understanding of Buddhism greatly improved. This was required on the one hand, because different factions within Buddhism often disagreed with one another about what constituted a correct interpretation of Dharma, and on the other, there still existed profound differences between the thinking of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confu-



cianism that had to be acknowledged and reconciled.

As Hui Yuan had been a Confucian scholar, who was also well versed in the Daoist teachings, prior to becoming a Buddhist monk. This educational background ensured that he developed the interpretation of Indian Buddhist philosophy in China through concepts familiar to both Daoist and Confucian practice. Since his childhood, Hui Yuan had studied the classic books of ancient China. He was particularly proficient in the study of the 'Changes of Zhou' (周易—Zhou Yi), the 'Record of Rites' (礼记—Li Ji), the 'Laozi' (老子), and the 'Zhuangzi' (庄子), as well as many other Daoist and Confucian texts which he had a profound knowledge of. He once explained the 'Mourning Clothes Classic' (丧服经—Sang Fu Jing) to the eminent scholars such as Lei Ci Zong (雷次宗), and Zong Bing (宗炳), etc, stating clearly the purpose and intent behind the text, and how its content should be applied in practice. Hui Yuan took the Daoist philosophical text of *Zhuangzi* for his guiding light, and interpreted everything through the concepts contained therein. Hui Yuan was of the opinion that *Zhuangzi* had realised enlightenment and that his words continuously expressed the state of 'prajna' (般若—Bo Re), or advanced wisdom. In this respect, Hui Yuan never waived in his practice of continuously integrating traditional Chinese thought with that of Indian Buddhist philosophy. The high government official in charge of ritual and culture (司徒—Si Tu)—named Wang Mi (王谧)—wrote to Hui Yuan and said:

*'When the age of 40 years old is reached, the senses begin to decline.'*

Wang Mi was very concerned and distressed about the possibility of premature aging, and the physical and psychological decline this process might entail. Hui Yuan answered:

*"The ancients had no affection for high walls, but always valued and appreciated the present moment."*

Hui Yuan used this literary reference as a means to encourage Wang Mi, and explained that whilst alive, life should be lived to its highest cultural degree, and the present moment fully cherished and comprehended. Hui Yuan added:

*"The wisdom of the Buddha is the product of the highest mind, and should be absorbed into the royal heart."*

When living in the present moment is fully

understood and mastered, then there is no great need to actively seek out, and overly pursue health and longevity.

Hui Yuan made extensive use of Confucian and Daoist teachings, when formulating a method for explaining the Dharma to the people of China. Hui Yuan viewed this developmental process as being the ongoing improvement of Indian Buddhist philosophy through its contact with traditional Chinese thought. The entry of Buddhism into China was greatly assisted through the integration of the clear and bright philosophy of Confucianism and Daoism (儒道合明—Ru Dao He Ming), and the concept of the 'Intention to Seek Sagehood' (求圣人之意—Qiu Sheng Ren Zhi Yi). Therefore the combined training of 'inner' and 'outer' cultivation of the Way (道—Dao) can be successfully pursued and achieved. The 'Law of the Way', (道法—Dao Fa), and the 'Moral Code' (名教—Ming Jiao) of Confucianism can be compared with one another, just as the Tathagata (如来—Ru Lai) can be favourably compared with the legendary sage king Yao (尧), and the great sage Confucius (孔—Kong). Although these paths can be interpreted as different and distinct from one another, it is also true in the final analysis, that they arrive at exactly the same place. Hui Yuan emphasised Shakyas (释迦—Shi Jia) and the sage Yao in his teaching, whilst recognizing, and fully understanding, the doctrinal differences between the Daoist and Confucian systems. However, despite these differences, Hui Yuan viewed these three paths as reconciling into a consistent realisation of reality. Hui Yuan's efforts in this task revealed the compatibility between Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, and demonstrated that with the appropriate will-power and determination, a unifying paradigm could be discovered and developed. The integration of these three paths—two Chinese and one Indian—greatly advanced the cause of Buddhism in China.

## **6) THE SANGHA ARDENTLY PRACTICES IN THE FORESTS AND HILLS**

Hui Yuan always attached a great importance to the correct and disciplined practice of the Buddhist monks, which he saw as very important for the strengthening of the Dharma, and the foundation for building a strong Sangha. He became a monk after much disciplined cultiva-



tion which involved the 'intense (and essential) practice of meditation and chanting throughout the day and night' (精思讽持, 以夜续昼—Jing Si Feng Chi, Yi Ye Xu Zhou). After his arrival on Mount Lu (庐山—Lu Shan), he 'mobilized the people to practice in this Way—from dusk until dawn—without a break' (率众行道, 昏晓不绝—Lu Zhong Xing Dao, Hun Xiao Bu Jue). Hui Yuan's essential practice of the Way (道—Dao) can be defined as including the following three aspects:

a) Keeping the Precepts (持戒—Chi Jie). Hui Yuan had made a deep and extensive study of the Confucian ritual system (儒家礼制—Ru Jia Li Zhi), and it was because of the weight of the influence of traditional Confucian ethics and morality, that he ascribed such importance to the correct study and practice of the Buddhist precepts.

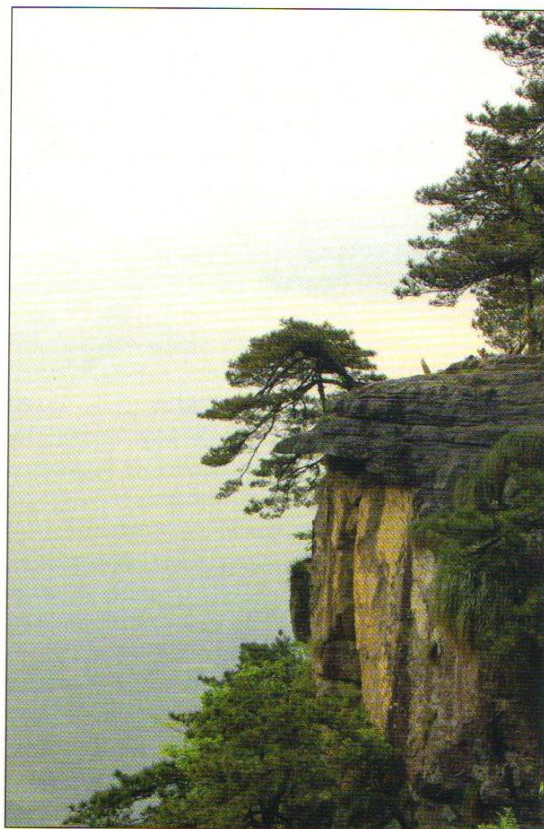
b) Recording of History (史载—Shi Zai). When the Indian Buddhist monk—known as 'Fu Ruo Duo Luo' (弗若多罗)—visited Chang An (长安), he taught the 'Ten Recitations of the Vinaya Discipline' (十诵律—Shi Song Lu) of the Sarvastivada School. Another foreign monk—named 'Kumarajiva' (鸠摩罗什—Jiu Mo Luo Shen)—rendered this teaching into Chinese characters, but Fu Ruo Duo Luo died before this task could be fully completed. This meant that only two-thirds of this teaching was translated into the Chinese language. Hui Yuan would often lament that it had not been completed. He said:

*"The foreign monk 'Dharmaruci' (昙摩流支—Tan Mo Liu Zhi), entered Qin (秦) and initially transmitted this reciting method. He then sent his disciple 'Tan Pa' (昙芭) to the Guanzhong (关中) area, (situated in the lower valley of the Wei River), with instructions to convey this Dharma-practice. This is how the method of the 'Ten Recitations' (十诵—Shi Song) is believed to have been originally transmitted to the Jin (晋)."*

Hui Yuan mobilized the people to rigorously practice Buddhism whilst strictly following the precepts, (or rules of discipline), after making his home at the 'East Forest Temple' (东林寺—Dong Lin Si), which was situated on Mount Lu. Mount Lu was Hui Yuan's 'Way of Virtue Dwelling' (道德所居—Dao De Suo Ju) in the world.

c) Cultivating Meditation (修禅—Xiu Ch'an). Hui Yuan acquired from Kapisa (罽宾—Ji Bin)—in the vicinity of modern day 'Kashmir' (克什

米尔—Ke Shen Mi Er)—the work of the Ch'an master named 'Buddhabhadra' (佛陀跋陀罗—Fo Tou Ba Tuo Luo), [also known by his Chinese name of 'Enlightened Virtue' (觉贤)]. The text entitled the '*Direct and Correct Method for Practicing Meditation Sutra*' (修行方便禅经—Xiu Xing Fang Bian Ch'an Jing) was translated by Hui Yuan on Mount Lu, and through the Foreword, Hui Yuan emphasized the 'Generating 3 Types of Karma and the Correct Development of Meditative Wisdom Sutra' (三业之兴, 以禅智为宗—San Ye Zhi Xing, Yi Ch'an Zhi Wei Zong). After this, Hui Yuan always emphasized the importance of the disciplined practice of extended periods of seated meditation. Hui Yuan transformed the interior of his temple to accommodate regular meditation practice. This is how Hui Yuan created a 'Ch'an monastery' (禅林—Ch'an Lin)—or a 'Sacred-space for Cultivating the Way' (Dao Chang)—which specialized in the development of the mind through meditative practice. Later, the developed Ch'an School of China took Hui Yuan's innovations as the ideal models for the



Lu Shan, Jiangxi, China. Photo by KongFu Wang



practice of meditation and the design (and regulation) of a Ch'an temple.

d) Reciting the Buddha's Name (念佛—Nian Fo). Hui Yuan advocated the practice of chanting the Buddha's name as a legitimate Dharma-door, which developed the power of concentration in the mind. This practice requires the intense focusing of the mind, the developed process of which dispels delusions from the mind. By contemplating the Buddha's name as an object, the mind becomes clear and good karma is generated as a result. Hui Yuan's teacher—Master Dao An (师道安—Shi Dao An—held a firm belief in Maitreya Buddha (弥勒佛—Me Li Fo), but Hui Yuan changed this practice, and instead emphasized a firm belief in Amitabha Buddha (阿弥陀佛—E Mi Tuo Fo). This was the spiritual path Hui Yuan preferred:

*"In front of the image of the Buddha of the Abode of Infinite Light (无量寿—Wu Liang Shou), also known as Amitayus Buddha, the pure vows (to travel to the West) are taken."*

It is said that those who practiced this method began to refer to it by the name of the 'White Lotus Society' (白莲社—Bai Lian She). Hui Yuan had a strong belief in Amitabha Buddha, and developed the method of practice that became known as the Pure Land (净土—Jing Tu) teaching. Indeed, Hui Yuan is considered the founder (and ancestor) of the Pure Land School of China.

Hui Yuan emphasized a unified practice (of chanting and meditation), and ensured that his monks received the advanced level of education available. In this way he fearlessly developed the standards of the ordained Sangha to a very high degree. He also took the initiative to invite the Indian monks 'Sanghadeva' (僧伽提婆—Seng Jia Ti Po), and Buddhahadra to his temple on Mount Lu, where he translated sutras and spread Buddhism widely.

Mount Lu was not only occupied by eminent monks, but also by famous scholars and other important members of the laity who submitted to the training. From the Pengcheng (彭城) area, there was Liu Yi Min (刘遗民), Yu Zhang (豫章), and Lei Ci Rong (雷次宗). From Yanmen (雁门) there was Zhou Xu Zhi (周续之); from Xincai (新蔡) there was Bi Ying Zhi (毕颖之), and from Nanyang (南阳) there was Zong Bin (宗炳), Zhang Lai Min (张莱民), and Zhang Ji Shou (张季硕), amongst many others. All eventually

renounced the world under Hui Yuan's guidance and stopped their pointless wonderings through life. This was because Hui Yuan ascribed a great importance to guiding his disciples personally along the path. Amongst Hui Yuan's students was included Hui Yao (慧要), Dao Wen (道温), Dao Zu (道祖), Tan Yong (昙邕), Tan Shun (昙顺), Tan Shen (昙洗), Seng Ji (僧济), and Seng Che (僧彻), all of whom were proficient in the practice of the Dharma, along side many others. All of Hui Yuan's disciples had their own particular expertise and strengths.

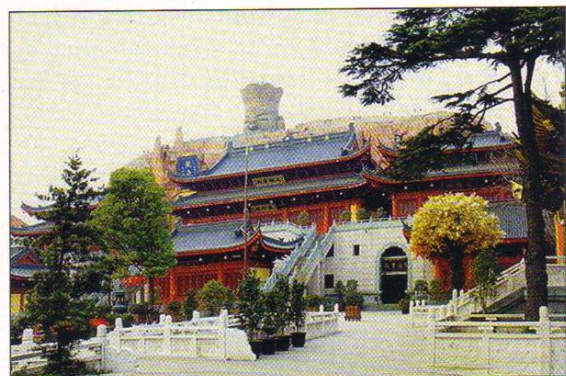
Due to the outbreak of war, Hui Yuan was forced to leave his teacher—Dao An. From Xiangyang (襄阳), he travelled south into the Daoist stronghold situated on the Mount Luofu (罗浮山—Luo Fu Shan) area of Guangdong province, and then into the 'Nine River' (九江—Jiu Jiang) area of Jiangxi province. Here, Hui Yuan saw that:

*"The peak of Mount Lu (庐峰—Lu Feng), was perfectly pure, and was a suitable place to 'still' the mind."*

After this observation, Hui Yuan decided that Mount Lu would be the place where he would permanently live. Since that time, Hui Yuan said:

*"I lived off the land, cultivating crops... For more than thirty years, my shadow never left the hillside, and no worldly people crossed my path."*

After Hui Yuan had spent much time planning, directing, and constructing the Dong Lin Temple, it became the Southern Chinese Buddhist centre for the cultivation of the mind, as well as a place for Buddhist innovation. It also became a centre that attracted different ethnic groups to the study of Buddhism, and served as an important cultural link between North and



**Main Hall at the Dong Lin Temple (East Forest Temple) located on Mount Lu.**



South China. The Dong Lin Temple also established and maintained cultural links with Indian Buddhism, as well as serving as a retreat centre for the laity, scholars, and officials, etc. At Dong Lin, Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians were all equally welcome, and there was a great exchange between the practitioners of these systems. Dong Lin was a great cultural centre for South China. Although China was experiencing great social upheaval and suffering due to the various wars that were erupting, Dong Lin remained a relatively peaceful area of South China. The design and location of the Dong Lin Temple, as envisioned by Hui Yuan, became the standard model for future generations. From that time onwards, Buddhist temples would be built in the mountains.

Hui Yuan developed the method of integrating and balancing what he described as the:

*"Internal (内—Nei) as philosophy derived from Buddhist teaching, with the external (外—Wai) as philosophy derived from Confucian and Daoist thinking."*

Hui Yuan achieved this finely balanced synthesis because he had a profound understanding and respect for the teachings of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. He could correctly compare and contrast the three teachings, and expertly 'draw-out' the teachings that overlapped with one another, as well as reconcile areas of thought that appeared to be contradictory. Hui Yuan's ability in this regard was the product of advanced spiritual ability manifest in the world. It was directly due to Hui Yuan's influence that Buddhism became popular and experienced a rapid expansion across China. Hui Yuan developed Buddhist theory and practice, coupled with an emphasis upon heritage and innovation. Hui Yuan single-handedly wrote a new chapter in the history of Chinese Buddhism, a chapter littered with impressive scenery that served as the back-drop for the drama of the age within which he lived. He clarified the relationship between Buddhism and the monarchy, defining what was correct, and what was not correct. He defined how Buddhism should relate to secular law, and the rituals associated with Confucianism (and Daoism). He devised strategies that harmonised the differences between Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. He used the Daoist teachings of Zhuangzi to advocate an underlying spiritual

essence for the physical universe. He developed and explained the theory of karma in relation to Buddhist practice, and established the first Buddhist temple designed to cater for the teaching and practice of meditation. He also gathered together fellow practitioners who believed in the Pure Land teachings of Amitabha Buddha. All these achievements greatly promoted the presence (and practice) of Buddhism in China, and serve as a monument to Hui Yuan's genius on the path of the historical development of Chinese Buddhism. ■

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This illustration of Hui Yuan appeared in a book titled "Wan hsiao tang-Chu chuang—Hua chuan 晚笑堂竹莊畫傳" which was published in 1921. (via wikicommons)