

HUI YUAN & THE TRANSFORMATION OF BUDDHISM IN CHINA

TRANSLATED BY ADRIAN CHAN-WYLES PH.D.

PART 1 OF A 2 PART ARTICLE

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 1st 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.

Hui Yuan mentions that Buddhism was known in the time of the Qin Dynasty (221—206 BCE), and it is certainly true that Chinese scholars talk of a date well before the Eastern Han. By the 4th and 5th centuries CE, (and the lifetime of Hui Yuan), it is clear that knowledge of the fundamentals of Buddhist thought was still in the process of being imported into China from India. Master Dao An (312-385), for example, (the teacher of Hui Yuan), specialized in the study of the Prajnaparamita Sutra, and is the first Chinese master to directly associate '*prajna*' (enlightened wisdom) with '*dhyana*' (meditation), as an accompaniment to his faith-based practice of worshipping Maitreya Buddha. These facts are significant, as his disciple—Hui Yuan—continued this combined emphasis of faith and developmental action in his teaching, but diverted away from worshipping Maitreya Buddha, and instead promulgated the worship of Amitabha Buddha.

As a consequence of this shift, Hui Yuan is often portrayed as the founder of the Pure Land School, which is also known as the 'White Lotus Society'. However, the Pure Land School, at least in tradition-

al Chinese Buddhist thought, is recorded as being founded by Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, (and further elucidated through Asvaghosa's treatise entitled the 'Awakening of Faith'). Therefore Samantabhadra is considered the 1st Patriarch of the Pure Land School, with Hui Yuan strictly speaking, considered the 2nd Patriarch—with both Patriarchs following in the footsteps of Amitabha Buddha—the original initiator of the Pure Land teaching. In this version of history, Hui Yuan becomes a 'popularizer' of Samantabhadra's method, and is responsible for making the Pure Land teaching very popular throughout China.

During his lifetime, Hui Yuan witnessed Amitabha three times—the last and final time just prior to his death, when Amitabha Buddha appeared before him accompanied by his assistants Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattvas.

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 12th 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 14th Patriarch of Ch'an), and Vasubandhu (the 21st 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.

As an expert in both Confucian and Daoist philosophy, Hui Yuan was able to integrate the thinking of all three schools into his interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism. This background allowed Hui Yuan to associate the Daoist concept of 'shen' (神), (as an empty spiritual substrata of the physical world), with that of the Buddhist notion of the 'Dharmakaya'. He preferred this Daoist interpretation to the early Buddhist concept of 'anatta', or 'no-soul', which has led many to assume that Hui Yuan advocated a 'permanent-soul' theory. The issue is more complex than it seems, and is not a matter of 'either/or'. It is known that Hui Yuan exchanged a number of letters with the great translator Kumarajiva, discussing in detail exactly what the 'Dharmakaya' is, and its implications for Buddhist thought. Although 'shen' can be taken to mean 'gods, and 'spirits', it is also true that as a distinct concept, it can also be used to refer to 'mind', 'consciousness', and even to the notion of 'ruling' or 'governing', depending upon context.

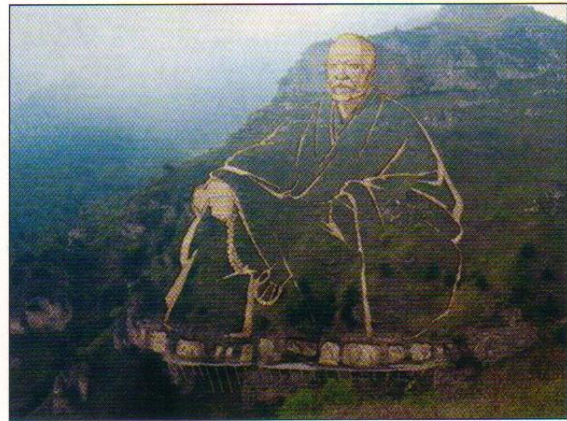
It seems that Hui Yuan was correctly avoiding the trap of nihilism that can sometimes be incorrectly applied to 'anatta'. As the Buddha rejected 'nihilism', the true teaching of 'anatta' can not be associated with it. If the Daoist concept of 'shen' is associated with the Buddhist concept of 'consciousness', then there is a perfect integration of the two ideals, whereby the trap of the permanent existence of an 'ego-self' is avoided and transcended. Base egoism, of course, is considered a training hindrance in both the Daoist and Buddhist schools of thought.

Hui Yuan, although keeping out of direct involvement with politics, nevertheless, attracted the attention of various warlords, officials, and kings. He is famous for handling the occasional political crisis he faced with an expert confidence and wise application of the 'middle way'. He did not give into the attempted bullying associated with officialdom, but neither did he appear to openly resist it in a manner that would cause open conflict, and yet he single-handedly managed to persuade the king that Buddhist monks should dress in unfamiliar (i.e. 'foreign') robes, and be exempt from the need to bow toward the king as a sign of respect. In a society that advocated a social

(and cultural) order premised upon a strict hierarchy of respect toward one's superiors, this was a remarkable achievement.

In times of warfare and social upheaval, including changes of government, etc, Hui Yuan and his temple community on Mount Lu, managed to stay impartial and avoid the problems associated with taking sides. No doubt this behaviour was inspired in part, by Hui Yuan's understanding and practical application of the Buddha's teaching associated with the cause and effect of *karma*, a teaching that Hui Yuan greatly popularized and spread during his lifetime.

—Adrian Chan-Wyles, 15.7.14



Hui Yuan [慧远]—(334-416 CE) lived during the mid to latter part of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and carefully cultivated the Dao (道) or correct spiritual path of Buddhism and this quality explains why it was that he eventually became an important and influential leader within Chinese Buddhism. History has a tendency to test and challenge people, and bring out their creative brilliance—this was the case with Hui Yuan.

At that time, as a Buddhist leader, Hui Yuan faced many important and severe challenges. The first issue of difficulty evolved around the internal political conflicts that erupted within the Eastern Jin Dynasty, where various cliques of the ruling elite fought (and killed) one another for influence and power. The political situation was both precarious and dangerous, and Hui Yuan found himself trapped between these cliques who tried to influence him into supporting one side over the other, through the use of a combination of flattery and threats. This climate of danger and political upheaval allowed Hui Yuan to perfect the application of Buddhist principles in the difficult situations that arose throughout his everyday life. Hui

Yuan had to learn to adapt his Buddhist practice during times of acute political upheaval.

The second issue involved the development of Buddhism and its different doctrine compared to the teachings of Daoism and Confucianism. The contradictions between the different systems with regard to lifestyle and ritual became ever more apparent, and this triggered an intense interest from officials and scholars who urgently sought answers from the Buddhist community, to questions they had regarding Buddhist theory and practice.

The third issue concerned the substantial growth of the ordained Sangha and the inevitable development of good and bad monks, with the latter becoming snobbish and seeking a life of luxury instead of humility. It became a matter of urgency to define the discipline the monastics should live under, so that the Sangha could be correctly developed and Buddhism strengthened as a result.

In the past Buddhism had travelled to China from India and had to be integrated with the national conditions of China, and made relevant to the 'true character' (根性—*Gen Xing*) of the Chinese people. Obviously such a process is ongoing and takes time to achieve. It requires continuous effort through the dissemination of true knowledge, and the exploration of different issues to ever greater degrees of understanding so that improvement is made. All these difficult issues were placed in front of Hui Yuan who strove diligently to solve each problem appropriately—this was a difficult and arduous task.

'The Dao (i.e. Way of Buddhism) flows (from India) to the eastern country (China) and has far to travel!'

In this way, the Dao of Buddhism was transmitted from India to China little by little, and a body of correct wisdom and knowledge was eventually established. Hui Yuan and his disciples assumed the great responsibility of ensuring that Buddhism was preserved, understood, and correctly practiced. Hui Yuan approached this task with a sense of confidence and anticipation. Through his efforts the Buddha-Dharma was established in China and people developed confidence in its teachings. This is why the life story of Hui Yuan is remembered with great

respect. History records Hui Yuan in the following manner:

'Since entering the Dao of Buddhism, strict self-discipline came naturally to him, and he avoided crowds. He constantly upheld the strictest of discipline, and saw the preservation and cultivation of the Great Dharma as his personal duty.'

He always considered his situation carefully, and acted as local conditions permitted. In all places he cared about the cultivation of the Buddhist teachings amongst the native people of China, and always made those teachings relevant to their needs. His ideas were both daring and innovative, as he found ways to integrate Buddhism into Chinese culture. By correctly responding to the times, he greatly strengthened and advanced the traditions of Chinese Buddhism.

Broadly speaking, Hui Yuan's work regarding the spread and preservation of Chinese Buddhism can be summarised in the presentation of 6 points.

1. THE ORDINATION OF BUDDHIST MONKS AND NATIONAL POLITICS

Hui Yuan lived on Mount Lu (庐山—Lu Shan), and did not partake in any vulgar activity, although he did retain communication with various political figures, mostly those occupying the highest positions within the government. Hui Yuan's interaction with government officials falls into three categories of definition:

- a) Emperors and kings such as Jin An Di (晋安帝) [382-419], the crowned monarch of the Northern Yao Qin (姚秦) area.
- b) Dynastic ministers (close to the emperor), such as those holding the ranks of 'Assists the Country General' (辅国将军—Fu Guo Jiang Jun), 'Grand Military Officer' (太尉—Tai Wei), 'Provincial Governor' (刺史—Ci Shi), and 'Minister of Culture' (司徒—Si Tu), etc.
- c) Leaders of the rebellion such as Lu Xun (卢循) and so on. These people sponsored the building and ongoing maintenance of a temple for Hui Yuan—a gift that Hui Yuan accepted. Although negotiations were often difficult, Hui Yuan always remained courteous and polite.

With regards to dealing with politicians,

Hui Yuan was highly skilled in (Daoist arts of) flexibility, compromise, and reconciliation. To achieve this, Hui Yuan employed four methods:

- i) He did not come down the mountain to meet people. Jin An Di denounced the Grand Military Officials (太尉—Tai Wei) named Huan Xuan (桓玄), and travelled back to the national capital from Jiang Ling (江陵), passing through Jiu Jiang (九江) on the way. The Assists the Country General (辅国将军—Fu Guo Jiang Jun) tried to persuade Hui Yuan to come down from the mountain and greet Jin An Di in an elaborate fashion, but Hui Yuan declined on the grounds of ill health. Upon hearing about the illness of Hui Yuan, Jin An Di sent an imperial emissary to offer his greetings from afar.
- ii) He did not discuss political problems. When Huan Xuan (桓玄) led a punitive military expedition against the provincial governor of Jing Zhou (荆州) named Yin Zhong Kan (殷仲堪), the army passed through the Mount Lu area. Huan Xuan requested that Hui Yuan come down the mountain, but Hui Yuan declined on the grounds of poor health. Hearing this, Huan Xuan travelled up the mountain to ask Hui Yuan what he thought of the military action—Hui Yuan remained silent.
- iii) He did not judge people according to their political status. After Lu Xun (卢循) occupied Jiu Jiang (九江), he climbed Mount Lu to meet with Hui Yuan. As it transpired that Hui Yuan's father and Lu Xun's father had once been students together, Hui Yuan warmly greeted him, despite the fact that it was common knowledge that Lu Xun was considered a 'National Bandit' (国寇—Guo Kou), and that his presence upon the mountain might cause suspicion amongst the dynastic authorities. Hui Yuan said:

"I have no choice as the Dharma teaches loving kindness should be shown to all. Even if this interaction is known, I have no fear of the authorities."

Later, Hui Yuan supported a military expedition against Lu Xun and the overthrow of the Jin Dynasty (晋王朝—Jin Wang

Chao) by the Liu Song Dynasty (劉宋朝—Liu Song Chao) which was founded by the Song Military Emperor Liu Yu (宋武帝刘裕—Song Wu Di Liu Yu). This demonstrates the force of Hui Yuan's excellent political judgement.

- iv) He would not accept an official post as a means to justify his actions.

'A true master possesses a profound depth of character and meets all unexpected situations with a dignified response. If the unexpected is met with confusion, then the performance of the correct action is delayed. It has been transmitted in the old books of wisdom that haste should be made to develop this important attribute amongst those who hold official posts, as holding such posts does not automatically guarantee the possession of this ability. This is a profound and strong statement that emphasises true fortitude. It is recorded that those who possess this ability endure like stone and can not be easily overcome.'

This is why Hui Yuan resolutely refused to travel down the mountain to meet Huan Xuan. On the one hand, Hui Yuan acknowledged the reasonable habits of ordinary people, whilst on the other he taught that Buddhist developmental philosophy and discipline (i.e. Dharma) was superior and an advanced mode of behaviour in the world.

With regards to politics, Hui Yuan remained indifferent. This was because many politicians possessed a selfish character that did not inspire respect and which lacked humility and was not interested in the Dharma. This is why Hui Yuan did not get directly involved in politics, and did not view the political authorities as superior to the practice of the Dharma. Through maintaining this independent attitude, Hui Yuan was able to integrate the practice of Buddhism into the complex fabric of Chinese social and political activity, without causing conflict. Through Hui Yuan's ability to adapt and integrate, Buddhism continued to independently grow and develop in China free of direct interference from outside forces and influences.

2. BUDDHA-DHARMA, CUSTOMS AND SECULAR RITUAL

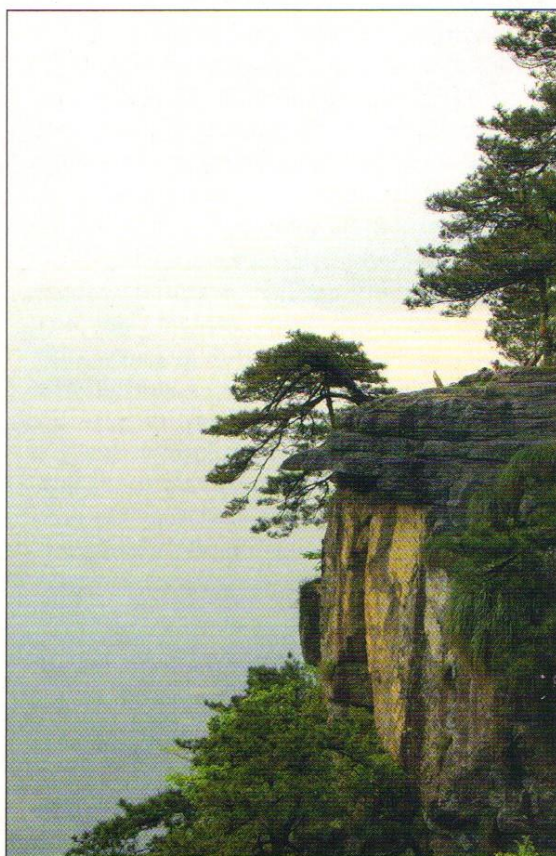
In accordance with the system of established Buddhist teachings; fully ordained monks did

not venerate or worship the emperor, their parents, or any members of their family. With regards to clothing, the fully ordained monk had to wear the correct type of robe, which allowed the right-shoulder to be exposed. However, some scholar-officials working for the government of the Eastern Jin Dynasty expressed a strong dislike of the rules associated with the Buddhist tradition. The high ranking dynastic official called Geng Bing (庚冰), together with Huan Xuan (桓玄), He Wu Ji (何无忌), and others, composed a document pointing out the difference between the attire and attitude of the Buddhist monks and that which they considered correct, particularly with regard to the serious matter of respecting the royal personage of the king himself. As a consequence, they proposed that the matter of Buddhist ritual, etiquette, clothing, manner of making a living, the Buddhist relationship with the ruler of the State, the use of the Buddha image, (and various other issues of concerns), be thoroughly examined through an official investigation. In response to these criticisms (of Buddhism in China), Hui Yuan wrote two special explanatory texts which were entitled the 'Treatise on Buddhist Monks Not Revering the King' (沙门不敬王者论—Sha Men Bu Jing Wang Zhe Lun), [which contained five chapters], and the 'Treatise on Why Buddhist Monks Leave the Right Shoulder Bare When Wearing Robes' (沙门袒服论—Sha Men Fan Fu Lun), as a means to present the correct Buddhist view on these matters. Hui Yuan defined two categories of Buddhist behaviour:

- a) *Dharma Instruction for Householders* (在家奉法—Zai Jia Feng Fa), which was designed to guide the laity. This text interpreted the great teaching of the Buddha so that lay-people could effectively follow the Dharma at home. Lay Buddhists must comply with the social ethics of the society within which they live, pay respect to the king, and wear the same clothing as everyone else.
- b) *Living Outside the World* (方外之宾—Feng Wai Zhi Bin), which was designed to instruct fully ordained monastics. These ordained followers of the Buddha seek liberation through non-attachment to the world of the senses. They are not interested in secular life, and do not participate

within it. This is because the secular law (associated with the Confucian tradition of ritual and rites) is somewhat different to Buddhist practice. Hui Yuan explained that monks do not live in, or participate within secular society, and have nothing to do with politics, and therefore are disconnected from the world.

This being the case, to worship and respect a ruling monarch would indicate an attachment to the world, and would constitute a violation of the Buddhist monastic code (*Vinaya*). Hui Yuan, therefore, explain that Buddhist monastics do not worship or show respect to the king so as to remain detached from the world. This attitude and behaviour was designed to safeguard the independence of the spiritual life, and ensure the impartial status of Buddhist monastics (who did not get involved in secular politics). However, Hui Yuan further explained that Buddhist monastics certainly did not disrespect the king, but as they followed



Lu Shan, Jiangxi, China. Photo by KongFu Wang

very strict rules, (often stricter than secular law), they assisted the king to keep law and order in society by setting a good example for others through their disciplined behaviour. Furthermore, as the Buddhist monastics strove for enlightenment of themselves and others, through the good and virtuous rule of the king, both Buddhist morality and secular morality could work together toward the common goal of social and spiritual liberation. Indeed, Hui Yuan stated that as far as Buddhism was concerned, it was understood that the Buddhist Sangha had a covenant which stated that it; 'Agreed with, and Acknowledged the Fact that the Emperor Supports the People, and that the People Exist Through the Person and Authority of the Emperor' (协契皇极, 在宥生民—Xie Qi Huang Ji, Zai You Sheng Min). This meant that in reality the Buddhist Sangha supported the king's co-ordinating role within society, and fully acknowledged and recognised his secular power.

3. THE RECTIFICATION OF THE MONKS AND SOCIAL COORDINATION

Hui Yuan was not in favour of the monks revering the king, but agreed with Huan Xuan's (桓玄) order that corrupt monks should be eliminated from the ordained Sangha.

Huan Xuan, whilst discussing the issue of the relationship between the ordained Sangha and the king, raised the issue of eradicating all bad elements from the Sangha, and setting it into good order. He said:

"Presently there is an issue with Buddhist monks and their behaviour. Officials state that monks should participate in the secular ritual of ancestor worship—official Chang (畅) states that this constitutes good and moral behaviour within society. It is also believed that Buddhist monks should dress like everyone else, and not wear robes with their right-shoulder showing. I will rectify these great misunderstandings amongst the officials, but to do this, I need to regulate the Sangha by removing all those who do not follow the Buddhist rules properly. It is my view that the Buddhist community of Mount Lu (庐山—Lu Shan) follows the correct Way of Moral Virtue (道德—Dao De), and that there is no observable corruption amongst its Buddhist population."

Huan Xuan approached the issue of regulating the Sangha using sociopolitical and socio-developmental arguments to justify the elimination of corrupt monks.

"The border areas of the country are not yet strong, and it is susceptible to military attack. Hundreds have deliberately avoided military service and have taken refuge in Buddhist temples. In the provinces thousands are missing and the villages have depleted populations. Many gather in unruly groups around the towns searching for food, or take refuge in the borderlands. This situation harms the government and prevents effective rule. Buddhism is under suspicion for harbouring criminals and sustaining this bad situation in the country. These rumours are carried everywhere and sully the good name of Buddhism."

It was clear from this analysis that Buddhism had become associated with the chaos of the time, and was perceived as being out of control. This situation harmed both society and the government. The image of Buddhism risked being permanently tarnished, particularly as many superstitious practices had infiltrated the pure practice from secular society. This is why Buddhism needed to be reformed, and the corrupt elements eradicated.

Indeed, at this time, Hui Yuan was of the opinion that the rules of Buddhism were not always followed correctly, and that Buddhist practice had degenerated and was often not always complete. He said:

"In the 'Integrated Great Grand Quietening Treatise for the Concise Management of Buddhist Monks Book' (与桓太尉论料简沙门书—Yu Huan Tai Wei Lun Liao Jian Sha Men Shu), it states:

'Buddhism has been in a state of slow and gradual decay, and has become corrupted by many outside influences and unsuitable practices. Everyone who witnesses degenerate Buddhism responds with indignation. These errors are often perpetuated everywhere through the habit associated with fear and ignorance. This mixture of superstition and wrong ideas creates a false Dharma that crushes the true spirit of authentic Buddhist teaching. Everyone everywhere sighs with fear, and can not sleep at night, or eat during the day; such is their mental distress caused by this corrupt Buddhism. Those who donate to the temples (檀越—Tan Yue), and who support

the monastics in their lifestyle, have a moral right to be clearly taught the correct path of spiritual development (道人教—*Dao Ren Jiao*), which reveals the true mind. Mastery should spread like the flow of water from one river to another, over-coming all obstacles in its path. The correct Buddhist teaching clears all human ignorance, and constitutes a special transmission. It is regrettable when the teaching is corrupt and lacks integrity, as it leads humanity far from the correct path. This situation is important and must be discussed. As this issue is a matter of divine (imperial) command (符命—*Fu Ming*), it must be thoroughly examined through the use of logic and reason.”

Hui Yuan accepted Huan Xuan’s suggestion that corrupt monks should be expelled from the Sangha, but added that Huan Xuan must learn to distinguish correctly between those who follow the monastic rules properly, and those who do not. Hui Yuan said:

“It is important to understand from the beginning, that within the Buddhist teachings there are three sections of practice:

- 1) *An in-depth study of meditation (禅思入微—Ch’an Si Ru Wei).*
- 2) *The recitation of the Buddhist canon (that is pleasant to the ear), which has been handed down from the past (讽味遗典—Feng Wei Yi Dian).*
- 3) *Practices that generate blessings and good fortune (兴建福业—Xing Jian Fu Ye).*

A good Buddhist monastic will develop and follow these three sections of proper discipline, and will not deviate from their teachings.”

Buddhists believe that these three sections that constitute correct Buddhist practice, derive from the Buddha’s enlightened mind, and guarantee enlightenment to anyone who puts them sincerely into practice. Enlightenment is achieved by strictly following the precepts (that is following the rules of discipline). This is why Hui Yuan proposed a set of standards that individuals had to meet if they wanted to ordain as a Buddhist monastic. This standard was not only aimed at preventing corrupt monks from joining the Sangha, but was also used as a reminder for already existing monks of the high standards expected of their behaviour, and the direction in which their practice should progress. Hui

Yuan carefully assessed the rank and file of the Buddhist monastics, and carried-out the campaign to purify the ranks of the Sangha. This was not only good for Buddhism, but good for Chinese society, as Buddhism became viewed as a compatible philosophy and acceptable mode of existence. This climate of acceptance allowed Buddhism to grow and develop naturally in China. ■

Editor’s note: The remainder of this article (part 2) will be published in the Winter 2014-2015 issue.

Adrian Chan-Wyles is an independent scholar (and published author) living in the UK. He has been a ‘work scholar’ for Dr. Rupert Sheldrake of Cambridge University, and holds a Philosophy of Mind Certificate from Oxford University. He is the custodian of The Richard Hunn Association for Ch’an Study (<http://wenshuchan-online.weebly.com>), and has written for *The Middle Way*—the journal of the Buddhist Society, London. He holds a PhD in (spiritual) Metaphysics, and writes extensively upon the subjects of Chinese history, philosophy, the paranormal and martial culture. As a Ch’an adept, he continues the lineage of master Xu Yun (1840-1959), as handed down to Charles Luk (1898-1978), and conveyed by Richard Hunn (1949-2006).



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)