

ACROSS THE HIMALAYAN GAP

CULTURE AND ART

MANICHAEAN INPUT TO CHINESE CULTURE AND ART

RADHA BANEJEE

Years ago, Indians used to talk about China's insularism, and the "Middle Kingdom" looking down at all foreigners as "barbarians", obviously taking the other quarter's disinformation with a pinch of sugar. Gradually, as our direct channel of information from China opens up, we see a Taj Mahal being hidden behind high walls. The garden of art in China is a fascinating field with such magnificent varieties catching the eye. Here, I propose to deal with one of the varieties -the Manichaeian art and culture. With the opening up of the Silk Road trade as a result of explorations in Central Asia by Zhang Qian (the Ambassador of Han Emperor Wu), many religious ideas and art motifs and other things came to China from the West in the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. Among them mention may be made of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. The history of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism in China is well known. Little attention, however, is paid to Manichaeism and the manner in which it spread to the east including Chinese Turkistan (now Xinjiang, i.e., the "new territory" in its Chinese name) and China, particularly the coastal provinces.

Manichaeism was propounded by a cultural reformer called Mani who was born in 216 AD in Cteshipon in Babylonia which was then part of Persia. Mani proclaimed himself a prophet and the messenger of god in Babylon, although he was not of Babylonian origin, but an Iranian descendant. His father, Patik (*Pattikos* in the hellenized form) was a native of Hamadan, and his mother, Maryam was a member of the princely family related to the ruling Arsacid Dynasty. The name Mani is perhaps of Semitic origin, and the term *Manichaios* is a hellenization of the Aramaic *Mani Hayya*, Mani the Living. In Manichaeian texts this epithet is often given to transcendental and benevolent things or beings. Mani is also called *Mar (Aram)*, i.e. lord). His Chinese name, "Mo-mo-ni", is a version of *Mar Mani* --Lord Mani. The environment in which Mani spent his youth accounts for the strong elements of eclecticism and syncretism that were his teachings. Mani was brought up in a liberal atmosphere. His father, by temperament, was inclined to mysticism, and was devoted to the study of the religious sects.

Mani was an exceptionally gifted child and he inherited his father's mystic temperament. It is said that communications of a supernatural character came to him. He travelled far and wide including Turkistan (*cin*), India, Iran etc. with many disciples to carry out evangelism. After forty years of travel he returned with his retinue to Persia and converted Peroz, King Shapur's brother to his teaching. The Zoroastrian priesthood, however, hatched plots against Mani by poisoning the ears of the king. After a brief period of hiding Mani was captured and crucified at the age of 65.

Manichaeism may be regarded as a ramification of Gnosticism. Central to the Manichaeian teaching was dualism, conceiving the world and all its creatures in the Great Divide between the good, represented by Light, and the bad, represented by Darkness -and Mani personified Light or was the God of Light. Mani had thus adopted Zoroaster's dualistic doctrine of the fundamental struggle between light

and darkness, soul and matter. He also drew from the teachings of the gentle and humane Buddha certain lessons for the conduct of life to be acceptable everywhere by mankind. This eclectic character was the strength and the basic nature of Manichaeism.

Mani lifted a leaf from Buddhism. He divided his followers into two categories. First, the Elect or Perfect, who led a life of celibacy and extreme austerity, exemplifying the highest standard of life, and who dedicated themselves to the task of preaching the doctrine. Women as well as men were received into the order. The Elect wore white robes, which covered their bodies entirely. Even the hands were not to be seen unless they had to work -then they need not be covered. Various types of headgear, which indicate the specific ranks of their bearers, were worn in addition to the uniform white robe. There is an interesting painting from Chotscho, that shows a high priest with a distinctive headgear which evidently belonged to the Elect.

The head is encompassed by a solar disc and the crescent moon laid around it. Mani was venerated among the Uighurs as *Kun ai tangri, esun-moon-godi*. The symbols of sun and moon occupy an important place in Manichaeism and these two celestial bodies emit spiritual light and enlightenment. The second category of Mani's followers comprised the Auditors or Hearers as the laymen of the community were called. Both the elects and hearers are disciplined by Mani's ten commandments. Manichaeism keeps seven seals for its emblem. Four of these were doctrinal, comprising: (1) Love for the god-patriarch; (2) Faith in the sun and moon as the great orbs of light; (3) Reverence for the divine elements in Primal Man; and (4) A recognition of the inspired office of the great revealers of religions. The other three seals were of a moral and ethical nature relating to the standards to be observed in day to day life.

Manichaeism was a typical trans-regional and trans-cultural religious movement. Paradoxically, the writings of Europe from Britain (including the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), Russia and other countries hardly mention the influence of Buddhism on Manichaeism. But, the scholars of China and Japan have highlighted this influence. We know that when Mani preached in Turan in India, the local people took him as the Buddha. The Manichaeism documents in Sogdian script also described Mani as Buddha. All this points to the hybrid character of Manichaeism which was preached east of Iran as different from its other stream that penetrated into Europe and northern Africa. We, therefore, can divide the Manichaeism religious-cultural movement into two: (1) Western Manichaeism and (2) Eastern Manichaeism. Western Manichaeism did not survive long. By the end of the 6th century there was hardly any trace of it in the Roman Empire. But, Eastern Manichaeism was quite tenacious, lasting beyond the first millennium of our common Era.

Modern enquiries on Manichaeism in China was sparked off by the discovery by Sir Aurel Stein in 1907 of several Manichaeism texts in Chinese along with many thousands of Buddhist scrolls from cave No 17 of the Dunhuang Grottoes. The Stein collection of Chinese manuscripts (now housed in the British Museum, London) comprise some important Manichaeism manuscripts viz., the Confession for the Hearer, The Hymns in praise of Mani and Manichaeism deities and saints, and a Compendium of the teaching of the Sect. The example of Sir Aurel Stein was followed by Professor Paul Pelliot of France. He was an eminent scholar conversant in Chinese language. During his expedition in Central Asia he paid a visit to the Dunhuang Grottoes and took away from there academically valuable Chinese manuscripts including Manichaeism documents to Paris (which are housed in the Bibliotheque Nationale). Among these documents there is a small fragment of Manichaeism text containing a summary of rules for the Manichaeism religious organization.

Chinese scholars have begun to trace the genesis of Manichaeism in China and discovered the presence of its culture as early as the post-Han period, around the 4th century. In *Jin Shu* (Annals of Jin Dynasty), there are two references which deserve our attention. There was a man named Liu Hong in Luoyang who gathered more than a thousand followers to his *Guangming* (light) belief which could be Manichaeism. (*Jin Shu, juan 86*). Another man Hou Ziguang, also of the Jin Dynasty, said he was the son of the Buddha coming from a foreign country named *Daqin*. He also gathered several thousand followers

and proclaimed himself the "Great Yellow Emperor" .(Ibid, *Zaiji* 6). He also could be a Manichaean convert having acquired his belief either in Europe (which was called *Daqin*) or in Asia Minor.

The most intriguing thing lies in the two Dunhuang manuscripts collected by Pelliot which were the fragments of the *Laozi hua hu jing* (The Canon about Laozi's reincarnation in a foreign country). In the first *juan* (fascicle), it mentions that 450 years after the passing away of Laozi, he flew to a neighbouring country in a gust of air of *ziran guangming dao* (the natural arJd bright Tao) passing through the *Sunyata*, and was born as a prince. Then, he left the palace and joined Tao, assumed the title of *Momoni* and turned the *Dharmacakra* (the wheel of truth). Then, he preached *erzong* (Two doctrines) and *sanjie* (three worlds). This discovery sparked off a warmth of interest among Chinese scholars who made inquiries about the text of *Laozi hua hu jing* which was authored by a Taoist priest, Wang Fu, during the Jin Dynasty in the 4th century AD. Here, Wang Fu seemed to be using the information from Manichaeism to achieve his aim -making belief that Buddha was an incarnation of the ancient Chinese philosopher, Laozi, who was revered as the patriarch of Taoism.

When was Manichaeism introduced to Central Asia is still a subject of speculation. While we concede Central Asia as the necessary conduit for Manichaean religion and culture to reach Chinese soil, there is also evidence of this religio-cultural movement retracing its footsteps to arrive at Xinjiang from the hinterland of China. In 755 there occurred the An Lushan rebellion against Emperor Xuanzong (reigning from 712 to 755) who fled from the capitals of Changan and Luoyang. The Tang government asked Uighur for help in quelling the rebels. The Uighur troops liberated Luoyang and Changan in 757 but did not withdraw until the following year. During his stay in Luoyang the Uighur ruler Mou Yu made the acquaintance of Manichaean monks probably of Sogdian origin. They must have made some impression on him, because when he vacated the city he took four monks with him. Shortly after this the Khaghan declared Manichaeism as the state religion of the Uighur empire. The whole story is narrated in the famous trilingual inscription of Karabalghasun. This is the first and only time in the history of Manichaeism that it reached such a high status of a state religion. Most of the Uighur nobles became converts to Manichaeism. Archaeological discoveries and systematic studies on the cave temples in Eastern Turkistan throw considerable light on the Manichaean re"igious and cultural activities in this region. Many Manichaean manuscripts were recovered from Turfan. They show that Manichaeism was wide- spread in Turfan during the 7th to 10th centuries. This is supported by the statement of the Arabic geographer" Tarim ibn Bahral- Mutawadi who came to Central Asia some time between the 8th and 9th centuries. He had observed that there were many followers of Manichaeism in Northern and Eastern Xinjiang. Another geographer Jahiz (9th century) has recorded that nine Uighur tribes were converted into Manichaeism by the eighth century.

Some fragments of a Manichaean book written in Turkish mention that in 803 the Khan of Uighur Kingdom went to Turfan and sent three Manichaean Magistrates to pay respects to a senior Manichaean cleric in Mobei. A Manichaean tp)tmn of the 8th century from Turfan written in Middle Persian mentions that most of the Khan's kinsmen were devoted to Manichaean faith. The Manichaean manuscripts found in Turfan were written in three different Iranian scripts, viz. Middle Persian, Parthian and Sogdian script. These documents prove that Sogdia was a very important centre of Manichaeism during the early mediaeval period and it was perhaps the Sogdian merchants who brought the religion to Central Asia and China.

During the early 10th century Uighur emerged a very powerful empire under the influence of Buddhism with some Manichaean shrines converted into Buddhist temples. However, there was no denying the historical fact that the Uighurs were worshippers of Mani. The Arabian historian Al-Nadim infor11s US that the Uighur Khan did his best to project Manichaeism in the Central Asian kingdom (of Saman). Chinese documents record that the Uighur Manichaean clerics came to China to pay tribute to the imperial court in 934. The envoy of Song Dynasty by the name of Wang visited Manichaean temples in Gaochang. It appears that the popularity of Manichaeism slowly declined after 10th century in Central Asia.

Manichaean art is religious in nature, and devoted to the propagation of Manichaean doctrines. Mani, as is attested to by all oriental sources, was an accomplished artist, who utilized his artistic talent in decorating his canonical works using art for the popularization of his religious ideas. He despatched scribes and illuminators along with his missionaries to strengthen evangelism. According to his own testimony: the pictures illustrating his writings were to complete the educated people's instruction, whilst rendering the message easier to understand for others. It is generally held that in the matter of illustrating his instructional treatises he adhered to the tradition which was already evolved in the Gnostic circles. There were a good many rich Jews in Mesopotamia, thus, it is quite possible that they encouraged the production of costly manuscripts, and Mani made use of them to prepare his own illustrated sermons. Being an Iranian, Mani must have been influenced by the Parthian-Syrian art idioms of Dura-Europos in the execution of his art works.

Though Manichaeism spread in many countries, the majority of Manichaean art examples have survived only in Eastern Turkistan where the followers of this religion received a wide support from the Uighur royal families during the 8th-9th centuries. Of all the sites in Eastern Turkistan, Kharakoja seems to have been the most important centre of Manichaean activities. Manichaean art of the region can be divided into two broad categories, viz. the wall paintings and miniatures. Their existence and importance have hardly attracted scholarly attention. We are much indebted to the arduous efforts on the part of German explorers, A von Lecoq and his colleagues. It is from an old temple complex that A von Lecoq (a well known Turkologist from Germany) discovered first in 1904-5 water-colour painting of a Manichaean high priest surrounded by a number of his clergy all clad in white Sacerdotal clothes characteristic of the Manichaean monastic order. The portrait of the high priest is shown in his monastic robe with a rectangular piece of embroidery covering a part of his bosom. His tall white cap is also embroidered with gold. His face is oval, nose aquiline, but eyes small and rather slanting, typical of the manner in which Chinese artists depict a Westerner. The nimbus of the figure contains the crescent and sun disc symbols. This extraordinary nimbus and the impressive costume create the impression that the figure is very important and perhaps a portrayal of the prophet Mani. As I have alluded to earlier sun and moon symbols occupy an important place in Manichaean cosmology. The discovery of this picture disproves the old theory that the Manichaeans had no churches and shrines embellished with paintings.

Another mural fragment from Khoco portrays three Manichaean women on a blueblack ground which is also a piece of fine artistic work. These three women closely resemble each other. Their hair is parted in the middle and falls over the back and shoulders. Their headgear consists of a roll of white cloth tied in a bow behind the ears. The fragmentary condition of the painting makes it difficult to ascertain whether they represent lay women or deities.

Karakhoja 1 (Khoco) fragments have yielded many illustrated Manichaean manuscripts distinctive by their contents as well as their artistic qualities. We may first take up here for discussion the Manichaean Leaf, bearing the Berlin Museum No. Mik III, 4979. One side of it depicts a church ceremony, with a high ranking Manichaean priest in full vestments (but the picture of his head is lost). A red embroidered stole is wrapped around his neck and shoulders. The stole bears a pattern of red lozenges on white background. The priest kneels down with his right leg before a man in full armour who is probably a Uighur king with three attendants. To the priest's left two Manichaean elects stand behind in white garments along with a layman, probably an auditor.

In the foreground of the picture there is Ganesha along with the Hindu trinity consisting of Visnu in Varaha incarnation, Brahma, bearded and pot bellied, and the three-eyed Siva. Facing them on the left are seated two Iranian Manichaean gods. Below these deities the leaf is damaged but paintings of flowers and ducks can still be made out. The artist who has drawn this picture, it seems, is equally conversant with the Hindu and Manichaean pantheons. The Hindu deities depicted here correspond to their descriptions given in the Indian *Shilpasastra*. The scene perhaps tries to suggest that Mani had been in India and borrowed Indian religious ideas to enrich the Manichaean pantheon which is hinted by the Manichaean tradition. Even if he was never in India, his having come into close contact with Indian

culture (including Hindu deities) is beyond doubt.

The miniature on the other side of the leaf depicts a religious celebration, the famous feast of Bema commemorating the martyrdom of Mani. This celebration took place every year in the Spring, for, according to St. Augustine, Mani died in March. In the centre of the picture, there is a red dias standing on a blue carpet. In front of the dias is a three-legged golden bowl containing melons, grapes, etc. as offering. Further forward stands a table bearing loaves of wheat bread in the shape of the sun disc and crescent. Again the miniature depicts several rows of different ranks of the elect many of whom have their names written on their white robes. The auditors (the hearers or lay worshippers) by their side can be distinguished by their high conical black hats.

Equally interesting is another Manichaean leaf (bearing No. MIK III 6368) in the Berlin collection. On one side of the leaf there is a two part picture divided vertically by a narrow band of writing in the middle. The picture shows priests arranged in two rows, one above the other. They wear black hair and tall hats. Each priest kneels at a low desk and each has a sheet of white paper in front of him. In the background are two flowering trees, one on either side. On one of the trees sits a golden bird. The other side of the leaf shows two splendid creepers, with inscriptions in black and red ink. The top of the leaf originally contained many musicians of whom only one vina player is extant. The floral designs and beautiful colours of this fragment are worth noticing.

In addition to the above there are several other fragments from a Manichaean book in the Berlin Museum collection. One of them contains the head of a woman with a beautiful face and a white hat. While another fragment shows the head of a man with usual white hat and sharp feature of a Uighur Turk. He has a well groomed moustache and beard. This type of face occurs later in Persian miniatures too.²

These mural fragments and miniatures illustrate various episodes and ceremonies pertaining to the Manichaean faith. They throw abundant light on the rites, rituals and costumes of the Manichaean priests and lay worshippers. Since the Manichaean religion is now extinct these murals and miniatures constitute a valuable source for the study of Manichaean religious life and art styles which are predominantly Iranian in character.

Manichaean art has left its mark also in the cave art of Central Asia. All the three temple complexes of Turfan, i.e. Toyuk, Bezeklik and Sangim, contain many Manichaean grottoes which have been studied in great details by Prof Chao (Zhao) Huashan of the Beijing University. According to his researches, the main and side chambers of the Toyuk Grotto No.2 contain pictures of the Manichaean treasure trees accompanied by envoys of light, and of the meditations of the disciples, etc. These pictures are repeated also in the Toyuk Grotto No 7.

The Bezeklik temple complex too has many grottoes devoted to Manichaean subjects, like the veneration of the divine tree, portraits of Mani's followers in Persian dress, as well as a sketch of a Manichaean temple (Grotto No.38 B. according to the classification of Professor Chao Huashan). From some of these Bezeklik caves there have been discovered also Uighur inscriptions which help in the dating of the caves.

At Sangim, Prof Chao could visit only two Manichaean temples which he termed as the Northern Temple and the Southern Temple. They also contain many pictures depicting the Manichaean subjects such as the Tree of Life, the Tree of Death, the Orchard of Treasure Trees, etc.³ We know from Manichaean texts that at the core of the Manichaean creed was a dualist doctrine that postulated two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Light (*guangming wangguo*) and the Kingdom of Darkness (*hei'an wangguo*). These two kingdoms are represented by two trees as mentioned above. There is an explanation of the nature of these two trees in the Book of Giants (*Juren shu*) that says: Virtue is expressed by Light or by the Tree of Life which occupies the East, the West and the North, while to the South there is the Tree of Death. The *Kephalaïs* (Essentials of the Faith), an ancient Manichaean

manuscript written in Coptic discovered in Egypt during the 1930s explains that these two trees are the Tree of Virtue and the Tree of Evil. The trunk of the two trees twist around each other in two places. The relative positions of the two trees also illustrate the Manichaean doctrine of three moments i.e. the Initial Moment; the Median Moment, and the Ultimate Moment.

According to the *Compendium of the Teaching of Mani: the Buddha of Light*, a Manichaean temple has five sections containing a lectorium, a hall for instruction, a hall for prayer and penitence, a hall for preaching, and a monk's hospice. In these five halls, monks and their followers lived together, engaged in spiritual cultivation and character improvement. According to Prof Chao, the imposing Northern Mosque in Sangir typifies the Manichaean temple.

From the chronological point of view the halls are divided into two periods. In the former period, the layout has several features: the main chamber is relatively wide, the side chambers are also quite spacious, but the prayer and penitence hall is rather small. The frescoes of the first period, can be placed in the early seventh century specially the painting of the Grotto No. 2 of Toyuk. The boar heads of this period are surrounded by a ring of white circles set in black, resembling a string of pearls imitating Persian motifs of the Sassanian period. Toyuk grottoes show two portraits of donors wearing striped cloaks with their hands raised. Prof Chao Huashan has described this dress as that of Macedonian aristocracy. At that time Macedonia was an important centre of Manichaean faith. The Manichaean grottoes of the second period (9th century) are distinguished by the presence of the Uighur script and their large scale showing the might of the Uighur empire.

Manichaeism was very popular in China during Tang Dynasty (618-907), the documents of which period yield various names like *Moni*, *Momoni*, *Momonifa* (law of Mani), *Xiao moni* (small Mani), *Da Moni* (great Mani), *Moni shi* (Mani priest) etc. After Tang, these names disappeared, and Manichaeism was popularly known as *mingjiao* (the Bright Religion). During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the government could not tolerate a non-government organization using the imperial title "Ming", hence, Manichaeism was banned, and its activities went underground. As I have alluded to earlier, during the post-Han period of political instability, Manichaeism arrived in China and was utilized by rebel leaders to mobilize followers. Such a phenomenon developed after the Song Dynasty (960-1279), particularly along the coastal regions where secret societies and rebellions sprang up by leaps and bounds. Even during the Song Dynasty there was the interesting occurrence in the two coastal provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian which is known as *chicai shimo* (literally, "eating vegetables and serving the devil"). In *Fozu Tongji*, which is an important historiography of Buddhism in China compiled by Buddhist scholars during 1258-1269, there is an account which categorically identifies these vegetarian followers of the "devil" as belonging to the Association of *Mingjiao*, i.e. the new Chinese name for Manichaeism. The account says that the leader wore a headgear of violet colour, while the followers wore white costumes. They worshipped the white Buddha.⁴ Many of these followers demonstrated their rebellious spirit and were quelled by the Song government. After that, all subsequent governments were suppressive against Manichaean activities. albeit the Manichaean followers' tenacity in their faith and in their organized activities.

The Quanzhou county of Fujian province was a place that used to have Manichaean activities from Song Dynasty onwards. This was also the place where there was an Indian community during the Tang and Song (and even afterwards), and where the remains of a Hindu temple have been found. Whether the presence of the Indian community and the Manichaean activities there had any connection with each other we are not able to ascertain. Historical reference alludes to a Manichaean temple built at Quanzhou in 1148. Archaeological excavations at the ruins of this temple at Huapiao Hill in this county have yielded several tens of broken pieces of black porcelain bowls of Song vintage, one of which bears the letters "mingjiaohui" (Association of the Bright Religion).⁵

In the Quanzhou Museum¹ of the History of Maritime Intercourses (*Quanzhou haiwai jiaotongshi bowuguan*) there is a carved Buddha of the Mani Light which was recovered from the ruins of the Mani temple (of Song Dynasty) at Huabiao Hill. The sculpture is round in shape, resembling a sun. While a

Buddha-like deity fills the circular sculpture, the deity wears a Chinese Buddhist robe and with a typical Chinese face. The design in the background depicts sun rays emitting from the deity. This very interesting artifact deserves close examination. It looks like that the *Mingjiao* followers were worshipping an alternative Buddha who, they might have wished, would bless the poor masses for a change -unlike the usual prevalent Buddhas in China who had been quite monopolized by the rich and high-ups. That Manichaeism came all the way from the Western Hemisphere to China to make the noble ideas and ideals serve the down-trodden is a fascinating historical phenomenon. I hope my brief account stimulates more Indian scholars to study it in collaboration with Chinese scholars.

In conclusion, Manichaeism was a religio-cultural movement that had a very significant influence on Chinese development it is clear that its activities both helped spread the popularity of the Buddha and completed with the Buddhist institution to the extent that the Manichaean followers were maligned as "vegetarian followers of the devil". As the Manichaean culture was internalized by the oral literature of the common people the movement has lost much of its distinct traces as well. This, however, should not inhibit us from making further inquiries about this fascinating movement which also bears a dimension of Sino-Indian interface it only indirectly.

1. *Along the ancient Silk Routes: Central Asian art from the West Berlin State Museums*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1982.

2 *Ibid.*

3. Chao, Huashan, "New evidence of Manichaeism in Asia. A description of some recently discovered Manichaean temples in Turfan" in *Monumenta Serica*, No 44 (1996), pp 267-315.

4. *Fozu Tongji* (Chronology of the reign of the Patriarch Buddha), *juan* 48

5. See Zhuang Weiji, "Quanzhou Monijiao Chutan" (Tentative studies on Manichaeism at Quanzhou) in *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (Journal of Studies on world Religion), Beijing, No.3, 1983, pp. 72-82.