The Debate and Confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia
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The Debate and Confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia

A Historical Overview

Translated by Jan Vrhovski

Foreword by Jana S. Rošker

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## Contents

Foreword .................................................. 7

Introduction ............................................. 13

1. A Historical Review of East Asian Confucian-Buddhist Debates .... 15
   1. China ............................................ 15
   2. Korea ........................................... 20
   3. Japan ............................................. 24

2. Common Topics of the East Asian Confucian-Buddhist Debates and the Buddhists’ Responses .......................... 29
   2.1 The Questions of Family Ethics: Filial Piety and Leaving Home for a Monastic Life (孝與出家) ......................... 29
      1.) China ....................................... 29
      2.) Korea ....................................... 33
      3.) Japan ....................................... 34
   2.2 Questions of Political Ethics: Buddhist Monks and Kingship (沙門與王權) ........................................... 37
      1.) China ....................................... 37
      2.) Korea ....................................... 42
   2.3 Questions of the Distinction Between Chinese (Civilized People) and Barbarians (華夷) .................................. 44
      1.) China ....................................... 44
      2.) Korea ....................................... 46
   2.4 The Question of the Relationship Between the Consciousness (Soul) and Body (神識與形體) ............................. 48
      1.) China ....................................... 48
      2.) Korea ....................................... 60
   2.5 Questions of Karma and Samsara (因果與輪迴) .................. 61
      1.) China ....................................... 61
2.) Korea ................................ 67
3.) Japan ................................ 71

3. Discursive Strategies in Debate and Confluence between
   Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia .................. 75

4. Conclusion ................................................. 83

Bibliography ............................................... 85
   Primary Sources ......................................... 85
   Secondary Sources ....................................... 88

Index of Names ............................................. 93

Index of Terms ............................................. 97
Chun-Chieh Huang, the author of the present book, is an extremely prolific writer. He is a Distinguished Chair Professor of National Taiwan University (NTU), and an academic adviser of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at the Academia Sinica in Taipei. He was the National Chair Professor of the Ministry of Education, Taiwan, and the Dean of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the NTU. Over the past 20 years, Professor Huang and his colleagues have edited eight book series in Chinese on Confucian culture, which has been brought to life due to the increasing relevance of these regions on the global level. The present work is a partial translation of his recent Chinese book on the discourse on humanity in the history of East Asian Confucianisms.

Professor Huang has been a leading author in the study of “East Asian Confucianisms.” As compared to the 20th century New Confucians, who studied Confucianism on a “state-centric” basis, Professor Huang and his team have promoted the study of “East Asian Confucianisms” from a transnational, multilingual, and transcultural perspective. This new study of Confucianism in 21st century Taiwan has been very much fascinated with two developments in the history of Confucianisms in East Asia, namely, the first one is the emergence of tensions and fusions between Chinese Confucian values and the specific characteristics of other regions such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam in East Asia, and secondly, the duality of cultural and political identity exhibited within East Asian Confucianisms among non-Chinese Confucians. The study of Confucianism in Korea, Japan and Vietnam explores the inseparability and tension between cultural and political identity in the minds of Confucian scholars in these countries.

In this work, Chun-Chieh Huang takes us on a long and exciting journey through the landscapes of Chinese and East Asian intellectual history, focusing upon an important question that has – for much too long – been overlooked or
even neglected by the majority of scholars dealing with East Asian history, philosophy and religious studies. As such, this book is elaborating upon the connections and interactions between Confucianism and Buddhism, which represent two of the traditional “three teachings (san jiao 三教)" that have been largely defining the long-lasting development of the so-called “Chinese mind”. The third teaching among these is Daoism, which – in the framework of what is commonly understood as indigenous Chinese thought – mostly served as a complementary antipode to Confucian ethics and philosophy.

When Buddhism came to China toward the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), it was confronted with a rich spiritual and philosophical life that was completely different from its own conceptual and metaphysical paradigms. While Buddhism originally preached a negation of the physical world, including human beings and their individual selves, presupposing their illusionary nature, Confucianism was completely attuned to the world and life itself, embracing and celebrating its positive connotations for concrete people and their societies and cultures. Therefore, it laid stress upon the systematic development of ethics and interpersonal relations, whereas Buddhism was originally inclined to understand morality and ethics as, at the most, one of the many tools on the difficult path that can lead to enlightenment.

This Buddhist view of the empty nature of the world was closer to certain Daoist approaches, which were similarly based upon such concepts as emptiness or selflessness, and which equally laid stress upon the importance of certain mediation techniques. Therefore, in the first centuries during and after the “Buddhist conquest of China”¹ as argued by Erik Zürcher (1928–2008) or the “domestication”² of Buddhism in China as Arthur F. Wright (1913–1976) termed it, Daoism was often used as a valuable and important bridge connecting the basic spiritual approaches of Buddhism with the worldly and positively oriented traditional Chinese worldview. In contrast to such linkages, Professor Huang’s book focuses upon the hitherto much less investigated, but nevertheless “eye-catching” phenomenon, namely the long and winding developmental stream of debates and confluences between Confucianism and Buddhism. The author points to the fact that after its arrival in China, Buddhism first found itself in a severe conflict with Confucianism. The resulting controversies reached their climax between the fourth and the sixth centuries CE. After the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), however, Mahayana Buddhism had spread and flourished over all of China.

¹ This is a reference to the title of Erik Zürcher’s famous book on the expansion and Sinicization of Buddhism in China, see Erik Zürcher. The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007).
On the surface, the Confucian and Buddhist positions were clearly separated during these periods. On a certain level, Buddhism was even endangering the dominant social and political position of Chinese Confucianism. Constituting the main material of the rigid and static official examination system, Confucian philosophy gradually became too static and formalised to satisfy the intellectual needs of the educated members of society at the time. While they had to learn the Confucian classics by heart in order to climb up their administrative and political careers, they increasingly tended to seek intellectual satisfaction in the endless depths of Buddhist philosophy. These deficiencies of the official Confucian state doctrine were addressed during the developmental course of the Neo-Confucian philosophies of the Song and Ming Dynasties, in which Mengzi was canonised as the most important follower of Confucius. In this period, Neo-Confucian thought, albeit latently and indirectly, integrated numerous conceptual elements of Buddhist thought (and especially of its Sinicised versions) into the newly evolving Neo-Confucian philosophy, which had a lasting impact on Korea and Japan. These indirect, but nevertheless significant elements of Buddhist intellectual legacies later also formed the pinnacle of the Confucian revival in the modern period, i.e. in the intellectual current of the so-called Modern or New Confucianism, which was established in China on the threshold of the 20th century.

Buddhism, on the other hand, was gradually also modified and enriched by numerous elements of originally Confucian ethics, which progressively led to its radical transformation from a world-negating escapism to a positive and ethically fulfilling religion. Therefore, it was understandable that Chinese Buddhism was strongly influenced by Confucian values and principles. Instead of concentrating on escapism and negating concrete life in society, which was a common thread of the original Indian teachings, Chinese Buddhism has instead focused on ways to integrate its practices into people’s life and still enable them to maintain strong familial and political responsibilities.

Hence, it is by no means coincidental that nowadays many people not only in China and Taiwan, but also all over East Asia, see themselves as Buddhist and simultaneously as followers of Confucianism, and such a personal identity does not imply any kind of contradiction.

This is because these dialogues were not limited to the Chinese geopolitical and cultural sphere. They were an important factor in the gradual establishment of a broader East Asian culture, which was based on Sinitic foundations. This is another significant contribution of the present book, for its author offers readers a transparent and easily comprehensible, but simultaneously a highly critical survey over the complex history of Confucian and Buddhist interactions in Korea and Japan. In this way, he manages to posit them into a complex intercultural context, into a network of relations, permeated with various multi-layered his-
torical, political and conceptual dimensions, and defined by the de- and re-contextualisation of numerous important notions.

Professor Huang, who is a well-known expert in East Asian Confucianisms, meticulously analyses this process of conflicts, connections and communications. He starts with an investigation of the social and ideational background of the spread of Buddhism from China to Korea and subsequently to Japan, and then centres our attention on the intense debates that arose in Korea in the 14th and 15th centuries, and later in 17th century Japan. The author introduces this process, which led from initial mutual negation, exclusion and conflict, to an ultimate confluence, harmonisation and synthesis between Confucianism and Buddhism, by making good use of textual analyses and by balancing them with a brilliant understanding and depiction of the particular historical periods and the political events that characterised them.

First, the author reviews the origins and development of the above-mentioned debates between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia. On this basis, he then analyses the central concepts that emerged in these debates. The work also comprehensively elaborates upon various developments of these polemics under the specific social and political circumstances that have defined these regions, contributing to manifold differences between them. By following the coherent and well-founded structure of this book, the reader soon discovers that the depth of research involved in compiling it is outstanding.

After introducing the historical background of the East Asian debates between Confucianism and Buddhism, the author focuses on the central topics of their disputes. Proceeding from ethical themes that are derived from the values and virtues defining interpersonal relations, to the various political and ideological contradictions, Professor Huang points to the relevance of political ethics. In this regard, the book focuses on the Confucian and Buddhist discrepancies in their particular views on the relation between the spiritual development or self-cultivation on the one hand, and social and political responsibilities and power structures on the other.

Another issue that is subsequently treated in this work is the problem of the classical Chinese dichotomy between the (allegedly superior) Han Chinese culture and the “barbarian” societies. Since Buddhism originated in India, it was certainly understandable that the two discourses collided concerning such questions. In this context, Professor Huang explains the multifarious reasons for the fact that this kind of controversies also arose in Joseon Korea, but never occurred in Tokugawa Japan.

In the next step, the author turns to the philosophical differences between the two teachings. Here, the central debate between Confucianism and Buddhism was evolving around the relation between body and soul. In ancient China, people tended to believe that the soul or human spirit resided in the body, and that after
a person died, this spirit disappeared, while the physical body decomposed. Buddhism, in contrast, was marked by its belief in reincarnation, and emphasised the immortality of the soul, established on the basis of the theory of *samsāra*, a view that was – at least directly – incompatible with the Confucian this-worldly and agnostic point of view. Therefore, the members of the Chinese Buddhist schools tried to deal with this discrepancy by applying various classical Chinese intellectual resources, through which they aimed to explain the Buddhist philosophy of body and mind. They raised arguments such as that “body and soul have different roots,” emphasising that the former is still, coarse, and static, while the latter is sublime, transformable and dynamic. The body-mind problem, however, was also tightly connected with the questions of *karma* and *samsāra*. Buddhism taught that after one’s death, the soul is not extinguished, and that one’s life is entangled in a continuous circulation of *samsāra*, guided by the causal principles of *karma*. Chun-Chieh Huang points out that although in ancient China there also existed the idea of retribution, this kind of notion was nevertheless still a social concept, which rested on family as the basic unit of communal life. This was a huge conceptual difference, which unavoidably led both discourses to an open conflict, which manifested itself in countless ideological debates taking place throughout the entire East Asian region.

These philosophical questions were not easy to solve, because the Buddhist worldview is rooted in a strict division between the realms of phenomena and the transcendent sphere of the spiritual world. The prevailing Chinese (and particularly Confucian) worldview, on the other hand, is rooted in a worldly paradigm, in which the “profane” can simultaneously be transformed into the “sacred”. The contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou denoted this paradigm as a “one-world-view”, while the Modern Confucian Mou Zongsan preferred to define it with the concept of immanent transcendence. Numerous Chinese Buddhist philosophers, particularly Huiyuan (慧遠, 334–416) and Chi Chao (郗超, 336–378), have tried to solve this contradiction between the two different worldviews by establishing the necessity of karmic retribution through the application of the infinity of time and space contained in the notion of *samsāra*. As already noted, these debates continued to evolve in Korea and Japan. The book shows how and why the Korean scholar Gihwa (己和, 1376–1433) used the Buddhist teaching of the infinite cycle of “three times” (past, present and future) to prove that the necessity of karmic retribution parallels the continuous rotation of day and night. In Japan, on the other hand, the doctrine of karmic retribution was mainly addressed in the debate between the Japanese Neo-Confucian Hayashi Razan (林羅山, 1583–1657) and the adherent of Nichiren Buddhism Matsunaga Teitoku (松永貞德, 1570–1653). The common thread of all these discussions can be found in the fact that in all these countries the Buddhist treatises written in response to Confucian disputations opened up new perspectives for their Con-
fucian opponents, which ultimately led to a gradual diminishing of Confucian scepticism regarding Buddhist thought.

In the last chapter of the book, the author offers a critical introduction and a detailed analysis of the discursive strategies and debates that led to a final convergence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia. In this chapter, he treated the most significant problems fought over by both sides, as well as the discursive strategies used by the scholars in China, Korea and Japan.

The book closes with a conclusion, in which the author points out two most important insights that can be achieved from the underlying analyses. Firstly, he exposes that all the previously mentioned questions emerged repeatedly in the Chinese, Korean and Japanese Confucian-Buddhist debates. These debates reveal how broadly and deeply Confucian culture had infiltrated all three countries. Consequently, when the three regions confronted Buddhism and resisted it, these questions were opened in the resulting arguments, which bore high resemblance to each other, even though the discursive strategies the sides adopted were substantially different.

The final and most valuable conclusion, which results from the meticulous analytical work underlying the study, manifests itself in the fact that, throughout the historical developments of these discourses, all Buddhist scholars who were adept in the Confucian classics and the core values they espoused, actively contributed to the mutual fusion and harmonisation of the two teachings. They either applied the approach of “assimilating Confucianism into Buddhism”, or of “illustrating Buddhism by means of Confucianism”. In this way, they ultimately managed to successfully transform the original scepticism of Confucians and to create a synthesis and convergence between Buddhism and Confucianism, contributing thereby to a greater richness and complexity of the unique East Asian cultures.

The book as a whole is consistent, well-written and extremely informative. Hence, it doubtless constitutes a milestone in the academic study of the fruitful dialogues and manifold fusions of Buddhism in Confucianism in East Asia. I am delighted to see that this book was translated by my colleague and friend Jan Vrhovski. I expect that this book would be a good addition to our understanding of the interaction between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia.
Introduction: The Debate and Confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia: A Historical Overview*

Chun-chieh Huang 黃俊傑**
Translated by Jan Vrhovski***

One of the most eye-catching and interesting phenomena in the development of East Asian thought, within which so many various currents of thought clashed together causing a great stir, was the debate and confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism. After the arrival of Buddhism toward the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), it found itself in a fierce conflict with indigenous Chinese thought. The controversies between Confucianism and Buddhism reached their peak in the time of the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589). By then, these two ideologies had gone through a long period of mutual conflict. At the beginning of the Tang dynasty (618–907), Buddhist teachings flourished, and the schools of Hua Yan (華嚴), Tiantai (天台) and Chan (禪) had become the leading representatives of Mahayana Buddhist teaching in China. This lasted until the 17th century, when in the final years of the Ming dynasty the creed of the “unity of three teachings” (sanjiao heyi 三教合一) became the mainstream ideology of the time. When Buddhism spread East from China and entered Korea and Japan, a wide array of intense debates was aroused in 14th and 15th century Korea and in 17th century Japan that resulted in an ultimate confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism. In the present work, we shall first review the origins and the development of the above-mentioned debates between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia, and take a closer look at the most important issues that emerged in these debates. Subsequently, we will also analyze...


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the differences between how these polemics developed in each of the above-mentioned countries, and what kind of tactics the proponents of both sides adopted during these debates.
1. A Historical Review of East Asian Confucian-Buddhist Debates

1. China

As Ge Zhaoguang (葛兆光, 1950-) indicates, as soon as the originally Indian Buddhism entered China: “In aspects of the external world, internal spirit, the Nether world, and of human relationships, Buddhism and Daoism expanded into and challenged the originally simple and concise philosophical world of Confucianism.” Thus, the conflicts between Buddhism and traditional Chinese thought, represented by Confucianism and Daoism, had erupted already at the earliest stages of their historical meeting. It was during that time that Mou Zibo (牟子博, also called Mou Rong 牟融, date of birth and death uncertain), who served as a governor of Cangwu (蒼梧) during the last years of the Eastern Han, composed a book entitled Master Mou’s Treatise on Settling Confusions (Mouzi Lihuolun 牟子理惑論, also known as Mou Rong bian huo 牟融辯惑). Throughout the 37 paragraphs of the treatise, in a succession of questions and

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4 Already Hu Yinglin (胡應麟, 1551–1602) doubted the authenticity of Mouzi’s Treatise on Settling Confusions, saying that: “Because among the scholars of the states of Jin and Song of the Six Dynasties there existed a Master Mou, they have forged this treatise in order to influence Buddhism.” See: Hu Yinglin 胡應麟, Gu Xiegang 顧頡剛 eds., Sibu zhengwei 四部正譌 [Correcting Mistakes in the Four Categories of Books] (Beijing: PuShe, 1929), p. 65. Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929) thought that: “Mou Rong, who lived at the beginning of the Later Han might not necessarily have authored the Lihuolun. But in the last years of the Later Han there existed no person called Mou Rong. This much can be asserted. From the first glance at its literary style, it becomes clear that the work could not have been composed by a person living in a village in the time of the Six dynasties.” See: Huang Xianian 黃夏年 ed., Jinxian dai zhuming xuezhe Foxue wenji: Liang Qichao ji 近現代著名學者佛學文集: 梁啟超集 [Collection of Buddhist Articles by Famous Modern Scholars: Liang Qichao](Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1995), pp. 50–51.
answers, Mouzi sets out to refute the disputation against Buddhism that had been raised by the intermediaries of Daoism and Confucianism since Buddhism was transmitted to China. The treatise also provides a detailed exposition of how Buddhist teaching could be considered compatible with Chinese native thought.

Mou’s comprehensive survey reveals not only his extreme adeptness in the Daoist as well as Confucian teachings, but also his familiarity with the art of war. He himself said: “Master Mou devoted himself to [studying] classics, commentaries and all philosophers. There was no book, however small or large, that he would not prefer [reading]. And even though he was not fond of the art of war, he would still read that kind of book [as well]. Although he read books about spirits, immortals and immortality, after dabbling with them for a short time he put those books down as he did not believe in them, and considered them empty and boastful.”

Tang Yongtong (湯用彤, courtesy name Xiyu 錫予, 1893–1964), who ascribed great importance to the Lihuolun within the history of Chinese Buddhism, once noted that:

The way Mouzi cites Laozi and Zhuangzi in order to explain Buddhism attests to a transformation of the spirit of the epoch. Evidently, it is exactly due to this fact that the thirty-seven paragraphs of Lihuolun truly ought to be considered an important Buddhist scripture.

He also remarked:

Because Mouzi’s beliefs in the Buddhist way were also compatible with the Laozi, he concurrently professed a firm determination in the Buddhist dao and at the same time also studied the five thousand words of the Laozi. In that way, he had already abandoned the art of the dao and started discussing the mysterious principle. Whereas in the Han dynasty Buddhist religion was still an appendage to the arts of the supernatural, in the Wei-Jin period the Buddha’s disciples already highly esteemed the texts Laozi and Zhuangzi. Because Mouzi was a figure living exactly in the time of transition between these two periods, his Lihuolun turned an important page in the history of Buddhism in China.

His Lihuolun, in which Mouzi set out to explain Buddhism with the help of Confucianism and Daoism, was primarily directed against the contemporary disputations against Buddhist teaching. The questions of Buddhist doctrine addressed by the contemporary critics were, for example, questions of family

5 Mou Zibo 牟子博, Mouzi Lihuolun 牟子理惑論 [Master Mou’s Treatise on Settling Confusions], in Seungyou 僧祐 ed., Liu Lifu 劉立夫, Wei Jianzhong 魏建中, and Hu Yong 胡勇 comment., Hongming ji 弘明集 [Collection of texts on spreading enlightenment] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), BK., p. 6.
6 Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, Han-Wei Liangjin Nanbeichao Fojiao shi 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史 [History of Buddhism in Han, Wei, Western and Eastern Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties] (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press Ltd., 1938 [3rd ed. 2012]), BK. 1, p. 78.
7 Ibid., p. 80.