CHAPTER 16

WHEN BUDDHA NATURE WAS NOT BUDDHA NATURE

Fo'xing, Shen, *and the Birth of a Universal Mind in Early Medieval China*

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I. Introduction

Chinese Buddhism is an awkward scholarly object: it is perceived in some corners of the scholarly community as neither Chinese (Confucian/Daoist) nor Buddhist (Indian). Such an awkward status is reflected in the tension in the scholarly approaches to the study of Chinese Buddhism:

> The modern study of medieval Chinese religion has been divided broadly between two camps: the sinologists and the buddhologists. While the former often ignored Buddhism, the latter tended to ignore everything but. . . . Consequently, when seeking historical and intellectual antecedents for Chinese Buddhist phenomena, they tended to look toward India rather than toward non-Buddhist China. There were, needless to say, important exceptions to this division of labor. . . . But for the most part, Anglo-American studies of Chinese Buddhism, particularly the Buddhism of the clerisy, have been dominated by buddhological models. (Sharf 2002: 1)

In other words, Chinese Buddhism fits neither the Sinological nor the Buddhological trope neatly. Compounding this problem right now is the fact that the study of Chinese Buddhism lacks a grand narrative to ground the discourse, serving as the paradigm. The old narrative of "Buddhist conquest of China" (e.g., E. Zürcher 1959/2007) or "Chinese transformation of Buddhism" (e.g., K. Ch'en 1973) has been called into question due to their inevitable reifications of what is Buddhist and what is Chinese in such

broad strokes, but new narratives have not yet emerged. Hence the study of (medieval) Chinese Buddhism is currently mired in that ambiguity.

In light of such circumstances, it should come as no surprise that Buddha Nature (*fó'xìng*佛性), a central doctrine in all major schools of Chinese Buddhism, is a problematic scholarly object for Buddhist studies. Buddha Nature is usually understood as referring to the possibility of sentient beings to attain enlightenment or become a Buddha. However, there is a great ideal of ambiguity in the concept. First of all, there is a terminological disjunction between the Chinese term *fo'xing* and its putative Sanskrit equivalent. It might come as a surprise to some that there is no obvious Sanskrit equivalent to *fo'xing*, even though the scholarly consensus points to *buddhadhātu*. According to Takasaki Jikidō, *buddhadhātu* has two meanings: "(1) the nature (*dhātu=dharmatā*) of the Buddha, thus equivalent to the term *dharmakāya*, and (2) the cause (*dhātu=hetu*) of the Buddha" (quoted in King 1991: 5). However, the Sanskrit term that is usually associated with Buddha Nature is *tathāgatagarbha* (*rúlái zàng* 如來藏), the embryo of the Buddha. This terminological ambiguity has complicated the effort to delineate the development of Buddha Nature in Chinese Buddhism, as it pulls together various discrete, though somewhat related, ideas from Indian Buddhism without acknowledging so. In Chinese Buddhism, *rulai zang* was quickly eclipsed by *fo'xing*, which became the singular term for expressing the idea of sentient beings' potential to be enlightened.

Second, despite the presence of the idea of *tathāgatagarbha* in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, such as *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* (*Rulai zang jing* 如來藏經), *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* (*Shengman jing* 勝鬘經) and *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Dabo niepan jing* 大般涅槃經, hereafter *MPNS*), and so on, it never achieved the kind of doctrinal prominence within Indian Buddhism enjoyed by other concepts like emptiness (*śūnyatā*; Ch. *kong* 空) in the scholarly construct of Mahāyāna Buddhist orthodoxy. Furthermore, the *MPNS*'s characterization of Buddha Nature as permanent, blissfulness, *ātman*, and purity (*cháng lè wǒ jìng* 常樂我淨), especially its use of the term *ātman* rejected in early Buddhist teachings, has led to suspicions among some modern scholars about the nature of the doctrine. Consequently, the study of Buddha Nature often starts with a defense or justification about why it should be regarded as Buddhist at all, given its perceived deviation from the established Buddhist orthodoxy, and some scholars simply reject Buddha Nature as Buddhist.[1]

Much of the controversy surrounding Buddha Nature in modern scholarship can be attributed to the scholarly focus on the doctrine while less attention has been paid to its history. Doctrinal questions tend to focus on the meanings of Buddha Nature, its significance in the Buddhist deliberation on the possibility of awakening (especially pertaining to the question of whether or not all sentient beings—sometimes even nonsentient beings—possess Buddha Nature), and its conflict with the "orthodox" Buddhist inclination towards nonreification, represented by the teachings of no-self, dependent origination, and emptiness. Such an approach to Buddha Nature is framed within a narrowly constructed Buddhological framework that tends to privilege some version of Indian Buddhism, at least implicitly, as normative and to regard Buddha Nature and its development in Chinese Buddhism as distortive. As such, it does not, in Robert Sharf's

words, take Chinese Buddhism seriously, as it does not take Chinese Buddhism(s) on its own terms.

This chapter will eschew questions concerning Buddha Nature's doctrinal orthodoxy, which was itself a construct largely resulting from the scholarly reification of certain aspects of Indian Buddhism while conveniently brushing aside the extraordinary diversity of Buddhist teachings. Rather, I will seek historical and intellectual antecedents of Buddha Nature within indigenous Chinese sources, taking a cue from Sharf, instead of only from Indian Buddhist texts. My effort here is guided by the following questions: What problems did the notion of Buddha Nature address in early medieval China? Why were those problems important to the Chinese intellectuals at the time? In what ways did the idea of Buddha Nature address those problems, and in what ways were those problems themselves transformed due to the Buddhist participation? I would argue that Buddha Nature was appropriated as an important conceptual resource to participate in the ongoing Chinese debate about spirit/soul (*shén* 神) and that the synthesis between *shen* and Buddha Nature and its locating in the mind would lead to the birth of a radically new conception of mind, a universal mind, in the subsequent Chinese deliberation on the nature of the mind (*xīnxìng* 心性), crucial to both Chinese Buddhists and the emerging neo-Confucians.

II. Buddha Nature in Early Medieval China (Third–Sixth Centuries CE)

Early medieval China, following the collapse of Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), was a chaotic and traumatic episode in Chinese history, but also one of its most creative periods rivaling the pre-Qin early China period. The era following the collapse of Han is known in Chinese history as the Six Dynasties (*Liuchao* 六朝 220–589 CE), the latter part of which is called the Southern and Northern Dynasties (*Nanbeichao* 南北朝 420–589 CE). This North–South divide was due to occupation of Northern China by non-Han ethnic groups and the fleeing of the Han elite to the South following the fall of Western Jin (*Xijin* 西晉 265–316 CE), a short-lived unified dynasty after Han. Non-Han minority groups established a succession of dynasties in the North, collectively known as the Northern Dynasties. Southern Dynasties were created by the émigré Han elites fleeing the occupied North. This divide also created a cultural chasm between the North and the South that would be relevant to the development of Chinese Buddhism during this formative period. Our discussion on Buddha Nature will focus on the development in the Southern Dynasties due to the lively debates going on there on this subject.

As Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, the best-known Chinese intellectual historian of early medieval China, famously observes, an important intellectual shift was taking place from cosmology to ontology during this period (Tang 2001: 43–44). The preceding Han Dynasty saw the flourishing of yin-yang cosmology and speculation about the origin of

the cosmos and the correlativity between the natural and the human domains that characterize the official Confucian discourse, articulated by thinkers like Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE). During the early medieval period, the prime intellectual energy moved to the speculation of the foundation or basis of the unsettled and unsettling reality, namely, Being/Nonbeing (*yǒuwú* 有無) and spontaneity (*zìrán* 自然), with Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252?–312 CE) as the leading figures. Such a shift to ontological speculations created a receptive intellectual ambiance for the incoming Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, especially the central teaching of emptiness due to its apparent, if misunderstood, resemblance with the notion of Nonbeing (*wú* 無) in *xuanxue* (玄學 "learning of the mysterious" which is sometimes translated as Neo-Daoism).

This ontological turn also coincided with a shift to spiritual transcendence during that period. In time of political disunity, ideological confusion and intellectual chaos, Buddhist teaching, such as *nirvāṇa* and *dhyāna* practices, made itself known by its seductive speculation on the other-worldly transcendence. As Whalen Lai observes, a "rumor" of transcendence was registered on the intellectual scene in early medieval China: "an awareness of a new and higher reality, a profound inner self, and a broader community, something not known before" (Lai 2009: 329). This is reflected in the intensified imaginations, both elite and popular, about transcendent beings (*xian* 仙) who have allegedly overcome death and ascended to the divine realm, partially fueled by the intense competition between Daoists' and Buddhists' rival accounts of miracle feats performed by their respective adepts.[2] Buddhism was, at least initially, perceived to contribute to such pursuits of interest for those Chinese on how to achieve long life or even immortality.

The teaching of Buddha Nature was introduced to China in such an environment. Many of the discussions on Buddha Nature during the Southern Dynasties were directly or indirectly spurred by the translation and transmission of the Mahāyāna *MPNS* wherein Buddha Nature is a major subject. The *MPNS*'s discussion of Buddha Nature is multidimensional and multilayered. It covers topics ranging from the necessity of faith, the nature of the Buddha, characteristics of the Buddha, causes of enlightenment, as well as the availability of enlightenment, and so on. Much of the early medieval Chinese debate on Buddha Nature tracks the various deliberations in the *MPNS*. One of the heatedly contested topics had to do with right or direct cause (*zhèngyīn* 正因) of Buddha Nature, following the discussions in the *MPNS*.

Jizang 吉藏 (549–623 CE), the founder of the Chinese Madhyamika School (Sanlun Zong 三論宗), put together a list of 11 positions on the right cause of the Buddha Nature in his *Mysterious Discourse of Mahāyāna* (*Dacheng xuanlun* 大乘玄論), which is a major source for modern scholarship on the early medieval Buddha Nature debate. The 11 interpretations are: sentient beings as the right cause, six elements (five *skandha*s plus the provisional person), the mind, perpetual activities of the mind, avoiding suffering and seeking bliss, true spirit, *ālayavijñāna* and the inherently pure mind, future result, principle of attaining Buddhahood, *Tathatā*, and the first principle of emptiness (Koseki 1977: 358–61). From a conventional Buddhological perspective, it should be clear that 10

of the 11 causes are variations of some standard items in the Buddhist conceptual universe. The only exception is true spirit or soul (*zhēnshén* 真神). Something interesting must have been going on at the time in order for the concept of *shen* 神 to be "slipped" into the list.

Indeed, Jizang's list tells us that there were at least two separate, though related, philosophical disputations pertaining to the right cause of Buddha Nature in the Southern Dynasties. One was conducted more within the Buddhist circle wherein the issue was focused on the right cause of Buddhahood or enlightenment. The other was part of a long-standing indigenous Chinese debate on the nature of spirit/soul, its relationship with body, and whether it outlasts the body or not. The participants of this latter debate were by no means limited to the Buddhist circle. In fact, the idea of Buddha Nature was appropriated by some participants as an additional conceptual resource. I argue that the role played by Buddha Nature in this latter debate would shape the intellectual trajectory of the subsequent Chinese deliberations of the mind.

III. Early Medieval Chinese Debate on *Shen*

One of the central Buddhist teachings is the idea of karma. The appropriation of karma into the Chinese spiritual universe is itself a fascinating story we cannot get into here. Suffice it to say that once karma was embraced by the Chinese, changes were needed within the indigenous Chinese conceptual universe to accommodate this new element. Since karma presupposes some form of existence beyond a single life span, a subject that had not been a central Chinese intellectual preoccupation, the incorporation of karma into the Chinese conceptual universe forced the Chinese intellectuals to contemplate such a possibility more directly and explicitly. In time, the disputation on karma would feed into the long-standing Chinese debate on *shen* during this period.

As Yuet Keung Lo summarizes,

> the idea of *shen* in pre-Buddhist China was understood as a form of individuated primal force which was considered to be psychophysical. As such, *shen* was considered the spiritual part in man [in] contrast to the purely physical. It was the principle of life and accounted for the principle of thought and action in man. Since the individuated primal force was deemed perishable, most Han thinkers tended to dismiss the idea of an immortal soul. Consequently, *shen* was given no supremacy over the physical body. Coordination rather than subordination characterized the relationship between the two entities. (Lo 1991: 144)

It was the Chinese Buddhists who elevated the status of *shen* and rendered it indestructible, due to the need to account for some form of continued existence after death, as the

law of karma dictates. In fact, *shen* became so identified with the Buddhists that many early medieval thinkers regarded it as an exclusively Buddhist concept.

Given the centrality of no-self (Sk.: *anātman*; Pali: *anatta*) in Buddhism, it is rather curious that any Buddhist could have advocated the indestructibility of soul/spirit as the carrier of karmic retribution after death and the achiever of awakening. However, the early Buddhist teaching of no-self was not part of the mainstream Chinese Buddhist conceptual universe until much later (Zürcher 2007: 11–12). Instead, belief in karma and transmigration as well as the *dhyāna* practice were the signature "trademarks" of Buddhism at the time. When the Chinese Buddhists were grappling with the possibility of transmigration, they came to believing that karma across several life spans necessarily presupposes a carrier. In time, the indigenous notion of *shen* was appropriated to assume such a role. Anybody familiar with the Buddhist "orthodoxy" of no-self would probably cringe at that development, but such was the historical contour of Chinese Buddhism. Let us examine a particularly consequential debate on *shen* that took place toward the end of the Southern Dynasties.

The ideas of karma and transmigration were gaining wide currency, especially among the elites. There the appeal was more about the justificatory function of karma for the way things were in the world than about the overcoming of karmic cycle. For example, Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460–494 CE), the prince of Jingling during the Qi Dynasty who was known for hosting salons for a group of literary figures, was using karma to explain the different social statuses and wealth, clearly demonstrating the justificatory convenience of the notion of karma. Two people in that group, Fan Zhen 范縝 (c. 450–515 CE) and Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549 CE), would come to define the parameters of the ensuing debate on *shen*. Fan Zhen rejected Xiao Ziliang's position on karma while Xiao Yan, who would become the founder of the succeeding Liang Dynasty, converted to Buddhism and fully embraced the notion of karma. Xiao Yan's injection into the debate elevated the stake to a much higher level, at least among the political and cultural elites, effectively ending the debate as it was previously configured. However, the *intellectual* consequence of Xiao Yan's participation in the debate has not been properly appreciated.

Fan Zhen is the author of a famous essay, *The Treatise on the Extinction of the Spirit* (*Shenmie lun* 神滅論).[3] There Fan Zhen takes on the Buddhist notion of *shen* and argues against an indestructible soul/spirit. He formulates his arguments as a response to an imagined interlocutor. The following is a brief summary of his arguments.

Fan Zhen starts by laying out two basic premises for his argument, namely, that body and *shen* are one, and the body is ontologically prior to *shen*. Therefore, when the body dies, so does the soul as the two are one. He describes the body as the soul's material base and soul as the functioning of the body, invoking the conceptual trope of substance/function (*tǐyòng* 體用, even though Fan uses a different term—essence [*zhì* 質]—for *ti*) made famous by Wang Bi. For Fan Zhen, body and soul are not separate; they are different names for the same thing. To make this point, he compares the *shen*–body relationship to the sharpness–knife relationship. That is, just as sharpness disappears when the knife disappears, *shen* dies when the body dies.

The opponent then challenges him with a question on how to explain a dead person's body, with the apparent assumption that body–*shen* dualism has the explanatory advantage. That is, in the common understanding, when a person dies, the body remains but consciousness departs; this, for the opponent, is the evidence that a person consists of two separate substances, body and *shen*. However, Fan Zhen rejects this by maintaining that living body and dead body are actually two different kinds of bodies. That is, a living human body is made of sentient matter (instead of insentient matter plus consciousness) and a dead body insentient matter, like a tree, even though Fan does not explain how those two kinds of bodies are related empirically. When pressed with the question about how to differentiate sensation from thought if *shen* and body are the same (with the assumption that *shen*–body dualism again has the explanatory advantage by associating thought with *shen* and sensation with body), Fan Zhen answers that the two are simply two different functions of the body, with sensation being the superficial one and thought the profound one.

The last argument has to do with the justification for the practice of ancestral worship. When asked about the rationale for ancestral worship if *shen* dies with the body with the implication that ancestral worship is the worship of ancestral spirits, Fan Zhen argues that questions about spirits is beyond our comprehension and refuses to indulge in a fruitless speculation. This echoes the long-standing Confucian reluctance on the speculation of spirits, famously expressed in the *Analects* 7.21: "Confucius had nothing to say about uncanny phenomena, feats of power, disorderliness, and the spirits." For Fan Zhen, a good Confucian, the focus should be on the educational utility of ancestral worship itself, rather than the ontological foundation for the practice. However, ontological questions were precisely what the Buddhists were interested in.

At the end of the treatise, Fan Zhen spells out what he considers to be the negative consequences of the belief in an indestructible soul. Such a belief, in Fan Zhen's eyes, undermines morals and encourages donation to temples at the expense of taking care of one's kin and the poor. Furthermore, the talk of Heaven and hell confuses people, alienates family and friends, enfeebles the military, and squanders treasures. Clearly it is these considerations that motivated Fan Zhen to compose the treatise.

It is hard not to be impressed by the cogency and power of Fan Zhen's argument in *The Treatise on the Extinction of the Spirit*, especially from a contemporary perspective. However, Fan Zhen's effort was not quite in tune with the zeitgeist of the Southern Dynasties, namely, the intellectual shift to ontological speculation and spiritual transcendence. Such a zeitgeist became especially potent when it had the imperial authority behind it.

Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549 CE), the famous Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–549 CE), sometimes regarded as the Chinese version of the famous Indian Buddhist monarch *Aśoka* 阿育王 (r. 273–232 BCE), was alarmed by Fan Zhen's contentions and decided to inject himself into the debate. Given his political power and unequivocal support of Buddhism after his conversion, Emperor Wu had an enormous influence on the subsequent development of Chinese Buddhism that cannot be overestimated, even though there is a lack of detailed study and acknowledgment of specific ways he shaped

the subsequent development of Chinese intellectual endeavors, other than some general recognition of his political impact on the development of Buddhism during his time.

IV. Xiao Yan's Synthesis of *Shen* and Buddha Nature

Emperor Wu wrote two essays on the topic of *shen*, "The Great Liang Emperor Orders His Ministers to Respond to the *Treatise on the Extinction of the Spirit*" (*Daliang huangdi chida chenxia shenmie lun* 大梁皇帝敕答臣下神滅論) and "On Establishing the Luminous Spirit as What Attains Buddhahood" (*Li shenming chengfo yiji* 立神明成佛義記). The first one is a preface to the collection of essays Emperor Wu solicited from his ministers to refute Fan Zhen's *The Treatise on the Extinction of the Spirit*, whereas the second piece is the emperor's meditation on the relationship between *shen* and Buddha Nature. Judging from the terminologies and the issues raised in the two essays, we can see that the first, short, essay was argued on Confucian ground and the second, longer, piece was presented more on Buddhist ground.

In the first piece, Xiao Yan tries to argue for the indestructible soul by citing two references from the Jiyi 祭義 chapter of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), the ultimate authority in the classical Confucian discourse on rituals. Both references are about the practice of ancestral worship, which is the single most important Chinese religious practice over the ages. According to the *Liji*, only a filial son can perform a sacrificial ritual to his departed parents, and he can see their spirits he prays to after three days of intense ritual contemplation.[4] Ritual contemplation (*zhāi* 齋, purification and abstention in preparation for a ritual) here refers specifically to the practice of five reminiscences of one's departed parents: reminiscing about their abode, their bodily and verbal expressions, their intentions, their enjoyments, and their passions. According to the *Liji*, three days of *zhai* practice would enable the person to see the one he has been reminiscing about.

Clearly Xiao Yan's argument is that without ancestral spirits, the practice of ancestor worship would become meaningless. In Xiao Yan's mind, an indestructible soul provides the best raison d'être for ancestral worship whose significance Fan Zhen could not have questioned. In other words, for Xiao Yan, the Buddhist notion of indestructible soul makes explicit what is implicit in the most important traditional Chinese religious practice. However, as we have seen previously, Fan Zhen regards such an effort spurious since, for him, the point of ancestral worship is its efficacy for moral education rather than grounds for pointless speculations about the status of the ancestral spirits. Due to their divergent interests, it was unlikely that either side would prevail over the other. As Tom De Rauw points out perceptively, Emperor Wu's tactics in settling the issue by forcing his ministers to take sides effectively shut down the opposite side that

advocated the destructibility of *shen* (De Rauw 2008: 122). To be fair to Xiao Yan, such a method was far gentler than brutally suppressing a dissenting view, as he could have easily done as an emperor.

Xiao Yan's second piece, "On Establishing the Luminous Spirit (*shenming*) as What Attains Buddhahood,"[5] was meant to shed light on key teachings in the *MPNS*, according to Shen Ji 沈績, who was asked by Xiao Yan to write a commentary on the emperor's essay. Xiao Yan's essay describes the possibility of enlightenment and the universality of Buddha Nature by defending the indestructibility of *shen* and its inevitability for enlightenment.

Xiao Yan starts with an emphasis on the importance of faith in the universality of Buddha Nature (*à la* Shen Ji's commentary) and right understanding as the basis for such a faith. Then the text shifts to the ground of faith and understanding, namely, the luminous spirit, which does not perish and "will inevitably return to the mysterious goal (of enlightenment)" (Lai trans. 1981a: 171). "The mysterious goal is one with the ultimate and is unchanging. The spirit (in its function) cannot, however, help changing" (Lai trans. 1981a: 171). Here Xiao Yan appeals to the trope of substance/function (*tiyong* 體用) to explain the relationship between the luminous spirit and its functions, with the former being permanent and the latter constantly changing:

> As the mind functions by clinging onto the external conditions (*ālambana*), consciousness will differ from moment to moment. If so, consciousness will disintegrate with the (disintegrating) phenomena. What entity can then attain enlightenment? (Lai trans. 1981a: 171)

Xiao Yan insists that without a permanent entity, there would be nobody that reaches Buddhahood, similar to the Chinese Buddhist belief in the necessity of *shen* to make sense of karma and transmigration mentioned previously. In other words, Xiao Yan applied the same logic for a substratum of transmigration to enlightenment, arguing that there has to be some agent that realizes Buddhahood. Furthermore, as we will see immediately, Xiao Yan argues that it is the same *shen* that underlies both transmigration and enlightenment. That is, there needs to be a subject who transmigrates and who is enlightened.

Intriguingly, in the quoted passage Xiao Yan's terminology shifts from the luminous spirit and its functions prevalent in the earlier part of the essay to the mind and its functions (consciousness) here, subtly equating the luminous spirit with the mind. This is how Xiao Yan links the luminous spirit to the mind, as he would do by quoting the *MPNS* in the next passage: "The mind is the basic cause. It will finally bear the fruit of enlightenment" (Lai trans. 1981a: 171). This is Xiao Yan's position in his participation in the Buddhist side of the debate on the causes of enlightenment.

The next segment of the text goes into the theme of the incongruity between ignorance and enlightenment and between the good and the bad. Xiao Yan argues that it is the luminous spirit qua mind that serves as the ground for both ignorance and enlightenment, both the good and the bad:

> "Non-enlightenment, by a sudden turn, is transformed into enlightenment." Here the principle can be found. How? The mind is the basis of the functions. The basis is one; the functions are many. The many go through life and death (*saṃsāra*) naturally. The nature of the one basis, however, does not change. The one basis is the *wu-ming shen-ming*. (Lai trans. 1981a: 172)

Here again, Xiao Yan resorts to the *tiyong* trope to explain the relationship between the basis and the functions. Interestingly, he mentions both *wúmíng shénmíng* (無明神明) and the mind as the basis of vicissitudes of life and death. *Wuming shenming* is a combination of two words, *wuming* (ignorance; Sk. *avidya*)—a standard Buddhist term—and *shenming* (luminous spirit)—Xiao Yan's term for indestructible spirit. Together it can be translated as either ignorant spirit or pre-enlightened spirit.[6]

Xiao Yan's equivocation between spirit and mind as the unchanging substratum of both ignorant and enlightened states is quite telling in terms of a subtle textual shift toward the mind. This shift to the mind becomes more pronounced toward the end of the essay when the reference to *shenming* is completely dropped off and the mind is now recognized as the locus of enlightenment. Accordingly, the mind, once it recognizes how its different functions and dependency on the external objects give rise to confusion and ignorance, comes to the realization that it is indeed itself the Buddha Nature and is therefore enlightened.

This analysis of Xiao Yan's text demonstrates that there is a synthesis of the notions of *shen*, Buddha Nature, and the mind in his writing such that the mind would eventually take on attributes of *shen* and Buddha Nature. In other words, Xiao Yan's writing clearly indicates a shift toward a model of the mind that is infused with qualities of *shen* and Buddha Nature, namely, spirituality, indestructibility, and universality. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that Xiao Yan's argument in the first piece in defense of the indestructibility of *shen* implies individuated ancestral spirits whereas his presentation in the second piece suggests a universal spirit that would realize its Buddha Nature. Furthermore, since *shen* was regarded as the underlying substratum of ignorance and enlightenment, the good and the bad, and so on, the locating of *shen* in the mind would eventually render the mind such a substratum.

Xiao Yan's text shows enough terminological ambivalence between *shenming* (luminous spirit) and *xin* (mind) to indicate its transitional role in the larger intellectual shift from *shen* to the mind that was underway at the time. Because of his powerful influence during his reign, politically, intellectually, and culturally, Xiao Yan clearly played an important role in such a critical shift. For example, Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513 CE), a famous poet at the time who was one of Xiao Yan's ministers, wrote several essays echoing and developing the emperor's argument about *shen*. In his detailed study,[7] Yuet Keung Lo argues that Shen Yue's pieces constitute a clear epistemic shift toward the human mind. Whalen Lai, in his study of Shen Yue, credits Shen as the one who "defused the old, perhaps futile, debate on 'body vs. soul' " and "turned the investigation toward more fruitful ends, such that the debate on the immortal soul which peaked at his time also declined soon afterwards" (Lai 1981b: 154). For Lai, speculation about the immortality of the soul/

spirit is "dead-end" (154.) since "[t]he problem, after all, is man and not spirit" (154). As a result, the Tang Buddhists were no longer worrying about this "passé issue" (154) and moved onto other more fruitful discussions, such as mind and human/Buddha nature (*xin xing* 心性) during the Tang and Song dynasties (138).

However, Lai's analysis drastically underestimates the way the debate on *shen* shaped the subsequent Chinese Buddhist debate on the mind (and beyond). Rather than simply dropping *shen* in favor of mind as the locus of Buddha Nature and enlightenment, later Chinese Buddhists' understanding of the mind was now a mind that is infused with characteristics previously attributed to *shen* and Buddha Nature, in terms of its spirituality, universality, permanence, deludability, and enlightenability. In other words, *shen* and Buddha Nature would be subsumed under a new conception of the mind as the result of the debate on *shen* and Buddha Nature, such that the mind now takes on features that were attributed to *shen* and Buddha Nature. We see the convergence of the three concepts, *shen*, Buddha Nature, and mind, during this period with a critical terminological shift to the mind. This convergence would culminate in the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (*Dacheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論, henceforth *AFM*), to which we turn.

V. One Mind in the *AFM* and the Emergence of a New Conception of Mind

The *AFM* appeared toward the end of the Six Dynasties (c. 550 CE), right around the time of Xiao Yan's death (549 CE). According to the traditional account, it was authored by Aśvaghoṣa (*Maming* 馬鳴, c. 80–150 CE) and translated by Paramārtha (*Zhendi* 真諦, 499–569 CE), although both have been challenged.[8] The extraordinary influence of *AFM* in Chinese Buddhism is evidenced in its being appropriated by virtually all schools of Chinese Buddhism in propagating their teachings.

Much of the modern scholarship on the *AFM* has focused on its questionable authorship and the corollary issue of its origin (whether it was composed in India or China),[9] its teaching of the One Mind, and its importance within various Chinese Buddhist schools. The scholarly consensus is that the *AFM* was probably composed in China toward the end of the early medieval period, although not necessarily by a Chinese author. Curiously, however, the question concerning the origin of the concept of One Mind has largely eluded the scholarly attention. Since One Mind is not a standard concept that has a clear Indian Buddhist antecedent, its origin is worth investigating. I propose that the peculiar notion of One Mind in the *AFM* points to a Chinese source, especially an important but neglected role played by Emperor Wu of Liang, thus lending support to the scholarly consensus on the Chinese origin of the *AFM*.

In the text, the One Mind refers to the mind of sentient beings that appropriates all worldly and otherworldly entities.[10] In its thusness this Mind demonstrates the nature of the absolute reality while in its worldly aspect (literally arising, cessation, causal and

conditional, *shēngmiè yīnyuán xiàng* 生滅因緣相) it exhibits three characteristics of the absolute reality, namely, substance, qualities, and functions (*tǐxiàngyòng* 體相用).[11] In terms of substance, all entities are equally identical with the absolute reality;[12] in terms of qualities, the *tathāgatagarbha* is complete with infinitely excellent merits and virtues;[13] and in terms of functions, the absolute reality can give rise to all worldly and otherworldly good causes and fruits.[14]

As Yoshito Hakeda summarizes,

> In the author's system of thought, the all-inclusive Reality, the unconditional Absolute, is called Suchness. When it engages the realm of being, it is expressed in terms of Mind, i.e., One Mind, the Mind of sentient being, the essential nature of Mind, etc. The Mind, therefore, represents the Absolute as it is expressed in the temporal order. The Mind necessarily contains within itself two orders or aspects—the transcendental and the phenomenal, the universal and the particular, the infinite and the finite, the static and the dynamic, the sacred and the profane, the Absolute and the relative, and so forth. The Absolute order, therefore, does not exist apart from the relative order; rather, they differ epistemologically but not ontologically. Man is presented as being located at the intersection of these opposing orders. The state of man, who belongs intrinsically to the Absolute order and yet in actuality remains in the phenomenal, finite, and profane order, is expressed in terms of the *Tathāgatagarbha* or "Matrix of Tathāgata." (Hakeda 1967: 12–13)

Clearly this One Mind does not refer to the mental faculty of an individual but, rather, a metaphysical, universal mind that is itself absolute but gives rise to dual aspects of reality, such as the transcendent and the worldly, the sacred and the profane, the pure and the defiled, and so on.

Such a universal One Mind is rather puzzling within the Buddhist context, and it is not immediately clear where such a concept could have come from. The apparent Indic term for One Mind is *ekacitta*. However, within the Indian Buddhist context, *ekacitta* refers to a mental state known as the one-pointed mind, when the mind is absorbed in a single thought or fixated on a single object, achieved through mental concentration prescribed in Buddhism.[15] Hence *ekacitta* does not at all refer to the kind of universal mind that serves as the ground of reality in the *AFM*. Here we see another case of terminological disconnect between Chinese and Indian Buddhist concepts, not unlike the case with Buddha Nature as mentioned previously. Therefore, if One Mind is indeed a Chinese misreading of *ekacitta*, the obvious question is: how did such a misreading take place, *in that particular fashion*? We will take a closer look later in the chapter.

Another possibility for the source of One Mind is Bodhiruci's translation of *citta-mātra* as *yīxīn* 一心, which is translated by most others as mind-only (*wéixīn* 唯心) or consciousness-only (*wéishí* 唯識). Liebenthal cites the translation of *citta-mātra* as one universal mind in the Chinese version of *Daśabhūmika* and *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Liebenthal 1958: 165n2). Clearly One Mind and mind-only have very different meanings since mind-only says nothing about the number of minds. For some reason the *AFM*

fully embraces One Mind whereas mind-only only makes scattered appearances in the text.

It is interesting to note that the *AFM* has been traditionally regarded as a Yogācāra Buddhist text. In this connection, *Daśabhūmika* and *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, where One Mind (as the translation of *citta-mātra*) appears, are also important Yogācāra texts. Incidentally, the alleged translator of the *AFM* into Chinese, Paramārtha, was a famous Yogācāra teacher responsible for the early transmission of Yogācāra in China. Because of its apparent conceptual affinity with Yogācāra, many scholars have assumed that the Mind in the *AFM* is similar to the mind in the Yogācāra School, but mind (*citta*) within the corpus of recognized Yogācāra scriptures does not refer to a universal mind.[16] Hence we are still in the dark as to where the idea of One Mind came from.

If the *AFM* was a Chinese production, a better understanding of the conceptual apparatus and terminological repertoire available to the author(s) of *AFM* in China toward the end of the early medieval period will provide useful clues to the origination of One Mind. For our purpose here, the link between Xiao Yan and Paramārtha is intriguing with respect to the production of the *AFM*. If Paramārtha was unlikely to have been the translator of the *AFM*, which, by contemporary scholarly consensus, was a Chinese text to begin with, and the possibility of him being the author of the text (Grosnick 1989) is also considered problematic (Sharf 2002: 311n85), we are left with few options.[17] As there is no scholarly consensus on the authorship of the *AFM* to work with, its association with Paramārtha is worth exploring, as it might hold the key to our understanding of certain critical components of the text, especially the origin of the concept of One Mind. That is, if we do not take the traditional claim that Paramārtha was the translator of the text as a historical fact[18] but, rather, treat it as a historical clue, the mere fact that he was credited as the translator itself might provide useful hints regarding at least some possible sources of the *AFM*.[19]

According to the forged preface to the T.1666 version of the text,[20] it was Emperor Wu of Liang who dispatched an envoy to the kingdom of Magadha[21] to acquire Buddhist scriptures and recruit Buddhist teachers. Paramārtha was persuaded to go to China and had an audience with Xiao Yan to converse about Buddhism. So, what does crediting Paramārtha as the translator of the *AFM* tell us about the text? Clearly the *AFM* contains some Yogācāra elements, in line with Paramārtha's reputation as a Yogācāra master. But his connection with Xiao Yan was also an important factor, so much so that it is entirely conceivable that a preface was forged to highlight this connection. This means that the encounter between Paramārtha and Xiao Yan (as well as the Southern Chinese Buddhist discourse that bore signs of his influence) needs to be taken more seriously in terms of its relevance to the production of the *AFM*.[22]

Paramārtha stayed in Southern China the entire time, from 546 CE till his death in 569 CE. The fact that Paramārtha stayed in Southern China, which was ruled by Xiao Yan for almost 50 years (502–549 CE), is significant. Due to Emperor Wu's fervent institutional patronage of Buddhism and active intellectual engagement with contemporary Buddhist discourse, the long shadow he cast on the Buddhist landscape in Southern

China should not be overlooked. Therefore, it is conceivable that someone living in Xiao Yan's Southern China—someone like Paramārtha but not necessarily the historical Paramārtha—who was knowledgeable about Yogācāra philosophy as well as the discourse on Buddha Nature authored the *AFM* to synthesize two, under the influence of Xiao Yan and his Southern Chinese Buddhism.[23]

The notion of One Mind in the *AFM* shows an uncanny resonance with Xiao Yan's synthesis of *shen*, Buddha Nature, and the mind. The One Mind in the *AFM* bears the marks of the indestructibility and enlightenability of *shen*, and the universal and absolute characteristics of Buddha Nature, as well as being the substratum of both ignorance and enlightenment, both purity and defilement, and so on. As the result of this grand synthesis in the hands of Xiao Yan as well as those who followed his lead, the mind that emerges is one that is singular, divine, universal, and absolute. This is precisely the idea of the One Mind in the *AFM*, signaling a brand-new conception of mind in Chinese intellectual history, whose importance in the subsequent Chinese intellectual projects cannot be overestimated. Clearly, a more detailed examination of this hypothesis is needed in order to demonstrate the specifics of the terminological and conceptual resonance between the One Mind in the *AFM* and Xiao Yan's Southern Buddhism, but that would have to be left for another occasion.

VI. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have discussed the ways the Chinese intellectual elite appropriated the idea of Buddha Nature in their ongoing debate on *shen* during the early medieval period. The Buddhists came to advocate the indestructibility of *shen* whereas the Confucians insisted on its bodily dependency. The involvement of Buddha Nature in the debate on *shen* elevated the status of *shen*, making it the spiritual entity that would eventually achieve enlightenment by realizing its original purity. Furthermore, this intellectual move from the indestructibility of *shen* to its spiritual awakening as well as the shift toward the mind would herald a singular mind that is the absolute, spiritual, and universal foundation of the world, in its all-encompassing capacity, from the worldly to the transcendent, from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*, evidenced in the celebrated idea of the One Mind in the *AFM*.

The early medieval Chinese debate on *shen* and Buddha Nature was critical in the birth of a new model of mind that would be shared by the Chinese Buddhists and eventually some neo-Confucians. Such a mind is luminous, originally pure, metaphysical, universal, spiritual, absolute, and indestructible. This grand conception of mind is radically different from a much more modest classical notion of heart-mind (*xin* 心). A good deal of details about this mind still needed to be worked out in the subsequent Chinese intellectual deliberations, but much of the groundwork was laid in the early medieval period. Once such a mind came to the fore, it gradually occupied the center of the intellectual universe in subsequent Chinese history, with some Buddhists declaring

that the mind is the Buddha,[24] and some neo-Confucians asserting that the mind is the cosmic principle or coherence (*lǐ* 理).[25]

Notes

1. Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkyō* 批判仏教) in Japan is the most famous manifestation of this tendency in recent scholarship. See Hubbard & Swanson (1997).
2. For one of the latest studies of such rivalry, see Campany (2009, 2012).
3. A complete translation of the treatise can be found in Balazs (1964: 266–76).
4. In Xiao Yan's citation, this reference is attributed to the Liyun (禮運) chapter, but it is actually from the Jiyi chapter of the extant *Book of Rites*. Apparently, this is a favorite citation from the *Book of Rites* for those who used ancestral worship to justify the belief in the indestructible *shen*. For example, Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443 CE), an earlier Buddhist sympathizer during the Eastern Jing and Liu Song Dynasties, also used this quotation from the *Liji* to defend the indestructibility of *shen* in his famous treatise *Ming fo lun* 明佛論, T52n2102. Citations and reference for *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* are based on the corpus of the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA 中華電子佛典協會). T is the abbreviation for *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經).
5. Whalen Lai has a complete translation of Xiao Yan's piece, together with Shen Ji's commentary, in his "Emperor Wu of Liang on the Immortal Soul, *Shen Pu Mieh*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1981a: 167–75).
6. Whalen Lai, in his translator's note, regards this as Xiao Yan's double *entendré*: "*wu-ming shen-ming* can be 'ignorant spirit' or 'precognitive wisdom' " (1981: 172).
7. Lo (1991, pp. 224–44).
8. Walter Liebenthal, in his famous 1958 article, "New Light on the Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda śāstra," credits P. Demiéville for the contemporary scholarly consensus that rejects the traditional account. For a more recent introduction to the text, its early commentators, and various modern discussions of controversial issues about its provenance, see Jorgensen et al. (2019: 1–55).
9. The most comprehensive discussion of this issue in English can be found in Liebenthal (1958). I disagree with his locating the production of the text in Northern China as we will see in the following.
10. T32n1666_p0575c21-22.
11. T32n1666_p0575c23-25.
12. T32n1666_p0575c26.
13. T32n1666_p0575c27.
14. T32n1666_p0575c28.
15. Dan Lusthaus (1998), in a brief note discussing sinicizing Buddhist concepts, observes, "The Sanskrit term *ekacitta*, a mind with singular focus (but literally meaning 'one mind') becomes the metaphysical one mind of the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*." He does not explain how this happened.
16. In his translator's note, Hakeda advises against trying to match the *AFM* with Yogācāra on their conceptions of the mind (1967: 47).
17. Liebenthal (1958) posits a hypothesis that Dao Chong 道寵 was the author.
18. For a detailed study of the divergent accounts of Paramārtha's translation of *AFM*, see Tao 2013: 126–50.

19. Similarly, the reason why Aśvaghoṣa was credited as the author of the *AFM* has more to do with how he was perceived in China, rather than what he was historically. For a recent study, see Young (2015: 130–34).
20. The *Taishō* contains two versions of the *AFM*, T.1666 and T.1667. T.1666 is by far the more popular and influential version, judging by the commentaries that have survived.
21. According to an earlier source, Paramārtha was actually in Funan (present-day Cambodia) where Xiao Yan's envoy met him (Paul 1984: 24).
22. Liebenthal mentions Hayashi Kemmyō, who traced materials in the *AFM* to Emperor Wu's writings and *Baozang Lun* 寶藏論, but Liebenthal rejects placing the author of the *AFM* in the South since he believes that the *AFM* does not have the notion of an immortal soul embraced by Emperor Wu (Liebenthal 1958: 157–58). But as I will try to show in the following, the One Mind in the *AFM* is an important connection to the immortal soul/spirit. Hence, the connection between Emperor Wu of Liang and the origination of the *AFM* should not be dismissed out of hand.
23. Gong Jun summarizes three theories about the composition of the *AFM*: the famous Korean monk Wonhyo (元曉 617–686 ce) thinks it is the synthesis of a wide varieties of sources; Huiyuan (慧遠 or 淨影寺慧遠 523–592 ce, different from Huiyuan of Mt. Lu 廬山慧遠 334–416 ce) takes *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* as the primary source of the *AFM*; and Japanese scholar Yusugi Ryōei 湯次了榮 tries to seek a middle ground between these two positions (Gong 1995: 7–8).
24. This is a saying by the famous Chan patriarch Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788 ce).
25. This is the position the famous neo-Confucian Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529 ce) would come to embrace.

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