

The Role of Iranians in the Spread of Buddhism, Manichaeism and Mazdaism in China

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Gandhara, an area that welcomed Buddhism and where the earliest monasteries are found from the late third century BC, was also a 'land of immigration'.¹

With the aim of converting the Greco-Iranian peoples to Buddhism, the dignitaries in charge of these provinces under Asoka had identified in Greek and Aramaic vocabulary equivalents of Hindu or Buddhist themes. But the Gandhara Buddhists seem not to have continued this attempt to translate their sacred texts into Greek, Aramaic and probably Middle Iranian. On the other hand the Buddhists from Bactrian, Sogdian and Xinjiang translated the great texts of Buddhism from Sanskrit into the indigenous languages.

It was from these translations and also from the Sanskrit originals that the first translators of Buddhism, the Parthians (An Shigao, An Xuan), Yuezhi (Zhi Loujiazhan, Zhi Qian), and Sogdians (Kang Mengxiang, Kang Ju, Kang Senghui), started to spread the impressive Buddhist canon through the Empire of the Middle Kingdom.

The literary activity of these interpreters – who had come from the Iranian world – extends from the middle of the second century to the first decade of the third.

However, the development of popular Buddhism in the various regions of the empire, the rise of local beliefs and cults, the way doctrine was taught to the illiterate population, the social and economic functions of the Church in rural communities encountered the obstacle of language. Only a few foreign monks had reasonable Chinese, and before the fourth century no Chinese were thought to know Sanskrit. Hence the importance of the monks from the 'Iranian world', who acted as intermediaries between India and China.

The introduction of Buddhism into China is directly related to trade. Non-Chinese Buddhists were merchants, refugees, envoys and hostages.

The first translator of Buddhist texts, and also the first propagandist for the doctrine of the Buddha in China, was the Parthian An Shigao.

An Shigao, the 'Marquess of An', the Parthian lord, arrived in the year 148

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in Luoyang, the Han capital, carried on his profession as a translator there for twenty-two years (148–170), and founded a school for translators with his fellow-countryman An Xuan and the Chinese monk Yan Fotiao. These first three translators for Buddhism in China were called the ‘three inimitables’.

Over his two decades of literary work An Shigao is said to have translated 176 Buddhist texts, *a million words*. In current editions of the *Canon of Taisho* 55 translations bear his name. Among these, four, which have an archaic linguistic character, may be attributed to him with certainty.

His compatriot and colleague An Xuan arrived in Luoyang in 181, at the end of the reign of the Han emperor Lingdi. Having settled in the Chinese capital, he obtained the military title of director-general of the cavalry, became a monk and attended the translators school started by his fellow-countryman An Shigao.

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The expansion of commerce between the Chinese and Persian states, and the re-establishment of caravan routes, helped make possible the arrival of the first Manichaeian missionaries to China in the seventh century of our era. Thus, in 694, a Persian with the title of *fuduodan* appeared before the Chinese court carrying ‘the false religion contained in *The Book of the Two Principles*’, *Erzongjing*.² In 719 another Manichaeian dignitary, bearing the title of *muzhu* and versed in astronomy, was sent to the Chinese emperor by the viceroy of Tokharestan.³ Some 20 years later, on 16 July 731, a Manichaeian Bishop, also called a *fuduodan*, completed the *Compendium of the Doctrines and Rules of the Religion of Mani, the Buddha of Light*. The resulting edict, which required the translation of this work, was designed to allow the Chinese authorities both to obtain a complete overview of Manichaeism and to indicate what attitude to take in its regard. Accordingly, the next year (732), an edict was promulgated which, while condemning Manichaeism, granted religious freedom to its non-Chinese adherents.⁴

The composition of the *Compendium*, along with the edict of 732, facilitated the expansion of the new religion in the Empire of the Middle Kingdom. Yet even more favourable developments occurred not long after. In 745 the Uighurs founded a vast kingdom that stretched from the Ili to the Yellow River. The Uighur chief, Muyou, who took Luoyang on 20 November 762, met a group of Manichaeian prelates there who converted him to their religion. With the conversion of the Kagan to Manichaeism it became the official religion of the Uighurs. The Manichaeians, emboldened by this development, and with the political support of the Uighurs, demanded that the Chinese authorities grant them the right to build temples.

The protection of the Uighurs obliged the Chinese emperor to accede to the Manichaeian demands. In 768 they were granted the right to build temples, called *Dayun guangming*, in the two capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang; and then in 771 they were permitted to build others throughout the Yangzi basin.

In 806 a group of Manichaeians were accorded the status of Manichaeian ambassadors to the Chinese court.⁵ The growth of Manichaeism at the end of the eighth century, and the arrival of the Manichaeian ambassadors at the T’ang court, are clear evidence of the liberal policies of these emperors: ‘In 784 there were some one

hundred and fifty thousand foreigners in the armies of the empire; among them were Uighurs, Tatars, Persians, and Arabs. In Xianfu [Chang'an] alone there were four thousand foreign families involved in the tea and silk trades.⁶

The end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth centuries marked the height of Manichaeism in East Asia. However its success was short-lived, its fall rapid and complete. The Kirghizian destruction, in 840, of the kingdom of the Uighurs put an end to the expansion of Manichaeism in the Empire of the Middle Kingdom. Indeed the decline of the Uighurs meant the decline of Manichaeism. Weakened and without protectors they could no longer even dictate their law to the T'ang court.

In 843, Manichaeism was outlawed throughout China. In obedience to a royal edict Chinese functionaries were required to collect and burn on a public street all Manichaean books and icons. In 845 all foreign religions – Buddhism, Nestorianism, Mazdaism, and Manichaeism – were subject to brutal persecution: 'As a result 260,500 Buddhist and 2000 Nestorian, Mazdaian and Manichaean monks entered secular society.⁷ After the catastrophic period of 840–3 the Uighur tribes settled in various parts of Central Asia, from Ganzhou to Gansu, and in Gaochang, to the east of Turfan.

There is evidence that Manichaeism survived in these two kingdoms. The Ganzhou Uighurs were surrounded by Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists. Having brought Manichaeism to Gansu in the middle of the ninth century, the Manichaeans there were gradually forced to give way to the Buddhists who pressed them from all sides. As for the Uighurs of Gaochang, 'it is because of their influence', Chavannes and Pelliot wrote, 'that we have the so-called "Turkicization" of Chinese Turkestan, the result of which was that the local population ceased to speak in Eastern Iranian or "Tokharian".'⁸

Turkologists such as Thomsen and Marquat have tried to identify the Uighurs with the people known as the Oghuz or the Nine Oghuz (*Toquz Oghaz*), a tribe mentioned in inscriptions from the Tujue (a Chinese name for the Turks) empire of the eighth century and in Uighur inscriptions of the ninth century, during which time the Uighurs were leading a nomadic life in Mongolia. This name, in the forms of *Toghuzghuz* and *Ghuzz*, crops up in later Muslim sources. According to Grousset,⁹ there is mention of a Turkish tribe called the *Toghuzghuz* by the tenth-century Persian geographer Hodoûd al-Alam. The latter writes that they lived to the south of Lake Balkhash, in Semirechye, the Ili region, around Charin, Tekes and Mouzart'; and that there were other Turks, called *Ghuzz*, living in the steppes to the west of Lake Balkhash and to the north of the Aral Sea. From this last group came the Uzes who settled in southern Russia in the 11th century, the Seljuks who lived in Persia in the 11th century, and the present-day Turkmenians.¹⁰

The historians Mas'oudi (10th century), Ibn al-Nadim (10th century), and Gardizi (11th century), confirmed the presence of Manichaeans among these *Toghuzghuz*. Some Turkologists, amalgamating these records, have identified the Nine Oghuz with the Uighurs. For instance, Chavannes and Pelliot stated: 'The manuscripts and frescos discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Turfan region have brought additional confirmation to the written evidence'.¹¹

But this identification is in question: Grousset believes that the above-mentioned historians of the 10th and 11th centuries might have been confused by the verbal

resemblance between Uighur and Oghuz; moreover, he is not even convinced that the Nine Oghuz are identical to the later *Toghuzghuz* and *Ghuzz*.¹²

The 11th-century Iranian philosopher Birouni wrote that around the year 1000 'the majority of oriental Turks, inhabitants of Sina and Tibet, and some of the Hindus, practiced the doctrines of Mani'.¹³

The civilizing influence of the Manichaeans on the Turks was therefore very important. It was through this religion that the Uighurs first had contact with Iranian culture.

Manichaeism continued to exist in Chinese Turkestan well into the 13th century. However, even in China, cut off from contacts with Iran which was now Islamic, and without political support, Manichaeism, persecuted and suppressed since the proscription of 843, was forced to disguise itself under cover of Daoism and Buddhism, and as a consequence found itself influenced by these two great religions. In order to escape the prosecution to which it was subject, Manichaeism went underground and became, in spite of itself, a 'secret society' that was accused of all possible crimes, including subversion.

With the fall of the Song dynasty (1277), dissident sects supported the Yuan, who in return granted them religious freedom. It was in this way that foreign religions, such as Nestorianism, Judaism, and Islam, were able to flourish. Manichaeism, however, did not benefit from this development. Indeed, in 1370, an imperial edict was promulgated that ordered that the leaders of the religion of the Venerable One be strangled and that their followers be beaten with sticks and deported without their property.¹⁴

The 14th-century *Ming Code* outlawed the religion of the Venerable One of the Light. This interdiction had a curious consequence. As part of the code of law of the last Chinese dynasty, it entered the *annamite* law, which was administered by French tribunals in Indochina. Thus in theory, without knowing it, the French government of the 20th century condemned Manichaeism.

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There is, among the Chinese manuscripts gathered by Sir Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot at the beginning of the 20th century in Dunhuang, a Manichaean scroll translated from the Parthian language. It is entitled '*Compendium of the Doctrines and Rules of the Religion of Mani, the Buddha of Light*'.¹⁵ I have personally brought together and analysed the two separated parts of this document, one of which is located in London and the other in Paris.

This text, which is a unique document in Manichaeism, is a kind of catechism of all Manichaeism, whose purpose, in the Chinese version, was to aid in the administration of the religions of the imperial T'ang government.

The religion of Mani, as it is presented at the time of its introduction to the Empire of the Middle Kingdom, contains many Buddhist ideas. This, however, is a voluntary syncretism, not an eclecticism imposed on it by time or by living in close proximity to one or another religion. Indeed this syncretism can be discerned even in the thought of the founder of Manichaeism, who created it by joining Christian and Buddhist concepts to Mazdaian ideas and who always strove to make the new religion a universal one.

Having passed through Central Asia to reach China, the Manichaean religion tried to assimilate Mani to certain *bodhisattvas* venerated by the Chinese and to amalgamate Buddhism and Manichaeism. The strategy proved to be quite effective, since it allowed the Manichaean religion to penetrate Chinese thought and culture through an already established religion.

In introducing Manichaeism to China the author of the *Compendium* tried to present it in such a way that it could more easily be accepted and understood by a population permeated with Daoist and Buddhist notions. In order to do so he not only made use of a vocabulary derived from Buddhism but presented Mani as the latest avatar of the founders of the doctrines that surrounded him. The author did this by attributing to a Daoist work or Buddhist *sutra* ideas that could serve as a bridge between the new and old faiths. It is interesting to note that Buddhism itself, at the time of its introduction to China, had had to take the same tack, that is to say identify itself with Daoism, borrowing its vocabulary and then converting the faithful to the new doctrine.

The *Compendium* is written as if it were a *sutra*. It is in the various names by which Mani is known and in the way his thought is described that the secret of this interdoctrinal mixture is revealed. Indeed, without an appreciation of the Buddhist contribution, it is impossible to grasp the essential meaning of Chinese Manichaeism. The Manichaean missionaries not only used the vocabulary of Buddhism but incorporated their own doctrine into those of Buddha and Lao-zi. The result of this incorporation was the *Compendium*, syncretizing Manichaeism, Mazdaism, Buddhism and Daoism, all the religions of the 'Silk Road'.

Although a reading of the *Compendium* shows the constant presence of Buddhist elements and frequent Daoist echoes, the text's Iranian and notably Mazdaian roots are also retained. The *Compendium* identifies Mani as 'The Unsurpassable King of Medicine'.¹⁶ This term is profoundly Buddhist. The Buddha of medicine, *da yiwang fo*, cures men of sicknesses such as ignorance. Paul Demiéville has identified this 'king of medicine' with the Buddhist Vaidyārāja.¹⁷ This epithet is even now commonly applied to incarnations of the Buddha. However, the description of the Mazdaian religion that is given in *The Third Book of Dēnkart*¹⁸ is very close to the medicinal role attributed to Manichaeism. In the *Dēnkart* it says: 'When all people have received and used the perfect doctor's remedy as it relates to the sickness of the world and its cure [. . .] there will no longer be sickness, disease, old age or death . . .'.¹⁹

The description, in the *Compendium*,²⁰ of Mani's extraordinary birth – marked by the blaze of a spiritual being which itself is engendered by two sparks – is reminiscent of the *xvaranah* of Zoroaster (or the Mazdaian glorious light) that Henri Corbin has described in the following terms: 'sometimes it is said that the *xvaranah*, descending in the form of a flame issued from an infinite light, pierces Zoroaster's mother at the moment of her birth; at other times it is said that the *fravarti* (celestial being) of Zoroaster and his *xvaranah* unite to create the form of the infant Zoroaster'.²¹

As we have just seen, the incarnation of Zoroaster is due to the union of the *fravarti*, that is to say the celestial entity – the light of his 'I' – existing prior to the birth of the terrestrial world, and the *xvaranah* interpreted as the Mazdaian light of glory. This supernatural process, which culminates in Zoroaster's birth, corresponds exactly to the process that precedes the extraordinary birth of Mani.

The *Compendium*²² promises payment to all those who follow the path of correct behaviour. The Chinese text says: 'When the path of behaviour is correct, remuneration will be obtained in the three palaces.'

The Mazdaian tradition also promises remuneration (*mizda*) to believers. The believer may receive it in this life but the true payment will be received after death, from the hand of Ahura Mazdâ. This payment is defined as participation in the 'kingdom' of Ahura Mazdâ, who is its king.²³

The *Compendium*²⁴ depicts Mani as crowned with the symbol of the 'twelve luminous kings of victory'. This aspect of Mani is reminiscent of the Kayanid princes who are depicted as crowned with halo and flame, symbolic of the Mazdaian light of glory, the *xvaranah*. Mani, crowned in a halo of light, can represent Mithra as well. In this case the 'twelve luminous kings of victory' correspond to the 12 signs of the zodiac, believed to be Mithra's helpers.²⁵ On the day of the feast of Mithra it was customary for Persian kings to grace the foreheads of their sons with the crown of gold. This image can be seen on medals of the Sassanid kings as well as on monuments dedicated to Mithra; and in the latter case the tips of the crowns appear to be sun rays.

The *Compendium*²⁶ defines the body of Mani as the 'secret meaning of the infinite and immeasurable light'. Interestingly, in the Buddhist tradition, the infinite light designates the *bodhisattva* Amitâbha. Immeasurability, the Chinese *wuliang* or Sanskrit *amita*, is one of the principal characteristics of Amitâbha.

Mani is compared to Amitâbha on four separate occasions in the *Compendium*. What we know of this *bodhisattva* – who was unknown to ancient Buddhism – is that he was of Iranian origin and was more popular than the historical Buddha himself. The idea of Amitâbha was likened to the Infinite Time of Iran (*Zurvan akanara*) because of his name ('Infinite Longevity') and of his luminous nature, which is fitting for an Iranian God (Mithra).²⁷ As H. de Lubac wrote, 'it is indeed in Iranian countries that the cult of Amitâbha first appeared; and it was men of Iranian origin, and of its neighbors, who brought it to China. The first translator of the *Sutra of Sukhâvatî* (the *Sukhâvatîyûa*, which describes the land of Buddha Amitâbha) worked in China, during the second century A.D., under the command of an Iranian by the name of An Shigao, who was called the "Parthian Marquis". This man, a member of the royal family of the Arsacids, son of a prince whose descendants currently reign on the throne of Afghanistan, renounced the throne to become a monk.'²⁸

Mani's 'voyage' which began in Persia and, following the Silk Roads, passed through the Indian lands before reaching China, is comparable to the route followed by the Iranian deity (incarnated in the person of Amitâbha) who reached China under the name of 'the Western Saint'.

The *Compendium* is also a source of valuable information in regard to the five grades of the priestly hierarchy and of Mani's Heptateuch.²⁹ The titles of Mani's works³⁰ have been studied by Haloun and Henning,³¹ who ascertained that most of them come from Middle Persian: *Niwan* corresponds to the Middle Persian word *dêwân*, 'Letters', *Eluozan* corresponds to the Middle Persian *râzân*, 'Mysteries', *Juhuan* to *kawân*, 'Giants'; and *Afuyin* to *âfrîn*, 'Psalms and Prayer'.

The titles of the five grades of Manichaean Church³² also derive from the Pahlavi language,³³ *muzhu* corresponds to Pahlavi *môze*,³⁴ 'masters', *sabosai* to *aspasag*,

'Deacons, Bishops', but also meaning '*bodhisattva*', *moxixide* to *mahistag*, 'intendants, priests', *aluohuan* to *ardâwân*, 'the elect'; and *noushayan* to *niyôsâgân*, 'listeners'.

Gauthiot³⁵ managed to restore in Pahlavi the titles of the three persons who head a Manichaeon monastery,³⁶ the *afuyinsa*, 'chief of hymns and vows', corresponds to the Pahlavi *âfrînsar*, 'chief of encomiums', the *huluhuan*, 'chief of religious doctrine', to the Pahlavi *xrwxw'n*, 'he who makes the call to prayer resound'; the *ehuanjian saibosai*, 'keeper of the I', to Pahlavi '*rw'ngânsâh pâsak*, 'supervisor of the recitation of prayer'.

These terms, transcribed from Pahlavi to Chinese, show that the *Compendium*, in spite of the influence of Buddhism, remained an essentially Manichaean text, tied to its original vocabulary, to the Mazdaian tradition and to its land of origin.

The text also shows how Manichaeism, while having incorporated – to its expansionist ends – certain traits of the established religions, Buddhism and Daoism, as it was implanted in various communities throughout the Yangzi basin, such as the oases of Turfan, was nevertheless able to preserve its Iranian origins. For instance, although it was not known under the name of its founder, it was known as the 'religion of light'. This 'light' is in fact the fulcrum of all the Iranian theogonies, whether symbolized by Mithra, God of the light and guardian of the truth and moral perfection, or metamorphosed as the Fire which Zoroaster symbolized in Ahura Mazdâ, thus establishing a parallel between celestial and moral light. This same light illuminates Iranian Islam with its radiance: the 12th-century Iranian philosopher Sohrawardi makes use of it in order to create a symbol of 'the instant of epiphany of the soul's knowledge of the self'.

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From other sources we know that Mazdaism or, as the Chinese called it, 'the religion of the celestial god of fire' played, during a period lasting two centuries, an important role in the Far East; indeed it was important enough to cause the T'ang government to set up a special department (*sabao*) devoted exclusively to the affairs of this religion. Unfortunately, all traces of Chinese Mazdaism have been lost.

Mazdaism, which was not as fortunate as Manichaeism, was unable to penetrate the Chinese milieu. Ancient historians sometimes even mixed them up. In the 13th century Zhi Pan³⁷ wrote of 'Persian Zoroastrianism, which established the Manichaean religion of the celestial god of fire'.

It is equally interesting to note how Mazdaism, the official religion of the Sassanid state, that superpower in the first centuries of our era, reacted when forced into exile: Mazdaism disguised itself as Manichaeism, a religion that it had condemned and hounded over a long period of time. Ultimately Mazdaism was conflated with and even assimilated to this 'heresy' that it had tried to banish from the 'territory of the king of kings'. By contrast, the religion of Mani, although it had to take on the colours of Daoism and Buddhism in its movement east, was able to retain its Iranian origin and Mazdaian roots. The irony of fate was that Mazdaism, when it in turn was persecuted, was forced to camouflage itself as Manichaeism.

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Notes

1. Fussman, "‘Upaya-kausalya’", Bouddhisme et cultures locales. Quelques cas de réciproques adaptations.' Actes du colloque franco-japonais de septembre 1991, Fukui Fumimasa and Gérard Fussman (eds), École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1994, p. 18.
2. Zhi Pan, *Fo zu tong ji* (Annals of the Patriarchs of Buddhism), chap. 39, III, pp. 233–238.
3. Wang Qinruo, *Ce fu yuan gui*, chap. 971, XII, p. 11,406.
4. Zhi Pan, *op. Cit.*, chap. 54, IV, pp. 340–349.
5. Ouyang, Xiu, Song Qi, *Xin Tang shu* (A New History of the Tang Dynasty), chap. 217, XIX, p. 6, 126.
6. M. G. Deveria, 'Musulmans et manichéens chinois', in *Journal Asiatique* (1897), p. 74.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 479.
8. E. Chavannes and P. Pelliot, 'Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine', in *Journal Asiatique* (1911), p. 269.
9. R. Grousset, *L'Empire des steppes*, Paris, Payot, 1969, p. 163.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
11. E. Chavannes and P. Pelliot, 'Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine', (note 8 above) p. 308.
12. R. Grousset, 1969, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
13. E. Chavannes and P. Pelliot (note 8 above), p. 278.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
15. N. Tajadod, *Mani, le Bouddha de Lumière*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, Sources gnostiques et manichéennes 3, 1990.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 90.
17. Unpublished work by P. Demiéville in N. Tajadod, 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 363.
18. The *Dênkart* was an encyclopedia in nine books, of which the first two and the first folio of the third have been lost. The first author of the *Dênkart* was a contemporary of the ninth century Caliph Ma'moun. The *Third book of Dênkart* takes up moral and theological questions, polemicalizing with Islam.
19. J. de Menasce, *Le troisième livre du Dênkart*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1973, p. 101.
20. N. Tajadod, 1990, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 94.
21. H. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, II, Paris, Gallimard 1971, p. 86.
22. N. Tajadod, 1990, *op. cit.*, pp. 53, 159.
23. See G. Widengren, *Les Religions de l'Iran*. Paris, Payot, 1968, p. 110.
24. N. Tajadod, 1990, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 173.
25. These helpers are purity, truth, greatness, force, vigilance, justice, bravery, protection, generation, benediction, pacification, and meditation. See J. de Hammer, *Mémoire sur le culte de Mithra*, Paris, Pinard, 1833, p. 30.
26. N. Tajadod, 1990, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
27. See J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique*, II, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1953, p. 569.
28. H. de Lubac, *Amida*, Paris, Seuil, 1955, p. 237.
29. N. Tajadod, *op. cit.*, pp. 57, 193–205.
30. They are the *Dayinglun* (the Gospel), *Zintihe* (the Treasure), *Niwan* (the Letters), *Eluozon* (the Mysteries), *Bojiamodiye* (the Legends), *Juhuan* (the Giants), *Afuyin* (Psalms and Prayers), and *Damen heyi* (the Image).
31. See G. Haloun and W. B. Henning, 'The Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of the Teaching of Mani, the Buddha of Light', in *Asia Major*, III (1952), p. 207.
32. N. Tajadod, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 213–217.
33. G. Haloun and W. B. Henning, *Compendium*, p. 195.
34. E. Chavannes and P. Pelliot (note 8 above), p. 74.
35. R. Gauthiot, 'Quelque termes techniques bouddhiques et manichéens', in *Journal asiatique* (1911), p. 60.
36. N. Tajadod, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–63, 240–244.
37. Zhi Pan, *Fo zu tongji* (Annals of the Buddhist Patriarchs), chap. 39, IX, 71 v⁶; a similar mention is made in chapter 54, fol. 151 r⁶.

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