

The Chinese Cultural Elements of the Ullambana Festival

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Abstract

Buddhism was disseminated from India to China during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 C.E.) and incorporated local Chinese cultures. It emerged gradually as a specific cultural phenomenon with Chinese features. According to Li Li'an, such a phenomenon could be considered a miniature of all the foreign cultures' destiny in China, too (Li, 2006). The Ullambana Festival of Buddhism experienced a long process of change within Buddhism itself. The Ullambana Service of Chinese Buddhism is a glittering example of this historically peerless amalgamation of two of the world's most remarkable ancient civilizations. Thus, this paper attempts to investigate the Chinese cultural elements of the Ullambana Festival during its transmission in China to explore the localization of Buddhism in China further.

Keywords: Ullambana festival, Saṃgha, Chinese cultural elements, Sinicization

Introduction

Ullambana Festival (Buddha's joyful day), known as Sangha Day, is the last day (15th of July, Chinese lunar calendar) of the Saṃgha community's three-month Vārsika (summer retreat or rainy season). It is an activity with great merits that allows the Saṃgha community to perform ritual practices without obstructions, rescuing spirits of the deceased ancestors, parents, and relatives from suffering. The distinctive features of Buddhism in China result from a process of absorption and assimilation between Buddhism and China's hitherto existing cultural peculiarities. It is observed that from time to time, scholars have busied themselves with the study of the Ullambana Festival or Yu-lan-pen Jie 盂兰盆节 (in Chinese) since the Ullambana Sūtra was introduced from India into China.

Since its first appearance in China, the Ullambana Festival has inevitably been enriched with elements of Chinese culture, and Ullambana scholars have always emphasized this facet of the Festival. After the introduction of Buddhism into China, it gradually absorbed a lot of inherent Chinese cultural elements and customs to adapt to the local traditions. A significant embodiment of such Chinese cultural factors in the Festival is represented by the inclusion of the Chinese practices of worship and entertainment during the lunar July. Meanwhile, the

influence of Chinese filial morality on Buddhism also plays an essential role in the development of the Festival.

Some scholars have noticed the significance of the Ullambana Festival. For instance, Fan Jun explored the origin of the Ullambana Festival and traced back this festival to Indian Buddhist tradition (Fan, 2006). Xie Wanruo examined the secularization of the Ullambana Festival in China and emphasized Taoist influences on this festival (Xie, 2004). Makita Tairyō observed the Ullambana Festival's association with the Chinese culture of death (Makita, 2000). In addition, Xing Yongfeng emphasized the dissemination of the Ullambana Festival from China to Japan and discussed the concept of ancestor worship in this festival (Xing, 2010). Undoubtedly, history has witnessed the evolution of the Ullambana Festival. The Chinese have practiced this festival for more than a thousand years, as recorded by Chinese literati and historians. However, these scholars did not investigate this festival by utilizing the abundant original Buddhist and historical sources, which provides a closer look at the development of the Ullambana Festival in ancient Chinese society. Hence, this paper will investigate the essence of the Ullambana Festival and attempt to reconstruct this ritual practice performed in ancient China by analyzing the related original Buddhist texts and historical literature sources.

Materials

The Ullambana Festival is held on the fifteenth of the seventh lunar month, and this date carries considerable significance in the traditional culture of China. Several kinds of calendars have been used in ancient China, but the Tai-yin-li (the Lunar Calendar) has been used only since the foundation of the Zhou dynasty (around 11th century B.C. – 256 B.C.). It must be remembered that the Chinese lunar calendar is partly based on the lunar phases and partly synchronizes with the solar year. The calendar consists of twelve months, similar to the current solar calendar. Moreover, each month starts with the new moon, while the subsequent full moon signifies the middle of the month.

In ancient China, as elsewhere, the major problem in calendar-making has been to reconcile, as far as possible, the incommensurate movements of the sun and the moon. The Chinese solution was to insert an intercalary month, usually at three-year but sometimes at two-year intervals, in such a way as to ensure that some important festivals and solar terms are set on fixed dates. The fifteenth of the seventh lunar month is always in the midpoint with the full moon (Bkdde, 1975, pp. 26-27). In this case, this day always falls between the Summer Solstice and the Autumn Equinox; “it was always associated with ripening, darkening, and decay” (Teiser, 2016, p. 27).

In China, the agricultural processes and governmental activities appropriate to each month are described at length in the Yue-ling (Monthly Ordinances), which forms a section of the early Han ritual book, the Li-Ji (Book of Rites). The Monthly Ordinances present an idealized picture of the actions undertaken by the rulers of Zhou. Their ritual observances were thought to link the way of heaven and the way of humans. The Monthly Ordinances were quite influential in the formation of Han rituals. They provided a detailed and dependable picture of

the rhythms of the seventh lunar month prior to the introduction of Buddhism and the birth of Taoism in China. According to the Monthly Ordinances:

Cool winds come in the first month of autumn; the white dew descends, and the cold cicada chirps. At this time, hawks sacrifice birds as their first step to hunt and kill (prey). ...In this month, autumn begins. Three days before the start of the autumn, the Grand Recorder informs the Son of Heaven (Emperor), saying: 'That day is the inauguration of autumn. The character of the season is fully seen in metal.' On this day, the Emperor devotes himself to self-adjustment (Uposatha). Furthermore, in person, he leads the three ducal ministers, the nine high ministers, the princes of the state (at court), and his Great officers; to welcome autumn in the western suburb. On their return, he rewards the general-in-chief and the military officers in the court. The Son of Heaven also orders the leaders and commanders to select soldiers, sharpen weapons, pick up and train talents, and give their entire trust only to men with outstanding service records to correct all unrighteousness. (He) investigates and sends troops against the ferocious—in order to maintain a solid stand on what to love and what to hate, and therefore, to allow the world to show obedience. This month, the Emperor orders the authorities to revise the laws and ordinances, repair the prisons, prepare handcuffs and fetters, prevent the vicious from happening, warn those who are found guilty, and do their best to capture those criminals. The Emperor also orders the prisons' authorities to look at wounds, examine sores, inspect broken members, and judge mainly of dislocations. The verdict of lawsuits must be executed (people of) guilty and strictly settle litigation. Heaven and earth now begin to be chilly, and no one should be slack. This month, the husbandmen present their newly harvested grains to the Emperor. The Son of Heaven tastes them, and first pays some as a tribute to his ancestors in the ancestral temple. He orders all officials to guide farmers to harvest their crops, to repair dams and dykes, and ensure there is no watercourse obstruction in case of floods. In the meantime, people have to renovate royal palaces and residential houses, and repair the courtyard and city walls. This month, there should be no investing of princes, and no appointment of great ministers, no subdivision of any territory, no sending out for any great commission, and no giving of any great present. (Legge, 1985, pp. 283-285).

This section of "Monthly Ordinances" portrays the natural landscape and the emperor's appropriate actions at the advent of early autumn. In the description, at first, the season starts changing; cool winds start blowing; frost and dew descend; the cold cicada chirps for the coming death. Hawks kill birds as if making sacrifices, and the emperor of the human society also prepares to go about his affairs under the native laws. Secondly, the emperor receives the purification and leads his officials to welcome the autumn; he then has to give rewards to his army and orders them to prepare for war. It is the time for harvest, so the Son of Heaven also makes offerings to his ancestors and partakes of the new grains himself. After all, in the seventh month, the summer welcomes the autumn; the chill coexists with the harvesting; the elimination of crimes parallels the removal of hidden dangers, and death celebrates with new birth.

Except during the Ullambana Festival of later times, other celebrations were held during the middle of the seventh month with the methods of purification and the joining of the sexes

to bring about world renewal. For example, the “Xi” (Lustration) festival was held on the fourteenth day of the seventh month. On this day in the Han dynasty, a large number of people from all classes of the society gathered at riverbanks under gaily-colored canopies to indulge in food, drink, and poetry (Granet, 1932, pp. 147-166). In addition, the “Que-qiao-hui (Reunion by magpie-bridge)” of the folk legends also takes place in the seventh month. Niu-lang and Zhi-nü, separated by Yin-he (the Milky Way), have only one day to reunite across the river on the seventh night of the seventh month, as the dead in the underworld also return to enjoy food from the sacrifice on the fifteenth of the seventh month. At least by the second century, the “Reunion by magpie-bridge” had already appeared in the folk ceremonies of China (Kominami, 1984, pp. 13-49).

Practically, the resemblances between pre-Buddhist and post-Buddhist feasts extend well beyond the trait of concern for the dead, which de Groot selects as the principal and enduring indigenous contribution to the Ullambana Festival. After an examination of the Han dynasty observances in the seventh month, he comments:

If Buddhist masses for the dead were celebrated throughout China in the seventh month, and if then all the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom vied to celebrate the festival of offerings in honor of their deceased ancestors, then these ceremonies, however Buddhistic they may have become in ritual, already existed in China for many centuries before Buddhism penetrated there. When the priests of the doctrine of Śākyamuni, began to invade China in the first two centuries of our era, they erected an exotic edifice upon this base, which was provided to them by the religion of a people who always showed extreme concern for the destiny of the dead. (De Groot, 1886, pp. 405-406).

It can be inferred from the above that traditional ceremonies undoubtedly have inevitable continuities with the later Ullambana Festival of Buddhism.

Methods

In the present case of Buddhist studies, one must not neglect the practices of the Ullambana Festival found in texts as well as the reality of people’s living practices provided by historical, and ritual sources and forms of literature.

For the purpose of analysis, one must familiarize oneself with Chinese existing cultural and philosophical peculiarities as it undergoes changes and emerges gradually as a specific cultural phenomenon with Chinese qualities and characteristics.

Result

Though the Buddhist doctrine also contains the notion of “family reverence”, it is not in the mainstream. Due to its prominent trans-mundane features, Buddhism had to endure the Chinese people’s condemnation when it first came to China. Especially the extreme divergence between the Indian Saṃgha system and the traditional Chinese concept of “filial piety” made it hard for people to understand and accept Buddhism. Eminent ancient Chinese monks had to dig out ideas of Buddhist “filial morality” from Buddhist canons and promote and popularize the same so as to make Buddhism congruent with traditional Chinese morality. Therefore, the

Sūtras containing the idea of “family reverence” had spread rapidly in China, such as “Fo-Sshuo fu-mu-en-Zhong nan-bao jing (Sūtra on the Hard Repaying of Great Kindness to Parents)”, “Fo-Shuo fu-mu-en nan-bao jing (Sūtra on the Repaying Great Kindness to Parents)”, “Di-Zang Pu-sa ben-yuan jing (Sūtra of Vows of Kṣhitigarbha Bodhisattva)”, “Da-fang-bian fo-bao-en jing (Sūtra on the Buddha Repaying Kindness in Great Convenience)” and “Xiao-Zi-jing (Sūtra of Filial Son)”, etc. Of course, the Ullambana Sūtra is one of them.

Buddhist doctrine professes that one’s parents possess incomparable nobleness and that a child could never completely repay their kindness in all of his or her life, as the Sūtra on Repaying the Great Kindness to Parents notes:

Bhagavata told the Bhikṣhus: Parents have great Svāhā (accomplishment) growth for a child. They nurture and feed their child at any time to foster the child’s body, so he (she) can grow up to be a man (woman). (If) the child carries his (her) father on his (her) right shoulder, and carries his (her) mother on his (her) left shoulder, for a thousand years, even if his (her) parents are nasty on his (her) shoulder, the child still could not end up repaying their deep kindness. (Taishō, 2002).

A similar opinion is also expressed in Zong-mi’s Commentary of the Ullambana Sūtra. He said that his parents gave birth to him, raised him, cared for him, and hugged him on his leaving and returning, so their immeasurable kindness he should repay (Taishō, 2002). For a child’s growth, parents pay through real toil. Thus, if a person who is a child to his or her parents but does not repay the parents’ kindness will surely fall into evil destiny and will suffer unlimited distress. The Sūtra on Kṣitigarbha praṇidhāna Bodhisattva mentions, “If any sentient being is not filial to one’s parents, or even kills the parents, this one will fall in the Avīci (Endless hell) for the Kalpa of ten million of hundred million years, and his or her release from it is without hope. (Taishō, 2002).

Karma is at the core of the Buddhist Doctrine, which means that if there is a cause, there must be an effect and vice versa. Differently, according to some scholars, the concept of Karma is not “cause and effect” but daily conduct or acts. For instance, Prof. Y.S. Alone held that the idea of “cause and effect” in Buddhism is more related to the origination of interdependent/co-independents, and Karma is more about the daily life of how one maintains the moral and ethical self. (Alone, 2020) However, I agree with Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s idea that the concept of Karma is complicated and difficult to define (O’Flaherty, 1980). My understanding of Karma is that any intentional action, whether mental, verbal, or physical, is regarded as Karma. It covers everything that is included in the phrase “thought, word, and deed”.

Karma makes all living things repeatedly pass through life and death like a spinning wheel, and sentient beings are reincarnated and die without an end.

Each human being has unlimited parents in countless lives of Saṃsāra, instead of only one pair of parents in the present life. The true “filial piety” is to try to rescue all parents from Saṃsāra and get wisdom. The Ullambana Sūtra recounts an instance of an Indian monk (Śākyamuni Buddha’s disciple) Mahāmaudgalyayāna’s deep sense of concern for the state of his deceased mother (a hungry ghost). Out of his compassion, Mahāmaudgalyayāna tried all

means to save his mother from being a hungry ghost and offered delicious food in Ullambana bowls to Śuddhasaṃgha (monks in ten directions) on the fifteenth of the seventh month. Eventually, his mother would be free from her ordeal and suffering. “Filial piety” is a key virtue in Chinese culture and plays a central role in Confucian ethics. Especially the filial piety of the children repaying the parents’ kindness was highly promoted in ancient times of China. Mahāmaudgalyāna’s compassion and action of saving his dead mother from suffering suggest the combination of Buddhist compassion and Chinese culture of “filial piety”.

As stated in the Ullambana Sūtra, it advocates that the majority of common people who practice compassionate filial conduct, on behalf of their current parents and the past seven generations of ancestors, should place food and drinks of one hundred flavors inside the Yulan bowl and donate it to monks from the ten directions on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, in order to release their ancestors. When the prayers are completed, one’s current parents will attain a longer life, passing one hundred years without illness and any of the torments of suffering. Their seven generations of ancestors will be freed from the suffering of being hungry ghosts, and reborn among gods and humans, acquiring blessings and bliss without limit.

Buddhists can, other than loving their parents and providing for them in daily life, also chant Sūtra, write, copy or popularize Buddhist Sūtras; donate or make Buddha images, make offerings to the Three Treasures, or even do charity for the poor and so on, to practice Puṇṇa and accrue virtue for their parents for repaying their kindness. Moreover, if one’s parents do not believe in Buddhism, one should advise them to convert; if they are believers, one should show them how to practice and assist them in getting enlightenment as quickly as possible. These actions are deemed as the utmost “filial morality”, which is beyond “family reverence” in the world. As noted in the Mūla-sarvāstivāda Vinaya (translated in 703 C.E.):

If parents have no belief (in Buddhism), the child should lead them to convert to the right religion; if parents have no Śīla, the child should urge them to receive it; if the nature of parents is miserly, the child should encourage them to do charity; and if parents have no wisdom, the child should guide them to get it. With this conduct, the child can persuade his or her parents to pacify their minds in Buddhism, which is called real repaying kindness. (Taishō, 2002)

These Buddhist thoughts of “filial morality” not only correspond to Confucianism’s conception of “family reverence” but also sublimate its secular meaning with sacred significance. Since the synthesis, Buddhist filial thought has been deeply admired by most Chinese and has spread throughout China.

The Ullambana Sūtra is a canon that advocates filial thought. The principle is simple, and the scripture is short, which is convenient for practice. Thus, it was praised as the Great Sūtra by Zong-mi as it facilitates the filial son’s expression of emotions for repaying kindness to his parents. The record states that:

Beginning in formless chaos, filling up all heaven and earth, uniting men and spirits, connecting the noble and the poor; Confucians and Buddhists revere it—it is the way of filial

devotion. Responding to filial sons' sincerity, saving parents from distress, and repaying broad heaven is kind virtue—it is the teaching of Yu-lan-pen. (Taishō, 2002).

It was in this cultural context that the Ullambana Sūtra attained its popularity. Since the festival was established, monks have been participating in the festivities as reverentially as the lay people. They perform Guṇa to bless their living and departed parents; for example, they comment on, preach, write and copy the Ullambana Sūtra, respect and make offerings to the Buddha, confess their evil deeds, etc. Regarding expressing the filial thoughts, some monks would even use their blood to write the Ullambana Sūtra. The Ullambana has enjoyed great acceptance in China with Buddhism's deep and decisive historical incisions into Chinese society.

Discussion

The advent and growth of the Ullambana Festival in China are not accidental; and closely related to the aboriginal culture and thought. The Chinese nation greatly emphasizes the importance of “filial piety”. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, was a strong proponent of the custom of “filial piety”. Alas, Confucius' words and deeds have not been well documented. Nevertheless, among the limited material available, advocacy of filial morality is evident everywhere. As Lun-yu (Confucian Analects) demonstrates:

There are few people who, being filial and fraternal, are fond of offending their superiors. There have been none who do not like offending their superiors, and do like stirring up confusion. The superior man pays attention to what is radical. (Logge, 1983, p. 38)

These words were spoken by Confucius' disciple You-tzu, who said that serving parents is the root of benevolence and righteousness. Man must depend on the perfect virtue to get the way. You-tzu's ideas were also Confucius's views on filial piety. Confucius attaches great importance to propriety in his preaching as well as to serve one's parents:

Meng Yi-tzu asked what filial piety was; the Master said, “It is not being disobedient.”...Fan-chi said: “What do you mean?” the Master replied, “(I mean) that parents, when alive, should be served in accordance to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried based on propriety; and that they should be worshiped based on propriety.”...Meng Wu-tzu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “(Children) should not make their parents anxious except when they (children) are in sickness.”...Zi-you asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “The filial piety of nowadays means to feed one's parents. But we can also feed dogs and horses; —without respecting (parents), how can we distinguish the support given to (those animals).” (Yang, 1958, pp. 147-148).

Confucius deems that filial piety does not just constitute providing parents with food and clothing; it is more important to respect their personality and learn their good habits that acknowledge the ancestors; whatever actions are performed should be done by propriety: including taking care of the parents' fading health, caring in illness, at the time of death and arranging for their funeral; in the meantime, one should strive to study and work hard in order to bring glory to his or her family. Following these instructions is a reflection of true filial piety. He also expands the notion of “family reverence” beyond the narrow ideal of serving one's

parents to include a vast gamut of people's careers and social (inter-personnel) communication. "Filial morality"—themed behavior includes developing noble virtues, doing one's work industriously, keeping faith in one's posts, building an excellent career, and earning wonderful achievements. This is recorded in vol. 1 of "The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence—A Philosophical Translation of the Xiao jing":

Family reverence is the root of excellence, and whence education itself is born. ... Your physical person (body) with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Being vigilant in not allowing anyone to injure your person is where family reverence begins; distinguishing yourself and walking the proper way in the world; raising your name high for posterity and thereby bringing esteem to your father and mother—it is in these things that family reverence finds its consummation. This family reverence, begins in service to your parents, continues in service to your lord, and culminates in distinguishing yourself in the world. (Rosemonf & Ames, 2009, p. 105)

Confucius emphasized filial piety and worship, which undoubtedly was a significant and profound impact on developing the features of Buddhism after it was introduced into China.

Next to the sage Confucius, Mencius advocates family reverence as hard as Confucius. He thinks that if a man cannot satisfy his parents, he cannot be considered an eligible man, If a man cannot abide by his parents, he cannot be considered an eligible son. He says, "There are many services, but the service to parents is the root of all others (Logge, 1983, p. 314)." Mencius also contends that "the path of duty lies in what is close, and men seek it from what is remote. The work of duty lies in what is easy, and men seek it from what is difficult. If each man would love his parents and show respect to his elders, the whole world would enjoy tranquillity (Logge, 1983, p. 302)." It shows the significance of filial piety when it is extended to the entire world from an individual.

Confucian culture has been the dominant ideology of the Chinese nation since the Han dynasty. Thence, the idea of "filial piety" has become an essential part of Chinese culture. Confucians advocated governing the country by "filial morality" and extended "filial piety" to faithfulness. They deemed that the core of the sages Yao and Shun's ways were "filial piety"; they further encouraged people to "cultivate their moral character (Xiu-Shen), to regulate the family (Qi-Jia), to manage the state rightly (Zhi-Guo), and to make the world peaceful (Ping-tian-Xia)." In ancient China, the relevance of "filial morality" led to seeking faithful ministers from only the supposedly "filial families". It was believed that if one can be dedicated to one's responsibilities, state, and nation, only if he is filial towards his parents first. If one cannot respect and show filial obedience to his parents and family, he cannot keep his loyalty to anyone. Therefore, the thought of "filial morality" is the indispensable foundation of ethics and moral principles in Chinese society.

Conclusion

Because native traditions of sacrifices and witchcraft were firmly rooted in the people's minds, Buddhism had to use oblique ways to tap into the witchery of the central plains'

traditional services for its incursions and subsequent development in the land, where its practices were disguised as a kind of witchcraft; Buddhists hid among the magicians to promote the doctrine of karma, exploiting the pre-existing traditions of spirits and gods, at the time when it was just introduced into China (Tang, 2000, pp. 39-41). It can be said that the Ullambana service was the principal function of Buddhism in its early days in China.

The foundation of the Ullambana Festival was laid on some traditions resembling the Festival, involving traditional sacrifices and festivities before and after the fifteenth of the seventh lunar month. The Ullambana Festival developed on the Terra firma of the indigenous practices, and in part, on those observances. The great time separating them should not lead us to assume any discontinuities between the earlier and the later celebrations.

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