

Thierry MEYNARD

*The Religious Philosophy of Liang Shuming. The Hidden Buddhist*, Foreword  
by Guy Alitto, Brill, 2011, 225 p.

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Professor Guy Alitto was quite aware that his *Last Confucian* was a Buddhist of sorts, but in his 1977 volume on Liang Shuming (1893-1988) he was mostly interested in the socio-political endeavours of Liang, not his religious beliefs. The latter are now brought to light in *The Hidden Buddhist*, by French scholar Thierry Maynard, a Beida Ph.D. in Chinese philosophy and current associate professor of Philosophy at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou.

But what did “religion” mean for embattled Chinese intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century? After reporting on the “Shaping of the Concept of Religion in China” and how the “concept” was eventually adopted even by the anti-religious camp, Meynard introduces the rather unique contribution of Liang who first developed a philosophy of religion, seen as “the heart of culture and society” and “standing above scientific knowledge”. Meanwhile, in his epoch-making *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* (1921), he identifies three main types of religion: Western, Chinese and Indian. Less well-known is Liang’s view of Christianity as a “social religion” which became one leading theme of his 1949 masterpiece, *The Substance of Chinese Culture*. Unlike Confucianism and its principle of ethical reciprocity, Christianity fuelled tensions between individuals and organization, and had been “a progressive force in shaping the West into a strongly structured society”. Yet, with its reliance on its God, dogmas and institutions, Christianity “could not fully develop humanity’s inner essence, since it failed to understand its inner heart”.

With Chapters IV-VI, the reader enters new, untrodden territory: Liang’s conversion to Buddhism as “the true religion of pure transcendence”, his adoption of Yogācāra epistemology and his ontology of the Mind as the ultimate reality. A self-taught Buddhist since he was 16, in his early writings (*Treatise on Finding the Foundation and Resolving the Doubt* (1916), *Outline of Indian Philosophy* (1919), *Outline of Yogācāra* (1920)), Liang considered that “the root of the Buddha’s decision to renounce the world was not his knowledge of its impermanence, but his inner feelings of compassion”. With this Mencian twist, compassionate feelings towards the suffering of others provided the best way to realize final enlightenment. But, Liang needed an epistemology and he found it in the Yogācāra (“consciousness-only”) school, which had just been rediscovered by Chinese literati fascinated by its speculative subtleness not unlike that of western philosophy. For Liang, with its meditative methods (*Lengyan* sūtrā) and epistemological depth (the “Eight consciousnesses”, the “Two modes of cognition”, etc.), Yogācāra “represented the entirety of Buddhist teachings”. Yet, he added a third mode of cognition, namely Confucian “intuition” or “moral reason” (*lixing*), which shared with Buddhism the “common aim of perceiving reality without any attachments”. Lastly, amidst debates on the orthodoxy of the “Awakening of Faith” sūtrā, Liang shared the view of Dom Tai Xu, Xiong Shili and others who found in Yogācāra a metaphysical blueprint. For him, “beyond the illusory elements of experience, an ontological reality could be found”. Nirvana was not only enlightenment, but Being as well.

And yet, for all his religious commitment, Liang was to remain the “hidden Buddhist”. Regarding Buddhism as a “religion of pure transcendence”, Liang wanted “to keep it intact and held in reserve for eschatological times”, that is after China has settled its socio-economic problems. On this count, he had little sympathy for Dom Tai Xu and monk Yinshun’s attempts at inventing a Buddhist Social Gospel (Chapter 7). Instead, he considered Confucianism to be a “third type of religion, or quasi-religion” halfway between “a Christian engagement with the world and the Buddhist drive to escape from it”. In an age of turmoil, Confucianism could “serve as a vehicle to bring people to Buddhism”.

In his final chapter, Meynard again breaks new grounds by weaving together scraps of Liang’s own recollections of his own spiritual practice: the daily recitation of sutrâs, dietary abstinence, Trantic meditations and 40-day retreats, as well as quasi-religious methods from the Confucian tradition that he followed and also taught the village folks in Shandong in the early 1930s. But, at the very end, in 1987, he admitted publicly: “In my former life I was a monk, a Chan (Zen) monk”.

Altogether, this volume is much more than an introduction to Liang’s “Philosophy of Religion”. It is one of the rare attempts since Wing-tsit Chan’s *Religious Trends in Modern China* (1952) to probe into the view of religion held by major Chinese thinkers in the decades before 1949. Furthermore, Liang’s religious experience, uniting Buddhist beliefs and practice with his Confucian socio-political engagement, epitomizes the deepest cultural dilemma facing China in years that were to come: nowadays Confucianism (but which Confucianism?) is on its way back as the mainstream national tradition and Buddhism seems to be the best religious proposition in the eyes of many university students. All those seriously interested in the fate of today’s China or in eastern religiosity in general will find in Meynard’s book the basic data and issues that only solid scholarship may provide.

Michel Masson, Jesuit, obtained his PhD from Harvard and specializes on Chinese philosophy and currents of thought in contemporary Chinese society. He has taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong from 1979 to 1987. He is now President of the Institut Ricci for Chinese Studies, Centre Sèvres, in Paris. His main publications include *Philosophy and Tradition : The Interpretation of China's Philosophic Past - Fung Yu-Lan, 1939-1949* (Taipei, Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 1985), *Feng Youlan. Nouveau traité sur l'homme*. Introduction, traduction and notes (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, Institut Ricci, 2006), *Liang Shuming, Les idées maîtresses de la culture chinoise*. Traduction and notes. Preface by Zhao Xiaoqin (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2010). He also edited *Matteo Ricci, un jésuite en Chine : Les savoirs en partage au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, Éditions Facultés Jésuites de Paris, 2010).