

Exemption not Granted: The Confrontation between Buddhism and the Chinese State in Late Antiquity and the ›First Great Divergence‹ between China and Western Eurasia

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Starting from the end of the fourth century, the Buddhist monastic community in China entered a protracted confrontation with a variety of political regimes, Sinitic and barbarian, significantly affecting their own processes of state formation and the reconstitution of a unified empire after a long period of division. Although elites and rulers often lavished patronage upon the clergy, and used Buddhism to buttress their authority, the overall response of these regimes, especially in the north, was unforgiving. Four persecutions from 446 to 955 and increasingly tight regulation effectively undermined monastic prerogatives, ultimately thwarting the emergence of a Buddhist ›church‹ in China. The last major episode of suppression intriguingly took place only a few years before the founding of the Song dynasty (960-1279) and China's subsequent transition towards what many historians have seen as her first modern period. Buddhism did live on in the new era, but as a social body it was terminally hamstrung by the state's inflexible grip.

Comparing this trajectory to the fortunes of Christianity in the late antique Mediterranean and then in early medieval Europe raises several counterfactual questions. One of the most important perhaps concerns the long-term effect that religious exemption, or the lack thereof, respectively had on imperial state formation on the two sides, in what Walter Scheidel has called the ›First Great Divergence‹ between China and Western Eurasia. Whether the rise of the Christian church with its privileges may have decisively stood in the way of an imperial resurgence in the West is an already old question; but whether, conversely, the Chinese state's successful confrontation with Buddhism was key to its extraordinary endurance as an imperial entity is a still largely unexplored avenue of inquiry, which this paper intends to probe.

Keywords: China; Buddhism; Late Antiquity; Great Divergence; taxation; religious exemption; population registration; imperial formation

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Did the Buddhist clergy enjoy forms of religious immunity in premodern China? In addressing this broad question, allow me to start with a mildly facetious warning: let's not take any exemption for granted; or put another way, let us bracket our assumptions about who would grant exactly what, and to whom. We need, in fact, to pierce through a thick layer of hindsight wrapping all those things we want to know about in the past – state, church, religion, to name but few.

My remarks will be mostly confined to medieval China, though not even this plain compound should be seen as entirely uncontentious. Several Sinologists, Michael Nylan for example, have cautioned that any backward projection of ›China‹ may mislead us »to imagine the early dynasties on the model of the modern nation-state«, rather than the contested purview of courts and elites presiding over fluid processes of ethnic and political formation.¹ As for the ›medieval‹, its catches have been exposed long enough for us to sense the awkward in its application to Chinese history between two major imperial breakdowns, the Han 漢 in the third century and the Tang 唐 in the tenth.² These caveats, to be sure, are only there to whisper critical nuance, not certainly to trumpet from the outset a terminological fundamentalism that would soon leave us speechless, should we rashly stick to it. But at least they should suggest reasons why the words ›Late Antiquity‹ are in my title. This paradigm, by no means undisputed in itself, may well lend narrative coherence to a significant swathe of global history: I have started suggesting elsewhere, and will do at greater length in forthcoming work, that the centuries in which the Roman empire dissolves and Christianity rises have interesting things to say when looked at from the perspective of the entire Old World *oikoumene*. The emergence, across boundaries, of communities defined by a new mode of discourse that we now identify as ›religion‹ is, in fact, a crucial marker of this period well beyond the Mediterranean, and most certainly in Buddhist Asia.³ Conceiving this shift as a tale of churches and states, of religious groups vying with secular rulers, would probably miss much of the process that brought these entities to define and establish themselves against each other through the negotiated devolution of a common metapolitical order.⁴ My global Late Antiquity starts therefore with the crisis and demise of the two great imperial formations at the opposite ends of the Old World, the Roman and the first Chinese empire, followed on both

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- 1 See her introduction to Nylan and Loewe, *China's Early Empires*, 2-3; cf. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, 42-43, 49. Such remarks are now frequent among scholars of modern and late imperial China, although still rare in historical discourse on earlier periods. For a forceful critique of the notion of ›China‹ in premodern history, see Dirlik, *Born in Translation*.
 - 2 On the trouble with the ›Medieval‹ see, among many others, Robinson, *Medieval, the Middle Ages*; Reuter, *Medieval*. On China in particular, see Barrett, *China and the Redundancy of the Medieval*, and Tanigawa, *Rethinking ›Medieval China‹*, 1-12.
 - 3 See Palumbo, *From Constantine the Great to Emperor Wu*, and Palumbo, *Buddhist Eschatology and Kingship*. Important critical reassessments of the concept ›Late Antiquity‹ are in Giardina, *Esplosione di tardoantico*; Marcone, *Tarda antichità*; Marcone, *Long Late Antiquity*; James, *Rise and Function*. I make no claim to break entirely new ground: S. A. M. Adshead, for example, has seen a ›China in Late Antiquity‹ between 400 and 1000 (although that chiefly meant mapping China's history against the latter period in the West), and Jerry Bentley proposed a global ›post-classical age‹ from about 500 to 1000 AD. See Adshead, *China in World History*, 54-108, and Bentley, *Cross-Cultural Interaction*, 763-766 (partly contradicted in Bentley, *Hemispheric Integration*). Neither periodization, however, takes Late Antiquity seriously (and both leave out the fourth century, arguably the defining segment of this age).
 - 4 See Palumbo, *From Constantine the Great to Emperor Wu*, 118-122, and pp. 131-143 in this paper.

sides by political and social fragmentation and the simultaneous ascendancy, from the fourth century, of large social bodies centred on ›religion‹, what we call Christianity and Buddhism respectively. These remarkably similar trajectories, however, appear to have parted at the end of the sixth century. While the Chinese sphere then recovered a political, cultural and territorial unity that it was to keep until modern times, the Roman Empire never came back, as neither Byzantium nor the Islamic caliphates were able to reinstate comparable polities in western Eurasia. So, at least, some of those few who have peered out of regional histories have remarked.⁵ One of them, Walter Scheidel, has called this phenomenon the ›First Great Divergence‹, as opposed to *the* Great Divergence that Kenneth Pomeranz has set in modern times.⁶ According to Scheidel, this early parting of the ways between China and the West projected long shadows on their respective futures:

...the cyclical restoration of a China-wide empire in the East and the decline of empire and central government in the West, followed by the slow creation of a polycentric state system that proved resistant to any attempts to impose hegemony.

Entering modernity as a dynamic political pluriverse would have given Europe a fateful edge over its once-thriving East Asian counterpart. The rest is well known.⁷

Let me hasten to point out that I find this narrative none too convincing. One reason is that the imperial comeback at the end of the sixth century may have been far less of the watershed these scholars imagine, as the dynastic polities that made it were considerably more precarious than they admit. The Tang in particular, after a glorious ride of a hundred years, from the mid-eighth century could only cast a ritual authority over a largely fragmented territory that in 907 would shed even this fiction of unity. One should wait at least until the advent and consolidation of the Song 宋 from the end of the tenth century for the imperial cycle in China to acquire its unique endurance, but that would have been an altogether different world.⁸ Yet, a divergence there was, and after so much history in parallel one should be no less than intrigued at how it came about. What I would like to start assessing here is how the tugs of war, at times very warlike indeed, between newly emerging monastic bodies and political elites shaped the respective destinies of the Buddhist community and the imperial entity in China, before and until the latter seemingly found its alchemy for self-perpetuation, at the end of the first millennium of the Common Era.

5 See, for example, Adshead, *China in World History*, 55, and Lewis, *China between Empires*, 54.

6 Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*, influentially arguing that China and Europe shared a not too dissimilar path of development up to the Industrial Revolution. For a valuable long-term view of this question see now Davids, *Religion*, which focuses on the different role of religious institutions in the formation of human capital and the circulation of useful knowledge in China and Europe between 700 and 1800.

7 See Scheidel, *State Formation* (quotation on p. 11); also *Fiscal Regimes*, 194. Adshead, whose influence on Scheidel is apparent, had sketched similar insights (*China in World History*, 55).

8 For an excellent overview contrasting the radical changes in China between the eighth and the eleventh centuries, see Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 7-42. Note that even the Song is too early for some historians: according to Arif Dirlik, »[i]t was the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, following Yuan (Mongol) consolidation, that created the coherent and centralized bureaucratic despotism that we have come to know as ›China‹.« Until then, there had been »ongoing political fluctuation between dynastic unity and a ›multistate polycentric system‹« (Born in Translation).

The early centuries of Buddhism in China: exemptions without a religious order?

Even those who are less familiar with Buddhism will have been baffled by my hint above at its rise from as late as the fourth century AD. Didn't the Buddha live long before that, indeed long before Jesus? And was there not a Buddhist monastic community, the *saṃgha*, in place from the early days? In India, of course, Buddhist monks and devotion had been around since at least the time of the Maurya emperor Aśoka (third century BC). However, the normative image of a highly structured monastic community that emerges from the *vinayas*, the disciplinary codes of a number of Buddhist schools, earns very little corroboration from the extant epigraphic and archaeological record before the early centuries of the Common Era, as the research of Gregory Schopen has argued, profusely and trenchantly, for the past three decades.⁹ Even by the time when such normative standards were no doubt extant, from the third to the early fourth centuries AD, a Buddhist order was still much of a chimera, at least in places like the Central Asian kingdom of Kroraina, where an Indian community of part-time monks with wives, children, slaves, and properties had to rely on the local king for its own regulation.¹⁰

Be that as it may, we know that, in China, Buddhist worship and doctrines entered court circles around the turn of the Common Era. From the late second century, we learn of individual monks and monasteries, especially in connection to the translation activities of a few foreign masters.¹¹ But before the end of the fourth century, which means a considerable amount of time since our earliest evidence, there is very little suggestion of organized Buddhist clergies. Communal activities seem to have clustered around rather large sacred areas centred on a sanctum enshrining some kind of vestiges of the Buddha, statues or relics. These establishments, named in the sources as ›Buddha shrines‹ (*Futu ci* 浮屠祠) or simply ›*buddhas*‹ (*Futu* 浮屠), could seemingly host up to thousands of people on occasion, but what relationship they had with regular monks, or even whether regular monks as defined in the *vinayas* existed at all at this stage, is not altogether clear.¹²

This scenario is immediately relevant to the question of religious exemption, certain forms of which begin to be mentioned from the fourth century in consistently accusatory reports. Thus in ca. AD 335, the Xiongnu ruler Shi Hu 石虎, then holding sway in the northern part of a divided China and himself a Buddhist devotee, invited his Chinese officials to deliberate on whether such worship was appropriate for the common people in the hamlets and villages, and noted his concern that among the *śramaṇas* (Buddhist monks), now very numerous, there were some who were criminals or labour service dodgers (*biyi* 避役), and

9 See the numerous essays collected in Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*; and *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, notably the discussion at 73-80. A useful summary of the state of our knowledge of the *vinayas* and their dates is in Clarke, *Family Matters*, 18-21.

10 On the monks of Kroraina see Hansen, *Religious Life in a Silk Road Community*, and van Schaik, *Married Monks*. The persistence of family ties in Indian Buddhist monasticism is extensively discussed in Clarke, *Family Matters*.

11 For standard accounts of this early stage, see Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 21-53, and Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China*, 22-57.

12 I have given a preliminary inventory of the evidence for these establishments in Palumbo, *Apropos of the Stūpa of Kang Senghui*. On the terminological obscurity concerning Buddhist ›shrines‹ and ›monasteries‹ in the early period, see Barrett, *From Shrine to Monastery*.

many who were just not monks.¹³ Several decades later, in 404, a Southern lord has similar remarks: »evaders of labour service (*biyi* 避役) gather in a hundred hamlets, fugitives make crowds in monasteries and temples.«¹⁴ Again in the south, in 458, a ruler complains that the community of monks had turned into a »harbour for fugitives« (*busou* 逋藪).¹⁵ Some scholars have seen in these scattered records early indications of fiscal exemption for the monastic community.¹⁶ However, things are less straightforward and arguably more interesting. What we have here are in fact repeated references to fugitives, criminals, and people shirking corvée duties found in large numbers in Buddhist temples and among the monks. Nothing is said about any avoidance of or exemption from taxes in general. Labour service (*yi* 役) was a fiscal obligation of sorts for adult male peasants, who could be called on limited shifts of up to one month per year, normally in their locality; its brunt, however, was chiefly borne by convicts and enslaved prisoners, who would serve considerably longer terms in the harshest conditions and anywhere the state authority commanded them.¹⁷ The regular association in our early sources between fugitives and corvée absconders suggests that it was notably this group they had in view rather than the ordinary peasantry. Significantly, it does look as though Buddhist temples and monastic communities enjoyed some kind of extraterritoriality, since those evading arrest or labour conscription could find sanctuary in them. It remains to be seen whether such immunity attended to monastic status, or rather to the power of place. By the time of our records (fourth-fifth centuries) an organized *samgha* was no doubt emerging, but while nothing proves that Buddhist monks enjoyed special privileges, much would seem to suggest the opposite, as we shall see.

Some of our earliest evidence of a Buddha-shrine concerns Zhai Rong 窄融, a warlord in the Jiangsu 江蘇 region at the end of the Han, who around AD 194 used his authority to erect a very large sacred compound of this sort, reportedly making room for more than 5,000 people (a figure that could double on festive occasions). In order to attract devotees to his Buddhist foundation and allow them to »receive the doctrine« (*shou dao* 受道), Zhai

13 *Gaoseng zhuan* (T vol. 50 no. 2059), 385b28-c4; cf. Wright, Fo-t'u-têng, 354-356. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Shi Hu (r. 334-349) was a sovereign of the north in the short-lived Later Zhao 趙 dynasty; his request sparked the earliest official remonstrances against Buddhism on record in China.

14 *Hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2102), 85a18-19, reporting the words of Huan Xuan 桓玄 (d. 404), who had freshly usurped the Jin 晉 throne in Jiankang and was then trying to crack down on the Buddhist clergy. Cf. Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China*, 260, who (mis)understands *butao* 逋逃 in the second part of the sentence as referring to tax-evaders, as does Ch'en, *Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, 92; not so Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 42.

15 See *Song shu*, 97.2386-87; also in *Guang hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2103), 278b8-12. These were the words of emperor Xiaowudi 孝武帝 of the Liu Song 劉宋 (r. 454-465), ordering a purge of the clergy after a rebellion that had implicated a Buddhist monk. Here too, Zürcher (*Buddhist Conquest of China*, 261) sees a reference to »tax-evaders« that is just not in the text.

16 See above, note 14.

17 See Lewis, *Early Imperial China*, 286, 288-289; Pearce, *Status, Labor, and Law*, 92-95 and *passim*. The imposition of labour service on the general population could be far more severe, as in southern China at the end of the fifth century (see He, *Buddhism in the Economic History of China*, 8 n. 6), but the evidence remains occasional and counterintuitive (enslaving the peasantry on public works would rapidly have killed an agrarian economy). Under the Northern dynasties, in the fifth and sixth centuries, corvée exploitation of convicts progressively made room for the establishment of separate hereditary groups of bondsmen and servile households recruited from war captives and craftsmen with their families. The system, however, petered out during the Tang: see Pearce, *Status, Labor, and Law*.

Rong would exempt the local population from other corvée duties (*fu qi ta yi* 復其他役).¹⁸ In this case at least, we can be sure that those granted exemption from labour service were not monks, but laypeople from surrounding areas, and in droves.¹⁹ Although such a privilege appears to have ensued from the ad hoc initiative of a local leader, it stands to reason that a Buddha-shrine with its vast compound would be seen as justifying that privilege on sacred grounds. Indeed, one further document from the same third-century source points rather neatly in this direction. In a report on the kingdom of Han 韓 in the Korean peninsula, we read of shamanic precincts called *sodo* (Ch. *sutu* 蘇塗), large enough to be deemed as »separate districts« (*bie yi* 別邑), where heavenly spirits were worshipped around a sacred pole at the centre. The Chinese historian notes, »if fugitives get inside them, they (i.e. the masters of the *sodo*) never hand them over, as they are fond of those who practise banditry«; next he adds that »the principle on which the *sodos* are established is similar to the *buddhas*, but their religious practice is different.«²⁰ In other words, the *sodos* of Korea were sacred areas where criminals and fugitives could take sanctuary, and to the author of our source they immediately called to mind the Buddha-shrines in China. It does seem, then, that from a very early date Buddhist compounds enjoyed some form of asylum privilege, which evidently extended to their visitors and residents, but was not inherent to any religious personhood of the latter. At the end of the third century, when these notes were written, there were just over 3,700 monks and nuns and 180 Buddhist temples in all of China according to one count.²¹ The former figure was probably only a rough estimate, since no monastic registration is attested at this time, and if it referred, as it seems reasonable, to the garbed and shaven-headed ones that one would outwardly recognize as religious professionals (whatever their actual status), more substantial numbers must have been around the Buddha-shrines. Still, the size of the Buddhist clergy in this long period must have been overall inconsiderable, its very existence as a religious order ill-defined, its exemptions accordingly unobtrusive – until all this started to change.

18 See *Sanguo zhi*, 49.1185; translations in Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 295, and Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China*, 28. A shorter account, omitting the reference to corvée exemption, is in *Hou Han shu*, 73.2368.

19 Gernet (*Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 30) understands the expression »receive the doctrine« (*shou dao* 受道) in the story as a reference to some sort of Buddhist monastic ordination, noting that »the act of entering into religious life freed an individual from his duties as a layman«, and perches on this straw of evidence to argue that tax exemption was the rule for monks. This does seem a long shot. Apart from the unlikelihood that monastic ordination could be performed on such a grandiose scale at this early stage, the context suggests something different. Elsewhere, the author of the *Sanguo zhi* uses the same expression (*shou dao* 受道) in connection to those who »received the doctrine« from the Taoist master Zhang Ling 張陵 (fl. 125-144), paying a fee of five pecks of rice in exchange (*Sanguo zhi*, 8.263). Here it is clear that religious instruction for ordinary people is meant rather than ordination or initiation into priesthood.

20 *Sanguo zhi* (completed in ca. 284), 30.852 (諸亡逃至其中, 皆不還之, 好作賊。其立蘇塗之義, 有似浮屠, 而所行善惡有異。). On the Korean *sodo*, see Grayson, *Korea*, 20.

21 *Bianzheng lun* (T vol. 52 no. 2110), 502c18-19. Unlike Gernet (*Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 6), I understand the mention of the »two capitals« (*er jing* 二京) in this passage as referring to what precedes rather than what follows, which means that the numbers of monks and temples are national totals (as demanded by the context) rather than for the two main cities only. The *Bianzheng lun* is a seventh-century work of Buddhist apologetics, and some of its information should be taken with a pinch of salt; however, there is nothing inherently implausible in its historical statistics on the size of the Buddhist community from the Western Jin (266-316) to the Sui (581-618). It should be noticed that from 280 and until their demise, the Western Jin had been able to unify Chinese territory, if only for three decades and before a more decisive breakup; hence the *Bianzheng lun* totals are likely to refer to both north and south.

The first confrontation between Buddhism and the state

Everything does change in the fourth century. Especially from its latter half, the *samgha* in China starts looking as more and more of a separate social body, with its own leaders such as Dao'an 道安 (312-385), commanding authority along a network that stretches across the boundaries of a territory still divided between ›barbarian‹ kingdoms in the north and Sinitic dynasties in the south. It is Dao'an who introduces a common surname for all Buddhist monks – Shi 釋, a Chinese transcription of Śākya, the clan name of the Buddha – to signal their corporate identity. A wave of foreign missionaries from northwest India and Central Asia leaves its mark from north to south. The *vinaya* codes, first in fragments, then in full in the first decades of the fifth century, are finally translated into Chinese, and so are the first monuments of Buddhist scholasticism as well as the four *āgamas*, the complete scriptural collections of the mainstream tradition.²² At the turn of the century, a disciple of Dao'an, Huiyuan 慧遠 (344-416), stands up to a southern ruler to make a passionate plea for the monks' exemption from the obligation to revere the emperor, in a daring blow to custom and convenience.²³ A head-count now gives 24,000 monastics in the south alone, but certainly far bigger numbers were swarming across the barbarian north, and everywhere, rulers and ruled were falling for them.²⁴ For all its extraordinary success, though, this viral blob of ostensibly meek skinheads, who according to a contemporary polemicist were even collecting taxes from the populace to fund luxurious temples and monasteries for themselves,²⁵ was soon to make waves of resentment.²⁶ In 446, the Wei 魏 emperor Taiwudi 太武帝 (r. 423-452), who at the head of his Inner Asian Xianbei 鮮卑 tribes had established himself as the overlord of the north, ordered an all-out persecution of Buddhism.²⁷ Mass killings of monks were certainly commanded, although we do not know on what scale they were carried out, especially in the provinces; monasteries were destroyed, statues were melted down, their precious metal probably impounded for the imperial workshops. To those who escaped, this was the end of the Dharma at the turn of its millennium, as the prophecy would have it.²⁸

22 On these developments, see Palumbo, *Models of Buddhist Kingship*, 314-317; Palumbo, *Early Chinese Commentary*, 1-3, 9-36 and *passim*; Palumbo, *From Constantine the Great to Emperor Wu*, 103-106.

23 On this important episode, see Hurvitz, ›Render unto Caesar‹, and Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China*, 231-238.

24 *Bianzheng lun* (T vol. 52 no. 2110), 503a3-4.

25 The anonymous critic is quoted in a Buddhist apologetic tract, aptly titled ›On the rectification of calumnies‹ (*Zhengwu lun* 正誣論); see T vol. 52 no. 2102, 8a18-19, and cf. Link, *Cheng-wu lun*, 151-154. Remarkably, the equally anonymous Buddhist apologist does not at all reject the charge, but rather argues for the appropriateness of lavish expenditures on the symbols of the Buddhist religion. I tend to agree with Liu Yi (Shi lun *Huahu jing* chansheng de shidai, 97-102), who places the *Zhengwu lun* in the early fifth century, although the mid-fourth-century date preferred by other scholars (e.g. Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China*, 304) cannot be excluded.

26 On the rise and themes of anticlericalism in early medieval China, see Ch'en, *Anti-Buddhist Propaganda*; Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest of China*, 254-285; Hureau, *L'apparition de thèmes anticléricaux*.

27 Tsukamoto, Hoku Gi Taibutei; in English, see Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 147-153; cf. Ch'en, *Some Factors*.

28 On the eschatological dimensions of the persecution of Buddhism in the fifth century, see Palumbo, *Buddhist Eschatology and Kingship*.

But it was not really the end, quite the opposite in fact. Shortly after Taiwudi's death, in 453, Buddhism was restored, and from then on it took a spectacular expanding trajectory that, in the north, saw the development of a sizeable monastic economy.²⁹ All this happened under the strict oversight of the imperial government, which appointed controllers of the clergy to rein in the unruly and scattered congregation of monks.³⁰ In the 470s, a number of major developments occurred in quick succession. Monastic residence was enforced through severe limitations to the freedom of movement for Buddhist clerics.³¹ Mandatory monastic registration, which may have been introduced earlier, produced its first results in 477, with a census counting 77,258 monks and nuns and 6,478 monasteries.³² At the same time, the post-nomadic Northern Wei regime acknowledged and encouraged the role of Buddhist establishments in its still fitful agrarian conversion with the creation of two new categories of taxpayers, the ›*samgha* households‹ and the ›*buddha* households‹. The former included resettled captives from newly conquered territories as well as affluent farmer households, who were to contribute a hefty yearly tax in grains to the local monastic administrations (*samgha* Office, *sengcao* 僧曹), formally to be redistributed to the needy in years of poor crops. The latter group should be understood as ›households attached to the *buddhas*‹, the archaic name for Buddhist sacred areas we have encountered above: it was made of convicts and state slaves with their families, who were tasked with the maintenance of temples, but also with »working the fields and bringing in the grains« (*yingtian shusu* 營田輸粟). Both institutions are said to have successfully spread to the provinces.³³ We should not fail to observe here that the bondsmen of the ›*buddha* households‹ were drawn from the very same categories – criminals and slaves – we have identified above as those reportedly crowding at the Buddha-shrines in search of sanctuary from forced labour. If so, what at first sight looks like a massive privilege granted to the monastic community may rather have been a ruse to make the status quo legal in the mutual interest of the clergy and the state, especially if the grains the temple bondsmen were made to grow and »bring in« were actually to be at least partly paid into the state granaries.³⁴ The same marriage of convenience was soon to be exposed for

29 On the growth of the monastic economy from the late fifth century, see the classic study by Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society* (originally published in French in 1956), but cf. the judicious reassessments in He, *Buddhism in the Economic History of China*, especially 12-30 on the situation at the end of the period of division.

30 When the proscription was overruled in 453, an eminent monk from Kashmir was appointed Controller of the Clergy (*Daoren tong* 道人統) on the same occasion; see *Wei shu*, 114.3036; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 71. The office continued under the following rulers, with counterparts at province and commandery level. On the Northern Wei imperial administration of the Buddhist clergy, see Xie, *Zhonggu Fojiao sengguan zhidu*, 51-74.

31 This happened in 472: see *Wei shu*, 4A.137 and 114.3038; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 76.

32 *Wei shu*, 114.3039; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 78-79. See also below, note 107.

33 *Wei shu*, 114.3036; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 72-73; Tsukamoto, Hoku Gi sōgiko – buttoko; Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 100-107; Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 154-158; Pearce, Status, Labor, and Law, 117-118. Note that Gernet (*ibid.* 100, 104-105) understands the »monastery households« (*si hu* 寺戶) mentioned at the end of the *Wei shu* passage as yet another type of institution, but this is in fact an alternative name for the ›*buddha* households‹. Compare the role and function of the *prebendarii* in medieval European monasteries, as briefly discussed in Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 300-301.

34 Other scholars (as per the preceding note) have seemingly understood the expression *shusu* 輸粟 in the *Wei shu* passage on the *buddha* households as referring to grains harvested exclusively for the monastery. In other occurrences within the same source, however, the term regularly refers to in-kind payments into state granaries: see *Wei shu*, 9.246, 110.2861 (twice).

the *saṃgha* households, although the Wei government would make sure everyone knew who was wearing the trousers. Responding to complaints that the charity grains were being misused for usurious loans to impoverished peasants, an edict in 511 brought their management back from monastic administrators to state officials.³⁵

Under these circumstances, the monastic community in the north kept on swelling, and by the end of the Wei dynasty, in the 530s, its statistics were staggering: 47 large state monasteries, 839 monasteries owned by aristocratic families, 30,000 temples across the realm, and an astonishing two million monks and nuns, although the last figure is expressly presented in one source as an estimate, taking into account large numbers of commoners who had joined the clergy to escape fiscal obligations.³⁶ This brings us back to our initial question.

The ambiguous fiscal status of the monks in the Period of Division

So, did these monks pay their taxes after all? How much of an exemption were they really enjoying? And what was the interest of the state in all this, the same state that was now intent on clenching the *saṃgha* in a firm bureaucratic grip, but only decades earlier had entertained no qualms in seeing to its effective annihilation?

Let us register in the first place that, in medieval China, no single document avers tax exemption for the clergy as a standing regulation.³⁷ Jacques Gernet's groundbreaking, brilliantly chaotic *Les aspects économiques du bouddhisme dans la société chinoise du V^e au X^e siècle* (first published in 1956) may have fostered some lingering confusion on this issue: general monastic exemption from taxes was explicitly decreed only under the Mongol Yuan 元 dynasty (1279-1368), which, on the other hand, extended it to all religious communities in the khanate (including Taoists, Muslims, and Christians).³⁸

One should also bear in mind that the *vinaya* does not appear to condone tax evasion – which is equated to theft and thus classed as a *pārājika*, a major offence demanding expulsion from the order – although most monastic codes only envisage custom duties for itinerant monks, whilst offering no legislation on issues of poll or land tax.³⁹ The Buddha's admonitions to the clergy to pay their dues to the revenue officer would have been known in China since the first half of the fifth century, when several such codes were made available

35 See *Wei shu*, 114.3041-42; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 87-88, and the discussions in Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 156, and Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 103-105. Despite Confucian finger-pointing at the greedy clergy in court circles, we should not forget that monastic administrators were clerics appointed by the state, and worked hand in glove with their patron. Lending on interest accruing from the inalienable property of the *saṃgha* was approved practice in some *vinayas*, as was the monastic ownership of slaves, both in China and in India: see respectively Gernet, *ibid.* 102-103, 158-166 and Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, 45-90, 193-218.

36 *Bianzheng lun*, 507b26-c1; and *Wei shu*, 114.3048; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 103. It is the latter source, completed in 554, that adds qualifying comments on the huge numbers of the clergy. I return to this at the end of the next section.

37 Pace Denis Twitchett (*Financial Administration*, 26, 250 n. 27), claiming that the Tang code did have such a stipulation; cf. Johnson (trans.), *The Tang Code*, 128-129.

38 See Schurmann, *Mongolian Tributary Practices*, 323-325; Atago, *Zeiryō yūmen ni tsuite*; Sagaster, *History of Buddhism among the Mongols*, 382-389. It is a document of the Mongol period that Gernet (*Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 31) quotes as evidence of a general monastic immunity from taxation; cf. He, *Buddhism in the Economic History of China*, 39-40.

39 See now the thorough research on these issues in Pagel, *Buddhist Monks in Tax Disputes*, focusing on the *vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school.

in translation.⁴⁰ These texts, the Indic original of which is lost, nevertheless reveal important differences: while the *vinayas* of the Sarvāstivāda and of the Mahīśāsaka schools make no special pleading for the *saṃgha*, that of the Mahāsāṃghikas claims that only commercial items should be taxable, not those belonging to Buddhist monks and nuns or heretical renunciants (read Brahmins).⁴¹ The *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* goes further: the *bhikṣus* have no law to pay taxes (比丘無輸稅法), and they only sin if, with a thieving intent, they help laypeople to evade customs.⁴² All these rules in which errant monks serve as accessories to tax-evading merchants were probably devised in an Indian society where taxation of trade factored prominently into fiscal revenues; against the agrarian backdrop of their Chinese translations, they would hardly have come across with the force of a ›render unto Caesar‹, though neither would they give much ammunition to a case for exemption. The normative position of the clergy, again as expressed in its disciplinary codes, seems to have been a guarded expectation to be left alone by the state on account of its ascetic withdrawal from worldly business, albeit with a number of very telling provisos. Surviving *vinayas* from a number of different schools include a section detailing the conditions restraining admission into the monastic order.⁴³ Here, among other things, one learns that slaves,⁴⁴ debtors,⁴⁵ those pursued by justice,⁴⁶ and those in the king's service, notably soldiers,⁴⁷ could *not* receive ordination. It is certainly

40 See *Shisong lü* (translation of the *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya*, AD 406, T vol. 23 no. 1435), 379c5-23; *Sifen lü* (*Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*, AD 412, T vol. 22 no. 1428), 573c12-13, 681b18-682a8; *Mohesengqi lü* (*Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya*, AD 418, T vol. 22 no. 1425), 252b12-253b1; *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (*Mahīśāsaka-vinaya*, AD 425, T vol. 22 no. 1421), 7a11-12. On the translation of these codes into Chinese, see Heirman, *Vinaya*.

41 *Mohesengqi lü* (T vol. 22 no. 1425), 253a26-29.

42 *Sifen lü* (T vol. 22 no. 1428), 574c7-11.

43 See Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 166-171 for a useful overview of the parallel structure of the extant codes.

44 See *Shisong lü* (Sarvāstivāda, T vol. 23 no. 1435), 151c13-29; *Sifen lü* (Dharmaguptaka, T vol. 22 no. 1428), 807b19-c6; *Mohesengqi lü* (Mahāsāṃghika, T vol. 22 no. 1425), 421b17-c12; *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (Mahīśāsaka, T vol. 22 no. 1421), 115b10. For a translation of the version in Pali from the canon of the Theravāda school, see Horner, *Book of the Discipline* (IV), 95-96.

45 See *Shisong lü* (Sarvāstivāda, T vol. 23 no. 1435), 152a1-17; *Sifen lü* (Dharmaguptaka, T vol. 22 no. 1428), 807c15-28; *Mohesengqi lü* (Mahāsāṃghika, T vol. 22 no. 1425), 420a18-b6; *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (Mahīśāsaka, T vol. 22 no. 1421), 115a26-b10. For the Theravāda version, see Horner, *Book of the Discipline* (IV), 95.

46 See *Sifen lü* (Dharmaguptaka, T vol. 22 no. 1428), 807c6-15. Theravāda: see Horner, *Book of the Discipline* (IV), 93-94.

47 See *Shisong lü* (Sarvāstivāda, T vol. 23 no. 1435), 156a8, 156b1 (no narrative); *Sifen lü* (Dharmaguptaka, T vol. 22 no. 1428), 811c1-13; *Mohesengqi lü* (Mahāsāṃghika, T vol. 22 no. 1425), 419c26-420a18; *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (Mahīśāsaka, T vol. 22 no. 1421), 116b1-18. Theravāda: see Horner, *Book of the Discipline* (IV), 91-92. Note that while the article and its etiological narrative refer to a soldier, the Pali and Sanskrit term for the latter, *rājabhaṭa*, literally means ›a king's servant‹, and is accordingly understood in the Chinese translations as ›an official‹ (*guanren* 官人). The exception is the *vinaya* of the Mahāsāṃghikas, where a literal rendition of *rājabhaṭa* as *wangchen* 王臣, ›a king's servant‹, could be construed as referring specifically to officials but also to any subject serving the ruler. The extensive implications of this wording are here balanced by an interesting casuistry (*ibid.*), in which the Buddha distinguishes four types of such subjects: those with rank and salary, those with rank but no salary, those with salary but no rank, those with neither rank nor salary. He explains that the first two categories are not allowed to become monks either ›in this kingdom‹ or in other kingdoms. Those with salary but no rank are not allowed into the order ›in this kingdom‹, but they may in other kingdoms. Those with neither rank nor salary are admitted as monks in every kingdom. This formulation would arguably make room for the acceptance into the clergy of virtually everyone in the king's service (thus including conscripts and corvée labourers), with the sole exception of rank- and salary-holders.

significant that in some though not all of the *vinayas*, the relevant rules, which the Buddha establishes so as not to irk those in power and thus safeguard the integrity of the *saṃgha*, are often presented as exceptions to a generic immunity granted by the king to all monks and nuns: »There is nothing to do against those who go forth among the recluses, sons of the Sakyans.«⁴⁸ However, it is not difficult to see that anyone owing taxes and corvées to the state would easily fall within one or the other of the categories above, so that the monastic community would have had to tread on eggshells only to abide by its own standards. This is most paradoxically reflected in what must be an interpolation – and all the more interesting for us *because* it is an interpolation – in the discipline of the Dharmaguptakas. This *vinaya* is unique in that it expressly includes among those barred from ordination »someone having [their] name [in the state] registers, or someone evading state taxation« (或有名籍, 或避官租賦).⁴⁹ The context in which this passage occurs suggests that it was inserted directly into the Chinese text, although it is difficult to determine whether this happened at the time of its initial translation in 412 or later, possibly under the Tang, when the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* rose to normative prominence in China.⁵⁰ Whoever tampered with it and made up this rule must have faced the situation it claims to counter; but if our interpolation does seem to confirm from the inside a recurrent outsider accusation that people would join the Buddhist clergy only to shelter themselves from taxation, it does not thereby also prove the existence of a legal exemption in the background. In fact, it rather contradicts it: for if monks were not to pay taxes, why would anyone not paying taxes be denied ordination as a monk?⁵¹ This apparent non sequitur can be accounted for in different ways. The authors of the rule, for example, may have lived in a society where taxation only hit certain sectors of the population, or at least so they wished. Elites extracting revenue chiefly from trade or from routine plunder may well have allowed that, after all, and it may be no coincidence that the one

48 Horner, *Book of the Discipline (IV)*, 93-94 (cases of fugitives from justice), 95 (debtor and slave), translating a formula appearing no less than four times in the *vinaya* in Pali of the Theravāda school, and alleging to report a decree of the Magadhan king Bimbisāra, a contemporary and well-wisher of the Buddha. Among the four codes translated into Chinese in the fifth century, only those of the Dharmaguptakas and Mahīśāsakas report this ruling in favour of the monks, although in somewhat different words: see respectively *Sifen lü* (T vol. 22 no. 1428), 807b28-c2, 807c22-24, and *Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü* (T vol. 22 no. 1421), 115b1-2. The *vinaya* stories quoting the decree show both that it could be invoked for immunity (e.g. for debtors or fugitives seeking refuge among monks) and that it did not work (since ordination for such immunity-seekers was disallowed).

49 *Sifen lü* (T vol. 22 no. 1428), 814a21-22. The line is already in a manuscript fragment of the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* from Dunhuang, probably dating to the eighth century (ms. 北 6806 [芥 011], now BD06011), although here the word »taxes« (*zufu* 租賦) is replaced (deliberately?) by a meaningless homophone (租傳); see Huang, *Dunhuang baozang*, vol. 102, 38.

50 The clauses have no parallels in the other *vinayas*. Moreover, they occur in a section itemizing disabilities and physical deformities on account of which one cannot become a monk: see *Sifen lü* (T vol. 22 no. 1428), 814a18-b20; cf. Horner, *Book of the Discipline (IV)*, 115-116. In this graphic gallery – including the dumb, the deaf, the blind, the hairless, the toothless, all sorts of amputees, men with scabs, with swelling tumours, with one or no testicles, with strange-coloured eyes, with beastly bodies or faces, and much more – healthy tax-evaders do stand out as intruders. The reference to name registers (*mingji* 名籍) and in-kind tax (*zufu* 租賦, cf. Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 2, 208 n. 10) also has a distinct Chinese ring to it. For the general adoption of the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* under the Tang, see Heirman, *Vinaya*, 194-195.

51 In a way, it would have been like banning the poor from becoming monks, while monks were expected to live in poverty.

regime granting tax immunity to all clergies were the Mongols.⁵² Alternatively, the rule may have countenanced a scenario where one would seek monastic ordination before becoming a taxpayer, or after ceasing to be one. None of this makes much sense in China, however, and the likelihood is that the clause barring tax-evaders from admission into the *samgha* simply gave a perfunctory cue of disapproval to a state of things that, however widespread and indeed unavoidable, would lack any official sanction. Whether such a rule could ever be applied in practice was in fact entirely contingent upon the absence of a universal system of taxation, or of the state's ability to enforce it: this is a crucial issue to which I return below. A similar quandary would engulf any attempt to observe the prohibition, in this case attested in all the *vinayas*, for soldiers to become Buddhist monks: it could probably work in a state with an elite mercenary army, much less in one recruiting its military through conscription or large-scale enlistment, such as the territorial soldiery established at the end of the Northern dynasties and in the early Tang.⁵³

May I repeat myself at this point: let's not take any exemption for granted. The disciplinary codes translated in the fifth century, on the eve of the first major confrontation between Buddhism and the state in China, would set a normative template for a regular clergy whose existence was still largely theoretical. But if these very codes could not spell out a clear stance on fiscal and penal immunity, why should we expect the ruling elites to have warranted what the monastic elites were unable to ask?

Scattered evidence from the period of disunion should accordingly be read afresh, and without prejudice. In the south we should note a document by Xun Ji 荀濟 (d. 547), a vehement critic of the pro-Buddhist policies of emperor Wu 武 of the Liang 梁 (r. 502–549). Xun notes that »monks come from the poor, and they scheme to avoid taxes and corvées« (僧出寒微, 規免租役).⁵⁴ His wording suggests that, while monastic status may have offered loopholes to evade fiscal duties, it granted no legal exemption as such.⁵⁵ In the north, an apocryphal Chinese *sūtra* probably dating from the early sixth century voices the distress of its surely monastic author at the vexing levies that state authorities were forcing on the

52 The Mongols, of course, did not lack their own taxation systems and, in time, tended to adopt many of those of the sedentary peoples they had conquered, including the Chinese. However, they relied on requisitions and extraordinary levies far more than they were able to develop forms of regular tribute. Compare Schurmann, *Mongolian tributary practices*, and Smith, *Mongol and Nomadic Taxation*, two classic studies respectively stressing the former and the latter aspect.

53 On this territorial army, the so-called *fubing* 府兵, see Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 189–193 and *passim*.

54 See *Guang hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2103), 130c6–7. A nearly complete translation of Xun Ji's memorial is in Ch'en, *Anti-Buddhist Propaganda*, 184–192; see also the discussion in Strange, *Representations of Liang Emperor Wu*, 67–77.

55 Kenneth Ch'en translates the key phrase *guimian zuyi* 規免租役 as »according to the law, they are exempt from taxation« (*Anti-Buddhist Propaganda*, 189). This is wrong: the term *gui* 規 can also mean a »rule«, although it would be unusual for state regulations, but in the present passage it must have the alternative meaning »to scheme«; in fact, the compound *guimian* 規免 is well attested in medieval Chinese in the sense of »finding ways to avoid [something unwanted]«, see Luo, *Hanyu da cidian*, vol. 10, 324. Cf. a nearly identical phrase within a passage in the *Sui shu* (24.681), describing a situation of widespread tax evasion in the Shandong area in the early years of the Sui dynasty (the 580s): »Out of every ten people, the layabouts dodging corvée duties were six or seven. There were slackers everywhere, some pretending to be old and some young, scheming so as not to pay taxes« 避役惰遊者十六七。四方疲人, 或詐老詐小, 規免租賦. Briefly, and it is no minor difference, what Xun Ji complains about is monastic tax evasion, not tax exemption.

saṃgha.⁵⁶ On the other hand, an anonymous memorial submitted in 486 under the Northern Wei complains that, after the introduction of monastic registration, people had been trying to take advantage of it as they would »falsely claim to have entered the path in order to avoid paying taxes« (假稱入道以避輸課).⁵⁷ A similar grievance will be raised several decades later: in the *Wei shu* 魏書 (ca. 554), the historian remarks that after the Zhengguang 正光 era (520–525), as the state authorities were increasingly imposing conscription to face a general crisis, »locally registered people would associate with those who have entered the path on the pretence that they revere the *śramaṇas*, but in fact to avoid taxes and corvées« (所在編民, 相與入道, 假慕沙門, 實避調役).⁵⁸ These documents stop short of admitting unambiguously that monks were exempt, but they do reinforce a view of the monastery as a tax haven of choice for fiscally battered populations. The big claim finally comes in 570 and again in the north, just before the second great proscription of Buddhism, although the source is not entirely unbiased: a lay apologist for the *saṃgha* brags that Buddhist monks, unlike Taoist priests, do not serve as soldiers or pay in-kind taxes (*zu* 租), and enjoy such exemptions because they are ultimately of royal stock.⁵⁹ Yet, a nearly contemporary document puts this boast in context. In 567, at the same northern court, the maverick monk Wei Yuansong 衛元嵩 (d.u.) had pleaded for sweeping religious reformation, denouncing the corruption of the clergy. One of his proposals was that unseemly rich monks be made to pay an exemption tax: »if wealthy monks pay a tax to be exempted from fiscal liability (*ding* 丁), then all monks will certainly disdain ceasing to pay taxes, and will strive to check stinginess and greed« 富僧輸課免丁, 則諸僧必望停課, 爭斷慳貪.⁶⁰ Wei's request conveys that while the monastic elite indeed enjoyed fiscal privileges, avoiding taxation was more of an endeavour for the larger mass of the *saṃgha*, which could be put off it as long as an example was set with their most powerful members.

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- 56 See *Xiangfa jueyi jing* (T vol. 85 no. 2870), 1337b16-23; Tokuno, *Book of Resolving Doubts*, gives an introduction and a full translation of this text (the passage on the taxation of the clergy is at 266-267). For the date of the scripture, see Lai, *Dating*; although Lai's attempt to anchor the authorship of the *sūtra* to a specific time and place (Luoyang, AD 517-520) is fragile, he convincingly argues that the text polemically reflects the situation of Buddhism under the Northern Wei in the early decades of the sixth century. Cf. also the brief discussions in Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 25 and 48 (Gernet, however, misdates the *sūtra* to the late Tang period).
- 57 Monastic authorities were accordingly asked to perform a scrutiny of the clergy, which resulted in a rather negligible 1,327 monastics being defrocked (slightly less than 2% of the total monastic population in the census of 477). See *Wei shu*, 114.3039; Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 79-80; cf. Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 38.
- 58 *Wei shu*, 114.3048; the comment is given as background to the sensational figure of two million monks and nuns in this period, which I have discussed above. The word for 'taxes' here is *diao* 調, which more specifically refers to a levy paid in fabrics: see Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 2, 208 n. 10. Cf. the slightly different translations of this passage in Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 103, and Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 38, who both misunderstand the key phrase *xiangyu rudao* 相與入道. On the Northern Wei crisis providing the context for these remarks, see the excellent analysis in Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 146-179.
- 59 This was mathematician and calendar expert Zhen Luan 甄鸞 (fl. 535-570) in his *Xiao Dao lun* 笑道論, a corrosive lampoon of the Taoists that caused a stir at the Northern Zhou 周 court in Chang'an 長安: see *Guang hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2103), 146c22-24. For a full study and translation of this text see Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao* (p. 82 for the passage in question). We have seen above that from the late fourth century, Buddhist monks in China had adopted the common surname Śākya and thus made themselves into kinsmen of the Buddha, whose royalty is alluded to in Zhen Luan's claim.
- 60 *Guang hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2103), 132b11-14; cf. Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 32, for a very different understanding of this passage. The term *ding* 丁 referred to a male adult liable for tax and corvée labour, and was also used by synecdoche for the latter in particular; see Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 513, 516-518. On Wei Yuansong, traditionally seen as an instigator of the suppression of Buddhism under the Northern Zhou, see Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 187-190; Tsukamoto, *Hoku Shū no haibutsu*, 490-510.

The foregoing evidence is doubtless contradictory, and inconclusive at best: only a very selective reading of the sources can warrant the conclusion, currently held by several Chinese scholars, that tax immunity was the rule for Buddhist monks during the period of division.⁶¹ Moroto Tatsuo 諸戸 立雄, who has studied the issue of monastic taxation in medieval China in some detail, acknowledges that things are none too clear before the Tang: monks were not on ordinary household registers, but if they were probably excluded from individual imposition (most certainly from *corvée* labour), their estates may have been taxed nevertheless, something which becomes more certain after the fiscal reforms of the late eighth century.⁶² Nor can such a clear-cut line be drawn at this stage between the regular *samgha* and the registered population, for the latter, as we have seen, could suddenly swell the ranks of the former. Between the two worlds, especially in the north, there was in fact an extensive grey zone of rural monasticism, deeply rooted in the local society and often populated by hybrid figures of monastic householders and peasants, more similar to the married monks of Kroraina than to the role models in the *vinayas* and the urban clergy.⁶³ Tackling this phenomenon, which had no clear equivalent in the south, was thus tantamount to substantially extending the fiscal reach and economic basis of the state.⁶⁴ The northern regimes, as we are going to see, would rise to this challenge with remarkable success, rewriting the rules of the imperial game in the process.

The fall and fall of the tributary state

Two preliminary conclusions can probably be drawn from our discussion so far. The first is that forms of exemption for the Buddhist clergy did exist in China during the period of division, but rather *de facto* than *de jure*. Evidence of taxation is consistent with this scenario and should not be construed as an exception to a rule: there was no rule. The second point is that whatever privilege there was, it appears to have descended, initially at least, less from the dubious charisma of the monks than from the sacred aura of the Buddha-shrines; communities established within the hallowed precincts of the *buddhas* would apparently acquire some of their immunities, and this would also explain why, for a long time, those escaping jail or conscription would flock to them.

To discern a meaningful image in this hazy picture, however, we may need to stand back and consider the broader setting. The word ›exemption‹, in particular, should be used with some caution, for as soon as we use it to refer to the state's withdrawal from demands imposed on some of its subjects, we are already assuming an absolute power of that state to im-

61 See, for example, Xie, *Tangdai siyuan sengni mianfu*, 66; Zhang and Liu, *Han Tang zhi ji Fojiao*, 129-130. These scholars, however, agree that forms of taxation of the clergy were present already during the Tang period.

62 Moroto, *Chūgoku Bukkyō*, 337-443, especially 403-406, 434-437. Note that Gernet, whose *longue durée* narrative hops back and forth between different centuries and regimes, settles at one point on a similar conclusion (*Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 43).

63 On rural Buddhism under the Northern dynasties, see Hou, *Wu-liu shiji beifang minzhong Fojiao xinyang*, and Liu, *Art, Ritual, and Society*. On irregular monks see Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 37-43 (although his thesis that the expression *rudao* 入道 refers to such ›lay monks‹ does not seem to have ground). The best evidence on rural monasticism in medieval China is unfortunately concentrated in the northwestern periphery (Dunhuang) and at a later period (ninth-tenth centuries); for an extensive discussion, see Hao, *Tang houqi* (partly summed up, with further materials, in Hao, *Social Life*). Cf. Ashkenazi, *Holy Man versus Monk*, for the significance of this phenomenon on the other side of the Late Antique *oikoumene*.

64 Epigraphic evidence for the period of division suggests a far more limited rural penetration of Buddhism in southern China, where, despite aristocratic patronage of the clergy in the main metropolitan centres, the alliance between court and local elites appears to have stifled everything in between; see Liu, *Return of the State*.

pose and exact those demands. This may well be what a state is about, monopoly of violence and all, but if so, here is another word that invites prudence. For in Late Antique China at least, the various ›states‹ that contested its territory simply did not have that power.⁶⁵

A degree of functional weakness, especially in fiscal matters, had been connatural with the Chinese imperial formation almost from the outset. The Han dynasty had survived for centuries on a regime of low land tax, not out of frugality, but to avoid both the empowerment of collectors in the provinces and a fiscal overload that would have quickly eroded the tax base. The bulk of the peasantry who were not landowners were in any case already ground down under the heavy rents owed to their landlords, which included the court itself.⁶⁶ There was also a poll tax cashed from across the empire, but the government chiefly relied on its own demesnes and on tributary resources from the region around the capital rather than from the broader territory; provisioning that area was therefore key to maintaining the sway of the imperial centre over the periphery.⁶⁷ Taking these and other aspects into account, Andrew Eisenberg has described the premodern Chinese polity in Weberian terms as a patrimonial regime in which a single extended household ruling from a royal court exerted varying degrees of military and fiscal coercion over semi-autonomous local elites acknowledging its suzerainty.⁶⁸ In Eisenberg's effective characterization, the fulcrum of this deliberately inefficient power structure »was essentially a regionally based garrison regime with tentative ties to its provinces«.⁶⁹

However, the inherent, long-term limitations of the imperial formation in China should not obscure the epic dimensions of its collapse in the Late Antique transition. Demographic data are a sobering token of this shift. In the second century AD, the Han empire, Rome's twin in eastern Eurasia, ran several censuses giving returns between 9.2 and 10.8 million households with 47.6 to 56.5 million individuals.⁷⁰ One century later, however, the three kingdoms that took its place could only count 1,473,433 households and 7,672,881 individuals altogether.⁷¹ Comparably low population figures are randomly recorded throughout the age of division, especially in the south.⁷² What happened? Since neither bubonic plagues

65 A significant strand of contemporary political theory is indeed unwilling to consider premodern empires as ›states‹ at all, reserving the term instead for the polities defined by sovereignty and mutually exclusive territoriality that emerged in Europe from the end of the Middle Ages (and to those later following their model): see, for example, Kratochwil, *Of Systems, Boundaries, and Territoriality*; Spruyt, *Sovereign State and Its Competitors*. This view clearly has merit, not least here because it bears on the problematic historical relationship between modern China and its imperial predecessors. Many of its assumptions, however, sit rather uncomfortably with evidence from outside premodern Europe, something which would warrant fuller discussion elsewhere. In the present context I will keep to a minimal definition of ›state‹ as any political organization making absolute claims over territory and people, with further qualifications in the discussion below.

66 The land tax amounted to a paltry thirtieth of the crop through most of the Han dynasty, but rents varied between a half and two thirds, depending on whether peasants had to borrow oxen, seeds, and implements from their landlords. See Crowell, *Government Land Policies*, 87-92, 105-113.

67 See Nishijima, *Economic and Social History*, 597-598; Ebrey, *Economic and Social History*, 617-622; Lewis, *Early Imperial China*, 289-298; cf. Deng, *Imperial China*, 313-314.

68 See Eisenberg, *Weberian Patrimonialism*, and Eisenberg, *Kingship*, 1-21.

69 Eisenberg, *Weberian Patrimonialism*, 97.

70 See the table in Bielenstein, *Chinese Historical Demography*, 12, and the discussion in Tang, *San lun*, 83-105.

71 See *Tongdian*, 7.145.

72 See Bielenstein, *Chinese Historical Demography*, 16-19.

nor nuclear bombings are attested in China in this period,⁷³ we can agree in principle with Nishijima Sadao (and many others) that these tallies should rather be seen as proxies for »the actual number of individuals on whom the state could lay hands and who were subject to taxation and labor service.«⁷⁴ Behind this demographic debacle, then, there would have been the sustained failure of the Late Antique regimes that replaced the Han, both alien and Sinitic, to do their basic job, to count and tax people.

Here again Chinese history appears to run on a parallel track to the Western end of the Old World, for there too one observes a similar waning of the fiscal reach of the state in the collapsing Roman empire, followed by the advent of smaller polities under Romano-Germanic rulers that were unable or unwilling to enforce taxation, and relied instead on the lands they could directly control. Chris Wickham has explained this transition in Marxian terms as one involving two competing modes of production: a tributary mode, in which a strong state drawing resources from taxation could enjoy a large degree of autonomy from and power over local elites, and a feudal mode where a weak state was instead beholden to rent-taking aristocracies. Both modes could coexist within the same polities, but while the tributary state seemingly managed to survive and endure in China and other premodern Asian empires, it vanished in the West, where land and rent defined the early Middle Ages.⁷⁵ Walter Scheidel has then built on Wickham's metanarrative to refine his thesis of a »First Great Divergence«, presenting the return of a unified empire in China at the end of the sixth century as a resurgence of the »strong tributary state«, heralded by a significant rise of population counts in the north after the demographic eclipse of the post-Han period.⁷⁶

Seductively elegant though they are, these models fit China's Late Antiquity only imperfectly. We should note in the first place that low census figures do not necessarily imply a demise of the state, nor rising demographic tallies its strengthening. In the third century, for example, the two regional kingdoms of Shu Han 蜀漢 (221–263) in the west and Wu 吳 (222–280) in the south were able to maintain impressive bureaucracies against dramatically

73 I have left this cheeky remark from the conference paper, but in the meantime Morelli *et al.*, *Yersinia pestis*, came to my notice. Their discovery, based on cutting-edge genome sequencing techniques, that the bacterial agent of plague probably »evolved in or near China« more than 2,600 years ago casts a sinister light on repeated but vague reports of epidemics in Chinese historical sources. Cf., however, the different responses of plague historians to their conclusions in Little, *Plague Historians in Lab Coats*, and Benedictow, *Yersinia pestis*. At present, the earliest certain instance of the bubonic plague (now also confirmed through historical DNA testing) remains the Justinianic Pandemic that spread in the Eastern Mediterranean and its inlands from the sixth century AD, whereas Chinese literary evidence does not suggest any comparable episode for scale and symptoms before this outbreak. This is not to deny the probable role of epidemics in Chinese demographic trends, as I hint below.

74 Nishijima, *Economic and Social History*, 596. Some scholars have been willing to assume a massive population decline, especially from the late third century, on account of natural causes such as war and epidemics (Yang, *Notes on the Economic History*, 114) or a major environmental crisis (Chin, *Climate Change and Migrations*, 57–59). These scenarios are probably relevant to specific demographic fluctuations, but they cannot explain the aggregate data nor the long-term trends. Cf. the sensible observations in Bielenstein, *Chinese Historical Demography*, 13, and Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 35–37.

75 See Wickham, *Uniqueness of the East* (with a focus on China at 172–175), and *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 56–62.

76 Scheidel, *Fiscal Regimes*.

diminished populations.⁷⁷ This suggests that, in these vast areas, the number of registered households and individuals shrank much faster than the state apparatus that was meant to control them. Exogenous factors must have been at play that cannot be discussed in detail here, but it is plausible to assume that a real depopulation brought about by famines, epidemics, and violence, while it cannot possibly account for the full scale of the demographic contraction in this period, may have increased the tax burden beyond bearing for those that remained. Faced with a spiral of flight and fiscal disobedience, the still sizeable bureaucracies of the post-Han states probably concentrated their efforts on manageable fractions of their nominal territories and populations.⁷⁸

Tellingly, both Shu Han and Wu were eventually overwhelmed by a northern regime whose own crippled demographics did not prevent it from deploying large armies and achieving a short-lived reunification of China. Since the 190s, the Cao 曹 clan, which would soon rule the north in its own right as the Wei 魏 dynasty (220-266), had effectively addressed the fiscal problem by means of state-owned agricultural colonies (*tuntian* 屯田) manned by conscripted civilians. These were removed from the authority of the Board of Revenue and accordingly exempted from taxes and corvées, but had to pay a rent of 50-60% of their yield to the government.⁷⁹ The farmers in the colonies were seemingly hidden from censuses, and in 263 the Cao Wei state could only count 663,423 households and 4,432,881 individuals, a dismal percentage of the north China population under the Eastern Han.⁸⁰ The system nonetheless produced enough resources to give the northern kingdom, which would switch to the Jin 晉 dynasty in 266, a decisive edge over its two rivals.⁸¹ One of the first acts of the Jin government was to dismantle the special administration of the colonies, and of the colonies

77 In 263, when Shu Han was defeated and annexed by the Cao Wei 曹魏 kingdom (then ruling in the north), it reported a population of 280,000 households and 940,000 individuals, with 40,000 government employees (*li* 吏), thus one every 7 households/23.5 individuals. When it was Wu's turn to be conquered by the north in 280, it counted 523,000 households, 2,300,000 individuals, and 32,000 clerks, one every 16.3 households/71.9 individuals. See respectively *Sanguo zhi*, 33.900 (comm.) and 48.1177 (comm.). These ratios of administrators against population should be compared to the data for the whole Han empire around the time of its demographic peak in AD 2 (12,233,062 households, 59,594,978 individuals, see *Han shu*, 28B.1640); a few years earlier, in 5 BC, there is an overall count of 130,285 government employees (see Bielenstein, *Bureaucracy of Han Times*, 156, 205 n. 1), which means a considerably lower ratio of one every 93.9 households/457.4 individuals. Thus the ›weak states‹ that succeeded the Han could actually deploy many more clerks as a proportion of the registered population than their ›strong‹ predecessor.

78 Recent archaeological evidence from Zoumalou 走馬樓 at Changsha 長沙, Hunan has offered a snapshot of heavy taxation and tight governmental control of the population in a single district in the southern kingdom of Wu during the period AD 232-238 (for a good overview, see Lu, *Managing Locality*). This cannot have been the norm across the entire territory, as it does not fit the bigger picture of the period. Describing the situation in the Northeast a few decades earlier, a contemporary observer also notes that the few left on the household registers were made to pay considerably more tax than was their due: see the quotation from Sima Biao's 司馬彪 (240-306) *Jiuzhou chunqiu* 九州春秋 at *Sanguo zhi*, 6.195 (commentary).

79 See Nishijima, *Chūgoku keizaishi kenkyū*, 297-379; Crowell, *Government Land Policies*, 151-171. This Wei dynasty of the (Chinese) Cao clan should not be confused with the (non-Chinese) Northern Wei (386-534) discussed above and again below.

80 See *Tongdian*, 7.145.

81 Shu Han was conquered in 263, and Wu in 280; see above, note 77.

themselves once the conquest of the south was completed in 280.⁸² The former measure must have involved a registration of the previous state tenants, for we see a demographic spike at this point, with the population in the north appearing to increase nearly fourfold in less than two decades, albeit still tallying well below the Eastern Han records.⁸³ But if the newly unified Jin empire toyed with the idea of bringing back a proper tributary state, it failed miserably: its land policies to this effect remained a dead letter, and within a single generation the empire itself disintegrated again, this time for a much longer break.⁸⁴

This overview warrants some adjustment to the Wickham/Scheidel model. A ›strong state‹, with enough resources and soldiers to successfully entertain imperial ambitions, could subsist as a militarized rent-taking landlord, whilst relinquishing much of its tributary prerogatives and census scope. Less successfully, it could still linger on in patches, with its bureaucracies ganging up on the easier bits of the tax base. Conversely, the rapid expansion of population registration that ushered in the Jin reunification in the second half of the third century did not result in a stable tributary empire. I shall briefly explore below some of the reasons behind this failure, but two quick observations are in order. One is that ever since the long decline of the Han dynasty, no fiscal leviathan was in place to restrain the emergence of social and political actors that could compete with the patrimonial centre, or simply ignore its demands. More importantly, however, even in the glory days of the tributary empire, taxation may have been less about the extraction of revenue than it was about the assertion of territorial suzerainty, a ritual measure of the extent to which the centre could command compliance from the periphery: through periodical intimidation no doubt, but also through the exercise of an imperial authority that would encompass what we parse as the economic, political, and religious spheres – what I call the metapolitical order.⁸⁵ It is this order that collapsed in the Late Antique transition; it is its reconstitution that local elites and Buddhist communities would challenge from different perspectives.

82 The separate administration for the agricultural colonies was abolished first in 264, at the very end of the Cao Wei, when the government was already firmly in the hands of the Sima 司馬 clan that would soon establish the Jin dynasty; it was then confirmed in 266 in the name of the new regime. See *Sanguo zhi*, 4.153 and *Jin shu*, 3.55. For the conclusion that the colonies survived the change of jurisdiction until around 280, I rely on the analysis in Crowell, *Government Land Policies*, 167-168, 183-187.

83 We go from 663,423 households for the Cao Wei only in 263 to 3,770,000 households for the unified empire in 282 (see *Sanguo zhi*, 22.636, comm.). If we deduct from the latter figure the 280,000 households added from Shu Han in 263 and the 523,000 households from Wu in 280 (above, note 77), we have a spectacular increase of 2,303,577 households over this short period. Tang Changru (*Clients and Bound Retainers*, 117-118) also notes this demographic expansion, although with more conservative figures based on a Jin census in 280, and links it to scattered evidence of stricter controls on registration evasion in northern China at the time. However, a simpler explanation is that the increase came from the registration of households previously under the separate administration for agricultural colonies.

84 See Yang, *Notes on the Economic History*, 166-169 (translating a traditional account) and the focused discussion in Crowell, *Government Land Policies*, 183-205.

85 This suggestion will probably be anathema to Wickham's analysis, although it is not necessarily in contrast with it to assume, as I do, that the tributary reach was an expression of imperial suzerain power rather than its basis.

The former, emboldened by the implosion of the centre, would progressively gain confidence in advancing an alternative view of society, where status no longer descended from service to the state – at least not only or even chiefly – but from birth into a local community with its hierarchies, and clientship into one replaced allegiance to the other.⁸⁶ Forms of manorialism, in which helpless peasantries running away from a crumbling administration would cluster around the fortress of some provincial magnate, had been spreading ever since the troubles at the end of the Han. However, it was especially from the early fourth century, after the Jin lost control of the north under nomadic pressure, that the territorial power of the great local clans became entrenched. Strong enough to shield themselves and their large numbers of retainer households from the fiscal demands of the state, they effectively stalled any attempt at a recovery of the tributary empire.⁸⁷ In the south, the trend would prove irreversible, as the increasingly short-lived dynasties ruling from Jiankang 建康 – hobbled between the centrifugal agency of the aristocracy and waves of northern émigrés that persistently shirked registration – could never reach an effective control of their populations.⁸⁸

Buddhism in the fiscal resurgence of the northern regimes

The great clans that remained in the north China plain after it fell to Central and Inner Asian tribes soon negotiated similar privileges with the new rulers, who were more than willing to use their services to squeeze surplus from the peasantry.⁸⁹ Some of these ›barbarian‹ leaders, and to a lesser extent their peoples, were in fact already partly Sinicized; the volatile polities they established match most of the features of other post-nomadic states set by pastoralists who gradually abandon their lifestyle and economy in territories that are not suitable to them, often ruling in »an almost permanent state of military mobilisation« and without a stable institutional framework.⁹⁰ Despite attempts to install Chinese-style bureaucracies that could control the population, these regimes generally ruled by might, and regularly resorted to heavy-handed relocations of war captives and peasant households to support their power bases.⁹¹ This was initially also the case for the Xianbei tribe of the Tuoba 拓拔, who would found the (Northern) Wei 魏 dynasty (386-534) at the end of the fourth century, and finally

86 The point is well made in Pearce, *Status, Labor, and Law*, 107-108.

87 On this problem see, among others, Elvin, *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 34-44; Tang, *Clients and Bound Retainers*; Tang, *San lun*, 23-39.

88 See Ochi, *Nanchō no koseki mondai*; Crowell, *Northern Émigrés*; Tang, *San lun*, 83-94.

89 See Tang, *Clients and Bound Retainers*, 122-124.

90 I borrow these definitions and the quote from Wink, *Post-Nomadic Empires*, 120, 128. On the Sinicization of the nomadic elites in the north China plain, see Honey, *Sinicification and legitimation*.

91 See Nishimura, *Chūgoku keizaishi*, 92-106; Tang, *San lun*, 115-118. These states could occasionally show tributary capacities. The Former Yan 前燕 kingdom (337-370) established by the Murong 慕容 branch of the Xianbei in an area between modern Beijing and the Liaodong region, but stretching south into the Central Plain in its final years, by the time of its defeat by the Former Qin 前秦 in 370, was able to count 2,458,969 households and 9,987,935 individuals distributed over 157 commanderies and 1,579 districts; see *Jin shu*, 113.2893. This was nearly as much as the census records for the unified Jin empire, covering a much larger territory, in 280. Tang Changru (*San lun*, 94-99) links the Former Yan (isolated) demographic exploit to a tightening of registration control after 360; Kenneth Klein, however, remarks that the Murong success in establishing an agrarian state in the northeast could benefit from somewhat exceptional environmental circumstances, a »dual insulation – from the pressures of the Central Plain and of the Mongolian steppe« as well as a limited presence of large landholders (*Contribution of the Fourth Century Xianbei*, 28-29).

impose their supremacy over all of northern China in 439.⁹² A few years later, as we saw, their emperor would order the first great persecution of the Buddhist clergy.⁹³ What we did not mention is that at this stage, fearsome and ruthless though they doubtlessly were, these Xianbei lords of the north were still clumsy greenhorns in the complexities of a bureaucratic state – bulls in a China shop, as it were. Semi-permanent warfare and booty distribution were the main glues sticking their fractious elite together, but the very consolidation of conquest set a timer on this expedient for stability.⁹⁴ They also lacked a professional administration, as their officials did not receive salaries, but were allowed to grab what they could from their bailiwicks.⁹⁵ Such a system evidently could not be either popular or efficient: frequent tax holidays granted in the early reigns of the dynasty surely were not acts of generosity, but acknowledgments of the difficulties of regular collection and the necessity to mollify an exasperated populace.⁹⁶ To control the local communities, the government had to rely on the heads of the great clans, who, exactly like their far more powerful counterparts in the south, could thus hide large numbers of dependent households.⁹⁷

Yet, it was this very same improbable regime, on the mere survival of which any wager would have seemed foolhardy after so many nomadic meteors had flickered out of the north China sky, that in the latter half of the fifth century contrived to reinvent itself as the strongest tributary state since the Han, and lay the foundations for the return of a unified empire one century later. Under Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (r. 471–499), a sweeping series of measures dramatically enhanced the fiscal and political authority of the Northern Wei central government and its ability to lead an agrarian society. From 473 inspectors were sent across provinces and districts to enforce household registration and ferret out hidden dependents and absconders.⁹⁸ In 484 fixed salaries funded by tax income at last were introduced for state officials.⁹⁹ One year later, a groundbreaking new policy known as the ›Equal Field‹ (*juntian* 均田) created firm rules for tax liability and land allocation under government supervision

92 On the background of the Tuoba Xianbei and the rise of the Northern Wei empire, see Klein, *Contribution of the Fourth Century Xianbei*, and Holcombe, Xianbei in Chinese History, 15–22, with further references.

93 See above, p. 124

94 See Eisenberg, Warfare and Political Stability. Klein (*Contribution of the Fourth Century Xianbei*, 115–116, 192–194 n. 32) charts all instances of booty distribution under the Northern Wei and notes their sharp drop after the mid-fifth century. Here my analysis expands on Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 47–48.

95 See e.g. *Wei shu*, 24.625.

96 See Klein, *Contribution of the Fourth Century Xianbei*, 114–115 and 191–192 n. 29.

97 The system was known as ›Supervision and Protection by Lineage Heads‹ (*zongzhu duhu* 宗主督護): see *Wei shu*, 110.2855; *Tongdian*, 3.61; cf. Gao, Bei Wei *zongzhu duhu*.

98 *Wei shu*, 7A.139, 42.954, 51.1129.

99 *Wei shu*, 7A.153–154. Two years later, the salaries of local administrators were indexed to the population in their bailiwicks, thus indirectly promoting census surveillance (*Wei shu*, 7B.161).

that would shape the agrarian state for the next three centuries to come.¹⁰⁰ To support its implementation and stamp out registration fraud, critical synergies were established with the local communities.¹⁰¹ Some of these measures, notably the ›Equal Field‹, were expressly meant to promote agriculture through the maximization of land cultivation, and curb the engrossment of arable land at the hands of the powerful clans. While the latter objective is unlikely to have been fully achieved or even pursued, the reforms did assert the government's exclusive right over land and population across every inch of territory, and with it the idea that service to the state was the only legitimate source of economic status.¹⁰² The suzerain ideal was back.

Once the new tributary foundations of the Northern Wei regime were in place, a spate of edicts in the 490s finally put some heavy Chinese make-up on its post-nomadic face, forcing Chinese customs and surnames on its elite, and moving the capital south from Pingcheng 平城, at the edge of the steppe, to Luoyang 洛陽 in the Central Plain, where Han and Jin monarchs had once ruled over a unified empire.¹⁰³

These developments are remarkable enough in themselves; seen against the trajectory of Buddhism in the same period, however, they present us with a gaping paradox, at least if we hold to the deep-seated view of monasticism as a major source of strain on the tributary state.¹⁰⁴ For we have seen that the second half of the fifth century was also when the Buddhist community and a monastic economy grew impetuously in northern China, with the proliferation of religious establishments that claimed immunities for their residents, on account of an altogether different brand of holiness from the one set in the imperial tradition: faced with a centrifugal force of this magnitude, with the great clans still riding roughshod over its fiscal demands and in the absence of an efficient bureaucracy, the Northern Wei state should rather have had a hard time staying afloat, never mind becoming so much stronger. But this is not what happened, and it bears wondering whether a very different dynamic, however counterintuitive, may have been at work in this transition.

It is certain that, within a single generation, the Northern Wei rulers conceived and deployed the two fundamental attitudes the Chinese state would countenance in its confrontation with Buddhism during the following five hundred years: a frontal assault with spoliation versus tight regulation and control (stripping or strapping, one might say). The great persecution of 446 was virulent in its rhetoric and violent in its execution, but whatever else may

100 See *Wei shu*, 7A.156, with the full text of the edict at 110.2853-55. See also the memorial by Li Anshi 李安世 (d.u.) (*Wei shu*, 53.1176; tr. in Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 210-211), which is said to have inspired the policy. Under the new rules, male and female adults (married couples in later versions) replaced the household (*hu* 戶), by now a screen for hidden retainers, as the basic taxable unit; they received fixed amounts of land from the state, with an obligation to farm it and pay in-kind taxes on it until the end of their working lives, at which point they would return their allotments. The policy also established land allocations for official post-holders, to be returned at the end of tenure. The most comprehensive treatment of the ›Equal Field‹ system and its background is probably still Hori, *Kindensei no kenkyū*; see also Crowell, *Government Land Policies*, 305-317. The overview in Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 1-11, shows well the continuity of the system into the Tang period.

101 This was done in 486 by putting ›Three Chiefs‹ (*sanzhang* 三張) – chosen from local elders respectively at neighbourhood, hamlet, and ward level – in charge of supervising tax and corvée registration in collaboration with the state authorities. See *Wei shu*, 7B.161, 110.2855, and 42.954.

102 Cf. the observations in Elvin, *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 48-50.

103 On these Sinicizing edicts see Lu, *Cong Pingcheng dao Luoyang*, 149-194, and the discussion in Holcombe, Xianbei in Chinese History, 24-28, noting the persistence of Xianbei traits in the ruling strata after the reforms.

104 A typical expression of this view is the account in Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 29-62.

have inspired it, it was launched after the last conquest in the north had stalled the Tuoba juggernaut and caused a dangerous lull in the previously regular distribution of booty.¹⁰⁵ If the great raid on the monasteries was really addressing a crisis in the traditional nomadic economy of predation, it must be significant that the main opponent of that raid and partisan of Buddhism in court circles, the Crown Prince Tuoba Huang 拓拔晃 (428-451), was also the one who, in those same years and circles, was championing a full-scale conversion to an agrarian economy, involving accurate land surveys and registration of the peasantry.¹⁰⁶ These advocacies may or may not have been linked in the eyes of the young prince, but there is room to speculate that a growing segment of the Northern Wei elite would see Buddhism as an opportunity for a radical transformation of the state rather than an internal surrogate for the vanishing foe to plunder. In this respect, the imperfect synchronism between the controlled revival of Buddhism and the agrarian turn in the second half of the fifth century should give us pause for thought. It is not the case that an already well-oiled bureaucratic machine caught the monastic community in its cogs, as we might be tempted to assume with hindsight from later dynasties that yet built on the Northern Wei experience. It seems, instead, that the policies mandating the registration of the clergy and the creation of monastic administrators preceded the great wave of census control and the professionalization of the officialdom, or at best, they unfolded in parallel.¹⁰⁷ And it is, again, simply not true that a clear fiscal apparatus and policies were already in place that could define tax liabilities or exemptions for the Buddhist monks. It seems, instead, that ad hoc forms of land tenure for monasteries such as the *buddha* and *saṃgha* households were introduced before effective regulations on land and taxation were devised for the commoners.¹⁰⁸

It almost looks as though the Tuoba government was testing its ability to count, tax, survey and control people and territory on the Buddhist clergy before tackling the big target.¹⁰⁹

105 The chart with a timeline of booty distribution on p. 115 of Klein, *Contribution of the Fourth Century Xianbei*, speaks for itself. From the detailed breakdown on pp. 192-194 n. 32, we can see that until 434, loot sharing among Tuoba generals after military victories took place at least once a year, but from then and until 447 there was a single instance following the conquest of the Northern Liang 涼 in 439. In this light it is probably relevant that the persecution of 446 was unleashed in the course of a military expedition against rebels in the area of Chang'an, and triggered by a charge of involvement in the rebellion against local monks; see *Wei shu*, 114.3033-34; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 64-65.

106 See *Wei shu*, 4B.108-109; *Zizhi tongjian*, 124.3902; Nishimura, *Chūgoku keizaishi*, 106-112; cf. Crowell, *Government Land Policies*, 302-304. On Tuoba Huang's Buddhist faith and his protection of the clergy during the persecution, see *Wei shu*, 114.3034-35; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 66, 68-69. The economic activism of the prince (regularly mentioned under his posthumous name Gongzong 恭宗 in the sources) drew sharp criticism from Chinese courtiers: see *Wei shu*, 48.1071-72; cf. Elvin, *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 46.

107 The first census figures for the clergy date from 477, but in 472 an edict was banning the circulation of unregistered monks: (*wuji zhi seng* 無籍之僧), implying that registration already existed then; see *Wei shu*, 114.3038; cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 76. This edict was issued at the beginning of Xiaowendi's reign, within weeks from another one formally encouraging the expansion of agriculture (*Wei shu*, 4A.137), a starting shot for the series of major policies discussed above. On monastic administrators, see above, note 30.

108 Cf. pp. 125 and 137 above. Tsukamoto (Hoku Gi sōgiko – buttoko, 112-120) suggests a date between 469 and 476 for the establishment of the *buddha* and *saṃgha* households.

109 In some cases, a specific connection seems clear. In 488, in order to further strengthen the income base for the government, a proposal was successfully passed to establish state-owned farms, no doubt following the distant model of the Cao Wei agricultural colonies; see *Wei shu*, 62.1385-86, 110.2856-57. The taxation rate of sixty bushels of grain for these farms, however, was identical to that of the earlier *saṃgha* households, as noted in Tang, *Clients and Bound Retainers*, 124-125.

But surely there was more to it than that. In an age dominated by locality and birth in the definition of an individual's loyalties and obligations, and in which the idea of universal empire could no longer find a political referent, the Buddhist community was the only institution in the real world that had kept some essential traits of that idea – its translocal orientation and its de-emphasis on birth – most visible. Buddhist establishments were literally everywhere, as once had been the relay stations for the Han imperial couriers and envoys, and kept in existence some form of the network of long-distance exchange that a large tributary state should have been able to offer.¹¹⁰ Registering the clergy was evidently no minor exercise, as it involved having government eyes and hands in nearly every district and village, sifting through rural communities where the peasant and the monk often blurred into each other, but also poking around the great clans' turf. These checks should accordingly be seen as a major investment in population control and territorial suzerainty, especially if the state promoting them was one piously endorsing Buddhism, as the Northern Wei did from 453.¹¹¹

Significantly, it is only after the ›Equal Field‹ policy was introduced – indeed, immediately after, in 486 – that we come across the first clear reference to people falsely claiming monastic status in order to avoid taxation.¹¹² This is presumably because, as Moroto has observed, the new regime linked fiscal duties to land allocation, and monks were not grantees under its terms, but were bound to a separate registration from ordinary householders.¹¹³ But even though they were not formally taxpayers now that formal rules did exist, it does not follow that monks were thereby sheltered from any exaction, as the state could descend on them whenever it saw fit.¹¹⁴ We should not expect a court officially worshipping Buddhism, or a monastic elite in cahoots with that court, to leave records of such infringements, but grassroots Buddhists had their own samizdat, often in the form of apocryphal sūtras where the Buddha was made to utter bleak prophecies about a dystopian future that happened to be their present. One such text, already hinted at above, is the ›Scripture on the Resolution of Doubts Concerning [the Age of] the Imitation Law‹ (*Xiangfa jueyi jing* 像法決疑經), reflecting conditions in the north around the turn of the sixth century. Here one reads of impious state officials »robbing through levies the properties of the *samgha*« (稅奪眾僧物), taxing their livestock and grain down to smallest things, and bossing around the serfs (*nubi* 奴婢) of

110 On this dimension of Buddhism see Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission*; compare Chris Wickham's reflections on the nexus between taxation and long-distance exchange in the Late Antique Mediterranean (*Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 708-720). Similar analyses with a focus on China are a desideratum. There, the formidable potential of the monastic network is best documented in its international dimension, thanks to the travelogues of Chinese monks who could rely on it in their pilgrimages to Central Asia and India; most famous in our period is Faxian 法顯 (d. ca. 423), on whom see Deeg, *Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan*. Within medieval China itself, network exchange between monasteries is still largely understudied; a preliminary exception that I am aware of is Lu, Zhishi zhi wang.

111 We lack detailed demographic tallies for the Northern Wei period, but a contemporary estimate that toward 520 the population was double the Jin census count in 280 (for a unified empire) seems credible, also in view of later data; see *Wei shu*, 106A.2455. This would mean no less than five million households in the north alone, as noted in *Tongdian*, 7.146.

112 See above, p. 130 and note 57.

113 See Moroto, *Chūgoku Bukkyō*, 342-343. Cf. Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 208 n. 8.

114 The memorial of 486 making the first connection between bogus monastic registration and tax evasion almost seems to threaten as much when it spurns those resorting to this subterfuge as »foolish people trying their luck« 愚民僥倖; see *Wei shu*, 114.3039.

the clergy.¹¹⁵ These grievances appear to bear out our suspicion that the *buddha* and *saṃgha* households were in fact means for the state to extract revenue from the peasantry through the monasteries, even though the latter, at least their leaders, are likely to have received their cut and (mostly) lived happily with it. Another apocryphal text from the same background (though one that eventually made its way into the orthodox canon thanks to the ambiguities of its message) is the ›Scripture for Humane Kings‹ (*Renwangjing* 仁王經), which voices shrill frustration at the Northern Wei state control of the Buddhist community. The Buddha here blasts a latter age in which arrogant rulers install superintendents and registrars for the clergy, laypeople take the high seats in monasteries, and conscripts become *bhikṣus*; he warns that monks and nuns who are included in the registers and commanded by state authorities are not his disciples, for the law they obey is one for convicts and slaves.¹¹⁶ These snippets do not really match the picture of a monastic community offering free rides to crowds of tax evaders, and basking in the glories and comforts of an imperial patronage so well attested in the records of Buddhism at the new capital Luoyang, or in the elite-sponsored programmes of Buddhist statuary and epigraphy at Yungang 雲崗 and Longmen 龍門.¹¹⁷ It is a tale of two *saṃghas*, then, that runs through the revival of the tributary empire: one pampered, the other bullied, both finally hanging by a capricious thread spun in court politics.

After fifty years from the reforms that had turned around its power structure, the Northern Wei state eventually collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions, notably an unresolved conflict between the Sinicized and more conservatively Xianbei strands of its elite, and the growing restiveness of its military, once paramount but now largely sidelined. It was a revolt of garrisons that, between 524 and 534, dragged the dynasty to its doom and brought about its split into two halves under Sino-Xianbei warlord clans, the Yuwen 宇文 in Guanzhong and the Gao 高 in Henan and Shandong. These ruled at first through figureheads from the deposed dynasty, respectively as the Western Wei (535-557) and Eastern Wei (534-550), then in their own right as the Northern Zhou 周 (557-581) and the Northern Qi 齊 (550-577).¹¹⁸ Both regimes resumed, tweaked and continued the land policies of the Northern Wei.¹¹⁹ Their circumstances, however, were radically different, and a showdown was to be expected. The eastern state commanded far stronger agricultural resources, population, and

115 See above, pp. 129-130 and note 56. In Buddhist eschatology, the age of the ›Imitation Law‹ (Ch. *xiangfa* 像法, Skt. *saddharma-pratirūpaka*) is one in which a debased teaching and practice supersede the correct *dharma*; some traditions placed its onset one thousand years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, a threshold that, in China, many believed had just been crossed in the second half of the fifth century (full discussion to appear in Palumbo, *Buddhist Eschatology and Kingship*).

116 See *Renwang banruopoluomi jing* (T vol. 8 no. 245), 833b19-23, c15-18. This is the original text from the late fifth century (an expanded version, heavily influenced by Esoteric Buddhism, would be produced in the eighth century). On the *Renwang jing* see Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom*, especially 107-121 on the historical context of the fifth-century version.

117 On the patronage of the Northern Wei aristocracy for the Buddhist caves at Yungang and Longmen, see respectively Caswell, *Written and Unwritten*, and McNair, *Donors of Longmen*. On the apogee of Buddhism at Luoyang in the final decades of the dynasty, see Jenner, *Memories of Loyang*.

118 On these developments see conveniently Lewis, *China between Empires*, 81-85; Holcombe, Xianbei in Chinese History, 28-34; and the extensive treatment in Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*.

119 Indeed, the first direct evidence of the ›Equal Field‹ system comes from the Western Wei, in a document of AD 547 from the northwestern outpost at Dunhuang. See Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 207-208, and Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 511-518.

tributary infrastructure; its ruling elite in the Central Plain also inherited the servile households previously attached to the Northern Wei court, but corruption and factional instability, fuelled by ethnic tensions, were soon to squander much of its advantage.¹²⁰ The Yuwen regime in the west was an outlier: clinging to the less populated, poorer half of the former Tuoba empire, starved of revenue and manpower, it nonetheless rose to the challenge under the iron hand of its Xianbei military elite, and through reforms that gained momentum after the conquest of Sichuan from the south and a political revamping as the (Northern) Zhou dynasty in the 550s.¹²¹ In both states the Buddhist presence was massive, but while the thriving economy of the east made room for control-cum-patronage and a functional accommodation between the elite and the clergy (much along the lines of the late Northern Wei), severe limitations on resources in the west meant that an appetite for spoliation was always lurking.¹²² This is, in fact, what happened in the end. In 574, more than one century after the Northern Wei persecution, the Yuwen regime under Wudi 武帝 (r. 560-578) launched a second and more radical proscription of Buddhism, this time comparatively subdued in its rhetoric and probably also in its violence, but ruthlessly explicit in its aim to appropriate to the state the staggering wealth of the *samgha*, and even more its huge reservoir of manpower.¹²³ Ideological motivations, of course, were by no means absent, but a major mobilization seems to have been the immediate trigger. Only months before the proscription was launched, an edict had quashed the traditional Xianbei monopoly of the military and made room for large-scale conscription of Chinese commoners, lured with their cancellation from household registers and attendant tax and labour duties.¹²⁴ Defrocking the clergy and returning them en masse to those very registers would evidently make up for this shift, or further swell army ranks should any laicized monks opt to join them. The ploy tipped the scales in the northern contest for power, as it gave the Yuwen regime all the boots on the ground¹²⁵ it needed to wipe out its once formidable eastern rival: Northern Qi was conquered in 577, and the great expropriation of the *samgha* continued there, but on a much grander scale that was commensurate to

120 Lü, *Bei Qi zhengzhi shi yanjiu*; Pearce, Status, Labor, and Law. The growing success of population registration under the eastern state is shown in its census records: 2,005,676 households in 550 (Bielenstein, Chinese Historical Demography, 18, adding the subtotals in *Wei shu*, 106A-C), 3,030,000 households in 559-560 (*Sui shu*, 29.807), and a peak of 3,032,528 households and 20,006,880 individuals in 577, at the end of Northern Qi (*Zhou shu*, 6.101; *Tongdian*, 7.147). Remember, this was just a regional state in the northeast, not a unified Chinese empire.

121 Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 474-480; Dien, Role of the Military.

122 See Li, State Religious Policy, 262-266, and Xie, *Zhonggu Fojiao sengguan zhidu*, 74-86.

123 See *Zhou shu*, 5.85 for a summary of the proscription edict, which also targeted the Taoists (incomparably less numerous but ideologically influential). At the end of 577, addressing protests from a former monastic leader, Wudi would give a matter-of-fact justification for his decision: he had briefly studied Buddhism and found it to be of no benefit, hence he abolished it (決知非益, 所以除之); conversely, since the abolition the labour load on the population had been lighter, whereas fiscal revenue and troops had been steadily increasing, enabling him to subdue the Qi in the east and tribal rebels in the west, all of which was indeed beneficial (事有益). See *Guang hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2103), 154b9-10, c18-20. No trace here of the anti-Buddhist vitriol in the Northern Wei edicts during the first persecution: cf. Hurvitz (trans.), *Wei Shou*, 65-67.

124 See *Sui shu*, 24.680, noting with a touch of hyperbole that »after this half the Chinese became soldiers« 是後夏人半為兵矣. Cf. Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 668-671; Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 110. Neither scholar makes the link with the proscription of Buddhism, and Graff in particular wonders »whether the relatively poor western realm would have been able to dispense entirely with the productive labor of more than 100,000 cultivators« (his estimate for the Zhou army) – a perplexity we can positively address.

125 In no manner of speaking – the Xianbei did wear boots.

the size of the Buddhist community in that rich and populous country.¹²⁶ An estimated three million monks, nuns, and their dependents were suddenly turned into soldiers and peasants; 40,000 monasteries with their lands, servants and gold changed hands overnight: from those emerging from a cloak to the long-nailed fists of the mandarins.¹²⁷

The Northern Zhou were now sole lords of a territory larger than the Northern Wei at their heyday, since it included Sichuan and even regions south of the Yangzi; it was only a matter of time before they could close in on the last monarchic straw man in Jiankang. Wudi, however, did not live to see this day, as he died in his prime in 578 (retribution for his evil deeds, the Buddhists immediately ruled). The dynasty itself survived him by no more than three years, for in 581 one of Wudi's generals, Yang Jian 楊堅, born and grown in a Buddhist nunnery, seized power and established the last of the northern regimes, the Sui 隋 (581-618). Even before he formally ascended the throne, one of his first acts was to restore Buddhism; then, in 589, Sui troops finally stormed south virtually unopposed, and China was one empire again.¹²⁸

Conclusion: Fearful symmetries, or the First Great Divergence postponed

I have now reached the margins of my canvas without, I fear, anything resembling a complete picture. Yet, like a pointillist painter, I hope to have at least thrown around enough dots that may blend into a meaningful image in the beholder's eye. My core hypothesis, after all, is simple: the confrontation, from the fourth to the sixth centuries, between a rapidly growing *saṃgha* and the alien regimes that ruled northern China may have helped the latter to consolidate their state formation, and eventually acquire enough control of territory and resources to victoriously launch themselves into the imperial endgame, the conquest of the south and a durable unification of 'All under Heaven'. In their unlikely attempt to cross over from predatory leagues of pastoralists to tributary empires, those regimes were soon caught in much the same quandary as their Chinese predecessors and competitors since the end of the Han: until they could bring the great local clans to heel, and enforce revenue collection across the length of their nominal realms, their claims to suzerain authority, however crowing, would sound persistently hollow. But as long as they failed to command ultimate suzerain authority, neither could these sedentarizing nomads dream of turning the skulking multitude of their subjects into obliging taxpayers.¹²⁹ The expansion of the Buddhist monastic

126 On the conquest of Qi, see Pearce, *Yü-Wen Regime*, 704-720. The extension of the proscription in the east is well documented in Buddhist sources, some of which are very close to the facts: see in particular *Lidai sanbao ji* (T vol. 49 no. 2034), 83a5 (on the size of the Northern Qi *saṃgha*), 94b23-28; and *Guang hongming ji* (T vol. 52 no. 2103), 153c23-27.

127 For these impressive figures, see the last two sources in the previous note. If they can be trusted, and they probably can, the monastic community, including the lay devotees and dependents attached to them, would thus have been close to 10% of the north China population at the time (for the latter, cf. Xiong, *Emperor Yang*, 250-252). The most thorough discussion of the Northern Zhou persecution of Buddhism to date is still Tsukamoto, Hoku Shū no haibutsu; good summaries in Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 184-194; He, *Buddhism in the Economic History of China*, 24-26; Li, *State Religious Policy*, 265-268.

128 On these events, see Tsukamoto, Hoku Shū no shūkyō haiki seisaku no hōkai; Wright, *Sui Dynasty*, 57-61, 110-114; Xiong, *Emperor Yang*, 15-17, 151-153.

129 Here I weave into Mark Elvin's apt sketch of the situation under the Tuoba Wei before the late-fifth-century reforms (*Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 47).

body may have wedged into this vicious circle by offering an initial alternative for dispossessed peasants and social misfits, trapped between the rock of serfdom (thinly disguised as retainership into the great clans) and the hard place of imperial taxation. To the brawny rulers of the north, this must have looked at first as an irresistibly soft target to smash and grab, especially when the vital cycle of raiding and loot-sharing had reached a dead end. But you cannot empty the same coffer twice: in time, allowing the clergy to grow rich again, whilst keeping a close eye on the monks' names and numbers in official registers, must have seemed an altogether better option to expand the territorial and fiscal reach of the state, all the more so as it could soar on wings of genuine devotion from court to commoners. And while monks may have been officially denied taxpayer status in the ›Equal Field‹ system, it certainly would have been easier for the imperial bailiff to reclaim land and revenue from the monasteries, as soon as his lords would see fit, rather than thumping in frustration at the unyielding gates of the manors. Spoliation, for that matter, was always an option, and it was decisively taken in the 570s, as the Northern Zhou found through it the resources to defeat their archenemies in the northeast and ready themselves for the long-awaited conquest of the south. The return of imperial unity was finally achieved in 589, but at the hands of a successor regime, the Sui 隋, established by a Northern Zhou general and Buddhist sympathizer. The Sui showed all the traits of the ›strong tributary empire‹, able to enforce taxation and household registration across the entire extension of its territory, order great public works, and mobilize huge armies. A census in 609 returned 8,907,546 households and 46,019,956 individuals, the highest tally since the Eastern Han.¹³⁰ A tightly regulated Buddhist community meanwhile reached new heights under state patronage, and it must, again, be significant that one of its most fervent supporters was also remembered as the architect of the Sui fiscal renaissance.¹³¹

As rulers of a unified empire, the Sui would last no more than three decades, but their inheritors, the Tang 唐 (618-907), would hold the scene for three centuries, and the new period of division that did follow their fall would quickly be ended by the advent of the Song in 960. It is this narrative that, as we have seen, has offered many scholars the glimpse of a China diverging from the West in Late Antiquity through the permanent recovery of an imperial statehood that the latter virtually lost forever. This would indeed be an apposite conclusion to these notes, if only I could endorse it. But I have suggested at the outset that even after the late sixth-century breakthrough, it would still take some time for ›China‹ to settle on its trademark cycle of long-term institutional stability; and while there is no space to consider the centuries up to the Song into any detail here, some final remarks may briefly broach problems that future research will hopefully address more thoroughly.

One of them is the lingering view of the Tang, a family name in world history books, as a single long and successful empire after the dark centuries of division, with the Sui as a mere prequel. Like so many other things about that dynasty, this view is a legacy of the Song period, but like so many others a distinctly questionable one. One should start observing, with the late Antonino Forte, that there were not one but two Tang dynasties: between the First

130 See *Sui shu*, 29.808 and *Tongdian*, 7.147. On the great recovery of taxation, population registration, and economic infrastructure under the first Sui emperor, see the valuable analysis in Xiong, *Emperor Yang*, 173-195.

131 This was Gao Jiong 高颎 (d. 607), Yang Jian's chief minister, who in the 580s established a new system of fiscal registration, ensuring the reversion of large numbers of vagrants and hidden retainers to the regular household registers; see *Tongdian*, 7.156 and Tang, *Clients and Bound Retainers*, 133-134. On Gao's close ties with the Buddhist community, notably his sponsorship of the powerful Three Stages sect, see Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion*, 195-197; and more generally Chen, *Monks and Monarchs*, on Sui patronage of Buddhism.

Tang (618-690) and the Second Tang (705-907) there was in fact a different dynasty, the Zhou 周 (690-705). This was established by a remarkable woman, Wu Zhao 武曩, who ruled in her own right as empress – decisively buttressed by Buddhist support – after a much longer tenure of power from behind the scenes.¹³² Apart from the political instability this fracture betrays,¹³³ our modern sensitivities (or presentist bias) should not distract us from the scandal that a female emperor meant to many of her contemporaries, and especially to those Song historians who successfully erased the memory of her dynasty.¹³⁴ Wu Zhao's case is there to suggest that in China, at the end of Late Antiquity, the imperial idea was a somewhat tentative business compared to the stiff template of later ages: how would we make room for the notion of a successfully reigning woman-pope in our historical view of the medieval papacy, for example?

But the Tang were precarious in far more compartments, and probably more significant, including the all-important area of taxation and household registration. The Sui may well have revived the glories of the Han tributary state when they could count nine million households in 609. Two or three decades later, however, their successors could not reach three million, and as late as 652, at a time when political consolidation should have been by all means achieved, the tally was still well under four million.¹³⁵ It is entirely plausible that, at this stage, the Tang elite could manage perfectly well by alternative means, including the taxation of commerce and good old rent-taking from imperial estates.¹³⁶ If so, however, it also means that the suzerain power of the dynasty across its territory was limited, as there were arguably fewer places where the taxman could go and make claims on behalf of the government. Only in the first half of the eighth century, notably during the long reign of Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756), would the registration capacity and demographic counts of the Tang reach back to the Sui records. But it would not last long: the rebellion of the Turco-Sogdian general An Lushan 安祿山 and his successors (755-763) shook the dynasty to the core, and left it limping ahead for the next one and a half centuries.¹³⁷ That household counts should have dropped spectacularly from nine million in 754 to 1.9 million in 760 is understandable, since at the latter date some of the most populous regions – Henan, Hebei, Shandong – were under the rebel dynasty of the Great Yan 燕 (756-763).¹³⁸ But even after the rebellion was quelled and a

132 Forte, *Political Propaganda*, xiv-xv. Of course, any China historian knows this, and yet we keep on referring to a single Tang dynasty, whilst – incoherently – we distinguish between the Former/Western and the Later/Eastern Han, separated by Wang Mang's 王莽 Xin 新 dynasty interregnum (AD 9-23).

133 Geopolitical as well, since Wu Zhao's power base was in Luoyang, whereas Tang emperors mostly ruled from Chang'an (Guanzhong).

134 See Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien*, 1-7.

135 For the first figure, see *Tongdian*, 7.148; *Cefu yuangui*, 486:11b1; *Xin Tang shu*, 51.1344; for the second, see *Tang huiyao*, 84.1550 (3.8m), and *Cefu yuangui*, 486:11b9 (3.85m). A lucid discussion of the demographic decline in the early Tang is in Pulleyblank, *Registration of Population*. Xiong (*Emperor Yang*, 193-194) briefly notes this problem and is willing to explain it as a real depopulation following »unnatural causes such as war, famine, and corvée [sic]«, but I cannot follow him on this point: apart from the lack of evidence for a loss of life on such a huge scale, it seems difficult to explain how the population could nearly double in the next five decades, as we are going to see.

136 Cf. Pulleyblank, *Registration of Population*, 293-295, and Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 9-11.

137 On the An Lushan rebellion and its long-term repercussions see, among others, Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 216-251, and Pulleyblank, *An Lu-Shan Rebellion*.

138 For the figure of 9,069,154 households in 754, see *Tang huiyao*, 84.1551, and *Zizhi tongjian*, 217.6929; the count of 1,931,345 households in 760 is in *Tang huiyao*, 84.1551; also in *Cefu yuangui*, 486:18b5, and *Xin Tang shu*, 52.1362, with slight variations.

sweeping fiscal reform was introduced in 780, the Tang state never recovered its full registration capacity, as tallies varied between 2.4 million households in 807 to 4.9 million in 845.¹³⁹

I have argued above that census records should not be used uncritically as a gauge of power, for the latter comes in different kinds that may or may not converge to shape an imperial formation: a strong state could dispense to significant degrees with the very exercise of taxation and household registration, thanks to direct landownership or extraordinary levies and requisitions (the Cao and Yuwen regimes in the third and sixth centuries), although this type regularly proved unable to produce enduring suzerainty over large territories; or it could survive by relying on unfortunate tributary pockets, presumably cross-subsidizing a larger apparatus of power (Shu Han, Wu), though in this case too not for long; or it could maximize its territory and indeed expand its registration reach, but not enough to secure a durable base of suzerain power for the centre over the periphery (as was the case of the Jin in the 280s). The long-lasting Tang, it would seem, managed to survive by switching across these different options, but we should resist viewing them as a strong tributary empire throughout, as they only looked like one during portions of their cycle.

Against this background, we must observe that the confrontation between Buddhism and the state continued across this period and until the latter half of the tenth century, climaxing in two more major persecutions: in 845 under the Tang emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840-846), and in 955 under the short-lived regime of the Later Zhou 周 (951-960), which ruled over northern China in the period of fragmentation known as the Five Dynasties (907-960), and would successfully morph into no less than the great Song at its end.¹⁴⁰

At a closer look, there is a fearful symmetry between these two incidents and the first two proscriptions in the fifth and sixth centuries. In both cases, we have a violent and ideologically loaded persecution (446, 845), followed after about one century by a less venomous, economically driven suppression of the Buddhist community (574/7, 955). It is also noteworthy that, in the latter pair, both proscriptions of 574/7 and of 955 were launched by regional states in the north on the eve of decisive campaigns that would lead to the reunification of Chinese territory, respectively under the Sui and the Song, and, arguably, provided through confiscation an essential quota of the resources for those ventures.

However, there were no more large-scale proscriptions of Buddhism after the tenth century, as the ostensibly capricious oscillation between exemption and disenfranchisement, patronage and suppression was to find its long-term balance in a state grip on the clergy that would never slacken after the advent of the Song.¹⁴¹ The end of the confrontation with

139 The counts for 807 and 845 are respectively in *Tang huiyao*, 84.1551; *Zizhi tongjian*, 237.7647, and in *Tang huiyao*, 84.1552; *Xin Tang shu*, 52.1363. On the demographic changes in the Tang, and in particular after the An Lushan rebellion, see Tang, *San lun*, 246-255. The fiscal reform was the so-called double-tax system (*liangshui fa* 兩稅法), based on income ranking of households rather than allotted land, and involving two yearly collections, measured in cash, with the simultaneous abolition of all other taxes; see Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 39-48.

140 On the anti-Buddhist persecution of 845, the largest in scope, see Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in T'ang China*, 217-271; Ch'en, Economic Background; Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 226-233; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 114-135. On the fourth and last suppression (in fact, a drastic downsizing and spoliation) in 955, see Makita, Go Shū Seshū no Bukkyō seisatsu, and the sketches in Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 22, and Worthy, *Founding of Sung China*, 32-33. Worthy offers an extremely detailed discussion of the Later Zhou transformation from regional regime to China-wide bureaucratic empire.

141 See Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 389-454 (with reservations, though, on his narrative of decline), and the brilliant He, *Buddhism in the Economic History of China*, 47-89.

Buddhism that had started under the Northern Wei, and whose fundamental terms had been defined back then, would thus give way to the consolidation of the unified bureaucratic empire as the enduring form of the Chinese polity until modernity: if nothing else, surely this is a ›great coincidence‹.¹⁴² Whether it also marked a fundamental divergence from the historical trajectory of the West is something that comparative historians may want to explore in greater depth from this particular entry point, but some preliminary counterfactual observations do seem relevant. That is, we have a very significant similarity between Eastern and Western Eurasia in Late Antiquity – as already noted, the fall of large tributary empires on both sides, followed by social, economic, and political fragmentation and the parallel rise of large religious bodies wedging their way into a collapsing metapolitical order. But while this rise had been firmly harnessed in China by the end of the first millennium, this would not be the case in the West: as a result, Song China and its successors would not be faced with the ›highly organized religious community‹ of Latin Christendom, or a ›Papal Revolution‹, or a gigantic ›proprietary church‹ standing in the way of their imperial statehood.¹⁴³

One would not leave this chain of adventurous remarks without sounding some ringing note of caution. More research is doubtlessly needed, including robust scrutiny of quantitative data and minute explorations of the historical contexts. And yet, haven't we already started to question the cliché of an eternal China, fated to stay imperial and one since antiquity? Perhaps no one put this view more forcefully than A. C. Graham, a master Sinologist like few, who once quipped that »[a]bout the time when the First Emperor was looking for the elixir of life China discovered the secret of the immortal empire, the unkillable social organism.«¹⁴⁴ The China we have known tells a different story, one where empire doth perish in the maelstrom of Late Antiquity, and bantam lords dance clumsily on its carcass, for centuries. Until along come monks and nomads, and look what happens!

142 The Song, to be sure, also suffered invasion from the north, loss of territory, and relocation to the south (Southern Song, 1127-1279). Unlike the Han and the Tang, however, the Song never controlled the far north and the northwest, whereas their economic and demographic powerhouse had already shifted to the south in the course of the eleventh century. Accordingly, the northern invasions in the twelfth century did not curtail the empire's resources of territory and population on a scale comparable to the position of the southern regimes in the period of division vis-à-vis the earlier Han unity.

143 See respectively Mitterauer, *Why Europe?*, 144-193; Berman, *Law and Revolution*, 85-119, 520-537; and Woods, *Proprietary Church*, for seminal discussions of the three concepts in inverted commas. A first, important exploration of what this meant in the long run for the diverging paths of development in China and the West can now be found in Davids, *Religion*.

144 Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 5. Yuri Pines has expanded on the idea twice, and at monograph-length: see his *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, and especially *Everlasting Empire*.

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