



# Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

Volume 5 1998:409–413

Publication date: 26 September 1998

*Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism.* By Alan Cole. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 292 pages, ISBN: 0-8047-3152-7, US\$49.50.

*Reviewed by*

Charles B. Jones

*Department of Religion and Religious Education*

*Catholic University of America*

[CBJones57@aol.com](mailto:CBJones57@aol.com)

*Copyright Notice*

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to [jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu](mailto:jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu).

The very first thing that strikes the reader of this book is that Professor Cole is a cracking good writer. This is without question the wittiest and most stylishly-written academic book I have come across, and is one of the most lucid in terms of putting complicated ideas into accessible prose. The book was a true pleasure to read.

What arguments do we find wrapped inside this attractive package? It goes in several directions, but the most fundamental issue under consideration is one of culture: How did Buddhism make use of certain fault lines in Confucian family values in order to gain acceptance and support in China? The author discusses these fault lines in chapter two, “Confucian Complexes.” He argues that the Confucian notion of filial piety, while ostensibly applicable to all sons and daughters *vis-à-vis* both their fathers and mothers, was in reality directed rather narrowly to the attitude of sons towards their fathers. At the same time, however, one of the most notable motivations that Confucius gave in the *Analects* for observing the three-year mourning period was that it paid back a moral debt that children owed parents for the three years of sacrifice they made at the beginning of the child’s life: the feeding, the nurturing, the willingness to sleep on the parts of the bed that the baby had wet while moving it to a dry spot, and so on.

The problem with this, says Cole, is obvious: all of the above items fall within the mother’s role; the father generally has no part in them. Thus, Confucianism had to abide with a disjunction, namely using things the mother did as motivations for directing acts of filial piety to the father. Why? Because Confucian family life embraced as one of its major goals the continuation of the patriline into the future while ensuring the maintenance of the cult of patrilineal ancestors of the past. But since fathers were explicitly encouraged to be emotionally distant from their sons, Confucian ideology had no choice but rely on the emotional attachments between sons and mothers to provide a motivation for the practices of filiality (pp. 28-31).

Aside from this rather glaring piece of doublethink, Cole argues that the Confucian system suffered because of several psychological realities that accompany mother-son relationships. These realities did not fit neatly into its patrilineal objectives and posed a challenge to the system. The first of these was the sons’ need to express a very real feeling of affection for their mothers. In spite of Confucian arguments about loyalty to the father’s line, they knew in their hearts that their mothers had been their first source of affection and nurture. The second had to do with the precarious position of wives in their households. Cole quotes extensively from Margery Wolf’s 1972 study of women in a Taiwanese village in describing the mother’s plight (Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* [Stanford

University Press, 1972]). Because women married out of their birth families, they were never really considered part of them. Once married off, a wife became a threat to the patriline of her new family, because she had the potential and the motivation to draw off part or all of her husband's loyalty from the patriline to herself. Thus she found herself struggling to establish a place for herself within a system that actively attempted to exclude her.

In this situation, the new wife had one powerful strategy open to her: to bear sons. During infancy and early childhood, the mother was free to inculcate her sons' loyalty and devotion so that, after they were grown, she would have powerful allies to protect her interests within the family (pp. 34-38). However, when these sons married, their new wives would vie for their affection, threatening the very security that the mothers had worked so hard to create. Thus, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law frequently embroiled themselves in fierce competition for the son's affection, and the winner took all. If the daughter-in-law failed to win her husband's affections, she still had a card to play: to bear sons of her own. Thus the cycle fed itself generation after generation (pp. 38-40).

When Buddhism arrived in China, its monastic adherents intuitively saw the potential for exploitation in this vicious cycle. As early as the fifth century, apocryphal texts began to appear explicitly praising the role of the mother and enjoining sons to realize the great debt that they owed to her. And how was the son to repay that debt? By making offerings to Buddhist monasteries and transferring the merit of the act towards the improvement of the mother's lot in the next life.

Thus, Cole says, a dynamic symbiosis arose among three participants: mothers, who found in this new ideology an affirmation of their role within the household and a device to aid them in monopolizing their sons' affections; sons, who found in these texts and their associated rituals a way to express the very real feelings they had towards their mothers; and monasteries, which by setting offerings to their establishments as the means for helping mothers in the next world, benefited materially from these feelings and acts (pp. 10-12, 128, 211, 223).

One more curious feature of the system will round out this brief summary of the book's argument. Having defined offerings for deceased mothers as the way to repay their kindness, the Buddhist establishment had to picture deceased mothers as needy and suffering. Unfortunately, the way that one becomes needy and suffering in Buddhist cosmology is to attain a lower-than-human rebirth, which necessitated picturing the departed mother as a gross sinner: passionate, lewd, duplicitous, and a slaughterer of animals (pp. 57-64).

Therefore, as in the case of the story of Mu Lian rescuing his mother,

mothers became dichotomized, in effect becoming madonnas and whores simultaneously. Cole graphically describes this as a bifurcation at the waist: the upper half, the location of the smiling face and the nurturing breasts, represented the warm and loving side known only to the son. The lower half, the location of the sexual organs, represented the wanton and lascivious woman, wasting her life in sin and luxury and therefore earning their place on the seething copper beds of hell (pp. 77-78, 100-101, 230-231).

Some texts went so far as to say that the very act of giving birth, since it inevitably involved sexuality and the emission of impurities, was itself the act that led to a rebirth in hell. Mothers ended up in hell just for choosing to be mothers. Perhaps, suggests Cole, this intensified the guilt and sense of obligation on the part of sons. After all, their mothers were willing to accept rebirth in hell just to give them life (p. 207).

In sum, Cole argues that the Buddhist establishment in China, consciously or unconsciously, saw a chink in the Confucian system of father-son loyalty and subverted its teaching of filial piety to emphasize the bond between mothers and sons almost to the total exclusion of any other family relationship. Even in this subversion, however, it only reinforced the Chinese family system by playing into the struggle between mothers and their daughters-in-law. After all, the tradition never generated any stories about sons rescuing their wives from hell. By preventing the wife from alienating the son's affection away from his mother, even Buddhist filial piety served to preserve the patriline against the incursion of foreign women from other families (p. 180).

The argument goes in other directions and describes insights which Cole draws from the number of Buddhist texts consulted and analyzed, but this, in main, is the argument of the book.

The author presents this as a case study in the sinification of Buddhism. Even as it took advantage of Confucianism's doublespeak, Buddhism still accommodated itself to Chinese family values and found a way to support them (and itself in the process) (pp. 1-13, 104). This presumes that choosing to play the mother-love card represents something that is particularly Chinese; otherwise, it makes no sense to speak of sinification.

However, a glance at some Tibetan materials reveals the same process at work there. For example, chapter seven of sGam Po Pa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* is dedicated to inspiring potential bodhisattvas to develop the mind of altruism by reflecting on the mass of kindnesses shown to them by their mothers and developing an intention to repay that kindness. The exposition of the mother's kindness includes an account of "Buddhist biology" remarkably similar to that presented by Cole, and the description of what the mother does in breast-feeding and sacrificing for

the child also rings familiar (see Herbert Guenther, trans., *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* [Boston: Shambhala, 1986], pp. 91-94).

In case someone should argue that sGam Po Pa, writing in the eleventh century, could have been influenced by developments in China, Kensur Lekden, in his *Meditations of a Tantric Abbot*, describes the seven meditations on the development of altruism based on similar appeals to the debt one owes to one's mother as going back to Maitreya's teaching to Asanga, which means that this tendency may be traced back to India (see Jeffrey Hopkins, trans., *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism* [Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1980], pp. 36-39).

The upshot of this is that a turn towards valuing the kindness and affection of the mother and utilizing mother-love as a motivation to Buddhist practice may not represent a process of sinification, a "Chinese transformation of Buddhism," but may in fact be part of the "Buddhist conquest of China." At the very least, one ought to take into account the possibility that Indian Buddhism contained antecedents that received new emphasis and flourished in Chinese soil. More comparative research between various national Buddhisms is needed to clarify this issue.

That aside, this book is a fascinating and enlightening piece of cultural criticism that will alter many of the ways that scholars think of the transmission of Buddhism to China. May it abide long in the world.