

# **Prospect Review of Research on Prediction and Augury in Buddhism in China**

**Zhou Qi**

INSTITUTE OF WORLD RELIGIONS, CASS

2009-7

It is a great honor for me to have been invited to join this project chaired by Prof. Lackner and sponsored by German Ministry of Education and Research. Though human beings have been trying to predict their future for ages and there is an equally long history of research on this subject, this is the first time that a large academic project is specially designed and initiated engaging in the efforts across multiple disciplines. The launching of this project demonstrates admirable academic vision and gallantry. I am flattered to be able to join it and would do the utmost for my share.

Below is a proposal about the research I intend to conduct concerning Buddhism in China, which is presented here for review of coherence and consistency with the general principles and design of the project. Suggestions and advice are most welcome.

## **Objectives of Research**

It is evidenced throughout the history of human society that there is no people (or culture) that does not show interest in what happens in the past, present and future. This curiosity is extremely evident when it comes to the unknown, whether it is something that already happened, is happening right now or is to happen. People try to explain such mysteries and some of them even come up with a systematic theory on prediction.

However, as the knowledge system gets further established in the modern times, theories to explain these mysteries have also changed. Scientific explanations quickly become the common approach and standpoint while prediction theories and methods dated from ancient times have been largely abandoned or simply labeled as “superstition”. But it is also important to note that these old theories and concepts, instead of being extinct in today’s world, are found, in an explicit or implicit manner, almost everywhere. They are still believed and practiced. A very important part of these, of course, is how prediction was made in various religions.

As for the proposed research, prediction in Buddhism in China can be studied in the following aspects.

Buddhism, though it originated in ancient India, was spread to China as early as the turn of Anno Domini, and has seen great developments here. In fact, the popularity and development of Buddhism in China is an important even decisive step for it to become a truly world religion. With a huge number of Buddhist believers and scholars, China boasts an intensive and comprehensive research on Buddhism. However, a systematic and rational research on prediction has hardly been done. Therefore, it is both necessary and significant for us to conduct such a research on theories and practices of prediction in Buddhism in China, which undoubtedly will fill one of the missing pieces of current research.

Besides, of all the Buddhist classics that can still be found today, *Tripikata* in Chinese, boasts

the greatest number of reference materials. By retrieving among them for records or information about prediction, we can not only present a full picture of the logical relations between prediction ideas in Buddhism and the doctrines of this religion, but also demonstrate how Buddhism in China explains and practices prediction. The huge load of materials would secure a study that is pleasantly based on a rich and reliable source of documents for reference.

Of course, it has to be admitted that this research also presents great challenges. As is widely recognized, the main theories of Buddhism oppose any thing like prediction or augury, while there are some Buddhism classics which do mention even give explanation about prediction. For practicing the religion, the disciplines forbid Buddhist believers to predict or augur while in reality prediction and augury has always been there. Such contrast has always remained so, which undoubtedly will be an important issue of research throughout my proposed study.

Moreover, the objective of my study here is Buddhism in China, where local cultural environment already presents its own abundance of theories and practices of prediction, which can well be described as sophisticated and systematic. Therefore, Buddhism, during its long process of dissemination and development in this country, has inevitably interacted with the indigenous culture, which in turn brings about changes and growth to the religion. This interaction between the prediction theories and practices of Buddhism and the Chinese culture not only enriches the religion itself but also the traditional culture of China. My proposed exploration into Buddhism in China, in fact, will also be an exploration into the Chinese traditional culture, which can well be expected as a comparative cultural research of width and depth.

Last but not the least, as Buddhism is still one of the most popular religions in China, it would be the best if research is extended to how modern people understand and practice the Buddhist theories on prediction (as well as its explanation of and ways of practicing those theories), which is sure to bring the proposed study more comprehensive and relevant to the reality.

In a word, even with a cursory look, a study on the subject of prediction in Buddhism in China presents itself as an exciting and promising exploration in an ancient but undeveloped forest.

### **Scope and Main Content of Research**

My proposed research mainly covers the first and second aspects below and, if possible, all three of them.

#### **A. Sorting out the general theories on prediction in Buddhism**

Though the focus of my study is Buddhism in China, it is first and foremost Buddhism and then a religion that gets disseminated and popular in China. As what is taught and believed in China, in terms of the religious teachings, still can be traced back to its origins, it is necessary that the doctrinal origin of prediction theories in Buddhism be first sorted out before a more specific study is done on the religion in the context of China.

What is to be sorted out first includes the general ideas about and theories to explain augury and prediction in Buddhism. The doctrine system of Buddhism is based on, ontologically, pratyasamutpada and, epistemologically, the karma theory, the logic of which determines that the Buddhist theories generally oppose augury or prediction.

However, though Buddhism does not give a paper approval of augury and prediction, doctrines do exist which not only try to explain the unknown but also give prediction even

presupposition about the future. This is because what is inherent in the pratityasamutpada and the karma theory is the logic of the law of causation, which on one hand may teach that everything is up to karma and not to be predicted or decided by augury, and on the other hand, by these two theories are doing prediction itself. This law of causation is not only making a cause-and-effect inference and deduction of the unknown in the future, but also trying to find the causes of those inexplicable “unknowns” that have happened or are happening right now. It is also to be admitted that augury and prediction has been an important part of both Indian and Chinese cultural traditions, so Buddhism, which has been interacting with them, will find it virtually impossible to be immune to this part of the cultural resources. Therefore, theories of and ways of practicing prediction are never missing from Buddhism.

This can be well supported by ancient books and historical records. For example, Buddhism (like *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*) may argue that augury is a kind of mithyājāva and would be punished as pāyattika, there are Buddhist classics (for instance, *mahābhīṣeka-mantra*) which tell about the King of the Brahma Heaven teaching 100 chants from the Sutra of Divination, clearing people’s doubts and predicting their future, which is approved by Buddha.

So the second area to be sorted out is, by retrieval from a large number of sutras and religious disciplines, presenting this contrast between the doctrines and practices of Buddhism concerning augury and prediction. As there has been no systematic study on this, it will be of great academic value.

B. Theories of and ways of practicing prediction in Buddhism throughout the history of China

The focus of this part, of course, is Buddhism in the context of China, which will be studied against the background of China’s traditional culture and along the country’s history. The main content of this part consists of the following three aspects.

Firstly, the basic ideas. As mentioned above, Buddhism has seen comprehensive interaction and mutual influence between its prediction theories and relevant theories in China’s traditional culture, for example, the former has a more detailed and thorough explanation concerning weal and woe, which not only helped the religion stand out in the early years after it came to China but also has seen it getting accepted by and influencing the local culture.

Secondly, how prediction is explained and practiced in Buddhism in China. Among the three competing religions in China Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, a very important area of competition has been how well they can predict and explain their predictions. Buddhism, interestingly, opposes prediction in its basic doctrines, while in reality practices it. Then it will be significant for us to find out and analyze how the religion deals with this contrast, how it practices prediction, and in what way their prediction is effective.

Answers to these questions can be found in stories of and books by accomplished monks, as well as collected works debating with other religions like *Hong Ming Ji* and *Fo Dao Lun Heng*. Another important source would be writings and behaviors of scholar-bureaucrats, kings and emperors. Special attention would also be given to things like the practices and influences of *Zhan Cha Shan E Ye Bao Jing* and Buddhist explanations of the *Book of Changes*.

Other important issues of research will be some typical figures in the history, what they did and wrote, what influences they had at that time and what impact they have on today’s China.

And thirdly, the various manifestations. As Buddhism has been popular across various classes and groups of people in China, how prediction is perceived and practiced also varies. Besides,

with the general secularization of Buddhism since the Song and Ming dynasties, explanation and practices of prediction in this religion also changes. Though research on this will be quite difficult as relevant materials are highly scattered, this aspect is an indispensable part of the whole.

C. A survey on ideas of and ways of practicing prediction in Buddhism in modern China

This is a proposed extension of my research, which of course will be subject to the general design and requirements of the project.

**Research Methods and Approaches**

For this part of research, multiple methods will be adopted, according to what is requested by the research content and issues, for example documentary research, historical study, comparative study, etc. If surveys will be done, methods common to sociology may also be used. In terms of methodology, neutral value is to be maintained throughout the academic research. For instance, Buddhism will be seen from the view of historical development, looking at it as a part of the diversified cultural makeup of the human society. Theories and research methods in the modern knowledge system may also be applied, when it is required by the research content or specific issues.

**Intended Result**

It is intended that this part of research will be accomplished, satisfying all the requirements of the project and keeping consistent and coherent with its general design.