

Where is God?

Evolution of the Representation of Buddhism in the French Translations of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*

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Abstract: *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* (*Sishi'er zhang jing* 四十二章經) is traditionally considered to be the first Buddhist sūtra translated into Chinese. Interestingly, after more than a millennium, its French translation also became the first integral translation of a Buddhist sūtra published in western language. However, despite its importance, its French translations have never been studied systematically. The present study is a historical and textual research of its four consecutive French translations from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, respectively translated by Joseph de Guignes (1721–1800), Joseph Gabet (1808–1853) and Évariste Huc (1813–1860), Léon Feer (1830–1902), and Charles de Harlez (1832–1899). Through an analysis of vocabulary, style and interpretation of the translations, it shows that the image of Buddhism represented in these translations has changed from a monotheism, to a pantheism, a nihilism and a panpsychism. The evolution of its representations, as the result of a search for ‘God’ when defining a religion, is analyzed from the historical point of view which reengages the translations in the cultural controversies during the period when the discovery of the Orient was used to both challenge and defend the European conscience.

The First Sūtra

In the history of encounter between Buddhism and Europe, the special significance of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* has mostly been overlooked. Despite its well-established importance in the history of Chinese Buddhism, people seldom know that in Europe it was the first Buddhist sūtra integrally translated and published in any western language.¹ In the United States, its English translation was also included in the first book written in English introducing Zen Buddhism.² In a period of roughly one and a half century, from 1753 to 1906, *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* was one of the most translated Buddhist sūtras in the Western world: it was translated four times in French, four times in English, and once in German.³ However, these translations and their influence in the European world are almost never investigated. Most of the important research dealing with the reception of Buddhism in the Western world during the eighteenth to nineteenth century focus on macroscopic historical narratives,⁴ but rarely study the evolution of the representation of Buddhism through the translations of one specific sūtra. This study presents research to fill this gap in scholarly work. By comparing and analyzing the four French translations of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, I will discuss the evolution of the representation of Buddhism within the French-speaking world with a specific focus on the interpretations of the nature of ‘God’ in Buddhism as they are manifested in these translations.

¹ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 189.

² Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, trans. Suzuki.

³ The number of translations was calculated by myself. It is possible that the number exceeds what is provided. The reference of the French translations will be given in their introductions. Besides the translation of Suzuki listed above, there are three more English and one German translation. They are: Beal, ‘The Sutra of the Forty-two Sections, from the Chinese’, 337–49; Beal, ‘The Sutra of Forty-two Sections’, 188–203; Matsuyama, *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections*; Schiefner, ‘Das Buddhistische Sūtra’, 435–52.

⁴ See: Lubac, *La rencontre*; de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies*; Droit, *Le culte du néant*; Li, *Oumci fojiao xueshu shi*; App, *The Birth of Orientalism*.

Editions of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*

Despite the controversies on dating in regard to the first composition of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, it is clear that this sūtra has been circulating in China since the fifth century. The long period of transmission led to the formation of various editions which can be mainly divided into three categories:⁵

1. the edition of the Korean canon (*T* no. 784);
2. the edition with annotations by emperor Zhenzong of the Song Dynasty 宋真宗 (*T* no. 1794);
3. the edition with annotations from Shousui 守遂 (*X* no. 669).⁶

Among these three, the Korean edition is the most concise and usually considered the one closest to the original form of the sūtra. The Zhenzong edition, while following the basic structure of the Korean edition, contains some variant readings of a Mahāyānist nature. The Shousui edition, which differs greatly from the previous editions with its versified style, is mostly characterized by its numerous interpolations of ideas from Chan Buddhism.

From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, *The Sutra of the Forty-two Chapters* was translated into French four times. Its translators are, respectively, the French orientalist Joseph de Guignes

⁵ Tang, *Hanwei liangjin*, 23–26; Okabe, ‘Yonjū ni shō no seiritsu to tenkai’, 103–118. It should be noted that this division, restricted by the article length, is a generalization of the various editions existed. For example, the edition in *Caoxi baolin zhan* 曹溪寶林傳 (*The Caoxi Biographies of the forest of treasures*) compiled by Zhiju 智炬 in 801, although usually considered as the precursor of the Shousui edition, still differs significantly from it. Despite its earlier establishment, interestingly the Baolin edition is more significantly marked by Chan interpolations than the Shousui edition.

⁶ This edition has three different annotated versions: an edition annotated by Shousui and Liaotong 了童 (*X* no. 669), an edition annotated by Zhixu 智旭 (*X* no. 670), and an edition annotated by Xufa 續法 (*X* no. 671). The main texts of the three editions are the same, while the commentaries differ.

(1721–1800), the French Lazarist missionaries Évariste Régis Huc (1813–1899) and Joseph Gabet (1808–1853), the French orientalist Léon Feer (1830–1902), and the Belgian orientalist Charles de Harlez (1832–1899). While de Guignes based his translation on the Shousui edition of the sūtra,⁷ all the other translators used a different edition, which was a polyglot version of the Chinese Zhenzong edition translated into Tibetan, Mongolian and Manchu by the orders of emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (1711–1799) in 1781. The book is in a long format, similar to that of a traditional Tibetan book (*pecha*), where texts in the four languages are paralleled sentence by sentence. A copy of this edition was obtained by Huc and Gabet during their stay in Kumbum Monastery (Ta'er si 塔爾寺) in Qinghai province and brought back to France,⁸ where it was later used by Feer. De Harlez possessed another copy of the same edition of the sūtra. However, it should be noted that, although Huc and Gabet,

⁷ According to de Guignes, the edition he used was kept in the Bibliothèque Royale de France, which is now the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). Thanks to the help of Ms. Nathalie Monnet, I have found five editions of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* in the Department of Manuscripts in BNF, among which four belong to the edition Shousui. After analyzing the date of printing, the commentators, the accordance with de Guignes's description, and the dates entering the library, etc., the text numbered *Chinois 3695*, which has the old code of the Bibliothèque Royale (*Nouveau fonds 85*) and was printed in 1638, is more likely to be the original text used by de Guignes, but it cannot be confirmed. Urs App thinks it should be the *Chinois 6149* (App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 493), but this text does not have the old code from *Nouveau fonds*, which puts into question the entrance date of the text in the library. However, since the Bibliothèque Royale didn't have strong surveillance over their holdings, it is also possible that the text has already been lost. Léon Feer mentioned in his translation that he saw a hand copy of the original text of the sūtra by de Guignes under the code 3599 of the *Fonds chinois* (Feer, 'Le Sūtra en 42 articles', 77–78). Unfortunately, due to the rearranging and renumbering of all the documents, I was unable to find the manuscript.

⁸ It is now preserved in the Département des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Fonds tibétain*, numbered *Tibétain 465*.

Feer and de Harlez used the same xylograph edition of the sūtra, their translations each rely on different languages. Huc and Gabet mainly referred to the Mongolian version, while contrasting it with the other three languages, whereas Feer relied on the Tibetan version and de Harlez referred to the Chinese and Manchu version.⁹ Thus, these later translations can be considered to be translations of translations. The existence of the polyglot edition, which made the deciphering of the sūtra by specialists in different domains possible, might have also contributed to the popularity of the sūtra as an object of translation in eighteenth to nineteenth century Europe.

One Sūtra, Four Identities

Interestingly enough, within the four French translations of the same sūtra, four completely different religious identities were attributed to Buddhism. The four identities are primarily characterized by the definition of the nature of ‘God’ as given by their translators and interpreters. The following sections analyze the process of this evolution and discuss the reason for this change by resituating the translations in their historical contexts.

1. Joseph de Guignes and the ‘adoration of *chi*’

Joseph de Guignes was the first French translator of *The Sutra of the Forty-two Chapters*. The text he based his translation on belongs to the most altered edition of the sūtra, the Shousui edition. De Guignes started learning Chinese and other Oriental languages at the age of fifteen from his teacher Etienne Fourmont (1683–1745), one of the first French to study Chinese systematically. However, the academic accomplishment of this master is largely

⁹ Feer also contrasted the Tibetan text with a Chinese text of the Shousui edition (*Chinois 6147*). He commented on the divergences between the two editions in notes, but the main body of the translation followed strictly to the Tibetan version of the Zhenzong edition.

contested.¹⁰ After Fourmont's death, de Guignes succeeded him as secretary interpreter for oriental languages in the Bibliothèque Royale and, thus, embarked on a glorious career. He later became a member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1753 and held the chair in Syriac at the Collège Royal from 1757. These examples are just a few of the many honours he was bestowed throughout his life.

In de Guignes' time, the concept of 'Buddhism' as an independent religion had not yet been formed. Although missionaries from the previous century already began to notice the existence of a 'pan-Asian' religion and its likely Indian origin,¹¹ its doctrines and the identity of its founder was far from a settled matter. Not only were Buddhist doctrines often confused with those of other Indian religions, but also the Buddha himself was attributed multiple identities. In the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot (1713–1785), the image of the Buddha is a blend of various opinions circulating at the time. He was described as an Ethiopian who received his education in Egypt and later traveled to South India and civilized their people. The term 'Buddha' was also said to be the synonym of 'Hermes,' from Greek mythology.¹² This perception prevails in de Guignes's dissertation, where 'budda' [*sic*] was interpreted as 'Mercury' and 'Omi-to-fo' (*amitābha*) was said to signify 'oh, Fo who possesses om'.¹³

De Guignes's integral translation of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* was published in his monumental work, *History of the Huns (Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols et des autres Tartares occidentaux)*,¹⁴ tome one section two. The whole work, composed

¹⁰ The representative work of Fourmont, the *Gramatica Sinica*, was later exposed by Abel-Rémusat as a complete translation of the *Arte de la lengua mandarina* of Spanish missionary Francisco Varo. See Abel-Rémusat, *Nouveaux mélanges*, 298; Regarding the academic background of Fourmont, see App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 191–97.

¹¹ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*.

¹² Lubac, *La rencontre*, 122.

¹³ De Guignes, 'Recherches sur les Philosophies', 776 (H).

¹⁴ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*.

of four tomes and five volumes, was published from 1756 to 1758. De Guignes' *History* is characterized by his use of Eastern, especially Chinese, sources, which led him to conclude that people named Xiongnu, who troubled the border of the Han Dynasty's China, were the same people named Huns who ravaged Europe. This identification was later taken up by Edward Gibbon in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and gained wide influence.¹⁵ It was precisely in this work, which was so greatly appreciated by Gibbon, that de Guignes included the full translation of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, which he called the 'Book of Fo' (*le Livre de Fo*), as an illustration of the 'religion of Fo' (*religion de Fo*) worshipped by Shi Hu 石虎 (295–349), the emperor of the Later Zhao (Houzhao 後趙, 319–351).

In fact, de Guignes already showed his interest in *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* three years earlier, when he presented a paper entitled 'Research on the philosophers called Samanéens' in front of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1753.¹⁶ In this paper, he translated the preface of the sūtra as an introduction to the religion practiced by the Samanéens and presented in detail his understanding of the 'Indian religion' (*la religion indienne*) founded by Fo in India.¹⁷ According to him, the 'Indian religion' is composed of two sects: the internal doctrine and the external doctrine.¹⁸ The adepts of the external doctrine are called 'Brahmans' and those of

¹⁵ Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, 99–153.

¹⁶ De Guignes, 'Recherches sur les Philosophies'.

¹⁷ The term 'Samanéen' is the transcription known from the Antiquity of the Sanskrit term '*śramaṇa*' (or from a Prakrit). In the third century CE, Porphyry of Tyre already called the Indian philosophers 'Samanéen' (Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, tome 14, 590), but its variant forms can be found in Magasthenes's report on India as early as third century BCE (Lubac, *La rencontre*, 10–11).

¹⁸ De Guignes, 'Recherches sur les Philosophies', 787: 'Les dernières paroles de Fo produisirent deux sectes différentes. Le plus grand nombre embrassa ce que l'on appelle *la doctrine extérieure*, qui consiste dans le culte des Idoles; les autres suivirent *la doctrine intérieure*, c'est-à-dire qu'ils s'attachèrent à ce vuide & à ce néant dont Fo les avoit entretenus en mourant.'

the internal doctrine are called ‘Samanéens’.¹⁹ For de Guignes, *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* includes all of the internal teachings followed by the Samanéens: they worship a one and only almighty God, believe their soul is a part detached from Him, and, by means of contemplating this Deity, hope to join Him after death. However, this monotheistic practice is only accessible to the Samanéens.

On the other hand, the adepts of the external doctrines, bound to various mundane obligations such as practicing rituals, making offerings and prostrating themselves in front of statues, are subject to the process of transmigration. It is through this process that they manage to eliminate their sins. When their sins are completely eliminated, they will be reborn as Samanéens, the purest beings on earth. Once reborn as a Samanéen, free from all mundane obligations, the individual’s singular concern is to suppress all sensations, contemplate the one Deity, and wait to reach Him after death, thereby rejoining the origin of one’s soul and the creator of the universe.²⁰ This unique Deity, according to de Guignes, is ‘the principle of all things, he is all eternal, invisible, incomprehensible, almighty, perfectly sage, good, just, merciful and having no origin but himself’.²¹

From the above description, one can distinctly perceive the image of a personified God. Therefore, the ‘Indian religion’ described by de Guignes has very little to do with the Buddhism we are more familiar with. However, de Guignes claimed that every doctrine he presented can be found in the ‘Book of Fo’, that is, *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*.

While ‘Samanéen’ is used by de Guignes as the translation of

¹⁹ This way of dividing the Asian religion as ‘inner/outer’ doctrines has a long history. According to App, this model can be traced back to the description of Japanese Buddhism by Portugal missionaries in the sixteenth century. See App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 15–76.

²⁰ De Guignes, ‘Recherches sur les Philosophies’, 788.

²¹ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, tome I, part 2, 225: ‘Cet Etre suprême est le principe de toutes choses, il est de toute éternité, invisible, incompréhensible, tout-puissant, souverainement sage, bon, juste, miséricordieux, & ne tire son origine que de lui-même.’

shamen 沙門 (Buddhist monk), the unique Deity worshipped by them actually comes from his translation of the opening sentence in the preface of the sūtra in Table 1:

TABLE 1 Opening sentence in the preface of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*.

Sūtra passage Shousui edition	Our translation	Translation of de Guignes
爾時世尊既成道已，作是思惟，離欲寂靜是最為勝。 ²²	At this moment, having attained Enlightenment, the World Honoured One thought thus: ‘To keep away from passion and to stay in peace is the ultimate good.’	The true law of the adoration of Chi, consists only in meditation, in detachment from passion and in a perfect apathy. ²³

Shizun 世尊, one of the titles of Buddha, originally means ‘World Honored one’. De Guignes, however, separated the term in two and translated it as ‘the adoration of *Chi*’ (l’adoration de *Chi*). Following this translation, he explained further that the ‘*Chi*’ (*shi* 世) here means ‘century’ (*siècle*) in Chinese. This corresponds to the concept of ‘Aeon’ (*Éon*) in Valentinianism, which believes that ‘in a supreme sky, which can neither be seen nor named, lived eternally the perfect Aeon, whom they called the first principle, the first father’.²⁴ This perfect ‘Aeon’, who is the ‘Aeon of Aeons’ (*Éon des Éons*) is exactly what de Guignes translated as the ‘*Chi*’

²² *Si shi'er zhang jing zhu*, X no. 669, 37: 1.660c12–13.

²³ De Guignes, ‘Recherches sur les Philosophies’, 802: ‘La véritable loi de l’adoration du *Chi*, ne consiste que dans les meditations, dans l’éloignement de ses passions & dans une parfaite apathie.’ In all the French citations translated in this article, I choose to follow as far as possible the norms of transcription, spelling and punctuation as they appears in the original texts, despite the fact that they may seem incoherent with the style of the main text.

²⁴ De Guignes, 803: ‘qui prétendoient que, dans un ciel suprême, qui ne peut être ni vû ni nommé, résidoit éternellement l’Eon parfait, qu’ils appeloient le premier principe, le premier père.’

(*shi*) in the first line of *Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, the God for the Samanéens.²⁵

Other doctrines developed from this central Deity, according to the author, can also be found ‘proven’ in the sūtra. For instance, de Guignes translated the term *wuwei* 無為 (the unconditioned law) as ‘the religion of annihilation’ (*la religion d’anéantissement*). He explained that the ‘annihilation’ here did not mean the ‘destruction of the soul’ (*destruction de l’âme*), but rather the elimination of all the sensations so that one can reach the Deity who has created the universe out of nothingness.²⁶ The rhetoric of negation heavily used in the Shousui edition, the ‘one who is beyond thoughts, beyond attachment, beyond practice and beyond attainment’ (無念無住無修無證之者),²⁷ was translated by him as ‘the one who thinks nothing, does nothing, and who is in total insensitivity to all things’.²⁸ A person in this condition, explained de Guignes, in the eyes of a Samanéen, is a ‘being like a God’ (*être comme un Dieu*).²⁹ In the translation of Article 36 of the sūtra, de Guignes completely reinvented the entire passage, making it a perfect match for his transmigration theories in his system of ‘Indian religion’ (Table 2).

In the last paragraph of the sūtra, the creation of the universe is also mentioned. In the last article, where Buddha described his opinions in regard to various worldly objects, one finds the sentence, ‘I regard all the expedient means as the accumulation of illusory

²⁵ De Guignes, ‘Recherches sur les Philosophies’, 788, 803–04.

²⁶ De Guignes, ‘Recherches sur les Philosophies’, 788. De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, 226: ‘Ainsi le vuide & le néant, principes des Samanéens, ne signifient point la destruction de l’âme, mais ils désignent que nous devons anéantir tous nos sens, nous anéantir nous-même.’

²⁷ *Si shi’er zhang jing zhu*, X no. 669, 37: 1.662b5–b6.

²⁸ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, tome I, partie 2, 229: ‘celui qui ne pense point, qui ne fait rien & qui est dans une entière insensibilité de toutes choses.’

²⁹ De Guignes, ‘Recherches historiques sur la religion indienne. Second mémoire’, 254.

TABLE 2 Article 36 of the *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*.

Sutra passage Shousui edition	Our translation	Translation of de Guignes
佛言：人離惡道，得為人難；既得為人，去女即男難；既得為男，六根完具難；五根既具，生中國難；既生中國，值佛世難；既值佛世，遇道者難；既得遇道，興信心難；既興信心，發菩提心難；既發菩提心，無修無證難。 ³⁰	Buddha says: It is difficult to get away from the miserable states of existence and become human; Once human, it is difficult to get away from the female body and become a male; Once male, it is difficult to obtain all six faculties; Once obtained the five faculties, it is difficult to be born in the middle kingdom; Once born in the middle kingdom, it is difficult to be born in the time of a Buddha; Once born in the time of a Buddha, it is difficult to encounter the dharma; Once encountered the dharma, it is difficult to have faith in the dharma; Once had faith in the dharma, it is difficult to give rise to the bodhicitta; Once given rise to the bodhicitta, it is difficult to attain (the state) beyond practice and beyond attainment.	He who does not embrace my Law and who dies in this state, has to return among humans after death, until he knows it, observes it, and eventually becomes a perfect Samanéen. ³¹

³⁰ *Si shi'er zhang jing zhu*, X no. 669, 37: 1.665a1-4.

³¹ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, tome I, partie 2, 232: 'Celui qui n'embrasse pas ma Loi & qui meurt en cet état, est obligé de revenir parmi les hommes après sa mort, jusqu'à ce qu'il la connoisse, qu'il l'observe, & qu'il soit enfin devenu un parfait Samanéen.'

treasures' (視方便門, 如化寶聚).³² However, in the translation by de Guignes, this sentence is changed into:

I regard [...] the creation of the universe which has been drawn out of nothingness just as the simple change from one thing to another.³³

While it might be possible that de Guignes's explanation of the 'adoration of *Chi*' was an over-interpretation due to his linguistic deficiency, the two interpretations listed above clearly show signs of manipulation. The 'creation of the universe which has been drawn out of nothingness' does not relate at all to the original text. The content presented above is closer to an interpolation than a mistranslation.

Nevertheless, de Guignes's creative impulse did not merely stop here. In a later dissertation presented by him in 1776, this kind of 'creative translation' was pushed to a new level. In this article, de Guignes claimed to quote his own translation of *The Sutra of the Forty-two Chapters*. However, this so called 'quotation' does not correspond to any actual passage from the original text, nor to any of his own translations from 1756. What one finds is simply a cluster of all the ideas put forward by de Guignes about the religion of the Samanéens, adorned with some elements from the sūtra:

Thus, he has to abandon,' he (Buddha) says, 'his father, his mother, his family, his property, his wealth, and all the living facilities, to extinguish all his passions to the slightest desire, in order to reach the state of total annihilation of oneself, so as to meditate more freely on the Deity. He has to stay in this condition as motionless as the Mont Siumi.³⁴

³² *Si shi'er zhang jing zhu*, X no. 669, 37: 1.665c4. In the Zhenzong edition, the term 'huabao 化寶' is replaced by 'fabao 筏寶', see *Zhu sishi'er zhang jing*, T no. 1794, 39: 1.522c5.

³³ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, tome I, partie 2, 233: 'La création de l'univers qui a été tiré du néant, que le simple changement d'une chose en une autre.'

³⁴ De Guignes, 'Recherches historiques sur la religion indienne. Second mémoire', 253: 'Ainsi il faut abandonner, dit-il, son père, sa mère, ses parents, son

In this ‘quotation’, de Guignes no longer needs the adoration of ‘*Chi*’ and its convoluted explanation to conjure the God worshipped by the disciples of the religion of *Fo*. Instead, he implies that the term ‘Deity’ appears within the translation itself, and, at this point, the image of an immaterial, supreme, unique God who is the origin of all mankind and who created the universe out of nothing, has already been established in the center of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*.

2. Auguste Bonnetty and Pantheism

The second translation of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* was published almost a hundred years later in 1848, by two Lazarist missionaries named Joseph Gabet and Évariste Huc. They were sent on mission in China in the years 1835 and 1839, respectively, and traveled all around China for over ten years. They mostly journeyed in the region of Mongolia and Tibet and became the first French to reach Lhasa. It was in Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai, during their journey towards Lhasa, that they obtained the polyglot edition of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, which they translated during the rest of their journey. The completed translation was sent back to France near the end of their trip and was published in the *Journal Asiatique* in 1848 under the title, ‘The Forty-two Points of Teaching Preached by Buddha’ (*Les Quarante-deux Points d’Enseignement proférés par Bouddha*).³⁵

Both of them had very little to say about Buddhist teachings. In the ‘best seller’ travel memoir written by Huc, *A Journey through Tartary, Thibet, and China during the Years 1844, 1845 and 1846* (*Souvenirs d’un voyage dans le Tartarie et le Thibet pendant les années 1844, 1845 et 1846*),³⁶ Buddhism was simply called an ‘idolatry’,

bien, ses richesses & toutes les commodités de la vie, étouffer toutes ses passions, jusqu’au moindre desir, afin de parvenir à un état d’anéantissement total de soi-même, pour ensuite méditer avec plus de liberté sur la Divinité. Il faut être dans cet état aussi immobile que la montagne Siumi.’

³⁵ Huc and Gabet, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 535–57.

³⁶ Huc, *Souvenirs d’un voyage*.

and its doctrines were described as ‘always fuzzy and drifting in the middle of a vast pantheism which they cannot be aware of’.³⁷ In one of the only four notes in their translation, there is merely an attempt to clarify the concept of nirvāṇa, in which they proposed it should be understood as the Buddhist ‘apotheosis’, instead of the ‘nihilism’ that many scholars thought it to be.³⁸

Interestingly enough, when their work reached the hands of another Catholic in France, things suddenly became a lot more serious. This Catholic was Augustin Bonnetty (1789–1879), the founder of the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*. Unaware that this translation was already published two years ago, Bonnetty republished it in 1850 in his own journal, along with copious commentaries made by himself.³⁹ The *Annales*, founded by Bonnetty after he gave up priesthood in order to better promulgate the Catholic cause, was the militant organ of the Christian traditionalism which regained power during that time. With several articles related to Buddhism already published in this journal, the purpose of this particular publication was clearly not to simply introduce Buddhism to the French audience.⁴⁰ In the opening sentence of the preface, added by Bonnetty, to the translation of the sūtra, the readers are kindly warned that:

The work that we are publishing here, if it was to be separated from the traditional method presented with so much care only in our *Annales*,⁴¹ would be very dangerous.⁴²

³⁷ Huc, *Souvenirs d'un voyage*, 42: ‘est toujours indécise et flottante au milieu d'un vaste panthéisme dont ils ne peuvent se rendre compte.’

³⁸ Huc, 555.

³⁹ Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d'enseignement’, 279–334.

⁴⁰ Regarding the reaction of Catholic Traditionalism towards Buddhism, see Lubac, *La rencontre*, 184–202.

⁴¹ Here, the ‘traditional method’ indicates exclusively the ‘sacred tradition’ in Christianity.

⁴² Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d'enseignement’, 279: ‘Le travail que nous publions ici, s'il était séparé de la méthode traditionnelle exposée avec tant de soin dans nos *Annales* seules, serait très-dangereux.’

Following this advisement, Bonnetty suggested, like other certain philosophers of his time who went so far as to accuse Christianity of plagiarizing Eastern religions, that in order not to be beguiled by the seemingly Christian-like doctrines of the infidels, the only way to read the translation ‘correctly’ was by following the instructions given by himself, from a traditionalist point of view, in the commentaries. But what doctrines exactly does this ‘dangerous’ text contain?

In Article 4 of the sūtra, we see the following translation (Table 3):

TABLE 3 Article 4 of *The Forty-two Points of Teaching Preached by Buddha*.

Sūtra passage Zhenzong edition	Our translation	Translation of Huc and Gabet
優婆塞行五事不懈退， 至十事必得道也。 ⁴³	If a Buddhist layperson can practice persistently the five good actions, and proceed further to the ten, he will certainly attain Enlightenment.	The Oubachis devote themselves relentlessly in the observance of the 5 duties, and, having established themselves in the 10 actions that are called good, will certainly go and <i>confound themselves in the great principle</i> . ⁴⁴

A strange translation by Huc and Gabet should retain our attention. They rendered *dedao* 得道 (to obtain the Way) or ‘to obtain Enlightenment’, as ‘confound themselves in the great principle’. Bonnetty did not fail to notice this revealing expression to which he commented:

Here is pantheism for you; but the conclusion is logic; the one who found in himself, and only by the force of contemplation

⁴³ *Zhu sishi'er zhang jing*, T no. 1794, 39: 1.518b6–11.

⁴⁴ Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 283: ‘Les Oubachi s’adonnent sans relâche à l’observance des 5 devoirs, et, après s’être établis dans la pratique des 10 actes qu’on nomme bons, certainement ils iront se *confondre dans le grand principe*.’

and intuition, the absolute, the infinite and God; this person is an emanation of God, who, returning to its origin, will be confounded there with its principle.⁴⁵

It is clear that Buddhism was tagged by Bonnetty as a ‘pantheism’, which, according to him, advocates seeking God within oneself by means of contemplation. This understanding is further explained in his commentary to the translation of Article 10, where Buddha enumerates twenty conducts difficult for men to follow. The eighteenth of these difficulties reads, ‘It is difficult to save humans according to their faculties’ (隨化度人難).⁴⁶ However, in the translation of Huc and Gabet, this sentence is translated as, ‘to decide humans to follow their conscience, it’s difficult’,⁴⁷ which again allows space for Bonnetty to see the manifestation of pantheism. He comments:

We have to note here [...] the 18th [difficulty] where one attributes all the perfection to following one’s conscience, a precept that has entered our Catholic philosophies. We understand this well in the case of Buddhists, for whom the human conscience is *a part of God*, but for the Catholics who have the external and positive law of God, to direct them to their own conscience, is to eliminate the positive precepts of God and impose the principles of pantheism in which the society is plunged at this moment.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 283 (F): ‘Voilà le panthéisme; mais la conclusion est logique; celui qui a trouvé en soi, et par la seule force de la contemplation, de l’intuition, l’absolu, l’infini, Dieu; celui-là est une émanation de Dieu, laquelle retournant à son origine, doit s’y confondre avec son principe.’

⁴⁶ *Zhu sishi'er zhang jing*, T no. 1794, 39: 1.519c2.

⁴⁷ Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 286: ‘décider les hommes à suivre leur conscience, c’est difficile;’

⁴⁸ Gabet and Huc, 286 (K): ‘Il faut noter ici [...] le 18^e où l’on ramène toute la perfection à suivre sa conscience, précepte qui a passé dans nos philosophies *catholiques*. On comprend bien cela chez les bouddhiques où la conscience hu-

Here, Bonnetty made clear the differences between ‘pantheistic’ Buddhism and Catholicism: the Buddhists believe that the human conscience is a part of God, which allows men to find God within themselves; whereas, the Catholic God exists independently from the world he created and is therefore able to impose positive laws on it as he wishes. For Bonnetty, the claim to seek God within oneself is directly equal to the unacceptable denial of the objective existence of God.

This differentiation also helps mark the difference between God as seen by de Guignes and by Bonnetty in *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*. Although at first sight Bonnetty’s idea of ‘merging with God through contemplation’ may look similar to de Guignes’ ‘joining God’, the nature of God actually underwent a fundamental change. The God described by de Guignes is a creation God with personal characteristics, such as justice and mercy. Though both Gods are at the origin of human souls, in de Guignes’ development, human souls are already detached and fallen apart from God. Therefore, in order to go back to Him, it is necessary for men to wash off their sins through transmigration. The final goal of reunification is not reached through the process of meditation, but rather solely after death. For de Guignes, therefore, the prerequisite for reuniting with God is redemption instead of contemplation and God himself exists independently from the world he created. However, for Bonnetty, Buddhism is pantheistic, which means that God is not the creator of the world and that human souls were not formed by detaching themselves from Him. Instead, humans remain as constituent parts of a greater God. This explains why men are able to find God residing within themselves and seek the origin of their souls through contemplation alone. Thus, God no longer exists independently from the world, but rather becomes identified with the world itself.

maine fait *partie de Dieu*, mais pour les catholiques qui ont la loi extérieure et positive de Dieu; les renvoyer à leur conscience, c’est supprimer le précepte positif de Dieu, et peser les principes du panthéisme où la société se trouve plongée en ce moment.’

3. Feer and nihilism

The third translator of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, Léon Feer, was an orientalist who was well trained in philology and knew Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Mongolian, and, to some extent, Chinese. Starting from the study of Persian with Étienne Marc Quatremère (1782–1857), Feer published his first book on the subject of the ruins of Nineveh of Assyrian Empire.⁴⁹ At the same time, he received his Sanskrit education from Théodore Pavie (1811–1896) and Philippe-Edouard Foucaux (1811–1894), both of them students of Eugène Burnouf (1801–1894). Foucaux, the first French Tibetologist, also taught him Tibetan. In 1864, Feer took over Foucaux's chair of Tibetan at the Bibliothèque Nationale and started teaching Tibetan and Mongolian at the Collège de France in 1869. Throughout his career, Feer was a regular contributor to the *Journal Asiatique*, where he published not only the edited texts from Kangyur, but also abstracts of sūtras and articles discussing Buddhist doctrines. In addition, he also edited the *Samyutta-Nikāya* which was published by the Pali Text Society.

Feer quickly discovered the polyglot edition sūtra which was brought back by Huc and Gabet and kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale. He published a hand copied version of the Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian texts in 1867, but it was not until 1878, more than ten years later, that he published his translation of the entire sūtra together with the translation of *Dhammapada* by Fernand Hû.⁵⁰

In contrast to his predecessors, Feer's training in philology enabled him to translate the major part of the text without many errors and to match the Tibetan Buddhist terms with their Sanskrit forms. The interpretation of the Buddhist doctrines also underwent interesting changes. In Article 1 of the Zhenzong edition of the sūtra (Article 2 according to Feer's division), four stages of sainthood in śrāvaka Buddhism, the arhat, the *anāgāmin*, the *sakṛdāgāmin*, and the *srotāpana*, and their respective achievements are presented. Feer

⁴⁹ Feer, *Les Ruines de Ninive*.

⁵⁰ Feer, 'Le Sūtra en 42 articles'.

translated all the terms in Sanskrit in the body of his translation, but also provided further explanation in the notes:

The 4 degrees which are, from bottom to top, the states of Çrota-âpanna, — sakridâgami, — anâgami, — arhat, — are sufficiently characterized in this chapter. We shall only make a few comments: 1. It is not necessary to go through all the degrees; each one of them leads to the goal, but through a different path; 2. The goal to reach and that one reaches by gaining one of these degrees, is the state of Arhat; 3. By giving up life, the Arhat enters the Nirvâna, which is the end of existence; the text does not say it formally, but we could demonstrate that this is the direct consequence of the predication.⁵¹

As Feer rightly points out, there is no mention of the question of nirvâṇa or the nature of existence in the original text of the sūtra, but that does not stop him from firmly concluding that the ultimate goal pursued by every Buddhist was the ‘end of existence’.

Article 3 of the sūtra includes a description of the ‘Way’, the nature of which was described through negative rhetoric. However, this rhetoric clearly became absolute negation to his eyes (Table 4).

Feer’s translation of that negative rhetoric does not differ greatly from the previous ones. However, instead of translating *wuwei* 無為 using terms with strong implications, like de Guignes’ ‘religion of annihilation’ or Huc and Gabet’s ‘the uncreated nature’ (*la nature incréée*),⁵² Feer chose a more neutral and literal way of rendering the

⁵¹ Feer, ‘Le Sūtra en 42 articles’, 53: ‘Les 4 degrés qui sont, en allant de bas en haut, les états de Çrota-âpanna, — sakridâgami, — anâgami, — arhat, — sont suffisamment caractérisés dans ce chapitre. Nous ferons seulement quelques observations: 1° Il n’est pas nécessaire de passer par tous les degrés; chacun d’eux mène au but, mais par un chemin différent; 2° le but à atteindre et qu’on atteint lorsqu’on a conquis un des degrés, est l’état d’Arhat; 3° en quittant la vie, l’Arhat entre dans le Nirvâna, qui est la fin de l’existence; le texte ne le dit pas formellement; mais on pourrait montrer que c’est là une conséquence directe de l’exposé.’

⁵² This term is specially used in a Christian context to describe God, who creates the world but is not created by anything himself.

TABLE 4 Article 3 of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*.

Sūtra passage Zhenzong edition	Our translation	Translation of Feer
佛言：出家沙門者，斷欲去愛，識自心源，達佛深理，悟佛無為，內無所得，外無所求，心不繫道，亦不結業，無念無作，無修無證，不歷諸位而自崇最，名之為道。 ⁵³	Buddha says, the śramaṇa who leave their family, should cut off all passion and desires. Knowing the origin of the mind, they penetrate the teachings of Buddha, are enlightened in the unconditioned law of Buddha, obtain nothing within, and search nothing without. Their mind is not attached to the Way, nor does it produce any karma. They are beyond thoughts, beyond actions, beyond practices and beyond attainment. Without going through all the levels of attainment, being the ultimate itself is called the Way.	When the initiated Bhixus have eliminated desires, known thoroughly (the nature of) their own spirit, penetrated the deep meaning of Buddha's law (which is the principle of) non-composition, and when, by this means, they reach the point of obtaining nothing, searching for nothing, not being bound by the way, nor troubled by things, not thinking, not acting, not meditating, not manifesting outwards, not being attached to anything, so that by their own nature, they rise to a superior and incredible state, this is what we call the Way is all about. ⁵⁴

⁵³ *Zhu sishi'er zhang jing*, T no. 1794, 39: 1.518a9–12.

⁵⁴ Feer, 'Le Sūtra en 42 articles', 7: 'Quand les Bhixus initiés ont supprimé les désirs, connu à fond (la nature de) leur propre esprit, pénétré le sens profond de la loi du Buddha (qui est le principe de) la non-composition, et que, par ce moyen, ils en sont venus à ne rien obtenir, à ne rien rechercher, à n'être point liés par la voie, ni embarrassés par les affaires, à ne point penser, ne point agir, ne point méditer, ne rien manifester au dehors, ne s'attacher à rien, en sorte que, par leur propre nature, ils s'élèvent à un état supérieur et merveilleux, c'est en cela que consiste ce qu'on appelle LA VOIE.'

word as ‘non-composition’. Ironically enough, although de Guignes firmly argued that ‘annihilation’ does not mean the ‘destruction of the soul’, despite the fact that he used the very term ‘annihilation’ in his own translation, Feer does the exact opposite:

This whole chapter is extremely nihilist [...] What we wanted to describe in this article, is the highest degree of perfection, which consists in the most complete voluntary annihilation that one can possibly reach.⁵⁵

Thus, for Feer, Buddhism clearly represented nihilism, whose central doctrine consists in the destruction of oneself, even though none of these inclinations is shown in the terminology of the translation itself. In the comment under Article 35, where the teaching of ‘all is suffering’ is given, Feer again stated that ‘the purpose of the teaching of Buddha is to eliminate suffering by eliminating existence’.⁵⁶ Furthermore, when he later laid eyes on the *prajñāpāramitā* texts, the degree of nihilism he saw in them reached a whole new level. In 1883, he translated the *prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra* and described it as a ‘nihilism pushed to the last limits’, because ‘even the four noble truths are denied’.⁵⁷

In contrast to de Guignes’ historical context, Buddhist studies during Feer’s time already gained a solid development. Feer, as a Buddhist scholar, had privileged access to the latest academic studies. More decisively, before translating this sūtra, Feer could consult all the existent western translations, not only those by de Guignes and

⁵⁵ Feer, ‘Le Sūtra en 42 articles’, 53–54: ‘Tout ce chapitre est fort nihiliste [...] Ce qu’on a voulu décrire dans cet article, c’est le degré le plus élevé de la perfection, consistant dans l’anéantissement volontaire le plus complet auquel il soit possible d’atteindre.’

⁵⁶ Feer, 69: ‘l’enseignement du Buddha a pour but de supprimer la douleur, en supprimant l’existence.’

⁵⁷ Feer, ‘Prajñā-pāramitā-hṛdaya’, 176: ‘Quant à la nature, cet enseignement se distingue par un nihilisme poussé aux dernières limites: les quatre vérités elles-mêmes y sont niées.’

Huc and Gabet, but also the English translation by Samuel Beal (1825–1889) from 1862 and the German translation by Anton von Schiefner (1817–1879) from 1851.⁵⁸ However, this did not prevent him from reaching a totally different conclusion from his predecessors. Both the monotheistic God and the pantheist God are abandoned and replaced by what Feer proposed is the negation of God, the cult of nothingness.

4. Charles de Harlez and the ‘panpsyche’

The fourth translation of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* was completed in Belgium. Its translator, le chevalier Charles de Harlez de Deulin was born in 1832 in an old aristocrat family in Liège. Having given up his law studies and become member of the Society of Jesus in 1858, de Harlez originally devoted himself to the training of clerics in charge of secondary school teaching. However, his degenerating health prevented him from carrying on the mission and directed him to academic studies. In order to remediate the lack of knowledge in Indo-Iranian studies within the Catholic Church, he decided to devote himself to the subject and systematically learned Sanskrit and Avestan languages. In 1871, he became professor of Oriental Languages in the Catholic University of Leuven and taught students who later became the new generation of scholars in the field of oriental studies, among which we find eminent figures like Louis de la Vallée-Poussin (1869–1938).

De Harlez’s academic career can be divided into two periods: Iranian studies from 1871 to 1883 and Chinese and Manchu studies from 1883 to 1899. In the first period, his most important work was the full translation of the Avesta of Zoroastrianism.⁵⁹ After becoming a member of the Académie Royale de Belgique in 1883, he gradually diverted his interest towards Manchu and Chinese studies and started research in various topics, especially focusing on philosophy and religion, as shown by his translation of *Yijing* 易經 (The

⁵⁸ Feer, ‘Le Sûtra en 42 articles’, xx.

⁵⁹ De Harlez, trans. *Avesta, livre sacré des sectateurs de Zoroastre*.

Classic of Change).⁶⁰ It was toward the end of his life that he decided to translate *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, which he believed would help him understand the primary doctrines of Buddhism as they spread in first century China. Despite his dilapidated state of health, he managed to finish the translation based on the Manchu and Chinese texts in the same polyglot edition of the sūtra, and published it in January 1899,⁶¹ six months before his death.

The nihilism Feer implicated is not present in the writing of de Harlez, nor is Feer's peremptory tone. It was replaced in de Harlez's writing by a sense of confusion. In the preface to his translation, de Harlez expressed his hesitation in calling Buddhism, which is 'a doctrine which dismisses all divinities', a religion.⁶² This feeling can also be perceived in his interpretation of the text. On the question of the attainment of an arhat, which Feer described as 'the end of existence', de Harlez provided a completely different interpretation:

Buddhist books are full of the most pompous descriptions of the state of glory and the happiness of the Arhat. It is quite difficult to understand what is the state of these perfect beings. They have overcome existence, they are extinguished in the Nirwāna like a lamp yet they still exist.⁶³

This explanation by de Harlez sounds more like a question to himself. Feer's 'the end of existence' somehow became the incomprehensible state where the arhat 'overcomes existence yet still exists'. Article 13 (Article 14 in de Halez's organization) tells a story of five colors covering the surface of water, a parable used to illustrate the

⁶⁰ De Harlez, *Le Yib-King*.

⁶¹ De Harlez, *Les Quarante-deux leçons de Bouddha*.

⁶² De Harlez, 3.

⁶³ De Harlez, 37: 'Les livres bouddhiques sont pleins des descriptions les plus pompeuses de l'état de gloire et de bonheur de l'Arhat. Il est assez difficile de comprendre ce qu'est l'état de ces parfaits. Ils ont vaincu l'existence, ils sont éteints dans le Nirwāna comme une lampe et cependant ils existent encore.' The underline is ours.

five obstacles (*wugai* 五蓋)⁶⁴ covering the true nature of the mind. In his commentary on this paragraph, de Harlez illustrated his understanding of the worldview of Buddhism as follows:

The Buddhists insist on the idea that the passions form a veil which blinds the spirit and that, once freed from this darkness, it can see all there is in this world. This is because they do not attribute an individual soul to everyone. Human being, formed by aggregates spread everywhere, participates in a kind of general spirit, a panpsyche which gives them intelligence and which, consequently, penetrates and knows all.⁶⁵

In de Harlez's description, we see once again a familiar model of interpreting Buddhism. That is, Buddhists believe their minds belong to a larger conscience, whether it be a God independent from the world as advanced by de Guignes, a God understood as the universe itself as suggested by Bonnetty, or a pervasive conscience which penetrates and knows all as described by de Harlez. Nevertheless, what gradually fades away in this model of interpretation is the central status ascribed to the personified identity of God: from God the creator of the universe to God the principle of human souls, until 'God' finally became a nebulous, indescribable mass of conscience that dismisses all divinities.

⁶⁴ According to commentaries of Zhenzong in *Zhu sishi'er zhang jing*, T no. 1794, 39: 1.520a16–a18, the 'five obstacles' are 'avarice, hatred, ignorance, agitation and misbehaviour' (貪慾、嗔恚、癡、掉舉惡作、昏沉睡眠). But according to the āgama tradition and the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論, they are 'avarice, hatred, sleepiness, agitation and regret, doute' (貪慾、嗔恚、睡眠、掉悔、疑) see *Za aban jing*, T no. 99, 2: 24.171c03–c04; *Da zhidu lun*, T no. 1509, 25: 17.183c21–185a15.

⁶⁵ De Harlez, *Les Quarante-deux leçons de Bouddha*, 43: 'Les bouddhistes insistent sur cette idée, que les passions forment un voile qui aveugle l'esprit, que celui-ci, dégagé de ces ténèbres, voit tout ce qui est au monde. C'est qu'ils n'attribuent pas une âme particulière à chacun. L'être humain, en se formant d'agrégats répandus partout, participe à une espèce d'esprit général, une panpsychie qui leur donne l'intelligence et qui, conséquemment, pénètre et connaît tout.'

Who was creating the Gods?

The four translations exhibited four different images of Buddhism: from monotheism, to pantheism, to nihilism, and then to panpsychism. The drastic change in the identity of Buddhism cannot be simply attributed to the difference in the understanding of the texts as a result of language barriers. Behind the veil of academic research, we can perceive a more decisive motivation than the simple thirst for knowledge.

Eighteenth-century Europe was a time of soul-searching. The Enlightenment did considerable damage to the authority of the Church. In *The Crisis of the European Conscience*,⁶⁶ Paul Hazard (1878–1944) expressed his surprise towards the dramatic contrast between social beliefs in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century: from divine rights to natural rights, from tradition to reason. The discovery of Oriental civilizations, which were said to be more ancient than the Flood or even the Creation, greatly challenged the worldview founded on Biblical authorities. The need for new apologetic references was pressing, both for the conservatives and the reformists.

The ‘Ur-tradition’ (pristine tradition) is a concept proposed by Urs App which described a model of reasoning prevalent in the discourse of European literary milieu during that period of time. It is characterized by the tendency to link one’s own idea or position to an ancient civilization, religion or wisdom assumed to be original and pure in order to demonstrate one’s legitimacy, while, on the other hand, accusing one’s opponent’s idea of being a more recent and debased form of that tradition.⁶⁷ Ironically, both sides of the campaign used the same logic. The reformists took texts from the Orient, praised their antiquity and accused Christianity of plagiarism. Meanwhile, the conservatives took the same texts, claimed that none of them outdated the Flood and accused their doctrines of simply being a corrupted heritage of the Gospels. This kind of

⁶⁶ Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*.

⁶⁷ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 8–9, 254–61.

argument parallels the controversies between Buddhism and Daoism during the initial period of Buddhism's introduction to China. Both sides were trapped in the same line of reasoning as they argued incessantly over whether it was Buddha who taught Laozi or Laozi who civilized the barbarians.⁶⁸

It was precisely under these circumstances that de Guignes, who believed that all human civilizations began with Noah's Ark, concluded the following after his translation of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*:

Those who set their eyes on this will find nothing but Christianity as taught by the Christian Heresiarchs of the first century, with the admixture of some Pythagoras ideas on metempsychosis, and some other principles drawn from India. This book itself could be one of those fake gospels that circulated then; all the precepts that *Fo* gives, with the exception of several particular ideas, seem drawn from the Gospel; I am all the more prone to support this idea that in Chinese History, Jesus Christ is called *Fo*.⁶⁹

Everything was explained using this logic: the monotheism of the Samanéens was but a travesty of Christianity, the divergences had their origins in Western philosophy, and even Buddha was probably none other than Jesus. At the same time, as App demonstrated, in order to contradict the attempt of several writers of his time to use Chinese annals to attack Biblical authority,⁷⁰ de

⁶⁸ Zürcher, *The Buddhist conquest of China*, 288–320.

⁶⁹ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, tome 1, part 2, 233: 'Ceux qui jetteront les yeux dessus, n'y trouveront qu'un Christianisme tel que les Hérésiarches chrétiens du premier siècle l'enseignoient, après y avoir mêlé des idées de Pythagore sur la métempsycose, & quelques autres principes puisés dans l'Inde. Ce livre même pourroit être du nombre de ces faux évangiles qui couroient alors; tous les préceptes que *Fo* donne, à l'exception de quelques idées particulières, semblent tirés de l'Évangile; je suis d'autant plus porté à soutenir ce sentiment que dans l'Histoire Chinoise Jésus-Christ est appelé *Fo*.'

⁷⁰ De Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns*, tome 4, 347.

Guignes did not hesitate to destabilize the textual foundation of his own *History of the Huns* by claiming China was a recent civilization colonized by the Egyptians. Later, when his opponents turned to praise India as the ‘cradle of humanity’, de Guignes hastened to prove that India was just as young as China and that the Indians never ‘civilized’ the Chinese.⁷¹

While de Guignes’ biased translation was made under the pretense of academic study, Bonnetty’s, on the other hand, did not even attempt to be covert about using the sūtra to defend his own ideology. In his commentary to the whole text, he used only two complementary methods: the first was to praise the doctrines that he found similar to the Catholic ones and call them heritage of the Tradition or borrowings from the Gospels; the second was to denigrate all divergences from what he believed to be true Catholic values, label them corrupted morals, and impute them to his opponents.

Bonnetty’s two methods of commentary were actually directed towards two different groups of adversaries. He used the first type of discourse to attack those who utilized Asian texts to challenge the authority of the Church. This is well-illustrated in Bonnetty’s commentary on the idea of ‘returning good for evil’ in Article 6 of the sūtra:

Beautiful precepts which should prove that, even in the pagan sects, one still practices the Christian virtues, such as return good for evil. Those are beliefs that have disrupted the mind of several so-called thinkers; they were no longer willing to believe in Christianity, just because they saw beautiful moral precepts among the infidels; they even concluded that Christianity had drawn its doctrines from there. They forgot only two things; first that there existed a pure and revealed moral from the beginning of the world, and practiced by the founding patriarchs of the peoples; second, that this text is perhaps from the 8th or the 13th century, and that *it* has borrowed from Christianity.⁷²

⁷¹ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 188–253.

⁷² Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 284 (H): ‘Beaux préceptes qui doivent prouver que, même dans les sectes païennes, on

On the other hand, interpreting Buddhism as pantheism facilitated the second type of discourse. This was directed against the ‘intuit’ Catholic philosophers who advocated seeking God within oneself without the instructions given by the church. This kind of claim was condemned by Bonnetty as equivalent to the explicit denial of the independent existence of God, which was just as intolerable. A typical illustration of this kind of discourse can be found in Bonnetty’s commentary on the last article of the sūtra, where Gabet and Huc made the following translation in Table 5.

In regard to this translation, Bonnetty commented:

After several very beautiful sentences on the vanity of things in this world, one will notice the principle of the *illumination* and of the pantheism placed in the *ecstatic* contemplation, and in the truths that are germinating in our soul. These are the principles of the German pantheism and of the French eclecticism. The philosophy didn’t make a single step forward since that time. Why should these principles be found expressed or implied in our Catholic philosophies?⁷³

pratique encore des vertus évangéliques, telles que de rendre le bien pour le mal. Voilà de ces croyances qui ont bouleversé la tête de quelques-uns de ceux qui sont appelés penseurs; ils n’ont plus voulu croire au Christianisme, parce qu’ils ont vu de beaux préceptes de morale chez les infidèles; ils en ont même conclu que c’était là que le Christianisme avait puisé sa doctrine. Ils oubliaient seulement deux choses; la première, c’est qu’il a existé une morale pure et révélée dès le commencement du monde, et pratiquée par les patriarches fondateurs des peuples; la deuxième, c’est que cette pièce est peut-être du 8e ou du 13e siècle, et que c’est elle qui a emprunté au Christianisme.’

⁷³ Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 332 (M): ‘Après plusieurs sentences très-belles sur la vanité des choses de ce monde, on remarquera le principe de l’*illumination* et du panthéisme posé dans la *contemplation extatique*, et dans les vérités qui sont *en germe* dans notre âme. Ce sont les principes du panthéisme allemand et de l’éclectisme français. La philosophie n’a pas fait un pas depuis cette époque. Pourquoi faut-il que ces principes se trouvent exprimés ou sous-entendus dans nos philosophies catholiques?’

TABLE 5 Last article of *The Forty-two Points of Teaching Preached by Buddha*.

Sutra passage Zhenzong edition	Our translation	Translation of Huc and Gabet
佛言：吾……視求禪定 如須彌柱……視平等者 如一真地。 ⁷⁴	Buddha says, I [...] regard the seeking of dhyāna as the pillar of Sumeru, [...] the equality [of beings or dharmas] as the ultimate ground of truth.	I regard the ecstatic contemplations as a pillar as firm as the Soumiry mountain [...] I regard the class of peaceful and tranquil people as a <i>field where germinates the truths</i> . ⁷⁵

Although in the original translation the ‘ecstatic contemplation’ and the ‘field where germinate the truths’ are not directly related, in Bonnetty’s eyes, they made perfect sense by matching them to the idea of ‘seeking within the direct inspiration of the God by means of contemplation’. This idea was advanced by pantheists and illuminists in the nineteenth century, which helped him identify the real nature of the new trend in Catholic philosophy. For Bonnetty, it hardly mattered what Buddhism really was. *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* was nothing but a convenient receptacle to help him recycle all the ideas he did not like, and pantheism was just one of the tags he used to besmirch his opponents. Once the receptacle was filled up, he was ready to turn to his adversaries, pour out the hotchpotch and ask his enemies: ‘Look, only the heretics like Buddhists believe people can find God in their minds, are you, our Catholic philosophers, worse than the infidels?’

⁷⁴ *Zhu sishi'er zhang jing*, T no. 1794, 39: 1.522, c3–8. In the *Taishō* edition, the text is formulated as ‘平視等者為一真地’ which should be an edition error, where the ‘平視等者’ should be changed into ‘視平等者’. In the polyglot edition preserved in France, the latter version is proposed.

⁷⁵ Gabet and Huc, ‘Les Quarante-deux points d’enseignement’, 332: ‘Je regarde les contemplations extatiques comme une colonne aussi ferme que la montagne Soumiry [...] Je regarde la classe des gens paisibles et tranquilles comme *un champ où germent les vérités*.’

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the rise of philology caused considerable progress in Buddhist studies in Europe. However, the main contributor to this progress, Eugène Burnouf, also established the link between Buddhism and the concept of nothingness.⁷⁶ In his groundbreaking work, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*,⁷⁷ ‘nirvāṇa’ was translated as ‘complete annihilation’ (*anéantissement complet*). Though he cautiously admitted to the existence of major divergence in different Buddhist schools, he still affirmed that ‘according to the most ancient school’, ‘nirvāṇa’ signifies ‘the definitive destruction of body and soul’.⁷⁸ The immense authority of Burnouf caused the concept to spread rapidly. However, when it reached French intellectuals like Victor Cousin (1792–1867), Jules Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (1805–1895) and Ernest Renan (1823–1892), the discretion of Burnouf disappeared, and Buddhism celebrating the ‘deplorable idea of annihilation’ officially became the ‘cult of nothingness’ (*culte du néant*), which had ‘nothing in common with Christianity, which is as much above it as our European societies are above the Asian societies’.⁷⁹

This sentiment of disdain was sometimes also revealed involuntarily in Feer’s comments. For example, in Article 9 of the sūtra, filial piety towards the parents was praised as the most meritorious conduct among all the acts of merit, even including the offerings to Buddha. Regarding this, Feer commented in the notes that this mention of filial piety should be a posterior interpolation. At the same time, he also noted that, although the text was not authentic, compared to serving Buddha, the idea of serving his own parents is a lot more ‘sensible’.⁸⁰

A ‘nihilist’ Buddhism, in the meantime, provided a new device

⁷⁶ Droit, *Le culte du néant*, 94 ; Lubac, *La rencontre*, 176.

⁷⁷ Burnouf, *Introduction à l’histoire du bouddhisme indien*.

⁷⁸ Burnouf, 110.

⁷⁹ Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, *Le christianisme et le bouddhisme*, 2–3: ‘Rien de commun avec le christianisme, qui était autant au-dessus de lui que nos sociétés européennes sont au-dessus des sociétés asiatiques.’

⁸⁰ Feer, ‘Le Sūtra en 42 articles’, 71.

for the apologists of the Catholic church to resist the invasion of Eastern ideals. From this perspective, Buddhism became a religion that ‘deserved disdain more than study’. In *Buddha and his religion* (*Bouddha et sa religion*), Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire described the purpose of his writing as thus: ‘By publishing this book, I have but one intention: that is to heighten, by a striking comparison, the greatness and the truthfulness of our spiritualist beliefs’.⁸¹

By the end of the nineteenth century, when de Harlez published his translation and as more and more scholarly works came to refute this thesis, nihilist Buddhism was no longer the fashion. However, traces of the heritage from the past were not totally swept away either. In the interpretation of de Harlez, Buddhism is still described as ‘inert’ and ‘insensitive’. Those judgments were not included in the body of translation, like in the work of de Guignes, but instead in the commentaries of the author hidden in the notes. The charity of Buddhism was also condescendingly criticized as ‘extending even to animals, even to worms, and to the verge of ridiculousness’.⁸² Interestingly, unlike his peremptory predecessors, de Harlez showed a lot more hesitation, as well as a slight sense of distance. It seemed that Buddhism, after becoming more familiar to the European world throughout the past century, gradually began to appear stranger and more incomprehensible instead.

Conclusion

Roger-Pol Droit concluded in his book that the establishment of the ‘cult of nothingness’ is a process where, by a projection of the vacillating spirit of Europe, a religion ‘without’ God became ‘atheistic’ and God-denying.⁸³ Through this study, one can see that the

⁸¹ Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, *Le Bouddha et sa religion*, 1: ‘En publiant ce livre, je n’ai qu’une intention: c’est de rehausser, par une comparaison frappante, la grandeur et la vérité de nos croyances spiritualistes.’

⁸² De Harlez, *Les Quarante-deux leçons de Bouddha*, 40.

⁸³ Droit, *Le culte du néant*, 232.

various images of the Buddhist God created by translations of the same sūtra, ranging from the world's creator, to the world itself merged with the human souls, and then to nothingness, are actually all projections of the European conscience under crisis. This kaleidoscope effect is the result of the different methods and perspectives employed by the authors. During this process, 'God', as the center of the traditional definition of 'religion'⁸⁴ in the Western world, naturally became the first thing to search for when trying to understand and define a newly discovered religion. In the particular process of interpreting Buddhism through the translation of *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters*, everyone was trying to find and fix the place and nature of God: from the monotheistic God, to the pantheist God, to the denial of God. Regardless, God was always the ultimate standard for defining a religion. It is precisely because of this that a Buddhism without God became so appalling to the French intellectuals, just like the insecurity experienced by the European world during the fall of clerical authority.

Nevertheless, as God the creator gradually became an omnipresent mass of consciousness, it seemed that the central role of God in defining a religion was also questioned. When de Harlez expressed his hesitation as to whether a doctrine 'dismissing the deities' can still be called a religion, a crack in the conventional definition of 'religion' became apparent and an opportunity to broaden the concept itself was presented. It was perhaps only when the image of Buddhism changed from familiar to strange, its interpretation from certainty to hesitant, and the questions from focusing on the 'being' to the 'having' of Buddhism, that the understanding of Buddhism in the Western world had truly turned a new page.

⁸⁴ At least after the redefinition of 'religion' by Christianity in the third century CE. On the etymology of religion and the historical context of its redefinition, see King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 35–37.

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