

# Universal Buddhist Temple (世界佛教會): Embracing a Myriad Dharmas<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:*

*The present article is a first attempt to provide some basic details on the history, function and orientation of the Universal Buddhist Temple. The Universal Buddhist Temple stands as the oldest functioning Chinese Buddhist Temple in Vancouver and has been supportive of other temples that have been established on the Lower Mainland throughout its history. What follows is a recounting of the basic history of this enduring community.*

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## Introduction

British Columbia is now home to Buddhist temples, centres, and organizations representing a diversity of immigrant communities: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tibetan, Thai, and Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup> As expected, represented among these groups, is a wide spectrum of doctrine and practice.<sup>3</sup> Immigrant communities associated with institutional origins in specific regions of Asia, along with their relevant languages, constitute the core supporters and participants at the various organizations. However, it is common to find participants from a variety of backgrounds attending weekly ceremonies and the periodic larger festivals associated with, for example, the lunar New Year and the birthday of the Buddha. There are also frequent accommodations made for a variety of languages when convening sessions for the purpose of general *dharma* talks, *sūtra* study or meditation practice. It is also common to find a

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blending of practices within one temple; practice of different approaches to meditation coexists with Pure Land ceremonies. It is also possible for parallel congregations to emerge and be accommodated under a single institutional roof. While a significant degree of flexibility and willingness to accept diverse immigrant populations is apparent, there remains a consistent emphasis on orthodoxy as a means for grounding legitimacy and authority. Among Chinese Buddhist organizations a commitment to the Mahāyāna is a given and, based on numerous interviews with many group leaders, is so fundamental as to be beyond mention. The formalities of public ceremony are widely shared and so cannot constitute a ground for identity and orthodoxy. Perhaps the most consistent means for demarcating both are claims to lineage through a founding teacher whose life-story and roots in Asia serve as compelling narratives capable of evoking faith in the methods and teachings represented in a temple, centre or service organization. Thus, for Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu shan 法鼓山) the teachings and example set by Master Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1930-2009) serve as the root.<sup>4</sup> At Gold Buddha Monastery a room is set aside for the veneration of a relic (*śarīra*) of founding Master Hsüan Hua 宣化 (1918-1995) and, again, his life-story serves as an inspiration to those officiating at or attending ceremonies at the monastery.<sup>5</sup> The same kind of inspiration is provided for hundreds of volunteers supporting the activities of the Lower Mainland's chapter of the Buddhist social service and relief organization, Tzu Chi 慈濟,<sup>6</sup> through the example and active leadership of founder Cheng Yen 證嚴. This standard feature of Buddhist institutions is not in evidence at Universal Buddhist Temple (UBT) located at Fraser Street and 49th Avenue on Vancouver's East Side. Rather than the story of an inspiring teacher and a recounting of their life story and teaching-lineage what is presented is the story of a community of resolute lay people committed to providing a space for Vancouver's growing Chinese immigrant community to gather and hear the teachings of the Buddha without any overarching lineage, or founding, teacher. Indeed, there have been both Theravāda and Mahāyāna monks and nuns in residence at UBT throughout its history. The subjects of temple meetings are not confined to discussions of Buddhist doctrine, texts or meditation practice. Over the years there have been, for example, many sessions devoted to careful study of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and Daoist meditation. What follows is a recounting of the basic history of this enduring community. To date, the author has been unable to locate a single academic article or book that has examined UBT and yet it stands as the oldest functioning Chinese Buddhist Temple in Vancouver and has been supportive of other temples

that have been established on the Lower Mainland throughout its history. The present article is a first attempt to provide some basic details on the history, function and orientation of UBT.

There are elements missing from the present historical overview: Firstly, while collection of documents, interviews and participant observation have served to provide the content of this historical overview no detailed and widely distributed questionnaires were used to gather more “finely grained” data. Such work is needed if this significant Canadian Buddhist institution is to be better understood in terms of immigrant history, demographic profile, congregational motivations for participation, and perceived position vis-à-vis other Buddhist institutions in British Columbia and beyond. Secondly, no information has been gathered concerning the number of Canadian Buddhist temples that are significantly similar to UBT for the purpose of making observations based on broad comparative efforts. The organizational nature of UBT and its orientation to Buddhist practice and doctrine is shaped in no small measure by the religious milieu out of which its founders and early membership emerged. Thus, “similar” Buddhist organizations would be based on the religious perspectives and aspirations of migrants from Hong Kong constituting two waves of immigration: The first wave began with immigrants who responded first to the Liberal Government’s significant revision of immigration policy instituted in 1967. The second was tied to the pull of the Conservative Government’s introduction of the investor class of immigrant in the late 1980s and the push of Tiananmen Square in 1989 coupled with rising anxiety over the transition of Hong Kong rule to the People’s Republic of China. The religious perspective of this constituency perhaps lends itself to establishing a Buddhist organization beyond the constraints of lineage and well-defined doctrinal and sectarian affiliations. Presently, the author is unaware of such comparable institutions in British Columbia. One would expect that Ontario, with the largest Chinese immigrant population, would be home to some comparable Buddhist organizations. Wider theoretical speculation awaits more detailed data and a broader Canadian survey.

## 1. “Five Pillars” and the Founding of UBT

In the late 1960s, the nucleus that would become UBT was formed around the figure of Mr. C.C. Lu 呂家琦 (1899-1982), a Taiwan-based businessman who owned an import-export business. His origins are unclear though Sichuan was his ancestral home. Interviewees suggested it

was likely he left China with the Nationalist Party (Guomindang 國民黨) to establish a new life on Taiwan. It was Mr. Lu who provided the principal financial support necessary to rent a space for the establishment of a temple in Vancouver. As UBT's founding president, he had a strong interest in Buddhism and longstanding relationships with lay Buddhist organizations in Hong Kong. He firmly believed that the new Chinese immigrant community in Vancouver needed somewhere they could go to continue practices familiar to them back in Hong Kong and desired to spread Buddhist teachings to North America. The first space, rented from 1968 until 1977, was located above the Chinese Freemasons at 116 East Pender Street in the heart of Vancouver's Chinatown. A Qing dynasty standing Buddha was installed in 1972 after a loan agreement was reached with the Royal Ontario Museum (R.O.M.) so that UBT could borrow the statue with subsequent two-year renewal periods.<sup>7</sup> While there was no formal board of directors there was a group known to present members as the "five pillars," including Mr. C.C. Lu mentioned above. Details on the remaining four are also very sparse due to a lack of documentation and gradual loss of institutional memory, as newer generations know less about the beginnings of UBT and the personalities who established both the temple and its general orientation.

Master K.S. Fung 馮公夏(1903-2000), despite his lay status, was revered as an important temple leader and as the principal teacher who shared his knowledge of Buddhism and his general insights into Chinese philosophy and culture.<sup>8</sup> Master Fung was born in Guangdong and from an early age took a keen interest in the *Yijing* and its complex commentarial traditions. He also developed an interest in Yogācāra thought and through his *Yijing* studies came to know a fellow independent scholar named Wei Tat (Wei Da 韋達) who was a co-founder of the Hong Kong Buddhist Faxiang Society (香港佛教法相學會).<sup>9</sup> Wei Tat is also famed for his translation into English of the *Chengweishi lun* 成唯識論 (skt. *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi-śāstra*).<sup>10</sup> A eulogy to Master Fung, prepared by Li Runsheng 李潤生 of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, recounts that in 1937 Master Fung began following the teachings of a Tantric Buddhist teacher named Rongseng kanbu 榮增堪布.<sup>11</sup> It goes on to state that, while he had a strong interest in the theoretical dimensions of Buddhism, he was also firmly committed to the marriage of theory and practice described in conventional non-Buddhist terms as embracing both "substance" and "function" (*ti* 體/ *yong* 用) and, in more Buddhist-specific terminology, as "noumenon" and "phenomenon" (*li* 理 / *shi* 事). Li recounts that in 1956

Master Fung, following his interest in Tantric Buddhism, went to Nepal to participate in a *dharma* assembly after which he visited the site where the Buddha is supposed to have left footprints and, while there, visited a “great teacher” of yoga. Upon returning to Hong Kong he founded a yoga society and began popularizing the exercise.<sup>12</sup> In 1960 Master Fung immigrated to Canada and in 1968 cooperated with a small group to found UBT in Vancouver.

Stephen Béla Renovich (1921-1992) worked in the City of Vancouver’s engineering department.<sup>13</sup> After relocating from the United States to Canada he became a founding member of UBT. His interest in Buddhism started in the late 1940s when he was in his late 20s. He discovered and became an avid reader of the *Young East* magazine, supported by several Japanese academics including D.T. Suzuki, and began corresponding with its chief editor, Professor Senchu Murano, who introduced him to Nichiren Shū 日蓮宗 Buddhism and, in 1964, arranged the formal introduction of Renovich to his pen pal and future Japanese wife at the Nichiren Shū headquarters in Tokyo.<sup>14</sup> After the couple settled in Vancouver they began visiting Reverend Ryusho Matsuda at the Seattle Nichiren Buddhist Church. The circumstances surrounding Renovich’s initial friendship with the other founders of UBT are unclear but it is safe to assume that his nearly twenty-year interest in Buddhism, combined with the availability of relatively few Buddhist institutions, would have increased his likelihood of participation.<sup>15</sup> After joining the UBT group he became one of the main teachers, frequently contributing lectures on Buddhism for the general membership. His role as one of the temple’s educators continued up until his death in 1992.

James T. Lee 李德齡 (1919-2010) earned a law degree from Dongwu (Suzhou) University but with the advent of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the outbreak, and aftermath, of World War II he had little opportunity to practice. In the early 1950s he left China and took a job at a newspaper on Taiwan and subsequently, after returning to Hong Kong in the late 1950s, took up a position as a writer for the prestigious *Far East Economic Review*. There he became friends with Master Fung and C.C. Lu. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution in China, and associated labour unrest in Hong Kong, James Lee and his wife elected to immigrate to Canada. Upon arriving in Vancouver he made immediate efforts to engage with broader Canadian society based on his credentials as a writer. He joined the press club and apparently came to know the editor of the *Vancouver Sun* quite well; he also became a member of the British

Columbia Social Credit Party during the W.A.C. Bennett years (1952-1972). James Lee's contribution to UBT lay principally in the realm of garnering public support for the temple through his network of friends. It was explained, for example, that the presence of M.P. John Fraser at UBT events was a result of James Lee's efforts.

Don Sue 蕭敦 (no dates) is the only one of the "five pillars" who was Canadian-born with his family roots on the west coast extending back before the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. He owned and operated a grocery store in New Westminster, B.C. Very little information is available concerning Don Sue's history immediately prior to joining UBT but he was involved from the very beginning, prior to retiring from his business in 1973 or 74 and relocating to Vancouver with his wife.

With considerable volunteer support the temple space in Chinatown was prepared and opened its doors to the public in 1968. A milestone in the temple's history was the commencement of preparation and distribution of vegetarian food (*zhai* 齋) to the public. Such events declare to the wider community that the temple is open, prosperous and well supported by an active membership. During its first nine years of operation the temple membership grew steadily. By 1976 it was apparent that a new space would be needed, meaning the group would have to leave its base in Chinatown. One of the few members involved during the earliest years, recounted challenges associated with the Chinatown location. Downstairs there were frequent practice sessions for a Lion Dance troupe and for Gongfu 功夫 practitioners that were very noisy and frequently disrupted temple activities. Also, there was a problem for members who had to drive, as there was a chronic shortage of parking spaces, particularly on the weekends when the temple was most active.<sup>16</sup> Again, with generous financial support from C.C. Lu, it was decided a property should be purchased. A suitable location was found on 49th Avenue west of Fraser Street, where a vacated church was listed for sale. The members of UBT moved into their new home in 1977. The newly acquired property was in need of much work and the devotion of many volunteers who rallied around the temple made possible the transformation of the church so that it was suited to the purposes and activities of a Buddhist temple.<sup>17</sup> During the same year the president, Mr. K.S. Fung recounts:

we ammended [*sic*] our consitutions [*sic*] and by-laws, to include a clause announcing that this premise [*sic*] is

dedicated for the exclusive use as a Buddhist Temple; it shall never be sold; nor used for any purpose other than Buddhism. In other words, our Temple will be a permanent Buddhist temple.<sup>18</sup>

During their first year in the new space the board resolved to join the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) that was then headquartered in Bangkok. As a result UBT became the Canadian Regional Centre for the WFB. The WFB, which was founded in 1950 with cooperation from Buddhist organizations in twenty-seven countries, seeks to bring together Buddhists of Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna traditions. Among its objects is the following statement:

Establish Regional Centres in countries, territories, or areas where there are appreciable numbers of Buddhists, whose belief in and practice of Buddhism are free and unrestricted, or give recognition to any existing organizations as Regional Centres;<sup>19</sup>

This particular objective and the diverse membership of the organization resonated well with the intentions of UBT's founding members. The following six years was a period in which the membership of the temple grew and the interior of the church was gradually transformed into that of a Buddhist temple. A key element in the transformation was the installation of statues. Initially the temple did not have a large statue of the Buddha. During an interview with two senior temple members documents were presented that detailed the extension of a previously arranged loan of a Qing dynasty bronze standing statue of Amitābha Buddha from the Royal Ontario Museum to Universal Buddhist Temple. The renewal document from the R.O.M. is dated March 19, 1982 and was signed by Heather Maximea, Registration Assistant in the Loans Department, and K.S. Fung, President of UBT. Understandably, the loan of such a precious object from a renowned Canadian cultural institution is recalled with some pride as it demonstrates both the legitimacy of UBT as an organization and respect for the then president, K.S. Fung. The statue figured prominently in the 1983 inauguration (*kaiguang* 開光) ceremonies held on May 8, 1983. The event was organized to celebrate the completion of renovations, including the addition of a library on the ground floor, and an extension to the building to enlarge the main meditation hall on the second floor. This extension is known as the "Boundless Light Hall." The pride of place given to the bronze standing Buddha is recounted in a letter to the

directors of the R.O.M. from K.S. Fung dated May 20, 1983, less than two weeks after the inaugural ceremonies had taken place. In his letter Mr. Fung states: “As informed you before, [*sic*] all our devoted members adore this Standing Buddha most heartily, and value its presence as a Divine power protecting our Temple and the members.” After an unsuccessful bid to either borrow the statue indefinitely or purchase it outright a mould was made and a duplicate bronze figure was cast in Taiwan.<sup>20</sup>



[Fig. 1: Bronze Amitābha Buddha]

The official ceremonies held on May 8, 1983 from 10:00am until noon, marked a major turning point for the temple; the leaders who organized the event demonstrated to the UBT membership that there was broad support from the community at large and, sent a clear message to the people of Vancouver that they were a permanent and vigorous part of the religious and cultural landscape. Three public officials were in attendance: City of Vancouver councillors May Brown and Bill Yee,<sup>21</sup> and Conservative Member of Parliament John Fraser.<sup>22</sup> Representing the Hong Kong Buddhist Association,<sup>23</sup> was President, and *Dharma* Master, Kok



Kwong 法師覺光, who conducted the “enlivening of the shrines” (*kai guang* 開光); in his letter to the R.O.M. dated May 20, 1983, K.S. Fung reported that approximately 2,500 members and guests had attended the event, which concluded with the serving of a vegetarian lunch.

The next six years saw a consolidation of the UBT and a gradually increasing membership that was provided with a variety of opportunities to learn about Buddhism and other elements of Chinese culture. It was not uncommon during the 1980s for six to eight hundred people to attend Sunday ceremonies and the vegetarian lunch. UBT enjoyed a high level of participation and support from the membership and the broader community of believers who, while not being official members, were very loyal to the temple and the supportive and welcoming community it represented. The strength of the temple through the late 1970s and early 1990s is evidenced by a second drive to expand and improve the temple facilities culminating in another inaugural ceremony held on November 26, 1989. The exterior features of what had been a church were now completely removed and the temple assumed its present appearance. The peaked roof was replaced with a two-tiered tiled roof with upturned eaves, evoking architectural characteristics of more classically styled temples, and the entire front of the building was replaced. The front of the building, facing south onto 49th Avenue, presented a flattened profile with the steps rising in two sets, one from the east and one from the west and meeting at the second-floor entrance in the centre of the building. Six red faux pillars were installed to protrude from the pink stucco surface and a large red and gold sign was installed above the door, on which five gold Chinese characters identified the temple as *Shijie fojiao hui* 世界佛教會 (Universal Buddhist Temple). At street level, below the elevated front entrance, and flanked by two red and gold dragons, two bilingual verses proclaim:

諸惡莫作 眾善奉行

Cease to do evil--endeavour to do good.

自淨其意 是諸佛教

Calm and cleanse your mind is the teaching of the Buddhas<sup>24</sup>



[Fig. 2: Front entrance of Universal Buddha Temple]

To the west of the building a shrine to Guanyin 觀音 was installed comprised of a standing statue of the Bodhisattva and a large covered incense burner. To the east, an elevated and enclosed shrine containing a statue of the “Four Faced Buddha” (Simian fo 四面佛), was installed. The second inaugural ceremony, once again led by *Dharma* Master Kok Kwong, President of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, was conducted on November 26, 1989,<sup>25</sup> after these changes were completed.<sup>26</sup>

Hong Kong immigrants largely constituted temple membership from its beginnings in Chinatown, and the principal language used in the temple was and continues to be Cantonese. As mentioned, a gradual increase in membership took place through the early 1990s and this parallels migration trends from Hong Kong to Canada during the same period. In 1994 Hong Kong immigrants reached a peak of 44,130.<sup>27</sup> This number is associated with the anticipation and uncertainty associated with the 1997 return of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China. Temple membership began to decline through the late 1990s and, once again, immigration from Hong Kong also declined precipitously with numbers of

immigrants falling to only 3,662 in 1999.<sup>28</sup> It should be noted though that construction of several major new temples also coincides with the period of decreasing membership at UBT. Three examples are the first site of Gold Buddha Monastery, now located near the centre of Vancouver, less than three kilometres south of Chinatown on Main Street, that opened in December of 1983, the Guanyin Temple 觀音寺, which was opened in 1986, and Ling Yen Shan Temple 靈巖山寺, also located in the Vancouver suburb of Richmond, and founded in 1999.<sup>29</sup> Thus, with dramatically declining immigration from Hong Kong and an increasing number of large temples on the Lower Mainland, numbers at UBT have declined. Despite both of these factors UBT continues to attract a crowd of devotees each weekend. Interviewees expressed concern, however, that the attendees tend to be quite elderly and younger participants will be necessary if the temple's long-term vitality is to be assured.

## 2. Temple Interior

When first walking through the main entrance of UBT one's initial impression might be similar to that of entering a community centre. The floor in the main hall is covered in linoleum and the room is lit with florescent lights. Against the wall to the right are stacks of neatly placed folding chairs and, on a bulletin board, are displayed the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Canadian Bill of Rights*, while to the left there is a reception counter with one or two volunteers usually in attendance and ready to offer warm greetings to visitors. A plain wooden outer public altar separates the entrance from the main hall and, on special occasions, is covered with flowers and offerings of fruit. Above the public altar, a red embroidered banner declares in golden characters, "the Buddha's light illuminates universally" (*fo guang pu zhao* 佛光普照). At the far (north) end of the Buddha Hall stands the main altar occupied by statues of Śākyamuni Buddha (Shijiamouni fo 釋迦牟尼佛) in the centre, Amitābha Buddha (Amitofo 阿彌陀佛) on his right and the Medicine Buddha (Yaoshi rulai fo 藥師如來佛) to his left. The main hall, which can comfortably accommodate approximately two to three hundred participants, is converted into a space for Buddhist ceremonies with the placement of kneelers in the front and folding chairs at the rear. The hall also frequently serves as a space for public lectures.<sup>30</sup>



[Fig. 3: Main Buddha Hall]

Midway into the main Buddha Hall and to the right is a large opening through which one passes into the 1977 extension, housing the memorial hall, which occupies approximately three hundred square feet. Passing through the opening one faces a modest altar to Kṣitigarbha, the Earth-store Bodhisattva (*Dizang pusa* 地藏菩薩), with two plates of oranges to the left and right of a central plate of red apples. Two vases of flowers flank the fruit and, on the outside left and right, are chanting instruments: a wooden fish (*myu* 木魚) and a resonant metal bowl (*qing* 磬) struck at important moments during ceremonies. An incense burner on a cookie tray stands at the front of the glass-covered altar. The bodhisattva is represented in a colour portrait above the altar. He sits in a full lotus posture on a pink lotus, embracing a large pearl in his arms, with a five-peaked crown on his head above which calligraphy states “Praise to the Bodhisattva King of the Earth Store” (*namo dizangwang pusa* 南無地藏王菩薩).<sup>31</sup> At the north end of the memorial hall, encased in glass, is a standing bronze figure of Amitābha Buddha<sup>32</sup> flanked by two female bodhisattvas (see Fig. 1). The altar includes the same items as that dedicated to the Earth Store Bodhisattva, though with more flowers and

eight oil lamps. On the walls behind the statues are two panels, each containing nearly two hundred and twenty ancestral plaques. In total the ancestral hall contains roughly two thousand plaques and the hall will soon need to be expanded if more are to be added.



[Fig. 4: Ancestral Hall]

The lower floor of the temple, which is at ground level, includes a multipurpose room for member activities and a clean and well-organized kitchen for preparing the weekly vegetarian meals. Also on the lower floor is a library housing a very good collection of resources on Buddhism and Chinese culture more generally. In addition to printed sources a large collection of audio recordings is available to members. These include hundreds of cassette tapes on which members recorded many years of Master Fung's lectures. The library is open to temple members and visitors and it was suggested that scholars of Chinese religion and culture are always welcome to take advantage of the resources available in the temple library. Additional Buddhist texts, including the Buddhist canon (*Fojiao dazang jing* 佛教大藏經 and *Xuyao jing* 續藏經), are housed in the main office on the upper floor.<sup>33</sup>

### **3. Being “Universal”**

From the very beginning C.C. Lu and the other “five pillars” of the temple resolved to avoid aligning the temple with any particular lineage. This decision was also extended to the political leadership of the temple. Initially, at the Pender Street location, established in 1968, there was no board of directors and so temple affairs fell to the five founding members and a small core of dedicated volunteers. UBT moved to establish itself more formally through registration under the Companies Law & Societies Act of the Province of British Columbia. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a need was seen to undertake a formal amendment to the UBT constitution. In accordance with sections 66 and 67 of the British Columbia Society Act the temple leaders and membership undertook to add two significant paragraphs to the existing constitution that were certified on May 31, 1993:

6. The Society shall have no officers. The Directors shall elect seven (7) Directors from the board of Directors to form an executive committee, which shall be responsible for handling the day to day affairs of the Society and shall have the duties and functions as determined from time to time by the board of Directors. This provision is unalterable.

7. A Director’s spouse, the Director’s or the Director’s spouse’s grandparents, parents, parents- in-law, brothers, sisters, step-brothers, step sisters, children, grandchildren, children-in-law, stepchildren, nieces and nephews and all corporations or entities related to or affiliated with any of them and all of their respective officers, directors, employees and agents shall not be paid any remuneration for services rendered to the Society but may be reimbursed for his, her or their reasonable and justifiable expenses incurred when acting on behalf of the Society. This provision is unalterable.

The intent behind paragraph 7 is unambiguous and a standard constitutional feature of many non-profit and charitable organizations. It may point to the nature of some of the challenges faced by temple leadership prior to 1993 but the author does not know those details. Paragraph 6 is of particular interest for the purpose of shedding further

light on the unusual organizational orientation of UBT leaders. As was made apparent in an interview, there is not, and can never be, a president of UBT. Political authority is intentionally decentralized and located in a group of core members elected to the board. It was explained that this is a way to ensure flexibility by avoiding concentration of power in the hands of one or two people who may not respect the general orientation of the temple vis-à-vis avoidance of lineages, sectarian affiliations, and monastic leadership.<sup>34</sup> Leaders are concerned with striking a balance between the ability to adapt to new circumstances while yet maintaining the integrity of the original intent of the founders who saw the temple as a resource for making the broadest possible spectrum of Buddhist teachings available to those who are interested; hence the designation “universal.” In at least one interview with a long term member the function of the temple was described as a “conduit” through which a variety of teachings can be shared.<sup>35</sup> Given that the metaphor of a conduit implies a function tied to emptiness one might say, perhaps paradoxically, that the identity of UBT rests in its members’ determination to resist a fixed Buddhist identity. The practical implications of this approach are twofold.

Firstly, there is no monastic leadership in temple affairs. Monks and nuns who live in residence at UBT are hired for two-year terms after a period of “probation” during which both the monastic and the temple members can assess the comfort of the arrangement. The monks and nuns who take up residence at the temple must be willing to concede organizational authority to the lay group in charge of daily affairs.<sup>36</sup> Their duties rest with conducting weekly ceremonies and, occasionally, teaching the *dharma* through lectures that tend to focus on moral discipline. A typical Sunday ceremony, lead by a Taiwanese nun, took place on Sunday August 15, 2010. It was attended by approximately one hundred active participants, the majority of whom were dressed in robes, gathered to chant from a book titled *The Buddhist Liturgy* (*Niansong keben* 念誦課).<sup>37</sup> The book opens with the following purifying mantra used to begin the proceedings:

Using the willow branch, the pure  
water is sprinkled everywhere in three  
thousand worlds.

楊枝淨水，遍灑三千

Its nature is empty, yet its eight virtues  
benefit humans and gods.

性空八德利人天

So their blessings and life span will be increased greatly.	福壽廣增延
Causing hungry ghosts to avoid having needle-sized throats.	餓鬼免計咽
Eradicating offences and getting rid of faults.	滅罪除愆
It turns their flames into red lotuses.	火燄化紅蓮
Homage to the bodhisattvas, mahāsattvas, of the clear cool ground.	南無清涼地菩薩摩訶薩

Also included in the standard chanting book is the ubiquitous and brief “Great Compassion Mantra” (Dabei zhou 大悲咒), followed by “The Heart of Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra”<sup>38</sup> (*Banruoboloumiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經). Both of these are standard elements in the liturgy of many Buddhist temples on the Lower Mainland. Also included is a variation on the shorter *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (*Amito jing* 阿彌陀經) which, in *The Buddhist Liturgy*, is titled “The Buddha Speaks of [*sic*] Amitabha Sūtra” (*Foshuo amito jing* 佛說阿彌陀經). Two pages are dedicated to a short verse titled “Praise of Amita [*sic*] Buddha,” which employs language evoking the descriptions of the Pure Land and the vows of Dharmākara (Fazang pusa 法藏菩薩) included in the longer *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (*Wuliang shou jing* 無量壽經). Other brief mantras or *dhāraṇī* are included, one of which focuses on eliminating karmic hindrances so that rebirth in the Pure Land is assured.<sup>39</sup> At the conclusion of the chanting session everyone was invited to line up outside for vegetarian food where chairs and tables had been set up on the west side of the temple. Several Chinese Canadian university students were helping to serve the food though they indicated that their involvement was based on community service work organized through the university rather than on personal interest in Buddhism. An exception was a young psychology major, whose parents attended temple functions; she said she found the temple interesting and liked the community atmosphere. After lunch people were invited back inside for a *dharma* talk led by the same nun who had officiated at the proceedings earlier in the morning.





[Fig. 5: vegetarian lunch]

The second implication associated with a flexible temple identity is that teachings and practice can vary widely. Thus, despite the Pure Land orientation of the weekly communal rites, Theravāda monks are also welcome to teach at the temple. Through conversations with temple leaders, long-term volunteers, and visitors there was no indication that the Mahāyāna represents an inherently superior path to awakening. Beyond the horizon of distinctions internal to Buddhism is a strong interest in divination, often associated with Daoist temple practices. During one temple visit an elderly gentleman, who expressed his deep interest in Daoism, sat at a table in the ancestral hall ready to assist people who sought answers to questions by tossing one of a hundred thin sticks (*qian* 籤) from a cylindrical bamboo container (*qiantong* 籤筒) and then consulting readings associated with the number on sticks that fall in response to questions.<sup>40</sup> Interest in Daoism and divination was something that K.S. Fung took seriously. Throughout his many years at UBT he gave weekly talks on two subjects: basic Buddhist doctrine<sup>41</sup> and divination and the *Yijing*. One of the interviewees was an enthusiastic student of Master Fung and has amassed substantial knowledge of the *Yijing* and its

associated commentarial literature. He also has expertise concerning the practical application of the text to the divination process and continues to give talks on this subject at the temple and in the community.

Master Fung's interest in Daoism extended beyond the theoretical to include meditation practice. It is very difficult to know the precise content of the Daoist meditation technique that Master Fung practiced but he seems to have been instrumental in the founding of a Daoist meditation group in 1994. Through interviews, currently being undertaken in connection with a separate project on Canadian Daoist temples, it has come to light that a Daoist meditation group that practiced a form of Daoist inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹), and was founded in the mid 1990s, had one of its earliest and most significant Canadian meetings at UBT when a good friend of Master Fung came to Vancouver from the Eastern United States to teach a group of students. His efforts met with success and a space was eventually rented in Richmond where the group began meeting regularly for practice. It is not clear what Master Fung's involvement was with this meditation group, once it moved beyond the confines of UBT, but practice continued under the guidance of master Fung's friend for three years before the teacher returned to the United States where he continues to reside.<sup>42</sup> As has already been mentioned, during the 1950s, Master Fung was also an early pioneer in the popularization of yoga and founded a society for yoga practice in Hong Kong. This interest continued in earnest after his immigration to Canada and he began offering regular yoga sessions at the temple for anyone interested in joining.

One final area of ongoing interest at the temple concerned continuation of life after death, a subject that intrigued Master Fung who saw it as a subject in need of attention for the purpose of reassuring those in the temple's community who were advanced in years. In addition to transmigration and rebirth, astral bodies and the human aura were also discussed. During the 1960s and 70s there was growing interest in the work of a Russian electrician and researcher, Semyon Kirlian (1898-1978), who studied auras through what has come to be known as Kirlian photography. Master Fung went as far as to purchase a machine from Russia that it was claimed could reveal the human aura.<sup>43</sup> This, it was felt, was a scientific way of corroborating Buddhist beliefs related to continuation after death. Of course this "scientific" approach to Buddhist theory and practice continues apace in the fields of clinical psychiatric

medicine and neuropsychology<sup>44</sup> standing as something of a corollary to the refrain that Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion.

While a wider range of interests can be sustained within an institution such as UBT, a practical concern regarding institutional stability is associated with welcoming teachers from other traditions. Such activities leave open the possibility of UBT students being recruited away from the temple. This possibility was raised during an interview and the response was that if students feel a need to follow a particular teacher then so be it. Indeed, given the 1993 amendment to the temple's constitution, such that there will be no officers and thus, no focused sectarian agenda, the aim appears to be the preservation of such open-ended possibilities. Again, the function of UBT, it was explained, is to serve as a point of access to a range of teachings. A related question was posed concerned the relatively few registered temple members compared to the large numbers of people who actually attend weekend events, and especially the major celebrations such as lunar New Year, Mid Autumn Festival and the Buddha's birthday. The response was that caution is needed concerning granting of formal membership. Members need to understand the importance of the temple's position and to lend their support. Newcomers may bring assumptions and expectations based on their experiences at other, more "traditionally oriented" institutions and perceive a need to impose a more uniform and "orthodox" position. Beyond the more abstract question of orthodoxy is the daily, social culture of UBT. Based on repeated visits to many temples and practice centres in Canada it is immediately obvious that, at UBT, much of the formality one would normally expect is not present. Those looking for a more formally oriented temple culture would likely be disappointed. This difference does not represent a lack of attention but, rather, a conscious choice on the part of the leadership and they are adamant that this less formal temple culture be maintained.

## Conclusion

Universal Buddhist Temple is the oldest functioning Chinese Buddhist temple on the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Through more than forty years it has steadfastly endured as a space in which a variety of approaches to the Buddha *Dhārma*, both Mahāyāna and Theravāda, can be explored alongside a variety of non-Buddhist practices. This is contrary to approaches one would normally expect, in which establishing a firm identity is allied with claims to orthodoxy for the purposes of

distinguishing an institution and attracting loyal adherents. Despite a self-conscious lack of both, the temple has endured. Starting in the mid 1990s, with the establishing of several large new temples, conveniently located in Richmond, where a large number of Chinese immigrants have settled, membership has decreased. However, it would be going too far to say that UBT is in decline. Weekend activities remain well attended and the weekly vegetarian lunch not only continues to attract significant numbers (200-300 people) but also demonstrates the commitment of roughly thirty volunteers whose efforts make this communal activity possible. The temple's connections overseas also continue with visits from representatives of Hong Kong Buddhist organizations and scholars. On September 10-12, 2010, a rite was held for the transmission of the Bodhisattva precepts (*zhuan pusa jie* 傳菩薩戒). Approximately one hundred and forty monks and nuns participated including a large number from Foguang shan 佛光山 temple in Richmond. Significantly, five monks from Taiwan accepted invitations to attend the proceedings. Among them was the presiding monastic, eighty-seven year old Venerable Dao Hai Changshi (道海長師), one of the most senior monks residing on Taiwan.<sup>45</sup>

While there is every indication that UBT remains very active, an oft-repeated concern was that, in the absence of Master Fung, who passed away in 2000, there is a lack of regular instruction. Resident monks and nuns do contribute by offering occasional lectures but these are confined principally to the precepts and moral education more generally. The more speculative and wide-ranging discussions that characterized the first thirty years of the temple's life are no longer offered. While this is seen as a weakness, interviewees remained sanguine concerning the future. In the absence of K.S. Fung, temple leaders look to continuing their role as a conduit in the service of bringing a variety of perspectives on Buddhist teachings to their members and supporters. They also remain committed to their status as a lay organization without sectarian affiliations.

As was noted in the introduction, this is a basic first foray into the history and orientation of UBT. There are, for example, archives of Chinese newspapers at the libraries of the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University that could, no doubt, provide much greater detail than is offered here. UBT temple records also appear to be quite well organized and there is likely to be a wealth of further information available for a more extensive study. Beyond its status as a Buddhist institution, the founding and development of UBT can also provide a

helpful window into the immigrant experience in Canada. Through closer examination of its roots in figures such as C.C. Lu, K.S. Fung, Ye Man-yeh (Ye Wenyi 葉文意) and Liang Yin'an 梁隱龕<sup>46</sup> much could also be learned about the role of post-war Hong Kong lay Buddhist organizations in shaping the contours of Buddhist institutions there and in Canada.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Information presented here is based on interviews and visits conducted in August 2006, January 2007, and July and August 2010. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality and the names of interviewees have been withheld in the interest of marinating privacy.

<sup>2</sup> A recent study of Buddhists in British Columbia that looks at all of these groups is Larry DeVries, Don Baker and Dan Overmyer, eds. *Asian Religions in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010). Another helpful overview of Buddhist organizations in British Columbia is James Placzek and Larry DeVries, "Buddhism in British Columbia" in *Buddhism in Canada*, ed. Bruce Matthews (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The Buddhanet "World Buddhist Directory" currently lists ninety-four Buddhist organizations in British Columbia, and eighty of these have their own web site. It is safe to assume that a significant number of organizations with less visibility are also part of the Buddhist landscape in B.C. <http://www.buddhanet.net/>

<sup>4</sup> Students of Dharma Drum Mountain also point beyond their teacher to the lineages he inherited, which, in turn, are believed go back to the Buddha.

<sup>5</sup> During vegetarian lunches Master Hsüan Hua's voice can be heard delivering the *dhārma* to attendees.

<sup>6</sup> Phonetic rendering of Chinese proper names will retain the spelling used by the relevant organizations.

<sup>7</sup> More details will be provided in relation to the 1983 inaugural ceremony in which the Qing statue figured prominently.

<sup>8</sup> The high regard in which Master Fung's teachings were held is indicated by the effort expended by the UBT library staff in have archiving all of his lectures on cassette tapes. One set is not circulated in order to prevent degradation of the recordings.

<sup>9</sup> While I was conducting interviews at UBT on October 3, 2010 Li Yun-sang 李潤生, a director of the Hong Kong Buddhist Faxiang Society, was visiting the UBT where he was lecturing on Yogācāra philosophy.

<sup>10</sup> Wei Tat, *Ch'eng Wei Shih Lun. The Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness* (Hong Kong: The Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun Publication Committee, 1973). Wei Tat's translation relies on the French version: Louis de la Vall'ee Poussin, *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: La Siddhi de Hiuan-tsang*, 2 vols. (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1929).

<sup>11</sup> This information is taken from the text of a eulogy to Master Fung titled "Mourning Master Feng Gongxia" (悼念馮公夏老師) composed by Li Runsheng 李潤生 of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association.

<sup>12</sup> A senior member of UBT recounted how, as a boy in Hong Kong, he saw yoga postures in the newspaper. Each day a different posture was given. At the time he did not know who was responsible for this and, many years later, learned through

UBT that it had been Master Fung who had championed the benefits of yoga practice in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s. In 1973 he returned to India for further study though I do not know the identity of his teacher. Interview with temple member, August 10, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Renovitch likely worked in the areas of planning and transportation. He is posthumously acknowledged in a paper on rapid bus and rapid rail in a transportation research circular delivered at the 9th National Light Rail Transit Conference held November 16-18, 2003 in Portland, Oregon.

<sup>14</sup> Rev Ryusho Matsuda, "You are a Link in the Buddha's Golden chain of Love," *Nichiren Shu News*, 161 (August 1, 2007): 3.

<sup>15</sup> Certainly there had been a long history of active Jōdo shinshū Buddhist churches in British Columbia but one can speculate that his Nichiren Shū affiliation may have made him rather less inclined to participate in those congregations.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with temple member, October 2, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> A commemorative booklet describes the building as being in a dreadful state of disrepair inside and out. Its interior is compared to that of a dark and dilapidated old house. *Shijie fojiao hui foen si shengxiang kaiguang jinian tegan* 世界佛教會: 佛恩寺 聖像開光紀念特刊 (Universal Buddhist Temple: Temple of Buddha's Mercy: A Special Pamphlet Commemorating the Consecration of the Sacred Statues)(Vancouver, 1989), n.p.

<sup>18</sup> This quotation is taken from a temple document provided to me by a senior member who granted two lengthy interviews. K.S. Fung, "A Brief History," July 1, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> The complete list of Aims and Objectives is listed on the WFB web site at [www.wfbhq.org](http://www.wfbhq.org).

<sup>20</sup> I was informed that Mr. Lu was importing Christmas lights from Taiwan during the period in question and, through his business contacts, was able to make the necessary arrangements for the casting of the statue. Sadly he passed away in 1982 before the inauguration took place. Personal Interview. Universal Buddhist Temple. August 10, 2010. Interview with temple member, August 10, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Yee was the first Chinese-Canadian to win a seat on Vancouver's City Council. He was a major figure among Chinese-Canadians in the city and formed a committee of academics and business leaders to champion the twinning of Vancouver with Guangzhou during his term under Mayor Michael Harcourt. Further details can be found in Patrick J. Smith, "More Than One Way Towards Economic Development: Public Participation and Policy-making," in Katherine A. Graham, Susan D. Phillips, eds., *Citizen engagement: lessons in participation from local government* (Vancouver: Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1998), 65-68.

<sup>22</sup> John Fraser served as MP for Vancouver South riding for twenty-one years and held posts as minister of the environment, minister of fisheries and Speaker of the House of Commons. UBT is in the centre of Vancouver South riding.



<sup>23</sup> The Hong Kong Buddhist Association (Xiang'gang fojiao lianhehui 香港佛教聯合會) was established in 1945 and acted as a social service organization in Hong Kong in the wake of the Second World War. Today it is a large and highly respected organization that runs thirteen middle and seven elementary schools, in addition to other social service and academic units. See the association web site for further details: <http://www.hkbuddhist.org/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> The translation included here is taken directly from the text painted on the front of the building.

<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to locate a copy of the program for the 1989 inauguration and so cannot report on the invited guests and have no information on the number of people who attended. Given that the temple had just completed its most costly renovations and was regularly welcoming between six hundred and eight hundred guests for weekly vegetarian meals it is safe to assume that the attendance would have been at least comparable to the ceremony held in 1983.

<sup>26</sup> Master Kok Kwong continues as president as of October 2010.

<sup>27</sup> *BC Stats Immigration Highlights*, issue 00-1, "Special Feature: Recent Changes in British Columbia Immigration Level (An Update)." The report indicates that British Columbia received a disproportionate 35% of Hong Kong immigrants to Canada. [www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/pubs/immig/imm001sf.pdf](http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/pubs/immig/imm001sf.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> *BC Stats Immigration Highlights*, issue 00-1.

<sup>29</sup> In an interview, conducted at Ling Yen Shan Temple in February of 2006, I was told the temple membership comprised of six hundred families.

<sup>30</sup> During my last visit to the UBT, on October 2, 2010, an independent scholar of Yogācāra Buddhism was giving a formidable lecture in Cantonese titled "Five Kinds of Perception in Consciousness Only Buddhism" (*Wuzhong weishi guan* 五重唯識觀).

<sup>31</sup> The iconography of the painting is at variance with the typical depiction wherein the bald-headed bodhisattva holds a staff in his right hand and a wish-fulfilling pearl in his left. The crown represents the Five *Dhyāni* Buddhas (*Wuzhi wufo* 五智五佛) or Wisdom-Tathāgatas. Each of these represents one of the five modes of cognition: essential nature of the *dharmadhātu*, the mirror-like cognition, the cognition of equality in nature, the subtle observing cognition, and the cognition with unrestricted activity. More detail can be found in Ding Fubao, *Foxue dacidian*, 558, s.v. 五智五佛. See also *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. 五智如來.

<sup>32</sup> This is the figure, referred to above, that is a replica of the statue borrowed from the Royal Ontario Museum.

<sup>33</sup> Notably, beyond Buddhist texts, the collection includes the *Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書) commissioned by the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735-1796) and the *Twenty-five Dynastic Histories* (*Ershiwu shi* 二十五史). Additionally two important Daoist collections are included: the *Zhengtong daoang* 正統道藏, completed in 1444 and

commissioned by the Ming (1368-1644) Zhengtong 正統 emperor (r. 1435-1449) and the later extracanonical collection titled *Daozang waizhuan* 道藏外傳.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with temple member, August 10, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with temple member, August 10, and October 2, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Currently there is one monk from the People's Republic of China and one nun from Taiwan in residence.

<sup>37</sup> *The Buddhist Liturgy (Niansong keben 念誦課本)* (Vancouver: Zhongxin paiban yinshua 重新排版印刷, 2000). Inside the rear cover is a list of all the people who gained merit (*gongde* 功德) by donating money for the printing the book. The donors are divided into six groups according to the amount donated which ranges from \$10 to \$100.

<sup>38</sup> The titles of chants are exactly as they appear in *The Buddhist Liturgy (Niansong keben 念誦課本)* where diacritics are not included.

<sup>39</sup> “Bayijie yezhang genben desheng jingtu tuoluoni 拔一切業障根本得生淨土陀羅尼” in *Buddhist Liturgy*, 26. In addition to the Buddhist Liturgy numerous other texts have been chanted regularly throughout the liturgical calendar over the past forty years. One of the few members who was part of the group from the beginning together with another senior member provided the names of these texts: *Foshuo amito jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 (*Amitābha Sūtra*), *Jingang banruo boluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經 (*Diamond Sūtra*), *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (*Sūtra of Lotus of the Wondrous Dhārma*), *Yaoshi liuli guang rulai benyuan gongde jing* 藥師琉璃光如來本願功德經 (*Original Vows of the Medicine-Master Tathāgata of Lapis Light*), *Dizang pusa benyuan jing* 地藏菩薩本願經 (*Sūtra on the Past Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva*), *Dizang pusa baochan yigui* 地藏菩薩寶懺儀軌 (*The Precious Repentance Rite of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva*), *Dafo dingshou lengyan jing* 大佛頂首楞嚴經 (*Sūtraṅgama-sūtra*), *Dashizhi pusa nianfo yuantong zhang* 大勢至菩薩念佛圓通章 (*The Universal Penetration of Mahāsthāma-prāptabodhisattva's Buddha Recitation*), *Dasheng jin'gang banruo baochan* 大乘金剛般若寶懺 (*Great Conveyance Diamond Wisdom Precious Repentance*), *Jingtu chanfa yigui* 淨土懺法儀規 (*Pure Land Rite of Repentance*), *Bashiba fo hongming baochan* 八十八佛洪名寶懺 (*Great Names of the Eighty-eight Buddhas Precious Repentance*), *Foshuo mituo baochan* 佛說彌陀寶懺 (*Buddha Speaks of Amitābha Precious Repentance*), *Cibei yaoshi baochan* 慈悲藥師寶懺 (*Compassionate Medicine Master Precious Repentance*), *Baowang sanmei chan* 寶王三昧懺 (*Precious King Samādhi Repentance*).

<sup>40</sup> A branch of Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism (Guoji daojiao penglai ge 國際道教蓬萊閣) on Bathurst Street in Toronto conducts the same practice as does the Evergreen Taoist Church of Canada (Daojiao jianada qingsong guan 道教加拿大青松觀) on Keefer Street in Vancouver's Chinatown. It would not be correct to describe this practice as Daoist though it is practiced in Daoist temples. Rather it is

a ubiquitous form of divination that can be found in both Daoist and Buddhist temples in addition to popular religious sites in Canada and Hong Kong.

<sup>41</sup> The subject of these talks was often grounded in a book that was popularized in Hong Kong on a Buddhist radio program. Ye Wenyi 葉文意 and Liang Yin'an 梁隱龕, *Foxue shiba jiang* 佛學十八講 (Eighteen Explanations Concerning the Buddha's Teachings) (Kowloon, Hong Kong: Sanlun foxue she 三輪佛學社, 1981). The publisher Sanlun foxue she (Sanlun Buddhist Study Society) was founded in Hong Kong in 1962 by Liang Yin'an together with Luo Shixian 羅時憲 and Liu Ruizhi 劉銳之. *Mingjue* 明覺, 106 (July 2006). <http://www.buddhistdoor.com/MingPo/issue106.html>.

<sup>42</sup> The group continues to practice and I was informed that the teacher provides instructions by telephone based on questions and answers concerning the students' experiences during meditation.

<sup>43</sup> During one interview I was shown some of Master Fung's diagrams representing astral bodies. At death these forms depart through a point on the crown of the head (*baihui* 百會) and move into the three realms (interview with a temple member, October 2, 2010). This description is very similar to accounts popular in Daoist texts from at least the eleventh century where such diagrams are also included.

<sup>44</sup> Examples of this are the dialogues held between the Dalai Lama and scientists and promoted by the Mind and Life Institute and recorded in publications related to "contemplative neuroscience." Some examples are Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* (New York: Random House, 2003), Richard J. Davidson and Anne Harrington, *Visions of Compassion: Western Scientists and Tibetan Buddhists Examine Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Richard Davidson, Vilas Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin Madison, is well known for his research into the brain-states of Tibetan Buddhist meditators, perhaps most notably Matthieu Ricard.

<sup>45</sup> Details of the assembly and a brief interview with Dao Hai Changshi can be found in *Shijie Xinwenwang* 世界新聞網 (*World Journal*), September 11, 2010 at <http://van.worldjournal.com>.

<sup>46</sup> Concerning the last two names see footnote 41.