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A Public Lecture by Dr. Jinhua Chen

(UBC, February 3, 2016)

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Violence and Religion:
East Asian Perspectives
A Public Lecture by Dr. Jinhua Chen
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On February 3, 2016, Professor Jinhua Chen, of the Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia (UBC), held a talk on East Asian Buddhism's involvement in warfare and other forms of violence. It was part of the Wall Wednesday Afternoon Public Lecture Series of the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies (PWAIS), UBC where he is working as a scholar in residence. His current project at PWIAS is titled "Merits of the Matter: Technological Innovation, Media Transfers, Book Market, and Religion in East Asia."

Despite the unwelcoming weather, scholars, students and interested individuals quickly filled the seminar room. After a brief introduction to Dr. Chen and his research experiences, the lecture commenced among an attentive and expectant crowd.

He began by proposing four reasons underlying the myth of Buddhism's non-violence. One of them was the prominence of the principle

of non-violence within the religion itself. It was said that the Buddha had even encouraged his disciples and followers to not witness or comment on any form of violence. Secondly, a lack of united and powerful global/ecumenical churches has made it difficult for Buddhism to stage cross-regional warfare against other religions. We can also attribute perpetuation of the myth to Western converts' "beautification" of Buddhism through its portrayal as a purely rational, peaceful, "atheistic" and democratic religion. Finally, a "positive Orientalist" understanding of Tibet as a mystical harmonious utopia, continues to reinforce the narrative of Buddhism as a non-violent religion.

However, as Chen affirmed, these images failed to capture a history of Buddhist violence. He cited several contemporary examples of Southeast Asian Buddhists' involvement in violence, from the nationalism-fueled movement against the Muslim Rohingya led by a Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu in Myanmar, Sri Lanka's monks' embrace of violence in repressing the Tamil rebels, to Thailand's government efforts to militarize Buddhist monasteries and conscript monks to fight insurgencies in southern regions. He then introduced examples of Buddhist violence in East Asia, particularly in Japan. There were a few Japanese Buddhist figures that were identified as fascist nationalists, notably Nisshō Inoue of the Nichiren Buddhist school. The trace of violence was also found in modern Japan's doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo, which was responsible for the Tokyo subway sarin attacks in 1995. Chen said major components of Aum Shinrikyo's religious ideas were derived from Indian Buddhism and it can be considered an offshoot of Japanese Buddhism.

If the image of contemporary Buddhism does not fit that of a peacemaker, could claims to its so-called nonviolent nature be justified in prior historical periods, particularly in East Asia?

To answer that question, Chen first proceeded to examine two theological ideas upon which Buddhism justifies the act of violence. The

first one was the idea of the impermanence of life and things. Since everything is empty (*śūnyatā*), there is, ultimately, no entity for one to kill and thus there is no possibility of a killer. The second idea was “skillful means” (*upāya*) in which goals can justify the means. In addition to these major ideas, there were less well-known theories advanced in China that were used to justify the use of violence. One of them was proposed by Zhiyi (538–597), founder of the Tiantai Buddhist School, which can be succinctly summarized in his famous saying: “[t]he appearance and nature of evil are the appearance and nature of good,” thus stressing the intimate relationship between good and evil.

After the discussion of theological ideas, Chen continued proving the manifestation of Buddhist violence by analyzing several roles taken by Buddhist monks during warfare in medieval China. Many of them assumed the role of military chaplains whose responsibilities ranged from converting soldiers on the battlefields to giving *dharma* talks. Others engaged in warfare as military advisors or counselors. The most notable military advisor-cum-Chan master was Yao Guangxiao (*Dharma* name: Daoyan) (1335–1418) who was remembered as a king-maker for his role in assisting Yongle (r. 1402–24), the third Emperor of the Ming dynasty, to claim the throne. Buddhist monks during this period also took up arms to fight against the rebels and foreign invaders who threatened to destroy the empire or Buddhist *dharma*. There were several records of monks serving both as generals and soldiers. Chen showed a painting depicting a scene of thirteen Shaolin monks rescuing Li Shimin (r. 626–649), the second Tang Emperor, to illustrate how Buddhist warrior-monks in medieval China actively engaged in political affairs particularly through violent means.

He continued to analyze the close relationship between Buddhism and different martial arts traditions in China with a particular focus on the Shaolin martial art school. Chen noted that Buddhist ideas,

deities and legends could be important sources for the discussion of the creation and evaluation of these martial traditions. In the case of the Shaolin martial tradition, a Buddhist deity named Jinnaluo (or Kimnara in Sanskrit) is considered to have inspired their famous use of staffs. Chen said that it was important for scholars to further study how martial arts were merged with religious rituals and the lives of lay people.

Further, Buddhist monks also worked as spies in warfare. Five levels of monastic espionage were identified including espionage between: 1) different Buddhist groups; 2) Buddhist groups and non-Buddhist groups; 3) two or several political cliques within a single government; 4) political regimes; and 5) states. Chen then introduced a case study on one fascinating monk-spy named Ignatius Timothy Trebitsch-Lincoln (1879-1943). He was born in an Orthodox Jewish family in Hungary and died in China as a Buddhist abbot. Trebitsch-Lincoln was famous for his multifaceted life, being known as an actor, thief, forger, convict, Christian missionary (in Montréal), Parliamentary member (in England), oil tycoon, advisor (in China) and ultimately, an international monk-spy.

The lecture then turned to focus on another important form of Buddhist violence—self-immolation. It was recorded that Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns committed suicide during wars, invasions or periods of state violence against the *dharma*. Their self-immolations could take different forms, one of which was the technique of burning part of their bodies (e.g. fingers, arms) and the other, suicide by burning their entire bodies. The reasons for self-immolation vary. For some, it is a form of protest against violence that threatens the state, a repressed group or the whole *sangha* to which they belong. For others, it can mollify “mass suffering.” The iconic scene of self-immolation carried out by Thích Quảng Đức (1897-1963) to protest the persecution of Buddhist

monks by the South Vietnamese government was an example of the former.

At this point in the lecture, Chen warned that people should not hastily jump to a conclusive judgment affirming the intrinsic relationship between Buddhism and violence. The question to be asked is not whether violence is intrinsic to Buddhism but rather how the religion was abused and misinterpreted by radical individuals and groups. As we recognize that violence is not a phenomenon unique to Buddhism, Chen said it's better to unpack questions of whether violence is natural to all religions or to humanity in general. He proposed that violence is an integral part of human nature and we cannot completely eradicate it and that human history is a history of violence. By accepting this premise, we can better spend our time trying to understand ways to curb the manifestations of our violence. In this sense, culture is born out of our attempts to modify and restrain our violent nature. Thus, there is a constant need to redefine the concept of violence.

The discussion of religious violence naturally led the lecture to the point of exploring its underlying causes. The first one was the self-alienation of religion (and any human institution). Chen suggested that religion has an inherent insatiable desire to expand and to be institutionalized, which results in championing its collective interests as an institution over personal freedoms and individual rights. The transition from an emphasis on individual freedom/spirituality to religious collective interests and power was a criterion of institutionalized religious violence. Another factor was the political abuse of religious power, which was attested through several case studies of Buddhist violence in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the lecture. Some Buddhist leaders can also attribute religious violence to the hunger for power.

In the last section of the talk, Chen tackled the remaining question of how we can minimize religious violence. He restated that since

violence is not inherent to religion, or Buddhism in particular, an answer to the problem should come from a larger social context, from society or the secular world. Thus, he prescribed modernization, globalization and secularization. By modernization, he meant a process that assists elimination of fundamentalist elements in religions. Globalizing religion is expected to make the religions more accessible. Secularization is needed because society should not be too religious. Chen then proposed a three-level approach to resolving religious violence by: 1) fostering individual spirituality, 2) expanding religions' communal roles (e.g. facilitating education, providing social relief or engaging in philanthropy); 3) controlling religion's political/hegemonic power and desires.

The talk was followed by a lively fifteen-minute question and answer session in which the audience asked him to either clarify his points or to make comments on recent political affairs relating to religious relations. People then mingled at the pleasant reception that followed.

Chen's lecture on the relationship between religion and violence, particularly on violence in East Asian Buddhism, offered plenty of interesting information and prompted some debate. His lecture provided a helpful complementary source of information on Buddhist violence for those who may read *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia* edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (Kendall Marchman's review of the book can be found in the recent [edition of the Journal of Buddhist Ethics](#)). His suggestion that we need a secularizing or minimizing of the political power of religious institutions as a mean of curbing religious violence can be a provocative starting point for further discussion.