

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 14, 2019

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Perceiving the Change of China through the Scope of Buddhism

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Under the organization of Professor Chen Jinhua, the University of British Columbia (UBC) hosted an international and intensive program on Buddhism from July 28 to August 12, 2018. The program has provided a platform for young scholars from across the world to engage in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dialogues on Buddhism, further undertaking the mission of promoting universal values of Buddhism as a world religion. Dr. Ji Zhe, professor of sociology at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) and Director of Centre d'Etudes Interdisciplinaires sur le Bouddhisme (CEIB) in Paris, delivered one segment of the program. Throughout years of researching the relationship between religion and the state in modern China, Professor Ji Zhe is interested in three themes: 1) evolution and development of Chinese Buddhism in post-Mao China; 2) relations between Buddhists and the communist state; and 3) recomposition of Buddhist field in the context of current globalization. The article is a reflection upon Professor Ji Zhe's lecture on the "Institutional Evolutions of Buddhism in Contemporary China," followed by an interview with him conducted at the UBC campus.

Defining “institutions” as “prescriptive modalities for organizing collective activities”—in religious context, this concept describes religious discourses and practices officially permitted by the state through transmission—Professor Ji Zhe traced the institutional evolutions of Buddhism in contemporary China during the class. He explored this process of evolutions in respective aspects of *Saṅgha* education, lay Buddhist movements, national Buddhist organizations, monastic economy, and rituals.

Drawing upon data collected from both official sources and local surveys, Professor Ji traced a rebirth for Chinese Buddhism since the 1980s. As he continued to detail, the institutional reconstruction of Buddhism was initiated by the then president of the CCP-censored Buddhist Association of China, Zhao Puchu 趙朴初 (1907–2000). In the name of a “Buddhism for the human realm” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) Mr. Zhao promoted “three excellent traditions” of Chinese Buddhism, namely, “combining Chan with agricultural work” (*nongchan bingzhong* 農禪並重), “academic study” (*xueshu yanjiu* 學術研究), and “friendly international exchange” (*guoji youhao jiaoliu* 國際友好交流). While acknowledging Zhao’s accomplishment, Professor Ji discerned how Zhao was the one to blame for sacrificing Buddhist autonomy for political legitimacy.

Buddhism in China has thrived during the previous decades, although the current number of monasteries and the size of the *Saṅgha* remain lower than that prior to 1949, according to the latest statistics.¹ Whether Chinese Buddhism will continue to revive and restore its former glory in pre-Mao phase is uncertain. From Professor Ji’s vantage point, Chinese Buddhism is confronted with two difficulties in its reju-

¹ For an evaluation of the social impact of Buddhist revival in China, see Ji Zhe, “Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force: Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival,” *Chinese Sociological Review* 45, no. 2 (2013): 8–26.

vention, one regarding monastic economy and the other concerning the politicization of Buddhism. Professor Ji began with the first issue. The *Saṅgha* used to live on farm rents prior to 1949. The socialist reforms during the 1950s and the 1960s had confiscated the land property of Buddhists which makes it impossible for the monastic communities rebuilt after the Cultural Revolution to have their previous source of income. The monastic economy now is based on donations and income from ritual services, which are very unstable. At the same time, as one famous slogan in the 1990s states, let “culture build the stage and the economy sing the opera.” Many Buddhist temples have since then been converted, by themselves or by the local authorities, into a pure profit-machine for developing tourism and soliciting temple entrance fees. Even if monastic economy can benefit from such commercial activities, they undermine the *Saṅgha*’s spiritual authority so severely that it dampens lay believers’ enthusiasm for donations and ritual services. The second issue, as Professor Ji argued, can be referred to as the politicization of Buddhism. To gain a legitimate status for existence and development, the official Buddhist institutions under the direction of Zhao changed the fundamental discourse of Buddhism through what Professor Ji called the “translation strategy:” political ideology has been expressed and confirmed in Buddhist terms. While Buddhist institutions adapt themselves in this manner to the regime and even benefit from favors bestowed by the state in comparison with other religions, this politicization could jeopardize the autonomy of Buddhist institutions in the long run.

The political use of Buddhist resources under the Communist regime was different than the utilization of Buddhism by the imperial state.² As explained by Professor Ji, imperial state shared Buddhist resources by a religious logic (such as by recognizing the sacredness of

² For an explanation of “Buddhist resources,” see the interview below.

Buddha and the ontology of other-worldliness). Sharing of Buddhist space between state and religion could even strengthen the power of eminent Buddhist monks, who were at times promoted as the “teachers of the state” (*guoshi* 國師). On the contrary, such sharing is operated in a secular logic under the Communist regime. The use of Buddhism is justified only by secular reasons—protecting cultural legacy, national unity, and building a harmonious society—most of the time without respecting the *Saṅgha*’s sovereignty and Buddhist symbolic resources. Political activity of Buddhism is granted under the condition of recognizing the rule of the Party.

Importantly, Professor Ji Zhe never regards Chinese Buddhism to be entirely subsumed under the political discourse and thus lacking agency. During the lectures, he frequently pointed out that he saw a light of hope in the younger generation of Buddhist *Saṅgha*, including those who are now walking out into the secular academic setting to hone their Buddhist knowledge. While suggesting that these monks and nuns follow the secular reasonable logic while being open to the criticism of academia, Professor Ji believed that academic research can become an edge tool for them to understand their own belief and spread the *Dharma*. From the government’s perspective, Professor Ji also discovered several paradoxes inherent in its regulation of Buddhism. Ironically, when the state exercised rigorous control of the official religious institutions, its religious policy leaves space for the flourishing of individual, sectarian and other non-institutional religiosities. These eclectic religious powers are segmentary and diffuse, but they will potentially thwart the totalitarian ambition of the Communist state in China.

Interview

What triggered your interests in research on Buddhism in contemporary and modern China?

I am a sociologist by training. Thus, the first and foremost thing that I care about and study is the social change, especially the logic behind the social order and how society is run. Buddhism is my research theme, but in the final analysis I see Buddhism as one of social phenomena. As such, Buddhism provides me with an excellent prism perceiving the tremendous change in the Chinese society since the reforming and opening up, both at the institutional and individual levels. On the one hand, Buddhism is part of the public sphere of power struggles that involve actors with different religious, cultural, political and economic motivations; on the other hand, it is also a private sphere of each individual's spiritual life. Through the study of Buddhism, I want to attain a better understanding of the forming and structuring of Chinese society today.

Why study Buddhism, not Daoism or Confucianism?

Any personal choice is result of karma. As a child I was always interested in all kinds of religions, I still am now. I do not and I will not limit my research to Buddhism. In fact, I also touch upon Confucianism and new religious movements in China and the West. I began my research on Buddhism fairly early. When I was studying at Fudan University, I was in good relations with Professor Wang Leiquan 王雷泉. With his help I was able to conduct my first fieldwork in Bailin Chan Temple 柏林禪寺 (Hebei, China) in 1994 while I was an undergraduate student. At that time, Buddhist activities had just regained its legitimacy, but the temples were secluded compared to nowadays. Buddhism was still extremely marginalized. Thanks to Professor Wang and the Bailin Chan Temple I estab-

lished my personal relation with Buddhism at its inchoate stage. From then on, I never leave the field of Buddhist studies.

Comparably speaking, Buddhism has its own advantage for sociological studies. First, whether in official data or local survey, we can safely say that Buddhism is, among the five recognized religions, the most influential in China proper. Even by the most conservative standard, there are at least one hundred million of adults who subjectively identify themselves as Buddhist. Buddhism has taken root in China for over two thousand years, and throughout time, it become closely connected to the base of Chinese society. For example, in Daoism and several popular religions, “bodhisattvas” (*pusa* 菩薩)—a notion for naming Buddhist divinity—has become the universal name for different deities. Many popular shrines are also called “Buddha halls” (*fotang* 佛堂), although inside those shrines, there were in reality statues of local deities. To a certain degree, Buddhism has become a common expression of Chinese religiosity. Therefore, one cannot expect a proper understanding of Chinese spiritual and moral life without an adequate study of Buddhism’s social role.

Secondly, Buddhism has showed an admirable capacity of adapting itself to social changes. Since the twentieth century, Buddhism in its process of modernization has established some very creative institutions, such as the system of Buddhist academy (*foxuan yuan* 佛學院), household grove (*jushi lin* 居士林), and Buddhist associations (*fojiao xiehui* 佛教協會). These inventions have offered models for Daoist groups and some new religious movements to integrate modernity. Besides, the “Buddhism for this human realm” forged by the Republican Buddhist leader Taixu (太虛 1890-1947) constitutes the most successful paradigm for religious modernism in China. It inspired and empowered all kinds of religious reform, for Buddhism as for other religions, inside and outside China. In this regard, Buddhism is a key player in Chinese

religious modernity, offering rich and incomparable resources for the study of Chinese modernization.

Thirdly, Buddhism has always been closely involved with politics. Since the establishment of the Communist regime, Buddhism has been utilized to forge diplomatic and ethnic relations, and now in religious regulation. As post-Mao Buddhism carries with itself a moderate and collaborative attitude, and as such is easily tamed, politico-religious conflict is a small number. From the perspective of the Communist regime, it wishes to support Buddhism as a means to resist the forces of Christianity and new religious movements. The delicate relations between Buddhism and the State remind us that the political-religious configuration in contemporary China is very complex, which can no more be subsumed under the simplistic paradigms of “toleration-revival” or “repression-resistance”.³

Lastly, Buddhism is also a world religion, and its influence is especially profound in East and Southeast Asia. Buddhism is a system of belief that has influenced a myriad of nations, ethnicities, and languages. It is by nature universalistic. A global latitude is inevitable for any study on Buddhist phenomena. This propels us sociologists to liberate our observation and thinking from the artificial borders, which are both political and mental, of nation-state. From my perspective, I started my research on Buddhism in mainland China as a specific case, then I expanded my scope to Taiwan, France, and now I also study Buddhism as a medium for cross-national transmission in Southeast Asia and Europe.

³ For a deep study on this question, see Ji Zhe, “Secularization without Secularism: The Political-Religious Configuration of Post-89 China”, in *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia*, ed. Tam Ngo and Justine Quijada (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 92-111.

Chinese Buddhism, as you argued, compromised its ideological and financial interests in exchange for political legitimacy. Do you find this approach used by Chinese Buddhism, contradictory with your thesis that “Buddhism has revived in China”?

As I have explained in one of my articles,⁴ this is what I call the “secularized revival.” What does it mean? It means that against the backdrop of the Communist regime, pure religious reform can never garner sufficient support from the state. Under this condition, Buddhists, be it cleric leaders or lay followers, tend to use the strategy of promoting Buddhism under the guise of secular causes, such as tourism, Buddhist studies, traditional culture, which can be more easily accepted by the government. Political rhetoric is also used for this purpose. This is why the first three “World Forums of Buddhism,” which took place in China successively in 2006, 2009, and 2012, all centered on the theme of “harmony.” As we know “harmony” was a term heavily advertised by the Communist Party under Hu Jintao’s regime.

The political use of Buddhism is of course mutual, which benefit both the State and Buddhism. However, this has inevitably led to the secularization of Buddhism, during which Buddhist resources are appropriated and manipulated by secular forces. Religious resources are both material and symbolic. Material sources are such as the mountains and temples that Buddhist groups managed; and the symbolic sources, for example, include the international influence and the peaceful image of Buddhism. This is why in the case of Falun gong or in the case of self-immolations of Tibetan Buddhists, leaders of the Buddhist Association were asked to speak for the government, and why in the affairs of human

⁴ Zhe Ji, “Buddhism in the Reform-Era China: A Secularised Revival?”, in *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*, ed. Adam Yuet Chau (London: Routledge, 2011), 32-52.

rights and that of cross-Taiwan strait relations, Buddhist figures were sometimes seen to speak up to create a decent image of the PRC government. During the past 40 years, the political use of Buddhist resources is efficient in maintaining a cooperative relation between political and religious power, thanks to which Buddhism has been legally rehabilitated and publicly expressed. What is paradoxical here is co-existence of secularization and the Buddhist revival, the former serving as a necessary condition of the latter.

You seem to be pessimistic about the role of Buddhism in balancing the authoritarian regime in China. Some scholars suggest that Buddhism in Taiwan and in other Asian countries is a constructive force for democracy movement and a civil society. What is your view on this?

I think before the change in the large political context, I rarely see any systematic force coming from Buddhism which is explicitly pushing at the direction of building a democratic, civil, and just society in China. At least in my fieldwork experience, except for some exceptional cases, I haven't found such tendency. Once again, I should point out immediately this does not mean that Chinese Buddhism has no potential for contributing to the reconstruction of a desirable civil society. It depends on the connection modality between the political and the social. It also depends on the wisdom and courage of Buddhists. Sociologists of Buddhism cannot be opted out, either. In fact, Buddhism and sociology share a common understanding of life: the suffering of others concerns us all.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Professor Ji Zhe and Li Jingjing for a thorough editing of an earlier draft of this article.

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