

# Buddhism in Modern China

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Could Buddhism in China remain unaffected by the transformation of the Chinese nation into a modern state? By the beginning of the 20th century it was apparent to many Chinese that it could not. The late-Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1911) novelist, Li Po-yuan (1867-1906), expresses the dilemma facing Chinese Buddhists in his novel, *A Brief History of Enlightenment* (completed in 1905): a young, modern-minded scholar, who is determined to establish a school, seeks to persuade the abbot of a Buddhist monastery to allow him to use some of the rooms in the monastery, and when the abbot refuses his request, he says to him:

Abbot, you must compromise a little. The world is now devoting itself to reform and your esteemed religion is no longer of any use. You would be advised to lend your rooms to us whilst there's still time ... If you don't do this now, it is doubtful whether you will be able to protect the temple once an imperial order has been given for the dissolution of monasteries and their transformation into schools.<sup>1</sup>

Attempts on the part of Buddhists to adjust to the modern world were first made towards the end of Manchu rule. The most important attempt was made by the layman, Yang Wen-hui (1837-1911),<sup>2</sup> who, following disappointments in his private life, turned to Buddhism and set himself the task of re-printing and distributing Buddhist scriptures. After two periods in London attached to the Chinese embassy, during which he was able to acquaint himself with modern science as well as with the work of such orientalist as Max Müller, Yang returned to China where, apart from continuing to publish the scriptures, he sought to assess the role of Chinese Buddhism in the modern world and considered the means whereby this role could be acted out.

From his observations, Yang concluded that Buddhism was the religion most compatible with modern science, and that the task of Chinese Buddhists was to introduce Buddhism to the Western world. To fulfil this mission, however, it was necessary, first, for Chinese Buddhists

to appreciate the significance of modern science and to see its relationship to Buddhist thought; and second, for Chinese Buddhists to be trained for the missionary task which lay ahead. To this end he opened a school for the training of Buddhist leaders in 1908. It was attended by a small group of young laymen and clerics, and all but one of its teachers were laymen.

Although the school had to close after only a year, the belief that Buddhism was the only religion with a message for the 20th century took root. This belief led certain young men, both lay and clerical, to strive for reform within the Buddhist community, to work for the establishment of national Buddhist associations, to launch attacks on superstition both within Buddhism and the community at large, to engage in social work, and to establish schools and colleges in which modern knowledge and a "cleansed" Buddhism could be taught and studied. The aim was to create a core of educated lay and clerical leaders who would carry Buddhist values into everyday life and, it was hoped, into the political arena. The ultimate goal was the conversion of the world to Buddhism.

In the political sphere the 20th century seemed to augur well for Buddhism. The dropping of the old examination system in 1905, and the eventual overthrow of the monarchy in 1911, meant that the traditional supports for Confucianism, as the ideology of the State, had been removed. Moreover, Buddhism was well represented in the higher echelons of government. Hsiung Hsi-ling, the premier at the time of the inauguration of China's first president, Yuan Shih-k'ai, in 1913, was a Buddhist, and as Holmes Welch has reminded us, "at least two chiefs of state, four prime ministers, nine officers of ministerial rank, and 17 provincial governors and warlords" were adherents of the Buddhist faith during the early years of the republic.<sup>3</sup>

But the potential in Buddhism for influencing the life of the nation was not to be found only at such exalted levels. The bulk of the population continued to feel free to call on Buddhist clergy at critical junctures in their lives, as they had done from time immemorial; and Buddhists quickly followed the growing trend among Chinese generally to form associations and parties. They organized themselves into a variety of bodies, not only for educational and charitable purposes, but also in order to protect the *sangha*\* against the many who regarded Buddhism as a vestige of China's superstitious past, and who wanted to secularize the monasteries and expropriate them for educational and other purposes.

During the first two tumultuous decades of the republic numerous short-lived Buddhist associations were formed. They reflected a variety of political and religious attitudes, as well as rivalries between the leaders of various groups of monks and between monks and influential lay leaders. Finally in 1929 the Chinese Buddhist Association was established in Shanghai.

\* Buddhist religious communities. Ed.

Although it aimed at a membership which represented the laity as well as the clergy, the Association was controlled by the latter and, up till 1949, witnessed the rivalry for leadership of two of the politically most active monks in the first half of the century: T'ai-hsü (1890-1947)<sup>4</sup> and Yuan-ying (1878-1953).<sup>5</sup> Although sworn brothers from the early years of their careers, T'ai-hsü came increasingly to be the leader and spokesman for the "progressives", and Yuan-ying the advocate of more moderate attitudes.

The history of the Chinese Buddhist Association until the outbreak of the Second World War was far from untroubled. The generation of lay Buddhists in high places began to give way to younger men who had been influenced by Christianity, or whose education had led them to consider that all religion hindered modernization.<sup>6</sup> The event which precipitated the formation of the Association was itself a symptom of the increasingly hostile and impatient attitude adopted by the modernizers. At a national conference on education, held in Nanking in May 1928, a Professor T'ai Shuang-ch'iu, who had recently returned from the United States where he had been studying education, proposed that monasteries be confiscated and that income from them "be allocated to the support of education".<sup>7</sup> This proposal thoroughly alarmed a meeting of Buddhists held in Shanghai in 1929. Delegates from 17 provinces had met at the behest of Yuan-ying to consider what should be done to defend the monasteries. The delegates were alarmed by the adoption of Professor T'ai Shuang-ch'iu's proposal at the education conference, by the Minister of the Interior's favourable response to the proposal, and by the promulgation of more severe regulations for the control of monasteries in January 1929. As a result, the meeting of Buddhists in Shanghai decided to form a Buddhist Association and elected Yuan-ying as its first president.

Despite internal discord and its failure to win an unequivocal commitment on the part of the government to protect Buddhist property, the Association managed, until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, to keep the confiscators at bay, and to provide a platform from which Buddhists could speak with a semblance of unity. By 1936 the Association claimed to have 500 branches and chapters throughout the nation.

During the war years Yuan-ying remained in Shanghai. The Association ceased to operate and Yuan-ying was briefly imprisoned by the Japanese. T'ai-hsü, on the other hand, made his way to the war-time capital, Chungking, where he actively supported the Chinese government which had had to retreat there, and where he continued to work for his own leadership of the Buddhist community. In 1941 he sought permission from the Ministry of the Interior to set up a committee for the reorganization of the Chinese Buddhist Association. T'ai-hsü's request was refused, in all probability because the Ministry wanted no restrictions imposed on itself should the need to appropriate Buddhist monasteries arise. However, in 1945, when the war was over,

T'ai-hsu's request was granted.<sup>8</sup> Although Yuan-ying had a seat on the committee, T'ai-hsu was given control of it. After two years of preparatory work, a national conference was convened on 26 May 1947, and a new constitution was adopted by the delegates who had come from all parts of the country, including Tibet, Taiwan and Sinkiang. T'ai-hsu, unfortunately, was not to enjoy the fruits of his labour since he died on 17 March 1947. The Association's membership at this time was put at 4,620,000.

On the eve of the communist take-over of China, Chinese Buddhists had created for themselves a national organization which embraced both clerics and laymen and which, through its chapters and branches throughout the land, was equipped to keep its constituency informed of governmental attitudes to Buddhism, and to represent the concerns of Buddhists to the central government.

Apart from the establishment of a nationwide association to knit the nation's Buddhists together, more radical elements, and T'ai-hsu in particular, sought to reform monastic life by drawing up a new structure for it. His detailed plan, which he published in 1915, bore the title, *The Reorganization of the Sangha System*.<sup>9</sup> Although he produced a number of revisions of this plan between 1915 and 1947, no serious attempt was made to implement it. This was not only, perhaps, because of its complexity, but also because the majority of Chinese Buddhists were still not ready for such a radical restructuring of the monastic system, or for the drastic pruning which its implementation would have required.

Part of T'ai-hsu's plan, however, was concerned with Buddhist activity outside the monasteries. Such activity, he considered, would include education, medical work and the running of orphanages. A number of elementary and middle schools were established by Buddhists and, although largely staffed by laymen and with curricula similar to those in state schools, they were usually attached to monasteries or Buddhist seminaries. Holmes Welch refers to one such school in Hunan, which took about one thousand boarders from all over the province and which, so its head claimed, "had the best academic record in Hunan"<sup>10</sup>.

T'ai-hsu, however, was particularly interested in a more advanced kind of education which, although including "secular" studies, focused on Buddhist teaching and the study of major Buddhist texts. To implement his ideas, T'ai-hsu established in 1922 the Wuchang College for Buddhist Studies,<sup>11</sup> and so popular did some of his innovations become that more than 70 similar institutions were set up in various parts of the country.<sup>12</sup> Although many of these colleges lacked the economic resources to sustain themselves for any length of time, enthusiasm for them persisted throughout the difficult war years and up until the communist victory in 1949.

No doubt because of the large sums of money needed for establishing modern hospitals and

for training medical specialists, neither T'ai-hsu nor any group of concerned Buddhists were able to do much to implement their wish to have medical centres operating under Buddhist auspices. Here and there, however, doctors could be found who were willing to contribute some of their time to free clinics. The Right Faith Society, for example, which was founded in 1920 by a businessman and director of the Chamber of Commerce in Hankow, and for which T'ai-hsu served as a kind of spiritual adviser, operated a clinic to which four doctors, trained in Western medicine, and four traditional practitioners gave their time. The clinic offered free medical treatment to the poor.<sup>13</sup> To run orphanages was a form of social work which was easier to undertake. Several of these were established by monasteries during the early years of this century.<sup>14</sup>

During the first half of the 20th century, Chinese Buddhists clearly responded to the forces which had begun to transform Chinese society. Whether every new attitude, action or enthusiasm of individual Buddhists furthered the interests of Buddhism is doubtful; but the Buddhists' positive attempts to meet the challenge of the modern world suggest that, despite its many weaknesses, Chinese Buddhism continued to harbour strength of faith and a sense of mission. Indeed, so strong was the sense of mission, that T'ai-hsu and other like-minded monks were able to keep alive Yang Wen-hui's vision of Chinese monks engaging in missionary work abroad.

## II

The passion of the radicals and progressives for relevance, for imposing national, centralized administrative structures on their fellow Buddhists, and their passion for secular activities and the reform of the *sangha* during the first half of this century, were to play into the hands of the new communist authorities. Communist approval of the aspirations of these men, when it was given, swept the Buddhist leadership along with the tide of change initiated by the new government, until both it and the Buddhism which it sought to serve were superseded by events, and by the new society formed by those events. The government protection of Buddhism, for which they had striven so long under the previous government, and which had never won more than a half-hearted response from the authorities, was now bestowed with embarrassing thoroughness.

Article 5 of the Common Programme, passed by the Chinese People's Consultative Conference on 29 September 1949, guaranteed freedom of religious belief.<sup>15</sup> But this and subsequent statements of a like nature had to be balanced against the communists' avowed hostility towards religion, a hostility which Mao Tse-tung had enshrined in his own writings.<sup>16</sup> Religion was seen as the product of a period in the development of human society and in the growth of knowledge when, "faced with natural and social forces that it could not contend with, [mankind] looked to

the mystical for help".<sup>17</sup> Religion, so official policy maintained, could not disappear until the social conditions which produced it had been swept away and, clearly, this would take time. To coerce those holding religious beliefs, without a corresponding transformation of society, was "useless and positively harmful", according to official theory.<sup>18</sup> It is clear, however, that in a society which was in a constant state of transformation, the line between what should be tolerated - and even protected - and what was to be attacked, would be bound to shift, and would always be difficult to determine. This applied particularly to parts of China at some distance from the centre, from which theory and policy emerged. Thus, despite statements calculated to comfort religious believers, Buddhist monks and monasteries in the provinces were to suffer from time to time at the hand of local cadres, dedicated to undermining religious faith.<sup>19</sup>

But even if Buddhists were promised protection in official statements, the government was determined to adopt a positive attitude to Buddhism. It was aided in this firstly by Chu-tsan,<sup>20</sup> a monk who had been a disciple of T'ai-hsu and who had submitted a grand programme of reform to the communist authorities; and secondly, by the re-formation of the Chinese Buddhist Association. Chu-tsan advocated the implementation of two slogans: "shift to production" and "shift to scholarship". By implementing the first, claimed Chu-tsan, the "old feudal economic organization of the monasteries" could be smashed, and by emphasizing the second, "Buddhists' knowledge of Buddhism and their orthodox faith" would be strengthened and superstition eliminated. (It is not difficult to find parallels to these statements in the writings of T'ai-hsu.) In 1950, thanks to his activism, Chu-tsan was appointed editor-in-chief of a new monthly magazine called *Modern Buddhism*,<sup>21</sup> which was to serve as the mouthpiece for government policy on Buddhism until 1964 when it ceased publication.

A re-established and centrally administered Buddhist Association was used as a second channel of government control.<sup>22</sup> The headquarters of the old Chinese Buddhist Association had moved to Taiwan with the Kuomintang government. This had left the monks and nuns, who remained on the Chinese mainland, bereft of any national body to represent their views to the government. The government was in no hurry to reconstitute a national body since, from its point of view, its first priority was a "reliable" leadership in the regions where Buddhism was strongest. In May 1951, however, the well-known layman, Chao P'u-ch'u, proposed that "18 prominent monks should sponsor a preparatory conference".<sup>23</sup>

At the Peace Conference of Asia and the Pacific Regions, held in Peking in 1952, Chinese monks were able to demonstrate the significant role which they could play on the international stage, by entertaining Buddhists from eight nations, and by signing a joint statement calling on

Buddhists throughout the world to support "the resolutions of the conference". Since the resolutions called for a halt to "American aggression in Korea", and for the withdrawal of American forces in Taiwan, the political usefulness of Chinese Buddhists became abundantly clear, and it comes as no surprise, therefore, that about two months later the preparatory committee for the formation of the China Buddhist Association should finally meet in Peking." As one has come to expect on these occasions, prominent government officials were also present at the meetings of the committee.

Despite the tensions which existed between Tibetans and Chinese at the time, Tibetan monks took a prominent part in the formation of the new Association. Of 93 members elected to the Council of the Association, 29 were Tibetans. The significance which the Association was meant to have for China's minority peoples, who also happened to be Buddhists, can be seen in the fact that, although the president was Chinese, two of the four honorary presidents were the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, and the third was a Mongol. Yuan-ying, who had founded the first Association in 1929 and who had been ousted by his rival, T'ai-hsu, in 1947, returned to the arena as president. He died shortly afterwards, however, and was replaced by another Tibetan.

With the adoption of a constitution at the inaugural meeting, held from 29 May to 3 June 1953, China finally had a Buddhist Association with a legal basis guaranteed by the government, and a Council membership which represented not only Buddhists in China proper, but also those in minority regions. But if this organization helped transmit Buddhists' views to the government, it also proved an excellent vehicle for transmitting government policy to Buddhists. The Association's constitution made clear that Buddhists could not simply withdraw into their monasteries and concentrate on religious duties and practices: the constitution stated that the Association existed "to unite all the country's Buddhists so that they will participate, under the leadership of the People's Government, in movements for the welfare of the motherland and the defence of world peace; to help the People's Government to fully carry out its policy of freedom of religious belief".<sup>25</sup>

On the surface the Association was a success. The part which Buddhists were able to play in China's diplomatic activities was an indication of this. Monks and nuns were soon to discover, however, that instead of being a bulwark for their defence, as the Association had been during the republican period, it was to prove an instrument for the reorganization of the *sangha* - an instrument so efficient that, between 1949 and the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, there was a marked decline in the numbers of monasteries in operation, and in many monasteries the number of monks was drastically reduced. None of the Buddhist seminaries, which survived at the end of the republican period, were able to operate properly after 1949. It

It was not until 1956 that a new seminary was established under Buddhist Association leadership. But there was a new emphasis in the curriculum of this institute. Political studies held an important place, and the seminary seemed more concerned to teach the techniques of administration than the niceties of Buddhist doctrine. In 1961 the emphasis changed again: the seminary became more of a centre for research into Buddhism than a seminary for the training of monks and preachers. During the Cultural Revolution it ceased to operate.<sup>26</sup>

On a recent visit to China, the present writer was informed by his guide that a famous monastery in Hangchow was now a museum, rather than a centre of religious life. During the Cultural Revolution, said the guide, the monks fled and, although a few later returned, many had married and settled into secular society. Those remarks may be said to sum up the current situation of Buddhism in China. In Taiwan, however, where the old republican government continues to function, and where every attempt is now made to prove to the world that it is the champion of free Asian societies, Buddhism has so flourished that, whereas in 1959 there were 354 monks and 482 nuns in 881 monasteries and nunneries, in 1976 these figures had risen to 7,750 religious in 2,250 temples and monasteries. Devotees are numbered at 7,500,000 out of a population of 16,149,202.<sup>27</sup>

As has been hinted above, administrative reforms and even Buddhist educational policy in China since the communists came to power, can be related to plans and ideas put forward by T'ai-hsu in his eagerness to make Buddhism relevant to the modern world. In his writings, however, he makes a clear distinction between relating Buddhism to modern life and allowing it to be secularized. His goal, so this writer believes, was to make reform serve the interests of Buddhism. Following the change of government in 1949, however, reforms were introduced so that Buddhism could more readily serve the interests of the State. Obviously, once those interests had been served there could be no further reason for the State to support it.

When confronted with the fact that Buddhism has, to all intents and purposes, ceased to exist in China, some Buddhists outside China have asserted that what is taking place in China is a manifestation of the "Buddha mind"; that "the whole country has become a monastery ... and ... the whole people ... the *sangha*".<sup>28</sup> Such remarks remind one of the comments of certain Christians who, in the face of the virtual demise of the Church in China, now equate Chinese society with an emerging Kingdom of God on earth.

In contrast to the abbot in the novel mentioned at the beginning of this article, modern Chinese Buddhists have been willing to "compromise" in order to come to terms with the modern world. But, sadly, in some societies today, neither accommodation nor a rigid conservatism guarantee a religion the freedom which it needs to work towards its own goals.



1. Quoted from chapter 35 of a so far unpublished translation of the *Wen-ming hsiao-shih* (A Brief History of Enlightenment) by Li Po-yuan (1867-1906). [Published 1996 as *Modern Times*]
2. A convenient summary of the life and work of Yang Wen-hui is found in *The Buddhist Revival in China* by Holmes Welch, Harvard, 1968, pp. 2-10. Welch bases his summary, as indicated in his footnotes, on accounts in English and in Chinese written by Yang's grand-daughter.
3. op. cit., p. 155.
4. T'ai-hsü's complete works together with his biography were published in 64 volumes in the 1950s by a committee specially formed for the task under the title *T'ai-hsu ta-shih ch'üan-chi* (Complete Works of the Venerable T'ai-hsu) and printed in Hong Kong. A work entitled *T'ai Hsu: His Life and Teachings* by Chou Hsiang-kuang, Allahabad, India, 1957, unfortunately tells us more about Dr. Chou than about T'ai-hsu. An excellent summary of his life and work is given in Welch's *The Buddhist Revival in China*, Chapter III.
5. The fullest accounts of the life of Yuan-ying are found in the *Yuan-ying fa-shih chi-nien kan* (Memorial Volume for the Revd. Yuan-ying), Singapore, 1954; in comments made throughout the biography of T'ai-hsu (*T'ai-hsü ta-shih nien-p'u*) by the monk Yin-shun, and in Welch's *The Buddhist Revival in China*.
6. Welch, op. cit., p. 155.
7. *ibid.*, p. 41. Accounts of the events leading up to the formation of the China Buddhist Association are also given in Yin-shun, op. cit., under the years 1928 and 1929.
8. Welch, op. cit., p. 46.
9. T'ai-hsu's detailed plans and articles drawn up and written to bring about the reorganization of the *sangha* are contained in Volumes 33 and 34 of his Complete Works.
10. Welch, op. cit., p. 127.
11. Yin-shun, op. cit., p. 131 ff.
12. See Welch, op. cit., pp. 285-7 for a comprehensive list of these seminaries.
13. *ibid.*, p. 79.
14. *ibid.*, pp. 123-6.
15. See *Chung-kuo ta-lu fo-chiao tzu-liao hui-pien* (Sourcebook on Buddhism in Mainland China: 1949-1967), Hong Kong, 1968, p. 4; Holmes Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, Harvard, 1972, p. 3; Donald E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China*, London, 1972, p. 21.
16. See MacInnis, op. cit., pp. 3-18 for a documentary study of Mao Tse-tung's views on religion.
17. From a passage quoted by Holmes Welch in his book *Buddhism Under Mao*, p. 4, which appeared in the *People's Daily*, 23 September 1950.
18. *ibid.*
19. Welch, op. cit., p. 2 ff.
20. *ibid.*, pp. 7-11 and 389-407.
21. *ibid.*, pp. 11-17.
22. See *Sourcebook on Buddhism in Mainland China*, pp. 119-186 for documents relating to the establishment and activities of the Chinese Buddhist Association. See also Welch, op. cit., pp. 17-89.
23. Welch, op. cit., p. 18.
24. *ibid.*
25. *ibid.*, p. 20. The relevant goals set for the Association are also cited in *Sourcebook on Buddhism in Mainland China*, pp. 122-3.
26. Welch, op. cit., pp. 156-159. See also *Sourcebook on Buddhism in Mainland China*, pp. 355-366.
27. See the *China Year Book* (Taiwan) for 1959/60 and for 1976.
28. Welch, op. cit., p. 376.

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