

REVIVING THE PAST OR REIMAGINING THE FUTURE: BUDDHISM IN MODERN CHINA

China's official policy stances on religion are complex and—especially outside of China's borders—often controversial, exhibiting a strong bias toward top-down control and the subordination of individual religious rights to national socialist-market goals.

At the same time, since liberalization in the 1980s, both the personal practice and public presence of religion have grown at phenomenal rates. While the CCP remains ideologically wedded to the ideal of eventually rendering religion obsolete, the presence of a troubling “moral vacuum” in Chinese public life has let the Party to support the revitalization of Chinese religions as part of the PRC's “intangible heritage.”

In sum, Chinese religious life is in the midst of significant redefinition—a negotiation of status that, like the Chinese idiom for crisis, *wei-ji* 危機, signals both “danger” and “opportunity.”

Authority Matters: The Interplay of State and Religion in China

Over much of Chinese history, state-religion relations have oscillated between two poles:

- *use of religion by state to consolidate and/or legitimize state authority*: sponsorship of rituals, temples, monasteries, translation projects, etc; epitomized by:
 - Wendi and Sui dynasty mapping/securing of the empire's boundaries via a network of 111 relic-bearing Buddhist temples
 - Empress Wu Zetian as self-declared *bodhisattva/cakravartin* in direct contestation of Confucian norms regarding male-only imperial power
- *use of religion by people to contest state authority*: populist millenarian movements
 - Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 CE led by Daoist secret society members, a contributing factor in dissolution of Han Dynasty
 - the Red Turban rebellions of the mid-14th century inspired by the White Lotus Society—a millenarian syncretism of Pure Land Buddhism and Daoism

Perhaps the most dramatic and damaging religious uprising: Taiping Rebellion that from 1850-1864 resulted in over 30 million deaths (1 in 8 people in population of 250m) and widespread devastation across southeastern China, the Buddhist heartland. (Spence, *God's Chinese Son*)

- the dissolution of the non-hierarchic “circulatory system” linking local Buddhist temples and monasteries to provincially- and imperially-supported public monasteries
 - impact on the informal education system for monks and nuns based on travel to and by textual experts and meditation masters

In the aftermath of the rebellion, China subjected to a technology-driven expansion of Western imperialist and commercial interests in China and an influx of “Western learning,” especially scientific and philosophical works that presented a new modern vision of the world order.

- religion targeted as a factor in China being the “sick man” and many questioned whether Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism had any legitimate role in a modernizing China
- two powerful discourses: one that placed science above culture and religion, and one that sought to rehabilitate ‘religion’ by differentiating it from ‘superstition’

- 1898 Qing proposal to convert temples to public schools → institutional survival response:
 - the first China-wide Buddhist association, aimed at promoting “Sangha education”
 - prominent lay intellectuals like Tan Sitong (1865-1898) advocated blending Buddhist thought, Western science and Confucian morality → a distinctively Chinese modernity
 - Tan’s *Renxue* 仁學 (*An Exposition of Benevolence or Humane Learning*) blended Neo-Confucian, scientific, and Buddhist ideas to develop a theory of mind consistent with sociopolitical utopianism
 - ❖ individualism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism → new historical agency based on mindset of non-duality (tong 通 as interpenetration/understanding/circulation)
 - ❖ Mao compared Tan’s value to CCP co-founder Chen Duxiu (1879-1942)
 - appeals to Yogācāra as indigenous Chinese “mind science” that 1] was validated by modern Western science or 2] could be used to critique modern science
 - Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936): used Yogācāra teaching of nonduality and ultimate equality of all things → radical egalitarian politics revolt against the Manchu Qing
 - ❖ appeals to Buddhist theories of karma and no-self to mount a critique of global capitalism
 - ❖ Wang Hui appropriates in 1990s *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*

With the 1911 fall of the Qing dynasty and the growth of the iconoclastic embrace of “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” by the New Culture movement, Buddhists responded with efforts ranging from *conservative reform* to *liberal modernization*

- **reformers:** emphasis on restoring tradition via appeal to core texts (school-defining sutras) and practices:
 - the largest number emphasized Chinese traditions and the value of using a single practice, drawing on either Pure Land or Chan resources (cp. Kamakura Bsm)
 - others, exemplified by the lay reformer Ouyang Jingwu (1871-1943), called for a return to core, Indian Buddhist traditions using Sanskrit and Pali texts
 - in both cases: a vision of monks and nuns serving society as 1] textual specialists; 2] religious/ritual virtuosos; and 3] moral exemplars
- **modernizers:** emphasis on transforming Buddhism into a force for positive and progressive social change
 - monks and nuns still committed to meditation, but also to being a highly educated elite corps of activists taking direct part in addressing real world issues
 - wisdom = study Buddhist texts, but also math, science, history, languages
 - compassion = engage in charitable works and creating conditions for harmony

Among the most famous of those in the modernizing camp was Taixu (1889-1947), founder of Chinese Buddhist Association (CBA). Working out from Xuanzang’s (602–664) *Demonstration of Nothing But Consciousness* (*Cheng weishi lun* 成唯識論) and Chinese apocryphal text *Giving Rise to Confidence in the Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論), Taixu rejected the thesis of Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), and Hu Shi (1891–1962) that the modern worldview was necessarily one in which personal and social life reduced to scientific thought and practice.

- during a 3-year isolated retreat, read Western philosophy and science, Zhang Taiyan’s “*Jianli zongjiao lun* 建立宗教論” (*Founding a Religion*), Kang Youwei’s (1858–1927) *Datong shu* 大同書 (*Book on the Great Unity*), Liang Qichao’s *Xinmin shuo* 新民說 (*On the New Citizen*) and Tan Sitong’s (1865–1898) *Renxue* 仁學

- emerged with a vision of “Humanistic Buddhism” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教; later *renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) animating a new and modern Chinese body politic
 - goal: realizing a “Pure Land in the human world” (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土)

Through the end of the Qing and the Republican period both reform and modernizing approaches to ensuring the survival and relevance of Buddhist institutions remained quite active.

- as a pan-Asian phenomenon, Buddhism was promoted as a potentially powerful force for realizing regional identity in opposition to Western imperialism
- in China, growth of lay organizations and lay teachers of the Dharma; building Buddhist clinics, orphanages, and schools; proselytizing in prisons; efforts to start ecumenical movements with Buddhists abroad
- public ceremonies by Han/Tibetan Buddhists for “strengthening the nation” and peace
 - G. Tuttle (2007), *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China*
- by the late 1930s there over 150 Buddhist periodicals and 68 Buddhist publishing houses; sound recordings; art/cartoons
 - F. Tarroco (2008) *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism*

The Founding of the PRC

With the founding of the communist People’s Republic of China and the supremacy of Marxist materialism filtered through Mao’s allegiance to the rural/agrarian, rather than urban/industrial, proletariat, the state-religion relationship fundamentally altered. Officially, every Chinese constitution since 1954 has guaranteed the right to “believe or not-believe” in religion. However:

- official *party policy*: “scientific atheism” (religion backward, unscientific)
- actual *party practice*: “militant atheism” (religion dangerous, counterproductive)
- stress on the control/constraint of religion via standardizing, state-sanctioned institutions
 - China Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (1954), China Buddhist Association (1955); China Daoist Association (1956); the China Islamic Association (1957); and the China Catholic Patriotic Committee (1957)

For Buddhism, a key turning point was the Land Reform initiative of 1950. Although the President of the Chinese Buddhist Association, Zhao Puchu (1907-2000) called for contributing to communist nation-building by “combining Chan with agricultural work, this proved futile.

- Buddhist institutions stripped of property → loss agricultural income and land rents
- urban properties appropriated, stripping Buddhist institutions of building rental income
 - as a condition of survival, Buddhist institutions began explicitly promoting state policies, including supporting military campaigns (e.g., on Korean peninsula)
 - Juzan (1908-1984) and use of Buddhist concepts to explain/ratify communism

While Buddhism was in steady decline over the first decades of PRC, like all other forms of religion, at least some senior monks at leading monasteries were able to sustain serious practice and lines of Dharma transmission. This changed dramatically with the “creative destruction” triggered by Mao’s call for a “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” in 1966.

- policy shift from dismissive tolerance to one of active, often violent eradication

- across China over the next ten years: widespread seizure or destruction of temples and monasteries; artworks destroyed or sold; libraries burned; monks and nuns forcibly returned to lay life
- the eventual result: a nearly complete end to the open practice of Buddhism
- scale of damage: in China in 1930, there were 740,000 monks and nuns, not including those residing in Tibet; in 1986, there were only 28,000

Buddhism in the Era of Market Reform

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and gradual “opening” of China from 1979 onward, the focus of the Chinese government has been on economic reform, industrialization, modernization. Religion begins reviving, first in a “*zone of indifference*” and then with official sanction:

- in 1982, Central Committee of the CCP issues “Document 19” admitting “leftist” errors in past dealings with religious life
 - reiterated in 1982 Constitution, Article 36: affirmation of freedom from *compulsion to believe/not-believe* and the protection of “normal religious activities,” defined as “not disrupting public order, impairing health of citizens, interfering with educational system of the state, or weakening national unity”
 - one key and more conservative provision (especially for Islamic and Tibetan Buddhist communities): no religious education for children under 18
 - 1997 “White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China”: “religion should be adapted to society in which it is prevalent” and foster “social and cultural progress”
 - relative *autonomy* in exchange for absolute *loyalty*

Further opening occurred in 2004 when State Council’s “Regulations on Religious Affairs” gave religious institutions rights to publish and broadcast religious materials; establish religious schools; send members abroad for education; conduct large-scale gatherings outside of religious sites; and receive both domestic and foreign donations. Some notable impacts:

- 2006 “World Buddhist Forum” in Hangzhou on theme of “A Harmonious World begins in the Heart-mind.” Sponsored by Chinese Buddhist Association and the Religious Cultural Communication Association of China
- national, one semester training program for high ranking clerics by People’s University
- local and provincial government support for what has been called “building the religious stage to sing the economic opera” (Yang Fenggang)
 - temple building as economic stimulus; both foreign and domestic tourism
 - at pilgrimage sites like Wutaishan, e.g., domestic tourists number of 3,000,000/yr
 - major temples and monasteries in Tibet 1-2 million visitors a year
 - in 2015, the 2nd International Buddhist Items and Supplies Expo in Beijing

Economic and social liberalization → new levels of prosperity, but also deepening inequalities, chaotic social dynamics, and a “values gap” or “moral vacuum” that threatens social harmony

- *songbang* 松绑 or “untying” the individual from traditional political, clan, religious and gender identities via party-led institutional reform → ironic decline in “social trust”
 - particularist morality married to instrumental *guanxi* networks → social polarization and incivility

- a resurgence and acceleration of religious belief/practice accepted by government as long as it aligns with social progress, economic productivity and physical well-being

Buddhism in 21st Century China: Drawing on the Past to Re-envision the Future

All across China, Buddhism is undergoing rebirth.

- *China Daily* poll in 2006: 31% of Chinese people have some religious affiliation/practice, of whom 62% are aged 16-39
 - recent survey, 18% of population claimed to “be Buddhist”
 - typology: problem-solvers, seekers, and lifestyle Buddhists
- over the twenty years from 1986 to 2006, the number of monks and nuns in non-Tibetan lineages went from 28,000 to 200,000 in over 20,000 temples
 - in Tibetan regions, another 120,000 monastics in nearly 3,000 temples
- temples are being restored or built from scratch and many municipalities are building “Buddhist Cultural Parks” or “Chan Cultural Parks”
 - e.g., a Buddhist theme park around Famen Temple in Shaanxi on 22,000 acres

A result: concerns about whether temples are being operated primarily as businesses.

- e.g., annual tourist revenue at Lingshan temple in Jiangsu province is over \$200 million
 - Wutaishan scandal: 150 fake monks were arrested for running “pay-for-prayer” scam
- but there is no question about the growth of lay interest
 - at Nan Putuo in Xiamen, over 45,000 lay members paying monthly dues

At the same time, Buddhist charitable organizations have increasingly public faces, engaging in relief efforts and community service (cp. Buddhist organizations in Taiwan and Hong Kong)

- in many of China’s 500 cities with more than 1 million residents, temples are opening vegetarian cafes and bookstores as “public spaces” for sharing ideas, learning how to handle the new stresses of urban life, and exploring options for personal self-cultivation
- Chan meditation and vegetarian groups are widespread on university campuses
- increasing presence of Buddhist symbols/content in popular media
 - 1000s of websites and most Buddhist masters *fashi* now have feeds on Weibo

This process of revitalization has government sanction to the degree that it: 1] celebrates China’s “cultural heritage”; and, 2] exemplifies recognition that—to quote a 2002 CCP document—“preaching the goods of social progress is an essential religious duty.”

- *endorsed*: reviving the past in a spirit of *ren jian fojiao* or “this-worldly Buddhism”
- *denied*: any movement in the direction of separatism and challenges to state authority
 - in 2017, State Religious Affairs Regulations were revised, with tightening of policies regarding donations
 - <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/%e5%ae%97%e6%95%99%e4%ba%8b%e5%8a%a1%e6%9d%a1%e4%be%8b-2017/?lang=en>

There is evidence that—much as many minority peoples have made creative use of their official designation *as* minorities to exercise new and unexpected kinds of agency—organizations like the officially-sanctioned Buddhist Association of China are beginning to use their status to negotiate with political authorities at the legal and polity levels. For example:

- BAC lobby→a law that enables punishing anyone who “illegally deprives citizens of their rights to religious belief or infringes on the customs and habits of ethnic groups.”
- in 2003, the vice chair of BAC demanded revision of chapters in the high school politics textbook that dealt with the “social effects of religion”

By global, democratic standards, these are very modest victories. And it is an open question as to how far Chinese Buddhists might be able to press toward a more “critical and yet supportive” stance toward the state. At present, the “religious ecology” of Buddhism includes:

- state-accredited institutions and organizations
- institutions and organizations with complex relations with the state
 - mainstream Buddhism, but often headed by figures from Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as from Tibetan regions now introducing Han Chinese to Tibetan Vajrayana
- “fringe” groups centered on self-appointed monks/nuns, new hybrid practice systems, etc

But focusing on the state and religion as adversaries is only one way of assessing the prospects of 21st century Buddhism—evaluating their interplay according to a logic of state/oppression and individual/resistance. In fact, matters are much more complex. Lineages of conservative “reformers” and radical “modernizers” continue to evolve in a context of market globalization and social media.

- Xingyun (b. 1927) is a Taiwanese monk in Taixu lineage who advocates “one China” policy and promotes Buddhism as crucial to Chinese culture
 - writes conservative life guides for lay Buddhists (e.g., *Being Good: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life*), promotes Buddhist values and practices via cartoons and anime
- Shi Daoxin (b. 1982) is a Chinese monk like Hongyi (1879-1942) who explored the use of music and art to promote Buddhist values and practices in Republican era China
 - a proponent of “fashionable Chan (*shishang* 時尚) that appeals to young urbanites, avid user of iPhone, Weibo and instant messaging for giving “Dharma advice”
 - a “complete person is a complete Buddha” (*rencheng ji focheng*)
 - media star who has appeared giving advice on dating shows and on “A Date with Luyu” (cp. Oprah) and who has recorded two CDs
- 2012 World Buddhist Forum opened with the Heart Sutra sung by actress Wang Fei <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/video/faye-wong-perform-heart-sutra-2012-04-26->
 - included letter from Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), read by Zhu Weiqun, Executive Vice Minister of the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee
 - the promise of Buddhism, Jia wrote, was to contribute to kinder human relations, greater social harmony and a more peaceful world

Seen from the perspective of relational creativity, the “use” of Buddhism in China in the 21st century may be something other than a way of either consolidating/legitimizing or contesting the authority of the state. What is unclear is whether the critiques of market capitalism and the egalitarian ethos of 19th and 20th century “humanistic” Buddhism—framed in the context of the industrial revolution—will be updated to be effective in addressing the inequities that are growing now as a result of the intelligence revolution.