

The Three Jewels in Contemporary China

Whalen LAI

University of California, Davis

It has been some time since the state of Buddhism in China was reported by Holmes Welch's trilogy, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (1967), *The Buddhist Revival in China* (1968), and *Buddhism under Mao* (1972), all issued by Harvard University Press. There are more recent report of it by John Yun-hua, Alan Sponberg, and William Powell in the *Journal of Chinese Religions*, No.12, Fall, 1984. The following is taking stock of the situation through putting it into the larger historical context of Chinese Buddhism.

By Buddhism one means the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Each of these takes certain institutional forms. Of the Buddha, there are two legacies: the internal and the external. The internal Buddha-nature had enhanced native Chinese humanism especially since its popularization by the Ch'an (Zen) school. Even non-Buddhists would echo the idea that all people are or possess the essence of Buddhas, that even if Buddhist institutions disappear, this idea will survive in other forms under other names. The external manifestation of the Buddha is epitomized by the objective form of the Buddha images and the faith that goes with them. Leading them are the Buddha Amitabha and, in his entourage, Avalokitesvara or Kuan-yin of the Pure Land faith. The worshipping of these at home or at temples may be idolatry and sheer superstition to the critical, but that has been the major form of Buddho-centric piety and any pronouncement of its immanent death is premature.

The internal Buddha is always there awaiting to be discovered but material representations do require patronage. At present, the Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Republic of China has committed funds to restoring many temples as cultural treasures that were once defaced during the Cultural Revolution. It has also underwritten the training of monks so that they could better staff the temples. At certain places Jan Yun-hua visited, temples remained well attended, usually by the older generation. And though those younger seems more interested in TV, still judging from the survival rate of Buddhism in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, modernity does not seem to naturally displace religion. The search for roots among the young is

just a matter of time. It is the particular form of Buddhist piety that engenders that we have no inkling yet of.

The fact that Buddhism should survive well is due to its having always offered a refuge to many a Chinese in the past who found Confucianism spiritually deficient. Modern Chinese who looked to secular ideologies might not be satisfied with just that either. Being more organized than the Taoists, Buddhists should fare better in this regard. The temples might not have its old economic base since much of their land holdings had since the Republic of 1911 been taken away from them. Still in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, the temples are enjoying a boom and donations should keep this aspect going for some time. and in the PRC the religious communities as a whole should flourish in the new freedom. Whether the tradition will or not capture the hearts and souls of men depends on the message of the Dharma

The state of the Dharma or Teaching is somewhat ambiguous. At present, the Chinese Buddhist Association has been most instrumental in reintroducing seminary training at a national and a regional level. Separate from the more advanced work being done at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the research wing of the CBA (last heard working on the Shih-ching shan stone tablets) is yet to be on its feet. The seminary curriculum is rather rudimentary. But if one expects an intellectual vigor in Chinese Buddhism, he should first consider a peculiar characteristic in late dynastic Chinese Buddhism: its anti-intellectualism. Since Sung, whatever theoretical interest there was among some Buddhist monks, that had proved nonessential for the ongoing practice of the faithful. For Pure Land devotees, what matters has always been burning incense and chanting the Buddha's name; for Ch'an, it is tso-ch'an (*zazen*) and k'ung-an (*koan*). Only a minimal of doctrinal reason is needed to justify the efficacy of such but even at that, the finer points of scholarship are usually half-forgotten by most. To others, reason is simply anathema; it is not required in the paths of intuitionism or of faith. Thus creative intellectual reflection had not been the mark of Chinese Buddhism since the Ming. By the Ch'ing, Buddhist scholarship went to the more enlightened and better learned lay Buddhists. It is a lay Buddhist Yang Wen-hui in the late nineteenth century and not the monk T'aihsu who single-handedly revived learning. The attempt of the original CBA to modernize the training of monks in the Republican era was due largely to such external forces; the learning was not tied to problems that rose or solutions found within the faith as such. Now courses that "emphasize T'ien-t'ai and Fa-hsiang thought" in the Chekiang seminary came out of that reformed program. The irony is that the Buddhology of T'ien-t'ai and the Systematics of Hua-yen hardly go with the Ch'an meditation and Pure Land devotion that most Buddhists practice.

The reason for the decline of Buddhist learning is, however, also due to a change in the genre of spiritual writings. In both Ch'an and Pure Land, scriptural studies had been replaced by an interest in personal testimonies. The k'ung-an is basically a recollection of encounters. The *wang-sheng-chüan*

(*ojoden*) a collection of witnessed birth in Pure Land. This literature functions like the Puritan testimony or the Evangelical Christian bearing witness. The records of Ch'an wisdom or Pure Land faith help to perpetuate the very wisdom and faith so recorded.¹ Hence people read these records of Zen enlightenment and Pure Land deliverance more readily than they would the words of the Buddha himself. In fact, both the Ch'an and the Pure Land tradition would call their members rather generously as Buddhas and bodhisattvas and their words and deeds as enlightened and exemplary. In excess, the cult of personal wisdom or faith often makes virtue out of ignorance and puts a damper on any diligent observation of the canon and the older standard.²

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this introvert turn toward personal experience or this anti-intellectual revolt against scholastic reason. Such turn and revolt have their place in religious history. We found similar trends elsewhere. Faith and mysticism also displaced traditional learning in the European Reformation. Nor are we saying that learning could not come back. The Ch'an and Pure Land schools evolved differently in Korea and Japan.³ It is only that Chinese Buddhism has yet to reintegrate theory and practice in a more dynamic way, especially in response to modernity. That reunion seems unlikely in the near future because Buddhist seminary training is (as it should be) geared first of all toward pastoral care, that is, in liturgy and ritual. It is only that pastoral theology in Christian seminaries would presume knowledge of the Bible and some training in dogmatics and systematics, but such might not be the case in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. The Chinese Buddhist liturgy is drawn more from a mixed bag of traditions, often more mantrayanic than either Ch'an or Pure Land proper. So Jan Yun-hua reports how recently China used the Tibetan ordination (based on the Sarvastivada code) oblivious of the fact that traditionally the Dharmagupta code was the norm.

Such Chinese nondiscrimination is not without its strength. Where Japan had been more purist and sectarian, China has always been more syncretic and open. More pressing a problem is the gap between the few learned clerics and the uninformed public. Sometimes it is the uninformed cleric and public. A friend of mine who just returned from a China trip reports how an official guide would explain the Buddha's mudra thus: the Buddha and Confucius made a bet that whoever won a chess game would snap his fingers at the loser. The Buddha won but Confucius ran off, so the Buddha's fingers (first and third) froze into a circle, waiting to give the Master his punishment. So much for the Dharma now lost in a meaningless apocryphal.

By retreating into the promise of enlightenment and of salvation at death, by offering occasional quietistic retreats and funeral rites, Ch'an and Pure Land might be able to preserve a niche for themselves in the midst of the mounting pressure of modern life. Still, Buddhist apologetics should seek rapprochement with contemporary issues—and hopefully at a higher level. A redress of the standard Marxist reduction of Buddhism to Idealism is also called for. The

social evils of the tradition should not be whitewashed but then the positive contributions should also be given a fair hearing. Buddhism was, after all, the first of the Three Teachings in China “to serve the people”; to create social welfare programs or merit-field of compassion; to insist on economic justice in the equal distribution of goods; and to experiment with cottage industry. Religion is more than just the opiate of the masses. It also represents, as Marx said, their hopes and aspirations. And Buddhism had its share of utopias peasant rebellions.

The ultimate fate of Buddhism might hang, as always, with the human person as such, i.e. the Sai-ga. Buddhism is no longer the major spiritual option in China. It is recuperating healthily, but it is not the one expanding most. The Sangha as a monastic bhiksu-fellowship would and has always been a precious minority. That monks now should be on the state payroll would probably see to that; the stipend system might succeed where even the old sale of monk certificates failed in keeping the bhiksu-Sangha pure. The rest one might have to trust the Spirit which will move as the Spirit will—hopefully as freely as Matter would allow it. This is because unlike Japanese Buddhism whose strength lies in the institution, Chinese Buddhism has always counted on “revivalist” movements associated with charismatic masters who come along roughly once in fifty years in the annals of these builders of faith.⁴

Traditionally Chinese Buddhism rested on the tripod of the popular public temple piety, the charismatic revivalist, and the powerful, gentry Buddhist supporters. That is, by way of a cooperative configuration of Buddha-centric temple piety, Sangha-centric vocation, and Dharma-centric gentry learning. What the new configuration of the Three Refuges in a new China will be is still in the making for us to say for sure. There is often more resilience in the tradition than we observers from the outside give it credit for.

Notes

1. Such publicized lay testimony of being called or changed took over what used to be the very private experience of monks who alone had the calling at one time and which was communicated in confidence only between the trainee and the spiritual master.

2. The Pure Land genre since Ch'ing had been fused to the popular but noncanonical *fu-chi* spiritual writing such that media now relate how so and so had become at death even a Taoist immortal in the Purple Heaven. For these, see David Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors*.

3. Korean harmonic Buddhism kept up learning; Japanese sectarianism produced sectarian exegesis, *shuigaku*, reflecting in minute detail on the patriarchal writings of its founders and created in Tokugawa a liturgy based on that selective tradition.

4. These are not—not till now and might never be—the modernizers. In fact, they are often conservatives, yogins by training at home with all the supernatural lore deemed unscientific to most moderns. Whether their lore was itself dependent on a less-than-modern audience and will change as the latter change or not awaits to be seen. Meanwhile, the staying power lies since the Ming in the ethico-rational and oftentimes learned lay Buddhist leaders. Whether this laicization (and hence demystification) of faith will, or should, continue is hard to tell.