Buddhist China at the Century's Turn

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ABSTRACT Based on fieldwork and studies of historical and contemporary materials, this article investigates several issues key to Buddhist life in the present-day PRC, focusing on Han Buddhists, especially the monastic tradition. It argues that many current practices take their shape from the innovations that transformed Chinese Buddhist life in the late Qing and Republican periods. While profound political, economic and social changes have occurred in the past few decades, some of the most pressing issues are extensions of questions raised at that time. The most significant question of the earlier period – what is the Buddhist monastic vocation, and what training and leadership are required to safeguard that ideal? – remains central to present-day activities and conceptions. To consider how to answer this question, or indeed how it is posed within present circumstances, three interconnected matters are investigated: current training methods, the economics of monasteries and the issue of leadership. In this context, Han–Tibetan interchange in the Buddhist field and the influence of overseas Chinese Buddhists on the mainland are also considered.

This article is not a "report" so much as an inquiry. Based on field experience and historical studies, I would like to raise some key issues regarding the state of Buddhist life in the People's Republic of China at the beginning of the 21st century.

A simple question strikes as the basis for this discussion: what is it, or who is it, that could constitute the subject of this article? An initial definition of the field of inquiry appears reasonably straightforward: a corporate body of individuals conventionally self-identified as Buddhist (the religious professionals – monks and nuns – and a lay community), their range of activities (including what might be thought of as "religious life"), and the sites of those activities (most especially monasteries, shrines, pilgrimage sites such as mountains, and *jushi lin*, or lay association halls).

The textured reality of these interconnected topics is complex, and points to difficulties at the heart of this inquiry. Some of these complications arise from an attempt to make meaningful statements about an extraordinary variety of individuals, who are found within a system that in its lived realities operates with acutely layered social practices. In addition, there are distinctive regional variations across Chinese territory, as well as striking differences among the various types of sites even within a single locality.

Another concern is where to set the bounds of affiliation, and thus how far one extends discussion. This is not a small point. In this article I define these limits in accordance with the practices of the formal tradition. "Monks and nuns" are understood to include both novices and their seniors, the fully ordained members of the clergy. They are easily recognized by such external characteristics as shaven heads and distinctive monastic attire. Fully ordained clergy possess ordination certificates

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(*jiedie*), which they may be asked to produce when they request temporary or permanent lodging at a monastery. The great majority may also be recognized by the *jieba*, "ordination scars" on their scalps ranging in number from three to 12, received following completion of the third and final stage of full ordination, the acceptance of bodhisattva vows to seek liberation in order to aid all beings.[1]

"Laypeople" within the Buddhist community are not so easily recognized. A Buddhist temple filled with worshippers who offer incense and bow before deity images is not necessarily filled with Buddhists. Such visitors may well respond to the atmosphere and the many images just as they would in any type of Chinese temple, with prayers and offerings made to powerful spirits in order to seek good fortune for themselves and others. Some may feel a special devotion to one of the figures of the Buddhist pantheon, especially the compassionate figure of Guanyin, whose popularity is widespread, but these worshippers are not necessarily "Buddhist." From the point of view of those within the system, lay Buddhists have made a conscious commitment to a Buddhist path and have affirmed that formal commitment by going through the Triple Refuge ceremony, sponsored by a monk or nun. Like the monks and nuns, they receive a "Dharma name" (*faming*) and thus enter the Buddhist "family." This is recorded on a certificate (*guiyi zheng*), with the individual's photograph attached, which serves as an essential identification document when a layperson (*jushi*) seeks admission to a temple without paying the gate fee charged to tourists and other outsiders, or seeks temporary monastic lodging while on pilgrimage.

To further complicate any account of contemporary Buddhist life in China, the situation on the ground has been changing rapidly within the past ten or 15 years. This undermines the usefulness of making certain types of generalizations or statements of "fact" (including the parroting of statistics, for which the methods of compilation are not clear). In setting forth discussion below, while I focus principally on some distinctive aspects of monastic life, I will attempt to address at least some of the complications noted above in relation to the basic points of inquiry. However due to space limitations there can be no pretence of covering the whole field. I will proceed with a highly selective approach in which I seek to pursue several lines of coherence with the aim of drawing attention to a few key issues. Within the wider social frame, it focuses especially on monks (that is, male monastics), because of the broader range of written sources and the nature of my own fieldwork carried out over the past few decades.

The present era, I will suggest, is not an entirely anomalous point of disjuncture, despite its strange feel. Although confronted by enormous changes in social, political and economic life that have occurred since the

1. The practice of branding the scalp with incense burns at ordinations, which appears to date back at least to the Yuan, has been discouraged at some sites over the past few years, but still continues as an optional procedure. For historical consideration of Chinese Buddhist practices of offering the body through fire, see James A. Benn, "Burning for the Buddha: a history of self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism," PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2001.

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early 1950s, with some acute disruptions such as the Cultural Revolution and its sporadic aftershocks, for Buddhists many key practices and discourse issues of this present moment arise directly from the profound changes in Chinese Buddhist life that were established during the late Qing and Republic. But of course that is not the full story.

This article describes some principal currents of Buddhist life during that earlier period, and then examines aspects of the present against this backdrop in order to gain a sense of continuity and change. To some readers, these historical matters may appear peripheral, even a digression, but this background cannot be separated from the story that I seek to tell. There are two key points at the base of this approach. First, to understand a progression of events and key issues in the aftermath of a convulsive period of religious persecution, it is instructive and indeed essential to consider Buddhist developments following a previous devastating calamity in China some 100 years earlier. I certainly do not propose a reductive view in which "history repeats itself," but familiarity with essential points of the near past may cast some light on the processes of the present. Secondly, while indeed one may provide a descriptive report on present-day Buddhist life without reference to what has produced that constellation of phenomena, such a report – by its "factual" barrage and anecdotal flair – can produce the satisfying *effect* of an apparent knowledge without any actual coherence. Therefore I have chosen this historicized approach, which looks at how things are now in the context of how they were just before.

As a final point in defining the scope of discussion, the geographic and social territory of present-day China encompasses at least three distinctly different "ethnicized" Buddhist traditions. (Such ethnic labels are intrinsically problematic, but for the sake of this present discussion I follow the divisions established within contemporary PRC discourse.) These traditions include Tibetan forms (also adopted by Mongols and some Manchus), the so-called "Southern" or non-Mahayana traditions ordinarily associated with South-East Asians, practised by Dai peoples in the border region of southern Yunnan, and the dominant form widespread across Chinese territory that may be termed "Han" Buddhism and generally has been thought of as "Chinese Buddhism." This article focuses on the latter form, whose practitioners are united by such elements as a standardized daily liturgy, an additional set of commonly practised rituals, and scriptures and other texts composed in Chinese; a sharply defined and commonly worshipped pantheon; a fairly consistent code of rules and etiquette; and an awareness of place within its wide-ranging lineage histories.

On the Tenor of Buddhist Practice and Discourse in the late Qing/Republican Period

The widespread destruction of Buddhist monasteries during the Taiping civil war (1851–64), both deliberate and circumstantial, had a profound effect on the material setting and structures of Buddhist life in

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south China, which had long been the heartland of Chinese Buddhist activity and support. In the decades immediately following the war's bloody conclusion, considerable energy was applied to campaigns to reconstruct fallen monasteries and temples. Fundraising and construction dominated.

In the aftermath of that turmoil and rebuilding effort, a cohort of figures appeared whose work and activities produced one of the most remarkable periods of Chinese Buddhist history. These individuals came to maturity and authority at the end of the Qing and during the early Republic. While their family origins were scattered across a variety of regions, for the most part they settled in the south-east Buddhist heartland. Buddhists were not separated from the political, social and intellectual transformations in the air at this time, and from various angles these individuals collectively produced a creative restatement of Chinese Buddhist life. Their teachings and reforms remain pervasive, dominant elements in present-day activities and discourse, such that any attempt to make sense of current modes requires familiarity with the basic positions of this earlier period.[2]

In the late 19th century, there were several types of sites where monks or nuns lived. They ranged from the large "public monasteries" (*shifang conglin*) that were understood as corporate property of the Buddhist sangha, with populations of long-term residents that could number in the hundreds; to equally large "hereditary monasteries" (*zisun miao*) controlled by specific lineages; to smaller complexes of the hereditary type, including sites with as few as one to five monastics in residence; to temples controlled by a local community or a group of laymen, sometimes as a profit-making venture, in which religious professionals were in a sense employees. There also were simple dwellings for solitary practitioners or small groups of monastics engaged in intensive practice, at isolated places in the countryside, usually at mountain sites. (All these institutional types still exist today.) Economic support for these institutions was varied, ranging from the rents paid on large land-holdings and profits made from investment of surplus income, to substantial gifts from wealthy families, to proceeds from ritual activities carried out for lay sponsors (usually tied to funerary or memorial matters), to small plots

2. Materials in this section are drawn most especially from readings in a wide range of primary sources; space limitations do not permit extensive citation. For primary and secondary sources in Chinese on some of the principal figures of this period, especially biographies and autobiographies, see Raoul Birnbaum, "Master Hongyi looks back: a 'modern man' becomes a monk in twentieth-century China," in Steven Heine and Charles Prebish (eds.), *Buddhism and the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2003). In English, the most important study remains the remarkable two-volume work of Holmes Welch: *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) and *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). My analysis sometimes differs significantly from that of Welch, but I remain ever indebted to him for these works. In Chinese, the principal history of Buddhist activities during this period is Shi Dongchu, *Zhongguo fojiao jindai shi*, 2 vols. (Taipei: Zhonghua fojiao wenhua guan, 1974); this work should be read with the understanding that Dongchu was a disciple of Taixu, a principal figure in this history.

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farmed by clerics themselves at remote places. Very importantly, there was no centralized authority internal to the system that exerted any real control over its many aspects.

While some clerics never travelled far from their native place (constrained in part by linguistic ties), many others roamed widely, sampling life at institutions in a variety of regions. They wandered through a remarkable nation-wide circulatory system that accumulated individuals at distinctive nodal points. These wanderers circulated ideas, practices, tales and gossip – essential factors in the construction of a linked system, rather than an atomized set of highly localized institutions. This circulatory system still retains its essential shape and functions. The best-known centres for practice and learning were mainly (although not exclusively) situated in the south-eastern provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Fujian. These regions also had especially large populations of lay followers, who were encouraged and instructed by the presence of numerous capable clerics, and in turn famously gave them support. Northern clerics who wanted to advance in their training, and those who wanted a more secure economic footing, tended to flow towards the major centres of the south-east.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, leading members of this cohort of monks, which loosely spanned two generations, were fairly consistent in their sharp critique of Buddhist life and the need for reform and renewal. Internally, levels of monastic training and practice were criticized. Put bluntly, there was considerable concern at the number of unlearned "rice buckets" within the system, whose adherence to monastic precepts was variable. The vital question concerned monastic vocation: what are the aims of monastic life, and by what means – training, leadership – can those aims be supported, achieved and sustained? This question was urgently felt. Externally, economic and political security were growing ever more tenuous, and there were voracious attempts at national, provincial and local levels to take over monastery buildings for "more productive" use as secular schools. There was a sense that the internal and external problems were linked, and that a higher level of monastic training and discipline would result in greater respect and support from the outside, as well as an inherent ability to ward off looming threats.

Significantly, while many of these prominent teachers did not ignore the work of the famous masters of the Tang and the Song, they turned for inspiration most especially to brilliant figures of the late 16th and 17th centuries (such as Zibo Zhenke, Hanshan Deqing, Yunqi Zhuhong, Ouyi Zhixu and Jianyue Duti), all of whom worked to renovate or even resuscitate the Buddhist practice traditions of their time, sometimes under very difficult conditions. There was, I think, a circumstantial kinship. Today, many look to the late Qing–Republican teachers for authoritative guidance, just as those teachers turned to their predecessors. This is a crucial point: Chinese Buddhists work within a historical continuum that neither ended in the Tang or Song, nor came to some final, memory-free halt with the Cultural Revolution.

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The responses of this cohort group to the particular challenges of the age may be set into two distinctive categories: an approach powerfully framed within traditional discourse that in some ways may be viewed as "fundamentalist," and a call for comprehensive reform that consciously embraced a certain vision of modernity. The same question of vocation remains a central issue today, and present-day positions draw directly from these earlier responses, sometimes citing the main proponents as their authoritative sources.

The first response, sometimes (although misleadingly) termed "conservative," consisted of various positions taken by monks thought of as "practitioners" (*xiuxing ren*), some of whom also were renowned as scholars within the tradition. They spoke from a basis of traditionally constituted training and personal realization, and thus commanded considerable respect within the lay and monastic community. The most prominent figures included the Pure Land master Yinguang (1861–1940), the Vinaya master Hongyi (1880–1942), Chan teachers such as Yekai (1852–1922), Jing'an (Bazhi Toutuo, 1851–1913), Yuanying (1878–1953), Laiguo (1881–1953) and Xuyun (1840–1959), and Tiantai master Dixian (1858–1932) and his disciple Tanxu (1875–1963). There were many others with regional rather than national reputations. Some of these men were abbots of high-prestige monasteries, while others preferred a less settled, more itinerant teaching life. I have listed these many names, and could have added quite a few more, to give a sense of the exceptional number that constituted this era's stellar array of monks of high reputation.

The fundamentalist approach was characterized by an attempt at reform through a return to basics, but the notion of basics differed somewhat amongst the various proponents. Many voiced explicit concerns over what practices could be effective in such difficult historical times. For some, an insistence on basics was set in discourse that suggested an unbudging resistance to any other approach. What they produced was a paring down to essentials, with boundaries clearly set.

The result was a narrowed range of practices, with particular emphasis on singular practices as the core of activity. The principal modes were this: for pure land practice, *yixin nianfo* ("single-minded concentration on the buddha"); for Chan practice, internal investigation through vigilant concentration on the key phrase *nianfo shi shei?* ("who is it who is mindful of the buddha?" that is, "who am I?"). If diligently carried out, these are powerfully effective practices that produce tremendous mental focus. They are not unique in the history of Chinese Buddhist practice, but the paring down to the singularity of practice as a core procedure within each cultivation tradition and the constricted range of practice options overall are particular characteristics of this era.

Some of these teachers were text-literal. They looked for fundamentals and held to them without distraction or deviation, sometimes to a point that others might consider intolerant. By this time the vast range of scriptural texts was narrowed down to a core group that received thor-

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ough study. These included the "three big sutras," certain small ones and a few additional works. The three big sutras were the *Huayan jing*, the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Lengyan jing*. In addition, some Chan practitioners studied texts such as the *Sutra of Complete Awakening*, the Sixth Patriarch's *Platform Sutra*, and the *Vimalakirti Sutra*; the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Great Vehicle* also was studied across lineage tradition lines. The small sutras were mainly those that focused on individual buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the vows they have made to aid all beings. Their popularity reflects the strongly devotional qualities of Chinese Buddhist life, a meeting point that united practitioners across the range of Buddhist China, from the least educated to the most sophisticated traditional adherents. The short texts include works on Amita Buddha, the Healing Buddha and Dizang Bodhisattva, as well as individual chapters separated from long works, such as the chapter on Guanyin from the *Lotus*, and the chapter on Puxian Bodhisattva's vows and practices from the *Huayan*. In addition, the *Diamond Sutra* circulated widely. These texts were objects of intensive study, but also, very importantly, many of them – especially the short texts – were chanted rapidly as a religious exercise. The ability to chant such texts is not necessarily related to any engagement with the complex of conceptual meanings contained within them.

While certainly these texts contain enough to provide a lifetime of fruitful study, comparison of the limited range of these works to the extraordinary variety contained within formal compendia available at that time, such as the *Dragon Treasury* (*Longzang*, the Buddhist canon produced during the Qianlong period), points to the prevailing characteristic of identifying a core and concentrating on it. This approach to texts is not new in Chinese Buddhist history, but it does form part of a constellation of factors that gives this era its particular texture.

A principal mode of textual study at this time, and thus of intellectual and spiritual development, was carried out by lecture series in monasteries, often presented by visiting masters invited for this purpose. In the case of long texts, it could take several months or longer to work through the material, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. While many prominent sutra lecturers had a range of texts within their grasp, often they were recognized for one text in particular (this is a well-established phenomenon in Chinese Buddhist history). Eminent monks such as the men listed above were invited to lecture all over the country, and clerics would gather at the lectures in order to study with such famous figures. Significantly, clerics could attend these lectures and pursue this type of higher learning throughout their lives.

I would like to return to this issue of training shortly, for in the contestation to define the nature of monastic life, to define the fundamental principles of monastic vocation – a contestation that is basic to this earlier period and continues to the present day – questions of monastic training were and continue to be central.

In contrast to this first response, the seemingly tireless monk Taixu (1889–1947) proposed a programme of comprehensive modernizing

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reform.[3] Taixu's talent and keen intelligence were recognized early in his career, when he studied and had close contact with some of the most eminent of the practitioners, such as Jing'an, Yuanying and Yinguang. However, his later views and actions caused some very painful ruptures in these relationships. These ruptures continue to demarcate some of the fault lines in Chinese Buddhist communities. Taixu was strongly driven by his understanding of modernity, which in part was conceived as Westernization. He hoped to induce a radical modernization of the Buddhist sangha, in which the numbers would be greatly reduced and the level of learning greatly increased. Taixu was concerned with creating a 20th-century Buddhism – which included notions of religion derived from Christian models, as well as notions of Buddhism derived from European academic assumptions. He devised numerous schemes as proposals for action, and out of these many proposals he established some enduring and highly influential institutions.

Taixu's work had support within some elements of Chinese Buddhist worlds, including reform-minded monks and some prominent lay critics of the monastic establishment. He also was strongly encouraged by relations with foreigners, especially Protestant missionaries in China, who cheered on his rhetoric of "anti-superstition," drastic clerical reform and social action. He gained considerable prestige in certain circles at home when he embarked on a nine-month tour of Europe and the United States in 1928–29. Very importantly, Taixu's close ties to government officials during the Republican period – which provided mutual benefit – helped establish a modern model for "political monks."

Taixu's provocative stance articulated a profound conceptual turn away from the underlying basis of the practitioners' position. Their Buddhism at core was a radical break from conventional society, a deep and uncompromising critique of the conventional values of worldly life. They sought to strengthen institutions and provide means of training through which clerics could achieve a classically understood Buddhist liberation. Their so-called conservative position is so radical that, properly grasped, it could be understood to threaten the stability of some constructed social and political orders. But it also is such a sharp break that those with secular power could view Buddhist institutions as no threat at all. In contrast to the step back from wordly engagement of the practitioners, Taixu sought to reconstruct the Buddhist clergy as an elite corps of men and women who would deeply engage with the world as it was encountered, and seek to change it.

Taixu wanted to get rid of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and eliminate the funerary rites that were a principal source of income for some clerics and their monasteries. The buddhas and bodhisattvas in their guise as

3. For his collected writings, see *Taixu dashi quanshu*, 32 vols. (Taipei: Shandao si fojing liutongchu, 1998). In addition to Taixu's autobiography, *Taixu dashi zizhuan* (*ibid.* Vol. 29, pp. 163–311), his disciple Yinshun's *Taixu dashi nianpu* (Xinzhu: Zhangwen chubanshe, 1998) is a principal starting point for study of his life. See also Li Mingyu, *Taixu jiqi renjian fojiao* (Hangzhou: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2000). An English language study also exists: Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2001).

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celestial benefactors are illusions, as is the Western Paradise of Amita Buddha, to which so many Chinese Buddhist devotees seek rebirth. He proposed that superstition-free Buddhists turn this place right here into a pure land, by bright mental training and compassionate activity. The training would be achieved in *foxue yuan*, Buddhist studies academies, with a carefully constructed curriculum that emphasized advanced studies in Yogacara and Madhyamika treatises, highly philosophical traditions whose study had been neglected for some centuries in China but were especially appreciated by European academics at that time. Compassionate activity most particularly would take the form of charitable action, as was seen in the work of Christian missionaries in China.

The first few decades of the 20th century marked the beginning of the era of *foxue yuan*. The institution of monastic academies for training novices and newly ordained monks, while encouraged by those seeking a better educated and more closely disciplined sangha, was hastened at this time by repeated attempts at local and national levels to convert monasteries or sections of them into secular schools. Even when support for a Buddhist studies academy was not whole-hearted, it was understood as an effective pre-emptive move to preserve monastic property and independence. It also was conceived by some, such as Taixu, as a deliberate and positive move toward modernity. Taixu's conception of learning and his notion of such schools (shared with other educational reformers active in the sangha) was tied closely to the model of a Western-style university. He founded several academies for monks where courses included foreign languages, modern history and mathematics, as well as aspects of Buddhist studies. This conception of monastic education differed sharply from the earlier and still-prevailing mode, which focused on one subject at a time (a text or group of texts) for several months or sometimes for years, under a master and his close disciples. While most of Taixu's schools were short-lived, the Minnan foxue yuan, which he transformed in Fujian in 1927 when he became abbot of Xiamen's Nanputuo Monastery, has endured and indeed flourishes today as a large and well-run institution.

It is all too easy to produce a portrait of Taixu that is merely a caricature. He provides more than enough encouragement by his repeated creation of "world-wide" or national Buddhist associations of very modest membership in which he was a principal officer, or his various grand schemes for a tightly controlled clergy that would wear new vestments of his design (who put him in charge of the Buddhist sangha?). Still, the main thrust of his concerns shows a thoughtful, serious and original approach to a meaningful place for Buddhist monastic life in a modern world. With an emphasis on productive activity and a harsh critique of "superstition," it was an approach that in some ways met the needs of the coming political discourse.

In considering these influential figures, the question of eminence, or at least of high reputation, is central. How did these men gain their authority at that time? From a very traditional point of view, one could say that practice accomplishment is recognized by peers in the same way that

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professional musicians will recognize the most capable amonst them. But as in the musical world, only a few of those most capable rise to meet the public eye.

The circumstances by which Buddhist monks stepped up to that position in the late Qing and Republican period are not entirely clear. Still, one can see – through study of autobiographies and biographies written by close disciples – certain points in common. Almost all these men spent significant time in one of the high prestige monasteries of the south-east, sites known for strict and thorough training. Almost all of them studied texts under the most celebrated lecturers of their time. In these two circumstances, they also met their peers – other monks, old and young, willing to endure hardship in order to receive serious training. Although Buddhist self-cultivation as traditionally understood is a personal matter that is generated from within, social factors can be very important, including mutual support and a kind of friendly competition when members of a cohort group share the same difficult aim. Following their training within monasteries, almost all these men also engaged in extensive solitary retreat practices (to be discussed below). In addition, and very importantly for the construction of a public reputation, most of them were verbally adept and were excellent writers, and they had access to the means for dissemination of their writings (sometimes through influential lay disciples involved in publishing houses). Most of these men knew each other, so in addition to some shared vertical relationships (training under famous masters, studying at the same elite monasteries), they developed horizontal relationships amongst each other.

I would like to conclude this discussion with a few comments on long-term retreat, since almost all the eminent monks of the late Qing and Republican period were veterans of this highly demanding practice, including Taixu. There are two main forms: "sealed retreat" (*biguan*) and solitary mountain retreat. Said to have begun in the Yuan period, *biguan* came to the fore as a special practice bearing great prestige during the late Qing. Sealed retreat was a formal, contractual procedure for a set period usually ranging from three months to three years. It was carried out in a special hut or chamber within a monastic compound, or in a cave or small building far from inhabitation. In contrast, mountain retreat was free and open-ended. This less formal retreat at mountains or other isolated places has a long history in China, where indigenous practices tallied with elements of the forest-dwelling traditions valued by some Indian Buddhists.

An emphasis on retreat for concentrated and focused practice, as a route to accomplishment and also as part of the path to eminence and authority, is a particular and striking characteristic of this period. Thus, very importantly, some of the most esteemed practices within the system in this period were carried forth outside the routine, or indeed even outside the walls, of monasteries. Many of those who sought the highest attainment felt it necessary to leave the monastic environment, which supposedly was constructed and organized for that purpose. Free of the monastery, they were at liberty to engage in concentrated practice. This

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flow outwards is an implicit but emphatic criticism of monastery life, and an experience that fuelled the reformist discourse of the age.

The Present Situation: Some Key Issues in Monastic Life

There is a historical break between the world of those eminent monks – most of whom had passed away by the 1940s or early 1950s – and the present. It encompasses not only the creation of the People's Republic of China and the rise of a pervasive official unsympathy for the Buddhist enterprise, but also the profound difficulties of the Cultural Revolution, the effects of which lasted well beyond the conventional "ten years of chaos." The land reforms of 1950 and afterwards took a substantial economic base away from the large monasteries, as well as from some principal lay donors. Leading monks in some regions were publicly reviled as "landlords" (*dizhu*) and suffered grievously. Other fierce pressures severely diminished the size of the clergy, and numerous monasteries were destroyed or converted into factories, warehouses, schools or housing. In contrast to some successful strategizing in the preceding era, there no longer was a way to resist comprehensive territorial incursions. Lay activities also came to a halt, at least in public.[4]

It was not until well into the 1980s that the Buddhist enterprise began to rebound, although fitfully so, with considerable regional variation. This process continues, but not always in sympathetic circumstances. Winds blow one way, and then they change course to blow in some other direction. What appears stable and secure can suddenly take on another cast. Set against the backdrop of the 2,000-year expanse of Buddhist history in China, in which there have been some very troubled moments, this particular period of difficulty has not been brief.

In keeping with other comprehensive changes in Chinese society, there has been a significant change in the way that Buddhist monastic life is organized, controlled and regularized. Of the many organizations that Taixu and his cohorts formed, the China Buddhist Association (Zhongguo fojiao xiehui) (CBA) has remained as a pivot point between Buddhist monastics and responsible agencies and figures in the government. This national organization is internal to the Buddhist world and bears responsibility for such matters as setting policy, overseeing monastic life, disbursing certain funds, transmitting government directives downwards, and also representing Buddhist interests in an official and unified manner. In addition to its national office in Beijing, the CBA also has provincial and county branches, as well as branches in large cities with substantial Buddhist presence.[5] Thus, it is thoroughly integrated into a wide range of

4. The only extended scholarly account in English of the Buddhist situation during this period is Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), which looks at the first two decades of communist rule, including the initial years of the Cultural Revolution.

5. Some CBA functions are well expressed by the organization's monthly magazine, *Fayin*, currently edited by the prominent monk Jinghui, which provides a mix of official notices and clarifications of positions and policy, scholarly and semi-scholarly articles, and news or announcements of events around the country. Also, there are many regional Buddhist magazines, usually sponsored by branches of the CBA, such as: *Shanghai fojiao*, *Ningbo fojiao*, *Taizhou fojiao*, *Fujian fojiao*.

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Buddhist matters and activities, from the broad national level to the most local concerns. It has a scrutinizing and regularizing function. The officers who fill its many positions by and large are monks and nuns, ordinarily including the heads or administrators of the most important monasteries. Also, there have been several laymen with key positions at the national level, notably the long-time president Zhao Puchu (d. 2000). The CBA provides a structure for clerics to have some voice in self-governance. By their positions and responsibilities such monks and nuns are pulled inexorably into a complex political world.

Despite certain sharp breaks from the past, there also are distinctive human continuities. Many of the most prominent monks who rose to responsibility and authority in the first stage of the rebuilding process were the direct disciples of the Republican era leaders. While the vast majority of this generation now have passed away or are elderly and retired, some of their direct disciples carry on and are conscious of their place within lineage traditions.

Rather like the period after the Taiping war, the most pressing immediate issues have been to rebuild material circumstances – monasteries and systems of economic support – and to reconstitute a clergy. Both processes now are well-established and continue apace. But at the same time, the intensity of the most significant question of the earlier period – what is the Buddhist monastic vocation, and what training and leadership are required to establish and safeguard that ideal? – is no less diminished, particularly after the significant growth of the clergy over the past dozen years or so.

The two positions staked out in the Republican period remain the dominant poles today, and the principal authors of those positions are cited often. The particular ways in which this question of vocation was framed in the first half of the 20th century arose in part from the pressures of modernity, under which some traditional forms of life were questioned. Those pressures certainly were intensified under communist rule, as the whole country was urged to transform its ways, with an emphasis on material productivity. While the position of reformers such as Taixu – who proposed a purging of "superstition," a paring down of personnel to a highly controlled core, a focus on involvement in the world through social service – met some of the discourse needs of the new society, that position was contested. The situation is no less critical in the face of the destabilizing effects of a new wave of prosperity and apparent social freedom that began to open out in the mid-1990s. And of course, while this is a question of absolutely basic importance, it continues to play out as a political question: *who* will define the answers?

Let me try to sketch out several interconnected matters that are fundamental to how the question is answered, especially how the question is framed or posed to youngsters within the system, as they constitute the future of that system. These include current training methods, the economics of monasteries and the issue of leadership.

There is a generation gap in the Order that was problematic in the 1980s and early 1990s. Its long-term effect still is not clear. In Chinese

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Buddhist history, the great majority of monks ordinarily entered the Order by their late teens or early 20s (some became novices at a much earlier age). In the mid-1960s, when many clerics were compelled to return to lay life and monasteries were closed, up to the mid-1970s and even later, it was extraordinarily difficult to become a monk, especially for a young, bright, able-bodied person. At the early stages of attempts to reconstitute the clergy, a small core group of old men – who either had managed to hold on through the preceding decades, or returned to monasteries from their sojourns in lay life, often leaving families behind, or to the side – was responsible for an increasingly large group of new, young recruits. What was missing at many sites was a crucial middle generation of experienced hands who could give the young recruits practical guidance and serve as a link to the old, frail survivors. There was no substantial presence of men and women who in their daily activities could provide visible examples of what it meant to be accomplished clerics in the prime of life. This gap was especially difficult for novices, not yet ordained, who needed the most basic training and socializing into the traditions of the system.

One result was that some sites at that time could be unruly: the young led each other, sometimes with a lack of understanding of what it was that they did not know. Because in the 1960s and 1970s the minds of the populace were strongly directed towards concentration on other matters, there was a knowledge gap. Some novices came into the system with sparse basic knowledge and quite a few fantasies about Buddhist life. This at times compounded the problem. And also the physical strength of youngsters was desperately needed for the rebuilding effort, which elders could envisage but not enact themselves. Although novices traditionally have contributed physical labour to their home monastery as an initial stage of training, in this period new recruits at many sites worked to an exceptional degree and had little energy for study or conventional Buddhist practice.

Now at the beginning of the 21st century the situation has grown more stable, and Taixu's dream of a network of Buddhist studies academies for monks and nuns, with a fairly consistent curriculum that highlights intellectual training in Buddhist philosophy, has been fulfilled. Clerics still receive initial training from their tonsure master, and more advanced training in precepts at the time of full ordination, but the traditional practice of life-long text study by participation in extended lecture series presented by famous masters has been cut off. Instead, young monks and nuns may apply to attend a Buddhist studies academy. Those who meet the increasingly selective admissions criteria (which now include competitive written examinations on a variety of topics) may enrol for a course of study, often for three years' duration. Graduation from the best of these institutions is considered the equivalent of a university degree. While in the past some *foxue yuan* were instituted to forestall takeovers of monastic property for use as secular schools, ironically the result has been a kind of takeover from the inside, in which this mode of study now dominates.

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In the past, any cleric could attend a sutra lecture series. The illiterate kitchen worker Huiming (1859–1930) attended lectures in the 1880s at Tiantong Monastery in Zhejiang that proved crucial to his development. Huiming later became a famous lecturer himself, and though he still looked like a simple peasant, he even went on to become a distinguished abbot of Hangzhou's famous Lingyin Monastery.[6] Paradoxically, with the broadening of monastic education, opportunities for some have become more limited, so that for example an intelligent fellow from the countryside with limited educational background, whose family could not afford tuition fees beyond elementary school, would be screened out by the competitive exams and could not advance his learning in this particular institutionalized mode.

Several additional points are worth special note. Following the modern university model, students take a large number of courses, including mandatory political study as well as specifically Buddhist matters. They survey many topics at once, take examinations, and move on term by term, in contrast to the old system that focused on mastery of one text at a time. Thus, a choice has been made (by whom? in what consultation?) for scope rather than depth. Given the amount of material to be covered, familiarity with the long sutras most often is limited to study of sections, rather than the full extent of the text (there are exceptions at some academies). Also, admission is limited to younger clerics, with cut-off ages usually at 28 or 30.

Thus, this system is set up to produce an elite of young clerics who are well-grounded in the parameters of their system. While those committed to life-long study have constructed a base from which to proceed, others may well feel that having received a degree and thus a kind of certification they have studied enough. Because the curricula are fairly consistent, this network of academies has a regularizing effect on the intellectual life of a generation of younger clerics. Again, the long-term effects of this method are not yet clear. (Significantly, the Buddhist studies academies provide scholarly clerics with positions as instructors, and thus they have a safe niche: approved sites in which to engage in activity that now is deemed socially productive, in contrast to the earlier harsh objections of the 1960s and 1970s.)

Monastic life has long been a means of up-classing in Chinese society. Young men with no particular prospects can enter the Order and receive food, shelter and clothing. One day, they are no one in particular, and the next, when they don monastic dress, they are entitled to respect from laypeople, who may bow before them and give them monetary gifts. Those with bright minds who wish to study may have access to opportunities that otherwise would have been out of the question (although now there are filters on that access). Those with power ambitions may rise to positions of considerable authority through avenues that otherwise would

6. A collection of Huiming's lectures was published in 1936 and has been reprinted many times. More recent editions usually include the biographical essay "Ji Huiming fashi" by his disciple Leguan (originally published separately in 1966); see *Huiming fashi kaishi lu* (Gaoxiong: Puzhao fotang, 1999), pp. 4–16.

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have been closed to persons of their background. These surely are not the sole reasons for joining the Order and remaining, but they are relevant in thinking about the social textures of this way of life.

While *foxue yuan* now have been established all across the country, they vary greatly in size (from a score of students up to several hundred), quality and reputation. Some monastery heads consider graduates of the most prestigious of these institutions as the elite of the young generation, and these graduates may be eagerly recruited for permanent residence at the wealthiest and most famous monastic sites, where life is considerably more comfortable than in a small poor temple in the hinterland. The political training that is part of the curriculum also prepares some clerics for leadership roles in major monasteries and within the China Buddhist Association. Thus, certain types of tangible rewards may accrue to graduates beyond an informed grounding in their chosen way of life.

The various academies may differ in lineage flavour, so that for example at Yunmen shan's Dajue si, a Chan monastery whose elderly abbot Foyuan was Xuyun's attendant and close disciple, there is a Chan emphasis to studies, while at Lingyan shan si outside Suzhou, Yinguang's Pure Land teachings dominate. Some sites are especially known for good *daofeng*, their atmosphere of serious religious practice, such as the two just mentioned, while others may be less orderly, less serious or more attuned to other kinds of ambitions.

Training also is carried out in the day-to-day experience at monasteries. Some large monasteries have excellent reputations within the system as centres for dedicated religious practice, and they serve as gathering places for like-minded individuals. These sites are widely admired, even by those monks who have no desire to live in such rigorous environments. They include (but are not limited to) sites such as Gaomin Monastery outside Yangzhou, Yunju shan in Jiangxi, Yunmen shan in northern Guangdong, Lingyan shan outside Suzhou, Wolong Monastery in Xi'an. It is no accident that most of these monasteries were closely associated with masters such as Laiguo, Xuyun and Yinguang. The institutions explicitly continue the traditions of serious practice those teachers established there. This is a direct legacy from the Republican period.

However, the monastic economy has changed, and this has had an impact on monastic life. The vast landholdings formerly controlled by some large monasteries are gone, although some institutions do have smaller agricultural holdings, which monks and nuns may work themselves. Beyond the food produced on limited acreage by some institutions, as well as sale of surplus crops or speciality items such as tea, economic sustenance at present appears to flow from several principal sources: lay donors (including not only individuals from local communities but also Buddhist devotees abroad), performance of sponsored rituals (as a kind of work for hire), and various types of governmental agencies.

Donations to monasteries from lay devotees are not new in Chinese Buddhist history, nor is ritual for hire. Both cases produce a meeting ground between the lay and monastic population that appears simple, but

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can be vexed in the social complexities of the exchange. Many monasteries, especially in the south-east heartland, now depend on ritual activities for a substantial portion of their sustaining income. While the rites have as a basic principle the aim of benefiting all beings, their constant, repetitive, exhausting practice may be understood as a necessary act to sustain a certain economic standard.

In some regions the ability to perform rituals is a basic qualification for admission as a permanent resident to a monastery, and mastery of the principal solo chant roles in such popularly-performed rites as the highly theatrical *fang yankou* ("releasing the burning mouths") makes one a prime catch. The ritualists receive a portion of whatever is paid to the monastery, and they also may receive "red envelopes" directly from lay sponsors. The regions of China's principal economic boom are precisely the areas where historically there have been large numbers of lay Buddhists, and it is there that sponsored ritual activity is most intense (and most lucrative). In the right locale, a skilled ritualist with a commanding voice and steadfast energy can earn substantial amounts of money. It is exhausting work, though, and potentially has a corrosive effect on those who began monastic life with high ideals. A focus on ritual, which brings with it attendant financial rewards, is very different from a quiet life concentrated on meditation or mindfulness of the buddha, study of texts and teaching. Monasteries where such rituals are the main activity may be pervaded by the atmosphere produced by that focus.

Monks ordinarily receive a set monthly stipend from their monastery, which varies according to region, wealth of a particular institution and level of monastic position. In addition to supplements earned through ritual performance, they receive monetary offerings from lay disciples (if they have them), as well as general offerings made by laypeople to monks of the entire monastery, especially on important holidays in the Buddhist and traditional calendar. They may need money for travel, for purchase of personal items, including sometimes cellphones and computers; some are able to support impoverished family members back home. Due to economic factors and the reputation of several key monasteries, the flow of monks from the north and hinterlands into the south-east Buddhist heartland continues as it did earlier.

Imperial sponsorship of certain monasteries had a long tradition in China, so one could say that the present economic support (or intrusion) by governmental agencies has a context. This support is most pronounced at large and famous monasteries, at the now-thriving four principal Buddhist mountain pilgrimage centres, and at some newly created sites. As part of the process of renovation and renewal begun in the 1980s, various government agencies have sponsored building projects at monasteries. This has had the short-term effect of infusing local economies, but especially a long-term effect in creating local and regional tourist attractions, with all the collateral economic benefits that could be imagined.

This is especially pronounced at many traditional pilgrimage sites, which now have been developed by local authorities as tourist destina-

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tions (in which religion forms a mildly exotic backdrop), and so from a Buddhist point of view there is a complicated mix of purity and defilement, dedication and sensual abandonment, all jostling in the same space. Monastic autonomy or self-direction sometimes becomes difficult under these conditions, and such monasteries may regain their quiet air only in the evening when the main gates finally are closed. In some large monasteries located in or near urban areas, or at prime pilgrimage sites, inhabitants are subjected to daily scrutiny as if they were part of a "living history" exhibit. As internal tourism rapidly expands in China, this experience grows with it. Of course, the tourist experience also provides opportunities for outsiders to come into contact with the Buddhist monastic world. In addition to supporting existing sites, some localities have created their own Buddhist holy places, apparently as business ventures, by such means as the construction of massive bronze or copper images, approached through a funnel of tourist facilities to which a small temple has been appended.

The institutionalization of charitable activities has become a conspicuous element of the expression of monastic economy at certain large and wealthy sites. Although there are precedents in Chinese Buddhist history, this particular mode seems to spring directly from the modernizing reformers' emphatic call to transform our world into a pure land. One notably active site for charitable work is Nanputuo Monastery in Xiamen, a place that bears the strong imprint of its former abbot Taixu.[7] Typically, aid is given for disaster relief, to old people, those who are sick or weak, and to children in schools in poor communities. This aid is given from one institution (the monastery or its charitable organization) to another (hospital, school and so on), but it is personalized by a ceremonial bestowal at the site of need by the monastery's abbot and assistants, as recorded with photographs. This very public charitable aid emphasizes Buddhist kindness that is expressed in material means. It presents a conspicuous display of productive responsibility to the nation. Some abbots also are notably attentive to a variety of needs personally brought before them, and can make a big difference in a private and unheralded way.

Let us turn now to the very serious matter of leadership. The long list of eminent teachers of the Republican period is unimaginable in the current scene. Of the men who made it through the storms of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and then were able to step up to lead monasteries in these last two decades, a few – for example, such widely admired teachers as Foyuan, Benhuan and Delin – remain as vibrant links to the now-legendary figures of the Republican era. But at this point most of the venerable *Dade* (Great Virtuous Ones) have passed away or stepped aside. Even if some of these elders have served merely as dignified figureheads, their absence is palpable in the current scene.

7. Nanputuo's charitable organization, the Xiamen Nanputuo si cishan shiye jijin hui, became a member of the China Charity Federation in 1995. Comprehensive reports are included in its annual publication, *Cishan*. The principal convent in Xiamen, Shishi chanyuan, an institution with an active Buddhist studies academy for nuns and close links to Nanputuo and its famous Minnan foxue yuan, also founded a charitable organization in March 2000.

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In some cases they have been replaced by men of a different sort, whose reputations have been forged not in the rigours of the meditation hall but by proving themselves as capable administrators with well-honed political skills. Generally these monks are graduates of the Buddhist studies academies. Such men also may hold positions in local, provincial or even national political bodies, and thus they may well have mastered the kind of thinking and rhetoric required to protect and advance Buddhist interests in the current environment. At the same time, undeniably it is their Buddhist affiliation that provided the route to achieving this political station. Their position as leaders of large monasteries, sometimes surrounded by core teams of monk-administrators that they have brought with them, certainly has an effect on the atmosphere of those institutions. This may produce another notion of monastic vocation.

At the same time that this new route to prominence has been forged, some among the generation now in their late 20s and early 30s are beginning to emerge as talented and authoritative leaders in a traditional sense, respected by their peers for their practice accomplishments. These are men and women who have a decade or more of experience, who diligently sought out excellent guidance, and then applied themselves to the work at hand with such dedication that the result is immediately apparent. It is relevant, I think, that by the timing of their birth, members of this age-group are less scarred by grievous political events than those of immediately preceding generations, and they have come to maturity after the initial rebuilding efforts have been established.

It is significant that when one asks such men and women about their heroes and models, they invoke the names and the specific methods of the practitioner-leaders of the immediate past: Xuyun, Hongyi, Yinguang, Laiguo and their direct disciples. To pursue training and practice without interruption or intrusion, some have moved from the heartland to remote areas (to small, quiet temples in outlying areas or even to such places as caves in Gansu), to traditional zones for solitary retreat practice such as the Zhongnan Mountains, or to small and scarcely-noticed temples of their own in an urban environment (*jingshe*, as small as one or two rooms in size). The move out from the big monasteries at key points in the lives of some serious practitioners of the late Qing and Republic is mirrored in these contemporary acts. It, too, can be seen as an implicit criticism of the pressures and trends of contemporary monastic life.

Tibet and Abroad

Shifting, unstable notions of "inside" and "outside" link two additional matters of considerable importance. The first is the issue of relations with ethnic Chinese Buddhists, especially Buddhist teachers, living outside the PRC. Secondly, there is the matter of Han and Tibetan interchange in the Buddhist field. I mentioned earlier that a list of eminent, widely known Buddhist teachers of present-day China could not compare in number to that of the Republican period. Attempts to fill this space have been made by figures from abroad, as well as by teachers from Tibetan culture areas.

Many monks left the mainland in 1949 for Taiwan and Hong Kong.

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Some were already eminent, such as the elderly Tanxu, who fled from the north-east to settle in Hong Kong. Others were young and unknown. A number ventured outwards through Asia, most especially Fujian natives who found natural connections to long-established Chinese communities of Fujian émigrés in Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. A few eventually moved farther afield to join overseas Chinese communities in places such as the United States, Canada and Australia. Some among these émigrés have risen to considerable prominence in their new locales, with large numbers of lay followers, devoted corps of monastic disciples and extensive international real estate holdings in the form of grand monastic establishments with numerous subsidiary branches. In a few cases, their teachings have had some impact on the mainland, especially (but not exclusively) among laypersons.

Among the Taiwan-based teachers, Xingyun (b. 1927), strongly influenced by Taixu's "humanistic Buddhism," is founder of the enormously wealthy and politically influential Foguang shan movement in Taiwan, with branches world-wide. Several others also are well-known in the PRC, such as the Chan teacher Shengyan (b. 1930), as well as the nun Zhengyan (b. 1937) and her very active Ciji charitable organization. Commentaries on precepts by the Vinaya master Guanghua (1924–96) have been used widely to train novices for monastic ordination.

A very traditional scholar-practitioner in the Tiantai tradition (the contemporary lineage running through Dixian and Tanxu), Miaojing (b. 1930) is well-regarded in corresponding circles in China. A native of the north-east, he lived in Hong Kong for many years, moved to California in the early 1970s, and recently established a monastic complex in the mountains of northern New Mexico.

The Chan teacher Xuanhua (1918–95) left his position under Xuyun at Nanhua Monastery to emigrate to Hong Kong in 1949, and later moved to the United States in 1962. He established a network of monasteries in North America and Asia, most importantly the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in northern California, a trilingual (Chinese, Vietnamese, English) Buddhist community for lay and monastic practitioners. Many of his sutra commentaries, transcribed from recorded lectures, are available in the bookstalls of large monasteries on the mainland. His accomplishments as a practitioner and teacher are held in high regard, and the legacy of his flourishing activities in the West is a factor in his homeland reputation.

While Xuanhua's followers have disseminated his teachings across China by means of the techniques of modern publishing, some other teachers have made intensive use of the most contemporary technologies to re-enter the mainland. Professional quality productions of Xingyun's lectures can be seen on mainland television. The monk Jingkong (b. 1927), a controversial Pure Land teacher who situates himself in Yinguang's tradition, has produced numerous video compact discs of his lectures for free distribution and use for television broadcasts. In addition, his organization of lay disciples in Singapore transmits daily webcasts of live lectures.

I have raised the names of several influential "overseas" clerics. It is important to recognize that almost all of them (with the exception of

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Taiwan-born Zhengyan) have mainland origins, and thus they have somewhat complicated insider/outsider relations to Buddhist circles in the PRC.

In addition to monastics, overseas lay devotees have played a fundamental role – economically and politically – in the effort to rebuild the material structures of Buddhist life in China. Their donations have gone not only to institutions for reconstruction projects, but also to congregations of monks and nuns at pilgrimage sites and large monasteries (sometimes in the form of sponsored vegetarian feasts, with "red envelope" monetary offerings distributed to each monastic participant), as well as significant gifts to elders. Also, some overseas devotees regularly come to the mainland to sponsor complex rituals such as the seven-day *shuilu* rites (for the liberation of all creatures of "sea and land"), thus enhancing monastic economies. This steadfast support, which continues to flow into Buddhist China, was crucial to the survival of Buddhist life after the Cultural Revolution.

"Buddhism" is posited by some as an international religion, and exists as such in the constructions of diplomatic and academic rhetoric, but in this present era it appears that Buddhists of most other cultural traditions seem to hold little real allure for Han Buddhists. Beyond the linguistic gap, which is significant, there are profound cultural gaps that seem insurmountable. Specifically in the Buddhist sphere, these include very different emphases or interpretations of Buddhist teachings and, most jarringly, different understandings of the codes of behaviour for monastic and lay practice. Thus Han Buddhists may feel that what others call "Buddhism" is not really the same thing, nor – very importantly – is it the "real" thing. There have been many friendly exchange visits between Han Buddhist dignitaries and various Buddhist groups from abroad, and generous economic support from Japanese Buddhist organizations has transformed some ancient Chinese sites important to Japanese lineage histories, but Buddhist teachers from outside Han circles do not seem to have made any substantial impact on the mainland. The significant exception lies in Tibetan worlds of teaching and practice.

The complex history of Tibetan-Han interchange in the 20th and 21st centuries is best told by specialists in those matters, as it is difficult and even treacherous for the uninitiated to penetrate the numerous layers of discourse produced by parties situated in a variety of positions. Still, I would like to attempt a brief sketch of the present state of this interchange in the specific realm of Han Buddhist practice and what is best understood as a Han Buddhist imaginary (*imaginaire*). This sketch portrays a set of contradictions – oppositions of views and oscillating attitudes.[8]

8. For a thoughtful and nuanced assessment of the current situation, see Matthew T. Kapstein, "A thorn in the dragon's side: Tibetan Buddhist culture in China," in Morris Rossabi (ed.), *Governing China's Multi-ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming 2003). For essential historical background, see Gray Warren Tuttle, "Faith and nation: Tibetan Buddhists in the making of modern China (1902–1958)," PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2002. Among many significant points argued, Tuttle makes clear the importance of Taixu's work in fostering studies of Tibetan Buddhist traditions during the Republican period, and shows how this work was entangled with a range of political strategies and aspirations.

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Over the past decade, there has been a small but steady flow of Han monks and nuns to the eastern Tibetan border regions of Amdo and Kham, such as beyond Kangding into the mountainous far western reaches of Sichuan. They travel there to study with Tibetan teachers, and often remain for a year or two to live under extremely harsh conditions. Groups of Han laypeople also have been travelling to well-known pilgrimage sites important to Tibetan Buddhists, sites in the Tibetan Autonomous Region as well as those in Tibetan culture areas within Sichuan and Qinghai provinces. Tibetan Buddhist books in Chinese translation, and books about Tibetan Buddhism, have been circulating on the mainland. Some are lurid, romantic accounts, others provide traditional biographies of saintly culture heros such as Milarepa, while others are demanding works that have become the focus of long-term lay study groups, such as the 14th-century Tibetan reformer Tsongkhapa's *Great Stages of the Path*. While a few Tibetans have become monastics in the Han tradition, for the most part the flow of learning has been in the opposite direction. What can be said about this phenomenon?

Principally, I think, there is the issue of difference, seen from several angles. Tibetan Buddhist forms and customs differ significantly from Han practices. Not only is the liturgy conducted in Tibetan language, but the daily rites are not at all the same as the thrice-daily communal rituals carried out in Han monasteries. The images in worship halls also are not the same: there are many figures in the Tibetan pantheon who are not encountered on Han altars. Practice methods also may differ, with a special emphasis on mantra and certain types of visualization methods as central elements of daily practice. In terms of daily sustenance, there are different customs for economic maintenance of monks and nuns, and importantly Tibetan monastics eat meat if it is available, in contrast to the strict vegetarian diet of Han Buddhists. And of course the altitude and harsh climate are challenging for outsiders to endure.

Thus, those who travel to these remote sites and are able to withstand the hardships to remain for a period of study are consciously looking for something strikingly different from the Han Buddhist teachings that are more easily available to them. In some cases they come to study with specific masters, whose charismatic reputations have filtered through to the heartland of Han Buddhism, mainly by word of mouth but also by photograph and descriptive flyer. Others make the long journey in hope of encountering one of these mysterious figures, who can initiate them into the powerful intricacies of a different Buddhism. There is something alluring about this difference, and something considered so valuable that one is willing to endure considerable physical hardship – something that these individuals are unable to find nearby.

Chinese media representations of Tibet and Tibetans have flip-flopped over the past few decades, depending on the political moment. These media representations have been absorbed by Buddhists in the Han population, as much as by any others who read newspapers and watch television. Some popular images of Tibetans focused on their undeveloped, wild, savage, child-like (or even sub-human) qualities, and empha-

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size the need to liberate, educate, civilize and discipline the population. While these images linger in popular consciousness, the opposite vision also has arisen, especially in recent years: the mysterious, supremely-accomplished, wonderfully pure, super-human Buddhist teachers of Tibet and the natural spirituality of the populace.[9]

Han Buddhist views about Tibetan Buddhist teachings, practices and teachers seem to mirror these extremes. They range from abhorrence of the difference and dismissal of its value, to absorbing attraction. Some monastics and lay Buddhists make the journey to Tibetan culture areas to fulfil fantasies or simply for the wild adventure of it. But in between these extremes, there are very serious individuals who endure the hardships in order to learn advanced meditative techniques and study practices aimed at overcoming and dissolving inner obstructions: traditional aims of Buddhist practitioners.

While Tibetans formerly were viewed as "other," attempts to integrate them within the Chinese nation-state have included media barrages that emphasize their place within the People's Republic, their kinship in the great Chinese family. And as this view permeates popular consciousness, study with Tibetan teachers has begun to seem increasingly reasonable to Han Buddhists. But still in the end the differences are so great that such study should be seen as a move out. For some, it is a distinctive mark of dissatisfaction or frustration with what commonly is available within the Han Buddhist environs.

Concluding Comments

In this article I have sought to identify several lines of coherence in the recent history and present activities of Buddhists in China. In order to accomplish a set of aims within a limited page space, I have made certain choices. Some modes of description, and some topics, have not been highlighted. There are no "tales of the field" here, at least not explicitly so, although this essay could not have been composed without field experience to reflect upon. I have not discussed at any length the world of nuns, whose numbers on the mainland are a good deal fewer than those of monks (in contrast to the situation in Taiwan). Given the strict gender separations maintained in this conservative aspect of Chinese society, many aspects of nuns' lives remain outside the experience of a male fieldworker. While interviews and observations suggest that the principal religious issues affecting nuns largely have been the same as the main issues confronting monks, my knowledge of the details of nuns' lives is not sufficient to venture substantive comments. Laypeople, like the clergy, come from all walks of society and have a wide range of motivations and understanding. Some are quite as dedicated to real engagement with Buddhist practice as the most serious monks and nuns, others find their place principally as generous donors who support monastic needs, others may only appear for rituals or advice in times of

9. A work by Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), considers this type of cultural pathology in a different setting.

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loss or trouble, others have reached their last years and prepare for death by chanting and other temple activities. A good deal of lay practice may be carried out privately before a family altar at home, and in this sense it is more difficult to observe and discuss – except on a case-by-case basis – than more public activities carried out in monastic halls.

This is not a comprehensive report but an inquiry into a world in process, set against the screen of its recent past. To conclude, I want to emphasize this matter of process. In 1968 or 1970, in the depths of the Cultural Revolution, it would have been difficult to foresee the astonishing Buddhist revival that has taken place over the past 15 years. Indeed, even ten years ago it might have been hard to imagine the liveliness of the current scene. While what the future now holds will only be seen as it occurs, for the Buddhist enterprise in China this future will continue to be shaped not only by individuals and groups within the Buddhist world, but also by powerful social, economic and political forces – as well as by powerful actors – within a China undergoing rapid change. At present the effect of the larger society on Buddhists often is visible, but the effect of Buddhists on the larger society is not at all clear. Whether that will change remains a question of no small importance in considering the vital future of Buddhists and their practices in a Chinese setting.

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