REVIVING THE PAST OR RE-ENVISIONING THE FUTURE?
BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

China's official policy stances on religion are complex and—especially outside of China's borders—often controversial. Government responses to the Falun Gong movement, to ethnic tensions in Muslim Xinjiang province, and to so-called "splittist elements" in Buddhist Tibet all evidence 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. Across China, temples, mosques, synagogues and churches are being renovated and reinvigorated. While the CCP remains ideologically wedded to convictions that scientific and industrial modernization will eventually make religion obsolete, the Party recognizes the historical fact that modernization is not always synonymous with secularization. And, confronted by a troubling "moral vacuum" in Chinese public life, it has begun tentatively supporting 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*, signals both "danger" and "opportunity."

What I'd like to do today is talk about how Buddhism fits into and might affect this process. That, however, will require a bit of historical context-setting.

- among the teachings of early Buddhism is that our sufferings, troubles and crises can only be effectively addressed *yathabhutam* or "as they have come to be" and not simply as they are at the present moment: that is, *histories make a difference*
- this is especially true in China where history—for at least the last 2500 years—has played a remarkably central role in public life

Authority Matters: The Interplay of State and Religion in China

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

- *state use of religion to legitimize its own authority*: state sponsorship of rituals, temples, monasteries, translation projects, etc.
  - epitomized by Song Emperor Xaiozong and 3 religions as legs of *ding*
- *contestation of state authority by religion*: typically, populist millenarian movements

Perhaps the most dramatic and damaging religious uprising: Taiping Rebellion that from1850-1864 resulted in over 30 million deaths (1 in 8 out of population of 250m) and widespread devastation across southeastern China, the Buddhist heartland.

- an important result: the dissolution of the non-hierarchic "circulatory system" linking local hermitages and shrines, hereditary temples and monasteries, and 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
  - significant reduction of Buddhist "human capital"

By the late Qing, Buddhism was in institutional disarray and religion was increasingly being targeted as a factor in China being the "sick man" of Asia. In this context, many intellectuals began questioning whether Buddhist monastics had any legitimate social role in modern China.

- 1898 Qing proposal to convert temples to public schools→institutional survival response: the first China-wide Buddhist association, aimed at promoting "Sangha education"
- but also, self-critical Buddhist responses: *conservative reform* and *liberal modernization*
  - **reformers**: emphasis on restoring tradition via appeal to core texts (school-defining sutras) and a single core practice: Pure Land=*yixin nianfo*; Chan=*nianfo shi shei*
    - monks and nuns serve 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
    - most famous: Taixu (1889-1947) and Chinese Buddhist Association (CBA)

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.

- in 1930s, in response to both internal strife and Japanese invasion of Manchuria: large public ceremonies by Han/Tibetan Buddhists for "strengthening the nation" and peace
- but among most leading intellectuals/politicians: growing skepticism about religion
  - growth of scientism, evolutionism and nationalism→intensification of rationales to break free from China's feudal, clan-based, superstitious past

With the founding of the communist People's Republic of China, the state-religion relationship fundamentally altered. Officially, every Chinese constitution since 1954 has guaranteed the right to "believe or not-believe" in religion, but:

- 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
  - "unproductive" Buddhist institutions stripped of property "rents" (farming/logging)
  - state appropriation and conversion of temples into schools or public buildings
    - condition for survival: Buddhist institutions explicitly promote state policies, including supporting military campaigns

Overall, like other religions, Buddhism was in steady decline over the first decades of PRC, but at least some senior monks at leading monasteries were able to sustain serious practice and lines of Dharma transmission. This changed with the "creative destruction" triggered by Mao's "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" from 1966-76.

- policy shift from dismissive tolerance to one of active, often violent eradication
  - across China: widespread seizure or destruction of temples and monasteries; artworks destroyed or sold; libraries burned; monks and nuns forcibly returned to lay life
  - complete disruption of open practice of Buddhism
    - closure of Buddhist schools and severing of all open lines of transmission

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and gradual "opening" of China from 1979 onward, the focus of the Chinese government was on economic reforms, industrialization and aggressively pursued modernization with a readiness for experimentation. In this more open environment, religion begins reviving, first in a "*zone of indifference*" and then with official sanction:

- in 1982, Central Committee of the CCP issues "Document 19"
  - an admission of "leftist" errors in past dealings with religious life and mandates both to allow the open practice of religion and to hand back management rights to properties previously belonging to religious institutions
- 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" points toward modernist vision: "religion should be adapted to society in which it is prevalent" and foster "social and cultural progress"
  - interdependence of rights and obligations: *autonomy* in exchange for *loyalty*

Further opening occurred in 2005 when State Council "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 Religious Cultural Communication Association of China
- national, one semester training program for high ranking clerics by People's University
- local and provincial government state 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

Economic and social liberalization in China have led to new levels of prosperity, but also deepening inequalities, chaotically changing social dynamics, and—with the retreat of socialist ideals in the face of materialist/market realities—a growing sense of meaninglessness and widening recognition of a "values gap" or "moral vacuum" that threatens social harmony

- a resurgence and acceleration of religious belief/practice
- increasing willingness on the part of the government to endorse this resurgence as long as it aligns with social progress, economic productivity and physical well-being
  - e.g., a charismatic Tibetan Buddhist lama teaching in rural Sichuan province→tent city of tens of thousands for several summers

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

All across China, Buddhism is being revitalized.

- temples are being restored or built from scratch
- charitable organizations are engaging in relief efforts and community service (often following the lead of 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

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"
  - build on modernist/humanist legacy to combine meditation and work; pursue intellectual studies; promote friendly international relations and national harmony
- *denied*: any movement in the direction of separatism and challenges to state authority

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 has successfully lobbied the CCP to add to the penal code 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.

One thing is certain: China has problems with difference. And as it integrates into the network systems of global informational capitalism, these problems are likely to intensify.

- throughout its history, China has been generally inclined to affirm cultural and religious plurality while insisting on political/ideological unity
  - but this compartmentalization may no longer be tenable in a global climate where cultural, ethnic and religious differences have undeniable *political salience*.
- the expanding information/exchange networks crucial to continued economic growth are already serving as lenses for amplifying concerns about power differentials
  - environmental and corruption issues most prominent
  - but also issues centered on cultural and religious rights and freedoms
    - e.g., Muslim Xinjiang and Buddhist Tibet

To date, the Chinese government remains committed to: 1] *expanding* economic *freedoms-of-choice* and 2] carefully *constraining* political *freedoms-of-expression*

- a strategy full of intrinsic tensions that eventually makes a mockery of the state goal of a "harmonious society"

Working with China's "intangible heritage" of Buddhist resources, Chinese Buddhists might offer a more robust and critically responsive conception of the "harmonious society"

- a way beyond both the modern dichotomy of plurality and unity, and the modern presupposition that the individual (person, ethnic group, gender or nation) is the natural and basic unit of economic, social, political and ethical analysis.
    - a non-dualistic conception of diversity as the activation of differences as the basis of mutual contribution to sustainably shared flourishing
        - an emergent relational achievement
- open prospects for movement from the finite-game "politics of power" now prevailing in China toward an infinite-game "politics of strength"—movement from:
    - a politics of difference based on crackdowns and condescension aimed at *enforcing common ideals* (even in the face of dramatically disparate realities)
    - to a politics of difference committed to *improvising shared ideals* of sustained, mutual contribution
        - a shift consistent with China's distinctive cultural legacies that would have positive impacts both on China's internal tensions and international relations