

Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force

Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival

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Abstract: This article examines the level of religious mobilization of Buddhism in post-Mao China and explores the potential of Buddhism for reconfiguring the relationships between religion, state, and society. In the first part, with existing data, three aspects of the ongoing Buddhist revival are measured: the number of lay Buddhists, the size and composition of sangha (Buddhist clergy), and the number and geographical repartition of monasteries. In the second part, the author analyzes three possible roles that Buddhism may play in Chinese public life, which are, respectively, a spiritual reference for political protest, a source of civil religion, and an element of the state's soft power. The author argues that although Buddhism has become a basic system of symbolic reference for 10 to 20 percent of the Chinese adult population, it is politically conservative and contributes little to changing the existing social structure and power relations

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the study of religion in the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC) has made considerable progress, with the publication of an increasing numbers of research articles and monographs. Such a growing interest is, of course, induced by multiple factors. It is not difficult, however,

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to discover that it is, in overt or covert ways, always linked to a major question: what impact can the changing spiritual life have on the existing social structure and power relations in China? It is in this sense that we perceive the necessity of reintroducing the notion of *social force* into the study of religion, which would bring a clearer vision of our problem and, consequently, of the criteria by which we can adjust our theoretical focus and interpret our data collection.

The notion of social force is anything but new. Almost every work by Émile Durkheim is an analysis of the origin, nature, function, and historical forms of social forces. However, it is still a concept worthy of reflection because it is far richer than usually understood. First, for Durkheim, a social force is not only a moral authority that transcends and constraints individuals, but also the prerequisite condition of liberty inasmuch as liberty results from the subordination of the exterior material forces to social forces (1998 [1893]: 380–81). That is to say, if the collective governs an individual's thoughts and behaviors, with precisely the same force, the individual can go beyond her material needs and give a meaning to her existence. A social force could be both coercive and empowering. It may be said that Durkheim's notion of *force* permitted him to avoid completely falling into a societal determinism, which he was often accused of by his detractors, and give a space to individual subjectivity.

Second, Durkheim also raised the question of system integration of social forces. With his research on the *Division of Labor in Society* (1998 [1893]) and *The Suicide* (1969 [1897]), he suggested that the health of a society is safeguarded by its balance between different social forces (Besnard 1973). Conversely speaking, the disequilibrium between social forces is the root cause of conflicts and mutations. In this way, the thesis of Durkheim finds its common ground with later theories centered on power structure, such as civil society theory and critical theory. Thus, social forces not only deal with individuals, but also, by their interactions, determine the forms and functions of macro institutions such as the market, state, means of production, and international relations (Cox 1981). If, as Randall Collins (1988) remarked, Durkheimian sociology contains a certain tradition of social conflict theory, *social force* could be precisely seen as one of efficient conceptual instruments to integrate both the microscopic and macroscopic aspects of social conflict.

There is an evident need for deeper theoretical inquiries on social forces. Here we content ourselves in stating that collective consciousness and actions have multilayered effects. They can both form individual ideas, convictions, values, and *habitus*, and influence the overall structure of social order and resource allocation. Reintroducing the notion of social force today means to attempt an integral study, incorporating both individual participation in religion and the role of religion in social changes at the structural level. With this in mind, in this article, we will estimate with existing data the level of religious mobilization of Chinese Buddhism, and continue with an analysis of the potential of Buddhism for reconfiguring the relationships between religion, state, and society. This double examination would allow a more realistic evaluation of the social impact of Buddhist *revival* in China.

Mapping the Social Scope of the Buddhist Revival

In 1983, Master Mingshan (1914–2001), then abbot of the Dinghui Temple and the Qixia Temple in Jiangsu province, wrote an article proposing a review of various stages of Buddhism under the Communist regime since 1949. According to him (2003), the period 1949–66 is one of the reforms during which Buddhism was transformed by the new norms imposed by the PRC government. Buddhism then entered a period of *crisis* or *disaster* during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. Finally, in 1978, a new stage of revival (*fixing*) began and Buddhism gained strength. This is probably the first time that people speak of the revival of Buddhism in China during the post-Maoist era. If the time line for dividing the first and second periods is contestable since the situation of Buddhism was already critical before the Cultural Revolution, every observer confirms that Chinese Buddhism today has entered a stage of revival in contrast to its state before 1980 (Zheng 2002).

Thirty years after the restoration of Buddhism in China, it is time to assess the situation. In order to piece the puzzle of the post-Mao evolution of this religion by a quantitative description, we will try to gather as much as possible published data, mainly from official documents of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) and the PRC government, on the results of various social surveys involving Buddhism as well as occasional information appearing in media interviews of Buddhist leaders. Constrained by the objective conditions, the data lacks completeness and continuity. However, a synthetic comparison still allows us to make out some overall aspects of the revival, especially that of Han Mahayana Buddhism.

Estimating the Number of Lay Buddhists

The size of the lay believer population is often the principal item of data in the evaluation of the social impact of a religion. However, for Chinese Buddhism, it is difficult to say how many lay believers there are. The principal reason for this is the conspicuous noninstitutionality of the construction of the Buddhist identity, a fact that invalidates much of relevant quantitative research. First, becoming a Buddhist is basically a matter of a subjective attitude, with no absolute necessity for institutional approval, except for those entering the *sangha* (or *sengtuān*). Despite a modern tendency of confessionalization among Chinese Buddhists, those who possess Buddhist beliefs and participate in Buddhist activities do not necessarily convert (*guiyi*) to Buddhism through formal rituals.

Second, not all lay Buddhists have a unitary, exclusive religious identity. Many lay Buddhists (*jushi*), who have participated in conversion rituals and who do have certificates, do not mind much the difference between Buddhism and other Chinese religions. They may also practice all kinds of popular cults in their daily life. Whether those believers are Buddhists depends on the strictness of the definition that the observer chooses to delimit what is a Buddhist.

Third, in the context of Han Mahayana Buddhism, although “conversion” is

theoretically a “refuge” in the whole *sangha*, it is often conceived by lay Buddhists as a way to construct a particular link with an individual religious lineage, monastery, or master. Hence, nothing prevents a lay devotee who has already undergone a conversion ritual to convert himself once more, even to take another *dharma* name (*faming*). In fact, cases of reconversion under the attraction of a particular *dharma* assembly (*fahui*) or a particular master are not rare.

It is probably those reasons that prevented the 1997 the government’s white paper, *Freedom of Religious Belief in China* (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China [IOSCPRC] 1997), from giving the exact number of Buddhists. It only stated quite vaguely, that “according to incomplete statistics, there are over 100 million followers of various religious faiths.” Among the five officially recognized religions, the white paper gave a number of about 10 million Protestants, about 4 million Catholics, and about 18 million belonging to Muslim ethnic minorities. It can be estimated from these data, that there could be at least 70 million Buddhists and Daoists in China. This number may be underestimated. Hongyi Harry Lai (2003: 44), basing his conclusions on informal data originating from Chinese Web sites of an official nature, calculated that Buddhism claims over 100 million followers in 2003, including 90.5 million Han Mahayana Buddhists, 7.6 million Tibetan Buddhists, and 1.5 million Theravada Buddhists. Hence, he judges Buddhism to be the most popular religion among the five in China. Han Buddhists, solely, might actually count above 130 million practitioners.

It is difficult to verify the original sources of the information treated by Lai (2003). Recent surveys, however, seem to confirm his estimation. According to an annual poll conducted by Horizon Research Consultancy Group from 2005 to 2007 in several Chinese cities (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008), Buddhists represent the largest religious group in China, making up in each survey 11, 12, and 16 percent of the adult population. As mentioned in the report, the surveys are disproportionately urban and representative of slightly more than half of China’s adult population. Another survey conducted in 2006, the Chinese General Social Survey, provides rural data according to which about 13 percent of rural residents consider themselves as possessing a religion. The most numerous are Buddhists, who number about 7.4 percent of those questioned.¹

In a parallel way, a survey begun in 2005 and published in 2007 on spirituality in China carried out by researchers at East China Normal University in Shanghai, found that the number of religious believers among the country’s 1.3 billion people amounts to as many as 300 million, and Buddhism accounted for 33.1 percent of those who declared themselves as believers (Shi 2011; Sun 2007), that is to say, about 10 percent of the total adult population, or about 100 million. Compared to this, the survey conducted by a group of American and Chinese sociologists taken in 2007, “Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents,” offers a more impressive result. According to the data collected from a national multistage probability sample of 7,021 Chinese at 56 locales, 18.2 percent of Chinese aged 16 and above recognize that they believe in Buddhism (Association of Religion Data Archives 2010).

It is difficult to trace the origin of the difference of over 10 percent among these surveys carried out in the same period. It is nevertheless clear from any of those surveys that Buddhism is the most influential among the five recognized religions. In fact, the actual influence should be even stronger than is shown by the data. The low level of identity institutionalization of Buddhism should have weakened the construction of its subjective identification. In other words, those who do not possess an explicit identity as Buddhist may be also influenced by Buddhism in thought and actions. For example, according to the Chinese portion of the World Values Survey undertaken by Research Centre for Contemporary China at Peking University in 2007,² only 11.1 percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 70 consider themselves as belonging “to a religious denomination,” of which 3.6 percent are Buddhists. At the same time, 21.5 percent consider themselves “a religious person.”³ This implies that about 18 percent of Chinese do not possess an explicitly institutionalized religious affiliation but still have a conscious belief in religion. In this connection, the result of a survey carried out in ten sites of eastern, central, and western parts of China from 2004 to 2006 is quite significant. Among the 3,196 people who were successfully interviewed and completed a detailed questionnaire, only 4.4 percent identify themselves as Buddhists, yet 27.4 percent pray to Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, and 77.9 percent tend to affirm the Buddhist concept of causal retribution and the doctrine of karma (Yao and Badham 2008: 9). A survey on the belief of urban residents conducted by the Horizon Research Consultancy Group in 2008 gives a similar result: 19 percent believe that Buddhas or Bodhisattvas exist, whether or not they consider themselves Buddhists (Jiang 2008). With these numbers, we may safely say that there should be 200 to 300 million Chinese who are more or less sensitive to (some elements of) the Buddhist cosmology and at least occasionally participate in festivals and rituals of Buddhism.

Size and Composition of Sangha

If, to some degree, the number of lay Buddhists remains indefinable, the magnitude of the Buddhist clergy, the *sangha*, is objectively measurable. Here, the clergy includes *biqiu* and *biqiuni*, that is to say, institutionally ordained monks and nuns, as well as *shami* and *shamini*, novices who are shaved and have begun monastic life but have not been ordained. The only official number from the Chinese government in this respect is the white paper published in 1997, according to which “Currently China has 13,000-some Buddhist temples and about 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns. Among them are 120,000 lamas and nuns, more than 1,700 Living Buddhas, and 3,000-some temples of Tibetan Buddhism and nearly 10,000 Bhiksu and senior monks and more than 1,600 temples of Pali Buddhism” (IOSCPRC 1997). It can be inferred from these numbers that the size of the Han Buddhist clergy is around 70,000.

Other numbers, too, can help in our understanding of the changes of the size of Han Buddhist clergy during the last two decades. In 1994, Master Jinghui (2003,

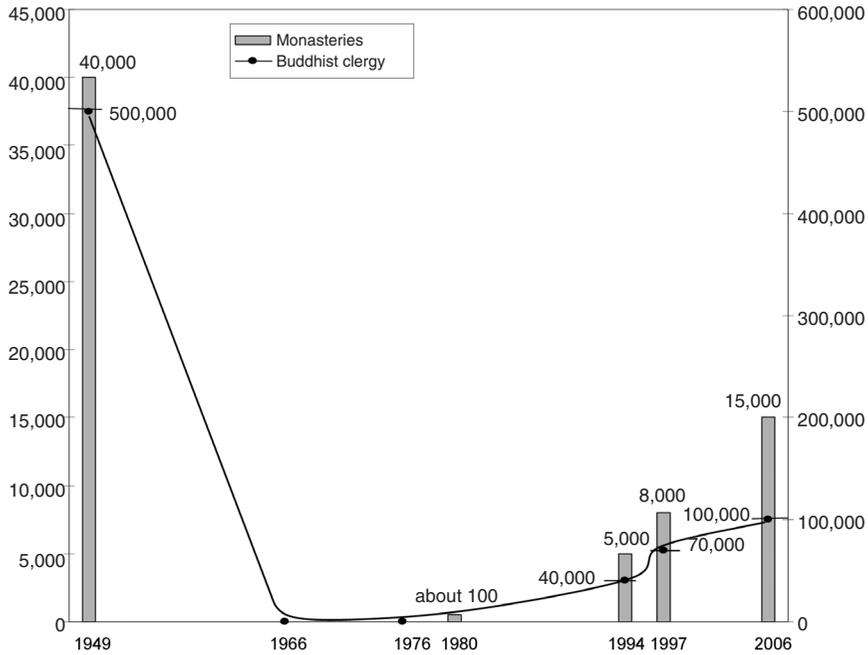
3–4), then vice chair of the BAC, stated that there were about 40,000 Han Buddhist monks and nuns. A special issue of *Yazhou zhoukan* (Asian Weekly) in Hong Kong about the first World Buddhist Forum in 2006 reported that there were more than 15,000 Han Buddhist monasteries in mainland China and around 100,000 Han Buddhist clerics (Jiang 2006). Chen Xingqiao, who works in *Fayin* (The Voice of Dharma), the official journal of the BAC, also provided circumstantial support for this estimate. He claimed in 2009 that according to *incomplete* statistics, there were about 200,000 Buddhist clerics altogether, over 80,000 of which are Han Chinese (Chen 2009).

If these numbers are reliable, the size of Han *sangha* has shown an 8 percent annual increase from 1994 to 2006. Such a rapid increase in growth is impressive, but only a historical contextualization could permit a real understanding of the base and extent of this revival. We know almost nothing about the situation of the postreform *sangha* until 1994. Concerning the situation in the Cultural Revolution, the fragmentary nature of the information that we have at hand does not yet lend itself to a reconstruction of the situation across China. Doubtlessly, even in the worst situation under the Cultural Revolution, there were monks and nuns who did not give up celibacy and vegetarianism, who recited scriptures secretly, and tried by all means possible to protect monastic property. Nevertheless, almost all collective and public religious activities, even the most fundamental practices of morning and evening scripture readings, were forbidden. The institutionalized entity of *sangha* thus ceased to exist. How about the situation before the Cultural Revolution? We do not know much about this topic except for bits of local data. However, according to Zhufeng Luo (1987: 34), there were about 500,000 Buddhist clerics around 1949. He did not specify the sources of his data. However, there were unlikely to be fewer than 500,000 members of clergy around 1949 if we consider the fact that the survey in the 1930s conducted by the Chinese Buddhist Association gave a number of approximately 738,000 Han Buddhist clerics in mainland China.⁴

With the help of the figures that we are possible to find or infer, we can make a sketch of the numbers of Han Buddhist clerics in the PRC since 1949 (Figure 1). We see clearly that institutional Buddhism has experienced a rebirth after the rupture of the Cultural Revolution. Yet it is still far from its level of development at the pre-Communist era. After sixty years of Communist government rule, China's population has more than doubled, but the number of Han Buddhist clerics has been reduced by four-fifths.

Another indicator of the evolution of the clergy during the past thirty years is the number of ordinations of monks and nuns. Since the 1990s, the BAC and its provincial branches have monopolized the right of ordination. According to the *Administrative Measures of Han Buddhist Monasteries* (Quanguo hanchuan fojiao siyuan guanli banfa) adopted by the Sixth National Congress of the BAC in 1993, only monasteries qualified by the national Association were permitted to organize ceremonies of ordination, and each ceremony had to be approved both by the Religious Affairs Bureau at the provincial level and by the national Buddhist As-

Figure 1. Evolution of Han Buddhist Clergy and of the Number of Han Buddhist Monasteries in the PRC (1949–2006)



Note: Here the Buddhists of ethnic minorities in China, that is, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Dai, are not the subjects of the statistics.

sociation. This document also shows that the number of ordinations of monks and nuns is restricted: each year, around five ordination ceremonies may be organized throughout China, and each time, the number of people ordained must be limited to approximately 200. In other words, each year only 1,000 newly ordained are admitted. In 2000, the BAC has promulgated the *Administrative Measures of Han Buddhist Ordination* (Quanguo hanchuan fojiao siyuan chuanshou santandajie guanli banfa) that lessened some of these restrictions. According to the *Administrative Measures*, each year, five to eight ordination ceremonies are permitted, and each time the number of ordained must be less than 300. Thus, in theory no more than 2,400 novices can become monks and nuns each year.

But in reality, the number of newly ordained far exceeds the limits prescribed by these rules. According to a report signed by Master Shenghui (2003), vice chair of the BAC, from 1993 to 2003, about 29,000 Buddhist novices were ordained as monks and nuns in permitted ceremonies, that is, 2,900 on average per year. From September 2002 to February 2006, this figure reached 12,060 (Shenghui 2006), or 3,530 per year on average. The number reached a peak in 2007, in which the

number of ordained people was 5,919 (“Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 2007 nian gongzuo zongjie yu 2008 nian gongzuo jihua yaodian” 2008). Later, until 2011, the number of newly ordained people has remained at a level around 3,000–4,000 each year (Xuecheng 2009; 2011). It is for this reason that the BAC modified the *Administrative Measures of Han Buddhist Ordination* in 2011 in order to avoid too large a discrepancy from the actual situation. According to the updated rules, ordination ceremonies in Han Chinese monasteries are limited to “about ten times” each year; every ceremony is required to involve less than 350 people. In total, there were 149 ordination ceremonies in Han Buddhist monasteries from 1994 to 2010, where 66,538 have been ordained (Hongdu 2011).

Number and Geographical Repartition of Buddhist Monasteries

The data about the size of the clergy (IOSCPRC 1997; Jiang 2006; Jinghui 1995) also noted the number of Han Buddhist monasteries. Apart from those, Xiao Xianfa (1981: 3), then director of State Religious Affairs Bureau, mentioned in a 1980 speech that there were “more than one hundred monasteries in the whole country that resumed religious activities.” The number of “more than one hundred” obviously includes all the schools of Buddhism, not only Han Chinese. According to the data, we can attempt a rough description of the number of changes witnessed by Han Buddhist monasteries from 1949 (Figure 1). All kinds of estimations imply that there are around 15,000 Han Buddhist monasteries and other places of worship in the 2000s. About 8,000 to 10,000 of such sites are legally registered. However, we can be sure that there are far more than 5,000 unregistered sites of Buddhist activities. In fact, they might number several tens of thousands (Chen 2009).

In 2006, with the support of the Buddhist Association of the Jiangsu province, some people, on behalf of a publishing company registered in Hong Kong, published a yearbook (Gui 2006) that collected the names and addresses of more than 15,000 Han Buddhist monasteries and other kinds of activity sites in mainland China, about 2,000 monasteries of Tibetan, Mongolian, and Dai Buddhism, and approximately 1,000 monasteries in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. The list is certainly not exclusive. In particular, compared to other sources of data in our grasp, the number of Buddhist sites in some regions (such as Hubei, Fujian, and Tibet) is surely underestimated. However, along with population statistics (National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China 2006), these data allow us to highlight, to a limited extent but for the first time, the distribution density per capita of the Buddhist sites in different regions in the PRC. As shown in Figure 2, in the PRC, there are two areas that are most affected by Buddhism: first, Tibet and Qinghai, which is populated by Tibetans, and second, southeastern China, consisting of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangxi, which is the main area for Han Buddhism.

Certainly, resources of Buddhism cannot be represented solely by the quantity of Buddhist sites. Furthermore, there are monasteries of different sizes. If a large monastery can gather hundreds of monks and novices and manage a dozen sub-

Figure 2. Number of Buddhist Sites in China Per Million Inhabitants (2006)

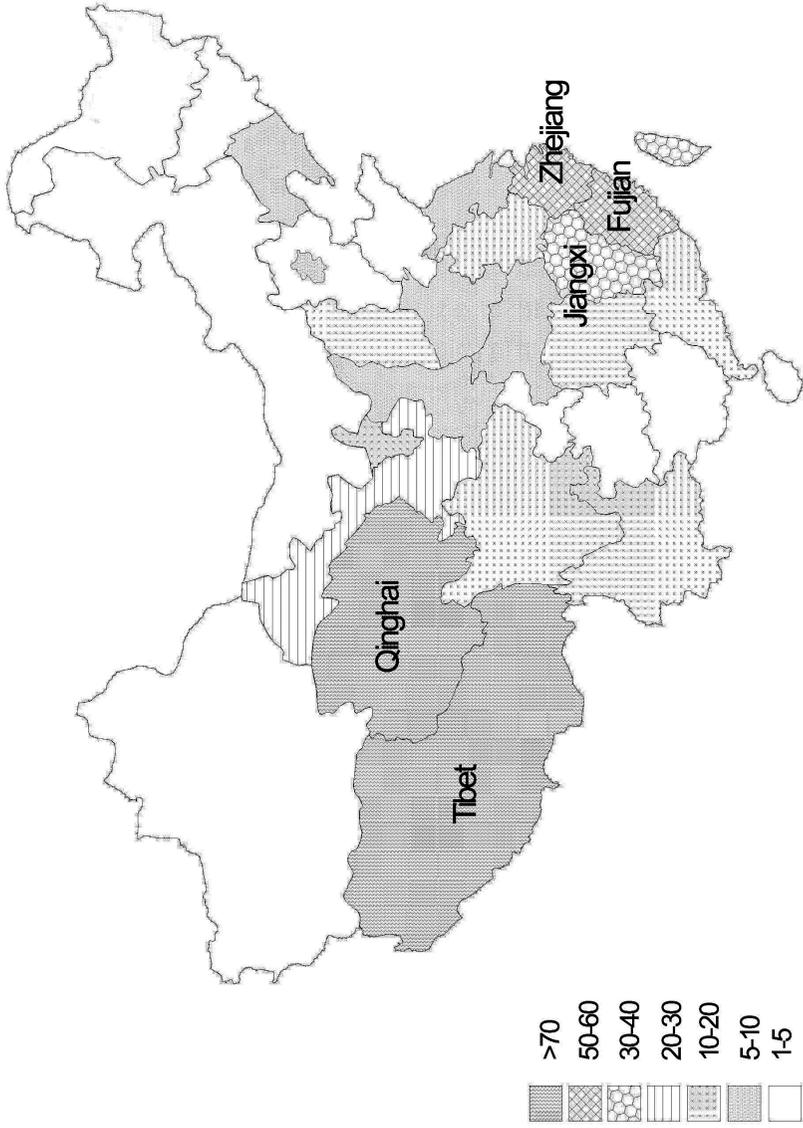


Table 1

The Regions Most Affected by Han Buddhism in Mainland China

Rank	1730s	1930s	2006
	Buddhist–Daoist clerics to population (per 1,000)	Buddhist clerics to population (per 1,000)	Buddhist sites to population (per million)
1st	Hubei (3.87)	Jiangsu (5.46)	Fujian (58.70)
2nd	Sichuan (3.83)	Zhejiang (5.30)	Zhejiang (55.70)
3rd	Jiangxi (3.69)	Fujian (3.47)	Jiangxi (38.92)
4th	Zhejiang (3.32)	Sichuan (3.39)	Guangdong (16.80)
5th	Guangdong (3.16)	Yunnan (3.24)	Yunnan (16.54)

Note: According to 1730s data, in Sichuan, Zhejiang, and Guangdong where Buddhist and Daoist clerics were separately censused, the proportion of Buddhists to the entire clergy are, respectively, 90.7, 96.0, and 92.2 percent.

monasteries, it is not unusual that only two or three monks or nuns live in a small monastery. However, we can assume that there is a correlation between the density of the monasteries and of the clergy. With the quantitative analysis conducted by Vincent Goossaert (2000) on the density of Buddhist–Daoist clerics in the 1730s and the figures collected by Holmes Welch (1967, Appendix I) on the number of Buddhist clerics in the 1930s, we can attempt a rough comparison of the regions most affected by Han Buddhism throughout time (Table 1). Because of the incompleteness of our statistics and administrative reorganizations, the data cannot be simply held as directly reflecting the regional growth and decline of Han Buddhism. However, what is certain is that the regions most affected by Han Buddhism are always along the Yangtze River and in southeastern China. There is a continuity of tradition that goes beyond the Communist rupture.

Buddhism and Politics: Current Situation and Future Potential

Now we have a basic image of the scale of the Buddhist revival in China. Our data reminds us of the necessity of keeping a cautious attitude to the trendy discourse of revival. There is no doubt that, compared to the total destruction of Buddhism in the 1949–1976 period, the post-Mao reconstruction of Buddhism is spectacular, both in its speed and magnitude. However, after thirty years of recovery, the quantity of Buddhist clerics and monasteries still cannot regain the situation of the pre-Communist period. The reason for this is quite complex and cannot be all reduced to state repression.⁵ Anyway, the idea that Buddhism has entered into a golden age, even the “best period in history,” is obviously contradicted by historical facts.

At the same time, we should not underestimate the social influence of Buddhism.

Undeniably, during about three decades, from the almost dead state of social isolation, Buddhism has been re-embedded into the social tissue and collective consciousness of Chinese. All kinds of recent surveys indicate that lay Buddhists (by self-identification) number between 10 to 20 percent of adult Chinese population. Moreover, the influence of Buddhism seems to be still increasing. The augmentation in the number of people who believe in and practice Buddhism may bring qualitative changes because the effects of religious mobilization cannot be limited to what is transcendent and private: they necessarily involve the redistribution of power and material resources, the regrouping of peoples, and the redefinition of social and symbolic orders. To what extent can Chinese (Han) Buddhism today be understood to exert a *social force*, participating in the making of culture, morality, gender, class, and other social facts and representations?

This is a major question and our study has just begun. Evidently, in order to offer a comprehensive answer to this question, various approaches and perspectives are necessary for examining the different aspects of the social implications of Buddhism before arriving at any synthetic conclusion.⁶ In the rest of this article, we will only briefly discuss the relationship between Buddhism and politics. In post-1989 China, a society that seems highly depoliticized, politics is in fact ubiquitous. Only when we have a clear vision of the relationship between Buddhism and politics, the largest and most complex “force” in the PRC, can we possibly have a qualitative interpretation pertinent to understanding the level of development and direction of changes of Chinese Buddhism. Concretely, the question I would like to raise is: if Buddhism can influence people’s behavior and mentality, and potentially, mobilize people on a large scale, what change can it bring to Chinese politics? We can propose three hypotheses concerning the role that Buddhism may play in the public life and the evolution in the triangular relationship between Buddhism, the state, and society.

Buddhism as a Spiritual Reference for Political Protest?

First, we may ask if Chinese Han Buddhism can be a spiritual reference for political protest as what we have seen in Tibet or, at least, an Engaged Buddhism for social justice as in some other Asian countries. Although Chinese Buddhism is generally considered as having a mild character and a tradition of collaboration with authorities, this is still not a naïve question. Chinese Buddhism is a victim of Communist totalitarianism. It is an undeniable fact that the Maoist regime was a period when Buddhism witnessed a scale of total devastation never seen before. Should Chinese Buddhists not ask themselves “Why?” and do something to change the current political system so that the same tragedy never happens again? Unfortunately, until now, the mainstream of Buddhist force has not yet been channeled to this direction.

One reason is that this kind of movement often needs a leader seen as the incarnation of both the history of sufferings and the hope of changes. In Chinese

Buddhism, however, there is neither an authority such as the Dalai Lama, who is attributed supremacy for both spiritual and political issues, nor a charismatic leader as the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the most important promoter of Engaged Buddhism, who takes a clear stand against oppression and injustice. The political environment in China does not allow for the existence of this kind of leader. After thirty years of reform, political control is still very severe in this respect. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), any kind of religious mobilization with a political feature is considered dangerous, hence to be put down immediately. Buddhist leaders can convert their increasing social capital into economical resources and build big temples or gigantic Buddha statues, but they have no way to organize any social protests if they are not ready to sacrifice their freedom or even their lives. In this context, the majority of Buddhist figures among the Han Chinese submit themselves to the double pressure from the market and the state. They have neither the intention to advocate the critical views that are beneficial to the public good nor the courage to be engaged in the civil rights movement (*weiquan yundong*) in China.

There are, of course, some exceptions. For example, the nun Miaoju concerns herself with HIV victims abandoned by the government since the 2000s. After the 2008 earthquakes in Sichuan, she demanded that the government stop the arrests, menacing acts, and violence to the parents of child victims and volunteers. She is also engaged, with some other lay non-Buddhist Chinese citizens, in the mobilizations to support arrested human right activists such as Hu Jia, Xu Zhiyong and, recently, Chen Guangcheng. Another example is the monk Shengguan, who held in 2006 a Buddhist commemorative ritual for the victims of the Chinese Democratic Movement of 1989. He demanded freedom of opinion and thought, urged the immediate release of all political prisoners on different occasions, and met the Dalai Lama in India in 2011. Their efforts, however, remained individual and did not form a sizeable social movement. As a matter of course, they are not supported by the official Buddhist establishment and, as dissidents, are monitored by the Chinese government.

Buddhism as a Source of Civil Religion?

Although Chinese Buddhism does not seem to have become a protesting force, it is permitted and even encouraged by the government to invest in charity and to assist in the delivery of a number of social services. Since the end of the 1990s, Buddhist monasteries have become rich thanks to increasing donations from lay believers. Now they can contribute money to set up schools in poor rural areas, adopt orphans, or offer free medical treatment. Whenever there is a natural disaster, such as earthquakes and floods, Buddhist monasteries and associations donate large sums of money to provide relief. In his studies on Buddhist charities in the PRC, André Laliberté (2012) has shown that Chinese Buddhist philanthropic enterprises are expanding dramatically during the last few years,

and this go beyond the rebuilding of temples. Among the thirty-one provincial Buddhist associations, at least seventeen have established related charities or foundations by the end of 2008. As Laliberté asked, does this new development mean the possibility that Chinese Buddhist institutions can represent a source of alternative civility?

In this connection, Taiwanese Buddhism could offer a successful model. In his book *Democracy's Dharma*, Richard Madsen (2007) showed that some large nongovernmental religious organizations in Taiwan, through their social service and moral discourse, have contributed to the formation of a civil society and a democracy. The Taiwanese experience seems to suggest that, under an authoritarian regime in transition to democracy, the cooperative relationship between religious groups and the government is to a certain degree a positive factor because participating in these groups is a respectable and safe way of taking initiative to help address social problems and because religious conservatism can play a stabilizing role in a rapidly changing political situation. According to Madsen, Buddhism has become in Taiwan a constructor of morality that the political forces cannot ignore and hence has played the role of a civil religion.

A collaboration rather than a confrontation between the state and religions in order to increase the common good is no doubt the scenario that we hope to see the most. However, until now there is no sign that it will happen in the short-term in mainland China. On the one hand, the lack of autonomy of Chinese Buddhist institutions for social service is a formidable obstacle preventing Buddhists from weaving a durable network with important social engagement. As Laliberté (2012) has explained, the activities of Buddhist charities are usually responding to demands made by the government, via the CCP United Front Work, or the state's relevant departments, such as the Labor and Social Security Ministry or the Ministry for Civil Affairs. To a great extent, these charitable activities are forced to reduce themselves to mere monetary donations. The moral practice, the face-to-face mutual help of human beings, is nonexistent. In China, the kind of organization of volunteers, commonly seen in Taiwan, which conducts large-scale social mobilizations in the public space, is nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the money donated to authorities is no more traceable than donations from other sources: for donors to decide or monitor its use is very difficult, if not impossible. In some situations, this kind of charity is in fact a *political task*, an obligation compelled by the local government, or a means to buy political recognition and support by leaders of religious institutions. On the other hand, unlike Taiwanese Buddhist organizations, Chinese Buddhist establishments cannot formulate a discourse of transcendence beyond the on-going politics. What they can publicly do is nothing but translate political orders into Buddhist terms, such as "harmony." Consequently, Buddhism in the PRC lacks a vision of the ultimate reality and universal good. At the most, religious actors strive in the aim of furthering development by catering to the state's likes or tastes, while the state reduces this negotiation to the level of a utilitarian exchange, neither admitting nor believing in any claim of value.

As the social services of Buddhism is not associated with the protection of civil rights and as its moral teaching is not associated with the criticism of worldly reality, Chinese Buddhism not only cannot function as a source of civil religion, but actually becomes a conservative force in politics. That is why Laliberté (2012: 113–114) concluded that Buddhism does favor the expansion of civility by encouraging the growth of a more compassionate and caring citizenry and provide a safety valve to social tensions, but it tends to strengthen the resilience of the current regime rather than cultivate the aspiration for reform.

Buddhism as an Element of the State's Soft Power?

The third possible line of development of Buddhism seems more realistic today than the first two: it can be used as an element of *soft power* by the Chinese government. Indeed, Buddhism appears useful to the government because of its transethnic and international influence in Asia. Since the 1950s, the PRC government has begun to profit from its use of Buddhism in its ethnic and diplomatic affairs, basically through the official and monopolizing BAC. Since the 1990s, recognizing the increasing influence of Buddhism in Chinese societies and the good image of Buddhism as a pacific religion in the West, the PRC government, at the central level, tends more actively to use Buddhism to realize its aims in its external policies. This includes the usage of Buddhism to promote national reunification in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diasporas, to strengthen the links between China and Buddhist countries in Asia, and to endorse the CCP's policies of religion. As for the latter, the most typical example happened after the repression of Falun Gong in 1999. Successively in 2001 and 2002, the PRC government sent two Delegations of Chinese Religions to the United Nation's dialogues on human rights in Geneva headed by Buddhist monks in order to make a defense for its *antisect* campaign.

In fact, Buddhism has become a cultural resource for which some Asian states strive to compete. Apart from the two major international Buddhist events, the General Conference held every two years by World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) and the United Nations Day of Vesak, initiated by Southeast Asian countries, an event called the "World Buddhist Forum" was orchestrated by the Chinese government in 2006. Still two others were held successively in 2009 and 2012, which gathers each time hundreds of representatives from different countries. In 2011, India, where Buddhism has declined long ago, also held the first Global Buddhist Congregation and decided to organize the International Buddhist Confederation. This competition is complicated by the existence of the Dalai Lama and the Republic of China in Taiwan. In principle, any international event that is participated by the Dalai Lama or that recognizes Taiwan as a political entity would meet with refusal of participation by the PRC government.⁷ For these reasons, the World Buddhist Forum can be seen as an attempt by the PRC government to create an international Buddhist universe that is politically controllable and excludes enemy forces (*didui shili*).

This serviceability earned Buddhism more political favors and public visibility, compared to other religions in China and, as such, stimulated the Buddhist leaders to break new ground in this direction. Soon after its resumption of activities in the 1980s, the BAC proposed international friendly exchange among the “Three Excellent Traditions” of Buddhism. In 1993, Zhao Puchu (1907–2000), then chair of the BAC, proposed that Buddhism is the golden link (*huangjin niudai*) of nonofficial diplomacy between China, Korea, and Japan. By his suggestion, an annual Buddhist conference is held successively in the three countries since 1995. In 2007, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CCP, stated explicitly the need to “develop the cultural soft power of the country” in his political report delivered to the Seventeenth Party Congress. Since then, the international exchange of Buddhism has started to be explicitly mentioned, in official discourse, as a means of promoting the soft power of China in world politics. For example, Master Xuecheng (2008), the most important vice chair of the BAC, openly suggested to the CCP to enhance the soft power of the state with Buddhism in order to overcome “the attempts to demonize China by hostile Western powers.” Recently, “soft power,” as well as “harmony,” has become one of the most employed key words of Buddhists and pro-Buddhist scholars for legitimatizing the current Buddhist revival.

Soft power is not simply an excuse, something insincere just to please the government. Nationalism that brings out a cult of power in international affairs is almost the only ideology shared by every kind of social force in China. Buddhists are unlikely to be exempt from its influence. Moreover, among the recognized religions, Buddhism is the most advantageous to the diplomatic interests of the PRC government: Christianity and Islam are suspicious in terms of national loyalty, while Daoism is limited to ethnically Chinese societies. This makes Buddhists especially favorable to concepts like “soft power,” which are susceptible to being employed to underline the political superiority of Buddhism in the power games in the Chinese religious field.

To be sure, in Imperial times too, political power used Buddhism, while Buddhism was involved in politics. However, compared to pre-Communist times, the central PRC government uses Buddhism more for exterior affairs than domestic integration. More significantly, the imperial state had at least a nominal respect for the sacred power of Buddhist clergy, while today, this balance between secular power and religious power has disappeared: the atheistic dogma of the communist state has never changed, and its use of Buddhism does not need any religious justification. While devoting itself to the construction of the state’s soft power, Buddhism has succeeded in obtaining a legitimate mode of expression and continually expanding its social influence. However, this process is not without its trade-offs. Serving the political power exacerbates the secularization of Buddhism, no doubt in a way that is different from the violent deprivation and devastation of Buddhist properties under Mao’s reign, but still resulting in a desacralization of religion, and loss of control by Buddhism of its own resources (Ji 2011).

Conclusion

Holmes Welch (1968) pointed out with his examination of the Buddhist revival in China in the period 1850–1950 three mistakes concerning the notion of “revival” at the time. Firstly, the reconstruction of Buddhism was a secularizing reform rather than a revival; secondly, it did not affect the Chinese as a whole; thirdly, certain trends, if they had continued, would have meant “not a growing vitality for Buddhism but its eventual demise as a living religion” (Welch 1968: 264), since this revival could be offset by the growing strength of the enemies of Buddhism, the unstable monastic economy, and the disqualification of the clerics as religious models for laymen. The same insights could also be valid for the Buddhist revival in the post-Mao China. After thirty years of so-called revival, Chinese Buddhism has not regained its pre-1949 position, neither spiritually nor materially, but it also, as a social force, has remained in a scattered state, unconscious of itself. No large, independent monastic organizations or autonomous lay movements have appeared in the PRC, unlike in pre-1949 China or in Taiwan. More importantly, Chinese Buddhist leaders have neither channeled religious mobilizing capacity toward participation in social movements, nor have they proposed a value system about public issues with an augment independent of and better convincing than the logics of power and market. There is no doubt that, in the microscopic sense, Buddhism has become a basic system of symbolic reference for many Chinese in order for them to construct their individual identity and understand their life-world. Macroscopically, however, the limited social and political engagement of Buddhism has almost no effect on the existing social structure and power relations. Under the current political and economic conditions, political collaboration and conservatism have enabled Buddhism to acquire resources more easily than other religions. However, in longer terms, Buddhism, not being able to link its development with the concerns of citizen rights and social justice, and faced with the competition of other religions, especially Christianity and Confucianism, as a religion, might have a less bright future than it seems to have.

Notes

1. See National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China (2009: 288). All the yearly data in this survey are available at www.chinagss.org/.

2. The related data and information are available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org/.

3. It is not surprising that the greatest number of those surveyed (4.4 percent) consider themselves Protestants. As a principle, a Christian must belong to a certain denomination. It is obviously unrealistic, however, to consider that there are more believers of Christianity than of Buddhism.

4. The survey was undertaken from 1930 to 1936. The data was later published in different ways and was treated by Holmes Welch (1967; 1968).

5. It is remarkable that the post-Mao revival of religion coexists with the ever growing secularization of China. This secularization is visible in the government’s exploitation of material and symbolic property of religions, but also includes the rise of individualism and the deepening of competition between different religions.

6. The special issue of *Social Compass*, “Social Implications of Buddhist Revival in China” (Ji and Goossaert 2011), is a step in this direction as it analyzes the organization and effects of Buddhist practice in both macroscopic and microscopic, and from both institutional and individual viewpoints.

7. For example, in 2011, the PRC refused to send delegations to the India-initiated Global Buddhist Congregation and the Twenty-Sixth General Conference of the WFB held in Korea for the reason that both organizers invited the Dalai Lama.

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