

Zhao Puchu and His Renjian Buddhism

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Renjian Buddhism: Its Origins and Divergences

ENGAGED BUDDHISM (*rushi fojiao* 入世佛教), as a category of religiously inspired socio-political movements, is usually linked to the humanitarian interventions initiated by Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1960s in order to reduce the suffering and alleviate the oppression of the Vietnamese people in the ongoing war.¹ The category proposes a concretized Buddhist compassion and wisdom in the pursuit of social justice, thereby giving an active, public role to Buddhism, which is generally considered otherworldly. Nhat Hanh received an excellent religious education in literary Chinese. His category of engaged Buddhism is based in part on the Buddhist modernist movement led by Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) in early twentieth century China. During the period from the 1920s to the 1940s, Taixu recommended a series of reformist experiments in monastic Buddhism, at both the theoretical and

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¹ Engaged Buddhism is usually considered a religious reaction to the Vietnam War, but it has its roots in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Buddhist reform movements in East Asia in the early-to-mid twentieth century, and the colonization experience of Vietnam. Since the 1980s, it has referred to a wide range of Buddhist phenomena involving different concepts and models of social engagement in both Asian and Western countries.

institutional levels. His endeavors greatly changed the landscape of Chinese Buddhism and deeply impacted Vietnamese Buddhism of the same and subsequent periods.²

Taixu's modern Buddhism focused on "human life" (*rensheng* 人生) and the "human realm" or "this world" (*renjian* 人間). In the early 1920s, he labeled his reformist efforts with the term "Buddhism for human life" (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教). He emphasized that the perfection of personality is the precondition for (if not the same thing as) achieving Buddhahood and that a modern Buddhism must base itself not on "ghosts" (*gui* 鬼) and "death" (*si* 死)—that is to say, ideas of the afterworld and the performance of funerary services—but upon "humans" (*ren* 人) and "life" (*sheng* 生). In 1926, Taixu put forward the idea of building a "Pure Land on Earth" (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土), which would be accomplished by activism such as founding local Buddhist communities and attempting to reform society through the practice of Buddhist morality. In 1933, Taixu gave a famous lecture in Hankou, in which he forged for the first time the notion of "Renjian Buddhism" (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) or "Buddhism for this world":³

Renjian Buddhism is neither the Buddhism that teaches people to be divorced from humankind to become deities or ghosts, nor the Buddhism that teaches everyone to leave his family to become a monk in the monastery or in mountains and forests. It is the Buddhism that, based on Buddhist principles, tries to reform society, so as to bring progress to humankind and advance the world.⁴

In this speech, Taixu made clear his concept of Renjian Buddhism: it values the rationalization of belief and social responsibilities for Buddhists, and brings the modern notions of reform, progress, and moral universalism into Buddhist discourse. Furthermore, in 1934, disciples of Taixu, notably Fafang 法舫 (1904–1951) and Daxing 大醒 (1900–1952), expounded the ideas of Renjian Buddhism and its relations with history, education, and politics in a special issue of the Buddhist periodical *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 devoted explicitly to the movement. For Taixu, "Rensheng Buddhism" and "Renjian Buddhism" were synonymous, though he employed the former most frequently in his own works. In 1944, three years before he passed away, Taixu col-

² About Taixu, see Pittman 2001. On the historical link between Taixu's Buddhist reforms and Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism, see DeVido 2009.

³ It is also translated as "Humanistic Buddhism," "This-Worldly Buddhism," or "Buddhism in This World."

⁴ Taixu (1933) 1956, p. 431.

lected his essays on both “Buddhism for human life” and “Buddhism for this world” into a book entitled *Buddhism for Human Life* (*Rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教).

In 1949, two years after the death of Taixu, Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005), Taixu’s disciple, foremost spiritual heir, and chief compiler of his complete works (1956), escaped to Hong Kong before the establishment of a communist regime in mainland China. Yinshun reached Taiwan in 1952 and proceeded to publish a series of works elucidating Taixu’s ideas and reasserting the notion of Renjian Buddhism. He underlined that the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are all in and for the “human realm,” and promoted a Buddhism that concerned itself with social welfare. Yinshun’s formulation proved very attractive to the youth. From then on, the name Renjian Buddhism, “Buddhism for this world,” gradually replaced Rensheng Buddhism and became the consensus term for the Buddhist modernist movements in contemporary Taiwan. After the economic takeoff and political liberalization of the 1980s, Taiwan witnessed a rapid growth of Buddhism, with its largest organizations, including Foguangshan 佛光山, Ciji (or Tzu Chi, more fully, Ciji Gongdehui 慈濟功德會), and Fagushan 法鼓山, claiming the promotion of Renjian Buddhism as their principle tenet. The globalized propagation of Buddhism, humanitarian commitments, and academic investments of these organizations are considered not only the embodiment of Taixu’s Renjian Buddhism, but also the Chinese expression of engaged Buddhism.⁵

In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the fate of Renjian Buddhism has been completely different for political reasons. Taixu, along with many in his circle, maintained close ties with the Nationalist Party (KMT), the enemy *par excellence* of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Taixu himself, for example, had befriended several high-ranking KMT officials including Chiang Kai-shek. So, after 1949, the word “Taixu,” which had been a key reference in any discussion of modern Chinese Buddhism rapidly became a word to be avoided. For roughly three decades, both “Rensheng Buddhism” and “Renjian Buddhism” disappeared from the lexicon of mainland Chinese Buddhists, although traces of Taixu’s reformist Buddhism remained.

In fact, under the communist regime, Buddhism became involved in a series of political movements, such as the Land Reform, the mobilization for the Korean War, the conflicts in Tibet, and the Great Leap Forward. Some

⁵ For Taixu’s legacy of Renjian Buddhism in Taiwan, see Pittman 2001, chapter 6. For the social and political participation of large-scale Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, see Laliberté 2004, Madsen 2007.

Chinese Buddhist elites, aside from their adoption of political terms like “anti-feudalism,” “patriotism,” “anti-imperialism,” “revolution,” “socialism,” and “collectivism,” felt compelled to justify the uses of Buddhism with a vocabulary internal to Buddhism itself. Hence, they retained the notion of a “Pure Land on Earth,” and sometimes employed similar metaphors such as “Country of Happiness on Earth” (*renjian leguo* 人間樂國), “Land of Happiness on Earth” (*renjian letu* 人間樂土) or “Sukhāvātī on Earth” (*renjian jile shijie* 人間極樂世界) in the new context, interpreting their submission to communist policies as a Buddhist moral imperative.⁶ As parallels to communist notions of “patriotism” and “popular sovereignty,” these Buddhists proposed slogans such as “to adorn the country’s land, to benefit sentient beings” (*zhuangyan guotu, lile youqing* 莊嚴國土, 利樂有情). Using the rhetoric of “repaying the debt of gratitude” (*bao'en* 報恩, to one’s country or to sentient beings), they tried to justify unconditional collaboration with the CCP, and even to deny or disregard the most palpable facts of political repression and religious persecution. However, obedience did not prevent the decline of Buddhism under Maoist totalitarianism. The Anti-Right campaigns of 1957 eroded the last vestiges of Buddhism’s autonomy. Then the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) brought an unprecedented degree of destruction to Buddhism,⁷ as both pro-communist and traditional forms of Buddhism were prohibited. Temples were destroyed and monks were forced to return to lay life. Countless Buddhist relics (including the *stūpa* of Taixu in Zhejiang) were destroyed.

The Cultural Revolution ended after Mao’s death in 1976 and Chinese Buddhism gradually resumed activity in the early years of the 1980s. It was during this period that the slogan “Renjian Buddhism,” propagated by Zhao Puchu 趙朴初 (1907–2000), chairman of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC, Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui 中國佛教協會), reappeared in the PRC. Thirty years later, Renjian Buddhism has become the official Buddhist ideology in China today, with Zhao Puchu portrayed as the spiritual heir of Taixu by various authors.⁸ Is this new Renjian Buddhism in post-Mao China a continuation of Taixu’s reformist project? Can it also be regarded as a form of engaged Buddhism? The present essay is an attempt to answer these

⁶ Welch 1972, chapter 8.

⁷ There were several persecutions of Buddhism over the course of Chinese history, all of which, however, were regional and short-lived.

⁸ This view is held by most of the recent mainland Chinese publications on Zhao Puchu’s Renjian Buddhism. See, for example, Xu 2007; Deng, Chen, and Mao 2009. For a justification of Zhao’s Renjian Buddhism as a development of Taixu’s notion, see Deng 2003.

questions through an examination of the theory and practice of Renjian Buddhism proposed by Zhao Puchu.

A Buddhist Translation of Political Order: Zhao Puchu's Renjian Buddhism

On 25 January 1980, the Central Committee of the CCP formally permitted the resumption of nationwide activities by all official religious organizations.⁹ In December, the BAC convened its Fourth Congress, marking the start of the institutional reconstruction of Chinese Buddhism. It was during this congress that the lay Buddhist Zhao Puchu, “comrade” of the CCP¹⁰ and the key figure in charge of the substantive work of the BAC since its foundation in 1953, was formally “elected” as its chairman. At the end of his congress report, Zhao introduced once again the notion of a “Pure Land on Earth,” which he had repeatedly analogized with the CCP’s ideal of “socialism” since the 1950s:

Under the glorious light of the Party’s religious policies, let us follow the teachings of Buddha, continue the wishes of the virtuous of all ages, carry on the excellent traditions of Chinese Buddhism, “repay the debt of gratitude to the country and to all sentient beings,” strive to build a “Pure Land on Earth,” and “constantly bring happiness to all sentient beings.”¹¹

In December 1981, Zhao made a speech in a meeting of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, where he stated yet again that the Buddhist idea of a “Pure Land on Earth” contained elements of socialism.¹² In March 1982, he identified the building of a Pure Land on Earth as a Buddhist ideal in his honorary doctorate acceptance speech at Bukkyō University in Japan.¹³ At the same time, between 1981 and 1983, he published

⁹ Luo 2001, p. 264.

¹⁰ Zhao is officially called “comrade” (*tongzhi* 同志) in the governmental discourse in the PRC. It is widely believed by Chinese Buddhists that he was a secret member of the CCP, though no official proof can be found.

¹¹ Zhao (1980) 2007, p. 452.

¹² Zhao (1981) 2007, p. 499. It is important to point out that “socialism” has a different meaning in the Chinese context from its usual understanding in the West. Identified as the preliminary stage of communism, socialism is given different interpretations by the CCP according to historical conjunctures, but the immutable core is the hegemony of the CCP. In other words, “socialism” in the PRC is equivalent to the “communist regime” in Western contexts.

¹³ Zhao (1982) 2007, p. 512.

a series called “Questions and Answers on the General Knowledge of Buddhism” (*Fojiao changshi wenda* 佛教常識問答) in *Fayin* 法音 (Voice of Dharma), the newly restored bulletin of the BAC. Parts of this series had already been published between 1959 and 1960, but in June 1983, a new section, entitled “Carry on the Superiority of Renjian Buddhism,” was published.¹⁴ It was the first time the concept of “Renjian Buddhism” appeared in the official discourse of the BAC. However, Zhao made no mention of Taixu. Concerning the originator of the idea of Renjian Buddhism, he only used the vague expression “the forerunners” (*qianren* 前人). In his succinct statements, Zhao made no reference to Taixu’s theory but instead tried to forge a link between Buddhism and the CCP’s ideology and policy, using vocabulary in accordance with the political climate at that time. According to Zhao, the significance of propagating Renjian Buddhism was found in the way Buddhist ethics helped to nurture individual morality, and hence benefit the country and society as a whole.

In December 1983, Zhao delivered a report entitled *Thirty Years of the Buddhist Association of China* in a meeting of the BAC, which can be seen as one of the most important documents of post-Mao Buddhism. Its importance does not lie in Zhao’s selective summary of the achievements of BAC, but in his presentation of the goal and future development of Chinese Buddhism thereafter. He raised two crucial questions in this report:

Chinese Buddhism has a long history of nearly two thousand years. Where should Chinese Buddhism go in the present era? What are the excellent traditions of Chinese Buddhism that we should carry on?¹⁵

To the first question, he answered, “I think we should promote the thought of Renjian Buddhism in our articles of faith.” In his view, Renjian Buddhism embodies the practice and commitment of the Mahayana vow of “benefitting both self and others” (*zili lita* 自利利他). Based on passages from the *Ekottara Āgama* and the *Platform Sutra* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經), Zhao explained that,

The Buddha was born in this world. He preached the Dharma and saved living beings in this world. The Dharma originates from this world and is intended to benefit this world. To promote the idea of Renjian Buddhism, we should practice the Five Precepts (*wujie* 五戒) and the Ten Wholesome Deeds (*shishan* 十善) to

¹⁴ Zhao (1983a) 2007, p. 672.

¹⁵ Zhao (1983b) 2007, p. 562.

purify ourselves, and follow the Four Means of Embracing (*sishe* 四攝) and Six Perfections (*liudu* 六度) for the benefit of the people. We would then voluntarily take up the task of realizing a Pure Land on Earth, and devote our light and warmth to the pursuit of socialist modernization, which is the noble cause of “adorning the land and benefitting sentient beings.”¹⁶

To the second question, Zhao answered that there are “three excellent traditions” of Chinese Buddhism that should be carried forward. The first is the tradition to “combine Chan with agricultural work” (*nongchan bingzhong* 農禪並重). In other words, Buddhists should “actively participate in productive labor and other practices in service to the cause of building socialism.” The second tradition is that of “academic study” (*xueshu yanjiu* 學術研究). Chinese Buddhists should proceed with it “to enable our active participation in the building of a socialist spiritual civilization.” The last excellent tradition of “friendly international exchange” (*guoji youhao jiaoliu* 國際友好交流) should be developed to “enable our active participation in the enterprise of promoting our friendship with peoples around the world, advancing the cultural exchange between China and other nations, and defending world peace.”¹⁷

In his speech Zhao gave several examples to try to prove that these “excellent traditions” have their historical roots in China. Zhao is not wrong on this point. Nonetheless, these traditions are no substitute for the ultimate concern of Buddhism: the release from this world of desires and suffering. In his discourse, however, the three traditions become the most important substance, if not the only substance, of Buddhism. Precisely as the “excellent traditions” enumerated by Zhao are all this-worldly oriented, they are regarded as the tangible expression of his Renjian Buddhism by both Buddhists and scholars in mainland China.¹⁸

Where, then, do the “one thought (of Renjian Buddhism)” and “three traditions” of Zhao come from? Do they represent a rediscovery of the ideas of Taixu? Indeed, Taixu mentioned the concepts of “agricultural Chan” (*nongchan* 農禪) and “work Chan” (*gongchan* 工禪), encouraged monks to engage in Buddhist studies, and was enthusiastic in the propagation of Buddhism in the world. Zhao had contacts with Taixu in his youth and seemed to appreciate Taixu’s reforms. However, Taixu did not limit Renjian Buddhism to the three traditions proposed by Zhao. Zhao, moreover, never

¹⁶ Zhao (1983b) 2007, p. 562.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ For example, Deng 1998; Chen et al. 2000, pp. 278–85; Yang 2005; Zhao 2012.

admitted that his version of Renjian Buddhism came from Taixu, glossing over Taixu's pioneering role in the modernization of Chinese Buddhism by referring to Renjian Buddhism as "an idea already present in early Buddhism," as being "not founded afterwards."¹⁹ Of course, as is suggested by some authors,²⁰ Taixu might still have been a subject of much political sensitivity when Zhao re-launched the notion of Renjian Buddhism. However, the situation was changing. Since the end of the 1970s, CCP's Taiwan policy has gradually shifted from military "liberation" to "peaceful unification." The antagonism between the CCP and the KMT was then mitigated. At the same time, the exchanges between mainland and overseas Chinese Buddhists have greatly increased, while many of the latter venerated Taixu as a great master. Under such circumstances, the insistence of a negative assessment of Taixu became outdated. Finally in 1987, on the occasion of the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of his death, Taixu was allowed to reappear in the discourse of mainland Chinese Buddhism as a positive figure, seen in the publication of a special issue of *Fayin* in his memory (no. 4, 1987). It must be recognized that Zhao had made contributions to this, since he was then the chief editor of *Fayin*. Nevertheless, surprisingly in Zhao's public statements from then until his death in 2000, we cannot find any instances in which he attributed his Renjian Buddhism to Taixu.

Zhao's omission of Taixu is not without reason. In fact, the content that he expressed with Taixu's term "Renjian Buddhism" came rather from the CCP. On 31 March 1986, in a conversation with cadres of the CCP Central Committee, Zhao explained the "inner implications" of his proposal of Renjian Buddhism: "My notion of Renjian Buddhism," said Zhao, "is in fact proposed from the angle of making Buddhism adapt and adjust to socialism," and "is for encouraging Buddhists to better serve socialism."²¹ In 1982, one year before Zhao's launching of Renjian Buddhism, some CCP cadres responsible for formulating religious policies, including Li Weihang 李維漢 (1896–1984), Hu Qiaomu 胡喬木 (1912–1992) and Luo Zhufeng 羅竹風 (1911–1996), raised the issue of making religions adapt or adjust to socialism²² in order to provide a justification for the CCP's policy change: prior to 1980, the CCP's policy had been to eliminate religions, but now religions were allowed to exist if political requirements were satisfied. It

¹⁹ Zhao (1987) 2007.

²⁰ Deng 1998; Chen et al. 2000.

²¹ Zhao (1986) 2007, p. 757.

²² Gong and Wang 2006; Wei 2000.

is against this background that Zhao proposed Renjian Buddhism, which could be, it seemed to him, linked with socialism.

Additionally, in 1982, the Central Committee of the CCP issued Document Number 19, entitled *The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period*, which summarizes the historical experience gained by the CCP in the understanding and handling of the religious issue, and clarifies the fundamental principles for the religious policy of post-Mao China. According to this document,

It is imperative to organize members of the religious community, according to their different situations and strengths, to participate in productive labor, social service, the academic study of religion, patriotic social or political activities, and friendly international exchanges, in order to muster their positive elements in service to the cause of the building of socialist modernization.²³

In my view, this statement is a harbinger for Zhao's choice to present Chinese Buddhism using the rhetoric of the "three excellent traditions" the following year.²⁴ As such, Zhao's Renjian Buddhism is not a return to the modernist Buddhism of Taixu, but rather an active theoretical response to the new CCP religious policy, or, more accurately, a Buddhist translation of the Party's demand on religions. In fact, even the term "carrying forward the excellent traditions of Buddhism" was inserted into the BAC constitution by Mao Zedong, when he was presented with its draft in 1953.²⁵ The word "excellent" also placed Buddhism in a position to be evaluated by political authority: the legitimacy of Buddhist ideas and practices depended on their utility to the CCP.

The "Three Excellent Traditions": The Practices and Consequences of Renjian Buddhism

As communist religious policy in the 1980s was, to a certain degree, a return to the policy preceding the Cultural Revolution, the roots of Renjian Buddhism in the 1980s can be partially found in the official discourse on Buddhism in the 1950s. In its essence, Zhao's Renjian Buddhism shares the same aim as his concepts of a "Pure Land on Earth." The last two of the

²³ Zhongguo Gongchandang Zhongyang Weiyuanhui 1982.

²⁴ Hu (2007) has remarked the correspondence between the political demands on religion and the self-demands of religious institutions.

²⁵ Zhu 2005, p. 60.

so-called “three excellent traditions” already appear in Zhao’s commentary on the life of the Tang-dynasty monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) in 1956.²⁶ Likewise, the two traditions of “combining Chan with agricultural work” and “academic study” are obviously influenced by the two slogans declaring that Buddhism needs to “shift to production” (*shengchanhua* 生產化) and “shift to scholarship” (*xueshuhua* 學術化), conceptualized first by the pro-communist monk Juzan 巨贊 (1908–1984) in the 1940s and officially put forward by the BAC in the 1950s.²⁷ However, the same words can carry vastly different meanings in different social contexts. In the 1950s, this-worldly discourses of Buddhism mainly served the *etatization* of Buddhism,²⁸ whereas after the Cultural Revolution, Renjian Buddhism has provided a political legitimacy for the institutional revival of Chinese Buddhism while at the same time limiting the form and direction of this revival.

According to the decision adopted by the Fifth Congress of the BAC in March 1987, “advocating the active and progressive thought of Renjian Buddhism” was written into the revised BAC constitution as one of its missions.²⁹ From January 1990 onwards, “Promoting Renjian Buddhism” appears on the front cover of the monthly *Fayin* (and later, from 2011 on, on the table of contents page). In attempting to position the association as a church-like “organization of religious affairs,” the Sixth Congress of the BAC revised its constitution again in December 1993, removing the phrase “advocating the active and progressive thought of Renjian Buddhism.” The idea of Renjian Buddhism, however, remained influential. After Zhao’s death, Renjian Buddhism became the stance publicly upheld by successive BAC leaderships.³⁰ At the Seventh Congress of the BAC in 2002, “advocacy of the thought of Renjian Buddhism” was written back into the constitution as a main mission of the association.³¹ The new constitution of 2010 has the even more proactive goal to “apply the thought of Renjian Buddhism.”³²

²⁶ Zhao (1956) 2007. In this article, Zhao considers the three most important “excellent traditions” of Chinese Buddhism to be: the sacrifice of one’s life in search of the Dharma, rigorousness in translation and scholarship, and the efforts towards international cultural exchange.

²⁷ On Juzan and his collaboration with the CCP, see Xue Yu 2009.

²⁸ That is to say, the human, material, and spiritual resources of Buddhism were controlled, appropriated, and used by the secular party-state according to its ideology and for its political purposes. For more discussion on this issue, see Ji 2008.

²⁹ Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui 1987, p. 14.

³⁰ Zhengcheng 2008.

³¹ Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui 2002, p. 25.

³² Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui 2010, p. 24.

The reason why Renjian Buddhism maintains its dominance in the discourse of the BAC to the present day is that it conforms to the communist policy to control and use religions. At the same time, it provides a legitimate mode of existence for Buddhism in the economic, cultural, and political contexts of post-Mao China. From this point of view, each of the “three excellent traditions” served a different purpose. The Land Reform of the 1950s deprived Buddhist monasteries of their traditional source of revenue, namely farm rents. Once reopened in the 1980s, monasteries immediately faced severe economic challenges. Economic self-sufficiency through agriculture, under the slogan of “combining Chan with agricultural work,” was the only means of survival for most monasteries in rural areas. A survey of sixteen monasteries in Fujian Province, for example, indicates that the harvest from the fields and forests provided 75.7% of their income in 1983.³³ Among the landless monasteries, some built factories or clinics; others traded in Buddhist good-luck charms and charged an entrance fee from visitors to their premises. Yet others ran hotels or vegetarian restaurants. These combinations of Buddhism with industrial work and commerce have sometimes been interpreted as new variations of “combinations of Chan with agricultural work.”³⁴ More importantly, Buddhism and the other religions had for a long time been stigmatized by the state. This stigmatization continued to some extent in the 1980s, and Buddhism was still treated as a pernicious remnant of the feudal past. In this context, participation in “productive labor” by monks was proof of the social utility of Buddhism. After the 1990s, with the massive surge in the number of Buddhists and improvement of their economic conditions, donations of lay believers and remuneration of religious services gradually became the major source of revenue for most monasteries. Because physical work no longer has pride of place in the official ideology, there is no reason for monks to participate directly in agricultural labor. Nonetheless, “combining Chan with agricultural work” is still widely applied rhetorically as a justification of profit-making activities conducted by monasteries, such as the operation of vegetarian restaurants or participation in the tourism industry.³⁵

In the 1950s, the slogan “shift to scholarship” served mainly to distinguish a reformed Buddhism from popular cults and folk expressions of Buddhism classified as “superstitions,” which were repressed by the state in modern

³³ Renren 1985.

³⁴ Cf. Chen 1991; Jing Yin 2006.

³⁵ On the evolution of monastic economy, and the related changes in the state-religion relationship in post-Mao China, see Ji 2004.

China. However, in the 1980s, emphasis on “academic study” helped the legal dissemination of Buddhist knowledge widely in society. “Academic study” here refers to humanistic research including literary, artistic, historical, and philosophical interpretations of Buddhism. The quantitative growth of Buddhist studies since the 1990s is remarkable. For example, no research article or book on Buddhism was published in the PRC between 1967 and 1973. However, 1,125 articles on Buddhism were published in 1992 alone, which is equal to the sum of all titles in the previous seventeen years.³⁶ Between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, the Internet was not available to the general public and control of religious publications was extremely strict. Under such circumstances, scholarly works on Buddhism as a “cultural” phenomenon effectively evaded government censorship. With the growth of the economic and social power of Buddhism in the 1990s, Buddhist institutions began to invest heavily in scholarship. Many monasteries and lay groups founded institutions for Buddhist studies, with or without governmental approval. They published periodicals, sponsored academic events, and invited secular researchers of Buddhism to write works and lecture to monks and followers. This investment created an alliance between Buddhists and lay intellectuals, contributed to the image of Buddhism as an “elite religion,” and helped revitalize Sangha education.

In a similar way, the notion of “friendly international exchange” served also as one initial impetus for the restoration of Chinese Buddhism after the Cultural Revolution. In fact, many Buddhist monasteries in China were permitted to resume their religious activities only in order to serve foreign and overseas Chinese Buddhist visitors. For example, in April 1979, the temple Shaolinsi 少林寺 in Henan Province, famous for its martial arts tradition, was allowed to open to the Japanese pilgrim Sō Dōshin 宗道臣 (1911–1980), the founder of the World Martial Arts of Shaolin (Jp. *Shōrinji kempō* 少林寺拳法). About a dozen monks from Shaolin, who were then working as farmers on about two hectares of land, received special permission from Beijing to resume their religious lifestyle. Seizing the opportunity, they restarted the daily rituals that had been forbidden for more than ten years. Similarly, in response to numerous Japanese pilgrims throughout the 1980s, the monastery Bailin Chansi 柏林禪寺, once a famous center of Buddhism in northern China, was finally handed over to the Buddhists for reconstruction as an authorized “site for religious activities” in 1988 after nearly thirty years of occupation by factories and schools.³⁷

³⁶ Wang 1995.

³⁷ Ji 2007.

On the other hand, recognizing the influence of Buddhism in the Chinese world and other East Asian countries, the CCP government readily uses Buddhism to realize the aims of its foreign policy. For example, after the repression of Falun Gong 法輪功 in 1999, the Chinese government sent at least two “Delegations of Chinese Religions” to United Nations dialogues on human rights in Geneva. Headed by Buddhist monks, they defended the Chinese policies on religion. In 2002 and 2004, the Chinese government organized exhibitions of a relic of the Buddha’s finger in Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively. The first exhibition was a reaction to the cultural de-sinization of Chen Shui-bian’s government in Taiwan, while the second was an attempt to repair the relationship between Beijing and Hong Kong residents after a large-scale anti-government demonstration in the previous year. Another recent example is the “World Buddhist Forum” organized by the State Bureau of Religious Affairs and the BAC successively in 2006, 2009, and 2012. These events brought together hundreds of representatives from different countries, except, of course, the Dalai Lama or any Buddhist leaders defined by the CCP as “hostile” to China. This kind of political utility has earned Buddhism more political favors and public visibility compared to other religions, and, as such, stimulated the BAC to go further in this direction. In a similar vein, Zhao Puchu’s efforts in the 1990s were oriented toward developing non-governmental diplomacy with Japan and Korea. He called Buddhist culture the “golden link” between China and these countries.³⁸ The current leaders of BAC seem even more ambitious. One even openly suggested that the CCP enhance the “soft power” of the state using Buddhism in order to overcome “the attempts to demonize China by hostile Western powers.”³⁹

In summary, Renjian Buddhism, encapsulated in the “three excellent traditions,” involved Buddhism in the social and political construction of contemporary China. In this process, the Buddhist institution successfully obtained a legitimate mode of expression and gradually expanded its social influence. However, this process was not without sacrifices. Profit-making activities have undermined the traditional image of Buddhism as a religion detached from the accumulation of wealth, fomented corruption in the Sangha, and as a result, compromised its moral authority. Even if the development of tourism is managed by the government with the majority of the profits going to local authorities and companies close to them, expectations about the religious purity of the Sangha inevitably raise

³⁸ Zhao (1993) 2007.

³⁹ Xuecheng 2008.

suspicion among devout lay Buddhists. Academic research is, in most cases, not intended to express the physical, mental, and emotional experiences provoked by religions. Because of the positivism and critical attitude often assumed by scholarship, Renjian Buddhism's pursuit of academic study is rather deconstructive to some central ideas of Buddhism. Finally, serving political power constitutes an open assent to the state's appropriation of Buddhism's symbolic resources. It exacerbates the secularization of Buddhism in a way that is, no doubt, different from the violent deprivation and devastation of Buddhist properties during the pre-Reform era, but that still results in a desacralization of the religion and a loss of control of the Buddhist establishment's own resources.⁴⁰

A Comparison of Zhao's Renjian Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism: Which World? How to Be Engaged?

Renjian Buddhism under Zhao encouraged Buddhist participation in economic, cultural and political life. Does this variety of Buddhism count as a form of engaged Buddhism? Of course, the answer to this question depends on our definition of engaged Buddhism. But it seems to me safe to assert that the Renjian Buddhism proposed by Zhao is not the engaged Buddhism represented by Nhat Hanh, in which autonomous religious organizations mobilize for peace, justice, and freedom.

The main difference between Zhao and Nhat Hanh lies in two aspects. Firstly, they display different attitudes toward this world. Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism concerns itself above all with the social suffering and oppression in this world, and attempts to reduce this suffering and oppression by collective moral conscience and through political and social reforms. For him, exposing unjust situations, enumerating the various causes of injustice, and removing injustice are applications of the Buddhist principles of the Four Noble Truths.⁴¹

In contrast, Zhao's Renjian Buddhism in the PRC does not address the systematic political repression suffered by people, even when they are Buddhists. The admission of "suffering" would imply a criticism of the regime and contradict the propaganda of the CCP. Accordingly, advocates of Renjian Buddhism have never dared to tackle social problems in a serious way. They discourage, even forbid, individual Buddhists' criticism of political power. In 1983, after the unprecedented devastation suffered by

⁴⁰ Ji 2011a.

⁴¹ Thich Nhat Hanh 1998, pp. 43–44.

the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution, Zhao still claimed that “the beautiful present and the glorious future would not be possible without the leadership of the Party.”⁴² At the same time, when he proposed Renjian Buddhism as the future direction of Chinese Buddhism, he claimed that the “basic experiences” that Buddhists should “remember forever” are to “voluntarily accept the leadership of the Party and the government,” and to “stand firmly opposed to hostile elements that seek to sabotage the socialist system.”⁴³ It would not be difficult to infer that, for Zhao, the “human realm” of Renjian Buddhism is not this world *per se*, but the present political system that stands beyond criticism.

Secondly, these two Buddhisms recommend different interventions in this world. Nhat Hanh’s style of engaged Buddhism is often embodied in religio-political movements that are independent from the state. Such movements, usually organized around charismatic leaders, strive for the realization of social justice by means of equality-based dialogue or by appeal to public opinion. Zhao’s Renjian Buddhism, by contrast, has demonstrated neither the motivation nor the courage to organize independent social movements, as it explicitly acknowledges the absolute authority of the party-state over religions. After the 1980s, Zhao Puchu and the BAC contributed to the restoration of Chinese Buddhism with “three excellent traditions” of productive labor, academic study, and friendly international exchange, but they were evasive in the face of political restriction. In its interaction with the state, the BAC usually sought compromise that addressed interests on either side, rather than appealing to any normative principles of social justice.

After 1990, with the change in the mode of the CCP’s governmentality, the economic strengthening of Buddhism, and due in part to the influences of Taiwanese Buddhism, philanthropy and youth-oriented mobilization started to appear in Chinese Buddhism.⁴⁴ Those activities, also considered practices of “Renjian Buddhism,” do go beyond Zhao’s original conception put forward in the 1980s. However, this philanthropy consists mainly of monetary donations to the government rather than toward humanitarian intervention by Buddhists and others; the youth activities, as well, are limited to religious assemblies held inside monasteries, and do not include social services. These developments remain of limited value to Chinese civil society.⁴⁵

⁴² Zhao (1983b) 2007, p. 559.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 558–59.

⁴⁴ Laliberté 2012; Ji 2011b.

⁴⁵ Recently in the PRC, some Buddhists have begun to engage in the pursuit of social justice. For example, the nun Miaojué 妙覺 concerns herself with advocacy for HIV victims

In short, Zhao's Renjian Buddhism affirms the logic of power imposed by the party-state, and unconditionally accepts the legitimacy of the present political system. It does not develop a profound criticism of the secular world, politics included, using a Buddhist vision of morality, nor does it encourage an organized social movement for a wider application of justice. It is a Buddhism that stresses fitting into the world as given, not reforming it; it is politically collaborationist rather than socially engaged.

The lack of motivation for political criticism and social mobilization in Renjian Buddhism in the PRC is often attributed to the severe control exerted by the authoritarian state. Indeed, political collaborationism becomes the primary requirement that the CCP demands of the Buddhist establishment and the official establishments of all legal religions. The policy of Jiang Zemin on party relations with religious institutions stated in 1991, while he was General Secretary of the CCP and President of the PRC, followed a principle of "unity and cooperation in politics, mutual respect in faith."⁴⁶ Recently, Wang Zuoran, head of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, reaffirmed this principle as "reflecting accurately the spirit of the relationship between the state and religion in contemporary China."⁴⁷ In this context, the collaborationist discourse and actions of Zhao Puchu are often regarded as difficult choices made for the sake of Buddhism's general interests under PRC governance. Zhao himself is often portrayed by Buddhist leaders and scholars as a saint who had to eat dirt in order to carry out some important task, a "Great Protector of Dharma" (*da hufa* 大護法) and even a "Bodhisattva" (*pusa* 菩薩).⁴⁸ But the question remains whether collaboration was the only option. Or more generally, when faced with a state power that oppresses and uses religions, what would be the sensible

abandoned by the government since the 2000s. She is also engaged with other lay non-Buddhist Chinese citizens in mobilizing support for imprisoned human rights activists such as Hu Jia 胡佳, Xu Zhiyong 許志永, and Chen Guangcheng 陳光誠. Another example is the monk Shengguan 聖觀, who held in 2006 a Buddhist commemorative ceremony for the victims of violence during the Chinese democratic movement of 1989. He has demanded freedom of expression and urged the immediate release of all political prisoners, as well as meeting with the Dalai Lama in India in 2011. Their efforts, however, remain individual and have not prompted a sizeable social movement. They are of course not supported by the official Buddhist establishment, and, as dissidents, are monitored by the Chinese government.

⁴⁶ Jiang 1991.

⁴⁷ Wang 2009.

⁴⁸ See for example Mingshan 2000, Fang 2000, Jing Yin 2000, Chuanyin 2011.

choice to ensure the wellbeing of Buddhist community or Sangha? On this question, the ideas of Nhat Hanh are diametrically opposed to those of Zhao and his apologists:

Be aware that the essence and aim of the Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform our community into a political instrument. A spiritual community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts. . . . Religious leaders may be tempted to support their government in exchange for the material well-being of their community. This has occurred throughout recorded history. In order to secure their government's support, religious communities often refrain from speaking out against oppression and injustices committed by their government. Allowing politicians to use your religious community to strengthen their political power is to surrender the spiritual sovereignty of your community.⁴⁹

In this respect, Taixu, who with his “Buddhism for human life” is considered to be the closest to the Nationalist regime, did not renounce his universalist stance, the moral supremacy of religion, nor did he give up on an ideal of independence for monastic authority. Taixu and his disciples maintained that Buddhist cosmology constituted a foundation of values for a genuine democratic state. They were opposed to radical nationalism and had neutralized to a certain degree the xenophobic content of nationalism with the Buddhist notion of “non-self” (*wuwo* 無我). Using non-self, Taixu put forward a nationalism that was non-violent and non-essentialist.⁵⁰ Consequently, with regard to the relationship between politics and religion, Zhao's Renjian Buddhism differs vastly from the Renjian Buddhism of Taixu.

Concluding Remarks: A Testament Betrayed?

Although Zhao Puchu has never publicly acknowledged Taixu's contributions to Chinese Buddhism, when Taixu was “rehabilitated” in mainland China in 1987, Zhao started to imply that he was the spiritual successor to Taixu in several personal meetings. One of these meetings was with Weixian 惟賢 (1920–2013) of Ciyunsi 慈雲寺 in Chongqing, who had once studied in

⁴⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh 1998, p. 43.

⁵⁰ Gong 2003.

an institute founded by Taixu in the 1930s and who was widely recognized as his disciple. In 1988, Zhao recounted his last meeting with Taixu to Weixian, explaining that several days before his passing at Yufosi 玉佛寺 in Shanghai, Taixu asked Zhao to meet him. At that time, Taixu gave Zhao a copy of his *Buddhism for Human Life* and said, “I completed this book only after many years of revision. . . . I present it to you, for you to study it well and carry on its ideas.”⁵¹ Obviously, such words would imply that Taixu in his final moments had identified Zhao as the heir to his tradition of “Buddhism for human life.” Zhao repeated the same story to Xingyun 星雲 (or Hsing Yun, born 1927), founder of Foguangshan and one of the most active advocates of Renjian Buddhism in Taiwan, when the latter visited mainland China in 1994. In Nanjing, Zhao also told Xingyun that only recently had he “suddenly” understood Taixu’s message for him, explaining that Taixu’s plan to travel to Wuxi and Changzhou, was actually a prediction of his own death. The first characters of the names of the two cities “*wu*” and “*chang*” make up the Buddhist term for impermanence (*wuchang* 無常). Then, according to Zhao, Taixu earnestly urged him to “safeguard Chinese Buddhism.”⁵²

However, Zhao’s words could not have been the whole truth. Taixu’s pun was not “suddenly” understood by Zhao in 1994, nor in 1988 when he told the same anecdote in his conversation with Weixian. In fact, Zhao had explained it in his own note to a eulogy he composed for Taixu, which was published two weeks after Taixu’s death in 1947.⁵³ In the note, we see that it was not Zhao himself who had understood the meaning of the pun of *wuchang*, but the abbot of Yufosi, Weiyi 葦一 (1905–1963). More importantly, Taixu did not exhort Zhao to “safeguard Chinese Buddhism,” but to “come more often, when time permitted, to the Chinese Buddhist Association (Zhongguo Fojiaohui 中國佛教會),” the Buddhist organization headed by Taixu, which had an anti-communist stance and fled to Taiwan along with the Nationalist Government in 1949. In later reprints, the note in 1947 was, not surprisingly, rephrased.⁵⁴

Putting Zhao’s attitudes toward Taixu aside, it remains a question whether Zhao really “safeguarded” Chinese Buddhism. Unlike his biographers in

⁵¹ Weixian 2008.

⁵² Xingyun 1997.

⁵³ Zhao 1947a.

⁵⁴ Zhao 2003, p. 8. In the reprinted version, the form of address of Taixu in the poem’s title also changed from the extremely respectful “Great Master” (*dashi* 大師) to a common address of “Dharma Master” (*fashi* 法師) that can be used to any monk and had no emotional connotations.

the PRC, who praise him as a saint who devoted his life to Buddhism, Zhao himself placed a higher value on his contributions to the party-state. In November 1996, four years before his death, Zhao wrote an eight-line “Poem of Recollection at Ninety Years of Age.”⁵⁵ In the latter half he summarized what he believed to be his most important achievements: first, he had replenished the human resources needed by the communist New Fourth Army in 1938 by dispatching people selected from among war refugees taking shelter with a Buddhist organization in Shanghai; second, in 1961 in New Delhi, as a member of the Chinese delegation for an international meeting, he made a public retort to the Indian Minister of Culture on the Tibetan issue and the Sino-Indian border conflict; third, during 1962–1964, he contributed to pushing Japan to finally recognize the PRC in 1972, by inducing Japanese Buddhists to pressure their government in Sino-Japanese Buddhist exchanges. All three represent service to politics drawing upon Buddhism; none of them can be regarded as protection or propagation of Buddhism itself.

Indeed, no matter how one evaluates Zhao today, it is undeniable that the fifty years during which he was responsible for the administration of Chinese Buddhism were also fifty years of unprecedented devastation for this religion. Even today, after more than thirty years of revival following the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Buddhism has not yet regained the level of activity it displayed during the pre-communist period in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵⁶ Should Chinese Buddhists not ask themselves, “Why did Zhao preside over Buddhism’s decline?” For an answer to this question, maybe we can find some inspiration in an article Zhao wrote to commemorate Taixu, published in 1947 when the author was relatively young. Zhao did not mention this article during his half century of administrative leadership:

Present-day Chinese Buddhism enjoys no human rights. It is absurd to demand that Buddhism propagate the Dharma, benefit sentient

⁵⁵ Zhao (1996) 2008.

⁵⁶ Arguing from a communist position, in all his accounts of contemporary history Zhao negatively assessed Republican-era Buddhism. But in fact, it can be argued that Buddhism was vital and flourishing from 1912 through 1949, despite incessant wars and military conflicts. Not only was the total number of monks and monasteries higher than today, but so was the number of Buddhist institutes and journals. Thanks to a widely enjoyed freedom of association and the press of the time, Buddhist social organization, social and political participation, and output of scholarly and artistic works were, in many respects, unmatched by Buddhism in the present-day PRC. On Chinese Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century, see Welch 1968. For a quantitative study on the level of religious mobilization of Buddhism in post-Mao China, see Ji 2013.

beings, protect the country, and support the people when it is itself unprotected by human rights. To say, “save both self and others,” means only that one should first save oneself from persecution and the wrongs of the day, and then save all sentient beings. The present task of Buddhists should be to struggle for the human rights of Buddhism [itself].⁵⁷

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⁵⁷ Zhao 1947b.

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