

REPORT

“A Day Without Work is a Day Without Food”: New Developments in Chinese Buddhism

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MY JOURNEY into Chinese Buddhism started in Beijing in February 2014. I visited the Buddhist Association of China (Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui 中国佛教协会; hereafter BAC) in Guangji Temple and was a bit disappointed that I could not interview the spokesman of the organization as I thought we had agreed upon. Instead, I was told I could visit Longquansi, about seventy kilometers west of Beijing, where I would find an example of the newest developments in Chinese Buddhism.

I accepted the offer, and on the way there in the car I spoke with Ms. Yan Zhang, a volunteer lay Buddhist, who had visited Denmark on more than one occasion. She used to be a curator at the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City, Beijing, and was one of the organizers of the exhibition *China Dream* at Christiansborg Castle, Copenhagen. However—and this was a pattern I met with several times—she found her career uninteresting after her conversion to Buddhism. She told me that she became a Buddhist for two reasons: the great earthquake in Sichuan Province in 2008 made her

THE AUTHOR has provided Chinese characters for the names mentioned in this article as far as has been possible. Due to the nature of the fieldwork, however, this has not been possible in all cases.

This report is a follow-up to my article “Chinese Buddhism Today: Impressions,” published previously in *The Eastern Buddhist* (Andreasen 2011). It aims to give a contemporary account of the relationship between the Chinese state and Chinese Buddhism. The impressions below are mainly based on visits to state-approved monasteries: Longquansi 龍泉寺, near Beijing, in 2014, and the following monasteries in Fujian Province: Pujisi 普濟寺, Pingxingsi 平興寺, Guanghuasi 廣化寺, and Jilesi 極樂寺 in October 2016. I also visited a newly founded nunnery in Utrecht, Holland, called Great Compassion Longquansi (Longquan Dabeisi 龍泉大悲寺), in December 2016.

think of life's vicissitudes, and this, combined with the death of her ninety-year-old grandmother who had brought her up, and who had urged her to take refuge in Buddhism, convinced her to become a lay Buddhist. Because of her linguistic qualifications, she was now employed in the Department of Translations at Longquansi, a monastery I shall describe later.

First, though, I must relate that about half a year later, in the autumn of 2014, I accompanied two monks from Longquansi on their visit to Copenhagen, and what struck me then was that we were accompanied by two cultural attachés from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Denmark. In the course of other visits, we also met a small group of Fo Guang Shan 佛光山 Buddhists from Taiwan. What was happening to the relationship between Buddhism and the state in atheist China?

Historical Background

The quote in the title of this article is attributed to the Chan monk, Baizhang 百丈 (749–814), and if you recite it to today's Chinese Buddhists, you get a nod of approval. But why?

A hundred years ago Chinese Buddhism was in a profound crisis. The modern world was encroaching, and neither socialists nor liberals were fond of monks and nuns, who were considered spongers and parasites. The Buddhist monasteries were powerful landowners who exploited the local population. Attempts were made to modernize Buddhism but to little avail until the monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) came up with ideas on how to reorganize the monasteries. According to Taixu, monks and nuns should work for Buddhism by taking up positions as teachers, social workers, and participants in public life outside the monasteries. His dream was that Buddhism should work for the establishment of the Pure Land on earth, a Buddhist paradise. Taixu was influenced by Christian social work among Chinese indigents, was well informed about international affairs, and engaged in dialogue with other religions. But civil war in China and the Japanese invasion were stumbling blocks for the modernization of Buddhism, and Taixu's reforms did not materialize in his lifetime.¹

Nonetheless, his ideas did not die, and when the People's Republic of China came into being in 1949, sections of Buddhism rallied to the support of the people's revolution. One of Taixu's students, Juzan 巨贊 (1908–1984),

¹ For more on Taixu, see Ritzinger 2016, "Taixu: To Renew Buddhism and Save the Modern World." http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/DLMBS/en/search/search_detail.jsp?seq=352919&q=Taixu&qf=TOPIC, accessed December 10, 2018.

pursued Taixu’s ideas and coined the maxim: “Combine Chan (Buddhism) and agricultural work.” He also wrote a letter to Chairman Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in which he promised the support of Buddhism in furthering the revolution. During the Korean War (1950–1953) he argued that Buddhist monks should fight the USA. And when the BAC was formed after the people’s revolution in 1953, he became a prominent leader.

After the revolution, the new regime’s land reforms expropriated the large territories that belonged to the monasteries, and in the countryside the monasteries were subordinated to the new collectives. Monks and nuns were ordered to work in secular society, except for a very few who managed to scrape through in poverty in those monasteries that—unlike most—were not torn down or changed into factories or collective farms.

Following the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and in the early 1980s, some of the devastated monasteries were reopened for monks and nuns, and the maxim “Combine Chan (Buddhism) and agricultural work” was heard again, but with a new interpretation. In 1983, the then president of the BAC, the lay Buddhist Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907–2000), stated in an important speech that “since its foundation thirty years ago, the Buddhist Association of China has made unceasing efforts to promote this excellent tradition and, in the spirit of the maxim ‘a day without work is a day without food,’ it has always encouraged all Buddhists to take an active share in productive labor or in any other activity that may serve the building of socialism.”²

According to the BAC, Buddhism in China was “engaged Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教), comparable to the version of Buddhism taught by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn (b. 1926), with the important difference that Buddhism in China is to serve the state, whereas Thich Nhat Hahn argued that Buddhism is independent of any regime.

After the death of Zhao Puchu, the presidents of the BAC have followed his line, and the recent president, Xuecheng 学诚 (b. 1966; plate 1), has moreover suggested that Buddhism should be used as “soft power” by the Chinese state.³

The Venerable Master Xuecheng

The now former president of the BAC, Xuecheng, is considered to be the heir of the Taixu and Zhao Puchu tradition. But his future career is highly uncertain as he was removed from his position by the BAC on August 15,

² Ji 2004, p. 4.

³ This introduction is based, and builds, on Ji 2004, 2008, 2013.

2018 because of accusations of sexual harassment, of illegally expanding Longquansi, and of embezzling donations from believers.⁴

In prefaces to some of his books, his childhood is described in almost hagiographic terms, and his adherents call him *shifu* 师傅, “teacher.” Both his grandmother and his mother were pious Buddhists—his grandmother became a nun later in life—and both influenced him in his childhood. He grew up in a small village in Fujian Province and played in the monastery yard when not helping out in the household or studying. The monastery was then known as Wangshensi, and today is called Jilesi since being rebuilt. He became a vegetarian when he was ten, started chanting sutras when he was thirteen, and became a lay Buddhist when he was fifteen. Shortly after, in 1982, he asked his parents for permission to become a monk. As this occurred only six months before he would finish middle school, his parents told him to first finish school; nevertheless, he had his way and made the vow to become a monk in Guanghuasi in the town of Putian 莆田 on the day that, according to tradition, the historical Buddha had also made his vow. His master was Yuanzhou 圆拙 (d. 1997), who was a disciple of Hongyi 弘一 (1880–1942), one of the most important figures in modern Chinese Buddhism.

After studying for one year at the local Buddhist academy at Guanghuasi, Xuecheng was admitted to the National Buddhist Academy (Zhongguo Fo Xueyuan 中国佛学院) at Fayuansi 法源寺 in Beijing in 1984. Before he had even finished his education there, he became the abbot of Guanghuasi in 1989 at only twenty-three years of age. During his time in Beijing, he was favored by Zhao Puchu.

After his appointment as abbot, Xuecheng’s career flourished in both the BAC, where he became president in 2015, and in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC; Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi 中国人民政治协商会议). In 2004, he also became abbot of the famous Famensi in Xian, and in 2005, abbot of the rebuilt Longquansi outside Beijing.⁵ He has also authored numerous books about Buddhism.

Master Xuecheng is a prolific blogger. On the Longquansi website,⁶ new speeches and other writings appear almost daily. A collection of his speeches published in 2016, titled *Cultural Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue*, is a useful point of departure for understanding Xuecheng’s Bud-

⁴ Wang 2018.

⁵ Shi 2016.

⁶ Voice of Longquan. <http://eng.longquanzs.org>. Accessed March 9, 2019.

dhism. He covers globalism, pollution, poverty, "soft power," and religious dialogue, among other topics, and at the same time he values Chinese history, which he portrays, somewhat embellished, as one of peaceful harmony between three religions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. But his political engagement is also apparent. The central government in Beijing is lauded for having created stability and harmony in China, especially after Deng Xiaoping's reforms and open policies introduced in 1978. (No Buddhists have words of praise for the Cultural Revolution.) Western influences on Xuecheng include, among others, John Maynard Keynes (macroeconomics), Joseph S. Nye (soft power), Hans Kung (*Projekt Weltethos*), John Hick (global dialogue), and Arnold Toynbee (*A Study of History*), whereas Samuel P. Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*) is roundly criticized. Apart from advocating for engaged Buddhism, Xuecheng's role is more of a modern social debater than a spokesman for Buddhism. Traditional categories such as Theravada, Vajrayana, and Mahayana, or Chan (Zen) and Jingtū (Pure Land), do not occur in his writings. As president of the BAC, Xuecheng advocated integration of the three main schools and the eight traditional subdivisions of Han Buddhism, that is, Chinese-language Buddhism.⁷

Longquansi

This monastery is situated about seventy to eighty kilometers west of Beijing, and is also known as the "sci-tech" or "IT" monastery. The monastery traces its history back to 951 CE, but during the Cultural Revolution it was turned into a farm, the buildings were torn down or left to deteriorate, and it was not until quite recently that it was rebuilt to an impressive size. It is known as a high-tech monastery because its many monks use the internet and are adept at using modern media; this in turn attracts IT specialists to the monastery, and these specialists then spend time solving problems and developing software in an atmosphere of quietness and concentration. Many monks were formerly highly educated specialists. In the monastery, there is a division that translates Buddhist texts into eight foreign languages, and a publication department which publishes a great number of books and DVDs and also runs an interactive website.⁸ One of their main projects is to scan and catalogue a large collection of Buddhist sutras.

⁷ Xuecheng 2016.

⁸ Voice of Longquan. <http://eng.longquanzs.org/>.

The monks, nuns, and volunteers also perform traditional chores. Ecological farming, however, is a new tradition, and home-grown organic vegetables are served at the meals. The daily schedule for monks and nuns is also very traditional: They get up at 3:55 a.m., practice meditation and chanting from 4:30 to 5:30 a.m., and have lessons from 5:30 to 7:00 a.m. Next, they have breakfast from 7:00 to 8:00 a.m., and then have time on their own until 11 a.m. After lunch, which for many monks and nuns is the last meal of the day, they work outdoors in the fields, in the kitchen, or cleaning the monastery and offices until 5:00 p.m., after which they meditate or chant again. They then have lessons until 8:30 p.m. and individual time until 10:00 p.m., when they go to bed. Like the other monasteries in this article, Longquansi prides itself on its traditional monastic rules.

Besides monks and nuns, there are about two hundred volunteers who get board and lodging in return for their work for the monastery. They also get pocket money for necessities like clothes and transport because some of them go to Beijing to take food to poor people in the city.

Recently Longquansi monastery has made a special effort to internationalize, not necessarily with the aim of establishing communities in other countries, but to cooperate with other Buddhists, for instance Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan—a sign of the new openness on the part of the People's Republic.

In 2016, about two years after my visit to Longquansi, my journey into Chinese Buddhism took me to four monasteries in Fujian Province: Pujisi, Pingxingsi, Guanghuasi, and Jilesi.

Pujisi

This small, very beautiful monastery (see plate 2) traces its history back to the Five Dynasties (907–960), a period between the Tang (619–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties. But after the Cultural Revolution, the monastery was reduced to ruins. That it was rebuilt to match its former beauty is due to a married couple from the region who in 1949 fled to Taiwan. The husband, Lin Yushun, who was twenty years old at the time, later became a successful businessman and after about fifty years, he returned to Yongshun County, where the monastery is situated. He donated great sums of money to build schools, a hospital, and a recreational park, and also paid for the restoration of Pujisi.

One of the reasons why Pujisi is held in high esteem is that it was the abode of Master Hongyi. He came from a rich Tianjin 天津 family and in 1905 traveled to Japan, which at that time was a pioneer in culture and

education. He attended an art academy in Tokyo and lived a bohemian life with a Japanese concubine. He returned in 1910, took part in revolutionary movements in China, and brought along from Japan a troupe of actors and actresses. He himself taught Western painting in Nanjing using nudes, and he introduced Western music to China. In later years, he was a composer, painter, poet, and master calligrapher. His songs are still popular in China. Then in 1916, he began a fast of three weeks, and this interest in ascetic life led him to become a monk in 1918. After that he spent large parts of his life reintroducing old monastic rules for monks and lay Buddhists, rules that had been eroded over time. Towards the end of his life, he wrote poems to encourage resistance against the Japanese invasion of China, and he wanted Buddhist monks to participate in the struggle. In 1942 he became seriously ill, refused to take medicine, gave orders for his own cremation, and wrote a farewell poem which ends: "You ask me where I am heading for, no word works confronting such a vast land ahead, where full moon is the heart of heaven, with the spring blossoms heavy on branches."⁹

He spent much of his life at Pujisi, and once spent 537 days in a row in isolation. The monastery honors him annually and publishes his books. Xuyun 虛雲 (1840?–1959!), maybe the greatest conservative monk in modern times, wrote his biography.

Today, Pujisi is best known for charitable work carried out by lay Buddhists. For example, they do not perform cremations at the monastery, but have annual commemoration days on which lay Buddhists visit the homes of the bereaved. The lay Buddhists live in a dormitory not far from the monastery in a building that was meant to be an old people's home, but the municipality offered it to the Buddhist volunteers as no retired people wanted to move in. They also run an old people's center in the nearby village. On my visit there, I found old women talking animatedly and doing needlework in a relaxed atmosphere. In connection with the center, there is a cafeteria which offers free meals, and this is also arranged by the Buddhist volunteers. During my brief stay, I was told that the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, has recommended mutual helpfulness between Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

It should be added that the local political apparatus is highly visible. The politician Kang Sijian, in particular, is very popular and is Chairman of Yongchun County's political consultative conference. As a member of the Chinese Communist Party, he is not allowed to be registered as a Buddhist,

⁹ Hongyi 2015, p. 17.

but this does not seem to hold him back. He works to unite and coordinate social life at all levels and shows strong sympathy for Buddhism.

My visit to Yongshun County ended with a dinner in which the mayor of the nearby town of Penghu also took part. After the dinner, I had the opportunity to present myself to many lay Buddhists and the head monk of Pujisi, Xianyan, after which I was asked many fine questions about my mission from a curious audience.

Pingxingsi

Nothing could be more different from Pujisi than Pingxingsi. Huge and newly restored, Pingxingsi is situated in wonderful surroundings in the Taimu 太姥 mountains in the northern part of Fujian. It accommodates about three hundred and seventy monks and about four hundred lay Buddhists. I was told that during the Cultural Revolution the monastery (see plate 3) was a collective farm worked by monks who had not fled to far-away regions of China or to Taiwan.

The present and very imposing complex of buildings (see plate 4) is said to be the work of the abbot, Jie Quan. He is of the same generation and was a disciple of the same masters as Xuecheng. Jie Quan reports that the money for the restoration comes from donors in China who have enjoyed the economic growth of the last couple of decades that has given rise to a wealthy middle and upper class. On top of this, the monastery receives an income from tourists, and this is certainly due to its scenic location. In the parking area, there is room for dozens of coaches.

One finds a great deal of technology at Pingxingsi, such as classrooms full of computers operated by monks, and all of the buildings are supervised by video cameras and their accompanying monitors. It looks almost futuristic.

But the numerous monks also do traditional chores such as working in the huge kitchen and cutting firewood (see plate 5). Walking recitation and chanting in the mornings and evenings are the norm, as is the custom in most monasteries.

The lay Buddhists I was among claimed that if it were not for me, they would not have been able to meet the abbot. They were visibly respectful and bowed deeply in front of him. One person even kowtowed—to the abbot's visible annoyance.

In the evening, my group met in my guest rooms for a meeting where everybody was supposed to speak about their impressions and about other members of the group. It looked to me a bit like Maoist "criticism/self-

criticism," but the result was the opposite: they all praised and encouraged each other to make spiritual progress. The atmosphere was more like that of a new religion than of Maoism.

Guanghuasi

When it comes to the use of modern technological communication, Guanghuasi in the city of Putian (see plate 6) is totally different from Pingxingsi. Information technology is banned from the monastery. For example, when I asked at the publishing office of the monastery why they do not publish electronic books, I got the following answer: "Because it leads to a loss of respect for the message. A book published electronically does not earn the dignity it deserves." That's it!

It is not because the monastery lacks people with a high level of education. The abbot, Xianli, used to be a NASA space engineer at the Houston center. At the age of thirty-four, he broke with his earlier life and became a monk, later becoming a master monk. A year ago, he was appointed abbot of Guanghuasi, and his qualifications from his earlier life are used when the Longquan network is about to build new monasteries.

My talks with Xianli led also to the topic of financing monasteries in today's China. Many people, among them many monks, fled to Taiwan and Southeast Asia after the Communist takeover in 1949. These monks are important collectors of donations from overseas Chinese in countries like Indonesia. This was the beginning of the literal reconstruction of Chinese Buddhism in the 1980s. From the 1990s, the monasteries got donations from local donors unless the building projects were very big. For that, the monasteries set up special building foundations to appeal to larger groups of donors and investors. At Guanghuasi you have several "boxes" which individual sponsors can contribute to. One "box" pays for free vegetarian meals, charity, education, and publications; another "box" is for animal welfare. The names of the donors are made public for all of these "boxes." Clearly this is a practice of merit-making for the lay Buddhists.

The many volunteers at Guanghuasi are both an asset in the shape of labor and an expense in the shape of free meals and lodgings. There is much work to be done: gardening and cleaning squares and paths, as well as office work. The volunteers work only four to five hours per day, but they are then expected to show up at recitations and instruction in Buddhism.

The daily schedule at Guanghuasi is as follows:

At 4 a.m. all are wakened by the sound of the monastery bell and drum.

At 5 a.m. the monks attend morning service, which lasts an hour, except for every fortnight when it lasts one and a half hours, according to the old *uposatha* practice where monks must go to confession after a recitation of the monastery rules (*pratimoksa*).

At 6:15 a.m. the monks have breakfast and then retire to clean the dormitories. They then study.

The volunteers eat breakfast at the same time but in a different hall, after which they work manually until 10:30 a.m.

At 10:50 a.m. the bell announces lunch, which lasts until 11:30 a.m. After lunch the monks and volunteers rest for an hour or so.

Between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m. the monks chant and then take time off on their own until dinner.

The volunteers work from 2:00 to 4:30 p.m. and are then free.

At 5:15 p.m. the bell announces dinner, but many monks do not eat, because of the old tradition of lunch being the last meal of the day.

At 6:30 p.m. the monks have lessons.

At 8:30 p.m. the drum sounds, and then the bell tolls to inform the monks and volunteers to prepare for the night.

9:30 p.m. is bedtime.

Monday afternoon is free, and monks and volunteers usually walk into nearby Putian to carry out personal errands.

In the monastery, there is a clear division between monks and volunteers. The monks wear brown coats, and the novices wear gray. Among the monks, there are those that are ordinary and those that are masters, but they cannot be told apart, as they wear the same clothes and participate on equal footing in all rituals. Still, masters and ordinary monks do not eat at the same table, and the vegetarian food at the abbot's table tastes better. I can tell from my own experience!

The Fujian Buddhist Academy (Fujian Foxueyan 福建佛学院) is part of Guanghuasi, and the academy offers instruction at the same level as the National Buddhist Academy in Beijing at Fayuansi. The monks enrolled have more time for individual studies. Two hundred monks showed up when I was asked to present what I know about the crisis in Buddhism in Japan. At the presentation, I mentioned my surprise to see the high level of activity I have found in Chinese Buddhism, an observation which was



Plate 1. Master Xuecheng in Utrecht, 2016.



Plate 2. Pujisi, 2016.



Plate 3. Pingxing after the Cultural Revolution.



Plate 4. Pingxing 2016.



Plate 5. Pingxing monks doing kitchen chores.



Plate 6. The old pagoda at Guanghuasi, 2016.



Plate 7. Handing out porridge at Jilesi, 2016.



Plate 8. Longquan Great Compassion, Utrecht, 2016.

met with approval. As one participant said, "China is on its way up, Japan on its way down." There is no doubt that the monks displayed great enthusiasm and optimism. "Buddhism is in for enormous growth in China, and now is the time to show the world." They asked if I think they can convert Denmark. I hesitated, and replied saying that while many people in Denmark know about meditation and mindfulness, I consider this to be a watered-down form of Buddhism and not Buddhism proper. Next, I asked the audience whether Fujian is representative of China as a whole. People smiled and said, "Well, OK, there are provinces in China which have not progressed as much as Fujian." A little later I am asked a strange question: "Do you think Jesus encountered Buddhism in India?" I could not give a positive answer. But one question I could not escape was, "Are you a communist or a socialist?" As I was not given any other options, I said socialist, and that answer, it seemed, was satisfactory.

After the presentation and the questions, our small group of lay Buddhists was on its way back to our rooms when the big bell boomed. On the spot, I suggested that we visit the bell tower. A definite scoop! The monk who rang the big bell was extremely delighted, and I had to take a great many photos.

Jilesi

The visit to Jilesi, "The Nunnery of Ultimate Happiness," takes me back to Master Xuecheng, for he grew up near here. His family were Buddhists, and his grandmother, who played a very prominent role in his life, became a nun here late in her life. The nunnery was rebuilt because it was in a state of ruin after the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, in 1979 the old main building was restored to its former beauty with many fine murals. Today the whole complex has been restored, with many new buildings in front of the old main building.

The nunnery is managed by women, and no men are allowed to sleep on the premises. Still, the abbot of the nunnery is male, but otherwise the women are in full command, and the nunnery is self-supporting. It has a bakery, laundry, kitchen, and vegetable garden, and it also runs a small school where children from the village are taught by nuns. The nunnery develops its own promotional materials in both Chinese and in English, and produces videos, including animated ones, to present itself to the world.

Every morning a group of nuns visit the nearby town of Xianyou to hand out free porridge made of rice and fruit to needy elderly people so that they

can get a healthy start to the day (plate 7). This is not because they are hungry and poor, I am assured, because “there is no poverty in China today.” The aim is to generate merit for the nuns and to make the old people aware of the generosity of Buddhism. The leader of the distribution the day I visited is the furniture designer and manufacturer, Chen Shifeng, who from the 1990s until about ten years ago made a huge amount of money by producing classic wooden furniture using modern technology. He lives as a bachelor in an enormous apartment at one of his factories, where he also receives his customers. Today he is no longer interested in his profitable business per se, and spends much of his time and capital supporting the nunnery. His is a typical success story of a newly rich person in modern China’s booming economy. The financing of Buddhist monasteries and nunneries is no longer dependent on exiled Chinese businessmen, and when I asked him if he gets tax deductions from donations to the nunnery, I was met with a look of disbelief! Not in China. If you give donations, you should not think in terms of tax advantages.

Like many other Buddhists I met, the nuns are highly educated. One of them, Ding Ding, has a PhD on climate change from a university in California. I was able to talk with her about the disastrous summit meeting, COP 15, in Copenhagen in 2009, and she did not hesitate to mention that China had signed the Paris Climate Agreement in 2016. Like many other people I met, she was dissatisfied with a secular career and wanted to become a nun, which the friendly nuns of Jilesi highly supported.

My visit ended with a meeting that evening where I gave a short speech, followed by a discussion with questions from the nuns that, to be honest, surpassed in quality those of the monks at Guanghuasi.

Longquan Great Compassion Nunnery, Utrecht

The last stop on my journey into Chinese Buddhism was visiting the Longquan Great Compassion Nunnery in Utrecht, Holland (plate 8). I was invited to participate in the first anniversary of the inauguration of the nunnery. The Utrecht nunnery is, I was told, an example of the Longquan organization’s attempt to internationalize, with the next step being perhaps in Prato, Italy, or Frankfurt, Germany. These cities also have Chinese populations, and in the Zuilen district of Utrecht there are thousands of Chinese immigrants.

The organizer behind the nunnery was the local businessman, Woo Che Kwang, who had collected funds to buy a closed-down church, which in 2015 was turned into a Buddhist nunnery. Nuns come from Longquansi in

Beijing and from Jilesi in Fujian, and there are always six nuns in residence from China. But in Utrecht as in other places I visited, the lay Buddhists constitute the driving force of the nunnery.

The anniversary I attended was planned meticulously to show Buddhism as a comprehensive, modern religion that embraces culture, science, and music.

The abbot in charge, Xianqing, gave a speech telling the audience about his conversion to Buddhism. He studied physics at university in China and did not care much for Buddhism. Then China opened up after the Cultural Revolution, and qigong fever took hold of many students in the 1980s. At Xianqing's university in the 1990s, there was also a growing interest in classical Chinese culture, and it was then he discovered Buddhism. Since the year 2000, Buddhism has boomed in China according to Xianqing.

His speech was followed by that of Zhisheng Huang, a professor of mathematics, who talked about handling "big data" from Web 1.0 up to the beginning of Web 4.0. What has this to do with Buddhism, he asked? Buddhism has not found its place yet, but Huang sketched a model of how Buddhism can be integrated into a "knowledge graph."

The morning ended with music when one of the most prominent people in Dutch jazz, Marc van Roon, emphasized the importance of the pause, stillness, silence, and emptiness in music, which was met with nods of approval from the Buddhist audience.

After lunch, a Dutch duo played meditation music on various instruments: the transverse flute and harp, representing Western music; and the *shakuhachi* and *koto* representing Eastern music. The symbolism was obvious.

The music continued as Marc van Roon stirred up the audience with the jazz composition "It Could Happen to You," a classic Bill Evans number. And just as the jazz trio started on van Roon's own composition to accompany the *Heart Sutra*, the orderliness of the audience was shattered: Master Xuecheng himself entered the hall, having just landed an hour earlier at Schiphol airport from Beijing. Together with an entourage of other Buddhist masters, he was applauded, photographed, and bowed to, but there was no kowtowing.

After the day-long meeting a vegetarian dinner was served in a nearby Chinese restaurant. More than twenty hours after Master Xuecheng left Beijing, and after having leisurely eaten the delicious food, he stood up; the monks and nuns put down their chopsticks and rose as well. It was time to return to the nunnery, or the hotel, depending on where one belonged.

Conclusion

After my small odyssey into modern Chinese Buddhism I am concerned with the following questions. First, where does the money that supports it come from? The relationship between economics and religion is an interesting and frequently discussed topic among scholars of religion today. And, what is the role of the Chinese state in modern Buddhism?

There is no taboo surrounding these questions among Chinese Buddhists. And you do not hide yourself in anonymity if you donate to monasteries because you acquire great merit by doing so. This is not a modern phenomenon, as the building of temples and pagodas also generated merit in antiquity.

As mentioned above, the Chinese diaspora has given huge sums of money to Chinese Buddhist institutions, and this has benefited the economy both locally and nationally. After the economic boom of the last thirty years, however, a newly rich class of people, ready to pay for their reputation as good Buddhists, has emerged within China itself. The Chinese state also profits from this capital, either imported from abroad or coming from the newly rich. The restoration of old temples and monasteries gives employment to many people, and when Buddhist monasteries carry out social work among older Chinese people and thus contribute to society, a new symbiosis is born that both partners, state and religion, can enjoy. Maybe there are old party ideologists in Beijing who do not approve, but who cares in a province like Fujian? The old adage may still be valid, translated for the modern age: “Heaven is high and the Emperor is far away.”

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