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A Report on Buddhism in the People's Republic of China

by Alan Sponberg

The 33-year history of PRC policy regarding Buddhism can be divided into three distinct phases: the initial period up to 1966, the period of the Cultural Revolution, and finally the more recent period of "readjustment" beginning with the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping^a in 1977 and the subsequent reintroduction of his policies of pragmatic development.

The first period was marked especially by the repression of institutional Buddhism, primarily as a result of the land reforms that deprived the monasteries of virtually all of their income-producing property. This policy forced the closure of all of the small private hereditary temples and many of the large public monasteries as well. There was, however, another equally significant development characterizing this period. In the late 1950's the government began to recognize the potential utility of China's Buddhist heritage in expanding relations with other Buddhist countries. China's role as the cultural leader of Buddhist Asia became an aspect of foreign policy and, as a result, a number of historical sites and monasteries were renovated, and selected groups within the Buddhist community were fostered as its official representatives. Buddhism was meant to have an important role in China's policy of "people's diplomacy."¹

The second period, the Cultural Revolution, was a time of great repression; it may perhaps come to be seen, in retrospect, as an interregnum, a time of retrenchment. It was a time of uncertain policy from above and a great deal of destruction locally. The repressions of this period were, moreover, directed increasingly towards individual Buddhists as well as the few remaining institutions. Even the government-sponsored Buddhist organizations dropped out of sight. While it was unquestionably a time of great

suffering for all of China, it is important to note that, after the initial fury, some of the monasteries did manage to reopen and a number of Buddhist sites, though by no means all, were saved from total destruction, in some cases by members of the local community and in others by units of the People's Liberation Army deployed at the order of sympathetic officials. A careful study of this period is not yet possible; however, it appears that some portions of the Buddhist community may have consolidated a base of both popular and official support even in the midst of this difficult time.

The third period, which has only just begun, marks, perhaps, a new opportunity for the Buddhists, one that comes at a crucial turning point in the survival of the debilitated community. The pressing questions are whether the community can find some place in the fabric of the current "pragmatic" New China, and further, whether it can regenerate itself in time to avoid a slow death by attrition. Answers to these questions are by no means clear as yet, though recent developments raise some possibilities. The following observations are presented to report on those developments and also to suggest that this third period has the prospect of being something more than a simple return to the circumstances prior to the Cultural Revolution.

In the last three years, with the advent of this recent "readjustment" period, delegations of Japanese Buddhists have again become increasingly common in the PRC. In the latter half of 1981 this new phase of the former "people's diplomacy" policy was taken a step further when, for the first time, two groups of North American Buddhist practitioners visited a number of Buddhist monasteries and cultural sites in the PRC.² At the invitation of the Zen Studies Society of New York I had the privilege of joining one of these groups as a historical consultant. We spent five weeks in the PRC (Oct.-Nov.) traveling under the auspices of the Chinese Buddhist Association, the semi-official liaison organization founded in 1953 to coordinate interaction between the PRC government and the Buddhist community.

Experiencing the rigors of a true pilgrimage, we visited some 20 monasteries in Zhejiang,^b Jiangsu,^c Henan,^d Shaanxi,^e Shanxi^f and Hebei^g Provinces and also in Shanghai^h and Beijing.ⁱ While it was an arduous itinerary, it was also one that allowed us to observe Buddhist institutions in a number of different areas, each with its

own set of historical and political circumstances. Since many of the historical sites of interest to the group were also among the currently active monastic centers of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, we also had an opportunity to observe the present state of Buddhist practice in the PRC, an opportunity coming just at the time when the Chinese Buddhist community is experiencing a number of significant changes under the readjustment of government policies following the Cultural Revolution and the downfall of the Gang of Four.

Space here allows only a brief mention of some of the more interesting of our findings. Perhaps most striking was the regional variation present in all of the changes we observed. The eastern coastal provinces of Zhejiang^b and Jiangsu^c were the heartland of Buddhism in China during the period from the Sung until the present century. Not surprisingly, it was in these two provinces that we found monasteries to be the most active and the most involved with the lay community. In Henan Province,^d which includes, in the area around Luoyang,^j sites very important to the early history of Buddhism in China, we found, on the other hand, a very different picture. Whereas the monks in the eastern provinces seemed to have regained some significant control of the monasteries and were generally led by abbots highly respected in the community, the monasteries in Henan^d seemed far less vigorous and, to the extent that they had been renovated and reopened, far more under the direct control of the local cadres. Readjustment appears to be coming more quickly and more easily in some areas than in others. Specific examples of these generalizations can be seen in three of the monasteries we visited.

The historically famous and rather remote Guoqing Monastery^k on Mt. Tiantai^l in the eastern hills of Zhejiang^b is now considered by many Chinese Buddhists to be one of the two most viable centers of monastic Buddhism in the PRC.³ The nearest town is Ningbo,^m and it was necessary to travel over eight hours by chartered bus from there. After spending the night at a recently opened hostel in the monastery compound, our group took part in the 3:30 AM morning service, a daily activity which on this weekday was attended by most of the 75 monks, some 70-80 lay Buddhists, and a group of 8 nuns on a pilgrimage. Almost all of the lay devotees appeared to be over 45 or 50 and most had traveled for some distance to spend one or two days at the monastery. On

other days the people would be different, but the numbers were consistent, in fact, slowly increasing, we were told by the monks.

Guoqing Si^k is certainly not what it was, at some times at least, in the past, when resident monks would have numbered in the hundreds or even thousands. It is hard, of course, to judge the vitality of a monastic community, but the organization and the activity we observed did leave a definite impression of persisting strength. This was particularly evident in the three monks who served as the heads of the various administrative departments, middle-aged monks capable of providing the transmission to a new generation if given the opportunity. For lay Buddhists, on the other hand, there was no question that, even during a time when travel is restricted, the pilgrimage to Mt. Tiantai^l still remains a viable aspiration.

At the Dinghui Si,ⁿ an island monastery on the Yangzi River^o in Jiangsu,^c we observed part of a week-long session of intensive practice held for both monks and lay devotees. The session was conducted by the monastery's highly respected abbot, Mingshan,^p who had just returned from a six-month stay in Hong Kong where, by local invitation, he had given a series of lectures to the Buddhist community. He told us that in the past these special week-long sessions had been held at least twice a year at this monastery, and that they were now being reinstated. The session we observed was attended by 60 individuals, some 10 monks and the rest lay devotees, mostly but not exclusively women. The practice was Pure Land devotionism, including a full daily schedule of group recitation-meditation periods interspersed with *sūtra* chanting and lectures by the abbot. Here again, we found evidence of vigorous leadership and also of a highly significant degree of monastic and lay interaction even with regard to training and practice. The latter is a relatively recent development in Chinese Buddhism⁴ and may be a significant step towards a more lay-based form of Buddhist institutional organization. It could, in the contemporary period, indicate one response to the monasteries' loss of financial autonomy.

The situation at the Baima Si,^q outside of Luoyang in Henan,^d provides an appropriate counterpoint to the two preceding cases. The Baima Si,^q or White Horse Monastery, is also of some historical significance: tradition considers it the first Buddhist monastery to be established in China, and it was the site of much activity,

especially during the pre-Tang period. Primarily because it is considered China's oldest monastery it was one of the sites chosen for major renovations underwritten by the government in the late 1950's and early 1960's before the Cultural Revolution. When we visited the White Horse, however, it was made quite clear that we were viewing a cultural monument, not a working monastery. We were led through the restored halls by a member of the local Cultural Affairs Bureau, and it seemed incidental that we were followed by several monks who lived in a small building at the rear of the compound. Our group was discouraged from chanting in front of the main Buddha images, something that had been allowed without hesitation in the eastern provinces. Later we were to stand around crowded into the monks' sleeping room to drink tea because the Cultural Affairs Bureau who administered the monastery, we were told, would not give the monks permission to host us in one of the restored halls or in the tea house that was part of the compound; again very different from the cordial, almost formal, receptions we had experienced in the eastern monasteries. In Henan^d generally there was little evidence of monastic or lay activity, even though large sums had been spent to renovate the Baima Si^q and even more is currently being spent to completely rebuild the famous Shaolin Monastery,^r another site we visited south of Luoyang.^j

While local circumstances thus vary considerably, the basic guidelines in terms of national policy are still set in Beijing. Several significant changes in this policy have already been implemented since the beginning of the readjustment period. A number of monasteries have been reopened; young monks are being ordained for the first time since the Hundred Flowers Period in the latter half of the 1950's; and the Chinese Buddhist Academy has been reopened, now with several provincial branches.

Holmes Welch has estimated that during the Republican Period in the first half of this century there were approximately 300 large public monasteries with 20,000 to 25,000 resident monks.⁵ Most of these monasteries were closed down during the land reforms of the 1950's, and even those that survived into the '60's were closed at least temporarily during the Cultural Revolution. The readjustment period has seen the reopening of perhaps 40-50 monasteries, some strictly as cultural museums with no resident monks at all⁶ and others as a varying combination of museum and

functioning religious facility. In some areas this relaxation had already begun in the early 1970's, even in the midst of the latter, and less severe, days of the Cultural Revolution.

Current policy still recognizes the importance of these institutions to the people's diplomacy efforts in Buddhist Asia, an important theme carried over from the late 1950's. Beyond that, a new and perhaps more important consideration has recently been added as well: the significance of China's Buddhist heritage to the rapidly expanding international tourist trade, a major source of the hard currency necessary to development plans under the Four Modernizations policy. It is no coincidence that the newly ordained younger monks are expected to learn modern foreign languages, nor that the currently prescribed choice is between Japanese and English.

The Buddhist community no doubt hopes to have the monasteries preserved as something more than empty museums. That they are having some degree of success is indicated by a recent policy shift which, beginning in 1980, has allowed the ordination of a number of new monks, most in their early twenties. While no national figures were available, we observed at ten monasteries in the east and in Beijing approximately 90 young monks and heard reports of perhaps 50 more elsewhere. All of these young monks have been ordained in slightly more than one year; so even though the numbers are quite small as yet, it does indicate that the government has accepted, for the first time, the need for some new monks, if only to act as custodians of the expanding number of museum-monasteries.

Perhaps the most dramatic recent change has been the reopening, in Oct. 1980, of the Chinese Buddhist Academy, a national training seminary for Buddhist monks established by the Chinese Buddhist Association (CBA) in 1956 but closed down during the Cultural Revolution. Of even more significance is the opening of several provincial branches of the academy, something the CBA had sought unsuccessfully for several years prior to the Cultural Revolution.⁷ This is clearly a step beyond simple readjustment, more than just a reversion to the previous status quo.

We visited the main branch of the Academy at the Fayüan Si in Beijing⁸ and also one of the new branches at the Lingyan Si in Suzhou.⁹ Both had 30-40 young monks studying a full-time cur-

riculum that included Buddhist doctrine and history as well as modern languages (either English or Japanese) and current affairs. After two years at the branch academy or 4 years in Beijing, the young monks are expected to return to their home monasteries to assume administrative responsibilities. At the Beijing Academy a graduate program is also provided for some who will study classical Buddhist languages in order to pursue a career in Buddhist scholarship. Two of these graduate students were recently sent to Japan to study Pure Land developments there. We were told that two more branches of the academy are scheduled to open soon, one in Fujian^v and the other, which will specialize in Tibetan Buddhism, in Qinghai Province.^w

All of the above activities have been funded by the government, a significant allocation of state funds given the current emphasis on pragmatic development. This financial support has unquestionably been of great benefit to the Buddhist community following the severity of the previous suppression, which left most of the monasteries in shambles, from neglect if not from actual destruction. Still, it underscores, at the same time, one fact that has not changed significantly during the readjustment period: the loss of financial autonomy the monasteries suffered even prior to the Cultural Revolution. There may be some slight improvement on this front as well,⁸ but it remains the greatest problem the Buddhist community must overcome if its institutions are to see a true rebirth.

It can indeed be said that the state of Buddhism in the PRC has improved over the last two years. This remains, however, a very critical period for the survival of Chinese Buddhism, especially for the survival of those traditions of practice and philosophical scholarship that have historically been based in monastic rather than lay institutions. Most of the capable leaders who remain are near the end of their careers. The transmission of their knowledge and understanding to a younger generation is crucial if the tradition is to continue. This possibility appears now once again to exist; it remains, however, still far from certain. In light of this, one further observation from our journey warrants mention: the government of the People's Republic is aware of international concern for the state of Buddhism in China. During this period of readjustment the expressed interest of scholars and Buddhist

practitioners outside of China may well be of some help to the Chinese Buddhist community as it struggles to develop a reformed Buddhism compatible with the New China.

NOTES

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to Shimano Eidō Roshi and the Board of Directors of the Zen Studies Society for their generous support of my research.

1. The best treatment of this period and the beginning of the second period can be found in *Buddhism Under Mao* (Harvard, 1972), the third volume of Holmes Welch's study of Buddhism in 20th century China. In the earlier volumes the late Prof. Welch provided invaluable documentation of a period now largely lost to further research, a great contribution to Buddhist scholarship.

2. Led by Shimano Eidō Roshi of the Zen Studies Society of New York and by Roshi Phillip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, the two separate groups were made up of a number of lay practitioners and also two American monks. Mostly professional people in a number of fields, the participants ranged in age from the early 20's to late 70's. Both groups have close ties to the Japanese Zen tradition and saw their visits as a pilgrimage to historical sites important to the transmission of Buddhism from India to China and, later, from China to Japan.

3. The other that was frequently mentioned by our Buddhist informants was Tiantong Si,⁸ the monastery where Dōgen⁹ met Rujing.⁷ Neither of these two monasteries had been officially opened to Western visitors at the time of our trip. Because of our special status we were given clearance in these two cases. We were unsuccessful, however, in our attempts to reach Putuo Shan¹⁰ or Wutai Shan¹¹ which remain closed, we were told, because of neighboring military installations. Unofficial comment was that all of the above would soon be accessible, a likelihood consistent with the new tourism policy.

4. Two of the great monastic Buddhist leaders of the early 20th century, Xūyūn¹² and Yinguang¹³ both advocated more intensive forms of practice for lay Buddhists, and the latter especially, with his emphasis on Pure Land recitation-meditation, sought to bring lay devotees into the monastery to practice along with the monks.

5. *The Practice of Buddhism* (Harvard, 1967), p. 4.

6. We saw examples of this extreme end of the scale at the Shuanglin Si,¹⁴ a small country monastery south of Taiyūan¹⁵ in Shanxi Province,¹⁶ and at the Longxing Si¹⁷ in the village of Dengfeng¹⁸ near Shijiazhuang¹⁹ in Hebei Province.²⁰ At the former we were told by the Archeology Bureau staff there that plans have been made "to bring in some monks to take charge of the site now that restoration has been done."

7. The opening of these branch academies has not, to the best of my knowledge, been reported in the West. It is, however, of more significance than the reopening of the Beijing Academy, which attracted some attention in the Western

press. Besides increasing the opportunities for training, the branch academies also provide a stronger potential base for local organization.

8. One possibility is reestablishing the income derived from performing services for the dead commissioned by lay devotees, traditionally a source of income second only to that from property. After having been expressly forbidden, these services are again being performed in some areas. At the Yüfo Si²¹ in Shanghai^h we saw services being conducted in the Hall of Rebirth and were told that the income was kept by the monastery. The scant number of soul tablets presently installed in the hall made it clear, however, that this is as yet an insignificant source of income. Social pressure against superstitious forms of religious practice may insure that this remains the case.

Glossary

a 道元	m 鄧小平	y 寧波
b 如淨	n 浙江省	z 定慧寺
c 普陀山	o 江蘇省	aa 揚子江
d 五臺山	p 河南省	ab 苑山
e 虛雲	q 陝西省	ac 白馬寺
f 印光	r 山西省	ad 少林寺
g 雙林寺	s 河北省	ae 法源寺
h 太原	t 上海	af 靈岩寺
i 隆興寺	u 北京	ag 蘇州
j 登封	v 洛陽	ah 福建省
k 石家莊	w 國清寺	ai 青海省
l 玉佛寺	x 天臺山	aj 天童寺