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# Ambitions and Negotiations: The Growing Role of Laity in Twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism

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This article highlights the growing role of laity in 20th century Chinese Buddhism. Like other Buddhist traditions in Asia, Chinese Buddhists were affected by the changes brought about by modernization. While lay Buddhists have played an important role throughout Chinese Buddhist history, during the modern period they assumed prerogatives that had been traditionally limited to monastics. The article explores three exemplary cases: a Tantric priest (Wáng Hóngyuàn), a scholar (Oūyáng Jìngwú) and a political leader (Zhào Púchū). The article examines the reaction of the Saṅgha to these lay Buddhists and their lasting impact on Modern Buddhism in China.

## 1. Introduction

This paper will focus on the changing role of the laity in late Qīng and early Republican China. Its main objective is to investigate the thesis that the modern period saw an unprecedented shift in lay-monastic dynamics, whereby laypeople took more liberty to interpret, practice and conceptualize Buddhism independently of, and sometimes at odds with, the Saṅgha. The so-called “laicization” thesis has been clearly articulated, among others, by Helen Hardacre:

“The modernization of Buddhist societies has brought sweeping changes. The extension of the franchise and expanded political participation in secular life colored religious life, creating the expectation that laity should be able to influence the character of Buddhist institutions. The spread of literacy has enabled laity to read

and interpret sacred scripture with increasing independence from the ordained. Higher education hones a critical spirit and encourages skepticism regarding clergy's preeminence over the laity and their monopoly over funerals and other rituals. The prestige of science and rationality in modernizing societies further nurtures a critical view of traditional religious beliefs, practices, and institutions." (Hardacre 2004, 448)

Has that been the case in modern China? This paper argues that while it would be a historical mistake to talk about the demise of monastic authority in the modern period, we do see a significant growth in the role of the laity in modern Chinese Buddhism. This growth is a part of processes related to the emergence of complex cross-cultural and global relationships with other Asian powers and with the West. Chinese Buddhism thus shared with other Buddhist traditions, especially those of Japan and South Asia, some characteristics that enabled lay Buddhist influence to grow. These include concerns, whether realistic or not, about threats from colonialism and imperialism, and also from growing secularist tendencies. In addition, we see a shared concern for authenticity, and a tension between continuity and rapture in these reform movements, many of which were led by lay people.<sup>1</sup>

In order to establish my claim, I intend to focus on three case studies of laymen with remarkable careers: a Tantric priest, a scholar and a leader. Each case study represents a different aspect of the religious authority that the laity claimed in this period: the right to give initiation and perform rituals, the right to authority on doctrinal matters, and the right to lead the Saṅgha's institutions.

Through the case studies I wish to demonstrate that (1) Chinese lay Buddhists assumed leadership roles they rarely claimed in pre-modern times; (2) Lay dynamics in China were closely related, at least in the early part of the 20th century, to the changing role of religion and Buddhism globally and in Japan in particular; and finally that (3) Lay Buddhism in the modern period is closely related to historical and social dynamics in modern China. I will begin with a brief overview of the laity's role in Chinese Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> At the congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Taiwan, June 2011, these shared characteristics came up repeatedly in a panel dedicated to the growing role of the laity across cultures in the modern period.

## 2. The Historical Role of the Laity in Chinese Buddhism

What do I mean by lay Buddhists? This is by no means an easy term to define. As Holmes Welch noted, “The director of the 1961 census in Hong Kong was unable to solve it (i.e. the question of what a Buddhist devotee is) and therefore no entry on religion was included” (Welch 1967, 357). So what is a lay Buddhist? Welch continues, “Suppose we asked, ‘do you believe in the Buddha (信佛)?’ In that case most of the rural population of China would answer in the affirmative... If we asked: ‘Do you go to worship at Buddhist temples?’ almost all would answer that they did” (Welch 1967, 357). What about those who worship in other temples too?<sup>2</sup> One cannot exclude all religious hybridity when discussing so-called Buddhists in China. For this paper I will define lay Buddhists as people who took their Buddhist identity a step beyond occasional worship. The three cases below are laypeople who made Buddhism their main vocation in life.

Devout Buddhist laypeople who have had a remarkable career are not new in Chinese history. Chinese laity began to organize into societies for recitation of the Buddha’s name already during the Six Dynasties (222–589) period. Some of the greatest poets of the Táng Dynasty, such as Wáng Wéi and Bái Jūyì were lay Buddhists. Lay Buddhists such as Lǐ Tōngxuán (李通玄) contributed to the development of Chinese Buddhist thought,<sup>3</sup> and layman Péng (龐居士) established his name as an ideal Enlightened Chán lay Buddhist, whose wisdom recalled that of Vimalakīrti.

It seems safe to argue that throughout Chinese Buddhist history, elite members of the literati both shaped and were shaped by their association with Buddhist monks.<sup>4</sup> In the Míng Dynasty, a large number of literati immersed themselves in

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<sup>2</sup>This raises a broader problem of religious identity in China, which is more fluid than has been traditional in the West. However, in 2008 the Pew Research Center published a study concluding that: “Based on interviews with more than 35,000 Americans age 18 and older, the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey finds that religious affiliation in the U.S. is both very diverse and extremely fluid.” <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/743/united-states-religion>, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/743/united-states-religion> (Accessed May, 2nd 2011). In another research published in the BBC and study religious patterns in 9 Western countries researchers argued that, “The study found a steady rise in those claiming no religious affiliation.” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12811197>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-12811197> (Accessed May, 2nd 2011).

One can argue that in recent years religious identity in the West became more fluid as well and that one can see more hybrid forms of religious practice (so called Jewish-Buddhists, or a Christian who is also a Zen practitioner, Christian Yoga etc.).

<sup>3</sup>For more see Gimello 1983.

<sup>4</sup>For more see Halperin 2006 and Gregory 1999.

the study of Buddhist scriptures, following the lead of Wáng Yángmíng (1472–1529). According to Wú Jiāng, some of Wáng Yángmíng’s followers incorporated Buddhist teachings into their Confucian teachings. It was a time of fascination with Buddhist scholasticism and there was a “prevalent Chán craze in the literati culture” (Wú 2008, 47). The Chán Buddhist tradition developed a highly sophisticated corpus of literature. Consequently, Míng literati read Chán literature for their leisure, to experience the “joy of Chán” (Wú 2008, 59). Sometimes they challenged the monks’ understanding (Wú 2008, 65–7) and even offered teaching as Chán teachers (Wú 2008, 68–71).

What, if anything, had changed in the modern period? Some may argue that not much changed, that the dynamics in the Qīng Dynasty and onward are simply the maturation of earlier dynamics. However, I would like to suggest that lay Buddhists not only increased their prominence during the late Qīng Dynasty, but also moved into new territories that they avoided in the past. For example, Holmes Welch noted that towards the end of the Qīng and the Republican period most of the lay associations were founded by lay initiatives, unlike the lay associations of the pre-modern period, which were founded mostly by monks (Welch 1968, 81). Welch also noted that laypeople began to participate in activities that were traditionally restricted to monks, sitting in meditation sessions with the monks in the meditation halls and the halls for the recitation of the Buddha name. Laypeople also began to participate in rituals, one of the monopolies of the clergy and an important source of income for the Saṅgha. The first case study is an example of how laypeople in the 20th century insisted not only on having a role in rituals but also on officiating at them.

### 3. The lay Ācārya Wáng Hóngyuàn 王弘願 (1876–1937)

#### 3.1. Biography

Wáng was a controversial lay Buddhist who was a 49th generation Ācārya 阿闍梨 (which literally means “teacher”, but is here defined as a Tantric priest) in the lineage of the Japanese Shingon School. He is a part of the long esoteric Buddhist tradition in China (密教), a tradition that in the early 20th century enjoyed a remarkable comeback via Japan.<sup>5</sup> Wáng’s early career did not suggest his future as

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<sup>5</sup>The history of this school in China is fascinating and has received well-deserved treatment by scholars in recent years (for more see Orzech, Sørensen and Payne (eds), 2010). Scholars such as Robert Gimello, Charles Orzech and Henrik Sørensen show that the history of this movement in

a propagator of esoteric Buddhism. He received a traditional Confucian education, and in 1899 passed his *Xiùcái* 秀才 degree, the first degree in the imperial examination system. He later taught and served as principal at a middle school in Cháozhōu, Guǎngdōng. When he was in his 40's, Wáng had doubts regarding the Confucian critique of Buddhism and the more he read about Buddhism the more he found himself drawn to it. In 1918, Wáng published a translation of the Japanese Shingon school priest, Gonda Raifu's 權田雷斧 (1846-1934) work, *Mizōng gāngyào* 密宗綱要 (Essentials of the Esoteric School). After the translation, and perhaps as a result of it, Gonda arrived at Cháozhōu in 1924 and gave Wáng tantric initiation (*abhiṣeka* 灌頂).

In 1926, Wáng left for Japan, where he received the title of Ācārya. He later returned to China and established the China Esoteric Buddhist Rebirth Association (震旦密教重興會). He consequently began to propagate the esoteric tradition, teach, and publish a magazine called “Records of Teaching Esoteric Buddhism” (密教講習錄). In 1928, Wáng began conducting initiation ceremonies in cities such as Cháozhōu, Guǎngzhōu, Shàntóu and Hong Kong, where thousands became his disciples (Dèng and Chén 2000, 353). In 1933, he became the director of the newly established Jiěxíng Vihāra 解行精舍 and lectured on Buddhism in Sun-Yat Sen University. In 1934, he also established the Shàntóu Esoteric Buddhist Rebirth Association (汕頭密教重興會) and published a magazine called “The Lamp of the World” (世燈). A prolific writer, he translated his teacher's writings, commented on esoteric Buddhist texts and wrote original works of his own.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2. Wáng Hóngyuàn and the debate with Tàixū

Before his return from Japan as Ācārya, Wáng was a part of the reformer-monk Tàixū's circle. Tàixū (太虛 1890-1947) is known especially for his relentless efforts to modernize the Saṅgha. Buddhists during the Republican period understood that times had changed and that they had to change with them. They also understood that the tide of change signified a risk to the stability and prosperity of Buddhism in China. One of the ways in which reformers such as Tàixū sought to combat these developments was to restore East Asian Buddhism to its state of glory during the Táng, when Chinese Buddhism was believed to be at its prime.

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China is much more complex than the traditional narrative of “popularity in the Tang and a later decline”. (Shì Dōngchū 1975, 426).

<sup>6</sup>For a list of publications see Dèng and Chén 2000, 335.

He thought that modern Buddhism should be a unified form of Buddhism, non-sectarian in its approach (Welch 1968, 198-9), presumably because internal debate and arguments would weaken the Saṅgha facing external detractors.

One of the schools that were popular during the Táng was the Esoteric School. In 1919 Tàixū began his attempt to revive the esoteric tradition through promoting Esoteric Buddhist literature in his journal *Hǎicháoyīn*. He encouraged monks to study in Tibet and invited Tantric masters to initiate his students (Clower 2003). In 1924, he opened the Buddhist College for the Study of Tibetan Buddhism and Language. Students who enrolled there were taught Esoteric Buddhism by the Tantric master Dàyǒng (大勇 1893–1929), who was also the principal of the institution (Welch 1968, 196-7). Tàixū initially supported Wáng’s interest in the esoteric tradition.<sup>7</sup> In the first letter he wrote to Wáng, Tàixū congratulated him, saying, “Your translation of Gonda Raifu’s two volumes of *A Thorough Explanation of the Maṇḍala* was published in *Hǎicháoyīn* and it is most welcome” (*The Complete Works of Tàixū*, hereafter TQS 26p122). In his second letter, Tàixū continued his praise: “The more published the better, and this is my hope. But looking at what has been published so far, I am not yet satisfied; I am looking forward to your great work!” (TQS 26p122-3)

However, shortly afterwards the tone changed and the enthusiasm of Tàixū shifted to cautious critique. The problem for Tàixū seemed to be that his plan for a humble revival of the esoteric tradition was too successful. Tàixū’s main goal was not to promote esoteric Buddhism but to modernize Buddhism. Modernizing Buddhism meant purging it of what many at the time considered superstitious elements (or to put it in the words of Holmes Welch, from “a mixture of Brahmanism and magical hocus-pocus” Welch 1968, 177), many of which could be found abundantly in the esoteric tradition. As a result of the revival effort, the esoteric tradition did not become the tamed tradition he envisioned but so widely popular that it threatened to overshadow the whole syncretic project of Tàixū. It was at that point that Tàixū’s support for the esoteric tradition waned, and he became critical towards Wáng Hóngyuàn.

What were the main complaints of Tàixū and some of his followers against Wáng? In a letter he wrote to Wáng, Tàixū enumerated some of them.

After reading your essay “Letter of Respectfully Informing Buddhist Scholars in China,” I learned about the visit of the Japanese

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<sup>7</sup>Tàixū also included the translation by Wáng in the curriculum of his seminary.

Archbishop<sup>8</sup> [Gonda] Raifu to China. This is indeed a significant karmic event. I also heard about the revival of the Esoteric tradition's spirit [in China], much of which is thanks to your translation of [Gonda] Raifu's writings. [Gonda] Raifu indeed established himself as a great scholar among Japanese scholars of the esoteric tradition. However, despite appropriating the title of a monastic archbishop, in fact he does not practice as a monk. I heard from Master Enka (演華師), that [Gonda] Raifu still has concubines in his seventies. I've heard that all Japanese clerics are like that, and that it has become a popular practice. This behavior is not better than the certain Jōdo Shinshū master whom you criticized [in the past]. [People like Raifu] merely talk the noble path of the Esoteric tradition practice, but do not practice it; they can only be regarded as philosophers but not as Shingon Ācāryas.

Therefore, in my opinion, [while visiting], [Gonda] Raifu should give lectures around China, like John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, but must not perform *abhiṣeka* rituals. I now question you, what do you think? (TQS 26p128-9)

On the surface, Tàixū seems to be concerned with the morality of the Japanese Shingon priests, but there are two other issues that bothered him. First, Raifu and other Japanese Buddhists arrived in China supported by Japanese imperialism. The infamous document of the twenty-one demands (二十一條),<sup>9</sup> included a demand that Japanese Buddhists should have the right to conduct missionary work in China. Japanese imperialists of that period attempted to use Buddhism as a “unifying” ideology to form a pan-Asian front in order to face European dominance. Needless to say, the Pan-Asian entity would be ruled by Japan (Yú 2005, 161).

The second concern, more relevant to our discussion, is the risk that under Japanese influence the boundaries between monks and laypeople would become murky. Tàixū saw the problem emerging, perhaps, when Gonda Raifu became the teacher of the monk Tēsōng (特松 1894-1972). Traditionally, it was not acceptable for a monk to be mentored by a layperson, only vice versa (Bianchi 2004,

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<sup>8</sup>僧正 is a highest title a Shingon priest can achieve. It literally means something like “Saṅgha's chief”, or “chief monk”, and Tàixū is criticizing the fact that they use the term monk or Saṅgha without actually being Buddhist monks.

<sup>9</sup>See Spence 1991, 285-6.

36-7) Wáng’s rituals were another ominous sign for Tàixū.<sup>10</sup> Welch noted: “It was far less common for laymen to appropriate the titles of monks than to appropriate their function (Welch 1968, 85). As is evident from Wáng’s case, one of the problems with his Buddhist career was that he did both; he used the title of Ācārya and at the same time performed the initiation ceremony and by that attracted thousands of followers.

That led to an escalation in the tone of Tàixū’s criticism. On a later occasion, he replied to a question about a criticism of Wáng:

This [criticism] was incurred by Wáng Shīyù’s (王師愈 Wáng’s original name) own fault of arrogance and pride. He is merely a mediocre Confucian scholar rejecting Buddhist [orthodoxy]. He translated two books by the Shingon Shingi-ha (the new interpretation sub-school) master Gonda Raifu and gained the favor of Gonda. [Consequently], he broke the laws of the Buddhas and the regulations of the patriarchs. He received an initiation [from Gonda], and then regarded himself as a rare and invaluable commodity and arrogantly thought to elevate [Gonda] Raifu’s teachings as surpassing all other Buddhist dharma-gates in China and abroad. He also erroneously thought that the upāsaka resides among the six communities of monks etc. and that [the upāsaka] leads the seven communities [of the Buddha’s disciples]. This is the reason that he provoked the monastic rebuke. In addition, Wáng Shīyù does not know how to admit mistakes. He does not recognize the words “humility and repentance”. He unceasingly provokes wrangling with others; consequently he is harshly scolded by [people] from all over. (TQS 31p1421)

What was Wáng’s reaction to Tàixū’s concerns about erasing the traditional difference between monks and laity? He seemed to be quite indifferent. He said, “There is no distinction between monks and laity in my school. All laypeople are dharma vessels, who carry forward the great Dharma, and are monuments<sup>11</sup> of the attainment of Buddhahood<sup>12</sup>” (Yú 2005, 161).

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<sup>10</sup>Needless to say for Shingon followers Gonda Raifu was not a monk in the traditional sense, but also not a layperson, borrowing from Richard Jaffe he was “neither monk nor layman.” For Tàixū there was nothing that separates Gonda Raifu from other ordinary laypeople, excluding perhaps the pretense to be a cleric.

<sup>11</sup>Literally *stūpas*.

<sup>12</sup>Literally Buddhahood in this very body.

Tàixū was definitely not the only Buddhist to be concerned about the ritualistic prerogatives that Wáng assumed. Other Buddhists wrote treatises denouncing him, among them Zhōu Yuánxìng's *The Danger of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism* (中國佛教密宗危矣) and the monk Dànyún's *Discussing Wáng Hóngyuàn's Transgressions from the Perspective of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism* (從顯密問題上說到王弘願犯戒). A prominent critic, the monk Yīnguāng, stated, "The layman Wáng Hóngyuàn, despite the fact that he has deep faith in Esoteric Buddhism, [and despite the fact that] it yielded some results, since he began to misinterpret the message, has missed the meaning and failed to understand it. He should continue his reading of the scriptures, and only then will he recognize his mistake. Now, despite the fact that his skills began to gain some momentum, it is like flames rising from a weak and empty fire"<sup>13</sup> (Yú 2005, 161-2).

Monastic critique seemed to do little to curb the popularity of Wáng initiations, but they were not the only challenge to monastic authority. Around the same time, a layman with a similar background to that of Wáng made an important contribution to the critical study of Buddhism in China. The layman Ōuyáng Jìngwú, through his Inner Studies Institute, challenged some longheld assumptions about Buddhist doctrine and further challenged the Saṅgha's authority.

#### 4. The scholar Ōuyáng Jìngwú 歐陽竟無 (1871-1943)

While Wáng challenged the monastic prerogatives in performing religious initiations, Ōuyáng challenged the monastic prerogatives in at least three different ways. (1) He argued against central doctrines and important schools in East Asian Buddhism, considering them inauthentic. (2) He challenged views that established monastic superiority. (3) He played a crucial role in an attempt to exert control over the monastic estate in China through the establishment of a Buddhist Association.

##### 4.1. Biography

Ōuyáng Jìngwú was born in 1871 in Yíhuáng county (宜黃), Jiāngxī province. His original name was Ōuyáng Jiàn (歐陽漸) and courtesy name Ōuyáng Jìngshú

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<sup>13</sup>This is a metaphor from Chinese medicine which refers to a condition resulting from general energy deficiency and inner fire hyperactivity. Yīnguāng compares Wáng to someone who produces efficacy from an unhealthy source.

(歐陽鏡湖).<sup>14</sup> Like Wáng, Oūyáng came from an educated family and was tutored from an early age in traditional Confucian education. Prepared to continue his family's literati heritage, he was trained in the Chéngzhū orthodox branch of Confucianism. At the same time Oūyáng was also trained in the methods of the Evidential Scholarship movement (*Kǎozhèngxúe* 考證學), a Qīng Dynasty movement that emphasized a critical approach to the study of the Confucian (and non-Confucian) classics. It is this critical spirit that he later applied to the study of Buddhist scriptures and through which he challenged some of the fundamental mainstream and monastic assumptions regarding the Buddhist teachings.

Like Wáng, Oūyáng converted to Buddhism in his adulthood. A major factor in his reluctance to convert to Buddhism was undoubtedly his Confucian heritage, to which he was committed ideologically but also emotionally, as it was his family heritage. Oūyáng finally converted to Buddhism after his meeting with Yáng Wénhùi, the so-called father of modern Buddhism in China. Yáng convinced Oūyáng that there is more to Buddhism than its East Asian tradition and encouraged him to study the Yogācāra tradition and the tradition of Buddhist logic. Yáng argued that without understanding the Yogācāra tradition it would be impossible to understand Buddhism (Chéng 1999, 162), a view that Oūyáng maintained throughout his later career.

The study of Yogācāra became more available thanks to Yáng Wénhùi's success in retrieving hundreds of volumes of Buddhist texts from Japan, volumes that had been lost in China for about a millennium. Prime among these texts were fundamental commentaries on Yogācāra and Buddhist logic, texts that provided the Chinese-speaking world with a renewed encounter with the Indian scholastic tradition after years of being marginalized in the East Asian Buddhist curriculum.

Oūyáng was known among Yáng Wénhùi's circle as the Yogācāra expert. He later established his own institution of Buddhist learning, the Inner Studies Institute (*Zhīnà Nèixuéyuàn* 支那內學院). Through this institution he taught and introduced Buddhism to some of the most prominent intellectuals of the early part of the 20th century, such as Liáng Qīchāo, Liáng Shùmíng and Cài Yuánpéi.

His Yogācāra studies often brought him into conflict with conservative Buddhists, many of whom were monks. In the next section I shall briefly discuss Oūyáng's challenge to orthodox Chinese Buddhism, which he deemed as partially inauthentic. I shall then discuss his institutional challenge to the Saṅgha, and his unsuccessful attempt to assume control over the Saṅgha's establishment. At that

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<sup>14</sup>He changed his name to Jīngwú when he converted to Buddhism in his 40s.

time, the idea that a layman, and a radical at that, could oversee the Saṅgha's estate was shocking. As we will see below, this scenario became a reality with the career of Zhào Púchū, when the Chinese Buddhist Association was reestablished after the Communists took over.

#### 4.2. Oūyáng's challenge to Buddhist Orthodoxy

Oūyáng's challenge to Buddhist orthodoxy extended beyond his individual work. As the head of the Inner Studies Institute, he trained the next generation of lay Buddhists, who contributed to the critique of mainstream Chinese Buddhist doctrines and practices.<sup>15</sup> Some of the disciples' critiques were even more analytical and precise than those of Oūyáng himself. Oūyáng can be credited with introducing a critical approach to the study of Buddhism which he inherited from his Confucian education. His understanding of the Buddhist teaching underwent various developments.<sup>16</sup> In his long career his doctrinal preferences evolved beyond the Yogācāra tradition (he also studied the Madhyamaka and continued to write on Confucianism); nonetheless, Yogācāra always remained his benchmark to judge the authenticity of the tradition. He said:

If one wishes to dispel the...obstacles [for Chinese Buddhism], one must enter the gates of the Yogācāra teaching.<sup>17</sup> The Yogācāra teaching is a skilful means; it is the understanding of the correct principles. A scholar who investigates it will be able clearly to understand the true principle. He will be able to cure the obstacle of vague and unsystematic thinking. (Oūyáng 1976, 1360)

Judging by this benchmark he found much to criticize within the Chinese Buddhist tradition. The most fundamental error was the teaching that can be located in texts such as the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* (大乘起信論 hereafter AFM). The AFM has been controversial since its appearance in China during the sixth century. However, during the Táng Dynasty, the AFM's popularity grew and it was accepted by most mainstream Buddhists as an authentic text. This was especially true in Huáyán circles. The text remained foundational for East Asian Buddhist thought, as evidenced by more than 150 commentaries that were written to explain its intricate system to generations of Buddhists.

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<sup>15</sup>Writers such as Lǚ Chéng and Wáng Ēnyáng.

<sup>16</sup>For more see Aviv, 2008 and Chéng, 2000.

<sup>17</sup>Literally wéishì and fāxiàng.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss at length the teachings of the AFM or Oūyáng's critique of it; nonetheless an example may illustrate the kind of objection Oūyáng made to it. The AFM's teaching can be contextualized in a larger debate on whether the mind is fundamentally pure or impure. The AFM offered a synthesis, that is, the mind has two aspects – the pure and the impure. Using the technical language of the AFM, the author of the text argued that there is only one mind but that it has two different aspects, “mind as suchness” (心真如) and the “mind that arises and ceases,” or saṃsāric mind (心生滅). The two aspects are two manifestations of one and the same mind, two sides of the same coin.<sup>18</sup>

For Oūyáng, this unique teaching was not confirmed by any credible Yogācāra text. He argued that fundamental to the Buddhist teaching is the notion of correct knowledge (Skt. *samyagjñāna*, Ch. 正智). Correct knowledge must have an object that it “knows” or cognizes. An object must be something that can serve as a cause. In the case of the AFM, however, the object collapses into the subject. Oūyáng argued that this is a doctrinal error.

The collapse of suchness and the subjective mind into one, as well as other errors, was consequently adopted by the main schools of East Asian Buddhism (Tiāntāi and Huáyán schools) and further distanced Chinese Buddhism from what Oūyáng saw as authentic Buddhism. In an attempt to settle seeming contradictions within the Buddhist teaching, these schools created a classification system known as *pànjào* (判教) that judged the subtlety of the various teachings. Over-emphasis on *pànjào* classification created the false assumption that there are several teachings within Buddhism, whereas the Buddhadharma is essentially one.<sup>19</sup> These teachings and classifications eventually informed Buddhist practice, which consequently took the wrong turn. Oūyáng argued that at the end “they [i.e. the indigenous East Asian schools] do not find the gateway to the practice of meditation” (Ouyang 1988, 181).

From the standpoint of practice, no other school shaped Buddhist practice in China more than the Chán School. Here, Oūyáng criticized Chán Buddhist anti-intellectual sentiments. He held that Chán Buddhism should be commended

<sup>18</sup>See T32n1666.0576a05-09.

<sup>19</sup>See for example when Oūyáng argues: “Both schools differentiate [the teachings of the Buddha] based on [different] concepts. [But, in fact] there is no difference in the meaning of the teachings.” (Ouyang Jingwu 1976, 1365).

for its Mādhyamika tendencies but its adherents must leave behind their anti-scriptural rhetoric. Oūyáng argued:<

Since the School of Chán entered China, its blind adherents [mistakenly] understood the *Buddhadharma* to mean ‘Point directly to the fundamental mind, do not rely on words and letters, see your nature and become a Buddha.’ Why should one attach oneself to name and words? Little do they realize that the high attainment of Chán followers only happens among those who combine reason with the sharp faculties of superior wisdom...they discard the previous scriptures of the sages of yore and the excellent and refined words of the worthy ones of old, which lead to the decline in the true meaning of the *Buddhadharma* (Oūyáng 1976, 1359).

Oūyáng was greatly concerned with this decline. How can the Buddhist tradition be dependent on ignorant and deluded monastic leadership?

#### 4.3. Oūyáng’s challenge to monastic prerogatives

As we saw from the dynamics between Tàixū and Wáng Hóngyuàn, there are certain assumptions in lay-monastic relationships regarding prerogatives that are available to the monastic community by virtue of their pure life, whereas they are not available to lay followers. Oūyáng rejected this presupposition and argued that from the Mahāyāna perspective it is a mistake. In a famous essay, he outlined ten mistakes he found in respect to the supposed monastic prerogatives. Prime among them is the mistake that only *śrāvaka*, i.e. ordained monks and nuns, can be considered as a part of the Saṅgha. This is rejected on two accounts. First, he argued, central Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, distinguish the *śrāvaka saṅgha* from the *Bodhisattva saṅgha*. High Bodhisattvas are monks but they are not part of the *śrāvaka saṅgha*. Second, more relevant for our concern, is that in the *Daśacakra-kṣitigarbha sūtra*, a layperson (worldling or *pārthagjanika*) can hear the preaching of the dharma and be considered a *śramaṇa* on the lowest level. Kuījī’s (窺基 632–682) commentary on the sutra explained that in respect to a layperson when “there is no inner discord and one’s external affairs are in harmony, one can be considered part of the gem of the Saṅgha” (Ouyang 1995, 44-49).

Oūyáng also argued against the assumption that all laypeople are completely secularized (俗), which in the Buddhist context is understood as someone who

does not observe any precept. In addition, Oūyáng argued that a layperson could receive the Bodhisattva precepts. He argued that laypeople could be a field of merit, serve as teachers and preach the dharma. Finally, he believed that a monk could seek the teaching of a layperson<sup>20</sup> (Ouyang 1995, 44-49). It is not difficult to see why prominent monks were outraged by Oūyáng. Yinguāng once commented, “Oūyáng Jīngwú is a great king of devils” (Welch 1968, 119). Yinshùn argued that Oūyáng’s circle “specialized in reviling monks and nuns and starting arguments between clergy and laity” (Welch 1968, 34).

#### 4.4. Oūyáng and the failed attempt to establish the first Buddhist Association

In March of 1912, Oūyáng petitioned Sun Yat-sen’s newly established government in Beijing to unite Buddhist institutions under the supervision of a Buddhist Association. The historical context was the growing threats that Buddhist faced to their institution progressive forces, greedy officials, bandits and warlords. It was also a response to the attempt to establish Confucianism as a state religion.

The proposal of Oūyáng and his friends provides a vivid picture of the self-confidence they felt in regard to their own ability to assume leadership over the Saṅgha.

The Association shall have the right to superintend all properties belonging to all Buddhist organizations.

The Association shall have the right to reorganize and promote all Buddhist business affairs.

The Association shall have the right to arbitrate disputes that may arise between Buddhists and to maintain order among them.

The Association shall have the right to require the assistance of the National Government in carrying out all the social, missionary, and philanthropic works stated above.

All activities of the Association within the scope of the law shall not be interfered with by the Government.

The National Government is requested to insert a special article in the Constitution to protect the Association after it has been acknowledged as a lawful organization (Welch 1968, 34).

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<sup>20</sup>This was an issue with Tèsōng (see page 9).

What is apparent in this proposal is the deep distrust of these lay Buddhists in the ability of the monastic community to handle effectively the delicate predicament of Buddhism in that period.<sup>21</sup> Welch saw it as no less than “a plan to place the whole Buddhist establishment in the hands of men who despised the Saṅgha.”<sup>22</sup> It is this level of distrust between laity and monastic and the attempt not only to suggest a governing body for the Saṅgha but also to assume the leadership role of this institution that was novel in the Republican period.

Initially, the charter was approved by Sun Yat-sen’s government, but it provoked a bitter reaction from some of the leading monks at that time. They established their rival association; consequently Oūyáng’s association dissolved. However, not long after, another layperson led the Buddhist Association without strong opposition from the monastic community. To consider the leadership of this man as a unique case in the history of lay Buddhism in China, the next section will deal with the career of Zhào Púchū

## 5. The career of Zhào Púchū 趙樸初 (1907-2000)

### 5.1. Biography

Zhào was one of the most famous Chinese Buddhists in the latter part of the 20th century, and succeeded in leading the Saṅgha during the tumultuous decades after the Communists took control over China. Interestingly, unlike the monastic leaders’ contentions against Wáng and Oūyáng, Zhào’s leadership was accepted by most. This can be explained by the historical and political context, which changed radically after 1949, and by the fact that at the same time as Zhào was a Buddhist, he was also an advocate of communism. As such he served as a bridge between the Buddhists and the new state ideology. In China, Zhào is also remembered as a politician and a social activist. No less important, he was also an appreciated calligrapher and poet.

He was born to a family of devout Buddhists in Ānhuī province in 1907. When he was a child his mother often took him to a Buddhist temple to worship the Buddha, and that kindled a lifelong commitment to the Buddhist teachings. As a young man, he enrolled as a student in Dōngwú University (東吳大學) in Sūzhōu. While recuperating from an illness that forced him to drop out of school, he began to study Buddhism more seriously. Through family connections he became

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<sup>21</sup> See Boorman 1970, 48 (vol. 3).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34.

associated with the Enlightenment Garden (覺園), a center for lay Buddhist activists and Buddhist charity work. There, at age 21, he met the eminent Buddhist teacher, Yuányīng (圓瑛 1878-1953), took refuge and studied Buddhist texts with him.

At the same time Zhào also began to serve as the secretary of the Chinese Buddhist Association (中國佛教協會, hereafter CBA) in Shànghǎi. During the war with Japan he participated in charity work in the city and after the war ended, with the help of others, he founded the Chinese Association for Promoting Democracy (中國民主促進會).

In the years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Zhào increased his participation in political and social activities. He participated in international conferences and delegations to promote China's relationship with other countries, such as Burma and Japan. He also participated in peace related activities and organizations. For example, he was a delegate to the Conference on Disarmament and International Cooperation in Stockholm in 1958, was in the Special Conference of the World Peace Council in Stockholm in 1959 and in the 6th World Conference Against the Use of Atomic Bombs in Tokyo in 1960.

## 5.2. Zhào Púchū as the leader of the Chinese Buddhist Association

In 1949, Buddhists struggled to secure their position in the new political situation. The odds were against them. The Communists were not interested in promoting any religion, but there was not yet any clear sign that it was forbidden. One of the leading figures in the effort to integrate Buddhism into the new China was a monk by the name of Jùzàn (1908–1984 巨贊). Jùzàn was attracted to Socialism from an early age and was the ideal person for the job. In fact, he was ordained under Tàixū to save himself from the Nationalists, who were looking for him because of his involvement with Communist activities in Shànghǎi.

Jùzàn diligently sent memorandums to chairman Máo seeking to reform the Saṅgha,<sup>23</sup> but they were repeatedly rejected. However, where Jùzàn failed, Zhào was more successful in soliciting the cooperation of the new regime. In May of 1951, he failed at his first attempt to reestablish the CBA on the mainland (The CBA had been disbanded in 1937.) According to Holmes Welch, Zhào managed to convince the religious affairs section of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Religious

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<sup>23</sup>For more information on Jùzàn's reforms see Xué Yú 2009 and Welch 1972, 7-11.

Affairs Division to form the CBA. However, in practice, nothing happened. It seemed that the ruling Communist party was yet to determine its policy towards religious institutions (Welch 1972, 17-18).

Finally, in 1953, the CBA was reestablished. Its inaugural meeting was held in May, exactly two years after Zhào's initial attempt. At first, both Jùzàn and Zhào had a leading role in the newly formed CBA, but Jùzàn's position gradually diminished, whereas Zhào's influence grew. Zhào played a major role in laying the foundations for the future of the CBA (Welch 1972, 19).

The relationship between laity and monks was a part of the CBA's agenda. For example, Zhào announced that the CBA would have no ordinary members. He argued, "ordinary members would lead to inequalities between the Saṅgha and the laity" (Welch 1972, 19). The CBA was then not an organization for Buddhists but functioned more as a mediating body between the Saṅgha and the state, and its leaders, both monks and laymen, were selected. While this move was probably politically motivated, it was another indication that during Communist rule laity would not be assigned a back seat on the Buddhist bus. While in name Yuányīng and then Sherab Gyatso headed the CBA, Holmes Welch argued that in fact Zhào, who served as secretary-general, was the true head (Welch 1972, 23).

The fact that a layman's influence overshadowed that of monks was uncommon in Chinese Buddhism, even in the early years of the PRC. In response to Zhào's leadership Jùzàn complained: "According to Buddhist scriptures, monks and nuns who have left lay life are in charge of the Dharma, whereas Buddhist devotees who remain laymen merely protect the Dharma" (Welch 1972, 10). This was a traditional view held by most of the monastic Buddhists. Monks should decide the governance of the Saṅgha and the laity should support the monastic leadership.

Jùzàn was eventually sentenced to prison in 1967 as a counter-revolutionary. He was released only after the Cultural Revolution in 1980 and died four years later. Zhào's lot was better, despite the fact that even he suffered a setback during the Cultural Revolution. Already in the early years of the CBA, prior to the Cultural Revolution, Zhào was well aware of Buddhists' vulnerable position and of the need to negotiate between a secular regime that was hostile towards religions and Buddhist interests. For example, in response to some Buddhist grievances, Zhào, the *de facto* leader of the largest Buddhist organization in China, did not protest to the regime in an attempt to ease the tensions, but instead sent the Buddhists to do some soul searching. He argued that some of the problems occurred because "the

personal conduct of Buddhists has gotten out of line... the first thing Buddhists should do is to ask whether they themselves have been patriotic and law-abiding and clearly distinguished between the enemy and themselves, between the heterodox and the orthodox” (Welch 1972, 24). Perhaps due to this kind of skillful navigation between the Buddhist community’s needs and the hostile political environment, the CBA survived until 1966.

Like many other leaders and intellectuals, Zhào suffered a humiliating fate during the troubled years of the Cultural Revolution. However, he was invited back to public service by Prime Minister Zhōu Ēnlái when he heard about Zhào’s predicament and was again appointed the head of the Buddhist Association. When the scholar John Strong visited China in 1972, he was hosted in the headquarters of the newly established CBA in Guǎngjì temple by Zhào Púchū (Sarah Strong and John Strong 1974). Zhào continued to lead the CBA until his death during a period of remarkable growth of Buddhism in China.

Zhào’s leadership, as far as I could gather, was remarkable in how uncontroversial it was. Zhào’s pragmatic approach in the years after the reestablishment of the CBA probably contributed to his success. Unlike the revolutionary young Zhào, the old Zhào seemed to see the monastic community as the “upholders of the Buddhadharma 住持佛法.” However, according to Zhào, while in Theravāda Buddhism there is a fundamental difference between monks and laity, in China (beyond the formal display of respect) the distinction is “not that strict” (Zhào, from his Common Q& A about Buddhism). He seemed less interested in the question of equality and more focused on the complementary roles of the laity and the monastic within the Buddhist community. When asked about the growing role of the laity, Zhào answered, “In Burma, they think that the present age marks the period when the power will shift from the Saṅgha to the laity. But whether this is the direction Chinese Buddhism will take, and whether Buddhism with no monks at all is still Buddhism, it is still too early to say” (Sarah Strong and John Strong 1974, 330). Zhào seemed to believe that if monks, nuns and laity each fulfill their respective roles, Buddhism could become a powerful force in creating a better society and a more peaceful world.

## Conclusions

I began this paper by quoting by Helen Hardacre’s argument that modern trends have affected the relations between the laity and monastic communities in many of the Buddhist traditions in Asia. The results have been (1) a larger participation in

shaping the future trajectory of Buddhist institutions; (2) a confidence that they, as laypeople, can interpret the sacred teachings, even at variance with the monastic interpretation; (3) a growing skepticism regarding monastic superiority over the lay community; (4) a challenge to the monastic monopoly over funerals and other rituals.

This paper has demonstrated that laity in China have been no different, as is evident from the careers of three notable lay Buddhists in 20th century China. These laypeople pushed the boundaries on all these fronts, and challenged the Saṅgha's authority on their sole right to perform religious rituals (as we saw with Wáng's initiation ceremonies), to interpret the teaching even in a controversial manner that rejected assumptions long held by the monastic authoritative interpretation (as we saw with Oūyáng and his promotion of Yogācāra), and even to attempt to assume leading positions in Buddhist institutions (as both Oūyáng's pioneering attempt and Zhào Púchū's success in leading the CBA demonstrate).

These three examples are by no means isolated. One can add the role of lay associations and initiatives of laypeople, independent of monastic guidance, in reaching out to the larger Chinese population (see for example Welch 1968, 72-86 and Jessup 2010). One can also adduce other controversial laypeople such as the self-proclaimed Chán teacher Nán Huáijīn (B. 1918 南懷瑾). These examples do not imply that the monastic authority was rejected. In fact, there is little doubt that the majority of lay devotees still looked to the monastic Saṅgha as the embodiment of the Buddha in the world and the upholders of his teaching. However, this traditional assumption that the monastic Saṅgha have a monopoly of religious authority, which was the *modus operandi* of the pre-modern period, has been consistently challenged by the laity since the early 20th century and resulted in a more egalitarian lay-monastic relationship.

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