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Buddhist Revival under State Watch

André LALIBERTÉ

Abstract: The Chinese Communist Party has shown tolerance, if not direct support, for the growth of Buddhism over the last few decades. Three explanations for this lenient attitude are explored in this article. The flourishing of Buddhism is encouraged by the state less for its propaganda value in foreign affairs than for its potential to lure tourists who will, in turn, represent a source of revenue for local governments. Buddhist institutions are also establishing their track record in the management of philanthropic activities in impoverished area where local governments lack the resources to offer specific social services. Finally, the development of such activities has contributed to enhance cooperation between China and Taiwan, whose governments have a vested interest in the improvement of relations across the Strait. The article concludes that the growth of Buddhism in China results from the initiatives of Buddhists themselves, and the government supports this growth because it serves local politics well.

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Keywords: China, Taiwan, communist party, Buddhism, foreign relations, philanthropy

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Introduction

This article¹ provides a general analysis of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) motivations in supporting the development of Chinese Buddhism during the Hu Jintao era. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a new area of research in the study of government in the People's Republic of China (PRC) that has received scant attention. The relationship between the state and Chinese Buddhism² in the PRC is an issue seldom examined in the study of politics in China. The existing political science literature on the subject of relations between state and religions in China has long devoted most of its attention to Christianity, whether Protestant (Kindopp 2004; Cheng 2003; Covell 2001; Wickeri 1989) or Catholic (Madsen 2003), and often from the perspectives of adversarial relations between religion and state (Bays 2003). Islam in China has attracted some attention from scholars, but mostly from the perspective of anthropology, which looks at that religion as a facet of ethnicity (Gladney 1996). Among the new religions originating in China, groups such as Falungong have received considerable attention (Tong 2009; Ownby 2010; Palmer 2007) out of a concern for human rights following the persecution of adherents of that religion.

However, aside from the exception of Falungong, there are too few studies about relations between state and religion in the PRC that focus on the two other religions recognized by the CCP. Research on Taoism and popular religions written in European languages has looked at relations between government officials and local religions in the fields of history (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Robinet 1997), anthropology (Chau 2006; Dean 1998; Schipper 1994), and sociology (Fan 2005), but few researchers have approached this topic from the perspective of political science (see Tsai 2002; Eng and Lin 2002; Feuchtwang 2000). The same

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 - 2 The situation of Tibetan Buddhism has received greater coverage than the situation of Buddhism among Han Chinese (汉族佛教, Hanzu Fojiao), which has many times more adherents. The relationship between the state and the latter constitutes the focus of this article.

is true for Buddhism, which is the object of many studies in anthropology, sociology and history in Western languages (Fisher 2008; Ji 2008; Wu 2009; Yang 2006; Yang and Wei 2005), as well as in Chinese (Liu 2006 and 2002; Li 2002; Lai 1999; Deng 1994), but none of these authors look at it primarily from the angle of political science. There are studies on the relationship between the state and Tibetan Buddhism (Tuttle 2007; Barnett 1994), about the relations between the state and Buddhism in Taiwan (Madsen 2007; Laliberté 2005, 2003; Jones 1999, 1996), and about Buddhist political thought (Chang 1971; Chan 1985), but with few exceptions (such as the case studies of Ashiwa on the revival of Nanputuo temple in Fujian (2009), Wank on the structure of authority over Chinese Buddhist institutions (2009), and Weller and Sun (2010), very little has been written on contemporary Chinese Buddhism in the PRC. That tradition deserves more attention than it has received so far because of its importance in contemporary China relative to other religions.

Buddhism has come a long way since the Cultural Revolution. As the religion with the largest number of adherents in China, according to official statistics, Buddhism has expanded steadily under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. While the growth of the Protestant churches represents one of the most dramatic developments regarding religion in China, the expansion of Buddhism is interesting in its own right. If human rights organizations that focus on religious persecution in China are to be believed, followers of Buddhism are seldom targeted by government interference, in contrast to followers of Christianity.³ Buddhism represents one of the pillars of the Chinese tradition, which the CCP claims to preserve. Party leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Jia Qingling have openly supported the development of Buddhism over the years by making public appearances alongside temple abbots. Local governments, often with financial assistance from overseas Chinese, Hong Kong-based or Taiwanese businesses, promote the repairing of temples and even the building of new ones. Why is the CCP more lenient toward Buddhism compared to other religions? Are there policy objectives being served by Buddhist institutions?

The article considers three policies of particular relative importance for the CCP and looks at the extent to which the growth of Buddhism could be helpful in achieving them, presumably providing a rationale for

3 This view, however, may reflect the perspectives of Western missionaries and Chinese Christians with good connections in the West and who have good channels to inform public opinion when they are targeted by Chinese authorities.

state support. It starts with the hypotheses that the development of Buddhism could help the CCP project the image of the PRC as a rising power striving toward “peaceful development”, that it could support the party’s effort to achieve a “harmonious society” in domestic policies, and that it could help improve cross-Strait relations. The article argues that official Chinese Buddhist institutions at the national level may be of limited value in influencing Buddhist citizens in foreign countries, but local temples and associations use their foreign contacts to develop activities that buttress the legitimacy of local governments and party cadres. In particular, Buddhist institutions take advantage of their value as cultural resources to attract foreign investment and use part of their wealth to deliver social services, two achievements that local cadres support. Within the context of these activities, central and local Chinese Buddhist associations’ opportunities for cooperation with Taiwanese Buddhist associations have increased, and thereby they have contributed to the improvement of the climate in cross-Strait relations, an important objective for the CCP. Even though the actual achievements of Buddhist institutions may fall short of directly helping the CCP reach its goals, it is not so much the successes of Buddhist associations that matter to the CCP, but the hope that they could help the party achieve them. The next section discusses the support given to Buddhist associations within the framework of the United Front Work Department.

Buddhism and United Front Policy

The institutional development of Buddhism in China for the last ten years has been most remarkable. One crucial aspect of this development that deserves scrutiny is the lack of opposition from the CCP. In contrast to the harsh response to the popularity of Falungong and other *qigong* groups since 2000, the government approves the growth of Buddhism by allowing the religion to increase its visibility in contemporary Chinese society. The difference between the lenient – if not supportive – treatment the CCP reserves for Buddhism, in contrast to the repression of the Falungong, is understandable, in that members of the former never opposed the state, while members of the latter openly challenged the government’s policy towards religion (Ownby 2010; Palmer 2007). But it is more difficult to understand what appears to be the preferential treatment the CCP bestows upon Buddhism, relative to the close control it imposes on Protestant Christianity, the other major religion among the five that are officially recognized. Chinese academics with whom I have

discussed the issue of Buddhism's growth have always mentioned that officials in the security apparatus look nervously at the expansion of Christianity, and that human rights associations that report on occasional actions against churches, congregations, etc., usually do not find similar treatments meted out on Buddhists. While the views of people concerned with human rights may reflect the cultural bias of associations that focus on Protestant and Catholic churches, the perspectives expressed by scholars are those of a group of people with a variety of beliefs and opinions. Even the instruction material used to train CCP cadre, for example, shows a respectful treatment of Buddhism (Gong 2000).

This article does not claim that the CCP policy has engineered the growth of Buddhism in China to respond to the growth of Christianity, even though many scholars I met in China over the last three years casually mentioned this possibility. Field research and participant observations by many scholars have shown that the expansion of Buddhism results primarily from the initiatives of entrepreneurial monks and energetic devotees, as well as their good relations with local governments (Fisher 2008; Ji 2008; Yang and Wei 2005; Li 2002; Liu 2002; Deng 1994). Yet, this article notes that the CCP has not opposed that expansion and investigates the reasons behind this passive form of support. Its main claim is that Buddhism represents an important component of the CCP United Front Work because the visibility of Buddhism serves its interests well. It argues that the government seeks to promote abroad an image of tolerance toward religion in general in the PRC; to demonstrate that tolerance, the PRC lets Buddhist economic and philanthropic activities flourish. A key group targeted by this endeavour is the Buddhist community in Taiwan.

The formidable expansion of Buddhism has been made possible by the interests that the CCP and Buddhist institutions share: The party looks toward the Buddhist Association of China (BAC, 中国佛教协会, *Zhongguo fojiao xiehui*) to implement some of its policies, and the BAC, in turn, willingly obliges because it grants its leaders a measure of authority and influence over Buddhists. For example, the party and the BAC share an interest in clearly defining the Buddhist field, i.e. in determining what they view as the correct practice of the religion. The CCP fears the proliferation of independent religious movements that could challenge its oligopolistic framework of five official religions, while the BAC is concerned with its own ability to control all activities in the Buddhist field (Ji 2008: 256). This convergence of interests was already clear in the 1990s

when *qigong* groups became popular, thereby prompting Buddhist scholars to criticize the Falungong as a threat to the BAC's monopoly over Buddhism three years before the clampdown by the CCP (Ji 2008: 257, 362 fn 14). In addition to this, both the CCP and the BAC seek to ensure the latter's authority over the different schools of the religion and to promote unity between the different ethnic groups where Buddhism is influential, most particularly Tibetan Buddhism. However, in such endeavours, the BAC has had difficulty maintaining control and cannot prevent the emergence of individuals and groups who operate outside of its framework. In other words, an analysis of the CCP United Front Work cannot be limited to the study of party cadres' relations with BAC officials. In order to present a full picture, relations between local officials, on one side, and Buddhist monks and lay devotees, on the other, must be examined.

Buddhism, in its institutional and informal dimensions, is too important an actor for the CCP to ignore. Official data and studies from independent scholars point to Buddhism as the largest religion in China – although these numbers are notoriously unreliable. State statistics have mentioned since 1978 that China has 100 million Buddhists. This number serves only to give an idea of the magnitude of that religion's followers but does not say much about the actual number of people who would say that they are Buddhists. Liu Zhongyu from the Research Center for Religious Culture, East China Normal University, estimated the number at 300 million in 2005 (Zhang 2009). Scholars at Renmin University and in Shanghai have accepted these numbers as credible, and criticized the official figures for being gross underestimations. More specific data for 2010 indicated the presence of 13,000 temples, over 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns, and 34 Buddhist schools and colleges, with more than 4,000 Buddhist students on campus and nearly 6,000 graduates (Xie 2006). These numbers, however, only count monastic personnel and do not include lay people, whose degree of commitment can vary considerably. From the lay person who works in a Buddhist charity and has taken the precepts, to the occasional pilgrim who visits a temple once a year on a holiday, it is more difficult to count Buddhists than it is to estimate the numbers of members of congregational religions such as Christianity or Islam, who meet regularly. What can be ascertained more confidently, however, is the growth of Buddhism, as measured by the increase in the number of new temples built or old temples restored. Moreover, Buddhist associations have successfully developed a wide

variety of activities within the very strict parameters of the corporatist institutions supported by the state. They have emerged in all provinces and autonomous regions of China, and many have been created at the level of prefecture and cities.

China is emerging as a destination for international pilgrimage tourism for Japanese and Korean devotees who want to visit the Buddhist historical sites from which the religion was introduced to their country. The effort to rebuild temples in that context could be read as a return to a policy adopted before the Cultural Revolution, when the CCP believed in showcasing the flourishing of Buddhism in China to convince fellow Buddhists outside China that religion was alive and well under socialism, and therefore that the country's policies deserved support. The commercially successful branding of temples such as Shaolin, which attracts foreign tourists and brings badly needed investments to the impoverished region of Central Henan, suggests, however, that initiative on the part of entrepreneurial monks can anticipate the state's efforts. This kind of activity is frowned upon by most Buddhists I have met in China, whether they were scholars or lay devotees, but it has obviously received approval from the authorities because of the positive economic effects. Buddhist devotees may criticize the activities of organizations like Shaolin because of its emphasis on martial arts, but they do not fault the management of the temples because they appreciate the fact that the temples are wealthy. In the moral economy of Buddhism, John Kieschnick explained, donors can gain merit by contributing to the building and furnishing of a monastery (Kieschnick 2003: 188). It is therefore non-Buddhists who are more likely to object to Buddhist temples gaining wealth.

Charitable deeds represent one way in which Buddhist temples can avoid this criticism from non-Buddhists. The accumulated wealth generated by tourism revenue and the sale of religious paraphernalia offers many temples the possibility to respond to demands by local governments to offer some services to vulnerable groups such as orphans, victims of natural disasters, and people suffering from AIDS. Many Buddhist associations have established foundations (基金会, *jijinhui*) to raise money for the supply of social services, such as helping special schools for children with disabilities or providing emergency relief after natural disasters. These activities – which were unthinkable during the first few decades after the founding of the PRC – are becoming commonplace, and what is most remarkable is that they respond to requests from state

officials. This expansion has not yet reached the scope of Taiwanese Buddhist philanthropy, but its existence nevertheless represents a significant trend. The philanthropic activities by individual temples or lay associations, which have been expanding every year (*Buddhist Heavens* 2011), have also another benefit from the perspective of local governments: They are bringing in money and volunteers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as overseas Chinese communities abroad.

Taiwanese and mainland Chinese Buddhist associations have over the years found complementary interests in cooperation with each other: Taiwanese associations welcome the opportunity to grow and expand in China, and mainland Buddhists appreciate the financial support given them by enthusiastic Taiwanese devotees. The convening of the World Buddhist Forums in Hangzhou (2006) and in Wuxi and Taipei (2009) served as an example of that cooperation (World Buddhist Forum 2011). Unfolding in the context of the recent rapprochement in cross-Straits relations, the event had received support at the highest level of government in China. But we should not infer from that that Buddhists are helping the CCP achieve its objective of integrating Taiwan into the PRC; neither Buddhist associations in China nor those in Taiwan have the clout to influence the public opinion of their government. In the end, however, cooperation between the BAC and Taiwanese Buddhist associations serves the PRC government because the technical help that Taiwanese Buddhists can bring to the development of Buddhist charities in China contributes to local governments' goal of implementing the conditions for a "harmonious society" in the area under their jurisdiction. The next sections explore these issues.

The Use of Buddhism in Chinese Diplomacy

In his study, Holmes Welch wrote that for Mao, Buddhism was of no use domestically, but that between 1952 and 1964 the religion was used in foreign relations (1972: 169-230). The CCP sought to persuade foreigners that Buddhism thrives under communism, hoping that Buddhist circles in foreign countries could influence public opinion and sway it to push governments to adopt a pro-China foreign policy (Welch 1972: 169). That approach had become unsustainable on the eve of the Cultural Revolution because the government realized that the contradiction between the suppression of religious activities and the use of deception to convince foreigners otherwise was undermining its authority, and

because foreigners were either indifferent to Buddhism or, if they supported Chinese policy, it was not due to Buddhism's prosperity (Welch 1972: 229). Since the CCP has abandoned its policy of actively suppressing religion, however, it is worth revisiting this issue. We need to ask whether the demonstration that Buddhism thrives in China is used by the state today to show something positive to foreign audiences that care about religious freedom, whether they are Buddhists or not. In other words, to what extent does the development of Buddhism help the CCP project the image of the PRC as a rising power focusing on "peaceful development"?

The Buddhist constituency in Asia is important, and it is reasonable to assume that the flourishing of Buddhism in China could influence a significant number of Buddhists elsewhere in Asia to adopt the view that their co-religionists thrive in China, and therefore that what is good for China is good for Buddhism. Buddhists constitute the majority of the population in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos and Bhutan, and they represent a significant proportion of the population in Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Taiwan and Nepal. And although they make up just a small proportion of the Indian population, they constitute a large number. Moreover, many overseas Chinese identify with that religion. In Thailand, Cambodia and Bhutan, the religion is part of the national identity, and the Buddhist Sangha represents an important institutional actor in each country. In Japan, a number of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments have ruled through the support of a Buddhist political party. In democratic societies like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, Buddhists represent an important pressure group. However, there are intrinsic limits to the usefulness of these international Buddhist networks.

Buddhism plays a minor role in promoting positive relations between China and other authoritarian states such as Vietnam, Burma, North Korea and Laos. The CCP's use of the BAC to impress the national Buddhist associations of these countries has little value because these associations have little clout within the political system of their own countries, and they are absent from the international Buddhist associations such as the World Buddhist Council. Encouraging the development of Buddhist institutions in China could presumably influence Buddhists in Japan, Thailand and other democracies in the region where they constitute a significant part of the electorate to support China's goals. However, these connections should not be overemphasized. Japanese Buddhists are divided in a number of different sects that disagree with

one another on a wide range of issues. In South Korea, Buddhists represents less than half the population and remain bitterly divided over property and monastic regulations. Finally, Chinese Buddhists will have difficulty influencing their co-religionists in other countries as long as the CCP prevents them from joining international Buddhist associations where Taiwanese Buddhist associations are members as representatives of the Republic of China, rather than the People's Republic. The BAC is not a member of the major international Buddhist associations, such as the World Youth Buddhist Association or the World Buddhist Sangha Council. As we will see below, one interesting exception is the World Buddhist Forum convened in 2006, but this event looks more like an event catering for a China-Taiwan rapprochement than a genuine international gathering.

There are other ways in which the CCP could use Buddhists to promote the idea of the PRC as a state committed to peaceful development. Chinese political leaders now underline the importance of interfaith dialogue as a policy to foster mutual comprehension, and naturally Buddhism should be the centrepiece of Chinese efforts to promote that process. During a recently concluded Non-Aligned Movement meeting, Liu Jianchao claimed: "The Chinese people will always be a staunch force advocating interfaith dialogue" (*Sina* 2010). Buddhist leaders and believers are sometimes invited to meet religious leaders of international stature during their visits to China. These events are usually organized by the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), and they serve to show that China favours mutual understanding between people of different religions. At least two obstacles prevent the CCP from efficiently using Buddhist institutions to promote interfaith dialogue. First, the Chinese Buddhists have yet to find a leader who can generate feelings of admiration comparable to those the Dalai Lama receives from foreigners. Second, Chinese Buddhists have to develop a more robust interfaith dialogue within China in order to lend credibility to the process; the BAC's acquiescence to the CCP's policy of persecuting the Falungong was the antithesis of inter-religious dialogue.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to the use of Buddhism in international forums to promote the PRC's foreign policy is the fact that few Chinese Buddhist leaders are known in the West, except perhaps leaders from Taiwan. North Americans and Europeans know much less about any of the BAC leaders than about the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, even though the BAC leaders can claim to lead a

community that is at least ten times larger. The leadership of the BAC, from Yuan Ying (圓瑛, whose term began in 1953) to Chuan Yin (傳印, 2010-present), never had the international prestige that the Tibetan leader enjoyed. Yuan Ying passed away within a year of his nomination as leader of the BAC, and during the tenure of his successor Sherap Gyatso (1953-1966), a representative of the Tibetan branch of Buddhism, the Tibetan Autonomous Region was invaded by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). From 1980 to 2000, Zhao Puchu (赵朴初), a lay Buddhist, led the organization; in fact, no monk led the association until 2000. It took almost half a century before a Chinese Buddhist monk, Yi Cheng (一诚), who presided from 2002 to 2010, once again assumed the leadership of the association.

In sum, the CCP could not expect to gain much from the promotion of Buddhism in the international arena to advance China's national interests because the influence of Chinese Buddhist institutions at the central level is limited vis-à-vis Buddhist citizens in foreign countries, as it was 40 years ago, and for comparable reasons. However, there is one key aspect of China's foreign policy in which Chinese Buddhism is proving increasingly useful: The development of mass tourism infrastructure in recent years has allowed for pilgrims from other Asian countries to visit historical Buddhist sites. This religious tourism, in turn, draws attention to the financial needs of Chinese Buddhist institutions. For Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese and overseas Chinese Buddhists, many Buddhist temples and monasteries in China represent sacred sites of historical value with deep meaning because they are the points of origin from which Buddhism was transmitted to their country. The historical and spiritual value attached to Buddhist sites in China by outsiders, in other words, represents an asset to the CCP because it attracts money from foreign investors and philanthropic associations, two key actors that can help local governments deal with poverty and the possibility of social unrest.

Supporting “Harmonious Society”

To what extent could the development of Buddhism also help the party's effort to achieve a “harmonious society” in domestic policies? To discuss this, it is better to focus on local Buddhist institutions, ranging from associations of devotees to philanthropic associations, instead of the BAC, because the latter is losing control over the development of activi-

ties by local Buddhist institutions. As Ji Zhe noted in his discussion on the institutionalization of Buddhism, the complexity of the field of that religion is reaching an extent such that the task of imposing uniformity is becoming increasingly difficult (Ji 2008: 256-257). It is more fruitful then to look at the local governments' use of Buddhism to support their legitimacy. As an aspect of China's cultural heritage, Buddhism represents a major economic asset. Five out of the 40 Chinese UNESCO world heritage sites are Buddhist: Mount Wutai, the Longmen Grottoes, the Potala Palace in Lhasa (Tibet), the Mogao Caves and the Yunggang Grottoes (UNESCO 2011). The government's tacit approval of the revival of Buddhist institutions since the beginning of reforms has sent the signal to co-religionists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore – as well as to overseas Chinese – that pilgrimage to historical temples and monasteries is welcomed. This religious tourism represents an important source of economic activities. It not only leads to greater prosperity for Buddhist temples and associations, but it also helps local economies. As Dong Wang demonstrated in her study of Longmen's inclusion into the World Heritage list in 2000, that Buddhist site has, among other benefits, brought considerable revenue to the city of Luoyang thanks to the growth of tourism linked to the site's new status (Wang 2010: 132). Moreover, the wealth some Buddhist temples have gained from pilgrimages and donations has allowed some of them to fund charitable activities and provide a number of social services. For some local governments, Buddhist institutions constitute economic resources that generate wealth and provide some degree of relief. In so doing, they can soften the impact of social inequalities that are generating so much discontent.

The development of religious tourism is visible all over China and is encouraged by the government (*China Daily* 2007). The benefits from these activities for the state and Buddhist institutions are manifold. Religious tourism benefits local economies through the expenses of pilgrims, but also through the foreign direct investments that Buddhist institutions can attract. For local governments, it represents a convenient way to improve economic performance at a relatively low cost. Guo Shusen and Shi Qunyi have noted, however, that the rebuilding of temples after the Cultural Revolution has brought a host of new problems. They lamented that “monks have forgotten the meaning of Buddhism” and that they focus on economic activities (Guo and Shi 2009: 75). Such views were corroborated on numerous occasions during the course of my fieldwork in Central and Northern China. In a non-directed interview in a temple

in Northern China, a monk who was also a leader of the local Buddhist association stated his belief that “where there is wealth there is no faith” (Shanxi 2010). An entrepreneurial attitude, however, allows Buddhist institutions to perform philanthropic activities.

The expansion of charity represents one of the most dramatic forms of institutional change for Buddhists that has been observed in the last decade. The delivery of social services by Buddhist institutions helps the central government perform its mission of poverty alleviation in impoverished regions. There is no nationwide Buddhist charity, but at least four Buddhist provincial associations have developed their own provincial charities. The Hebei Buddhist Philanthropic Merit Society (河北佛教慈善功德会, *Hebei Fojiao Cishan Gongdehui*) was established in 1995 and since then has offered relief to schools for children with special needs, and to areas affected by natural disasters. Between 1993 and 2002, the Guangdong Provincial Buddhist association set up six foundations for various tasks ranging from elder care to maternity wards (Gen 2006: 269). In addition, the provincial association has recently created a merit society, which has opened its own Chinese medicine clinic (*Ciguang Buddhist Medicine Online Consultancy* 2011). In 2000, building on two decades of experience in fundraising for disaster relief work by Buddhists in the province, the Hunan Provincial Association set up a province-wide foundation to finance elementary schools and offer scholarships to children in need (Gen 2006: 269). From 2004 to 2005, the Shanxi provincial association worked to set up its own merit society, the *Shanxi Wutaishan Fojiao Cishan Gongde Zonghui* (山西五台山佛教慈善功德总会), to help people in poor households and offer scholarships (Gen 2006: 269).

Three of the special municipality-level Buddhist associations have also created their own charities. The Shanghai Municipal Buddhist Association, a wealthy association responsible for important locations such as the Jade Buddha Temple (玉佛寺, *Yufu si*) and the Dragon Lotus Temple (龙华寺, *Longhua si*), has built on the strength of 20 years of experience and created its own charity foundation, the Shanghai Municipal Charity Foundation (上海市慈善基金会, *Shanghai shi cishan jijinhui*), to help children in need and sponsor elementary schools. The local temples and their affiliates themselves are very active in charity work: The Yuanming Lecture Hall (圆明讲堂, *Yuanming Jiangtang*) even publishes its own newsletter, *Yuanming Cishan Tongxun* (通讯), to document its philanthropic activities with detailed information on donors to local charities. In 1993, the Chongqing Buddhist Association set up its own “project hope” (希望

工程, *xiwang gongcheng*) committee and sponsored the building of classes for elementary schools. Tianjin has also set up the *Tianjin Cishan Gongde Jijinhui* (天津佛教慈善功德基金), its own charitable foundation (*China Buddha Light Culture Net* 2009).

As Raoul Birnbaum concluded in an earlier survey, the reach of these Buddhist associations remains hampered by the limitations of their own resources – which are devoted to the rebuilding of their temples and the training of a new generation of monks – and by the immensity of the needs to address (2003). Although the Shanxi Buddhist Association can expect to benefit from alms and donations from pilgrims and tourists to the well-known site of Wutaishan, one of China's four sacred mountains, not all provinces are endowed with such an advantage. And even provinces with such assets do not necessarily choose that path. Hence, the Buddhist association of Anhui, which is home to another major site, Jiuhuashan (九华山), has yet to capitalize on this possibility. People in Jiangsu have received relief from Hong Kong-based charities, but the Buddhist provincial association has not yet established its own provincial-level charity association. Such associations, however, support local organizations at the level of prefecture or counties. Hence, the Jiangsu Buddhist Association has sponsored the development of Buddhist merit societies in Taixing (泰兴) Prefecture. The Liaoning Buddhist Association has done likewise with the Jinzhou (锦州) Prefecture Merit Society (*Chinese Buddhist News Online* 2005).

Buddhist associations at lower levels of administration, such as the prefecture and the county levels, have also established their own charities. I am aware of such associations in the prefectures of HuaiBei (淮北, in the Anhui province), Taizhou (台州, in the Zhejiang province), Nanting (南宁, in the Guangxi province), Shanwei (汕尾, in the Guangdong province), Putian (莆田, in the Fujian province), Xuzhou (徐州, in the Jiangsu province), Chenzhou (郴州, in the Hunan province) and Hunchun (琿春, in the Liaoning province). The Buddhist associations of cities such as Nanjing, Chengde (承德) and Quanzhou (泉州) have done likewise. Finally, even county-level associations have launched their own charities. Despite their limited resources, some, such as the Lingchuan (陵川) Buddhist Charity Foundation in Shanxi province, have managed to set up their own websites. Buddhist charities are sprouting up in every region of the country, regardless of both its socio-economic level and its relations with other provinces (or even with other countries). Some of the temples have been able early on to capitalize on their history to at-

tract support and afford philanthropic activities. Hence, Raoul Birnbaum mentioned the example of the Nanputuo temple in Xiamen, which has been able to use its renown as a temple where Taixu served as an abbot to establish a charity. Its success has been so considerable, he reports, that the Xiamen Nanputuo (南普陀) has inspired a convent with which it has close links to do the same, and it eventually set up its own charity in 2000 (Birnbaum 2003: 444).

In sum, the CCP has encouraged the growth of Buddhist institutions because of their ability to generate growth and their performance in the delivery of social services. But the performance of the Buddhist institutions has been limited by the state's reluctance to let religious institutions gain too much capital through such activities. Chinese scholars researching Buddhist philanthropy who were interviewed in Shanghai, Nanjing and Wuxi have all noted that the governments still impose too many constraints. Others elaborated that Buddhism is still too young and under-resourced to affect social policy. Academics tenured in major institutions who specialize in Chinese religions, and who are well connected with Buddhist associations in Eastern China, complained about the same issue. One of them described the Buddhist associations' work as amateurish and unprofessional. Observations on different websites highlighted many promises and much potential, but the reality of achievements falls far below. One of the major difficulties faced by the Buddhist organizations is the lack of ability to undertake sustained relief operations. This assertion was corroborated by observations on site in Hebei and Jiangsu during my fieldwork in 2004, 2006 and 2009. The BAC does not appear to support these initiatives: The map of its website lacks a tab labelled anything along the lines of "charity" (Buddhist Association of China 2011). Local associations, however, do advertise such activities. For example, the website Zhongfowang (中佛网, China Buddhism web), managed from Shijiazhuang (*Chinese Buddhism Online* 2010), operates a page entirely devoted to Buddhist charities, and in 2010 it cited ten relief projects throughout the country (*Chinese Buddhist Charity Online* 2010).

In sum, local temples and Buddhist associations use their foreign contacts well to develop activities buttressing the legitimacy of local governments and party cadres. In particular, Buddhist temples and monasteries take advantage of their value as cultural resources to attract foreign investment, and associations use part of their wealth to deliver social services. These are two achievements that both local governments and CCP cadres support because they indirectly bestow legitimacy on the

party-state. Foreign and overseas Chinese Buddhists may help bring investments to the PRC, but they cannot operate charitable activities, at least directly, lest this appear to be foreign interference and contradict CCP policy. Taiwanese Buddhists, who have achieved considerable success in the development of philanthropic associations on the island, are bound to play a privileged role because of the party's objective of achieving reunification with Taiwan.

Buddhist Institutions and the Taiwan Issue

Considering the importance for the CCP of the policy of "One Country, Two Systems" directed at Taiwan, the role of Chinese Buddhist institutions in supporting that policy deserves consideration. Over recent years, the PRC leadership has acquired the ability to prevail militarily over Taiwan (Parameswaran 2009). It has successfully deterred moves toward a proclamation of independence by previous President Chen Shui-bian (Chen Shuibian), and the 2008 presidential elections brought to power a government with whom China shares some interests in increasing economic cooperation and easing military tension, without the PLA having used intimidation in any ways comparable to the presidential elections of 1996 and 2000. Yet, despite the lessening of tension, the political dynamics in Taiwan prevent the current president, Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu), from contemplating negotiations for an eventual unification with the PRC, which the CCP wishes to bring about. Political negotiation between the governments is impossible, and as long as PRC leaders refuse to recognize the legitimacy of their counterpart in the ROC, the impasse remains: The negotiation for an Economic Framework Agreement may offer a possibility to break that stalemate, but at the time of writing, it was still a work in progress.

Political dialogue between Hu Jintao, as general secretary of the CCP, and Lien Chan (Lian Zhan), as chairman of the Kuomintang (KMT, Guomindang), in 2005 has not led to significant change in the short term, even if it has helped the resumption of meetings between the Strait Exchanges Foundation (SEF) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS), which were re-started in 2008 (Ko 2009). But as long as a majority of the electorate in Taiwan remains unconvinced that it is in its best interest to accept incorporation into the PRC, the goal of peaceful reunification will be difficult to achieve (Romberg 2010). It is in this context that the CCP relies on civil society to

convince Taiwanese about the benefits of reunification with China. The SEF-ARATS meetings, which were exchanges between business elites, did produce some agreements between the two sides, but did not lead to a change of opinion in Taiwanese society (MAC 2010). The CCP has to think of strategies to win the heart of Taiwanese “compatriots”. Among these strategies, the idea that the two sides share the same culture and therefore that reunification is natural has often been expressed (*Xinhua News* 2009). Buddhism, as an institutional religion with deep roots in China and a vibrant development in Taiwan, represents an important resource to achieve that goal.

Buddhist institutions in the PRC have shown great interest in knowing more about the welfare of their counterparts in Taiwan since the beginning of the reform policy. After the Cultural Revolution almost destroyed the last remnants of their institutions on the mainland, Buddhist leaders and younger generations of monks and lay people have looked to Taiwan as a source of continuity for their tradition. After Taiwan had embarked on its democratic transition and the regulations preventing the expansion of independent Buddhist associations were relaxed, large lay Buddhist associations expanded and started to establish branches overseas. In so doing, they became known to overseas Chinese, and from their locations in North America and Asia, the members of these Taiwanese associations could visit the PRC.

At the beginning, cooperation between Buddhist institutions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait was limited. Yet, high-profile visits by prominent monks based in Taiwan, such as Xingyun, the founder of the Buddha Light Mountain (Foguangshan), who was a native of mainland China, generated high hopes from the leadership of the CCP that he could sway Taiwanese Buddhists to their side. Xingyun has emerged as an important player among Taiwanese Buddhists and in Taiwanese society at large, someone that the leaders of the CCP could welcome in China. During the presidential election of 1996, Xingyun had supported a candidate that opposed Taiwanese independence and won about 10 per cent of the vote. Although this was not significant electorally, it demonstrated to the PRC where Xingyun and his organization stood. Lay Buddhists with important positions in Foguangshan were instrumental in facilitating some form of dialogue between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Hence Wu Po-hsiung (Wu Boxiong), chair of the Taiwan chapter of the Buddha Light International Association (BLIA) – the organization founded by Xingyun after he successfully developed Foguangshan – was

also the chairman of the KMT and became instrumental in maintaining channels of communication between the leadership of the KMT and the CCP. His visit to the PRC laid the groundwork for the historic meeting between Lien Chan and Hu Jintao.

The Tzu Chi Merit Society (慈濟功德會, *Ciji Gongdehui*), the most important charity organization in Taiwan, is another Taiwanese Buddhist association that has received support from governments in China. The foundation finally received authorization from the central government to set up a branch in Beijing in the immediate aftermath of its rapid effort to provide relief to Sichuan after the 512 quake of 2008. Tzu Chi has established branches in other cities, with the help of Taiwanese businesses operating in the PRC. The information about the PRC government's acceptance of Tzu Chi's presence in China, tellingly, has been relayed by the official site of the China Corporate Social Responsibility (2008). However, the organization has been active in the PRC since 1992, when it provided relief to victims of natural disasters in central China (Shih, Lin, and Hsieh 2000; Shi 1999). Until 2008, Tzu Chi was encouraged to provide relief, help establish schools in impoverished areas, and contribute to the reconstruction of communities affected by flood or quakes, but was not allowed to set up a permanent presence. During those years, the foundation relied on the goodwill of local governments. Since Tzu Chi has received permission to operate in China, more local governments have approved (or have not opposed) its opening of new liaison bureaus, including a headquarters in Suzhou (State Administration for Religious Affairs 2010). The activities of Tzu Chi are known to all members of the association overseas and in Taiwan. Leaders of the foundation's administrative board have also managed to leave their imprint on Chinese institutions. Wang Tuan-cheng, the brother of Tzu Chi's founder Cheng Yen, was a member of the honorary board of China's national philanthropic association (*Chinese Federation of Charities* 2010).

The crowning achievement of the religious diplomacy conducted by the CCP was the convening of the World Buddhist Forum. Its co-organizers included the BAC, the BLIA, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association (HKBA) and the China Religious Culture Communication Association (CRCCA). The BAC is presented as a national patriotic association for Buddhists of various nationalities, the BLIA as an international association, the HKBA as a leading organization in Hong Kong, and the CRCCA as a national organization founded voluntarily by residents of

the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, and by overseas Chinese. After an initial event organized in Hangzhou in 2006, Buddhist leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait agreed to organize the event in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, and to conclude it in Puli, in central Taiwan. Xingyun, as leader of the Buddha Light Association, contributed to the organization of the event in that capacity, and not as a member of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC), which claims legitimacy over all Buddhists in China. The CRCCA chairmanship was held by Ye Xiaowen, general director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (World Buddhist Forum 2008). The event received the support of the very top leadership: Jia Qinglin, head of the constitutionally second-most important state organ, the CPPCC, launched the forum in a widely broadcasted ceremony in China (Gov.cn 2009).

The close connections between Xingyun and people close to the political leadership of the PRC, however, has generated some outrage in Taiwan, and some of the members of his organization have expressed strong opposition to their spiritual leader. In sum, the membership in Foguangshan does not always support Xingyun's rapprochement with the mainland government. A similar caveat needs to be made with respect to Tzu Chi: Many Taiwanese are uncomfortable with the work the association is performing in the PRC. Despite these limitations, however, the CCP has learned over the years that cooperation between Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhists does not present the kind of political risks that Christians, who have links with their co-religionists in the West, could present. Buddhists tend to be apolitical. Taiwanese Buddhists proved to be so during the period of martial law in Taiwan, and they were absent from the movements in civil society pushing for democratization (Jones 1999). They were never pro-active to the same extent as the Way of Unity (*Yiguandao*) (Lin 1994) or the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan (Rubinstein 1991) in pushing for political reforms. In addition, the considerable number of charitable activities undertaken by lay Buddhist associations in Taiwan has not led to a questioning of state legitimacy and has never engendered an oppositional political movement. In short, Buddhist institutions, in Taiwan at least, have shown the leadership in China that it needs not fear the empowerment of Buddhism within its borders. Although support for the development of Buddhist charities in China is not spelled out explicitly in CCP documents, it is tacitly expressed in the willingness of the Chinese government at all levels to allow the registration of Buddhist charities and foundations whose activities are similar to

those of their counterparts in Taiwan. Buddhist monks and lay leaders in locations as diverse as Shijiazhuang, Tianjin, Taiyuan and Xiamen have all confirmed in the course of interviews that Taiwanese Buddhist associations have provided the model they would like to emulate (Shijiazhuang 2007, Tianjin 2010, Taiyuan 2010, Xiamen 2010).

Conclusion

The CCP sees the expansion of Buddhist institutions in the PRC favourably because it can serve three important and interrelated policy objectives at little cost. Firstly, it can demonstrate to foreigners that Buddhism thrives in China and foster religious tourism that brings in revenues from pilgrims coming from countries where Buddhism matters. This is a rather different approach from the objective sought by the CCP in the first decade of the PRC's existence, when the new regime attempted to convince the foreign public that Buddhism thrives under socialism and hoped that as a result foreign governments would improve their relations with China. Secondly, tourism and pilgrimages have generated wealth for Buddhist institutions that has made the development of philanthropic activities possible. The delivery of social services by Buddhist charities is appreciated by local governments because it dampens the worst effects of China's mode of development and contributes to the goal of social stability encapsulated in the slogan "harmonious society". Finally, one additional benefit of that development is that the cooperation between Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhist associations results in conditions favouring the détente between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait at the political level. We cannot infer from the fact that the state looks favourably upon the success of Buddhist tourism and the expansion of Buddhist philanthropy, however, that these developments result from deliberate CCP policies at the central level. The evidence discussed here suggests that the wealth of Buddhist associations and the activities of Buddhist charities result from initiatives on the part of these organizations rather than from state action.

However, the achievements of Buddhist institutions in promoting China's diplomacy, fostering economic growth, delivering social services and improving the climate of cross-Strait relations should not be overstated. The BAC has not managed to convince the rest of the world that the Dalai Lama is an illegitimate leader, or that believers in China enjoy total religious freedom. Although they have helped improve cross-Strait

relations and facilitated contacts between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese, Buddhist institutions cannot contribute to reunification as long as most Taiwanese reject the PRC's concept of "One Country, Two Systems". With respect to investments made by foreign and overseas Chinese tourists and devotees to help restore old temples or build new ones, the available data does not allow us to make generalizations valid for the entire country. It is clear that the recently acquired wealth of Buddhist temples allows them to operate charities that can complement the shortcomings of impoverished local governments, but there are wide variations throughout the country. Though charities linked to temples with historical reputations (such as Nanputuo in Xiamen and the Jade Buddha temple in Shanghai) are able to assist large numbers of destitute people, temples in interior provinces are often unable to maintain themselves, let alone succor others. The expansion of Buddhist activities in the PRC, it is important to stress, does not necessarily mean that they automatically meet with state support. In some respects, the central government simply lacks the ability to control significant domains of Chinese society, including religious activities. This is also true of the BAC and its local branches. With the exception of the two World Buddhist Forums and the establishment of some charitable organizations, the BAC itself is not orchestrating many of the developments of Buddhism in China.

Buddhist institutions benefit from CCP tolerance of their activities to the extent that the party-state does not impose too many obstacles to their growth. But this attitude falls short of total support for the expansion of their influence within and outside the country. Temples are being rebuilt, monastic orders are expanding, temple networks are becoming denser, publications more numerous, scholarship is increasing, and charitable activities are spreading thanks to the initiatives of Buddhist institutions and leaders; little of this depends on state patronage. All of the above should not be confused with a hands-off state policy of neutrality toward religion. The wider scope of these activities becomes permissible in the view of the CCP as long as it can serve, among others tasks, to buttress its new-found claim to legitimacy as the promoter of Chinese tradition, help fill gaps in the provision of social services, and support the goal of national unification. The Chinese state is largely supportive of Buddhist activities in China today, but this support is qualified. The nature of this support can be best described as merely a lack of opposition rather than an overt backing of the kind the Confucius Institutes receive for their expansion around the world. Local governments vary in their

responses to the growth of Buddhism. China being such a large, complex and diverse country, it is impossible to generalize about the relations between local governments and Buddhist institutions, but the available evidence, discussed above, has demonstrated an enthusiasm across regions for the development of Buddhist philanthropy. The CCP's acceptance of Buddhism's growth in China is one of the most important aspects of its policy towards religion, even though it is not particularly well known outside the country.

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