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Banner calligraphy Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

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‘ASPIRING TO ENLIGHTENMENT’: BUDDHISM AND ATHEISM IN 1980s CHINA

 Scott Pacey

With its theoretical foundations in Marx, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always been officially atheist, and members of the party are not supposed to be religious adherents. In practice, since coming to power in 1949, the CCP’s approach to managing religious activity has been much more complex. In the 1950s, the party expected religious beliefs to disappear as society progressed ideologically, but the 1954 constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) granted freedom of religious belief nonetheless. This policy reflected Mao’s early, comparatively relaxed approach to dealing with religion. In his 1927 ‘Report of an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan’, Mao explained that ‘it is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely’.¹

According to the sociologist of religion in China, Fenggang Yang:

In the ideological lexicon of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), atheism is a basic doctrine, which manifests in two major forms: scientific atheism and militant atheism. Scientific atheism, as the offspring of the European Enlightenment Movement, regards religion as illusory or false consciousness, non-scientific and backward; thus atheist propaganda is necessary to expunge religion. In contrast, militant atheism, as advocated by Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks, treats religion as the dangerous opium and narcotic of the people, a wrong political ideology serving the interests of the anti-revolutionary forces; thus forces may be necessary to control or eliminate religion. Scientific atheism is the theoretical basis for tolerating religion while carrying out atheist propaganda, whereas militant atheism leads to antireligious measures.²

However, although atheism is a central tenet of the party’s ideological platform, its approach to dealing with religion has not been rooted only in these sources. It is also built on approaches developed during the modernisation

¹ Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China* (New York: Continuum, 2011), p.162. For Mao’s original comments, see Mao Tse-Tung, *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), p.46. <<http://marx2mao.com/Mao/HP27.html>>.

² Fenggang Yang, ‘Between Secularist Ideology and Desecularizing Reality: The Birth and Growth of Religious Research in Communist China,’ *Sociology of Religion* 65.2 (2004): 101–19, at p.103.

- 3 See Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Religions: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp.7–8.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.3.
- 6 Hu Shi 胡適, 'Kexue de renshengguan' 科學的人生觀, in ed. Hu Shi, *Hu Shi wenxuan* 胡適文選 (Hong Kong: Xiandai shudian, 1956), p.74.
- 7 Hu Shi, 'A Scientific View of Human Life,' p.74.
- 8 D.W.Y Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p.135.
- 9 T'ai-hsü, 'On Atheism,' in ed. and trans. Douglas Lancashire, *Chinese Essays on Religion and Faith* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), p.63. For the original text, see Taixu 太虛, 'Wushen lun' 無神論, in ed. Yinshun 印順, *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (CD-ROM), Vol.13 (Xinzhu: Caituan faren Yinshun wenjiao jijinhui, 2005), pp.284–95, at p.291.
- 10 T'ai-hsü, 'On Atheism,' p.71; Taixu, 'Wushen lun,' p.291.
- 11 See Erik J. Hammerstrom, 'Buddhists Discuss Science in Modern China (1895–1949)' (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2010).
- 12 See *ibid.*, p.443.

movement in the Republic. Then, two neologisms — 'religion' (Ch. *zongjiao* 宗教; Jp. *shūkyō*)³ and 'superstition' (Ch. *mixin* 迷信; Jp. *meishin*)⁴ — that were imported into Chinese from Japanese came to frame debates about religious belief. As Rebecca Nedostup notes regarding the Nationalists' (hereafter abbreviated according to the Wade–Giles romanisation of their Chinese name — KMT) policies during the Republican period, religion had to be 'religion in a rationalized form — not tales of magical crabs and mystical eggs. In other words, religion can be distinguished from superstition'.⁵ Under the KMT, religious practice was, therefore, permitted, but religious representatives sought to carve out a space for their traditions within the realm of the rational and religious, rather than the irrational and superstitious.

Opposition to 'religion', however, increased with the rising tide of scientism and Marxism in the 1910s and 1920s. Modernist intellectuals, during the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement in 1919, called for religion to be discarded in light of science and philosophy — a position that gained currency during the latter stages of the Republic. For example, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), a proponent of pragmatism and former student of John Dewey (1859–1952), advocated 'using science as the basis of our philosophy of life' and 'using a scientific attitude, spirit, and methodology as our attitude to life and way of living'.⁶ In 1930, he put forward a set of scientific 'new ten commandments' that held human beings to be animals — whose values changed according to the time and environment — and a product of evolution, in contrast to divinely created beings.⁷ A debate between advocates of science and metaphysics occurred in print in 1923, concerning which of these — science or metaphysics — was most suited to the formation of a viable 'philosophy of life'.⁸ The period thus saw a group of Chinese intellectuals begin to articulate a worldview founded in atheism and science, while at the same time opposing religion, and not just superstition, as unmodern.

Certain Buddhists tried to establish a privileged space for Buddhism in the 1920s and 1930s. The most vocal proponent of this approach was the monastic Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947). Taixu pointed out that there was no creator deity or notion of the soul in Buddhism; therefore, it was atheistic and scientifically valid.⁹ For example, in an essay penned in 1913, he wrote:

Alas! lord of creation! You are no lord of creation! Are you not the supreme expression of ignorance? For the deceptive and non-existent to be regarded as true and existent is truly to be subject to the greatest of illusions. Because this illusion has not been destroyed, and because enlightenment has not been established, I shall never spare myself in controverting this notion.¹⁰

Taixu did, in fact, continue to argue for the atheistic nature of Buddhism and its compatibility with science throughout his career. As Erik J. Hammerstrom has shown, Buddhists associated with the Wuchang Buddhist Seminary (*Wuchang foxueyuan* 武昌佛學院), where Taixu was an important influence, thought about Buddhism and science too, and published articles on the subject in the pages of *Haichao yin* 海潮音 — a magazine Taixu co-founded in 1920.¹¹ These writers shared with Buddhists who were not interested in science the 'core' of Buddhist beliefs (reincarnation, karma, the superknowledges or *shentong* 神通, and other beliefs that can be considered 'supernatural'),¹² indicating that their definitions of what was scientific differed from those of their non-Buddhist opponents.

Although the ideological environment shifted in 1949, and began moving towards militant, rather than scientific, atheism in the lead-up to the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Buddhists continued to align their doctrines with the nation’s overarching intellectual context. In the 1950s, the government established representative organisations for China’s official religions. Writers affiliated with these often sought to show how their religious ambitions did not contradict party policy. For example, as Holmes Welch has shown in his classic study *Buddhism under Mao*, articles in the magazine *Xiandai foxue* 現代佛學 often reinterpreted Buddhist doctrine in terms of Communist ideas. ‘Sentient beings’ (*zhongsheng* 衆生), then, could refer to the ‘masses’ (*qunzhong* 群眾).¹³ ‘Thought reform’ was interpreted as a process of mental purification.¹⁴ In denying the existence of a soul and a creator deity, the Buddha had presaged Marxist scientific atheism.¹⁵

The magazine’s editor, the monastic Juzan 巨贊 (1908–84), explained that ‘the nature of Buddhism was different from that of other religions because it was “atheist” (*wu-shen* 無神)’.¹⁶ He thus carved out a unique space for Buddhism by showing that it alone cohered with one of the most fundamental tenets of Marxism. In 1960, the monastic Jinhui 晉惠 also wrote in the magazine that Buddhism was atheistic. He supported this assertion with the work of writers including Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), whose essay ‘Buddhist Dialectics’ was published in Chinese translation in 1957.¹⁷ Sankrityayan referenced Buddhism’s lack of belief in a creator deity. Jinhui also referred to the Russian Buddhologist Fedor Shcherbatskoi’s *Buddhist Logic* (1930–32) (part of which appeared in translation in *Xiandai foxue*’s second issue in 1959), in which he cites the fact that Buddhism does not incorporate belief in a god or soul.¹⁸

Despite their efforts to show that Buddhism could coexist with Marxism — and even complement it — *Xiandai foxue* ceased publication shortly before the Cultural Revolution, in 1964. During the ensuing period of militant atheism, religious activity continued privately and in secret.¹⁹ After this, the Eleventh Party Congress reaffirmed the freedom of religious belief that had been guaranteed in the 1954 constitution. The government re-established the Religious Affairs Bureau (*Zongjiao shiwuju* 宗教事務局) in 1979, and China’s five national religious associations were revived in 1980. A new religious policy, Document 19, was released in 1982. This stated that while one of socialism’s goals was to see the end of religion, this would happen naturally, with the progress of science and technology. Religious activity would be permitted so long as it did not contradict the aims of the CCP, was patriotic, and was pursued within the framework of China’s official religious organisations.²⁰

According to Shiping Hua, by this stage China’s intellectual landscape was divided between the Marxist scientism of Hu Qiaomu 胡喬木 (1912–92) and the Marxist humanism of Wang Ruoshui 王若水 (1926–2002).²¹ Hu’s scientific approach reflected the new emphasis on scientific development as promoted by Hua Guofeng 華國鋒 (1921–2008) after the Cultural Revolution, while Wang’s reflected the dissatisfaction with scientific Marxism felt by many students and intellectuals. At the same time, the relatively liberal religious environment created by the party’s changed stance on religion enabled writers to focus on demonstrating compliance with Document 19, and to choose whether or not to think about religion in terms of Marxist theory.

13 See Holmes Welch, *Buddhism under Mao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.86.

14 *Ibid.*, p.270.

15 *Ibid.*, p.271. Welch provides other examples as well. See his ‘Interpreting Buddhist Doctrine,’ in *ibid.*, pp.267–97.

16 See Chü-tsan [Juzan], ‘Appendix A: An Account of My Work over the Past Year,’ in *ibid.*, p.396.

17 In the magazine *Xuexi yicong* 學習譯叢. See issue 3, pp.11–15.

18 Jin Hui 晉惠, ‘Fodian zhong “wushenlun” sixiang’ 佛典中「無神論」思想, *Xiandai Foxue* 現代佛學 5 (1960): 25–27. For Fedor Shcherbatskoi, see *Buddhist Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962).

19 See Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.165.

20 For a translation of Document 19, see Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), pp.8–26.

21 Shiping Hua, *Scientism and Humanism: Two Cultures in Post-Mao China (1978–1989)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p.54.

- 22 He Guanghu, 'Thirty Years of Religious Studies in China,' in eds Fenggang Yang and Graeme Lang, *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodology, Theories and Findings* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2011), p.30.
- 23 See He Guanghu, 'Thirty Years of Religious Studies in China'; Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.49–54; Gong Xuezheng 龔學增, 'Makesizhuyi zongjiaoguan yanjiu 60 nian' 馬克思主義宗教觀研究60年, in ed. Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, *Dangdai Zhongguo zongjiaoxue yanjiu (1949–2009)* 當代中國宗教學研究 (1949–2009) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2011), pp.9–11.
- 24 'Xining shi shiliusuo zhongxiaoxue xuesheng changyi guo yige xue Lei Feng shu xinfeng de hanjia' 西寧市十六所中小學學生倡議過一個學雷鋒樹新風的寒假, *Renmin ribao* 人民日報, 31 January 1980, p.6.
- 25 Zhao Enyuan 趙恩雲 and Song Xianzhi 宋賢智, 'Xianggou gongshe yindao qunzhong pochu fengjian mixin,' 香溝公社引導群眾破除封建迷信 *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 7 January 1983, p.3.
- 26 MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, p.11. Fenggang Yang reports that 85 per cent of respondents in the Chinese Spiritual Life Survey in 2007 held some form of religious belief. See Fenggang Yang's reference to his 2010 conference paper in 'A Research Agenda on Religious Freedom in China,' *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11.2 (2013): 6–17.
- 27 Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, p.276.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.287.

This policy change was accompanied by new academic trends. From 1978, religious studies departments and institutes reopened around the PRC, including the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Institute for Religious Studies at Nanjing University. The Chinese Association of Religious Studies was founded that same year.²² There were scholars, such as Lü Daji 呂大吉 (b. 1931), who argued that the notion of religion as opium was of fundamental importance when viewing religion from a Marxist perspective. Others, such as Zheng Jianye 鄭建業 (1919–91), Zhao Fusan 趙復三 (b. 1926), as well as Ding Guangxun 丁光訓 (1915–2012) (who in 1980 became chair of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*Sanzi aiguo yundong* 三自愛國運動) — China's official Protestant organisation), argued differently. For them, Marx's comparison of religion to opium either did not represent the entirety of his views, or had been misinterpreted as a tool of oppression in light of China's 'century of humiliation'.²³ Since this began with China's defeat in the First Opium War, opium had a special resonance in China that it lacked in other contexts.

The CCP itself, however, continued to promote atheism. This can be seen in the official media. For example, *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 reported that middle and high schools in the city of Xining held a movement to study Lei Feng 雷鋒 (1940–62) during the winter of 1980. They were encouraged to maintain a diet of scientific literature, as well as to 'advocate atheism, and refrain from engaging in feudal superstition'.²⁴ Another *Renmin ribao* article, from 1983, relates how work units in Jiangsu province participated in an education campaign against 'superstitions' such as fortune telling. Part of this involved the promotion of atheism. Its success was shown by the fact that in 1982, 'not one of the commune members who built a new house — over 430 — had invited a geomancer to determine its fengshui'.²⁵

Nevertheless, religious adherence does appear to have grown, as suggested in the figures provided in Document 19. This reports that in 1949 there were 8 million Muslims, 2.7 million Catholics, and 700,000 Protestants. By 1982, these numbers had increased to approximately 10 million Muslims (although the report notes this was mainly due to population growth), more than 3 million Catholics, and 3 million Protestants. It does not give precise figures for Buddhists and Daoists, but notes that 'among the Han race, Buddhism and Daoism still exercise considerable influence at present'.²⁶ Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer report that

even though the publication of religious literature was in theory strictly controlled in the PRC — Bibles and other scriptures could be sold only on the premises of officially designated places of worship — in practice, it was easier to find religious materials than the works of Marx and Mao. Bootlegged *fengshui* manuals, divinatory almanacs, and *qigong* handbooks were among the main offerings of street-side book vendors during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁷

Throughout this period, vegetarian restaurants and lay-Buddhist associations grew in number; Goossaert and Palmer also estimate that 'from the late 1970s until the suppression of Falungong in 1999' perhaps 'about one fifth of urban residents had some form of direct contact with *qigong*'.²⁸

Reanimating Buddhism

The continued re-emergence of religion in Chinese life shows how people had begun to question the CCP's ideological stance as a totalistic worldview.

According to Zhao Dingxin, ‘fevers’ (or crazes; *re* 熱) for ‘Sartre, Nietzsche and Freud’, as well as for ‘religion’, were symptomatic of a public need for alternatives to Marx and Mao. While the ‘culture’ craze was driven by a belief that ‘Chinese culture should be held responsible for the failed development and tragedies of Mao’s era’, there was a renewed interest in ‘traditional’ culture as well.²⁹ The 1980s thus saw intellectuals become interested in Chan 禪.³⁰ Others were led to Buddhism through their interest in *qigong*.³¹

One of the principal ways for people to encounter Buddhism after Document 19 was through popular media. Goossaert and Palmer report that around this time, ‘novels, films, and TV shows were populated with Buddhist monks, Taoist magicians, and invincible heroes who could fly, disappear and reappear at will, read people’s minds, and neutralize adversaries with their miraculous inner powers or secret magical potions’.³² The comic strips of Cai Zhizhong 蔡志忠, including *Chanshuo* 禪說, were hugely popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s.³³ One producer of religious-inspired media was the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (*Shanghai meishu dianying zhipianchang* 上海美術電影製片廠). It released the classic feature *Danao tiangong* 大鬧天宮 in two parts, in 1961 and 1964. However, it disappeared along with much of the Chinese film industry during the Cultural Revolution. It revived in the reform era, producing a series of films drawn from China’s pre-modern cultural milieu, including Buddhist and Daoist topics.³⁴

In 1980, the studio released *San ge heshang* 三個和尚, a film about a trio of monastics who initially struggle to reside together, but who eventually find friendship in adversity. This won the inaugural Golden Rooster Award for best animated film. The studio also produced an animated film based on a tale of one of the Buddha’s former lives — *Jiu se lu* 九色鹿. *Laoshan daoshi* 崂山道士 was another short film about a man who trains under a Daoist master on Lao Mountain, and learns how to walk through walls.³⁵ And between 1982 and 1987, China Central Television produced a series based on the classic novel *Journey to the West* — a fantastic reconstruction of the Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang’s 玄奘 (602–664) journey to collect Buddhist texts from India.³⁶

The re-emergence of Buddhism into daily life — and the dissatisfaction with official ideology — is also evident in Li Ping’s 禮平 (b. 1948) novel *Wanxia xiaoshi de shihou* 晚霞消失的時候.³⁷ The semi-autobiographical work first appeared in the magazine *Shiyue* 十月 in 1981, and describes the regret Li felt over his participation in the Cultural Revolution. In a 1988 interview, he recalled that while searching the YMCA in Beijing as a Red Guard, he found photographs of their activities. Li remarked that ‘this was the first time I became aware that religious life was so colorful, friendly, and beautiful’.³⁸ Although he never became religious himself, he eventually came to believe that while ‘religion is not true ... it has its beauty’.³⁹

The novel was popular among university students, but his positive portrayal of religion as an alternative value system, and his criticisms of an overly scientific and dehumanised Marx, led to him being interrogated about his links to underground writers and barred from delivering lectures or joining the Chinese Writer’s Association (*Zhongguo zuojia xiehui* 中國作家協會).⁴⁰ Although the novel generated, according to his own reckoning, over 100 critical essays,⁴¹ it reflected the thoughts of a young generation of students who were disillusioned with Chinese Marxism after the ‘ten years of turmoil’ (*shinian dongluan* 十年動亂). Such youths were willing to see what religion could offer in the formation of post-Maoist worldviews.

29 Zhao Dingxin, ‘Crazes,’ in ed. Edward L. Davis, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp.161–63.

30 Ji Zhe, ‘Non-institutional Religious Re-composition Among the Chinese Youth,’ *Social Compass* 53 (4): 535–49.

31 *Ibid.*, p.541.

32 Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, p.277.

33 See Ji, ‘Non-institutional Religious Re-composition,’ p.538–39.

34 See Yan Hui 顏慧 and Suo Yabin 索亞斌, *Zhongguo donghua dianying shi* 中國動畫電影史 (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2005), pp.125–58.

35 See *ibid.*, chapter 5.

36 The novel is attributed to Wu Cheng’en 吳承恩 (c.1500–c.1582), although it also appears to be an elaboration and development of earlier stories and texts concerning Xuanzang’s journey. See Anthony C. Yu’s ‘Introduction’, in, ed. and trans. Anthony C. Yu *The Journey to the West* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), Vol.1, pp.1–62.

37 Li Ping 禮平, *Wanxia xiaoshi de shihou* 晚霞消失的時候 (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1981).

38 Li Ping, cited in ed. Laifong Leung, *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), p.103.

39 Leung, *Morning Sun*, p.101.

40 *Ibid.*, p.100.

41 Li Ping, cited in Leung, *Morning Sun*, p.100.

42 Li Ping, *When the Sunset Clouds Disappear*, p.105.

43 *Ibid.*, p.110.

44 *Ibid.*, p.111.

45 Li Ping, trans. Daniel Bryant, 'Autumn,' in ed. Michael S. Duke, *Contemporary Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Post-Mao Fiction and Poetry* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1985), p.65.

Li's persona in the novel parallels the journey of many of these disaffected young people. When he discusses Shakespeare with a young girl, Nanshan, he learns that in Marxism there is a place for subjective values. The ever-idealistic Li nevertheless proceeds to become a Red Guard, and next meets Nanshan while searching the house of her grandfather — a former commander in the KMT army. Nanshan appears holding a large, unidentified book. Despite his admiration for her, Li found himself sharply criticising her bourgeois ways, and they were both ultimately disappointed in one another's ideological choices.

Two years later, full of regret over this incident, he found Nanshan and her grandparents on a train. Listening in to their conversation, he heard Nanshan express the humanistic sentiments of students in the post-Mao era. Although she had no clear ideology herself, she stated that 'the hope of this world lies more in the human spirit and actions, not in the minds of different theorists'.⁴² But aside from humanity, she also believed in something higher, because she told her grandfather that

I must thank an unknowable power. At a time when I might have become a completely different person, it made me who I am today, and I am extremely grateful. This power is great and mysterious. Some people say it's a sacred consciousness; some people say he's a just old man. I'm more willing to believe the latter. I believe he stands above the universe, that he knows everything that's going on in the human world, and that he knows everything that's going on with me. I do not doubt that he has benevolently influenced both my life and my destiny. Therefore, even though I can't see him, I do long for him. If he really does exist, then one day, when I finally face him, I will, on behalf of myself and the family he has bestowed me with, bow deeply to this old man, and pay a daughter's respect.⁴³

Her grandfather, astounded by her monologue, asks: 'Are you praising Jehovah?' To which Nanshan replies: 'Yes, Jehovah. I love him deeply'.⁴⁴ Li was amazed too. How could Nanshan, with her superior understanding of Marx, revealing her to be both scientific and aesthetic, be a Christian? Yet, coming from her, he believed that she must somehow be right. He also realised that the book she had been holding on the day he searched her grandfather's house had been a Bible.

The final chapter is set after a gap of twelve years, during which time Li had grown disgusted with the servility the Cultural Revolution fostered. Walking on Taishan, he had his first encounter with an erudite Buddhist monk. During their discussion, the monk talked about the history of Western philosophy and science, as well as the weather formations that characterised the area. Impressed with his knowledge, Li finally could not help himself, and said:

I cannot deny that Buddhism has a glorious history and traditions, but if someone understands astronomy and meteorology, he can't suppose that there are heavenly palaces for the gods constructed in the middle of the universe, and if he understands mechanics and physics, then he can't believe it possible for anyone to mount the clouds and ride the mist. But you are obviously someone with a thorough knowledge of science, and your learning convinces me that you must also be someone with a warm love of it, too. So I simply find it impossible to understand how you can go on believing in religion.⁴⁵

Although at first the monk did not reply, he soon expressed his agreement with Li that ‘there is something beyond truth, and this is beauty’. But he also explained that

beyond beauty there is goodness. It is the search for truth, beauty, *and* goodness that constitutes the whole spiritual life of humanity... There are many religions in the world, from those of Jesus and Allah in the West to Buddhism and Daoism in the East, and their branches and sects are numberless... It should be apparent from this that the basis of religion is morality, and does not really conflict with science.⁴⁶

Even though Nanshan had a superior understanding of Marxism, and the old monk on Taishan had firm knowledge of science, they both had their own form of religiosity. Li, who had existed entirely within the framework of atheism and Marxism, was able to admire both of them because he felt there was something missing in his own worldview. While the novel ends ambiguously concerning Nanshan’s ultimate religious affiliation, it tantalised its readers with suggestions about the place of subjectivity and humanism in Chinese Marxism, and its compatibility with religious sentiment. Therefore, sociologist of religion Fenggang Yang notes that the significance of the novel is probably that it showed ‘religious clergy, once ridiculed and driven out of public sight, might hold some enlightening truths about the questions with which many young people were struggling’.⁴⁷

Buddhist Mediations on Atheism

In the intellectual arena, dissatisfaction with Maoism led Li’s generation to consider that perhaps religion could coexist with Marxism. In the political sphere, the policy changes of 1979–1982 brought a new tolerance for religion founded in scientific or Enlightenment, rather than militant, atheism. This allowed Buddhists to reconsider their doctrine’s relation to Marxism anew, as well as its relation to Taixu’s earlier stance, and those of monastics such as Jinhui and Juzan in the early Communist period.

In 1981, *Fayin* 法音 was founded to serve as the Chinese Buddhist Association’s (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中國佛教協會) journal of record. In some of the articles appearing in the magazine in the 1980s, a range of views concerning atheism were expressed that would not have appeared in the more ideologically rigid conditions of the 1950s and 1960s. More specifically, these articles embody a reassessment of the line that had been established since the days of *Xiandai foxue* before the Cultural Revolution — that Buddhism cohered with scientific atheism — and thus with the CCP’s ideological platform.

In 1987, the deputy secretary general of the Sichuan Buddhist Association (*Sichuansheng fojiao xiehui* 四川省佛教協會), Gu Titao 賈題韜 (1909–95), gave a speech entitled ‘Lun kaiwu’ 論開悟. According to the report furnished in *Fayin*, Gu’s talks were always well attended. Audience members included ‘scientific workers and qigong professionals from outside the Institute, as well as students from Peking University’.⁴⁸ Gu characterised awakening in an interesting way — as something that is eminently attainable in this life — and as anything but mysterious or lofty. He explained that the Buddha became awakened after only six years of ascetic practice, and then 40 days of further practice beneath the bodhi tree. He then led numerous people towards their own awakening.

46 *Ibid.*, pp.66–67.

47 Yang, *Religion in China*, p.142.

48 Deming 德明, ‘Dakai rensheng aomi zhimen: Gu Titao lao jushi de yidu hua’ 打開人生奧秘之門:賈題韜老居士的一席話, *Fayin* 法音 2 (1987): 37–38, at p.37.

49 Julian F. Pas, *Visions of Sukhāvātī: Shantao's Commentary on the Kuan Wu-Liang Shou-Fo Ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp.53–55.

50 Deming, 'Dakai rensheng aomi zhimen,' p.37.

51 *Ibid.*

52 You Youwei 游有維, 'Guanyu "Fojiao shi wushenlun" de jin yibu yanjiu' 關於「佛教是無神論」的進一步研究, *Fayin* 法音 5 (1987): 7–10, at p.7.

53 *Ibid.*, p.7.

54 Dan Lusthaus, 'What is and isn't Yogācāra'. <<http://www.acmuller.net/yogacara/articles/intro-uni.htm>>.

This view concerning the ease with which awakening can be achieved differs with how it is usually described in the two main Chinese schools of Buddhism: Chan and Pure Land (*Jingtu* 淨土). The Indian Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna (2nd – 3rd century CE), is purported to have outlined two paths to practice: the 'hard path', in which one relies on one's own efforts, and the 'easy path', in which one relies on the power of enlightened buddhas, and thus reaches the stage of nonretrogression (in a bodhisattva's practice) more easily.⁴⁹ Later, Chinese Pure Land exegetes and practitioners advocated the pursuit of practices that included recitation of the buddha Amitābha's name. This 'easy path' became a core mode of praxis in Chinese Buddhism.

However, awakening is not normally described as easily attainable — it is often, in fact, the end product of lengthy periods of positive karmic accrual. But for Gu, it was simply a case of having the correct 'belief', and 'courage'.⁵⁰ It was, rather, this characterisation of awakening, rather than the lengthier, more 'other worldly' type, that cohered well with the CCP's stance on atheism and historical materialism. Amitābha was an 'other worldly' personage, and his Pure Land was distant from the earth. This, clearly, was at odds with the Chinese Marxist emphasis on founding an earthly utopia. Gu's approach to awakening — as a state that could be achieved through human effort rather than through recourse to deific figures — made more sense in an age of atheism.

Gu, therefore, also explained in his speech that Buddhism was, in fact, a form of atheism. According to him, where Buddhism differs from other religions is in its lack of a creator deity and belief in divine ordination. Due to the unity of all phenomena, a notion expounded on in the Huayan school of Buddhism, sentient beings were also one with the Buddha and could become like him.⁵¹ One can see how this equality between the Buddha and unenlightened beings might resonate with the official ideals both of a classless society and scientific atheism.

Gu's pragmatic approach reflected the line taken in a vast backlog of Republican and early communist-period material. But, in the open religious climate of the 1980s, the pressure to align religion with atheism was absent. You Youwei 游有維 (1917–90), writing in 1987, could thus find scope to consider Buddhism beyond materialism. In his article, You, who was a layman holding a variety of posts within the Shanghai Buddhist Association (*Shanghai shi fojiao xiehui* 上海市佛教協會), responded to a question from some readers on this subject. He answered that in the sense that Buddhism did not have a creator deity who ordered earthly affairs, the answer was yes — Buddhism was atheistic.⁵² But, in other respects, the Buddhist position was less clear-cut. For example, in the cycle of transmigration through the paths of rebirth there was a cognitive essence (*jingshen zhuti* 精神主體) that survived physical death. You also referred to the view that the form taken by the external world depended on the purity of one's mind.⁵³ You was in fact describing what in the 1950s would have been denounced as idealism.

You's argument was made from the perspective of Yogācāra Buddhism, which posits that there are eight different types of consciousness. The first five of these are akin to the sensory faculties, while the sixth consciousness is responsible for conscious mental activity. The seventh consciousness has the unique role of using information gathered through the other types of consciousness to forge our discrete identity and notion of selfhood. In Buddhism, this is considered a false construct, and hinders awakening.⁵⁴

The eighth and final consciousness is the ‘base consciousness’. It is here that ‘seeds’, which are the results of our volitional actions, are deposited. When these seeds mature, they generate the conditions of our experience, and also form the karmic repository that will lead to subsequent lives. While the eighth consciousness is not considered to have any kind of spiritual existence as a soul does, it does indicate that for Yogācāra all experience is cognitive. The eighth consciousness, however, is never considered to be in any way akin to a soul.

For You, in 1988, it was precisely this latter consciousness which enabled him to think about Buddhism as incorporating aspects that were not strictly materialistic — a deviation from Marxist doctrine but one that was made possible through the freedom that was now available to Buddhist thinkers. In particular, You cited the existence of a ninth or undefiled consciousness, which in Yogācāra Buddhism has been postulated as a way of explaining the minds of enlightened beings.⁵⁵ Awakened beings, like the Buddha, have purified the eighth consciousness, which allowed this pure, undefiled consciousness to emerge. Such a position clashes with earlier efforts to align Buddhism with science, since it cannot be scientifically verified. However, the newly open political context was allowing Buddhists not only to reconsider their relationship to scientific atheism and the stance taken in *Xiandai foxue*, but also to think about Buddhism and atheism in new ways altogether.⁵⁶

Finally, a short piece by the prominent Taiwanese monastic, Shengyan 聖嚴 (1930–2009), was printed in the magazine in late 1989. In this, Shengyan asserted that there were two kinds of atheism: materialist atheism, and Buddhist atheism. The first

denied the independent existence of all spirits, and does not accept the existence of spirit worlds (*guishen shijie* 鬼神世界). The atheism discussed in Buddhism states that all phenomena arise co-dependently, that the myriad things in the universe arise from the collective karma of sentient beings, and affirms that there are spirits (*jingshen* 精神) and ghosts (*guishen* 鬼神). But it does not assume that there is an omniscient, omnipotent ruler that created the universe — as is spoken of in monotheism — which is the first, last and only god.⁵⁷

With these definitions, Shengyan highlighted similarities he considered Buddhism to share with scientific atheism, while carving out a privileged space for ‘Buddhist atheism’. In making this argument, he returned to discussions he had engaged in during the 1950s and 1960s that were aimed at showing Buddhism to be a more scientific and modern religion than theistic Christianity. In 1956, he had claimed that besides its lack of a creator deity, beings commonly thought of in popular practice as celestial — buddhas and bodhisattvas — were merely spiritually advanced beings.⁵⁸

We Fade to Grey

The above examples show that there were instances of mediation between state ideology and young intellectuals, religious studies scholars, and Buddhists. Even though these discussions had somewhat restricted audiences — university students, writers in China’s metropolitan centres, and a limited number of monastics and Buddhist laypeople — they helped create the conditions for China’s religious efflorescence in the 1980s. But they were not its end product. Li Ping’s novel was certainly popular and reflected the views of a generation, but scholarly debates on opium were not the bread and butter

55 For different views on this, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.92–93.

56 Another contributor to the discussion, Yuanming 圓明, was a teacher at the Shanghai Buddhist Academy. He rejected the question of whether Buddhism was atheistic or not altogether, arguing that it was misguided. By leaving the question open, Yuanming’s stance perhaps granted even more leeway concerning the degree to which Buddhism was atheistic or not. See Yuanming, ‘Guanyu “Fojiao shi wushenlun yanjiu” xiaoyi’ 關於「佛教是無神論研究」小議, *Fayin* 6 (1988): 43.

57 Shengyan 聖嚴, ‘Fojiao chengwei wushenlun de yiyi shi shenme?’ 佛教稱為無神論的意義是什麼, *Fayin* 10 (1989): 17–18, at p.17. Also see this brief text in Shengyan, *Xuefo qunyi* 學佛群疑 (Taipei: Dongchu chubanshe, 1989), pp.137–40.

58 Shengyan, ‘Ping bo Fojiao yu Jidujiao de bijiao’ 評駁佛教與基督教的比較, in Shengyan, *Jidujiao zhi yanjiu* 基督教之研究 (Taipei: Dongchu chubanshe, 1993 [1956]), pp.293–94.

- 59 Fenggang Yang, 'The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,' *Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006): 97–122.
- 60 For a brief hagiography, see <www.buddhism.com.cn/jingtu/wnz/hnzszzsj.htm>.
- 61 Huang Nianzu 黃念祖, *Xinsheng lu* 心聲錄 (Taipei: Huazang jingzong xuehui, 2004), p.26.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p.54.
- 63 Huang wrote an essay on the Chinese Pure Land patriarch Shandao 善導 (613–81) for *Voice of the Dharma*: Huang Nianzu 黃念祖, 'Shandao dashi yu chiming nianfo' 善道大師與持名念佛, *Fayin* 11 (1990): 29–31.
- 64 Huang Nianzu, 'Foxue yu kexue' 佛學與科學, in ed. Beijing fojiao wenhua yanjiusuo 北京佛教文化研究所, *Foxue yu kexue: xin shidai de duihua* 佛學與科學: 新時代的對話 (Beijing: Beijing fojiao wenhua yanjiusuo, 2002), p.21.
- 65 On Buddhists and science in Republican China, see Hammerstrom, 'Buddhists Discuss Science in Modern China (1895–1949)'.

of Chinese religious life. And *Fayin* was not a magazine that aimed at mass circulation in the 1980s or even today.

For this, we must look to other forms of popular media, or simply to the *qigong* movement, or the interest in Buddhist culture, that characterised the 1980s religious landscape. These movements gave expression to religious sentiment and aspirations, and provided an alternative to the Marxism that many were criticising as devoid of subjectivity, or as incapable of solving the problem of alienation. The religious engagement with party policy in the 1980s can thus be described in terms of varying degrees of disengagement. Fenggang Yang has described this in a legal sense with his division of the PRC's religious landscape into red (legal), black (illegal) and grey (borderline) religion.⁵⁹ There was also an intellectual division into those who supported and spoke about party policy, and those who did not discuss Marxism, at least in any great depth, at all.

The Buddhist layman Huang Nianzu 黃念祖 (1913–92) is one example of a practitioner and teacher who spoke about traditional Chinese Buddhist aspirations. Huang was raised as a Buddhist and studied at the Beijing Engineering College (*Beijing gongxueyuan* 北京工學院). In the 1980s, he became a prominent preacher in Beijing, and his discussions of Pure Land soteriology are widely available on the internet today.⁶⁰ In a collection of talks entitled *Xinsheng lu* 心聲錄, for example, Huang teaches the importance of reciting a buddha's name (*nianfo* 念佛) as a way of supplementing one's own limited capacities.

Huang held that certain aspects of Buddhist practice (such as keeping the precepts) depended on one's own power. However, this was unreliable and needed to be augmented with 'other power' (*tali* 他力),⁶¹ which stemmed from an advanced buddha or bodhisattva such as Amitābha. He explained that 'this epithet Amitābha is the accumulation of countless eons of merit. This epithet is therefore the actual fruit of merit, and thus in the epithet there is naturally unlimited merit.'⁶² Huang's stance was clearly not atheistic; he advocated recitation of Amitābha's name as a purifying, efficacious practice that exemplified Mahāyāna teachings. The reality of Amitābha, and the power of his vows, was thus a key aspect of Huang's buddhist oeuvre.⁶³

However, Huang also accepted that there were similarities between Buddhism and science. For example, in a 1986 speech on this subject in Beijing, he explained that Buddhist knowledge could aid in the understanding of physics:

Relativistic physics adds time to the third dimensional coordinate of space, thus comprising a fourth dimension. The two complement one another, and constitute the unified field of space and time. When people think about the reality of four-dimensional space, they are unable to understand it before thoroughly ridding themselves of erroneous thoughts and vexations.⁶⁴

Huang thus ascribed a scientific nature to Buddhism, something that Taixu and his associates at the Wuchang Buddhist Seminary did in Republican China, and which the *Xiandai foxue* writers did in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁵ However, once this had been established, Huang's Buddhist outlook remained otherwise traditional, something that was made possible by the comparatively open religious climate of the 1980s.

Conclusion

The articles in *Fayin*, Li Ping's novel, the re-emergence of Buddhism in the realm of popular culture, and the teachings of Huang Nianzu show that

Buddhists and their sympathisers were no longer confined to discussions of Buddhism in terms of party ideology. Even so, Buddhists and Marxists were, perhaps, actually asking the same questions, which centered on delusion. Marxists argued that religion was the product of a false conception of reality, and was determined by class and social structures. For Chinese Buddhists, the Buddha also taught that we are deluded, and outlined a path through our delusion towards awakening. While for CCP members, delusion could be overcome through the study of party ideology, for Buddhists, this could be done through their own canon of scriptures and commentaries.

Like Li Ping's monk on Taishan, Buddhists also continued to value science. However, so long as discussion was carried out within the parameters of legal acceptability, Buddhists and other religious adherents could experience new levels of intellectual freedom. This, in turn, opened up spaces for Buddhists to explore their own tradition, and at the same time, to experience Buddhism in a greater variety of lived, daily contexts.

They could thus once again prioritise *bodhicitta* (*puti xin* 菩提心) — the aspiration to realise bodhi-wisdom, that is, perfect enlightenment'.⁶⁶ Or, they could seek supernormal abilities, or rebirth in *Sukhāvātī*. Of course, Deng's economic reforms offered one sort of aspiration — to attain wealth. But for many Chinese, this was clearly insufficient. They wanted something more than what most of the 'crazes' for education, money and travel — which characterised the era — could offer. As something Chinese and ancient, forbidden and now accepted, this enthusiastic stampede back to pre-liberation religious life, or as close to it as possible, showed that the 'aspiration to enlightenment' was still remembered.

⁶⁶ Charles A. Muller, 'Enlightened Mind' 菩提心, in ed. Charles A. Muller, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*. <<http://buddhism-dict.net/ddb>>.

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