

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM ❶**

Foundational Thoughts
人間佛教論文選要

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

The Relationship Between Buddhism and Chinese Culture



Zhao Puchu
*Former President,
Buddhist Association of China
1907-2000*

Born in Taihu county, Anhui Province, **Zhao Puchu** graduated from Soochow University, Jiangsu. His Buddhist involvements are as follows: in 1928, he was appointed Secretary of the Shanghai-based United Buddhist Association of Jiangsu and Zhejiang,¹ Secretary of the Shanghai Buddhist Association, and President of the Shanghai Buddhist Pure Karma Association. In 1936, he established the Chinese Buddhist Association of Defense and Peace for the Nation,² an organization aimed at resisting the Japanese and saving the nation. In 1953, he was appointed Vice-President and Secretary-General of the Buddhist Association of China, of which he was made President in 1980. In the same year, he was appointed Rector of The Buddhist Academy of China, and consultant to the Advanced College of Tibetan Buddhism in China. In 1982, he accepted the “The Cultural Awards for the Promotion of Buddhism” in Tokyo, which was awarded by the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, and received an honorary doctorate from Bukkyo University, Japan. He authored publications such as *A Collection of Drops of Water*,³ *A Collection of Stone Pieces*,⁴ and *Essentials of Buddhism: Questions and Answers*.⁵

The Relationship Between Buddhism and Chinese Culture

Buddhist culture is part of Chinese traditional culture. The issue of culture has recently become a hot topic of discussion in intellectual and cultural circles. Concerning this discussion, my understanding is shallow and my thoughts immature. However, I believe that the development of human culture is a continuous process, thus traditional and contemporary culture cannot be completely separated. We should draw out all the valuable essentials of traditional culture to enrich and develop a socialist-oriented national culture. My view is that traditional Chinese culture should also include Buddhist culture. At present, there is a biased opinion of equating the former with Confucian culture, and entirely eradicating the role and contribution of Buddhist culture in traditional Chinese culture. This is unfair and not reflective of historical facts.

In fact, Chinese traditional culture subsequent to the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties was not solely comprised from Confucian culture. In fact, it was a confluence of three schools of thought: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Almost two thousand years has passed since Buddhism's introduction during the time of the Eastern Han Dynasty; it has seeped into every aspect of Chinese society and its influence has been extensive. For example, consider language—a most common and accessible cultural element. In our daily lives, there are many words which originate from Buddhism—words such as “world” (世界 *lokadhātu*), “in reality” (如實 *tathābhūta*), “practically” (實際 *tathatā*), “equality” (平等 *tulya*), “to be in effect” (現行 *samudācāra*), “an instant” (剎那 *kṣaṇa*), “monastic rules of Chan Buddhism and general Buddhist precepts” (清規戒律), “relatively” (相對 *paraṣpara*), “absolutely” (絕對 *nirapekṣa*), and many others. On one occasion, I discussed this issue with Comrade Xia Yan (夏衍). He said to me that there are many adages that originate from Buddhism—an example being the Chinese idiom “hit the nail on the head.”⁶ As such, if we were to completely put aside Buddhist culture, I am afraid we cannot even speak our minds thoroughly enough in order to fully express our thoughts. Therefore, I have on many occasions appealed for research regarding the influence of Buddhism on Chinese culture. Currently, *Chinese Literature and History* is publishing a special issue on “The Relationship Between Buddhism and Chinese Culture”; this is good and I am very supportive. However, I have not systematically researched this issue and so I am only able to share some of my thoughts for your reference.

To conduct research into the relationship between Buddhism and Chinese culture, it is necessary to clarify what Buddhism is first. When we speak of Buddhism these days,

some will say, “Isn’t it to offer incense, kowtow, pray to spirits and the Buddha?” There are those who perceive Buddhism too simplistically. I think the problem is that Buddhism is perceived from a rather superficial level of external phenomena. Such one-sided perspectives lead to a lack of comprehensive understanding of Buddhism as a whole.

I think society today, holding these biased views of Buddhism, is in fact somewhat related to the shortcomings that can be found amongst Buddhists. Due to its long-term decline, quite a few shortcomings and limitations can be found in Chinese Buddhism. We in Buddhist circles have to overcome these limitations, which are inherited from history, and be of service in building a foundation for material and ethical progress.

What then is Buddhism? Broadly speaking, it is a type of religion, which includes its sūtras, teachings, rituals, institutions, practices, religious orders, etc. More specifically, it is the teachings spoken by the Buddha—which, if we were to use the existing Buddhist terminology, we call “Dharma.” The fundamental content of the Dharma can be summarized using the Four Noble Truths: (1) the truth of suffering refers to experiencing worldly realities, (2) the truth of the cause of suffering refers to the causal factors behind pain and suffering, (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering refers to the alleviation of pain, and (4) the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering refers to the method of extinguishing this pain. The principles found in the sūtras may be many, but in fact they are all discussed in reference to the Four Noble Truths, which in turn is based on the fundamental principle of dependent origination. All Buddhist doctrines spring forth from the theory of dependent origination.

Speaking of dependent origination, what it is referring to is the arising of all things or phenomena that are determined by interdependent mutual relationships and conditions—without such relationships and conditions, no thing or phenomena could arise. The common explanation of cause and effect is to explain it as relationships and conditions. Amongst the different religious sects at the time of the Buddha, the theory of dependent origination was unique to Buddhism. The sūtras speak of these eleven implications of dependent origination [that all things come into being]:

1. Without creator
2. From causes
3. Free from sentient beings

The Relationship Between Buddhism and Chinese Culture

4. Dependent upon other conditions
5. Without actor
6. With the nature of impermanence
7. Extinguishing in every instant
8. With causes and effects continuously connected without interruption
9. With various causes and effects falling into different types
10. With cause and effect leading into each other in harmony and in compliance with each other
11. With cause and effect functioning in order without confusion⁷

If we were to summarize these eleven points, then they would roughly correspond to the following four propositions:

1. No creator
2. Non-self
3. Impermanence
4. Continuity of cause and effect

“No creator” refers to the repudiation of the idea that there is a master creator of the universe. Instead, it posits the idea that all causes originate from another cause and all conditions arise depending on other conditions, due to other conditions. Vertical inference leads us to the conclusion that the universe is beginningless and endless, while laterally inferring, boundless and limitless. Buddhism does not believe in an anthropomorphic creator, and also refutes the origin of the universe is in any way anthropomorphic creation.

“Non-self” refers to the belief that nothing possesses a substantial and independent state of existence.

“Impermanence” refers to all things being in a constant flux due to temporal and spatial conditions.

“Continuity of cause and effect” refers to all dharmas (things or phenomena) being causally created; arising and ceasing without permanence. The uninterrupted succession of cause and effect is like a continuous flowing stream—in the way water is always at one point, yet it is never the same water molecules at that point. Conversely, from a lateral

point of view, the relationship between cause and effect is complex, but its relationship is yet orderly and determined by fundamental rules. A particular type of cause will result in a particular type of effect, e.g., a positive cause results in a positive effect. The causes and its effect are always in agreement and mutual in accordance.

From an overall perspective, the above-mentioned four propositions (no creator, no self, impermanence, and continuity of cause and effect) are really just two—impermanence and no self. “Impermanence” is the continuity of arising and ceasing, as well as includes the “continuity of cause and effect.” “Non-self” refers to there being no master—neither for one’s body, nor for everything in the universe—thus the importance of “no creator” is encompassed within. This is how Buddhism summarily explains the existence of all things in the universe.

The Buddha was a human; he was not a god. He lived back in the sixth century BCE, had a personal identity and a family name—respectively Siddhārtha and Gautama. As he belonged to the Śākya clan, he came to be known as Śākyamuni—which means the Sage of the Śākyas. The Chinese character “fo 佛” is the abbreviation for “*fo*uo 佛陀,” which is the Chinese transliteration of the word Buddha, meaning “awakened one” or a “sage.” As we know, the Buddha was later deified by humans. However, according to the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha was not a creator deity. He may possess exceptional wisdom and abilities, but he could not dictate an individual’s fate and fortune. Buddhism believes there were humans who became buddhas in the past and who will become buddhas in future, and that everyone possesses the potential to be enlightened. Therefore, it is said that: “All sentient beings possess Buddha-nature and whoever possesses Buddha-nature can become a Buddha.”

Buddhist philosophy is a storehouse of extremely deep wisdom—its clear insight into the universe and human life is a reflection of human rationality and is an analysis of human concepts that are all deep and original points of view. Friedrich Engels in his *Dialectics of Nature*⁸ commends Buddhists, considering them relatively advanced in terms of human dialectical thought. In terms of its worldview, Buddhism repudiates the concept of an almighty God, and instead posits that all phenomena exist within a web of causes and conditions—without beginning and end, without boundaries and limits. Therefore, there are some scholars in western academia who see Buddhism as the only “atheistic” religion. This may be difficult to understand but is in fact true according to Buddhist teachings.

The reason is simple. Since Buddhist doctrine holds that “all phenomena are empty,” then it follows that God too is empty. If God is empty, then how could creation of the world be possible? On the other hand, Buddhism posits that “karmic retribution is not empty.” “Karma” refers to conscious human activities, and so such activities must create definite results—both exist in reality and cannot be considered empty and without a substantial self. However, they are circumscribed by dependent arising and impermanence, and do not have an independent and unchanging nature, and are thus empty without an intrinsic nature.

In terms of its perspective on life, Buddhism emphasizes one’s self-awakening, and relates to the self-liberation of all human beings. The mutual exchange and influence between Buddhism and classical Chinese philosophy has prompted new ideas in the field of philosophy. With its unique perspective on life, Buddhism has inspired people and advanced their spirituality to new planes.

Buddhism has had a profound and broad influence on Chinese culture. In the two thousand years since its introduction to China, Buddhist ideology has evolved into more than ten schools, and can be said to have resulted in a brilliant array of academic accomplishments—while strongly influencing Chinese thought and culture. In terms of literature, we can see Buddhist influence on Chinese literature in the thousands of fascicles of Buddhist sūtras which have been translated from the Sanskrit original—some of which are elegant and refined. Examples include: the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*,⁹ *Lotus Sūtra*¹⁰ and *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*¹¹—all these have been favorites among the scholars of different dynasties and were often studied simply as literary works. Mr. Lu Xun¹² once made a donation to the Jinling Scriptural Press to sponsor the engraving of the *Hundred Parables Sūtra*¹³—the parables narrated within are often translated into a vernacular style, which are appreciated as literature. Buddhism has brought fresh creative concepts, genres and increased vocabulary to Chinese literature. Sūtras like the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* inspired the creative production of short stories during the Jin (265-420 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) dynasties. Prajñā and Chan philosophy influenced the poetry of many famed scholars, such as Tao Yuanming (陶淵明), Wang Wei (王維), Bai Juyi (白居易), Wang Anshi (王安石), and Su Shi (蘇軾).

If we were to examine the effect of Buddhism on traditional Chinese genres, it is evident that popular Chinese literature, which later developed such as *pinghua*¹⁴

storytelling, novels, and operas, had their roots in the various *bianwen*¹⁵ found at the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang. In addition, various “Record of Sayings” arose from the conversations and teachings of Chan masters. In terms of phonology, the method of *fanqie*,¹⁶ commonly used in Chinese dictionaries of the past, was a development influenced by the phonetic combinations found in Sanskrit.

When discussing the arts’ use of statues and symbols, we must first correct a common misconception: due to biased preconceptions, foreigners who see statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas in Buddhist temples often deem Buddhism “polytheistic” or a form of idolatry, and some of us may even hold the same view.

In fact, there were no statues in Buddhism in its earliest phase, during the time when Hinayana was prevalent (lasting approximately 500 years); instead, the symbols commonly used were the Buddha footprints or the bodhi tree. It was only after Mahayana became popular that Buddha statues were crafted. Differing from idol worship, these statues served two purposes: for commemoration and to symbolize the Buddhist teachings. For instance, most of the early Buddha statues either depict the Buddha’s enlightenment under the bodhi tree or his nirvana under the twin sala trees—respectively representing that Buddhahood was attained by a human, and that the doctrine of impermanence demonstrates that all which arises must also cease. This method of visualizing Buddhist teachings came to be known as “Expressing the Dharma,” which led to brilliant achievements in the creation and development of Buddhist art. For example, it is known that pagoda-building and statue-crafting in China originated from Buddhism following its dissemination, and therefore became popular throughout the country. From the fourth to sixth centuries BCE, there emerged many magnificent pagodas and temples throughout the country. Late Tang poet Du Mu’s (杜牧) verse shows the numerous monasteries at that time:

Four hundred and eighty temples
have been there since the Southern Dynasty;
In the mist and rain,
many pagodas can still be seen.¹⁷

Presently, the majority of our country’s historic buildings are Buddhist monasteries and pagodas. Much of this Buddhist architecture is considered scenic views and landmarks. For example, the world-renowned grottoes of Dunhuang, Yungang, and Longmen are

considered to be the treasuries of China's sculptural art. In addition, Buddhist paintings, mainly murals, are also very famous, the subject of which primarily developed from the Jataka tales and the "sūtra illustrations" from the later Tang Dynasty. These "sūtra illustrations" transformed the stories and parables found in sūtras into graphic forms. Its popularization greatly enriched the content of Buddhist paintings, enabling painters to exercise more imagination, and gave them broader horizons to express their artistic talents. This led to the pinnacle of development for Buddhist temple murals during the Tang Dynasty. There were many renowned and skilled painters during this period, among them Yan Liben (閻立本) and Wu Daozi (吳道子). The development from scholastic paintings, represented by the likes of Wang Wei, to freehand paintings popular from the Song and Yuan dynasties is also closely related to Prajñā and Chan philosophy. This goes to show the heavy influence Buddhism had on painting as an art form at that time. Furthermore, pictures printed from woodblocks also emerged early with the publication of sūtras, with China's earliest extant seen in the "Śākya[muni] Preaching the Law."¹⁸

Accompanying the dissemination of Buddhism is also the teaching and practice of such things as astronomy, music, and medicine. In 1955, the People's Republic of China issued stamps to commemorate an astronomer in our history—Venerable Yixing (一行), an eminent monk of the eighth century CE. He created the Dayan Calendar,¹⁹ surveyed and determined the meridian, and made other significant contributions to astronomy. As for medicine, the historical books of the Sui and Tang dynasties record more than ten types of medical books with prescriptions that were translated from Indian sources. In the Tibetan tripiṭaka, there is even a branch of learning known as the "knowledge of medicine," which contains copious amounts of medical literature. In terms of music, Buddhist chanting was popular in China by the third century CE. Tang Dynasty music absorbed influences from India, Kushan, Parthia, Samarkan, the Pyu city states, Lâm Ấp and other Buddhist countries. A small and select variety of Tang music is today preserved in some Buddhist monasteries.

Theories of the various Buddhist schools also created an indelible impact on Chinese philosophical development. Some scholars in the history of ancient Chinese philosophy feel that the philosophy of the Western Jin and Eastern Jin, Northern and Southern, Sui, Tang and the Five Dynasties is basically the developmental history of Buddhism in China. As for Neo-Confucianism, its creation followed this development

and was greatly influenced by the theories of the Huayan and Chan schools. During the late Qing Dynasty, it became a common practice to study Buddhism amongst the Chinese intelligentsia. Some early proponents of democratic thought, such as Tan Sitong (譚嗣同), Kang Youwei (康有為), Liang Qichao (梁啟超), and Zhang Taiyan (章太炎), adopted parts of Buddhist principles and used them as ideological weapons. Even comrade Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白), an early Marxist activist, was also influenced by Buddhist philosophy in his early years. He once said: “Having the two perspectives that society is impermanent and life is for bodhisattva practice has guided me to walk the revolutionary path.”²⁰ What is “bodhisattva practice”? Whoever cherishes a great aspiration, wishing to liberate all sentient beings from suffering, desiring to bring benefit to the masses, and causes them to become awakened—all who bear such aspirations can be called a bodhisattva. Bodhisattva practice is the persistent fulfilment of such aspirations. This is evident in the Buddhist notions of compassion, equality, impermanence and no-self—which has been considerably inspired and motivated by the intelligentsia during modern times.

Given the enormous influence Buddhist culture had in ancient Chinese philosophy and culture, one cannot reach a convincing conclusion in the subjects of ancient Chinese literature, history, philosophy, and the arts without demonstrating their relationship with Buddhist culture and the influence that Buddhist culture asserted, nor is it possible to find patterns that correlate with historical fact without Buddhism’s influence. Taking the example of studying Chinese history, especially cultural history, one truly cannot afford to exclude the study of Buddhism. In fact, from the time An Shigao (安世高) arrived in China and translated the sūtras in 148 CE, or when Zhu Xi (朱熹) and Lu Jiuyuan (陸九淵) had the Goose Lake Debate in 1175 (both marking new cultural movements—the former being the start of Buddhism in China, and the latter being the establishment of Neo-Confucianism), the millennium in between was the golden epoch of Chinese national culture, and what scholars both within and outside China term as the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern, Sui and Tang dynasties cultural period. It so happens that during this period, Buddhism was the dominant element in the development of Chinese philosophy. The strength of its momentum and the breadth of its influence outmatched even the classical learning of the Han Dynasty or that of Neo-Confucianism. It is also the reason why Hu Shi (胡適) put his pen down in the midst of authoring *The History of Chinese Philosophy*—because he found it impossible to continue without understanding Buddhism.

The Relationship Between Buddhism and Chinese Culture

To give you another example, Mr. Zhou (周建人) wrote to me twice, urging me to hasten my research on Buddhism. Later, when I visited him, he told me that he was previously a neighbor to a historian who studied Marxism, and that they had many exchanges. This historian wholly rejected Buddhism early in his life, but systematically studied the sūtras in his later years. He made copious amounts of notes during his sūtra studies, claiming he was making up for the lessons he missed. He told Mr. Zhou that in the course of Chinese history, the relationship between Buddhism and Chinese culture is of such depth that one cannot fully comprehend the latter without understanding the former. I have developed a deep feeling concerning this matter. I should include the study of how Buddhism influenced Chinese culture on our agenda.

Speaking of the relationship between the “two civilizations”—the building forces of Buddhism and socialism, as earlier mentioned: I believe the development of human culture is a continuous process, and traditional and contemporary culture cannot be completely separated. We should draw out all the valuable essentials of traditional culture to enrich and develop a socialist-oriented national culture. When viewing the two civilizations of Buddhism and socialism, I would like to pose this question: In this primarily socialist era, how can Buddhism integrate into society and be of service? With this in mind, it is important to draw out the valuable essentials of Buddhist culture, and propagate the spirit of Humanistic Buddhism. The primary content of this includes the Five Precepts, the Ten Virtues, the Six Perfections, and the Four Means of Embracing. The Five Precepts and Ten Virtues focus on the purification of body and mind, whereas the Six Perfections and Four Means of Embracing are concerned with benefiting society.

From a historical perspective, Buddhist charitable undertakings are multifaceted and of varying nature. There are monastics who treat the ill, dispense medicine freely, construct bridges, repair roads, dig wells, found free schools, and engage in reforestation—all these are well-attested in historical records. With respect to the last, much has been achieved. A quick review of where all our monasteries and pagodas are located shows that the areas are well-forested and very scenic—these sites embellish the landscape of our country. We should promote the exemplary traditions of Buddhism and be heir to the inheritance endowed to us by the pioneers who came before us—applying Humanistic Buddhism’s spirit of engagement and liberating beings in service of the socialist ideals of the four modernizations.²¹

In summary, Chinese Buddhism has existed for almost two thousand years, its cultural heritage is immensely rich and content colorful—its role in the development and history of human culture can hardly be overstated. As to the role of Buddhist culture in traditional Chinese culture, and its function in the construction of a socialist-oriented national culture: by being objective in researching this role and coming to the correct conclusions, we would find that the essentials of Buddhist culture also provide the foundations for the construction of a socialist spiritual civilization.

Notes

- 1 Also known as the Jiangsu-Zhejiang Buddhist Federation. -Ed.
- 2 中國佛教護國和平會 -Ed.
- 3 《滴水集》-Ed.
- 4 《片石集》-Ed.
- 5 《佛教常識問答》 This book has been translated by Tong Zhao and published by Cengage Learning Asia in 2014. -Ed.
- 6 The Chinese rendition is 一針見血 lit. to draw blood with the use of a single needle. -Ed.
- 7 Translation by Tong Zhao in *Essentials of Buddhism: Questions and Answers* published by Cengage Learning Asia in 2014. -Ed.
- 8 《自然辯證法》-Ed.
- 9 《維摩詰經》-Ed.
- 10 《法華經》-Ed.
- 11 《楞嚴經》-Ed.
- 12 Lu Xun (魯迅, Lu Hsün, 1881-1936) -Ed.
- 13 《百喻經》-Ed.
- 14 *Pinghua* (評話 or 平話) (plain tales) are Chinese popular stories. -Ed.
- 15 *Bianwen* (Chinese: 變文; pinyin: *bianwen*; literally: “transformation texts”) is a technical term referring to a literary form that is believed to be some of the earliest examples of vernacular and prosimetric narratives in Chinese literature. -Ed.
- 16 *Fanqie* (反切). A style of rhyming using two Chinese characters to represent the sound of a single character. -Ed.
- 17 南朝四百八十寺，多少樓台煙雨中。 Translated by C.K. Tang in *Tang Poems in Original Rhyme: An Innovative Translation*, 2016. -Ed.
- 18 《釋迦說法圖》-Ed.
- 19 《大衍曆》-Ed.
- 20 「無常的社會觀，菩薩行的人生觀引導我走上了革命道路。」-Ed.
- 21 This refers to the modernizations of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. -Ed.