

**STUDIES ON  
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM Ⅳ**

**HUMAN LIFE  
人間佛教研究論文選**

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

**COMMENTARY:  
YANG RENSHAN, A LIVING  
BODHISATTVA**

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**Source**

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When I began my studies on Master Taixu in 1996 at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, it was difficult to find sources on Taixu. Fortunately, the small library of the center had the trilogy by Holmes Welch. The first and most important source book for me to research was Welch's *The Buddhist Revival in China*, published in 1967. The first chapter begins with Yang Renshan (1837–1911). Holmes Welch called Yang “father of the revival of Buddhism in China.”

Yang was born in an eminent family of Confucian literati in Anhui Province in 1837, two years before the outbreak of the Opium War. He witnessed the years of turmoil in nineteenth century China: the Taiping Rebellion and subsequent series of China's defeats and humiliations. When he was twenty-seven years old, his father died of illness and the following year Yang Renshan himself contracted the plague. After his recovery in Hangzhou, he continued to suffer from depression. By chance, he read two texts entitled *Dacheng Qixin Lun* (*Mahāyānśraddhotpāda Śāstra; Mahayana Treatise on the Awakening of Faith*) and *Lengyan Jing* (*Śūraṅgama Sūtra*). These two books made an enormous impression on him. From that time, he began searching for scriptures in all the bookshops, monasteries, and temples, and got his friends to search on his behalf.

The nineteenth century witnessed the collapse of the Chinese empire. Chinese Buddhism also declined rapidly, and Buddhists believed it was a dark age of the Dharma decay. The only hope to save Buddhism was the circulation of Buddhist scriptures, and at the same time the merit generated from this might save all sentient beings. The imperial court edition of the Buddhist canon—the *Qianlong Canon*—was kept in the court. It was extremely difficult for ordinary people to make a request to obtain a set. During the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1865), Buddhism suffered one of its most crushing blows. The Taiping leaders, in their campaign against idolatrous worship, destroyed all Buddhist images, libraries, and temples in all the areas they overran. The woodblocks of the *Jingshan Thread-Bound Edition of the Buddhist Canon*, and the woodblocks of the *Yongle Southern Canon*, were burned by marauding troops of Taiping rebels. The revival of Buddhism after that devastation fell

onto Yang Renshan. He took leadership in the effort to restore Buddhism. With the destruction of the scriptures, Chinese Buddhists found it difficult to obtain reading materials, so to alleviate this shortage Yang and his friends resolved to cut printing blocks for the Buddhist canon in order to create wider circulation. They drafted by-laws, took on the task of fund-raising, and publishing the corpus of Buddhist literature.

The magnanimous actions undertaken by Yang Renshan to save Buddhism included the collection of Buddhist scriptures, the establishment of the Jinling Scriptural Press, and promotion of the Buddhist education. Yang's efforts were greatly praised by Master Hsing Yun when he said, "Without Yang Renshan, Chinese Buddhism would have suffered a huge break. Due to Yang's staunching efforts to protect Buddhism and maintaining the link to the traditional culture, Chinese Buddhism has been able to develop to this day. I call him a bodhisattva."

A person standing up to protect Buddhism in that period required great courage and strength. Yang took advantage of the many advantages he had at the time. First of all, he was well-educated due to his family background. He turned to Buddhism because of a series of misfortunes in his personal life. Seeing the suffering of the nation, its people, and himself, Yang had a compassionate heart. Indeed, he gave his heart and life's blood, exerting every mental and physical effort to complete the project he initiated to put together the entire Buddhist canon.

For almost a half century, Yang devoted himself to collating, printing, and distributing Buddhist scriptures in Nanjing. His initial plan was to construct a complete set of the Buddhist canon. This ambitious plan was handicapped by the lack of sufficient funds, however it was a good start. It manifested a hope for the survival of Buddhism in China. Buddha's words are Dharma truths, and like torches in the heart of darkness, Buddhist scriptures may enlighten the common people groping in the dark. Yang asked his kinsman to collect Buddhist scriptures in Japan with the help of Japanese scholar Nanjio. Yang immediately printed the best of the scriptures his kinsman brought back from

Japan. This was an advantage that Yang could take because of his working experience abroad and his vision of Buddhism as a world religion.

The Jinling Scriptural Press, under the direction of Yang, contributed tremendously to the elevation of Buddhist culture and the revival of Chinese Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century. It played a key role in disseminating Buddhist texts nationwide. The editions of works published by the Jinling Scriptural Press were all selected with great care, and the painstakingly collated.

At the same time, he attached considerable importance to the training of Buddhist talents. He made great efforts to annotate Buddhist scriptures, especially scriptures with abstruse doctrines and theories. This was demonstrated in his compilation of a textbook for his Jetavana Hermitage School called *Fojiao chuxue keben* 佛教初學課本 (*Textbook of Buddhism for Beginning Students*).

Venerable Master Hsing Yun called the Buddhist Scriptural Printing Press and Buddhist school that Yang set up a bodhimaṇḍa (*daochang* 道場, Dharma center). He praised Yang as a Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva for establishing the Buddhist scripture printing house and disseminating Buddhist scriptures far and wide, as an Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva for his compassion despite personally suffering from all kinds of pains, as a Samantabhadra Bodhisattva who set up schools to train Buddhists to continue the cause of liberating all sentient beings, and as a Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva who traveled far and wide to propagate Buddhism.

Yang's bodhimaṇḍa is a cultural center. It is formless but lies in the Buddha wisdom, and is different from the Four Bodhisattvas' sites in China. Yang's contribution to the revival of Buddhism and Chinese culture is even greater than that made by the lay Buddhist Vimalakīrti. It is even greater than Anāthapiṇḍada, who built up Jetavana Hermitage with his wealth.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's words are very impressive—he is not a bodhisattva worshiped in a shrine. He is living in the hearts of Buddhists in China.

Taixu (1889–1947) called him “the one figure of the greatest significance in the revival of Chinese Buddhist studies.”

Liang Qichao (1873–1929) gave Yang high praise. He said, “The so-called scholars of new studies in the late Qing dynasty all were closely connected with Buddhist studies. Yang Renshan was the one who truly followed the faith of Buddhism.”

Yang's most important legacy to future generations of Buddhists is certainly establishing a Buddhist printing house. Yang has had a tremendous impact on the recent and contemporary revival of Chinese Buddhism.

In early January 1997, I was invited to visit Professor Rulan Chao, great grand-daughter of Yang Renshan. She showed me some of the scriptures engraved and printed at Jinling Scriptural House in Nanjing and relayed to me some stories her mother had told her about Yang Renshan. All these increased my admiration and respect for this great intellectual—the father of the revival of Buddhism in China in the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

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