

The Modern Transformation of the Pure Land Sect A Comparative Study of the Doctrinal Classification Thought of Master Yinguang and Taixu’s “Humanistic Buddhism”

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Abstract: In modern China, Buddhism faced both institutional decline and the impact of modernity. As a result, the Pure Land School was tasked with re-evaluating its own doctrines and practical forms. This paper focuses on the “doctrinal classification thought” and compares the traditional approach of Master Yinguang, who “interprets the Pure Land teachings with the Avatamsaka teachings”, with the modern reconstruction of Master Taixu’s “Five Vehicles of Common Dharma”. The paper points out that Master Yinguang integrated the Pure Land Dharma within the Avatamsaka doctrinal classification, positioning it as the “ultimate of the sudden and perfect teaching” and a “special Dharma gate”, and responded to the crisis of the era with the ethical orientation of “fulfilling one’s social duties and practicing faith and vows in Buddha-recitation”. Master Taixu, on the other hand, reorganized the doctrinal classification framework with the “Five Vehicles of Common Dharma”, grounding Buddhist practice on the “Human Vehicle” and promoting institutional and ideological innovation through the path of “becoming a Buddha as a human being”. These two approaches are not simply opposed but respond to the same contemporary issues from different directions. Comparing the doctrinal classification thoughts of the two masters helps to understand the internal structure of the transformation of modern Han-Chinese Buddhism and provides a reference for contemporary Buddhism to handle the relationship between traditional preservation and modern response.

Keywords: Master Yinguang; Master Taixu; Doctrinal Classification Thought; Pure Land School; Humanistic Buddhism

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Introduction

During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, Chinese society was in a profound historical transformation and cultural collision, and Buddhism also faced its own ideological crisis and transformation opportunity. In this long-lasting revival movement, the Pure Land School, as the sect of Chinese Buddhism with the broadest social foundation since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, played a unique historical role. On the one hand, with the characteristic of “suitable for all sentient beings regardless of their spiritual faculties”, it provided direct spiritual support for believers in the troubled times. On the other hand, it had to confront modern challenges such as the spread of Western learning to the East, the decline of the monastic system, and the backwardness of monastic education, and consider its position in the new social structure. Against this backdrop, two contemporary Buddhist leaders, Master Yinguang (1861-1940) and Master Taixu (1890-1947), provided their respective answers to the modern fate of the Pure Land School from the directions of adherence and innovation.

Master Yinguang is revered as the 13th patriarch of the Pure Land Sect, with the sect's style characterized by "strictly observing precepts, solely practicing Buddha-recitation, fulfilling one's duties in human relationships, and fending off evil to preserve sincerity". Wang Shuai pointed out when examining the compilation process and version origin of Collected Works of Master Yinguang that Master Yinguang was "unknown" before the Republic of China, self-describing himself as "reciting Buddha and awaiting death" and "an ordinary monk just fulfilling his duties", but after the 7th year of the Republic of China, he was "pushed to the limelight" and "praised by both monks and laypeople", and was once respected as "the master of the Pure Land Sect", "the great master of the Lotus Sect", and "the first person in three hundred years"^[1].

Master Taixu is the founder of the modern "Humanistic Buddhism" ideology, calling for "revolution in religious doctrines, revolution in the monastic system, and revolution in temple property", which initiated the modern transformation of Han Buddhism. Deng Zimei's research indicates that Taixu is the conscious founder of the modern transformation of Buddhism. During his tenure as the head of the Southern Fujian Buddhist College, he put forward four concepts, namely "modern sangha", "modern Buddhism", "modern Buddhist studies", and "modern national society", and expounded their interrelationships, laying the talent foundation for "modern Buddhism"^[2].

On the surface, the ideological orientations of the two masters are very different: one is conservative and rigorous, dedicated to the Pure Land; the other is radical and innovative, reconstructing the teachings. However, upon closer examination, it can be found that the two masters are facing the same era-specific proposition, and the essence of their thoughts actually has similarities, only with different ways of response and path choices.

To date, the academic community has amassed a considerable body of research on Master Yinguang and Master Taixu. Regarding the study of Master Yinguang, Ji Huachuan and Li Jiwu systematically sorted out Master Yinguang's selection of Pure Land scriptures, the establishment of dedicated Pure Land cultivation sites, and the clarification of the issue of Pure Land patriarchs from the perspective of the Pure Land sect's lineage inheritance. They believe that Master Yinguang laid the foundation for the modern Pure Land sect and, at the same time, reflected the strengthening of the sectarian consciousness of the modern Pure Land sect^[3]. Regarding the study of Master Taixu, Zhang Zibo systematically sorted out the teachings-classification ideas put forward by Master Taixu, such as the "Three-Only Theory" and the "Three Periods and Three-Lineages". He believes that Master Taixu's teachings-classification is different from the previous sectarian views that highlight one's own sect. Its content is coherent and clear, and the spirit of equality and harmony it reflects still has inspiring significance today^[4]. However, in the current research situation, there are still few research results that use Master Yinguang and Master Taixu as a set of ideological contrasts, especially those that conduct systematic comparisons from the perspective of "doctrinal classification thought". Jiang Yanzhou once conducted a preliminary comparison of the two masters' thoughts based on two landmark speeches, namely Master Yinguang's "Speech at the Shanghai Dharma Assembly for Protecting the Country and Quelling Disasters" and Master Taixu's "How to Build Humanistic Buddhism", and put forward the assertion that "the core of their thoughts is the same but the paths are different, and although the paths are different, they are mutually inclusive and complement each other"^[5]. This can be regarded as a relatively systematic study among the existing comparative studies. However, this research mainly focuses on the perspectives of cultivation theory and social response, and there is still room for further in-depth exploration of the fundamental differences and internal connections in their doctrinal classification thoughts. Based on previous studies, this paper intends to take the "doctrinal classification thought" as the core entry point to conduct a systematic comparison between the traditional approach of Master Yinguang's "interpreting the Pure Land teachings with the Huayan School" and the modern reconstruction of Taixu's "Five Vehicles of Buddhism". The so-called "doctrinal classification" is a traditional theoretical method used by Chinese Buddhism to sort out the meanings of scriptures and determine the positions of sects. It reached its peak in the Sui and Tang Dynasties and has been the fundamental basis for patriarchs of all generations to construct their own ideological systems. In the context of the modern transformation of Buddhism, re-examining the doctrinal classification thoughts of Master Yinguang and Taixu can not only reveal the theoretical roots of the ideological differences between the two masters, but also show how the traditional doctrinal classification method is activated, reformed, and re-endowed with modern significance under new historical conditions. This paper hopes that through this comparative study, it can deepen the overall understanding of the ideological transformation of modern Chinese

Buddhism and provide a theoretical reference for the balanced development of contemporary Buddhism between tradition and modernity.

1. The Historical Context of Buddhism in the Late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China and the Transformation Opportunity of the Pure Land Sect

To understand the similarities and differences between the thoughts of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu, one must first return to the historical context they both faced. During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, Chinese Buddhism was confronted with both internal decline and accumulated drawbacks and external ideological impacts, standing at a crossroads where change was both necessary and difficult. This section aims to outline the historical background of the modern transformation of Pure Land Buddhism from three aspects: the internal and external crises faced by Buddhism, the special status of the Pure Land Sect in the modern context, and the ideological connection between Master Yinguang and Master Taixu.

1.1 The Internal and External Crises Faced by Buddhism in the Late Qing Dynasty and the Early Republic of China

The drastic changes in modern Chinese society have subjected Buddhism to the most severe survival crisis since Emperor Wuzong of the Tang Dynasty's persecution of Buddhism. Internally, it is an undeniable fact that the long-standing drawbacks of the monastic system, the uneven quality of the Sangha, the laxity of the temple economy, and the relaxation of precepts have persisted. Xia Demei pointed out that since modern times, with the transformation of the social form and the rapid progress of science and technology, Chinese society has entered a period of great transformation. How Buddhism precepts can adapt to the new era, absorb new materials, and play new roles is a new issue that Buddhism must face and resolve^[6]. Externally, the "using temple properties for education" movement has forced a large number of temple properties to be converted into school buildings. The spread of Western learning to the East and the New Culture Movement have shaken the legitimate foundation of traditional religions at the ideological level.

During this period, the rise of lay Buddhism injected new vitality into the Buddhist revival movement. Scholars such as Zhou Jianbo examined the important case of the Shanghai Buddhist Laymen's Forest and pointed out that in modern Chinese Buddhist circles, there was a Buddhist revival movement characterized by modernization and with "Humanistic Buddhism" as the reform direction, in which lay Buddhism played a major supporting role. As the first laymen's organization in the country, the Shanghai Buddhist Laymen's Forest gathered many industrialists who were devout Buddhists, and it was a typical example of the combination of Buddhist thought and modern industrial and commercial civilization^[7]. Master Juexing also wrote in an article that Shanghai, with its open and inclusive urban pattern and diverse and integrated cultural atmosphere, became an important stage for the convergence of modern Buddhist thoughts. A group of Buddhist reform pioneers such as Master Taixu and Master Yuanqing put forward innovative ideas and carried out practical explorations here, and the path of modern Humanistic Buddhism exploration was thus born in Shanghai^[8]. It can be said that it was in this complex environment of being besieged both internally and externally but full of reform opportunities that all modern Buddhist sects were actively thinking about their own ways of survival.

1.2 The Status of the Pure Land Sect in the Pattern of Modern Chinese Buddhism

In the diverse landscape of modern Buddhism, the Pure Land School holds a particularly important position. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to the involution of Chan Buddhism and the decline of other sects under the teachings, the Pure Land practice of Buddha-recitation, with its characteristic of "suitable for all three types of sentient beings, regardless of their spiritual faculties", has gradually become the main vehicle for the spread of Han-Chinese Buddhism in society. The Pure Land School is one of the most influential sects in Chinese Buddhism after the Ming and Qing dynasties, and it has spread widely among all social strata. This foundation endows the Pure Land School with both a profound mass base and special transformation pressure in the modern Buddhist revival movement. It has to respond to the doubts of modern rationalism about "reciting the Buddha's name to be reborn in the Western Pure Land" while maintaining its core characteristics as a faith community.

Zhao Huayu pointed out in his master's thesis that in the face of the collapse of the old social ethics in modern society and

the impact of Western civilization, Master Yinguang proposed a new set of methods and systems for social governance from a religious perspective based on his view of Pure Land doctrine classification and cultivation. His view of Pure Land doctrine classification identifies the Pure Land chanting method as a “special method”, highlighting its uniqueness and superiority from different aspects such as the characteristics of the era, the degree of difficulty, and the spiritual aptitude of the general public^[9]. This assertion reveals that the transformation of the Pure Land sect in modern times was not simply a “restoration of the past”, but a re-interpretation and re-positioning of its own doctrines and practice methods under new historical conditions.

1.3 Master Yinguang and Master Taixu: Two Ideological Routes in the Same Era

Although Master Yinguang and Master Taixu were nearly thirty years apart in age, their Dharma-propagation activities were mainly concentrated from the early 20th century to the 1940s, making them truly contemporaries. The core of their thoughts was similar, but the paths they took were different. Master Yinguang focused on saving the social morals and the people’s hearts, with the Pure Land chanting Dharma-gate as the ultimate destination. Master Taixu focused on reconstructing the relationship between Buddhism and modern society, with the concept of “Humanistic Buddhism” as the banner. It is worth noting that although the two had different emphases in their path-selection, they shared common overall ideological concerns when facing the Buddhist crisis. Both hoped to re-interpret the Buddhist traditions so that Buddhism could regain its vitality under the new social conditions. This implicit commonality is the fundamental reason for comparing the two in this paper.

2. The Doctrinal Classification Thought of Master Yinguang: The Traditional Approach of Interpreting Pure Land Buddhism with the Doctrines of Huayan School

Although Master Yinguang is well-known for “strictly abiding by precepts and specializing in Buddha-recitation”, his thoughts are by no means a simple “sectarian adherence”. Beneath his seemingly traditional image, Master Yinguang actually carried out a re-interpretation of the doctrinal classification of the Pure Land School with contemporary significance. This section intends to systematically sort out Master Yinguang’s thoughts on doctrinal classification from four aspects: the positioning of doctrinal classification, the status of the Pure Land, ethical orientation, and internal tension.

2.1 The Doctrinal Classification Position of “Interpreting Purity through Sages”

The most distinctive feature of Master Yinguang’s teaching classification ideology lies in “interpreting the Pure Land teachings from the perspective of the Huayan School”, that is, integrating the Pure Land Dharma Door from the perspective of the Huayan School’s teaching classification. Jiang Yanzhou made an incisive summary of this: To address the drawback of “emphasizing rational understanding while neglecting practical cultivation” in the modern Buddhist circle, Master Yinguang introduced the principles of the Huayan School into the practice of the Pure Land, pointed out that the Pure Land Dharma Door “originated from the Huayan”, proposed that the superiority of the Pure Land lies in “being expounded based on the Huayan”, and the perfect and sudden nature of the Huayan is “fulfilled by returning to the Pure Land”, advocating the “harmony of principle and practice” between the Huayan and the Pure Land^[10]. This approach to teaching classification contains at least three layers of implications:

Firstly, in terms of scriptural basis, Master Yinguang took the scripture in the Avatamsaka Sutra-Chapter on the Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva about Samantabhadra Bodhisattva “guiding sentient beings to the Pure Land with the Ten Great Vows” as the fundamental basis to establish the supreme status of the Pure Land Dharma Door in the Great Vehicle sudden and complete teachings. This selection of scriptures provided the Pure Land Dharma Door of Buddha-Recitation with the theoretical support of the Avatamsaka’s realm of “unhindered interpenetration of all phenomena”, thus effectively refuting the wrong judgments of some modern scholars who regarded the Pure Land Dharma as “expedient Dharma” or “Hinayana”. Secondly, in terms of doctrinal interpretation, Master Yinguang connected the “principle” of the Avatamsaka and the “practice” of the Pure Land through concepts such as “same in nature but different in cultivation”, “perfect accomplishment in the Western Pure Land”, “rebirth with karmic hindrances”, and “the karmic consciousness becoming empty”. This enabled the Pure Land Dharma Door to maintain its practical characteristic as an “easy path” while attaining the doctrinal height of the sudden and complete teachings. Thirdly, in terms of the relationship between sects, Master Yinguang’s approach of “interpreting the Pure Land with the Avatamsaka” went beyond simple “sectarian protection”. Instead, standing from the perspective of the entire Han-Chinese Buddhist tradition, he re-integrated the two major ideological resources of the

Avatamsaka and the Pure Land, providing new theoretical legitimacy for the development of the Pure Land School in modern times.

2.2 The Supreme Status of the Pure Land in Master Yinguang's Doctrinal Classification

In Master Yinguang's doctrinal classification system, the Pure Land Dharma Door of Buddha-name recitation is established as a "special Dharma Door", which is in contrast to the general "common Dharma Doors". Zhao Huayu further points out that Master Yinguang's view on Pure Land practice emphasizes that "concentrating the six senses and maintaining a continuous pure mindfulness" is an important method for being reborn in the Pure Land, "faith, aspiration, and practice" are the essential conditions, "undistracted mind" is the state of the samadhi of Buddha-name recitation, and "being reborn in the Pure Land with remaining karmic afflictions" reflects the superiority of the Pure Land practice^[11]. The establishment of this series of concepts constitutes the practical aspect of Master Yinguang's doctrinal classification of the Pure Land.

What deserves more attention is Master Yinguang's classification of the relationship between the Pure Land School and other sects. In Master Yinguang's view, the scriptures of the Chan School are profound, and misinterpretation according to the literal meaning will lead one astray. The practice of the Pure Land School can guide people of different capacities, providing more security than the Chan School. When studying the Huayan School, he particularly emphasized the "Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva" and used it as the theoretical basis for guiding people to the Western Pure Land. He also encouraged practitioners of the Tiantai School to return to the Pure Land based on its theoretical doctrines and the deeds of its patriarchs. It can be said that in Master Yinguang's doctrine-classification system, all traditional sects of Han-Chinese Buddhism are ultimately guided to the "special Dharma door" of chanting the Buddha's name in the Pure Land.

Huang Jiazhang and Huang Xuwen started from Master Yinguang's self-title of "the monk always feeling ashamed". They pointed out that as a Buddhist monk who strictly abided by Buddhist precepts and conducted himself rigorously, why did Master Yinguang deeply feel "always ashamed"? This implies the ultimate concern for the great issue of sentient beings' life and death and the profound self-awareness of "carrying forward the past and opening up the future" in Pure Land Buddhism^[12]. This self-awareness is precisely the spiritual foundation for Master Yinguang to classify the Pure Land as a "special Dharma door". He not only recognized his historical responsibility as the patriarch of the Pure Land School but also saw the actual needs of sentient beings' spiritual faculties in the Dharma-ending age. Thus, he reached the conclusion of Dharma classification that "only the Pure Land Dharma can be widely applicable to all sentient beings".

2.3 The Orientation of "Fulfilling Moral Obligations and Duties" based on Ethical Values

Another important characteristic of Master Yinguang's teaching classification ideology is its distinct ethical orientation. In Master Yinguang's view, Buddhist practice cannot be separated from the ethical practices in daily life. "Upholding ethics and fulfilling duties, keeping away from evil and maintaining sincerity" is the foundation for chanting Buddha's name to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. This ideology is prominently reflected in his Buddhist interpretation of the concept of "investigating things to extend knowledge". Su Xiangjun and Chen Bing pointed out that Master Yinguang was greatly influenced by Neo-Confucianism in his youth and later experienced a transformation from Confucianism to Buddhism. Due to his academic style of integrating Confucianism and Buddhism and his religious enthusiasm for saving social customs and the fate of the world, he boldly adopted Wang Jiuchuan's insights in defining "investigating things to extend knowledge" and gave it a Buddhist treatment, promoting both Confucianism and Buddhism during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China^[13].

Qiu Junling further pointed out in her master's thesis that Master Yinguang took the theory of cause and effect as the guiding principle, reinterpreted "investigation of things" as the spiritual practice of "controlling bad habits and seeing through ignorance", and finally led to the Pure Land practice of "faith, aspiration, and mindfulness of the Buddha". His thought on the investigation of things took cause and effect as the fundamental principle, carried out a Buddhist transformation of the Confucian thought on the investigation of things, which was an embodiment of his integration of Confucian thought into Buddhism, and ultimately led to the Pure Land practice of faith, aspiration, and mindfulness of the Buddha^[14]. This interpretive approach of "incorporating Confucianism into Buddhism and taking the Pure Land as the destination" endows Master Yinguang's doctrinal classification thought with a distinct ethical practice orientation.

Yang Yingrun's research on Master Yinguang's "educational thought of integrating Confucianism and Buddhism" shows that

Master Yinguang took family education as the main line and the cause-effect relationship of good and evil in Buddhism as the connotation of social education, gradually forming the social ideological concept of “being kind-hearted to others”. From the perspective of Buddhist concepts, in terms of the relationship between transcendence and involvement in the world, on the basis of using worldly education to help people become sages, he educated the secular world through the Pure Land Dharma-door of Buddhism and successfully solved the urgent issue of death that people were concerned about^[15]. This ideological path indicates that although Master Yinguang regarded the Pure Land as the ultimate for transcendence in the classification of Buddhist teachings, his practice was deeply rooted in the construction of worldly ethics. Wu Xingzhou’s research on Master Yinguang’s “thought on maternal education” also confirms this point: Master Yinguang advocated that maternal education was more important than paternal education and believed that maternal education was the foundation of world peace. This view not only promoted women’s rights and reflected the Buddhist view of equality among all sentient beings, but also broke through the historical limitation of the traditional Chinese family education thought that emphasized paternal education, highlighting the ideological characteristics of the integration of Confucianism and Buddhism^[16].

2.4 The Internal Tension in Master Yinguang’s Doctrinal Classification: Traditional Vocabulary and Modern Concerns

On the surface, the doctrinal classification thought of Master Yinguang seems to be completely rooted in tradition: taking Huayan as the theoretical resource, Pure Land as the ultimate destination, and Confucian ethics as the practical foundation, with hardly any trace of “modernization.” However, a closer examination reveals that behind the seemingly conservative traditional vocabulary of Master Yinguang actually lies a profound concern for modern social issues.

Tian Hu’s research indicates that the Bodhisattva path thought is one of the fundamental characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism. The Wenchao of Master Yinguang is replete with well-formed Bodhisattva path thoughts, yet there has been little systematic collation of this in the academic community^[17]. This discovery implies that the practice of chanting Buddha’s name to seek rebirth in the Pure Land advocated by Master Yinguang is not a mere “self-centered” practice but encompasses the Bodhisattva path spirit of “aspiring to the Buddha-way above and saving sentient beings below”. In other words, there is no fundamental opposition between Master Yinguang’s “trans-worldly” orientation and Taixu’s “this-worldly” proposition. On the surface, Master Yinguang’s teachings on the classification of Buddhist doctrines appeal to the most traditional vocabulary, but in essence, they respond in another way to the same contemporary proposition: how to reconstruct the spiritual coordinates of Buddhism in a turbulent world and how to maintain the effectiveness of Buddhist edification under new social conditions.

3. The Doctrine Classification of the “Five Vehicles of Common Dharma” by Master Taixu and the Theoretical Reconstruction of Humanistic Buddhism

If Master Yinguang’s teachings classification ideology represents “the modern extension of tradition”, then Taixu’s teachings classification ideology represents “the modern reconstruction of tradition”. The teachings classification system constructed by Taixu with the “Five Vehicles of Common Dharma” as the core is not only an inheritance of traditional teachings classification methods but also a creative transformation of its fundamental spirit. This section intends to sort out Master Taixu’s teachings classification ideology from four aspects: the formation of the ideology, the meaning of the structure, the subversion and continuation of tradition, and the classification and inclusion of Pure Land Buddhism.

3.1 The Formation of Master Taixu’s Doctrine Classification Thought

The doctrine classification thought of Master Taixu was formed under the special historical background of modern times. Zhang Zibo further pointed out that since modern times, the introduction of Western academic thoughts has posed new challenges to traditional Chinese culture, including Buddhism. To address the disputes over Buddhist doctrines both within and outside the religious circle and respond to the academic research on Buddhism based on the rationalist discourse system and the evolutionary view of history, Master Taixu conducted in-depth sorting and interpretation of Buddhism, and successively put forward the doctrine classification thoughts such as the “Three-Vijnapti Theory” and the “Three-Periods and Three-Systems”^[18]. This assertion reveals the dual motivations of Master Taixu’s doctrine classification thought: to respond to the rationalist challenges from the academic community and to re-integrate the theoretical resources of Buddhism itself.

The formation of Taixu's doctrine classification thought is closely related to his monastic education practice. Cheng Gongrang's research on Taixu's teaching at Minnan Buddhist College shows that as the core thinker and practitioner of modern Chinese Buddhist reform, Taixu advocated and practiced the concepts of "Buddhism for life" and "Humanistic Buddhism" throughout his life, promoting the modern transformation of Chinese Buddhism. From 1927 to 1933, when he served as the abbot of Nanputuo Temple and the dean of Minnan Buddhist College, he gave at least 16 special lectures to the monks at Minnan Buddhist College. The content covered sūtra interpretation, treatise analysis, monastic education, and the dialogue between Buddhism and modern civilization, among which the theme of monastic education was particularly prominent^[19]. This practical experience laid the foundation for the systematization of Taixu's later doctrine classification thought.

3.2 The Structural Implications of the "Common Teachings of the Five Vehicles"

The core of Master Taixu's doctrine classification thought is the "Five Vehicles of Common Dharma". In his work "How I Classify and Summarize All Buddhist Dharma" published in 1940, he systematically expounded his doctrine classification system, dividing Buddhist Dharma into five levels: Human Vehicle, Deva Vehicle, Śrāvaka Vehicle, Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, and Bodhisattva Vehicle, and emphasized the cultivation sequence of moving from the results of the Human Vehicle practice towards the Great Vehicle Bodhisattva path. Lü Lingna conducted a detailed analysis of this in her master's thesis. She pointed out that according to the Buddhist principle of "conforming to truth and adapting to the occasion", Taixu believed that practitioners' practice should start from the Human Vehicle. Therefore, the concept of "becoming a Buddha as a human being" first emphasizes being a complete person in the human world. How to be a complete person? Naturally, it is necessary to emphasize the practice of human-world morality. Only after the perfection of one's personality can one pursue further progress. The perfection of personality is the foundation of Taixu's thought on the Human Vehicle^[20].

Lü Lingna further pointed out that Master Taixu put forward the important value of the Human Vehicle in his doctrine classification thought during the third period. His emphasis on "pursuing the path of the Great Vehicle based on the achievements of the Human Vehicle" highlights the important value of the Human Vehicle and points out the path for upward progress from the Human Vehicle Dharma. Here, the "path of the Great Vehicle" refers to the "Bodhisattva path", and the Bodhisattva path is the only way to reach the Buddha Vehicle, indicating that this path includes both the means and the result, which is the so-called "becoming a Buddha as a human being"^[21]. The fundamental difference between this doctrine classification structure and the traditional one lies in that it no longer takes the doctrine of a certain sutra or a certain sect as the highest criterion, but takes the "Human Vehicle", the most basic starting point of practice, as the foundation of the entire doctrine classification system.

3.3 Subversion and Continuity of "Humanistic Buddhism" towards Traditional Doctrinal Classification

Compared with traditional doctrine classification systems, the "Five-Vehicle Common Dharma" doctrine classification system of Master Taixu features both subversive breakthroughs and inherited continuations. The subversiveness is mainly reflected in the following: Traditional doctrine classification systems, such as the "Five Periods and Eight Doctrines" of the Tiantai School and the "Five Doctrines and Ten Sects" of the Huayan School, all establish the hierarchy from the highest state (such as the "Perfect Teaching" and the "Unique Vehicle of the Special Teaching of Huayan") downwards. In contrast, Taixu's doctrine classification works in the opposite way, establishing the hierarchy upwards from the most basic "Human Vehicle" and taking "how to be a modern person" as the starting point of Buddhist edification. This reversal, seemingly simple, has actually profoundly changed the relationship between Buddhism and modern society.

Master Minghai has made incisive elaborations on this. He pointed out that Master Taixu's "Five-Vehicle Doctrine Classification" inherits the tradition of the doctrine classification in Han Chinese Buddhism and becomes the methodology for Humanistic Buddhism to interpret scriptures in line with the times. From the perspective of the "Five-Vehicle Doctrine Classification", the saying "One should produce a mind that abides nowhere" in the Diamond Sutra can be interpreted as an ethical proposition at the level of human-vehicle good deeds: fulfilling one's duties without considering right or wrong, success or failure, gain or loss. Practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism can cultivate the courage and strength to act steadfastly according to this^[22]. This interpretation shows that the "Five-Vehicle Doctrine Classification" is not only a theoretical

establishment but also an interpretive method, which enables traditional Buddhist scriptures to have the possibility of being combined with modern social moral construction.

However, the doctrine classification thought of Master Taixu was neither created out of thin air nor free from controversy. Ding Jianhua's research indicates that Master Taixu, who affirmed the history and reality of Buddhism and sought modernization in modern times, put forward the well-known concept of "Humanistic Buddhism", calling on Buddhism to care about social reality, respond to the spirit of the times, and promote the reform of Buddhism. However, he was severely criticized: Liang Shuming had reservations about Master Taixu's concept of Humanistic Buddhism, stating that "Buddhism cannot be applied in the present world at all"; Ouyang Jingwu focused on returning to the origin of Indian Buddhism to classify and select the entire history and sectarian theories of Buddhism. He examined Master Taixu's call for "engagement in the secular world" with a strict attitude and believed that Master Taixu's call for "monks to participate in politics" violated the monastic regulations^[23]. These criticisms prove from the opposite side that Master Taixu's doctrine classification thought was a conscious theoretical adventure, and its implication of subverting tradition was acutely perceived by all parties at that time.

4. Taixu Master's Classification of the Pure Land: From "Special Dharma Door" to "Right Dharma of the Human Vehicle"

Of particular concern is Master Taixu's classification of the Pure Land Dharma Door. Different from Master Yinguang, who classified the Pure Land as a "special Dharma Door", Master Taixu did not deny the Pure Land. Instead, he incorporated it into the overall framework of the "Five Vehicles of Common Dharma" and re-positioned it as one of the components leading from the "Right Dharma of the Human Vehicle" to the Bodhisattva Path. When comparing the thoughts of the two masters, Jiang Yanzhou pointed out that from two landmark speeches of the two masters in the same period—Master Yinguang's "Dharma Talks at the Shanghai Dharma Assembly for Protecting the Country and Quelling Disasters" and Master Taixu's "How to Build Humanistic Buddhism"—their ideological threads can be sorted out. The core of their thoughts is the same but the paths are different. Although the paths are different, they are inclusive of each other and complement each other^[24]. In Master Taixu's view, chanting Buddha's name in the Pure Land is not a "world-avoiding Dharma Door" detached from the human world, but one of the specific ways of practice to implement the "Right Dharma of the Human Vehicle".

This way of categorization gives the Pure Land Dharma Door a new role in Master Taixu's teaching classification system: it is no longer the "special Dharma Door" in the ultimate sense, but an important link in the learning sequence and one of the bridges connecting the Human Vehicle and the Bodhisattva Vehicle. This positioning forms a sharp contrast with Master Yinguang's teaching classification idea of "taking the Pure Land as the ultimate destination" and also constitutes the deepest divergence in the two masters' teaching classification thoughts.

5. Comparison between Master Yinguang and Master Taixu: Two Paths of Modern Transformation of the Pure Land School

After the systematic review in the previous texts, we have already had a relatively comprehensive understanding of the teaching classification ideas of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu respectively. In this section, we intend to place the two masters' teaching classification ideas within a unified comparative framework and conduct an analysis from four dimensions: the stance of teaching classification, the target audience of religious instruction, the relationship between self-power and other-power, and the way of responding to the era, so as to reveal the internal differences and complementary relationships between the two modern transformation paths of Pure Land Buddhism.

5.1 The Fundamental Divergence in the Stances of Doctrinal Classification: Returning to Purity VS. Centering on Human Beings

The fundamental divergence between the teaching-classification ideas of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu can be summarized as the contrast between "taking Pure Land as the ultimate destination" and "putting people at the center".

Master Yinguang's doctrine classification follows the traditional approach of "upward classification and inclusion." He uses the Huayan doctrine classification as a methodological resource, placing the Pure Land Dharma Door at the highest position in the entire theoretical system of Han Buddhism. All other sects and Dharma Doors are subsumed under the fundamental

tenet of “guiding people to the Pure Land.” Jiang Yanzhou pointed out in his analysis of the idea of “interpreting the Pure Land with the Huayan teachings” that Master Yinguang’s doctrine classification makes “the perfect and sudden cause of the Huayan School find its realization in the Pure Land,” and ultimately all Mahayana teachings converge in the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name in the Pure Land. This has contributed to the development of both modern Huayan and Pure Land thoughts and played an important role in the renewed integration of Huayan and Pure Land. This is a typical logic of doctrine classification centered around “taking the Pure Land as the destination”: the Pure Land is set as the ultimate destination, and all cultivation and learning activities should ultimately lead to this destination^[25].

The teaching classification of Master Taixu follows a modern approach of “downward establishment”. He took the “Dharma common to the five vehicles” as the basic framework and regarded the “human vehicle” as the starting point of the entire teaching classification system, emphasizing that “one should first become a good person before becoming a Buddha”. Lv Lingna summarized it as follows: Master Taixu emphasized the practice of the correct Dharma of the human vehicle and valued the significance of the human vehicle; although the Dharma of the human vehicle belongs to the mundane Dharma, Taixu’s emphasis on the mundane Dharma does not mean giving up the essence of the supramundane^[26]. This is a typical teaching-classification logic of “human-centeredness”: the human vehicle is set as the fundamental starting point, and all learning and cultivation activities unfold upwards from this starting point.

The difference between these two logics of Buddhist doctrine classification is not “opposition” but “complementarity”. Master Yinguang’s principle of “returning to Pure Land” provides an ultimate destination for the entire Buddhist practice and answers the question of “what is the purpose of practice”. Taixu’s concept of “human-centeredness” offers a realistic starting point for the entire Buddhist practice and answers the question of “how to start the practice”. One is a doctrine classification focusing on “ultimate concern”, and the other is a doctrine classification focusing on “starting-point concern”. Together, they form the dual dimensions of the transformation of modern Han-Chinese Buddhism.

5.2 Differences in the Objects and Methods of Moral Instruction

The differences in the standpoint of Dharma classification between Master Yinguang and Master Taixu inevitably lead to differences in the objects and methods of religious instruction. In terms of the objects of religious instruction, Master Yinguang mainly targeted the general lay Buddhists and the public, while Master Taixu mainly focused on the elite of the Sangha and the intellectual class.

The educational approach of Master Yinguang centers around “faith, aspiration, and mindfulness of the Buddha, as well as fulfilling one’s social duties”. It does not require complex theoretical training, nor does it rely on elite-style monastic education. All it needs is the sincere faith of believers and their daily ethical practices. This educational approach with “low entry requirements and high acceptance” has enabled Master Yinguang’s influence to rapidly spread across all social strata, especially among the lay community and female believers, where it has gained wide recognition. In this sense, Master Yinguang’s doctrinal classification is not only a theoretical establishment but also a “faith governance technique” targeting the general public.

Master Taixu adopted a completely different approach to religious edification. He advanced ideological innovation and institutional reconstruction simultaneously, with particular emphasis on cultivating a new generation of Buddhist talents through modern monastic education. The core of this edification method is “ideological innovation and institutional reconstruction”, which requires complex modern knowledge training, relies on elite monastic education, and is also targeted at the intellectual class with relatively high cultural qualities. The two edification methods each have their own rationality and limitations: Master Yinguang’s method has a wide coverage and far-reaching influence, but lacks attention to modern institutional construction; Master Taixu’s method has great theoretical depth and sufficient reform courage, but it is difficult to quickly translate into popular practical effects. Only by combining the two can a complete picture of modern Buddhist edification be formed.

5.3 The Tension between Self-Reliance and External Support

Another significant difference between the teaching classification ideas of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu is reflected in the handling of the relationship between “self-power” and “other-power”. Pure Land chanting of Buddha’s name is

regarded as a “dharma door of other-power” in traditional Buddhist doctrines, emphasizing relying on the vow power of Amitabha Buddha to be reborn in the Pure Land; while the practice of the Bodhisattva path is regarded as a “dharma door of self-power”, emphasizing relying on one’s own diligent practice to achieve Buddhahood. In the context of the modern transformation of Buddhism, the tension between self-power and other-power has become particularly prominent.

Although Master Yinguang is well-known for his approach of relying solely on the Buddha’s power (other-power), his thought still contains the self-power aspect of the Bodhisattva path. However, this self-power aspect is skillfully integrated into the other-power framework of “faith, aspiration, and mindfulness of the Buddha”. In other words, Master Yinguang does not simply deny self-power. Instead, he redefines the meaning of self-power as the ethical practice of “fulfilling one’s duties in human relationships and eliminating evil while maintaining sincerity”, and ultimately directs it towards the other-power salvation of “relying solely on the Buddha’s power”. This treatment enables Master Yinguang’s doctrinal classification to not only maintain the pure spirit of the Pure Land School but also leave sufficient space for daily ethical life.

Master Taixu took the opposite stance. In Master Taixu’s system of Dharma classification, the significance of self-power is greatly strengthened: practitioners must start from the human vehicle, and through their own moral practices, learning, and cultivation, gradually make progress upwards, and ultimately achieve the bodhisattva vehicle and even the Buddha vehicle. Other-power is of course not denied, but it is no longer the dominant principle of practice. It is worth noting that although the two handle the relationship between self-power and other-power differently, neither of them simply takes an either-or approach; instead, there is an internal tension and balance in each. Master Yinguang’s “solely relying on the Buddha’s power” contains the foundation of ethical self-power, and Master Taixu’s “becoming a Buddha as a human being” does not deny the guidance of other-power. This relationship of “containing unity within differences” is precisely the key to understanding the complexity of the modern transformation of Buddhism.

5.4 Response Methods to the Crises of the Era

The last difference between the teaching classification ideas of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu is reflected in their ways of responding to the modern Buddhist crisis. Facing the same contemporary issues—the decline of Buddhist monasteries, the laxity of precepts, the impact of Western learning, and social changes—the two masters chose almost opposite coping strategies.

Master Yinguang’s response was to “cope with the turbulent times with tradition.” He diagnosed the various chaotic phenomena in modern society as “people’s hearts being corrupted and the order of ethics being disrupted,” and believed that the way to address these issues was to “promote the law of cause and effect, uphold ethics and fulfill one’s duties, and practice the Pure Land Buddha-recitation with faith and aspiration.” The core of this response was not to reform precepts or innovate institutions, but to construct a “spiritual fortress in turbulent times” by extremely strengthening traditional ethics and Pure Land Buddha-recitation.

Master Taixu’s response was to “cope with the turbulent times through innovation.” He held that the root cause of the decline of Buddhism lay in the drawbacks in three aspects: “doctrine, monastic regulations, and temple properties,” and advocated rebuilding the relationship between Buddhism and modern society through the “Three Great Revolutions.” In Master Taixu’s view, simply re-emphasizing traditional ethics was insufficient to deal with the fundamental changes in modern society. Only through simultaneous innovation at the institutional and ideological levels could Buddhism truly gain a modern living space.

Li Xiangping pointed out when reviewing *A Study of the Modern Transformation of Buddhism’s Engagement in the Secular World* co-authored by Hong Xiuping and others that Buddhism has a history of more than two thousand years in China and has served as a model for the sinicization of religions, forming rich and profound experiences in the sinicization of religions. The evolution of the form of Chinese Buddhism and its ideal types present a transformation mechanism with different characteristics of the times^[27]. From this perspective, the different responses of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu are precisely two manifestations of the same “sinicization of religions” tradition under special conditions in modern times. Although they seem diametrically opposed, they actually jointly constitute the overall strategy of modern Buddhism to deal with the challenges of modernity.

Pan Biao pointed out when comparing the “dual paths” of Ven. Yinshun and Ven. Hsing Yun that the two different paths of

the Humanistic Buddhism ideology have brought different traditional resources and order effectiveness to the development of their respective Humanistic Buddhism. This diverse development of modern Humanistic Buddhism helps to resolve different risks, but it is also prone to causing “rivalry for splendor.” It is necessary to apply the wisdom of “co-existence as one entity” to ensure that there is “co-splendor” rather than “rivalry for splendor”^[28]. This observation also applies to the relationship between Ven. Yinguang and Ven. Taixu: The two paths they represent are essentially two reasonable choices of modern Han-Chinese Buddhism in the face of modernity challenges. The tension and complementarity between them constitute the internal driving force for the transformation of Buddhism.

6. Historical Significance and Contemporary Enlightenment of the Modern Transformation of the Pure Land School

Through the systematic comparison in the previous text, we have gained a relatively comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences as well as the internal connections between the teachings-classification thoughts of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu. In this section, we intend to summarize the overall value of their thoughts from two aspects: historical significance and contemporary inspiration.

6.1 The Internal Tension and Complementarity of the Two Paths

The Doctrine Classification Thoughts of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu seemingly represent two opposing paths of modern Han Buddhism, but in fact they constitute two aspects of the same transformation process. Specifically, Master Yinguang’s approach of “Interpreting the Pure Land with the Doctrines of the Huayan School” provided the most solid traditional foundation for the Pure Land Sect in modern times, enabling the Pure Land Dharma to maintain its spiritual essence under the impact of Western learning. Master Taixu’s “Five Vehicles of Common Dharma” provided the most pioneering modern framework for modern Buddhism, enabling Buddhism to establish an effective dialogue with modern society. One guards the “essence of tradition”, and the other explores the “possibilities of modernity”. Together, they form a complete picture of the transformation of modern Han Buddhism.

Notably, this pattern of “maintaining complementarity in differences” was not the result of the conscious coordination of the two masters, but rather due to the objective requirements of the same era’s proposition. Whether it was Master Yinguang’s traditional adherence to “taking Pure Land as the destination” or Master Taixu’s modern reconstruction of “putting people at the center”, in essence, they were both responses to the fundamental question of “how Buddhism could continue to survive and develop in modern China”. During this process of response, the tension between the two paths not only did not weaken the overall strength of Buddhism, but instead enabled modern Han Chinese Buddhism to obtain richer theoretical resources and more diverse practical paths.

6.2 Enlightenment for the Development of Contemporary Han Buddhism

The ideological legacies of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu continue to offer valuable insights for the development of contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism. On the one hand, the spirit of innovation embodied by Master Taixu remains indispensable in the contemporary era. When discussing Zhao Puchu’s thought of Humanistic Buddhism, Deng Zimei pointed out that Zhao Puchu seized the historical opportunity presented by the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which clearly shifted the focus of work to socialist modernization. He took the progress of modernization as an important ideological backdrop for advocating Humanistic Buddhism and developed his own ideas of Humanistic Buddhism, including “carrying forward three traditions and strengthening five aspects of construction”^[29]. This ideology represents the continuation and development of Master Taixu’s “Humanistic Buddhism” tradition under contemporary circumstances, indicating that innovation and transformation remain among the fundamental tasks of contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism.

On the other hand, the ethical adherence in the style of Master Yinguang is equally indispensable. When discussing the practice of Humanistic Buddhism in Shanghai since modern times, Master Juexing emphasized that Humanistic Buddhism not only has the ideological origin and the exploration and establishment of modern systems, but also has the historical mission of serving the present and facing the future^[30]. This statement actually implies a renewed recognition of the ethical adherence in the style of Master Yinguang: without the foundation of traditional ethics, any form of “modern transformation”

will become a tree without roots. In this sense, the healthy development of contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism requires both the “pioneering spirit” in the style of Master Taixu and the “guardian spirit” in the style of Master Yinguang, and neither can be dispensed with.

A more profound inspiration lies in the fact that the doctrine classification ideas of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu indicate that the traditional method of doctrine classification did not lose its vitality in modern times. Instead, it was re-activated and re-interpreted, becoming an important theoretical resource for Buddhism to respond to the propositions of the era. Whether it is Master Yinguang’s “interpreting the Pure Land teachings with the teachings of the Huayan School” or Master Taixu’s “Five Vehicles of Common Dharma”, they are all creative transformations of the spirit of traditional doctrine classification. This experience tells us that when contemporary Buddhism faces new challenges of the era, it should not simply “return to the tradition” or “embrace modernity”. Instead, it should learn from the dual wisdom of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu, which is “innovating within the tradition and upholding the right path in modernity”.

Conclusion

This paper takes the “doctrinal classification thought” as the starting point to conduct a systematic comparison of the modern Buddhist thoughts of Master Yinguang and Master Taixu. The study finds that although there are significant differences between the two in many aspects, such as the standpoints of doctrinal classification, the targets of edification, the relationship between self-power and other-power, and the ways of responding to the era, the core of their thoughts has a deep-seated complementarity, jointly constituting the dual aspects of the transformation of modern Chinese-transmitted Buddhism.

It should be noted that there is still room for further in-depth research in the comparative study of this paper. First, this paper mainly conducts the comparison from the perspective of theoretical texts, and pays insufficient attention to the interaction and influence between the two in specific Dharma-spreading practices. This aspect needs to be supplemented by more historical materials. Second, this paper focuses on the specific theoretical issue of “doctrinal classification thought”, and only touches upon other aspects of their thoughts (such as the practice of Pure Land Buddha-recitation, views on precepts, educational thoughts, etc.), without fully elaborating on them. Third, from the perspective of the depth of the intellectual history, the ideological divergence between Master Yinguang and Master Taixu does not end with just the two of them. There are also ideological lineages with temporal continuity between Master Yinguang and Yinshun, Taixu and Xingyun, and even Taixu and Zhao Puchu. In fact, Pan Biao’s research on the “dual paths” of Yinshun and Xingyun points out that Yinshun’s classification of traditional Buddhism tends more towards depreciation and deconstruction, while Xingyun tends more towards affirmation and sublimation. The former aims to “revitalize pure Dharma” by clarifying the origin and differentiating the true from the false, and the latter aims to “improve the happy life” by guiding the inherent culture towards a more positive and meaningful world^[31]. There is an obvious corresponding relationship between this and the analysis of the “two paths” of Master Yinguang and Taixu in this paper, which can serve as the basis for further comparative research. It is hoped that in the future, the overall understanding of the ideological transformation of modern Chinese-Han Buddhism can be further deepened in these directions.

From the perspective of the teaching and doctrinal interpretation work in contemporary Buddhist institutions, the two paths initiated by Master Yinguang and Master Taixu are not merely case materials in the history of modern thought. They can also serve as important references for understanding the relationship between upholding the right path and innovation in Chinese Buddhism today. If Pure Land teaching only emphasizes traditional beliefs while neglecting real-world ethics, it is likely to weaken its social educational function. On the other hand, if it only focuses on modern responses while ignoring the religious foundation of faith, vows, and practice, it may lose the distinctive features of the Pure Land School. Therefore, in the context of the sinicization of Buddhism and the modernization of Buddhist education, re-understanding Master Yinguang’s ethical view of the Pure Land and Master Taixu’s classification of the Humanistic Buddhism is conducive to simultaneously grasping the foundation of faith, cultural integration, and the responsibilities of the times in classic study, curriculum construction, and the cultivation of Buddhist talents.

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