

From Monastic Rescue Units to“Monk Brigades”: A Study on the Salvation Practices of Chinese Buddhism during the Full-Scale War of Resistance

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Abstract: During the All-Out War of Resistance, the Chinese Buddhist community transformed its longstanding tradition of loving both nation and religion into concrete actions to save the country. Drawing on masters' collected works, chronologies, and memoirs, this study examines several historical episodes: the battlefield medical relief provided by the Shanghai Monastic Rescue Teams; the armed and propaganda activities of the monastics at Mount Wutai and Mount Nanyue; the overseas publicity mission led by Master Taixu; and the nation-protection and disaster-relief ceremonies presided over successively by Masters Yinguang and Xuyun. It maps the practical forms and underlying rationale of Buddhist engagement across four dimensions—field medical relief, armed resistance, international advocacy, and spiritual mobilization. This research argues that these practices constituted an organic component of the nationwide resistance, reshaped societal perceptions of Buddhism, deepened the Buddhist community's national and ethnic identification, and offer historical lessons for contemporarily advancing the sinicization of religion and strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese nation's community.

Keywords: War of Resistance Against Japan; Chinese Buddhist Community; Monastic Relief Teams; Patriotism and Religious Devotion; Sinicization of Religion

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1. Introduction

The Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression was, since modern times, the longest, largest-scale, and most casualty-heavy national liberation struggle against foreign invasion undertaken by the Chinese people, and it was also the first national liberation struggle to achieve complete victory^[1]. After the September 18 Incident, the national crisis deepened step by step; with the outbreak of the full-scale War of Resistance, defending the nation and saving it from peril became the common will of all sectors of society. The Buddhist community, traditionally characterized by monastic seclusion and ascetic practice, also faced a pressing question at that moment: amid the disintegration of the country, how should disciples of the Buddha conduct themselves? History's response was clear and forceful. From battlefield medical teams in Shanghai to monk self-defense units on Mount Wutai; from the Salvation Association on Mount Heng (Southern Peak) to Buddhist delegations traveling to Burma and India; from the national-protection and calamity-warding dharma assemblies in Shanghai to the Great Compassion dharma assembly venue in Chongqing, monastics and lay Buddhists

engaged in the salvation movement in multiple forms, composing a profoundly heroic chapter in the modern history of Chinese Buddhism. Scholarship has already produced several studies on the relationship between modern Buddhism and the salvation movement—some examine the intellectual reform of the Taixu lineage, others analyze the adaptation of Buddhist organizations to modern society^{[2][3][4]}—but systematic, in-depth treatment of the various practical forms of Buddhist participation in the salvation effort remains to be further developed. This historical episode merits reexamination not only for commemoration but also for the practical insights it offers into religion–state relations: the diverse forms of sangha-led salvation efforts were driven both by Buddhism’s intrinsic compassion and world-saving impulse and by the cohesive force of the Anti-Japanese National United Front policy; internal motivations and external enabling conditions interacted and complemented each other, warranting close study. Drawing on masters’ collected works, chronologies, memoirs, and other materials, this article examines Buddhist salvation practices during the period from four dimensions—battlefield medical relief, armed resistance, international advocacy, and spiritual mobilization—and offers a brief discussion of their historical significance.

2. Battlefield First Aid and Refugee Relief

After the July 7 Incident, the Chinese Buddhist Association convened an emergency meeting in Shanghai and resolved to establish a disaster relief corps, appointing Venerable Master Yuanying as its director and head of the corps, and notifying temples in Beijing and Shanghai to select young monastics to be sent to Shanghai for training^[5]. When the August 13 Battle of Shanghai erupted, the first Beijing–Shanghai Monastic Relief Team assembled and departed from the Jade Buddha Temple, led by Venerable Master Hongming. On the eve of their departure, Yuanying instructed the members to proceed to the frontlines with the spirit of “great fearlessness, great selflessness, and great compassion,” and to cooperate fully in wartime medical and relief work^[5]. This homogeneously monastic unit operated in and around the frontline sectors of Wusong, Dachang, and Liuxing, rescuing wounded soldiers and evacuating refugees. According to the report of the Shanghai Charitable Organizations Joint Disaster Relief Committee the following year, during the Battle of Shanghai alone the monastic relief teams saved more than 8,200 wounded servicemen and refugees; Shanghai newspapers praised them as “heroic monks,” while foreign-language papers labeled them “enemies of the god of war.”

Beyond medical relief, refugee resettlement was likewise an urgent priority. The Buddhist Association of China established refugee shelters at Jueyuan, accommodating more than three thousand refugees and providing rice porridge, food, and medical supplies. Layman Zhao Puchu, who served as the association’s chief secretary, personally escorted over a hundred able-bodied young refugees who volunteered for military service to the front lines. In occupied areas’ shelters, progressive youths conducted resistance education among refugees and consecutively funneled large numbers of young men into the New Fourth Army to take up anti-Japanese posts. During the later stages of the Battle of Shanghai, the wounded swelled beyond the capacity of local hospitals; within two days the Shanghai Buddhist community founded Buddhist hospitals to receive and treat the injured, and instituted memorial rites within those hospitals to consecrate the spirits of fallen soldiers, thus consoling the loyal dead^[5]. After Shanghai fell, the remains of fallen soldiers and victims were left exposed in the countryside, with the Japanese army forbidding burial. Master Yuanying organized and resumed a corps of monks to bury the dead, assuming the role of chief commander; he led monastics and temple attendants from Yufu Temple, Fazang Temple, Qingliang Temple, and elsewhere to transport remains by truck to burial sites in the suburbs, interring more than ten thousand bodies within three months^[5]. Clad in monastic robes, these men daily confronted death and enacted, in the gravest manner, the bodhisattva vow to preserve life and alleviate suffering, moving all who witnessed them. As the theater of war expanded, the disaster-relief corps established additional contingents—the second in Hankou and the third in Ningbo—each of which subsequently proceeded to the various battlefronts to render service^[6].

In southern Fujian, Buddhist participation in wartime medical relief was catalyzed by Master Hongyi’s advocacy. In his later years in Quanzhou, during a period of frequent aerial bombardment, he would suspend his lectures to inscribe the maxim “念佛不忘救国” and thereby exhort the congregation, urging both monastics and lay followers to fulfill their duties as citizens^[7]. Inspired by his appeal, the Jinjiang County Buddhist Wartime Relief Corps was established at Kaiyuan Temple; able-bodied monks were selected for concentrated training in battlefield first aid and engaged in treating the wounded and preparing the

deceased^[7]. Spaces traditionally devoted to monastic cultivation thus became sites for saving lives and tending the injured.

3. From Ascetic Practice to Armed Struggle: Monastics on the Frontlines of the Resistance War

Mount Wutai in North China served as a crucial rear-area base during the early stages of the War of Resistance. In November 1937 the Jin-Cha-Ji Military Region established a presence in the Wutai area, and under Nie Rongzhen's command forces centered their guerrilla operations around the Buddhist holy sites. When troops first arrived amid driving snow, severe cold, and scarce supplies, Abbot Ranxiu led the mountain's monastic community in greeting them at the temple gate with Buddhist music, offering the meditation hall and monks' quarters to billet the soldiers, and presenting them with leather garments and bedding^[8]. In January 1938 the Jin-Cha-Ji border region's conference of military, political, and civilian representatives convened in Fuping; Wutai's monk representatives attended in their kasaya and moved the entire assembly. On the spot Ranxiu declared, "Monastics are compassionate by nature. If we, who have left the world, do not defend the nation, who will? If the country falls, what will become of Buddhism and the temples? It is the monks' duty to participate in the resistance and national salvation"^[8]. Thereafter the Wutai Buddhist Salvation Alliance was formed, drawing over a thousand monks from the mountain's temples—blue and yellow sects, Han, Tibetan, and Mongol alike. Able-bodied young monks organized anti-Japanese self-defense units to stand guard, relay intelligence, and shelter resistance cadres. Monastic communities also contributed funds energetically: the Xiantong Temple alone donated one thousand silver dollars and one hundred dan of grain, and the mountain as a whole subscribed several thousand yuan to national salvation bonds, earning commendation from the border region authorities.

In August 1938, Japanese forces made their first incursion into Mount Wutai. The monk militia, under the command of squad leader Ciyin, with more than one hundred members, cooperated with Eighth Route Army units to ambush the enemy around Jinge Ridge and Shegou. From their elevated positions they rolled rocks and fired upon advancing troops, repelling the enemy vanguard^[8]. The fighting continued thereafter; over one hundred monks cast off their monastic robes to join the ranks of the Jin-Cha-Ji military subdistrict forces, forming what became known as the "monk company." They followed the army through hundreds of engagements, with many wounded and earning commendations; at Pusa Peak alone monks reportedly killed more than thirty enemy soldiers in combat^[8]. Local civilians came to refer to the Mount Wutai monks as "revolutionary monks." The abbot of Jinge Temple, Hankong, once declared to the entire monastery: "We have left home but not our country; we love the Dharma, and we love the nation even more."^[8] Brief yet forceful, these words became the most widely circulated wartime confession within the Buddhist community.

In southern China, Mount Heng (Nanyue) served as a major anti-Japanese stronghold during the war. In the spring of 1939, patriotic monks such as Ju Zan and Mu Jia initiated the formation of Buddhist–Daoist organizations for national salvation, receiving enthusiastic support from Chinese Communists. Zhou Enlai inscribed the eight-character slogan “上马杀贼，下马学佛” to bolster their efforts. On May 7, the Nanyue Buddhist–Daoist Relief Association was formally established; Ye Jianying delivered a speech in person, urging the clergy to leave their monasteries and engage in the national salvation movement. The association soon organized wartime instruction classes, providing young and middle-aged monks and Daoists with training in Buddhist studies, basic political knowledge, military fundamentals, first-aid skills, motivational addresses, and wartime songs. Upon graduation, participants formed the Buddhist Youth Service Corps and the Buddhist Mobile Work Corps, led respectively by Ju Zan and Yan Wen, and were dispatched to places such as Xiangtan, Changsha, and Chongqing to conduct anti-Japanese propaganda—delivering street speeches, producing wall newspapers and choral performances, and reaching into towns and villages to arouse the populace. This shift by young monastics from solitary devotional practice to street-level public engagement was regarded by contemporaries as a new phenomenon within the Buddhist community.

4. Overseas Advocacy and International Solidarity

As the full-scale War of Resistance entered a protracted stalemate, the survival of international transport routes directly affected the course of the conflict. The Japanese spread rumors in Burma and elsewhere, falsely accusing China of "destroying religion" to incite local opposition to the opening of the Burma Road, aiming to isolate China. To clarify the facts and win

the sympathy of peoples in Buddhist countries, the idea of dispatching a delegation from the National Political Participation Council was first proposed; subsequently the government officially invited the esteemed Dewangsu—authoritative and previously having traveled in Europe and America as a mendicant monk—appointing Taixu as the delegation leader. In November 1939 Taixu led an International Buddhist Visiting Mission abroad via the Burma Road, making extensive visits to Burma, India, Ceylon and other countries over a seven-month^[9] period. The delegation paid homage at Buddhist sacred sites, met with Buddhist leaders, reported on the actual situation of China's war effort, and exposed Japanese atrocities and fabricated rumors. In India Taixu met with figures from various circles such as Nehru and Tagore and delivered speeches continuously at each stop; the Chinese community in Burma initiated a vehicle-donation campaign, providing automobiles to support domestic transportation; and Ceylonese statesmen received the delegation with ceremonial grandeur^[9]. The mission declared the stance of Chinese Buddhists and enhanced understanding and sympathy for China's resistance among Buddhist countries in South and Southeast Asia. As Ceylon occupied a strategic position on the Eurasian maritime routes, the delegation there established extensive dharma ties; local political leaders personally came to the wharf to welcome them, with monks and laypeople aligned in ceremonial order and great pomp. The seven-month^[9] journey cultivated both religious and national bonds and played an active role in preserving the Burma Road as an international supply line.

Overseas Chinese assistance constituted the other pillar of international support. After the Battle of Shanghai, as funds for relief services ran short, Yuanying twice led his disciple Mingyang on missions to Southeast Asia: presiding over ceremonies in Singapore to pray for world peace and disaster abatement, and—supported by diaspora leaders such as Tan Kah Kee—establishing fundraising committees and traveling to Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and other locations to deliver lectures and solicit donations; all proceeds were remitted in full to relief and rescue efforts in China^[5]. In October 1939, following betrayal by a traitor, Yuanying and Mingyang were arrested by the Japanese army and taken to the Kempeitai headquarters in Nanjing, where they endured torture but remained unyielding; when the Japanese subsequently attempted to entice Yuanying with offers of positions such as “President of the Sino-Japanese Buddhist Association,” he uniformly declined on grounds of age and illness, preserving his integrity and earning the respect of both domestic and foreign observers^[5].

5. Posthumous Religious Honors and Spiritual Mobilization

Holding dharma assemblies to pray for the war effort and to memorialize the dead constituted a distinctive mode by which the Buddhist community mobilized popular sentiment. The designation “protect the nation and avert calamities” (*huguo xizai*) derives from the Buddhist canon: the Golden Light Sutra elucidates the four Heavenly Kings' role in safeguarding the realm, teaching that if a monarch reveres the Three Jewels and governs by the correct Dharma, the Four Heavenly Kings and their retinues will guard his territory, preventing foreign aggression and disasters from entering^[10]. Rituals performed across dynasties to bless the state and protect the people are continuations of this tradition. In the years surrounding the full-scale war of resistance, *huguo xizai* assemblies proliferated throughout the country. The earliest and most influential of these was convened in the winter of 1936 by the Pure Land Society (*Jingye She*) in Shanghai: the assembly was presided over by Master Yuan Ying and featured invited teachings by Master Yin Guang, who at that time had been in seclusion in Suzhou. At seventy-six years of age, Yin Guang arrived in Shanghai discreetly with a single attendant and delivered two-hour public teachings daily to packed audiences. Upon learning during the assembly of the dire situation in Suiyuan, he immediately donated the entire sum of 2,900-plus yuan collected from the refutation/rite for taking refuge (*guiyi xiangyi*) to support the anti-Japanese soldiers in Suiyuan, and furthermore contributed 1,000 yuan from his personal fund for printing sutras as an initiative; he also declared that “only by relieving others' suffering can one abate one's own calamities”^[11]. In 1937, when a Japanese officer presented newly printed collections of scriptures to Lingyan Temple, Yin Guang courteously declined, explaining that the temple's monastics merely chanted the Buddha's name and recited scriptures and thus lacked the karmic disposition to accept such a gift; his demeanor—neither servile nor arrogant—elicited admiration from observers^[11].

The largest dharma assembly held during the resistance period was the Great Compassion Ritual for the Protection of the Nation and the Quelling of Calamities in Chongqing in the winter of 1942. That winter the Nationalist Government dispatched envoys to Nanhua Temple in Guangdong to invite the centenarian Master Xuyun to preside over the rites in Chongqing; in December the ceremonies were opened simultaneously at the Ciyun and Huayan temples and lasted forty-

nine days, during which fallen soldiers and deceased compatriots were commemorated and prayers were offered for victory in the War of Resistance and for national peace and the well-being of the people^[12]. Ciyun Temple in Nan'an served as the exoteric (Hinayana/Mahayana public) platform, where Master Xuyun led the sangha in recitation of the Lotus Sutra and the Shurangama Sutra and in the performance of the Great Compassion Repentance; Huayan Temple functioned as the esoteric platform, where the Tibetan Buddhist Gonga Hutuktu presided over tantric practices. With exoteric and esoteric rites conducted concurrently and Han and Tibetan monastics and laity practicing together, the assembly not only aimed at salvation and supplication but also manifested a symbol of national unity^[12]. Over the course of the event more than one hundred thousand monastics and lay participants from the provisional capital took part, presenting a striking spectacle of the sangha and laity collectively confronting the national crisis^[12].

Another focal point of spiritual mobilization was Venerable Hong Yi in Southern Fujian. When hostilities began in 1937, he was residing in Xiamen; his disciples urged him to relocate inland because of the perilous situation, but he refused, saying, "For the sake of protecting the Dharma, I do not fear shells," and inscribed his residence "Martyrdom Hall" to signify his resolve to share the fate of the besieged city^[7]. After moving to Quanzhou, one day in the refectory he wept and addressed the assembly: "We partake of the grain of China and drink the waters of Wenling; as sons of the Buddha, at such a time we cannot do nothing to alleviate the country's calamity even in the slightest degree," expressing shame at being unable to repay the homeland; those who heard him wept. Thereafter, at every lecture he would hang his own inscription behind the seat reading "Recite the Buddha's name without forgetting to save the nation," and daily composed couplets to distribute to the laity and monastics alike, using his renowned calligraphy to propagate the cause of national salvation^[7]. During this period a commander of a Japanese fleet once paid a visit and requested to converse in Japanese; Hong Yi insisted on speaking Chinese. The commander then offered to send a special plane to bring him to Japan to propagate the Dharma, to which the master replied that an ordained person has forgotten both favor and disgrace; though his country is poor, his love for it is all the deeper, and when the nation is in peril he would not hesitate even to give his life. His stern words were reported widely in domestic and foreign newspapers^[7]. In his later years he remained steadfast in Fujian, not avoiding bombardment, his resolve to sacrifice himself for the nation deepening with age, thereby establishing a model for both monastics and lay followers.

6. Conclusion

From battlefield first aid to armed resistance, from overseas advocacy to memorial services, the salvation practices of Chinese Buddhism during the full-scale War of Resistance were diverse in form yet consistent in spirit. The saying in the Platform Sutra that "the Dharma is in the world, not apart from the world's awakening" found its most concrete validation in this context^[13]. Monastics left their monastery gates and engaged in relief efforts with compassionate resolve; the otherworldly teachings and worldly actions became fused under the banner of national duty.

The historical significance of this practice can be summarized in three respects. From the perspective of the overall Anti-Japanese War, the Buddhist community's engagement in national salvation through its extensive social networks made it an integral component of the nationwide resistance and attested to the broad and deep foundations of the anti-Japanese united front — for example, the Mount Wutai monastic militia submitted to the leadership of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region, and the Nanyue Relief Association received support from Chinese Communists; cooperation between monastics and laypeople in resisting foreign aggression furnished clear evidence. With respect to Buddhism itself, this episode dispelled the prevailing view of Buddhism as retreating from the world: monks' rescue teams entering battle zones and burial squads personally attending to the dead embodied the doctrine of compassion in concrete deeds, and furnished important experience for reconciling Buddhism with modern society^[14]. In terms of intellectual history, the 救亡 (national salvation) practice deepened the Buddhist community's sense of state and national identity; love of country and devotion to religion were elevated from historical tradition to a conscious stance, and Humanistic Buddhism moved from theoretical conception to an actionable orientation^[15].

Over eighty years later, reflecting on this episode, what those Buddhist predecessors embodied with their flesh and blood was the profound interconnection between a religious community and the life and fate of the nation—an import that transcends mere historical recovery. It signals to later generations that the fate of religion is inextricably linked with that of the state and

the nation, and that patriotism and fidelity to faith have never been separate matters. The Buddhist community in the new era should inherit the legacy of its forebears, uphold the sinicization of religion in our country, strengthen the consciousness of the Chinese national community, and, through practices that serve society and benefit the people, allow this tradition—written in both blood and compassion—to be revitalized.

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