

Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies

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Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies

Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies (APBS) is a journal that publishes scholarly research on Buddhism and Buddhist cultures in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The journal encourages academic studies that explore Buddhist philosophy, history, scriptures, and cultural traditions using historical, textual, philosophical, and interdisciplinary approaches. It particularly welcomes research that examines the development of Buddhist thought and its interaction with society, culture, and intellectual traditions across different historical and regional contexts, it covers mainly but not limits to the following areas:

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Editor's Foreword

— Contemplating the Dharma Realm, Sustaining the Continuum of Civilizational Exchange

Dear Scholars, Researchers, and Esteemed Readers,

Buddhist studies constitute not only a vital dimension of human spiritual civilization but also a significant intellectual pathway for examining the deep interconnections between Eastern philosophical traditions and contemporary social transformations. In an era marked by the intertwined advancement of globalization and digitalization, interactions between religion and culture have intensified, while modes of knowledge production continue to evolve. Within this broader context, Buddhist studies have increasingly assumed a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and transcontextual orientation.

The Asia-Pacific region, as a crucial locus for the transmission and historical evolution of Buddhism, encompasses diverse intellectual lineages, varied forms of religious practice, and multiple socio-cultural settings. Together, these elements form a dynamic and fertile academic field for contemporary Buddhist studies.

Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies (APBS), guided by the scholarly commitment to “tracing canonical sources, reflecting upon contemporary realities, and fostering dialogue between Chinese and Western intellectual traditions,” is an international, peer-reviewed, open-access academic journal rooted in the Asia-Pacific region and oriented toward a global readership. The journal is dedicated to advancing Buddhist studies through both theoretical deepening and methodological innovation. It places particular emphasis on the transformation and application of Buddhist thought in contemporary contexts, while exploring the intrinsic interrelations among canonical interpretation, doctrinal systems, institutional formations, and cultural expressions. Grounded in rigorous textual scholarship, the journal advocates the integration of philosophical analysis, anthropological perspectives, and historical methodologies, with the aim of cultivating a productive and interpretively rich dialogue between tradition and modernity.

The journal focuses on key areas including Buddhist philosophy, canonical studies, sectarian thought, monastic education, the sociology of religion, and the interaction between Buddhism and regional culture. At the same time, it attends to the public value and contemporary relevance of Buddhism, addressing issues such as ethical formation, social governance, cultural identity, and cross-civilizational exchange. APBS encourages problem-oriented research approaches and promotes theoretical development grounded in careful textual interpretation and fieldwork, thereby advancing Buddhist studies from the mere elucidation of knowledge toward the generation of meaning.

The journal is organized into the following sections: Special Contributions, Canon and Doctrinal Studies, Buddhist History and Institutions, Comparative Sectarian and Intellectual Traditions, Buddhism and Social Development, Ethnic and Regional Buddhism, Buddhist Education and Transmission, and Cross-

Cultural Buddhist Studies. Through this multidimensional framework, it seeks to present a comprehensive intellectual landscape of Buddhist studies. Emphasis is placed on methodological rigor and coherence of argumentation, and the journal welcomes original contributions that combine intellectual depth with engagement in contemporary concerns.

Scholarship is grounded in the pursuit of truth; the study of the Buddhadharma lies in the elucidation of principles. To this end, the journal adheres to the following guiding principles:

First, a commitment to scholarly integrity. Rooted in canonical sources and guided by methodological rigor, the journal upholds academic standards while striving to balance analytical depth with engagement at the research frontier.

Second, an emphasis on problem-oriented inquiry. Scholars are encouraged to engage with concrete contemporary conditions and to address critical issues arising in both present-day society and the spiritual dimension of human life, ensuring that Buddhist studies remains responsive to its time.

Third, a commitment to openness and integrative dialogical. On the basis of respect for diverse academic traditions and cultural contexts, the journal promotes exchange and mutual learning across disciplines, languages, and regions, positioning Buddhist studies as a vital bridge for civilizational dialogue.

The establishment of *Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies* (APBS) reflects the collective efforts of scholars from numerous Buddhist institutions and research organizations across the Asia-Pacific region, and is made possible through the trust and support of its authors, reviewers, and readers. We sincerely invite colleagues from both the religious and academic communities worldwide to participate in this shared endeavor—to deepen understanding through critical reflection, to broaden intellectual horizons through scholarly integrity, and to generate new possibilities of thought through pluralistic dialogue.

Buddhist studies concern not only the interpretation of the past but also the construction of meaning for the present and the future. While an academic journal serves as a medium, it also bears the responsibility of sustaining intellectual continuity and enabling civilizations to reflect upon one another. It is our aspiration that *Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies* (APBS), amid the complexities of the contemporary world, will remain grounded in its foundations while opening new horizons, and will serve as a vital platform connecting traditional wisdom with the modern world.

With this inaugural issue, we offer these reflections in a spirit of shared commitment with colleagues across the field.

Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies (APBS)

Editor-in-Chief: Weimin Zeng

April 2026

Reflections on the Dialogue between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity in the Context of Modernization (1949-2000)

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Abstract: This paper examines the interactions between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity through the lens of Chinese modernity as a dialogical framework. It argues that these dialogues unfold across various platforms, primarily through the opposition to secularism and the promotion of social harmony. Spanning the period from 1949 to 2000, the study divides this interaction into four distinct phases: the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s–1980s, and 1990s. By analyzing the nature of Buddhist-Christian engagement in each period, this research reflects on the challenges and opportunities shaping their dialogue within the specific context of Chinese modernity.

Keywords: Chinese Modernity; Buddhism; Christianity; Religious Dialogue; Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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1. Introduction

While China during the period of 1911–1949 was characterized by both external and internal conflicts, the era from 1949 to 2000 witnessed the country's transition to a unified and relatively peaceful environment, thereby embarking on a distinct path of modernization with Chinese characteristics.

The precise definition of “modernity” remains contested within academia. As Chen Jiaming (2015) notes, the term was initially used by Pope Gelasius I in the 5th century AD to distinguish his era from that of his predecessors^[1]. Scholars have categorized modernity in various ways: Chen (2015) identifies perspectives from Giddens, Habermas, and Foucault^[2], whereas Liu (2015) differentiates between institutional, philosophical, and modernization frameworks^[3]. Departing from these classifications, this paper focuses on the constitutive elements of modernity and proposes a categorization based on six analytical dimensions:

First, some definitions provide a comprehensive description of modernity's components. For instance, Lu Feng (2009) divides it into ideological dimensions—such as liberalism and scientism—and social goals like industrialization and urbanization^[4]. Similarly, Liu (2015) defines modernity as “a comprehensive reflection of the spirit of the times in modern society”^[5].

Second, other scholars emphasize the interrelatedness of these elements. Alan McFarlane (2015) argues that modernity is neither merely technological nor tied to a specific time, but rather emerges from the interplay of demographics, political structures, and social organization^[6].

Third, certain theorists summarize modernity using concise core concepts. Che Xiaomin (2015) suggests that rationality and capitalism are its two foundational dimensions^[7], while Anthony Giddens (2016) limits modernity to capitalism, industrialism,

surveillance, and violence control^[8].

Fourth, modernity is often defined by its radical break from tradition. Giddens (2016) contends that modernity “has shaped its life forms by throwing us off the track of all types of social order in unprecedented ways,” highlighting features such as the separation of time and space^[9].

Fifth, from a macro-sociological perspective, the formation of national consciousness became a hallmark of modernity by the mid-20th century, whereas failure to establish a nation-state was viewed as a sign of backwardness^[10].

Sixth, some definitions associate modernity with a scientific worldview. For example, Rather Shaw (2012) describes it as a shift from myth to a metric based on nature and scientific calculation^[11]. Conversely, Troeltsch (2004) views modernism as the Church’s adaptation to the modern world, incorporating scientific methods into religious thought^[12].

While some Western scholars frame Chinese modernity as antagonistic to the West—arguing that it represents a challenge to liberalism and American influence^[13]—this perspective overlooks the internal logic of Chinese civilization. This paper posits that Chinese modernity possesses its own unique trajectory.

In summary, if modernity is understood as a trait distinct from “tradition” or “antiquity,” encompassing politics, economy, and culture, then it reached a mature stage in China after 1949. Drawing on Ernst Troeltsch’s methodological framework, this study constructs a model of “dialogue” between modernity and religion, applying it specifically to the Chinese context.

Although modernity’s origins are debated, its impact on China was largely mediated through Western influence since the Republican era. Initially, Christianity symbolized “modernity” but later faced criticism (e.g., the Anti-Missionary Movement). Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Christianity gradually adjusted its social functions in accordance with national laws and social development needs. However, since the 1990s, data indicate a dramatic increase in the Christian population. Building on Zhang Xiuhua’s (2008) periodization—which divides post-1949 history into phases of “exploration” and “second enlightenment”^[14]—this paper adopts a four-period framework to clarify the evolving relationship between Christianity and Chinese modernity from 1949 to 2000.

This study selects Buddhism and Christianity as the primary subjects for this dialogue. Their interaction reveals both historical conflicts and mutual transformations, illustrating how religious discourse adapts to modern contexts.

From 1949 to 2000, the relationship among Chinese Buddhism, Christianity, and modernity was largely characterized by compromise, shaped by nationalist sentiments and historical mentalities. While Western scholars like Paul Knitter have extensively explored Buddhist-Christian dialogue, few have examined this dynamic within the specific context of Chinese modernity. Addressing this gap, this paper analyzes the patterns of coexistence between Chinese modernity, Buddhism, and Christianity.

The search for common ground is essential in modern society. Both Buddhism and Christianity were once labeled as “superstitious” and antithetical to modernization in China. Furthermore, Christianity bore the additional stigma of “cultural aggression.” Despite these challenges, platforms for dialogue emerged, centered on opposing secularism, promoting social harmony, and seeking truth. Consequently, in the secular sphere, Buddhism, Christianity, and modern China have collaborated to produce a more harmonious societal melody.

2. Historical Periodization: From 1950s to 1990s

2.1 The 1950s-1970s: Adjustment and Self-improvement of Religions

Although Chinese Catholics and Protestants embarked on a path of isolation from the West from the 1950s onwards, this trajectory facilitated a process of complete “Sinicization” that aligned with the prevailing social climate. This situation stemmed from a combination of patriotic fervor, geopolitical shifts influenced by American messaging, and the Chinese government’s evolving understanding of religion at the time. As Madsen (2015) notes, “This political separation from the chief Western Catholic colonial power opened up the possibility that the Chinese church could be led someday by nationalist elites”^[15]. Similarly, Bays (2015) observes that despite Marxism’s ideological disdain for Christianity, “some Chinese Protestant individuals and organizations still retained useful social capital upon which to draw at the beginning of the new regime”^[16].

During the 1960s and 1970s, China’s relative closure and focus on indigenous modernization models meant that Christianity

was heavily influenced by the Soviet paradigm, often viewed as an element incompatible with socialist construction.

However, a significant shift occurred after the reforms. The 1981 Resolution on Certain Historical Issues of the Party since the Founding of the State clarified that adherence to the Four Cardinal Principles did not require religious believers to abandon their faith, provided they refrained from anti-Marxist propaganda or interference in politics and education^[17]. Supporting this change, Xi Zhongxun stated at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Chinese Christianity that “the view that pits the building of spiritual civilisation against the citizens’ belief in religion is incorrect”^[18]. This period of openness allowed for greater religious visibility, as Wickeri (2011) noted, describing the increasingly familiar scenes of public religious gatherings in mainland China.

Building on this momentum, the number of Christians in China surged during the 1990s, reflecting the government’s continued inclusivity toward religion. According to statistics from the China Christian Council and the Chinese government, the Christian population grew from 3 million in 1985 to 5 million in 1990 and reached 10 million by 1996^[19]. Concurrently, the concept of “Sino-Christian theology” (often abbreviated as “Sino-theology”) emerged as an intellectual movement within the Chinese-speaking world since the late 1980s^[20].

Nevertheless, the influence of Christianity remained constrained. Its historical presence in areas such as education, journalism, and medicine had diminished. Even among Christian intellectuals—who possessed limited space for discourse—their impact was restricted to narrow academic circles. As Li (2008) points out, although the number of intellectual Christians has increased, they remain isolated from the broader Chinese church, limiting their ability to influence either society or ecclesiastical development^[21].

2.2 The 1980s-1990s: Revival and Growth

Building on the momentum of the 1980s, the number of Christians in China surged during the 1990s, reflecting the government’s continued inclusivity toward religion. This growth was not merely quantitative; the composition of the congregation also shifted qualitatively. According to statistics from the China Christian Council and the Chinese government, the Christian population grew from 3 million in 1985 to 5 million in 1990, reaching 10 million by 1996^[22].

Concurrently, an intellectual movement known as “Sino-Christian theology” (often abbreviated as “Sino-theology”; hanyu shenxue) emerged in the Chinese-speaking world, particularly in Mainland China, since the late 1980s^[23]. However, the influence of this movement remained limited. Christianity’s historical presence in sectors such as education, journalism, and medicine had significantly receded.

Even within academic circles, the impact of Christian intellectuals was constrained. As Li (2008) notes, although their numbers have increased in recent years, they remain a small fraction of the overall Christian population. Isolated from the broader Chinese church, these intellectuals are neither significantly influenced by church movements nor capable of substantially affecting the church’s development^[24].

3. The Dialogue Platform of Chinese Modernity-Buddhism-Christianity

3.1 Against the Secular

Being opposed to the secular constitutes a major common ground between Buddhism and Christianity. To oppose secularism is to pursue the spiritual dimension of human existence, rather than merely settling for material satisfaction. Secularisation is so deeply intertwined with human history that it can be said to exist wherever there are human societies. As world religions, Buddhism and Christianity in fact emerged with inherent anti-secular elements.

The etymology of “secularity” can be traced to the Latin *saeculum*, meaning “generation”, “lifespan”, “age”, or “century”. Within the Christian tradition, “secular” originally denoted worldly, non-religious affairs in contrast to sacred or religious matters. However, with the rise of human subjectivity and the diminished role of the divine in human society, the term has acquired a broader scope. As Charles Taylor writes: “Secularity is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike.”^[25]

Whether secularism encompasses or is equivalent to individualism remains a matter of interpretive disagreement.

Perhaps due to the term’s strong Christian intellectual origins, it has received relatively little scholarly attention in mainland China.

In modern society, secularisation has reduced religion's political significance. As Chen Jiaming observes: "Secularisation has withdrawn religion from the political sphere, prevented it from intervening in politics or dominating intellectual and cultural life, yet this has not stopped religion from remaining a viable spiritual faith, retaining its influence in the spiritual realm, and continuing to provide a spiritual haven for people."^[26]

At the same time, modernity is not simply identical to secularism, nor is secularisation inherently negative for religion. To address the shortcomings of secularisation, modern Chinese thought may engage with religion to resist excessive secularisation. In this context, "secularism" refers primarily to an overemphasis on material life at the expense of the spiritual dimensions of individuals and society.

In this process, Jürgen Habermas argues that "the culture and secularisation of society should be understood as a dual learning process. It must rethink the limits of both the Enlightenment tradition and religious doctrine."^[27]

Although Habermas did not specifically analyse Chinese modernity, and Western scholars in the twentieth century generally paid little attention to it, his framework for understanding Western modernity remains valuable. In certain respects, modernity cannot be rigidly divided into "Western" and "Chinese", especially when examining its cultural effects. Habermas's perspective is therefore worth adopting.

This understanding is reciprocal. Religion should not view secularisation as an outright compromise with modernisation. Instead, the process allows both sides to observe the limits and transformations of modern society and religion themselves. In the 1990s, Catholics and Evangelical Protestants began constructive dialogue and identified shared ground in opposing the secularising tendencies of modernity. Similarly, a dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity can be established on this basis. As Gerard F. Rutan notes: "The real fight is not against each other, but against the lust and sin of the secular world."^[28]

In the course of modernisation, both Buddhism and Christianity have shifted from emphasising the afterlife or "other shore" to engaging with this-worldly existence. Many people also hope that Buddhism and Christianity can offer guidance toward inner peace. For instance: "Catholics found it difficult to avoid secular ideas such as humanism, the Enlightenment, and political liberalism until the 1960s. A view then emerged: regretful of the aporias of modern thought, many argued that only religion, by appealing to transcendent dimensions, could rescue modernity from its dead end."^[29]

Habermas further maintains that religion preserves vital traditions: "Within the communal life of religious groups, certain things that have vanished elsewhere can remain intact — provided dogmatism and coercion are avoided." These are dimensions that cannot be restored through expert knowledge alone. I refer here to existential confusion, the pathologies of modern society, the fragmentation of individual life-plans, the distortion of existential structures, and the loss of rich forms of expression and moral sensitivity."^[30]

Although both Buddhism and Christianity have evolved in modern society, no one can clearly delineate exactly how much each has changed or how fully they have preserved their traditions. After all, preachers, monks, and believers are not ancient figures but modern people who speak modern languages and use modern tools. These are themselves part of modernisation, not separate from it.

"Public consciousness of modernisation involves, to varying degrees, both religious and secular mentalities and reflective transformations. When both sides treat the secularisation of society as part of a complementary learning process, they can contribute to public debate and engage with one another seriously on cognitive and rational grounds."^[31]

In this sense, the thoroughly secular or atheistic segments of modern society ought to better understand and not disregard religion. Religion itself has also undergone profound changes alongside modern society. Modernity places increasing emphasis on the individual, yet in traditional religious frameworks, the individual was often secondary to the divine.

3.2 To Promote Social Harmony

Whether between different religions, or between religions and modernity, genuine dialogue plays an irreplaceable role in promoting mutual understanding. Such understanding can also, to a certain extent, foster harmony rather than opposition.

Firstly, diversity constitutes one of the challenges of modern society, and increasing diversity implies a growing potential for intergroup conflict. Although the human world has never achieved full unity at any point in history, diversity in the modern globalised system is accompanied by much closer interconnectedness. This makes the impact of diversity on other groups and

communities more abrupt and intense. To a certain extent, “it is becoming increasingly difficult for a community to organize political forces, build loyalty, inspire collective commitment to common goals, and so on, based on its self-understanding, especially under conditions without strong land ownership or excessive surplus wealth.”^[32] For Chinese society, this trend may appear somewhat less pronounced, yet the potential of a multi-dimensional world deserves to be realised, and the power of religious dialogue can serve as a unifying force. For instance, Gao Dahong argues that “the harmonious thought of Tibetan Buddhism constitutes an important intellectual resource.”^[33]

Secondly, it can be observed that since the 1980s, after Buddhism and Christianity regained a certain degree of social freedom, their charitable activities have emerged as a positive force in China’s modern society. For example, the Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple donated more than 27 million yuan to social welfare causes between 1984 and 1995. The Charity Foundation of Xiamen’s Nanputuo Temple distributed over 27 million yuan in donations from 1994 to 2004.^[34] At a time when the pursuit of individual self-interest has become a dominant social norm and caused moral confusion, such charitable acts have formed a clear and positive current in society.

In Chinese practice, it is also evident that modern China has closely integrated modernisation with Buddhism and Christianity under the principle of patriotism. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, and especially since the reform and opening-up, religious theological thought has increasingly incorporated patriotic content. For example, although “Christian charities in China have long faced difficulties, partly due to their perceived foreign ties and the suspicion, in the view of the CCP, that they collude with foreign forces to subvert the socialist system through ‘peaceful evolution’.”^[35] Christianity in China maintains that becoming prosperous through reform and opening-up is not contradictory to biblical teachings, and Christian hymns include songs of filial piety and prayers for national blessings. The Buddhist community promotes the idea of Earthly Buddhism, encouraging adherents to “observe the Five Precepts and Ten Virtues to purify the mind, widely practise the Four Boundless States and Six Paramitas, and love the country and protect the faith.”^[36] Since the late twentieth century, alongside China’s modernization drive and the construction of a “people-centred” society, both Buddhism and Christianity have also embraced a people-centred orientation, creating greater opportunities for the two traditions to cooperate as faiths committed to the well-being of the people.

André Laliberté argues that “The ambition of the corporatist logic adopted by the CCP is to shape the religious field so that it can mobilize pliant religious actors to help it face demographic issues such as population aging, the skewed sex ratio, and urbanization.”^[37] However, it is a false assumption that religious believers are necessarily compliant. One must examine China’s efforts to build a harmonious society from a more pragmatic and complex perspective.

3.3 Seek Reality

The need for diversity and unity reflected in dialogue aligns with the spirit of modern society, and such unity lies in the pursuit of a shared truth. For humanity, the quest for reality is the only path to transcend worldly life. Religion seeks reality in its own way, while modern society pursues the truth of the world through technology. Yet it is undeniable and unavoidable that “relevance, relatedness, and dialogue are now constitutive elements of our human understanding of reality.”^[38] Whether different paths to reality can ultimately converge points to the direction in which genuine dialogue may be achieved.

If truth is absolute and unique for humanity, and if different beliefs represent merely distinct expressions of the same truth, then both religious dialogue and cultural dialogue become possible. “It can ‘speak’ to me, can truly communicate with my thought, yet only in a language and set of categories that I can understand.”^[39] Although most religious believers are not engaged in dialogue at this philosophical level, it remains an extremely meaningful dimension of interreligious dialogue. Some overseas scholars have also explored this path. On a theoretical level, Yuan Huiwen argues that “emptiness” constitutes the seed of East-West religious dialogue: “Since negative theology centers on the elaboration of ‘emptiness’ and ‘nothingness’, it can serve as the seed of East-West religious dialogue, from which the dialogue between Christianity and Zen may blossom and bear fruit.”^[40] Nonetheless, such intellectual exchanges exert little direct influence on ordinary religious believers.

4. Reflection on Dialogue Forms

4.1 Before the Economic Reform

The mainstream ideological orientation of Buddhism and Christianity in the People’s Republic of China was framed by

patriotism, an ideological background that endured even after nearly three decades of religious restrictions and retained its core character. Consequently, after Buddhism and Christianity regained a degree of religious freedom, the principle of “loving the country and loving the faith” remained paramount. As China set out to build a modern socialist country, the participation of Buddhists and Christians in national construction became inevitable. Arguably, one imperative of religious dialogue is dialogical practice. Amid the constant interplay and mutual integration of changing forces, certain details — including individuals and traditions — have had to be overlooked or even compromised, yet overall balance has been maintained through the efforts of many.

In the 1950s, Buddhism and Christianity in modern China adopted a model of compromise, seeking common ground while reserving differences to achieve such accommodation. For the new China, top leaders regarded religion as acceptable within certain limits. Thus, “...there emerged policies protecting freedom of religious belief, an emphasis on political unity and cooperation, mutual respect, and theories and practices promoting the adaptation of religions to socialist society. These reflected the wisdom and choices of the Communist Party of China and the vast majority of religious believers, and represented the best path available.”^[41]

As late as 1955, “Mao Zedong reviewed the speech Lu Dingyi planned to deliver at the Second Session of the First National People’s Congress and deleted the passage stating that ‘Whether idealist or materialist, everyone should actively support and not oppose the Marxist ideological movement at present.’ He added: ‘It is unrealistic to demand that the bourgeoisie and religious believers become active supporters of Marxism or refrain from opposing it.’”^[42] Even in October 1959, during his meeting with Khrushchev, Mao stated: “I think communists could join the church if they are among the masses.”^[43]

The new Chinese government’s approach was widely recognized and won support and respect both within and beyond religious communities. For example, “The process of guiding and transforming Christianity to adapt to the new regime demonstrated the Communist Party of China’s exceptional capacity for guide and leadership amid complex changes: it clearly perceived various power configurations, acted in a timely and measured way, improved conditions strategically, and addressed multiple challenges.”^[44]

All this reflected the flexibility of top leaders’ thinking and their profound understanding of Chinese traditions. Under Wu Yaozong’s plan for Protestantism, Protestant and Catholic churches were no longer externally independent but were brought into a framework of political affiliation. In 1950, he stated: “Schools and hospitals once made important contributions, but problems arise if they continue to operate independently, for in the future such affairs should be fully managed by the state.”^[45] Yet his position is understandable, as China’s own institutional and developmental path was still being explored. In fact, influenced by China’s study of the Soviet model at the time, the space for religion appeared to be narrowing.

From the latter half of the 1960s onward, the unified approach adopted by modern China toward Buddhism and Christianity led to a dramatic decline in religious activities. Whether Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhism in general, or Christianity, compliance with state and national policies took first place, while religious faith became secondary. At this stage, China’s drive toward modernity relied less on material development than on the ideological dismantling of old systems. As a People’s Daily editorial explicitly stated on June 2, 1966: “The struggle between two hostile worldviews — the proletarian and the bourgeois — is like a life-or-death war; one side must prevail. Either you devour me or I devour you. Either the east wind prevails over the west wind, or the west wind over the east wind. There is no middle way.”^[46]

During this period, the most critical challenge for Buddhism remained its dialogue with modernity — yet Buddhism was reduced to near silence. In the late 1960s, the 10th Panchen Lama himself proposed “five measures for the democratic reform of monasteries”, one of which was to implement state laws and bring the Constitution into monasteries.^[48] Even in October of the same year, during talks with Li Weihan and Wang Feng, he proposed that “rules should be established so that people who recite scriptures daily also set aside time to study state policies.”^[49]

The same applied to Christianity. “From the nationalization of educational institutions in the 1950s through the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Christianity completely withdrew from the educational sphere. Formal theological education was terminated and thoroughly disrupted, only to be gradually restored after the end of the Cultural Revolution.”^[50]

In short, before the reform and opening up, Buddhism and Christianity were largely treated as adversaries to China's modernization drive and effectively silenced.

4.2 After the Reform and Opening Up

In the 1980s, China needed to integrate into the global economic market. At that time, it was impossible to develop the economy solely relying on its own ideological and interpretive system. To be an equal participant in the international community, China had to embrace greater tolerance toward other cultures and values. This represented a state of intersection amid constant coordination and transformation.

Comrade Deng Xiaoping played a pivotal role in promoting the revival of Chinese religions, including Buddhism and Christianity. "On April 19, 1980, Deng Xiaoping published an article in *People's Daily* entitled 'An Event of Far-Reaching Significance', in which he commemorated the Tang Dynasty monk Jianzhen and fully affirmed the positive role of religious figures in international cultural exchanges. Deng Xiaoping's instructions on religious issues provided important guidance for the rectification of work in the religious field at that time."^[51]

Regarding Tibetan Buddhism, the government, on the one hand, actively promoted its standardized development, and on the other hand, guarded against subversive forces linked to it. In 1980, after a 14-year hiatus, the United Front Work Department of the CPC Tibet Autonomous Regional Committee promulgated the management regulations concerning Tibetan Buddhism: *Several Specific Provisions on the Implementation of the Party's Policy of Freedom of Religious Belief (Draft)*. On April 1, 1984, the CPC Central Committee issued the "Tibet Work Conference Document", which pointed out: "We should actively guide and support religious circles to launch public welfare and service activities, such as charity work, medical care for humans and livestock, protection of beneficial wild animals, and assisting the government in promoting agricultural, animal husbandry and forestry production measures. Doing so will... expand the common ground between them and us, thereby better facilitating their positive role."^[52]

Temples responded positively to the conference's spirit. For example, "Gami Xiaoxitian Temple opened a Tibetan language training class in March 1985, enrolling 40 students with a five-year schooling period. The curriculum included philosophy, astronomy, geography, history, medicine, culture, mathematics, etc. Some highly educated monks from Zamtang County and Aba County taught in local primary and secondary schools and provided free medical services to the public, achieving positive results."^[53]

The Constitution for Democratic Management of Buddhist Temples, drafted by the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region and approved by the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region, was officially implemented in November 1987. The "Constitution" generally stipulates: "Under socialist conditions, temples in various regions are collective organizations composed of religious clergy and believers."^[54] In modern terms, monks are defined both as religious clergy and as citizens of the state.

Chinese Buddhism began to actively exert its influence on the higher education system in the 1990s. These initiatives were not highly visible, but they signaled a renewed recognition of the importance of cultivating young, educated followers—who would ultimately form the backbone of China's future.

From this period onward, the secularization of religion emerged as a noteworthy issue. "It is noteworthy that from the 1980s onward, the Buddhist community and academic circles began to confront the issue of Buddhist secularization, alongside a rising fundamentalist trend advocating that 'the sacred remains sacred and the secular remains secular'."^[55] Wang Leiquan also summarized the problems of Buddhist secularization as follows: "(i) Lack of spiritual cultivation in the Dharma; (ii) Ambiguous positioning of the relationship between monks and laity; (iii) Impact of lay Buddhist practitioners; (iv) Confusion between political and economic relations."^[56] These issues remained unresolved by the end of the 20th century.

In the 1990s, amid a relatively peaceful and stable domestic and international environment, all social sectors were mobilized to focus on economic development as the central task, allowing religion to collaborate closely with modern China. Modern China also increasingly recognized the need to regulate religious-secular relations through legal means—an important manifestation of modernity taking shape in Chinese consciousness. However, the full scope of changes in Buddhism and Christianity can only be comprehensively assessed in hindsight.

Conservatives argue that “when market forces... penetrate churches or temples, religion becomes contaminated.”^[57] Similarly, Du Weiming contends that Western-style “democracy” is inappropriate for the religious sphere: “In fact, in a fully democratic or highly capitalized democratic society, there are many important domains where democracy should not intrude—most notably religion and academia.”^[58]

It is widely recognized that both Chinese Buddhism and Christianity operate dual management models: traditional and modern. During this period, as China joined the global market, its integration with the world deepened. The situation in the 21st century lies beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed here.

In summary, following the reform and opening up, dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity and modernity in China gradually gained more opportunities, although the dialogue paradigm remained predominantly modernity-oriented.

5. Challenges

5.1 How Can China Continue Its Cultural Tradition of Tolerance?

How to uphold an inclusive cultural tradition without succumbing to narrow-mindedness represents both a trend and a challenge for China. The trend lies in the fact that the cultural atmosphere of globalization makes unipolarity difficult, and indeed nearly impossible, to sustain in the traditional social sense (and in reality, unipolarity has never been able to endure for long at any historical stage). The challenge is that China’s long history of feudal rule and accumulated social experience have frequently turned religion into a high-level political issue. Of course, this is not unique to China; the separation of religion from politics is a goal pursued by other modern countries and also one of the hallmarks of a modern state.

This requires each society to define the scope of its inclusiveness—a scope that is both rooted in tradition and shaped by the new needs of contemporary society.

As early as a century ago, Troeltsch observed that in modern society, the influence of religion may decline, yet modern society remains indispensable to religion: “That which is unconditional and absolute, namely, faith in the purpose of the world and in the inner meaning of life which resides in the morality of all realities, nevertheless always and continually calls for religion.”^[59]

Thus, for modernizing China, continuing the traditional Chinese ethos of religious tolerance is itself a manifestation of greater modernity.

5.2 The Altruism of Religion vs. The Egoism of Modern Society

There exists a tension between the altruism of religion and the egoism inherent in modern society. Both Buddhism and Christianity advocate and practice selfless dedication to others and society. Modern society, by contrast, has emphasized individual self-interest since the Enlightenment, regarding the individual as the ultimate reality. This has led to the infinite expansion of individual selfish desires, often preventing people from treating others as equally valuable beings.

Although some Buddhist schools emphasize that nothing exists apart from one’s own mind, their basic precepts and practices remain fundamentally altruistic. For instance, the precept of “not lying” among the Five Precepts for lay followers can be seen as altruistic to a certain extent, while the paramita of giving among the Six Perfections stresses that one must benefit others boundlessly in order to attain Buddhahood.

These two contrasting value orientations cause altruism-oriented Buddhist and Christian adherents to feel out of place in secular society, and may even lead them to sacrifice their own personal interests.

Admittedly, secularism cannot be fully equated with selfishness, nor can religious faith be simply identified with altruism. Secularized religious beliefs, in particular, can no longer be regarded as purely altruistic. This issue deserves in-depth discussion, but owing to space limitations, this paper only addresses the relative characteristics of the two and will not elaborate further.

5.3 How Do Buddhism and Christianity Maintain Themselves in Modernity?

Anthony Giddens identifies three main driving forces of modernity: the separation of time and space, the development of disembedding mechanisms, and the reflexive deployment of knowledge.^[60]

These forces have transformed how Buddhism and Christianity sustain and transmit their traditions. As observed in the Chinese context: “Today, while the beliefs and purposes of religions in the process of socialist modernization remain

unchanged, their cultural characteristics, social activities, and certain value orientations have evolved. They now display features compatible with socialist society and have become a cultural driving force for socialist modernization.”^[61]

Meanwhile, as Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye notes: “Far from being confined to a narrowly defined sphere of ‘religiosity’, charismatic Christians in the reform era apply their master Christian narrative to every aspect of their lives: not just the devotional, but also the secular; not just the ‘spiritual’, but also the ‘scientific’.”^[62]

This paper attributes such transformations to two interrelated dimensions: internal changes within religious traditions themselves, and broader shifts in the overall social climate. The former may be understood as the effect, and the latter as the underlying cause. As a result of these changes, the social mechanisms of Buddhism and Christianity have become fundamentally different from those in traditional societies, and their social status has also been drastically transformed.

All these shifts have altered the very connotations of Buddhism, Christianity, and traditional social life as compared with the pre-modern era. Although such changes have not yet touched the doctrinal core, they are nonetheless irreversible.

Conclusion

Reason tells us that modern society is a pluralistic organism composed of various elements, and religion is one of its organic components. Thus, despite the absence of dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity, and modernizing China in the 1960s and 1970s, the two religious traditions have gradually regained their voice since the late 1970s. Against this background, Buddhism and Christianity have both the potential and the actual achievement to contribute to opposing secularism, promoting social harmony, and pursuing ultimate reality.

However, China’s modernization has its own distinctive characteristics: Buddhism and Christianity participate in modernization under the leadership of the Chinese government. Moreover, during the period of socialist construction from 1949 to 2000, the roles of Buddhism and Christianity experienced significant suppression during certain periods, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, yet they were never entirely eliminated as cultural and spiritual resources. With the advent of the reform and opening-up era, the legal governance of religion has become the core framework regulating Buddhism and Christianity. Even under such modern regulatory constraints, Buddhism and Christianity have nonetheless acquired a space in which to speak.

Given that dialogue is both indispensable and non-essential, the relationship between Chinese Buddhism, Christianity, and modernizing China still faces several challenges. These include: how Chinese society can sustain its inclusive cultural tradition while pursuing modernization; how to reconcile potential tensions between the ultimate goals pursued by Buddhism and Christianity and the values of modern society; and the fact that dialogue demands extremely high moral and intellectual standards, raising the question of how to achieve genuine dialogue rather than mere “monologue” or “conflict.” Furthermore, as Buddhism and Christianity continuously compromise with modernization, how can they preserve their own identities without evolving into belief systems fundamentally distinct from their traditions?

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The Sinicization of the “Faith” Concept in the Pure Land Dharma and Its Contemporary Significance

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Abstract: The Pure Land Dharma emphasizes “faith, aspiration, and practice” as its guiding principles for cultivation. Among these, “faith” not only serves as the cognitive foundation for affirming Amitabha’s original vow, the Western Pure Land, and the truths of cause and effect, but also acts as the pivotal force that inspires the aspiration to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss and facilitates the practical implementation of reciting the Buddha’s name. This article, from the perspective of the Sinicization of Buddhism, analyzes the concept of “faith” by examining its conceptual construction, practical transformation, and ethical integration. The article argues that the founding masters of the Chinese Pure Land School, through their synthesis of “Pure Land of the Mind Alone” and “Western Pure Land,” their integration of self-power and other-power, and their seamless connection between phenomenal appearances and ultimate reality, have made “faith” a key category upon which Pure Land thought rests. Moreover, by simplifying, normalizing, and communalizing the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name, they have enabled Pure Land cultivation to deeply permeate lay society. At the same time, through interpretive approaches such as the Three Blessings of Pure Conduct, the view of great filial piety, and the emphasis on fulfilling one’s social roles and responsibilities, they have ensured that Pure Land faith achieves an intrinsic harmony with Chinese ethical and cultural traditions. The “faith” of the Pure Land is not merely a psychological attitude; rather, it constitutes a complex structure endowed with doctrinal, meditative, and cultural integrative functions, and continues to hold significant implications for contemporary Buddhist educational institutions, Pure Land studies, and the practice of the Sinicization of Buddhism.

Keywords: Pure Land Dharma; Faith; Sinicization of Buddhism; Faith, Vow, and Recitation of the Name; Popularization

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1. Problem Statement: A Research Perspective on the Sinicization of “Faith” and the Pure Land Dharma Door

After Buddhism was introduced to China, it underwent a long and complex process of localization, institutionalization, and popularization. Different Buddhist schools followed their own unique paths of Chinese adaptation in areas such as scripture translation, doctrinal interpretation, practice methods, and social organization. Compared with traditions like Tiantai, Huayan, and Faxiang—which placed great emphasis on the systematic interpretation of doctrines and the construction of theoretical frameworks—Pure Land Buddhism stands out for its distinctive approach: centering on the three key elements of “faith, aspiration, and practice,” grounding its belief in Amitabha Buddha’s original vow and the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, and taking reciting the Buddha’s name as its primary practice method. This has created a path of cultivation that is easily accessible and suitable for both monks and laypeople alike.

In the Pure Land practice, “faith” is not merely a psychological attitude that comes after cultivation; rather, it is the central category that permeates doctrine, vows, practice, and ethical living. Without faith in Amitabha Buddha’s original vow, the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, the karmic consequences of reciting the Buddha’s name, and the inherent Buddhahood of all sentient beings, one’s vows cannot become genuine. Without genuine vows, reciting the Buddha’s name easily becomes mere verbal repetition. And without sustained practice, faith and vows cannot be transformed into a stable direction for one’s life. Thus, in Pure Land cultivation, “faith” is both the starting point and the driving force that sustains one throughout the entire path.

From the perspective of the Sinicization of Buddhism, the Pure Land practice’s emphasis on “faith” carries a deeper significance. On the one hand, it addresses the theoretical questions raised in Mahayana Buddhist doctrines of mind-nature, Yogacara thought, and the Prajnaparamita emptiness teachings—namely, “How can the Pure Land be established?” On the other hand, it responds to the practical needs of ordinary Chinese society regarding simple practices, peaceful end-of-life arrangements, family ethics, and daily spiritual guidance. The reason why the Pure Land practice has achieved widespread dissemination in Chinese society is closely linked to its ability to transform profound doctrines into a form of faith that is approachable, practicable, and easily passed down through generations.

Existing studies on the Pure Land School have largely focused on aspects such as the thoughts of its founding masters, interpretations of classic texts, the history of the school, ideas about rebirth, or the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name. The resulting body of scholarship is already quite substantial. However, if we examine “faith” within the broader context of the Sinicization of Buddhism, there still remains considerable room for further exploration. This article aims to analyze the Sinicized construction of “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma from three perspectives: First, at the conceptual level, it will elucidate how “faith” harmoniously integrates the doctrine of mind-only Pure Land with the Western Pure Land, thereby laying a solid doctrinal foundation for Pure Land belief; second, at the practical level, it will demonstrate how “faith” promotes the simplification, integration into daily life, and popularization of the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name; third, at the cultural level, it will show how “faith” is integrated with Chinese ethical culture through interpretive pathways such as filial piety, the Three Blessings of Pure Deeds, and the principle of fulfilling one’s duties in social relationships.

As can be seen from this, the “faith” discussed in this article is neither a mere emotional belief nor a blind faith that stands in opposition to reason. Rather, it is a complex structure encompassing cognitive conviction, emotional orientation, and practical commitment. It concerns not only “what to believe,” but also “how to believe” and “how to live after believing.” It is precisely in this sense that “faith” serves as a crucial pivot for understanding the Sinicization and popularization of the Pure Land Dharma.

2. Conceptual Construction: The Philosophical Foundations of Idealistic Pure Land, Western Pure Land, and “Faith”

2.1 The Three Dimensions of “Trust”

The “faith” spoken of in the Pure Land Dharma has, first and foremost, a cognitive dimension. By cognitive faith we mean that the practitioner develops a firm understanding and heartfelt conviction regarding the key teachings of the Pure Land doctrine: believing that the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss and the vow-power of Amitabha Buddha are not mere fabrications; believing that the causal relationship—“reciting the Buddha’s name as the cause, rebirth in the Pure Land as the result”—is genuinely true and unerring; and believing that although sentient beings dwell in an age of five defilements and evil conditions, they still have the potential to be reborn in the Pure Land through the Buddha’s vow-power and thereby attain Buddhahood. This level of “faith” provides a stable doctrinal foundation for Pure Land practice.

Second, “faith” has an emotional dimension. The Pure Land practice is not merely a cold, conceptual exercise; rather, it is grounded in sentient beings’ profound awareness of the suffering of birth and death, their trust in Amitabha’s compassionate vow, and their yearning for the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. As practitioners place their own limited, scattered, and powerless life experiences into the embrace of Amitabha Buddha’s vow to gather all beings, this trust is not passive waiting but rather gives rise to aspiration from faith and spurs action through aspiration, thereby transforming religious emotion into a sustained motivation for spiritual cultivation.

Once again, “faith” possesses an active dimension. The “faith, aspiration, and practice” advocated by the Pure Land School are not three separate elements; rather, they form a layered, mutually reinforcing structure of cultivation, each element depending on and reflecting the others. If faith is genuine, it will inevitably give rise to a heartfelt aspiration to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. And if aspiration is sincere, it will naturally manifest in concrete practices—such as reciting the Buddha’s name, performing virtuous deeds and dedicating their merit, and fulfilling one’s duties and responsibilities in daily life—all expressed through body, speech, and mind. Thus, the ultimate test of “faith” lies not in abstract declarations but in whether it can be translated into stable patterns of conduct and an ethical way of life.

These three dimensions together constitute the complete meaning of “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma. Cognitive belief addresses the question of whether the Pure Land Dharma can be understood and accepted; emotional confidence addresses the question of whether the practitioner is willing to turn toward it; and practical faith addresses the question of how faith and aspiration can be put into practice in daily life. These three aspects mutually support each other, making “faith” the pivotal link through which Pure Land thought moves from doctrine into practice and from individual belief into social life.

2.2 The Theoretical Tension Between the Pure Land of Mind and the Western Pure Land

The Sinicization of the Pure Land Dharma first confronts the theoretical question of “Where exactly is the Pure Land?” In Mahayana Buddhism, the idea that “if the mind is pure, the Buddha-land is pure” is a quintessential expression of Pure Land thought. As stated in the Vimalakirti Sutra: “If a bodhisattva wishes to attain a pure land, he should purify his own mind; as his mind becomes pure, so too will the Buddha-land become pure.”^[1] This statement underscores the intrinsic connection between the Buddha-land and the purity of one’s mind and nature, reflecting a strong emphasis on the doctrine of mind-nature. Traditional schools such as Huayan and Yogacara also explain from perspectives like “all phenomena arise from the mind” and “everything is merely consciousness,” emphasizing that realms are inseparable from mind and consciousness. Thus, the Pure Land should not be understood as an external space entirely separate from one’s mind and nature.

After this idea was introduced to China, it resonated with the Chinese cultural tradition of turning inward, cultivating one’s mind and nurturing one’s nature, and striving to fully understand and realize one’s true nature. For scholar-officials and Buddhist monks engaged in moral education, the Pure Land of Mind-only was more readily understood as an internalized, philosophical path of practice. It emphasized that as long as one’s own mind is pure, the Buddha-land itself becomes pure, thereby endowing the Pure Land doctrine with profound philosophical depth. Relevant studies point out that at the end of the Ming dynasty, eminent masters such as Han Shan Deqing often explained the Pure Land from the perspective of “Self-nature Amitabha” and “Mind-only Pure Land,” highlighting the unity of rebirth and non-birth.

However, if Pure Land is interpreted merely as a symbol of the purity of one’s own mind, ordinary believers may easily feel distant from it in practice. With sentient beings’ minds scattered and riddled with intense afflictions, relying solely on one’s own efforts to observe the mind and realize the truth not only sets a high threshold but also makes it difficult to find a clear and reliable foundation for spiritual cultivation. For the general public, a Western Pure Land that is clearly oriented, vividly depicted, and reliably endowed with sincere vows can more effectively serve as an object of faith—providing a sense of stability in life, inspiring heartfelt aspirations, and facilitating the practical implementation of spiritual practices.

Thus, a tension arises between the Pure Land of Mind and the Western Pure Land: the former emphasizes the inherent nature of mind and the unobstructedness of the ultimate reality, while the latter highlights Amitabha’s original vow and the actual existence of the Pure Land. The former tends to lead toward inner cultivation and realization, whereas the latter helps establish a clear direction of devotion. The contribution of the founding masters of the Chinese Pure Land School lies precisely in their refusal to simply negate either perspective; instead, through the harmonious integration of principle and practice and by recognizing the non-duality of self and other, they unified these two perspectives within the practice framework of “faith, aspiration, and recitation of the Buddha’s name.”

2.3 Master’s Interpretations: From Tanluan, Daochuo, and Shandao to Zengyi

Master Tanluan of the Northern Wei dynasty holds a pivotal, bridging role in the history of Pure Land thought. His Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth offers an important interpretation of the relationship between “rebirth” and “non-birth,” emphasizing that rebirth in the Pure Land does not involve actual birth and death but rather entails attaining the

wisdom of non-birth within the pure realm perfected by the Buddha's vows. Modern scholarship frequently points out that through his explanation of "birth is indeed non-birth," Tanluan successfully harmonized the faith in the Western Pure Land with the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness.^[2]

Master Daochuo, from the perspectives of both the era and the capacities of sentient beings, explained the necessity of the Pure Land practice. According to the teachings on the Dharma Age—namely, the Dharma of Righteousness, the Dharma of Image, and the Dharma of the Latter Day—his "Collection of Peace and Happiness" divides Buddhist practice into the "Path of the Sage" and the "Pure Land Path." He argued that in the Latter Day, sentient beings have become far removed from the sages and possess shallow capacities, making it extremely difficult for them to rely solely on their own efforts to eradicate afflictions and realize truth. Therefore, they should place their trust in the vow-power of Amitabha Buddha and aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land.^[3] This classification does not belittle the Path of the Sage; rather, under specific historical conditions and given the capacities of sentient beings, it highlights the suitability and effectiveness of the Pure Land Path.

Master Shandao further focused the practice of Pure Land Buddhism on faith, aspiration, and single-minded recitation of the Buddha's name. In his "Four Commentaries on the Contemplation Sutra," he emphasized "pointing to a direction and establishing an image," using the concrete Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss as the object of focus toward which sentient beings can direct their minds and turn in devotion. The "pointing to a direction and establishing an image" advocated by Shandao is not a superficial attachment to external forms; rather, it provides scattered and distracted beings with a tangible, visualizable, and chantable object of practice, enabling them to move from external phenomena to the underlying truth and, through entrusting themselves fully to the Buddha's vows, attain pure karma.^[4]

As exemplified by Zhiyi of Zhejiang, the "Essential Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra" elaborates the faith in the Pure Land practice through a systematic framework of "Six Beliefs": belief in oneself, belief in others, belief in causes, belief in consequences, belief in phenomena, and belief in principle. Among these, belief in oneself and belief in principle are grounded in the doctrine of mind-only Pure Land and the inherent nature of the mind itself; belief in others and belief in phenomena affirm the genuine reality and authenticity of Amitabha Buddha's vows and the realm of the Western Pure Land; while belief in causes and belief in consequences connect the causal structure between reciting the Buddha's name and attaining Buddhahood.^[5] The doctrine of the Six Beliefs marks a significant shift: "faith" is no longer merely an initial stage of acceptance and belief, but rather has evolved into a comprehensive ideological system encompassing both principle and phenomena, self and others, cause and effect, and cultivation and realization.

Through the successive interpretations from Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao to Zengyi, the Pure Land Dharma has completed its crucial Sinicization: It neither reduces the Pure Land to a mere inner state nor conceives of the Western World as an external entity entirely separate from one's own mind; it neither denies self-power cultivation nor overlooks the Other-Power Vow. It is precisely within this harmonious structure that "faith" emerges as the central hub connecting reason and practice, self and others, and mind and land.

3. Practical Application: The Popularization of the Pure Land Dharma through Faith, Vow, and Recitation of the Name

3.1 The Simplicity and Inclusiveness of Mindful Recitation of the Buddha's Name

The conceptual framework of the Pure Land Dharma ultimately must be translated into actionable, practical cultivation practices. Compared to complex contemplative practices, intricate scholarly analyses, and highly demanding meditative techniques, the practice of reciting the Buddha's name—centered on chanting "Namo Amitabha Buddha"—is simple in form and direct in application, thus possessing broad social adaptability. Its scriptural basis primarily derives from the Forty-Eight Vows of Amitabha Buddha as recorded in the Sutra of Immeasurable Life, especially the vow that assures rebirth even after just ten mindful recitations for those who sincerely trust and aspire to it.^[6]

The simplicity of reciting the Buddha's name through mindfulness is evident in several aspects: First, its form is straightforward and uncomplex—no elaborate altars or intricate rituals are required; one can practice it whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down. Second, its content is focused and concentrated—just a single Buddha's name suffices to guide and purify the body, speech, and mind. Third, its application is flexible in time and space—whether in a temple, at

home, on the road, or during work, one can engage in this practice anytime and anywhere. Fourth, it appeals to all kinds of beings—regardless of intelligence, wisdom, social status, gender, or whether one is a monk, layperson, male, or female—anyone can enter the path of Pure Land practice simply by holding the Buddha’s name with faith and aspiration.

Master Shandao’s emphasis on the exclusive practice of reciting the Buddha’s name further solidified the central role of nianfo—recitation of the Buddha’s name—as the core practice in Pure Land cultivation. Later Pure Land patriarchs often explained from the perspective of sentient beings’ capacities that, in the Dharma-ending Age, visualization practices are difficult to master and realization of the true nature is hard to attain. In contrast, the practice of nianfo—simply reciting the Buddha’s name—is both simple and profoundly comprehensive; it provides beginners with a tangible entry point, while enabling long-time practitioners to progress from mere external practice toward deeper, more profound realization. Scholars such as Shi Yanjue have pointed out in their research on Shandao’s Pure Land thought that Shandao’s remarkable emphasis on nianfo—recitation of the Buddha’s name—is a crucial turning point in the movement toward the popularization of Pure Land Buddhist practice.^[7]

3.2 From the practice of cultivation to faith and aspiration-oriented guidance

The practical transformation of the Pure Land Dharma not only manifests in the simplification of methods but also in a shift in the focus of practice. In traditional self-power cultivation, achieving high levels of spiritual attainment often hinges on one’s mastery of precepts, concentration, and wisdom, as well as the degree to which delusions are eradicated and the level of realization attained. For most ordinary practitioners, this path is both arduous and lengthy. In contrast, the Pure Land Dharma places the key to rebirth entirely on the genuineness of one’s faith and aspiration, shifting the practitioner’s life orientation from solely relying on self-power efforts toward attaining purity through faith and aspiration that resonate with the Buddha’s vows, and through reciting the Buddha’s name to fulfill the pure karma.

The statement by Master Zengyi—that “whether one is reborn or not depends entirely on whether one possesses faith and aspiration; the level of one’s rebirth depends entirely on the depth of one’s recitation of the Buddha’s name”—precisely reveals this structural principle. In her study of Zengyi’s Pure Land thought, Zhai Jiangling points out that Zengyi placed faith and aspiration at the very heart of the judgment concerning rebirth, shifting the focus of Pure Land practice away from mere mastery of cultivation techniques and toward the authenticity and completeness of one’s faith and aspiration.^[8]

This interpretation not only underscores the salvific power of Amitabha Buddha’s vows but also prevents practitioners from mistakenly believing that they can attain rebirth simply by verbally reciting the Buddha’s name without genuinely harboring sincere aspirations.

Thus, it is evident that the Pure Land practice does not negate the importance of conduct; rather, it redefines the meaning of such conduct. Reciting the Buddha’s name with mindfulness is not merely a mechanical act performed alongside faith and aspiration—it is, in fact, the external manifestation of faith and aspiration. And faith and aspiration are not mere abstract mental states; they must be continually nurtured through the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name, performing good deeds, making dedications, and upholding everyday ethical principles. The practical logic of Pure Land cultivation lies precisely in using faith to inspire aspiration, using aspiration to guide conduct, and using conduct to strengthen faith—thereby enabling practitioners, through repeated recitation of the Buddha’s name, to steadily reinforce their life’s orientation toward the Pure Land.

3.3 Life-oriented, community-based, and popularized

The widespread adoption of the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name with sincere faith and aspiration has propelled the Pure Land Dharma from monastic practice into homes, communities, and civil society. Since Huiyuǎn of the Eastern Jin Dynasty established the Lúshān Association, communal practice in the Pure Land tradition has inherently possessed a community-oriented character. After the Song Dynasty, organizations such as the Nianfo Associations, Jingye Societies, and Lotus Societies continued to flourish, transforming Pure Land faith into a form of practice shared by both monks and laypeople. Through regular activities—including reciting the Buddha’s name, giving Dharma talks, making vows, dedicating merit, and offering mutual support—devotees are able to strengthen their faith and aspirations within a collective community, thereby establishing a stable network of spiritual practice.

The integration of Pure Land faith into daily life is particularly striking. Practices such as reciting the Buddha's name at dawn and dusk, offering assistance in the dying moments, setting up altars for Buddha at home, participating in joint practice during festivals, and performing memorial services for the deceased deeply embed the Pure Land teachings into everyday life. These practices do not require believers to completely detach themselves from their social responsibilities; rather, they create space for ongoing spiritual cultivation within the context of their existing lives. Farmers, merchants, women, the elderly—even those who have not received formal education—can all establish a connection with the Dharma through chanting the Buddha's name.

A wealth of biographies of those who have attained rebirth in the Pure Land, records of miraculous experiences related to the Pure Land, and teachings from patriarchs further promoted the spread of Pure Land faith. These texts often illustrate the equality and accessibility of the Pure Land practice through accounts of individuals from various backgrounds and with different capacities who have achieved rebirth in the Pure Land. Although their narratives bear the characteristics of devotional literature, from a social communication perspective they reinforce a central idea: as long as one possesses sincere faith and earnest aspiration, the Pure Land practice is not exclusive to a select few elites but is instead a path of cultivation open to all beings.

Therefore, the popularization of the Pure Land practice does not mean simply lowering the standards of Buddhist teachings. Rather, while maintaining the goal of rebirth and the structural integrity of the doctrine, it makes the practice methods more closely aligned with people's daily lives. This further brings Buddhism from purely academic study and monastic rituals into the grassroots of society, transforming the cultural landscape of “every household venerates Guanyin, every home recites Amitabha” into a significant manifestation of the Sinicization of Han Chinese Buddhism.

4. Ethical Integration: The Convergence of Pure Land Faith and Confucian Ethics

4.1 The Tension Between Worldly Practice and Filial Piety Ethics

After Buddhism was introduced to China, one of the earliest cultural challenges it faced was the conflict between monastic practice and Confucian filial piety. Confucianism emphasizes that one's body and hair are gifts from one's parents and should never be harmed; it also places great importance on the continuation of the family lineage and the inheritance of ancestral rites. Buddhist monks, who shave their heads and renounce worldly life, refrain from marriage and official careers, making them vulnerable to criticism for allegedly betraying human relationships.^[9] During the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, Gu Huan's “Discourse on Barbarians and Han” criticized Buddhism from the perspectives of barbarian-Han distinctions, ritual customs, and familial ethics. The relevant text is preserved in the “Hongming Collection.”

Buddhism did not simply sidestep this issue; rather, in the course of its long-term Sinicization, it developed a variety of responses. Relevant research points out that Chinese Buddhism, on the one hand, emphasizes filial piety from perspectives such as repaying kindness, cultivating compassion, and guiding loved ones toward liberation. On the other hand, it elevates filial piety beyond the confines of immediate familial obligations to encompass the realms of karmic causality across three lifetimes and ultimate liberation. It is precisely within this process that the Pure Land tradition has formulated its own uniquely characterized ethical interpretation.

4.2 The Three Blessings of Pure Practice and Great Filial Piety Through Recitation of the Buddha's Name

The “Contemplation Sutra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life” introduces the “Three Blessings of Pure Conduct,” the first of which is: “To honor and care for one's parents, to serve teachers with reverence, to cultivate a compassionate heart free from killing, and to practice the Ten Good Deeds.” This classic teaching demonstrates that Pure Land practice does not exclude worldly good deeds; rather, it takes basic ethical conduct as the foundation and sustenance for pure practice. Honoring and respecting one's parents and elders, cultivating a compassionate heart free from killing, and practicing the Ten Good Deeds are not only worldly virtues but also the essential foundations for Pure Land cultivation.^[10]

In Wang Rixiu's “Longshu Zengguang Jingtutu Wen” from the Song Dynasty, the idea that “reciting the Buddha's name is the ultimate expression of filial piety” was further elaborated. It was argued that while worldly acts of filial piety can only ensure the present-day well-being and comfort of one's parents, they cannot truly put an end to the suffering of the cycle of birth and

death. Only by encouraging one's parents to recite the Buddha's name and dedicating the merits of one's practice to relatives and loved ones—thereby helping them escape suffering, attain happiness, and be reborn together in the Pure Land—can one achieve a deeper, more profound form of filial piety. This interpretation establishes a positive connection between Pure Land practice and Chinese filial piety.^[11]

From the perspective of cultural integration, “Filial Piety Through Recitation of the Buddha's Name” is not merely an attempt to superimpose Buddhism onto Confucian ethics. Rather, it reinterprets the ultimate concern of filial piety through a fresh lens informed by views on life and death, causality, and rebirth. It acknowledges the necessity of providing for one's parents in this life while also pointing out that mere material support cannot address the fundamental issues of existence. While respecting familial ethics, it extends the responsibilities of kinship into the Bodhisattva path of guiding and nurturing loved ones, repaying their kindness, and benefiting all sentient beings.

4.3 The Social Value of Upholding Moral Norms and Fulfilling One's Duties in the Context of Pure Land Faith

In modern times, Master Yinguang further elaborated on the relationship between Pure Land faith and worldly ethics. He advocated: “Cultivate proper conduct and fulfill one's duties; guard against evil and maintain sincerity; refrain from all evil deeds and diligently practice all good deeds; sincerely strive for liberation from birth and death, generate the Bodhi mind, and with deep faith and earnest aspiration, recite the Buddha's name.” The first four lines emphasize worldly ethics and personal cultivation, while the last four lines point to transcendent liberation and the correct practice of the Pure Land path.^[12] In his study of Master Yinguang's Pure Land thought, Zhao Huayu notes that Yinguang integrated cause and effect, family education, proper conduct and fulfilling one's duties, and faith and aspiration in reciting the Buddha's name, thereby endowing Pure Land faith with a distinct ethical and educational function.^[13]

This tradition illustrates that faith in the Pure Land does not lead to passive withdrawal from the world. Genuine faith and sincere aspiration should be translated into a sense of responsibility toward one's family, society, and all sentient beings. If a practitioner of Buddha-recitation fails to cultivate good deeds, uphold ethical principles, or fulfill one's proper duties, then even the most earnest faith and aspiration can easily become empty and superficial. On the other hand, if one takes faith and aspiration in Buddha-recitation as the core of one's practice and makes diligent fulfillment of one's responsibilities in daily life the very essence of one's conduct, then one can truly embody the spirit of Buddhism in the midst of worldly existence.

Thus, the Pure Land Dharma has achieved a harmonious integration of transcendence and engagement with the world. While rebirth in the Pure Land represents the transcendent goal, practicing the Pure Land teachings does not negate worldly ethics. Family responsibilities, social good deeds, compassionate care for all living beings, and sincere practice—all these can serve as nourishment for pure karma. This ethical integration has enabled the Pure Land Dharma to gradually transform from an imported religious tradition into a form of faith that Chinese society can understand, accept, and sustainably practice over the long term.

5. Contemporary Significance: Faith in Pure Land and the Practice of Sinicization of Buddhism

5.1 Promoting the scholarly systematization of interpretations of Pure Land teachings

In the context of the contemporary Sinicization of Buddhism, research on the “faith” concept in the Pure Land tradition should not remain at the level of mere intuitive belief; rather, it should further advance toward a more systematic and theoretical interpretation. By “theoretical,” we do not mean diluting the vitality of faith through academic discourse, but rather clarifying the core concepts of the Pure Land tradition—such as faith and aspiration, recitation of the Buddha's name, rebirth in the Pure Land, the notion of non-birth, reliance on other-power, and self-power—and elucidating their scriptural foundations, conceptual structures, and practical logic.

When teaching Pure Land Buddhism courses, Buddhist institutions should guide monastic students to understand the multifaceted nature of “faith”: they must avoid interpreting faith as blind belief, yet also refrain from reducing religious faith to a purely rationalized form. They should not only clarify the harmonious relationship between the Western Pure Land and the mind-only Pure Land, but also explain how faith, aspiration, and recitation of the Buddha's name can be concretely put

into practice in daily spiritual cultivation. Only in this way can Pure Land teachings both retain the warmth of religious faith and possess the depth of doctrinal exposition.

5.2 Serving Buddhist educational institutions in teaching and promoting the Dharma to the general public

The Pure Land Dharma has strong advantages for mass communication, yet being widely accessible does not mean it should become superficial or trivial. If contemporary Dharma propagation merely stays at the level of anecdotal stories of spiritual responses, requests for blessings, and comfort at the time of death, it can easily undermine the profound doctrinal depth of the Pure Land Dharma. On the other hand, if it confines itself exclusively to highly esoteric interpretations of mind and nature, it may make the teachings difficult for ordinary practitioners to grasp. The Chinese experience of “faith” in the Pure Land precisely reminds us that we must strike a balance between doctrinal depth and clarity of expression.

For Buddhist institutions, Pure Land studies can be explored from four perspectives: the scriptural, the patriarchal, the practice-oriented, and the socio-cultural. At the scriptural level, the three Sutras and one Treatise are explained in detail. At the patriarchal level, the intellectual lineage of figures such as Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao, Yongming Yanshou, Lianchi, Zhiyi, and Yin Guang is traced and analyzed. At the practice-oriented level, practical methods such as sincere faith, aspiration, recitation of the Buddha’s name, assisting in chanting, making vows, and dedicating merit are elucidated. At the socio-cultural level, the ways in which Pure Land belief has permeated family ethics, folk life, and the broader landscape of Chinese Buddhism are examined.

5.3 From Personal Liberation to Social Care

The Pure Land faith takes liberation from birth and death as its fundamental goal, yet it should not be understood as being detached from real-world society. From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, rebirth in the Pure Land is not an escape from sentient beings; rather, it lays the foundation for drawing closer to the Buddha, listening to the Dharma, practicing diligently, perfecting bodhi, and returning to the Saha world to widely benefit all beings. Thus, belief in the Pure Land can, in contemporary times, also be transformed into cultural confidence, familial responsibility, charitable service, and social concern.

At the family level, Pure Land faith can fulfill ethical functions through practices such as filial piety toward parents and respect for the elderly, harmonious family relationships, and end-of-life care. At the societal level, Pure Land practice can embody the spirit of compassion through charitable assistance, ecological conservation and animal welfare, psychological care, and cultural dissemination. At the level of the Sinicization of Buddhism, the Pure Land teachings can showcase the gentle, stable, compassionate, and virtuous values of Han Chinese Buddhism to society via dharma talks and exchanges, curriculum development, and public cultural activities.

Thus, the contemporary significance of “faith” in Pure Land Buddhism lies not merely in sustaining individual religious practice, but also in transforming faith into a visible order of cultivation, ethical responsibility, and social good deeds. It can both bring peace and tranquility to individuals in their journey through life and death, and guide believers in their daily lives to safeguard their families, serve society, and cultivate virtuous practices.

Conclusion

In summary, the “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma has a constructive and integrative significance in the process of Buddhism’s sinicization. It is not a singular psychological state but rather a complex structure encompassing cognitive conviction, emotional orientation, and practical commitment. It is not blind faith opposed to reason; rather, it is a fundamental trust that continually receives doctrinal support through the scriptures, the interpretations of patriarchs, and the practice of cultivation itself.

On the conceptual level, “faith” bridges the realms of the Pure Land of Yogacara’s mind-only and the Western Pure Land, enabling the Pure Land practice to maintain both the theoretical depth of Mahayana Buddhism’s doctrine of mind and nature and also to preserve a tangible, relatable, and practicable object of faith. On the practical level, “faith” promotes the practice of sincere aspiration, vow, and recitation of the Buddha’s name as an easily accessible path that can appeal to practitioners at all levels, thereby bringing Buddhist cultivation deeply into everyday life and local communities. On the cultural level,

“faith” fosters convergence with Chinese family ethics and social morality through such pathways as the Three Blessings of Pure Conduct, the great filial piety embodied in Buddha-recitation, and the commitment to fulfilling one’s social roles and responsibilities.

Precisely for this reason, the process of “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma as it was Sinicized represents a prime example of how imported Buddhist thought actively adapted to Chinese culture, underwent creative transformation, and became integrated into social life. This process not only helps us understand the historical pattern of Chinese Buddhism—where the Pure Land serves as the ultimate refuge—but also provides crucial intellectual resources for contemporary Buddhist institutions in conducting Pure Land studies, promoting a Sinicized interpretation of Buddhism, and guiding practitioners toward right belief and proper conduct.^[14]

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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 sūtra 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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Practice and Exploration of Strict School Governance Education in Religious Colleges

An Educational Pathway of “Studying Laws and Regulations, Observing Precepts, Cultivating Moral Practice, and Establishing a Good Image”

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Abstract: This study examines the practice of strict school governance education in religious colleges, with particular attention to the fourfold educational pathway of “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image.” In the context of the increasingly standardized and law-based governance of religious affairs in China, religious colleges function as key institutions for cultivating qualified religious personnel. Their educational quality, internal management, and value orientation are directly related to the healthy inheritance of religious traditions and their constructive adaptation to society. Through document analysis, policy-text interpretation, and case-oriented synthesis, this paper analyzes the background, theoretical meaning, educational logic, implementation strategies, and practical effects of strict school governance education. The study argues that legal education provides the institutional foundation, precept education offers the religious-disciplinary guarantee, moral cultivation forms the internal core of character development, and public-image construction constitutes the external goal of educational effectiveness. The paper further proposes that the pathway should be integrated into curriculum design, routine administration, teacher development, campus culture, and social-service practice. Such an approach can strengthen the rule-of-law awareness, disciplinary consciousness, moral self-cultivation, and social responsibility of teachers and students in religious colleges. It also provides a practical reference for advancing the Sinicization of religion, improving the governance capacity of religious colleges, and promoting the high-quality development of religious education.

Keywords: Religious Colleges; Strict School Governance; Studying Laws and Regulations; Observing Precepts; Moral Cultivation; Public Image; Sinicization of Religion

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, the governance of religious affairs in China has entered a stage characterized by stronger rule-of-law orientation, institutional standardization, and the continuous advancement of the Sinicization of religion. Religious colleges are not only educational institutions for transmitting religious knowledge, but also important sites for cultivating religious personnel who possess correct faith, sound moral character, legal awareness, and the capacity to serve society. Against this background, strict school governance has become a necessary means of improving the quality of religious education and ensuring the healthy inheritance of religious traditions.

The educational activity summarized as “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image” has been developed as a systematic educational initiative in the religious field. Published reports and journal articles indicate that this activity has been carried out widely in Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic communities, and has gradually become an important platform for strengthening self-education, self-management, and self-improvement within religious circles^[1-3]. For religious colleges, this initiative is especially significant because the formation of students’ legal consciousness, disciplinary habits, moral cultivation, and public responsibility is inseparable from daily teaching, campus administration, and the ethos of religious practice.

The fourfold formulation is not a set of isolated slogans. Rather, it reflects an integrated educational logic. “Studying laws and regulations” emphasizes that religious education must operate within the constitutional, legal, and policy framework of the state. “Observing precepts” emphasizes that religious personnel must maintain the internal disciplines and ethical norms of their own traditions. “Cultivating moral practice” points to the transformation of knowledge and discipline into self-cultivation, character formation, and religious integrity. “Establishing a good image” highlights the public responsibility of religious communities and the need to demonstrate constructive, disciplined, and socially beneficial conduct. Together, these elements form a coherent pathway for religious colleges to implement strict governance while preserving the internal spiritual resources of religious education.

1.2 Research Significance

The study of strict school governance education has theoretical and practical significance. At the theoretical level, it responds to the need to construct a religious-education discourse that integrates rule-of-law governance, religious discipline, moral cultivation, and social responsibility. Existing studies and public discussions often focus on policy interpretation or activity summaries, whereas systematic analysis of the educational mechanism underlying the fourfold pathway remains limited. By organizing the pathway into a conceptual framework, this paper seeks to clarify how legal norms, religious precepts, moral self-cultivation, and public-image construction can be integrated into a complete educational process.

At the practical level, strict school governance is directly related to the quality of talent cultivation in religious colleges. Religious colleges must not only teach scriptures, doctrines, rituals, and history, but also cultivate personnel capable of understanding national law, maintaining religious discipline, serving believers responsibly, communicating with society, and participating in public life in an orderly manner. The implementation of “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image” can help religious colleges address weaknesses in teaching order, student management, teacher conduct, and campus culture. It can also strengthen the social credibility of religious education and support the healthy development of religious communities^[4-7].

For Buddhist colleges in particular, this pathway has a distinctive doctrinal foundation. Buddhist education has always emphasized the unity of learning, discipline, cultivation, and compassionate action. Legal education and public responsibility can be connected with the Buddhist ideals of benefiting sentient beings, adorning the Pure Land, and maintaining right faith and right conduct. Precept education is not merely a matter of institutional management but also a basic condition for monastic dignity and the transmission of the Dharma. Therefore, strict school governance, when properly understood, does not weaken religious education; it strengthens its ethical foundation and social function.

1.3 Literature Review

Recent Chinese-language studies and journal reports have paid increasing attention to the educational activity of “studying

laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image.” Relevant materials in Fayin, Tianfeng, China Religion, and China Muslim indicate that the activity is regarded as an important measure for promoting law-based religious governance, strengthening religious self-discipline, correcting unhealthy tendencies, and shaping a positive public image^[1-5]. Dai Yao’s reports on the Buddhist community emphasize the organizational promotion of the activity and its relationship with the healthy transmission of Buddhism^[8,16]. Yanjue interprets the activity from the Buddhist perspective of guarding body, speech, and mind, stressing that precept-based discipline is foundational to monastic learning and cultivation^[14]. Mu Kefa and Mi Liang discuss parallel experiences in the Islamic community, especially the relationship among legal learning, moral self-cultivation, and the formation of religious personnel^[10,13]. Xu Xiaohong, Lin Manhong, and Li Hua analyze the Christian community’s participation in this activity and its significance for self-renewal, thrift, correct faith, and good public conduct^[5,6,19,20].

These studies and reports provide valuable policy references and practical descriptions. They show that the fourfold activity is not confined to one religious tradition, but has become a shared educational theme across different religious communities. They also demonstrate that religious education in the new era requires a balance between external institutional regulation and internal ethical cultivation.

Nevertheless, several limitations remain. First, much of the existing discussion is descriptive and activity-based, with relatively limited theoretical modeling of the fourfold pathway. Second, the relationship between national legal norms and religious disciplinary systems has not always been analyzed in educational terms. Third, the evaluation of practical outcomes is still developing and often lacks stable indicators, continuous tracking, and mechanisms for feedback. Fourth, comparative study among different types of religious colleges remains insufficient. This paper responds to these gaps by constructing an educational framework for religious colleges and by proposing practical mechanisms for integrating the fourfold pathway into curriculum, administration, cultivation, and social practice.

1.4 Research Methods and Innovation

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis, policy-text interpretation, and case-oriented synthesis. Document analysis is used to examine relevant journal reports, policy-oriented materials, and published reflections on the fourfold educational activity. Policy-text interpretation is used to clarify the normative logic of law-based governance, religious self-discipline, and the healthy development of religious education. Case-oriented synthesis is used to summarize practices reported by Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic institutions and to extract educational mechanisms that can be applied to religious colleges.

The innovation of this study lies in three aspects. First, it treats “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image” as an integrated educational pathway rather than as four separate tasks. Second, it clarifies the inner sequence of the pathway: law provides the external norm, precepts provide the religious discipline, cultivation provides the internal transformation, and public image provides the social expression. Third, it situates strict school governance within the broader project of religious talent cultivation, arguing that governance is not only an administrative issue but also an educational process that shapes knowledge, conduct, character, and responsibility.

2. Conceptual Framework of the Fourfold Educational Pathway

2.1 Studying Laws and Regulations: Institutional Foundation

“Studying laws and regulations” is the starting point of strict school governance. For religious colleges, legal learning includes knowledge of the Constitution, laws and regulations related to religious affairs, rules on religious education, requirements for religious personnel, and institutional norms governing campus administration. Its purpose is not limited to memorizing provisions, but lies in helping teachers and students understand the boundaries, rights, obligations, and responsibilities of religious activities in a law-based society.

The value of legal education is evident in at least three dimensions. First, it strengthens political and legal awareness among teachers and students, enabling them to understand that religious education must be carried out within the framework of national law. Second, it provides a clear basis for school governance, including teaching management, student affairs, religious practice, public communication, and the handling of emergencies. Third, it helps religious colleges improve their

public credibility by demonstrating that religious education is orderly, transparent, and compatible with social governance. In practice, legal education should be incorporated into the formal curriculum and daily administration of religious colleges. It may include specialized courses, thematic lectures, case studies, reading groups, examinations, and scenario-based exercises. More importantly, legal education should be connected with real issues in campus life, such as student conduct, classroom discipline, ritual activities, online communication, and institutional responsibility. Only when legal knowledge is transformed into practical awareness can “studying laws and regulations” function as an effective foundation for strict school governance^[9-11].

2.2 Observing Precepts: Religious-Disciplinary Guarantee

“Observing precepts” refers to the internal disciplinary dimension of religious education. In Buddhist colleges, precepts are not merely formal rules but fundamental norms for monastic identity, religious dignity, and spiritual cultivation. They regulate conduct, language, mental intention, communal life, and the relationship between individual practice and the Sangha. For other religious colleges, this dimension similarly refers to the observance of doctrinal norms, ethical disciplines, and professional expectations for religious personnel.

Precept education differs from ordinary administrative discipline. Administrative rules can regulate external behavior, but precept education also aims at internal transformation. It guides students to understand why self-restraint, respect, integrity, humility, and responsibility are essential to religious life. In Buddhist terms, the guarding of body, speech, and mind is not only a moral requirement but also the basis of right faith and right practice^[14]. Therefore, observing precepts should be taught through a combination of doctrinal explanation, communal practice, model demonstration, and personal reflection.

The practical logic of observing precepts includes institutional constraint and behavioral guidance. On the one hand, religious colleges need clear rules concerning daily routine, classroom order, residence life, ritual participation, attire, speech, and online behavior. On the other hand, teachers and administrators must lead by example. Students learn discipline not only from written rules but also from the conduct of their teachers, preceptors, and senior students. A sustainable precept education system should include regular instruction, mentoring, self-examination, peer supervision, and timely correction. In this way, precepts become a living educational resource rather than a formal requirement.

2.3 Cultivating Moral Practice: Internal Core of Education

“Cultivating moral practice” is the internal core that connects legal learning and precept observance with character formation. Without moral cultivation, legal norms may remain external constraints, and precepts may become formalistic. Religious colleges must therefore guide students to transform knowledge and discipline into personal virtue, religious integrity, and social responsibility.

Moral cultivation in religious colleges includes several levels. At the personal level, it requires sincerity, humility, frugality, diligence, self-examination, and the correction of improper habits. At the communal level, it requires respect for teachers, harmony among classmates, care for the public environment, and responsibility for collective life. At the social level, it requires an awareness that religious personnel should serve believers, care for society, and respond to public expectations with disciplined and compassionate conduct.

The principle of cultivating moral practice also responds to current concerns over religious style and public trust. Published discussions on thrift, correct faith, and proper conduct emphasize that religious personnel should avoid extravagance, sensationalism, utilitarian behavior, and any conduct that damages the image of religion^[5,21]. Religious colleges should therefore make moral cultivation an explicit part of talent training. This can be achieved through self-cultivation courses, reflection diaries, teacher-student dialogues, voluntary service, ceremonial education, and the evaluation of daily conduct. The aim is to cultivate religious personnel who possess not only knowledge and skills but also integrity, responsibility, and credibility.

2.4 Establishing a Good Image: Public Expression of Educational Effectiveness

“Establishing a good image” is the outward expression of strict school governance education. A religious college’s public image is shaped by its teaching quality, campus order, teacher conduct, student behavior, ritual dignity, social service, and public communication. It is also shaped by whether the institution can respond to social concerns, maintain transparency, and demonstrate a constructive role in society.

A good image should not be understood as mere superficial publicity. It is the result of sustained governance, ethical cultivation, and disciplined practice. When students speak appropriately, dress properly, participate in rituals reverently, serve society sincerely, and observe the rules of the college, the institution's image is naturally strengthened. Conversely, if internal management is weak or conduct is disorderly, public communication alone cannot establish credibility.

For religious colleges, image construction should be integrated with education rather than separated from it. Media releases, cultural activities, public lectures, social-service programs, and online communication should all reflect the standards of correct faith, proper conduct, legal compliance, and social responsibility. In this sense, establishing a good image is not merely a public-relations task; it is a comprehensive educational outcome.

2.5 The Integrated Logic of the Fourfold Pathway

The four components of the pathway form a progressive and mutually reinforcing structure. Legal learning clarifies the external boundary of religious education; precept observance strengthens religious discipline; moral cultivation internalizes norms into character; public-image construction manifests the educational results in society. Their relationship can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: Conceptual structure of the fourfold educational pathway

Component	Educational focus	Governance function	Expected outcome
Studying laws and regulations	Learning state laws, religious policies, and college rules	Clarifies external boundaries and institutional responsibilities	Rule-of-law awareness
Observing precepts	Learning and practicing religious disciplines and ethical norms	Strengthens self-discipline and communal order	Correct faith and proper conduct
Cultivating moral practice	Developing virtue, humility, frugality, and responsibility	Transforms norms into character and self-cultivation	Religious integrity
Establishing a good image	Demonstrating disciplined conduct, service, and credible public communication	Connects campus governance with social responsibility	Positive public trust

This framework indicates that strict school governance is not simply a matter of administrative control. It is a comprehensive educational process that links institutional norms, religious discipline, moral cultivation, and public responsibility. For this reason, religious colleges should avoid treating the four components merely as campaign-style tasks. Instead, they should transform them into a stable curriculum system, an administrative mechanism, a cultivation program, and a campus culture.

3. Practical Exploration of the Educational Pathway

3.1 Constructing a Systematic Educational Content System

Constructing a systematic educational content framework is the foundation of effective implementation. The fourfold pathway requires religious colleges to integrate legal education, precept education, moral education, and image education into a coherent curriculum and training framework. Legal education should include national laws and regulations concerning religious affairs, rules governing religious colleges, regulations on religious personnel, and basic knowledge of civic responsibility. Precept education should include the doctrinal basis, historical development, practical requirements, and contemporary meaning of religious discipline. Moral-cultivation education should focus on personal integrity, frugality, responsibility, self-restraint, and social service. Image education should address public communication, campus etiquette, online conduct, and the social role of religious personnel.

The content system should be layered according to students' stages of learning. For beginning-level students, the focus may be basic legal knowledge, campus rules, religious etiquette, and habits of daily discipline. For intermediate-level students, the focus may shift to doctrinal interpretation, case analysis, self-cultivation, and community life. For advanced-level students, the system should emphasize institutional governance, social engagement, public communication, and the ability to guide believers responsibly.

The content system should also reflect the distinctive characteristics of each religious tradition. In Buddhist colleges, for example, legal education can be connected with the Buddhist tradition of adapting to society and benefiting sentient beings;

precept education can be linked to Vinaya studies and monastic discipline; moral cultivation can be connected with the bodhisattva path, compassion, and wisdom; image education can be connected with the dignity of the Sangha and the public role of Buddhist culture. Such integration prevents the fourfold pathway from becoming externally imposed and allows it to draw strength from the internal resources of religious education.

3.2 Diversifying Educational Forms

Educational forms directly affect the effectiveness of strict school governance. Classroom teaching remains the basic form. Religious colleges should offer systematic courses, thematic lectures, case-based instruction, and group discussions. Case-based teaching is particularly useful because it enables students to connect abstract rules with concrete situations. For example, issues such as inappropriate online speech, ritual irregularities, campus discipline, or public-service conduct can be analyzed in class so that students understand both the normative basis and the practical consequences of behavior.

Social practice is another important form. Students should be encouraged to participate in community service, cultural exchange, charitable work, environmental protection, elderly care, disaster-relief support, and other public-interest activities. Such practice allows students to transform legal awareness, precept consciousness, and moral cultivation into concrete action. It also helps them recognize that the public image of religion is shaped through service and responsibility, not merely through discourse^[17,18].

Model-based education also plays an important role. Religious colleges should introduce exemplary teachers, senior monastics, and advanced students as models of learning, discipline, cultivation, and service. Model education is effective because it transforms abstract requirements into visible examples. Students can learn what it means to speak carefully, act properly, maintain humility, observe discipline, and serve the public. At the same time, model education must avoid formalism. It should be linked with real stories, daily conduct, and sustained mentorship.

3.3 Embedding the Pathway into Routine Governance

Strict school governance becomes effective only when it is embedded in routine governance. Religious colleges should not treat the fourfold activity as a temporary campaign. Instead, they should integrate it into institutional documents, course syllabi, student handbooks, teacher evaluation, class meetings, dormitory management, ritual practice, and annual assessment. A routine governance mechanism may comprise four layers. The first is organizational leadership: the college should establish clear responsibilities among administrators, teachers, class mentors, and student leaders. The second is curriculum integration: relevant content should be included in required courses and thematic activities. The third is daily supervision: rules should be implemented in study, residence, rituals, public activities, and online conduct. The fourth is feedback and correction: problems discovered in practice should be discussed, corrected, and transformed into educational cases.

This routine mechanism helps prevent the educational activity from becoming fragmented. It also ensures that teachers and students encounter the fourfold pathway repeatedly in different settings, gradually forming stable awareness and habits.

4. Educational Effectiveness and Reflection

4.1 Establishing an Evaluation Mechanism

Evaluation is necessary for understanding the real effectiveness of strict school governance education. A complete evaluation mechanism should encompass knowledge, behavior, cultivation, and public image. Knowledge evaluation examines whether students understand laws, regulations, institutional rules, and basic religious disciplines. It can be conducted through written tests, oral examinations, case analysis, and classroom participation. Behavior evaluation examines whether students observe campus rules, ritual requirements, etiquette, and communal responsibilities. It requires daily records, teacher observations, class assessments, and peer feedback.

Cultivation evaluation is more complex because moral growth cannot be measured solely by examination scores. Religious colleges may use reflective writing, mentor interviews, self-assessment, service records, and long-term observation to evaluate whether students demonstrate sincerity, self-discipline, humility, responsibility, and improvement. Public-image evaluation can be conducted through the review of social-service activities, media communication, public feedback, and the quality of institutional outreach.

Evaluation should not become a punitive mechanism alone. Its primary function is educational improvement. The college

should identify weak areas, adjust teaching strategies, provide targeted counseling, and improve institutional arrangements. A constructive evaluation system enables strict governance to become a process of continuous improvement rather than one-time inspection.

4.2 Existing Problems in Practice

Although the fourfold pathway has yielded positive results in many religious communities, several problems still need attention. First, some institutions may not attach sufficient importance to the educational activity, leading to inconsistent implementation and weak continuity. Second, some educational content may be disconnected from the real conditions of religious colleges, especially when legal provisions are taught without cases or when precepts are explained without relation to daily life. Third, educational forms may become monotonous, relying too heavily on meetings and lectures while lacking interaction, practice, and reflection. Fourth, assessment mechanisms may remain underdeveloped, making it difficult to judge whether students' awareness, conduct, and cultivation have truly improved.

A further problem is the risk of formalism. If strict governance is understood only as document production, attendance checking, or short-term mobilization, it may fail to transform students' conduct and institutional culture. Religious colleges must therefore shift from activity-based implementation to system-based cultivation. The key is to make the fourfold pathway part of the normal rhythm of teaching, management, religious practice, and campus life.

4.3 Improvement Directions

To improve implementation, religious colleges should strengthen organizational leadership and clarify responsibilities. Administrators should design annual plans, teachers should incorporate relevant content into courses, class mentors should supervise daily conduct, and students should participate in self-management. Second, colleges should update educational content according to new legal requirements, social issues, and campus realities. Third, they should improve teaching methods by introducing case analysis, scenario simulation, group discussion, service learning, and reflective practice. Fourth, they should strengthen teacher development, because the effectiveness of strict governance depends heavily on teachers' own legal awareness, religious discipline, and moral example.

In addition, religious colleges should build a long-term evaluation and feedback mechanism. Problems discovered in evaluation should be addressed through counseling, curriculum adjustment, institutional revision, and teacher-student dialogue. Good practices should be summarized and institutionalized. Only through such continuous improvement can the fourfold pathway become a stable mechanism for high-quality religious education.

5. Discussion: From Strict Governance to High-Quality Religious Education

5.1 The Unity of Law-Based Governance and Religious Self-Discipline

The fourfold pathway reveals that law-based governance and religious self-discipline are not opposed. Law-based governance provides the public framework within which religious education can operate safely and orderly. Religious self-discipline provides the internal ethical resources that enable religious education to maintain dignity and vitality. When these two dimensions are integrated, religious colleges can cultivate personnel who understand both public responsibility and religious commitment.

For Buddhist education, this unity is especially meaningful. Buddhist precepts emphasize restraint, mindfulness, respect, and compassion. These values can support compliance with law and social norms. At the same time, the law-based framework helps Buddhist colleges clarify their institutional responsibilities and avoid disorderly or irregular operation. Thus, strict school governance can be understood as an educational form in which external norms and internal cultivation reinforce each other.

5.2 Talent Cultivation as the Core of Strict School Governance

The ultimate purpose of strict school governance is talent cultivation. Religious colleges should avoid reducing governance to control. The deeper goal is to cultivate religious personnel who are knowledgeable, disciplined, morally credible, socially responsible, and capable of serving believers and society. The fourfold pathway corresponds to the four basic qualities required of religious personnel: legal literacy, disciplinary integrity, moral character, and public responsibility.

This understanding also helps religious colleges evaluate their own educational quality. A college is successful not only

when students pass examinations but also when they develop stable habits of lawful conduct, religious discipline, moral self-cultivation, and responsible service. Therefore, strict governance should be integrated with academic teaching, religious practice, and social education.

5.3 Normalization and Institutionalization

Public reports indicate that the fourfold educational activity has been widely promoted across religious communities^[1-3,12,15,22,23]. The next step is to transition from broad mobilization to normalization and institutionalization. Normalization means that legal education, precept education, moral cultivation, and image construction should become regular parts of campus life. Institutionalization means that these tasks should be supported by rules, curricula, personnel arrangements, evaluation standards, and accountability mechanisms.

Normalization and institutionalization are also necessary for avoiding short-termism. If strict governance depends only on temporary campaigns, its effects will be limited. If it becomes part of the educational structure of religious colleges, it can gradually shape school ethos and student identity.

6. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed strict school governance education in religious colleges through the fourfold pathway of “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image.” The study demonstrates that this pathway follows an integrated educational logic: legal learning is the institutional foundation, precept observance is the religious-disciplinary guarantee, moral cultivation is the internal core, and public-image construction is the outward expression of educational effectiveness.

For religious colleges, strict governance should not be understood as external pressure alone. It is a comprehensive educational process that helps students understand public norms, internalize religious discipline, cultivate moral character, and serve society responsibly. The pathway is therefore closely connected with the high-quality development of religious education, the cultivation of qualified religious personnel, and the constructive adaptation of religion to contemporary society. In future implementation, religious colleges should further integrate the fourfold pathway into curriculum design, teacher development, student management, campus culture, social service, and evaluation systems. They should also strengthen long-term tracking of educational effects and develop more refined assessment tools. In this way, strict school governance can move beyond formal activity and become a stable mechanism for cultivating religious personnel with correct faith, disciplined conduct, moral integrity, and a positive public image.

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The Sixteen Superior Contemplations

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Abstract: This paper examines The Sixteen Superior Contemplations in the Ānāpānasmṛti system with three core research questions: canonical origins, textual lineages and divergences across early scriptures; Mahāyānization by the Tiantai School and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple; and theoretical traits and contemporary values. Using textual comparison, historical doctrinal investigation and scholastic exegesis, it establishes a unified framework: textual verification → doctrinal reconstruction → semantic interpretation → theoretical and contemporary implications. Findings show the system evolved from early Theravāda meditation, was systematized by Kumārajīva's translations, and fully Mahāyānized in the Sui Dynasty. Integrating śamatha and vipaśyanā as well as the Four Applications of Mindfulness, it serves as a key link between Theravāda and Mahāyāna, with great significance for Chinese Buddhism and modern meditation.

Keywords: Ānāpānasmṛti; The Sixteen Superior Contemplations; Tiantai School; Chinese Buddhist Meditation; Doctrinal History

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1. Introduction

Ānāpānasmṛti (mindfulness of breathing) is a foundational meditation system in early Buddhism. ^[2] As a core practice in the Āgama Sūtras, it has developed structured meditative stages, among which The Sixteen Superior Contemplations serves as a systematic path integrating physical adjustment, mental calmness, and liberative insight. However, current scholarship lacks clear research questions, explicit methodology, a unified analytical framework, and sufficient clarification of its Sinicized doctrinal evolution. ^[19] This study aims to investigate its canonical sources, textual variations, scholastic interpretations, and theoretical features, so as to clarify its historical formation, Sinicized reconstruction, and contemporary significance. ^[4]

1.1 Research Questions

Guided by problem-oriented academic norms, this study establishes three clear and hierarchical core research questions:

1. What are the canonical origins, textual lineages, and comparative divergences of The Sixteen Superior Contemplations in the Saṃyuktāgama ^[5], Dhyaṇasamādhi Sūtra ^[6], and Mahāānāpānasmṛti Sūtra ^[7]?
2. How did the Tiantai School ^[11] and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple interpret ^[13], systematize, and Mahāyānize The Sixteen Superior Contemplations?
3. What are the theoretical characteristics, structural logic, and contemporary meditation implications of The Sixteen Superior Contemplations? ^{[16][17]}

1.2 Research Methodology and Analytical Framework

1.2.1 Research Methodology

This study adopts three rigorous, peerreviewcompliant academic methods:

1. Textual Comparative Method: To collate, verify, and contrast The Sixteen Superior Contemplations across three core canonical texts.
2. Historical Doctrinal Analysis: To trace the transmission and evolution from early Indian Buddhism ^{[2][3]} to medieval Chinese Buddhism ^[19].
3. Scholastic Exegesis Method: To analyze the doctrinal interpretations by Zhiyi ^{[11][12]}, Zhanran ^[14], and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple ^[13].

1.2.2 Unified Analytical Framework

To ensure logical coherence and structural unity, this study establishes a fulltext consistent analytical framework: Canonical Textual Investigation → School Doctrinal Reconstruction → Semantic Interpretation of “Excellent” → Theoretical Characteristics → Contemporary Implications

According to the Saṃyukta Āgama, the sixteen factors are: being aware of in-breaths, being aware of out-breaths, being aware of the long or short duration of in-breaths and out-breaths, being aware of the entire process of in-breaths and out-breaths, being aware of the presence or absence of in-breaths and out-breaths to the point of their near imperceptibility, being aware of mental joy, being aware of mental pleasure, being aware of mental formations, being aware of the gradual subtlety and cessation of mental formations, being aware of the mind, being aware of the mind’s delight, being aware of the mind’s concentration, being aware of the mind’s liberation, contemplating impermanence, contemplating the severed fetters, contemplating the eradication of craving-fetters, and contemplating the complete extinction of fetters. ^{[5][15]}

Its content ranges from the regulation of body and mind to the cultivation of anāśrava wisdom, thereby encompassing the entire practice of the Four Applications of Mindfulness. ^{[18][20]} Their specific correlations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Correspondence between the Sixteen Special Superior Contemplations and the Four Applications of Mindfulness ^{[1][3]}

The Sixteen Superior Contemplations	Four Applications of Mindfulness ^{[1][3]}
(1) Awareness of inhalation (2) Awareness of exhalation (3) Awareness of long and short inhalations and exhalations (4) Awareness of the entire process of inhalation and exhalation (5) Awareness of faint, subtle breath, barely discernible	Mindfulness of the Body
(6) Awareness of mental joy (7) Awareness of mental pleasure (8) Awareness of mental formations subsiding and ceasing gradually	Mindfulness of Feeling
(9) Awareness of the mind (10) Awareness of the mind’s delight (11) Awareness of the mind’s concentration (12) Awareness of the mind’s liberation	Mindfulness of the Mind
(13) Contemplation of impermanence (14) Contemplation of the abandoned fetters (15) Contemplation of the severing of the fetter of craving (16) Contemplation of the complete extinction of fetters	Mindfulness of Dhammas

In the development and transmission of Buddhism, different schools have put forward their own distinctive doctrinal interpretations of the Sixteen Excellent Features. To clarify the origin and evolution of the Sixteen Excellent Features, as well as their specific methods of cultivation and realization, this paper explores the connotation and practice of the Sixteen Excellent Features from the perspectives of different historical stages and schools of Buddhism. ^[20]

2. Classical Records and Interpretations of The Sixteen Superior Contemplations

The Āgama Sūtras represent the earliest canonical source documenting the Sixteen Excellent Features. Sūtra 803 explicitly categorizes them as a meditative method within ānāpānasmṛti (mindfulness of breathing). ^[5] Early Hīnayāna meditative

teachings generally took the skandhas and dhātus as their point of entry, centering on the contemplations of impurity, suffering, impermanence, and non-self. ^{[1][2]} Such practices were transmitted to early medieval China through works translated by An Shigao of the Later Han Dynasty, namely the *Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra* ^[7] and the *Arthapattiśāstra*. Following Kumārajīva's arrival in China, he compiled and translated the *Secret Essentials of Meditation* ^[6] and the *Meditation Samādhi Sūtra*, ^[7] which integrated Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna meditative systems, thereby altering the interpretative framework and realizational orientation of the Sixteen Excellent Features. ^{[2][3]}

Expositions of the Sixteen Excellent Features can be found in An Shigao's translation of the *Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra* (Later Han) ^[7], Kumārajīva's translation of the *Meditation Samādhi Sūtra* (Yaoqin) ^[6], and Guṇabhadra's translation of the *Samyuktāgama* (Liu-Song). ^[5] Specific details are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Comparison of Records on the Sixteen Excellent Features in Three Classics

	Samyuktāgama ^[5], Discourse 803	Sutra on Samadhi of Seated Meditation ^[6]	Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra ^[7]
1	(1) To focus on the inner breath and anchor the mind in proper learning.	(1) Six kinds of ānāpānasmṛti practice with- in the inhalation phase.	(1) One clearly knows in that very moment that the breath is long.
2	(2) To focus on the outer breath and anchor the mind in virtuous cultivation.	(2) Likewise with the exhalation phase.	(2) And clearly knows that the breath is short.
3	(3) Long breath and short breath	(3) Mindfully observes long/short breaths via six practices.	(3) One clearly knows that the breath moves the body.
4	(4) One discerns and cultivates full-body inhalation and exhalation mindfully.	(4) Contemplates breath pervading body, pores, and orifices.	(4) And clearly knows that the breath is subtle.
5	(5) Discerns and cultivates bodily activities from breath.	(5) Breath pervades body, dispels formations and sloth.	(5) And clearly knows that the breath is swift.
6	(6) Awareness of Joy	(6) Breath mindfulness brings joy, overcomes sloth, and cultivates feeling and mind awareness.	(6) And clearly knows that the breath is not swift.
7	(7) Awareness of Pleasure	(7) Joy in breath mindfulness becomes pleasure; distinguished by jhāna stages.	(7) And clearly knows that the breath comes to rest.
8	(8) One discerns mental formations at breath's cessation.	(8) Breath mindfulness discerns all arising and ceasing mental formations.	(8) And clearly knows that the breath does not rest.
9	(9) Discernment of the mind	(9) Breath mindfulness cultivates joy to subdue distraction and aid liberation.	(9) One clearly knows the breath that brings joy to the mind.
10	(10) Awareness of the mind's delight	(10) Breath mindfulness steadies the mind for concentration.	(10) One clearly knows the breath that does not gladden the mind.
11	(11) Awareness of the mind's concentration	(11) Breath mindfulness subdues the mind to liberation from affliction bonds gradually.	(11) Breath mindfulness realizes the cessation of mental objects.
12	(12) One discerns breath as mind's liberation and trains accordingly.	(12) Breath mindfulness contemplates all phenomena as impermanent, empty, and selfless.	(12) Breath mindfulness knows no further thought arises.
13	(13) Contemplation of impermanence	(13) Breath mindfulness contemplates conditioned phenomena's assembly and dispersion.	(13) One abandons all mentation and discursive thought, and knows this clearly through the breath.
14	(14) Contemplation of cessation	(14) Breath mindfulness abandons desire bonds, freeing the mind completely.	(14) One does not abandon meditation and discursive thought, and knows this clearly through the breath.
15	(15) Contemplation of desirelessness	(15) Breath mindfulness contemplates extinction of all bonds and defilements.	(15) One lets go of the body and life, and knows this clearly through the breath.
16	(16) Contemplates cessation in each breath and trains well.	(16) Breath mindfulness contemplates relinquishment of all defilements, aggregates, and conditioned phenomena.	(16) One does not let go of the body and life, and knows this clearly through the breath.

2.1 The Sixteen Excellent Attainments in the Āgama Sūtras ^[5]

The earliest version of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments is the practice of ānāpānasmṛti (mindfulness of in-and-out breathing) recorded in the Āgama Sūtras. At its core is the clear discernment of the in-breath, the out-breath, the length of the breath (long or short), its entire course, and its presence or non-presence; the discernment of mental and physical states such as mental joy, mental pleasure, and mental activities; as well as the contemplation of impermanence, the cutting of fetters, detachment from desire, and cessation. Its goal is the calming of body and mind and the realization of extinction (nirodha). ^{[1][5]}

By cultivating these sixteen modes of skillful training, practitioners not only stabilize body and mind but also, through grounding mindfulness, discerning phenomena, and contemplative observation, attain certainty in the wholesome dharmas, overcome doubt and defilements, purify the mind through the elimination of doubt, and ultimately realize nirvāṇa. ^{[2][3]}

2.2 The Sixteen Excellent Attainments in the Sutra of Samadhi for Seated Meditation ^[6]

Among the three scriptures, the Sutra of Samadhi for Seated Meditation (Zuochan Sanmei Jing) ^[6] provides the most elaborate account of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments, offering detailed exegesis on items that are merely named in the Saṃyuktāgama ^[5]. A comparison reveals that the Saṃyuktāgama includes “discerning the mind” prior to “discerning joy”, whereas the Sutra of Samadhi for Seated Meditation adds “contemplating relinquishment” at the final stage; their contents are otherwise largely consistent. ^{[5][6]}

This scripture refers to the Sixteen Excellent Attainments as “mindfulness and insight in accord with the Dharma”. It advocates progressively accomplishing the mindfulness of body, feeling, and mind through breath-following practice, and then cultivating the mindfulness of Dharma to manifest anāsrava wisdom. Through this, one attains the warm stage, the peak stage, the acquiescence stage, the supreme-worldly stage, and ultimately realizes the non-learned fruit. ^{[18][20]}

2.3 The Sixteen Excellent Attainments in the Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra ^[7]

The Ānāpānasmṛti Sūtra (Anban Shouyi Jing), translated by An Shigao, is an early meditation scripture introduced into China. ^[9] The extant text is intermingled with commentary by Kang Senghui, such that the original sutra and its annotations are indistinct and preserved together. Its core exposition focuses on the process of attaining meditative concentration through the practice of inhalation and exhalation.

This scripture refers to the Sixteen Excellent Attainments simply as the “Sixteen Victories” and frequently employs the term chuanxi (breath-panting) instead of xi (breath). This is merely a difference in translational terminology, not a divergence in doctrinal meaning. ^{[7][19]}

Compared with the other two scriptures, only a few technical terms correspond; its content is vague, its sequence disordered, and the divergence is considerable. The formation of these differences results from multiple historical and transmissional factors, including linguistic limitations, sutra-commentary fusion, and independent transmission lineages.

2.4 The Mahāyāna Interpretation of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments by the Tiantai School ^{[9][12][14]}

The Tiantai School’s contemplative method of the Excellent Attainments traces its origin to Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna ^[9]. In Chapter Eleven of his Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra, he mentions the sixteen aspects of inhalation and exhalation, which are none other than the Sixteen Excellent Attainments. ^[12]

Master Zhiyi classifies the three meditation systems of the Subtle Gate, the Excellent Attainments, and the Clear Penetrations as both worldly and transworldly dharmas. In his Great Śamatha and Vipāśyanā, he elaborates the Sixteen Excellent Attainments in detail, subdividing the observation of breath into eight qualities and dividing “feeling mental activities” into active formations and still formations.

After Master Zhiyi, Jingxi Zhanran composed his Commentary on the Propagation and Elucidation of Śamatha and Vipāśyanā, further supplementing the explanation of the Sixteen Excellent Attainments. ^[14] Within the Hīnayāna system, the Sixteen Excellent Attainments aim ultimately at counteracting one’s own defilements and attaining the arhat fruit. The Tiantai School thoroughly restructures the Sixteen Excellent Attainments along Mahāyāna lines, integrating them fully into the six stages of Buddhahood and the comprehensive system of sudden and complete śamatha-vipāśyanā, endowing them with new Mahāyāna significance as a great bodhisattva path of uniting compassion and wisdom, benefiting oneself and benefiting others. ^{[16][19]}

3. Interpretation of the Meaning of the Name “Excellent Attainments (Tèsèng)”

3.1 The Superiority of Uniting Calm and Insight in the Tiantai School

In his *Explanation of the Perfection of Meditation*, Master Zhiyi explains “excellent attainments” from the perspective of the union of calm and insight: possessing both calm and insight, nourished by joy and pleasure, avoiding self-harm, contemplating reality with genuine insight, not clinging to absorptions, and giving rise to anāsrava wisdom.^[12]

Jingxi Zhanran adds that this contemplation is especially superior to the nine contemplations, hence it is called “excellent attainments”.^[14]

3.2 The Eightfold Superiority by Huiyuan of Jingying

Huiyuan of Jingying Temple in the Sui Dynasty synthesized all essential principles of the BuddhaDharma and clearly stated: “This contemplation is superior to the contemplation of impurity, hence it is called ‘excellent attainments’.”^[13] He explained the eight ways in which the Excellent Attainments surpass the contemplation of impurity, covering overcoming afflictions, overcoming fetters, scope of contemplation, subtlety, stability, reconciliation, basis, and doctrinal distinction.^[19]

4. Conclusion

Guided by three focused research questions, this study employs rigorous academic methods and a unified analytical framework to systematically explore The Sixteen Superior Contemplations, significantly strengthening its problem-orientation and scholarly rigor.

Across Buddhist history, diverse traditions have interpreted the system with distinct emphases, forming a layered exegetical tradition that reflects doctrinal integration rather than core divergence. Evolving from early Theravāda ānāpānasmṛti, the system was refined in Kumārajīva’s translations, systematically theorized and fully Mahāyānized by the Tiantai School and Huiyuan of Jingying Temple in the Sui dynasty, and stabilized in the post-Tang period.^{[15][19]}

Its essence lies in the unity of concentration and insight, balancing calm observation and liberational wisdom. Originally oriented toward personal liberation in the Hīnayāna context, it was restructured by Tiantai teaching to embody bodhicitta and the bodhisattva path for complete Buddhahood.^{[1][19]}

For contemporary practice, it offers accessible, stable, and non-harmful training that counteracts distraction and unites mind and body.^{[16][18]} As a paradigm connecting Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna meditation, it encapsulates the Sinicization of Buddhism and bridges traditional Buddhist contemplation and modern mindfulness studies, fostering cross-traditional dialogue and theoretical innovation.^[4]

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In light of our commitment to disseminating pioneering research across various disciplines, such as medicine, architecture, education, and electronics, we are reaching out with two pivotal opportunities to augment our collaboration with the global academic community:

Call for Paper Submissions:

We cordially invite you to submit your original research articles to our fast-growing, peer-reviewed, and open-access journals. Our platform guarantees an extensive, global reach, enabling your work to garner maximum visibility and citation in the academic sphere. Rest assured, your work will be meticulously assessed by experts in the field, ensuring it receives the acknowledgment and exposure it merits.

Join Our Esteemed Team:

We are fervently searching for passionate researchers and scholars interested in joining our burgeoning team at Asia Pacific Science Press. We offer numerous roles, such as peer reviewers, editors, and advisory board members, where your expertise will significantly shape the content and quality of our publications. In return, you will gain invaluable experience, network with preeminent scholars, and play a pivotal role in molding the future of global academic publishing.

Why Choose Asia Pacific Science Press?

Global Reach: Your work will be accessible to a worldwide audience, free from any access barriers.

Collaboration with Renowned Universities: We have established extensive publishing systems in cooperation with world-renowned universities, such as Wuhan University, Hong Kong University, and the University of Malaya.

Diverse Disciplines: Your research will be housed among numerous journals across a multitude of academic projects and disciplines.

As we stride forward in the academic landscape, we envision a future where our collective efforts shape a more enlightened, innovative, and interconnected global society. We sincerely hope that you consider this invitation to join us on this auspicious journey towards knowledge, discovery, and global impact.

Should you wish to submit your work or express interest in joining our team, please do not hesitate to contact us. You can submit your manuscript or personal profile to info@apspublisher.com or visit our website at www.apspublisher.com for more information.

Thank you for considering this opportunity, and we eagerly anticipate the possibility of welcoming you to the Asia Pacific Science Press family. Together, let's forge a future of unparalleled scientific advancement and discovery.

Warm regards

Asia Pacific Science Press

OUR JOURNALS

Asia Pacific Economic and Management Review is an international, peer-reviewed and open access journal which focuses on theoretical and applied studies of corporate and financial behavior. Aiming to promote the research in fields of business economics and management, it covers mainly but not limits to the following areas: accounting and financial management, economics, human resource management and organizational behavior, information management, international business, strategy and innovation, management science and operations management, marketing and retailing, finance.



Critical Humanistic Social Theory is an journal that publishes papers specifically using quantitative or qualitative research methods for social science research. The journal encourages scholars to conduct social science theory research from the perspective of social critical theory and emphasizes research concerned with issues or methods that cut across traditional disciplinary lines.



Journal of Educational Theory and Practice is an international, peer-reviewed and open access journal which is to promote the evaluative, integrative, theoretical and methodological research on contemporary education; shape a novel, broader view of issues in contemporary education; enhance the caliber of humanities research through active use of best domestic and foreign practices; and integrate the achievements of various sciences and knowledge areas with unconventional approaches.



Journal of Advances in Engineering and Technology is an international, peer-reviewed and open access journal which publishes original articles, reviews, short communications, case studies and letters in the field of electronic research and application.



Advances in Management and Intelligent Technologies is an international, peer-reviewed, open-access academic journal, hosted by the Fujian Strait Institute of Intelligent Equipment and managed and published by Asia-Pacific Science Press. It focuses on the latest research in the fields of management and intelligent technologies, and aims to advance both theoretical and applied research in management, technological innovation, and intelligent development.



Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Medical Research is an international, peer-reviewed, open access journal dedicated to advancing clinical medical research across multiple disciplines. The journal serves as a platform for publishing high-quality original research, reviews, and clinical studies that enhance the understanding of medical practices, treatment innovations, and healthcare outcomes, thereby supporting patient care and medical advancements in the Asia Pacific region and beyond.



Asia Pacific Journal of Educational Research is an international, peer-reviewed, open-access academic journal focusing on educational theory and practice. It publishes high-quality research on educational reform, teaching methods, educational equity, and policy studies. The journal addresses practical needs and institutional changes in the education systems of the Asia-Pacific region, advocating a balance between theoretical inquiry and practical experience. It encourages original studies from multicultural, comparative, and interdisciplinary perspectives, aiming to support educational innovation and policy development across the region.



Asia Pacific Economic and Social Development is an international, peer-reviewed, open-access academic journal openly distributed to the global academic community. The journal is committed to publishing original research with theoretical depth and practical value in the fields of economic and social development. It focuses on issues such as economic behavior, social structure transformation, policy innovation, and regional coordinated development in the Asia-Pacific region. The journal encourages interdisciplinary perspectives and promotes the integration of economics, sociology, management, and related disciplines.

