

Institutional Innovation and International Comparative Study on the Cultivation of Religious Professionals under the Sinicization-Oriented Development of Han Buddhism

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Abstract: In the context of the growing pluralization of global Buddhism and the profound transformations brought about by the digital era, the Sinicization of Buddhism represents not merely the continuation of cultural heritage, but also an internal process of self-renewal within Buddhist traditions. Grounded in the dual theoretical frameworks of the Sinicization of religion and the socialization theory of education, this study employs qualitative comparative research and document analysis to explore institutional innovations in the cultivation of monastic and religious professionals within Chinese Han Buddhist education. In addition, a comparative analysis is conducted with Buddhist educational systems in Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve faculty members and administrators from five Han Buddhist academies in China, the study reveals that contemporary Han Buddhist education in China is gradually forming a “three-dimensional integrated training model”, characterized by political identification as its core orientation, cultural integration as its developmental pathway, and institutionalized educational structures as its foundational guarantee.

The findings further suggest that Buddhist academies should strengthen cultural self-confidence, scholarly research capacity, and social service functions within their institutional frameworks, so as to promote a more comprehensive, open, and internationally engaged model of Buddhist education in the new era.

Keywords: Han Buddhism; Sinicization of Buddhism; Religious Education; International Comparison; Cultivation of Monastic Professionals

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1.Introduction

The Sinicization of religion constitutes a central theme in the contemporary development of religion in China. President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized that religions should “adhere to the Sinicization orientation” and be guided to “adapt to socialist society”, a policy framework that has provided a clear developmental direction for Buddhism in China. With a history spanning more than two millennia, Han Buddhism itself represents a long-standing process of localization within the cultural soil of China. In the new era, however, the notion of “Sinicization” places greater emphasis on the integrated alignment of political identification, cultural integration, and social responsibility.

From the perspective of global religious history, religious localization is an inherent and ongoing process in the transmission

and development of religions. It is not a completed historical stage, but rather a continuous and dynamic trajectory that reflects a general pattern in the evolution of world religions. Moreover, issues of localization—also conceptualized as indigenization or contextualization—are by no means unique to China; they constitute a widely observed phenomenon occurring simultaneously in diverse religious contexts across the world. As Zheng Xiaoyun (2020) has noted, this represents a meaningful unity of diachronic continuity and synchronic coexistence in the development of religion.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the emergence of a digital society and the intensification of global exchanges have introduced new challenges. In particular, structural tensions have become increasingly apparent between traditional Buddhist educational systems and the evolving demands of contemporary society.

Against this backdrop, a critical question has emerged for both academic and religious communities: how can the educational system of Han Buddhism achieve a modern transformation of its social functions while preserving the integrity and authenticity of Buddhist faith and doctrine? Employing a qualitative comparative research approach, this study examines innovative practices in the institutional development of Han Buddhist education under the orientation of Sinicization. It further conducts a comparative analysis with Buddhist educational experiences in Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, with the aim of offering analytical insights and practical references for the modernization of religious education.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

2.1 The Theory of the Sinicization of Religion

The core of the Sinicization of religion lies in achieving political identification, cultural integration, and social adaptation. This theoretical framework emphasizes not only the alignment of religious thought with the core socialist values, but also the recognition of religion's own capacity for cultural creativity. As Yang Zengwen (2017) argues, Sinicization does not signify the alienation of religion; rather, it represents a process of regeneration and reinterpretation within the specific socio-cultural context of China. The educational system of Han Buddhism constitutes a crucial institutional vehicle for this process.

From a sociological perspective, Yang and Tamney (2011) suggest that religions can maintain vitality in rapidly changing societies by adapting their organizational structures and value systems to prevailing national cultures and political environments. Within this analytical framework, Sinicization may be understood as a form of cultural adaptation, through which Han Buddhism redefines its religious identity within the socialist context of contemporary China.

2.2 The Theory of Educational Socialization

The theory of educational socialization conceptualizes education as a critical bridge between social values and individual identity formation. Talcott Parsons (1959) emphasized that educational systems do not merely transmit knowledge, but also shape the roles, responsibilities, and normative orientations of social members. When applied to Buddhist education, this perspective implies that the cultivation of monastic professionals should not be confined solely to religious training, but should instead strive to achieve a dynamic balance between religious cultivation and social service.

Under this theoretical approach, Buddhist academies function as socializing institutions that transmit patriotic values, cultural literacy, and ethical awareness to both monastics and lay practitioners. This process facilitates a structural transformation of Buddhist education—from a relatively closed and inward-looking model toward a more open, socially engaged orientation, and from an emphasis on “otherworldly withdrawal” toward a mode of this-worldly engagement.

2.3 Review of Domestic and International Scholarship

In recent years, Chinese scholars have conducted multidimensional investigations into the Sinicization of religious education. Chen Jinguo (2021) argues that Buddhist institutions should strengthen the integration of ideological and political education with cultural curricula in the cultivation of religious professionals. Zheng Xiaoyun (2020) further contends that the modernization of educational institutions constitutes a critical component of the broader process of religious Sinicization.

In the international scholarly arena, Swanson (2012) examines the educational transformation of Japanese Zen Buddhism in its adaptation to modern society, while Gombrich (2018) analyzes the processes of state integration and popularization within Theravāda Buddhist education. Collectively, these studies provide valuable comparative perspectives and theoretical support for the present research.

3. Research Methodology and Data Sources

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research approach in combination with NVivo-based document analysis. The data sources comprise the following categories:

- (1) Policy documents issued by the National Religious Affairs Administration and the Buddhist Association of China (2017–2023);
- (2) Training programs and curriculum documents from Buddhist academies in China;
- (3) Institutional materials concerning Buddhist education systems in Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka;
- (4) Semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve faculty members and administrators from five Han Buddhist academies in China.

3.1 Analytical Procedures

NVivo Coding: Five primary nodes were established—political education, curricular integration, faculty development, cultivation–practice integration, and international exchange—with a total of 45 subordinate nodes identified through iterative coding.

Triangulation: Research reliability was enhanced through methodological triangulation, whereby findings derived from policy documents, interview data, and international comparative materials were cross-validated.

Cluster Analysis: Key terms such as “education on the rule of law,” “social service,” “Sinicization,” and “international cooperation” were extracted and analyzed to generate core thematic clusters.

3.2 Reliability and Validity Control

To ensure analytical rigor and the replicability of research findings, all data underwent multiple rounds of coding comparison and expert review. The interview sample encompassed Buddhist academies from diverse regions and institutional levels, thereby enhancing the representativeness and external validity of the study.

4. Research Findings and Interview Analysis

4.1 Political Identification and the Institutionalization of Education on the Rule of Law

All interviewees (100%) reported that their institutions have incorporated courses on political theory and religious policy, accounting for approximately 30–40% of total instructional hours. The majority of monastics emphasized that such courses “help monastic students understand the importance of governing religion in accordance with the law”, and regarded political identification and education on the rule of law as the foundational basis of learning. According to the respondents, only with a sound worldview and value system can future Buddhist professionals effectively engage in Dharma propagation and benefiting sentient beings.

Instruction in political theory and legal education is generally delivered by experts or scholars assigned by United Front-related authorities or invited from universities. However, respondents noted that the teaching materials remain predominantly theoretical and lack Buddhist-specific case studies, which limits the depth and effectiveness of pedagogical outcomes.

4.2 Integration and Innovation of the Curriculum System

All participating academies have retained traditional canonical studies as core components of their curricula, while courses oriented toward modern society occupy a relatively limited proportion. Some Buddhist academies have introduced subjects such as psychology, cultural communication, new media applications, music, and English, reflecting a trend toward the socialization of Buddhist education. Nevertheless, these subjects are generally not designated as core courses and are often treated as optional rather than essential components of the curriculum. As a result, their continuity is frequently affected by the availability of qualified instructors.

NVivo word-frequency analysis indicates that terms such as “integration,” “innovation,” and “service to society” appear with high frequency, reflecting the overall direction of contemporary Buddhist educational reform. While certain monasteries and academies have initiated reform efforts, the scope and intensity of these initiatives remain limited, with most institutions continuing to rely primarily on traditional monastic cultivation models.

4.3 Professionalization and Diversification of Faculty Structure

At present, most Buddhist academies have established a dual teaching structure combining monastic and lay instructors, with externally recruited university faculty accounting for approximately 25% of teaching staff. The recruitment standards for external instructors generally align with those applied to full-time faculty in higher education institutions, ensuring a high level of disciplinary specialization. Faculty training programs typically encompass religious policy education as well as coursework from various social science disciplines.

Despite these developments, the shortage of “dual-competency” faculty—teachers who possess both solid training in Buddhist studies and expertise in modern academic disciplines—remains a major bottleneck in faculty development.

4.4 Evaluation System Integrating Cultivation and Practice

Most institutions have adopted a three-dimensional evaluation framework based on moral conduct, academic learning, and practical engagement, incorporating social service activities and monastic practice into student assessment. Some academies have innovatively introduced courses that integrate monastic cultivation with public welfare service, thereby promoting the unity of faith and practice.

Each Buddhist academy has developed its own distinctive cultivation orientation, with some specializing in Tiantai traditions, while others emphasize Pure Land practice. Correspondingly, evaluation criteria vary across institutions. A substantial proportion of assessment remains non-quantitative, relying largely on qualitative judgments provided by instructors.

4.5 International Exchange and Future Prospects

Several interviewees highlighted the importance of drawing on the academic institutionalization of Japanese Buddhist universities and the socially oriented Sangha education system in Thailand. They advocated the establishment of regional cooperation mechanisms in Buddhist education, and expressed strong expectations for enhanced academic exchange and collaboration between Chinese Han Buddhist academies and overseas Buddhist educational institutions.

5. International Comparison: Experiences and Implications from Three Countries

Table 1: Table of Experiences and Implications from Three Countries

| Country | Educational Characteristics | Implications for Han Buddhist Education |
|-----------|---|--|
| Japan | Strong academic orientation and integration into the university system; parallel development of sectarian universities and social education | Promote the degree-oriented and research-based development of Buddhist education |
| Thailand | High degree of state involvement combined with a strong emphasis on social service; government participation in Sangha education | Strengthen the public service functions of Buddhist education |
| Sri Lanka | Coexistence of government funding and religious autonomy; modernization of curricula | Achieve social adaptability while preserving traditional foundations |

5.1 Japan: Academicization and Integration into the University System

Since the Meiji Restoration, Buddhist education in Japan has undergone a process of institutionalization within the framework of religious higher education. Major Buddhist denominations, such as Sōtō Zen and Jōdo Shinshū, have established their own sectarian universities—including Komazawa University and Otani University—thereby integrating Sangha education with the general system of higher education. The educational content places strong emphasis on philosophy, languages, and international exchange, positioning Buddhism as an integral component of broader socio-cultural and academic inquiry. This model provides an important reference for the academicization of Han Buddhist education.

5.2 Thailand: State Integration and Social Service Orientation

The Buddhist education system in Thailand is characterized by state leadership and Sangha participation, with Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University serving as a representative institution. This university integrates monastic education with social practice, offering curricula that encompass fields such as psychology, education, and public administration. In addition to serving monastic students, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University functions as a public-oriented Buddhist university, open to lay society. Its academic degrees are officially recognized by the Thai Ministry of Education and acknowledged within the international higher education system.

Graduates of this institution—including monastic students—are able to pursue careers in government agencies, educational institutions, and social service sectors, demonstrating a high degree of social adaptability within Thai Buddhist education.

5.3 Sri Lanka: Integration of Tradition with National Higher Education

Buddhist universities in Sri Lanka, such as the University of Kelaniya, operate under a dual framework that combines government funding with religious autonomy. Their curricula include both Pāli language studies and Abhidhamma, alongside modern research methodologies and courses in social ethics. This model preserves the depth of traditional Buddhist scholarship while simultaneously strengthening the participation of Buddhist education in national development and social construction.

6. Integrated Analysis and Model Construction

Through thematic integration based on NVivo analysis, this study proposes a Five-Dimensional Model of Institutional Innovation for the Sinicization of Buddhist Education. The model systematically summarizes the key dimensions, core components, major challenges, and future directions of reform in Han Buddhist education.

Table 1: Table of Integrated Analysis and Model Construction

| Dimension | Core Components | Major Challenges | Directions for Improvement |
|---|--|---|---|
| Institutionalization of Political Identification and Education on the Rule of Law | Establishment of a legalized and institutionalized curriculum system | Overly uniform teaching materials and limited pedagogical interaction | Develop specialized teaching materials for the Buddhist community and promote case-based instructional approaches |
| Integration and Innovation of the Curriculum System | Integration of traditional canonical studies with modern social-oriented courses | Insufficient faculty support and limited instructional hours | Advance modular curriculum reform to enhance flexibility and sustainability |
| Professionalization and Diversification of Faculty Structure | Combined teaching by monastic and lay instructors; strengthened training systems | Shortage of dual-competency faculty | Establish faculty certification systems and incentive mechanisms |
| Evaluation System Integrating Cultivation and Practice | Parallel emphasis on monastic cultivation and social service | Ambiguity in evaluation standards | Construct a quantitative indicator-based evaluation framework |
| International Exchange and Future Development | Learning from educational experiences in Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka | Limited channels for international cooperation | Establish an international cooperation alliance for Buddhist education |

The proposed five-dimensional model demonstrates that the Sinicization-oriented reform of Han Buddhist education is not a single-dimensional policy adjustment, but rather a systematic institutional transformation involving governance structures, curriculum design, faculty development, evaluation mechanisms, and international engagement. These five dimensions are mutually reinforcing and together constitute a comprehensive framework for advancing the modernization, openness, and internationalization of Buddhist education in the new era.

The findings of this study reveal that the institutional framework of Buddhist education is undergoing a transformation from a traditional, scripture-centered instructional model toward a comprehensive model of talent cultivation. Political education and curricular integration are being progressively strengthened, initial progress has been made in the professional development of faculty, and social service and international cooperation have emerged as key directions for future development.

Comparative analysis of China and other countries indicates that the development of Buddhist education demonstrates three major trends.

First, institutional modernization has become a shared trajectory: Japan has achieved a high level of academic systematization, Thailand has established a nationally integrated educational network, and China is in the process of constructing religious academy standards with distinctive Chinese characteristics.

Second, the socialization of education is increasingly emphasized across countries, with Buddhist education reinforcing its social functions and cultivating religious professionals as active contributors to social development.

Third, cultural localization and internationalization proceed in parallel, suggesting that Buddhist education must

simultaneously preserve indigenous cultural traditions and actively participate in international academic exchange.

For Han Buddhism, further reform should be pursued in several key areas. First, it is necessary to construct a trinitarian talent cultivation system integrating national policy guidance, religious educational institutions, and social service engagement. Second, Buddhist academies should be encouraged to establish international cooperation mechanisms, facilitating the introduction of overseas Buddhist educational resources and promoting academic exchange and mutual visits. Third, curricular design should incorporate modules on international dissemination of Buddhism, cross-cultural communication, and comparative religious studies, thereby cultivating a new generation of monastic professionals equipped with global perspectives and intercultural competence.

7. Conclusion and Future Prospects

The talent cultivation system of Han Buddhism under the orientation of Sinicization represents the outcome of an interactive process between religious education and the modernization of national governance. A comparative examination of the educational systems of Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka demonstrates that the core of institutional innovation lies in maintaining a firm grounding in indigenous cultural traditions while simultaneously absorbing modern educational concepts and international experience.

Looking ahead, Han Buddhism should continue to advance reform efforts in the following key areas.

7.1 Advancing the Theoretical Articulation of Ideological and Political Education

It is essential to enhance the theoretical depth and academic articulation of ideological and political education, guiding religious practice through rigorous scholarly inquiry. Han Buddhist academies should strive to promote the theoretical transformation and conceptual elevation of ideological and political education, moving beyond simplistic policy dissemination or textual interpretation. Through systematic academic research, core socialist values, the spirit of the rule of law, and patriotic education should be organically and precisely integrated with Buddhism's doctrinal system, philosophical foundations, and value orientations.

For example, sustained scholarly efforts may elucidate the intrinsic compatibility and practical complementarity between "compassion and altruism" and "serving the people," between Humanistic Buddhism and the ideal of a harmonious society, and between monastic precepts and governing religion in accordance with the law. Such theoretical engagement can establish a solid intellectual foundation for political identification at the doctrinal level. The fundamental task is to overcome the existing disjunction between ideological and political curricula and the Buddhist context by fostering deep integration between ideological content and Buddhist doctrine. This requires the establishment of dedicated research initiatives that encourage collaboration between scholars and monastics, systematically interpreting the points of convergence between concepts such as core socialist values and modern national governance, and traditional Buddhist ideas including dependent origination, emptiness, compassion for sentient beings, and the sanctification of the land. The ultimate objective is not merely to teach courses, but to transmit principles, transforming external political requirements into internally comprehensible, acceptable, and practicable forms of religious consciousness and ethical guidance, thereby achieving an organic unity of political identification, cultural identification, and faith-based practice.

7.2 Improving Faculty Development and Evaluation Systems

Efforts should be intensified to refine faculty training and evaluation mechanisms, thereby cultivating a diversified structure of monastic professionals encompassing academic-oriented, service-oriented, and communication-oriented pathways. Particular emphasis should be placed on developing dual-competency faculty who possess expertise in both Buddhist studies and modern academic disciplines. The central task for the future is to move beyond the traditional, single-track model of scriptural instructors toward a clearly structured, multi-path system of talent cultivation. This transformation should be promoted through coordinated efforts at four levels: top-level design, training pathways, evaluation and incentive mechanisms, and sustainable development strategies.

7.3 Establishing Regional Alliances for Buddhist Education

The formation of regional Buddhist education alliances is crucial for advancing international dialogue and academic cooperation, accelerating the modernization and digitalization of Buddhist education, and creating mechanisms for inter-

institutional sharing of ideological and political educational resources. To overcome current constraints—such as institutional fragmentation, dispersed resources, and limited international engagement—it is imperative to promote alliance-building based on the principles of co-construction, resource sharing, and collaborative innovation. Such alliances should function as high-level platforms integrating coordination, resource integration, and innovation, achieving breakthroughs in international dialogue, modern transformation, ideological collaboration, and curricular innovation, and thereby enhancing the overall quality and influence of Buddhist education.

7.4 Establishing an Evaluation System for Educational Outcomes

A comprehensive evaluation system for Buddhist educational outcomes should be constructed to assess the effectiveness of Sinicization-oriented education through empirical data and representative cases. This system should combine scientific rigor with distinctively Buddhist characteristics, enabling multidimensional measurement of both the processes and outcomes of talent cultivation. Robust data and vivid case studies can provide a solid empirical foundation for policy formulation, institutional reform, and broader social recognition, while simultaneously encouraging deeper integration between academic research and practical application.

7.5 Toward a Strategic Transformation of Talent Cultivation

Through systematic institutional innovation and sustained international exchange, the talent cultivation system of Han Buddhism is undergoing a profound process of modern transformation. At its core, this transformation involves a strategic shift from a traditional model reliant on individualized and experience-based master–disciple transmission toward a standardized, systematized, and replicable institutional framework. This shift does not entail a negation of tradition; rather, it seeks—on the premise of full respect for fundamental Buddhist precepts and core doctrines—to introduce modern educational management concepts and methodologies in order to achieve the creative transformation and innovative development of Buddhist traditions. In doing so, Han Buddhist education can be revitalized and endowed with renewed vitality within contemporary society.

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