Questioning the Legitimacy of Chinese Buddhism: From the Chinese Critical Buddhists’ Critique of Xiong Shili (1882-1968) to Their Rejection of Chinese Buddhism

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Abstract

In the early Republican period (1911-1942), the academic discipline of Buddhist studies as practiced in Europe and Japan had spawned a new breed of Buddhists in China. When it came to interpreting Buddhist doctrines, they did not defer to the medieval, exegetical writings of the Chinese schools as most of their Chinese Buddhist compatriots and predecessors did. They were keenly aware of what they perceived to be meaningful and profound differences between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, the latter being viewed with increasing suspicion and criticality. As it were, the modern academic methods for studying religions can and have served as a sculpting and informative source of the very religions they study; and Chinese Buddhists in the modern times are increasingly defining orthodoxy and historical realities by a global discourse that is arrived at through modern academic methods.

Keywords: Critical Buddhism, Yinshun, Lü Cheng, Ouyang Jingwu, Ouyang Jian, Modern Chinese Buddhism, Buddhology in China, Taiwanese Buddhism, Buddhist apocryphal studies.
The better known of this new generation of Buddhists who employed modern methods at studying Buddhism—such as Ouyang Jian (1871-1943), Lü Cheng (1896-1989), and Yinshun (1906-2005)—had all engaged in debates through correspondence with the famed Neo-Confucian Xiong Shili (1885-1968). All of them had charged Xiong Shili for having been misguided by the less-than-reliable Chinese indigenous interpretations of Buddhism. Their protracted debates with Xiong offer a condensed overview of what they deemed wrong with Chinese Buddhism in general—how its most distinctive features resulted from grossly misreading certain key Indian Buddhist teachings. This presentation gives more than an overview of this unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of Chinese Buddhism. It does so in the context of the new academic-religion dynamic and of an emergent impulse to “return to the Indian roots.”

In the early Republican period (1911-1942), the academic discipline of Buddhist studies as practiced in Europe and Japan had spawned a new breed of Buddhists in China. They were savvy with the historical studies of Buddhism. Some of them were equipped with linguistic skills to read non-Chinese Buddhist primary materials. When it came to interpreting Buddhist doctrines, they did not defer to the medieval, exegetical writings of the Chinese schools as most of their Chinese Buddhist compatriots and predecessors did. They were keenly aware of what they perceived to be meaningful and profound differences between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism, the latter being viewed with increasing suspicion and criticality. This was the generation that heralded a whole new era—one where traditional Chinese Buddhist tenets and sacred texts were critically re-examined; one where the very legitimacy of Chinese Buddhism was seriously challenged for the first time since the founding of the so-called Sinitic Buddhist schools.

There were unprecedented, defining features about Chinese Buddhism in the early twentieth century that, in many ways, pits the new age against the totality of premodern Chinese Buddhism. For one thing, and in fact I would argue it is among the most important things for understanding modern Chinese
Buddhism, Chinese Buddhists in the modern times are increasingly defining orthodoxy and historical realities by a global discourse that is arrived at through modern academic methods.

Traditional Buddhism, one based on premodern exegeses and hermeneutics, sectarian lore and hagiographical myths, and the sheer rhetorical prowess of normative reasoning, is still alive and well. But its authority and cogency are increasingly invaded by and dependent on the corroboration of modern religious historiography.

Scholars who studied abroad brought back controversial ideas advanced in modern academe. Yuanming (圆明, ?-1949-?), for example, provoked the ire of many traditional Buddhists for his “sacrilegious” claims. He said, according to modern findings, the Chinese “have been fooled by [their patriarchal] predecessors,” having been misled into believing the truthfulness and historicity of all Chinese sutras and their teachings, which in reality were “conflated and polluted by legends, myths...lies...sophistry.”

Much of the traditional Chinese Buddhist wisdom, according to Yuanming, “directly contradicts” what “modern scientific knowledge” has revealed about Buddhist history.1 Outraged, prominent Chinese Buddhist leaders organized boycott of Yuanming, branding him an “apostate,” “a progeny of Mara,” and “a freakish lunatic.”2

The better known of this new generation of Buddhists who employed modern methods at studying Buddhism—such as Ouyang Jian (1871-1943), Lü Cheng (1896-1989), and Yinshun (1906-2005)—had all engaged in debates through correspondence with the famed Neo-Confucian Xiong Shili (1885-1968). All of them had charged Xiong Shili for having been misguided by the less-than-reliable Chinese indigenous interpretations of Buddhism. Their protracted

1 Cited in Jiang Canteng, Taiwan fojiao bainian shi zhi yanjiu, p. 386.
2 Jiang Canteng, Taiwan fojiao bainian shi zhi yanjiu, p. 386-387.
debates with Xiong Shili, therefore, offer a condensed overview of what they deemed wrong with Chinese Buddhism in general—how its most distinctive features resulted from grossly misreading certain key Indian Buddhist teachings.

What seemed to be a relatively innocuous controversy over Yogācāra orthodoxy could really be seen as a vicarious battleground where these new Buddhists either question or reject the legitimacy of Chinese Buddhism. The debate primarily revolved around Xiong Shili’s magnum opus [Xin weishi lun] A New Treatise on Yogācāra, where he posited a Primordial Mind that is the creative source of all phenomena. Much has been discussed about Xiong’s treatise in western scholarship, so I will not dwell on its content. Instead, I’d like to point out some interesting themes in the Buddhist come-back to Xiong’s criticism of their religion, and why they are relevant to understanding certain new developments in Chinese Buddhism.

There are quite a few themes in the new Buddhists’ arguments that we can summarize here, we’re going to focus on four:

1. One of the most pernicious and prevalent Chinese distortions of Indian Buddhism is its invention of ontological notions such as Buddha-nature, Primordial Mind, and any such creative substance that is said to have been the generative source of myriad phenomena. “Ontology” (benti lun) is about the positing of a metaphysical substance that lies behind phenomena.

Ouyang Jian, Lü Cheng, and Yinshun had all commented on this point. For example, Ouyang’s student, Lü Cheng, pointed out that the Tathāgatagarbha thought in India was originally an innocuous assertion of people’s ability to attain Awakening. It was the Chinese who injected into it an ontological dimension. He said, “The embryo of Tathāgata” (the literal meaning of Tathāgatagarbha) was initially and predominantly a designation for the potential to become awakened (a soteriological notion), but it was transformed by Chinese to refer to a literal
“substrate of consciousness...with cognitive capacities” (an ontological notion). Because of this fundamental misunderstanding, the principle of Buddhist practice was changed from its initial emphasis on deconstructing attachments to one on “restoring the primordial/original nature.”

2. The Second theme in the Chinese Critical Buddhists’ arguments is as follows: The so-called uniquely Chinese Buddhist schools, including Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan, are all founded on such questionable ontological notions that were either absent or critiqued in Indian Buddhism. The uniqueness of these Chinese schools—the way in which they’re distinct from Indian Buddhism—should be something Chinese Buddhists should rue over, rather than be treated as a source of national pride over Chinese genius and doctrinal innovations.

Ouyang, Lü Cheng, and Yinshun all thought that the source of Xiong Shili’s misunderstanding about Buddhism lays exactly at this confusion perpetuated by the Chinese Buddhist schools themselves. Yinshun famously talked about how he would not allow whatever nationalistic sentiments to blind him from recognizing the differences between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism. In his criticisms against the Chinese interpretations of Yogācāra, Lü Cheng also pointed out that it was the Chinese Buddhist schools that perpetuated a hybrid Tathāgatagarbha-ālayavijñāna thought that confuses “consciousness” with some kind of monistic, all-encompassing Mind. He called such a Chinese Buddhist doctrine the prime example of “counterfeit/semblance Dharma (xiangsi fofa 相似佛法),” and said, “The Chan teachings of Daoxin and Hongren were entirely based on the misleading influence of the Awakening of Faith. As for those practitioners who entrust their lives to such teachings in expectation of liberation, how can they not encounter difficulty and find themselves in dire straits?”

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3 “Shilun zhongguo foxue youguan xinxing de jiben xiangsi,” p. 127 & 130. See also Jinglun kaozheng jiangshu, p. 126.
4 “Shilun zhongguo foxue youguan xinxing de jiben xiangsi,” p. 129.
3. The third theme in the Chinese Critical Buddhist debates: Many of these “distorted” Chinese notions were in fact based on sutras that were themselves of questionable authenticity. These apocrypha had become so entrenched and influential that they dominate the root of Chinese Buddhist thought. Many conservative Buddhists were highly resistant and hostile to both the modern scholarly methods and what they have revealed, when in fact a wholesale reassessment of what is Buddhism ought to be performed with the aid of such scientific and scholarly methods.

Unlike Xiong, the Chinese Critical Buddhists have had exposure to either European or Japanese Buddhological scholarships or both. Yinshun was privy to the contemporaneous Japanese works on Indian and Chinese Buddhist histories. Lü Cheng had traveled to and studied about Buddhist traditions outside the Chinese borders. Both of them explained that their approaches rely on texts that are geographically of Indian provenance and chronologically earlier than the Chinese apocrypha. Lü Cheng called for the need to squarely re-situate Yogācāra philosophy in the doctrinal context of the early sutras instead of in the many influential Chinese apocrypha. He discussed how the ontological idealism he criticized was founded on “spurious texts like the Heroic March and the Perfect Enlightenment.” He also pointed out that such idealism would be hard-put to find any connection with mainstream Indian Buddhist thought. The Chinese apocryphal texts ranging from the Awakening of Faith, Book of Divining the Requital of Good and Evil Actions (Zhancha shan-e yebao jing), the Vajrasamādhī (Jinggang sanmei jing), the Perfect Enlightenment (Yuanjue jing), to the Śūramgama (Lengyan), had followed one another in continuing [this error] which initially stemmed from the same erroneous notion.

In addition, Lü Cheng had composed scholarly essays to systematically

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7 Lü cheng ji, p. 299.
8 Jinglan kaozheng lunshu, p. 132-133.
undermine the credibility of some of these Chinese apocrypha, and went so far as to say that indigenous Chinese Buddhist schools like Chan and Tiantai, given that they were largely based on such problematic texts, have promulgated numerous heresies and contributed to Buddhism’s doctrinal corruption.

4. The fourth theme in the Critical Buddhist argument: The importance of the Agamas and the so-called early suttas cannot be over-emphasized. This emphasis is not founded upon sectarian bias, but on the appreciation that any legitimate, historically subsequent developments of Buddhism ought to be squarely based on that foundation. One should accept the historical realities of textual and doctrinal evolution within Buddhism as the primary source of doctrinal divergence.

About this point, Lü Cheng remarked:

Of the sutras the Buddha had propounded and that were compiled and circulated, none preceded the Agamas and none is more credible than the Agamas...Translators of the texts were mired in their bias, so that they were nominally incorporated into the canon but their pivotal importance...was never explained. For this reason, exegetes had classified it in their panjiao systems under “hinayānist texts,” and relegated its teaching as elementary. None had composed a single text exploring and divulging their profound and subtle messages, the result of which was that they exerted no influence whatsoever in the [Chinese Buddhist] scholarship.

Yinshun had also remarked that any legitimate Mahayana teaching has to be rooted in the Agamas. Yinshun’s indirect promotion of the Agamas has inspired in many Chinese Buddhists an unprecedented fascination with this

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10 See, for example, “Lengyan baiwei” and “Dasheng qixin lun kaozheng,” respectively, in Lü Cheng Wenji.
11 “Shilun zhongguo foxue youguan xinxing de jiben xinxing,” p. 132-134.
12 Jinglun kaozheng lunshu, p. 319.
long-neglected corpus. In the wake of Yinshun's advocacy, an increasing number of Chinese Buddhologists have become specialists in the Āgamas/Nikāyas. A battalion of scholars devoting themselves to the study of what were traditionally called hinayānist texts would have almost been sacrilegious in Chinese Buddhist circles not too long ago!  

As mentioned, Yinshun's scholarship has a direct impact on the emergence of a fascination with Āgamas and Theravādin studies in Taiwan. Despite the fact that Yinshun’s ultimate allegiance was with Mahayana, his impact has created a whole generation of Taiwanese Buddhists who advocated a complete abandonment of traditional Chinese Buddhism and Mahāyāna teachings in favor of the adoption of Theravāda style of practice and monasticism. Many first generation Theravadins have acknowledged their indebtedness to Yinshun, though many of them have since become exclusive devotees to the Āgamas approach. In prominent Buddhist academies on the island, for the first time in history an increasing number of scholars have made Āgamas studies their primary specialization.  

Due to Yinshun’s longevity and his eventual relocation to Taiwan, his influences are much more consequential to the contemporary Chinese-speaking Buddhist circles than, say, Lü Cheng, whose scholarly activities came to an abrupt hiatus after the Communist take-over of mainland China. Nonetheless, both Yinshun and Lü Cheng, alongside their predecessor Ouyang Jian, embodied a subversive and unprecedented approach on the part of Chinese Buddhists at defining and reinventing their own traditions—an approach that was only possible with the advent of modernity and the emergence of the academic Buddhological methods.


15 Evidence of this trend could be seen in Shengyan’s report of the recent development in one of the leading Buddhist institutions in Taiwan. “Xiandai taiwan fojiao de xueshu yanjiu,” p. 14 and 15.
Bibliography


