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Chan in Communist China: Justifying Buddhism's Turn to Practical Labor Under the Chinese Communist Party

Abstract

A prominent Buddhist reformer, Ju Zan, and twenty-one other progressive monks sent a letter to Mao Zedong appealing to the congenial nature between the two parties at the dawn of the Communist takeover in China. Ju Zan took the opportunity to declare Buddhism's new emphasis on "shifting to productivity" in his letter, suggesting the religion's compatibility with the Communist Party. In fact, much of the Communist doctrine surrounding practical labor synchronized perfectly with the Buddhist school of Chan's teachings and tendencies, and, together with other monks, Ju Zan urged Buddhism to stray from its growing transcendentalist nature and back to its secular involvement in the human world. Alongside official orders of the Communist Party, progressives within the Buddhist *sangha* welcomed the shift to productivity, harkening back to Chan teachings to encourage the new outlook of secular Buddhism.

Keywords

China, communism, chan, buddhism, Ju Zan, Taixu, Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong

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In the year 1949, the Chinese Communist Party formally declared victory over the Nationalist Army in the center of Tiananmen Square, Beijing. With China under communist leadership, the role of religion became a controversial issue. As Mao remolded the country through land reforms to resemble a socialist model, churches, temples and shrines were all seized by the state. Article three of "The Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference," adopted on Sept. 27, 1949, states, "Rural land belonging to ancestral shrines, temples, monasteries, churches, schools, and organizations, and land owned by public bodies, shall be requisitioned."¹ However, article five guaranteed the freedom of religious belief, thus providing at least slight hope that religion would have a future under the Communist Party.² A prominent Buddhist reformer, Ju Zan, and twenty-one other progressive monks sent a letter to Mao Zedong appealing to the congenial nature between the two parties. Buddhism had been in the process of reforming its *sangha*, or its spiritual community, since the days of the New Culture Movement just twenty years prior. Ju Zan took the opportunity to declare Buddhism's new emphasis on "shifting to productivity" in his letter, suggesting the religion's compatibility with the Communist Party.³ In fact, much of the Communist doctrine surrounding practical labor synchronized perfectly with the Buddhist school of Chan's teachings and tendencies, and, together with other monks, Ju Zan urged Buddhism to stray from its growing transcendentalist nature and back to its secular involvement in the human world. Alongside official orders of the Communist Party, progressives within the Buddhist *sangha* welcomed the shift to productivity, harkening back to Chan teachings to encourage the new outlook of secular Buddhism.

Many historians, such as Holmes Welch, treat the CCP's attempts to make monks into "good citizens" as a negative or forced action, but when looking at the letters of Buddhists and the teachings of Chan one can perceive what can be interpreted as a congenial relationship. This essay will outline how the daily lives of Buddhists changed and how they responded to the refocusing toward practical labor, and it will illustrate that many monks genuinely enjoyed working for the masses. Mahāyāna, or "great vehicle," Buddhism emphasized the individual striving toward path of the bodhisattva, a lesser deity that willfully chooses to

¹ Donald E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China; a Documentary History*, (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 21.

² Ibid.

³ Holmes Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972), 395-396

remain in the earthly human realm to aid in the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Through returning to this mentality and by adopting the Chan school's work ethic, Buddhists like Ju Zan perceived no strife inherent in the reeducating of monks into "good citizens." Indeed, the second half of Ju Zan's proposal to "shift to production" involved a "shift to scholarship" as well, in an attempt to do away with feudal organizations and superstitions within the *sangha* indefinitely.⁴ By examining the comments made by Buddhist monks during this time period, and establishing a background in Chan teachings, it will be possible to understand why Ju Zan and other reformers felt a congeniality to the Communist Party through the shift from isolation to productivity in the *sangha*.

Before 1949, Buddhist monks lived primarily on rents, donations, and the income from their superstitious religious services, and as a result were largely considered corrupt and exploitative of the peasant masses.⁵ These were the issues that reformers like Ju Zan wished to address with the help of the Communist state, and a passage from a work report of the Hangchow Buddhist Association for 1950-51 demonstrates that some monks desired a shift to productivity as well. As the report describes,

Monks and nuns, as they have gone through the stages of study, have realized how unreasonable and shameful their parasitic life used to be in the past. A good example is a monk called T'ien-chu, who said at a discussion meeting: 'If I had realized a little earlier the greatness of labor, I would certainly not have betrayed the laboring class and become a parasite.' A nun from the outskirts of the city said: 'I wanted to leave the life of depending on income from rents. I must exert myself to take a post in productive labor. Only then can I really stand erect . . . I want to struggle to become self-sufficient on my income from growing vegetables.'⁶

Some monks and nuns were cognizant of the fact that they were exploiting the masses, and Ju Zan urged these Buddhists to remodel themselves to become productive laborers on farms or workers in factories, encouraging the right path of aiding in the interest of the people.⁷ Mao's socialist programs rested well with the idea of monks becoming laborers, yet it was not the Maoists that prompted these reforms. Ju Zan was extracting his justification for the productivity shift through the teachings of Chan Buddhism, thus his position within the Communist Party

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Zhe Ji, "Buddhism and the State: The New Relationship," *China perspectives* 55, (September - October 2004), <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/408> [accessed on April 22, 2013]

⁶ *Modern Buddhism*, (March, 1952), 93.

⁷ Xue Yu, "Buddhist Contribution to the Socialist Transformation of Buddhism in China: Activities of Ven. Ju Zan during 1949-1953," The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/10/you09.htm>.

cannot simply be retold as a scramble for power under a new government. By examining his writings within the magazine *Modern Buddhism*, a more accurate depiction of his intentions can be developed.

Ju Zan's conciliatory stance toward the Chinese Communist Party won him the position as editor-in-chief of *Modern Buddhism*, a magazine published from 1950-1964 that would be used to declare the direction of Buddhism reforms. In his articles, Ju Zan echoed the vision of his late teacher, prominent Buddhist reformer Ven. Taixu,⁸ writing once, "To talk about religious practices isolated from the masses of living creatures is like catching the wind and grasping at shadows . . . we can know that absolutely no one becomes a buddha while enjoying leisure in an ivory tower. . . this is just another pastime and opiate of landlords, bureaucrats, and petit bourgeois..."⁹ In the same issue, Ju Zan reiterated that labor should be treated as a religious practice, not as political propaganda. He would also tell his fellow monks as early as 1950 that "they had to cleanse their religion of 'pessimism and escapism.' Salvation was to be sought not by withdrawing from the world but by contributing to it."¹⁰ As evidence of this claim, many Buddhists during the 1920s, including Taixu, turned to Chan teachings as justification for the socialization of monks. Ju Zan had merely picked up where his predecessors left off.

One major source of inspiration for Buddhist reformers was the Baizhang Chan Monastic Regulations. Baizhang was a monk during the Tang Dynasty who was known for his famous maxim, "A day of no work, a day of no eating."¹¹ Documented in the Regulations were specific mentions of monks involving themselves in labor. For instance, in regard to the official on kitchen duty, Baizhang wrote that "he must not allow [novice attendants] to become idle and negligent in matters of public action . . . or participating in physical labor (puqing)."¹² Monks were expected to remain actively at work, being productive to the monastery. Baizhang also advocated the rule of "universal participation in the task of labor," which in his words were "meant to equalize the work contribution of individuals, whether higher or lower in rank. In general, wherever a number of people live together, there should necessarily be things accomplished on the basis

⁸ Taixu had been a leading voice in the reformation of the Buddhist *sangha*, and had called for a "sweeping spiritual transformation" in the world, and averred that a western paradise could be created on Earth, as opposed to the Confucian era belief that one transcended into an otherworld pure land, thus divorcing him from the plights of the common man. For in-depth analysis of Taixu's ideology, see Don Alvin Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2001)

⁹ *Modern Buddhism*, (April 1952): 145-146.

¹⁰ Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, 85-86.

¹¹ Shohei Ichimura, *The Baizhang Zen Monastic Regulations: Taishō Volume 48, Number 2025*, (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2006), 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 165.

of all members' cooperative effort."¹³ *Modern Buddhism* would also quote Dajian Huineng, more famously revered by Chan Buddhists as the Sixth Patriarch, stating, "The dharma is in the world and enlightenment is not something apart from the world; to seek for enlightenment apart from the world is like looking for the horns of a rabbit."¹⁴

Written over a century before, Baizhang and Huineng promoted a religious form of the peasant cooperatives that Mao Zedong would later support after land had been redistributed in Communist China. The idea of a self-sustaining and productive Buddhist *sangha* dated back far before the Communist Party sought to socialize the country's religious institutions, thus it is hardly surprising that Ju Zan would sense an opportunity for his religion to thrive under the new government. The Buddhist reforms toward a "shift to productivity" may not be so easily dismissed as political appealing.

To explain how Chan Buddhism understood common labor as enlightening, the premise of its overarching school of thought, Mahāyāna Buddhism must be explained. Mahāyāna's most significant aspect that differentiates itself from other delineations of Buddhist thought is the emphasis on the path of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva, as already mentioned, is a lesser deity that chooses to refrain from reaching enlightenment until all other sentient beings reach enlightenment as well. Rather than transcend the world as a Buddha, the individual makes a more selfless path, delaying eternal bliss. On this point, Welch correctly assesses that "no bodhisattva can attain the supreme enlightenment without living creatures" and went on to draw from it the implication that enlightenment cannot be won in isolation from the toiling masses.¹⁵ So when one of the leading Buddhist figures in the Chinese Buddhist Association at the time, Zhao Puchu, commented that Buddhists should acknowledge the "universal spirit of serving the people and the large-scale growth of our national construction,"¹⁶ it should be thought of not as an appeasement to Party officials, but as a reassertion of the path of the bodhisattva according to Mahāyāna Buddhism. He would go on to conclude that Buddhists could work together with the masses and still be true to their religious faith, "for the sublime task of the peace, happiness, mortality, and wisdom of mankind."¹⁷ Being a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Chan harmoniously equated productive labor as a form of religious faith because it benefitted the people--the ultimate goal of the bodhisattva.

¹³ Ibid., 265.

¹⁴ *Modern Buddhism*, (May, 1956), 49.

¹⁵ Holmes Welch, "The Reinterpretation of Chinese Buddhism," *The Chinese Quarterly* 22 (April-June, 1965): 148.

¹⁶ Zhao Puchu, *Buddhism in China* (Peking: Chinese Buddhist Association, 1957), 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

As productive labor became inseparable from the exemplification of the bodhisattva ideal, many monks and nuns found it easy to justify working for the Communist Party as a form of religious practice.¹⁸ There were even some monks who were so enticed by *Modern Buddhism's* emphasis on entering society and working for the liberation of the whole of humanity that they began to forsake their vows of asceticism, giving up their vegetarianism, discarding their coarse robes and growing out their hair.¹⁹ This blurring of lines between monks and members of society demonstrated radical attempts made to pursue the path of the bodhisattva, and should not be construed as a rejection of Buddhism but an affirmation of Chan teachings. Monks who did remain in the *sangha* reported in 1959 that in temples they routinely carried water, lugged firewood, swept the floor, and grew vegetables and planted trees, thinking that their labors assured them religious merit, and stated, "Now we know that 'to purify the buddha land, beautify the land, and show kindness to living creatures' are even greater Buddhist services (*fo-shih*). Therefore we all look on labor as having the greatest merit of any kind of Buddhist service."²⁰ The introduction of Chan Buddhism in the reformation of the *sangha* reassured monks that practical labor was a greater expression of the Buddha way, and the Communist Party was no oppressor. If the concept of beautifying the land and showing kindness to living creatures meant being a productive citizen who contributed to society, and therefore, to the welfare of the common people, then the goals of Buddhism aligned closely with the egalitarian, socialist society that the Communists were striving to create. The shift to productivity was not a tool of political oppression on religion, it was a Buddhist created branch of religious thought that insured the collecting of good merit.

Welch's view that the CCP was making monks into "good citizens," was a misrepresentation of the facts, and contributed to the perfunctory thinking of Cold War era historians that typically defined the Communist Party of the 1950s as the same Communist Party of the 1960s. It is a misjudgment to equate the two, because from 1949-1957, Communist China had yet to declare itself as fully transitioned to socialism.²¹ This "New Democratic Period" allowed for the congenial relationship between the state and Buddhism just as much as Ju Zan's emphasis on a shift to productivity did. Welch's generalizations of the nature of

¹⁸ Taken directly from that stated explicitly, "productive labor is inseparable from the exemplification of the bodhisattva ideal." *Modern Buddhism*, (June 1953) 48.

¹⁹ "Buddhist Contribution to the Socialist Transformation of Buddhism in China: Activities of Ven. Ju Zan during 1949–1953" Xue Yu, Cultural and Religious Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong <http://www.globalbuddhism.org/10/you09.htm>.

²⁰ *Modern Buddhism*, (July, 1959), 34.

²¹ Thomas Lutze, "The Chinese Revolution." Lecture. Liberation: Continuing the Revolution: Contradictions and Social Movements of the 1950s. Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington: March 25, 2013.

the Communist Party during this period seem contradictory when his evidence of Chan influence in Buddhist reforms was supposed to indicate political oppression. He acknowledged that after 1949, monasteries became self-sufficient and monks more labor-inclined, and that "[t]he result was not an unprecedented reform in the monastic system but rather a return to the T'ang dynasty ideal of [Baizhang]."²² The examination of the Chan teachings of Baizhang and Huineng, Ju Zan's explicit mention of a "shift to productivity" in his letter to Mao, and the various testimonies and reports of monks suggests not political oppression, but a reformation of a corrupted *sangha* by returning to the emphasis on laboring in the secular world to achieve the ultimate goal of the bodhisattva, enlightenment of the masses.

²² To avoid confusion, I inserted the Pinyin form of the name, replacing the original "Pai-chang." Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, 85.