

The Changing Functions of *renjian fojiao* 人间佛教 in Mainland China¹

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Abstract

Since the revival of Buddhism in the People's Republic of China following the Cultural Revolution, *renjian fojiao* 人间佛教, often translated as 'Humanistic Buddhism', has become a very prominent label. It has served as a basic concept for various purposes, from the political self-legitimation of Buddhists, to the revival of traditional(ized) thinking, to religious innovation. It has undergone a continuous process of adaptation to Buddhists' needs at the moment in question. With its initial role, quite early in the 1980s, emphasized officially by Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907–2000), the president of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), it became an important element of the statutory purpose of the BAC and developed separately from, but not without the influence of, later dynamics in Taiwan. This article reflects on some of the steps in the 40-year development of what has been declared in the People's Republic of China as *renjian fojiao* ('Humanistic Buddhism'). It focuses on its metamorphosis within the context of the BAC's statutory purpose, asking what the concept has been necessary for and how it might still be relevant today.

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Introduction

Buddhists in the People's Republic of China (PRC) could have celebrated a remarkable anniversary in 2018 (as is true for all world religions permitted by the Communist Party): Exactly 40 years previously, in December 1978, the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China had permitted the revival of religious practice in Mainland China. It was a new starting point, after the preceding years had led to the total suppression of religions during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

This article reflects on the role that *renjian fojiao* (人間佛教) (which is mostly translated as 'Humanistic Buddhism', though I prefer not to translate it in this paper)² has played in the development of Buddhism in Mainland China during the last 40 years, with a focus on its function since the early years of this century.

The emergence of the term *renjian fojiao* as a core concept in Buddhist intellectual history in the Chinese-speaking world since the 1930s (and 1940s) is regarded as both a reflection and a catalyst of new conceptual thinking. This term has been connected closely to its creator, the reform-minded monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947). He called for a renewed focus on original Buddhist values of this-worldly orientation in tandem with ongoing adaptations to modern society. In the course of the political developments of the twentieth century, the conceptual dimensions of *renjian fojiao* were discussed most intensively among Taiwan-based Buddhists, such as Yin Shun 印順 (1906–2005), Hsing Yun 星雲 (1927–), Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (1930–2009) and Cheng Yen 證嚴 (1937–), as well as overseas Chinese Buddhists. It also became the subject of international research.

I am aware of the fact that there are far too many documents and scholarly works on *renjian fojiao* for a comprehensive overview. Yet apart from a discussion in some specific articles,³ this concept seems to have been underestimated in

² For a short (English) overview of the usage of *renjian fojiao* as a fixed term in the early/mid twentieth century see the article by Bingenheimer (2007). Although there are many possible translations of *renjian fojiao*, 'Humanistic Buddhism' has been used widely, and was propagated intensively by the Fo Guang Shan. This implies two unresolved questions: (a) this translation is not perfect, since it may be wrongly associated with the European concept of humanism, and (b) it may be one-sidedly identified with the Fo Guang Shan's specific brand, which does not represent the whole phenomenon of *renjian fojiao*. On Taixu's original motivation regarding the concept of *renjian fojiao* see for example Pittman 2001, Yao/Gombrich 2017. For the Fo Guang Shan's modern adaptation see Chandler 2004, Yao/Gombrich 2017 and 2018.

³ See Ji 2013, Ji 2015, Travagnin 2017.

English secondary literature on Buddhism in Mainland China. It is therefore time to take a closer look at its discursive genesis and current relevance.

For a basic analysis, I first focus on how the Buddhist Association of China (中国佛教协会, hereafter BAC) has treated the concept of *renjian fojiao* in the more official context. By examining recent developments, I then attempt to provide the framework for a discussion about the concept's further relevance in a broader context.

On the role of *renjian fojiao* in the initial phase of revival (1980s)

It is well known that shortly after becoming president of the BAC in 1980, lay Buddhist Zhao Puchu 趙朴初 (1907–2000) paved the way for *renjian fojiao* to become a central term in the further revival process. His first emphasis on this concept was published nationwide in 1982/83 in the very first issues of the BAC's official journal, *Fayin* 法音, which had just been founded one year earlier in 1981.⁴ Zhao Puchu's series of articles was called 佛教常识问答 ('Questions and Answers about Basic Knowledge of Buddhism'), and one year later the same text was transformed into a widely published book that closed at the end of Chapter Five, on 'Chinese Buddhism', with a focus on *renjian fojiao*.

In the same year, at the BAC's Second Meeting of the Board of the Fourth Session (中国佛教协会第四届理事会第二次会议) in December 1983, Zhao Puchu developed *renjian fojiao* into a more comprehensive system of thought. His official report, which was also a commemorative speech on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the BAC, suggested an emphasis on *renjian fojiao* in a very special manner: Zhao Puchu did not explicitly mention the well-known Master Taixu, though it was he who had initiated reforms of Chinese Buddhism some decades earlier and therefore invented the idea of a *rensheng fojiao* (人生佛教) which has always been seen as the immediate blueprint for the later idea of *renjian fojiao*.⁵ Zhao Puchu only spoke of 'predecessors' (前人) who had played a central role in former times.

⁴ Zhao 1982–1983, Zhao 1983. The relevant passage about *renjian fojiao* appeared in May 1983 in *Fayin* 1983, 3 (13), 6-7+13. On Zhao and his approach to *renjian fojiao*, see Ji 2013, Ji 2017.

⁵ As Bingenheimer points out, Taixu himself initially used the term *renjian fojiao*, but shortly thereafter preferred *rensheng fojiao*. Though the term *renjian fojiao* has become increasingly accepted since Taixu's death in the 1950s, partly due to its consistent usage by Yinshun 印顺 (1906–2005), it is still Taixu who is regarded as the mastermind of the term's evolution.

There may be several reasons – direct ones as well as indirect – for this cautious (re)invention of Taixu’s thinking. On the one hand, as has been mentioned by Deng Zimei 邓子美 and Ji Zhe 汲喆,⁶ Zhao Puchu obviously aimed to avoid provoking internal conflict among *Buddhists* themselves, since not everyone appreciated Taixu’s thinking on reforms as a whole. On the other hand, Zhao Puchu was looking for the best compromise with the *political authorities*, since at that early stage of Buddhist revival it could have been problematic to refer to Taixu explicitly because of his efforts not only to improve the Buddhists’ *social* engagement, but also to exercise a more radical influence in the field of *politics*.⁷

Against this historical background, Zhao Puchu developed his own approach to the concept of *renjian fojiao*. Similarly to Taixu’s argumentation, Zhao Puchu referred mainly to categories of traditional Buddhist teachings on this-worldly actions that were to be adapted to modern Buddhist practice (including the historical Buddha’s Five Precepts 五戒, the later teachings of Mahayana Buddhism about the Ten Good Deeds 十善, Four Embracing Dharmas 四摄 and the Six Paramitas 六度).

In addition, Zhao Puchu combined this thinking with a construction of what he called ‘three great and marvellous traditions’ (三大优良传统). These were his central arguments used to convince Buddhists as well as politicians of the necessary compatibility of Buddhism with the social and political circumstances:

The first of these traditions was (1) ‘equal weighting of farming and Chan’ (农禅并重), which picked up the Chinese Chan Buddhist idea of considering agricultural work as one aspect of the daily work of (Chan) Buddhist self-cultivation. This concept had already been ideologized directly after the founding of the People’s Republic of China to secularize the Buddhists’ daily engagement and make it more useful in pursuing socialist purposes.⁸

The second tradition was (2) ‘strong concern for scientific research’ (注重学术研究). This had also become an important issue early in the first half of the twentieth century – for instance, to counter superstitious tendencies. This

⁶ See for example Deng 1998, Deng 2006, Ji 2013, 2015, 2017.

⁷ For more cautious approaches to the idea of *renjian fojiao* at that early stage in Mainland China and Taiwan in comparison, see Deng 2006.

⁸ Especially in the 1980s the slogan of *nongchan bingzhong* appears to have become more of a metaphor where ‘farming’ stood for ‘work in human life’ in general (not necessarily in the field of agriculture) and Chan stood for ‘Buddhist practice’ (although far from Chan Buddhist practice in the narrow sense). I am currently writing a separate article on the evolution of *nongchan bingzhong* and its metamorphosis.

approach complied with the materialistic ideology of the ruling Communist Party and especially with the newly invented concept of the ‘Four Modernizations’ (四个现代化) demanded by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904–1997).

The third tradition was defined as (3) ‘friendly international exchange’ (国际友好交流). Once again, this had already become a strategic part of the Buddhist self-understanding over the previous decades, with the aim of playing an active role in the country’s intercultural and international exchange and stability.⁹

The historical interpretation of Zhao Puchu’s conceptual framework has been the subject of significant debate. As Deng Zimei has pointed out, Zhao Puchu’s explanation of *renjian fojiao* could have been interpreted as too superficial and different from Taixu’s original intention; yet Deng provides several explanations for it in light of the complicated political and religious circumstances of the time.¹⁰

Ji Zhe, however, has stressed that Zhao Puchu mainly carried forward a way of thinking that had already been shaped in the 1950s, with the result of subordinating Buddhism to political aims. Therefore Zhao Puchu’s concept of *renjian fojiao* was not to be understood as a revolutionary power to actively change the world, but more as an instrument that could be changed to serve the people according to the needs of the Communist Party.¹¹

What all have acknowledged (independently from different interpretations) is that Zhao Puchu’s great merit lies in having paved the way for a new start for Buddhist life in Mainland China under the label of *renjian fojiao*, and in making the latter a general guideline (指导思想 ‘guiding thought’) for Buddhists across the country.

Consequently, just a few months after Zhao Puchu’s initial report of December 1983, the BAC integrated *renjian fojiao* into its congratulatory message (on the occasion of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China) in the September 1984 issue of *Fayin*. The editorial’s heading read

⁹ For a discussion of possible historical inspiration as well as the shifts in these categories’ functions, see also Ji 2013, 45-48.

¹⁰ See Deng 1998, 2006.

¹¹ See for example Ji 2013, 2015, similarly, Xue 2015, 477-478. Ji Zhe does not want to underestimate the meritorious efforts of Zhao Puchu. However, he distinguishes between the more political achievements of Zhao Puchu, who paved the way for *renjian fojiao* in general (while also preserving a more intimate, soteriological level of motivation), and, for example, the religious efforts of the later Master Jinghui, who played a more central role in refreshing the idea of Buddhism as a progressive religion by ‘affecting contemporary [society]’ (化现代), see Ji 2015.

‘Advocate the Buddhism of Human Society, Devote One’s Life to the Cause of Four Modernizations’ (社论: 提倡人间佛教·献身四化建设 [translation from the ‘Table of Contents’ in the English version]). While the issue included an article by Master Zhengguo 正果 (1913–1987) entitled ‘Notes on the Buddhism of Human Society’ (人间佛教寄语 [translation from the ‘Table of Contents’ in the English version]), it seems even more remarkable that it also presented a rich collection of ‘Data Concerning the Buddhism of Human Society (Selections)’ (人间佛教思想资料选编 [translation from the ‘Table of Contents’ in the English version]). This collection offered eight pages with 85 quotations from Buddhist scriptures and was intended to serve as inspiration for creating one’s own understanding of *renjian fojiao*. Nevertheless, half a year later another issue of *Fayin* published a more doctrinal article by Ai Wei entitled, ‘On the System of the Idea of Human Society Buddhism’ (试论人间佛教思想体系 [translation from the ‘Table of Contents’ in the English version]).¹²

The most visible landmark in the promotion of *renjian fojiao* took place in May 1987, when the BAC – for the first time since 1953, 1957, and 1980 – revised its statutes and included *renjian fojiao* as an integral part of its ‘statutory purpose’ (宗旨).

In the following, I take this development as the starting point for a comparison of the different versions of the statutes that have appeared up to the present time. The focus is on the dynamic development of the status of *renjian fojiao* in the statutes of the BAC.¹³ Based on this analysis, I then shed some light on the very recent state of discussion about the further relevance of *renjian fojiao*.

1980 statutes

The main ‘statutory purpose’ documented after the Cultural Revolution in the statutes of 1980 focused on five aspects:¹⁴

- a. Assistance to the Government’s Politics for Freedom of Religious Belief
- b. Solidarization of all Buddhists

¹² See *Fayin* 1984, 5 (21), 1985, 3 (25).

¹³ In the preliminary stage, this analysis focuses on the status of the phrases connected with *renjian fojiao* and related to the teachings of Buddhism without a deeper analysis of the other (socialist) phrases – which is also worthwhile and will be undertaken soon in a separate article.

¹⁴ See Table 1. For the years after 1980, see also Table 2.

- c. Promotion of Buddhist Teaching
- d. Participation in Socialist Modernization
- e. Support of the Country’s Unification and World Peace

If we look for *Buddhism* in its narrow sense within the statutory purpose, it can be found in the third aspect, where it is stated that Buddhists are encouraged to ‘promote the marvellous tradition of Buddhism’ (发扬佛教优良传统). This very general phrase was part of the statutory purpose right from the beginning in 1953 and is said to have been added by Mao Zedong personally.¹⁵

1980		1980	
第二条 本会是中国各民族佛教徒的联合组织。 其宗旨为：		Article 2 Statutory Purpose (宗旨) :	
A	协助人民政府贯彻宗教信仰自由政策；	A	=Assistance to the Government’s Politics for Freedom of Religious Belief
B	团结全国各民族佛教	B	= Solidarization of all Buddhists
C [1]	徒发扬佛教优良传统，	C [1]	= Promotion of Buddhist Teaching
D	积极参加社会主义现代化建设和	D	= Participation in Socialist Modernization
E	促进祖国统一、维护世界和平的事业。	E	= Support of the Country’s Unification and World Peace

Table 1

¹⁵ As Li 2005 wrote: ‘Li Weigang handed the “Statutes of the Buddhist Association of China (Draft Version)” over to Mao Zedong for review. When Mao Zedong read it and permitted it, he added the sentence “promote the marvellous tradition of Buddhism”. From then on, the “Statutes of the Buddhist Association of China” always preserved the sentence “promote the marvellous tradition of Buddhism”.’ (李维汉将《中国佛教协会章程(草案)》呈送毛泽东审阅时,毛泽东阅批时加进了“发扬佛教优良传统”一句话。从此,在《中国佛教协会章程》中也一直保留了“发扬佛教优良传统”这句话。) On the founding process and the early years of the BAC, see also Xue 2015, esp. 435–486.

1987 statutes

When the statutes underwent their first revision in 1987, the original structure was mostly preserved. But in terms of the Buddhism-related contents, *renjian fojiao* was not only *added* to the ‘Buddhist marvellous tradition’ but was also *set in front* of it with the aim of ‘initiating the rigorous and progressive thinking of *renjian fojiao*’ (提倡人间佛教积极进取的思想). According to the understanding of the time, this special arrangement precisely reflected the newly invented thinking of Zhao Puchu: *renjian fojiao* became the *central label* under which Buddhism should be developed, and the ‘marvellous tradition of Buddhism’ (of 1953) was indirectly transformed into a *specification* in the sense of the above-mentioned ‘three great and marvellous traditions’ (三大优良传统) (of 1983). From now on, such a specified understanding of the ‘Buddhist tradition’ was subordinated under the guideline of *renjian fojiao* (instead of representing the ‘whole’ Buddhist tradition, as it had been understood to do for the previous 35 years). Based on this new arrangement, according to Zhao Puchu’s explanation, Buddhism would serve the aims of socialism and world peace as formulated in the last part of the statutory purpose (D and E).¹⁶

1993 statutes

Although nearly all contemporary Buddhists and scholars now regard the 1987 revision of the ‘statutory purpose’ as a pioneering initiative, it is somewhat strange (to me) that the next revision in 1993 led to the replacement of the label *renjian fojiao* with the more general phrase ‘spreading Buddhist teachings’ (弘扬佛教教义) in front of the phrase ‘promoting the Buddhist marvellous tradition’ as well as two other descriptions of Buddhist activities following it (‘strengthen the building up of Buddhism’s self-standing’ (加强佛教自身建设), ‘raise Buddhist enterprise’ (兴办佛教事业)). In the BAC’s statement with explanations of the revision, Dao Shuren 刀述仁 (1935–) gave no reason for the deletion of *renjian fojiao*. This version remained in effect for almost nine years, until the next revision, in 2002, reintegrated *renjian fojiao*.¹⁷

¹⁶ See the explanation by Zhao 1987. This shift in definition is similar to the added phrase in the field of socialism under (D), which, however, is not part of the analysis here.

¹⁷ Dao Shuren merely introduced the newly *added* phrases with the words: “With regard to the Association’s statutory purpose, according to the needs which evolved from the new circumstances of reform and opening, the step-by-step clarification of the association’s nature as well as the building up and further development of the Buddhist enterprise, in the draft work

2002 statutes

The 2002 revision of the statutes took place after the death of Zhao Puchu. Under the guidance of the new president, Master Yicheng 一诚 (1927–2017), the concept of *renjian fojiao*, together with some other minor additions, was reintegrated into the statutory purpose with slightly simplified wording: ‘pave [the way for] [instead of “initiate” 提倡] the thinking [instead of the “vigorous and progressive thinking” 积极进取的思想] of *renjian fojiao*’ (倡导人间佛教思想). What seems quite significant here is that the new placement of *renjian fojiao* was not within the field of Buddhist contents (C), which would mean close to the phrase ‘promoting the Buddhist marvellous tradition’ (发扬佛教优良传统). It appears to have become more closely related to the phrases at the end of the text which emphasize the contributions of Buddhists to socialism.

Another (re?)invention from that year which is worth mentioning in this context is the phrase ‘realizing a dignified country, bringing happiness to sentient beings’ (庄严国土，利乐有情). This Buddhist phrase, which includes the only original terminology from Buddhist sutras in the statutory purpose, had already been used by Zhao Puchu – for instance, in his 1987 speech on the occasion of the BAC’s Fifth Plenary Session. Now it was inserted in the end of the whole phrase which had been opened by *renjian fojiao*.¹⁸

of revising the relevant clauses of the current Statutes we made some enrichment and adjustment and added: [...]” (本会的宗旨，根据改革开放的新形势，本会性质的进一步明确和佛教事业建设与发展发展的要求，修改草案对现行章程的有关条文作了充实和调整，增加了: [...]), see Dao 1993. I have not found any hint in secondary literature about the reasons for the deletion of *renjian fojiao* in 1993. One (more philosophical) explanation may be that at that time *renjian fojiao* had become regarded as inappropriate *in its combination with* the (*narrow definition of the three*) ‘Buddhist marvellous traditions’, and was therefore replaced with the broader expression ‘Buddhist teachings’ in combination with the *reinterpretation* (according to its original broader sense) of the ‘Buddhist marvellous traditions’. On a more political level, as hinted by several Chinese scholars in my recent discussions, it has been due to internal opposition (since *renjian fojiao* was not accepted broadly enough), or even due to external differences with Taiwan’s Fo Guang Shan, after Master Hsing Yun – who was by then a famous advocate of *renjian fojiao* – had shown some solidarity with the student movement of 1989.

¹⁸ Although it is not very visible here, it could be that ‘realize a dignified country, bring happiness to sentient beings’ could already be interpreted as belonging to *renjian fojiao*, which it would later become closer related to syntactically. The title of Zhao’s 1987 speech even focused on it, Zhao 1987.

2010 statutes

The next revision of the statutes, which took place in 2010 under the political leadership of President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 (2003–2013), involved much more structural change: the more socialist phrases, which had been located at the end of the statutory purpose since 1993, were completely rearranged and restored to the very beginning of the text (as had been the case in the original version of 1953).

Further, the textual passage describing the contents of Buddhism (C) was reduced to three main aspects, among which a new phrase – ‘to bring into practice’ (践行) – was once again placed in front of *renjian fojiao*. The latter became the arrangement’s climax and was now directly combined with the Buddhist phrase ‘realize a dignified country, bring happiness to sentient beings’ (庄严国土，利乐有情):

‘Spread Buddhist teachings’ (弘扬佛教教义)

‘Promote the marvellous tradition [of Buddhism]’ (发扬[佛教]优良传统)

‘Bring into practice the thinking of *renjian fojiao*’ (践行人间佛教思想)

‘Realize a dignified country and bring happiness to sentient beings’ (庄严国土，利乐有情)

This probably was the most coherent description of all the versions of the statutory purpose with regard to the question of what Buddhist teachings should consist of. The status of *renjian fojiao* underwent a particular shift in the way that it was brought back into a context of Buddhist teaching (C). *Renjian fojiao* no longer served as part of socialist thinking (at least in the narrow sense), as it had in the former version from 2002. It was also no longer specified by the ‘[Buddhist] marvellous tradition(s)’ ([佛教]优良传统), so that it could have been interpreted by the connotation of Zhao Puchu’s threefold definition (in the context of the 1987 version). In contrast, *renjian fojiao* was now placed at the end of the enumeration, with relatively open possibilities for its further interpretation.

While the last sentence of the statutory purpose had changed very little in the previous iterations, the 2010 version added the quite influential political concept of ‘social harmony’ (社会和谐) to frame the overall agenda in a political sense.

2015 statutes

The most recent revision occurred in 2015 under President Xi Jinping 习近平 (since 2013), and was headed by Master Xuecheng, the new president of the BAC. What can be observed here is that the BAC reversed its former *reduction* of the description of Buddhist thought (C) and brought back the additional phrases that had been invented in 1993 – but in another order. However, the really new accent was that the BAC placed the new phrase ‘transmitting the excellent culture’ (传承优秀文化) (probably in the sense of the stronger political demand by Xi Jinping for a general ‘Sinicization’) just behind the phrase ‘promoting the [Buddhist] marvellous tradition’ (发扬[佛教]优良传统), which itself was upgraded to first place in the overall enumeration.

All the other new phrases inserted into this 2015 version were of a much stronger political character than ever before and were placed at the beginning or the end of the text. In spite of this, when one looks for *Buddhist* content in its narrow sense, it appears (to me) that the concept of *renjian fojiao* can still be viewed as the *central doctrinal term* that *Buddhist thinking* should be oriented around.

1980	1987	1993	2000	2002	2010	2015
发扬佛教优良传统			Zhao Puchu's death			
	提倡人间佛教积极进取的思想 发扬佛教优良传统					
		提倡人间佛教积极进取的思想 弘扬佛教教义 发扬佛教优良传统 加强佛教自身建设 兴办佛教事业			弘扬佛教教义 兴办佛教事业 发扬佛教优良传统 加强佛教自身建设 倡导人间佛教思想 庄严国土, 利乐有情	
					弘扬佛教教义 发扬优良传统 践行人间佛教思想 庄严国土, 利乐有情	
						发扬优良传统 传承优秀文化 加强自身建设 维护合法权益 弘扬佛教教义 兴办佛教事业 践行人间佛教思想 庄严国土, 利乐有情

Table 2

Contextualization

Looking back at the four decades and six revisions of the BAC statutes, one may conclude that the status of *renjian fojiao* has undergone quite a dynamic change.

In **1980**, *renjian fojiao* did not play any role at all in Buddhist public discourse. After Zhao Puchu constructed a ‘thinking of *renjian fojiao*’ in combination with the ‘three Buddhist marvellous traditions’, his initiative was finally inserted into the statutory purpose of **1987**. Although this very peculiar construction was not explicitly connected with Taixu in the beginning,¹⁹ it is remarkable that *Fayin* used the fortieth anniversary of Taixu’s death in July 1987 as an opportunity to republish one of his most famous works: ‘Explanatory Notes on the Buddhism of Life’ (人生佛教开题 [translation from the ‘Table of Contents’ in the English version]).

The thinking on *renjian fojiao* had become increasingly more accepted among the BAC elite, and even Taixu, one of the historical roots for better understanding *renjian fojiao*, had become presentable again. But given that *renjian fojiao* again lost its status as part of the **1993** revision of the statutory purpose, it appears that in the 1990s it no longer belonged to the strategic glossary of (Mainland) Chinese Buddhists. More research is needed in this respect.²⁰

Master Shengkai 圣凯 (1972–) mentioned in one article quite recently that Zhao Puchu himself did not talk very often about *renjian fojiao* in the years after 1994. But Shengkai suggests that nevertheless the whole of Zhao Puchu’s work in the 1990s has to be understood in the light of his ongoing efforts to fill the idea of *renjian fojiao* with life.²¹ Ji Zhe goes even deeper

¹⁹ In the *Fayin* of the early 1980s one can find one short report on the stupa that had been (re) erected for Taixu’s relics in Nanputuo Monastery in November 1985, but it only presents him as a ‘leader of Buddhist reform movements in the recent past’ (近代佛教革新运动之领袖) and does not bring him into relation with *renjian fojiao*. At the beginning of 1987, there followed the first article about Taixu in *Fayin*, but it focused merely ‘On the meanings of Master Taixu’s division into three phases of Indian Buddhist history’ (论太虚法师对印度佛教史三期划分的意义).

²⁰ See footnote 17 above.

²¹ See Shengkai 2017a, where he refers to the new important phrases of that time: ‘One cannot interpret his thinking on *renjian fojiao* only based on his writings. One can better understand the consistency of his thinking based on the thought’s thread, its historical phases and the demand of the times. Methodologically it is a “unity in diversity”, so the phrases like “Buddhism is culture” (佛教是文化), “three great Chinese Buddhist traditions” (中国佛教三大传统), “strengthening the building up of Buddhism’s self-standing” (加强佛教自身建设), “adaptation of Buddhism to the socialist society” (佛教与社会主义社会相适应) are all expressions of his thinking and practice of *renjian fojiao*.’ [不能从文字上去理解他的“人间佛教”思想，而是从思想脉络、

with his analysis and refers to documents that make much more explicit how Zhao Puchu appears to have regarded the concept of *renjian fojiao* as a personal legacy of Taixu's, possibly also in the much more revolutionary sense of the 1940s.²²

A similar tendency can be seen in the work of Master Jinghui 净慧 (1933–2013): He did not call his own teaching *renjian fojiao*, but with the BAC as well as 'renjian fojiao thinking' in the background, he has been widely recognized as one of the central figures to begin, early in the 1990s, to create his own system of Buddhist teaching under his newly invented (and relatively independent) label of *shenghuochan* 生活禅 ('Living Chan').²³

Shortly after Zhao Puchu's death (2000), *renjian fojiao* was reintegrated into the BAC's statutory purpose, in 2002. One can perhaps speak of a 'renaissance' of this concept, as more and more conferences were bringing to mind the possible legacy of Zhao Puchu. Again, there are more questions than explicit statements as to why *renjian fojiao* once more became part of the statutory purpose. Strategically speaking, one may assume that the change lay in the popularity of *renjian fojiao* in Taiwan after the 1990s and that relations with Taiwan were becoming more important, whether they were shaped by competition with or inspiration from Taiwan-based Buddhist institutions.²⁴

Over the last 18 years, none of Zhao Puchu's three successors within the BAC – (Yicheng 一诚 (1927–2017): 2002–2010; Chuanyin 传印 (1927–): 2010–2015; or Xuecheng 学诚 (1966–): 2015–2018) – has invented any new personal phrase for insertion into the statutory purpose. *Renjian fojiao* has rather served as an ongoing offering for diverse interpretations according to current needs. This is how it comes across in the words of Master Yicheng, who articulated quite a conventional understanding of the concept of *renjian fojiao* in 2002 as follows:

历史阶段、时代需求中去认识他在思想上的一贯性，在方法上则是“多元一体”，即“佛教是文化”、“中国佛教三大传统”、“加强佛教自身建设”、“佛教与社会主义社会相适应”等都是“人间佛教”的思想与实践。]

²² See Ji 2013, 2017.

²³ See Ji 2015.

²⁴ Thanks go to Barend Ter Haar (University of Hamburg) who brought up the idea of a possible intention by the BAC to renew the status of *renjian fojiao* in order to compete with Taiwan-based Buddhist institutions or to offer them better opportunities for identification with Mainland Chinese Buddhist developments. Yet much has to be done to find more historical facts to explain why the status of *renjian fojiao* within the BAC's statutory purpose changed.

With regard to the scientific connotation of *renjian fojiao* thought, the Chinese Buddhist community should further explore it in theory and continue to summarize it in practice. In my opinion, spreading *renjian fojiao* thought in a proper way includes the following practical contents: Training talents through education, [which means that] training qualified Buddhist talents through [Buddhist] academy education, monastic education, and lay education is the key to the rise and fall of Buddhism. Purifying a person's mind through practice and theory, [which means] diligently practising the Three Teachings of Morality, Meditation and Wisdom (戒定慧), plays an important role in making the Buddha's disciples aware of human life and purifying the people's minds. To provide feedback to society with charity, [that means] to respond to the country's and all sentient beings' kindness, is the Buddhists' positive outlook on human life based on recognizing and giving feedback to their kindness, compassionately rescuing the world and altruistically benefitting others. The spirit of compassion and devotion should be vigorously advocated in Buddhist circles. Only in this way can we gain further social recognition and achieve a better standing in society. Let us unite and promote progress, unite the Buddhist patriots of all nationalities in the country to contribute to the prosperity of our motherland and contribute to the development of the Buddhist cause.

关于“人间佛教”思想的科学内涵，我国佛教界还要进一步在理论上进行深入探讨，同时在实践中不断加以总结。契理契机地弘扬“人间佛教”思想，我认为有如下几个方面的实际内容：以教育培养人才，通过院校教育、寺院教育、居士教育培养合格佛教人才，是佛教兴衰存亡的关键所在；以修学净化人心，如法如律地勤修戒定慧三学是佛弟子觉悟人生、净化人心的重要内容；以慈善回报社会，报国土恩、报众生恩是佛教徒知恩报恩、慈悲济世、无我利他的积极人生观。慈济和奉献的精神要在佛教界大力倡导，只有这样才能进一步获得社会的认同，才能更好地立足于社会；以团结促导进步，团结全国各民族佛教爱国人士，为祖国的繁荣昌盛，为佛教事业的发展贡献力量。²⁵

²⁵ Yicheng 2002.

Over time, however, commemorative events under the umbrella of the BAC have led to a new consciousness: While in the 1980s and the 1990s the BAC was only (to a certain degree) able to commemorate Master Taixu as the individual who had originally provided the inspiration for the idea of *renjian fojiao*, the years following 2000 have led to a new challenge in terms of history. There is no longer only the legacy of Taixu; now there is also the question of how to deal with the legacy of Zhao Puchu and other Buddhist thinkers of his generation.

The preliminary result can be seen in the commemorative events of **2017**, which partially constructed a new combination of the seventieth anniversary of Master Taixu's death and the 100th anniversary of Zhao Puchu's birthday (as well as the 180th anniversary of another important Buddhist reformer – Yang Renshan 杨仁山 (1837–1911)). The concept of *renjian fojiao* was once again the main subject of discussion, and resulted in the compilation of a new publication under the umbrella of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, the BAC and the Religious Culture Publishing House (宗教文化出版社) entitled, 'Library of *Renjian Fojiao* Thought' (人间佛教思想文库). The book collection was edited by BAC president Xuecheng and Lou Yulie 楼宇烈 (Beijing University) and released in August 2017.²⁶

The publication was in effect a 'canonization' intended to lay the foundation for what should serve to provide a better understanding of *renjian fojiao* from the BAC's point of view. The book's 'inclusion' (or 'emphasis on') as well as its 'exclusion' of Buddhist thinkers and authors may tell us a great deal about the newest common sense regarding *renjian fojiao* in Mainland China. It includes the following 'thinkers', presented by the following authors:

²⁶ On the press conference of 18 August 2017, see *Fojiao zaixian 2017*, and the publication by Xuecheng, Lou 2017.

'Thinker'	Author
《太虚卷》 Taixu (1890–1947)	邓子美老师编 Deng Zimei
《法航卷》 Fahang (1904–1951)	梁建楼老师编 Lian Jianlou
《巨赞卷》 Juzan (1908–1984)	黄夏年老师编 Huang Xianian
《赵朴初卷》 Zhao Puchu (1907–2000)	圣凯法师编 Shengkai
《净慧卷》 Jinghui (1933–2013)	明海法师编 Minghai
《惟贤卷》 Weixian (1920–2013)	宗性法师编 Zongxing
《隆根卷》 Longgen (1921–2011)	惟俨法师编 Weiyang
《当代人间佛教传灯录》 (Diverse Generations of Masters arranged according to those from Mainland China, Taiwan and Overseas)	邓子美、陈卫华教授编著 Deng Zimei, Chen Weihua

The central message accompanying the publication was expressed by the slogan 'Diversity in Unity, Coexistence without Contradiction' (多元一体、并行不悖). At least with regard to that slogan, much speaks for quite an open-minded understanding of *renjian fojiao*. But it underlies a specific condition: because President Xi Jinping had emphasized the 'Sinicization' of religions in China in his speech at the 'Religious Affairs Work Conference' (全国宗教工作会议) in April of 2016, the book collection also had to fulfil that kind of political expectation.²⁷

Challenges of diffusion: Debate about what?

While the developments outlined above mainly reflect the path of consolidation for *renjian fojiao* as the general guideline for Buddhist circles in Mainland China, the concept finally appears to have become a much more serious topic than ever before.

²⁷ See the foreword by the publication committee, Xuecheng et al. 2007, 1-9, and the similar article by Shengkai 2017b. In my further analysis, there will be a more detailed discussion about this book collection, as well as a comparison of the Taixu-related commemorative events of 2017 with those of former times.

The impetus for a severe dispute about *renjian fojiao* came from the ‘Second Seminar for Hermeneutic Studies of Buddhism’ (第二届佛教义学研讨会) on 29–30 October 2016 in the Huishan-Monastery 惠山寺 in Wuxi. The seminar was organized by the Research Group for Hermeneutic Studies of Buddhism (佛教义学研究会), which was founded by Zhou Guihua 周贵华 (1962-) et al. in 2014/2015.²⁸

Approximately 40 participants presented and discussed papers on the seminar’s topic, ‘Master Yinshun’s Buddhist Thinking: Reflections and Discussions’ (印顺法师佛学思想：反思与探讨), which was dedicated to commemorating the 110th anniversary of Yinshun’s 印顺 (1906–2005) birthday. A significant share of the papers levelled harsh criticism at Master Yinshun’s promotion of *renjian fojiao* and his related influence. A central point of their criticism was directed at Yinshun’s so-called opinion that ‘Mahayana is not the saying of the Buddha’ (大乘非佛说). This statement would lead to dangerous secularization, so that the seminar was summarized in the following conclusion by Fazang 法藏:

The greatest threat to [China’s] Buddhism is not the [Mahayanistic] power of the ghosts and of the [realms of] deification, it is the secular Confucian ideology, the high degree of secularization, and the utilitarian social ethics. That is why the main task for Chinese Buddhism is to defeat secularization and anti-deification. The automatism of [grasping for] the medicine of rationalism and anthropocentrism according to Western-style secularization cannot in any way at all defeat the fundamental disadvantages of Chinese Buddhism; on the contrary, it will aggravate its vulgarization.

²⁸ Zhou Guihua’s main work appeared in January 2018 with the title “批判佛教”与佛教批判 (*Critical Buddhism’ and Criticism of Buddhism*), Zhou 2018. On Zhou’s self-understanding regarding the ‘Research Group’ and the multifaceted meaning of *yixue* (义学, here preliminarily translated as ‘Hermeneutic Studies’), cf. also Zhou 2014, 2016. As Zhou initiated his criticism of Yinshun early in 2006 (Zhou 2006), one may see an initial reaction in Deng et al. 2009, 7–9, 83f. He actually ran a homepage (www.fojiaoyixue.org), which is still cited here, although it appears to have been offline since at least March 2019, because I have preserved the main contents. For a summary of the second seminar and how the ‘Research Group’ dealt with the consequences of the dispute (“Zhendan shihong”: fansi Yinshun fashi “dasheng fei foshuo” sixiang wangluo wenji’ 《“震旦狮吼”：反思印顺法师“大乘非佛说”思想网络文集》(‘The Lion’s Roar of China’: Online Collection of Reflections about the Thinking of Master Yinshun according to which ‘Mahayana is not the Saying of the Buddha’)), see Fojiao yixue yanjiuhui.

佛教面临的重大威胁不是神权、天化，而是世俗的儒家意识形态和高度世俗化、功利化的社会伦理。因此，对于中国佛教而言，基本的任务是对治俗化而非天化，机械地照搬西方世俗的理性主义、人本主义的药方，并不能对治中国佛教的根本弊端，反而会加重其俗化。²⁹

While the main criticism focused on ‘Yinshun-style *renjian fojiao* thinking’ (印顺版“人间佛教”思想) and in some cases explicitly distinguished between the latter and Taixu’s more Mahayanistic interpretation, the seminar as a whole provoked every kind of online and offline reaction in Mainland China and Taiwan, many of which defended the concept of *renjian fojiao* in general.

Against this background, it is remarkable that the debate did not directly affect the above-mentioned book collection. Not surprisingly, the personal role of Yinshun, as described in the above-noted book review by Shengkai, was mainly restricted to Yinshun’s famous emphasis on the formula of *qiliqiji* (契理契机).³⁰

Nevertheless, apart from the BAC’s official publication project, scholars as well as monastics have published numerous articles, not only in order to defend the works by Yinshun but also to defend the more general idea of *renjian fojiao*. Some of the most renowned and energetic statements by Mainland and Taiwanese scholars and monastics have been concentrated in the organs of the ‘Hongshi Cultural and Educational Foundation’ (弘誓文教基金會), which is closely related to Yinshun’s teachings and heritage.³¹

Some of the debates have been accompanied by severe allegations. The representatives of the seminar regarded themselves as the ‘party of reflective

²⁹ Fazang 2016. Compare with the critics of Taixu in 1943, as summarized in Bingenheimer 2007, 148: ‘Apart from the desire to set Buddhism apart from Confucian “narrowness”, another reason for Taixu to prefer *rensheng* [人生] over *renjian* [人间] was perhaps the homophony with an important concept in his *panjiao* [判教]: i.e. the idea of the “human vehicle” (*rensheng* 人乘). Taixu held that in the current age it is the “human vehicle” that should be practised. At one point, in his critical remarks on Yinshun’s *Yindu zhi fojiao* 《印度之佛教》(1942), Taixu cautioned Yinshun directly against the tendency to limit Buddhism to the “human realm” [人间]. He might have accused him of anthropocentrism (人本主义), if the term had entered Chinese parlance already.’

³⁰ This formula can be interpreted as ‘taking advantage of the opportunity in line with the Buddha’s teachings’; it is part of the title of Yinshun’s book *Qiliqiji zhi renjian fojiao* 《契理契机之人间佛教》(1993). Huayu ji 華語集 5 vols. Taipei: Zhengwen.

³¹ Hongshi 弘誓 (2017) 145, *Fayin xuebao* 法印學報 (2017) 8, Hongshi 弘誓 (2018) 152.

thinking’ (反思派) and their critics as the ‘party of Yin[-shun’s] protectors’ (护印派), comparing some of their critics’ behaviour with methods during the Cultural Revolution.³² On the other side, the Taiwanese journal *Hongshi* 弘誓 distinguished between those ‘respectful of Yin[-shun]’ (尊印) and the ‘Yin[-shun]-bashers’ (批印), and its editorial went so far as to compare the latent production of a ‘collective hysteria’ (集體歇斯底里) by the so-called ‘Huishan-group’ (惠山眾) with methods preferred by the German Nazi Dr. Joseph Goebbels.³³

The questions that arose out of the debates in 2016/2017 around Master Yinshun appear to represent a new stage of reflection about the current situation and future challenges to Chinese Buddhism, for which the further understanding of *renjian fojiao* plays quite a significant role. Whereas many doctrinal aspects of the debates are not really new, they reflect (or are interpreted by different participants as) controversies at another level between traditionalists and reformers, scholars and monastics, representatives from Taiwan and the Mainland, etc. They also raise various questions about religious vs. political influences. This article cannot provide an answer to all the different layers inherent in these debates, but a deeper analysis will be undertaken in another work.

As a result of these debates, the central point is to ask to what extent *renjian fojiao* will be questioned in the long term.

Outlook

Coming back to the history of the statutory purpose of the BAC, one may envision three possible developments if one contemplates the future role of *renjian fojiao*:

1. Omission of *renjian fojiao* or replacement of the term with another label [similar to the 1993–2002 version]
2. Preservation of *renjian fojiao* as a concept open to interpretation [similar to the 2010–2015 version]
3. Development of *renjian fojiao* as a concept with a more specific definition [similar to the 1987–1993 version]

³² Jiang 2017a, Jiang 2017b.

³³ Zhaohui 2017. The ‘Huishan group’ is used here as a generalized designation of those who had supported the seminar (with the explicit exception of those few participants who did not support it).

With regard to option 1, the abandonment of *renjian fojiao* does not appear likely in the near future. The concept is still necessary in times of ongoing modernization (as well as political development). Eleven years ago, in 2008, Master Jinghui was asked about this in an interview:

The concept of ‘*renjian fojiao*’ should be said to have played a very positive role in history and should be fully affirmed. But for nearly 80 years, after having been shouted as a slogan over 80 years, can it always adapt to the needs of the times? The slogan and concept are not the Noble Truths of Shakyamuni. The Noble Truths, which were transmitted for two thousand years, were never to be changed. However, as ‘*renjian fojiao*’ has come into the present time, it is facing unprecedented peace and prosperity, towards a well-off and harmonious society. Isn’t it necessary to propose new ideas based on this era that are more suitable for the needs of our time? That is to say, isn’t it necessary to push the idea of ‘*renjian fojiao*’ further?

“人间佛教”的理念，应该说是在历史上发挥了非常积极的作用，应该是值得充分肯定的。可是将近八十年了，一个口号喊上八十年，是否能够始终适应时代的需要？口号、理念，不是释迦所说的佛法真谛，真谛说了二千年也改不了，但是作为“人间佛教”走到了今天，已经面对着前所未有的一个太平盛世，一个走向小康的构建和谐的社会，是不是需要根据这个时代提出一些更适合我们时代需要的新理念？就是说，是不是需要把“人间佛教”的思想再向前推进一步？³⁴

Instead of abandoning or changing the thinking of *renjian fojiao*, Jinghui gave the following summary:

The modernization of Buddhism began with Master Taixu, and the slogan of Buddhist modernization is just ‘*renjian fojiao*’. Everything we have done so far has not reached the goals that Master Taixu proposed at the time, so the course of Buddhist modernization still continues. Today’s question is nothing more than how to modernize Buddhism, how to make Buddhism move with the times, take advantage of the opportunity and reach a new

³⁴ Jinghui 2008.

development. How to modernize Buddhism and how to affect contemporary [society] is still a goal of today.

佛教现代化是从太虚法师开始的，佛教现代化的口号就是“人间佛教”。我们现在所做的一切还没有达到太虚大师当时提出来的那些目标，佛教现代化的历程还在继续走。今天的问题无非就是要怎么样使佛教现代化，怎么样使佛教能够与时俱进，契理契机，有一个新的发展。目前还是一个目标，佛教如何现代化，如何化现代。³⁵

If one envisions a new concept that could be of interest for replacing the status of *renjian fojiao*, one might look at the potential of the concept that Master Xuecheng developed in recent years under the label of the so-called ‘Culture of the Heart’ (心文化). This concept appeared to be suitable for the culturalist (secularizing) approach of the politically desired ‘Sinicization’ (中国化) on the one hand, and for the more general Buddhist purpose of ongoing ‘internationalization’ on the other. But as Master Xuecheng had to give up all his functions within the BAC, it is unlikely that this approach will be of further relevance in the near future.³⁶

With regard to options 2 and 3, despite the debates mentioned above, *renjian fojiao* still appears to be (politically) irreplaceable. However, promoting the ‘historical necessity’ (历史必然性) of *renjian fojiao* – as Cheng Gongrang 程恭让 ((1967–) formerly Nanjing University, now Shanghai University) did in a November 2016 article – with a bias toward Master Hsing Yun’s model of the concept³⁷ does not seem to be very promising either.

All in all, the question of whether *renjian fojiao* will be needed by the BAC in the sense of option 2 or option 3 appears speculative, as well as controversial. One of Master Xuecheng’s last official statements, in November 2017, about the role of *renjian fojiao* still seems to speak for quite a free interpretation in the sense of option 2:

³⁵ Jinghui 2008.

³⁶ It will be an open question for a long time, until it is possible to see what the impact of the group around Xuecheng and his Longquan Monastery on Buddhist thinking in contemporary China has been. According to an interview with a representative of the Longquan Monastery in April 2019, the idea of a ‘culture of the heart’ is still alive and part of the monastery’s doctrinal development – however, without ongoing support from Xuecheng.

³⁷ Cheng 2016.

The very direction of the new phase (新阶段) of promoting the ‘*renjian fojiao*’ thought is as follows: On the basis of the Buddha’s wisdom, the Bodhisattvas’ vigour and the worthy predecessors’ experience, we should explore how to build up, develop and improve the establishment of the original foundation of the Buddha; we should carry forward the marvellous tradition(s); we should adapt to the spirit of the times; we should embody the Chinese characteristics and serve the system of ‘*renjian fojiao*’ thought (“人间佛教”思想体系) according to contemporary society. Therefore, we should take the lead in the healthy development of Chinese Buddhism in the new era (新时代中国佛教健康发展), giving full play to the functions of Buddhism for purifying humans’ minds, enriching morality, enlightening wisdom, transmitting culture, improving human life, helping diverse groups, serving society, and benefiting all beings.

开启弘扬“人间佛教”思想新阶段的致力方向，就是要在佛陀智慧、菩萨愿行、先贤经验的基础上，探索建立、发展完善立足佛陀本怀、发扬优良传统、融入时代精神、体现中国特色、服务当代社会的“人间佛教”思想体系，引领新时代中国佛教健康发展，更好发挥佛教净化人心、涵育道德，启迪智慧、传承文化，改善人生、利益人群，服务社会、广利众生的积极作用。³⁸

What is remarkable here and in the official speeches of recent years is that Xuecheng framed *renjian fojiao* within a ‘new historical phase’ (新阶段，新时代) which it is going to be directed at. This is obviously a more or less direct reference to President Xi Jinping’s ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’ (新时代有中国特色色社会主义). Only three months earlier, however, in his opening speech on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of Taixu’s death, Xuecheng made a reference to Taixu’s essay ‘How to Build up a Modern Chinese Culture’ (《怎样建设现代中国的文化》), in which the latter demanded the ‘creation of a new culture (新文化) in order to “revive the Chinese Nation” and “protect against the global crisis”’. Xuecheng thus led away from (or merged with?) Xi Jinping’s ‘new’ direction by calling to mind Taixu’s legacy in relation to *renjian fojiao*, concluding with the remark:

³⁸ Xuecheng 2017a.

In today's era of globalization, we should merge Buddhist thought with the marvellous traditional Chinese culture (中华优秀传统文化) and the essence of world culture (世界文化精华) and jointly construct a new world culture (世界新文化) that adapts to the needs of China's modern development and opens up a new paradigm of human civilization.³⁹

在当今全球化时代，我们应将佛教思想与中华优秀传统文化及世界文化精华相融通，共同建构适应中国现代发展需要、开启人类文明新范型的世界新文化。

This article has served as a starting point for looking back at the discursive developments of at least four decades in the PR China. Much more material from religious, political and academic discourses is going to be analysed in a following work to shed new light on the impact of *renjian fojiao* in the PR China's recent history, and to obtain an understanding of its future relevance. Since the fall of Xuecheng (July 2018), the question of how the BAC will define its understanding of *renjian fojiao* in the long term has remained an open and exciting one. As long as *renjian fojiao* maintains its position in the statutory purpose of the BAC, Chinese Buddhists will have to continue to explore what it is about.

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³⁹ Xuecheng 2017b.

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