

禅与人类文明研究丛书(3、4)

T H E S T U D I E S O F
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A N D C U L T U R E S

佛学思想 与佛教文化研究

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学 愚 / 主编



社会科学文献出版社
SOCIAL SCIENCES ACADEMIC PRESS (CHINA)

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目 录

上 册

第一编 文献与文化

| | |
|---|--------------|
| 西夏文《药师琉璃光七佛本愿功德经》及相关问题考略 | 崔红芬 / 003 |
| 《大般涅槃经集解》诸师的法身观 | 张 凯 / 023 |
| 从《弘明集》看“涅槃”观念与中国文化的最初碰撞 | 盛 宁 / 040 |
| 大唐公主的宗教信仰 | 郭海文 / 057 |
| 试论《维摩诘经》中的人间净土 | 涂艳秋 / 084 |
| 蒙藏地区佛教传承的特点与“三主要道” | 嘉木扬·凯朝 / 110 |
| 愿令众生得度的佛教观与以人生为目的的美术思想 ——以太虚大师为例 | 刘美奇 / 119 |
| 从四组常用词更替频度看汉译佛经在中古汉语研究中的价值 | 战 浩 / 135 |
| 从形象变化看弥勒信仰的变迁 | 体 恒 / 148 |

第二编 义理与实践

六经开生面，佛学在我心：论王船山《相宗络索》

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| “转识成智”的创见 | 张晓芬 / 177 |
| 印顺导师对《中论》“观时品”之诠释与芝诺悖论 | 郭延成 / 195 |
| 从第一义空论中道佛性：以《大般涅槃经》为主 | 释证真 / 207 |

从天台教义看禅宗的悟与修 郝金广 / 234

从“移情”初探藏传佛教中的师徒关系 李璞妮 / 244

从禅净双修与基督禅的比较中探究佛耶对话新进路 尚真洁 / 254

《金刚经》之语言哲学

——依据禅宗之《六祖坛经》“不立文字”的研究 刘启霖 / 269

论禅病的四类疗法 夏金华 / 289

净土思想与现代临终关怀 刘建平 / 307

《楞严经》“征心辨见”与《正脉疏》“指见是心”之研究 胡健财 / 319

下 册

第三编 历史与现状

The Picture of “religion” and Chinese Buddhism in the Eyes of Chinese Oversea Students in the UK 释见城 / 343

慧皎《高僧传》对僧人亡化神异的书写

——兼谈其对中土尸解信仰的借鉴 白照杰 / 365

当代北京地区佛教寺院遗迹的流变 安红坤 / 387

从白语经看阿吒力教的信仰内容及其本土化 李 艳 / 403

中国中古时期佛教降魔与关羽“授五戒” 周努鲁 / 420

论基于新媒体交流平台的当代佛教传播模式

——以北京龙泉寺为例 孙 静 / 437

从莫高窟游人题记看明清时期敦煌地区的佛教 秦弋然 / 452

憨山德清与山东 马德璟 / 465

境内南传佛教傣泐亚文化圈课诵音声的发展变迁 董 宸 / 483

当代中国佛教与宗教对话

——台湾法鼓山圣严禅师的观点初探 郑凯文 / 495

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| 论缅甸宫廷式出家文化的流变 | 释祖道 / 515 |
| 云南剑川白族地区阿吒力教“奠土”仪式 | 段 鹏 / 530 |

第四编 禅宗与禅学

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 禅道合一：王维的禅意画研究 | 王忠林 凌继尧 / 551 |
| 中国古典园林的禅学意境研究 | 田 雨 / 558 |
| 南北朝时期小乘禅法大乘化与大乘禅法中国化 | 白 冰 / 571 |
| 曹洞宗的思想和禅风 | 伍先林 刘 渊 / 589 |
| 明代无生老母概念发生的禅宗因素 | 朱 钧 / 601 |
| 西田几多郎的禅哲学与民族主义问题初探 | 李宜静 / 616 |
| 禅诗里的情与爱 | |
| ——以画僧传棨的“题图诗”为例 | 林孟蓉 / 630 |
| 《文殊般若经》与禅宗 | |
| ——以印顺的观点为中心 | 邱敏捷 / 649 |
| 大慧宗杲对主战派与主和派的弘法策略研究 | 陈 进 / 665 |
| 禅宗中的佛与具象化的佛信仰：从“即心即佛”谈开 | 董 泊 / 686 |
| 从《大智度论》探讨桑耶寺僧净摩诃衍之观点 | 余淑芳 / 696 |
| 禅宗无相戒究竟义 | 韩 翠 韩凤鸣 / 718 |

第三编

历史与现状

The Picture of “religion” and Chinese Buddhism in the Eyes of Chinese Oversea Students in the UK

释见城*

Abstract: This paper offers a unique perspective in exploring the picture of “religion” and Chinese Buddhism through the lens of Chinese younger generations. It marks a significance in opening up a new discussion about the place of Buddhism in contemporary China, where its current and future trajectories for Chinese students and younger generations in China can be detected. The current trend for young Chinese students to study abroad provides an intriguing basis for exploring Chinese Buddhism and its notions among those students who find themselves at a pivotal phase of development in their lives and caught between the cultural disjuncture of the East and the West. The study suggests that Chinese students engage with Buddhism in a unique and interesting manner, which is full of curiosity, confusion, and a yearning for spirituality.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism; Overseas Students; Religion; Spirituality; Western Context; Morality

1 Introduction

1.1 Points of interests sparking the study

This paper focuses on the perspectives and insights on “religion” and Chinese Buddhism of a group of students who grew up in mainland China and now

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study at UK universities. This study sets out to consider the extent to which Chinese Buddhism is relevant to them, and offers insights into how the Chinese younger generations may be engaged with Chinese Buddhism in the future. This is currently an under-researched area; therefore, this paper attempts to foster a deeper and more complex understanding of, and dialogues on, the place of Chinese Buddhism in Chinese society in the future.

An initial interest in the exploration of this topic was sparked by this author's personal experiences. My first observation was that many Chinese students whom I have met in the UK seem to regard themselves as having no religious faith. It has naturally led me to raise the questions of the reasons that contribute to their designation of "non-religious" and their views on the notion of "religion".

Secondly, the attitudes of Chinese oversea students toward Chinese Buddhism are particularly interesting. It is because these students are the ones at the juncture to confront the cultural disjuncture between the East and the West. Having been brought up in Chinese society, where Chinese Buddhism has been closely intertwined with both Chinese history and culture over thousands years, they now are situated in a context where Christian churches and events are vibrantly active on campus as well as in their daily life. It is fascinating to discover how they respond to the western faith in this new cultural context and any potential impact on the change in constructing their image of "religion".

1.2 Significance of the study

The youth are the hope and power of the future society (Stanat, 2006). The course of university life is one of the most decisive stages in building up their understanding of the meaning of life and the direction of their future path. My personal experience echoes this quite well, while being a university student, I began strongly interested in ways of discovering spiritual paths and that has later led to my life-changing decision of becoming a Buddhist nun. Therefore, I am intrigued to learn about what Chinese younger generations think of "religion" and in particular Chinese Buddhism. This research offers a unique chance for a deep reflection upon the image of Chinese Buddhism, which has been shaped by many

factors in modern China. Furthermore, it offers a meaningful contemplation on the future development of Chinese Buddhism in China.

1.3 A brief overview of conducting the anthropologist study

In order to have an initial glimpse on Chinese younger generations' perceptions of Chinese Buddhism, the study was primarily focused on Chinese overseas students in the UK as a starting point. I have conducted anthropological research and interviewed 25 Chinese students aged between 18–28 currently studying at two universities in Lancaster, a city in the northwest of England. All interviews were mainly conducted in Mandarin instead of English in order to ensure all informants to express their opinions more genuinely and relaxingly. Each interview took place on campus to suit the convenience of the informants, and the length of each interview ranged from thirty minutes to four hours depending on the flexibility of informants' time. The initial question to open the conversation was "do you have a religious faith?" and then the focus would move onto their justification for their answer. Following that, my attention focused on any possible connection between their perception of "religion" and personal experiences. Gradually, the interview probed into their opinions about Buddhism. The informants usually expressed their thoughts about Buddhism without categorizing Buddhism by its regions or traditions, such as Western Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, etc. Also, their contributions appear to be a combination of what they have absorbed throughout their life experience in relation to Buddhism in Chinese society. Hence, in this paper, I would like to address their perception of "Buddhism" to "Chinese Buddhism".

During the interviews, the presentation of my identity as a Buddhist nun has influenced the research in some ways, but this fact sometimes has helped open up a deeper conversation with the informants. I have found a way through this dilemma by constantly showing my respect on their opinions and encouraging an open and authentic expression of their thoughts. Meanwhile, they were clearly informed all of their information would be presented anonymously and for the purpose of this research only.

2 Investigation on the notion and attitude towards “religion”

2.1 Overview

Before probing into the Chinese overseas students' perception of Chinese Buddhism, I will start with a discussion on the notion and attitude towards “religion” among these Chinese overseas students, which are characteristic of eclecticism, cautiousness, and ambivalence.

2.2 Eclectic approaches to “religion”

The majority of the informants do not regard themselves as either having a particular faith or being a faithful follower in any religion. Their eclectic ways of approaching religion operate from three levels.

Eclecticism between science and religion

The first level is an eclectic attitude towards both religion and science; in other words, they could not trust either science or religion completely. In their views, neither is perfect. For them, religion appears to be superstitious and emotional; on the other hand, it could be also partly insightful or even beneficial. What makes religion be interpreted as mysterious and superstitious is because some religious ideas remain improvable in a scientific perspective. For example, Informant C implied that she is doubtful whether God or the Buddha really exists as she could not either perceive or examine it. In addition to the questioning about the truth of spiritual beings, another doubt points to the religious believers and communities. For instance, Informant W cast doubts on human being's capability to truly perceive what God or the Buddha wants to tell us without misinterpretation (if they truly existed). Likewise, Informant L criticized many people in China going to temples and burning incense simply to wish for wealth. From her point of view, it appears very superstitious and commercial in nature and the true spirit of Buddhism might have been lost.

A direct connection seems to exist between their distrust of religion and their education in China. During the interviews, quite often when the informants

attempted to justify why they were non-religious, they frequently referred to Marxism and atheism, which have deeply penetrated into the core of their education. They commonly stated that the concept of non-existence of God, ghost, or other spiritual beings has deeply rooted in their heart. Furthermore, any issues related to religious ideas are usually discouraged or dismissed at school^①. As a result, this education has left a strong impact on many informants to view science as the ultimate way to examine the authenticity of any theory. When any religious belief appears to contradict scientific views, most informants would remain uncertain and doubtful toward religion.

Conversely, although science is generally highly respected by all informants, it does not mean that science has won over their full trust. In fact, the informants have occasionally showed their doubts of science being viewed as the absolute truth. When it is clear to see many scientific discoveries tend to be updated or challenged as time goes by, the informants agreed science is not omnipotent. Many subjects and myths remain unknown in science until today. Therefore, religion deserves its place as a way of supplementing and compensating for the uncharted territories that are beyond scientific discoveries. Hence, Informant F clearly concluded, "we can not totally trust either science or religion".

Eclecticism between different religions

On the second level, there is a tendency of keeping an open-minded attitude to face and learn from every religion instead of just one. Most informants are keen on gaining inspiration from various religious perspectives. At the same time, they are likely to keep a distance from every religion and avoid sticking to only one religious idea. Informant I provided an explanation as to the tendency that, for her, no religion is perfect as they all have some positive influence on people as well as their own downsides. Likewise, Informant Y's opinion echoes and clarifies the view on the role each religion serves. He said that "all religions seek to see the truth of the world, but each of them might only perceive parts of that, not a complete picture.

① See Hiroataka (2008), pp. 226 – 227.

Eclecticism in studying the aspects of a religion

On the third level, these Chinese oversea students' interest to a religion could be selective, focusing on its practicality over its authenticity. Meanwhile, their attentions and curiosity land on the aspect of religious philosophy rather than the aspect of ritual formality. In other words, religious rituals are less likely to be appreciated; conversely, religious meaning and ideas are much more attractive to them. Informant J stressed that what has intrigued her most in learning more about each religion is how a religion provides insights on ways of facing one's life and a better understanding towards the world, her life, and general values. For her, whether the idea is "true" or not does not really matter. More importantly, these insights and perspectives need to be sensible and thought-provoking. She emphasized that she would not take any advice simply because it is preached by a religious authority, God, or the Buddha. Her acceptance of any ideas in religion must come from her freewill and own judgment. From this aspect, this selective manner reflects a desire to rely on self-power rather than other powers of religious authorities. During the interviews, one of the most common expressions made by most informants is to "believe in myself". They are willing to gain inspiration from different perspectives of religious philosophies, and yet are afraid of being tied to religious obligations and regulations.

2.3 Prudent attitudes toward converting to a religion

Apart from the previous discussion on the sense of distrust on the validity of religion, two other factors have affected the informants' prudent attitude towards converting to any religion, including insufficient understanding of every religion and a less friendly social atmosphere.

It seems the identity of being "religious" sometimes is a label against the identity of communists and the mainstream social expectation. Many informants suggested that the majority population in China do not have a religious faith. It indicates a sense of insecurity and concern on being labelled as "religious", which may place them in an unfavourable position. As a result, some people with a religious faith have chosen to hide this fact in public.

While touching upon this issue, Informant I suddenly started reminding

herself to keep a distance to any religion due to her identify as a member of CCP. Moreover, Informant T, who has converted to Christianity after studying in the UK, delivered her concern about the future when she needs to go back to China. She has not decided on whether she should disclose her faith in the column of religious faith on her identification card. Her family in China, who do not have a religious faith but respect her own decision, prefer not to disclose her religious faith to prevent any potential harm to her future career prospect. In this respect, it indicates that religion might be a relatively sensitive topic in China. And such concern leads to a more cautious attitude towards converting to a religion.

Furthermore, most informants feel that they do not have a comprehensive understanding about every religion, so it might be too early to make a decision of which faith they prefer to commit. However, it is still a possibility that they might convert to a religion in the future. A few informants made the analogy between marrying someone and choosing a faith to highlight that converting to a religion is a big decision in life. At the present, they would be willing to know more about each religion, which is like the stage of "making friends". Overall, they hold a very prudent attitude towards the decision to make their commitment before having fully understood a religion.

2.4 Ambivalent complex

There are a variety of ambivalent feelings underneath the informants' designation of "non-religion". Interestingly, two of my informants echoed this statement. They said, "many of us engage with the practices of worshipping ancestor and praying in temples, so one thing for sure-we are not atheists." Additionally, in the eyes of many informants, religious obligations are seen as unnecessary burdens constricting their freedom of doing whatever they want. Religion, on the other hand, also appears to offer something attractive and important. For instance, towards the end of the interview, Informant I admitted that she sometimes envies people who have a religious faith, which gives them extraordinary support and power.

From some informants' points of view, having a religious faith is viewed as a good thing and even sometimes needed. It could be discussed from both ethics and

spirituality perspectives. First, they suggested that religion might help reinforce morality and ethics in people and in society with the claim that “religion is about teaching people to do good”. Therefore, even though it can be viewed as “a kind of saying” created by human beings, it still presents its value in promoting moral education, which is urgently needed in modern China according to some informants. Informant T directly pointed out that many social problems in modern Chinese society are simply caused by a lack of faith among the majority. She provided an example of moral decline with the news about “poisonous baby milk power”.^① She believed people would not have done such harmful things if they had faith and knew that someone is watching over.

In terms of spirituality, some informants implied that religion acts as a source to gain strength and comfort under difficult circumstances. Two of my informants said something similar in that it will bring comfort by knowing “someone” is watching, loving, and caring about them. Informant C stated that she sometimes doubts the existence of the Buddha, but would still like to have a faith in it, especially when she needs blessing and help. In addition, a yearning for spiritual guidance and support has emerged from some interviews. Informant O suggested that the young generations in China are striving after ways to affirm the value of individuality, which she argues is in need yet remains absent from Chinese mainstream education.

2.5 Summary

To sum up, the discussions above have presented my understanding of the Chinese overseas students’ notions and attitudes toward “religion”. It is an area full of ambiguity and uncertainty. It reflects a lack of confidence in their understanding about each religion and a sense of insecurity of revealing one’s religious faith in public. The discoveries of these complicated feelings have effectively paved a path to a discussion concerning their perceptions of Chinese Buddhism in the following sections.

① See BBC News (2013).

3 Investigation on the perception of Chinese Buddhism

3.1 Overview

If the wholeness of Chinese Buddhism serves as a map of spiritual landscape illustrating the path to rediscover one's intrinsic wisdom and virtue^①, I would argue that what is seen by the informants is no more than sporadic signposts in the detailed map. Overall, their image of Chinese Buddhism is rather bewildered, vague, and incomplete, where many questions wait to be answered and many concepts need to be clarified. They tend to be familiar to the formality of some practices and rituals, but unsure of their principles and meanings.

To portray what Chinese Buddhism is perceived as in the informants' eyes, I will first discuss where their knowledge about Chinese Buddhism come from. Next, I will explore what kinds of contextual factors and individual experience during their growth have affected their perception of Chinese Buddhism. Moving on, I will explore the informants' knowledge as well as their opinions on the principles and practices of Chinese Buddhism. This section also touches upon a number of confusing points concerning Buddhist ideas raised by some informants in the interviews. It presents the areas where they have issues in daily life and are willing to gain insights from Buddhist perspectives.

3.2 The source of knowing Buddhism

Knowing Buddhism from social-cultural aspects

Most informants' perspectives on Buddhism appear to be constructed under social circumstances and through cultural traditions. This could be the influences of the elder family members or closed friends; personal experiences of visiting temples; ritual practices, such as ancestor worshipping and funerals, as well as the influence from mass media and Chinese folktales.

It appears that the social-cultural context in China provides most informants

① See the second charter of *The Sixth Patriarch Platform Sutra*.