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FACADES OF
RELIGION
IN CHINA

/ Holmes Welch*

“**I**n China things aren’t what they seem.” Of course, things are not necessarily what they seem in any country. There often turns out to be an inside story. But in China the inside story is there more often, or it is more important, or, at any rate, the Chinese tend to assume that it is, so that even when things are what they seem, the Chinese may think they are not.

This was brought home to me when I first began to carry on research on Buddhism in modern China. I had to interview a great many Buddhist monks. I would explain to them that I had a grant from the Ford Foundation to write a book and needed their help to get accurate data. But they had never heard of the Ford Foundation and the idea of an American writing a book about Chinese monasteries sounded very thin. Furthermore, that was what I had *said* I was doing; so presumably I must really be doing something else. At first they presumed I was working for the C.I.A., later that I was a Christian spy, bent on collecting information that missionaries could use to undermine Buddhism. Finally they decided that I was actually a Buddhist myself, although a little shy about admitting it, and was going to start a monastery back in the United States. That was why I needed all the details on daily life and monastic administration. Perhaps if I had begun by saying that I was going to start a monastery they would have ended by believing that I was writing a book.

I had another experience along these same lines. There was a Buddhist layman I knew in Hong Kong who had been most friendly and helpful. After a while one of the leading monks there—let me call him Reverend A—warned me that this layman was pro-Communist and I should be very careful. Then I went to Malaya and there I met another monk—Reverend B—who told me that the Reverend A was pro-Communist and I should be very careful. When I said that I could hardly believe it, since the Reverend A had taken part in all kinds of anti-Communist activities, the Reverend B gave me a somewhat sour look and said: “Oh you Americans are so naive.” That was a sentence that I heard many times during my years in the Far East. I do think that we Americans tend to take things at face value more

*This article is a slightly revised version of the first Evans-Wentz lecture presented by the author at Stanford University in April 1969.

than the Chinese, who are an older, wiser people. But of course this does not mean that they always get at the truth about things. I am nearly certain that the Reverend A was *not* a Communist and that the Reverend B was just being too clever. He was assuming that things were not what they seemed when actually they were.

The best procedure is not to assume either. In my interviewing I found that I had to be very cautious in interpreting the answers to even the simplest questions about religious life. When a monk told me that so-and-so was his master and that he was so-and-so's disciple, it was not safe to assume that there was a close relationship between them. Usually there was, but not necessarily. Sometimes the disciple had never seen his master and in a few cases his master might have died centuries earlier. The relationship between them was nominal—*ming-i-ti*—but still an important one in the life of the monk I was interviewing. Another example is eating solid food after twelve o'clock noon. It was forbidden according to the original Buddhist rules, which some Chinese monasteries of the Vinaya sect purported to observe. So all they had after noon was "tea." At any rate, that was what they *said* and that was what they would write on the notice board. But if you walked over and looked into their bowls, you would find soft rice. Nominally it was tea, actually it was rice. What good reason Confucius had to be concerned about the rectification of names! Somewhat more than Europeans, I think, the Chinese are able to keep names and reality, theory and practice, in more or less independent compartments. Or rather it is not so much that the compartments are independent, but that they serve different purposes. The theory compartment is for keeping information about what people *ought* to do, what their ancestors did, what it says to do in ancient texts—in a word, what is orthodox. The practice compartment is for keeping information about what people actually do to cope with the problems of everyday life.

Of course there are many different orthodoxies just as in different places there are different customs and ways of coping. The overriding orthodoxy is Confucian. One of the stereotypes about Chinese religion is that from the Ming dynasty on, the upper classes in China, from the emperor down to the most junior literatus, tended to be exclusively Confucian, in practice as well as theory. Only the lower classes were Buddhist or Taoist. I think that is an oversimplification. For example, almost all Ch'ing emperors were patrons of Buddhism. They endowed monasteries, stayed in them on their tours, and conferred titles on eminent monks. But the very same emperors issued anti-Buddhist edicts to keep down the size of the clergy and to restrict its activities. How can this be explained? In my opinion the explanation is that the anti-Buddhist edicts belonged to the theory compartment and were basically intended to show that these emperors, like their predecessors, maintained the great tradition of Confucian orthodoxy. These edicts were not meant to be implemented except where Buddhist monks became involved in scandal or caused social unrest. And,

in fact, most monks do not seem to have been affected by them at all. As to the emperors' patronage of Buddhism, that belonged to the other compartment—the one for actual practice. As a practical matter, every emperor found it important to have tens of thousands of monks praying for his longevity, as they did every two weeks, and accumulating merit by their pure lives that could be used to offset the bad *karma* of people's dead parents who might otherwise be reborn in hell or as cows or pigs—so that most Chinese, including the emperor, who had parents too, were ready to do their part under the monastic social contract: they provided the monks with rice and in return the monks produced transferable merit.

Because orthodoxy in public pronouncements and overt behavior was the basis for a man's reputation, for his status, men of status tended to be publicly Confucian and to be discreet about any non-Confucian activities. An emperor could risk overt heterodoxy (the Yung-cheng emperor, for example, started a meditation hall in the palace and consorted with Zen masters), but the ordinary official preferred to keep his Buddhist and Taoist activities out of sight. In public he might even scoff at Buddhist monks as uneducated and commercialized and say they were purveying superstition to the ignorant masses: yet when his own father died, he would quietly call them in to perform the rites that would increase his father's chances for a better rebirth. In public, he might call Buddhism a foreign heterodoxy, yet in his own home have an altar where he practiced some form of Buddhist meditation or devotion. One might say that his public Confucianism provided a facade behind which it was easier for him to satisfy his personal religious needs in private.

This is something about which it is very hard to quantify. Even if one combed Chinese biographical sources,¹ I doubt that there would be enough data to determine how many of the literati were publicly Confucian but privately Buddhist, and to what degree. That is not only because documents tend to emphasize what is orthodox and play down what is not, but also because we cannot get inside of the heads of the people involved. We cannot know how much they believed in the Buddhist practice that they might be carrying on. It was quite possible to do meditation as a form of psychotherapy without accepting a single Buddhist doctrine, just as it was possible to take part in a Buddhist rite for one's late father without really believing in its efficacy. Or perhaps one only half believed in it, just as, in many cases, one only *half* believed in the prayers one was required to make (if one was an official) to the tutelary gods in time of drought. I think there was very widespread ambivalence of belief and of official policy.

This ambivalence did not end with the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty. It is true that there was no longer an emperor for whose longevity the monks could pray and transfer part of the merit they accumulated. The whole

¹Most of the information that I myself have collected about this does not come from Chinese sources but from Western observers, like De Groot, Hackman, Soothill, and Reichelt, but it fits in with what I have found from my own investigations.

idea of the transfer of merit became less accepted as younger men with a modern education began to get positions in Republican governments. Fewer and fewer district magistrates were prepared to ask the monks to perform a penance service in order to avert a drought or a flood. Nonetheless, there were still some devout Buddhists in office—particularly in high office. To be specific, between 1912 and 1950, there were two chiefs of state, four prime ministers, nine officers of ministerial rank, and seventeen provincial governors and warlords who were devout Buddhists and intervened again and again to save monasteries from encroachment or confiscation or to help eminent monks. I have come to call them “cultural loyalists” because, for them, Buddhism was not only a source of spiritual and practical help, but also a token of their identity as Chinese. This should not be overstated: the Buddhist element in Chinese nationalism was not nearly so important as it was in the nationalism of Burma or Ceylon, where almost all nationalist leaders and the great majority of the citizens felt a real commitment to it. Committed Buddhists in China probably did not amount to more than one or two per cent of the population, but among them there were these influential devotees in high office and they *did* help to keep the monastic establishment intact—in the central provinces at least—until 1949.

We might have expected that, with the Communist victory, the last traces of official ambivalence towards Buddhism would disappear, and the government apparatus would devote itself wholeheartedly to eradicating religious beliefs and practices. This did not happen. Mao Tse-tung had learned from his early efforts to set up Communist enclaves that, as he puts it, one “cannot abolish religion by administrative decree.”² One must remove its causes; then it will disappear of its own accord. Its main cause are man’s inability to understand and control nature; and the existence of exploiting classes that use religion to anesthetize the people. Scientific progress and the victory of socialism will create a new kind of man who will not depend on gods or superstitions to solve his problems. Of course this cannot be accomplished overnight, and in the meantime a socialist government must have a policy that controls and utilizes religion even as it allows it to wither away. In the Chinese case, the desire to control and utilize led ineluctably to providing support and patronage. Thus in 1953 a Buddhist association was set up in Peking. Since monasteries contained valuable art and architecture, repairing them became part of the overall effort to preserve Chinese culture. This in turn fitted in with Peking’s need for closer relations with the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia; the restoration of monasteries would be used to convince them that their co-religionists in China were flourishing. Buddhist delegations began to go back and forth, and Buddhism became one instrument—and a fairly important one—in the orchestra of people’s diplomacy.

²*On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People (Selected Readings of Mao Tse-tung, p 355)*. The idea can be traced back at least as far as Engels.

Now what this meant was that, for new reasons, the old ambivalence was continuing. The basic government policy still combined patronage with suppression. Total figures are not available, but it seems quite likely that the Chinese People's Government spent as much money restoring Buddhist temples between 1952 and 1962 as came from the official budget in any decade of the Ch'ing dynasty. Like the Ch'ing, the Communists gave subsidies to elderly monks, and official positions and titles to church leaders. On the other hand, also like the Ch'ing—but much more seriously—they worked to reduce the number of monks and to make those who remained serve no needs but those of the State.

Chinese monks had always been ready to serve the needs of the State, but in return they had been free to continue with their personal religious practice. It was this *quid pro quo* that was now denied them. The new regime insisted that the time formerly used for religious study and meditation be spent on political study, productive labor, and participation in mass movements. If we said, a little cynically perhaps, that in the old days prayers for the longevity of the emperor had provided a facade behind which the monks were free to pursue their own enlightenment or a better rebirth, then it would seem that such a facade was now denied them. Actually, however, the very aggressiveness of the government, its abundance of programs and movements, provided an abundance of new facades. Let me illustrate this.

In October 1950, a year after liberation, a group of thirty-one prominent Buddhists got together in Peking and decided to hold a series of religious services. The stated purpose was to protect world peace against the American aggressors. As they put it, "We Buddhists of Peking . . . consider that the imperialists are demons who threaten world peace and they must be subdued by the power of exorcism."³ So for seven days some of them chanted liturgy and others lectured on the sutras—including the *Diamond Sutra*, perhaps the most popular subject for traditional Buddhist lectures. We are told that "those who attended were overjoyed at this, the first large-scale Buddhist religious event since Liberation."⁴

Now how should this event be interpreted? Had the People's Government succeeded in using Buddhists for its own purposes—in whipping up an anti-American campaign? Had it vitiated the purity of Buddhist rites by making them serve political ends? Or was it the other way around? Had Buddhists used the peace movement as the facade behind which they could chant and lecture on the sutras to large gatherings of the faithful just as they always had in the past? Had they even, perhaps, been "trying something on"—seeing whether the new regime would accept the idea of using exorcism as a weapon with which to fight the American imperialists?

³*Hsien-tai fo-hsüeh (HTFH)*, 10/50, p. 32.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 33. "Self-dedication" is not a very good rendering of *chu-yüan*, which means to offer a solemn, prayerful resolve, but it is the best translation I can think of.

In that case, they had a vast store of ceremonies on which they could draw to exorcise China's enemies and justify their existence. This part of it did not succeed. At any rate, we hear no more about exorcism; but on the whole the services went off well, and it was suggested that similar ones be held in other places. They soon were. In Tientsin, for example, the *Heart Sutra*—another popular text—was lectured on for eight days in November, and then a manifesto was issued calling on the people of the city to realize that it was true compassion to aid the Korean war effort and repel the American imperialists.⁵

One purpose of the ceremonies in Tientsin was said to be to “dispel disasters” (*hsiao-tsai*). This was a catchall term that could refer to floods, droughts, or anything else that people were afraid of. But what were people afraid of in this case? Were they afraid of American imperialists? Or were they afraid of over-enthusiastic cadres, who were then holding struggle meetings against Buddhist abbots, smashing Buddhist images, and taking over Buddhist monasteries? (This was before a policy of protection for monasteries had been effectively promulgated.) It is conceivable at least, that in the minds of many who participated the real purpose of the ceremonies was not to dispel the Americans, but the Communists.

For the next decade monks and devotees continued to contribute to the peace movement. Not only did they hold religious services—for self-dedication to peace—but they attended conferences. In 1952, for example, the future president of the Chinese Buddhist Association headed a delegation to the Peace Conference of Asia and the Pacific regions, held in Peking that October. It was a big occasion—the first contact between Chinese and foreign Buddhists since liberation. The foreign Buddhists who came to attend saw Chinese monks and nuns marching in a parade before the T'ien-an Men and carrying cardboard doves and big placards with the slogan “Protect World Peace.” Afterwards the future president of the Buddhist Association said: “Because we are Buddhists we must do Buddhist things. What are Buddhist things? Safeguarding world peace is the biggest Buddhist thing.”⁶ The catch is that “to do Buddhist things” was the standard phrase for performing Buddhist rites for the dead—the principal source of income for most Chinese monks and an activity that many cadres were now suppressing because it amounted to “cheating the masses with superstition.” Here was a chance to try and put it in a more respectable category—or rather to put peace propaganda and Buddhist funeral rites into the same category so that both would be permitted. My point is not that the effort was successful—since funeral rites were only permitted to continue in a few of the larger cities—but rather to show how quick Buddhists were in

⁵*Ibid.*, 12/50, p. 30. On the meeting held in Wuhan, also to dispel disasters, see *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶*Ibid.*, 5/57, p. 4.

seizing every opportunity to turn Communist slogans to their own advantage.

They went on to participate in several peace conferences—Vienna, Hiroshima, Stockholm, and others too. Foreign peace delegations visiting China were usually received by the Buddhist Association, and Chinese Buddhists throughout the country pitched into the huge campaign of 1955 to collect signatures opposing the use of atomic weapons.⁷ All this was useful to the government; and it was therefore useful to Chinese Buddhists, since it provided a facade of orthodoxy behind which they could carry on some, at least, of their normal religious activities. Let me give more illustrations. During a peace meeting held in November 1952 by two hundred monks and devotees at a monastery in northern Kwangtung, an eminent abbot, Pen-huan, came to lecture. What Pen-huan lectured on was *partly* world peace, but his main topic was methods of self-cultivation. The audience then proceeded to practice these methods. They not only chanted the sutras, but they recited Amitabha's name. Reciting Amitabha's name—saying "Homage to the buddha Amitabha," thousands of times, with intense concentration—was the principal activity of the Pure Land sect and its purpose was to secure rebirth in the Western Paradise over which Amitabha presided. According to the *official* line, the Western Paradise was being built here on earth by the Communist Party and the way to reach it was by participating in socialist construction, not by reciting Amitabha's name. But this did not deter Buddhists here and elsewhere from reciting his name in the old way, so as to be reborn in another world altogether. Sometimes they even practiced the intensive form of recitation, that went on day and night for seven days—in two cases as a contribution to the peace movement⁸ and in two cases as a measure to bring about the liberation of Taiwan.⁹

The liberation of Taiwan also provided a basis for celebrating the Buddha's birthday, on the fourth of the eighth lunar month—one of the major religious festivals of traditional China. A tiny statue of the infant Sakyamuni would be placed in a basin and then everyone present would pour some holy water over it. After liberation, this was sometimes done as an act of self-dedication to world peace,¹⁰ sometimes to bring about the liberation of Taiwan, and in one case to celebrate the achievements of the first Afro-Asian conference. Actually it was in two cases, for some of the Chinese delegates to this conference were said to have been killed on their way by U.S.-Chiang agents, and when a memorial service was held for them, it, too, was a celebration of the Buddha's birthday.¹¹ Amitabha—not the buddha of this world, but the one who presides over the Western Paradise—also has a birthday (on the seventeenth of the eleventh lunar month)

⁷*Ibid.*, April-July, 1955 has many examples.

⁸*Ibid.*, 12/54, p. 29; 4/55, p. 29.

⁹*Ibid.*, 12/54, p. 29. Cf. 12/54, p. 27.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 7/55, p. 30.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 7/55, p. 30; 6/55, p. 30.

and in 1951 it was celebrated at a peace rally called by the Oppose America-Aid Korea Committee.¹²

Sometimes, when an activity was particularly "sensitive," Buddhists sought for multiple protection—protection, we might say, several facades deep. For example, in October, 1954, some monks and devotees in Hupei had had the main images of their temple re-covered with gold leaf. They wanted to hold an inaugural ceremony, but they knew (or at least I assume they knew) that they might be criticized for having spent money on images that had not been declared important by the Ministry of Culture in Peking. So they announced that the purposes of the ceremony would be: first, thanksgiving to the Buddha and to the State; second, commemoration of martyred patriots; and third, self-dedication to world peace and to the hope that the people of China could always live an independent, free, democratic, and happy life in a Western Paradise here on earth.¹³

Buddhists could use the rhetoric of the regime not only to camouflage religious activities, but also to exert counter-pressure on cadres who were making trouble for them. In 1957, for example, a delegate to the second conference of the Chinese Buddhist Association compared the lot of monks in the new China with their lot under the Kuomintang. Such comparisons have been a standard exercise in political study designed to make people count their blessings. "What is especially true," he concluded, "is that the monasteries we live in today are peaceful and solemn whereas in the past they were invaded and despoiled by Kuomintang troops. In this respect there is even less of a comparison with the past."¹⁴ Now everyone present, including the cadres, knew that *both* the Communists and the Nationalists, despite laws to the contrary, had taken over monasteries for barracks and offices. By talking about the superiority of life under the Communists, this delegate was reminding the cadres that, if they really wanted to be considered superior to the Kuomintang and to abide by the law, they should be more considerate of monasteries in the future. The speech was not sycophancy, but a curious kind of intimidation—almost like jiu-jitsu, in which the weaker tries to use the strength of his opponent to defeat him.

Praise of the regime was *often* loaded this way. The very next month the abbot Pen-huan attended the Kwangtung provincial CPPCC where he made a speech apparently lauding the government's religious policy. He did refer to the fact that in some areas monks and nuns had not been getting enough to eat, that cadres did not respect their customs, that cadres persisted in pressing political indoctrination; but he said that all these were failures to *carry out* the religious policy. He hoped it would be carried out better in the future. Then he spoke of the ordination that he had held at his monastery the previous winter. 600 Buddhists had come to be ordained, including some from Southeast Asia. "This," he said, "should help con-

¹²*Ibid.*, 4/53, p. 28.

¹³*Ibid.*, 10/54, p. 29.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 5/57, p. 16.

vince the overseas Chinese of the government's good faith with regard to religion."¹⁵ The fact was that this particular ordination had been held *without* getting government permission and afterwards his monastery had been expressly prohibited to hold another one. So what he seems to have been really saying was: look out, cadres, unless you lift your prohibition and let us ordain when we like, it will jeopardize your relations with the overseas Chinese.

The cadres could deal with a tricky individual, like this Pen-huan, by arresting him, but what really must have caused them to scratch their heads were the efforts by many Buddhists to do exactly what the cadres expected of them—efforts that could represent either submission or camouflage. For example, soon after liberation monks began to refer to themselves as “the masses”—*ch'ün-chung*. This was only a slight phonetic change from the traditional term for the monks who held no monastic office—*ch'ing-chung*, the “pure multitude.” Now did this change of terms mean that monks really had begun to identify themselves with the broad, toiling masses? Or did it just mean that they wanted the cadres to think they had? But how could the cadres forbid the monks to adopt a proletarian stand—since that was the whole purpose of socialist study? All the cadres could do was to go along, maintaining their vigilance. In the end, their vigilance was often rewarded.

An example is provided by the Ling-shan Monastery in eastern Kwangtung. About 1951 its monks started a farm. They called it an Experimental Farm, which sounded very progressive, and they announced that they were leading a communal life of political study and productive labor.¹⁶ From the cadres' point of view here was a group of model Buddhists. But in 1956 the abbot was expelled for having given asylum to counter-revolutionaries, and in 1958 he was arrested as the head of a reactionary Taoist sect.¹⁷ His “experimental farm” and his slogans had apparently been just a facade, which the cadres finally penetrated. A more sensational case was that of Pen-huan, who also was arrested in 1958 for giving asylum to counter-revolutionaries. Besides that he had privately criticized the Government's religious policy, opposed the reading of Chairman Mao, and committed many other crimes that he had never confessed to the cadres—his lack of frankness was one of the reasons he was in trouble. Meetings were held by Buddhists throughout China to denounce him, and at one of them, a disciple of his said: “In the past I mistook Pen-huan for a good man, so I revered him as my master. I did not realize that he was a traitor and a reactionary. Now I must stand firm and draw a line of demarcation between myself and him.”¹⁸ The obvious question is: had he *really* been taken in by Pen-huan and was he now *really* confessing?

¹⁵*Nan-fang jih-pao*, May 13, 1957.

¹⁶*HTFH*, 5/53, p. 26.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 11/58, p. 34.

¹⁸*Nan-fang jih-pao*, June 11, 1958.

Or consider what happened in the case of the Shanghai Buddhist magazine, *Chüeh-hsün*. Its origins were impeccable. It had been founded under the patronage of the Youth League soon after liberation to help monks and nuns “depart from their former parasitic way of living.” By 1954 it was being read in socialist study classes as far away as Shensi, where its articles on politics and current events were said to have “raised the patriotic fervor” of local Buddhists.¹⁹ But just three months later, it was suppressed and eleven people connected with it were arrested. All along, as it turned out, it had been “viciously ruining young Buddhists through the misuse of Buddhist terminology and the distortion of Buddhist doctrine . . . It fabricated rumors, sowed dissension to undermine patriotic movements, destroyed the unity between Buddhists and the government and the unity among the Buddhists themselves.”²⁰ This last charge was particularly ironic, since just before the case “blew,” the group that published the magazine was congratulated for consolidating the unity among Buddhists.²¹

In the meetings that were called to discuss the case one of the speeches was made by an eminent Shanghai abbot. He was shocked, he said, at what had happened. This group had clothed itself in Buddhist garments and borrowed the signboard of spreading the dharma in order to commit many evil deeds. “We who were living in Shanghai saw them and met them very often,” he said, “shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with them: yet we were unable to discern their true political identity.”²²

What an old story this is in totalitarian societies! But it has been particularly common in China and most particularly in the past three years, when government and party leaders at the highest level have been accused of being bad elements in disguise. Of course, we can explain this as a mere facade of accusation, behind which a power struggle was underway. But I think that the accusers have often really believed in their charges and have considered that it was their opponents who had been working behind a facade. Perhaps the Chinese are more adept and more prone than other peoples to use facades and protective camouflage because they have had such long experience at it—two thousand years of survival of those who were fittest at espousing the philosophical orthodoxy of a strong central government. Among Chinese, the Buddhists have had to develop specially high survival skill, since they were, after all, heterodox. Just as in earlier centuries they used to justify their existence on Confucian grounds, now in the 1950’s they could point out that their monasteries had been collectives for a thousand years. Monks had lived in buildings communally owned, worked together, eaten together in their mess halls, and decided things to-

¹⁹*HTFH*, 5/54, p. 28.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 4/56, p. 5. Much similar material is given in the issues of *HTFH* for September-November 1955.

²¹*Ibid.*, 5/54, p. 29.

²²*Ibid.*, 9/55, p. 11.

gether. By a little judicious selection Buddhist doctrines could be presented as denying the existence of god, of the soul, and advocating the overthrow of privileged classes.

One often reads how the political study carried on at monasteries raised the awareness of the monks—but then how they slipped back to the same low level. For example, the following was reported at a monastery in Chekiang: “Every movement was carried out with fire and thunder, but after the movement was over, the fire died down and things grew cold.” “When it was time to display a sense of duty, [the monks] would write wall posters stating their determination to obey the organization, obey the leadership, go anywhere they were assigned, but once the storm was over, they would forget all about it.”²³ Needless to say, this pattern of behavior has been very common in China, but Buddhists may have been specially slippery and frustrating for the cadres to deal with.

Anti-Communist monks in Hong Kong and overseas are seldom if ever critical of their brothers who have stayed behind on the mainland and accepted posts in the Buddhist association or other people’s groups. They do not consider them Quislings—any more than the monks were who joined puppet Buddhist groups under the Japanese. It seems to be generally accepted that one has to play along with whoever is in power.

I have found the same attitude among some of the foreign Buddhists who have taken part in people’s diplomacy. After they made extensive tours of the mainland, visiting monasteries that had been beautifully restored, where they were shown monks dressed in immaculate robes, chanting the sutras, they would go home and write quite favorable descriptions of what they had seen. In private conversation, they expressed somewhat different feelings: Buddhism, they said, was being slowly choked out in China. When asked why they had not written this in what they published, they replied that it would only hasten the end. So long as foreign Buddhists continued to come and admire the liberal religious policy of the regime, the regime would continue to maintain a facade of Buddhist prosperity—and this would enable a few monks and monasteries to survive. In other words, it was a facade which everyone concerned—the Chinese government, the foreign Buddhists, and the monks themselves—had an interest in maintaining. They all benefitted from it.

Unfortunately its benefits for the government began to erode in the second decade after liberation. The suppression of the Tibetan rebellion in 1959 alarmed Buddhists abroad and made them less ready to cooperate in people’s diplomacy. China’s foreign relations with Buddhist countries from Ceylon to Japan were deteriorating: the Bandung spirit was dead. Long-standing Chinese efforts to win control of the World Fellowship of Buddhists—the Buddhist counterpart to the World Council of Churches—ended in failure in 1964.

²³*Ibid.*, 5/53, p. 12.

At the beginning of 1965 a major shift seems to have taken place in the government's policy towards religion. The only remaining Buddhist journal ceased publication; the Buddhist association became less active; and articles began to be published that advocated, for the first time, active measures to eliminate religion—rather than just waiting for it to disappear of its own accord.²⁴ The number of foreign Buddhist delegations dropped sharply. After August 1966 there were none at all and in September of that year, during the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, came the campaign against the “Four Olds.” Foreign residents reported that monasteries throughout China were closed and the monks sent back to their native places. This cannot be confirmed from the press because there has simply been no mention of Buddhism in the mainland newspapers for almost three years. All we know is that in places foreigners could visit—like Peking, Nanking, Shanghai, Hangchow—the temple buildings were locked up or converted to other uses.

This undoubtedly happened because of the Cultural Revolution, but I think it might have happened anyway, not only because Buddhism was no longer of much use in foreign policy and because domestically its strength had been sharply reduced, but also because of cumulative frustration in trying to control and utilize the few Buddhists who remained. To some extent they had been using the programs of the regime for their own purposes, which was just the reverse of what the regime wanted.

Let me try to anticipate a misconception of my thesis. It may seem that I have painted a picture of the monks manipulating the cadres—as if the cadres were almost helpless in their hands. Needless to say, that is absurd. It was the monks who were almost helpless when their monasteries were occupied, their lands confiscated, their ordinations forbidden, and the greater part of religious practice displaced by productive labor and political movements. They were almost, but not quite helpless. This “not quite” is the subject of my thesis. I think that people who have written articles about the fate of Buddhism in Communist China (including myself) have tended to overlook the resourcefulness of the Buddhists in trying to survive. They were certainly very weak; they did not have strong popular support—certainly not strong enough so that it was strengthened by persecution—but they did have ways of temporizing, compromising, dissembling that enabled them to postpone the end for eighteen years—and even now it may not be the end. We do not know what has happened to monasteries on sacred mountains in remote areas; and we do not know what would happen to monasteries in Hangchow and Shanghai if Mao died tomorrow. A swing to the right appears underway. If it continues, Buddhist activity may resume—and even, perhaps, the uneven contest to see who uses whom, who is more adept in the use of facades.

I may seem to have been employing the word “facade” to cover too

²⁴See, for example, *Hsin chien-she* 1965. 10:33 (October 1965).

many, too different phenomena. I have suggested that tea was the facade behind which monks could go on eating rice; that Confucianism was the facade behind which the emperor was a patron of Buddhism; that patronage of Buddhism was the facade behind which the Chinese People's Government tried for a time to make friends in Southeast Asia; and that support of the government's programs was the facade behind which Buddhist monks continued some of their religious activities. I would admit that in each case there was a tremendous difference in the degree of commitment. Most monks have felt no commitment at all to the socialist programs in which they were participating. They were just using them for self-protection. Similarly the government was just using its patronage of Buddhism as a tool of foreign policy. But those monks who ate rice after noon really felt, I think, a mild commitment to drinking tea. Nominally it was tea. Tea was the ideal, the orthodox. And if practice could not measure up to it, it did not invalidate the ideal. A much stronger commitment to Confucian orthodoxy was felt by the rulers and the literati in recent dynasties. Sincerity, righteousness, and propriety, the study of neo-Confucian commentaries and the rejection of heterodox foreign cults—all this was what held the establishment together. To call their attitude a facade is not to imply that it was a flimsy pretense. It was very solid; but behind it there was room for activities that were necessary to complement it, as *yin* complements *yang*. Heterodoxy was part of a larger orthodoxy, to the inclusiveness of which the Chinese may someday return.

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