

# ***Buddhist Revitalization and Tai Xu's Buddhist Modernist Movement in China***

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**Abstract:** China gradually got rid of the influence of feudalism at the beginning of the 20th Century and stepped on its long and winding path of "modernization". During the same period, a Buddhist Revival in the 1920s aimed at reforming Chinese Buddhism to cope with modern society and the modern mind. One of the most important figures of Buddhist Revival is Master Tai Xu. He advocated Three Revolutions Towards Chinese Buddhism in 1913, two years after the Revolution of 1911, which signified the beginning of The Republican China. This paper will analyze why Tai Xu's reform was defined as a Buddhist "Modernist" Movement by discussing the term "modernization" in Religious History.

**Keywords:** Tai Xu, Buddhism, Modernization, Monasteries, Republican China

## **1. Introduction**

The research of Buddhist History is prosperous in the world, especially concerning Zen Buddhism in the Tang dynasty when a forgery of transmission lineages from Bodhiharma and, ultimately, the Buddha appeared to gain Tang court approval as the only true Buddhism in China [1]. However, modern Buddhist history is a field that attracted little attention among Chinese scholars. This is perhaps because countless events took place in modern China, and the revival of Chinese Buddhism seemed less significant. In terms of Chinese Intellectual History, there were the Opium War (1840-1842; 1856-1860), the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), the Westernization Movement, the Reform of 1898, the Boxers (1900), and of course the long-lasting struggle between western ideas and Chinese traditional culture.

When Guo Zhanbo wrote the *Chinese Intellectual History of the Past Three Decades* in 1934, he did not mention the Buddhist revival in modern China. Wang Ermin, an eminent Taiwanese Historian, listed "the Buddhist Revival in Republican China" as a topic worth researching in his book *Modern Chinese Intellectual Research and Potential Research Questions*, but that only ranked 17 among 20 topics worth researching. Buddhist revival in late Qing and early Republican China is a topic worth in-depth research because this is perhaps the second biggest transition of Chinese Buddhism since the Tang dynasty, also deemed by Tai Xu as Buddhist Modernization.

## **2. Research Question**

Ever since Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese Buddhism has undergone a decline together with the feudal society. Influenced deeply by the patriarchal system, the monasteries were groups of families

owning much land and property donated by the emperor or the lay people. Besides this, most monks were illiterate and thus had little understanding of Buddha Hood or the Buddhist Scripts. So, when the western powers blew down the back doors of China with shells, a wave of modernization, represented by western culture, was unleashed. This drive influenced China significantly. As a result, Chinese Buddhism, which has a time-honored history and was initially deemed as the signal of wisdom, was greatly challenged.

Although challenged by Western ideas, Chinese Buddhism was still one of ancient China's greatest assets. Some patriotic scholars and monks in the late Qing dynasty tried to resort to Buddhism to save the collapsing empire. Later generations deemed this intellectual debate among scholars as the Buddhist Revival. Tai Xu once said, "The late Qing Chinese was firstly robbed by western power's guns and shells, secondly by western religions such as Christianity, thirdly by democratic, and lastly by science. At this time of national crisis, layman Yang Renshan resorted to traditional Indian Buddhist scripts and established the first Buddhist academy. Politicians and scholars such as Kang (Kang Youwei), Zhang (Zhang Taiyan), Yan (Yan Fu), and Liang (Liang Qichao) have also resorted to Buddhism." [2].

At the time of the national crisis and the Buddhist Revival, so many scholars, monks, and lay people were actively discussing Buddhist ideas. Among all these people, one of the most famous figures of Buddhist Revival is master Tai Xu, acknowledged by scholars worldwide as the one leading the Buddhist Modernist Movement. This paper will define Tai Xu's terming of "Buddhist Modernization" and then look into the measures Tai Xu believe is the key to "Buddhist Modernization."

### 3. Literature Review

"Zen" was introduced to the western world by Japanese Scholar Suzuki, who witnessed the Chinese Modern Buddhist Revival in the 1930s and exchanged ideas on Zen Buddhism in 1934 with Hu Shi, a crucial Chinese Scholar in modern China. In fact, before the 1990s, Japanese and American Scholars published much more papers on Zen Buddhism and modern Chinese Buddhist History than Chinese Scholars because Chinese people suffered from the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s. Then Communist rule prohibited the research of Buddhism from 1949 to 1978. During these periods, one of the most significant scholars on Chinese Buddhism should be Holmes Welch, with his great monument to the investigations of modern Chinese Buddhism: *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950* (1967), and *The Buddhist Revival in China* (1968). These two books about the history of modern Chinese Buddhism are both systematic and thorough, and they are published three decades before the research of this topic boom in China.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when China gradually got rid of the influence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), many Chinese scholars began to publish their research on the modern Buddhist Revival. Notably, there were Gao Zhenrong and his publication of *Buddhist Culture and Modern China* (1992), Ma Tianxiang and his *Late Qing Buddhism and Modern Social Ideology* (1992), and Deng Zimei and his *Traditional Buddhism and Chinese Modernisation* (1996). These works of scholars from mainland China were pretty thorough concerning the history of Buddhism in Late Qing and Early Republican China. Their works were systematic, and most of the Buddhist Revival's important figures were discussed, including monks, laypeople, and scholars. Among them, Professor Ma Tianxiang's work was particularly intriguing. He traced back the origin of Buddhist Revival into two schools, those that insist on a path of pragmatism and philosophic thinking of Buddhism. According to Prof. Ma's definition, Tai Xu's Buddhist Modernization Movement has combined these two ideas, which will be discussed in the following context.

After entering the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, scholars from China and the western world started to do more detailed research into Modern Chinese Buddhism, which include the ideas and life history of Yang

Wenhui, Ouyang Jingwu, and Tai Xu. Among all these great minds who contributed to the Buddhist Modern Revival, Tai Xu's idea of the Buddhist Modernist Movement has attracted the attention of many Scholars. Charles B Jones published *Apologetic Strategies in Late Imperial Chinese Pure Land Buddhism* (2001), a detailed book illustrating Tai Xu's Pure Land Buddhism. Another work, which focused mainly on Tai Xu's ideas in terms of a religious modernization perspective, *Tai Xu's Choice of the Path of Modern Chinese Buddhism* (2002), was written by Luo Tongbing. Prof. Luo systematically summarized Tai Xu's ideas regarding Modern Buddhism. However, he did give a clear definition of what "Buddhist Modernization" is, and another question should be whether "Buddhist Modernization" is equal to the "modernization" of a country.

#### 4. Research Methods

Chinese Intellectual History is, in most cases, closely connected with its Political History and Social History, especially when China's politics and social life are confronting significant changes. Ever since the first Opium war, the influence of western powers and China's response became the main topic of Chinese History, and China's political and social changes have attracted most of the attention. Because of this, scholars from mainland China tend to apply the timeline and terms they used in Political History to Intellectual History. Significantly, the term "Modernization" was often used in 20th-century China to signify progress in political and social systems, but when "Modernization" is used in Intellectual History, namely Buddhist History, the same term may mean very different things [3].

There is no answer as to when and who came up with the definition of "Modernization," but it is closely connected with man's understanding of social changes. According to C.E.Black, Historians have long adopted the word "modern" as a sarcastic metaphor, and a good example is that they would call those French thuwar "Modern People"[4]. Historians, however, also deem "Modern" as a historical stage, such as "Modern" History would imply the period began in 1500 in the western world. Based on Black's theory, "Modern" should first be a distinction of the historical period, and then it represents social changes. For example, Chinese scholars of Politic and Social History nowadays would deem The Opium War (1840) as the event that signifies China's entrance into a modern period. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the term "Modern" and "Modernization" are commonly seen in Chinese newspapers such as La Jeunesse. Its use here was a call for social changes in the 1920s, especially after the New Culture Movement prospered in 1915 to revolutionize the old society, traditional thoughts, and feudal system. This means that "Modern" expresses a difference in social nature and that it is distinguished from a "traditional" society, but this does not mean that any society would be "Modern" automatically in a certain period. The origin of modernization can be divided into two theories: some western countries' modernization was caused by internal industrialization, and some other countries followed suit. This is the process of social changes projected by a relatively more advanced country on a less advanced country. It indicates two of the origin of modernization: either caused by local industrialization or the result of passive learning towards the west [5].

However, this led to a series of questions. Regarding Social History, what modern character should a modern society have? Is there any sign that could indicate a society have become "modern"? In terms of Intellectual History, the political system of a state may be "modern," but people's minds are still traditional; then, can we state that it is "modern"? There are still many questions about the definition of "modern" because this term is cross-discipline. We can only agree that from an abstract level, "modern" indicates changes in a field, whether from feudalism to republic in terms of politics or traditional thoughts to science.

## 5. Analysis

In the spring of 1908, when Tai Xu was eighteen, he met Huashan, who was actually “the first person to start modernizing the sangha” [6]. Impressed with Tai Xu, Huashan told him about those working for revolutionary political and social changes in China, asserting that the monastic order must modernize and promote educational reform. Initially, Tai Xu was uncertain about Huashan’s ideas; indeed, Buddhahood should be constant, and reform seemed ridiculous. However, this challenged Tai Xu to broaden his reading. Huashan gave him a wide variety of provocative books with which he was unfamiliar, including Kang Youwei’s utopian classic *Datong shu* (The Book of the Great Community), Liang Qichao’s *Xinmin Shuo* (On New People), Zhang Taiyan’s (1868–1936) *Gao fozi shu* (Letter to Followers of the Buddha) and *Gao baiyi shu* (Letter to Lay Buddhists), Yan Fu’s *Tianyan lun* (On Evolution), and Tan Sitong’s *Renxue* (An Exposition on Benevolence) [7].

Deeply influenced by these writings, Tai Xu committed to religious reform for the Buddhist community. His autobiography later described this transition: “Buddha-hood is unchanging universal wisdom, but rules in mortal society changes. Time changes and people's ideas change: if we interpret Buddhist scripts do not change, then there will be no space for Buddhism in modern society. This is why we should ‘modernize’ Buddhism in a Republican China” [8]. In Tai Xu’s early years, his ideas were revolutionary. When he gradually put these ideas into practice in the following years, these efforts were later deemed the Buddhist Modernization Movement. Moreover, one of the most important ideas that Tai Xu advocated was the three revolutions: an organizational revolution, an economic revolution, and an intellectual revolution.

Tai Xu noted, “The Chinese nation emphasizes the family system in the old patriarchal society. Buddhism, however, is also influenced by this tradition... The monasteries now are like a big family, honoring the abbot as the head. These monasteries are so self-governed that they have absolutely no influence on each other” [9]. If public monasteries only lay their focus on conversion, tonsure, and protecting monastery properties, they then have no contribution to the study and promotion of dharma. “China now has hundreds of thousands of monks, but they are loosely organized, and most are illiterate; how could we expect them to contribute to the spread of dharma?” [8]. Tai Xu believed that monks focused too much on protecting monastery property, leading to the sangha system's corruption. “Profit-making activities have undermined the traditional image of Buddhism as a religion detached from the accumulation of wealth, fomented corruption in the Sangha, and as a result, compromised its moral authority” [8].

After the revolution of 1911, Republican China was established, and the process of modernization accelerated. Therefore, the Sangha system should be adjusted to suit modern society and mind. The organizational revolution can be divided into three parts: First, the monastic property is publicly owned. This requires the establishment of a National and Regional Buddhist Association to manage and protect the property of public monasteries. The association will allocate the property for education, donation, and organizing the teaching of dharma. Second, to select an abbot by democratic election among the monastery instead of by following the direct appointment of the last abbot. The purpose of these acts is to break down the traditional patriarchal organization of monasteries and return the focus of monks on the learning and teaching of dharma. However, it is impossible to accomplish because public monasteries are completely self-governed, and no monasteries would hand over their lands and currency. Third, the establishment of Buddhist Institutes. Tai Xu believes that the sangha's lack of selection and education is one of the reasons Buddhism declined in modern times. Yang Renshan, a famous layperson in China, once wrote in his diary that Jin Shan Temple, having four hundred monks, could not even find anyone that could write a letter of approximately 300 words in fluent Chinese language [10]. Illiterate is common in Republican China, but monks, unlike farmers, should be familiar with Buddhist scripts and preach the teaching of dharma in order to gain universal

wisdom. Therefore, a reform of the sangha education system is imminent. Tai Xu draws on the organizational system of public education in Republican China and the blueprint of the sangha education system. Monks would be allowed to propagate dharma after a series of systematic learning of Buddhist scripts. The aim of sangha education was only to educate monks but also to cultivate the habit and ability of constant learning and then be able to be a more qualified Buddhist monk.

The economic revolution aims to revolutionize monastic property while simultaneously exploring new ways of income. As mentioned above, Tai Xu believes that making monastic property publicly owned will be able to break the patriarchal monastic organization and encourage young monks who are talented and familiar with Buddhist scripts to be abbots. Patriarchal systems in the monastery are the remnant of feudal society, and Tai Xu call for the revolution of community ownership and "modernizes" Buddhism in a Republican society. This is very hard to accomplish, but another idea has brilliantly foreseen what Buddhism would be like under communist rule. During the Qing dynasty, the monastic property most came from donations from the royal family, government, and lay people. When monasteries got donated lands, one of their significant incomes was from collecting land rent, and another was by doing rituals to help ghosts reach their afterlife. When the Qing dynasty was overthrown, and people began to accept science and modern ideas, they started to question the existence of ghosts and the afterlife. So, Tai Xu advocates that monks focus on this life instead of the afterlife and stop the ritual of ghost salvation. However, if the ritual stopped, monastery income would significantly decrease. He then advocates that monks should learn from Baizhang Zen master (Baizhang Chanshi), a famous Zen master in the Tang dynasty, to practice Agriculture Zen (Nong Chan,) which means "no working, no eating." Monasteries in the mountain should provide a stable income through physical labor such as farming and tree-planting; those monasteries in the city could start factories such as book printing and robe making. This is precisely what happened to Buddhism under communist rule in the 1950s. What Tai Xu hoped was that monasteries could get rid of the adverse influence of property and return to the learning and teaching of Buddhist scripts. Moreover, at the same time, the traditional incomes of a monastery may not seem stable and possible when entering into a modern society.

The intellectual revolution is, however, much more complex, but in essence, they are built based on the most discussed terms of Republican China: "equality" and "human-centered."

"Equality" means that all the eight ways of achieving Buddhahood are equal because "their realm and aim are the same, so all the eight ways are equal." [11]. Initially, there were eight ways of achieving Buddhahood, the universal wisdom in Buddhism, but after Indian Buddhism was introduced to China, Indian Buddhism underwent tremendous changes. Zen Buddhism became the dominant way of practicing dharma in China during the Tang and Song dynasties, and in fact, Zen is so popular that people would equal Zen Buddhism to Buddhism [12]. Moreover, now, influenced by the concept of "equality" during the revolutionary ages of China, Tai Xu advocated equality among the eight ways of achieving Buddhahood and raised a heated debate among monks and scholars. "Human-centered" is represented in his core concept of "On the Establishment of the Pure Land in the Human Realm." Tai Xu understood the significance of human existence, emphasized the attainment of Buddhahood within this world, and rejected the givenness of the social order in favor of building a pure land on earth [13]. This encourages people to focus on living in the world, enjoying this life instead of expecting a better afterlife, and contributing to constructing a pure land on earth. The focus of Buddhism should no longer be sending ghosts to their afterlife or encouraging people to expect a better afterlife, but on how to live your lives well and contribute to constructing world peace.

## 6. Conclusion

Looking into Tai Xu's early ideas of three revolutions: an organizational revolution (zuzhi geming), an economic revolution, and an intellectual revolution (xueli geming) have all signified a proposed



transaction to Buddhism by Tai Xu. Then tracing back to the “modern” theories favored by historians and sociologists, what Tai Xu advocated and practiced in his later life can be defined as a Buddhist modernization movement. He wished to reform Buddhism by eliminating the feudal influences formed during the last five dynasties and helping Chinese Buddhism realize the transaction to a “modern” Buddhism. According to his imagination, an ideal Buddhism in China should have collective ownership of monastery property, abbots should be selected through a democratic election instead of a direct appointment by the last abbot, and people should focus on attaining Buddhahood in this world and jointly construct a pure land on earth.

These ideas may be too “modern” because some of them were achieved under communist rules thirty years later, especially that monks should practice agricultural Zen (nong Zen) and industrial Zen (gong Zen) to support themselves and that in 1956, China established the national level Buddhist Institutes to provide education for every sangha. Some of his other ideas, such as the collective ownership of monastery property, might be achieved when a communist society existed on earth. Tai Xu’s ideas were perhaps too advanced and too visionary for Chinese Buddhism and turbulent Republican China. However, despite all that, he is one of the most important figures for Buddhist Modernization, and he has contributed significantly to the Intellectual History of China.

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