CHAPTER SIX

THE LEGACY OF BUDDHISM IN CHINA

In examining the legacy of Buddhism in modern China, it is useful to consider two levels. One comprises the elements of thought, language, and culture which have been so completely appropriated that their provenance is forgotten. The other consists of self-conscious efforts to identify, reinterpret, and use elements of the Buddhist heritage to meet the problems of a China whose traditional civilization crumbled under the impact of forces generated in the modern West. In examining the Buddhist legacy at these two levels, we shall again be concerned with the differences between elite and popular cultures, with those contrasting attitudes and interests that have figured so largely in the whole historic process of the interaction of Buddhism and Chinese culture.

One of the most palpable and pervasive legacies of Buddhism is to be found in the Chinese language of modern times. From the proverbs of the peasant villages to the formal language of the intelligentsia, words of Buddhist origin are found in common use by people who are quite unconscious of their origin. For example, the common name for glass (po-li) is a corruption of a transliterated Sanskrit word, and the names of many precious and semi-precious stones are
of similar origin; so are the terms for many trees and plants. Other words for common objects, gestures, and expressions are used with a special meaning originally given them in Buddhist usage. Still others, coined for Buddhist purposes, entered the secular vocabulary with quite a different meaning.¹

Buddhism left still another linguistic legacy. When Western culture invaded China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the missionaries of religion, of Western technology, and of political ideologies introduced into China for the second time in its history a wide range of foreign ideas and foreign terminology, the new challenge was met largely with the help of resources developed in the centuries of effort to deal with Indian languages: improved techniques of phonological and grammatical analysis,² and, of more immediate and general utility, the stock of linguistic devices developed and conventionalized for expressing Indian words and ideas. Once again the invading culture expressed its ideas in inflected polysyllables, and the characters invented for the transliteration of Indian and Central Asian words were now put to new uses. Proper names from the Bible and from Western history and philosophy, untranslatable terms from the sciences and the humanities, were now introduced into Chinese by means of transliterative devices originally developed to render the untranslatable words of Indian origin. These devices now served to intro-


duce innumerable Western ideas; for example, "romantic," which had no Chinese analogue, became lang-manti, "modern" became mo-teng, "motor" became mo-po. Few, if any, of the missionaries of Western culture or the Chinese translators were fully aware of the rich store of relevant experience available to them in the records of Buddhist translators who had grappled with similar problems a millennium and a half earlier, but the modern interpreter of things Western was, however unconsciously, greatly in their debt.

In Chapter Five we noted many elements of the cultural legacy of Buddhism in China. Here we might mention the popular notions of karma and the after-life, the gods of folk religion, festivals whose symbols and observances suggest their Buddhist origin, decorative motifs in architecture and the lesser arts, and literary and musical genres and conventions which in times past were enriched by borrowings from Buddhism. We might extend this list almost indefinitely, but it is plain that Buddhism had ceased to be a definable tradition, a coherent body of belief, or a distinct way of life. The tradition had become fragmented, and elements introduced during the long period we have considered had fused with one or another strand of indigenous culture. Not until the new pressures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made themselves felt did a few Chinese seek to revive and reconstruct Chinese Buddhism as a separate and integral tradition. A brief consideration of these efforts may perhaps shed light on the whole historical process we have been reviewing.

The background of the modern rediscovery of Chinese Buddhism is of course the erosion and break-up of Chinese
civilization itself. During the hundred years of ever-deepening crisis after 1850, the intelligentsia—the Confucian literati—were first the self-conscious defenders of their civilization, then its critics and reformers. Finally, when nothing but the rubble of traditional civilization remained, these men led the quest for new ideas and institutions which, they hoped, might provide the basis for a new and viable Chinese order. One of many critical observations of Chinese society in its modern crisis was that the literati, with their once self-sufficient neo-Confucian way and view of life, were separated by a wide gulf from the peasant masses, to which the old order permitted a Buddhó-Taoist religion of many gods and many cults. Modern Chinese observers of the deepening crisis in their society looked for a solution toward the modern West, where they thought they saw nations socially united and invigorated by a common faith. For the great reformer K’ang Yu-wei (1858–1927), who had devoted himself for a time to Buddhist studies, the remedy lay in a remodeled Confucianism that could serve as the religion of a modernized state. Others turned to the heritage of Chinese Buddhism.

As the pace of social and political disintegration increased, Chinese intellectuals were driven to a cultural defensiveness which set them to ransacking their own history for analogues or prefigurings of the Western ideas whose truth seemed unanswerable in the light of their world-wide success in action. This kind of cultural defensiveness spread over most of Asia, and in China and elsewhere it often centered some of its defenses in the Buddhist tradition. Paul Demiéville sums it up:
They endeavor first of all to show that the Occident has invented nothing and that Buddhism, for example, is democratic, since it is essentially egalitarian and the decisions of the monastic communities were reached by majority vote; that it is humanistic, since man alone counts in the canonical doctrine; that it is communist, since the primitive religious community was classless and its property collectively owned; that it is rationalist, since salvation is a matter of reason divorced from all transcendence; that in its doctrine of the Void and its dialectic it is Kantian and Hegelian; that it is existentialist in its denial of all essence and its insistence on suffering; that it is, in the theories of the School of Knowledge, the precursor of Freud and Jung. Certain of these diverse traits (they admit) are not always present in Buddhism as it exists, but one need only reform it to adapt it to the modern world and put it in a condition to stand up to Christianity or even to Marxism.8

The writings of the reformer Liang Ch‘i-ch‘ao express this cultural defensiveness, and when he speaks of Buddhism, it is to claim the superiority of the doctrine of Karma over the theories of Darwin and Spencer, to point to the more advanced form of Western libertarianism to be found in Buddhism, and so on. Moreover, he claims for China the key role in the formation of the Mahayana, and thus adds to the list of Chinese priorities and superiorities with which he seeks to revive his own and his countrymen’s waning confidence in the creativity of their culture.4

Still another and quite different stimulus to the re-examination of China's Buddhist heritage arose from a general reappraisal of Chinese history, often guided by the consciously or unconsciously posed question: "What has brought our civilization from the heights of greatness to the depths of chaos and humiliation?" Hu Shih and other scholars began the great task of rediscovering those Buddhist chapters of Chinese history that Confucian historians had largely ignored. Hu Shih's ultimate findings amounted to an indictment of Buddhism. He found that it was Buddhism that had deflected the humane, rational, and proto-scientific culture of China from an orderly course of development which would have made Chinese civilization fully the equal of the West's in the modern world. He points to the failure of the neo-Confucians "to revive a secular thought and to build up a secular society to take the place of the other-worldly religions of Medieval China. They failed because they were powerless against the dead weight of over a thousand years of Indianization." And his prescription for Chinese backwardness follows naturally from this: "With the new aids of modern science and technology, and of the new social and historical sciences, we are confident that we may yet achieve a rapid liberation from the two thousand years' cultural domination by India."

In addition to these seekers after a new social cement, or cultural parity with the West, or an explanation of the lack of such parity, there were those who looked to a modernized

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Buddhism as a new ideology for an Eastern Asia united in a common stand against the intruding West. The Japanese empire-builders and their Chinese collaborators in the years 1937 to 1945 rebuilt and repaired temples, sponsored societies of lay Buddhists, and attempted to use Sino-Japanese Buddhism as a bond between the two peoples in what was represented as their common struggle against Western imperialism. This effort failed, but the attempt to make tactical use of Buddhism in the international politics of Eastern Asia is now continued by the People's Government in Peking. The preface to a recent Chinese Communist volume on Buddhism states this aim clearly: "Chinese Buddhists have united with the people of the whole country to give active support to China's socialist construction and to protect world peace. . . . To propagate Buddha's holy teachings and to safeguard world peace, Chinese Buddhists are eager to strengthen their friendship and co-operation with the Buddhists of other countries."6

These varieties of revived interest in Buddhism manifested themselves in a wide range of intellectual, political, and social activities. If we consider a few of these, we may be led to general reflections on some persisting disabilities which Buddhism labored under in modern China and on its possible role in a future Chinese culture.

It is significant that most of the serious revival of Buddhism in modern China was the work of laymen—people who felt that Buddhist ethics might reunite a divided society and Buddhist thought deepen men's awareness of the changing world in which they lived. The lay leaders ob-

served that the older Buddhist clergy, if educated, were sunk in lethargy and despair—their defeatism rationalized by the doctrine that one who lived in a period of "the extinction of the dharma" (mo-ja) could do little but look to his own salvation. The lay Buddhists organized themselves in a variety of efforts to revitalize and update Buddhism for modern China. Publishing houses were started, magazines and books were published, the sacred texts were reedited and reprinted. Although study groups and devotional groups were founded in many provinces, the center of the new activity was in the Yangtze valley and in the southern coastal provinces. There were national conferences on religious and social problems, fund-raising drives for new seminaries to train a modern clergy, efforts to establish modern organizations such as the YMBA and the YWBA. In 1914 the Chinese Buddhist Association was founded to fight the effort to make Confucianism a state religion. It continued as a nation-wide organization of laity and clergy to defend and promote Buddhist interests. Yet for fairly obvious reasons its structure was loose and ineffectual, and no great leaders emerged to give it vitality.

All the new activities were confined for the most part to the educated class, and Buddhism remained socially stratified; for the literate there were refurbished Buddhist ideas and a scattering of modernized institutions; the peasantry were left with their old Sinicized cults and a corrupt and illiterate Buddha-Taoist clergy. We noted that the social stratification of religion began to have serious effects on Buddhism after the decline of the T'ang order. The Buddhist revival in modern China failed to bridge that chasm.
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We may say that this was a failure of drive, of vision, of vitality, but we shall have to seek a fuller explanation in the doctrinal and institutional limitations which Buddhism inherited from its past.

The intellectual appeal of Buddhism in modern China has not been sufficient to attract more than a handful of the new political and social leaders. Many of these leaders received their education in the last days of the old order, and they were indoctrinated with neo-Confucianism’s dislike and disdain for Buddhist thought. The ideas and technical terms were difficult yet lacking in the novelty and the aura of success which accompanied the new ideas from the West. Buddhism—for all its new social consciousness—seemed to many to teach a lesson of passivity or tolerant resignation at a time when the mood of the intellectuals and political leaders called for a program of positive action. This revulsion against the passivity of Sino-Indian religion was well expressed by Ch’en Tu-hsiu, later to become one of the founders of the Chinese Communist party. He maintained that whereas the West had won its preeminence through strenuous conflict and blood, the East was inert, pacificistic, and helpless. He espoused Western militancy and dynamism: “The Oriental peoples may regard all this as madness, but in what condition do all these Oriental people, with their love of peace, quiet and harmony, now find themselves?” That Ch’en and men like him trafficked in dubious clichés should not obscure the fact that they were passionately seek-

ing a solution for China’s ills, and that the Buddhist ethos as they understood it was anathema to them.

Another disability of Buddhism and one that made its revival in modern China abortive was its apolitical character. We have noted its political passivity, its subservience to the state, throughout most of its history in China, and this appeared anachronistic to modern Chinese who had their eyes on the independent and militant religions of the West. Buddhist clergy and laymen made their peace with the warlords of North China, with the Japanese puppet regimes of the period of the Sino-Japanese War, and with a Kuomintang which had taken the most draconian measures against temples and clergy; this passivity was damning in the eyes of those who favored revolutionary change or a pluralistic society with a new balance of power between the state and groups united by common beliefs.

For centuries Buddhist apologists had sought to delineate the spheres of Buddhist and of Confucian doctrines and beliefs by saying that whereas Confucianism prescribed in detail for the here-and-now, Buddhism overarched it at both ends by interpreting the past, the present, and the future in a single continuum. Yet this continuum was a spiritual one, an explanation of the individual’s destiny in terms of his past deeds, present acts, and future reward or retribution. In modern China two burning interests worked to exclude Buddhism from the spectrum of intellectual choice. One was precisely the overriding concern with the here-and-now, with the diagnosis of China’s desperate illness and prescriptions for its cure. The other was linked to this; it was a concern for the collectivity that was China, whether regarded as
nation, society, or civilization. These two concerns tended to focus intellectual interest, not on the spiritual destiny of the individual, but on theories of history and society which claimed to explain the dynamics of states, of economies, and of societies. Buddhism had no such theory to offer, and it lost by default to the rising tide of evolutionary and materialist doctrines which seemed to offer the Chinese both an explanation of their plight and formulas which would put China on one or another allegedly universal escalator of progress.

Around the great and pressing problems of China's plight and its possible future a fierce controversy raged. One phase of this controversy was the debate on "Science and Philosophy of Life" in 1923, in which the real issue was not whether science was or was not superior to metaphysical thought, but which outlook would help China regain its strength, integrity, and self-respect. Those who continued to speak in religious or metaphysical terms, whether European or Asian, came in for a variety of attacks. Those who followed Russell, Dewey, and, in increasing numbers, Marx, asserted that the "age of religion" was a thing of the past in all advanced countries and that China in its march to modernity should take no backward steps.

This view was given wide public expression in the anti-religious movement of the 1920's; among other things, the cry went up that the West was seeking, through its missionaries, to saddle China with the incubus of religion which the West itself had finally succeeded in throwing off. The right to spread Christianity was included in the unequal treaties that were deeply resented and incessantly denounced by all parties and groups. Nor was it forgotten that the right to
send Buddhist missionaries had been exacted by Japan in the treaties she imposed on a prostrate China. When Tagore visited China in 1924 and preached the doctrine of the superiority of Eastern spirituality over Western materialism, he was attacked as a living symbol of the futile passivity of Eastern religions, a passivity that had reduced India to colonial and China to semi-colonial status. His appeal to open up the overgrown paths of cultural contact between India and China and unite the countries in a common spirituality fell on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{8} Neither his message nor the manifestoes of modernizing Buddhists offered any concrete and comprehensive formula for the salvation of China.

As we have seen, Buddhism was used by Chinese governments as an instrument of foreign policy from the Sui and T'ang, through the Manchu dynasty's use of Lamaism, down to Mao Tse-tung's tactical use of Buddhism in his relations with the rest of Asia. But there were also Chinese who sincerely regarded Buddhism as a supra-national faith that might unite the peoples of Eastern Asia in common resistance to the West and in the solution of their common problems. Tagore's spiritual pan-Asianism was rejected, but Chinese Buddhist groups made continuing efforts to establish their own Chinese variety of Buddhist internationalism. Yet when they asserted the international character of Buddhism they encountered two forms of resistance, both formidable. One was a pervasive xenophobia, a product of foreign pressure and Chinese frustration during nearly a century of crisis. The other was the rising tide of nationalist fervor,

particularly after 1919, that rallied Chinese in increasing numbers to what was exclusively and distinctively their own. Internationalism—Buddhist, Christian, or any other variety—was in conflict with a nationalism that for decades was the only article of faith on which all Chinese could agree. When Japan, in its own imperial interests, sponsored a Buddhist internationalism designed to smooth the path to conquest and foster docility and acceptance among the conquered, Buddhism became detestable in the eyes of patriotic and nationalistic Chinese. Not only did they resent this use of Buddhism as an instrument of psychological warfare, they also noted the subservience of Japan’s “modernized” Buddhist clergy to the will of a tyrannical and aggressive state; and from this they drew the lesson—justifiably or not is hardly the issue—that a modernized Chinese Buddhist clergy might well become the instrument of tyranny and reaction in their own country.

The invasion of China by the secular faiths of the modern West placed Buddhism in an arena of competition for which its history had ill prepared it. Faith in science was propagated by Dewey and Russell. The great abbot T’ai-hsü (1889–1946), the leading spokesman for a modernized Buddhism, might reply to the missionaries of science that Buddhism had long ago discovered the atom and relativity, that its psychological science was far more advanced than that of the West, but his critics would retort in effect: “What did you do with your discoveries? Did they liberate men’s minds and contribute to a freer and a more abundant life, or did they remain the intellectual playthings of monastic speculation?” To reply was difficult, for Buddhism had in fact em-
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phasized the apprehension of reality and faith in Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as means to release from an ephemeral and illusory world. Its effects on society had been the by-products of the spread of a faith and not of a concerted or planned effort to build a new society on the basis of Buddhist ideas.

The rising tide of materialist thought in this century saw the steady ebb of interest in idealisms, whether Chinese, Western, or Indian. It was against this intellectual background that the secular faith of Marxism steadily gained ground until it was finally imposed upon all Chinese by a militant minority.

Since 1949 Buddhism has suffered the fate of other organized religions in China. Its struggling schools and publishing houses have been taken over; its temples and clergy have been secularized on a large scale; stripped of their long-dwindling property, the few remaining temples and their monks exist at the pleasure of the government. The modern nation-wide organization of Chinese Buddhists, originally set up for the defense and propagation of the faith, has been revived as part of the complex network of organizations through which the government controls the people of China. The great monuments of Chinese Buddhism are being systematically restored not as centers of worship but as shrines to the "cultural creativity of the Chinese people under the feudal empires of the past."

In the course of this revolutionary process, Buddhism has once again adapted itself to political change. Though many suffered and died, few martyrs and no new martyrology have emerged from the recent period of strife. The secular faith of Marxism-Leninism has been made the center
of all thought and value, and adherence to it is the only path to worldly success. Officially approved Buddhist apologists strain to prove—and not for the first time in Chinese history—that Buddhism is wholly compatible with a creed ordained by the state. Elderly Buddhists meet for prayers and sutra readings under portraits of Chairman Mao, and the residue of organized Buddhism is barely tolerated as an adjunct of Communist minority and foreign policies.

We are seeing, I believe, the last twilight of Chinese Buddhism as an organized religion. The dispersed fragments of its cults and beliefs are being systematically extirpated throughout the whole of society. The Communist war on “superstition” in the villages is unremitting, and one wonders how long the peasantry will cling to its Buddhist-Taoist folk religion. The secret societies, with ideologies drawn from Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian sources, have been ruthlessly suppressed along with every other form of association that challenges the monopoly by the state and the party of all matters of belief and behavior.

If, in the years to come, we look for the legacy of Buddhism in China, we shall perhaps find it still in literature and language, in drama and the arts. And if we watch closely the steps by which the Chinese seek to build a new composite culture out of selected elements from their own traditions blended with Western borrowings, we shall note the long-term effect of the Buddhist experience. Typically it will appear as it does in statements like that of Liu Shao-ch’i—the leading theoretician of Chinese Communism—when he says that the ideal Communist party member “grieves before all the rest of the world grieves and is happy only after
all the rest of the world is happy.” Here is a restatement of Fan Chung-yen’s ideal of the Confucian scholar, an ideal appropriated from Buddhism nearly a millennium ago. It would seem that so long as there are Chinese speaking the Chinese language and dealing with their problems in ways that are distinctively the product of their common heritage, an awareness of the legacy of Buddhism will help us to understand their thought and behavior.

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As we look back over the two thousand years of history surveyed in these pages, there seem to be certain general observations that we can make about the characteristics of Chinese civilization, and about certain of its persistent and recurrent patterns.

First, we should observe that one persisting ideal of the Chinese is the notion of their culture as a whole self-consistent entity. History records much that is at odds with this, as with all ideals. Yet we find the Chinese returning again and again to the ideal of a monolithic society, economy, and polity, supported and rationalized by a thought system that is wholly consistent with itself and with the institutions it supports. The Han order approximated this ideal, and in the Sui and the T’ang, Buddhism was more or less successfully integrated into the effort to recapture the Han ideal. Later, however, when circumstances had changed, the Sung synthesis rejected any separate and distinctive Buddhism as in conflict with the ancient holistic ideal of Chinese civiliza-

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tion, and appropriated only such parts of the faith as were compatible with this ideal. Most recently we have seen a new reintegration that is more complete, more totalitarian in its broadest sense, than anything in China's previous history. Once again an orthodoxy imposed by the state supports and rationalizes an institutional order allegedly consistent with the approved system of ideas. To the degree that this ideal is realized, all competing ideas, religious or secular, are rejected or suppressed.

Second, we might observe that periods of disintegration and the loss of the holistic and related ideals are the only periods in which Chinese have shown any responsiveness to alien ideas. Buddhism could no more have established itself in the Empire of Han than Catholic Christianity could in the prosperous years of the Ch'ing dynasty. There are many similarities between the period of disunion from about 300 to 589 and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the first, an age of chaos and experimentation, the foreign ideas of Buddhism were the object of interest and commitment. In the second, first Christianity and then the secular faiths of the West have attracted those who sought a solution to the crisis of their civilization. In both these periods one sees an iconoclastic attitude toward ancient traditions, a restless, often passionate search for something new. In the ages that followed the first period we observed the reworking, then the appropriation, of what had been taken from an alien religion. On what will follow the present age we can only speculate, remembering that the erosion of native traditions has now gone much further than ever before. What we have
seen of the role of Buddhism in the development of Chinese civilization may help us to understand the process of borrowing and adaptation that is now going on and to analyze whatever cultural synthesis may emerge in the future.

Third, we should do well to note the fatuity of the notion of "absorption" as an explanation of what China does with elements of alien cultures. Just as innumerable invasions of alien people have not left the Chinese physical type unchanged, so what came in with Buddhism was not simply absorbed; it was appropriated and became part of a new cultural synthesis utterly different from that which had preceded this experience. The image of China as the sea that salts all the streams which flow into it does violence to the history of Buddhism in China, and it will mislead those who invoke it as a clue to the future of Chinese culture.

Fourth, the history of Buddhism in China demonstrates, as the history of Communism has more recently done, the Chinese capacity for fanatical commitment to an idea or a way of life. The West, in its appraisal of Chinese culture, has been the victim of the self-image of the civilization—the myth that was the property of the neo-Confucian elite of recent times. One element of that self-image was that the Chinese were consistently ethnocentric, rational, and humanistic. The Jesuits were taken in by this myth and propagated it in the West, where it lingers today. We have noted the fanatical commitment which characterized the Yellow Turban movement, and we have pointed to the wave of religious enthusiasm, the passionate acts of sacrifice and renunciation, which characterized the high tide of Buddhism in China.
If you wish evidence of the persistence of this capacity in
the present, I commend to you the chapter entitled “The
Red Nun” in Father Green’s *Calvary in China.*

Fifth, we have often noted in these pages the degree of
authority which the Chinese state perennially claimed over
matters of behavior and belief. Sometimes the state was un-
able to assert this control, but its right to do so was never
renounced. In the long history of Buddhism we saw state
power used to modify and to restrict both thought and
action; we also observed the pragmatic and utilitarian use of
selected religious beliefs that the state could not extirpate
but chose to use for social control. Much of the failure of the
Buddhist church to preserve its doctrinal integrity can be
traced to this implacable state pressure and state policy. In
modern China the same tendency is to be observed. The
Communist regime does not choose at this time to extirpate
Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism; from the point of view of
international politics this would not be expedient. But the
Communist state *uses* selected religious doctrines whenever
and wherever these serve its tactical purposes. The tragic
apologists of the three faiths acknowledge this time-honored
power of Chinese governments and cooperate in emphasizing
those beliefs that the state has decided are useful for the
moment.

I should like to stress that I do not believe that history
ever repeats itself in such a way as to provide a basis for
prediction. The people who say that the regime of Mao
Tse-tung is “just another dynasty” are quite as mistaken as
those who say that China’s break with its past is sharp and

complete. The great formative experiences of a people’s collective past seem to me, if they are rightly understood, to explain what that civilization has become in our time and to suggest some of the ways in which it will respond to the challenges it faces now and those it will face in the future. One of the formative experiences of the Chinese people was their age-long effort to deal with the religion and culture that came to them from India. To the degree that we ignore or misinterpret the history of that experience, we shall go astray in our efforts to understand the life, the culture, and the character of a great people.