

Buddhist Concepts and Phrases in China

Trajectories of Meaning over the Past Forty-five Years

Old and New Concepts and Phrases and their Discursive Evolution

Workshop, 23–25 March 2023

The 70th anniversary of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) in 2023 is widely regarded as an occasion to reflect on the development of Buddhism in the People's Republic of China since its founding in the year of 1949. The present workshop will adopt a discursive approach to take stock of conceptual (re)inventions and their changing meanings over the past 45 years, a period characterized by the opening policy since 1978.

It is time to undertake a more systematic examination of these four decades and look at contemporary Buddhist concepts, phrases and their dynamic evolution. Which concepts and phrases were favored by whom and how were they interpreted in order to fill Buddhism in China with life again? And what can we learn from the discursive experience over the decades including historiographical, doctrinal, or also practical adaptations? For instance, central phrases that played a dominant role in the early stages, like *renjian fojiao* (“Buddhism for a Human Realm”) and the associated *san da youliang chuantong* (“three great and marvelous traditions”), which have been propagated by the BAC since the early 1980s, underwent an enormous change of top-down and bottom-up interpretation. While *sangha* education (*sengcai peiyang*)

developed into a mantra for the monastics under changing conditions, slogans like *wenming jingxiang* and *heli fangsheng* (“civilized burning of incense”, “rational releasing of life”) became part of the daily vocabulary of temple visitors with growing relevance. Other concepts and phrases gained popularity and influence in the 1990s, or even later, including the emergence and diverse understanding of what is called *wangluo fojiao* (“cyber Buddhism”). Many keywords and phrases could be added that represent conceptual positions which played a more or less dynamic role in the recent history of Buddhism.

The objective of the workshop is to bring together experts and to foster their exchange about concepts and phrases that appear significant for a better understanding of the Buddhist preferences with all the possible changes of meanings through the past four decades. In addition to our online and on-site speakers (see program), we have invited Kai Vogelsang (Hamburg University) as keynote speaker and the following guests for discussion: Daniela Campo (Strassbourg), Richard Ellguth (Berlin), Leo Koenig (Hamburg), and Amandine Péronnet (Marseille).

Convenor: Dr. Carsten Krause

Venue: Hamburg University

Funded by: Numata Center for Buddhist Studies, German Research Foundation

Program

Thursday, 23 March

Room 123, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, East Wing

13:30–13:45	Reception	
13:45–14:00	Introduction	Carsten Krause (Hamburg)
14:00–15:00	Keynote	Kai Vogelsang (Hamburg) Conceptual History and the Study of Chinese Buddhism
15:00–15:15	<i>Coffee Break</i>	
15:15–16:15	Presentation/Discussion 1	Carsten Krause (Hamburg) About the Possible Invention of Traditions and its Implications: Is <i>san da youliang chuantong</i> 三大优良传统 still Alive?
16:15–16:30	<i>Coffee Break</i>	
16:30–17:30	Presentation/Discussion 2	André Laliberté (Ottawa) <i>Cishan</i> 慈善: Charity or Philanthropy?
18:00–20:00	<i>Dinner</i>	

Program

Friday, 24 March

Room 123, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, East Wing

9:00–10:00

Hongkong: 16:00–17:00

Presentation/Discussion 3

Weishan Huang (Hongkong)

On “Urban Buddhism” (*dushi fojiao* 都市佛教)

10:00–10:15

Coffee Break

10:15–11:15

Beijing: 17:15–18:15

Presentation/Discussion 4

Shengkai (Beijing)

Zhao Puchu's Conceptual World and the Issues, Methods and Practices of the Revival of Buddhism in Modern China

11:15–11:30

Coffee Break

11:30–12:30

Beijing: 18:30–19:30

Presentation/Discussion 5

Xuan Fang (Beijing)

A Study on the Conceptual History of *qili qiji* (契理契机): Focusing on Interpretations in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Buddhism

12:30–14:30

Lunch

Program

Friday, 24 March

Room 123, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, East Wing

14:30–15:30

Paris: 14:30–15:30

Presentation/Discussion 6

Ji Zhe (Paris)

The "Sinicization" of Religion: Culture as Political Rhetoric

15:30–15:45

Coffee Break

15:45–16:45

Presentation/Discussion 7

Avi Darshani (Tel Aviv)

Remolding the Old Practice: The Emergence of "Rational Releasing of Life" (*heli fangsheng* 合理放生)

16:45–17:00

Coffee Break

17:00–21:00

City Tour & Dinner

All Participants

Program

Saturday, 25 March

Room 123, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, East Wing

9:00–10:00

Presentation/Discussion 9

Stefania Travagnin (London)

From *wangluo fojiao* 网络佛教 to *jiqi seng*
机器僧: Shaping New Ideas "with Chinese
Characteristics"

10:00–10:15

Coffee Break

10:15–11:15

Presentation/Discussion 10

Adam Yuet Chau (Cambridge)

Getting Close(r) to the Buddha
(*yu fo qinjin* 与佛亲近)

11:15–11:30

Coffee Break

11:30–12:30

Final Discussion

All Participants

12:30–14:30

Lunch

Abstracts

Conceptual History and the Study of Chinese Buddhism

Kai Vogelsang (Hamburg University, Hamburg)

This keynote speech is meant as an introduction to conceptual history from a decidedly non-Buddhist perspective. It will first discuss the theory and methods of conceptual history in general; second, it will offer some reflections on the study of religious concepts in particular; and third, it will address some examples from the field of Buddhist studies, exploring ways in which conceptual history can contribute to the field.

About the Possible Invention of Traditions and its Implications: Is *san da youliang chuantong* 三大优良传统 still Alive?

Carsten Krause (Hamburg University, Hamburg)

The religious life after the Cultural Revolution was more than just a revival of traditions. Much depended on Buddhist elites and their theoretical framing, the most prominent of whom became Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907-2000). As President of the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会), he introduced the so-called *renjian fojiao* 人间佛教 (Humanistic Buddhism) as a “guiding thought” (*zhidao sixiang* 指导思想) and connected it – independently of Taixu’s 太虚 (1890-1947) and

others’ more sophisticated theories – with the “Three Great and Marvelous Traditions” (*san da youliang chuantong* 三大优良传统). He identified these three as 1) “equal weighting of farming and *chan*” (*nongchan bingzhong* 农禅并重), 2) “strong concern for scientific research” (*xueshu yanjiu* 学术研究), 3) “friendly international exchange” (*guoji youhao jiaoliu* 国际友好交流).

My contribution examines the trajectories of this construction and attempts to explore how it has been interpreted and used in official rhetoric and wider discourse over the years, including possible reinterpretations after Zhao’s passing away. In a broader sense, this may also raise the question of what the changing connotations of “tradition(s)” (*chuantong* 传统) have become in contemporary China, whether they are old or new, dead or alive.

Abstracts

***Cishan* 慈善: Charity or Philanthropy?**

André Laliberté (University of Ottawa, Ottawa)

Although the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会) has appropriated that concept since the beginning of the period of reform and opening, its relationship with Buddhism is complicated. My paper will start by contrasting the absence of the term *cishan* 慈善 in the canonical literature to its widespread use by all the state-sponsored religions in contemporary, as well as many civil society actors and CCP-sponsored organizations. I will substantiate the extent of the latter claim with examples of historical narratives that discuss *cishan* in ancient China and contrast them with the writings of Taixu 太虛 (1890-1947). I will contextualize this appropriation of the concept in relation to the transition of China into a market-based economy and radical changes in the provision of social welfare, as well as the more recent changes in the CCP United Front work strategies for religious work. I will then point to the ambiguities inherent to the concepts of charity and philanthropy, commonly used as translations of *cishan*.

On “Urban Buddhism” (*dushi fojiao* 都市佛教)

Weishan Huang (Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hongkong)

“*Dushi fojiao* 都市佛教” (Urban Buddhism) is a relatively new concept among current city Buddhist monasteries and lay practitioners. In this talk, I will review the recent discourse on a bottom-up concept and practice, “urban Buddhism,” in the last few decades, building on monastic narratives, elite narratives, and state narratives. Adapting to urban Buddhist practice, inevitably, means adapting to modernity. The talk will also cover the association on how the term “humanistic Buddhism” has been shifted to “urban Buddhism” in the long history of Shanghai's local setting about the normative account of contemporary Buddhism in China.

Abstracts

Zhao Puchu's Conceptual World and the Issues, Methods and Practices of the Revival of Buddhism in Modern China *

Shengkai (Qinghua University, Beijing)

Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907–2000) can be distinguished by three identities: a lay Buddhist, a political leader, and a cultural celebrity. Zhao Puchu's position as President of the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会) was an “overlap” of these three identities. Therefore, the revival of Chinese Buddhism after the reform and opening-up was due to the exercise of the function of “politics” and “culture” benefiting from the hard work of Zhao Puchu. At the same time, Zhao Puchu's sense of identity and terminology as a “lay Buddhist” inevitably missed the horizon of the sangha community. In his later years he emphasized “Strengthening the Self-construction of Buddhism” (*jiaqiang fojiao zishen jianshe* 加强佛教自身建设) as a kind of correction.

A Study on the Conceptual History of *qili qiji* (契理契机): Focusing on Interpretations in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Buddhism **

Xuan Fang (Renmin University, Beijing)

This contribution first conducts an etymological investigation on the phrase *qili qiji* 契理契机 and takes a special look at Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), one of the four eminent monks in the late Ming

Dynasty, who held great importance in shaping the thoughts of Chinese Buddhist circles in the late Chinese Empire and the Republic of China. It was his emphasis on *qili qiji* which had a profound impact on Buddhist circles of the Republic of China, both reformers and conservatives.

The main part of this contribution focuses on examining the different connotations, emphases, and interpretations of *qili qiji* in the relevant discourse contexts of representative figures and groups of Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教). It undertakes a comparison of the different emphases in explaining *qili qiji* between Taixu 太虚 (1890–1947), the initiator of the theory of Humanistic Buddhism, and its completer Yinshun 印顺 (1906–2005). Further, it elaborates on the differences in the interpretation of *qili qiji* by the representative figures of contemporary Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan, like Sheng Yen 圣严 (1930–2009), Hsing Yun 星云 (1927–), and Cheng Yen 证严 (1937–). Finally, it examines the use of *qili qiji* in the official documents of the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会) and in the expositions of master Jinghui 净慧 (1933–2013), a sangha leader who was representative of the promotion of Humanistic Buddhism in contemporary Chinese Buddhist circles in mainland China.

The article concludes by examining how the term *qili qiji* has spilled over from Buddhist circles into the official expressions of government religious affairs administrations and other religions such as Daoism.

Abstracts

The “Sinicization” of Religion: Culture as Political Rhetoric

Ji Zhe (INALCO, Paris)

The “Sinicization of Religion” (*zongjiao zhongguohua* 宗教中国化) policy launched in 2015 marked a turn in the Communist Party’s approach to religious governance, opening a new era of strict control over religion in post-reform China. This presentation will analyze the official discourse about such a policy. The author argues that the “Sinicization of Religion” primarily includes two meanings. On the one hand, religion should obey the leadership of the Party, that is, adapt to China’s existing system and maintain its security; on the other hand, religion should play a certain role in shaping morality or interpreting a system of values, with the legitimacy of these ethics and system of values then subject to the Party’s evaluation. With regard to a particular religion, the impact of these two aspects is different. In any case, however, the term of “culture” in the related discourses is no more than a rhetoric that allows the CCP to cover up its political intentions.

Remolding the Old Practice: The Emergence of “Rational Releasing of Life” (*heli fangsheng* 合理放生)

Avi Darshani (Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv)

Fangsheng 放生, the release of animals to the wild or into man-made pools, is a long-established practice among Buddhist monastics and lay devotees in Chinese societies throughout the world. Nonetheless, during the last two decades, the practice has gained immense popularity in China, especially among lay practitioners. The unchecked growth in the intensity and volume of *fangsheng* in China has not gone unnoticed on the part of government bureaus, national media, and institutional Buddhism. Consequently, *fangsheng* was framed as an imminent problem which deserves full consideration.

This paper analyzes the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao xiehui* 中国佛教协会) and state bureaus’ response to the “*fangsheng* craze” and rhetorical discourse employed by these bodies which culminated in an orchestrated campaign urging for “rational releasing of life” (*heli fangsheng* 合理放生). The new meanings and purposes loaded on the ancient practice will be presented and contextualized. At the local level, based on fieldwork conducted in the city of Xiamen, the understandings of the newly propagated phrase, the apologetics used by proponents of ritual, and some of the effects of the campaign will further be discussed.

Abstracts

From *wangluo fojiao* 网络佛教 to *jiji seng* 机器僧: Shaping New Ideas “with Chinese Characteristics”

Stefania Travagnin (University of London, London)

In the past two decades Buddhist communities and individual practitioners have relied on digital tools to, for instance, learn about the Dharma, continue their cultivation, and perform ritual offerings. A new terminology has been introduced to identify this new dimension of Buddhism; this set of words and expressions has not just labelled, passively, the new Buddhism, it has also contributed, actively, to create it. Secondly, online Buddhism and Buddhist AI are not an isolated phenomenon in Chinese society as digital technology and artificial intelligence are penetrating and reforming various cultural sectors in Chinese society.

I will start with an overview of the digital/AI Buddhist vocabulary, outlining especially the more recurrent words and expressions; I will then continue by assessing the new imagination of Buddhism that this taxonomy has shaped. Finally, I will reflect on how Buddhism, via the new vocabulary, has participated in the political plan to make China a digital and AI power in the 21st century.

Getting Close(r) to the Buddha (与佛亲近)

Adam Yuet Chau (University of Cambridge, Cambridge)

In recent decades a new expression has been quietly spreading amongst lay Buddhists in China: getting close/closer to the Buddha (*yufo qinjin* 与佛亲近). Sometimes one is also exhorted to get close/closer to the dharma (or simply the ‘three treasures’ [Buddha, dharma, sangha]), to a particular bodhisattva (e.g., Guanyin), to a particular Buddhist master/teacher, to one’s fellow lay Buddhist practitioners, to a particular Buddhist site, etc. This paper explores the possible causes and implications of this phenomenon. Where did this expression come from (e.g., did it come from Taiwanese Buddhist groups? from evangelical Christianity?)? What does it mean to get close/closer to the Buddha or a dharma master? Why do lay Buddhist practitioners wish to get ‘up close and personal’ with the Buddha or their dharma teachers (instead of, or in addition to, sponsoring sutra chanting)? What happens when one does get close to the Buddha? How does this sentiment or goal resonate with the explosive growth of Buddhism in recent decades and broader societal developments? In what way is this a form of ‘religious subjectification’?

Abstracts

* Chinese original (Shengkai):

赵朴初的观念世界与现代中国佛教复兴的问题、方法、实践

圣凯 (清华大学哲学系)

赵朴初具有三重身份：在家佛教徒、政治领袖、文化名人，赵朴初担任中国佛教协会会长是这三种身份的“重叠”。因此，改革开放后的中国佛教复兴是“政治”和“文化”作用的发挥，这得益于赵朴初的努力运作；同时，赵朴初作为“在家佛教徒”，其身份意识与观念世界难免缺乏出家僧团的视野，其晚年极力强调“加强佛教自身建设”是一种纠偏。

** Chinese original (Xuan Fang):

契理契机的观念史考察：以现当代汉传佛教的诠释为中心

宣方 (中国人民大学佛教与宗教学理论研究所)

本文首先对“契理契机”进行词源学的考察，进而指出晚明四大高僧之一的蕅益智旭对中华帝国晚期和民国时代的中国佛教界的思想有巨大形塑意义，智旭对契理契机的强调，对民国佛教界无论是革新派和保守派都有深刻影响。

本文的主体部分着重考察“契理契机”一词在人间佛教代表性人物、团体的相关论述语境中的不同意涵、侧重和诠释展开面向；这部分首先对比了人间佛教理论的奠基人太虚和完成者印顺之间阐释“契理契机”时的不同侧重；其次对比了当代台湾人间佛教代表性人物圣严、星云、证严诠释“契理契机”时的差异；最后考察中国佛教协会的官方文件和大陆当代佛教界推行人间佛教的代表性僧团领袖净慧法师的论述中“契理契机”一词的用法。

本文最后考察“契理契机”一词如何从佛教界外溢到政府宗教事务管理部门和其它宗教如道教的官方表述中。