Encountering Buddhism in Today's China - The Quest of Christian Cochini

Book review by Benoit Vermander 魏明德

Abstract

Christian Cochini (1929-2018), the author of 50 Great Masters of Chinese Buddhism, was a man passionate about Chinese culture and Chinese religions, in particular. His love for China made him eager to foster intercultural and interreligious encounters. Before starting his Sinological studies he had specialised in the study of the Latin and Greek Fathers of the Church. His special attention paid to their monastic traditions, certainly prepared the way later on for his encounter with Chinese Buddhism. After several years teaching in China, Taiwan, and Japan, he moved to Hong Kong and Macao, where he embarked on a program of study and encounter with Chinese Buddhism that kept him busy till the end of his life. From around 2000 onwards Cochini became a pilgrim, travelling to every major Buddhist temple in China, and to many lesser-known centres. He recorded their cultural and scriptural riches, and engaged in long conversations with elder Masters whom he loved and revered. Deeply anchored in the Catholic and Jesuit tradition himself, he believed that interreligious dialogue was a privileged way to appreciate the spiritual traditions of the whole of humankind, in the hope of opening up the minds and souls of people from every nation and culture. Cochini was a visionary, and, for him, interreligious encounter was key to the betterment of humankind. Cochini published

two voluminous books that are the fruit of his countless pilgrimages. The first one is about Buddhist temples in China. The second one – which is the one reviewed here – is about eminent Buddhist Masters.

The Centrality of Buddhist Monastic Communities

During recent decades, China's religious awakening has manifested itself in many ways. One of its most notable expressions has been the rapid development of Buddhism, based on the reconstruction and expansion of the Buddhist monastic communities. This is not surprising; from the very beginning of Buddhist expansion in China, the monastic community constitutes the axis around which rotates the devotional practices, the beliefs and the institutional continuity of Buddhism. A liturgical place, the temple acts as a collective intercessor for the community of believers directing to it their wishes and their prayers, especially for the deceased. As places of learning, the great temples make it possible to carry on through several centuries the translation of the Buddhist canon into Chinese, one of the greatest editorial enterprises in history, and to multiply the interpretations of it. As a place of power, the temple knows how to negotiate its relationship with the political leaders of the locality and then of the Empire, although this model was held at bay at the time of the big persecution of the ninth century, partly due to the concentration of wealth realised by the monastic communities.

Erik Zürcher provides us with the best summary of the *modus operandi* proper to Chinese Buddhism:

> During the first three centuries of our era the dissemination of Buddhism in China was carried on at the popular level. In the 4th century, Buddhism starts reaching out to the elites, and the first large monasteries are established. Enriched by important donations, they keep developing by running social and economic activities: management of their estates, accumulation of capital, organisation of fairs and pawn shops, printing press and guest houses. Chinese Buddhism has thus become a powerful religious power drawing its strength from this remarkable institution which is the monastery. But the amazing fact is that this great religious power came to pass without any form of central direction or coordination. Chinese Buddhism has always been an ocean of countless centers, big and small, of very different levels, the biggest ones sponsored by the Court and peopled with learned monks, the smallest ones vegetating in the villages and inhabited by some illiterate monks. In summary: a great institutional force, combined with a great weakness of organisation. (Zürcher, 1990, p. 26-7)

The reconstruction of Chinese Buddhism after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution relied therefore on the monastic institution, as it was already the case in other times. And the vitality of the monasteries bears witness to that of the Buddhist practices and beliefs in the whole of the society.

It is not so easy to describe the Chinese Buddhist world in its totality. Monks and nuns, be they still novices or already ordained, are as easily identified by their clothing, their tonsure, and, for those who have been ordained, by their ordination certificates as by the scars on the head following the fulfilled rites. But the faithful are not recognisable in the crowd of those who visit the temples, so great is the diversity of their motivations and behaviours. The term, "Buddhist faithful" (居士), is normally reserved for those who have formally taken refuge (皈依) in the "three Jewels": The Buddha, the Law, the Community. In return they receive a certificate that they can show at the entrance of a temple to be exempted from paying admission fees, for instance, or to get board and lodging. The levels of membership are many and not always so clearly identified.

The visitor to a Buddhist monastery will generally be struck by the predominance

of young monks, often already at the head of their monasteries, sometimes graduated from prestigious universities. These monks are more and more engrossed in their tasks—construction of buildings, setting up of research centres and libraries in social institutions. The production of this elite of clerics is facilitated by regulations reserving admission into Buddhist studies centres to those of less than thirty years of age on average. Beside these young monks, one will usually see some quite old and silent monks who had entered the monasteries at a very young age, and long before the turmoil of the sixties. Having already assimilated the spirit and traditions of the school to which their temple belonged, and managing to survive, even starting anew some communities at the beginning of the eighties, they had handed over their responsibilities to their successors.

Of course, with the passing of time, the absence of an intermediary generation, conspicuous between 1985 and 2000, is less visible now, and the generation in power today has progressively asserted its experience and its authority. The nature and the exercise of this authority depends mostly on a transformation in the economic bases of the monasteries. The exploitation of the agricultural estates was replaced by an increased dependence on donations (at first from overseas, then from local donors), on the help of government agencies (for the reconstruction of buildings in particular), on the practice of rituals, and on some specialised productions. The monks affiliated with a given monastery generally receive a modest allowance, in nature or in cash, in return for their liturgical talents or for other services. Some develop a congregation (and thus a revenue) of their own.

One cannot understand the present state of Chinese Buddhism by looking only at its two extremes—the time of its beginnings, when the basic shape of the monastic community has taken form, and the reconstruction boom of the last two or three decades. One must also say a word about the ups and downs of its history throughout the last 150 years, for the destructions of the Cultural Revolution had been preceded by those of the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864), particularly in South China, a traditional Buddhist bastion. The subsequent effort of reconstruction coincided then with rising internal criticisms concerning the system of formation and the lack of respect towards monastic precepts. Seen in Catholic perspective, Chinese Buddhism was entering the era of *aggiornamento*. Some of the reformer monks advocated mainly going back to the ancient disciplines, privileging a small number of select texts and practices of meditation. A little later, came another trend, of which the monk Taixu (1890-1947) is the most well-known representative. This involved a modernisation of Buddhism, following a method close to that of the Chinese Republicans of the beginning of the last century—the ideal of "science and democracy" applied, so to speak, to the religious sphere. The role of the laity was emphasised, and monastic education was similar in style to that of the western universities.

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The creation, in the first half of the twentieth century, of the Chinese Buddhist Association, the popularisation of a humanistic Buddhism or Buddhism in the world (人间佛教), the contacts between monks and political leaders of that time—all these characteristics have helped shape the look of Chinese Buddhism after 1980. Nonetheless, the debates that characterised the revival of 1870-1940 continue today, as the Buddhist community seeks to define its relationship with a post-modern China in a state of constant transformation.

Neither the development of Chinese Buddhism today, nor its social and cultural impact, can be understood without resituating it within the more general context of the religious awakening of China. Of course, the question of

the nature of the "religious" in China must be raised at once, and therefore the question of its awakening. In China, as it is commonly said, religion affects and is affected by everything surrounding it. Rites, pilgrimages, temples, congregations, and beliefs create a landscape where political, civilian and familial institutions are inextricably linked together in a whole, through which the community reproduces and regulates itself, and at the same time expresses a search for meaning and prosperity. It must also be emphasised that the very word "religion" (宗教) in the Chinese language is relatively new, a term borrowed from the Japanese language towards the end of the nineteenth century to express a reality which could not be found in the Chinese world. From this perspective, to speak of the "return of the religious" would be immediately questionable.

Nevertheless, China has experienced a progressive structuring of the religious sphere. When the scholars of the 1920s and 1930s affirmed that "China [did] not need religion", they acknowledged by the same token the distinction between the sphere of the religious and the other spheres of social activity, an evolution carried on through quite a few centuries. In other words, Chinese religions are historical phenomena in perpetual evolution, redefinition and social specialisation. Religions have developed with, against and beside the state; dogmas and norms of behaviour have been asserted, questioned and developed. Having been stalled at the time of the Sino-Japanese war, the debate about the role of religious beliefs and institutions in individual and social life was revived after 1979.

Transmission Through Spiritual Masters

Christian Cochini's first book, focused on temples, can be read as a kind of "composition of a place", as the notion is used in the *Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius of Loyola: "Preamble I. This is the composition, seeing the place. ... The 'composition' consists in seeing through the gaze of the imagination the material place where the object I want to contemplate is situated." Let us be quite clear about this: Cochini carried out a long and meticulous survey to compose his overview of those privileged places—the temples—which join together the monastic communities, the faithful and the historical evidence, which condense and perpetuate the living reality of Chinese Buddhism. If there was "imagination" in this regard, it was not anchored anywhere else than in the most scrupulous observation. However, and this is the meaning of the parallel I am suggesting, his *Guide to the Buddhist Temples* did construct some "spiritual places". These are the nodes and the junctions through which Buddhism makes its contribution to the Chinese social and cultural fabric as well as its contribution to the inner quest that all humanity pursues and shares throughout the ages. Cochini's perspective was not just concerned with buildings or monastic organisation but above all with collective memory and what was at stake in such places. To construct the place is indeed to get ready to go from the visible world to the invisible stakes involved in it.

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By contrast, his new work, the *50 Great Masters of Chinese Buddhism*, calls to mind what Ignatius of Loyola asks from the person who starts a spiritual retreat once the place is composed: "It is to recall the narrative." What is told here are the stories for which these temples have often been the scene. Here are stories of men (more rarely women) who lived and worked in their own time and environment and were often incorporated into the unified historical narrative made official both by the state and by their religious tradition. These individual monks have also become collective types: they have become models on

which Buddhist faithful, but also perhaps believers from other religions, evaluate and guide their own spiritual paths. Their influence is not limited to China. Quite a few monks studied in this book shaped the development of East Asian Buddhism as a whole—in Japan and Vietnam notably—and are considered the founders of Buddhist Schools in the whole of Asia.

Far from confining ourselves to an exotic world, the reading of this book enables us to enter a "global spiritual history"—marked by travels, exchanges, returns, long-term evolution. In that respect, the account of the life of Hui Neng (慧能), perhaps the best known of all the monks mentioned here, is a good example. At night, his abbot expelled him from the monastery, at the very moment when he confirmed the authenticity of Hui Neng's awakening however socially radical and religiously subversive it may have been. It seems that the purpose of the expulsion was to save Hui Neng's life, but can we not discern something else in the expulsion of the man who tells the inner truth? Somehow, his Master does not appear to be able to follow through to the end. The narrative has such force that it has left a mark on the imagination, so much so that it largely explains the success and astonishing fecundity of the Zen school in the Japanese world and nowadays also on a global scale. Here it appears difficult to separate a doctrine from the story of the life in which it was embodied. Hui Neng has become a type in the spiritual history of the world beyond schools and dogmas. A reading of Cochini's book will show that this type plays a part in guiding the lives and choices of monks who have come after him.

It is significant to note that while Chinese Buddhism has exerted (and still exercises) a spiritual influence that extends beyond its borders, it had first strongly, and at length, taken root in the heritage it was receiving – the ones of the first generations of monks coming, for the most part, from the Persian Empire. The first texts we possess are aimed at building up localised monastic communities – however, these texts are not reserved for the community of monks: many passages of the *Sutra in Forty-two Sections* (四十二章经) are clearly directed at all the faithful and define a middle way which makes asceticism and study a vocation shared by all. This is also the case with another text of the second century ascribed to Mouzi (牟子), whose *Settling of Doubts* (理惑论) is clearly aimed at an audience of Confucian scholars. That synthesis has been a characteristic of subsequent Chinese history, but even so it was not accomplished on the basis of a doctrinal weakening of the Buddhist tenets: between the third and seventh centuries, and under the impetus and the direction of some of the Masters whose biographies are in this book, the translation of the Buddhist Canon into Chinese established itself as the greatest enterprise of translation in history and deeply modified the evolution of the Chinese language itself. But that subject is beyond our scope here.

There is a final point to which I would like to draw the reader's attention: Cochini's book proves particularly useful for understanding the history and role of Buddhism in modern and contemporary China. The eminent place he has given to the Masters of the twentieth century is a most fortunate choice. Chinese Buddhism experienced two transformations of the utmost importance in that century: the first one was a consequence of the destruction underwent during the Taiping rebellion as well as of the shock created by Westernisation. Following the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, the second transformation took place from the middle of the 1980s onwards and relied on new political and social conditions to rebuild the monastic institutions and carry out an enterprise of religious education for all social classes, mainly in the cities. Therefore, the biographies of the last part of this volume acquire a special interest as we begin to appreciate the meaning and scope of the religious mutations unfolding throughout the second half of the last century.

But the book's importance in throwing light on the most contemporary period does not stop there: once again it is the long lineage of eminent monks, with spiritual connections formed between individuals who lived in different times, which provides models and inspiration for all people in quest of a spiritual path. In other words, Buddhism today transforms China not

only by the power of its institutions but even more by the impact of its long history, as it is taken on and reinterpreted by the monks and faithful who continue it. The biographies of monks form a chain, with some of its links recalled in this volume, and the chain looks likely to continue. Thanks are due to Christian Cochini for having helped us to locate Chinese Buddhism into a global spiritual history, which must continue to guide and inspire the whole of humankind.

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References

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