

Attuning Within Inertia: The Buddhist Lay Authority Among Chinese Americans

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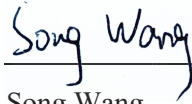
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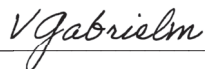


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I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted
as an exercise for a degree at any other institution,
and that it is entirely my own work.

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The conclusion of my doctoral dissertation marks the end of my academic education, yet it also signifies the inception of a broader university of life. This new chapter means not only engaging in social practice, creating value, and making a living, but also embarking on a new journey for my personal faith. Whether it be Buddhism as an academic field or as a personal spiritual practice, these nearly six years of academic endeavors have provided fresh footnotes to my practice of faith and guided its potential direction. As a glimmer of light begins to emerge along this narrow path, I recognize that this convergence of causes and conditions has been paved by abundant care and love.

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Abstract

Attuning Within Inertia: The Buddhist Lay Authority Among Chinese Americans

By

Song Wang

This dissertation explores how Chinese American lay Buddhists established independent authority and lay subjectivity within the transnational context after 1950. While existing scholarship focuses more on monastic-led institutions or frames Buddhist modernism within a narrative of “monastic-lay confrontation,” American Buddhism has further emphasized a lay orientation as a whole. Adopting the theoretical framework of transnationalism and McMahan’s Buddhist Modernism, this dissertation differentiates between the individual identity of “layperson” and the sociological concept of “lay Buddhism,” focusing more on the level of the lay Buddhist elites and their lay organizations, rather than the broader group of lay Buddhists. This brings the clarification of “independence” as the lay community’s shift from “identity dependence” to possessing autonomous organizational and interpretative authority. However, historical Chinese lay Buddhism shows that excessive independence risks being branded “heretical” by orthodox authorities. This quest for legitimacy amid independence serves as a subtext for

analyzing my cases.

Employing ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and archival research, this dissertation conducts research on the Buddhist Association of the United States and the Amida Society of Los Angeles. In the transnational context, Shen Jiazhen and President Chen played as a “Functional Sangha” and gained growing independent lay authority in both administrative and spiritual aspects, while still maintaining respect for traditional monastic authority. This results in a mechanism of “Mutual Empowerment” fraught with both collaboration and tension: laypeople provide the “stage” (secular resources) to support the Sangha, and in exchange, they obtain the endorsement of “orthodoxy.” By summarizing, Chinese American lay Buddhism demonstrated non-sectarianism that supports monastics from various backgrounds. During this monastic vacuum era, these organizations evolved into inclusive “Pan-Buddhist hubs” or “landing platforms” for immigrant monastics, thereby accelerating the transplantation of Chinese Buddhism to America. So, the conceptualization of “Attuning within Inertia” is used to depict how Chinese American lay Buddhism navigated the dual forces of adherence to tradition (inertia) and adaptation to modernism (attuning). Through this dynamic, these groups have forged a resilient, highly adaptive model of modern Buddhism.

Keywords: Lay Buddhism, Chinese Americans, Authority, Independence, Non-sectarianism

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Chapter One:

Introduction

The first time I went to the Amida Society to participate in a weekend Buddha-recitation retreat, I was deeply impressed by the rigorously structured ritual space and the solemn religious atmosphere. Practitioners all wore traditional, dignified *haiqing* 海青 robes before entering the chanting hall. Spatially, male and female practitioners were arranged separately on the left and right. It reflected the strict disciplinary order in the hall, which can be seen in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. Notably, the lay Buddhists play a key role. Some lay Buddhists operate instruments such as the handbell (*yingqing* 引磬) and wooden fish (*muyu* 木鱼), control the rhythms and guide the process of collective meditation. Though a monk was invited to preside over the ceremony, the deep level of lay participation was clearly evident. After the collective recitation of scriptures, the association held a teaching lecture, and President Chen explained the *Sutra of Innumerable Life* (*Wuliang shoujing* 无量寿经).

Lay Buddhists expounding Buddhist scriptures are relatively rare in Chinese Buddhism, especially in mainland China in recent years. The traditional Chinese Buddhism centered on monastic communities, and the booming development of lay Buddhism within the transnational context in the United States have triggered my

academic reflection. The core is how Chinese American lay Buddhism maintains vitality in a multicultural context and reshapes the power pattern. To understand the evolution of contemporary overseas Chinese Buddhism, it is crucial to clarify how lay authority has expanded from organizational management to encompass spiritual authority, including ritual guidance and the preaching of doctrine. This shift highlights the self-adjustment and paradigm transformation of Chinese Buddhism during its localization in North America. It also offers critical academic insights for analyzing the multidimensional historical processes of Chinese Buddhism in transnational circulation and the reconstruction of its role within the Western religious landscape.

Research Objectives

This dissertation mainly explores the complex evolution of the first-generation Chinese American lay Buddhist immigrants in establishing their own independent authority within the multicultural environment of United States after the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*. Chinese Buddhism in the US experienced the absence of the traditional monastic system during that period, which led to a vacuum in religious leadership and sacred interpretation. Then, lay leaders not only played the role of system designers but also assumed the responsibility of faith disseminators. Gradually, they played a unique role in guiding temple affairs, integrating monastics, and shaping local religious life. Therefore, they were able to fill the institutional gaps and re-establish their identity, transforming from marginal followers to a dominant force. This research subject reflects the transnational evolution of Chinese lay Buddhism in different historical

periods, political systems, and cultural backgrounds, especially at the modern intersections of mainland China, the Taiwan area, and the United States.

This study, for the time being, sets aside the traditional Tibetan Buddhism and maintains academic focus and rigor. There are topics for discussion regarding the localization process of Tibetan Buddhism in the US. Lay believers are also active in this tradition, but the unique doctrines and organizational structure of Tibetan Buddhism form an independent and complex narrative, and it is more appropriate to conduct special research in the future.

This dissertation adopts a transnational perspective and uses the theory of Buddhist Modernism represented by McMahan as the main analytical framework, aiming to explore how religious policies and traditional inertia jointly shape the global spread and the development strategies of lay Buddhism. Besides, it conducts a historical analysis of the description of Chinese lay Buddhism across different contexts. But these discussions are mainly to help understand the current situation. The core of this research is to find the emerging evolutionary trend of lay Buddhism among Chinese Americans in the contemporary context, and emphasize their localization efforts and increasing subjectivity in the context of religious diversity in the US.

This study selects the Buddhist Association of the United States (hereafter abbreviated as BAUS), founded by layperson C. T. Shen (Jiazhen Shen, 沈家桢), and the Amida Society in Los Angeles, established by layperson Jingchang Chen 陈景昌 and affiliated with Ven. Jingkong's lineage, as its core case study. In the process of

modernization and localization, Shen demonstrated the model whereby elite laypeople successfully transform “secular capital” into “religious capital.” As a powerful businessman in the international shipping industry with great financial resources, Shen’s role after immigrating to the United States has extended beyond traditional charitable sponsorship. He established organizations such as BAUS, integrating the management rationality of modern non-profit organizations (NPOs) into the traditional governance of temples. As an individual lay believer, he actively participated in the top-level planning process of organizational affairs. By interpreting the doctrines, he restructured the discourse power of lay believers in the sacred space and gained an independent authority with characteristics of being “institutionalized and intellectualized.” Different from the traditional monastic hierarchical system, the whole Amitabha Buddhist Society system has constructed a highly decentralized transnational network, and combines modern mass media with a simplified practice model. It initially originated from a deep reliance on the spiritual authority of a charismatic monastic leader, which brought a clear sectarian orientation to the Pure Land School. Within this system, grassroots laypeople took on the crucial role in organizational management, ritual guidance, and textual community building, demonstrating another “bottom-up” approach to establishing authority.

Choosing these two distinct cases holds special significance. First, their geographical locations span the east and west coasts of the United States, which helps to comprehensively depict the pioneering and transplantation situations of Chinese Buddhism in different regional social ecosystems. Second, this combination accurately

captures the “dual perspective” within lay Buddhism: the “elite perspective” of intellectuals and business leaders, as represented by Shen’s case, and the “popular perspective” oriented toward popularization and daily life, as represented by the Amida Society. In particular, the Amida Society elevated the Pure Land dharma gate, a tradition with a strong lay-oriented character, to a mainstream sectarian status. This complex process involves the sectarian selection, doctrinal reconstruction, the modern adaptation of Pure Land faith, and the later rational return of monastic reverence by Ven. Jingkong and President Chen. Additionally, Shen’s organizational structure is more influenced by the modern religious reform of Western Christianity, and contains more elements of “modern Buddhism” from the West. In contrast, Amida Society, although also greatly influenced by modernity, retains more traditional Asian elements. This distinction helps us analyze how lay Buddhism constructs its modernity in a transnational context.

In order to clarify the research scope and lay a theoretical foundation, this research systematically defined the concepts of “lay Buddhists,” “lay Buddhism,” and their “independence” within the academic context. In terms of terminology differentiation, it is necessary to distinguish “lay Buddhists” as an identity label from “lay Buddhism” as a sociological category. Although “lay Buddhists” is a historical term used to describe lay believers, this identity tradition traditionally relied on the authority of the Sangha within the Chinese Buddhist system. In contrast, “lay Buddhism” is a concept with a modern power structure. It is not only the faith held by individual believers, but also a religious phenomenon centered around lay Buddhists. They will establish

independent forms, such as Buddhist lay groups and associations, to control the discourse power of doctrines and rituals. This transformation from “subordinate status” to “subjective consciousness” represents a modern narrative, depicting the lay community moving from the margins of Buddhist institutions to a central role in the power dynamics.

Throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism, we can find that lay Buddhism has truly established its own position in modern times. It underwent a profound transformation from “identity dependence” to “subjective awakening,” and thereby achieved an independent identity. This independence in the modern era manifested itself first in organizational form, where it achieved institutionalization by adopting the board system that draws on modern enterprise structures, thus completing the structural reorganization from traditional dependence to modern social organization. Secondly, it promoted the rationalization of doctrinal interpretation in the ideological field. Relying on “academic Buddhist research” to reshape the discourse system, it essentially challenged the long-standing monopoly of traditional monastic orders over the interpretation of scriptures.

However, the construction of this “rational, intellectual and confrontational” modern narrative requires a more detailed and cautious assessment. The independent discourse is always associated with reliable “legitimacy,” which requires a precise definition of different categories of situations. Historical experience shows that lay movements pursuing absolute independence from the monastic system often lack the support of institutionalized sacred resources. Therefore, the traditional mainstream

narrative often marginalizes them or condemns them as heretics. In addition, the composition of “lay Buddhist genealogies” reflects different evaluation criteria and subjective tendencies. Therefore, to determine the scope and subjective status of lay Buddhism, it is necessary to analyze in depth the historical self-construction in the interaction between power and belief, rather than passively accepting external narratives of “independence” and “legitimacy.”

To explore the profound meaning of the lay perspective, this study needs to go beyond a simplified one-dimensional model, such as “lay subjectivity” or “Sangha’s patronage.” I would introduce “legitimacy” as a core variable to make the two-way empowerment mechanism clear. The material and institutional sponsorship of the laity to the monastery ensures their religious legitimacy in both religious sects and secular fields. This legitimacy is transformed into the recognition and reinforcement of lay authority. The evolution of the power logic inherits the “cultural inertia” of Chinese Buddhist history, and is also influenced by the specific context of the North American Chinese Buddhist ecosystem in the context of immigrant society and multiculturalism. Therefore, subjectivity is not a static identity mark, but rather a dynamic operation of continuously “attuning” legitimacy, adhering to traditional ethics and navigating in modern transformation.

Therefore, in this dissertation, I would analyze the authoritative characteristics of representative lay leaders among the Chinese American community. It does not adopt a biographical narrative method, nor does it generally discuss trends in lay Buddhism.

Instead, it explores how charismatic lay leaders establish independent organizations and make strategic adjustments in the mutual entanglement of tradition and modernity, east and west, and the sacred and the secular. Through power negotiation and cultural reconstruction, many such leaders not only establish unique lay authority but also create a comprehensive paradigm of subjectivity outside the traditional monastic system.

Literature Review

Regarding this research topic, the academic community's research on the modern transformation of domestic and overseas lay Buddhism has mainly developed on two levels. Firstly, it's the rise in status of lay Buddhism in modern times of China, and scholars have comprehensively studied the role of laypeople in the urban transformation and the process of intellectual revival. Secondly, it's about the "lay-oriented" transformation in the modern American context, scholars mainly analyze the development trends of Buddhism towards rationalization, democratization, and equalization under the influence of Western culture.

Regarding the analysis of the first point, it was derived by integrating the research findings of various scholars on the historical development of Chinese lay Buddhism. Ren Jiyu 任继愈 pointed out that pre-modern Chinese lay Buddhism experienced two periods of prosperity, namely during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the Song, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, and regarded this as a precursor to the transformation of

Buddhism.¹ However, the research conducted by R. Mather, Daniel Getz, Robert Sharf, Barend ter Haar, and others on medieval lay Buddhism indicates that Chinese lay Buddhism often remains dependent on the monastic community. Excessive “independence” often implies the loss of legitimacy.² This dependent relationship underwent a significant transformation in modern times. Ji Zhe, Eyal Aviv, and others believe that the lay movement initiated by figures such as Yang Wenhui 杨文会 and Ouyang Jingwu 欧阳竟无 was essentially an elite Buddhist reform. It utilized modern educational tools to break the monopoly of monastics over sacred knowledge, marking the birth of “substantive autonomy” in lay Buddhism.³ However, after 1949, the control of “state corporatism” dismantled this secular elite network. Gareth Fisher pointed out that the contemporary revival of laymen has retreated to the private domain, abandoning the political ambitions of the Republic era, and instead relying on decentralized Internet “connection” networks and private spaces such as tea houses, presenting a new modern form characterized by pursuit of spiritual autonomy and a rhizomatic (rooted) structure.⁴ The elite layman leadership model mentioned above and this modern trend of

¹ Ren Jiyu 任继愈, preface to *Zhongguo jushi Fojiao shi* 中国居士佛教史, by Pan Guiming 潘桂明 (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), 2–3.

² Richard B. Mather, “Vimalakīrti and Gentry Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 8, no. 1 (1968): 60–73; Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz Jr., eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (University of Hawaii Press, 1999); Robert H. Sharf, “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China,” *T’oung Pao* 88, no. 4/5 (2002): 282–331; Barend J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Brill, 1992).

³ Ji Zhe 汲喆, “Jushi fojiao yu xiandai jiaoyu” 居士佛教与现代教育, *Beijing daxue jiaoyu pinglun* 北京大学教育评论 7, no. 3 (2009): 41–64, 189; Eyal Aviv, *Differentiating the Pearl from the Fish-Eye: Ouyang Jingwu and the Revival of Scholastic Buddhism* (Brill, 2020).

⁴ Gareth Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014).

privatization, massification, and decentralization in the near modern era, as well as the self-organization development model of lay organizations, have respectively found an intrinsic fit with Shen Jiazhen's mature organizational form and the worldwide lay organization model of Ven. Jingkong.

As to the second point, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive understanding of the landscape of Buddhism in the United States, where the Chinese lay Buddhism was transplanted to. Early scholars' accounts of American Buddhism focused excessively on white middle-class converts, leading to a long-term neglect of the Asian immigrant community. In response to this bias, scholars began to gradually shift their attention to the Asian immigrant community that constitutes the vast majority of American Buddhism. The subsequent "Two Buddhisms" theoretical debate further deepened the ethnic division. Numrich observed the temples in Chicago and Los Angeles and proposed the "parallel congregations" model, revealing the spatial isolation between traditional merit-oriented immigrant believers and white converts with meditative philosophy, reflecting the white privilege and racial power dynamics in American Buddhism.⁵ This controversy led to a long-term debate among several scholars such as Prebish on classification labels or the typology of American Buddhism,⁶ until Martin Baumann proposed to replace racial divisions with the cognitive and cosmological differences between "Traditionalist

⁵ Paul David Numrich, *Old Wisdom in New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* (Univ Tennessee Press, 1996).

⁶ Charles S. Prebish, "Two Buddhisms Reconsidered," *Buddhist Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (1993): 187–206; Paul David Numrich, "Two Buddhisms Further Considered," *Contemporary Buddhism* 4, no. 1 (2003): 55–78; Wakoh Shannon Hickey, "Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism," *Journal of Global Buddhism*, no. 11 (2010): 1–25.

Buddhism” and “Modernist Buddhism,” thus shifting the academic focus from “the skin color of practitioners” to “the modernity of the practice mode.”⁷ Based on this, McMahan systematically expounded the emergence of “Buddhist Modernism,” a global transnational networked hybrid entity, pointing out that it was deeply shaped by three major modernity discourses: Enlightenment rationality, Romantic expressionism, and Western monotheism (Protestantism), presenting new characteristics such as de-traditionalization, de-mythologization, and psychologization.⁸

The review of modern Buddhism, particularly in the American region, has led to a contextual understanding of the transformation of the development of lay Buddhism. This development of modern Buddhism not only reshaped the concept of practice, making daily life itself sacred, but also gave rise to a transitional identity between monastics and laypeople. It also triggered the “De facto Congregationalism,” or the democratization of institutional democracy in organizational structure, where the board elected by believers gradually shared or even dominated the decision-making power of traditional monastics. At the same time, the “ecumenicism” across sects and beliefs has presented a tendency of multiple devotions and compromises for modern practitioners, cooperatively transforming the traditional authority of the Sangha. Therefore, this can be summarized as the study of Chinese and immigrant Buddhism in the American context unfolding in

⁷ Martin Baumann, “Protective Amulets and Awareness Techniques, or How to Make Sense of Buddhism in the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002).

⁸ David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

the interweaving of the inertia of “traditional inheritance” and “modern adaptation or attunement,” presenting a high degree of lay-orientation and modernist characteristics.⁹

Therefore, by comprehensively reviewing the development of lay Buddhism in these two regions, we can observe that the existing literature has limitations in its research paradigms. These studies often limit the evolution of lay Buddhism to common models such as “rationalized transformation” or “monastic-lay dualistic confrontation.” The current research lacks systematic tracking and in-depth theoretical interpretation of the uniqueness of lay Buddhism among Chinese Americans under the complex, diverse, and symbiotic “monk-lay interactions” after transnational migration, especially in the heterogeneous cultural environment of North America and in the diaspora society. In particular, it lacks exploration of how they construct subjectivity to establish independent authority. The theoretical framework underlying the existing research often assumes that modernity is replacing the backward aspects of traditional monastic authority with the advanced modernity represented by intellectual laypeople, thereby presenting a conflict between monastics and laypeople. This is also pointed out by McMahan’s research, namely that he respects the main role of the Asian architect and emphasizes how Buddhist Modernism is used to criticize Western ethnocentrism and resist colonialism.¹⁰

⁹ Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (University of California Press, 1999); James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Nelson-Hall Incorporated Publishers, 1976); Sylvia Wetzel, “Neither Monk nor Nun: Western Buddhists as Full-Time Practitioners,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 32.

Therefore, when we examine the studies on some of the Asian lay Buddhism phenomena in the West, we can observe the ambiguity of the lay-centered characteristic represented by Buddhist modernism. Scholars such as Numrich, Joseph Cheah, and Penny Van Esterik, who focus on Theravada lay Buddhism,¹¹ and Chandler, Irene Lin, and Shoujen Kuo, who research on Chinese lay Buddhism, often highlight the “non-modern” characteristic of Asian lay Buddhists, such as their adherence to traditional elements or their dependence on the monastic community. Compared to this study, these studies often focus on the collective or holistic aspects of lay Buddhist movements, and rarely conduct research on individual lay leaders.

Additionally, from a transnational perspective, there are many cases of the overseas dissemination of Chinese Buddhism in existing academic studies. These studies offer valuable insights into their global operations and the driving mechanisms behind them. However, looking back on this field, existing research shows an obvious trend centered on monastic groups, as the academic focus is on the transnational development of monastics. Driven by traditional inertia and religious policies, monastic communities have inherent spiritual leadership and institutional legitimacy. Therefore, they have long become the mainstream center of transnational Buddhist research. The small independent lay Buddhist movement is less concerned with academia. However, lay Buddhists gained social adaptability, reshaped the power structure within Buddhism, and also posed

¹¹ Numrich, *Old Wisdom*; Joseph Cheah, *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*, 1 edition (Oxford University Press, 2011); Penny Van Esterik, *Taking Refuge: Lao Buddhists in North America* (Asu Center for Asian Research, 2003).

challenges to traditional monastic orders. This constitutes an indispensable part of the modern Buddhist academic landscape.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study relies on the theories of transnationalism and McMahan's "Buddhist Modernism." Transnationalism provides a macro-dynamic perspective for analyzing the complex interactions of lay Buddhism among Chinese Americans. This framework breaks away from traditional analytical models bounded by nation-states. It acknowledges that religious traditions and practices exist in a state of cross-border fluidity, continuously shaped by multiple social, cultural, and political contexts. "Transnational religious networks" constitute an important channel for the exchange of religious ideas, practices, and community interactions among Taiwan, mainland China, and the United States. These networks facilitate the cross-border flow of spiritual guidance, textual resources, and ritual paradigms, enabling Chinese American lay Buddhism to evolve continuously within a diasporic environment. The internationalization of Buddhism is frequently associated with global migration waves and localized adaptations. Guided by charismatic leaders and related organizations, such as Fo Guang Shan 佛光山 and Tzu Chi 慈济, Buddhists have not only established global organizational systems but also adapted their principles and traditions to local contexts worldwide.

During this process, Chinese diasporic lay organizations leverage the fluidity of their transnational networks to increasingly become an indispensable driving force in the

development of contemporary Buddhism. Transnationalism highlights the “hybridity” inherent in the transmission and evolution of religious practices. In Chinese lay Buddhism, organizations and individuals integrate traditional Chinese religious customs with American cultural and political elements. This hybridization not only generates unique forms of practice but also demonstrates how multicultural environments reshape belief systems. In this study, the “inertia” and “attuning” models are used for analysis. When lay organizations adapt to the social environment of the United States, they also need to maintain the roots of Chinese culture. These dual characteristics enable them to retain key traditional elements and rely on strategic “attunement” to fit in the heterogeneous cultures and practical needs in North America.

The historical context and academic debates of American Buddhism form the key background for exploring the transnational transformation of Chinese lay Buddhism. The core of this discussion revolves around ethnic boundaries, the remodeling of modernity, and the reconfiguration of authority. Starting from the early biased attention to white Buddhism, to the “Two or Three Buddhisms” framework model from an ethnic perspective, this seemingly led to the refinement, supplementation, and controversy of more cases. Then, Martin Baumann proposed to replace racial divisions with the cognitive and cosmological differences between “traditionalist and modernist Buddhism.”¹² Based on this, this dissertation mainly takes “Buddhist Modernism” as

¹² Baumann, “Protective Amulets.”

expounded by McMahan as another major theoretical framework. Under the shaping of the three modernity discourses of enlightenment rationality, romantic expressionism and Western monotheism (Protestantism), the new characteristics of modern Buddhism, such as de-traditionization, de-mythologization and psychologization, have not only shaped the development context and driving elements of lay Buddhism, but also deeply depicted the connotations of lay authority and subjectivity in reshaping the boundary of the power relationship between monastics and laypeople.¹³

In this process of authority reconfiguration, Weber's theories on traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority provided an analytical tool for examining how lay elites utilized secular capital to re-establish sacred power.¹⁴ In the traditional Asian context, the monastic community, through the hereditary transmission of the dharma lineage, had long monopolized the role of authority; while lay believers were in a subordinate position, merely playing the role of "external patronage." In the modern era, lay leaders began to organically integrate these three types of authority, a process that broke and reconfigured the traditional boundaries between monastic and lay power. According to Ritzinger's analysis, Weber's theoretical framework holds that the core of modernity is the victory of "rationalization" over "tradition and witchcraft," that is, the "de-enchantment" of the world. This model regards Western Protestantism as the sole

¹³ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

¹⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (University of California Press, 1978), 941–55, 1111–1156.

ultimate template for “modern religion” and uses it as a yardstick to measure and shape the modernization process of Buddhism.¹⁵

However, Ritzinger criticized this “push model” which assumes that religion must adapt to modernity and move towards de-mythologization and rationalization, arguing that excessive emphasis on the “scientific rationality” of the modern narrative would cause researchers to overlook the still vigorous traditional worship and spiritual elements in modern Buddhism. McMahan, based on postmodern and postcolonial theories, proposed a more inclusive “Buddhist Modernism” analytical framework, which not only includes Weberian rationalism and scientism (the Protestant model), but also deeply integrates the “romantic expressivism” discourse from Western modernity. It breaks away from the excessive emphasis of the Weber model on “rational bureaucracy” and “de-mythologization,” taking into account the dynamic aspects of modernity or traditional elements in Asian Buddhism, and more accurately depicts the complex evolution of modern Buddhism in the globalized context.¹⁶ This theoretical framework provides a crucial perspective for re-evaluating the conservatism and compromise of Chinese American lay Buddhists towards the monastic tradition.

Although the two models reached highly similar conclusions in explaining how Buddhism adapts to the changes in modern states, Ritzinger pointed out keenly that both

¹⁵ Justin Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–4.

¹⁶ Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land*, 2–3.

models have fallen into a serious academic blind spot because they “pre-supposed” what modern religions “should be like”: scholars often only focus on those phenomena that conform to the characteristics of modern religions, such as rationalization, concern for social welfare, de-mythologization, and de-sacralization. Therefore, this study does not blindly follow the binary opposition of “modern/rational” and “traditional/backward.” This framework can reasonably explain why in the highly modernized North American context, although the Chinese lay group is proficient in using modern laws, organizations, and management tools and demonstrates a high degree of legal authority, they still stubbornly retain “non-modern/traditional” elements such as respecting the sangha, valuing traditional merits, emphasizing the sense of divinity and ritualism. This lay Buddhist practice is not simply a “modern adaptation,” but rather a complex reconciliation, attunement, and negotiation between modern institutions and traditional beliefs.

Methodology

This dissertation adopts qualitative research methodology, including ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, text analysis, and digital ethnography. The purpose is to analyze the construction logic and operation mode of the independent authority of Chinese American lay Buddhism. Between early 2023 and the end of 2025, I conducted a longitudinal observation of the Amida Society of Los Angeles and actively participated in activities such as weekend group practices and Dharma assemblies. During participant observation, I wore a *haiqing* robe to engage personally with ritual details. This allowed

me to understand the performance of authority by laypersons serving in ritual roles such as *karmadāna* (*weinuo* 维那), etc. I also examined the library's physical layout and the symbolic meanings and power structures underlying its displays of literature. In 2024, I conducted fieldwork at Chuang Yen Monastery in New York, primarily attending the Buddhist Summer Camp with the theme of "Accumulating Merit and Cultivating Wisdom." I subsequently tracked several of their online activities. Through deep involvement in daily morning and evening chanting, communal labor (*chupo* 出坡), and educational programs for adults, English speakers, and youths, I meticulously recorded and analyzed how lay lecturers strategically integrate secular professional knowledge with Buddhist hermeneutics to become key participants in the monastery.

To deeply understand and construct an "insider perspective" for this study, I conducted multidimensional qualitative interviews and field investigations with lay leaders, senior devotees, and relevant monastic groups. During core data collection, I focused on interviewing Mr. Jingchang Chen 陈景昌, president of the Amida Society of Los Angeles. This helps grasp the historical information about building and obtaining permanent dwellings. It also allowed for an in-depth analysis of the organization's decision-making logic during critical crises, such as controversies involving guiding teachers, and how devotees achieved psychological transformation and faith reconstruction by returning to the doctrinal principle of "relying on the Dharma, not the person." Beyond the leadership, interviewees included lay lecturers long engaged in Dharma propagation, administrative staff, and ordinary members, thereby ensuring

sample diversity and representativeness. To maintain data continuity and a dynamic understanding, I conducted long-term follow-up interviews with the monastics at Anfu Monastery, a partner of the Amida Society. Through participant observation—such as providing transportation and serving as an attendant—I gained a deep understanding of the interactive ecology of the monastics while they propagated the Dharma at the Amida Society. Furthermore, in the case study of Chuang Yen Monastery, I collected oral histories from senior laypersons who had long followed Mr. C. T. Shen, such as Mr. Lee TsuKu 李祖鹄. The purpose was to reconstruct Mr. Shen's life and exemplary spiritual conduct, while also verifying the evolution of the monastery's organizational structure and its experiences with modern Buddhist management.

Given that both the Amida Society and the BAUS possess highly developed modern media platforms, this study also employs digital ethnography as a core methodology. This effectively supplements observations of lay organizations' promotional methods amidst modern media trends and aids in the recording of historical archives. This study conducts a longitudinal analysis of approximately 1,500 audiovisual recordings from the Amida Society's official YouTube channel between 2012 and 2025. The aim is to track changes in its lectures and dissemination strategies, thereby observing the agency demonstrated by core lay members during the digital propagation of the Dharma. Through participant observation of devotees' interactions in virtual spaces such as Zoom and YouTube, this article further explores how “textual communities” or “virtual believers” transcend the spatial and temporal limitations of physical temples, thereby

constructing a new paradigm of modern practice.

To trace institutional origins and the historical development of figures and organizations, this study combines archival and biographical research methods. I systematically examine the biography of C. T. Shen and his core lectures, such as *The Mayflower* (*Wuyue hua* 五月花) and *A Study of the Diamond Sutra* (*Jingangjing de yanjiu* 金刚经的研究), etc. By comparing BAUS's organizational charter, this research analyzes the intellectual roots and practical trajectory of his “institutionalized” management philosophy. Additionally, this research incorporates spatial narrative analysis, treating the monastery's library and Dharma materials distribution center as Foucaultian “knowledge-power” fields. By quantitatively analyzing and qualitatively interpreting the categories and authorship of displayed books—particularly the distribution of discursive power between laypersons and monastics—this study clarifies how the “lay Dharma lineage” is affirmed at material and cultural levels, ultimately achieving legitimacy within modern Buddhist discourse.

Finally, in this study, through the differential analysis of typical samples, a comparative case study method is adopted to observe the dimension of Chinese American lay Buddhism. The case of Shen is the “institutional model” dominated by the elite layperson. This model has a strong institutional characteristic, and the interpretation of doctrines and religious practices are aligned with Western academia. The Amida Society is the “network model” driven by the general lay followers. It relies on a highly mediated method and a decentralized organization, and has obvious social resilience. This study

also deeply compares samples from two US coasts, which differ in organization, audience, and dissemination logic. Combining macro and micro, it depicts the overall state and evolutionary trajectory of contemporary Chinese American lay Buddhism.

In the view of quality researchers, the screening of key data is the foundation of this paper. During the careful study of numerous autobiographies, organization commemorative books, and internal publications about related Chinese Buddhist leaders, I found that these texts are usually constrained by the common “hagiography” tendency in religious narratives, such as the internal materials related to layperson Shen and Ven. Jingkong. The intention of these texts is often to establish moral standards and sectarian authority by sanctifying the image of the leader. To mitigate this single and idealized narrative bias, this study first adopts oral history reconstruction and demystification as the core methods to restore the complexity of history. During the field investigation at the Chuang Yen Monastery in New York, I not only referred to official documents but also conducted in-depth interviews with some senior laypeople, such as Mr. Lee TsuKu, who had been working closely with Shen since the early stages. By collecting the true details from personal memories, I was able to observe the power dynamics that were simplified or concealed in the official narrative. This brings the leader’s image down from a “pedestal” of praise and back into the context of concrete social action. Secondly, this study enhances the rigor of its evidence chain by establishing a system of “triangulation of perspectives,” or flexible adjustment between “insider” and “outsider.” Through interviews with the leadership, grassroots volunteers, and external collaborating monastic

groups such as the monastics of Anfu Monastery 安福寺 in LA, this study examines the organization's operations across intersecting, multidimensional perspectives. By utilizing a tripartite cross-validation approach of “text, oral history, and archives,” this study aims to remove the hagiographic filter from the data. This enables us to depict the real, complex and subjective development process of lay Buddhism among Chinese Americans more critically and dynamically.

This study strictly adheres to research ethics regarding participant confidentiality and data integrity. To protect personal privacy, pseudonyms are employed in the text for contemporary interviewees who are non-critical to the narrative or who explicitly requested anonymity. Conversely, real names are retained for historical figures, deceased individuals, and persons whose identities are already established in public archival records, as anonymizing them would compromise the historical accuracy and empirical verifiability of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all living participants prior to the interviews.

With the rapid development of AI, I have also extensively utilized the assistance of AI during my research. Firstly, the main products I use are Gemini and NotebookLM produced by Google. Gemini, with its advantage in long text reading, can help me quickly understand the framework of the entire book and locate specific information. I will try to use prompts such as “Summarize the content of each chapter of the entire book in a detailed key points format” or “Help me locate the source and detailed elaboration of specific information” to quickly browse a book and assist me in subsequent detailed

reading. Additionally, NotebookLM focuses on the function of collecting multiple resources to form a database to comprehensively answer specific questions across resources. For example, I will gather the abundant literature about Ven. Jingkong together and ask questions like “What are Jingkong’s preaching strategies?” and so on. Of course, these two products may still have certain illusions and misinterpretations. For the given evidence, it is still necessary for me to re-read and verify the correct original text.

Additionally, NotebookLM often interprets the text literally or has logical confusion when providing explanatory answers, and I still need to independently review it to verify its usability. The second point is the use of translation and revision. At first, I was amazed by the professionalism of AI in language proficiency, so I widely used and relied on the Gemini web interface and its API interface for translation and revision. However, in the AI review stage, it was found to be difficult to pass, so I had to start over, and could only translate by myself or use basic translation software for this function. Just like traditional revision software like Grammarly, its high degree of AI involvement still brings red flags for AI review, so I will only use Grammarly or AI software to review basic and obvious sentence problems. In summary, living in this era of rapid AI explosion, it has brought great convenience to our academic research, but how to correctly use them will also become a lesson that future scholars need to constantly learn.

Research Significance

This study expects to meticulously analyze the logic of the construction of authority in Chinese American lay Buddhist groups. It explores the widespread “monk-

centered” situation in the transnational dissemination of Chinese Buddhism in current academia. Most of the research still mainly focuses on the migration, the establishment of institutions, and inheritance and dissemination among traditional monastics. In fact, when the establishment and consolidation of Chinese Buddhism in North America, the lay believers are not only the providers of material resources, but also the pioneering force in institutional design and doctrinal interpretation. Taking Shen as an example, when there is a lack of traditional monk resources, the first-generation Chinese immigrant lay believers transformed from “subordinate protectors” to “independent authorities.” This fills a critical gap in understanding the pluralistic and unified leadership model of Chinese Buddhism under globalization, and breaks the stereotypical impression that lay Buddhists are “affiliation of monastic Sangha” or that the relationship between monastics and laypeople is primarily one of mutual contradiction.

Within the context of Western modernism, existing studies on American Buddhism often frame “lay-oriented” as an exclusive characteristic of Euro-American “Convert Buddhism.” Conversely, they view “Ethnic Buddhism” as a conservative, “monastic-centered” transplant of tradition. Through empirical analysis, this study demonstrates that while Chinese American lay Buddhism adheres to traditional beliefs, such as Pure Land practices, honoring monastics, and following the rituals, it has also achieved a high degree of “managerial rationality” and “disintermediation” in its organizational management. Both the modern monastic-lay co-governance in Shen’s organization and the “textual community” established in Jingkong’s system reflect a

“Chinese lay paradigm.” This paradigm differs from Western individualism yet possesses distinct modern characteristics. This offers a paradigm for the academic community to re-examine the driving forces behind the internal evolution of “Ethnic Buddhism,” providing a reference for constructing a more inclusive picture of “American Buddhism.”

This study analyzes the strategic mobilization of lay leaders for traditional capital, charismatic capital, and legal-rational capital, and reveals a mixed authority structure: the secular affairs are managed by modern laws and legal-rational authority is established; the spiritual field relies on Dharma interpretation and practice to construct intellectual charisma; formally, in accordance with historical inertia, strategic respect is shown for traditional monk authority. This is reflected in terms of a return to the “method of practice” (*xingmen* 行門) in the Amida Society, which is embedded in the essence of Pure Land Buddhism. The logic of “attuning within inertia” provides a framework for analyzing the reconstruction, disenchantment and re-sacralization of religious authority in different cultures. This approach helps enrich localized theories within the sociology of religion.

At last, this study explores the survival mode of “independent lay Buddhists” on the edge of legitimacy. The comparative analysis shows that the believers’ “protection” of the Sangha authority is a form of “two-way empowerment.” Lay believers provide economic support for the monastic community and also formally invite orthodox monastics to ensure the legality of religion and the recognition of their own organization. This legal identity makes lay believers more charismatic in doctrinal explanation and

organizational decision-making. After the controversy of the tutor of the Amida Society, this kind of survival mode is transforming from “relying on individuals” to “relying on Buddhist Dharma” within this group. Lay organizations have independence and flexibility, and can self-correct and actively reconcile historical inertial rationality. This provides key insights for understanding how immigrant communities use religious organizations to reconstruct cultural identity, cope with geopolitical risks, and maintain the purity of religious doctrines in a diverse world. Additionally, through the dynamic practice of Chinese American lay Buddhists, it has helped us enrich the connotation of Buddhist modernism theories, and also enabled us to correctly understand the unique value and role of Chinese American lay Buddhists in the American Buddhist landscape.

Structure Design

This dissertation is structured as follows to systematically analyze how Chinese American lay Buddhists establish independent religious authority in a transnational context:

Chapter 2 brings the focus back to ancient China and it dialectically examines the evolutionary logic of Chinese lay Buddhism, tracing its historical transition from “monastic dependence” to “seeking autonomy” in the modern period. This chapter reviews the reforms initiated by modern laypersons, including Yang Wenhui 杨文会 and Ouyang Jingwu 欧阳竟无, and analyzes the historical development of American Buddhism and its lay-orientation characteristic. It examines how lay groups reconstruct religious legitimacy at the boundary of the sacred and the secular through

intellectualization, organization, and socialization. This chapter tries to clarify the conceptual boundaries of “lay Buddhists” and “lay Buddhism.” It argues that the establishment of lay subjectivity generally accompanies an objective process of rewriting and redefining traditional lineages.

Chapter 3 expounds the history of Chinese Buddhism in the US since *the Immigration and Nationality Act*, and also tells the transformation process from the early “scattered phase” to the “elite-led” one. Then it introduces two core cases of this study. The first one is the model established by the elite represented by layman C.T. Shen, and the other is the Amida Society within the Jingkong system. This chapter detailedly introduces C.T. Shen’s life, business career, and temple-building efforts. Also included are the propagation strategies of Jingkong and the founding of the LA branch Amida Society. It lays a factual basis for subsequent comparisons.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the individual cases of C. T. Shen and layperson Jingchang Chen 陈景昌, respectively. These chapters examine the specific characteristics of how they constructed independent lay authority. Chapter Four details how C. T. Shen translated his secular business success and management experience into “institutional capital” within the religious sphere. This chapter analyzes the modern board-of-directors system that Shen implemented at the BAUS. It also examines his unique emphasis on the “scientific interpretation of the Dharma” and his charitable practices based on the “dual cultivation of merit and wisdom (*fuhui shuangxiu* 福慧双修).” These elements present an authority model of “elite laity.” Shen’s legal

organizational structure and intellectual ability to interact with Western culture, ensure the leading position of laity in organizational management and doctrinal interpretation.

Chapter 5 analyzes the internal operation of Amida Society and examines its unique “mass-oriented” laity authority model. It emphasizes that the organization uses modern media to construct “textual community,” and through the ritual and Retelling (*fujiang* 复讲) system, it allows laity to lead believers in the roles of *weinuo* (*karmadāna*) and “Dharma speaker” to achieve the “disintermediation” of power. This chapter tells the subsequent controversy of Jingkong, presents the rational experience of Society in applying the Kālāma Sutta (*Gela majing* 葛拉玛经), and reflects the transformation from relying on personal charm to relying on Buddhist Dharma. This transformation enables the organization to become independent, carry out the doctrinal self-correction, and reshape the subjectivity.

Chapter 6 expounds some differences in the interaction between monastics and laypeople in lay organizations. The North American Chinese lay organizations are “landing platforms” and “incubators” for Chinese monastics who spread Buddhist dharma. It also contrasts the institutionalized respect for the monastic community by Shen (where the president needs to be a monk) with the ritualized respect of the Amida Society (such as specific seating arrangements and formal invitations to the Anfu Monastery). Laypeople want to make monasteries recognize the legitimacy of their organizations, so they give up some of their own power resources. This dynamic forms a symbiotic framework: laypeople in the world set up the stage, and monastics perform.

Chapter 7 analyzes this study and finds that Chinese American lay Buddhism has three core characteristics: horizontal non-sectarian cooperative networks, the return to “method of practice” as the essence of Pure Land Buddhism, and actively maintaining the reverence of monastic authority in modern times. The conclusion is: this authority model neither completely abandons the tradition nor completely integrates Western culture. On the contrary, it reflects the wisdom of “attuning within inertia.” Retaining the core of traditional Chinese Buddhist culture (inertia) and using modern legal, management, and cultural methods (attunement) for strategic reconstruction, these groups construct a highly autonomous lay Buddhist paradigm in a heterogeneous cultural environment.

Chapter Two:

Historical Evolution and the Independence of Lay Buddhism

2.1 The Independent Chinese Lay Buddhism at the Edge of Legitimacy

During the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha's disciples would renounce their families and worldly lives to become monastic practitioners, dedicating themselves to the path of liberation. These monastic practitioners were the earliest followers of Buddhism, taking the Buddha's teachings as their guide and identifying themselves as *Śrāvaka* (*shengwen* 声闻) disciples, striving to learn and attain the same state of freedom as the Buddha. They were divided into two categories: *bhikṣu* (monks) and *bhikṣuṇī* (nuns), and were regarded as the earliest "Sangha" in Buddhism, forming the actual monastic community. In addition to the monastic Sangha, there was another group of Buddhists who believed in the Dharma but did not undertake monastic life. They were lay practitioners, continuing their household and social duties while supporting and providing for the monastic Sangha. These lay practitioners were known as "*upāsakas*" (male) and "*upāsikās*" (female), and they together form part of the Buddhist community.¹⁷ While the division and definition of monastics and laypeople may vary

¹⁷ Lü Kaiwen 吕凯文, "Lun sengsu erzhong zhi zongjiao jiaoyu-cong sengsu shenfen de qufen yu zongjiao zhinengde dingwei tanqi" 论僧俗二众之宗教教育-从僧俗身份的区分与宗教职能的定位谈起, *Shijie zongjiao xuekan* 世界宗教学刊, no. 5 (2005): 62–64.

slightly across historical periods and traditional sects, there is a general pattern: monastics tend to be fewer in number, adhere to stricter precepts, and are primarily responsible for propagating the Dharma. On the other hand, lay practitioners are the opposite, with a greater inclination toward protecting or supporting the Dharma. We can seemingly summarize their relationship as mutually interdependent; monastics rely on the support and protection of lay practitioners, while lay practitioners require guidance in the Dharma or Buddhist services provided by monastics, which actually implies the dominance of the monastic role.

Throughout various historical periods, the relative strengths of monastics and lay practitioners may change. At times, lay Buddhism can even break through the dominant position of the monastic Sangha, playing a leading role in the innovation and propagation of Buddhism. Pan Guiming 潘桂明 provides a full overview of the history of lay Buddhism before modern times, while Ren Jiyu 任继愈 notes two periods in history when lay Buddhism flourished in the preface to Pan's book. The first wave occurred during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, a period characterized by vibrant interactions between the secular literati and eminent monastics, leading to the popularity of Buddhism among the scholar-official (or gentry, *shida fu* 士大夫) and literati class. The development of Buddhism during this initial period further cemented the foundations for its flourishing in the Sui and Tang dynasties, a time when lay Buddhism discovered its profound theological legitimacy within the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Weimo jie jing* 维摩诘经). The second wave manifested in the wake of this golden era, when there was an internal

decline and ideological rigidity within the monasteries, leading to a crisis. It was during this time that lay practitioners, not relying on the monasteries, achieved a second major development through their efforts. Ren concludes that when lay Buddhism's influence and social impact surpass that of monastic Buddhism, it foreshadows significant changes within Buddhism.¹⁸

When we carefully examine the historical development of the Chinese lay Buddhist movement, we find that although it experienced periods of flourishing, characterizing this prosperity as “independent” does not have sufficient historical support. R. Mather (1968) found that among the upper class in the 4th to 5th centuries, literati Buddhism (*shidafu fojiao* 士大夫佛教) that centered on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* was relatively popular. The reason for its popularity is the mutual congruence of complex intellectual Buddhism and the “Abstruse Learning” (*xuanxue* 玄学) trend. The exquisite debates, flexible world outlook, and dialogical form attracted this class. The lay *Vimalakīrti* is a model of lay practice, demonstrating ideas such as being able to obtain the highest Buddhist enlightenment without giving up secular life, and providing an ideal example for literati who want to study Buddhist dharma but are not willing to leave home. This sutra harmonizes the values of Indian Buddhist thought with Chinese values such as filial piety. Seemingly leading to anticlericalism and secularization, this sutra is strongly “supportive of the Sangha.” The bodhisattva ideal that it championed so

¹⁸ Ren, preface to *Zhongguo jushi Fojiao shi*, 2–3.

eloquently could be followed by house-holder or monk, each in his own way, without any necessity of opposing one another.¹⁹ Yang Jihua (2023) analyzes the “literati” image of Vimalakirti, saying that he is an ideal personality model for the Chinese literati to harmonize Confucian and Buddhist thoughts.²⁰ However, Mather (1968) explicitly argued that the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* extols laypeople in order to disparage or oppose the monastic community (Sangha). He clearly pointed out that both the hermeneutical intent and actual impact of the sūtra were profoundly aligned with upholding the authority of the Sangha. The bodhisattva vow and path advocated by the sutra can be followed by both lay and monastic practitioners, “each in his own way (*gexing qidao* 各行其道),” without mutual opposition. Its function is “reconciling” rather than “opposing” the lay and monastic lifestyles.²¹

Pan examines literati representatives who frequently interacted with eminent monastics, particularly Chan masters, and promoted the spread of Chan thought among the literati. Through their significant cultural influence, they enabled Buddhism (especially Chan concepts) to integrate more deeply into mainstream Chinese culture and the spiritual world of the literati.²² Getz’s research on Song dynasty Pure Land Buddhism traces the genealogy of this movement back to Huiyuan’s 慧远 convocation of a joint

¹⁹ Mather, “Vimalakīrti,” 67–73.

²⁰ Yang Jihua 杨吉华, “Shidafu huade Weimo jushi: Fojiao zhongguohua de yige ceying” 士大夫化的维摩居士: 佛教中国化的一个侧影, *Shenzhen daxue xuebao (Renwen sheke ban)* 深圳大学学报 (人文社科版) 40, no. 3 (2023): 24–34.

²¹ Mather, “Vimalakīrti,” 73.

²² Pan, *Zhongguo jushi*, 317–20, 513–28.

society composed of both prominent monks and secular literati at Mount Lu, as well as the practices of Ven. Zhili (智礼, 960–1028) and Ven. Zunshi (遵式, 964–1032) in the Song dynasty, who engaged with government literati and organized lay societies. Getz analyzes that through the establishment of the Pure Land patriarchate under the rubric of the Lotus Society might be construed as an attempt to confirm monastic leadership in Pure Land by invoking the authority of Hui-yuan and other revered monastic proselytizers of Pure Land.²³ Shao Jiade's 邵佳德 research additionally brings out the “Buddhist network” formed by mid-Qing Jiangnan literati such as Pan Zengyi 潘曾沂. They interacted closely with one another, integrated Confucianism and Buddhism, and devoted themselves to reciting the Buddha's name. They were often philanthropic, organizing and participating in various institutions, providing widespread relief, printing morality books, and encouraging others to do good.²⁴ Overall, however, these forms of lay Buddhism were elite, individualistic, and structured as noncentralized networks. The historical prominence of these groups was usually based on their elite status in culture, wealth, and virtue, rather than being an “independent movement” with a unified organization and agenda. They often enjoyed associating with Dharma masters and maintained immense reverence for the traditional Sangha. Their related organizations

²³ Daniel A. Getz Jr., “T'ien-t'ai Pure Land Societies and the Creation of the Pure Land Patriarchate,” in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz Jr. (University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 478–506.

²⁴ Shao Jiade 邵佳德, “Pan Zengyi de xinyang yu shenghuo shijie: Jianlun Qing zhongye Jiangnan de jushi fojiao” 潘曾沂的信仰与生活世界：兼论清中叶江南的居士佛教, *Minsu quyi* 民俗曲艺, no. 204 (June 2019): 108–20.

were usually established at the initiative of these masters, and existed in a supplementary and subordinate state, relatively dependent on monastic authority.

To further explore whether Chinese lay Buddhism possessed independence, lay societies guided by Pure Land belief warrant separate examination. As mentioned above, Getz uses Ven. Zhili and Ven. Zunshi as a framework for demonstrating the expansion of the Pure Land school, alongside the eventual establishment of its “patriarchal” transmission lineage. This is inextricably linked to the “Pure Land societies” (Buddha name recitation practice groups) founded by early Song Tiantai masters. The author argues that these societies not only furnished an organizational model for lay Buddhist groups during the Southern Song, but also that their expanding independence prompted the thirteenth-century Tiantai historians to “create” a Pure Land patriarchal lineage. This was done to acknowledge the importance of the Pure Land teachings while bringing them back under the institutional and ideological control of the Tiantai school. Compared to Ven. Zunshi, Zhili’s society model had a more profound influence, mainly because of its innovative organizational structure. Zhili established 210 “assembly heads (*huishou* 會首),” each responsible for recruiting 48 members. This structure enabled individual groups to meet separately throughout the year, while the entire ten-thousand-member society held a large-scale gathering annually.²⁵ Getz points out that this dual-level structure, “by empowering lay assembly heads, also established a structure for future lay-

²⁵ Peter N. Gregory, “The Vitality of Buddhism in the Sung,” in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz Jr. (University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 14.

initiated Pure Land societies operating outside official Buddhist institutional and ideological control.”²⁶ This structure enabled lay groups to gradually detach from their monastic roots and become more independent and autonomous. The author uses a society founded in the early thirteenth century by a Mingzhou 明州 education official named Qiu Dingguo 丘顶国 as an example. Evidence indicates that it was entirely initiated and managed by lay believers, and its organizational structure was clearly inspired by Zhili’s society model.²⁷ Therefore, we can say that the early Pure Land did not possess clear sectarian characteristics or patriarchal lineages. This relatively lay-oriented Pure Land society movement was mostly “co-opted” by monastic authority or existed in a dependent structure. Building on this, Sharf further analyzes that an “independent” Pure Land school simply did not exist in medieval China. By contrast, “Pure Land cosmology, soteriology, and ritual were always part and parcel of Chinese Buddhism in general and of Chan monasticism in particular.”²⁸ Therefore, early lay associations such as the “Lotus Societies (*lianshe* 莲社),” which were based on these elements, operated under the guidance of the Sangha and did not possess institutional independence.

However, the “Ten Thousand People’s Pure Karma Society (*Wanren jingye hui* 万人净业会)” and its assembly heads (*huishou* 会首) system, created by the Song Tiantai master Zhili to organize lay believers, may have initially aimed to regulate and integrate

²⁶ Getz, “T’ien-t’ai,” 497.

²⁷ Getz, “T’ien-t’ai,” 495–501.

²⁸ Sharf, “Pure Land Buddhism,” 282, 317–21, 331.

lay practice. Yet, as Getz points out, by empowering lay assembly heads, this dual-level structure objectively provided an organizational framework or inspiration for the later emergence of highly autonomous lay societies within the Chinese Buddhist system (especially in the context of Pure Land belief), and even for independent lay organizations operating outside orthodox Buddhism.²⁹ However, the realization of this ability that enables laypeople to spontaneously establish and independently operate groups often came with notable risks in the historical setting from the Middle Ages to the late Qing Dynasty. Such religious groups, completely led by laypeople and devoid of direct supervision and guidance from the Sangha, often struggled to enter the orthodox mainstream Buddhist narrative co-written and maintained by monastic and literati elites. Their sources of authority, such as a charismatic lay leader, specific miraculous responses (*ganying* 感应), or non-traditional texts like “precious scrolls (*baojuan* 宝卷),” were often unrecognized by the orthodox system. Traditional authority was based on traditional texts (Scriptural Authority)³⁰ and monastic transmission (Spiritual Authority).³¹ More

²⁹ Getz’s original point was to highlight the potential of the Zhili model, even if it was not intended to encourage a complete separation from the monastic community. See Getz, “T’ien-t’ai,” 494–501.

³⁰ Zhiru Shi, “Scriptural Authority: A Buddhist Perspective,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 30 (2010): 85–105. See this article for a detailed discussion of the complexity of scriptural authority in Buddhism.

³¹ Shenpen Hookham, “Spiritual Authority: A Buddhist Perspective,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 30 (2010): 121–32. The text notes that one of the Three Jewels, the Sangha, especially the noble Sangha (*Ārya Sangha*) who have attained realization or are firmly on the path, serves as a source of authority; the authority of the Sangha lies in their role as living embodiments and practitioners of the Dharma, and they are capable of guiding and supporting other practitioners. The authority of a Guru or Spiritual Friend (*shanzhi shi* 善知识) derives from their own level of realization, their pure lineage, and their ability to effectively transmit the teachings and guide disciples in their practice.

importantly, lacking the constraints of an orthodox transmission lineage represented by the Sangha that based on the Vinaya and extensive scholastic training, these independent lay organizations were prone to doctrinal “deviation or mutation,” or to having their organizational power exploited by various social and political forces.

Haar’s research on Song-Yuan lay Buddhism underscores its status as a vibrant, self-sustaining religious tradition that commanded a large number of grassroots followers across various social classes. The aspiration for Pure Land rebirth served as the absolute core undergirding *nianfo* practice, merit accumulation, and organizing societies. Activist lay believers such as the “People of the Way” (*daomin* 道民) built their own private hermitages and sought deeper religious practice in secular society by imitating the monastic lifestyle, pursuing the Dharma independently of specific monasteries and monastic authority. They established their identity by using common Dharma name characters (such as “Dao 道,” “Pu 普,” “Jue 觉,” and “Miao 妙”), which symbolized their acceptance of lay precepts.³² Although officials and the elite created a series of negative labels to stigmatize these groups, this did not result in systematic persecution. Instead, it illustrated the society’s tolerance toward diverse religious practices at the time; even some Neo-Confucian scholars were deeply influenced by Buddhism or participated in its activities.

In this environment of fully developed lay Buddhism, although it was initially

³² Haar, *White Lotus Teachings*, 16–63.

founded by the Southern Song monk Mao Ziyuan 茅子元 and remained legal and open, the White Lotus Society 白莲教 quickly developed into a controversial, independent network centered on laypeople. It allowed for lay teachers and hereditary transmission, and frequently absorbed elements of folk belief. Consequently, from the mid-sixteenth century onward, the nomenclature and conceptual framing of “White Lotus Society (*Bailian she* 白莲社)” underwent changes. It was no longer an “autonym” claimed by a specific group, but rather a “label” used by officials and literati to refer to various religious groups and social phenomena they perceived as threatening. Haar writes “. . . the use of the name by believers to refer to themselves (in other words, as an autonym . . .) or by later writers (persecutors and historians alike) as an analytical category has never been systematically questioned.”³³ This also included the Luo Teachings 罗教 or *Wuwei jiao* 无为教, founded in the late Ming by the lay soldier Patriarch Luo 罗祖. This organization relied on the “precious scrolls” expounded by Patriarch Luo himself as its core texts, establishing an organization independent of the Sangha. Therefore, “from a Buddhist monastic perspective, this transmission among laypeople could never be recognized as valid, leading to tensions between these lay groups and elite monastics.”³⁴ Precisely because such lay organizations were independent of monastic authority, possessed self-contained doctrines and structures, and

³³ Haar, *White Lotus Teachings*, 64–246.

³⁴ B. J. ter Haar, *Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014), 1–84.

had strong potential for social mobilization, these movements were highly prone to being viewed by officials (across the Yuan, Ming, and Qing governments) as threats to ideological control and social order. Therefore, they were classified as “illegal” or “heretical” and often encountered severe suppression. Put differently, whenever traditional Chinese lay Buddhist communities sought to bypass the authorized hierarchy of the Sangha, they inevitably relegated themselves to the margins of state legality, often being categorized as heterodox sodalities. Their “independence” often meant being excluded from the orthodoxy and even suffering political persecution.

2.2 Independent Lay Buddhism in Modern China

Besides the two periods in history when lay Buddhism flourished, as mentioned in Pan’s book, the third time when lay Buddhism’s influence became powerful or truly independent was in modern and contemporary China. Lay practitioners sought reform for survival and aimed to innovate in Buddhism, particularly in Buddhist theory and academia, where they took the lead. In evaluating the relationship between monastics and lay practitioners, a wide spectrum of contemporary scholarship has advanced the paradigm of “lay dominance” in the modern era. This perspective potentially embodies a critique of the monastic Sangha, highlighting various accumulated problems, especially the detachment from worldly matters at that time.

Since the beginning of modern China, society has suffered from domestic turmoil and foreign aggression, and old thoughts and cultures have also endured pain and

reflection. Zhangjia 张佳 and Jizhe's 汲喆 article views this transformation through an educational lens and categorizes it as traditional Chinese intellectuals seeking a newly found societal status in Buddhism that corresponded with their own identity following the collapse of the Confucian system. Educated intellectuals, possessing a higher degree of erudition, appreciated the scholarly and rational elements within Buddhism. Their emphasis on the reinterpretation and revitalization of traditional Buddhism, particularly in this regard, potentially posed a challenge to the conventional monastic community who had historically held dominant Buddhist discourse.³⁵ During that period, the society endured events such as the Taiping Rebellion, the "Confiscating Temple Property to Set up Schools" (*miaochan xingxue* 庙产兴学) movement, and the Opium Wars, which inflicted sustained damage upon Buddhism. This further led to the dissolution of traditional Buddhism and its ideological tenets. It also resulted in mutual recognition at the intersection of the survival needs of monastics and the secular beliefs of the general populace regarding the practice of burning incense and making offerings for merit. Consequently, traditional temples predominantly focused on Buddhist services and Dharma assemblies. These not only encompassed strong elements of folk beliefs but also infiltrated multiple forms of superstitions involving ghosts and deities.³⁶ Hence, the deteriorating situation in which traditional monastics prioritized secular interests over

³⁵ Jia Zhang and Zhe Ji, "Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China: Social Engagements and Political Regulations," *China Review* 18, no. 4 (2018): 14–15.

³⁶ Pan, *Zhongguo jushi*, 835.

education and other vital aspects became the subject of criticism and reform by lay communities, epitomized by modern intellectuals.

In 1866, Yang Wenhui relocated to Nanjing and keenly felt the severe loss of Buddhist scriptures, which constituted major challenges to both rigorous scholastic inquiry and the broader dissemination of the Dharma. Determined to address this issue, Yang established the Jinling Scriptural Press (*Jinling kejing chu* 金陵刻经处) and dedicated himself tirelessly for decades to the collection, organization, engraving, and distribution of Buddhist scriptures.³⁷ Later, he also set up Jetavana Hermitage (*Qihuan jingshe* 祇洹精舍) and Buddhist Studies Research Society (*Foxue yanjiu hui* 佛学会). In these institutes, laypeople (including himself) could teach monastics, “which was strictly forbidden in traditional Buddhism.”³⁸ From this, it can be seen that the layman Yang made pioneering attempts to reform and innovate Buddhism through academic, educational, and cultural means. As a result, he is also recognized as a primary architect behind both the institutional modernization of Chinese Buddhism and the systematic resurgence of the laity.

Yang positioned the Jetavana Hermitage as a “Buddhist School” aimed toward revitalizing Buddhism. He planned to use it as a model and planned to “establish Buddhist Schools” in famous monasteries throughout various provinces in the future, to comprehensively reform the education of both monks and nuns. It is worth mentioning

³⁷ Pan, *Zhongguo jushi*, 837.

³⁸ Zhang and Ji, “Lay Buddhism,” 15.

that when the Jetavana Hermitage was established, Ven. Taixu was one of the eleven monastics who participated in the study. However, the Jetavana Hermitage was closed shortly after. The author Pan believes that, on the one hand, this was due to the extremely declining state of Buddhism at the time, and that the goals and requirements Yang set for education were quite high. On the other hand, it faced resistance from conservative forces within the Buddhist circle.³⁹

After Yang, his disciple Ouyang Jian 欧阳渐 established the Chinese Inner Studies Institute (*Zhina neixue yuan* 支那内学院). It would be set up as an integrated, institutionalized, and modernized school, granting opportunities for teaching, research, and publishing. It formed a stable community between students and teachers, with their respective educational goals. Wang Leiquan 王雷泉 summarized, “Ouyang Jian’s Buddhist education had the significance of rebuilding a modernized Buddhist populace, and the establishment of the Chinese Inner Studies Institute was framed as the definitive catalyst that gave rise to modern Chinese Buddhist education.”⁴⁰ Ouyang Jian also boldly put forward that “laypeople can also uphold and propagate the True Dharma” and argued that “lay Buddhists also belonged to the Sangha in a broad sense and could equally preach the Dharma as masters.”⁴¹ This expansion of the Sangha’s scope, including laypeople, including the fourfold assembly, was considered quite radical at the time.

³⁹ Pan, *Zhongguo jushi*, 841.

⁴⁰ Wang Leiquan 王雷泉, *Ouyang Jian wenxuan* 欧阳渐文选 (Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 2011), Editor’s Preface: 4.

⁴¹ Ji, “Jushi fojiao,” 41–64.

However, it disturbed the established pattern of monastic authority and lay adherence that had been in place for two thousand years.

Aviv argues that the true nature of the “independent lay Buddhist movement” led by Ouyang was essentially a conservative, elitist “scholastic revival” movement carried out in the name of “purification.” The essence of this movement was not social engagement or organizationally building (although he did establish institutions), but rather the “purification” of Chinese Buddhism by rigorous textual research, philosophical analysis, and doctrinal authentication. The Chinese Inner Studies Institute was an elite, academic center whose purpose was not to train ordinary monastics or believers, but to cultivate “Buddhist experts” capable of rigorous textual research and philosophical study, thereby dominating Buddhist discourse.⁴² Liu Yifeng also analyzes that modern Chinese Buddhist education went through a profound paradigm shift, transitioning from the traditional Sangha Forest (*conglin* 丛林) model to the modern Buddhist academy model. This transition means that Buddhism responds to the challenges of modernity and reshaped its social image through a profound epistemological reinvention, pivoting from a “faith-based culture” to a “knowledge-based culture.” In this transformative discursive practice, elite lay intellectuals emerged as the primary architects.⁴³

Therefore, we can say that periods of monastic decline and institutional corruption

⁴² Aviv, *Differentiating the Pearl*, 3, 14–18, 32, 40, 175–78.

⁴³ Yifeng Liu, “From ‘Sangha Forest’ (丛林 *Conglin*) to ‘Buddhist Academy’: The Influence of Western Knowledge Paradigm on the Chinese Sangha Education in Modern Times,” *Religions* 14, no. 8 (2023): 1–18.

traditionally yield the fertile social soil for the rise of autonomous lay Buddhism, playing a pioneering and exploratory role in considering and reforming Buddhism. In Liu Qiong's 刘琼 review of scholarship on the modern Chinese lay Buddhism, most scholars agree that the emergence of lay Buddhist organizations represented an integral dimension of the modern era's Buddhist renaissance in China.⁴⁴ In the modern era, lay Buddhism is primarily influential in academia, education, and publishing, and has even given rise to a new form of lay authority, expanding the connotations of the Sangha. Ji Zhe suggests that this ultimately marks the "birth of modern Chinese lay Buddhism with veritable autonomy from the Buddhist Sangha." This kind of autonomy is reflected in a fundamental independence movement that utilized "modern education" to turn traditional "faith-based" Buddhism into a more "knowledge-based" academic system, which essentially contained ideological implications such as academic autonomy, freedom of thought, and critical reflection on monastic authority. Consequently, this lay Buddhist movement redefined the content, form, and subjects of transmission. It contested the monastic monopoly on spiritual authority that had lasted for millennia to achieve an independent religious status, thereby reshaping the integration of the sacred, knowledge, and power.⁴⁵

The activities of modern lay elites were not confined to the fields of philosophy

⁴⁴ Liu Qiong 刘琼, "Jin sanshi nianlai zhongguo jindai jushi fojiaoshi yanjiu zongshu" 近三十年来中国近代居士佛教史研究综述, *Yuanguang foxue xuebao* 圆光佛学学报, no. 41 (2023): 77–78.

⁴⁵ Ji, "Jushi fojiao," 60–61.

and education; they also had a significant place in cultural practice. Laypeople (especially artists like Feng Zikai 丰子恺) utilized modern media such as publishing, cartoons, literature, and music in new public spaces, such as publishing houses and societies. They played an active role in “attuning the Dharma,” thereby developing new “sites of cultural production” independent of traditional monasteries. Through integrating Buddhist ethics with modern art, modern lay Buddhism successfully assimilated into the discourse of Chinese modernity and public life, thereby responding to and shaping China’s modernity.⁴⁶

In addition, in early twentieth-century China, Mr. Science (*Saixiansheng* 赛先生) was upheld by the intelligentsia as the highest standard for judging all values, including religion. Amid the wave of “scientism,” traditional religions like Buddhism and Daoism were widely regarded as “superstition” and backward ideologies hindering national progress. Consequently, a group of Buddhists—particularly lay intellectuals—initiated a “Buddhist modernism” movement. They sought to prove that Buddhism was rational, logical, and fully compatible with modern science. Against the backdrop of scientism becoming the dominant discourse of the era, the lay-driven dialogue between “science and Buddhism” sought to construct a Buddhist modernism in response to these problems, profoundly shaping the form and self-perception of modern Chinese Buddhism. It established the story that “Buddhism is scientific” as a core theme of Buddhist

⁴⁶ Francesca Tarocco, *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma* (Routledge, 2008).

modernism for over a century, a theme that also encompasses the case of the elite layman Shen Jiazhen.

Urban elites like Wang Yiting 王一亭 possessed significant social, economic, and cultural capital. As industrialists, bankers, and philanthropists, they differed from traditional laypeople who relied on the monastic Sangha. They also differed from late Qing figures like Yang Wenhui and Ouyang Jian, who focused more on scholasticism. Instead, these urban elites placed greater emphasis on social practice and urban public affairs. By examining the “activism” of the Shanghai lay elite in the early 20th century and their leadership in Buddhist social engagement, philanthropy, and cultural production, such as the Shanghai Buddhist Pure Karma Society (*Shanghai fojiao jingyeshe* 上海佛教净业社), Shanghai Municipal Buddhist Association Orphanage (*Shanghaishi fojiaohui ciyouyuan* 上海市佛教慈幼院), and the World Buddhist Householder Grove (*Shijie fojiao jushilin* 世界佛教居士林), etc., Jessup argues that these “householder elites” were the true structural vanguard behind the twentieth-century revival of Chinese Buddhism, thereby constructing their own faith-based spaces and identity.⁴⁷

However, this transformation of the secular elite’s role as representatives of the Shanghai region and their rising status also led to fierce conflicts between them and the monastic community (including both conservatives and reformers). They used their

⁴⁷ J. Brooks Jessup, “The Householder Elite: Buddhist Activism in Shanghai, 1920–1956” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 5–78.

substantial economic power to fund Buddhist-related enterprises and leveraged their political influence within the Republican government to oppose the “Confiscating Temple Property to Set up Schools.” Organizationally, they established Buddhist groups and networks such as the World Buddhist Householder Grove, which possessed independent property, management rights, and a vast membership. Through these efforts, they gained independence in organizational and religious authority, thus forming a powerful secular network separate from the monastic community. However, their active social engagement and intervention also drew them into a vortex of controversy, leading to collective resistance from the monastic class. On the one hand, conservative monastics strictly adhered to customary boundaries between the monastic and the lay, where monastics were revered, and laypeople were subordinate. They viewed the active involvement of Shanghai laypeople in national Buddhist affairs, the formation of organizations, and the preaching of the Dharma as a direct challenge to traditional monastic authority. On the other hand, their conflict with reformist monks led by Ven. Taixu manifested as a “struggle for leadership” over the modern Buddhist reformation. During the 1936–1937 restructuring of the Chinese Buddhist Association, Ven. Taixu and his followers (such as Fafang 法舫) argued that the Shanghai lay elite were using their wealth and political influence to “manipulate the association.” Ven. Taixu’s faction explicitly criticized the Shanghai laypeople for overstepping their boundaries and interfering in the reform and administration of the religious order, which should have been led by the monastic

community.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, this conflict at least reflected the elevated status of laypeople at the time, to the extent that it manifested as a counterbalance to monastic power. The development of contemporary lay Buddhism no longer completely relies on traditional monastic orders, and it has become independent in terms of organization and influence.

Overall, the deep meaning of the “independence” of modern Chinese lay Buddhism is manifested in the transition that it has shifted from a previous state of relying on the authority of monastics and being in a subordinate position to becoming an independent Buddhist entity with “true autonomy.” However, I need to note that this transformation has not deviated from the framework of the mainstream legitimacy, that is, it still remains influenced by traditional monastics or political authorities. Therefore, the independence discussed here cannot be divorced from “legitimacy.” The process of attaining independence was also a process of shaping the discourse surrounding the “sacred and power.” As revealed by the research of scholars like Ji Zhe, the fundamental driving force behind this transformation stemmed, on the one hand, from the institutional decline and functional failure of the traditional Sangha under the impact of movements such as the “Confiscating Temple Property to Set up Schools.” On the other hand, it stemmed from the fact that lay elites took the lead in mastering and applying new “knowledge-power” tools, such as modern education, scientific dialogue, and modern organizational management. Consequently, they acquired a new type of legitimate

⁴⁸ Zhong Qiongnig 钟琼宁, “Minchu Shanghai jushi fojiao de fazhan (1912-1937)” 民初上海居士佛教的发展 (1912-1937), *Yuanguang foxue xuebao* 圆光佛学学报, no. 3 (1999): 181–90.

authority independent of traditional monastic dharma transmission. Thus, modern laypeople no longer simply played the traditional role of dharma protectors. Instead, led by lay elites representing intellectuals and the emerging business class, they became an active, autonomous force that guided the agenda of Buddhist revival and modernization across numerous fields.

We can now conclude that the independence of lay Buddhism found expression in several distinct areas. In terms of organization and economy, the lay Buddhists establish their own organizations, such as the World Buddhist Householder Grove. These organizations have independent property, funds, and places for practice. They abandon the patriarchal system of traditional monasteries and adopt the board-of-directors system similar to modern enterprise management. In education and academia, laypeople fundamentally changed the production and transmission of Buddhist knowledge by establishing modern Buddhist academies, such as the China Institute of Inner Studies, or the Jinling Scriptural Press. Lay figures represented by Yang and Ouyang even set what has been described as “the first precedent in Chinese history” of lay teachers instructing monastics in the Dharma. This directly challenged the traditional hierarchy that privileged monastics over laypeople, and can be seen as a key step in reshaping Buddhism as an intellectual culture. Ouyang Jian and others further attempted to theoretically challenge the monastic monopoly on religious authority by expanding the wider connotation of the “Sangha.”

Furthermore, lay elites achieved an independent status in modern public discourse. Facing the challenge of Mr. Science, lay scholars like Wang Xiaoxu took the lead in utilizing modern scientific dialogue to demonstrate the scientific nature of Buddhism, especially Yogācāra. By doing so, they responded to secular accusations of Buddhism as superstition and mastered a modern discourse of legitimacy that the traditional Sangha lacked. At the same time, they used modern media such as publishing and art to open up new sites of cultural production. Operating independently of monasteries, they sought to attune the Dharma for inclusion into public life, therewith addressing the issues of Buddhist modernization. Finally, this independence was fully realized in religious functions and social practices. Lay organizations began to take over religious activities that traditional Buddhism stipulated could only be performed by monastics, and laypeople's preaching of the Dharma became widespread. Additionally, the lay community, represented by the householder elites in Shanghai, spearheaded Buddhist philanthropy and social engagement through their vigorous "activism."

However, the strongest evidence of this independence lies precisely in the fierce conflicts between monastics and laypeople that it provoked. When reformist monastics like Ven. Taixu harshly criticized Shanghai laypeople for manipulating the Chinese Buddhist Association and overstepping their bounds, the conflict itself demonstrated that lay Buddhism was no longer an appendage of the Sangha. Instead, it has achieved a substantial degree of independence, sufficient to challenge the authority of the monastics.

However, this revival was only temporary. Amid the subsequent political upheaval and wartime turmoil, the development of modern lay Buddhism underwent transformation and eventual termination. Although there has been a contemporary recovery, it has largely lost its independent character. After 1949, the new regime placed religion under strict “State Corporatism” controls. In this new political environment, the identities of the householder elites, as industrialists and capitalists, became targets for ideological remolding. The relevant organizations were taken over by the government. During the series of turbulent political campaigns in the 1950s, they were deemed feudal superstitions or reactionary organizations. Their leadership was stripped, their properties were confiscated, and they ultimately ceased operations or were completely restructured around 1956. The state often chose to support and control the Sangha Buddhism as its sole legitimate representative. This policy resulted in the extreme marginalization of lay Buddhism both politically and organizationally.⁴⁹

Lately, this “marginalized revival” is no longer an elite movement aimed at transforming society, as it was during the Republican era. Unlike the elite “lay Buddhist movement” of the Republican era, which aimed at transforming society and national character on a macro-institutional level, the contemporary revival has lost its grand sociopolitical ambitions. Instead, it has shifted fully toward an individualism focused on the reconstruction of individual subjectivity, and a moralizing turn that retreats into the

⁴⁹ Jessup, “Householder Elite,” 79–88; Zhang and Ji, “Lay Buddhism,” 22–28.

private sphere (such as vegetarianism and the sponsoring of scripture distribution).

Through decentralized “bond-creating” (*jieyuan* 结缘) media networks, such as the free distribution and reproduction of Buddhist materials, it “accelerates the integration of the new practitioners into a community of Buddhists and sometimes their estrangement from relationships with nonpractitioners.”⁵⁰ Therefore, marginalized lay Buddhists have constructed an “imagined Buddhist community” on a national and even global scale. In more detailed studies, Harrison Carter explores the central role that state-sanctioned community temples play in the lives of contemporary lay practitioners.⁵¹ Fisher also observes that some lay Buddhists, particularly the highly educated, younger middle class, have begun turning to “private spaces” (teahouses, bookstores, apartments) for their practice, forging a new, privatized form of “independence.” Fisher concludes that post-Mao lay Buddhism has evolved into a decentralized, rhizomatic, and networked social movement. It relies on neither a single leader nor a central organization, nor does it seek the public political influence characteristic of Republican-era lay Buddhists; instead, it pursues “autonomy” in cultural and spiritual practice.⁵² Overall, while lay Buddhism has become increasingly diverse in its development, “independent lay Buddhism” can be considered to be in gradual decline.

⁵⁰ Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 91–92.

⁵¹ Harrison Blaine Carter, “The Cultural Gravity of a Neighborhood Temple: Lay Practice and Temple Buddhism in Contemporary Shanghai” (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2020).

⁵² Gareth Fisher, “From Temples to Teahouses: Exploring the Evolution of Lay Buddhism in Post-Mao China,” *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 7, no. 1 (2020): 50–58.

2.3 The Context of American Buddhism

When examining the social and religious background of Chinese American lay Buddhism, we need to understand the unique development history and characteristics of Buddhism in the United States. Historically, Buddhism in its transnational development inevitably required active or passive local adaptation and integration. In the modern era, traditional Buddhism is encountering the impact of the modernization process, and a theme of “Buddhist modernism” begins to present its unique and diverse aspects. American Buddhism is at the intersection of American religious history and global Buddhist history, and it has a mixture of various Buddhist traditions and ethnicities, becoming a research field that gradually acquires independence and significant research value.

Early works on American Buddhism mainly focused on how Buddhist concepts were introduced to the United States and their echoes among intellectuals. As Thomas A. Tweed pointed out, although certain aspects of Buddhism were regarded as contrary to the prevailing Christianity and Victorian culture at that time, such as its alleged atheism, nihilism, passivity and pessimism, those Americans who became interested in or converted to Buddhism did not actually completely abandon their cultural roots. Instead, they usually reinterpreted Buddhism to make it consistent with the core values of the Victorian era, such as revised theism, individualism, optimism, and activism, thereby achieving “limited dissent” and “wide cultural identification.” The author classified these

Buddhist sympathizers and converts into “mystics,” “rationalists” and “romantics,” and believed that it was this adaptation to mainstream values rather than a complete overthrow that explained why Buddhism failed to establish a strong and independent institutional influence in the United States at that time.⁵³ The journalist and Buddhist Rick Fields’ book *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* detailed the introduction of Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and the combination of the 1960s counterculture movement with Buddhism, such as the “Beat Generation” Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and others.⁵⁴ However, with the development of academia, scholars gradually pointed out that these works overly focused on white middle-class converts, seriously neglecting the large number of Asian immigrant Buddhist groups that flooded in after the *1965 Immigration Act*.

To correct the bias of early literature towards white converts, sociologists and historians began to turn their attention to the Asian immigrant group that constitutes the important majority of the American Buddhist population. For example, in 1977, Tetsuden Kashima’s *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution* examined in a sociological perspective the “Americanization” and institutional adaptation of the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA, representing the Japanese Pure Land sect or Jōdo Shinshū) in the face of mainstream Protestant culture in the United

⁵³ Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture & the Limits of Dissent* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵⁴ Rick Fields and Benjamin Bogin, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Shambhala Publications, 1992).

States, exploring the combination of religion and ethnic identity, and the profound impact of the detention of Japanese Americans during World War II on accelerating their religious Americanization.⁵⁵ Later, Stuart Chandler, Paul David Numrich, and Irene Lin, among others, also conducted research that enriched the understanding of Chinese Americans and Asian American Immigrant Buddhism in Southeast Asia.⁵⁶

Therefore, how to determine the typologies of the highly fragmented and diverse Buddhist groups in the United States has triggered long-term theoretical debates in the academic community. Referring to the above basic discussion categories, Western Buddhism has a “Two Buddhisms” dichotomy based on a broad ethnic perspective. These two groups of Buddhists have substantial differences in their perspectives and practices regarding Buddhism: one is the Asian-origin Buddhists who inherit the Buddhist cultural heritage, and the other is the non-Asian Buddhist converts. Although this dichotomy has been noticed for a long time, it was not subjected to critical reflection until the early 1990s, and since then it has had a profound impact on contemporary Buddhist research fields.⁵⁷

According to Numrich’s analysis, the early broad ethnic division was rooted in the historical social and legal structures that regarded Asian immigrants as “strangers

⁵⁵ Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution* (Greenwood, 1977).

⁵⁶ Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Esterik, *Taking Refuge*; Numrich, *Old Wisdom*.

⁵⁷ Paul David Numrich, “Two Buddhisms Further Considered,” 55–56.

from a foreign land” and discriminated against them. The “Buddhist Churches of America,” based on the Japanese-American community as an example during the same period, generally followed ethnic parallelism, resulting in functional isolation between Asian-origin and non-Asian Buddhist believers. For instance, Nyogen Senzaki’s zendos in San Francisco and Los Angeles in the early 1900s had gatherings on different nights by Japanese and non-Japanese believers.⁵⁸ Additionally, cases of different ethnicities appearing simultaneously in the same monastery also occurred in Numrich’s research based on his studies of the Thai and Sinhalese Theravada Buddhist communities in Chicago and Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He observed “parallel congregations” in the temples: one group was composed of immigrants and their descendants, mainly participating in cultural and merit-making activities; The other group was composed of converts, mostly white, and they were mainly interested in meditation and Buddhist philosophy. Numrich believed that this model revealed the reality of the racial dynamics in the United States, that is, there was little interaction between Asian-origin and white Buddhist believers, and white people had more power and resources than recent Asian immigrants.⁵⁹ The World Religious Congress held in Chicago in 1893 tended to cater to white intellectuals and the public fascinated by “Oriental” philosophies,

⁵⁸ Numrich, “Two Buddhisms,” 56–57; Fields and Bogin, *How the Swans*, 181.

⁵⁹ Hickey, “Two Buddhisms,” 2; Numrich, *Old Wisdom*; Paul David Numrich, “How the Swans Came to Lake Michigan: The Social Organization of Buddhist Chicago,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39, no. 2 (2000): 207.

while ignoring the traditional Buddhism practiced by Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the United States.

Before the 1990s, a few observers had consciously reflected on the dichotomy of “Two Buddhisms” before, but to a limited extent. The debate in the early 1990s marked the watershed of the evolution of the “Two Buddhisms” concept. It began with an editorial in the magazine *Tricycle* in 1991. Editor-in-chief Helen Tworokov claimed that the spokespersons of “American Buddhism” were almost all educated white middle-class people, while Asian-American Buddhist believers (in large numbers) did not occupy a significant position in the development of “American Buddhism.” This triggered a strong rebuttal from Japanese-American Buddhist monk Ryo Imamura. This debate became public in 1993-1994, and Rick Fields commented that the differences between white American Buddhists and Asian-American Buddhists were even greater at that time than in the past. He believed that there were “not one but two American Buddhisms.”⁶⁰ Charles Prebish’s 1993 article explicitly applied his 1979 concept of two types without ethnic connotations to this debate, distinguishing between “ethnic Asian-American Buddhist groups” and “mainly composed of European ancestry members.”⁶¹ Later, following Numrich’s footsteps, he made a distinction between two ethnic groups, that is, Asian immigrants and American converts.⁶² This debate made the distinction of “Two

⁶⁰ Numrich, “Two Buddhisms,” 57–59.

⁶¹ Prebish, “Two Buddhisms Reconsidered.”

⁶² Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Yale University Press, 2019), 35; Prebish, *Luminous Passage*.

Buddhisms” become the core of academic and public discussions on the existence of Buddhism in Western society. Researchers have proposed various labels to refer to these two camps: ethnic Buddhism and new Buddhism (Coleman 2001), heritage Buddhists and new Buddhists (Nattier 2001), cradle Buddhists and convert Buddhists (Tweed 2000; 2002), culture Buddhists and convert Buddhists (Numrich 2000), hereditary Buddhists and convert Buddhists (Carl Bielefeldt 2001). Some of these labels represent scholars’ modifications, improvements, or retention of the classification of “two or three Buddhisms,” or their rejection or alternative proposals. For example, Hickey pointed out the white privilege or superiority tone operating within it.⁶³

The research object of this dissertation, Chinese American Buddhism, seems to definitely fall within the category of Ethnic Buddhism or traditional hereditary Buddhists. These debates aim to distinguish the composition of American Buddhism and who can represent American Buddhism, but in the process, they tend to slide into the misconception of racism. Although it is still deepening and continuing with more Buddhist development processes and observational studies, this model or discussion can help us understand the landscape of American Buddhism development. We might need to pay attention to avoiding excessive focus on ethnic/racial identity issues while neglecting the emphasis on “sociological function.”⁶⁴ This is also pointed out by many scholars and

⁶³ Numrich, “Two Buddhisms,” 57–65; Hickey, “Two Buddhisms”; Numrich, “How the Swans,” 194–95.

⁶⁴ Numrich, “How the Swans,” 194–95.

studies later on that the study of American Buddhism needs to examine a specific temple or meditation center from multiple dimensions, such as race, class, gender, generation, and language, rather than directly attaching labels of “converted” or “ethnic.”

From this discussion topic, it leads to the discussion of the subject, definition, and connotation of “Buddhist Modernism.” To break the deadlock of “Two Buddhisms” in the racial dimension, scholar Martin Baumann proposed a transitional theoretical reconstruction. He argued that the main line of distinguishing the two major schools of Western Buddhism should not be people’s skin color or racial ancestry, but the “religious concepts and cosmology” they hold. Therefore, Baumann suggested replacing the labels of “immigrant” and “convert” with “Traditionalist Buddhism” and “Modernist Buddhism.” Traditionalist Buddhism emphasizes piety, rituals, and the accumulation of merit, and holds specific cosmologies (such as reincarnation, heaven realm, and hell), and its goal is often to pray for good conditions in this life and the next. Modernist Buddhism is a form reshaped by Western Orientalists and modernists from Asia, emphasizing rationality, science, textual reading, and meditation elements. Most Western modernist Buddhists have abandoned the concept of rebirth, do not aim to accumulate merit, but strive to achieve awakening in this life, and even move towards a “Buddhism without beliefs.” And modernist Buddhism is often led by laypeople rather than monastics. In the West, many modern Buddhist groups are related to social activism, such as introducing

mindfulness meditation to stress reduction clinics, prisons, and hospice care services.⁶⁵

This shift by Baumann is of decisive significance. It shifts the academic focus from “who is practicing Buddhism (by race)” to “what form of Buddhism are they practicing (with modern characteristics),” thus paving the way for the emergence of “Buddhist Modernism” as a core analytical category.

With the shift in research perspective, scholars began to ask: Where did the “modern Buddhism” practiced by Western white converts, which emphasizes meditation, anti-ritualism, and alignment with science, come from? McMahan provides a profound answer in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*: The “Buddhism” understood by the Western masses is actually not the original form of the ancient Asian tradition, but a mixture created by Asian Buddhists and Western enthusiasts over the past century in response to modern dominant cultural and knowledge forces, that is, “Buddhist Modernism.” Given the broad participation, classifying it as “Western Buddhism” is limiting; more broadly, American Buddhism is a facet of a more global movement network, rather than the exclusive product of one geographic or cultural setting.⁶⁶ McMahan does not simplify it to a simple adaptation of Buddhism to Western modernity, but respects its main Asian architect’s role and emphasizes the way Buddhist Modernism is used to criticize Western ethnocentrism and resist colonialism.⁶⁷ It can be seen that the

⁶⁵ Baumann, “Protective Amulets.”

⁶⁶ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 6.

⁶⁷ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 32.

development of transnational Buddhism in the modern context exhibits many common characteristics: it is rational, universal, socially engaged, free from cultural and institutional accretions as well as devotional and ritual practices, and places meditation at its core as an empirically verifiable practice. Represented by modern figures including Asian teachers, McMahan and Lopez agree that Buddhist modernism is a historically novel and distinctive form, one that can itself be regarded as a Buddhist sect. Like other Buddhist sects, it has its own lineage, doctrine, practice, and canon of sacred scriptures.⁶⁸

McMahan points out that the formation of Buddhist Modernism was deeply influenced by three major discourses of Western modernity: the scientific-rationalism of the Enlightenment, Romantic expressivism, and Western monotheism (Protestantism). This contains two major modern themes: (1) a world-affirming stance rooted in everyday life, along with a subjective turn toward interiority and self-reflexivity, and (2) key modern values such as individualism, egalitarianism, liberalism, democracy, and the importance of social reform.⁶⁹ These have given rise to a form of “New Buddhism” characterized by detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization. Although Chinese lay Buddhist traditions overall retain strong traditional features, within the North American context and under the influence of modernist trends, one can observe a positive orientation toward adaptation and appropriation. Therefore, analyzing the main body,

⁶⁸ David L. McMahan, ed., *Buddhism in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2012), xxxii–xxxix; Gleig, *American Dharma*, 30–32.

⁶⁹ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 32; McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*.

connotation, and influence of Buddhist modernism has profound reference value for us to understand the subject of this dissertation.

Related to the main body of laypeople in this dissertation is this modernist transformation process that brings about individualism, the turn of integrating practice into daily life, the change of Lay Ordination precepts, the substantive control by laypeople (De facto Congregationalism), and cross-sectarian ecumenicism. In this process of modernist development, the Chinese American lay Buddhism has also been actively and selectively adapting and transforming itself. Modern believers (especially those in the West who have converted) view religion as a freely chosen, even self-assembled private matter. They can not only question traditional dogmas but also tend to separate the Buddhist enlightenment experience from supernatural myths and transform it into a psychological self-discovery and inner freedom.⁷⁰ Modern Buddhism breaks the strict barrier between “otherworldly” (sacred) and “worldly” (secular) and eliminates the gap between monastic and lay life. This practice of making life secular means that Buddhists no longer merely rely on the ritualized exorcism ceremonies performed by monastics to seek benefits in the afterlife, but rather practice Buddhism in family, work, and interpersonal relationships, making “lay people’s secular life become sacredized.” This transformation of regarding the secular society itself as a sacred space gives modern Buddhism a strong concern for present-world ethics and a spirit of social participation.

⁷⁰ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 42–57.

As the status of lay people in the Buddhist revival rises, the traditional precepts and ordination system have also undergone adaptive evolution. In Western Buddhist communities, such as in North America, forms of intermediary ordination like “*anagarika*” emerged, which are between traditional lay people and monastic communities.⁷¹ In the modern context, ordination no longer means having to follow the “monastic” (*shukke*) ritual identity, but makes it possible for an independent spirituality of “lay Buddhism” (*zaike bukkyō*) that does not rely on abandoning the family to become a reality.⁷² In addition, in response to modern urban life, some traditionally strict precepts (such as not eating after noon and not keeping gold and silver) have been reinterpreted or weakened, and the core of the precepts is internalized as a tool for self-moral restraint rather than rigid dogmas.⁷³

In terms of organizational structure, modern lay Buddhism presents a “de facto congregationalism” (de facto congregationalism) in the sense of Western sociology. In this model, Buddhist groups become communities that members voluntarily join, where Buddhists become an “achieved status” rather than an “ascribed status.”⁷⁴ With the trend of democratization and egalitarianism, the authority and patriarchal hierarchy of

⁷¹ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 72–73.

⁷² Pye Michael, ed., *Lay Buddhism and Spirituality: From Vimalakīrti to the Nenbutsu Masters* (Eastern Buddhist Voices, 2014), 2.

⁷³ Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (University of California Press, 1998), 175.

⁷⁴ Joseph B. Tamney, “Afterword: Modernization, Globalization, and Buddhism,” in *North American Buddhists in Social Context*, ed. Paul David Numrich (E. J. Brill, 2008), 232.

traditional Buddhism have been broken. In many modern Buddhist organizations in North America and elsewhere, the board of directors elected by the believers manages the organization, and laypeople have gained greater decision-making power within the organization, while clergy members are responsible for their professional performance. This egalitarian model eliminates the unquestionable absolute authority of monastics in the past, allowing lay people and women to participate as equal partners in the decision-making and management of the Buddhist community's life principles.⁷⁵

Facing modern multiculturalism and globalization, Buddhism exhibits strong “ecumenicism” and “non-sectarianism” traits. Modern practitioners often no longer limit themselves to a single lineage inheritance but present a “diffuse affiliation” and eclectic tendency.⁷⁶ Lay people may practice simultaneously in Zen Buddhism, Theravada Vipassana, or Tibetan Buddhist centers. At the macro-organizational level, this universalism has given rise to cross-faith Buddhist councils across North America, which adopt a “diversity” model or a “fusionist” model, attempting to find common ground among various sects, and even some sects have proposed that the interaction of different Buddhist lineages is forming a new “New Vehicle” (Navayana).⁷⁷

Therefore, lay practitioners became the primary agents of practice, and Buddhism

⁷⁵ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 74.

⁷⁶ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 90–92.

⁷⁷ Paul David Numrich, “Local Inter-Buddhist Associations in North America,” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Psychology Press, 1999), 122–23.

in the United States, from the outset, has largely taken the form of a “lay community.” Prebish includes that there seems to be little doubt that American Buddhism will continue to be a mostly lay-oriented movement.⁷⁸ Emma Layman argues that “In general, American Buddhists are expected to lead their lives with the lay community later than in a monastic setting . . . ,”⁷⁹ and Rick Fields echoes, “Generalization of any kind seeds to dissolve in the face of such culture and relative diversity. And yet it does seem safe to say that lay practice is the real heart and koan of American Buddhism.”⁸⁰ The main topic of this dissertation is to observe how the Chinese community in this environment exercises its authority among laypeople, balances its relationship with the traditional monastic authority, and explores new paths between tradition and modernity.

Under this model of Buddhist modernism, we can place the existence of layperson authority within Weber’s three religious authority theory models to help us analyze the complex dynamics within. Weber’s three ideal types of authority, namely traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal, respectively stem from the ancient traditions, customs, and the sense of worship and sacredness, then the personal charisma of the leader, and the formal promulgation of laws, decrees, and procedural justice.⁸¹ In the traditional Asian Buddhist environment, monastic groups have long maintained “traditional authority”

⁷⁸ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 267.

⁷⁹ Layman, *Buddhism in America*, 18.

⁸⁰ Fields and Bogin, *How the Swans*, 371.

⁸¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 941–55, 1111–1156.

through inheritance, and lay believers often occupy a dependent position as “external patrons.” After Chinese Buddhism entered the multicultural environment in North America, lay leaders have integrated and utilized the three dimensions of authority to reconstruct the boundaries of religious power. Therefore, charismatic leaders can no longer be monastics but also talented and knowledgeable lay people, and they can also naturally take on rational-legal authority since they play important roles in the organizations under the law.

However, it is important to note that this long-standing Weberian & Protestantization Model is distinct from the Discursive & Postcolonial Model based on postmodern and postcolonial contexts, represented by McMahan. These two are the two main schools of the “Push Model.” Ritzinger, when analyzing the widespread neglect of Ven. Taixu’s devout belief in Maitreya in the academic community, proposed to use this push mode to summarize the modern Buddhist research paradigm. The core logic of this approach holds that the arrival of modernity is a “challenge” or “crisis” for religions, and religions must “respond” to it. Religion is like a species suddenly pushed into an unfamiliar environment, and it must quickly “adapt” to modernization; otherwise, it will face extinction. Under this pressure (push), Buddhism, in order to survive, will inevitably move towards rationalization, de-mythologization, de-sacralization, emphasizing social participation, and weakening traditional devotional beliefs.⁸²

⁸² Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land*, 2–3.

These two specific types include Max Weber's theory, which holds that the core of modernity is the victory of "rationalization" over "tradition and witchcraft." Protestantism promoted the "disenchantment" of the world by rejecting witchcraft and advocating "present-day asceticism." Therefore, scholars often regard Western Protestantism as the template of "modern religion" and use it to measure the modernization of Buddhism. The Discursive & Postcolonial Model, on the other hand, does not follow Weber but is based on postmodern and postcolonial theories. For example, scholar McMahan proposed a more inclusive "Buddhist Modernism" analytical framework. He pointed out that the formation of modern Buddhism was influenced by the protestant model and scientific rationalism (Weberian factors), but it also deeply integrated "romantic expressivism" discourse. This multi-dimensional theoretical reconstruction breaks the limitations of the Weber model that overly emphasizes "disenchantment" and "rational bureaucracy," and more accurately reflects the complex evolution of Buddhism in the global context. Overall, the conclusions drawn by these two models are highly similar: Buddhism must change to cope with the challenges of modern states. However, Ritzinger's inspiring discovery is that because these models "presume" what modern religions should be like, it leads to serious academic blind spots. On one hand, scholars only focus on phenomena that conform to the characteristics of "rationality, social benefits, de-mythologization, and de-sacralization," while ignoring certain seemingly modern phenomena (such as the emphasis on studying scriptures) that actually have deep pre-modern roots and cannot be explained, or not willing to pay

attention to the non-modern elements still thriving in modern Buddhist movements, such as Ven. Taixu's devout belief in Maitreya Bodhisattva.⁸³ This lays an important theoretical framework for my analysis of the phenomenon of Chinese American lay Buddhism, which still maintains traditional elements of respecting the monastics.

2.4 Lay-centered American Buddhism

After 1949, many Buddhist institutions and figures were transferred to Taiwan and overseas. Among overseas Chinese, lay Buddhist believers have developed in the United States. The “Two Buddhisms” model offers a viable lens for understanding the landscape of Buddhism in North America. “Ethnic Buddhism” originates from the situation formed by Asian immigrants and their descendants, and is related to ethnic religious customs. This form connects specific ethnic cultures and religious rituals with the native languages, emphasizing traditional rituals, festivals, and community activities. The monastery is not only a religious place but also the center of the cultural society.⁸⁴ “Convert Buddhism” is a Buddhist tradition that attracts many non-Asian Americans. It often uses authentic English, pays more attention to meditation, mindfulness training, philosophical inquiry, and psychological application, and simplifies or discards traditional rituals and cultural elements.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land*, 3–4.

⁸⁴ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 26, 37, 58.

⁸⁵ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 58, 63, 65.

This simplified dichotomy also corresponds to the division between monastic and lay identities, as “Convert Buddhism” is largely lay-oriented. This can be regarded as one of the elements that best reflect its characteristics; it contrasts sharply with many “Ethnic Buddhism” schools and constitutes the core part of its “Americanized” feature.

Prebish pointed out that the situation centered on lay believers is reflected in a fundamental transformation in the American Buddhist way of life. His research emphasizes that monastic life has never been an ideal choice in the US. In the early 1960s, American Buddhist groups were basically lay believer groups. The author’s research over nearly 20 years holds that since most American Buddhists are laypeople, the truly Americanized Buddhism needs to solve the core problem: adjusting the focus of Buddhist practice to adapt to lay life rather than monastic life.⁸⁶ By the 1990s, recognizing “the normative state of lay Buddhist life in the United States” had become standard practice. To adapt to this domestic reality centered around lay devotees, Buddhist groups have introduced the “in-between Sangha.” Lay practitioners can sustain the monastic community while simultaneously maintaining their responsibilities to family life. In the Los Angeles Zen Center, many devout students carry out cultivation training equivalent to that of monastics. They are married and engaged in secular work.⁸⁷

Shunryu Suzuki Rōshi said: “American students are not priests and yet not completely

⁸⁶ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 70–71.

⁸⁷ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 72, 264.

laymen... You are on your way to discovering some appropriate way of life.”⁸⁸ This transformation may be accompanied by the adjustment of traditional precepts. For example, to adapt to the contemporary context, some Buddhist centers relax the requirement of monastic celibacy, and introduce a new collective identity such as “Bodhisattva Sangha,” so that people can fulfill monastic roles without adhering to the vow of celibacy.⁸⁹

In terms of organizational structure, its hierarchical structure is usually relatively flat; the relationship between monastics and lay believers is more like that of a mentor and a student, rather than a fixed hierarchical one. Convert Buddhist meditation centers and groups are typically established and managed with the modern American non-profit organizational model. Organizational operations are overseen by a lay Board of Directors, which handles secular matters such as finance, administration, and development planning. In this scenario, more lay practitioners join the board system, potentially granting them some decision-making and managerial authority. While the head teacher exercises unrivaled authority in day-to-day operations, this system regularly proves important in periods of crisis. In addition, this organizational structure has also transformed the nature of traditional lay donations previously dedicated to sustaining monastics. In the West, support may eventually be distributed in accordance with the

⁸⁸ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 72; Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: John Weatherhill, 1970), 133.

⁸⁹ Coleman, *New Buddhism*, 136.

contract and the shareholding. In addition to the monastics, lay practitioners who hold a significant share may also have gained profits. Prebish concludes that Zen centers in North America tend to adopt governance structures similar to those of Christian and Jewish churches, in which a board of lay practitioners and the abbot jointly share power. There is a noticeable social structure between monks and laity, similar to the distinction between administrators and workers in American corporations. Hence, it is often described as “Managerial Zen.” There is a rotation system between officials and non-officials, with officials not forming a rigid elite class but cycling through different positions. This is similar to some practices in American corporations.⁹⁰ This model stands in clear contrast to the traditional monastic system, in which the abbot or head of the monastery holds the highest decision-making authority. In contrast, the Sangha (the monastic order) occupies an absolutely central position within traditional “Ethnic Buddhism” communities. The primary role of the laity is that of “Dharma Protector,” supporting the Three Jewels through almsgiving (*dāna*) and various services to accumulate personal merits. Although laypeople are necessary, the authority to interpret doctrine, lead religious rituals, and manage the organization stays firmly in the hands of the monastics.

When describing the subjectivities of monastic and lay groups, one can observe how the corresponding “religious” and “secular” binary categories have evolved and

⁹⁰ Prebish and Tanaka, *Faces of Buddhism*, 65–66.

blurred over the course of Buddhism's transmission from Asia to the United States. In traditional Asian Buddhism, the line separating the "religious" from the "secular" is largely defined by the clear distinction between monastics and the laity. The Sangha, representing the "religious" sphere, embodies Buddhism's core spiritual pursuit: they renounce secular life, taking liberation and the attainment of arhatship as their ultimate goals. Conversely, the laity (*upāsakas* and *upāsikās*), representing the "secular" sphere, are one of the four Buddhist assemblies; however, their main role is to protect the Sangha and provide material support for monastics, thereby acting as facilitators of "religious" practice. The monastic goal of liberation supersedes the lay goal of merit accumulation; this "essential inequality of religious status" underpins the authoritarian hierarchy within Asian Buddhism.⁹¹

However, upon Buddhism's transmission to the United States, this clear monastic-lay (religious/secular) boundary was thoroughly blurred and reconstructed. It is widely recognized that the modernization of Western Buddhism, exemplified by the United States, is considered by some scholars a new form of Buddhism, or "New Buddhism." Coleman argues that the Western pursuit of liberation, especially by means of practices like meditation and retreats, blurs the foundational boundary separating ordained monastics from laypeople, offering everyone a path to liberation beyond sects and traditions. Thus, a major characteristic of New Buddhism is that the "fundamental

⁹¹ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 70.

distinction between monk and layperson is almost wiped away.”⁹² This is prompted partly because Westerners find it difficult to accept a life of monastic celibacy, and partly due to questioning and challenging the absolute authority and hierarchy system represented by traditional Asian masters. Therefore, lay practitioners became the primary agents of practice, and American Buddhism has predominantly developed in the form of a “lay community” since its very origins. It elevates the “secular” lay identity to the center of practice, treating daily life, professional careers, and social engagement as core components of “religious” cultivation, thereby generating a deeply integrated new paradigm. Prebish includes that there seems to be little doubt that American Buddhism will continue to be a mostly lay-oriented movement.⁹³ Prebish lists the view from several authors. For example, Emma Layman argues that “In general, American Buddhists are expected to lead their lives with the lay community later than in a monastic setting,” and Rick Fields echoes, “Generalization of any kind tends to dissolve in the face of such culture and relative diversity. And yet it does seem safe to say that lay practice is the real heart and koan of American Buddhism.”⁹⁴

Overall, shaped by this Western transformation, the traditional definition of Sangha, one of the Three Jewels, has expanded in its connotations. In traditional settings,

⁹² Coleman, *New Buddhism*, 13.

⁹³ Charles S. Prebish, “The Emergence of American Buddhism,” in *The Buddhist World*, ed. John Powers (Routledge, 2016), 102.

⁹⁴ Charles S. Prebish, “The Academic Study of Buddhism in America: A Silent Sangha,” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Psychology Press, 1999), 183–214; Layman, *Buddhism in America*, 18; Fields and Bogin, *How the Swans*, 371.

Sangha primarily consisted of monastics, including both the *bhikṣu-Sangha* and *bhikṣuṇī-Sangha*, which were collectively designated as the *ubhayato-saṅgha*. In this sense, only the monks and nuns are included in the connotation of Sangha, which can also be named as the “twofold community.” However, with the development of global Buddhism, the roles of laymen (*upāsakas*) and laywomen (*upāsikās*) rose in prominence. The fourfold Sangha came to be known as the “Sangha of the four quarters,” consisting of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.⁹⁵

The traditional model in which scholar-monks monopolize Dharma education is being dismantled in the West and in certain modernized Asian communities. Due to the lack of well-educated “scholar-monks” to instruct the laity in the United States, “scholar-practitioners”—lay intellectuals who simultaneously engage in Buddhist studies and individual practice—have emerged. Acting as “quasi-monastics,” they provide Dharma knowledge and guidance, filling the gap left by the Sangha regarding systematic Buddhist education.⁹⁶ In modern China, lay elites and intellectuals assumed a dominant role by establishing “Buddhology” as a new discursive space, stressing the rational study of Buddhist scriptures. Similarly, “the majority of Buddhist teachers were laypeople and half of them were women. The lay teachers teach mostly in Buddhist lay centers or in

⁹⁵ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 70, 204.

⁹⁶ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 199.

secular settings.”⁹⁷ They have the aim of highlighting the integration of Buddhism and Western scientific and psychological methods.

The evolution of the relationship between monastics and lay believers not only broke the traditional authority model but also generated alternative religious practices and new community structures. In the traditional settings, the devout respect of lay believers towards the Sangha can be defined as “devotion in the mode of Dharma-protector,” forming a non-equal hierarchical relationship. In this relationship, the Sangha, as the main representative of the Three Jewels, possesses absolute spiritual and doctrinal authority. The core role of the lay believers is to act as “protectors,” and their devotion is mainly demonstrated through providing material offerings and services to the Sangha, as well as respectfully receiving teachings. In this model, the religious life of the lay believers is centered around temples and monastics; the religious legitimacy of individuals and the collective is directly derived from the recognition and blessings of the Sangha.

However, under the influence of contemporary society, a tendency to “reduction of faith” has gradually emerged. This so-called “weakening” does not mean a decrease in faith; rather, the traditional “hierarchical dependence relationship of the Sangha” has decreased. The presentation of faith has shifted from simply focusing on offerings and obedience to a partnership based on the shared responsibility of propagating the Dharma.

⁹⁷ Wetzel, “Neither Monk nor Nun,” 275–76.

This weakening and the rise of so-called “lay authority” are closely related, indicating that there is a widespread existence of “independent lay Buddhism” in North America.

According to the above analysis, “lay authority” mainly refers to the fact that secular Buddhists systematically undertake many of the functions and roles that were originally preserved and passed down by the Sangha. Additionally, they create an independent authority by addressing modern issues, thereby re-establishing sanctity and power. The elevation of their authority is manifested in two aspects: The first aspect is the authority in leadership, which means that laypeople have substantive operational and leadership powers in the establishment and management of religious organizations, enabling them to use the power of the organization to assist Buddhist causes or charitable activities, thereby expanding social recognition and influence. The second aspect is the religious authority situation, indicating that laypeople begin to assume such responsibilities as spiritual and doctrinal guidance in religious practice, a duty that traditionally was undertaken by the monastic community. This includes not only the rituals of leading chanting and giving insights and guidance during collective practice, but also the systematic interpretation of scriptures and answering questions for believers.

2.5 Reconstructing Legitimacy

This modern independent development movement of lay Buddhism is essentially a process led by laity to re-establish legitimacy. During the modern development process, lay believers often respond more actively to the ideological challenges brought by

modernity, such as scientism, democratic thought, and nationalism. The fundamental goal is to liberate Buddhism from its subordinate position within the traditional social structure and transform it through dialogue or change into a rational, world-oriented, and highly autonomous form. This reconstruction takes on a complex and interwoven form, covering a wide range of areas from the cognitive basis to social practice.

First of all, through the introduction of modern academic standards, lay elites successfully achieved a fundamental transformation from the traditionally monopolized “religious inheritance” by the monastic class to a rational, understandable “universal knowledge.” The lay group represented by Ouyang Jingwu and his China Inner Studies Institute is committed to an “innovation through restoration” academic approach. They attempt to establish a Buddhist framework that conforms to modern academic standards (innovation), by reverting to the original Indian Buddhist scriptures (restoration).⁹⁸ Through rigorous textual research and philosophical analysis, they launched a disruptive challenge to the deeply rooted doctrines in traditional Chinese Buddhism, calling into question the very conceptual frameworks that sustained the Chan, Tiantai, and Huayan traditions. Ouyang Jian focused on traditional core scriptures and questioned their authenticity, such as the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* (*Dacheng qixin lun* 大乘起信论).

⁹⁸ Liu Wanli 刘婉俐, “Minguo shiqi (1912-1937) hanchuan fojiao de xiandaihua zhuanzhe-Jiantan zangchuan fojiao chuanru minjian de hushe yu yingxiang” 民国时期 (1912-1937) 汉传佛教的现代化转折—兼谈藏传佛教传入民间的干涉与影响, *Shijie zongjiao xuekan* 世界宗教学刊, no. 12 (2008): 61.

He radically dismissed this commentary as “fish eyes” rather than “pearls.” This questioning of the orthodoxy of core scriptures effectively demystified and deconstructed the foundation of traditional Chinese Buddhism. Ouyang Jian intended to establish the core status of “correct knowledge” (*zhengzhi* 正智) on the path to liberation by classifying Buddhist teachings. He strongly condemned the traditional vice of “blind practice” and pointed out that its root cause lies in the lack of systematic study of doctrines, which has led the monastic community to be content with a state of ignorance. Therefore, he vigorously revived Yogācāra and Buddhist logic (*Hetuvidyā*), because from a modern perspective, Yogācāra was viewed as the only Buddhist school possessing a rigorous methodology and a scientific orientation.⁹⁹ Through mastering this Buddhist discourse based on “academic rationality,” lay intellectuals were able to establish a status in propagating the Dharma that was equal to or even higher than that of the monastics on an intellectual level. This shift toward intellectualization aligned with the historical trend of rising knowledge authority in modern society, driving the “transition of monastic education from its traditional *Conglin* (public monastery) Style to a rational, systematic modern model of Buddhist studies focusing on research and investigation.”¹⁰⁰

Second, in an era when science was revered as the highest truth, the lay movement strategically adopted “scientific dialogue” as a key marker for establishing

⁹⁹ Aviv, *Differentiating the Pearl*, 3–4, 48, 69–108, 165; Erik J. Hammerstrom, “Buddhists Discuss Science in Modern China (1895–1949)” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2010), 37.

¹⁰⁰ Liu, “‘Sangha Forest’ (丛林 *Conglin*),” 6.

Buddhism's modern legitimacy, thereby guaranteeing that the Dharma could secure a foothold in an increasingly secularized society. Lay elites (such as Wang Xiaoxu in China and Western converts) dedicated themselves to interpreting Buddhism as a "Science of Mind," using this to construct a basis for dialogue with modern physics and psychology.¹⁰¹ Hammerstrom researches that the revival of Yogācāra thought in modern China provided a vital intellectual framework for Mahāyāna Buddhism to engage with and challenge modern science. By leveraging the core proposition that "all dharmas are nothing but consciousness-only (*wanfa weishi* 万法唯识)," Buddhist intellectuals established a robust ontological and epistemological stance that philosophically resonated with contemporary debates on materialism and idealism. Lay intellectuals pointed out that science and technology are inherently amoral; without the guidance of the Buddhist ethical system, technological progress could easily lead to war and human crises.¹⁰²

In the Western context, the lay movement closely integrated Buddhism with psychology, becoming the most successful model for achieving secular legitimacy. Western secular instructors, represented by Jon Kabat-Zinn, strategically decoupled mindfulness from its original religious, ethical, and cosmological frameworks. "Kabat-Zinn combined elements of Vipassana and Zen meditation into a meditation program that has been quite consciously excised of explicitly religious language in accordance with the

¹⁰¹ Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 24.

¹⁰² Hammerstrom, "Buddhists Discuss Science," 150, 195, 440–41.

particular religious-secular configuration of the United States.”¹⁰³ The program of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was transformed into a secular, clinical, and scientifically validated psychological treatment technique, mainly used to alleviate stress and anxiety.¹⁰⁴ This de-Buddhification strategy enabled the meditation technique to legally enter secular institutions such as hospitals, schools, enterprises, and the military, and gain authoritative recognition from the scientific community and professional organizations.¹⁰⁵ This path of legitimizing religious elements psychologically, although resulting in the objectification and de-contextualization of traditional religious elements, successfully enabled Buddhism to be widely spread in the highly secularized Western society.

Furthermore, during the Republican era, places like Shanghai established independent organizational structures. They extensively participated in social charity activities, thereby establishing the social legitimacy of Buddhism in the public domain and ultimately obtaining the recognition of state power. Lay organizations broke away from the reliance on the traditional monastic system and fully introduced modern management models and economic rationality. New organizations such as the Lay Buddhist Society were entities established specifically for and autonomously managed by

¹⁰³ David L. McMahan, “Buddhism and Global Secularisms,” in *Buddhism in the Global Eye: Beyond East and West*, ed. John S. Harding et al. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 50.

¹⁰⁴ Stephanie Maietta Romero, “The Awakened Heart of the Mindful Teacher: A Contemplative Exploration” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2016), 43–46.

¹⁰⁵ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 185.

laypeople, rather than subordinate institutions of monasteries. Their internal governance adopted modern administrative structures such as a board of directors and an accounting department, showing a high degree of rationalization and bureaucratization.¹⁰⁶ Lay elites implanted market economic rationality inside organizational operations; their flow of funds was no longer limited to the traditional support of the monastic Sangha or repentance services, but shifted on a large scale toward social philanthropy. This change was closely related to businessmen and industrialists becoming the main body of laypeople, marking the birth of a new Buddhist economic model adapted to the logic of a commercial society.¹⁰⁷

Having attained organizational and economic independence, social engagement and charitable activities became key means for lay organizations to secure survival space and political legitimacy in a turbulent political environment. Laypeople shifted their practical attention from traditional “funerary rites and ancestral deliverance” (often viewed by modern elites as superstitious and non-productive “religion for the dead”) to practical “social philanthropy.” This included substantive work such as establishing orphanages and hospitals, and participating in disaster relief. Through incorporating social welfare within their core mission, lay organizations demonstrated to the

¹⁰⁶ J. Brooks Jessup, “Buddhist Activism, Urban Space, and Ambivalent Modernity in 1920s Shanghai,” in *Recovering Buddhism in Modern China*, ed. Gareth Fisher et al. (Columbia University Press, 2016), 49–50.

¹⁰⁷ Tang Zhongmao 唐忠毛, “Jushi fojiao de jindai zhuanxing jiqi shehuixue yiyi—yi Minguo Shanghai jushi fojiao weili” 居士佛教的近代转型及其社会学意义——以民国上海居士佛教为例, *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao: Zhexue shehui kexue ban* 华东师范大学学报: 哲学社会科学版, no. 5 (2012): 120.

government Buddhism's active contribution to modern state-building, thereby obtaining legal registration status and political protection. For example, the World Buddhist Householder Grove in Shanghai actively registered as an organization under the government, and actively participated in state-sponsored social public welfare initiatives. "Besides sharing the responsibility of the government on philanthropy and moral cultivation, especially by their modernized social welfare work (such as reclaiming land, building dams, dredging watercourses, borrowing agricultural seeds to peasants, and building factories to employ the hobodom)..."¹⁰⁸ Against the severe backdrop of the state's implementation of anti-superstition campaigns and the "Confiscating Temple Property to Set up Schools," this was undoubtedly a brilliant expedient means for ensuring the ongoing survival of Buddhism.

Finally, the lay movement's reconstruction of legitimacy culminated in its direct intellectual challenge to the traditional hierarchical order of religious status between the monastic and lay communities, citing Buddhist scriptures to provide a solid canonical basis for laypeople to independently propagate the Dharma. Ouyang Jingwu systematically refuted the "ten fallacies (*shimiu* 十谬)" that traditionally restricted the religious power of laypeople, giving a theoretical defense for the elevation of lay status. He explicitly advocated that "worthy laypeople can also serve as teachers" and that "bhikṣus may learn the Dharma from laypeople." He pointed out that if the monastic

¹⁰⁸ Zhang and Ji, "Lay Buddhism," 19–20.

community fails to broaden its horizons and learn from each other's strengths, but instead sticks to old practices, it will accelerate the decline of Buddhism. Ouyang Jian cited sutras and treatises to argue that if lay Buddhists generate bodhicitta, they not only constitute a "great field of merits" but also can be integrated into the definition of "Sangha" in a broad sense. Liang Huey-pin mentions that the establishment of lay Buddhist centers serves as strong evidence that "laypeople can likewise uphold Buddhism" in Ouyang's view. "This is proved in the sutras and commentaries, and is a development that corresponds with modern social trends."¹⁰⁹

This conceptual reinterpretation is not without basis; rather, it is a conclusion fundamentally informed by a profound discernment of the actual decline of the monastic community at that time. During the Republic era, owing to the relatively limited educational background and conservative mindset permeating the monastic community, the secular elites represented by Yang Wenhui were regarded as being better able to effectively disseminate Buddhism to the modern-educated social class.¹¹⁰ Consequently, the role of lay Buddhists rapidly shifted from traditional "Dharma protectors" to "leading figures in Dharma propagation." The rise of the laity formed an effective external check and supervision on the monastic community, breaking the traditional convention that "laypeople do not criticize monastic faults." Objectively, this pressure from the laity

¹⁰⁹ Liang Huey-pin 梁蕙萍, "Zaijia jushi yu jindai fojiao fuzhen yundong—Ouyang Jingwu yu Damo boluo zhi bijiao yanjiu" 在家居士与近代佛教复振运动—欧阳竟无与达磨波罗之比较研究 (master's thesis, Nanhua University, 2006), 70.

¹¹⁰ Jessup, "Householder Elite," 10.

became a major driving force for the monastic community to reform itself and rebuild its image.¹¹¹ This transformation denotes a shift in Chinese Buddhism from the traditional structure of “monastic dominance and lay subordination” to a new model, where monastics rely more on the laity and the independence of the laity is also constantly increasing.

By re-embedding the Dharma into the discourse of modernity, the modern lay Buddhist movement successfully constructed a multiple, parallel, and autonomous system of legitimacy. Through this systematic method of adapting to capacities (*qiji* 契机), modern lay Buddhism not merely saved the religion from marginalization or extinction during a turbulent era. It also transformed Buddhism into an autonomous force capable of being fully involved in social reform and conversing on equal terms with global modern thought, therewith establishing a distinct, independent authority.

2.6 The Layperson versus Lay Buddhism

At this point, it is necessary to define and distinguish the key terms of this dissertation: “layperson” and “lay Buddhism.” The ancient Chinese term *jushi* 居士 (layperson) was adopted after the introduction of Buddhism to translate the Sanskrit terms *grhapati* (elder or householder, often referring to wealthy individuals of the Vaisya caste) or *kulapati* (head of a clan). Through Shao’s analysis, we can find that over time,

¹¹¹ Jin Yiming 金易明, “Jindai hanchuan ‘Jushi fojiao’ xianshi chengyin fenxi” 近代汉传“居士佛教”现实成因分析, *Foxue yanjiu* 佛学研究, no. 1 (2009): 294–96.

its meaning gradually detached from the Indian context of caste and wealth, shifting to emphasize the practice of Buddhism as a householder.¹¹² However, “lay Buddhism” is a more modern and academic concept. It refers not only to the religious practices of the laity but also implies a religious organizational form or school of thought that is lay-centered, possesses a degree of independence, and may even rival the monastic system. In his comparative discussion with Pan Guiming on the scholarship of lay Buddhism, Jin Yiming 金易明 distinguished between the broad and specific categories and scopes of “lay Buddhism.” In a broad sense, the lay Buddhist groups we generally refer to encompass all individuals in society who are identified as “practicing Buddhism at home,” making the concept identity-based. This category includes their participation in Buddhist activities, writing, and forming associations. It spans two millennia, covering all scattered lay phenomena from the Han 汉 and Wei 魏 through the Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties. In contrast, Jin defines its core as a “special type of faith and a special sectarian phenomenon,” which introduces concepts of power and institutional structure. Jin emphasizes, “the fact that laypeople believe in Buddhism does not equate to the existence of lay Buddhism.” Historically, this relatively independent phenomenon of lay Buddhism specifically refers to the modern Buddhist revival movement around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, centered in the Wuyue 吴越 region (Jiangsu,

¹¹² Shao, “Pan Zengyi,” 125–26.

Shanghai, and Zhejiang).¹¹³

From the ancient “lay biographies” to the modern “lay Buddhism,” this semantic evolution reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of the laity’s status within the institutional power structures of Buddhism. This dissertation emphasizes the differences between the two to clarify whether in different historical periods, the laypeople merely existed as appendages of the monastic community, or whether they constructed their own transmission system as independent and self-propagating forces. Equally important is that it studies how, in the political, religious, and cultural environments of various historical periods, the lay believers were marked or defined in historical stories and academic constructions. Therefore, unlike the term “layperson,” which simply describes an individual believer, “lay Buddhism” is a category laden with sociological, historical, and power-structural implications. “Lay Buddhism” represents more than personal belief. It encompasses the collective Buddhist thought and writings of the laity, as well as organizational forms independent of the monastic community, such as lay Buddhist societies and associations.¹¹⁴

Thus, the key distinction between “lay Buddhism” and traditional lay practice lies in the laity’s actual independence, as reflected in the laity’s transition from a subordinate role to a dominant position. Lay Buddhists no longer simply played the role of external

¹¹³ Jin, “Jindai hanchuan”; Pan, *Zhongguo jushi*.

¹¹⁴ Tang, “Jushi fojiao,” 13.

protectors providing political and financial support. Instead, they began to strive for authority in interpreting Buddhist doctrine, even challenging the monastic monopoly on scriptural interpretation.¹¹⁵ Through organizational and economic independence, along with considerable religious authority, lay Buddhism in the modern sense secured a voice and control over religious authority, while also gaining significant power to mobilize social capital. Eminent monastics who guided lay study, such as Huiyuan in the Eastern Jin dynasty, still fall under the category of traditional monastic Buddhism. After that, people followed the example of organizations like the Lotus Society, which were more scattered and tended to be obsessed with the pursuit of supernatural powers, and were also easily manipulated by powerful leaders.¹¹⁶ Only when laypeople possess financial resources and literacy, and can conduct political protection, doctrinal propagation, and social charity through independent organizations without monastic mediation, does “lay Buddhism” in the academic sense truly emerge.

Admittedly, this simple categorization helps clarify the laity’s unique status and value in modern Buddhism. However, such theoretical clarification risks appearing hollow or arbitrary if divorced from specific historical texts and narrative contexts. In fact, relatively independent forms of lay Buddhism were not entirely absent in Chinese

¹¹⁵ Jin, “Jindai hanchuan,” 39, 49.

¹¹⁶ Liang, “Zaijia jushi,” 42; Long Quan 龙泉, “Zhongguo fojiao zhidu shihua zhiyi – Handi jiaotuan de jianli ji zaoqi xingtai” 中国佛教制度史话之一—汉地教团的建立及早起形态, *Fayin* 法音, no. 8 (1996): 18–20.

history. The key point is that the legitimacy and independence of lay identity were largely empowered through a pedigree-based (*puxi hua* 谱系化) narrative. Looking back at Chinese history, phenomena related to “lay Buddhism” were often defined and transmitted through “lay biographies.” The construction of these “Lay Pedigrees” inherently applied different criteria regarding which laypeople merited inclusion. Indirectly, this meant there were varying standards for the legitimacy and authority of lay individuals, lay Buddhism, and lay organizations. These standards contained implicit presuppositions about the status and identity of the laity. Dedicated records of lay pedigrees in early Buddhist history appeared relatively late and were mostly appended to monastic biographies. In traditional historical records like the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧传), laypeople were usually depicted as followers or external protectors of eminent monastics, lacking independent narrative subjectivity. With the growth of literati Buddhism and the spread of popular belief, a large number of texts dedicated exclusively to lay biographies emerged by the Song and Ming dynasties.

These texts are not only used to record life experiences, but also play a pivotal role in asserting the autonomous legitimacy and distinct institutional status of lay Buddhists. The Ming Dynasty represented a watershed era in the historiographical evolution of lay biographies. After that, there were two model works that shaped laypeople into “external protectors of the Dharma (*hufa jintang* 护法金汤)” and as “Dharma heirs of the Chan school.” Xie Zhiming 谢志明 mentioned that *Fofa jintang bian* 佛法金汤编 written by Xintai 心泰 takes this name, regarding emperors, officials,

and scholars as outsiders protecting Buddhism. And it lists aristocratic elites, enhancing the status of Buddhism in politics and society. In order to maintain the temple community, the collection standard of a certain document was relatively broad, and even literati who were slightly related to Buddhism or held a Confucian stance were included, with the purpose of enhancing religious prestige. At that time, this strategy was considered not rigorous enough, but it integrated resources to fight against anti-Buddhist ideas. Later, Zhu Shien 朱时恩 established the lay believers' status through internal cultivation, imitating the style of Chan "lamp records (*denglu* 灯录)," and recording the Chan practice and enlightenment of lay believers since the Tang and Song dynasties. This method aims to show that laypeople can equally take over the Chan inheritance and become formal heirs of Buddhism. Later generations often criticized Zhu's selection criteria as too weak. He sometimes took literati as the heirs of Chan masters just based on a brief conversation or letter. This verification record is not strict enough and has academic flaws, but it reflects the strong aspirations of laypeople to advocate their own religious subjectivity.¹¹⁷

Then, Peng Shaosheng 彭绍升 marked the maturity of the writing of biographies about lay Buddhists in the mid-Qing Dynasty. He collated Buddhist literature and set strict standards for the practice patterns of lay Buddhists. When compiling "Biographies of Lay Buddhists (*Jushi zhuan* 居士传)," Peng Shaosheng did not like the unqualified

¹¹⁷ Xie Zhiming 谢志明, "Songdai jushi fojiao yanjiu" 宋代居士佛教研究 (master's thesis, Taiwan zhanghua shifan daxue, 2001), 22–24.

characters in the earlier works. He believed that many literati-lay Buddhists in the biographies were merely making textual comments and lacked true spiritual comprehension. This criticism corrected the mistake of confusing educated Buddhist monastics with true lay Buddhists. To reverse this trend, he established a strict “correspondence between practice and understanding” (*xingjie xiangying* 行解相应) standard. He eliminated those educated Confucian scholars who were merely Confucian scholars and accepted only lay Buddhists with practical “wisdom-life” (*huiming* 慧命) cultivation. Based on this, he constructed a lay Buddhist practice pattern based on essence (*zong* 宗), doctrine (*jiao* 教), and practice (*xing* 行) methods. In his work, representatives were selected. Pang Yun 庞蕴 represented Chan liberation, Li Tongxuan 李通玄 represented doctrinal understanding, and Liu Yimin 刘遗民 represented Pure Land faith and vows. This made lay believers not just guardians or economic supporters, but practitioners who can achieve independently in Buddhist cultivation.¹¹⁸ After establishing an overall framework for lay practice, Peng compiled the first biographical collection in China for lay female believers, to solve the problem of few records of female genealogy. Titled *Biographies of Good Women* (*Shan nüren zhuan* 善女人传), it included the deeds of lay women, tracing their history from the Eastern Jin down to the Qing Dynasty. This broke the long-standing neglect of women in both monastic and lay narratives. Although the text includes some Chan accounts, it exhibits a distinct Pure

¹¹⁸ Xie, “Songdai jushi,” 24–27.

Land orientation overall. It stresses that women enjoy equal capacity to attain liberation and rebirth in the Pure Land through the practice of Buddha-name recitation. This account approach not just reflects the ideal of equality among all sentient beings but also secures a rightful historical status for women within lay Buddhism. This focus on *nianfo* and individual cultivation was further expanded in subsequent texts compiled by the Peng family and their associates.¹¹⁹

Shao's research indicates that after Peng Shaosheng, growing historical and biographical texts related to lay Buddhists began to shift their focus to the Pure Land School. This phenomenon fully demonstrates that since the Qianlong period, seeking rebirth through *nianfo* has become the most common form of belief and practice among Buddhists. Driven by this trend, a series of important Pure Land texts appeared at the time, such as the *Xu wangsheng ji* 续往生集, *Guobao wenjian lu* 果报闻见录, *Xinzheng lu* 信征录, *Jingtu quanshu* 净土全书, and *Xigui jianwen lu* 西归见闻录, among others. The *Record of Pure Land Sages* (*Jingtu shengxian lu* 净土圣贤录) further refined the compilation system of such biographies. It also reveals the conscious actions taken by the Pure Land believers. By compiling relevant collections, they aimed to promote the wider dissemination of the Pure Land faith in society. This book was compiled by Peng Xisu, the nephew of Peng Shao-sheng, and later supplemented by Hu Ting and others. In

¹¹⁹ Hongyu Wu, "Leading the Good Life: Peng Shaosheng's Biographical Narratives and Instructions for Buddhist Laywomen in High Qing China (1683-1796)" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2013).

addition, there was also the “Supplement (*Xubian* 续编)” compiled by Hu Ting 胡珽 in the late Daoguang period. During the Republic of China era, Yang Huijing’s 杨慧镜 *Jindai wangsheng zhuan* 近代往生传 and Desen’s 德森 *Sanbian* 三编 (*Third Compilation*) ensured the continuous continuation and rich development of this Pure Land classic tradition. The *Jingtu shengxian lu* series completely broke the traditional boundaries between monastics and laypeople, including outstanding monastics, common people, women, and even animals. The main focus of this type of literature no longer focused on an individual’s social status or Buddhist academic level, but prioritized the documentation of miraculous signs accompanying the practitioner’s decease, alongside subsequent proof confirming their successful rebirth in the Pure Land. This constructed a “Pure Land Tradition” based on sincere practice rather than institutional hierarchy, greatly enhancing the religious confidence of lay believers. At this point, lay Buddhism became more systematic in its theories and personal paradigms. Through these cross-class documentary records, it formed a highly dynamic account of a practicing community. Furthermore, the criteria for inclusion in the lay lineage clearly shifted during this period. Shao concludes that the compilation of lay Buddhist biographies during this period was primarily motivated by the desire to propagate doctrine, promote specific traditions, attract followers, and accumulate merits. Consequently, when selecting figures, compilers prioritized the depth of their spiritual practice and their karmic responses, paying little attention to their social status or Buddhist erudition. During the Republican period, however, certain intellectuals began to explicitly

emphasize the tradition of “lay Buddhism.” This was largely an effort to contest monastics for authority over the Dharma, seeking to guide Buddhism toward modernization and intellectualization.¹²⁰

Therefore, from the early history to the modern era, those who compiled biographies of lay figures or advocated for “scholarly studies of laypeople” had diverse motivations. In other words, these compilation activities were highly intentional. Due to the significant differences in these motivations, the term “layperson” was applied to different subjects and standards, making it difficult to form a unified historical definition. Thus, this broader concept of “lay Buddhism” also has different connotations and functions. The complexity as well as fluidity of these concepts actually reflect the struggles among social elites and religious groups over power, identity, and the authority to interpret faith throughout various historical periods. Rather than focusing on the existence of independent, organized, and legitimate lay Buddhist organizations, it is more critical to examine the underlying power of definition. The authority to determine who qualifies as a “layperson,” what constitutes “lay Buddhism,” and who deserves praise or inclusion in historical lineages—rooted in ideology, cultural background, and discursive power—is often more significant than actual organizational structures. Therefore, while those historical biographical texts are valuable sources for studying the historical origins and identity construction of lay Buddhism, they must be examined critically in light of

¹²⁰ Shao, “Pan Zengyi,” 129–33.

the compilers' motives, standpoints, and historical backgrounds.

This is perfectly exemplified by Pan Zengyi; as demonstrated in Shao Jiade's analysis, Pan stood out as the preeminent philanthropist within the mid-Qing Jiangnan area. Shao believes that although Pan's actions fully conform to the definition of the term "layperson" as used in the text, he was excluded from various Buddhist lay traditions due to his lack of significant social status, the auspicious signs at the time of his death, and his original contributions to the teachings. This phenomenon indicates that if modern scholars simply adopt the past definition of "layperson" without studying its subtle differences, then the confusion between the conceptual category and the historical reality will be inevitable. In actual historical development, this conceptual ambiguity primarily manifested as tension in monastic-lay relations. For instance, many within the monastic community rejected the confrontational banner of "lay Buddhism," creating a degree of estrangement in both past and present-day contexts. However, monastics often had to rely on wealthy laypeople for protection and financial support. It is therefore necessary to recognize the specific differences between labeled slogans and historical realities. Furthermore, scholars typically use "rationalization" to characterize modern lay Buddhism. They often view this trait as the primary factor in reversing monastic decline, advancing doctrinal development, and consequently facilitating the Buddhist revival. In reality, however, the religious practices of most lay Buddhists remained focused on icon worship, merit accumulation, and even spirit-writing (*fúji* 扶乩, or planchette), as seen in Wang Yiting's case. So, Shao says "this indicates that the actual degree of doctrinal

sophistication and modernization among the lay community was quite limited at the time.”¹²¹

Therefore, we must not overlook the historical ruptures that occurred during the construction of lay lineages. Late Ming biographical texts, such as those by Ven. Lianchi 蓮池, could still praise the independence of laywomen whose religious achievements “surpassed those of men.” However, when Peng Shaosheng compiled the *Shan nüren zhuan* during the Qing dynasty, he deliberately altered earlier narratives to counter Confucian accusations that Buddhism undermined family ethics. He repositioned laywomen within the Confucian framework of “chaste maidens” and “filial wives,” emphasizing submission and family duty. In doing so, he betrayed the non-dualistic gender perspectives found in earlier Buddhist biographies. The situation of the “half-Confucian and half-Buddhist” of this sect is relatively mixed. It was not really a reflection of women’s religious life. As Xing Wang concludes that “this transition—from using the stories of eminent lay female Buddhists to challenge Confucian teachings to positioning lay females under Confucian disciplines—exhibits Peng Shaosheng’s own invention, rather than a transmission of the inherited formulaic narration of lay female believers, as he claimed.”¹²² Scholars who study the lay lineage of Peng and Yang often ignore the long-standing gaps and large ideological differences among them. Since the

¹²¹ Shao, “Pan Zengyi,” 133.

¹²² Xing Wang, “Rethinking Gender and Female Laity in Late Imperial Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Biographies,” *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 1–18.

Qianlong era, lay Buddhism has not vanished but has spread locally through the religious network of the Pan Zengyi family. However, it did not produce national-level biographical works, and these networks were also excluded from the established lineage of religious sects. For instance, Peng Shao-sheng's attitude toward evaluating the practice of spirit-writing was pragmatic and tolerant, viewing it as a viable way to verify rebirth within the Pure Land. Modern secular Buddhists like Yang Wen-hui, influenced by rationalism, criticized the mythical writing style. Placing individuals within the "rational secular Buddhist tradition" would eliminate the complexity of history.¹²³

In conclusion, things like "lay lineages" or "lay Buddhism" are patterns formed to meet specific needs. It highlights certain characteristics of the lay community and also covers content that does not satisfy particular needs. Such cover-ups often suppress class, regional and religious diversity within the lay community. The "lay tradition" is not a natural historical fact, but a "competitive construction" carried out by compilers with specific religious purposes or academic paradigms. Researchers should be aware of the limitations of these lineage constructions. We need to abandon narrow labels and identify the historical figures that have been omitted in traditional Buddhist biographies. We should also restore the full picture of Chinese lay Buddhism in its social and historical background. Conduct in-depth investigations into the latest developments of modern Chinese and overseas lay Buddhism, and find that their model meanings are not always

¹²³ Shao, "Pan Zengyi," 131; Wu, "Leading the Good Life," 210–12.

the same. Early modern lay Buddhism, through processes such as knowledge rationalization, obtained a relatively large “legitimacy breakthrough” in the modern era. Then it established an independent authority, coexisted with the traditional monastic community, and played a leading role in some fields. When focusing on contemporary lay Buddhism among the diasporic Chinese groups across countries, it is also necessary to conduct a more in-depth examination of details and make comparisons.

Chapter Three:

Introduction to C. T. Shen and Ven. Jingkong

He Zhe 何哲 divides the dissemination of Chinese Buddhism in the US into two stages according to the stages of Chinese immigration. The first stage is the disorderly spread caused by early labor immigration; temples are small in scale, and there are no resident monastics and formal religious ceremonies in the Chinese community. At the end of the 1940s, the second stage started with intellectual immigration, and the development of Buddhism turned into a model dominated by laypeople. They started systematically spreading the teachings of Buddhism. Several Buddhist societies were established during this period, mostly led by these educated lay figures, who can be considered the “pioneers” of Chinese Buddhism in the US.¹²⁴

The Tin Hou Temple and the Kong Chow Temple, established in San Francisco around 1853, were among the first Chinese temples built in the continental United States.¹²⁵ Early temples typically integrated Buddhism, Daoism, and folk beliefs; strictly speaking, they could not be classified solely as “Buddhist temples.” Subsequent discriminatory legislation, such as the *1882 Chinese Exclusion Act*, led to the decrease of

¹²⁴ He Zhe 何哲, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan* 沈家桢传 (The Institute of World Religions, 2020), 165–66.

¹²⁵ Stuart Chandler, “Chinese Buddhism in America: Identity and Practice,” in *Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (University of California Press, 1998), 16.

the Chinese population, and the abandonment of many early temples. As Chandler describes, following the *1965 Immigration Act*, Chinese immigrants typically arrived in the United States to pursue higher education or employment. With a relatively high level of education, their approach emphasized scriptural study, and the integration of Buddhist practice with a scientific, technological worldview, while relying less on traditional monastic guidance.¹²⁶

Around this time, Chinese American Buddhist organizations were predominantly established by laypeople. For example, in 1952, Shanfu Feng 冯善甫, Shandun Feng (M.D. 冯善敦), and Liangqian Tang (Ph.D. 唐良谦) founded the first Buddhist society in the US, Buddha's Universal Church 佛禅会 in San Francisco. Operating from a five-story building, the church propagated the Dharma in both Chinese and English and produced an English translation of the *Platform Sutra*, attracting many young practitioners. Other Buddhist societies subsequently emerged. For instance, in 1953, Ven. Zhiding established the Honolulu Chinese Buddhist Association of Hawaii 檀香山华侨佛教总会, which garnered over 400 members. In 1955, the Hawaii Chinese Buddhist Society 中华佛教总会 was established. In 1958, Peilin Wu 伍佩琳, a Chinese businessman and lay Buddhist in San Francisco, organized the Orthodox Buddhist and Daoist Research Society 正信佛道研究会, attracting hundreds of members. In New York of 1962, layperson Ying Jin Yutang 应金玉堂 established the Eastern States

¹²⁶ Chandler, "Chinese Buddhism in America," 16–19.

Buddhist Temple of America (*Meidong fojiao yanjiu zonghui* 美东佛教研究总会), followed by the Mahayana Temple 大乘寺. She also maintained frequent exchanges with C. T. Shen. Ven. Ledu 乐渡 was considered the fourth Chinese monk to propagate Buddhism in the United States. Ledu was preceded by Ven. Zhiding 知定 (Honolulu, January 1956), Ven. Miaofeng 妙峰 (San Francisco, March 1962), and Ven. Dulun 度轮 (San Francisco, April 1962).¹²⁷ Overall, among the early Chinese Buddhism in the United States, laypeople played a more significant role.

Currently, academia lacks dedicated case studies focusing on layperson Shen and the related organizations he founded. In reviewing the broader landscape of American Buddhism, scholars such as Prebish and Seager typically offer only brief, introductory mentions of C. T. Shen and BAUS when outlining the Chinese Buddhist community or listing representative organizations. Given the scarcity of formal academic publications, much of the data on C. T. Shen comes from internal publications, such as biographies and collections of his speeches, supplemented by my own field observations and interviews. We may find some introductions on prominent and influential Chinese American Buddhist organizations, such as Fo Guang Shan, founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun 星云大师, and its main American branch, Hsi Lai Temple 西来寺; the Tzu Chi Foundation 慈济, founded by Ven. Zhengyan 证严; the Chan Meditation Center in New York 纽约禅修中心 and Dharma Drum Mountain 法鼓山, founded by Ven. Shengyan

¹²⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 166.

圣严; and the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association 法界佛教总会, founded by Ven. Xuanhua 宣化. Unlike the aforementioned organizations, which are primarily led or spiritually symbolized by monastics, BAUS was founded by an eminent layperson, C. T. Shen, who served as its core leader for many years. Consequently, BAUS provides a unique and highly valuable case study for understanding how lay Buddhists in the United States construct organizations, establish leadership models, and contribute to the propagation of Buddhism and community development. Analyzing this unique case will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of the development of Buddhism in the US, particularly the internal diversity of Chinese American Buddhism.

Shen immigrated to the United States during the 1950s. Following the *1965 Immigration Act*, he and numerous other intellectuals and laypeople became increasingly active in the Buddhist sphere. In contrast, the Amida Society, the other primary subject of this dissertation, was established somewhat later. Although the Amida Society is a lay organization, any analysis must account for its early core spiritual monastic leader, Ven. Jingkong 净空. Ven. Jingkong initiated his international Dharma propagation in his later years. However, even before he formally established institutions in the United States, his teachings were already circulating among North American Chinese communities via modern media. Beginning in 1977, Ven. Jingkong received invitations from Buddhist groups outside Taiwan and began traveling frequently to overseas regions, including the United States, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia, etc. to expound the sutras and propagate the Dharma. During these visits, he helped or inspired local Buddhist

groups to set up and expand.¹²⁸ As his influence among the overseas Chinese diaspora continued to grow, Ven. Jingkong's activities in the United States gradually became more organized and institutionalized. He formally founded a Buddhist association in Dallas, Texas, and served as its president in 1985.¹²⁹ The establishment of the Dallas Amitabha Buddhist Society 达拉斯净宗学会 provided a solid institutional base for the propagation of Pure Land teachings in North America and laid the foundation for subsequent Amitabha Buddhist Societies.

This chapter focuses on lay Buddhist C. T. Shen, the founder of the BAUS, and Ven. Jingkong, the early spiritual leader of the lay organization, the Amida Society, in LA. By examining their major life events and contributions, this study highlights their unique status and influence in the development of Chinese American Buddhism, thereby establishing a factual foundation for subsequent analysis of the lay identity characteristics of these individuals and their organizations.

3.1 The Life of Lay Buddhist Shen

C. T. Shen (1913–2007) was a remarkable Chinese American lay Buddhist whose life profoundly influenced Chinese Buddhism in America. Born in Hangzhou, Shen had a father, Shen Junye 沈钧业, as a democratic revolutionary and poet, while his mother,

¹²⁸ Yanfei Sun, "Jingkong: From Universal Saint to Sectarian Saint," in *Making Saints in Modern China*, ed. Ownby David et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 399.

¹²⁹ Zhang and Ji, "Lay Buddhism," 30.

Xie Wensu 谢文素, was a devout Buddhist.¹³⁰ Prebish described that originally as an electrical engineer, Shen transitioned into entrepreneurship in 1947, establishing an international trading company in Shanghai before relocating to Hong Kong two years later. By 1952, he had moved to the US, where he co-founded a highly successful shipping enterprise alongside his business partners, achieving success in the business field. In 1973, he was awarded an honorary Litt.D. degree by Saint John's University in New York, and eventually retired from the shipping business in 1980 to devote all his energies to Buddhist activities.¹³¹ The wealth and management experience he accumulated in the secular society provided the material and organizational foundation for the subsequent Buddhist work. Secular achievements fund his Buddhist cause and give it a unique social impact.

There is a lay Buddhist depicted as an outstanding representative of Chinese Americans in business. Later, we will also analyse his importance in the introduction and development of Chinese Buddhism in America since the 1950s, with secular success and transcendental goals. As a highly successful entrepreneur, he drew upon his devout religious faith and profound cultural dedication to build a bridge connecting “merit” and “wisdom,” East and West, and traditional beliefs with modern society. Leveraging his success in the shipping industry and his international perspective, he engaged extensively with social elites and eminent monastics. He supported the dissemination of Buddhist

¹³⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 27–28, 34, 60, 127.

¹³¹ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 29.

culture economically while also conceptually advancing the exploration of a practical paradigm for modern lay Buddhism. Because lay Buddhist Shen possessed both entrepreneurial management skills and the compassion of a practitioner, the Chinese American community esteemed him as a dual exemplar: a shipping magnate and a Bodhisattva layman.

His development of Buddhist enterprises was broad and systematic. Spanning from the initial establishment of the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS), to the Temple of Enlightenment 大觉寺 as a physical practice center, and later to Chuang Yen Monastery 庄严寺, which integrated the traditions, arts, and academic functions of Chinese Buddhism, he constructed a framework for Dharma propagation that transcended culture, language, and geography. This system built a spiritual home for Chinese devotees and provided Chinese Buddhism with greater opportunities for exposure and dialogue within mainstream American culture. Next, I will outline the origins, historical development, and religious and cultural significance of the three major institutions established under C. T. Shen's leadership. This will demonstrate how he successfully advanced the spread and transplantation of Chinese American Buddhism as a layperson.

3.1.1 BAUS

The establishment of the BAUS resulted from the joint efforts of C. T. Shen, Ven. Ledu, Yujing Huang Jiang 姜黄玉靖, and others, marking the beginning of a significant stage in the spread of Chinese Buddhism to the US. Its early preparation and

establishment began when Ven. Ledu arrived in the land of America from Hong Kong on January 6, 1963. He initially planned to settle in San Francisco to propagate the Dharma, but finding that the local Orthodox Buddhist and Daoist Research Society had the background of Daoism, he deemed it unsuitable for teaching the orthodox Dharma. In August of that year, he returned to Hong Kong to manage the funeral arrangements for his teacher, Ven. Tanxu 倓虛, and commissioned Buddha statues to bring back to the United States. When the nine boxes of Buddha statues arrived in San Francisco, customs required that a designated temple be available for their enshrinement before the boxes could be opened. While Ven. Ledu was troubled by this requirement, devout laywoman Jiang and others in New York strongly urged him to relocate to the East Coast. Ven. Ledu subsequently arrived in New York in March 1964.¹³²

Yujing was an active practitioner who had immigrated from Hong Kong to New York; despite their financial difficulties, she held strong religious aspirations. Qixiu Ren Jiang 姜任启秀, a friend of C. T. Shen's wife Ju Woo 居和如, had met in Hong Kong, acted as an intermediary, leading to C. T. Shen's acquaintance with Yujing Huang Jiang. During C. T. Shen's first visit to Yujing Huang Jiang in March 1964, she expressed her desire to build a temple in New York to propagate the Dharma, though she lacked the necessary financial resources. When C. T. Shen asked who would manage the temple once built, Jiang mentioned Ven. Ledu. She noted his strong determination to propagate

¹³² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 166–68.

the Dharma in the United States and his hope to unite Buddhists for this significant endeavor. Furthermore, Jiang was a lay disciple of Ven. Tanxu, meaning she and Ven. Ledu shared the same master. Deeply moved by their conversation, C. T. Shen stated that he and his wife would help her realize this wish and expressed a desire to meet Ven. Ledu. A few days later, Qixiu, Jiang's daughter-in-law, introduced C. T. Shen to Ven. Ledu.¹³³ At their first meeting, Ven. Ledu and Mr. Shen discussed the decline of Buddhism in the Chinese mainland and pointed out that if Buddhism merely followed the old patterns, it would never be able to gain a foothold in the United States. Regarding Mrs. Jiang's intention to help build a temple, Ven. Ledu acknowledged its value but emphasized that establishing a Buddhist organization to unite practitioners and propagate the Dharma in the United States was even more crucial. He asked C. T. Shen to assist in founding this organization. After a lengthy conversation, C. T. Shen was delighted to realize he had met a pragmatic Buddhist leader.¹³⁴

According to Ledu's recollection, Yujing's eldest daughter-in-law, Jiang Ren Qixiu 姜任启秀, proposed the name "Buddhist Association of the United States." Several names were proposed at the time, but after discussion, they unanimously agreed on the title of "Buddhist Association of the United States" (*Meiguo fojiao hui* 美国佛教会). On October 8, 1964, six lay Buddhists acted as interim directors to apply for formal incorporation under the New York State Religious Corporations Law. Drafted upon the

¹³³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 167–68.

¹³⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 163–64.

advice of a white American lawyer, the bylaws adopted standard organizational structures for American associations. By implementing a membership and board of directors system, the BAUS aligned itself with the American democratic legal framework from its inception, rather than relying on traditional Chinese temple management models. On October 21, 1964, the relevant authorities in the Bronx, New York, officially approved the incorporation of this association.¹³⁵

On February 11, 1968, the BAUS held the first special membership meeting to pass its bylaws and operational rules. The association established its mission to practice and propagate the Dharma for the purpose of awakening the world and aiding humanity, and it also produced an official steel seal. On August 11, 1968, the BAUS held its first general membership meeting and elected its first board of directors. The nine official directors included Ven. Ledu, C. T. Shen, Yu Shizhong 俞时中, Jiang Huang Yujing, Shi Daoji 石道济, Cheng Yunqing 程云庆, Zhang Chengji 张澄基, Shen Ju Woo 沈居和如, and Gao Nengxin 高能馨; notably, these members were predominantly lay practitioners Shen had befriended earlier. The *Bylaws of the BAUS* adopted during the meeting, established democratic organizational principles. All members—regardless of gender, age, or monastic/lay status—were granted equal voting and election rights. Directors served three-year terms, with one-third of the board elected annually to facilitate the integration of new talent into the leadership.

¹³⁵ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 167–68.

As the first president, Ven. Ledu led by example, consulting the members on all matters. He stipulated a maximum of two consecutive terms as president; true to his word, he stepped down ten years later to become an ordinary member. Serving as vice president for over thirty consecutive years from 1968, the lay Buddhist C. T. Shen never accepted compensation. Serving as “senior assistant” for over thirty-five years, C. T. Shen supported five successive presidents: Ven. Ledu, Ven. Minzhi 敏智, Ven. Renjun 仁俊, Ven. Xianming 显明, and Ven. Mingguang 明光. He significantly advanced the Dharma propagation efforts of the BAUS and, alongside Ven. Ledu, served as an exemplar in safeguarding organizational interests. Therefore, this regulation represents an innovative move by the BAUS. It combines the modern democratic and legal organizational principles with the essence of Buddhism. This aims to establish a stable and pure platform for long-term development, free from the influence of individualism and secular power.¹³⁶

3.1.2 The Enlightenment Temple

The establishment of the Enlightenment Temple constitutes a milestone in the historical trajectory of BAUS. It provided a spacious venue for preaching. In the initial three to four years, the Buddhist American Association was quite small. Yujing and others rented an apartment that also served as the registered address, the venue for Buddhist activities, and the residence of Ven. Ludu. Gradually, this cramped space could no longer

¹³⁶ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 171.

meet the growing demands for activities. Woo Ju realized that without a suitable temple, the Buddhist American Association could not further develop. She secretly decided to build a temple for the association. In December 1965, Woo Ju purchased a building at 3070 Albany Crescent in the Bronx, New York, with “all her own money.” She donated it to the BAUS and used it as a temple, naming it “Enlightenment Temple.” The establishment of the Enlightenment Temple laid an economic foundation for the Buddhist American Association. It provided a venue for promoting Buddhism, attracting many eminent monastics to preach and teach. This greatly promoted the development of the association and marked an important milestone in its history.¹³⁷

The establishment of the Enlightenment Temple was like “the phoenix returning to its nest.” It provided a stable base for eminent monastics to promote Buddhism, which made New York an important center of Chinese Buddhism in the US. Propelled by Ven. Ledu and Shen, the Enlightenment Temple widely invited eminent monastics to lead Dharma propagation. The Dharma teachings they delivered were not restricted to any specific Buddhist school, nor did they harbor sectarian bias. Instead, they propagated Buddhist principles based on the fundamental spirit of Buddhism. The eminent monastics invited to teach at the Temple of Enlightenment came from a range of Buddhist traditions. These diverse Dharma propagation activities promoted exchange and integration among different Buddhist schools, conceptually preventing the emergence of “isolated sectarian

¹³⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 179–83.

factions.”¹³⁸ Consequently, the spread of Buddhism was no longer confined to a small Chinese community. This effectively paved the way for both the localization and the growing popularity of Buddhism in the US. Practices such as drawing divination lots or channeling spirits were absent at the Temple of Enlightenment; only an atmosphere of right faith and diligent practice was maintained.¹³⁹

3.1.3 Chuang Yen Monastery

As an urban practice center in New York, the Temple of Enlightenment enjoyed convenient transportation, but its over 4,000-square-foot area offered little room for expansion. This prompted C. T. Shen to ultimately donate 125 acres of land in Kent, upstate New York, for the construction of the grand Chuang Yen Monastery. Chuang Yen Monastery was the most profoundly influential Buddhist project to which Shen Jiazhen and his wife, Ju Woo, devoted their later years. It became the most important and largest meditation center of the BAUS, embodying Shen’s concept of accumulating merit and wisdom.¹⁴⁰

In April 1969, Shen Jiazhen happened to learn that a 468-acre woodland was for sale in Kent City, Putnam County, New York. He bought the land with a personal check, initially for economic reasons. In 1975, Shen Jiazhen was inspired in a dream and decided to build this temple. He envisioned a magnificent temple with a huge Buddha

¹³⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 182–84.

¹³⁹ See note 138 above.

¹⁴⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 331.

statue, led by Ven. Minzhi. This dream prompted him and Ju Woo to present a plan to the board of the BAUS. On November 16, 1975, BAUS held a special general meeting. They approved the Chuangyen Monastery project and officially accepted the donation from Shen Jiazhen and Ju Woo. Shen signed a 99-year lease agreement with the BAUS with an annual rent of one dollar. He personally paid the property tax every year, thus finding a balance between the interests of the association and those of the residents. Subsequently, Shen Jiazhen served as the main person in charge of the Chuangyen Monastery construction project for 17 years, during which he did not receive any economic compensation. He contributed a large amount of money, energy, and wisdom to this cause.¹⁴¹

Prebish mentioned that in 1971, Shen Jiazhen established the Advanced Study of World Religions Institute at Stony Brook campus of the State University of New York, which moved to the Woo-Ju Memorial Library of Chuang Yen Monastery. “The library has more than seventy thousand volumes on Buddhist topics. Many scholars, have been afforded access to what is arguably one of the finest libraries for Buddhist Studies in North America.”¹⁴²

3.1.4 Summary

Shen held a key leadership position when the BAUS was established in 1964. This means that he transformed from an individual practitioner to a leader in the field of

¹⁴¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 337–43.

¹⁴² Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 30.

Buddhist public affairs. He not only donated a large amount of funds but also personally participated in the planning and operation of this organization. This enables the charity projects to be effectively implemented and the Buddhist initiatives to develop in an orderly manner. Shen Jiazhen has accumulated numerous merits through extensive and continuous charitable activities and has won wide social praise. He has shaped the image of a compassionate and almsgiving Buddhist. This favorable public standing secured a resilient social foundation for his subsequent endeavors to build physical temples later, and established his unique charm as a layperson and religious authority.

As a lay practitioner, Shen adhered to the Humanistic Buddhism concept, which emphasizes the integration of Buddhism and modern social life. He regarded charitable donations as the main way for lay practitioners, adapting to the Western cultural environment and achieving very obvious results. This concept aligns with the Buddhist reform theories of modern renowned monastics such as Ven. Taixu and Ven. Yinshun. However, for Shen Jiazhen, many concepts were achieved at the secular level, including his secular professional activities and transcendent spiritual practices. To some extent, his earthly identity facilitated a closer integration of these two aspects; it meant that the supramundane and the mundane parts could be more closely combined. Shen's charitable actions and the dissemination of Buddhism belong to the direct presentation of his Buddhist faith. They are also the key methods for building his own public image and religious authority. Many practices of integrating transcendent Buddhist doctrines with secular social responsibilities have enhanced the appeal of his faith and established a

solid foundation for his religious authority.

3.2 Ven. Jingkong and the Amitabha Buddhist Societies

3.2.1 Introduction to Ven. Jingkong

Ven. Jingkong, whose secular name Xu Yehong 徐业鸿, was born in Lujiang 庐江 County, Anhui Province, China, in 1927. In 1949, after the defeat of the Nationalist government, he fled mainland China and migrated to Taiwan with the army. This was a turning point in his life when there was a situation of scarce monastics and spiritual desolation. Taiwan became a place where mainland Buddhist elites and local religious traditions collided, merged, and reshaped each other. This environment forms a special way for Jingkong to promote Buddhism.¹⁴³

From the lineage transmission and doctrinal background, Jingkong showed a distinctly non-academic nature and a lay-oriented approach. This contrasted sharply with the mainstream monastic education system of the time. He initially studied privately under Professor Fang Dongmei 方东美, entering the realm of Buddhism through philosophy. Fang's assertion that "Buddhism represents the highest realm of philosophy" had a profound impact on him. Subsequently, he studied under Zhangjia Khutukhtu 章嘉呼图克图 for three years. This Mongolian living Buddha not only taught him the Dharma but also advised him to ordain as a monk to dedicate himself fully to propagating

¹⁴³ Sun, "Jingkong," 397–98.

the Dharma. However, it was the prominent Pure Land layman Li Bingnan 李炳南 who played the decisive role in shaping his doctrinal framework and style of practice. Li Bingnan received direct guidance as a disciple of Ven. Yinguang 印光 (1861–1940). He closely integrated Confucian ethics with Pure Land faith and emphasized the principle of “focusing on a single path of practice (*yimen shenru* 一门深入).” Jingkong studied with Li Bingnan for ten years from 1958 to 1968, took over Li Bingnan’s thought of “integration of Confucianism and Buddhism,” and comprehensively adopted the classification of Li Bingnan’s doctrine that “only reciting Buddha’s name can save people in the Dharma-Ending Age.” He followed lay Buddhists to study, and having him wear monk’s robes to propagate Buddhism has strong characteristics of lay Buddhism in terms of spirit and organization.¹⁴⁴

In 1959, he became a monk at Taipei Linji 临济寺 Temple and took the Dharma name “Jingkong.” In 1961, he received full ordination. He had a legitimate monastic identity, but it was difficult for him to integrate into the mainstream monastic system in Taiwan at that time. The main reason was that there were structural contradictions within the Taiwanese Buddhist community. Conservative monastic groups, especially the Buddhist Association of China 中国佛教会, opposed and even excluded the Dharma propagation and monastic guidance of layman Li Bingnan. They regard these behaviors as an offense to the authority of the monastic community. Ven. Jingkong, who was a

¹⁴⁴ Sun, “Jingkong,” 398.

favored “Buddhist disciple” of Li Bingnan, was involved in the controversy over the ethics between monastics and laypeople. After receiving ordination, he had difficulty integrating into the traditional monastic system and once had no temple to rely on. Although in a difficult situation, this experience of being marginalized by the mainstream finally enabled Jingkong to explore a survival method different from the traditional public monastery system and a path for the spread of Buddhism.¹⁴⁵

The structural pressure arising from Ven. Jingkong’s marginalized position ultimately drove him to utilize innovative methods of Dharma propagation and organizational forms. In 1966, Ven. Jingkong met Han Ying 韩瑛, an important lay patron. Han Ying not merely provided substantial economic support but also broke with convention by inviting Ven. Jingkong to reside in her home. Ven. Jingkong resided with the Han family for seventeen years. While this arrangement of a “monk living in a lay household” might provoke controversy under traditional monastic precepts, it provided him with a stable base for Dharma propagation at the time. With Han Ying’s assistance, they founded the Hwa Dzan Buddhist Audio-Visual Library 华藏佛教视听图书馆 in 1979, initiating the use of modern audio and video technologies for Dharma dissemination. The practices during this period established the basis for Ven. Jingkong’s unique Dharma propagation system, which was lay-led, centered on sutra lecturing, and mediated by technology. Serving as the de facto administrator, Han Ying freed Ven.

¹⁴⁵ See note 144 above.

Jingkong from tedious administrative affairs, allowing him to focus entirely on Dharma lecturing. This division of labor was later replicated in the Amitabha Buddhist Societies worldwide.¹⁴⁶

The passing of laywoman Han Ying in 1997, along with subsequent internal changes, triggered another major shift in Ven. Jingkong's Dharma propagation career, finally leading to its internationalization and decentralization. Having lost his core patron and propagation base in Taiwan, Ven. Jingkong had no choice but to relocate, shifting his Dharma propagation to Singapore. There, he obtained substantial support from Li Muyuan 李木源, president of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge. By making use of Singapore's position as an international hub, Ven. Jingkong rapidly expanded his influence among the global Chinese diaspora. In 2002, following a deterioration in his relationship with Li Muyuan, Ven. Jingkong relocated to Australia. There, he established the Pure Land Learning College 净宗学院 and subsequently set up overseas branches in locations such as Hong Kong, etc.¹⁴⁷ This series of relocations and reconstructions ultimately formed a loose yet massive transnational Dharma propagation network. It comprises various Amitabha Buddhist Societies, libraries, and associations that view Ven. Jingkong as their spiritual leader while operating independently and managing their own finances. This network not only surpassed the geographical restrictions of traditional monasteries but also utilized satellite television and the internet to construct a global

¹⁴⁶ Sun, "Jingkong," 398.

¹⁴⁷ Sun, "Jingkong," 398–99.

“digital bodhimanda.”

3.2.2 Xia Lianju’s Dharma Lineage

The Pure Land school (also known as the Lotus school, or *Lianzong* 莲宗) is deeply anchored in the salvific ethos of Mahayana Buddhism. The core objective of this practice centers on the continuous recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name, driving the practitioner’s aspiration to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. Since ancient times, this practice has held a significant position in Chinese Buddhism. From the perspectives of historiography and sectarian lineage, the Chinese Pure Land school reveres Ven. Huiyuan 慧远 of Mount Lu 庐山 from the Eastern Jin dynasty as its first patriarch. In 402, he formed the White Lotus Society (*Bailian she* 白莲社), gathering 123 clerical and literati followers to cultivate Pure Land practices on Mount Lu. They had vowed to devote themselves to rebirth in Amitabha’s Western Paradise.¹⁴⁸ This lineage endured for over fifteen hundred years. By the late Qing and early Republican periods, Ven. Yinguang (1861–1940) was revered as the thirteenth patriarch of the Pure Land school. Jones describes him as one of the most important modern Buddhist reformers.¹⁴⁹ This lineage was continued and developed in post-war Taiwan. Among them, Layperson Li Bingnan (1890–1986), also known as “Elder Xuelu 雪庐老人,” was a direct disciple of Ven. Yin Guang. He founded the Taichung Buddhist Lotus Society (*Taizhong lianshe* 台中佛教莲

¹⁴⁸ Haar, *White Lotus Teachings*, 2–3.

¹⁴⁹ Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 115–19.

社), integrating Yin Guang's Pure Land thought deeply into Taiwanese society.¹⁵⁰ The distinguished contemporary Pure Land monk Ven. Jingkong (1927–2022) studied under Li Bingnan for a decade, thereby inheriting this “intellectual lineage” extending from Ven. Yinguang to Li Bingnan.¹⁵¹

In the process of modernizing the structure of the Buddhist organization, the emergence of the Amitabha Buddhist Society marked an important milestone. Ven. Jingkong initially did not create this organizational concept; instead, as he himself explained, this concept originated from a proposal of Xia Lianju 夏莲居 (1884–1965), who was a renowned layperson around the early republican period. Xia proposed the establishment of the Amitabha Buddhist Society given the changes in the post-war social situation and public attitudes. This association dedicated itself to propagating Pure Land Buddhism while consciously distancing itself from the stagnant or corrupt practices of traditional monastic institutions, and guiding Buddhism towards an educational and family-oriented direction. However, this grand vision of Xia did not fully materialize during his lifetime. It was not until Ven. Jingkong put it into practice that this vision was realized. Jingkong inherited this organizational blueprint and combined it with modern media technologies and global communication strategies, enabling the Amitabha Buddhist Society to take root globally. Over the years, more than 100 Amitabha Buddhist Societies have been officially registered worldwide. Although they are largely

¹⁵⁰ Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 123–24.

¹⁵¹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 398.

independently operated, they constitute the practical system established under the advocacy and influence of Jingkong.¹⁵² Gu Jiefeng 顾颉锋 pointed out: “Tracing the establishment back to Xia Lianju’s ideals locates this organization in a historical background, and provides it with legitimacy and authority.”¹⁵³ Accordingly, Ven. Jingkong also traced his lineage and scriptural basis back to the layman Xia Lianju to establish the source of his own legitimacy.

Xia was not only the pioneer of this organizational concept, but also a leading architect in the compilation and textual alignment of modern Chinese Pure Land scriptures. In his early years, Xia was proficient in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and had a profound literary accomplishment. In his middle age, he devoted himself to Buddhist practice, shifting from Chan Buddhism to doctrinal research, from exoteric Buddhism to esoteric Buddhism, and ultimately adhered to the Pure Land School. “In 1921, he quit his job and devoted himself to engaging in culture and religion. As a young man, he studied Confucianism and Buddhism and took the precepts under Huiming 慧明 (1859–1930) and focused on Pure Land.”¹⁵⁴ His most significant religious contribution was the compilation and reconstruction of the *Infinite Life Sutra* (*Wuliang shoujing* 无量寿经). This work directly modified the practice systems of

¹⁵² “Jingzong daoshi-Jingkong laofashi” 净宗导师—净空老法师, Huazang Jingzong honghua wang 华藏净宗弘化网, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://www.hwadzan.com/venmaster>.

¹⁵³ Xiefeng Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics Intersecting with Pure Land Soteriology: The Discursive Structures of the Lay Education of ‘The Corporation Republic of Hwa Dzan’” (master’s thesis, National Chengchi University, 2020), 46.

¹⁵⁴ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 66.

certain Pure Land sects after World War II. Gu mentioned the analysis made by Huang Chao Zai 黄超自 and Mei Guangxi 梅光羲 (teacher of Li Bing Nan) on the previous compilation of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, they both wrote prefaces for the works of Xia. Their discussions on this issue are helpful for us to better understand this scripture. The *Infinite Life Sutra* has five different versions, and these translations differ in details and even in core doctrines, causing difficulties for beginners in the dissemination and practice. “Some are detailed, whereas some have many omissions. This is unfavorable for the initial resolve of a learner since broadly reading is difficult.”¹⁵⁵ Although there were personal compilations by people like Wang Rixiu 王日休 and Wei Yuan 魏源, “not only Lianchi Zhuhong 莲池祿宏 but also Master Yinguang (1862–1940) were criticizing all previous compilations.”¹⁵⁶ Firmly believing that this scripture represents the ultimate unification of all the Tripitaka scriptures, Xia Lian Zhu vowed to compile a flawless and authoritative version and inherited the achievements of predecessors on this basis.

Commencing a retreat in 1932, he spent three years rigorously synthesizing the five versions of translations from the Han, Wei, Wu, Tang, and Song dynasties. After numerous revisions, he finalized *The Buddha Speaks the Mahayana Infinite Life Adornment, Purity, Equality, and Enlightenment Sutra* 佛说大乘无量寿庄严清净平等觉

¹⁵⁵ Xia Lianju 夏莲居, *Foshuo dasheng wuliangshou zhuangyan qingjing pingdeng juejing* 佛说大乘无量寿庄严清净平等觉经 (Zhonghua huazang jingzong xuehui, 2013), 1–2; Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 124.

¹⁵⁶ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 123, 126.

经 in 1946. It stands as a culmination that integrates the distinct advantages of all five historical translations, and demonstrates excellent literary style and theoretical coherence. Notable Buddhist figures of that time, such as Huang Chaozi 黄超自 and Mei Guangxi 梅光羲, all highly praised the achievements of Xia Lianzhu. Mei Guangxi explicitly praised the text, asserting that “not a single meaning is absent from the original version translations,” and concluded that it successfully rectified the deficiencies of the five earlier versions.¹⁵⁷

It is evident that the Amitabha Buddhist Society’s developmental trajectory can be traced back to several prominent lay Buddhists. Xia Lianju became famous for compiling *The Infinite Life Sutra*. His work thus provided a crucial textual groundwork for Pure Land cultivation. According to Li Yingpu 李颖璞, Xia Lianju’s compiled edition did not circulate widely during his lifetime. It only became well-known after his disciple Huang Nianzu 黄念祖 authored a commentary on it, which Ven. Jingkong subsequently promoted worldwide.¹⁵⁸ Through the dissemination efforts and the establishment of a Pure Land practice system through figures such as Huang Nianzu and Ven. Jingkong, Xia Lianju has greatly influenced the landscape of modern Pure Land Buddhism. As a close disciple of Xia Lianju, Huang Nianzu authored a comprehensive commentary on *The*

¹⁵⁷ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 122–27; “Xia Lianju dashi wangsheng zhuan” 夏莲居大师往生传, 2025 Huang Nianzu jushi fayin xuanliu wang 2025 黄念祖居士法音宣流网, accessed September 18, 2025, <https://www.masterhznz.com/110101.php>.

¹⁵⁸ Li Yingpu 李颖璞, “*Wuliangshou jing huijiben zhenglun zhi yanjiu—Yi Xia Lianju huijiben wei zhongxin*” 《无量寿经》会集本争论之研究——以夏莲居会集本为中心 (master’s thesis, Shanghai shehui kexue yuan, 2017), 4.

Infinite Life Sutra in the 1980s, giving a strong doctrinal foundation for the compiled edition. In the late 1980s, Huang passed this comment on to Yin Guang. The latter then widely promoted it as the core text of his Buddhist dissemination system. As a result, this text gained profound reverence across Taiwan and Southeast Asia, as well as throughout the global Chinese diaspora. Although there are still ongoing debates within the Buddhist circle on the legitimacy and authority of the compiled version, including fierce criticism from traditionalists (such as the sect of Lingyanshan Temple 灵岩山寺 in Suzhou) towards Ven. Yinguang's transmission, it is undeniable that Xia's text reconstruction, Huang's doctrine interpretation, and Yin Guang's global promotion transformed this belief system into a highly dynamic and effectively mobilizing force in contemporary Chinese Buddhism.¹⁵⁹ In the face of controversy, Ven. Jingkong, who promoted Xia's compiled edition, further adopted a strategy of "sanctifying" Xia Lianju. Jingkong argued that Ven. Yinguang only opposed sutra compilation by ordinary people. He claimed that Xia Lianju was not an ordinary being, but rather a "returner" (*zailairen* 再来人), a "great being" (*dashi* 大士), and a "bodhisattva" (*pusa* 菩萨).¹⁶⁰ Ven. Jingkong elevated Xia to the status of a sage, aiming to avoid the indirect criticism from Ven. Yinguang that "ordinary people must not alter sutras." This move established the legitimacy of the version compiled by Xia and Jingkong's own lineage.

¹⁵⁹ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 44–45, 127; Sun, "Jingkong," 414.

¹⁶⁰ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 140.

3.2.3 Ven. Jingkong's Dharma Propagation

Following the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Buddhism was in ruins and faced a severe shortage of scriptures. Starting in the 1980s, Ven. Jingkong used his foundation to donate large quantities of the Buddhist canon and the compiled *Infinite Life Sutra* to the mainland. This effort aimed to fill the spiritual vacuum of that era. His audio tapes and optical discs circulated widely among the public, allowing him to amass millions of followers.¹⁶¹ Ven. Jingkong was one of the earliest pioneers in the Buddhist community to utilize modern media. By utilizing a shifting array of technologies from audio and video tapes to CDs, VCDs, and eventually satellite television and the internet, he enabled the large-scale reproduction and circulation of his Dharma talks. The Hwa Dzan Buddhist Audio-Visual Library 华藏佛教视听图书馆, founded by him and his patron, laywoman Han Ying, was not only a venue for his Dharma talks. It also became the modern production center of the “Dharma treasure,” integrating recording, production and distribution. Subsequently, in 1984, he and the layperson Jian Fengwen 简丰文 jointly established the Buddha Education Foundation Corporation 财团法人佛陀教育基金会, which aimed at printing Buddhist scriptures for free and producing audio-visual materials for global dissemination. The principle of “open-source content” enabled the spread of his teachings without hindrance. It became the core mechanism supporting his transnational network.¹⁶² By modern media, Jingkong was able to replicate and distribute

¹⁶¹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 404–7.

¹⁶² Sun, “Jingkong,” 399–400.

his Buddhist sermons on a large scale at low cost. This approach allowed him to avoid the traditional monastic hierarchy and geographical limitations, establishing direct connections with his followers. In this way, this model rapidly expanded his audience from a small local group in Taiwan to the global Chinese community. Therefore, he transformed from a regional Buddhist disseminator to a “universal saint.”¹⁶³

Moreover, this media-based religious practice gave rise to a relatively unique form of Buddhist organization. In related research, Gareth Fisher defined this phenomenon as “textual communities.” In such communities, lay believers no longer merely rely on the physical existence of monastics as an intermediary. Instead, they use the model of textual community as a type of discursive community where people belong to particular social (and, in this case, religious) units based on whether they share the reading and discussion of a particular set of texts.¹⁶⁴ For Ven. Jingkong, these “textual communities” formed a decentralized, network-like structure. Followers spontaneously replicated and distributed his books and audio-visual discs of Buddhist teachings. They would also gather at home or independent secular meditation centers to watch these videos and engage in collective practice. This model greatly strengthened the power of lay believers. Through the consumption and reproduction of media, they avoided the supervision and monopoly of traditional monastic authority and state policies. By

¹⁶³ Sun, “Jingkong,” 396–97.

¹⁶⁴ Gareth Fisher, “Mapping Religious Difference: Lay Buddhist Textual Communities in the Post-Mao Period,” in *Recovering Buddhism in Modern China*, ed. J. Brooks Jessup and Jan Kiely (Columbia University Press, 2016), 260–84.

obtaining a certain degree of religious interpretation rights and organizational autonomy, they formed a unique secular Buddhist movement with strong mobilization capabilities in contemporary China.¹⁶⁵

Ven. Jingkong's propagation strategy involved realizing "religious" goals through "secular" projects. He directed the global resources of the Amitabha Buddhist Society into a massive socio-cultural movement. His core concept was the "return of religion to education." He rebranded "Buddhism" as "Buddha's education" and viewed all religious founders as "volunteer workers in multicultural social education." Furthermore, he treated "monasteries" as schools and interpreted "Arhat, Bodhisattva, and Buddha" as academic degrees of Bachelor, Master, and PhD.¹⁶⁶ The purpose of this "educational" interpretive strategy was to eliminate the alienation modern people felt toward Buddhism. This allowed Buddhism to integrate into mainstream society under the guise of "traditional cultural education." The naming of institutions such as the "Buddha Educational Center," the "Library," and the subsequent "Societies" all reflected this core concept. The goal was to transform practice centers into schools for learning and disseminating the Buddha's education, rather than merely venues for traditional repentance rituals or spaces exclusively managed by monastics. This concept actively dissolved the dichotomy between the "religious" and the "secular." It allowed all of his activities to be presented through the more inclusive frameworks of "education" and

¹⁶⁵ Sun, "Jingkong," 409.

¹⁶⁶ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 162.

“culture.” This lowered the barrier to entry for the general public, particularly for groups such as intellectuals, making the teachings easier to encounter and accept. This approach to cultivation greatly simplified Buddhist practice. It became highly suitable for many lay followers who lacked the time for complex textual study and strict practice. Supplying a clear, direct, and easily actionable path was the key to its ability to attract numerous lay believers.

The core of Jingkong’s teaching is Pure Land Buddhism, and it has been simplified and practicalized. It centers its doctrines on Xia Lianju’s version of *The Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, utilizing it as the primary textual basis for Pure Land cultivation.¹⁶⁷ It focuses on one classic and simplifies the content of Buddhist scriptures. It creates a plain practice path for lay believers without a systematic practice foundation.

The scope of his teachings reached beyond Buddhism to incorporate many traditional Confucian and Daoist concepts. He placed a strong emphasis on disseminating fine traditional Chinese culture. Ven. Jingkong steadily upheld the core concept that filial piety is the key to the revival and widespread promotion of Chinese culture. He believed that manifesting filial piety by means of practices such as ancestor worship was a necessary prerequisite for cultural revival. The success of the Lujiang Experiment 庐江实验 triggered a global trend of studying the *Dizigui* 弟子规. He also collaborated with the Malaysian Ministry of Education to conduct training programs for thousands of

¹⁶⁷ Sun, “Jingkong,” 403.

principals and teachers. Influenced by Ven. Yinguang and Li Bingnan, he believed that reciting the Buddhist mantra for rebirth in the Pure Land is inextricably linked to the cultivation of secular ethics. So, Ven. Jingkong effectively placed Confucian ethics, particularly filial piety, as core components of the Pure Land cultivation path.¹⁶⁸

Jingkong lectures not only on Buddhist scriptures concerning karmic retribution, but also selects Confucian classics, Daoist texts, and morality books (*shanshu* 善书) that stress parallel themes. Except *Dizigui*, morality books also include *Four Instructions of Yuan Liaofan* (*Liaofan sixun* 了凡四训), *Wenchang's Secret Good Deeds* (*Wenchang dijun yinzhi wen* 文昌帝君阴骘文), the Buddhist sutra *The Discourse on the Ten Wholesome Ways of Action* (*Shi shanyedao jing* 十善业道经), and the *Treatise of the Exalted One on Actions and Consequences* (*Taishang ganyin pian* 太上感应篇), etc.¹⁶⁹ The integration of Confucianism and Buddhism not only made his teachings more acceptable within the Chinese cultural sphere but also gave the movement the appearance of a “cultural revival.” As Jizhe describes, Ven. Jingkong can be defined as a classic “Confucian-Buddhist.” He “Buddhicized” Confucian texts like the *Dizigui* and successfully integrated them into his own system of religious practice.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, his numerous activities promoting cross-faith dialogue and world peace received recognition and support from

¹⁶⁸ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 164–65.

¹⁶⁹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 400–401.

¹⁷⁰ Ji Zhe 汲喆, “Making a Virtue of Piety: *Dizigui* and the Discursive Practice of Jingkong’s Network,” in *The Varieties of Confucian Experience: Documenting a Grassroots Revival of Tradition*, ed. Sébastien Billioud (Brill, 2018), 70–71.

government officials in multiple countries and international organizations. In his lectures, he then frequently mentions these encounters with government officials and celebrities to boost his authority among followers and win legitimacy in other contexts.¹⁷¹

His authority does not stem from the traditional role of the abbot. Rather, it is based on his influence as a “content creator” and the “communication channels” he controls. The principle of the “free distribution” of Dharma treasures also explains how related organizations worldwide were able to form a loose, “non-hierarchical” transnational network. Because the central teachings for lay organizations were open access, followers everywhere did not need to navigate a bureaucratic hierarchy for authorization. They could independently establish societies or learning groups to receive and practice Jingkong’s teachings remotely. This formed a unique “open-source content” organizational model. These seemingly loose organizations were mostly established under the inspiration of Ven. Jingkong’s personal and religious authority. This mediated mode of communication not merely expanded his influence but also formed the very nature of his authority. Followers received his teachings through standardized audio-visual products, guaranteeing the consistency of his message as it spread globally.¹⁷² Meanwhile, he repeatedly stressed the practice principle of “focusing deeply on a single method and cultivating it continuously over time (*yimen shenru changshi xunxiu* 一门深

¹⁷¹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 400.

¹⁷² Sun, “Jingkong,” 398–99.

入，长时薰修).”¹⁷³ Following this system, his followers committed to “following only one teacher, studying a single sutra, and exclusively reciting one Buddha’s name” (*gensui yiwei laoshi zhuanxue yibu jingdian zhuanxiu yiju fohao* 跟随一位老师，专学一部经典，专修一句佛号) for their entire lives.¹⁷⁴ This further strengthened the believers’ inner reliance on him.

In general, the core of Jingkong’s practice model is to use modern technology means. Under the simplified method of global free dissemination to practice, a loose decentralized network is formed. Each organization is rooted in Pure Land Buddhism, utilizing the charisma and teachings of a spiritual leader as a cohesive bond, while maintaining a strictly laity-led administrative structure. General administration and finance are independent, but all are related to the common respect for Jingkong’s teachings. Initially, lay Buddhists gathered relying on books and CDs, then registered to become formal organizations, and finally formed a loose but relatively unified community. These groups work independently and do not depend on particular temples or monk groups. Most branches are managed by laypeople. Global branches are network points, with teaching as the center and no strict administrative hierarchy. Jing Kong is the spiritual mentor and does not directly manage these branches. He carries out spiritual guidance work by spreading Buddhist doctrines, holding public lectures and conducting

¹⁷³ Sun, “Jingkong,” 403.

¹⁷⁴ Sun, “Jingkong,” 410–11. The Chinese translation is “跟随一位老师、专学一部经典、专修一句佛号。”

live webcasts, creating a unified spiritual connection for the global organization. This “core mentor + independent nodes” model is helpful for large-scale cross-regional dissemination and can also ensure the flexible autonomy of local branches.

3.2.4 Amida Society in LA

The successful Taipei model has been adopted and replicated by global followers. These Amitabha Buddhist Societies rely on the active support of lay Buddhists. With the increasing number of practice followers in various places, there is an urgent need for permanent places for reciting Buddhist scriptures of doctrines. In many regions, local followers spontaneously form Amitabha Buddhist Societies and raise money to lease venues. They take Jingkong’s portraits, scriptures, and audio-visual materials as the core basis for practice. Establish an organization to support the concept of purifying the mind, multiculturalism and Buddhist education, and provide places for public practice. Consequently, there have been established such Pure Land practice centers as “Amitabha Buddhist Association” or “Buddhist Education Center” around the world. By 1990, the “Amida Society” in Temple City of Los Angeles was also formally established.

Analysis shows that the Los Angeles branch has similar characteristics. When encountering keywords such as “lay Buddhist centers” or “Chinese communities,” people may broadly classify them into binary categories, such as “convent Buddhism” and “ethnic Buddhism” or “religious” and “secular.” But in fact, there are relatively large differences in the management organization models among different Amitabha Buddhist Societies. The characteristics of “lay-centered” seem to apply to the Los Angeles Amida Society.

However, many Amitabha Buddhist Societies in Taiwan and the United States are formally managed or led by monastics. Initially, laywoman Han Yi founded the Hwadzan Pure Land Society 华藏净宗学会. This society is currently managed by Ven. Wudao 悟道 and Ven. Zhuangyan 庄行. Moreover, all previous presidents were Buddhist monastics. Other organizations such as the North America Mituo Village 弥陀村 and the Dallas Buddhist Association 达拉斯佛教会 are also managed by resident monastics. This complex situation shows that such societies cannot all be regarded as isomorphic groups. However, due to space constraints, we will first start with the Amida Society in Los Angeles.

Following the proposal of a Singaporean laywoman who advocated for a local organization early on, the association adopted “Amida,” the Japanese abbreviation for Amitabha Buddha. Therefore, the official name “Amida Society” will be used hereafter to distinguish it from most other Amitabha Buddhist Societies. Through an interview with President Chen Jingchang 陈景昌, we learned about the founding process of the Amida Society in Los Angeles. The establishment of the Amida Society in Los Angeles dates back to 1990. It was initially proposed by a Singaporean laywoman, but it did not begin formal operations until 1992 under the promotion of laywoman Han Ying, director of the Hwadzan Library in Taiwan. The society initially operated out of President Chen’s accounting firm. By distributing Buddhist books and audio recordings of Ven. Jingkong’s lectures, it gradually built its initial base of followers from this small, private space. According to the president, although several prominent figures in the Los Angeles

Buddhist community were invited to serve as board directors, the organization stalled temporarily due to a lack of unified leadership and collective momentum.

The activities were carried out before in Dharma Seal Temple 法印寺, presided over by Yin Hai. Ven. Yin Hai even compassionately sat in the audience during these lectures. Later, because the Buddhist nuns there were worried about the activities of laypeople in the temple, the society moved to Bodhi Temple 菩提寺 presided over by Ven. Zhao Chu 照初. Chen realized that if he wanted to independently spread the Dharma, he needed an independent practice center. At the end of 1996, Jingkong's Dharma propagation became an important turning point. When visiting, after the Dharma assembly ended, the door of the monk's quarters in Dharma Seal Temple was not opened in time. So, Jingkong stayed at President Chen's home. Jingkong told President Chen that he should not always borrow places from others, but should buy his own property and build a permanent practice center. There was a non-Buddhist client who took the initiative to offer help. The association chose a building that was formerly a Masonic lodge.

The listed price of the property is \$575,000. The price is relatively low, but the condition of the building is poor. Yin Hai, with a devout heart, thought the place was suitable when he came to see it, so he urged to buy it and then gradually renovated it. The funds are mainly from the donations of Mr. Chen and his wife, and the largest part is also provided by two other devout lay Buddhists. However, there is anti-Buddhist sentiment with white supremacist tendencies in Temple City, and the process of the community use

permit hearing is difficult. Chen has insightful support and negotiation skills in the face of the community's exclusion of Buddhists. He knows that it is useless to buy the property without a use permit. So, he reached a strategic agreement: the funds are placed in escrow and will be disbursed only after the permit is obtained.

During three public hearings, the society encountered many obstacles and deliberately created difficulties. For example, the city council wanted to ban Buddhists from kowtowing on the grounds of "superstition," and also hindered the hearing process on the grounds of no parking spaces. But the association explained the Buddhist significance of prostration to the council, saying that the purpose was to reduce arrogance and express respect. In addition, with the assistance of a helping councilor, they refuted the saying that there were not enough parking spaces. Finally, a councilor left in a huff. The bill was passed with 4 votes in favor and 1 against. This removed the last obstacle for Amida Society to buy the practice center.

The Amida Society adopts a non-member system and a free-of-charge operation mode. At that time, other Amitabha Buddhist associations also questioned this practice. President Chen believes that this practice can avoid the situation of power struggles caused by membership fees, enabling the association to purely focus on the dissemination of Buddhism. This institution presented the distinctiveness of a lay Buddhist organization, and a purely practical group can independently make action decisions based on common beliefs, not relying on monastic orders or external authorities.

Chapter Four:

Lay Authority in BAUS

In the trend of Western rationalism, integrating ancient Buddhist teachings with the modern spirit is a long-standing challenge. Shen's work of promoting Buddhism is an example. He does not simply repeat scriptures, but follows the example of Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti: "Though living as a householder, he remains unattached to the three realms; though having a wife and children, he constantly cultivates pure conduct."¹⁷⁵ Therefore, he successfully integrates profound Buddhist principles with the modern industrial and commercial society. After 1949, lay Buddhism in mainland China experienced a decline. Then it relied on the scattered distribution of Chinese people around the world for development. Driven by the demographic growth of Chinese immigrants and the institutional expansion of Chinese American Buddhism, the religious leader C.T. Shen carried out explorations that had an impact on the Chinese community.

Shen cites the "Raft Parable (*rufa yu* 如筏喻)" and considers himself a householder, with the afflictions of laypeople such as wife, children, greed, anger, ignorance, doubt, pride, etc.¹⁷⁶ Based on this identity, his spiritual practice blueprint is

¹⁷⁵ The Chinese translation is "虽处居家，不着三界；示有妻子，常修梵行。"

¹⁷⁶ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, "Zaijiaren ruhe xiuxing de shangtao" 在家人如何修行的商讨, *Huiju* 慧炬, June 15, 2016, 18–19.

not to follow the transcendent path of the sage, but to secure a pragmatic alternative for modern secular strugglers seeking spiritual shelter. This part explores the authority composition of the layman Chen and its manifestations in the localization of Buddhist practices in the American context.

4.1 Secular Achievements and Organizational Management

Before devoting himself to the cause of Buddhist dissemination, the layman Shen had already achieved remarkable success in the secular field. An alumnus of the Department of Electrical Engineering at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shen distinguished himself through his exceptional administrative capacity during his tenure at the National Resources Committee of the Nationalist Government. Relocating to the United States in 1952 due to the civil war and family upheavals, he initially encountered financial hardship. However, using his sharp business acumen, he co-founded the Transatlantic Financing Corp. in 1954 with a meager \$500 in capital per person, and miraculously secured a \$16 million ship-purchasing deal with Turkey.¹⁷⁷

This achievement earned him the reliance of prominent American political and business figures, including Roger M. Kyes and Robert M. Anderson. Together, they founded the MTL shipping group, where Shen served as senior vice president. In 1970, he later ascended to the position of chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the

¹⁷⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 143–52.

American Steamship Company (ASC), a critical corporate subsidiary of the broader group. In response to the 1973 oil crisis, he formulated and implemented a national energy strategy to transport western coal to the east. By coordinating power companies, railways, ports, and shipyards, he successfully shipped low-sulfur western coal to the East Coast using thousand-foot vessels, thereby revitalizing the Great Lakes fleet.¹⁷⁸

Furthermore, he transformed his significant success in the secular realm into a practice of “accumulating merit,” which involved managing Buddhist enterprises for organizational management. These secular achievements not only gave him sufficient economic support for the dissemination of Buddhism but also introduced a modern and efficient organizational model and established a strong public reputation. In other words, as a successful entrepreneur in the international shipping industry, he owned an enormous amount of financial assets far exceeding those of ordinary lay elites. He also had modern management experience in operating large enterprises and legal entities (including non-profit organizations) in a highly developed capitalist society. This enabled him to purchase and donate large tracts of land and buildings alone and provide long-term financial support for major Buddhist propagation projects.

Among the Chinese immigrant community, business elites are usually highly respected, and their success is regarded as an embodiment of wisdom and ability. Shen’s business background enabled him to gain extremely high prestige and influence among

¹⁷⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 275–302.

the Chinese community. This provided favorable conditions for him to later devote himself to promoting Buddhism and establishing Buddhist organizations. His business insight and management skills also demonstrated efficiency and vision in operating Buddhist institutions. His business success was seen as an expression of his wisdom and good karma. This strengthened his persuasiveness and influence in promoting Buddhism, making believers more willing to believe in his leadership. He was not only financially independent but also formed a wide social network and a good reputation. This provided him with strong, non-traditional resource support for his leadership work in the religious field.

Mr. Shen applied his enterprise management skills perfectly to the development of Buddhist organizations. In 1964, he, along with Ven. Ludu, Jiang Huang Yujing, and others, jointly founded the American Buddhist Association (BAUS). He critically reflected on the traditional “individual-centered” shortcomings that historically constrained Chinese Buddhism. He argued that under this model, “human lifespan is limited, and when the individual passes away, the enterprise collapses.” To avoid repeating those historical mistakes, he strongly advocated that BAUS should adopt the organizational model of Western Christianity. He proposed establishing an “organization-centered” modern board of directors based on democratic standards and the rule of law. He believed this was the only way to build an “ironclad institutional foundation (*tieda de yingpan* 铁打的营盘)” for American Buddhism, thereby assuring its lasting viability. At the first general assembly in 1968, Shen was elected as vice president. He served in this

volunteer capacity for thirty-five years, assisting five different presidents. His persistent and firm presence in this role acted as a symbol of stable authority in itself.¹⁷⁹

Shen's authority in organizational management was ultimately reflected in the magnificent practice centers he established. The establishment of the Temple of Enlightenment was "a milestone in the developmental history of BAUS." In 1980, at the age of sixty-seven, C. T. Shen retired from the shipping industry. He devoted himself fully to building Chuang Yen Monastery, working as the chief project director for seventeen years, up to the age of eighty-four. He used his engineering background and management experience to guide the construction. Overseeing every detail, he "became the general commander of the construction site."¹⁸⁰

The establishment of Chuang Yen Monastery occurred precisely with the late-20th-century demographic influx, an era marked by the continuous surge of Chinese immigrants into the United States. Initially, most Buddhist organizations in the U.S. were small and mainly linked to Japanese Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, which did not fully meet the needs of Chinese immigrants. Shen saw that Chinese Buddhists needed a large, well-equipped center for study and Dharma practice. He began to build a temple that could accommodate a large number of believers. His vision for the grand temple was not only to provide a religious venue for Chinese Buddhists, but also to connect Eastern and Western Buddhist cultures and help Buddhism take root in the United States. This

¹⁷⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 168–71.

¹⁸⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 173–85, 327–84.

denoted a shift from laypeople mainly supporting temples by providing funds to taking on the important roles of planners and leaders. This process demonstrated the legitimacy of the layperson's leadership position and set a new model for Chinese Buddhism in the United States.

Different from traditional temples led by monastics, Chuang Yen Monastery was shaped by the hard work and knowledge of C. T. Shen and other laypeople. Shen was involved in every step, from choosing the site and planning the design to coordinating fundraising. He used his business skills to make sure the monastery would last and serve its community well. For instance, he chose a location that proved both peaceful and accessible to the public. The majority of the capital was derived from his personal endowments and the community-wide fundraising campaigns he initiated in the Chinese community. They also assisted in managing the implementation of the project, employing their expertise in fields such as architecture, engineering and law to ensure that the project proceeded as planned.

By founding the two monasteries, Shen created a firm foundation for Chinese Buddhism across the landscape of the American East Coast. He used these centers to bring together resources for spreading the Dharma, both from within the U.S. and abroad. The organizations he started became lively public platforms that attracted many respected Buddhist teachers. Shen personally invited and hosted well-known monastics and masters, such as Ven. Sheng Yen, Ven. Renjun 仁俊, Ven. Minzhi 敏智, Ven. Shouye 寿冶, Ven. Jinghai 净海, and even the Karmapa from Tibetan Buddhism. By these efforts,

he gathered many resources for spreading Buddhism in America and changed his own role from a “Dharma protector” to a “mentor.” He became a spiritual leader respected by both monastics and laypeople, which was gained through his work outside the religious community.

4.2 Faith Journey and Personal Practice

Shen’s Buddhist faith did not remain superficial but developed through profound study and practice. The seeds of this faith can be traced back to his childhood. His mother, Xie Wensu 谢文素, was a devout laywoman who adhered to a vegetarian diet and recited the Buddha’s name, exerting a strong Buddhist influence on Shen. When he was four years old, he contracted severe diphtheria and was in critical condition. His mother made a vow to the bodhisattva Guanyin. After he recovered, she braved the snow to go up the mountain and fulfill her vow. This experience profoundly instilled in the young Shen a lifelong conviction regarding the efficacy of Guanyin. At the age of twelve, he made his first donation to Buddhism during the Buddha’s Birthday festival in Shaoxing 绍兴. While visiting a Guanyin temple with his mother, they encountered danger on the way. He silently recited Guanyin’s name and escaped unharmed. This led him to firmly believe in the bodhisattva’s compassion and ability to save beings from suffering.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 8–11.

However, the true deepening of his faith began at the age of eighteen. While taking a leave of absence from school due to illness, he happened to read the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* 楞严经 in his father's study. His first encounter with Buddhist concepts such as the "true mind" and "illusory perceptions (*xu wang xiang xiang* 虚妄相想)" triggered his long-term philosophical reflection on the question, "Who am I?"¹⁸² This quest was elevated during two life-or-death trials. The first occurred after the outbreak of World War II in 1939, during which, he silently recited Guanyin's name to pray for protection during confronting an air raid in Germany. During this time, he deeply reflected on the connection between the "true self" and the "clinging mind," thereby deepening his understanding of Buddhist doctrines.¹⁸³ The second time was in 1942, while flying over the Himalayas from India back to Kunming. The plane encountered severe turbulence and experienced a sudden drop. During the rapid descent, he once again clearly experienced the separation of the "clinging mind" (fear) and the "true self" (undisturbed).¹⁸⁴ These two life-or-death experiences, akin to contemplating a *huatou* 话头, elevated his faith from an emotional prayer for protection to a rational understanding and actual realization of the essential nature of mind. These early experiences prompted him to view the Dharma as the fundamental path to resolving life's predicaments and

¹⁸² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 24–28.

¹⁸³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 70–72.

¹⁸⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 95–98.

realizing the value of life. They additionally laid the basis for his later strong involvement with the Dharma and devotion to Buddhist causes.

Shen's practice possessed strong intellectual characteristics. He not only studied scriptures but also diligently requested guidance from renowned masters. During his era, Chinese lay Buddhism began to display elitist traits alongside the immigration wave of highly educated intellectuals. As mentioned above, following the *Immigration Act of 1965*, Chinese immigrants typically came for further education or employment, with a relatively high rate of higher education attainment. They tended to emphasize the study of Buddhist scriptures, focus on the compatibility of Buddhist practice with a scientific, technological worldview, and were less likely to obtain guidance from monastics.¹⁸⁵ During this period, Shen began to build extensive connections with other lay Buddhists, most of whom were highly educated elites. The resulting circle of lay practitioners proved highly valuable in improving Shen's understanding of the Dharma and advancing his Buddhist endeavors. The China Institute in America 华美协进社 was founded in 1923 by Henry Luce, general manager of *The New York Times*, with the aim of promoting harmony between Chinese Americans and other ethnic groups through cultural sharing. In 1963, Shen was elected as a trustee of the institute in his capacity as a prominent social figure. Henry Luce's sister, Elisabeth Moore, was also a trustee of the organization. She put forward establishing a cultural research project and mobilized Shen

¹⁸⁵ Chandler, "Chinese Buddhism in America," 16–19; Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 143–44.

to design and fund its implementation. Shen designed several projects to translate Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures from Chinese into English. He also donated funds to establish grants to support and reward the translators. Shen subsequently invited Zhang Chengji 张澄基 and Zhongyuan 张钟元 to undertake the translation work, such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and the *Transmission of the Lamp* (*Chuandeng lu* 传灯录).¹⁸⁶

Zhang was a Buddhist scholar and practitioner in the American Buddhist community who exerted a strong influence, particularly on Shen. He frequently interacted with Shen and guided his meditation retreats, which greatly helped Shen deepen his Buddhist attainments.¹⁸⁷ In addition, while devoting himself to the study of Buddhist theory, Shen became acquainted with fellow practitioners such as Jiang Huang Yujing, Chen Jianmin, Yu Shizhong 俞时中, Yu Junmin 俞俊民, the Zhang Zhirui 张志锐 couple, and Huang Linkui 黄麟奎. This early group of practitioners can be considered the backbone of Buddhism's spread in American society.¹⁸⁸

Therefore, in Shen's Buddhist faith and Dharma propagation practices, a series of local lay practitioners played a key role. Before the arrival of the traditional Sangha, they had already initiated extensive and active practical activities. For lay leaders like Shen, this initial exchange provided him with spiritual support and a platform for joint exploration. During the period when Shen was deeply studying Buddhist theory, these lay

¹⁸⁶ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 161–62.

¹⁸⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 93–94, 161–66.

¹⁸⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 162.

practitioners gathered frequently. They mainly engaged in in-depth exchanges and discussions about Buddhism, mutually inspiring each other. This atmosphere of joint learning and exploration provided Shen Jiachen with continuous spiritual inspiration. By introducing Dharma resources, they established the basis for the establishment and growth of Chinese American Buddhism. For instance, Jiang Huang Yujing's active aspiration helped found the BAUS. Through their own faith, they offered initial resources and stimulated enthusiasm for propagating the Dharma. Moreover, this group of Chinese Buddhist lay practitioners did not entirely break with respect for and support for the traditional Sangha. During their studies and practice, they gradually realized that the mature development of Buddhism and the advancement of personal practice still relied on the guidance of the traditional Sangha. In 1962, Laywoman Ying Jin Yutang established the first Chinese Buddhist society in New York, the Eastern States Buddhist Temple of America. She frequently invited Dharma masters to reside there and lead activities. It did not completely separate from monastic leadership and became the first practice center on the East Coast to be headed by monastics. She invited several masters to the US, including Ven. Miaofeng 妙峰, Ven. Haolin 浩霖, and Ven. Shouye 寿冶. These masters later established their own practice centers, and through this, she indirectly drove the development of Buddhism on the East Coast.¹⁸⁹ This demonstrates that within the

¹⁸⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 162; Shi Jinghai 释净海, ed., *Xifang geguo fojiao lueshi* 西方各国佛教略史 (Fagu wenhua, 2017), 375–76.

Chinese American lay community, their exploration and practice of Buddhism often preceded those of the traditional Sangha.

While purchasing supplies in Calcutta, India, in 1942, Shen made a special trip to visit Zhang Chengji. After conversing and exploring Shen's foundation in Buddhism, Chang asked Shen how he should study the Dharma in real life, and finally instructed him: "After you return to China, find a copy of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* 圆觉经, then devote yourself to its recitation and contemplation. We will meet again in the future." Studying and understanding this sutra helped him comprehend the steps and methods of Buddhist practice.¹⁹⁰ Between 1964 and 1966, under the guidance of Professor Zhang, he undertook three meditation retreats, each lasting twenty-one days. During these periods, Shen had to be completely isolated from the outside world and maintain a strict discipline of daily cultivation: initiate his practice at three a.m., not sleep before ten p.m. at night, and maintain complete silence. During this time, Professor Zhang guided him in the systematic study of Chan Buddhism, exoteric teachings, and even the "Mahāmudrā" of Tibetan Vajrayāna, which greatly enhanced his Buddhist attainments.¹⁹¹

Apart from the early contemplation and practice of the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* scripture, another classic that had a profound influence on Mr. Shen's spiritual journey was the Diamond Sutra. Unlike other scholars who study it through doctrines, Mr. Shen's

¹⁹⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 93–94, 161.

¹⁹¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 188–203.

in-depth exploration of the Diamond Sutra began with his wife, Ms. Ju Woo. Ms. Ju was not a Buddhist scholar, yet she had been reciting the Diamond Sutra every morning for eighteen years. In 1988, she suffered from bone cancer. Yet, in the final stages before her death, she was “clear-headed and free of pain,” passing away peacefully. Shen recalled in an article: “She did not groan, nor did she cry out in pain . . . Not only was she not in pain, but her mind was clear . . . She uttered the Buddha’s name with absolute clarity . . . Twelve hours after she passed away, when I changed her clothes, her body was still soft.” This experience had a tremendous impact on Shen, who attributed all of this to the immense merit of his wife’s eighteen years of reciting the Diamond Sutra. Deeply moved by this, layman Shen vowed to continue reciting the Diamond Sutra as his morning practice on his wife’s behalf. This also made the Diamond Sutra the core of his Dharma propagation in his later years. Using his wife’s “Dharma experienced by a layperson” as an example, he demonstrated to the public the immeasurable merit of reciting the sutra.¹⁹²

This deep practice experience granted him spiritual realization and Buddhist scholarship far beyond that of an average layperson. It established the spiritual foundation and authoritative basis for his leadership in Buddhist initiatives and the propagation of doctrine, forming his image as a modern, highly educated, and charismatic elite lay Buddhist.

¹⁹² Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, *Jingang Jing de Yanjiu* 金刚经的研究 (Caituan faren taibeishi huiju chubanshe, 1991), 33–34; Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢 and Shi Xianming 释显明, *Fuhui zhuangyan* 福慧庄严 (Caituan faren taibeishi huiju chubanshe, 1993), 235–46.

4.3 Lectures and Dharma Propagation

Mr. Shen also interprets the Buddhist doctrines to the public, combining profound Buddhist principles with modern life problems, making the audience feel that the teachings are close to their own lives. He is a major disseminator of Chinese Buddhism in late-20th-century North America, a figure whose extensive lectures and writings epitomized the modernization and localization of the tradition. He has three identities: a successful scientist, an entrepreneur, and a lay Buddhist, creating a unique “contextual interpretation” to help Buddhism spread and be accepted in American society.

During the 1969 Buddha’s Birthday ceremony, he delivered his first English lecture, *The Five Eyes* (*Wuyan* 五眼). By explaining the Dharma through modern scientific perspectives and humorous language, he pioneered a new model for the propagation of the Dharma in English. His lecture was subsequently translated into multiple languages.¹⁹³ Following his initial English lecture in 1969, Shen was frequently invited to speak at religious and academic institutions across the United States and abroad. His lectures covered Buddhist theory, methods of practice, and their application in daily life. Many of these talks were compiled and published in over a dozen books, including “*A Collection of Layman Shen Jiazhen’s Lectures* 沈家居士演讲集,” “*The Adornment of Merit and Wisdom* 福慧庄严” (co-authored with Ven. Xianming 显明),

¹⁹³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 204–16.

“*The Mayflower* 五月花,” “*A Glimpse of Buddhism* 佛学鸟瞰,” and “*Reasons for Studying Buddhism* 学佛缘由,” yielding a broad and durable impact.¹⁹⁴

4.3.1 Cultural Adaptation and Localization

From its inception, Shen’s Dharma propagation was deeply characterized by a spirit of adaptation. First, he utilized core American cultural symbols to reshape Buddhist narratives. In his famous 1976 lecture “*The Mayflower*,” he compared the early Puritans’ voyage for religious freedom to the spiritual necessity of “crossing the ocean of hatred, discrimination, selfishness, and greed to reach the other shore of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.”¹⁹⁵ He likened this to the modern spiritual journey for Buddhist liberation. This metaphor not only diminished the perceived foreignness of Buddhism but also reframed it as a universal path aligned with the core American values of freedom and liberation.

In the context of modern American Christianity, he emphasizes integration and coexistence for those who are skeptical of Buddhism or deep monotheistic beliefs, and distinguishes the differences between Buddhism and other religions. The core strategy is to avoid missionary activities, eliminate people’s strangeness and threat to Buddhism through inclusive and dialectically clear explanations. When respecting other religions, clearly expound the unique value of Buddhism and the more advanced path to liberation.

¹⁹⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 320, 367–70, 394–99.

¹⁹⁵ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, *Mayflower II: On the Buddhist Voyage to Liberation* (The Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions, 1983), Preface iii.

The primary goal is to reduce the ideological bias of Western audiences, especially in the case of Christians. He said that Buddhism is not exclusive or supreme. In “*A Glimpse of Buddhism*,” he compared monotheism with Buddhism: Most major religions, such as Christianity, are monotheistic. Some religions maintain that only their own God is real and the deities of other faiths are false; Buddhism, however, presents a strikingly different approach. According to his narrative, when the Buddha achieved supreme awakening, he perceived a boundless universe containing countless deities across different realms, which is similar to the omnipotent God at that time.¹⁹⁶

After expressing adequate respect to establish common ground, Shen proceeded to provide detailed doctrinal clarifications to highlight differences. The core of his comparison lay in the fundamental distinction between “God” and “Buddha” within Buddhist cosmology and soteriology. He pointed out that while the monotheistic “God” is powerful, from a Buddhist perspective, this deity is still recycling inside the samsara. “According to the Buddha’s teachings, gods possess much greater power than humans, yet they are not free from afflictions and are still subject to anger.” The definition of a “Buddha,” however, is entirely different. A Buddha is an awakened being who has surpassed this cycle: “Therefore, God cannot be called a Buddha; upon attaining perfect awakening, a Buddha has already escaped the samara.”¹⁹⁷ The doctrinal distinction

¹⁹⁶ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Foxue niaokan” 佛学鸟瞰, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi yanjiang ji* 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 112–14.

¹⁹⁷ Shen, “Foxue niaokan,” 114–15.

proved absolutely critical. Shen acknowledged the existence and power of “God” by placing him within the heavenly realm of the six Buddhist destinies, yet explicitly maintained that “God” is neither the cosmic creator nor the ultimate liberator. Attaining Buddhahood represents a realization of boundless wisdom and compassion that transcends the level occupied by “God.”

Having completed this doctrinal comparison, Shen shifted to a higher level of dialogue by identifying shared ethical and value pursuits. He found an ideal point of connection: compassion. When discussing the bodhisattva spirit in Mahayana Buddhism, he emphasized *dāna* (giving), particularly the “giving of fearlessness” (helping others overcome fear and terror). At this point, he extended a gesture of friendship toward the core Christian doctrine of love.¹⁹⁸ This was a highly astute localized interpretation. Shen skips the low-level argument about whether God exists or not. Instead, he compares whose compassion is more complete. He respects Jesus by calling him a great bodhisattva, saying that Jesus’ compassion and sacrifice conform to the standards of Buddhism. He builds a bridge of dialogue, demonstrating the consistency of Christian love and Buddhist compassion in altruism. He retains the Buddhist doctrine: a bodhisattva is practicing towards Buddhahood, which means that the deeds of Jesus are lofty, but not the ultimate goal. This approach, while adhering to the basic stance of Buddhism, guides modern audiences through reason and symbolism, and is a good

¹⁹⁸ Shen, “Foxue niaokan,” 123–24.

example of Buddhism's localization and dissemination in Western society.

As for the specific locations of the speeches, he not only delivered speeches in Buddhist temples, but also at Catholic schools, Protestant churches, city halls, enterprises and universities. His speech content was both open and inclusive, respecting various religious beliefs and seeking consensus among different religions. For example, in a speech at a Catholic school, he first pointed out that according to Webster's Dictionary, Buddhism cannot be regarded as a religion because the Buddha was just an ordinary person, not an all-powerful God. This unique opening method successfully attracted the attention of non-Buddhist listeners. These cross-boundary exchanges expanded the influence of Buddhism and made Shen a religious leader with a broad vision and profound wisdom. He has always maintained a humble attitude, stating that he is still "seeking answers." Through his Dharma talks and lectures, Shen constructed an authoritative image that exceeded religious and cultural boundaries. This process shows his study of cultural adaptation and localization strategies to spread Buddhism in America.

4.3.2 Science as an Expedient Means

Mr. Shen mainly relies on modern science and cross-religious dialogue to explore the convergence points between Buddhism and modern American spirit. Since the early 20th century, debates regarding religion, science and superstition have prompted Buddhist scholars to develop discourses and theories about the compatibility of Buddhism with science, integrating Buddhism into the public discourse framework of

rational modernity. In this way, Shen shifted the presentation of the Dharma from a religious domain requiring faith to a field of knowledge open to cognition and inquiry, consequently aligning tightly with modern rational thought. The dialogue between science and Buddhism is a core issue within the framework of Buddhist Modernism. Notably, within the broader trajectory of Buddhism's westward transmission, it remains indispensable to scholarly debates concerning the Buddhist legitimacy and localization.

In 1950, he met Ven. Yuexi 月溪 in Hong Kong; inspired by this encounter, he began attempting to explain the Dharma through science. Ven. Yuexi noted: "We are, after all, modern individuals who have received a modern education. Buddhist scriptures are in ancient Chinese, translated from Indian Sanskrit, which makes them quite distant from us. If someone could use modern scientific theories to explain Buddhist teachings, I believe people would understand them immediately."¹⁹⁹ Subsequently, drawing on his strong background in modern science and engineering, he proficiently utilized scientific knowledge as an expedient means (*upāya*) to address a modern society grounded in Western rationalism and empirical science. His goal was to dispel the perception of Buddhism as "superstitious" and to demonstrate the profundity and rationality of the Dharma, particularly the Mahāyāna view of emptiness.

He Zhe argues that for Chinese Buddhism to establish itself in the United States, the Buddhist spirit must be aligned with the American spirit; otherwise, the effort will

¹⁹⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 120–22.

fail. This agreement cannot be achieved overnight and will inevitably entail a rather difficult process. Shen devoted considerable effort to finding these points of alignment. Engaging with his comprehensive works and Buddhist lectures reveals a sustained commitment to harmonizing the foundational spirit of Buddhism with the core ethos of America. Furthermore, the discourse of modern science can facilitate communication and offer new views on the Buddha's reflections on the origins of the universe and humanity.²⁰⁰ Shen's audience, whether modern-educated Chinese or curious Americans, possessed worldviews deeply formed by scientific rationality. In this context, any religious system perceived as "anti-science" or "unscientific" would struggle to gain credibility among the intellectual class. Therefore, comparing and integrating Buddhist doctrines with modern science was an inevitable choice for the localization of his Dharma propagation.

Thus, we can see him skillfully applying Einstein's mass-energy equation ($E=mc^2$) to explain the principle that "all appearances are illusory (*fan suoyou xiang jieshi xuwang* 凡所有相，皆是虚妄)." In his analysis, all things in the universe, when traced back to their origins, are merely manifestations of "energy" under different causes and conditions. Based on this, he designed an "atomic contemplation" meditation method: "First, visualize that all things are 'energy.' . . . Once you are proficient at visualizing simple objects, you can gradually see through more complex ones. . . . Under

²⁰⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 385.

your observation, they completely transform into elusive, formless energy. . . . If we replace the word “energy” with “emptiness,” what is the difference? These are simply human-designated terms, and this reveals that all sentient beings are fundamentally empty.”²⁰¹ This approach of comparing “emptiness” with “energy” has instantly transformed a highly abstract philosophical concept into a physics-based and easily understandable concept, thereby enhancing the understanding of “emptiness.”

Additionally, Shen Jiazhen frequently used the restrictions of human senses as a means to expose the illusory nature of appearances. He illustrated that the appearances we perceive are severely restricted by our sensory organs (such as eyes and ears) and do not reflect the true nature of reality. In his lecture *The Five Eyes*, he addressed this point more systematically: “The range of what our familiar physical eyes can see is exceedingly small. . . . Since we know our physical eyes are so limited, we should not trust them too much, nor should we claim that something does not exist simply because we cannot see it.”²⁰² By comparing human senses with the vision of eagles, the hearing of dogs, and the functions of scientific instruments such as microscopes and telescopes, he convincingly demonstrated the relativity and limitations of our sensory world, which in turn illustrated the Buddhist doctrine that “all appearances are illusory.”

²⁰¹ Shen, *Jingang Jing*, 102–4.

²⁰² Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Wuyan” 五眼, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi yanjiang ji* 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 2–15.

Shen Jiazhen also frequently used modern astronomy to corroborate statements in Buddhist scriptures, seeking to highlight the advanced nature of Buddhist cosmology. In his lecture *Science and Religion*, he quoted the *Śūraṅgama* Sūtra: “Emptiness arises within great enlightenment, like a single bubble appearing in the sea.” He linked this to the current astronomical theory of a “bubble universe,” stating: “The latest astronomical theories indicate that worlds are like bubbles, and there are many of them. The universe is filled with these bubbles; a single world is just one bubble. . . . Isn’t this remarkable?”²⁰³ Such correlations not solely enhanced the modern credibility of Buddhist scriptures but also manifested his systematic endeavor to connect Buddhism and science.

However, as the preceding analysis shows, Shen did not view science as omnipotent. On the contrary, drawing upon his deep scientific background, he offered a deep Buddhist critique of the limitations of science. He employed science to analyze Buddhism, not to prove that “Buddhism is science,” but as a form of concept-matching (*geyi* 格义). By using science as an analogy, he ultimately sought to highlight the transcendental wisdom that Buddhism can attain, which remains beyond the reach of science. Shen Jiazhen systematically addressed the limits of science in his English-language lecture, “The Five Eyes.” Using the Buddhist framework of the “five eyes” (the physical, heavenly, wisdom, Dharma, and Buddha eyes), he positioned science within the first two levels, thereby exposing its basic limitations. Shen pointed out that science is

²⁰³ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 214–15.

based on observation, yet human sensory instruments—especially the physical eye—are extremely limited. Whether relying on the physical eye or scientific instruments (the heavenly eye), everything science observes consists merely of different appearances (*lakṣaṇa*) of the material realm, as opposed to its ultimate reality. Shen argued that the major discoveries of twentieth-century physics and astronomy have only just begun to touch the fringes of the universal reality revealed by Buddhism. The ultimate limit of science (the heavenly eye) lies in the analysis of phenomena, such as Einstein’s reduction of all matter to energy. In contrast, the goal of Buddhism is the “wisdom eye,” which entails personally realizing the essence of phenomena: emptiness (*śūnyatā*). While science stops at the objective description of energy, Buddhism requires practitioners to personally realize the liberated state of emptiness.²⁰⁴

Crucially, he also noted that science is externally sought “knowledge,” whereas Buddhism is internally realized “wisdom.” This wisdom naturally flows from one’s pure self-nature once the attachments to self (*ātma-grāha*) and phenomena (*dharmagrāha*) have been eradicated through meditative practice. He used the metaphor of a “bright mirror and wax” to describe their relationship. In his view, science represents the knowledge (wax) that humans have accumulated through external exploration; although this knowledge is very useful, it simultaneously conceals our inner wisdom (mirror).²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Shen, “Wuyan.”

²⁰⁵ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, *Xuefo yuanyou* 学佛缘由, trans. Pan John 潘维疆 (The Buddhist Association of the United States, 1981), 53–62.

The scientific method is a process of constantly “accumulating” data and theories.

Conversely, Buddhist practice is a process of “subtraction”; it is “constantly wiping the mirror clean” and “removing the wax.” In *What Buddhism Can Offer Us*, he astutely observed: “Enlightenment is not the fruit of knowledge; one cannot attain liberation through intellectual pursuits. . . . Intellectuals spend too much precious time on research, in-depth analysis, and debate. They often have little or no time left for actual practice.”²⁰⁶

Thus, science is a product of the clinging mind, conducting research based on the dualistic opposition between “self” and the “world,” whereas Buddhist wisdom demands the dissolution of this split. Science may land humans on the moon, but it cannot eradicate the greed, hatred, and ignorance within the human mind. Therefore, although science can serve as a bridge for modern people to approach and understand Buddhism, it is difficult for it to reach the wisdom and liberation that Buddhism aims to achieve.

4.3.3 The Diamond Sutra as the Guide

As previously noted, inspired by his wife, Shen vowed to undertake the daily recitation of the Diamond Sutra on her behalf, adopting this practice as his daily morning ritual. This led him to study the text deeply, and it gradually assumed a central position in his lectures and intellectual framework. Seager mentions that “in his speech, he likens the Mayflower crossing, a charter event in American history, to a verse from the Diamond Sutra, which he considers the charter of the American Buddhist community.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Shen, *Mayflower II*, 88.

²⁰⁷ Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 167.

All the world's phenomena and ideas
 Are unreal, like a dream,
 Like magic, and like a reflected image.
 All the world's phenomena and ideas
 Are impermanent, like a water bubble,
 Like dew and lightning.
 Thus should one observe and understand
 All the world's phenomena and ideas.²⁰⁸

This *gāthā* aims to illustrate that all worldly phenomena and thoughts are neither real nor eternal; they are like dreams, illusions, dew drops, or lightning flashes. Understanding this truth can weaken attachments to “self” and “mine,” thereby eliminating hatred, discrimination, selfishness, and greed. As the “view of self” diminishes, the Four Immeasurables naturally manifest, namely the loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Thus, this *gāthā* symbolizes a “Mayflower” capable of crossing the ocean of suffering and afflictions. However, Shen Jiazhen also pointed out that not everyone is willing to board this “Mayflower.” Although the scripture points towards the direction of liberation, most people still have doubts and are reluctant to give up their attachment on themselves. Moreover, boarding this ship does not guarantee immediate success. Spiritual cultivation is a long-term and dangerous undertaking that requires perseverance, just like the “Mayflower” that endured a 72-day arduous voyage across the ocean. And once we reach the other side, this ship will no longer be necessary, which echoes the famous metaphor in the “Diamond Sutra” of “the raft metaphor (*rufa yu* 如筏喻).” When the Four Immeasurables manifest, dualistic

²⁰⁸ Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 167.

concepts of “true versus untrue” and “permanent versus impermanent” no longer bind the mind, and the old tools—the metaphorical Mayflower—are naturally transcended.²⁰⁹

Through the Mayflower analogy, Shen successfully grafted his Buddhist insights onto American cultural soil, vividly and profoundly explicating the greater significance and value of the Diamond Sutra.

As a successful entrepreneur, Shen Jiazhen mainly focused on the practical benefits that the Buddhist scriptures, particularly the “Diamond Sutra,” could bring to practitioners, namely the accumulation of merit and the purification of karma. In his book *A Study of the Diamond Sutra*, he repeatedly cited Buddha’s metaphors to emphasize the extraordinary benefits of adhering to this scripture. Shen did not view this as mere literary exaggeration, but rather as the Buddha’s guarantee as “one who speaks the truth and speaks reality.” He clearly pointed out to his audience that the Buddha stated the merits derived from making offerings to “84000 *nayutas* (*youxun* 由旬)” of Buddhas is still inferior to the merits of preserving and practicing the Diamond Sutra during the Dharma-ending era. This is because the *prajñā* (wisdom) represented by the Diamond Sutra is universally revered as the “mother of all Buddhas.” Therefore, upholding this sutra constitutes an “offering of the Dharma,” and its resulting merit is naturally inconceivable.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, *Wuyue hua* 五月花, trans. Chow Ansu H. 周胡安素 and Chen Kang 陈纲 (Caituan faren taibeishi huiju chubanshe, 1983), 1–12.

²¹⁰ Shen, *Jingang Jing*, 44–50.

Shen placed particular emphasis on the passages in the Diamond Sutra concerning the “eradication of karma.” He noted that the sutra explicitly states: “If the heavy karma from the previous lives of these people dictates that they should fall into the evil realms, because they are despised by people in this life, their past heavy karma would be eliminated, enabling them to obtain *anuttarā samyaksambodhi* (*a’nou duoluo sanmiao sanputi* 阿耨多罗三藐三菩提).” He regarded this as a comfort for the believers in their Buddhist practice. He explained that practitioners should not be afraid of encountering setbacks, slander or being “looked down upon” in their daily lives. These tests are not bad things; they transform “past negative karma” into “minor karmic retribution in the present,” thereby eliminating these karmas. This interpretation gives a positive salvific meaning to the daily hardships. It enables those practitioners who are under the pressure of life and suffering from the hardships of practice to calmly face adversity with an attitude of “persisting based on an understanding of the truth,” and view these tests as favorable opportunities to eliminate negative karmas.²¹¹

Another of Shen’s reflections on the Diamond Sutra lies in his use of the scripture as a bridge to reconcile the seemingly opposed Chan school (self-power) and Pure Land school (other-power). This acts as one of his most creative arguments. In his lecture “*The Diamond Sutra and the Western Pure Land*,” he proposed a nuanced synthesis in response to the traditional question of whether practicing *nianfo* to enter the Pure Land

²¹¹ Shen, *Jingang Jing*, 51–54.

constitutes an attachment to form. He pointed out that the three essential conditions for rebirth in the *Amitabha Sutra* are “good roots, merits, and causal conditions.” Reciting the Diamond Sutra perfectly fulfills these three provisions. The first point comes from the sutra’s statement: “If any good man or good woman can produce faith in this sutra, one should know that this person has already planted good roots with countless thousands of millions of Buddhas.”²¹² Shen pointed out that the ability to believe and understand the Diamond Sutra proves that one’s “good roots” are already complete. Also, the sutra repeatedly demonstrates that the merit of upholding it far exceeds the giving of infinite seven treasures; therefore, upholding the sutra equates to accumulating supreme “merit.” Furthermore, he noted that the Shakyamuni’s ordinary manifestation at the opening of the Diamond Sutra, in which he merely returned from alms-gathering and arranged his seat to sit. This is the ultimate embodiment of “no mark of self, others, sentient beings, and the life span.”²¹³ Therefore, when a person recites the Diamond Sutra and experiences this equal compassion of the Buddha, their “mind” instantly corresponds with Amitabha Buddha’s “vows,” thereby accomplishing the most supreme “causal condition” for rebirth.²¹⁴

²¹² The Chinese translation is “若有善男子、善女人，能于此经，生信心者，当知是人，已于无量千万佛所，种诸善根。”

²¹³ The Chinese translation is “无我相，无人相，无众生相，无寿者相。”

²¹⁴ Shen, *Jingang Jing*, 149–51.

4.3.4 Targeting Lay Buddhists

As a lay Buddhist himself, Shen frequently discussed how laypeople should practice in their daily lives. He also believed that his success in the business world was largely due to his ongoing attempt to apply Buddhist philosophy to his daily life.²¹⁵ Shen's Dharma propagation did not focus solely on the deep doctrines of any single school. Instead, it centered on a core question: how should a layperson practice while living in a modern industrial and commercial society and bearing the burdens of family and career? His answer to this was the "dual cultivation of merit and wisdom." Guided by this principle, he integrated various aspects of Mahayana Buddhism.

Shen viewed Subhūti's questions, "How should one abide? How should one subdue the mind?" as the core in his work "*A Study of the Diamond Sutra*."²¹⁶ He argued that the Buddha's response "I must lead all sentient beings to final nirvana . . . yet when immeasurable, countless, and infinite sentient beings have been led to final nirvana, truly no sentient being has been led to final nirvana"²¹⁷ is not only profound prajñā wisdom and also a method of "dual cultivation of merit and wisdom" designed for lay bodhisattvas. On the one hand, Shen maintained that "subduing the mind" does not mean suppressing thoughts, but rather redirecting the mental energy of "self-grasping" toward a positive goal. Vowing to liberate all sentient beings would expand the "self" of an

²¹⁵ Shen, *Mayflower II*, 180.

²¹⁶ The Chinese translation is "云何应住? 云何降伏其心?"

²¹⁷ The Chinese translation is "我应灭度一切众生……如是灭度无量无数无边众生，实无众生得灭度者。"

ordinary person into the “self of a bodhisattva.” This “self” exists not for its own sake, but for the benefit of others. The process of actively benefiting others and practicing generosity constitutes the accumulation of merit; this is the “cultivation of merit.” On the other hand, while actively cultivating merit, one must observe with wisdom, understanding that the “self” who liberates, the “sentient beings” who are liberated, and the act of “liberation” itself are all products of “the aggregation of conditions” and are empty in their basic nature. Realizing that “truly no sentient being has been led to final nirvana”²¹⁸ breaks down attachment to dharmas and to the self; this is the “cultivation of wisdom.”²¹⁹

Furthermore, Shen condensed this profound principle into a general guideline for lay practice, which is the conclusion of his essay *A Discussion on How Laypeople Should Practice*: “One should practice generosity without abiding anywhere.” He analyzed this phrase as follows: “‘practicing generosity’ is the cultivation of merit, and ‘without abiding anywhere’ is the cultivation of wisdom.”²²⁰ The brilliance of this interpretation consists in its perfect combination of the highest philosophy of the Diamond Sutra, “non-abiding” (emptiness), with “generosity” (doing good deeds), which is the easiest practice for laypeople. This provides modern individuals with a harmonious path of “exceeding the world while remaining within it.”

²¹⁸ The Chinese translation is “实无众生得灭度者。”

²¹⁹ Shen, *Jingang Jing*, 94–105.

²²⁰ Shen, “Zaijiaren,” 25–26.

Shen's teaching style on Buddhism is unique. He often shares his personal experiences and knowledge, making the content closely related to the daily lives of laypeople and generating strong resonance. Shen's methods in spreading Buddhism profoundly embody the Buddhist principle that "it conforms to the truth of the teachings and also suits the ability of the listeners." He clearly realizes that laypeople face many obstacles, such as "making a living, family responsibilities, and external temptations." His core work, "A Discussion on How Laypeople Should Practice," serves as the overall outline for how the laity practice Buddhism in their daily life. In this article, he proposed four main points for "setting one's own daily practice": first, maintaining a morning practice; second, participating in a seven-day Buddha recitation retreat or Chan retreat annually; third, carefully comprehending oneself; and fourth, integrating generosity within daily life. This set of methods is pragmatic and feasible, with a low barrier to entry but a high upper limit. It provided laypeople with a stable framework for practice while completely considering their time constraints. This system brought Buddhist practice back from remote mountain temples to the homes and workplaces of laypeople, making it solid, actionable, and measurable. Additionally, he emphasized that practice is not separate from daily life and aims to change everyday afflictions. Regarding daily practice, he proposed three points of vigilance: first, do not assume there will definitely

be a tomorrow; second, do not criticize; third, do not be swayed by afflictions. He thereby guided his audience to maintain mindfulness and awareness at all times.²²¹

Mr. Shen focuses on integrating Buddhist wisdom into daily life, especially in the business field, during his promotion of Buddhism. He emphasizes that business activities should follow the principles of honesty and altruism, and consider the success of the enterprise as a way to give back to society. In 1973, he collaborated with Dr. Tobey Yu 俞托比 to construct the Midwest Energy Terminal using advanced technology. This project indirectly advanced the national strategy of “transporting western coal eastward,” showing his concept of integrating business enterprise with Buddhist principles.²²²

He explored how lay Buddhists practice the bodhisattva path in their daily business activities. This theme was prominently featured in his 1990 address at the Sanfu Corporation in Taipei, titled “*A Discussion on Applying the Dharma to Corporate Management.*”²²³ As Shen noted, his commercial success was largely due to his constant efforts to apply Buddhist philosophy to his daily life.²²⁴ After sharing multiple practical principles, Shen concluded that the essence of “turning” money is actually giving. Giving involves more than simply donating money; it also includes the giving of the Dharma (such as transmitting knowledge) and the giving of fearlessness (relieving others of fear).

²²¹ Shen, “Zaijiaren,” 22–25.

²²² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 272–302.

²²³ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 144–46, 368.

²²⁴ Shen, *Mayflower II*, 180.

He emphasized that giving serves to eliminate the false concept of “self,” thereby eradicating self-grasping.²²⁵ Shen noted that some companies advocate teaching meditation in corporate settings, and that certain Japanese companies even schedule daily meditation sessions. Although he was reluctant to claim exactly how much impact meditation might have on a company, he acknowledged that, in theory, it is an effective way to reduce the afflictions and stress of corporate managers.²²⁶ Shen viewed business management as a field of merit where lay Buddhists can practice the bodhisattva path. He believed that discovering one’s creative nature would be the most important task. Regardless of the field of work, including business, this creative nature should remain central.²²⁷ In this way, Shen successfully unified secular achievement with the bodhisattva practice of “cultivating merit,” outlining a path for modern lay Buddhists to develop both merit and wisdom.

Furthermore, as discussed above, Shen astutely realized that the Dharma would be difficult for modern people to accept if presented in traditional, esoteric language. He therefore innovatively employed scientific metaphors as “skillful means,” which greatly helped attract lay Buddhists and encourage them to reflect on and deepen their understanding of the Dharma. Shen uses scientific metaphors such as “wireless decomposition” and “equivalence of energy and mass” to explain abstract concepts,

²²⁵ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Foxue yipie” 佛学一瞥, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi yanjiang ji* 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 30.

²²⁶ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 161.

²²⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 382.

arguing that physical phenomena are transient illusions and that energy in physics and emptiness in Buddhism refer to the same reality.²²⁸ He wants to demonstrate the insight of “Wisdom Eye.” All phenomena have no permanence, no substantial foundation, and also come from causes and conditions. With the help of “matching concepts,” he made Buddhism liberated from the frame of “superstition.” Buddhism is made into a strict and rational “spiritual science,” so that intellectuals can accept it and ordinary people can also understand it.

4.4 Philanthropy and Buddhist Endeavors

As a “Super Layman” in the trace of American Chinese Buddhism, Shen’s life profoundly embodied the modern lay bodhisattva path, granting his reputation as the “modern *Anāthapiṇḍada* (*Jigudu* 给孤独).” Using his immense wealth and resources, Shen emulated the vow of *Anāthapiṇḍada* from the Buddha’s time, who famously donated the Jetavana monastery. After retiring from the business world in 1980, he devoted all his energy and a large amount of wealth to promoting Buddhism and supporting charitable causes. He systematically established Chinese Buddhist physical temples, academic institutions and cultural foundations in the United States.

Dual Cultivation of Merit and Wisdom

Shen’s Buddhist career was not limited to the simple cultivation of wisdom or the

²²⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 205–10.

act of giving; rather, he centered on the core philosophy of “cultivating both merit and wisdom to adorn the world.” The formation of this philosophy was deeply influenced by his wife, Woo Ju 居和如. Ju pointed out that some Buddhists at that time “merely argued over scriptures in a rigid manner, engaging in empty talk but failing to put their words into practice.” This was in sharp contrast to Christian groups, which actively engaged in practical work such as establishing hospitals and schools. Initially, Shen viewed such social services merely as the “cultivation of merit” leading to the “minor karmic rewards of humans and devas,” while he personally preferred the “cultivation of wisdom.” Woo Ju cleverly proposed a division of labor: “You cultivate wisdom, and I will cultivate merit. In the future, with your wisdom, you can expound the sutras to me; with my merit, I can cook for you.” Following the sale of Shen’s shipping shares in 1970, this domestic agreement evolved into a common great vow: “We must work together to develop both merit and wisdom.”²²⁹

Shen adopted the principle from the Diamond Sutra, “one should practice giving without abiding anywhere,”²³⁰ as the theoretical guideline for his twofold cultivation of merit and wisdom. He emphasized that “not abiding anywhere” represents the cultivation of wisdom, while “practicing giving” represents the cultivation of merit. Combining the two constitutes “the cultivation of merit and wisdom without attachment to characteristics, which yields formless merit.” Ultimately, the purpose of giving is to

²²⁹ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 15–16.

²³⁰ The Chinese translation is “应无所住，行于布施。”

eliminate attachment to the “self.”²³¹ Shen himself was a model of “formless giving.”

For example, he anonymously funded Ven. Sheng Yen’s doctoral studies for many years and supported numerous Buddhist cultural enterprises in Taiwan, with the public remaining almost entirely unaware of his identity as a benefactor.

Establishment of Buddhist Institutions and Support for Dharma Propagation

Shen’s concept of “dual cultivation of merit and wisdom” found its concrete expression in the institutionalization of several practical organizations. He was the main founder and initiator of the American Buddhist Association (BAUS) and its affiliated temples. In 1964, Shen, along with Ven. Ledu and others, jointly founded the American Buddhist Association, serving as a non-sectarian, “Pan-Buddhist” platform that welcomed eminent monastics from various traditions.²³² Besides the Temple of Enlightenment, they established a Family Trust and used the remaining funds to purchase Bodhi House on Long Island, New York in 1970.²³³ Chuang Yen Monastery represents the greatest culmination of Shen’s lifelong dedication during his later years. After retiring from the shipping industry in 1980 at the age of sixty-seven, Shen personally served as the chief project director for seventeen years without accepting any remuneration.²³⁴

²³¹ Shen, “Zaijiaren,” 25–26; Shen, “Foxue yipie,” 30.

²³² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 165–72.

²³³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 314, 389, 488–89.

²³⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 173–85, 327–43.

In 1970, on the eve of selling the MTL shipping group to the General American Transportation Corporation (GATX), Shen decided to establish the Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions (IASWR). This organization would provide information services to religious figures and intellectuals worldwide, helping them broaden their horizons and encourage mutual understanding and friendship. On October 27, 1970, the IASWR was officially established with the approval of the New York State government. Three days later, at the merger signing ceremony for the MTL shipping group, Shen announced the donation of a portion of his shares, valued at \$1.4 million, to the IASWR. Unlike the BAUS, the IASWR was not a religious organization. Instead, it functioned strictly as an academic institution dedicated to interfaith religious studies.²³⁵

Beyond his internal organizational donations, he also provided land and financial support in the 1970s to help the Sixteenth Karmapa, leader of the Tibetan Kagyu school, establish his primary North American seat, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD).²³⁶ He also offered support to Xuan Hua's Dharma Realm Buddhist Association on several occasions, including donating land in 1968 to establish the Buddhist Text Translation Society. Later, he funded the International Institute for the Translation of Buddhist Texts in 1973.²³⁷ In addition, he donated \$ 200,000 in 1974 to support the construction of Gold

²³⁵ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 303–9.

²³⁶ Seager, *Buddhism in America*, 166–67.

²³⁷ According to the DRBA website, the official establishment occurred in 1973, rather than 1974 as stated in the original text; this has been corrected accordingly. Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 28.

Mountain Monastery, and in 1978, he contributed a large collection of valuable books to Dharma Realm Buddhist University.²³⁸

Promoting Buddhist Education, Translation, and Academic Research

Understanding that the survival of Buddhism in America depended upon the formation of its own cultural identity, Shen conceptualized scriptural translation and academic research as the lifeblood for this endeavor. He considered translating Buddhist texts into Western languages “the top priority in spreading Buddhism.” To firmly establish the Dharma in the West, he argued that meaning-based translation was more important than literal translation. In 1963, he established a fellowship for the Chinese-to-English translation of Mahayana texts at the China Institute. This grant funded Professors Zhang Chengji and Zhang Zhongyuan to translate the scriptures, thereupon promoting the “localization” of Buddhism.²³⁹ In 1971, he donated \$ 200,000 to establish the Translation Institute of BAUS in Taiwan 美国佛教会台湾译经院, and he also initiated a translation book series at the IASWR.²⁴⁰ Leveraging his engineering background, he helped establish the American Buddhist Computer Information Database Association in 1994 and served as its president. The organization converted Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist texts into CD-ROMs, utilizing modern technology to improve access for scholars and practitioners.²⁴¹

²³⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 388–89.

²³⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 161.

²⁴⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 161–62, 313–15.

²⁴¹ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Yuan fofa jiuyuan liuchuan” 愿佛法久远流传, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi*

In his subsequent development plans, he designed Chuang Yen Monastery to serve as a center integrating religious activities with academic research. To fulfill his late wife's wish, he invested over 1.5 million dollars in 1991 to construct the Woo Ju Memorial Library. Housing over seventy thousand books on Buddhism, it is recognized as one of the finest Buddhist research libraries in North America and serves as the permanent home of the IASWR. He intended for the IASWR to serve as a hub to "cultivate talent" and raise the overall standard of Buddhist studies.²⁴² Furthermore, he provided long-term financial support for the Torch of Wisdom magazine, founded by the Taiwanese layperson Chou Hsuan-te 周宣德, and for the collegiate Buddhist youth movement 大专青年学佛运动. This support exerted a transformative influence upon the cultivation of Buddhist talents.²⁴³

The Establishment of Modern Philanthropic and Social Service Institutions

Shen's philanthropic endeavors embodied the engaged bodhisattva spirit of "never abandoning sentient beings." This approach required not only the cultivation of wisdom along with a direct response to social suffering through "unconditional loving-kindness and universal compassion." To fulfill Woo Ju's early wish and to alleviate immigrants' "fear of entering the hospital," he founded the BAUS Medical Compassion Society 医疗慈善功德会 in 1998 to provide free medical clinics, serving as its

yanjiang ji 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 252–56.

²⁴² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 303–9.

²⁴³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 390–91.

president.²⁴⁴ The establishment of the Thousand Lotus Memorial Terrace (*Qianliantai* 千莲台) at Chuang Yen Monastery strived to address the cultural and sentimental dilemma of early Chinese immigrants, who “feared the isolation of being buried alongside foreigners.” It provided them with an egalitarian, frugal, and dignified final resting place.²⁴⁵ During a trip to Taiwan, Woo Ju was deeply inspired by Ven. Cheng Yen’s 证严 “Tzu Chi World,” which became the origin of her own vision for a “Chuang Yen World.” He donated to the Tzu Chi Foundation 慈济功德会 during its formative stage, greatly encouraging its early development.²⁴⁶ For the benefit of the local community, Shen chose to continue paying tens of thousands of dollars in property taxes annually rather than claiming legal tax exemptions. Over the decades, his total tax payments amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars. He also donated vehicles to the Putnam County Senior Center to help transport the elderly.²⁴⁷ BAUS regularly dispatched monastics and laypersons to prisons to expound the Dharma in English and other languages. Many inmates experienced profound repentance after hearing these teachings, and some even took refuge to become Buddhists, thereby effectively assisting the government in preserving social stability.²⁴⁸

Shen’s philanthropic and Buddhist endeavors serve as an example for integrating

²⁴⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 409–11.

²⁴⁵ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 15–16; He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 342.

²⁴⁶ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 172; He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 417.

²⁴⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 405–6.

²⁴⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 406–7.

the lay bodhisattva spirit with modern social responsibility. Adhering to the principle of “cultivating both merit and wisdom,” he transformed his personal worldly achievements (merit) into resources for spreading Buddhism and benefiting all beings (wisdom). Beyond establishing large institutions through his donations, he built a firm material and cultural foundation for the long-term flourishing of Chinese Buddhism within the American landscape through forward-looking organizational planning, systematic investment in education and translation, and direct engagement with social suffering.

4.5 Inviting Lay Lectures

Shen demonstrated a broad perspective and an open attitude during the preaching activities in North America. He did not confine the preaching rights entirely within the traditional Sangha community. Instead, he actively supported and invited learned laypeople to interpret the scriptures, thereby injecting a fresh and modern force into the preaching activities. According to the existing literature, including Shen’s biography and various lecture collections, Shen absorbed many lay spiritual friends (*kalyāṇamitra*, *shan zhishi* 善知识) and greatly enriched the content of the lectures.

In Shen’s Buddhist journey and his vision for propagating the Dharma, two foundational spiritual friends occupied a central position, serving as both mentors and peers. They were frequent guests at the Shen residence and crucial guides on his path of practice. Professor Zhang Chengji acted as an “initiating mentor” and “spiritual friend” on Shen’s Buddhist path. They first met in India during their early years. Professor Chang

not only guided Shen during meditation retreats and taught the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, dhyāna, and Mahāmudrā, but he also dedicated himself to explicating the Dharma through modern academic language with Shen's support. Regarding his teachings at the monasteries, Professor Chang's lecture topics were broad and profound, including “*A Casual Talk on Buddhism and Science* 佛法与科学漫谈” and “*The Contemporary Development of Guanyin Bodhisattva* 观音菩萨之时代发展.” These topics reflected his academic-related capability to bridge ancient and modern thought. Furthermore, he was invited to serve as the director of the Sutra Translation Institute founded by Shen, where he managed the English translation of the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra 大宝积经.²⁴⁹ The other figure was the elder practitioner Yogi C. M. Chen, well known for his *Qugong zhai congshu* 曲肱斋丛书. During Guru Chen's solitary retreat in the United States, Shen provided long-term support for his livelihood and Dharma propagation efforts, while also being deeply inspired by his Buddhist thought. Chen's teachings at the monasteries frequently integrated exoteric and esoteric doctrines, presenting a profound and extensive system of Buddhist practice and realization to North American devotees.²⁵⁰

Apart from these two mentors, Shen also established an open lecture platform for many senior lay practitioners. This initiative made the two monasteries under the BAUS become stages where lay leaders could showcase their talents. Most of the laypersons

²⁴⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 94, 186–203, 314, 395.

²⁵⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 162, 396.

invited to teach possessed specialized Buddhist knowledge and advanced academic backgrounds, and their lecture topics were highly diverse. For example, the layperson Zhao Zhenjue 赵真觉 delivered lectures on the Five Sciences (*pañcavidyā*, *wuming* 五明) and the Diamond Sutra. The layperson Li Hengyue 李恒钺 systematically lectured on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and Madhyamaka thought. His topics ranged from “*An Introduction to Madhyamaka* 中观简介,” “*The Theory and Practice of Madhyamaka* 中观的理论和修持,” and “*Liberation and Apparent Liberation* 解脱与相似解脱,” to “*Summarizing the Basic Principles of Various Religions and Buddhist Schools* 归纳各种宗教及佛教各宗派的基本原理,” showing a strong capacity for theoretical construction. Layman Zhu Fei 朱斐, founder of the Taiwanese magazine *Bodhi Tree* 菩提树, was also invited to speak on The Greatness of *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva: The Ten Great Vows* 普贤菩萨的伟大——十大愿王, and *Hidden Merit* 阴德. Furthermore, the lecture topics showed a strong present-day relevance and connection to daily life. Lay teacher Gou Jialing 苟嘉陵 lectured on topics such as *Principles and Practice of Early Buddhism* 原始佛教的理与事, and *Buddhism and Love* 佛法与爱情, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness* 四念处, bringing Buddhist teachings into everyday life; layman Chen Gang 陈纲 explored the philosophical problem of “I” and “You”; lay teacher Zhuang Zhenwei 庄震威 spoke on *The Gift of Fearlessness* 施无畏者 and *How to Engage in Social Service* 如何参与社会服务; and Lin Shimin 林世敏 guided audiences through *Learning Buddhism with Joy and Ease* 快乐自在的学佛. In addition, Zhang Hongyang 张鸿洋 taught *The Basic Doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism* 大乘佛法的基本教义,

while Yang Beiguan 杨北管 analyzed *On the Convergence of Confucian and Buddhist Doctrines* 儒佛教理相契之种种, demonstrating the diversity of doctrinal approaches. It is especially remarkable that Shen placed strong emphasis on dialogue between science and Buddhism: Wang Shouyi 王守益, a Ph.D. in physics, presented *Buddhism and Science* 佛法与科学, and Cai Kuanjing 蔡宽静 discussed *Biology and Buddhism* 生物学与佛学, both serving as vivid examples of this approach. In addition, scholars such as Professor Pillai of Columbia University, who lectured on *Buddhist psychotherapy*, and Professor Robert Thurman, who taught the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, were also highly influential.²⁵¹

This network of lay Dharma speakers also extended into the translation and digitization initiatives to which Shen devoted his efforts. Upon the founding of the translation institute, layman Shen recruited a group of highly educated lay practitioners. Although they primarily cultivated literary prajñā, they also served as “Dharma speakers” in a wider sense. In addition to the aforementioned Professor Zhang Chengji, the renowned translator layman Gu Fayan 顾法严 served as vice president of the Institute. Proficient in Sanskrit and Pāli, he translated notable works such as *What the Buddha Taught* and *Buddhism in Translations* 原始佛典选译. Layman Ge Benjie 戈本捷 also served as vice president. This academic preaching team also included several scholars, including Xu Weiwen 许巍文, Guan Shiqian 关世谦, Yang Ziming 杨梓茗, Xu

²⁵¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 183–84, 395–96.

Yangzhu 许洋主, Miao Shulian 缪树廉, Liu Yici 刘奕赐, and He Guangmo 何光谟.

Shen brought all together under this shared and auspicious karmic connection, and they became key lay supporters in the joint promotion of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism.²⁵²

According to the account of Wang Minqin 王敏勤, in July 1994, lay practitioners Shen Naixuan 沈乃宣, Yu Lingbo 于凌波, Zhu Fei 朱斐, and Zheng Zhenhuang 郑振煌 endorsed the proposal of Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢 to promote the establishment of the “Merit Association for a Buddhist Computer Information Database.” The project was led by Professor Gu Weikang 顾伟康, a scholar of Buddhist studies, and Zhang Jingquan 张景全, a computer specialist, and began with the digitization of *Ding Fubao: Dictionary of Buddhist Studies* 丁福保佛学大辞典. Layman Shen Naixuan 沈乃宣, the founder of the Great Enlightenment Lotus Society 大觉莲社 in Los Angeles, mobilized over twenty fellow Buddhists to volunteer in digitizing the 2.6-million-character *Complete Works of Ven. Ouyi* 藕益大师全集. The organization later collaborated with research institutions in Taiwan to establish the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA). They digitized widely used Chinese Buddhist texts, including the *Taishō Tripiṭaka* and the *Manji ShinsanDainihon Zokuzōkyō* 卅续藏, providing immense convenience for Buddhist scholars. BAUS also publishes its own periodical, *BAUS Wisdom Journal* 美佛慧讯. Established in 1989, this journal has been continuously published to this day.²⁵³

²⁵² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 313–14; Wang Minqin 王敏琴, “Zhongguo fojiao zai Beimei daochang de jianli ji qi quanqiu hua de nuli” 中国佛教在北美道场的建立及其全球化的努力, *Hunan daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 湖南大学学报(社会科学版) 35, no. 2 (2021): 19.

²⁵³ Wang, “Zhongguo fojiao,” 19.

Overall, the lay participants organized by Shen displayed outstanding characteristics: they had a high level of cultural literacy, incorporated scientific knowledge into their practices, and concentrated on practical cultivation and enlightenment. He broke down the identity barriers surrounding the authority to teach the Dharma, refusing to limit it to the monastic community. On the contrary, he advocated the egalitarian spirit of the “fourfold assembly,” actively encouraging people with various kinds of intellectuals to take to the podium and expound on the true Dharma. This preaching method carried out by laypeople, which aims to interpret ancient wisdom through modern language, has greatly contributed to the establishment and dissemination of Buddhism in modern Western society, and has profoundly shaped the foundational grounding and proliferation of Chinese Buddhism in America.

4.6 Lay Participation After Shen

From July 4th to 7th, 2024, I conducted participatory observations at the Buddhist summer camp held at Chuang Yen Monastery as part of my ethnographic fieldwork. The theme of this four-day summer camp was “Accumulating Merit and Cultivating Wisdom (*Jifu peihui* 积福培慧).” During the event, the chairperson of the Buddhist Association, Bhikkhu Bodhi, stressed the “twofold benefits” that benefit oneself and others. He said that achieving the goal requires relying on generosity, doing good deeds, meditation, as well as knowing cause and effect karma, getting rid of troubles to increase wisdom and accumulate merit. The abbess, Ven. Hongzhen 宏珍, further emphasized that the dual

cultivation of merit and wisdom is exceptionally crucial for both the attainment of Buddhahood and the cultivation of the bodhisattva path. This shows that the summer camp not only imparts knowledge but also teaches practice, which is used to cultivate the Buddhist qualities of the campers.

Campers gather in the separate auditorium every day to recite scriptures and experience the solemnity of collective practice. The daytime schedule includes Buddhist lectures for adults, English, and youth groups. The course content is extensive, including basic Buddhist concepts, meditation experiences, and the application of Buddhism in modern life. For example, the adult group's courses included *Lay and Monastic as One Family* 在家出家同一家 (exploring lay practice) presented by several monastics, Dr. Huang's *A Beautiful Life: Accumulating Merit and Cultivating Wisdom* 人生美好 积福培慧 (contextualizing this twofold cultivation within secular life), and Dr. Mou's *Sensation and Compassion* 觉受与慈悲 (studying the Buddhist concept of compassion through a psychological lens). The English group holds lectures, such as Ven. Zheng's *The Code to Change Your Life* (exploring the Dharma's viewpoints on life transformation) and Dr. Nakagaki's 显实 *Creating peace through dialogue not violence* (examining peace and nonviolence from a Buddhist perspective). The youth group offers courses, "SEE Learning" (involving society, emotions, and ethics) and "*I Want to Protect the Environment*," etc. These courses connect teenagers' interests with current topics and integrate educational practice. There are also night school activities, including group sharing, meditation, and "Bodhi Night" activities in the evening. These activities help

campers communicate and think, making them understand Buddhist teachings better.

Diverse courses meet the needs of campers of different ages and backgrounds. This reflects the inclusiveness and flexibility of Chuang Yen Monastery in its propagation of Buddhist doctrines, both following the breadth of Buddhist education and considering the depth.

The teaching staff of this summer camp included both monks and laity, which provided an excellent opportunity to observe the specific characteristics of the roles played by the laypeople. The monastic lecturers included Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ven. Hongzhen, among others. They were mainly responsible for teaching Buddhist doctrines and guiding meditation practices, ensuring the rigor and depth of Buddhist teachings. This demonstrates that the monastic group played an irreplaceable, central role within the trajectory of Buddhism's dissemination. The "lay" lecturers also comprise a significant portion of the teaching team. They have received solid academic training and have extensive professional experience in their respective fields. Examples include Tsu Ku Lee or Zuhu Li 李祖鹄, a master's graduate in computer science and board member of the Buddhist Association of America, who was responsible for book distribution; Ms. Liu (all using pseudonyms hereafter), a specialist in Pāli translation with a doctorate in Buddhist studies, whose lectures integrated academic research with Buddhist practice; Mr. Hong was trained inside educational psychology and also a yoga instructor, who interpreted the benefits of Buddhism for physical and mental well-being from a psychological perspective. Mr. Li was a public librarian and Buddhist enthusiast, who contributed to the

management and dissemination of Buddhist materials; Mr. Wang got a MBA and was board member of the BAUS, who applied business management experience to Buddhist work; Ms. Liang, a retired finance professional with a background in computer science and an author of Buddhist writings, whose works and lectures were well received among lay audiences; Ms. Hua, was the founder of the Little Fish Art Studio specializing in children's art education, who skillfully introduced Buddhism through artistic activities; Ms. Cai, had a master's degree in law and was a high school teacher as well as an environmental practitioner, who combined Buddhist teachings with environmental issues; Ms. Ling was a principal of a Chinese school and educator, who focused on the role of Buddhism in family education; Ms. Song was trained in nutrition and ethics, who examined the intersection of Buddhism and modern ethical issues; and Mr. Dong was a Ph.D. in systems biology and hedge fund manager, who shared his understanding of Buddhism from both scientific-related and professional perspectives.

Mostly lay mentors had secular professional knowledge or achievements, and integrated Buddhism into their work and life. They would explain the teachings through their own experiences. Their lectures are relatively practical and closely connected with daily life. They linked Buddhism to modern issues such as career, family, and mental health, thereby illustrating that Buddhism functions not as an abstract construct, but as a deeply practical methodology for daily life. For example, *A Beautiful Life: Accumulating Merit and Cultivating Wisdom* and *Sensation and Compassion* both revolve around the theme of camp. Laypeople's interpretations make Buddhism more accessible and

practical. Laypeople take the lead or assist in the spread of Buddhism, have authority in interpreting doctrines, etc., and are recognized by camp students. After Shen passed away, the laypeople still exerted a critical impact on the propagation of the Dharma, especially among young believers. This means that Shen Jiazhen's layman dissemination model continues and develops at Chuang Yen Monastery, attracting outstanding laypeople from all walks of life and expanding Buddhist dissemination.

Making use of the professional backgrounds of its lay instructors, such as their high educational attainment, academic discipline, and pedagogical expertise, Chuang Yen Monastery has undertaken substantial efforts to engage younger Chinese generations and diverse, multi-ethnic groups. The laypeople at Chuang Yen Monastery are not ordinary believers. Most of them had high degrees and have achieved success in their respective fields, and contributed to the courses of this camp. For example, during the courses taught by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ms. Liu, their expertise in Buddhist scholarship and languages attracted middle-aged and young adults who engaged thoughtfully with academic questions, leading to active discussions with the instructors. In our English group, there were also students of Indian descent who had long followed Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. They inquired about issues related to spiritual cultivation and also discussed the controversial concept of "women transforming into male bodies" in Theravada Buddhism. Besides this summer camp, Chuang Yen Monastery also invited Buddhist research professors and researchers from various universities to give speeches, including Dr. Dan Lusthaus, Prof. Yu Junfang 于君方, Dr. Paul Fulton, Professor Liang Zhiying

梁志英, Dr. James Carter, Prof. Wen Zongkun 温宗堃, Dr. Ginny Tavee, Dr. John Marklansky and Dr. David Loy.²⁵⁴ Therefore, this project is not only not limited to traditional Buddhist doctrines but also incorporates the achievements of modern academic research, thereby enhancing its professionalism.

The summer camp included various engaging interactive activities, such as singing, dancing, and artistic performances, which were likely designed specifically for the youth group. Participant demographics indicate that, among the over 100 attendees, more than half were teenagers, followed by adults, with the English-language group being the smallest. Although the vast majority of the teenage group members spoke English, they were still prioritized for the youth group based on age division. The Chuang Yen Monastery summer camp launched its first adult group in 1986, added a children's camp in 1989, and established a youth camp in 1990. This age-based structure demonstrates Chuang Yen Monastery's meticulous consideration of the educational needs of devotees throughout diverse age groups. In 1992, Chuang Yen Monastery began training counselors to develop a group of professional Buddhist educators.²⁵⁵ During this summer camp, the lay instructor who led most of the interactive activities was Ms. Hua. She graduated from Hsinchu Teachers College in Hsinchu, Taiwan, with a major in children's art education, and worked as an elementary school teacher in Taipei for five

²⁵⁴ “Meifo dashi ji” 美佛大事记, BAUS, accessed December 6, 2025, <https://www.baus.org/tc/> 关于美佛-2/美佛大事记.

²⁵⁵ “Meifo dashi ji.”

years. She later served as a headquarters and Hsinchu regional counselor for the China Youth Corps, Taiwan's largest youth organization, and was also a Ranger Girl Scout and a leader in the Girl Scouts of Taiwan. In 2000, she founded the "Little Fish Art Studio" in central New Jersey, where she has since been teaching art to young children. This background reflects her extensive experience in youth education. In her direct work with the youth participants, she demonstrated a warm, interactive teaching style, strong guidance and group facilitation skills, and was especially well received by the younger group. Lay teachers with this kind of specialized training in working with youth are still relatively uncommon in traditional monastic settings.

Overall, by integrating the advanced degrees and professional background of the lay lecturers with modern educational methods, the Chuang Yen Monastery Summer Camp provides a systematic, professional, and dynamic platform for the younger generation to learn Buddhism. The deep involvement of the lay mentors reflects an exploratory attitude of the traditional monastery during its transformation from modernization to localization. Due to its removal of sectarian biases and lineage divisions, Chuang Yen Monastery has effectively transformed into an open educational venue, spreading and deepening the Buddhist wisdom and teachings in an accessible, clear, and gentle manner.

The observation of this summer camp indicates that Chuang Yen Monastery has demonstrated a high degree of organization and professionalism in spreading Buddhist teachings and benefiting the world. Its course design and teaching team fully reflect the

close collaboration between monastics and laypeople. The lay lecturers, with their professional backgrounds and rich life experiences, played a crucial role in explaining Buddhist doctrines and providing guidance for spiritual practice. This effectively demonstrated the strong subjectivity and initiative of laypeople in the modern Buddhist propagation endeavors. Even after the passing of the founder, this lay-led propagation model has been successfully continued with remarkable effectiveness.

4.7 Summary

In summary, this chapter demonstrates how the BAUS served as the core institutional venue for the reconfiguration and negotiation of the authority of Chinese-American lay Buddhists. This chapter clarifies how the elite layperson Shen Jiazhen strategically transformed his vast secular achievements and management experience into a “hybrid authority structure” within the transnational religious domain. Shen did not choose to bypass the monastic community or create a confrontational, purely secular space; instead, he adapted flexibly within the “inertia” of the monastic tradition by establishing a “dual-track” governance model. Within this legalistic framework, the board governance and financial transparency of modern non-profit organizations (NPOs) are organically combined with the deep and ritualized respect for the sacred primacy of the monastics. Through the organizational authority derived from secular achievements, the spiritual authority brought by personal faith practices and speeches, and the democratization of the podium through extensive invitations of lay lecturers, the BAUS

effectively challenged and restructured the absolute monopoly of the monastics on the interpretation of the sacred, establishing a highly resilient and highly knowledgeable paradigm of lay subjectivity, and this continued to thrive even after its founder's passing.

However, although the case of the BAUS represents a model of lay authority centered on the East Coast, dominated by elites, and highly institutionalized and influenced by Protestantism, this only constitutes one aspect of the diverse picture of Chinese-American lay Buddhism. To fully understand the breadth of the agency and adaptation strategies of laypeople in immigrant communities, it is necessary to examine other non-eliteist, more traditional paradigms. Therefore, the next chapter of this dissertation will turn to the West Coast to examine the “networked model” of lay authority established by the Amida Society of Los Angeles, a decentralized, popular-oriented framework operating under Ven. Jingkong's transnational lineage.

Chapter Five:

The Lay Authority Built in Ven. Jingkong's System

During the early post-war period and extending into the 1950s and 1960s, the Buddhist ecology on the mainland had a highly closed hierarchical power structure. This structure was mainly controlled by the retreating senior monastics, such as the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China, led by Ven. Baisheng 白圣. The monopoly of power by senior monastics made the system face greater pressure, which was prominently manifested in the situation of resource imbalance (there were many monastics but few temples). This dilemma made young monastics like Jing Kong, who had a relatively shallow background, extremely marginalized and difficult to find a place to live. At the same time, the compression of living space prompted young reformist monastics to find places of power vacuum for independent development.²⁵⁶

In addition to the lack of physical space, Ven. Jingkong also faced the “original sin” of his lineage transmission and conflicts regarding his philosophy of study and practice. First, his lineage background was highly controversial from the perspective of the conservative Buddhist establishment of that era. He had studied for a long time under the eminent lay practitioner Li Bingnan 李炳南 (1890–1986). Because Li preached from

²⁵⁶ Sun, “Jingkong,” 398; Yanfei Sun, “Religions in Sociopolitical Context: The Reconfiguration of Religious Ecology in Post-Mao China” (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2010), 117–18.

the podium and organized devotees as a layperson, mainstream monastic communities regarded him as a typical “usurper of clerical authority.” As a disciple of Li, Ven. Jingkong was naturally viewed as an unorthodox outlier. Furthermore, Xia’s revised version has sparked numerous controversies due to issues related to its doctrines and textual orthodoxy, which has led to doubts about the legitimacy of the transmission of Ven. Jingkong. Although these attacks mainly occurred after Jingkong’s rise to fame, the inherent nature of his transmission compelled him to adopt specific strategies to defend his authority.²⁵⁷ Additionally, in terms of economy and practice models, Jingkong insisted on only preaching Buddhist doctrines during his first ordination (during the Linji Temple period). He refused to participate in “Sūtra recitation, penitential offerings, and ritual feeding of hungry ghosts” in order to obtain income from the temple, which was directly contrary to his pure ideal of spreading Buddhist doctrines. After a heated debate, the abbot sent him off.²⁵⁸

The disputes among monasteries and sects, as well as the differences in the way ideas were disseminated, collectively caused a serious “structural dilemma.” Although Ven. Jingkong was a monk by profession, the specific religious environment compelled him to break away from the traditional monastic system and seek a way to survive outside the temple walls. This process directly led to the formation of a “cooperative

²⁵⁷ Sun, “Religions in Sociopolitical Context,” 398, 414–16.

²⁵⁸ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 39; Li Shuhao 李恕豪, *Jingkong fashi zhuan* 净空法师传, (Taiping ciguan si, 2012), 147–52.

structure” between him and the lay groups, a relationship that transcended the traditional relationship between monks and laity. In 1966, he accepted the invitation of the lay practitioner Han Ying 韩瑛 (1922–1997) and moved into her private residence in Taipei, where he lived for 17 years.²⁵⁹ This “monk permanently residing in a lay family” behavior actually addressed his basic survival needs, but at the same time further severed his connection with mainstream Buddhist organizations. With the financial support of Han Ying and her family, Jingkong officially established the Huazang Buddhist Library 华藏佛教图书馆 in 1979.²⁶⁰ He deliberately named this institution “Library” rather than “Monastery” or “Temple.” This decision not only avoided the strict religious regulations of that time, but also indicated his attempt to break away from the constraints of traditional monasteries and establish a lay-oriented practice center, with a focus on preaching, printing scriptures, and education.

As his development opportunities in Taiwan gradually shrank, Jingkong shifted his focus to overseas expansion. He responded to the urgent demands of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore, Australia, the United States, and other areas and established an international network independent of the mainstream traditional Buddhist clergy system in Taiwan. According to Sun and Ji, Jingkong’s international expansion began in 1977. Through giving speeches worldwide, he played an indispensable role in the establishment and support of local organizations. These expansions included the establishment of the

²⁵⁹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 398.

²⁶⁰ Sun, “Jingkong,” 398–99.

Buddhist Association in Dallas (in 1985), spreading his teachings to Singapore and Malaysia (beginning in 1988), entering Australia (in 1998), and later establishing the Pure Land School Learning College in Queensland in 2001. “In 2016, more than a hundred temples, centers or groups in different countries refer to Jingkong as their master and spread his doctrines and rituals. These entities are independent from each other and form a loose transnational network.”²⁶¹ However, the ensuing question is: How to manage these non-monastic sites scattered around the world? Due to the long-term lack of sufficient monastics to be dispatched to various places, and to avoid the cumbersome management costs of traditional monasteries and to adapt to the pace of modern life, laypeople naturally became the ideal candidates to fill this management vacuum. This arrangement is not entirely based on doctrinal principles, but rather a temporary measure taken for the organization’s survival and management. Therefore, in his system, the lay community is no longer merely the guardians of Buddhism.

Instead, they became the agents and actual managers for rapidly expanding their organization and played a role in its actual management. This unique organizational strategy enabled the Amitabha Buddhist Society to rapidly expand in Taiwan and among the global Chinese community without the support of a large monastic group. It formed a highly decentralized modern operation model that combined the spiritual monastic leadership with the actual management of laypeople, thus establishing a unique form of

²⁶¹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 399; Ji, “Making a Virtue of Piety,” 67.

layperson authority in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. Naturally, this was accompanied by a series of radical doctrines and institutional reforms by Ven. Jingkong, leading to unprecedented “empowerment” of the layperson group.

5.1 The Empowerment of Lay Buddhists

Ven. Jingkong’s empowerment of lay Buddhists encompasses the reconstruction of the lineage, the revolution of terminology, the reversal of moral concepts, and the transformation of governance methods. It is a comprehensive religious reform that successfully constructed a self-consistent legitimacy framework for lay Buddhism in the modern context. It elevated lay believers from peripheral supporters within traditional Buddhism to core participants and interpreters. This empowerment granted lay believers significant independence and autonomy, enabling them to break away from the traditional hierarchical system dominated by monastics and achieve a transition to modern “functional division of labor” and “substantive salvation theory.”

Firstly, in terms of the theological basis of inheritance and salvation theory, Ven. Jingkong broke the absolute monopoly of monastics on the sacredness of religion and established the “white robe (lay) inheritance” and the “substantive salvation theory.” Under the strict traditional norms of traditional Chinese Buddhism, only monastics could serve as missionaries. Therefore, the inheritance relationship was usually passed down from generation to generation among monastics through tonsure and ordination ceremonies. However, Ven. Jingkong creatively reinterpreted his own inheritance story.

Although he was ordained at Linji Temple in Taipei, he did not overly emphasize his tonsure inheritance. Instead, he vigorously promoted his ten-year experience studying under the famous layperson Li Bingnan, regarding this experience as the true source of his thoughts. Li Bingnan was also controversial in the conservative Buddhist community for standing on the pulpit to preach as a layperson at that time, which was regarded as an “invasion of the authority of monastics.” However, by inheriting and strengthening this inheritance, Ven. Jingkong effectively broke the privilege of monastics, suggesting that the dissemination of Buddhist truth could be independent of the identity of monastics.²⁶² Moreover, he established the *Infinite Life Sutra* compiled by layperson Xia, as the highest guiding text for Pure Land practice and an authority. To establish the legitimacy of this text compiled by a layperson, he adopted a sanctification strategy. He attributed the status of “the reincarnation of the Samantabhadra Bodhisattva” to Xia Lianju. He also claimed that this text was “the primary scripture for saving sentient beings in the Dharma-Ending Age.” By venerating laypersons like Xia Lianzhu, Li Bingnan, and Huang Nianzu as key teachers in the inheritance, Ven. Jingkong effectively constructed a modern Pure Land Buddhism “intellectual lineage” centered on laypeople. This method bypassed the monopoly of the traditional monk system on the inheritance of Buddhist teachings.

Based on this, he proposed a radical realist soteriology, emphasizing that the state of “renunciation of the mind” (internal enlightenment) is superior to formal “renunciation

²⁶² Sun, “Jingkong,” 398.

of the body.” By upholding the layman Vimalakīrti as the archetype of an “at-home Buddha,” he demonstrated the possibility of practicing Buddhism in the secular world and attaining the supreme realization.²⁶³ He strongly disparaged formalistic renunciation. He frequently cited the saying “there are many monastics and Daoists at the gates of hell (*diyu menqian sengdao duo* 地狱门前僧道多)” to warn the monastic community, pointing out that formal renunciation is often accompanied by lax adherence to precepts and heavier karmic retribution. On the contrary, he pointed out that if a layperson can fully concentrate on a particular practice method and hold firm faith and aspiration, then their merit will far exceed that of the monastics whose minds remain in the mundane world. He even boldly proposed that a proficient layperson, regardless of age or gender, can be called a “Buddhist Master” and has the right to teach monastics.²⁶⁴ By emphasizing the attainment of spiritual insights rather than the fixed labels in religious doctrines, Jingkong completely overturned the superior status of the monastic class in the religious salvation process.

Furthermore, through de-religiously transforming Buddhism and rebuilding it as the education of the Buddha, Ven. Jingkong provided a modern doctrinal basis for laypeople to assume authoritative discourse. In response to the rejection of traditional religions by modern secular society (considering them as superstitions), and to adapt to the specific political environment of the Chinese mainland, Jingkong strategically

²⁶³ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 25–26.

²⁶⁴ Sun, “Jingkong,” 402.

proposed his famous argument: Buddhism is an education, not a religion. He defined it as the ultimate and perfect education that the Buddha provided for all beings in the nine realms. This rhetorical shift has dual strategic significance. From an external perspective, it enables Buddhism to enter schools, communities, and mainstream Western society under the guise of multicultural education, thereby reducing the psychological defensiveness of different cultural groups. From an internal perspective, this brings Buddhist practice back to an equal level of knowledge transmission and moral education, breaking the sacred barriers surrounding the clergy. Within this discourse framework, he compared religious achievements such as the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats to doctoral, master's, and bachelor's degrees in the modern education system, thereby secularizing them, and containing a profound logic of equality.²⁶⁵ If these achievements were merely some kinds of ranks, then anyone who reaches the standard through learning and practice can obtain these achievements, and laypeople would not need to go through a specific clergy as an intermediary.

Correspondingly, he initiated a terminological revolution regarding spatial naming. He advocated renaming traditional temples, monasteries, and nunneries to terms with a modern scholarly style, such as Society, College, Institute, or Education Center. This aimed to eliminate confusion and highlight their educational nature.²⁶⁶ Under the

²⁶⁵ Chang Yu-Hern 张有恒, "Jingkong fashi fojiao jiaoyu sixiang chutan" 净空法师佛教教育思想初探, *Buddhist Culture* 佛教文化, 1999, 27.

²⁶⁶ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 39.

organizational structure of a school, the traditional master-disciple relationship, with its undertones of feudal dependency, is replaced by modern, egalitarian teacher-student or senior-junior relationships. The deepest impact of this transformation was that it legitimized elite lay practitioners ascending the teaching podium. This is especially true when promoting Confucian and Daoist classics, such as the *Taishang ganying pian* 太上感应篇 and the *Dizigui* 弟子规, as the foundation for proper conduct. Because these texts are defined as secular ethical education, laypeople like Cai Lixu 蔡礼旭 and Zhong Maosen 钟茂森 often possess more experience and qualifications to expound upon them than monastics do. Therefore, in Ven. Jingkong's practice centers, it is common to see laypeople lecturing on stage as teachers while ordained monastics sit in the audience and listen.²⁶⁷ While this may seem similar to Shen Jiazhen taking the stage to share personal reflections on the Dharma, or perhaps more restricted in terms of free expression, these lay practitioners typically provide systematic interpretations of traditional classics. Furthermore, their authoritative role in guiding public practice within local organizations closely approximates the essence of traditional monastic preaching. Doctrinally, this arrangement completely subverted the traditional taboos that "laypeople must not expound the Dharma" and that "monastics are superior to the laity." It achieved a redistribution of discursive power, allowing laypeople to occupy a dominant position in doctrinal dissemination and moral edification.

²⁶⁷ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 171.

Li Bingnan significantly influenced Ven. Jingkong's approach to cultivating lay preachers. Li Bingnan was born into an official family in Jinan, Shandong. Influenced by his family from a young age, he became well-versed in the traditional Chinese classics, history, philosophy, and literature. In his early years, he served as the warden of the Ju County 莒县 prison, where he used moral virtue to reform inmates. In 1937, he was appointed as the chief secretary in the Office of the Sacrificial Official to the Great Sage and First Teacher 大成至圣先师奉祀官府. This position endowed him with profound orthodox Confucian status. It allowed him to present an image of cultivating both Confucianism and Buddhism, advocating the dissemination of the Dharma through literary prajna. He propagated the Dharma as a layperson throughout his life, a practice that was far from mainstream in the Buddhist community of that era, which maintained the superiority of monastics over the laity. In 1950, Li Bingnan founded the Taichung Buddhist Lotus Society 台中佛教莲社. This society is led by lay believers, with a Ciguang Library 慈光图书馆, Bodhi Hospital, and an orphanage, and also established welfare and legal networks.²⁶⁸ This model breaks through the limitations of traditional temples and makes use of social resources. Then it becomes the model for Jingkong to promote the Amitabha Buddhist Society globally.

In 1958, Jingkong studied under Li Bingnan at Ciguang Library. Li Bingnan determined three premises as the core for Jingkong's Dharma lineage inheritance. The

²⁶⁸ Wang Yuguo 王与国, *Taiwan fojiao zhuming jushi zhuan* 台湾佛教著名居士传 (Taiping ciguan si, 2007), 215–45.

first was to listen only to Li Bingnan's sermons. The second was to discard the previously learned content and start all over again. The third was to only read the books specified by Li Bingnan. This strict master-apprentice contract is to build an absolute legal lineage and pure thoughts, ensure that the disciple is not disturbed by the outside world, and can fully absorb the teacher's teachings.²⁶⁹ Although these rules were enforced between laypeople, they effectively established a master-disciple relationship and a formal transmission lineage among the laity.

Regarding Li's learning and pedagogy, he utilized a method of retelling or re-lecturing (*fujiang* 复讲) as a core pedagogical technique to train Dharma preachers at the Taichung Lotus Society. Ven. Jingkong later sanctified this method and applied it widely in the training of his own monastic and lay disciples. This retelling was not a simple repetition but rather a strict disciplinary ritual. Li Bingnan established a scriptural study class in which students were allowed to study only one scripture at a time. They had to accurately recount the meaning of the text, exactly as the teacher, before being permitted to move on to the next scripture.²⁷⁰ Students, acting as prospective lecturers, had to take the stage and deliver the lecture content exactly as the teacher (Li Bingnan or Ven. Jingkong) had.

The strict core rule was that they were forbidden from adding their own interpretations. Li Bingnan typically sat at the back of the classroom to monitor the

²⁶⁹ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 35.

²⁷⁰ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 51.

recitation, often prohibiting the use of microphones. If a student's retelling contained deviations, omissions, or personal opinions, they were immediately stopped and forced to start over.²⁷¹ From the perspective of spiritual practice, this retelling method aimed to eliminate the students' arrogance and desire for self-expression. By completely surrendering to the mentor's teachings, students practiced non-self and became transparent conduits for the transmission of the Dharma. From an organizational communication perspective, this system ensured the standardization of doctrine throughout the transmission process. It prevented students from arbitrarily distorting scriptural meanings before attaining realization, thereby guaranteeing strict ideological consistency within the lineage from Xia Lianju and Li Bingnan to Ven. Jingkong. Li Bingnan would sit in the back of the classroom to supervise recitation. If there are deviations, omissions, or personal opinions in the students' recitation, they will be interrupted and asked to start over.²⁷² From the perspective of spiritual cultivation, the purpose of recitation is to remove students' arrogance and desire for self-expression. Students fully obey the teacher's instruction, practice "non-self," and become a transparent channel for spreading Buddhist teachings. From the perspective of organizational communication, this system enables the standardization of doctrine transmission. It can prevent students from misunderstanding the meaning of the scriptures, and thus keep the thoughts on the transmission path consistent. Furthermore,

²⁷¹ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 37.

²⁷² Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 37.

through this retelling method, Ven. Jingkong successfully replicated his own interpretative authority across countless disciples. Li Bingnan's training of Ven. Jingkong prompted him to later apply this exact method when instructing his own disciples, such as Liu Suyun 刘素云.

Liu Suyun is neither a highly educated intellectual nor an ordained monastic. Rather, she is an ordinary retired layperson from Heilongjiang 黑龙江 in Northeast China who became particularly highly esteemed by Ven. Jingkong. She claimed to have suffered from severe lupus erythematosus, a terminal illness, but eventually recovered without medication after over a decade of consistent practice. This practice involved “deeply entering a single Dharma door” (reading only Xia Lianju's compiled edition of the *Infinite Life Sutra*) and “long-term continuous cultivation” by exclusively listening to recordings of Ven. Jingkong's commentary on the text. Her story is perfectly consistent with Ven. Jingkong's teachings on “curing illness by listening to sutras” and “eliminating karma by changing one's mindset.” Liu's scripture lectures strictly followed the principle of “retelling.” She claimed that her achievements come from strictly following the teachings of Ven. Jingkong. She did not study profound Buddhist theories, but used popular words and her own experiences to “reinterpret” the core teachings of Ven. Jingkong. Jingkong also highly praised that Liu is not only loyal but also a good example in Pure Land Buddhism practice. An ordinary believer without a formal Buddhist college education can reach a spiritual realm equivalent to or even higher than that of ordained monastics only by relying on audio-visual materials and Buddha-name recitation.

Grassroots believers were inspired by this narrative, and the status of “root master” was consolidated. Liu’s success was explicitly attributed to her absolute reliance on him.²⁷³

Besides Liu Suyun, Qi Suping 齐素萍 (the founder of Zhaoming Temple 昭明寺), Cai Lixu (an expert in lecturing on the Confucian primer *Dizigui*), entrepreneur Hu Xiaolin 胡小林, economics professor Zhong Senmao 钟森茂 (who holds an American doctorate), and police officer Huang Bolin 黄柏林 formed a unique lay lecturer group. With the support of Jingkong, they became “second-level authorities” like quasi-sages with the help of videos, the Internet, and live broadcasts.²⁷⁴ In the Lujiang Cultural Education Center 庐江文化教育中心 established by Ven. Jingkong in Anhui and the Traditional Culture Forums, Cai Lixu often taught as a “teacher.” Some materials say that monastics could even be seen sitting in the audience listening to the layperson Cai Lixu lecture.²⁷⁵ Within Jingkong’s “education” framework, Cai Lixu’s mastery of ethics and morality made him a qualified “good knowledge” teacher. His lecture recordings, such as *Lectures on a Happy Life: A Detailed Explanation of Di Zi Gui*, were made into DVDs. They were also spread through the Jingkong’s global network, making them study materials for all Pure Land Learning Centers.²⁷⁶

Scholar Sun said that this relationship has opened up avenues for the main lay

²⁷³ Sun, “Jingkong,” 412.

²⁷⁴ Sun, “Jingkong,” 412.

²⁷⁵ Zhang and Ji, “Lay Buddhism,” 31.

²⁷⁶ Ji, “Making a Virtue of Piety,” 74.

leaders to obtain religious legitimacy and piety, and also helped “Master Jingkong” to expand his influence in China from overseas and consolidate the grassroots foundation. With the help of “transfer of charisma” and “resource exchange,” the two sides jointly build a decentralized and extensive religious network.²⁷⁷ For example, in his videos, Jingkong will praise some individuals, groups or practice centers and convey the power to unknown grassroots organizations. Many centers without a formal monk system can quickly gain a good reputation and influence. This kind of interaction is not one-way. Jingkong is restricted by his identity and region. He uses the “localization mechanism” to make the dissemination of religious doctrines and behaviors lively and in-depth. The lay believer group is widely distributed, which is both a way to interpret scriptures and pass on materials and a way to verify the effect of religious doctrines. The miracle examples of Liu Suyun and others show that Jingkong’s practice method is effective. During the cycle, the monk grants resources and authority to the lay followers to maintain their local influence. The lay leaders use this authority to expand the development scope of their master, thus forming a unique form of modern Pure Land Buddhism. Therefore, Jingkong and his followers have a deep connection of transcendence of traditional inheritance and coexistence.

Ven. Jingkong rephrased Buddhism as “Buddha’s Education.” To reduce the difficulty of entry, he built a system of faith, vow, and Buddha-name recitation centered

²⁷⁷ Sun, “Jingkong,” 412.

on “deeply engaging in one Dharma door and adhering to practice for a long time,” simplifying the spiritual practice of lay believers. This made the power of lay believers exceed the elite class and get rid of the mediation function of traditional monastics. This transformation formed the “simple path” mode of modern lay believers, making secular life legally compatible with theology. He often took his long-term experience of studying under Li Bingnan as an example to persuade followers to practice according to one teacher. His teachings correspond to the principle that believers need to adhere to “one sutra, one Buddha’s name, one teacher” to achieve liberation in this life. He also stated that in the Dharma-ending age, other methods such as meditation or doctrinal research are no longer effective, and the simple method is the only way to salvation. Jingkong mentioned the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, especially the version by Xia Lianju, which is the most fundamental one to study in Pure Land Buddhism.²⁷⁸ Relying on “single-minded practice,” Jingkong’s followers have formed a more exclusive identity and have more initiative and independence in practice and management.

Traditional monastics often oppose this practice because it breaks their “ritual monopoly” and “confession service economy.” In Jingkong’s system, rebirth in the Pure Land relies on personal belief, vows, Buddha-name recitation, and moral accumulation, not the complex exorcism rituals conducted by monastics. Lay believers do not need monastics to perform trivial redemption rituals.²⁷⁹ This makes lay believers have

²⁷⁸ Sun, “Jingkong,” 403, 410–11.

²⁷⁹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 402.

independence in religious redemption and breaks the sources of the traditional temple economy. In addition, through “aerial practice centers” or “digital ashrams” established by radio, television, and the Internet, believers can bypass monastics’ groups of different qualities in the local area and directly establish virtual master-disciple relationships with Ven. Jingkong. “Media disintermediation” makes authority gather around materials related to Jingkong. In the process of localization, authority is transferred to selected lay leaders. This makes the ordained monastic community in a marginalized state, and enables lay believers to construct lay practice networks by copying and sharing pronunciation video materials.²⁸⁰ Some places have become national practice centers or pilgrimages, such as Zhaoming Temple 昭明寺, located in the East Tianmu Mountains of Zhejiang Province, the Ancient Dabei Temple 大悲古寺 in Liaoning Province, and the Jiangnan Amitabha Village 江南弥陀村 in Jiangsu Province. Most places claim to serve Jingkong’s teachings and prohibit the teachings of other monks and nuns. These practice centers are quite successful, attracting practitioners to come for study and practice, and also regulating the practice activities of Jingkong’s center in China. Large centers and matters related to leaders provide a vision for aspiring lay Buddhists, inspiring them to build or expand their own practice places. This also inspires some monastic leaders on the margins of mainstream Buddhism.²⁸¹

Ultimately, these theoretical innovations have brought the “separation of

²⁸⁰ Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 161–62.

²⁸¹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 410–11.

government and religion” and the model dominated by laypeople to modern religious organizations. As Jingkong was prohibited on the Chinese mainland, the government was more strictly managing the appointment of laypeople as legal representatives of temples. However, this model has been rapidly and widely established in overseas Chinese communities. Different from the public temples where traditional abbots are in charge of the administrative and financial powers of religions, the ideal practice centers of Jingkong strictly implement a “double separation” management and preaching model. In this model, lay leaders (usually the legal representatives of the institutions or board members) serve as “professional managers,” responsible for administrative decisions, personnel appointments, and financial management, becoming the builders and guardians of the practice centers, and practicing their beliefs as protectors of the dharma. At the same time, monastics are redefined as employed “spiritual professionals” or “technical experts.” They give up worldly administrative affairs and focus on teaching or spreading Buddhism.²⁸² This model has the characteristics of “laypeople management, monastics specializing in dharma propagation,” giving laypeople greater “management power” and allowing them to decide whether monastics stay or leave. When there are no monastics to propagate dharma, many laypeople managers take on the role of spiritual guidance, such as explaining Buddhist dharma or leading collective practice, further improving the status of laypeople.

²⁸² Sun, “Jingkong,” 402.

This design transformed the traditional monastic power structure into a governance model similar to a “modern enterprise,” which was particularly evident in many centers influenced by this method. Although some centers, such as Dabei Ancient Temple 大北古寺 and Anshan Temple 鞍山寺, retained the layout of traditional temples, their actual managers or main decision-makers were laypeople. Laypeople had absolute authority, while monastics were mostly in subordinate positions, mainly responsible for assisting the Buddhist chanting activities organized by the laypeople.²⁸³

This power structure inversion occurred in a specific historical context as a survival strategy adopted by Ven. Jing Kong. Due to his marginalization by mainstream monastic groups in Taiwan in the early days, he aimed to avoid internal conflicts among monastics. However, this objectively triggered strong criticism from the traditional Buddhist community regarding its “separatist tendencies” and “the occupation of high positions by laypeople.”²⁸⁴ Nevertheless, this model of granting substantive administrative power to laypeople greatly liberated those with professional secular skills (such as management, finance, and law). It transformed them from marginal assistants into the main drivers of the Buddhist preaching cause. Granting laypeople substantive power became the institutional impetus for the Pure Land centers to rapidly replicate and expand in the global Chinese community. This formed a decentralized but highly united transnational

²⁸³ Ji, “Making a Virtue of Piety,” 42.

²⁸⁴ Sun, “Jingkong,” 414–15.

Buddhist layperson network.²⁸⁵

5.2 Lay Authority in the Amida Society of LA

The Los Angeles branch Amida Society inherits the concepts of Jingkong's Pure Land School and also deepens the operation mode of lay Buddhist groups. The authority of lay Buddhists is reflected in the operation of the Buddhist center in the position of an auxiliary role. Chen Jingchang, the founder, practices a multi-functional, core-positioned mode in the religious group. President Chen is the main decision-maker of this association, and also a key figure in resource mobilization, system design, and the dissemination of Buddhism. His responsibilities go beyond those of traditional administrative managers or guardians. When the organization was established, he led the handling of numerous difficulties, such as legal affairs (such as application conditions and license usage), financial planning, and facility maintenance, etc. During these complex issues, he transformed his solid accounting expertise into the capital for managing religious organizations. This model of managing non-profit religious groups with rigorous and pragmatic secular rationality has made the organization's operation both efficient and transparent, and has laid the foundation for maintaining independence and stability in a diverse environment.

²⁸⁵ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 46.

Regarding the teaching and dissemination work, the core doctrines of the Amida Society still need to invite monastics, and Mr. Chen also actively interprets Buddhism. In group activities, he often leads chanting and scripture lectures. With methods such as sharing insights, Q&A, and scripture interpretation, he gains real religious authority, and this authority is institutionalized in regular study. After the first half of the collective practice on Saturday afternoon, Mr. Chen usually leads scripture interpretation at 4:45. There will be a Buddhist Q&A activity on the weekend night. There are no monastics. Believers can raise questions on study, practice, reflection, etc. Mr. Chen will answer professionally on the platform and explain the sentences of the texts such as the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life*. Mr. Chen's interpretation of scriptures, as well as questions and answers, is different from the "retelling" of other laypeople. His authority is more like that of a monk conducting "Dharma talks" or "sutra preaching." This is a clear challenge from the lay groups to the traditional monopoly of monastics' knowledge and power in terms of control over religious discourse.

President Chen does not confine religious sects to a single sect. Instead, he invites monastics from various schools and research fields through open invitations to hold lectures, and always adheres to the guiding principles of the Pure Land School. This balance of openness and adherence stems from the guidance of President Chen's spiritual philosophy. From this perspective, President Chen's authority has shifted from simple organizational management to high-level religious/spiritual guidance, and has formed an authoritative model that combines the administrative system with the religious authority.

The role of the president is also reflected in his broader coordination and operational capabilities in the external relationship environment. He establishes horizontal cooperation networks with external systems and collaborates with local Buddhist temples such as Hsi Lai Temple 西来寺, Dharma Seal Temple 法印寺, and Anfu Monastery 安福寺. The association invites monastics to hold large-scale Buddhist gatherings and utilizes external professional knowledge to overcome the limitations of non-monastic groups in rituals and other aspects, enabling monks and non-monks to functionally collaborate and complement each other.

Besides President Chen, many directors, lecturers, volunteers, and staff of Amida Society are laypeople. They are responsible for the daily management and operation of the association, such as venue arrangement, financial management, event organization, media promotion, and material distribution. They use their secular management experience to make the association operate smoothly. In addition, the laity profoundly immerse themselves in the practice of Pure Land Buddhism, internalizing the core religious scriptures and the specific teachings of Ven. Jingkong, so that they can become preachers of the Dharma. During group practice, they can lead Buddha recitation, share insights and deliver Dharma talks after obtaining appropriate approval.

Based on field observations and archival website data, it is evident that several regular lay practitioners provide long-term, systematic teachings. For example, the March 2024 lecture schedule for the Amida Society shows that, in addition to President Chen frequently lecturing on the *Infinite Life Sutra* and hosting Buddhist Q&A sessions, lay

practitioners Mr. Max and Ms. Alen (pseudonym) also delivered shared teachings on the “*Fundamentals of Chan Contemplation and Pure Land* 禅观与净土基础篇.” Generally speaking, apart from sharing insights and experiences related to the Pure Land scriptures, they also give keynote speeches on the practices and doctrines of both Theravada and Mahayana traditions, encompassing foundational themes like the Kālāma Sutta, the Thirty-seven Aids to Enlightenment, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.²⁸⁶ It is worth noting that these lay speeches are usually named “sharing reflections (*xinde fenxiang* 心得分享),” largely avoiding traditional terms such as “preaching” or “Dharma talks,” which are usually reserved for respected monastics. Before giving the speech, they usually prepare by studying the lecture materials of a respected monk, so that they can recite accurately on stage; this is similar to the “retelling” teaching method inherited by Ven. Jingkong from Li Bingnan, which has been mentioned earlier in the discussion.

If President Chen represents the pioneering authoritative position of the first generation of Chinese immigrants who engage in lay practice, then other lay representatives, such as Daniel (pseudonym), have perfectly demonstrated the rise of skilled and cross-cultural lay leaders within the Amida Society. As a core member of the organization, Daniel has Vietnamese ancestry and possesses typical socio-economic characteristics of well-educated, professionally identified middle-class individuals.

²⁸⁶ Details can be found on Amida Society’s official YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElkvX5T_1uI&list=PLqfGvanjfgcQLoDksXTr1Bcl7DrS55-Dw

Through years of continuous religious belief and dedicated service to the organization, he has won the deep trust of the core leadership of the organization and become a key link between the founding elders and the new generation of believers.

His outstanding language ability mainly reflects the unique value of the organization. He can fluently use Vietnamese and English, and is proficient in Mandarin; this trilingual ability makes him an indispensable cultural bridge. In an increasingly diverse religious environment like this organization, he often takes on simultaneous interpretation and cross-cultural communication, effectively bridging the cognitive and communication gaps between language and ethnic groups, especially between China and Vietnam, and between the first-generation immigrants and English-speaking second-generation. More importantly, Daniel took on the responsibility of providing localized explanations to disseminate the teachings. Unlike the traditional reliance on Chinese for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings, Daniel mainly conducted lectures and shared Buddhist teachings in English. With his language ability and Western higher education background, he transformed the traditional Pure Land teachings into modern discourse that fits the cognitive framework of English speakers. This approach not only made up for the organization's previous shortcomings in disseminating Buddhism to English speakers (including second-generation immigrants and non-Asian individuals), but also demonstrated the transformation of the Amida Society from a single Chinese immigrant group to a more inclusive and localized Buddhist organization. Through Daniel's efforts, the diversity of the Amida Society has been significantly expanded, indicating that in a

transnational context, lay Buddhism has strong adaptability and penetration power.

It is notable that on March 28, 2024, when the necessary conditions were met, Daniel held a tonsure ceremony in the Amida Society, becoming the first ordained monk of the organization. Although the Amida Society is a lay organization, Daniel's long-term dedication and deep connection with the organization led to his initiation ceremony being held directly within the organization. The initiation ceremony followed the traditional Chinese Buddhist monk ritual, with ordination master and several invited monastics jointly presiding and witnessing the ceremony.

At the tonsure ceremony, many lay believers closely related to Daniel were deeply moved and cheered excitedly, witnessing the birth of the first monk in this center. This identity transformation further elevated this layperson's authority; although he has entered monastic life, the development of his authority is still closely linked to this lay Buddhist center. This event not only represents an important turning point in his personal religious life, but also marks a significant transformation for the Amida Society as a layperson organization, shifting from relying on invited external monastics to independently cultivating its own monastic members.

Apart from Dharma sharing, another crucial aspect of the laypeople's departure from their traditional roles is manifested in the collective practice, Buddhist ceremonies, and rituals of the Amida Society. This departure is not merely functional; it represents a profound shift and reconstruction of the authority of the rituals. In traditional Chinese Buddhist temples, the precentor (*weinuo* 维那) serves as the guide of the rituals, leading

the believers to recite scriptures and controlling the rhythms of instruments such as bells, drums, rosaries, and wooden fish, which are generally handled by professional monastics. However, in the practice of the Amida Society, senior lay Buddhists assume the traditional monk's role during collective practice and Buddhist gatherings. Therefore, their roles have transformed from traditional Dharma guardians to a group with dual identities as both practitioners and organizational leaders.

As Gareth Fisher observes in his study of modern Chinese lay Buddhism, contemporary lay Buddhists are actively constructing their moral and religious agency. They form “textual communities as a type of discursive community where people belong to particular social (and, in this case, religious) units based on whether they share the reading and discussion of a particular set of texts.” “The ‘text’ broadly refers not only to printed matter but also to multimedia materials such as the DVD sermons of famous masters.”²⁸⁷ The early Amida Society relied on Pure Land materials as study guides, such as books, VCDs, and audio recordings by Ven. Jingkong and others. The lay-driven study activities that emerged from this process represent a concrete practice of constructing such textual communities. In this way, the Amida Society has not only maintained the continuity of religious life. In practice, it has also cultivated and consolidated a highly self-sustaining and functional lay Buddhist community, thereby reshaping traditional monastic-lay relations and functional boundaries.

²⁸⁷ Fisher, “Mapping Religious Difference,” 259–60.

In conclusion, like President Chen, such elite lay practitioners are no longer marginal or external protectors within the organizational structure. Instead, they are core participants, responsible for leading the establishment, governance, dissemination of Buddhism, and the execution of rituals. Relying on secular professionalism and firm religious beliefs, they successfully constructed a set of Buddhist lay operations that are adapted to modern society, providing a unique practical case model for the localized evolution of Chinese Buddhism in the West.

5.3 Interpretation of the Kālāma Sutta

During the period from 2022 to 2024, several senior lay practitioners took turns systematically preaching the Kālāma Sutta within the Amida Society. As a Theravada classic, its interpretation holds special significance within the center. This sutra begins by describing the Buddha's entry into Kesaputta, a town of the Kālāmas, during his travels in the Kosala kingdom. The local Kālāmas expressed their confusion to him. Many Brahmins and *śramaṇa* had visited the town, each propagating their own doctrines while disparaging and debunking the views of others. This left the Kālāmas unable to distinguish who was telling the truth and who was lying. The Buddha then enumerated several criteria for determining whether a teaching is the truth.

Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, The monk

is our teacher.²⁸⁸

The Buddha advised the Kālāmas that the true standard for evaluating a doctrine should be personal direct experience and wise examination.

Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: “These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,” enter on and abide in them. “These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,” abandon them.²⁸⁹

Therefore, this teaching has been reinterpreted in a modern context, serving as a scriptural basis against superstition and dogmatism. When confronting various authorities, the rational Western cultural environment advocates critical thinking. It demands personal practice and verification to disenchant and select among authorities. This empirical approach re-evaluates traditional Buddhist beliefs, and instead of blindly believing in them, it shifts the focus from external authority to individual observation, reflection, and verification for those objects they convert to.

Whether this trend represents correctness remains to be examined, and it has indeed sparked many subsequent controversies and reflections. However, it undoubtedly shaped the main framework of American Buddhism and modern Western Buddhism. As discussed in previous chapters, this is evident in representative Convert Buddhism rather than in Ethnic Buddhism. Convert Buddhism places greater emphasis on meditation,

²⁸⁸ Soma Thera, trans., *Kālāma Sutta: The Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1963), 6.

²⁸⁹ Thera, *Kālāma Sutta*, 8.

mindfulness, philosophical inquiry, and psychological applications, while often simplifying or discarding traditional rituals and cultural elements.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, Convert Buddhism is largely lay-oriented. This constitutes a core feature of the Buddhist Americanization and the modernization of the Buddhist tradition in the West. In this process, the specific reinterpretation, adaptation, and utilization of the Kālāma Sutta represent an important development that cannot be ignored. For the Amida Society, a lay Buddhist organization leaning toward ethnic Buddhism, choosing this text for long-term study and discussion retains significant research value. It allows us to observe how a group that is both traditionally oriented and an independent lay organization positions itself and chooses its path in a transnational environment.

Similarly, as a modern religious organization primarily composed of lay Buddhists, the Amida Society's promotion and propagation of the Kālāma Sutta is by no means an accidental textual selection. By emphasizing the independence, rationality, and critical thinking inherent in Buddhist teachings, lay practitioners can no longer rely on traditional authority but instead establish evaluation criteria based on their own practice, observation, and whether it can alleviate suffering. The speakers in Amida Society also pointed out that the Buddha did not ask people to completely abandon tradition but rather reminded them not to simply consider something as an absolute truth just because of an ancient legend or widespread dissemination. This argument actually emphasizes the

²⁹⁰ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 58, 63–65.

ability of every rational-minded lay practitioner to judge religious authority. This grants them great autonomy and independence in their practice. So, this represents a profound form of cognitive empowerment.

This emphasis on rational judgment and independent thinking is closely related to Ven. Jingkong's marginal status within the early Buddhist landscape in Taiwan and his unique organizational development strategy. In the early preaching career, Ven. Jingkong, due to being marginalized by the mainstream conservative monastic group, adopted the "marginal breakthrough" strategy, leaving the traditional organized monastic structure and conducting activities independently.²⁹¹ Under this tense relationship, he had to construct a legitimacy account that was not completely dependent on the authority of the traditional monastic group. By redefining Buddhism as the education of the Buddha and establishing an independent authoritative lineage, he advocated the doctrine that the truth of the Dharma does not depend on one's monastic identity. In the traditional system, the enlightenment of laypeople relied on the guidance of monastics. This transformation provided a theoretical basis for the believers, enabling them to directly seek liberation through scriptures and practice.²⁹² In the Amida Society system, believers are no longer merely passive providers of offerings, but have become active practitioners and verifiers of the truth.

More importantly, the subtle shift from organizational authority to spiritual

²⁹¹ Sun, "Jingkong," 398; Sun, "Religions in Sociopolitical Context," 117–18.

²⁹² Chang, "Jingkong fashi," 27.

authority also occurs naturally. In the Jingkong's system, as internal management deepens, lay believers often begin to get involved in the arrangement of religious ceremonies, the formulation of courses, and the interpretation of doctrines. This is driven by their control over organizational resources and their familiarity with the founder's teachings. For example, due to his role as a co-founder and his rich spiritual experiences, Mr. Chen, has greater freedom in interpreting scriptures and answering questions. This is different from many other laypeople, who do not merely repeat previous teachings but have more freedom for independent interpretation. This phenomenon indicates that in modern lay Buddhist organizations, organizational governance often leads to the jurisdiction of spiritual affairs as well. This breaks the strict boundaries of the traditional Buddhist hierarchy and effectively enables laity to assume both the role of managers and spiritual mentors. The Kālāma Sutta does not emphasize relying on authority, which helps to explore the transformation from traditional authority to new forms of authority.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the Amida Society's interpretation and application of the Kālāma Sutta have significant doctrinal and practical value. In terms of doctrinal interpretation, the society cites the Kālāma Sutta as a form of implicit legitimacy recognition. Its purpose is to establish a reasonable foundation for its organizational model as a modern lay Buddhist organization. One interpretation of this text can be expressed as: through rational thinking and empirical verification, individuals achieve inner enlightenment and liberation, rather than blindly obeying traditional authority. This interpretation strategy provides important doctrinal support for lay leaders

in the Buddhist community and can also be acknowledged as a significant symbol of theological legitimacy. It not only affirms but actively advocates a viable path of self-education and cultivation praxis centered on lay Buddhists. This differs significantly from the traditional monastic-led model, offering a path of self-cultivation independent of monastic mediation. Therefore, this lay-led operational model undoubtedly challenges and reshapes the internal power structures and praxis paradigms of traditional Chinese Buddhism. Although many societies remain organizationally independent and maintain strong ties to a specific monastic teacher, this approach still presents a deconstructive challenge to traditional authority systems. It also represents a significant attempt by contemporary Chinese Buddhism to undergo adaptive transformation amid secularization and modernization in a transnational context, ultimately realizing lay subjectivity and empowerment.

Beyond emphasizing lay subjectivity, the Amida Society's study of the Kālāma Sutta provides a perspective for rational examination and critical reflection on traditional Chinese Pure Land practice. In this lecture series, approximately six consecutive sessions focused entirely on discussing the *True Meaning of the Pure Land* 淨土真義. In traditional Pure Land belief, "faith" is often positioned at the core. At times, this is simplified into an unconditional adherence to patriarchal teachings or specific rituals. However, the Kālāma Sutta advocates the spirit of not believing merely based on tradition, hearsay, scripture, or logical inference. This actually provides modern lay Buddhists with a set of criteria for distinguishing truth and correctly establishing faith

when confronted with complex Pure Land literature and diverse teachings. These criteria are not intended to weaken fundamental faith in the great vows of Amitabha Buddha. Rather, they shift this faith from blind emotional dependence to a rational faith based on personal choice and empirical verification. In modern society, especially within the Western rationalist tradition, the Pure Land tradition is being redefined from a superstitious perspective to a self-transformation process characterized by the enhancement of enlightenment and critical thinking. Thus, while maintaining the core content, it has shifted towards a modern model.

In the 2nd and 3rd lectures of “*The True Meaning of Pure Land*,” the speakers distinguished the Buddhist Pure Land from the general religious paradise. They mentioned that the practice of pure land needs to rely on wisdom and enlightenment, not just on psychological dependence and superstition. The scriptural depiction of the Pure Land in Buddhist scriptures should not be reduced to simple worship. Practitioners need to think deeply about the profound meaning. The speakers asked the audience to regard true rebirth as the promotion of the spiritual realm. Therefore, the Pure Land functions not merely as a literal site for post-mortem rebirth, but also as the manifestation of the purity of nature.²⁹³ Traditional Pure Land beliefs are often criticized as superstition and relying on “external forces.” Modern believers redefine the Pure Land as a process of

²⁹³ “Jingtu zhenyi (san) Gelama jing - Tingjing xinde fenxiang 净土真义（三）葛拉玛经 - 听经心得分享 - Dec 31 @ 7pm,” Pureland Lecture Hall, streamed live on December 31, 2022, YouTube video, 1:32:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=istQhDVW9ts>; “Jingtu zhenyi (zhier) - Tingjing xinde fenxiang 净土真义（之二）- 听经心得分享 - Dec 24 @ 7pm,” Pureland Lecture Hall, streamed live on December 24, 2022, YouTube video, 1:26:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAS8gBFxRJc>.

spiritual state improvement from the perspective of the Kālāma Sutta, which makes practice more psychologically and philosophically meaningful, and is in line with the “psychological turn of American Buddhism.”

Furthermore, using the Kālāma Sutta to respond to modern scientism, it helps define the boundary between conceptual logical reasoning and directly realizing the ultimate truth. Logic and science may be helpful for initially understanding Buddhism. The real meaning of Pure Land Buddhism is a true realization (*shizheng* 实证) experience beyond logic. The emphasis on “true enlightenment” goes beyond simple doctrinal transmission or deduction. It provides profound intellectual support for lay practitioners to obtain religious legitimacy through personal practice, especially in environments lacking traditional monastic guidance in modern times. After this paradigm shift, Pure Land Buddhism practice gets rid of the label of superstition. Maintaining core traditional values while being a self-transformation with critical inquiry and subjective awareness, laypeople can do it by themselves, showing that believers are not passively relying on the traditional temple system to learn, know, and practice Dharma, but become a belief subject with a high degree of self-awareness and independent judgment. Building this subjectivity allows lay practitioners to screen and reconstruct complex doctrines according to their own rational understanding and personal practice. Therefore, they can form a relatively self-sufficient practical system in secular life. This is a profound transformation from heteronomy to autonomy, from blind obedience to rational faith, and from a passive dependency on “other-power” to an active elevation of “self-power.” This

process gives the laypeople more discourse power in the interpretation of doctrines. In addition, at the level of true understanding, it provides them with a solid philosophical support and a practical way to achieve spiritual liberation in modern society.

Therefore, attuned to the spirit of the Kālāma Sutta, the traditional triad of “faith, vows, and practice” has been reconfigured, finding its rational expression within the concrete framework of end-of-life care for rebirth. This change shifts from relying on the scriptural authority (*shengyan liang* 圣言量) to emphasizing personal true realization. This enhances the practice effectiveness of lay believers. Also, it enables the Pure Land tradition to be vital to have self-renewal and continuous dialogue when facing the challenges of modern science and humanistic philosophy. Finally, in the global spread of Buddhism, this practice paradigm based on rational subjectivity constructs a spiritual framework for modern lay believers. This framework has traditional sanctity and also fits the logic of modernity.

However, the elevation of the status of laypeople does not mean a complete separation from the authority of the monastics. Instead, it mainly manifests as the reconfiguration of power and the integration of resources at the margins of the traditional Buddhist system. This reconfiguration does not attempt to completely overthrow the monastic system. On the contrary, although it recognizes the formal status of the monastic group, it represents an attempt to independently organize and practice, that is, to achieve this goal by controlling the interpretation of the doctrine and maintaining the autonomy of the organization. Compared with the Western lay Buddhist movements, the

latter shows a relatively higher degree of independence. The strategy adopted by the “Amida Society” or the Jingkong is to utilize lay power to resist the marginalization imposed by the traditional monastic authority. This strategy is not aimed at establishing an independent community led entirely by laypeople. Instead, by regaining the right to speak and lay resources, it establishes a “vertical leadership structure” centered on the charismatic authority of the teacher and the specific practice system outside the traditional public monastery system. In doing so, it creates a new form of authority. In discussing the Kālāma Sutta, Zhiru introduces the dynamic historical process of scriptural authority. She contends that the crisis of authority confronting contemporary religion is not unique to modernity. Buddhism has experienced similar crises at various critical stages in its historical development, such as early Buddhism, the rise of Mahayana, and the emergence of Chan. She demonstrates how Buddhists have questioned established scriptural authority and emphasized personal religious experience, thereby creating new canonical forms and literary genres, such as Mahayana sutras and Chan koans. However, this process of challenging old authorities often generates new ones, which in turn face subsequent questioning. Chan Buddhism represents a Chinese Buddhist rebellion against Indian scholasticism. Yet, despite its anti-scriptural stance and questioning of the efficacy of language, Chan’s ineffable, mind-to-mind religious experiences were still committed to text. In practice, this gave rise to one of the largest bodies of literature, including *Transmission of the Lamp* (*denglu* 灯录, biographies), *Recorded Sayings* (*yulu* 语录, dialogue records), and Koans. Therefore, the author notes that while Western religious

history often views “crises of authority” as characteristic of modernity or postmodernity, critical reflection and skepticism toward scriptural authority have always been a dynamic process throughout Buddhist history.²⁹⁴ This also sheds light on the dynamic adjustment process exhibited by the Amitabha Buddhist Societies as they navigate both internal and external monastic authority. This dynamic must be traced back to President Chen’s own dialectical selection of Ven. Jingkong’s practice system. In turn, this process further corroborates the spirit of rationality, experiential verification, and the rejection of blind worship advocated in the Kālāma Sutta.

5.4 The Controversies over Ven. Jingkong

If the rise of the lay community is merely regarded as an isolated case of modern Buddhist transformation, or if the Amitabha Buddhist Societies are simply equated with a general lay Buddhist organization, then it would be inaccurate in history. This is because, during the evolution of Buddhist civilization, the Pure Land lay community groups themselves have profound foundational significance and wide dissemination potential. As a typical religious and cultural model, they have demonstrated significant ontological independence and typological value in history. However, as mentioned above, in ancient Chinese society, increasingly powerful lay Buddhist organizations usually maintained a subordinate relationship with the Sangha, which was determined or arranged by design.

²⁹⁴ Shi, “Scriptural Authority,” 85–96.

Or, when they formed lay communities completely independently outside of the control of the Sangha, they often faced “legitimacy judgments.” These judgments not only stemmed from the need of the state to maintain religious order, but also from the instinctive defense of the clergy class over its monopoly on clerical authority.

The controversy sparked by Ven. Jingkong mainly originated from the fierce conflict between the independent lay authority he represented and the traditional monastic authority in the modern context.²⁹⁵ According to the key points summarized above, the most controversial point is that Ven. Jingkong vigorously promoted the edition of *the Infinite Life Sutra* compiled by Xia Lianju, regarding it as the primary scripture of the Pure Land sect. Traditional monastics generally hold a conservative attitude towards modifying scriptures. Ven. Yin Guang once severely criticized compiled editions for “setting a precedent for recklessly altering Buddhist scriptures.” This also led to Jingkong being criticized.²⁹⁶ However, from the perspective of lay Buddhism, the emergence of compiled editions greatly simplified the complex issues of various translations. The concise language and coherent teachings precisely met the cognitive needs of modern lay practitioners seeking an “easy path.”²⁹⁷ This “text selection” itself is a declaration of power: it indicates that the secular community has the right to choose the most suitable guidance method for modern practice, and has effectively liberated itself from the

²⁹⁵ Sun, “Jingkong,” 398; Sun, “Religions in Sociopolitical Context,” 117–18.

²⁹⁶ Gu, “Confucian Family Ethics,” 123, 126.

²⁹⁷ Sun, “Jingkong,” 403, 410–11.

strictures of outdated academia and tradition.

Secondly, Ven. Jingkong's proposition that "Buddhism is an education, not a religion" granted power to laypeople, and objectively weakened the necessity of the traditional Sangha as "professional ritual intermediaries."²⁹⁸ When listening to scriptures at home replaced religious ritual services in the temple, and Ven. Jingkong's teachings were disseminated through digital media, the traditional temple economy (such as confession ceremonies and dharma assemblies' income) faced a serious threat.²⁹⁹ In the Amitabha Buddhist Societies, laypeople no longer needed to offer goods to monastics to purchase tickets to the Pure Land from the Buddha. Instead, they conducted self-guided spiritual practice directly at home through the teacher's video guidance.³⁰⁰ This "de-intermediation" trend was regarded by the monk class as the intentional marginalization of the "monastic" elements in the fundamental structure of the Sangha.³⁰¹ Moreover, Ven. Jingkong trained numerous lay preachers, enabling them to exercise teaching functions similar to those of monastics in specific forums or associations. This completely broke the thousand-year-old traditional model of "monastics leading and laypeople following." When laypeople like Cai Lixu and Liu Suyun became respected spiritual role models by the believers, the traditional Sangha groups believed that their

²⁹⁸ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 161–62.

²⁹⁹ Gu, "Confucian Family Ethics," 39.

³⁰⁰ Sun, "Jingkong," 392.

³⁰¹ Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 161–62.

sacred status was seriously threatened. In mainland China, this controversy was often expressed as an “orthodoxy and heresy” debate, reflecting traditionalists’ attempt to regain their declining power in religious discourse by using legitimacy labels.³⁰²

Jingkong’s model triggered collective boycotts by the official Buddhist institutions in mainland China. This institutional conflict eventually turned into policy-based exclusion.³⁰³ *Harmony Saves Crisis* 和谐拯救危机 is a series of in-depth documentary interviews lasting several hours produced by Chen Dahui 陈大惠 from 2006 to 2008 through grassroots fundraising. Chen Dahui was a well-known host of China Central Television (CCTV). This documentary focused on Jingkong as the core interviewee, using modern television editing techniques and grand narrative methods to package his religious thoughts as a traditional cultural solution to modern civilization crises. Leveraging Chen Dahui’s reputation as a former CCTV host, this documentary was widely spread among the mainland public through hundreds of thousands of CDs, free download links, and community group activities. In mainland Chinese society during the early 21st century, this attracted a large number of intellectuals, government officials, and entrepreneurs who were previously uninterested in Buddhism to focus on traditional culture, directly fueling the “National Studies fever (*guoxue re* 国学热).” However, as its influence expanded, the documentary’s eschatological views and extreme interpretations of karmic retribution provoked a degree of skepticism. The Tangchi Cultural Education

³⁰² Sun, “Jingkong,” 414–15.

³⁰³ Sun, “Jingkong,” 414–15.

Center 汤池文化教育中心 he founded in Lujiang, Anhui, attempted to reshape rural morality through the *Dizigui*. Although briefly praised by official media, its highly closed nature and strict psychological control over followers led some to engage in extreme social behaviors, such as liquidating family assets, refusing medical treatment, and abandoning their studies;³⁰⁴ meanwhile, capable lay leaders established large-scale practice centers, overcoming the hurdles of Chinese Buddhist authority and state regulations by registering them as non-religious organizations (such as educational institutions, nursing homes, or libraries). Lay followers of Ven. Jingkong study together by donating private residences or renting apartments; this model enables autonomous lay groups to continually bypass the effectiveness of religious control within the existing state framework.³⁰⁵ These irrational actions, stemming from an over-immersion in specific religious interpretations, not only severely disrupt the followers' family lives and social relations, but also generate significant instability at the local societal level. This measure aimed to build a Confucian-style moral utopia, but due to its huge social mobilization capacity and potential political risks, the plan was halted by the government in 2008.³⁰⁶ This subculture deviated from the mainstream social values and had strong mobilization potential. In the eyes of the government, it gradually became regarded as a difficult-to-control social risk. Its absolute control over the thoughts of the followers was

³⁰⁴ Nanlai Cao, "Chinese Religions on the Edge," *China Review* 18, no. 4 (2018): 3.

³⁰⁵ Sun, "Religions in Sociopolitical Context," 94–103, 120, 193, 227–31.

³⁰⁶ Ji, "Making a Virtue of Piety," 67.

seen as a challenge to the country's ideological leadership position, thus triggering the high vigilance of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and security agencies.

Ven. Jingkong's system emphasizes "deeply entering a single dharma door," suggesting that followers should only read the compiled version of the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* and only listen to his audio recordings. Due to its rejection of other sects and even traditional Buddhist scriptures and treatises, this approach was accused of being highly sectarian.³⁰⁷ This indirectly led followers to reject external media, including the doctrines of other sects or masters, and also marginalized certain aspects of the national education system. Some sociologists and government agencies regarded the "spiritual monopoly" of the followers' thoughts at that time as a form of psychological control or quasi-cult.³⁰⁸ For a Chinese government pursuing social harmony and scientific governance, the eschatology propagated by Ven. Jingkong fundamentally conflicted with the country's scientific development ideology.³⁰⁹ Through the viral dissemination of modern media, these ideas constructed a discourse system independent of mainstream values in the grassroots society. The resulting social instability was caused by the exploitation of the religious fears of the followers, which was intolerable for the Chinese government. The Buddhist Association of China issued multiple documents

³⁰⁷ Sun, "Jingkong," 403.

³⁰⁸ Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 46–47.

³⁰⁹ Sun, "Jingkong," 403.

criticizing him for disrupting normal religious order, engaging in personal worship, misleading followers, and promoting superstition, and even defining his actions as spreading heresy under the guise of Buddhism.³¹⁰ Subsequently, from 2011 to 2012, the State Religious Affairs Bureau ordered the confiscation and prohibition of his related materials in Buddhist temples.³¹¹

Whether Ven. Jingkong constitutes a cult is beyond the scope of this article. However, we can observe a historical phenomenon that popular Pure Land sect movements that have broken away from traditional political and religious authority undergo legitimacy review or adjudication. The core of this conflict lies in the fact that Ven. Jingkong's means of disseminating and organizing operations in terms of doctrine and organization have touched upon the sensitive issue of "boundaries and order" in contemporary China's religious governance. According to the traditional logic of religious management, China's management of religious groups follows the "State Corporatism" model defined by Ji Zhe, that is, all legal religious activities must be conducted within the framework of the five recognized religious organizations like the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). According to this logic, the BAC is recognized by the state as the sole legitimate representative of the Buddhist community, and can "be considered a concrete embodiment of state corporatism under the Communist regime."³¹²

³¹⁰ Sun, "Jingkong," 416.

³¹¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 166.

³¹² Ji Zhe 汲喆, "Secularization as Religious Restructuring: Statist Institutionalization of Chinese Buddhism and Its Paradoxes," in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed.

As the bridge and transmission link between the state and the followers, the BAC and its provincial, municipal, and county-level branches have monopolistic administrative power over Buddhist affairs. Any Buddhist organization operating outside the administrative system of the BAC and without certification from it is necessarily lacking legal legitimacy.

Yang Fenggang 杨凤岗 puts forward that “government restriction of religion influences the dynamics of the tripartite markets.”³¹³ In this theory, Chinese religious space can be divided into a legal red market (the five major religious associations), an illegal black market (such as cults), and a blurred gray market. The dissemination network of Ven. Jing Kong has long occupied this “gray market.” Although it was not officially recognized as a cult in the early stages, the organization has always been on the periphery of legitimacy due to its failure to be officially registered. However, as its scale expanded, this gray development gradually exceeded the bottom line of the state’s religious management. Its influence no longer remained confined to specific geographical areas or traditional temple spaces; instead, it presented a dispersed, cross-regional, and cross-class expansion pattern. By relying on modern media, Ven. Jingkong has established a decentralized and rhizomatic transnational network. Local Buddhist groups or chanting halls are often spontaneously established by laypeople. They maintain

Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (University of California Press, 2008), 247–49.

³¹³ Fenggang Yang, *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts* (Brill, 2018), 11–12.

financial independence and directly gain guidance from the distant and profound spiritual leader who is not in the local area, rather than getting advice from the local Buddhist association. This parallel organizational network without hierarchical management constraints is regarded by the government as a potentially influential and difficult-to-regulate social mobilization force.³¹⁴ As a globally influential transnational religious leader, he possesses great capabilities in the allocation of overseas resources, especially in Singapore, Australia, and Hong Kong. Under the policy of Sinicizing religion and resisting foreign infiltration, this powerful overseas religious influence is seen as a challenge to mainstream religious groups, national ideological security, and religious administrative autonomy. Subsequently, the United Front Work Department and the SARA attempted to prohibit Ven. Jingkong's audio-visual products from entering the mainland and warned him not to conduct religious activities on the mainland. In 2012, due to the spread of rumors, SARA further ordered Buddhist temples to prohibit distributing materials from Ven. Jingkong. Some temples posted notices prohibiting unauthorized dissemination of his audio-visual products and warning violators that they might face confiscation or even be handed over to the public security authorities.³¹⁵ In 2018, after implement of *Religious Affairs Regulations (Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli 宗教事务条例)*, China strengthened its control over online religious information and religious

³¹⁴ Sun, "Jingkong," 408–14.

³¹⁵ Sun, "Jingkong," 416; Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 46–47.

activities outside designated religious venues.³¹⁶ Ven. Jingkong's excessive reliance on CD dissemination and the online distribution of Buddhist treasures made him lack a legal publication number or formal religious qualifications in the country. Therefore, from a legal perspective, these actions are considered illegal publications or illegal religious activities.

An international religious organization led by a charismatic leader has structural contradictions with the religious management system in sovereign country regions. Specifically, it is the contradiction between the traditional management paradigm and the new technology environment. It filled the spiritual gap of Chinese people during the social transformation period and also used modern media for low-cost religious discourse dissemination. However, its independent discourse system and strong social mobilization ability broke the monopoly of official religious institutions, so it was judged to have illegal infiltration threats to ideological security and social stability. The essence of this controversy goes beyond the academic debate of doctrinal orthodoxy and personal moral judgment. The in-depth participation of modern mass media has triggered the reconstruction of orthodox beliefs and the ecological reconstruction of the religious field. By communicating through decentralized, real-time, and interactive digital media, the authority of the traditional bureaucratic system has been weakened. The actual operation of religion is separated from the framework of traditional governance and organizational

³¹⁶ Cao, "Chinese Religions," 3.

control.

By effectively using non-mediation media and large-scale laymen's empowerment movement, Ven. Jingkong constructs a highly decentralized "shadow order" on the edge of the authority of traditional temples. This reflects the internal tension of the identity logic during the transformation from traditional "lineage authority" to modern "knowledge contract." Under the new identity model, the connection of believers does not rely on specific sect organizations or bureaucratic systems, but originates from the "consensual alignment" with standardized Pure Land belief discourse and practice systems. However, because this identity logic is separated from the traditional temple institutions and patriarchal inheritance systems, the traditional temple structure is weakened.

Max Weber explored why people obey orders and proposed three types of legitimate authority: rational-law type, based on law, procedures, and bureaucratic systems, which is a characteristic of modern states; traditional type, based on sacred traditions and hereditary power, which has been followed by people for a long time, such as in monarchies; charismatic type, based on loyalty to the extraordinary sanctity of outstanding leaders, etc.³¹⁷ In Chinese Buddhism, traditional authority corresponds to such things as the official bureaucratic institutions maintaining the monopoly of religious capital, the disciplinary traditions and continuity of the master-disciple network in

³¹⁷ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 941–55, 1111–56.

traditional monastic communities. Charismatic authority relies on famous masters or leaders to inspire the masses and provide spiritual care, with a widespread regional feature. As Weber mentioned, the tension between charismatic authority and traditional authority, as like the case of Ven. Jingkong. Ven. Jingkong uses modern media to establish his personal authority and freely spreads sacred stories. This non-institutionalized authority breaks the distribution pattern of religious power and triggers the exclusion of the official, bureaucratic, and traditional monastic groups. This is not merely a defense of the purity of religion; its deeper logic lies in the fact that traditional authority inevitably has to contend with the impact of emerging communication forces in order to maintain its monopoly over religious symbolic capital and its right to legitimate interpretation and compliance.

5.5 Relying on the Dharma Rather Than the Person

Starting from the initial stage when the laypeople spontaneously organized, the Amida Society broke away from the traditional bureaucratic authority system and collectively followed the personal authority of Ven. Jingkong. During this process, the believers established a new kind of dependency relationship. However, the formation of this authority was not a simple return to the previous form of dependency. In this system, even after disputes arose, many believers still showed strong attachment and loyalty to Ven. Jingkong and his doctrinal framework. Nevertheless, the Amida Society was neither a traditional monastic community strictly constrained by bureaucracy nor a highly

centralized administrative religious entity. It was essentially a relatively weak-connected lay community connected by the belief in the Pure Land. This unique organizational structure provided great flexibility and autonomy in independent decision-making, rational judgment, strategic direction, and the personalized interpretation of the doctrines of local branches.

Ven. Jingkong himself also advocated that President Chen should maintain the openness of the organization. According to Chen, Jingkong clearly told him: “You cannot act alone; you must visit other meditation centers and learn their strengths.” By citing the story of Bhikṣu Dharmākara 法藏 traveling to the 20-billion Buddha Land to seek knowledge, Jingkong encouraged the Society to maintain an open attitude towards learning. When Chen reported that the group had invited monastics from Fo Guang Shan to preside over collective chanting activities, Jingkong did not oppose and expressed that each meditation center and monastics had their unique strengths, and they should be widely integrated. To a certain extent, this inclusive and open attitude established the operational logic of the group. While respecting the core of the specific doctrines, it did not require believers to absolutely or completely follow any individual. This interactive model implicitly established a “systematic firewall” for the group. This enabled this lay organization to maintain independent authority in administrative management and decision-making while still accepting the spiritual guidance of the mentor.

This “keeping a proper distance” tension relationship was an extension of the “non-sectarian” approach adopted by Ven. Jingkong when spreading Buddhism.

Moreover, it also provided a survival strategy for the Los Angeles branch as an overseas lay organization operating in a multicultural environment. It broke away from the typical high dependence and vertical master-disciple relationship in the traditional monastic system and established “horizontal connections” based on doctrinal consistency, rather than based on personal subordination. This early openness and experimental nature made this lay organization more adaptable in the overseas Chinese community. It enabled the group to acquire and introduce more diverse Buddhist doctrines and secular resources, thereby enhancing its survival ability. Therefore, this group not only functions as a place for spreading Buddhism but also as a center for multicultural integration. In this diverse immigrant society in Los Angeles, this branch adopted this non-exclusive operational model and successfully integrated into a broader social network. This avoided the phenomenon of organizational rigidity caused by excessive reliance on any specific individual. This flexibility not only won widespread social support in this society but also provided space for the evolution of its internal governance structure.

Ironically, although these decentralized and rational traits initially manifested as a strong cohesion centered around a specific mentor, the organization’s own looseness led to situations of “disenchantment” or “internal transformation” later on. After facing various criticisms from within and outside the Buddhist community, this loyalty quietly shifted from “emotional following” to “rational identification.” In other words, guided by its own open, rational, and diverse doctrines, the reverence for the personal authority of Ven. Jingkong instead led to a departure from that authority. An interview with the

president, Mr. Chen, revealed that when the controversy caused by Ven. Jingkong in the Buddhist community later emerged, Mr. Chen became aware of these situations and conducted careful reflection and judgment. In fact, Mr. Chen observed that some of the remarks of Ven. Jingkong were inconsistent with orthodox Buddhism. This prompted Mr. Chen to downplay the importance of Ven. Jingkong in the subsequent ideological transformation of the organization and instead seek more objective evaluation criteria centered on scriptures and treatises. This shift from “relying on the individual” to “relying on the Dharma” essentially reflects the organization’s self-protection in the face of disputes regarding authority and its return to rationality. President Chen also realized that blindly following the personal opinions of the mentor while ignoring the original meaning of the scriptures could lead the organization into the quagmire of superstition and dogmatism.

This adjustment or attunement is not an emotional betrayal or an open break. Instead, it is gradually diluting the personal characteristics of the master while safeguarding the overarching trajectory of Pure Land Buddhist practice. There has been a change in the organization’s attitude, and people are emerging from absolute dependence on a single master and cultivating more independence. There are subtle behind-the-scenes adjustments within the organization: secretly retaining the master as the founding symbol of spiritual heritage, while criticizing and reinterpreting the teachings in a modern sense. Persons introducing the multi-interpretation doctrine and representatives of monastic groups gradually disperse the discourse system, reducing the risk of a “single authority.”

The “selective inheritance” strategy enables the group to interact with a broader monastic community and does not openly challenge the status of the master. Thus, a new balance is sought between “following the master” and “independent thinking.” This transformation does not weaken the original authority, still recognizes the contribution of the master’s guidance, and the focus of belief shifts from worshipping “personal charisma” to verifying “the practical effect of the doctrine.”

The Amida Society quotes the Kālāma Sutta of Theravada Buddhism, perhaps to create a new internal atmosphere and encourage members to maintain vigilance and critical thinking. This scripture mentions that people should not blindly believe in the teachings merely because of the charisma of the preacher, the authority of tradition, or the master-disciple relationship. The final basis for judgment is whether the teachings can effectively stop suffering. The innovative application of this scripture provides the Amida Society with a method to resist blind following, showing that contemporary lay Buddhist organizations can establish an independent position while respecting their teachers and emphasizing the verification from individual experiences. For the Amida Society, this transformation did not adopt an extreme way to eliminate the deep religious feelings of believers. Instead, it used the wisdom of moderation and inclusiveness to return the right to make judgments and decisions to the consciousness of individual practitioners themselves. Jingkong’s doctrine is still placed in the association’s library or audio-visual area, but the actual practice direction has changed. The past individual dependence (with strong personality cult) has quietly transformed into doctrine dependence based on the

orthodox Buddhist logic.

In essence, this evolutionary process led to a modern transformation of the community's educational model from blind superstition to rational belief. Through critical reflection, the empirical spirit in the Kālāma Sutta became an assessment tool, achieving a profound shift from emotional piety to rational adherence to the Dharma. This internal logical evolution indicates that how lay Buddhism adapts to the crisis of authority through self-adjustment or self-coordination ultimately realizes a more conscious reconstruction of faith in the context of modern society. This transformation from personal worship to widespread participation in the doctrine reflects the profound meaning of "relying on the Dharma rather than on the individual." Ultimately, this rational self-dominant practice model provides a faith framework for modern lay practitioners, which retains the traditional sacredness while fully conforming to the logic of modernity.

However, by interpreting and applying the Kālāma Sutta from different perspectives, the issue of lay subjectivity can be expanded to different levels. Influenced by universal rationality and empiricism, the mainstream Western lay Buddhist movement and the Chinese American lay Buddhist groups show varying degrees of differences in reconfiguring the subjectivity of laypeople. Returning to the interpretation of the Kālāma Sutta, the mainstream view has undergone significant revisions in both the academic and Buddhist circles. Emphasizing rationality, empirical evidence, and personal experience does not mean rejecting unknown things or beliefs that cannot be verified through

empirical means at present. For the Amida Society, this is specifically manifested in its continuous support and respect for tradition and the authority of monastics, even so, it maintains independence in choosing doctrines and upholds the subjectivity of laypeople. In its later development, the organization shifted from personality cult to broad doctrinal engagement in the doctrine, from worshipping a single authority to inviting various monastics. The main criterion for judgment became: whether the monastics have disseminated orthodox Pure Land doctrines and whether their words are consistent with their moral behavior.

Through multi-dimensional interpretation and academic borrowing of the Kālāma Sutta, the contemporary Buddhist academic community has deeply explored the issue of layperson subjectivity from multiple perspectives. Under the general influence of rationalism and empiricism, the mainstream layperson movements in the West and the Chinese American layperson groups have shown significant differences in the way they reconstruct the subjectivity of laypeople. Based on a re-examination of the Kālāma Sutta, both the academic community and the Buddhist community have critically revised the previous overly simplistic rationalist interpretation. They emphasize that rationality, empiricism, and personal experience do not necessarily require the abandonment of religious beliefs or transcendental elements. While establishing the ability to independently discern and the autonomy of laypeople, this organization still insists on maintaining and respecting the traditional lineage and the authority of the monastic community. Looking back on its evolution, this group gradually moved beyond the early

tendency of individual worship and moved towards a broader and more inclusive approach to Buddhist cultivation. Its focus has shifted from blind obedience to individual authority to rational decision-making and judgment. During this evolution, the group has placed the orthodoxy of the Pure Land belief and aspiration at the forefront, and has also conducted a comprehensive and prudent assessment of the verbal logic and moral conduct of various invited preachers.

Chapter Six:

The Monastic Role in Lay Buddhist Organizations

6.1 Chinese Monastics in the U.S. in the Post-1950 Era

Following the World War II, the spread and institutionalization of Buddhism in North America were driven by two forces: the lay elites among the “upgraded immigrants,” and the transmission system of the transnational monastic groups. This cross-border development of Buddhism was rooted in the social structure of the Chinese immigrant community and also required dialogue with the modern Western cultural context. Therefore, this was not only an expansion of religious geography but also a social experiment to rebuild Chinese cultural identity and spiritual home in a multicultural environment.

Firstly, the significant demographic changes among the Chinese immigrants in North America established a resilient sociological bedrock for the development of Chinese Buddhism. Following the end of the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1943 and the enactment of the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*, North America experienced what Wang Gungwu described as an “upgrading the migrant” wave.³¹⁸ Generally

³¹⁸ Jens Reinke, *Mapping Modern Mahayana: Chinese Buddhism and Migration in the Age of Global Modernity* (De Gruyter, 2021), 45–46; Gungwu Wang, “Upgrading the Migrant: Neither *Huaqiao* nor *Huaren*,” in *The Last Half Century of Chinese Overseas*, ed. Elizabeth Sinn (Hong Kong University Press, 1998).

possessing higher education and substantial economic resources, these new Chinese immigrants became the material backbone supporting the Sangha. Furthermore, their intellectual capacity to engage with Western modernity made them catalysts for the modernization of Buddhist institutions, thereby cultivating a fertile soil for the growth of the Dharma. As mature lay elites established the necessary organizational and economic foundations, propagating monastics frequently traveled to the U.S. under their direct sponsorship and institutional patronage.

The first wave of pioneers, such as Ven. Zhiding 知定 and Ven. Miaofeng 妙峰, established the earliest practice centers in areas with prominent Chinese communities. Ven. Zhiding was the first Chinese monk to propagate Buddhism in North America; Invited by the local Chinese community, he settled in Honolulu in 1956. “Ten years later, he opened the Xu Yun Temple 虚云寺.”³¹⁹ Ven. Zhi Ding was initially a lay disciple of Ven. Xuyun 虚云 and later he accepted the monastic precepts under him. Naming this temple after the master not only demonstrated recognition of the authority of the tradition but also continued the traditional Dharma lineage based on the master-disciple relationship.

In 1962, Miao Feng arrived in San Francisco. Ven. Miaofeng studied under Ven. Yinshun and represented the modern Buddhist trajectory of Ven. Taixu’s lineage. He eventually settled in New York and established Fawang Temple 法王寺 in 1963.

³¹⁹ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, “The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism: Clergy and Devotee Networks in the Twentieth Century,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005): 225.

Additionally, invited by senior lay devotee Wu Peilin 伍佩琳, Ven. Ledu traveled to San Francisco in 1963 to establish the Orthodox Buddhist and Daoist Study Society 正信佛道研究会. Subsequently, in 1964, he relocated to New York at the invitation of lay devotee Jiang Huang Yujing. Both Jiang and Ven. Ledu were disciples of Ven. Tanxu. In New York, Ven. Ledu collaborated with lay devotee Shen Jiazhen and other followers to establish the BAUS. Shen's wife, Ju Woo, donated a property that enabled Ven. Ledu to found the Dajue Temple. In 1974, Ledu established the Young Men's Buddhist Association of America 美国佛教青年会 to translate sutras into English.³²⁰

The early propagation of Chinese American Buddhism was characterized as “point-like existence.” Monks and lay devotees shared little to no geographical connection; instead, their relationships were sustained by a strong sense of vertical loyalty.³²¹ Later, “establishment monastics” such as Ven. Xuan Hua, Ven. Hsing Yun, and Ven. Sheng Yen founded large-scale transnational religious organizations. Through the large-scale, institutionalized transplantation of Chinese Buddhism, they achieved a visionary leap from a closed “ethnic religion” to an open “world religion.”

North American Buddhist groups adopt modern management methods such as board elections, but the early “point-like” monastic group operation logic is still affected by the traditional “religious kinship network” and H. Welch's “vertical loyalty” model.

³²⁰ Ashiwa and Wank, “Globalization of Chinese Buddhism,” 228–29.

³²¹ Ashiwa and Wank, “Globalization of Chinese Buddhism,” 231.

This driving force is the key to the initial cross-border spread of Chinese Buddhism.³²² In other words, early propagation networks frequently developed along the traditional, authoritative lineages of figures like Ven. Xuyun, Ven. Taixu, and Ven. Tanxu 倓虛. The flow of personnel and resources depended heavily on trust relationships within these Dharma lineages. For example, Ven. Ledu's reliance on the support of lay devotee Jiang Huang Yujing and his subsequent appeal for assistance to his Dharma brother, Ven. Miaozhan 妙湛, both exemplify these bonds of lineage kinship. Under this model, lay devotees formed a vertical structure of emotional attachment and power by taking refuge in and making offerings to specific charismatic monastics. Welch's model of "vertical loyalty" can also be applied to master-disciple lineage relationships. Disciples within a given lineage establish spiritual authority through Dharma transmission, while lay communities attach themselves to these key figures, providing resource support in specific localities.

Ven. Zhiding, Ven. Miaofeng, and Ven. Ledu belonged to the distinct lineages of Ven. Xuyun, Ven. Taixu, and Ven. Tanxu, respectively; consequently, there was minimal overlap in their lineage affiliations. The Dharma transmission served as a critical mechanism in the early propagation of Chinese Buddhism in North America. It served not only as proof of religious pedigree but also as the foundation for organizational legitimacy, resource mobilization, and personnel transfer. In a new environment where

³²² Ashiwa and Wank, "Globalization of Chinese Buddhism," 220–21.

Chinese Buddhism had not yet been widely established, a clear Dharma transmission endowed monastics with unquestionable religious authority and legitimacy among the laity. This transmission established a bond of “vertical loyalty” between lay devotees and monastics, characterized by a profound attachment and reverence for a shared master. This dynamic enabled affluent lay devotees to mobilize resources efficiently, thereby supporting monastics in establishing temples. Furthermore, Dharma transmission served as the cornerstone for sustaining monastic networks. It allowed these pioneers to recruit well-trained young monastics from the monastic ranks in their home countries, thereby addressing the shortage of personnel in their propagation efforts.

Consequently, in subsequent developments, Ven. Zhiding named his temple after his master and invited Ven. Fahui 法慧, who was also ordained by Ven. Xuyun. The two were Dharma brothers. In New York, Ven. Miaofeng established the Cihang Prayer Hall 慈航精舍 to honor his teacher, Ven. Cihang 慈航. During his early years, Ven. Ledu established trust and cooperation precisely through his shared lineage ties with Jiang Huang Yujing, a lay disciple of Ven. Tanxu. Additionally, both he and Ven. Miao-zhan 妙湛, the dean of Minnan Buddhist College, belonged to the lineage of Ven. Tanxu, making them Dharma siblings. Together with Ven. Miaofeng, he actively sponsored and facilitated the relocation of several graduates from his own Buddhist College of Minnan (BCM) to the United States.³²³ By bringing in these monastic talents, these monastics not

³²³ Ashiwa and Wank, “Globalization of Chinese Buddhism,” 230–31; Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, *The Space of Religion: Temple, State, and Buddhist Communities in Modern China* (Columbia University Press, 2023), 186–88.

only expanded the Sangha and the influence of Chinese Buddhism in America but also leveraged their connections in education and Buddhist academies to sustain lineage networks within a transnational context. Even for those who later established massive bureaucratic organizations, the core of their organizational cohesion still relied heavily on a “vertical” spiritual authority and devotion directed toward the traditional Sangha, such as Fo Guang Shan. This indicates the pivotal role of monastic authority as an indispensable driver when spreading Buddhism.

Although the previous analysis emphasized the core role of the authority of the monastics in the dissemination of Buddhism, we must go beyond the superficial “monk-centered” model and re-examine the role of the religious community. Behind these early pioneers lies an important historical fact: most of them were either actively invited by the laities or hired by existing Buddhist organizations. This phenomenon reveals the unique core role played by the lay believers within the process of propagating Buddhism across the United States. At early stages, when the monk groups had not yet established a solid organizational and institutional foundation, the Buddhist elites with a global perspective and financial resources initiated the foundational step in the cross-border transplantation of Buddhism through the act of “invitation.” They not only provided actual spaces such as temple properties, but also served as early bridges, connecting Buddhism with mainstream American society. Therefore, the early development of modern Chinese Buddhism in North America basically followed a symbiotic model, that is, “laypeople built the stage, and monastics performed the play (*jushi datai sengren changxi* 居士搭

台，僧人唱戏).” This model preserved the sacred doctrinal authority of the monastics while fully mobilizing the agency of laypeople in allocating modern social resources. Within the context of globalized transnational propagation, this dynamic balance in monastic-lay relations assumed a more distinct and critical significance than it had in traditional societies. Naturally, there are further details and dynamic relationships worth exploring here, and Shen’s model differs specifically from that of the Amida Society. The following sections will analyze these characteristics in detail.

6.2 Shen’s Patronage of the Sangha

6.2.1 The Institutional Design of BAUS

For a modern, lay-led Buddhist organization, establishing legitimate authority in its internal governance while properly managing its relationship with the sacred authority of the traditional Sangha is a primary issue concerning its survival and long-term development. Although lay Buddhist organizations rapidly emerged in early North American Chinese immigrant communities, demonstrating strong mobilization capabilities by widely inviting eminent monastics across the ocean to propagate the Dharma, this model of “laypeople building the stage, and monastics performing the play” often faced inherent instability. For the invited monastics, taking up long-term residence in lay-led centers often required a difficult balancing act between maintaining the dignity of traditional monastic authority and relying on the organization. The core tension here lies in a fundamental difference in the logic of power: the modern corporate governance

structure of a non-profit organization (NPO) inherently conflicts with the traditional hierarchical system of the Sangha as a religious community.

Specifically, in a lay organization adopting a modern board of directors, financial authority and administrative power are often concentrated in the hands of the lay leader serving as president. There is a nominal existence of a board of directors. In the actual operation of small organizations, the situation of “chairman dominating and the board of directors being weak” often occurs. The other members only play an auxiliary or endorsement role. Such a power structure makes it easy to marginalize the monastics in the organizational decision-making process, making them “religious service providers” or “ritual experts,” not the real spiritual leaders. Such a mismatch often leads to the breakdown of lay-monastic cooperation. Many independent monastics with the ambition of dharma propagation, after accumulating enough social capital and followers, will leave the organizations dominated by the laity, establish their own temples, and re-adopt the traditional temple model based on “dharma lineage inheritance” and “master-disciple relationship.” In North American Buddhism, the “employment, leaving employment, and independence” model is common. This model reflects that the traditional temple authority has discomfort or resistance to the modern lay authority.

Therefore, Shen Jiazhen has challenges, not just about fundraising and infrastructure. He also needs wisdom in institutional design. Within the framework of non-profit organizations stipulated by modern law, relying on clever institutional design to balance “lay support” and “monastic administration” is very important for the

institution's operation and the maintenance of monk authority. This determines whether BAUS can break through the restrictions of lay groups and achieve healthy development and inheritance.

In 1964, Shen Jiazhen met Ven. Ledu. The two talked about the development of Buddhist undertakings. The master said that before the Communist Party was in power, there were problems in Chinese Buddhism and it was in a state of decline. He criticized the old model, which attached importance to things like divination, repentance rituals, engaging in sectarian criticism, and monastics regarded temples as private property to inherit. If American Buddhism learns this old model, it will be difficult to take root in. Furthermore, Ven. Ledu felt that establishing a Buddhist organization was more important than building temples; such an organization could unite many Buddhists to work together and propagate Buddhism throughout the United States. The two immediately agreed on their vision for Dharma propagation, and Ven. Ledu's pragmatic style earned Shen's deep admiration.³²⁴ Following this important meeting that same year, Shen Jiazhen applied to formally establish the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS). Based on the advice of a Caucasian American lawyer, the association's constitution adopted standard American corporate bylaws, implementing a membership and board of directors system. This aligned BAUS with the American democratic legal system from the beginning of its establishment.³²⁵

³²⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 164.

³²⁵ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 167–68.

As mentioned above, in 1968, BAUS held its first special membership meeting to pass its bylaws and operational rules, and then the general membership meeting and elected its first board of directors. The bylaws adopted at the meeting of the BAUS established the democratic organizational principles. All members have equal voting and election rights. The term of directors is three years, and one-third of the board members are elected each year to facilitate the integration of new talents into the leadership. The meeting also established an internal organizational structure, divided into two operating systems: the administrative system and the Buddhist affairs system. The administrative system includes affiliated members, formal members, the board, the chairman, the vice-chairman, the financial supervisor, the secretary, the membership committee, the finance committee, the publishing committee, the library committee, the temple, the academies, and the meditation center. The president serves as the administrative head, assisted by the vice-president, the financial supervisor, the secretary, and the committee chairperson. The Buddhist affairs system includes Dharma masters, *bhikshus*, *bhikshunis*, *shramanerakas*, and *shramanerikas*.³²⁶

Furthermore, it is stipulated that the chairperson can only be elected from monastics. After the current president retires, the successor president will also be selected from monastics. Laypeople can hold the position of vice-president or lower-level positions. After 35 years of its establishment, this regulation has never changed and has

³²⁶ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 168–70.

always been a unique feature of the organization. Eventually, Ven. Le Du was elected as the first president, and was responsible for managing all affairs and Buddhist affairs. His “system establishment” is widely regarded as his greatest contribution to BAUS and the broader Buddhist community. In terms of administrative affairs, he established a comprehensive democratic management system. In terms of Buddhist affairs, he advocated that when promoting Buddhism, Buddhist doctrines should be interpreted based on the basic spirit of Buddhism, believing that “one should not be confined to any specific method of any single sect, nor should there be sectarian prejudice.” Therefore, during his ten-year tenure as the president, he invited outstanding monastics from different sects to preside over the dissemination of Buddhist teachings at the association.³²⁷

Although Shen was the main organizer and financier of the organization, he did not hold a dominant position within it. On the contrary, he fully respected traditions and the monastic community, while advocating democratic principles. It can be said that the regulation that limits laypeople from holding the position of president is rooted in a discerning grasp of the essential nature of Buddhist organizations and a deep respect for traditional Buddhist institutions. As the direct inheritors and practitioners of Buddhism, monastics constitute the core group of Buddhism. Limiting the presidency to monastics ensured that the leadership was in the hands of Buddhist professionals. Moreover, this

³²⁷ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 170.

arrangement more clearly reflected the core position of the Buddhist affairs system in the organization, ensuring that the dissemination of Buddhist Dharma and the welfare of all beings can be given priority.³²⁸

Shen believes that for religious groups to achieve long-term development, they must adhere to the principle of “organization-centeredness.” Contrasting the success of Christianity with the systemic flaw of factionalism in Chinese Buddhism, he concluded that Christianity revolves around organization, in which institutional power far exceeds that of the individual. In contrast, Chinese Buddhism remains individual-centered, reducing the organization to a personal tool. This often results in sectarian division and territorialism (*zongpai linli gezhan shantou* 宗派林立，各占山头), which inevitably leads to institutional decline. Therefore, BAUS needed to establish a stable, democratic system to prevent rule by personality or an individual-centered approach. The institutional design of the presidency directly reflected this concept. Shen observed that in traditional Chinese Buddhism, an individual-centered organizational model often meant that since human lifespan is limited, the enterprise collapses when the individual passes away. “Everyone experiences shifts in thought, and when these thoughts change, the enterprise is destabilized accordingly.” Furthermore, this model tends to prevent other talents from contributing, triggers interpersonal conflicts, depletes internal resources, and causes the enterprise to decline. By stipulating that the position of the presidency can

³²⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 170–71.

only be held by monastics and implementing democratic elections, it is possible to limit lay power. This prevents lay practitioners from competing for leadership based on their secular status or social connections, thereby reducing power struggles and ensuring the stability of the organization.³²⁹ Through such careful planning and institutional construction, Shen is building an “ironclad institutional foundation (*tieda de yingpan* 铁打的营盘)” for Buddhism in the United States. He believes that only by formulating regulations and rules that are in line with the American spirit can Buddhism develop into an important religion with real influence on American society. He had long recognized that only through such measures could Buddhism take root in a democratic society governed by the rule of law, such as the United States. This would also enable the organization to accommodate the inevitable influx of non-Chinese Buddhists, moving beyond the demographic limitation of Chinese Buddhists remaining a minority in the country.³³⁰

Subsequently, Ven. Ledu declared that the presidency should be limited to two consecutive terms. Meanwhile, Shen served as vice president for over thirty consecutive years without financial compensation, becoming an exemplar of safeguarding organizational interests. This system and practice established a model wherein organizational interests superseded personal fame and wealth. This paved a resilient foundation for the healthy development of the BAUS. In his role as a “senior assistant,”

³²⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 170–71.

³³⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 385–86.

Shen supported five successive presidents: Ven. Ledu, Ven. Minzhi, Ven. Renjun 仁俊, Ven. Xianming 显明, and Ven. Mingguang 明光. He significantly advanced the Dharma propagation efforts of the BAUS and, alongside Ven. Ledu, served as an exemplar in safeguarding organizational interests. Combining “modern democracy & rule of law organizational principles” with the spirit of Buddhism, this regulation aims to prevent the expansion of individualism and secular power, and to build a stable and pure platform to assist long-term development.³³¹

This institutional design originated from Shen’s in-depth reflection on the defects of the traditional Buddhist organizational system in China, and also reflects his strategic understanding of how to modernize and localize Chinese Buddhism within a Western context. Shen respected and supported the authority of the traditional monastic community. However, when there was a lack of the constraint of traditional patriarchal authority and insufficient modern institutional checks and balances in American society, blind worship of the authority of monastics is likely to form closed sectarianism. So, by means of institutional design, he wanted to establish a framework in the self-constructed Buddhist space to regulate any form of unhealthy and absolute worship of the monastic authority.

Mr. Shen has his own unique observation and thinking on the Buddhism propagation strategy. He keenly observed that many monastics from the East, although in

³³¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 171.

the United States, were still completely surrounded by the social circle of Chinese believers. This comfortable environment actually forms a trap, which weakens the motivation of monastics to learn English and integrate into the mainstream society. This turned the temple into an isolated ivory tower, even a spiritual feudal territory, which led to an isolated and dependent relationship between monastics and believers, rather than an open interaction aimed at spreading Buddhist teachings to the public. He believes that Buddhism will never reach the deepest part of American society unless it can get out of the Chinese community. This requires monastics to abandon the “closed circle” mentality and transcend the narrowness of Buddhism in Chinatown.³³² When discussing cross-cultural communication strategies, Mr. Shen put forward the metaphor of “reverse Matteo Ricci.” Matteo Ricci was a Jesuit missionary in the Ming Dynasty. He took off his robes, put on Confucian costumes, and studied Confucianism deeply in order to adapt to Chinese society. Taking this as an example, Mr. Shen constructed a “reverse” scenario: a Chinese monk may have profound wisdom of skillful means, continue to develop in line with the image of a layman, and integrate into the Western society with the help of the government, academic circles, and scientific circles with fluent English. Although this deep cultural adaptation is not an orthodox form, it retains the true essence of Buddhism and is the most effective way for Buddhist Dharma to take root within the American

³³² Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Fang Shen Jiazhen jushi—Fuhui shuangxiu, zhuangyan shijie” 访沈家桢居士——福慧双修, 庄严世界, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi yanjiang ji* 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 220–21.

landscape. On the contrary, it has realized the transformation from simple “transplantation” to real “internalization.”³³³ This prediction implies the basic development direction established by Mr. Shen for the BAUS: it should not only be a group to safeguard the ethnic identity of Chinese Americans, but should be transformed into a modern religious organization that conforms to the “American spirit” and embodies universal values.³³⁴

In a word, the institutional framework designed by Mr. Shen for the BAUS does not rigidly oppose the two simple and opposite options of “laymen leading” and “monastics leading.” On the contrary, he adopted the “mixed constitution” model with great political wisdom, realizing the dynamic balance between “respecting” and “standardizing” the authority of monastics. This balance does not stem from the static compromise caused by the power struggle, but is based on a deep comprehension of the modern rule of law and the tenets of traditional Buddhism.

In terms of respecting the authority of the monastics, Shen aimed to establish a sacred hierarchical order for the monastics and an assistance system for the laypeople, with the purpose of maintaining the orthodoxy of Chinese Buddhism in a multicultural environment. By ensuring the authority of the monastics in the top-level design of the organization, this framework legally recognized the leadership position of the monastics as the upholders of the Dharma. This internally affirmed the religious orthodoxy of the

³³³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 412–13.

³³⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 385–86.

organization, externally established the social image of the monastics as representatives of Buddhism, and ensured the normal conduct of religious affairs and rituals within the organization. As the main founder and financial sponsor, Shen voluntarily held a secondary role for thirty consecutive years. This approach essentially transferred the laypeople's secular capital (funds and administrative power) to support and enhance the spiritual capital of the monastics. This effectively avoided the situation of capital controlling the monastics that occurred in some lay Buddhist groups during the republican era, ensuring that outstanding monastics could live and spread the Dharma as “spiritual leaders” rather than “employees.”

However, Mr. Shen's unique contribution lies in his clear recognition that although he deeply respects the sacredness of the Sangha, the United States lacks the supervisory mechanism of a traditional patriarchal society. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce modern “governance institutions based on law” to regulate the power of the monastics and prevent the privatization and corruption of power. To this end, he utilized the institutional logic of modern non-profit organizations to set necessary boundaries for the power of the monastics. Through implementing membership systems, term limits for the board of directors, and regular elections, the BAUS fundamentally eliminated the feudal remnants in traditional Chinese Buddhism, especially those temple systems controlled and inherited by the “tonsure lineages.” Under this framework, temple assets were restored to public ownership of the company. The role of the monastics was redefined as “public servants” rather than “temple owners” holding private property.

Thus, the “secular property rights” and “private personnel control” were successfully separated from the power of the monastics. Additionally, by establishing a dual-track system that separates administrative affairs from Dharma affairs, Shen constructed a micro-balancing framework similar to “Buddhist constitutionalism.” Although the abbot of the temple is responsible for organizational work and has absolute authority over the dissemination of the Dharma and rituals, the specific “administrative affairs,” including administrative management, finance, legal affairs, and publishing, are mainly handled by lay directors with corresponding professional skills. This arrangement of separating finance from power and programming decision-making procedures enables the monastics to avoid cumbersome secular administrative work and focus on spiritual practice. Objectively speaking, this also forms a balancing system where lay Buddhists play the role of “supervisory board (*jianshi hui* 监事会)” and effectively prevents personality cults and autocracy.

From the above analysis, we can draw the conclusion that this dialectical unity of respect and regulation enables the BAUS to avoid the common secularization trap in “lay Buddhism.” It also overcomes the rigidity of traditional “monastic Buddhism.” This approach realizes the modern organizational model of “relying on the Dharma (including Buddhist doctrines and secular laws) rather than relying on individuals,” providing a feasible institutional model for the long-term survival of Buddhism in Western society.

6.2.2 The Landing of Monastics in North America

Like Shen, lay believers utilize their abundant financial resources, extensive social connections, and organizational capabilities to provide a crucial “landing platform” for Chinese monastics who have just arrived in the United States. What they offer goes beyond visa invitations and financial assistance; they also provide stable, legally recognized, and mature organizations where the monastics can reside and promote Buddhism. These platforms enable the monastics to establish themselves, gain experience, and build connections with local believers. Once the conditions are ripe, these outstanding monastics will leave and establish their own sect temples in other American regions, thus sowing the seeds of Chinese Buddhism in a wider area. Therefore, Buddhist lay organizations often serve as “transit stations” for Chinese monastics arriving in the United States to promote Buddhism.

With its substantial financial resources as a shipping giant and a grand religious vision, lay disciple Mr. Shen transformed the BAUS into the most inclusive Chinese Buddhist center in North America at that time. It was not just an organization but also a “talent pool.” Historical records indicate that Mr. Shen provided meticulous and thoughtful support, helping outstanding monastics settle down in the United States. He issued invitations, arranged flights and accommodations, and assisted in processing permanent residency applications.³³⁵ The records show that several monastics arrived at

³³⁵ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 387.

the land of America through the BAUS and eventually established their own temples.

According to Jiang Huang Yujing, the Ven. Le Du initially gave Buddhist teachings in the Eastern States Buddhist Temple of America founded by layperson Ms. Ying Jin Yutang. Later, as one of the co-founders of the BAUS, he collaborated with Mr. Shen and became a model of co-governance by monastics and laypeople. He held the position of president for ten years, from 1964 to 1974, laying the foundation for the democratic management system of the BAUS. However, this platform did not limit his religious pursuits. He resigned from his position in 1974. Utilizing the resources and experience gained at BAUS, he founded the Young Men's Buddhist Association of America 美国佛教青年会 and the Buddhist Text Translation Society of America and Canada 美加佛经翻译委员会.³³⁶ So, BAUS served not only as the starting point for his Dharma propagation but also as the cornerstone supporting his transition toward deeper cultural engagement.

Ven. Minzhi 敏智 (1909–1996) formerly served as the abbot of Tianning Temple 天宁寺 in Changzhou, Jiangsu. In 1973, at the invitation of BAUS, he came to America to propagate the Dharma. He served for many years as the abbot of the Temple of Enlightenment in New York and as the president of BAUS. Later, Ven. Minzhi returned to Hong Kong in the spring of 1976 to fund the construction of Chuang Yen Monastery. Thanks to his moral prestige, the fundraising efforts were highly successful. During the

³³⁶ Ashiwa and Wank, "Globalization of Chinese Buddhism," 229; Wang, "Zhongguo fojiao," 18.

initial land-clearing phase for Chuang Yen Monastery, Ven. Minzhi personally led devotees at the construction site. They worked together to saw wood, clear brush, move stones, and build bridges. He later established the World Buddhist Center 世界佛教中心和 Guanyin Temple 观音寺 in Chinatown. There, he held Dharma assemblies every weekend, leading the congregation in Buddha-name recitation. The number of devotees grew steadily, resulting in a thriving Buddhist community. In 1986, the BAUS board of directors held another election. At the earnest request of the board members, he assumed the presidency of BAUS for a second term.³³⁷

The arrival and subsequent independence of Ven. Sheng Yen serve as the best illustration of this “incubation model.” In 1975, invited by Shen, he came to America from Japan. Shen had been his anonymous sponsor during his studies in Japan. Furthermore, when Ven. Sheng Yen first arrived in New York without knowing English, Shen hired a private tutor for him. Ven. Sheng Yen successively held the post of the vice president of BAUS, and the abbot of the Enlightenment Temple. After gaining an understanding of American society and building a follower base through BAUS, Sheng established the Chan Meditation Center in New York in 1979.³³⁸ This ultimately launched the global Dharma propagation mission of Dharma Drum Mountain.³³⁹

Also invited by BAUS, Ven. Renjun 仁俊 traveled to the United States in 1973

³³⁷ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Yi Min’gong” 忆敏公, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi yanjiang ji* 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 290–92; Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 379.

³³⁸ It’s also named as 纽约禅中心 or 东初禅寺.

³³⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 427; Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 30–31.

and later served as the abbot of the Enlightenment Temple and the president of BAUS. His residency at BAUS provided a crucial opportunity to disseminate Ven. Yinshun's Humanistic Buddhism in the eastern United States. Based on this foundation, he later established Bodhi Monastery 同净兰若 in New Jersey. This institution became a major center for Ven. Yinshun's thought in North America.³⁴⁰

Another example is Ven. Jinghai 净海, who was invited to New York in 1972 to propagate the Dharma. He initially resided at the BAUS and later stayed at the Temple of Enlightenment and Bao'en Temple 报恩寺. In 1978, he relocated to Houston, Texas, where he co-founded the Texas Buddhist Association 德州佛教会 and Buddha Light Temple 佛光寺 with Ven. Yongxing 永惺. He also facilitated the construction of the Jade Buddha Temple 玉佛寺, becoming a pioneering propagator of Buddhism in the American South. Ven. Zhihai 智海 got an invitation to America in 1967. After serving as a board member of BAUS, venerable migrated westward to San Francisco in 1972 and set the Prajna Lecture Hall at Buddha Mountain Temple 佛山寺般若讲堂. Ven. Xianming 显明 took a trip to America in 1984, visiting Los Angeles before arriving in New York. At that time, BAUS had recently established Chuang Yen Monastery and completed its initial phase of construction, then appointed Xianming as the third abbot. In the 1990s, Ven. Jiru 继如 became the abbot of both temples. He later relocated to St. Louis in the Midwest to pioneer new efforts in Dharma propagation.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Shen, "Yi Min'gong," 291; Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 380.

³⁴¹ Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 378, 385, 387, 389.

Complementing the efforts of C. T. Shen was Mrs. Ying Jin Yutang, the founder of the Eastern States Buddhist Temple of America. This institution is described as the first temple in New York to be managed by a monastic. Scholars have explicitly noted that she played a significant role in facilitating the transnational relocation of numerous Chinese monastics, who subsequently went on to govern the foundational network of temples in America. Mahayana Temple 大乘寺, established by Mrs. Ying in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, served not only as a place of practice for devotees but also as a residence for monastics. According to records, Ven. Shouye 寿冶 served as the abbot of Mahayana Temple before establishing Guangming Temple 光明寺 in New York's Chinatown. Although initially invited by lay Buddhists in San Francisco, Ven. Miaofeng 妙峰 was soon asked by Mrs. Ying's organization to preside over Dharma assemblies in New York. Recognizing the potential for propagating the Dharma on the East Coast, he decided to stay. He subsequently established the Fawang Temple 法王寺 in Chinatown, Manhattan, which became an important symbol of Chinese Buddhism on the East Coast. This model also applies to the Ven. Haolin 浩霖 who arrived in the U.S. under the sponsorship of Mrs. Ying. On this basis, he established the Eastern Chan Temple 东禅寺 in New York, continuing the model of introducing, resident, and independent temple construction.³⁴²

³⁴² Yu Lingbo 于凌波, "Ying Jinyutang jushi (1915 nian~) *Hanchuan fojiao renwu jindai renwu*" 应金玉堂居士 (1915 年~) 《汉传佛教人物近现代人物》, *Nanguo fojiao* 南国佛教, accessed October 18, 2025, <http://www.n12345.com/dict-aaw-7803.html#>; Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 372–73, 376–79.

In short, the history of Chinese Buddhism in North America throughout the 1960s and 1970s was largely determined by the cooperation and interaction between lay elites and monastic groups. Lay leaders like Shen and Ms. Ying have utilized their secular success and resources to establish highly inclusive and inclusive public religious platforms, such as BAUS and Mahayana Temple. These institutions provide a crucial “landing platform” for Chinese monastics to enter the United States. For newly arrived monastics, these platforms serve as “river crossing rafts.” Here, monastics obtained their legal status and the primitive resources needed to spread Buddhism. Once the conditions are ripe, they will naturally develop towards establishing independent temples and establishing their own lineage. This transition from relying on lay organizations to establishing independent monastic communities is an effective and mutually beneficial communication strategy. It significantly accelerated the expansion and diversification of Chinese Buddhism within the American landscape.

As a critical platform, lay organizations have a highly adaptable and open operational model, contributing to the early spread of Chinese Buddhism here. Regarding the adherence to tradition, most lay organizations (such as BAUS and Mahayana Temple) have always respected the authority of the Sangha, reflecting the core principle of Chinese Buddhism. However, in practical practices, they have demonstrated a broad-mindedness that transcends sectarian boundaries and a pragmatic attitude towards appointing capable individuals. They are not bound by or fully respect any single Buddhist tradition or teaching tradition. On the contrary, as long as a monk possesses

pure moral behavior, profound Buddhist knowledge and cultivation, and dedicated meditation experience, they will be widely invited to spread Buddhism on these platforms, regardless of their sectarian background.

This flexible, merit-based dissemination strategy led by laity greatly overcomes the geographical and sectarian limitations of traditional bloodlines. Following its passage in 1965, the *Immigration Act* indirectly and effectively facilitated the rapid and widespread influx of outstanding monastics and various Buddhist traditions into the United States. Therefore, it quickly established a diverse early landscape of Chinese Buddhism in the United States. Undoubtedly, this efficient, inclusive, and pragmatic communication model is closely related to Shen and his contemporaries' lay identity, cross-cultural perspective, and propagation ideals. This allows us to clearly observe the special value and historical contribution of lay Buddhism in the early spread of Chinese Buddhism in North America, surpassing traditional boundaries.

6.2.3 Cross-Sectarian Support for the Sangha

In addition to providing accommodation and communication facilities for the newly arrived monastics, Shen also extensively supported independent monastic groups. He actively promoted lectures and exchanges among renowned monastics from different sects around the world. These actions of his profoundly embodied the concept of protecting the true Dharma without any sectarian bias, which also coincided with his institutional efforts to establish the BAUS in 1964.

As mentioned earlier, Mr. Shen's early financial support for the two sect leaders,

Ven. Shengyan and Ven. Xuanhua contributed to the establishment of the sect system in the United States. It is worth noting that even after Shengyan left BAUS, Mr. Shen's assistance did not cease. Additionally, the Bodhi House 菩提精舍 founded by Mr. Shen in New York invited Buddhist experts from all over the world to reside and teach, becoming an important center for cross-sectarian dissemination in North America.³⁴³ In the early environment of scarce Buddhist resources in North America, this lay-centered communication network effectively eliminated geographical and sectarian barriers, promoting exchanges among different Buddhist sects.

A detailed review of the relevant archival documents indicates that the list of those supported by Mr. Shen covered several major schools of contemporary Buddhism. Among the highly respected leaders in the Buddhist community, Ven. Yanpei 演培 was undoubtedly a prominent figure. Serving as the abbot of Shandao Temple 善导寺 in Taipei and Lingfeng Prajna Lecture Hall 灵峰般若讲堂 in Vietnam, as well as the founder of Fuhui Lecture Hall 福慧讲堂 and the first president of the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services 新加坡佛教福利协会, Ven. Yanpei delivered significant teachings at Shen's center. His lectures, which included "*The Concept of Right Awakening in Buddhism* 佛教的正觉思想," "*The Proper Attitude Toward the Dharma Based on the Agamas* 从阿含经义说明法应有的态度," and "*The Expedient Means Chapter of the Vimalakirti Sutra* 维摩诘经方便品," profoundly elucidated orthodox

³⁴³ Shen and Shi, *Fuhui zhuangyan*, 171; He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 314.

Buddhist doctrines. Ven. Xichen 洗尘, another Buddhist leader and president of the Hong Kong Sangha Association 香港僧伽联谊会, delivered a lecture titled “*Why We Should Believe in Buddhism* 为什么我们要信佛” to help the public establish a foundation of faith. Ven. Richang 日常, founder of the Bliss and Wisdom Sangha 福智僧团, taught a rigorous Lamrim (*daocidi* 道次第) study system to Chinese devotees.³⁴⁴

Regarding the study of scriptures and the elucidation of doctrines, the invited monastics presented a highly diverse and flourishing academic field. Ven. Jiming 即明 dedicated considerable effort to propagating Tiantai doctrines and meditative practices. His highly systematic lectures covered the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Lesser Treatise on Concentration and Insight* 小止观, the *Wondrous Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* 法华妙慧, and the *Exhortation to Maintain and Peaceful Practices Chapters of the Lotus Sutra* 法华经中之劝持品及安乐品. Together, these provided devotees with a thorough framework of Tiantai thought. Ven. Puxian 普献 delivered accessible yet profound teachings on the Diamond Sutra. We can find a dialogue between Buddhism and modern philosophical inquiry among Ven. Haoru’s 浩如 lectures, such as “*Practicing According to Faith*, *Practicing According to the Dharma* 随信行, 随法行,” “*Starting from Scratch* 从头开始,” and “*Religion and Philosophy* 宗教、哲学.” Ven. Xiaoyun 晓云 shared “*A Brief Discussion on True Suchness and Ultimate Reality* 浅谈真如实相.” For beginners, Ven. Jingxin 净心 systematically taught “*The Basic Principles of Buddhism: Suffering*,

³⁴⁴ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 183–84, 395–96.

Accumulation, Cessation, Path, Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom 佛教的基本道理：苦集灭道、戒定慧。” Ven. Wuhuan 悟幻 highlighted the everyday ethics of Buddhist practice in his lecture “*Contentment and Patience* 知足与忍辱。” This teaching curriculum also broadly included Esoteric practices, Madhyamaka, Yogacara, and the Pure Land tradition. Ven. Chaofan 超凡 taught the “*Samadhi of the Syllable A* 阿字三昧,” introducing the meditative perspective of Esoteric Buddhism. Ven. Hongyin 宏印 dedicated himself to propagating the thought of Ven. Yinshun. He taught “*Selected Lectures from the Miaoyun Collection* 妙云集选讲” and “The Buddhist View of Dependent Origination 佛法缘起观,” emphasizing rationality and the Madhyamaka right view of dependent origination. Ven. Mengcan 梦参 encouraged the audience with his lecture “*How Buddhist Disciples Can Strengthen Their Resolve for the Path* 佛弟子如何坚定道心。” The contributions of female monastics were particularly noteworthy. Ven. Daji 大寂 delivered a lecture on “*The Agama Sutras and Pure Land Thought* 阿含经与净土思想,” attempting to bridge the doctrinal divide between early Buddhism and the Mahayana Pure Land tradition. Ven. Changyuan 昌愿 elucidated Yogacara doctrines through her lecture “*A Brief Discussion on Mind-Only* 浅谈唯心.”³⁴⁵

In addition to the visiting monastics mentioned above, Shen maintained contact with and provided long-term support to a group of monastics deeply engaged in local North American communities. These included Ven. Jinghai 净海, an outstanding

³⁴⁵ See note 344 above.

graduate of the Tianning Buddhist College, abbot of the Buddha Light Temple in Houston, and the founder of the Texas Buddhist Association; Ven. Yin Hai 印海, abbot of the Fayin Temple in Los Angeles; and Ven. Zhi Hai 智海, founder of the Prajna Lecture Hall at Foshan Temple 佛山寺 in San Francisco and abbot of Jingyelin 净业林 in Taipei. Furthermore, the funding and correspondence records include Ven. Dacheng 达成, Ven. Zongcai 宗才, and Ven. Chanyun 忏云, although no specific lecture records exist for them.³⁴⁶

Shen Jiazhen also widely patronized Buddhist charitable organizations. For example, in 1973, Typhoon Nora devastated eastern Taiwan, and the Tzu Chi Foundation had a disaster relief funding shortfall of 600,000 New Taiwan Dollars. After learning of Ven. Zhengyan's appeal, Shen Jiazhen's wife, Woo Ju, immediately remitted 5,000 US dollars. Ven. Zhengyan described this donation as a gift "falling from the sky." As Tzu Chi expanded internationally, Shen Jiazhen utilized his experience and prestige within the North American Buddhist community to provide specific, operational guidance for the establishment and management of the Tzu Chi USA Chapter. He maintained close contact with the chapter's first CEO, Stephen Huang 黄思贤, and shared his experiences and resources to promote Buddhist initiatives in the United States. By assisting Tzu Chi in establishing operational mechanisms compliant with local North American regulations, Shen demonstrated his active commitment to the internationalization and

³⁴⁶ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 183–84.

institutionalization of Buddhist philanthropy.³⁴⁷

Shen also had a deep spiritual friendship with Venerable Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan. The two shared highly aligned visions regarding the modernization of Buddhism and the globalization of the Dharma. During the early years, Ven. Hsing Yun was invited to teach the “*Guanyin Dharma Gate*” at Shen Jiazhen’s center.³⁴⁸ In April 1990, during a propagation trip to Taiwan, Shen Jiazhen made a special visit to the Veterans General Hospital 荣民总医院 in Taipei to see Ven. Hsing Yun, who had just undergone heart surgery. Despite his illness, Ven. Hsing Yun conversed with Shen in a relaxed and composed manner, leaving Shen deeply impressed. Their conversation revealed that the bronze bell commissioned by Shen for the Chuang Yen Monastery in New York was cast from the same mold as the bell commissioned by Ven. Hsing Yun for the Nan Hua Temple in South Africa. This detail served as a metaphor for their shared vision and resonance in their propagation efforts. Foguangshan alone funded the establishment of Hsi Lai Temple. But Shen and the Chuang Yen Monastery, which he founded, objectively provided a successful reference model and legal basis for later Chinese Buddhist organizations rooted in the West. After the completion of Chuang Yen Monastery, Ven. Hsing Yun led Ven. Cizhuang 慈庄, Ven. Cihui 慈惠, and other monastics on a visit. This interaction between eminent monastics and prominent

³⁴⁷ Shen Jiazhen 沈家桢, “Fangtai shiwuri zaji” 访台十五日杂记, in *Shen Jiazhen jushi yanjiang ji* 沈家桢居士演讲集 (Great Enlightenment Lotus Society, 2003), 262–63; He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 415–17.

³⁴⁸ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 395.

laypersons not only promoted overseas solidarity among different Buddhist orders but also demonstrated the cross-sectarian synergy of Chinese Buddhism on a macro level.³⁴⁹

Shen is particularly commended for his exceptional vision and Mahayana altruism. He broke the historical barriers that had long kept Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism apart, advanced the transnational expansion and structural adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism within the Western cultural landscape, and facilitated cross-sectarian exchange within a Western context. In 1974, when the 16th Karmapa, leader of the Kagyu School, made his first visit to the United States, Shen not only personally welcomed him but also arranged for his entourage to stay at Bodhi House. Shen donated his 323-acre land in Kent, New York to the Karmapa, where established Karma Triyana Dharmachakra 噶玛三乘法轮寺 (KTD), a major center for Tibetan Buddhism in North America. Later, due to the expansion of the building scale, the Karmapa decided to move the monastery to nearby Woodstock. Mr. Shen once again assisted in purchasing the land. In 1981, when the Karmapa was receiving treatment in the United States, the 70-year-old Mr. Shen even voluntarily offered to donate his blood to help with the treatment. Although this was medically unfeasible, his selfless dedication to protecting the Dharma was deeply moving and remains a celebrated example of friendship between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. Following the Karmapa's passing, some of his relics were gifted to Shen, further confirming their profound spiritual friendship and mutual respect.³⁵⁰ In

³⁴⁹ Shen, "Fangtai shiwuri," 262; He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 397.

³⁵⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 389–90.

addition to the Karmapa, Shen invited the Dalai Lama to attend the 1997 inauguration of the Great Buddha Hall at Chuang Yen Monastery and preside over a three-day Dharma event.³⁵¹ Furthermore, prominent Tibetan monastics such as Sapa Rinpoche, Geshe Rinpoche, Shamar Rinpoche, and Kalu Rinpoche were all beneficiaries of his patronage. This exemplifies broad religious unity and marks a crucial step in the cross-cultural and cross-sectarian globalization of Buddhism.³⁵²

An overview of Shen's vision for protecting the Dharma reveals that its core value lies in transcending ethnic and national boundaries. This reflects a conscious effort to promote the localization of Buddhism in a Western context, functioning essentially as a modernized strategy for Buddhist globalization. His patronage was by no means limited to the Chinese Buddhist tradition. Beneficiaries included the Korean Seon master Ven. Song Chan 松禪, and he even funded Haus Hallundbaek, a scholar of Danish descent with a Catholic background, to pursue a doctorate in Buddhist studies. This direct support for Western academic research aimed to cultivate local scholars capable of propagating the Dharma and engaging in academic exchange within a Western cultural framework. Shen also provided economic support and living allowances to young monastics and international students from both sides of the Taiwan Strait for a long time. He did not expect any return and never demanded that they belong to any specific organization.³⁵³

³⁵¹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 362.

³⁵² He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 184.

³⁵³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 184, 391, 427.

In summary, this list of beneficiaries reflects the wide range of religious sects, regional diversity and inclusiveness that Shen sponsored. This inclusive approach of gathering outstanding figures across religious boundaries enriched the landscape of Buddhism in North America at that time. It also established Shen's unique historical position as a key resource allocator of Chinese Buddhism in North America. This pure practice of "markless giving" is a true reflection of his broad preaching method, indicating his respect for the independence of the Sangha and their autonomy in teaching. As he himself said: "My goal is to spread the Dharma; I will do my best to support anyone who is committed to this cause." As a layperson, Shen Jiazhen made systematic investments and allocations of resources and institutions. This established a solid human, material and institutional foundation for the localization and globalization of Buddhism in the West, making his work an indispensable case study in the history of contemporary Buddhist dissemination.

6.2.4 President Bhikkhu Bodhi from the Theravāda Tradition

During my participation in the summer camp organized by Chuang Yen Monastery in 2024, I observed that a bhikkhu dressed in the robes of the Theravada tradition was residing in a Chinese temple and actively participating in many Dharma activities. At first glance, it seemed quite peculiar. Later, it was confirmed that this was the current president of the BAUS, Bhikkhu Bodhi. Bhikkhu Bodhi, whose common name is Jeffrey Block, was born in Brooklyn, New York, USA, in 1944. He studied philosophy at Claremont Graduate School in the early years and obtained a doctorate in

1972. However, to explore the essence of Buddhism beyond philosophical speculation, he went to Sri Lanka and took refuge under the senior monk Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Thero (1896–1998) in 1972, receiving the novice ordination and the full ordination in 1973, and officially becoming a member of the Sangha. Since then, he has been residing in Sri Lanka for a long time, deeply studying the Pali Tripitaka. This experience laid a solid foundation for his subsequent academic achievements.³⁵⁴

Bhikkhu Bodhi's most outstanding contribution in the Buddhist community lies in his systematic English translation and editing of the Nikāyas of the Pali language. Since 1984, he has served as the general editor of the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS), and was later appointed as the president in 1988. His works are known for their accuracy, elegance, and faithfulness. Not only did he revise and annotate the manuscripts of the late Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, but he also personally completed the translation of many large-scale classics. These translations have become authoritative models for Western academic circles and English practitioners to study early Buddhism. In addition, Bhikkhu Bodhi is not only an erudite teacher who sits and lectures but also a practitioner of “Socially Engaged Buddhism” who takes action. In 2007, he founded “Buddhist Global Relief” to address global hunger and poverty issues, embodying the spirit of compassion and salvation of Buddhism.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 380–81; “Bhikkhu Bodhi,” BAUS, accessed December 6, 2025, <https://www.baus.org/en/teaching/bhikkhu-bodhi/>.

³⁵⁵ Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 381.

Although Bhikkhu Bodhi is a Theravada monk, he has a deep spiritual connection with the Chinese Buddhist community in North America. Upon his retirement and subsequent relocation back to the United States in 2002, he was invited to reside at Bodhi Monastery 同净兰若 and Chuang Yen Monastery founded by Shen, giving teachings and teaching the Pali classics. In early 2004, the senior monk, Ven. Jen Chun 仁俊, a disciple of Yinshun, strongly recommended Bhikkhu Bodhi to take over the position of the chairman of the Yinshun Foundation 印顺导师基金会. This move symbolized the deep interaction of the teachings between the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. In 2007, the board of directors of the BAUS resolved to invite Bhikkhu Bodhi as one of the professor-teachers. Starting from 2008, he opened a Pali-English Buddhist scripture study class at Chuang Yen Monastery, teaching on Saturdays every week, injecting the rigorous academic style of the Theravada school into this Chinese temple, and greatly enriching its preaching content. On August 30, 2013, Bhikkhu Bodhi assumed the presidency of BAUS; in the same month, he presided over the first “Abhidhamma Retreat” at Chuang Yen Monastery.³⁵⁶

As an internationally renowned translator of Buddhist scriptures, Bhikkhu Bodhi’s contributions are in line with the translation philosophy of Shen Jiazhen. He had long been in charge of the Buddhist Publishing Society (BPS) and also assisted in the translation work of the BAUS’s translation institute.³⁵⁷ His joining has made the

³⁵⁶ “Bhikkhu Bodhi”; “Meifo dashi ji”; Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 381.

³⁵⁷ Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 381.

preaching content of the BAUS more diverse and inclusive. Although the association's foundational grounding in Chinese Buddhism, Bhikkhu Bodhi's assumption of leadership has actually made the association a hub for substantive exchanges between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions, facilitating mutual understanding and cooperation among different Buddhist sects. The high status of the Bodhi Bhikkhus in the international academic community has significantly enhanced the reputation of the BAUS in the academic field, attracting many scholars with in-depth studies of Buddhism to come and exchange.

Retreat for Laity

In the meditation camp held in 2024 with the theme of “The Buddha's Guidance for Lay Disciples,” Bhikkhu Bodhi gave a lecture mainly based on the *Mahāmaṅgala Sutta* (*Auspicious Sutra*, *Jixiang jing* 吉祥经), to show the public how disciples at home lived in the secular world.³⁵⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi spoke highly of the Auspicious Sutra, and regarded it as a comprehensive, gradual and universal “Ground Plan.” This scripture established the practical guidance of early Buddhism to laypeople at home, and effectively corrected the one-sided cognition of the Western world that “serious practice is limited to monastics.” He pointed out that the Buddha provided a large number of teachings applicable to daily life for householders, such as *Sigālovāda Sutta* 善生经. More crucially, the Noble Eightfold Path is equally open to monks and nuns at home. Lay

³⁵⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi, “The Buddha's Guidance for Lay Disciples 2024,” YouTube playlist, August 30–September 2, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLgu0hJSLkqCUOnxOscpF-ROZu4GZkPXiG>.

practitioners can also obtain stages of Stream-Enterer (*Sotāpanna*, *yuliuguo* 预流果), Once-Returner (*Sakadāgāmi*, *yilaiguo* 一来果), and even Non-Returner (*Anāgāmi*, *buhuanguo* 不还果) through intensive practice, and their ultimate goal is the same as that of monastics, all of which are Nibbāna.

In the framework of doctrine, Bhikkhu Bodhi re-divides the 38 auspicious factors listed in the Auspicious Sutra into three progressive stages. The first stage is “worldly morality,” such as staying away from fools and getting close to wise people, aiming at establishing an upright social personality; the second stage is “inner character,” such as respect, modesty, contentment, gratitude, etc., focusing on the softening and purification of mind; and the third stage is “supramundane realization,” such as practicing the four noble truths and proving nirvana, which directly points to liberation. This division highlights that Buddhist practice is a complete system that progresses from worldly law to worldly law. In the specific practice, Bhikkhu Bodhi made an incisive definition. First of all, it is about the hierarchy of precepts. He distinguishes between “worldly morality” and “other-worldly ethics” and emphasizes that moral practice is not the end, but the only way to liberation in the Auspicious Sutra. Then, it is about the connotation of the noble Sangha. When practicing “recollection of the Sangha” (*sāvaka-saṅghānussati*, *nianseng* 念僧), he warned laymen to focus on the ideal “ultimate Sangha” or “noble Sangha” (*ariya-saṅgha*), that is, four pairs and eight types of saints, rather than the secular habits of individual ordinary monastics. This distinction helps laypeople to protect their confidence and draw spiritual strength from the “integrity” and “ideal” of the monk group

when facing the imperfection of the real monk group. Finally, he reiterated the “unity of the fourfold assembly” and pointed out that *upāsaka*, *upāsikā*, *Bhikṣu*, and *Bhikṣuṇī* formed a complete “fourfold disciple” and jointly shouldered the responsibility of abiding by the Dharma.

In this meditation camp, Bhikkhu Bodhi also deeply analyzed the similarities and differences in the design of practice paths between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism by comparing the pāramī system. There is a distinction between the “ten paramitas” in the upper seat and the “six paramitas” in Mahayana in the classics. He pointed out that in the Mahayana system, meditative concentration (Dhyāna) has replaced renunciation (*nekkhamma*) in the Theravada system, which reflects the shift of spiritual ideal: that is, the Theravada focuses on the decision to leave samsara, while Mahayana emphasizes the accumulation of public resources in the process of constant wisdom. In the practice of vows (*adhiṭṭhāna/prañidhāna* 誓愿), Bhikkhu Bodhi pointed out that Mahayana Buddhism strongly advocated that laypeople make vows of bodhisattvas, and institutionalized and ritualized the precept of accepting bodhisattvas, making it a clear commitment in the early stage of studying at home. Though Theravada Buddhism also emphasizes vows, it regards them more as a personal and internal psychological orientation than a universal ritual requirement. In addition, Bhikkhu Bodhi tried to clarify a common misunderstanding that Theravada only prioritizes being a monastic. He reiterated Theravada’s position through the Auspicious Sutra: the path of lay is complete and effective. While fulfilling the responsibilities of the world (such as family life and

right livelihood), a layman can completely achieve outstanding achievements in the world with the world morality as the cornerstone. This also echoes the Mahayana, such as the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, which emphasizes the great role of laymen in spreading Buddhism and benefiting sentient beings.

The core value of Bhikkhu Bodhi's "dialogue platform" lies in revealing the possible consistency between the two legacies in terms of ethical foundations and ultimate goals. Through the analysis of the Auspicious Sutra, he demonstrated that the five precepts, right effort, patience, and loving-kindness, and other virtues are the personality cornerstone that Theravada and Mahayana jointly respected and universally applied. Regardless of whether they aspire to Arhatship or Buddha fruit, the practice spirit of perfecting the pāramīs is indispensable, thus constructing a similar ethical framework. Despite the difference in appearance, he emphasized that the ultimate goal of both inheritances is to completely eradicate the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion, thus achieving a reality beyond reincarnation, which leads to a common goal of liberation. Moreover, his systematic discourse on the four aspects of faith, precepts, generosity, and wisdom that support the achievements of laypeople provides solid theoretical support for Theravada and Mahayana in addressing the common issues of "Humanistic Buddhism" and "popularization of lay Buddhism" in modern society, helping us explore the common path of laypeople in modern society.

Bhikkhu Bodhi's preaching practice at Chuang Yen Monastery went beyond simple classical teachings and had the characteristics of dialogue and communication

among different schools. At the level of dialogue between Theravada and Mahayana, Bhikkhu Bodhi abandoned the common “judgment of doctrines” binary classification and did not attempt to forcibly merge Theravada and Mahayana. By keenly pointing out the differences in the paths of cultivation and vow practice between the two, Bhikkhu Bodhi not only dispelled the unfamiliarity of believers towards Theravada teachings, but also provided a discussion platform for constructing a cross-religious dialogue. Additionally, in terms of the layperson’s path, Bhikkhu Bodhi, through the hierarchical structure of the Auspicious Sutra, re-established the legitimate status of lay life as a “path to liberation.” He no longer regarded “the mundane world” as a pure obstacle for practice, but transformed it into a path to achieve perfect pāramīs. He emphasized the distinction between the “Ariya Sangha” (the holy Sangha) and the real-world monastic community, and advocated the “Sangha” concept of “unity of the fourfold assembly.” This actually gave lay Buddhists higher religious subjectivity, making them not only “resource providers” for upholding the teachings, but also “truth practitioners” capable of attaining enlightenment, marking a modern Buddhist ethical paradigm that transforms from “seclusion practice” to “worldly enlightenment.” In summary, Bhikkhu Bodhi’s discourse is not merely an annotation of a classic, but a deliberate reconstruction of Buddhist modernity. With the Pali Canon as the anchor, he not only retained the rigorous and pragmatic traditional color of Theravada Buddhism, but also demonstrated an open mind towards diverse traditions, providing a paradigmatic solution for contemporary Buddhism on how to handle the tension between “tradition and modernity,” “monastic life and lay

life,” and “one’s own tradition and other traditions.”

Transformation from Female Body into a Male One

The word “*Strī-liṅga-parivarta*” refers to the transformation of a woman into a man. This concept mainly originates from the interpretation of texts such as the *Apadāna* in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* 小部·譬喻经, which records that some female disciples made a vow to reincarnate into male bodies in the afterlife for the purpose of cultivation. Within certain historical strands of Buddhist tradition, there persists a doctrinal presumption that women are inherently inferior to men regarding enlightenment ability.³⁵⁹ In the 2024 summer camp activity that I participated in, this issue also raised intense discussions. Traditionally, this is often interpreted as: firstly, believing that men have advantages in terms of physiology, social status, and abbot teachings; Secondly, it is believed that female identity is limited by family and social constraints, which constitutes a barrier to spiritual cultivation.³⁶⁰ However, this interpretation has sparked intense theological and ethical controversies in the modern context. Opponents argue that the essence of Buddhist Dharma lies in the equal potential for liberation of all sentient beings. Historically, saints who have proved Arhatship, such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī 大爱道比丘尼 and Uppalavaṇṇā 莲华色比丘尼 are clear evidence of women’s liberation. The concept of

³⁵⁹ Naomi Appleton, “In the Footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the Bodhisatta Path in Theravāda Buddhism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 1 (2011): 34, 38–39.

³⁶⁰ Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (State University of New York Press, 1992), 16–17; Bhikkhu Anālayo, “The Bahudhātuka-Sutta and Its Parallels on Women’s Inabilities,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16 (2009): 62.

‘turning a woman into a man’ reflects more gender bias in ancient Indian society than the true meaning of Buddhism. In the modern Theravada Buddhist community, many eminent monastics tend to examine this issue through the conceptual lens of ultimate truth, believing that being obsessed with the “male body being superior” itself is an attachment to the body (*rūpa*), which contradicts the path of liberation beyond binary opposition.³⁶¹

Bhikkhu Bodhi’s answer to the question raised by the students at Chuang Yen Monastery summer camp reflects his high level of Buddhist knowledge and modern consciousness. First of all, he affirmed the equality of liberation potential, and verified that both genders share the exact same capacity to attain Arhatship and enter Nirvana, according to early classics such as *Therīgāthā* 长老尼偈. Secondly, he critically examined historical literature and held a cautious attitude towards the claim of “transforming from female to male.” Bhikkhu Bodhi believed that this was not the fundamental teaching of the Buddha, but rather a product of later scholars being limited by specific temporal and cultural backgrounds; During the era of the Buddha, the obstacles faced by the female in their spiritual practice were more due to external social environments (such as lack of independent wandering and freedom to beg for food) rather than a lack of inner awareness. Finally, he guided the public back to the concept of formless reality, pointing out that from the perspective of Ultimate Dhamma, being

³⁶¹ Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women,” 8–10; Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (State University of New York Press, 1993), 73; Thanissaro Anālayo, “Bahudhātuka-Sutta and Its Parallels,” 137–38, 162–63.

fixated on the superiority or inferiority of gender is falling into the “view of a self” (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, *shenjian* 身见); The true practice lies in the elimination of afflictions, and at the level of emptiness or reality, all phenomena have no self, and there is no inherent gender.

Through the lens of topics such as “lay path” and “transforming women into men,” we can glimpse the profound interdependence between Bhikkhu Bodhi’s fusion and dialogue of Theravada and Mahayana philosophy, and the diverse and inclusive atmosphere of Chuang Yen Monastery where he resides. On the one hand, Bhikkhu Bodhi is not confined to sectarian forms and returns to the open thinking of Buddha’s original intention, which coincides with the broad-mindedness of Chuang Yen Monastery as a major Chinese Buddhist hub in the West, renowned for its enduring patronage of Theravada monastics. This “Ecumenical Symbiosis” exceeds traditional family distinctions and embodies the spirit of “relying on the Dharma rather than the person.” On the other hand, Chuang Yen Monastery provides an ideal platform for Bhikkhu Bodhi to spread the teachings, enabling him to deeply integrate the rigorous Pali scholastic tradition with the spirit of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path in Western society. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is not just a resident teacher at Chuang Yen Monastery, but also a living symbol of its ethos of embracing diversity and bridging the Mahayana and Theravada traditions. A Theravada monk offering accommodating responses to sensitive issues within a Chinese Buddhist center reflects more than the convergence of distinct lineages. It also demonstrates how the contemporary Buddhist community synthesizes the spirit of

the monastic precepts with modern egalitarian ideals.

Interestingly, as the president of the BAUS, Bhikkhu Bodhi would often conclude his lectures and Q&A sessions by walking back to his quarters. During rainy summer days, leaning on a walking stick and wearing a large bamboo hat, he would make his way along the wooded paths encircling the Seven-Treasures Lake and return to his own monastic quarters. Despite his advanced age, hunched back, and unsteady gait, he still appeared independent and calm. He would quietly walk into the woods, demonstrating the unique demeanor of a meditator.

Bridging the Theravada and Mahayana and the Critique of Buddhist Modernism

Within the context of the historical tensions between Theravada Buddhism and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, Bhikkhu Bodhi established a unique interpretative stance. He both upheld the authority of the early scriptures and actively advocated for dialogue between the two. As an internationally renowned translator of Pali classics, he firmly defended the “original value” of Theravada scriptures and Pali texts. He pointed out that early Buddhism was neither the so-called “Hinayana Buddhism” nor an “expedient means” (*upaya*) from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, he warned against simplifying early Buddhism to “secondary truths.” While explicitly warning against “undermining the original teachings of the Buddha,” his foundational text-historical adherence never devolved into a dogmatic sectarianism. Instead, Bhikkhu Bodhi advocated for a “dual perspective” with historical depth. On the one hand, he maintained a profound reverence for early texts, regarding them as the cornerstone of

Buddhism. On the other hand, he fully recognized the historical development and contributions of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly regarding its Bodhisattva ideal and the doctrine of emptiness. He considered these to represent “genuine historical transformations that brought to light latent possibilities within the ancient teachings.”³⁶²

Based on this dialectical stance, Bhikkhu Bodhi practically served as a bridge connecting the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. In an interview, he mentioned that following his return to the United States in the early 2000s, he established ties with Chinese Buddhist groups in the country. He was deeply inspired by three eminent modern Chinese Buddhist monastics: Ven. Taixu, Ven. Yinshun, and Ven. RENCHUN 仁淳. These monastics emphasized “Humanistic Buddhism,” which expands the scope of the Dharma beyond otherworldly liberation to address contemporary social issues. He actively participated in lectures and observations at Chinese Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, he dedicated himself to promoting cooperation across traditional boundaries to collectively address modern issues such as social justice, hunger relief, and the status of the female Sangha.³⁶³

While promoting integration, he maintained clear critical boundaries. He strongly criticized two extreme tendencies in contemporary Buddhism: a rigid traditionalism that clings to the old model of “monastic superiority and lay inferiority,” and a “boundary-

³⁶² Joe Livingstone, “Mahayana Buddhism,” A Level Philosophy & Religious Studies, April 14, 2022, <https://alevelphilosophyandreligion.com/buddhism/mahayana/>.

³⁶³ Maia Duerr, “Interview with Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi,” *The Jizo Chronicles*, September 1, 2011, <https://jizochronicles.com/2011/09/01/interview-with-ven-bhikkhu-bodhi/>.

dissolving” trend that attempts to arbitrarily patch together and erase sectarian differences. The strategy of Bhikkhu Bodhi is to seek a balance between respecting primitive traditions and encouraging mutual dialogue. His “non-sectarianism” does not aim to undermine sectarian identity. On the contrary, it attempts to establish a multidimensional dialogue space that allows different forms of Buddhism to mutually verify and complement each other under a common vision of liberation.³⁶⁴

When scrutinizing the interface between Buddhism and modernity, particularly the ascendant paradigm of “Buddhist modernism” in the West, Bhikkhu Bodhi showed a highly cautious and sharp critical attitude. He pointed out that the modern Western appropriation of Buddhism is often accompanied by the narrowness and secularization of Buddhism. This not only deviates from traditional Pali language expressions, but also deprives it of the means to achieve justice through social transformation. Similar to the concept of “debugging source code” from Bodhipaksa, Bhikkhu Bodhi supports this goal through rigorous academic research. By returning to early scriptures to clarify Buddha’s original intention, he provided a well-founded classical critique of the widely misunderstood concept of “mindfulness.” In the common view of the Western Vipassana community that *sati* or mindfulness is defined as “nonjudgmental bare attention,” Bodhi Bhikkhu points out that this lacks support in the Pali canon. He emphasized that the concept of “right mindfulness” (*samma sati*) is by no means a neutral state. On the

³⁶⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, “The Challenge of the Future: How Will the Sangha Fare in North American Buddhism?,” *Buddhasasana*, 2008, https://budsas.net/ebud/ebdha350.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

contrary, it is “a form of awareness that can clearly distinguish between ‘wholesome’ and ‘unwholesome’ mental states, and must be practiced within the comprehensive ethical and soteriological framework of the Eightfold Noble Path.”³⁶⁵ He expressed concern about “McMindfulness” because it has been deprived of ethical dimensions and liberation goals. Although it can serve as a secular therapeutic tool to relieve stress, the claim that “present centered awareness” encompasses the whole of the dharma seriously undermines the ultimate goal of Buddhist liberation.³⁶⁶

In order to clarify the confusing mindfulness landscape in the contemporary context, Bhikkhu Bodhi proposed a highly theoretical typological framework: “The Modes of Applying Mindfulness.” He divided mindfulness into four modes: “classical mindfulness,” which aims to liberate oneself from samsara but carries the risk of falling into narcissistic self-concentration; “Secular Therapy of Mindfulness” aims to alleviate psychological stress; “Secular Instrumental Mindfulness,” used to improve efficiency; And his strong advocacy for “Mindfulness in Social Transformation.” This classification reveals the limitations of classical patterns in the face of structural injustice, as it may lead to a disregard for socioeconomic inequality. In addition, this provided a theoretical basis for him to turn to “Engaged Buddhism.” He believes that the traditional approach of solely focusing on individual liberation is no longer sufficient to solve structural social problems. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate a mindfulness that promotes social and

³⁶⁵ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 57.

³⁶⁶ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 57.

economic justice. On this basis, Bhikkhu Bodhi introduced the core concept of “Conscientious Compassion,” marking a significant transformation from an academic scholar to a social activist. This concept advocates for a deep confluence of contemplative mindfulness and the moral obligation to mobilize actionable interventions for the reduction of human suffering. It criticizes the lack of a sense of justice in traditional mindfulness training. He defined justice as the objective task of establishing a socio-economic order and political system that respects the dignity of every individual. Through his published anthology on social harmony, he strategically cited overlooked Pali scriptures to establish that early Buddhism contained doctrinal resources that supported justice and social participation.³⁶⁷

According to scholar Ann Gleig, this stance has elevated Bhikkhu Bodhi beyond the simple debate between traditionalists and modernists. It represents a pioneering framework designed to elucidate a postmodern integral understanding of Buddhism. This understanding goes beyond the individualistic and psychological tendencies of Buddhist modernism. The rediscovery of traditional resources provides strong theological support for Buddhism’s intervention in structural social issues in postmodern and postcolonial contexts.³⁶⁸

Summary

³⁶⁷ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 74.

³⁶⁸ Gleig, *American Dharma*, 74, 83.

Bhikkhu Bodhi is a key element in understanding the uniqueness of Chuang Yen Monastery within the context of transnational and cross-cultural Buddhism. His academic background and Theravada spiritual experience enable him to serve as a bridge connecting the Western academic community with the Asian Buddhist tradition. As a center of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in America, Chuang Yen Monastery was able to invite and accept a Theravada monk to serve as the president of the BAUS, reflecting the “openness and inclusiveness” of this lay organization in terms of its sectarian identity. Through its rigorous teachings of Buddhist dharma, precise translations of Pali scriptures, and emphasis on Buddhist ethics and practice, Bhikkhu Bodhi introduced unique Buddhist viewpoints and practices to the followers of Chuang Yen Monastery. Furthermore, he promoted mutual understanding and communication among different Buddhist schools and traditions, thereby creating a more diverse and open atmosphere at Chuang Yen Monastery. As a result, this lay organization attracted a wider range of groups, including Western practitioners and later Chinese Americans, thus expanding the audience base and influence of the monastery.

The monastic authority of Bhikkhu Bodhi mainly stems from his profound knowledge of Buddhism and his promotion of the universal value of the Dharma, rather than merely from traditional Buddhist inheritance or administrative power. This forms a subtle complementary relationship with the management model of Chuang Yen Monastery. The lay team is more responsible for secular management, while the monastics provide guidance in dharma education and spiritual leadership. Both sides

work together based on their respective strengths to build the monastery.

His academic rigor and global perspective have earned Chuang Yen Monastery a stronger reputation in the academic community and the international society, which has made the monastery a key hub connecting Buddhist traditions with the modern world. This model of lay-initiated, elite-monk participation, and cross-sectarian integration reflects the continued development of lay activities within Chuang Yen Monastery after Shen's passing. Bhikkhu Bodhi's connection with Chuang Yen Monastery is a unique and irreplacable case in contemporary American Buddhism, but it also has universal exemplary value. It shows that the vitality of Buddhism does not lie in strengthening sectarian barriers, but in sincere dialogue and deep integration among different traditions in the face of modern challenges. Moreover, Chuang Yen Monastery, under the leadership of a Theravada monk, did not lose its Mahayana Buddhist identity. Instead, by embracing the rigor and critical spirit of the Pali tradition, it gained deeper connotations and more modern characteristics. Similarly, Bhikkhu Bodhi did not violate the precepts and viewpoints of the Theravada in a Mahayana institution. Instead, he fulfilled his vow and devoted himself to social relief work as a modern Bodhisattva.

6.3 The Honorably Invited Monastics in Amida Society

6.3.1 Reserved Space for the Monastics

It is difficult for the academic circle to accurately classify the characteristics of Amida Society within the academic and sociological framework. It is not simply between

“Convert Buddhism” and “Ethnic Buddhism,” or between the “religious” and “secular.” This ambiguity is not only because of the complex organizational form, but also because the core feature “centered on lay believers” is formed through dynamic overlap. Amida Society has an obvious lay believer orientation, an independent management system, and high religious participation, but this does not mean that the authority of the traditional monastic community is weakened or disintegrated. From the perspective of organizational governance, this group has undergone subtle functional changes and has “rational disenchantment” with the personal influence of the Ven. Jingkong. However, as a lay organization, its management logic still holds deep respect for the traditional authority of the monastics. This is reflected in aspects such as inviting outstanding monastics to give teachings on Buddhism and strictly adhering to rituals, as well as the “seating arrangements” during gatherings and Buddhist teachings. The balance achieved between lay leadership and recognition of the authority of the monastics has created a dynamic situation. This makes the group a highly valuable example for studying secular Buddhist organizations among modern Chinese-American immigrants.

The Society regularly invites eminent monastics from both domestic and international communities to the center. They preside over major Dharma assemblies, such as the Three-Session of Pure Land Chanting (*sanshi xinian* 三时系念) and seven-day Buddha recitation retreats (*foqi* 佛七), and conduct doctrinal lectures. The invited monastics include not only those from the Amida Society’s own lineage, but also well-known figures from local public monasteries and international Buddhist networks. Their

specific doctrinal expositions cover a wide range of traditions, including Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, Chan, Vinaya, Tiantai, and Theravada. This open strategy for Dharma propagation aims to break through the cognitive limitations of individual practitioners. It treats the eighty-four thousand Dharma gates as an integrated system of practice unified by the mind. The act of inviting monastics from other sects to participate in the activities demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of the organization. It provides believers with an excellent opportunity to get closer to the Three Jewels and to deeply study, reflect, and practice. In fact, it also utilizes the dialectical thinking of various schools to deepen believers' understanding and faith in Pure Land Buddhism. Traditionally, the Pure Land practice is described as “easy to practice, but difficult to believe in.” By way of a systematic framework, this approach guarantees a rigorous adherence to core rituals alongside a sustained, collective concentration on Pure Land cultivation.

An examination of the monastic roster on their official website reveals that their teachers come from both internal lineage transmission and external recruitment. On one hand, the Society's core monastic faculty is deeply influenced by the Buddhist thought of Ven. Jingkong. Figures such as Ven. Wudao, Ven. Wuxing, and Ven. Chengde 成德 (formerly Cai Lixu) belong to the system of Amitabha Buddhist Society. Additionally, the Society demonstrates sectarian inclusivity. It includes monastics proficient in Yogācāra, Tiantai, and Chan, such as Ven. Jingjie 净界, Ven. Kuanqian 宽谦, and Ven. Dazhao 达照. In addition, it specially invited eminent Vinaya masters like Ven. Guoqing 果清 to

impart the precepts.³⁶⁹ This cross-sectarian exchange enhanced the doctrinal depth of the group and made it a convergence point for various Buddhist philosophies.

In terms of institutional background and social prestige, the monastics invited by this group transcended regional and organizational boundaries. For instance, Ven. Yikong 依空 from Fo Guang Shan, Ven. Jingjie from the Institute for Buddhist Studies of Jing-Liu Monastery 净律学佛院, and Ven. Guoqing from Yuan Tong Temple 圆通寺, who come from different backgrounds and belong to different monastic systems, gathered at a “layperson” center. This reflects the wide recognition that the Amida Society has gained in contemporary Buddhist circles, and also highlights the organization’s characteristic of integrating resources. At the same time, it is obvious that the monastics in this group are showing a trend of development in academic and professional aspects.

Figures like Ven. Yikong, who is the first monastic from Fo Guang Shan to obtain a doctoral degree, and numerous graduates from renowned institutions such as the Chinese Buddhist College, together constitute the organization’s highly educated and modernized intellectual elite foundation. These monastics not only possess outstanding academic qualifications but also enjoy a high reputation for their powerful meditation practice and strict adherence to the precepts. For example, Elder Ven. Zhihai 智海 is a pioneer of Buddhism in North America. Ven. Guoqing is an authoritative figure in the field of precepts, and Ven. Jingxin 净心 is an outstanding leader of the World Buddhist

³⁶⁹ “Fashi zhuanji” 法师专辑, Amida Society, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://amtb-la.org/%e6%b3%95%e5%b8%ab%e5%b0%88%e8%bc%af/>.

Chinese Sangha Congress 世界佛教华僧会. This optimized combination of the monk team ensures that the dissemination of Buddhism can be carried out professionally. At the same time, this significantly enhances the organization's academic status and religious authority in the global Buddhist community.

In all religious practices, the Amida Society emphasizes elevating the status of monastics and strictly follows its doctrines. This respectful spirit constitutes an indispensable core ritual element in its practice framework. This respect for the Three Jewels does not merely stop at superficial rituals. Through strict adherence to traditional religious rituals, it highlights the lofty position of monastics as mentors between humans and deities in all aspects of behavior. In its spatial layout, the Society strictly observes hierarchical order. During major lectures, an elevated Dharma seat for the presiding monastic occupies the axial center of the main hall. Meanwhile, the seats of lay speakers including President Chen are placed at a relatively lower position. This spatial division actually reflects the appropriate order between the Buddhist tradition and the lay community. The observance of rituals is reflected in many details, such as during Buddhist gatherings, monastics often walk in front of the procession, and the daily meal distribution and reception procedures also have many detailed manifestations. In major celebrations each year, such as the Bathing Buddha Day, the respect for the leadership position of the monastics is particularly evident. In April 2025, during a release of animal activities I participated in, President Chen specially invited many monastics from Anfu Monastery in Los Angeles to preside over the ceremony. This ensures that every detail

complies with the regulations of Buddhism, thereby maintaining the solemnity of the event. The respect for the leadership of the monastics enables the association to successfully organize major commemorative events and Buddhist activities, and to coordinate with regular weekend practices and lectures. This approach ensures that the center operates in accordance with Buddhist teachings and enhances the believers' sense of loyalty to the Three Jewels.

This kind of respect for the Sangha is not merely an expression of traditional inertia. We can say that it is also influenced by a deep cultural background and organizational development strategies. This respect stems from the cultural logic centered around the monastic community in Chinese Buddhism, and is also influenced by organizational development strategies. In Chinese Buddhism, the monastic community, as one of the "Three Treasures," is regarded as the authoritative interpreter of orthodox Buddhism and truth. This sacred status demonstrates extraordinary institutional resilience, even in the face of the impact of modernity. Because the power to determine the legitimacy of religion has long been controlled by the Sangha group and its related discourse, any lay organization seeking legitimacy still needs to obtain reliable recognition from the traditional Sangha, regardless of the success of its organization or its ability to mobilize believers. This firm belief in the authority of traditional inheritance has become the core contradiction for overseas Chinese Buddhist groups to restructure their religious identity and establish their own subjectivity. If an organization led by laypeople is considered to have deviated from the orthodox norms in its interpretation or

practice of the doctrine, then it may be marginalized by Buddhist institutions. It may even face a legitimacy crisis and be labeled as “Attached-to-Buddhism Heterodoxy (*fufu waidao* 附佛外道).” Notably, some scholars have deconstructed the binary opposition of “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” arguing that it is an ideological construction rooted in a specific Chinese governance model. However, even amidst the landscape of religious freedom and diversity inherent to the US, this explanatory logic still has strong vitality within the ethno-cultural consciousness of the overseas Chinese diaspora. It regulates the community by defining doctrinal boundaries and maintaining religious order. The study of the dynamics of modern Buddhism also reveals similar tensions. For example, the Guan Yin Citta Dharma Door 观音心灵法门, founded by Lu Junhong 卢军宏, and the Bliss and Wisdom Foundation 福智基金, led by the laywoman Zhenru 真如 following the passing of Ven. Richang 日常, both faced severe scrutiny from traditional Buddhist circles regarding their lay leadership and the legitimacy of their practices. These debates reveal a structural conflict between independent development and the maintenance of orthodoxy within lay Buddhism.³⁷⁰

From this perspective, monastics are respected not only for religious piety or moral pursuit. It’s not just the rituals carried out by internal believers for accumulating merits and so on. Under the secular power and the power of traditional sects, there are

³⁷⁰ Jason WM Ellsworth, “Glocalization in Buddhist Food Ventures on a Small Canadian Island,” in *Buddhism in the Global Eye: Beyond East and West*, ed. John S. Harding et al. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 163–76; Zhang and Ji, “Lay Buddhism,” 32–33.

active mechanisms for interacting with the mainstream monk group, which reflects a way to survive in the complex religious ecosystem. That is, the Pure Land invites external monastics and strictly follows traditional rituals, sending clear legitimacy signals to both inside and outside. This shows that the practice of this group is not simply an innovative move, but an orthodox behavior deeply rooted in Buddha's teachings and legal inheritance. This positive pursuit of the recognition of traditional monastic authority not only has a defensive function against possible doctrinal disputes but is also a key element in rebuilding its religious identity. Therefore, it eliminates the risk of being marginalized or labeled as an extremist from the very root, and then ensures the orthodox status of this group and maintains its vitality in modern social discourse.

However, it would be incomplete to attribute this phenomenon solely to the organization's institutional will or to President Chen's personal decisions. This clear hierarchy between monastics and the laity is strongly embedded in the cultural mindset of most overseas Chinese immigrants, which in turn regulates and guides the organizational will at the upper levels. For many first-generation immigrants, although they are in a free and open religious environment in North America, the Buddhism they understand and believe in still follows a traditional model centered around temples and the reverence for monastics. Therefore, the respect that religious groups show towards the monastic community is not only a declaration of external legitimacy, but also a construction of the identity of the subject. It responds to and fulfills the deep cultural expectations of community members for "orthodox" Buddhism. This bottom-up collective cultural

psychology naturally exerts structural pressure on the organizational leaders, prompting them to adopt policies of respecting the monastics. Therefore, this interaction pattern between monastics and laypeople has become an inevitable trend for the group to maintain stability and development overseas. However, attributing this interaction dynamic merely to specific institutional arrangements or personal decisions might be too simplistic. We need to understand that this unique hierarchical order and role allocation are deeply rooted in the underlying cultural patterns of the overseas Chinese community. Even in a free and diverse religious environment like North America, the first-generation immigrants usually still maintain a basic understanding of Buddhism, which continues the traditional institutional model centered around the Sangha and based on the monastery. Therefore, the respect for the Sangha by Buddhist religious groups is no longer merely a superficial claim of legitimacy.

It plays a role in reinforcing the status of laypeople and the cultural identity of the community, precisely responding to and meeting the deep collective expectations of the masses for “orthodox” Buddhism. This bottom-up collective cultural psychology prompts the leadership to adopt policies of respecting monastics, enabling the group to establish an orthodox position and achieve stable development in a foreign environment.

Therefore, within the Amida Society, a unique practical ecosystem characterized by openness, inclusiveness, and diversity has emerged. The elevation of the layperson’s authority within the Amida Society is mainly reflected in its own autonomy, group practice leadership, and the daily practice of spreading Buddhist teachings; however, in

terms of its fundamental doctrines and the highest spiritual symbols, the organization strictly follows tradition and relies on the teachings and interpretations of recognized authoritative monastics. The organizational model of the Amida Society is fundamentally different from that of organizations such as Fo Guang Shan. The latter usually has a core spiritual mentor as a guide. However, as an organization founded by laypeople, the Amida Society has been given greater flexibility and autonomy to determine its direction and doctrinal foundation. As a result, the branches of Amida Buddhist associations around the world usually operate in a loose network format, without a unified management, supervision, or intervention from a central authority. In this context, the internal strategic transformation demonstrated by the Los Angeles Amida Buddhist Society during its development is particularly unique.

Investigating the development model of the Contemporary Amitabha Buddhist Society, we can see that the profound internal integration of “teacher-oriented” and “sect-oriented” is present. Most branches achieve the goal of a broader “sect-oriented” through “teacher-oriented.” Specifically, they study and practice Pure Land Buddhism in accordance with the spiritual guidance of Ven. Jingkong. From the perspective of religious sociology and organizational effectiveness, this strategy of taking the teacher as the carrier of sect inheritance and the core of dharma lineage dissemination has a high degree of internal consistency in logic and practice. It can effectively solve potential method differences and construct a cohesive development paradigm. The rapid expansion of Jingkong’s system has exceeded the boundaries of the government’s religious

management departments, and there are strict restrictions on its doctrines or publications.³⁷¹ External controversies bring survival challenges to a system relying on his personal charisma. Many overseas branches take a wait-and-see or conservative attitude, while the Amida Society adheres to “following the Dharma rather than individuals” and shifts its focus to a more open “sect-oriented” model. Its ultimate goal is to commit themselves to one practice method and dedicate themselves to it profoundly (*yimen shenru changshi xunxiu* 一门深入，长时熏修).³⁷² This openness did not diminish the believers’ sense of sectarian identity and collective cohesion; instead, it enabled the society to demonstrate remarkable adaptability and organizational vitality within the religious landscape of North America.

6.3.2 Anfu Monastery and Other Partner Monasteries

An important phenomenon worth noting is that since 2025, the monastics participating in the Amida Society’s teaching activities have shown a distinct trend toward a younger demographic. The deep engagement between the Amida Society and the new generation of monastics has actually developed around Ven. Zexu 则旭 as the central hub. Ven. Zexu is a disciple of Ven. Dazhao and holds a doctorate from the United States. He not only assists his teacher in establishing an overseas branch of Anfu Monastery in Los Angeles but also functions as a crucial intermediary in the

³⁷¹ Sun, “Jingkong,” 414–16.

³⁷² Sun, “Jingkong,” 403.

communication network between the two centers. Subsequently, Anfu Monastery in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, taking on more roles in the Amida Society also became the core partner. Under the leadership of Ven. Dazhao, disciples practicing Pure Land Buddhism were gathered. Among Dazhao's disciples, those with the same aspirations participated in the dissemination of Amitabha religious teachings and provided support to the people in teaching. In the religious activities of the Amida Society, long- and short-term monastics were dispatched to create a new model of mutual-aid cross-border cooperation. Ven. Zexu, on the path of practice, is not only a disseminator of doctrines but also a key hub in organizing and cooperating in integrating Buddhist resources.

Ven. Zexu traveled to the United States approximately a decade ago to study at the University of the West in Los Angeles.³⁷³ Following his graduation, Ven. Zexu began preparations to establish a branch of Anfu Monastery in Los Angeles. In September 2019, Anfu Monastery officially submitted an application to the State of California and the US federal government for the establishment of the monastery and was approved on June 20, 2020. Therefore, the Los Angeles branch was officially established, becoming an important base for the overseas expansion of this monastery. With the completion of registration and the establishment of a legal status, the Buddhist teachings dissemination activities of this center gradually became institutionalized and standardized, laying a solid foundation for subsequent cooperation with the Amida Society.

³⁷³ The University of the West, located in California, is an institution of Buddhist higher education established by the Fo Guang Shan organization, dedicated to promoting Buddhist education.

This connection began in early 2024 (approximately in February). Ven. Zexu took the initiative to call President Chen. At first, the call was not connected because Chen didn't recognize the incoming number. Then Zexu sent a WeChat message through an acquaintance, saying that his Master Dazhao wanted to come to Amida Society for Dharma exchange. Chen called back and promoted this cooperation. Many years ago, Chen heard from Ven. Xingren 性仁, the abbot of the local American Buddhist Fellowship 美佛寺, about his classmate Da Zhao. President Chen watched the online teaching video of Ven. Dazhao and expressed admiration. Ven. Dazhao was invited to give lectures at the association in 2024. Chen said that his approach designates Pure Land rebirth through Buddha-name recitation as its central axis, aligning strictly with foundational Pure Land Buddhist orthodoxy. The believers responded relatively warmly, thinking that his teaching was practical and beneficial. As mutual alignment grew, both parties gradually developed a plan for collaboration. Anfu Monastery would send monastics to support the Amida Society's Dharma propagation in the United States, including delivering lectures, giving Dharma talks, and leading assemblies and communal practice.

Ven. Dazhao is one of the few mainland Chinese monastics invited by the Amida Society. In its early years, the vast majority of visiting monastics came from Taiwan. Anfu Monastery in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, was originally built in the Tang dynasty but eventually fell into decline. By the end of the 20th century, only half of a square wooden hall and a few broken stone steles remained at Anfu Monastery. There were no resident

monastics, chanting had ceased, and the site stood empty. On December 1, 2003, the Zhejiang government officially approved the reconstruction of Anfu Monastery on its original site, but subsequent progress was slow. A place of virtue serves as a site of practice, and sacred sites often attract auspicious karmic connections. To carry on the Buddha's wisdom lineage and propagate the Dharma, Ven. Dazhao accepted the sincere invitations of the government and the lay community in March 2006. He became the director of the Anfu Monastery Reconstruction Committee and took full charge of the restoration work. Monastics officially took up residence in August 2007, and through the joint efforts of government agencies and practitioners, a foundation-laying ceremony was successfully held on April 2, 2008.³⁷⁴

After becoming the abbot, Ven. Dazhao dedicated itself to a comprehensive revival. Not only did they build new structures, but they also established their social functions. Dazhao combined traditional Buddhist doctrines with modern education, culture, and charitable endeavors to construct a multi-dimensional system for the dissemination of Buddhism. Due to its academic background and Buddhist lectures, Anfu Monastery attracted young students, many of whom chose to become monastics in the monastery or enter the Buddhist education system to study scriptures and treatises systematically. The convergence of talents has made Anfu Monastery prosperous and has

³⁷⁴ “Xiujian yuanqi” 修建缘起, An Fu Monastery 安福寺, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://www.anfusi.cn/#/pc/website/column/detail?col=1526&page=1574&detail=64812&three&cate=1977&tab=news>.

cultivated the reserve force for the young monastic community.

In terms of hardware, Ven. Dazhao presided over the large-scale reconstruction and expansion of Anfu Monastery, restored the style of ancient buildings, and also built modern facilities such as a Buddhist academy, a meditation center, and a library, making it a practice place with complete functions. In terms of education, Ven. Dazhao assisted in founding Wenzhou Buddhist Academy 温州佛学院 in December 2013 to train new monastics. The academy adopts an educational model of combining learning and cultivation, and integrating knowledge and practice. Many young students were attracted by this method and came to study here. Ven. Dazhao held various Buddhist lectures, meditation camps, and cultural forums to spread Buddhist doctrines. These activities made Anfu Monastery an open platform for cultural exchange. Under the leadership of Ven. Dazhao, Anfu Monastery established the An Foundation 安基金, organized volunteers to participate in poverty alleviation, educational assistance, and disaster relief activities, and put the compassionate spirit of Buddhism into practice. This enhanced the public image of Anfu Monastery and also enabled more people to come into contact with and understand Buddhist doctrines through charitable activities.

In summary, Ven. Dazhao's construction of this temple was a comprehensive project, ranging from the restoration of the ancient temple, to the reconstruction of the system for spreading Buddhism, and to the practice of innovative ideas. He regarded education as the core, culture as the medium, and charity as the bond, transforming Anfu Monastery from a traditional temple into a modern Buddhist center that integrates

Buddhist research, cultural education, and social services. Over the past few decades, Anfu Monastery has transformed from a local temple to an important Buddhist site, with a large monastic community and an international perspective. Based on this, it can send outstanding monastics overseas to spread Buddhism. Recently, Anfu Monastery established a branch in Los Angeles, and the Amida Society needs a continuous monk group resource, so the time and ideas of both parties are in agreement. After an initial assessment and reaching mutual trust based on each other's intentions and the nature of orthodox Buddhism, both parties began preliminary cooperation.

In terms of specific cooperation, the cooperative relationship between Anfu Monastery and the Amida Society is mainly reflected in the following aspects. One of the main points is the mutual support of temple resources, such as Anfu Monastery providing stable Buddhist service support to the Amida Society, and regularly sending young monastics with higher educational backgrounds to the United States to directly participate in the daily operations of the society. These monastics not only serve in key ritual roles—such as *weinuo* (*karmadāna*), or assembly leader—during weekend communal practice. They also serve as an essential team during large-scale Dharma assemblies, such as the Seven-Day Buddha Recitation Retreat and the Thrice Memorial Ceremony, taking charge of the ritual instruments and leading the chanting. This “stationed support” model brings greater professionalism to the Dharma services of a predominantly lay-led practice center. It ensures that traditional Chinese Buddhist rituals are presented with discipline in an overseas environment. Regarding the distribution of Buddhist scriptures and the

transmission of doctrines, the two parties have established a close resource-sharing mechanism. Anfu Monastery introduced its core Buddhist resources, including a series of works by Ven. Dazhao and the electronic Buddhist chanting devices, to the distribution center of the association. Amida Society also posted related teaching videos from Dazhao on social media platforms, both parties jointly constructed a cross-regional digital learning network. This enabled practitioners to precisely integrate their daily learning with the Anfu Monastery's system.

According to the Amida Society's organizational structure, its core management team has long been composed of laypeople, meaning the organization has always lacked a stable resident monastic community. This structural characteristic compelled the association to seek support from external monastics to maintain its Buddhist service. The usual practice is to invite monastics from various places to participate in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings. However, this cooperation model has obvious limitations in practical operation, as the invited monastics are mostly from small monasteries or simple practice centers.

Due to the scarcity of personnel, these monastics have to handle the daily affairs of the temple by themselves on a regular basis. Therefore, it is difficult for them to stay in the association for a long time to provide guidance. This kind of temporary cooperation has caused the teaching plan of the association to experience periodic stagnation. This means that the excessive reliance on external monastics has left the educational ability of the association in an unstable state. Furthermore, the disagreement between the monastic

group and the lay group regarding management rights is a deeper cause of instability. In the Buddhist tradition, monastics usually tend to maintain the autonomy of the Buddhist center and the independence of the monastic authority. On the contrary, the management system dominated by lay individuals often triggers conflicts with the monastics in terms of management and ideology during actual cooperation. As President Chen grew older, he has been seeking an ideal successor to ensure the long-term stable inheritance of the association. During the interview, President Chen expressed the difficult situation of maintaining a lay organization. He mentioned that the Amitabha Buddhist Societies in San Francisco and Seattle were successively closed. Chen had previously spent a long time carefully considering whether to appoint a monk or a layperson as the leader. Recently, due to the availability of favorable conditions and based on a comprehensive examination and deep respect for Ven. Dazhao and his doctrinal system, both sides shifted from a temporary invitation for lectures to a more institutionalized strategic cooperation, including organizational cooperation and transmission relationships. These institutional connections have brought stable support from the traditional monk community to the Amida Society and ensured the confirmation of the norms and legality of rituals in the religious ecosystem of Chinese Americans in North America.

Chapter Seven:

Attuning within Inertia

7.1 Non-sectarianism

In global Buddhism, the role of lay followers is gradually becoming prominent; they are not only supporters but also have important roles in the system. This change is more obvious in the lay Buddhist groups in Chinese American Buddhism, showing a cross-regional and non-sectarian appearance. They serve not only as venues for religious practice and gathering but have likewise evolved into platforms for multicultural exchange and academic discussion. Religious groups invite different monastics or scholars for teaching exchanges, transforming the lay groups into hubs connecting tradition and modernity, the East and the West, monastics and the laity. “Non-sectarianism” is not completely separated from traditional practices such as Pure Land or Chan, but attempts to go beyond rigid denominations or boundary divisions in organizational operation, resource integration, doctrinal interpretation, etc. This is because of the flexible reconstruction of the traditional Buddhist system, and also reflects the efforts of the lay groups to seek consensus in the pluralistic culture. This is a strategic Buddhist organization tendency to adapt to the pluralistic cultural environment of immigrant society. Lay organizations establish transnational and cross-sectarian

networks, carry out religious exploration and dharma propagation activities in an independent identity, maintain the core of religious traditions, and also demonstrate strong social adaptability and cultural vitality.

Prebish argues that the United States is the first region in Buddhist history to achieve a “full-spectrum” coexistence of all geographical traditions and lineages. In this context, lay organizations function as a “common denominator platform.”³⁷⁵ The reason for this lies in the fact that the core of authority in traditional Asian Buddhism typically relies on a monastic system based on lineage transmission. Furthermore, in mainland China, the lay organizations of the Buddhist community have gradually lost their independent development space due to policy and religious restrictions. In contrast, the majority of the lay organizations of Chinese Americans mostly adopt the board management model commonly seen in modern American non-profit organizations (NPOs). Under this system, lay organizations have the final decision-making power over resource allocation, teacher recruitment, and the direction of organizational development. They have achieved administrative and financial independence and fundamentally changed the power structure within religious groups. This breaks the vertical monopoly model of “lineage as power” in traditional Buddhism and replaces it with a “function-oriented” model rather than a “lineage-oriented” model. This decentralized management logic enables non-governmental organizations to transcend the narrow perspective of a

³⁷⁵ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, Preface X.

single sect and combine various Buddhist resources in a more open and pragmatic way. By converting religious affairs into quantifiable management indicators and functional modules, these organizations provide structural guarantees and practical space for “non-sectarianism” at the institutional level. As Prebish pointed out, the management logic of American non-religious organizations is closer to “Managerial Zen” or modern corporate governance models.³⁷⁶ Consequently, this structure allows organizations to emphasize “practitioner needs” and “propagation efficacy” when inviting teachers, rather than being restricted by sectarian bias. For instance, the BAUS founded by Shen Jiazhen, stipulates in its bylaws that the president must be a monastic, but does not restrict the position to any specific sect. This institutional design transformed the Temple of Enlightenment and Chuang Yen Monastery into a “pan-Buddhist” platform, capable of accommodating outstanding monastics from various Buddhist schools. For instance, Chuang Yen Monastery invited the authoritative figure of Pali Buddhism, Bhikkhu Bodhi, as the chairman of a Chinese Buddhist organization. Such an arrangement is almost unimaginable in traditional monasteries but is completely logical in the North American region.

The Chinese Buddhist community actively strives to combine the content of early Buddhist scriptures with the thoughts of Mahayana Bodhisattvas. The Amitabha Buddhist Society under the Jing Kong missionary system initially did not have a strict hierarchical

³⁷⁶ Prebish and Tanaka, *Faces of Buddhism*, 65–66.

leadership system. Each group operated independently and had a highly decentralized and autonomous organizational network. This system enabled different regional groups to maintain independence in terms of legal status, finance, and personnel, allowing each group to flexibly adjust its activities to adapt to local social and cultural differences, thus effectively spreading globally. The cohesion of this system stems from the common recognition of the Jingkong's doctrine rather than administrative coercion. Modern media such as tapes, CDs, and the Internet made the master's preaching the core content, rather than traditional administrative orders. This logic lowered the entry threshold of the temples, enabling practitioners to easily engage in collective practice. The Amitabha Buddhist Society reduces prejudices between sects through simplified practice methods and modern media. The name of the organization emphasizes Pure Land Buddhism. It was initially inspired by Ven. Jingkong, and the actual work focuses on moral education and cross-cultural lifestyles. Using audio, video, and internet technologies, complex doctrines are clarified for guidance, so that practitioners from different backgrounds can practice independently without relying on the guidance of traditional monastics. The "free circulation of Buddhist scriptures" principle breaks the monopoly of religious knowledge among traditional sects, and practitioners carry out "self-guided practice" by consuming standardized audio and video content. This decentralization dissemination model that separates Buddhism from specific temple spaces eliminates the boundaries of sect regions and has "universality." This non-institutionalized method enables religious dissemination to get rid of the restrictions of regional levels and transform into a flat

network based on common beliefs.

Furthermore, lacking a centralized monastic authority, this decentralized model allows organizations to make independent decisions and adjust their direction when facing resource integration or crisis management at the macro level. Moreover, lacking a strict clerical hierarchy, the organizational structure of the Amitabha Buddhist Society is fundamentally egalitarian and decentralized. When facing a crisis of authority, President Chen of the Amida Society was able to act as an independent decision-maker, exercising a high degree of administrative autonomy to facilitate internal transformation. As a lay leader, Chen's criterion for selecting teachers is whether they are "beneficial to practice and realization," rather than "whether they belong to its lineage." This model of "Managerial Layism" enables the center to invite monastics from Fo Guang Shan, Dharma Seal Temple, and even Anfu Monastery in mainland China. Especially after the emergence of disputes, this organization consciously reduced its reliance on a single spiritual leader and shifted its focus to the universal beliefs of Pure Land Buddhism. This, in turn, demonstrates its inherent non-sectarian nature.

Also, due to the limited number of early immigrant monastics, combined with language barriers and the initial survival pressure, it was impossible to establish strict sectarian boundaries and bureaucratic systems in North America as was done in Asia. This spatial void and institutional flexibility provided a historical opportunity for lay leaders with a transnational perspective and the ability to mobilize funds. People like Shen and Ying were acutely aware of this. They did not insist on establishing hereditary

temples for a specific sect, but defined the lay Buddhist organization they created as an inclusive “pan-Buddhist center.” In this case, the survival pressure faced by the dispersed groups actually prompted the secular organization to pursue “horizontal cooperation.” In an environment dominated by Western culture and characterized by diversity, the lay leaders have downplayed the sectarian labels and instead have shaped a generalized image of “Chinese Buddhism” or “Universal Buddhism” to expand its application scope and social influence.

Holmes Welch believed that the organizational nature of Chinese Buddhism means that “common vertical loyalty cannot promote horizontal cooperation between monks and laity,” and this insight clearly reveals the position of the traditional lay group in the Buddhist network. This theory is based on regarding Buddhism as a dispersed network composed of multiple subordinate relationships rather than a single administrative organization. In this network, interpersonal relationships mainly rely on personal loyalty to the monk and the sense of belonging to the sect, and this structure determines its basic operational logic. In this logic, lay believers demonstrate a strong “vertical loyalty” and become the core bond that sustains the organization. Laypeople form a strong sense of belonging to their mentors by following a well-known monk. This vertical attachment relationship is very stable; whenever a monk needs to repair the temple or mobilize resources, the believers will promptly provide financial support out of personal respect. Clearly, in a specific religious environment, laypeople mainly play the role of resource providers, lacking the ability to actively build the organizational

structure. However, these deep vertical connections cannot promote horizontal cooperation among believers. Welch pointed out that even if two lay believers convert under the same mentor, their focus is only on the vertical master-disciple relationship; therefore, they rarely establish actual social connections with each other or other believers of the mentor. This indicates that the vertical loyalty system fails to provide a cooperative platform for the layperson, resulting in their relationships being in a loose state. In contrast, traditionally, the appointment relationships among monastics and the geographical connections often constituted the substantive framework for the expansion of the Buddhist system. The lay believer groups are usually only supporters attached to these monastic nodes and will migrate with the change of specific locations. In the Buddhist tradition, monastics have unquestionable religious authority; they are the objects of worship for believers, rather than equal partners in cooperation. This strict hierarchical division further consolidates the vertical power structure, making horizontal group cooperation a rare feature of traditional Buddhist organizations.³⁷⁷

During the period when Shen invited Ven. Ledu, the dissemination of Chinese Buddhism in North America especially the missionary activities carried out by the monastics, basically followed the traditional “vertical loyalty” model, demonstrating deep loyalty to a specific Buddhist lineage, or maintaining a unique sectarian characteristic. This sectarian characteristic does not necessarily refer to the specific doctrines of

³⁷⁷ Ashiwa and Wank, “Globalization of Chinese Buddhism,” 220–21; Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900–1950* (Harvard University Press, 1967), 404–7.

individual schools, but rather refers to the maintenance of the vertical Buddhist transmission system. For example, the development of modern transnational monastic groups is not limited to the dissemination of a single religious doctrine. However, due to the organizational structure that requires monastics to maintain loyalty to a specific master, it still has the characteristics of a “religious sect,” essentially a form of authority and exclusivity.³⁷⁸ In this network, the role of laypeople is usually associated with vertical nodes, and their influence is usually weaker than that of monastics. Although this organizational model based on the doctrinal dissemination ensures the continuity of the monastic community and the orthodoxy of the doctrine, it also leads to a narrow scope of social connections. Because these monastics mainly communicate through master-disciple relationships or Buddhist brotherhood relationships, their connection scope is narrow, and their respective social circles hardly intersect. Unlike the diversified networks formed in Southeast Asia based on a common geographical background, academic connections, and cultural background, the early monastic network in North America shows a clear hierarchical nature, which further limits its dissemination scope. Due to the lack of significant geographical connections between monastics and laypeople, this structure severely restricts the horizontal expansion and broader connections of the local Buddhist community.

However, early Chinese American lay groups have important roles and status in

³⁷⁸ Ashiwa and Wank, “Globalization of Chinese Buddhism,” 220–21.

the vertical network. Their influence and contributions made them the core force for the spread of Buddhist teachings at that time. Because the traditional monastic system had not been fully established locally, laypeople took on the main responsibility of establishing organizations and spreading Buddhist doctrines. So lay leaders like Shen objectively had the opportunity to reshape the Buddhist ecology of the “new world” in North America. Laypeople worked hard to help Buddhism take root in the different cultural environments. By funding medical centers, organizing learning activities, and promoting cultural exchanges, they successfully integrated Buddhism into the local social life. The lay-dominated “non-denominational” dissemination method has changed the social structure of Buddhism in North America and also paved the way for the subsequent expansion of the monastic community.

A prime example of horizontal cooperation is the deep collaboration between lay followers Ying Jin Yutang and Shen Jianzhen: although they operated different institutions, they manifested remarkable synchronicity and cooperation in welcoming overseas monastic talent and sharing resources for Dharma propagation. In March 1964, Ven. Ledu arrived in New York from San Francisco. Like Shen, Ying met Ven. Ledu through an intermediary, Jiang Huang Yujing. To facilitate the pooling of pedagogical resources between the two lay leaders, Ying requested Ven. Ledu to temporarily oversee the Eastern States Buddhist Temple of America and preside over sutra lectures on the 1st

and 15th days of the lunar month.³⁷⁹ In October of the same year (1964), inspired by Ven. Ledu, Shen and some other lay believers (including Jiang), officially registered and established the BAUS. Ven. Ledu served as the first president of this association. Therefore, Ying provided a preliminary platform for Ledu's preaching activities, while Shen provided the establishment of a lasting system and financial support. Moreover, Ying actively participated and supported the Buddhist enterprises organized by Shen Jiazhen.³⁸⁰ Besides this horizontal cooperation among lay believers, their extensive and non-sectarian support for monastics was a more important form of horizontal collaboration. This support transcended sectarian boundaries and individual master-disciple relationships, effectively constructing a dynamic network centered around lay believers and characterized by resource sharing. In the early phase of Buddhist transplantation, due to the scarcity of monastics and the unfamiliarity of the environment in America, lay believers no longer confined their offerings to specific "masters" but provided support to any monastic who could promote the localization of Chinese Buddhism.

Aside from the extensive list of monastics invited by Shen across sectarian lines, another prime example is the role of lay follower Yan Kuanhu 严宽祐 as a patron and intermediary in establishing the Texas Buddhist Association. Ven. Jinghai 净海 (also

³⁷⁹ Yu, "Ying Jinyutang."

³⁸⁰ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 167–68.

transliterated as Zhenghai 真海) was a well-educated scholar-monk who had studied closely under Ven. Cihang 慈航 and earned a doctorate in Buddhist studies in Japan. However, upon arriving in Houston, Texas, in 1978, he faced a typical “pioneer’s” dilemma: he had no local connections, lacked a practice center, and even had to sleep on the living room floor of a local international student. Hearing of an enthusiastic local couple dedicated to supporting the Dharma, Ven. Jinghai reached out to them. Although they had never met, the Yans quickly welcomed the young monastic based on their shared Buddhist faith and Dharma affinity. As a follower of Ven. Yongxing 永惺 in Hong Kong, Yan contacted the highly respected Elder Ven. Yongxing, president of the Hong Kong Bodhi Siksa Society 香港菩提学会. Yan not only contributed his own funds but, more importantly, leveraged his connection with Elder Yongxing to successfully secure external financial support from Hong Kong. In the spring of 1979, with the assistance of Yan Kuanhu, Ven. Jinghai and Elder Ven. Yongxing officially registered the Texas Buddhist Association 德州佛教会. They subsequently established Buddha Light Temple and later initiated the construction of the grand Jade Buddha Temple between 1989 and 1990.³⁸¹ Furthermore, Yan broadly supported other Sangha groups, such as the Fo Guang Shan order founded by Ven. Hsing Yun. He actively invited Ven. Hsing Yun to Texas to propagate the Dharma, facilitating the establishment of the Dallas Lecture Hall 达拉斯

³⁸¹ Ashiwa and Wank, “Globalization of Chinese Buddhism,” 229, 231.

讲堂 and the Xiangyun Temple 香云寺 in Austin.³⁸²

This collaboration largely challenges Welch's observation regarding traditional Chinese Buddhism, which suggested that loyalty rarely produces effective horizontal ties. Within the North American social context, the role of lay Buddhists has fundamentally changed; rather than merely serving as Dharma protectors who provide material support, they have become the actual drivers in building cross-organizational networks. Lay believers can use this to contact different Buddhist groups, enhance cohesion, enable Buddhism to survive and develop overseas, and change the traditional loose state. In the global context, loyalty to specific high monastics has become a bond, which is the basis for horizontal cooperation among lay believers and between lay believers and monastics. This loyalty is not limited to one monk, but is more open and mobile. Influenced by modern American religious institutions, the practice of lay Buddhists has begun to actively promote monastics to come to serve or invite monastics to come to serve. They are no longer in a passive supporting state, but have become the core driving force of the system, independently establishing networks, organizations, and carrying out religious activities. This shows that the status of laypeople in the Buddhist system has become relatively high. Lay leaders actively mobilize to help many monastics enter the Americas when there is a vacancy in the American religious market. Monks obtain practical support in social networks, the growth of the number of believers, and funds through this channel,

³⁸² "Canxue suoyi" 参学琐忆, Shi Hsingyun 释星云, Hsingyun dashi quanji 星云大师全集, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://books.masterhsingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article10048>.

and it is easier for them to get a response from immigration policies. These external conditions provide a way for monastics to settle abroad. Therefore, the early accumulation laid the foundation for their subsequent work of spreading Buddhism. Taking a layperson like Shen Jiazhen, who has more resources, as an example, organizations like the BAUS are regarded as key “landing platforms” and “transit stations” for newly arrived Chinese monastics. These organizations not only provide visas and financial aid but also act as a “talent pool” for the monastics to establish themselves. Once the time is ripe, the monastics will change from relying on the organizations of believers at home to building temples by themselves and founding religious sects. This highly efficient, mutually beneficial strategy broke through traditional sectarian boundaries. Following the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*, it greatly facilitated the rapid spread and diversified development of Chinese Buddhism in North America.

The Amda Society was established relatively late. It invited monastics to preach scriptures from the very beginning, especially inviting monastics from Taiwan, to promote the flow of cross-border Dharma resources. Personnel exchanges integrated Buddhist resources from various places, and also built a reputation platform for monastics. Because of the exchange opportunities, well-known monastics have a broader impact and occupy an important position in the international Buddhist community. The expansion of this influence deepens the connection between regional Buddhist cultures, making the association an important link in cross-regional Buddhist dissemination. With

the passage of time, the number of Mainland Chinese immigrants in the United States exceeds that of Taiwanese immigrants, and the lay and monastic proportion of the Mainland Chinese in the association has increased. Recently, changes in population have been confirmed through my field investigations. The survey of temples in the San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles, from 2023 to 2024 found that the number of monastics from mainland China is increasing rapidly. At present, the abbots of the two major temples in this area, Hsi Lai Temple and Dharma Seal Temple, are both monastics from mainland China, which shows that the leading positions of people in the mainland Chinese Buddhist circles are gradually rising locally.³⁸³ This change in leadership is closely related to the needs of the lay believer groups in operation. The Amida Society, which is mainly composed of lay believers, also particularly relies on the guidance of a stable monastic group.

This traditional characteristic has led the society to establish a long-term cooperative relationship with the monastic community of Anfu Monastery in mainland China, which is seeking to set down roots in the United States. This cooperation possesses a clear practical logic in the current environment. Recently, the U.S. has tightened its visa policy for Chinese monastics and new temples need larger sites to be recognized by the Immigration Office to get a visa. So, applying for a visa to go and preach to believers at the invitation of the Amida Society became a natural and

³⁸³ “Mapping Buddhism in the San Gabriel Valley,” Institute for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism at University of the West, accessed Aug 09, 2026, <https://www.ishb-uwest.org/mapping-sgv>.

convenient choice for Anfu Monastery. Due to the current supervision of the Jingkong network in China, there are obstacles to the name “Amitabha Buddhist Society 净宗学会” on social media. Because of these restrictions, the society decided to change its name to Pure Land Society (*Jingtu xuehui* 净土学会) at the beginning of 2025. This name change is mainly to avoid media and policy scrutiny, so that information can be spread more effectively. In addition, this adjustment helps to carry out deeper and long-term cooperation with Chinese temples and lay a foundation for establishing a more solid religious relationship between the two sides. Amida Society has a non-sectarian nature that is not limited to specific regions or Dharma lineages. This openness promotes communication between Buddhists of different backgrounds, and provides an important channel for Buddhists to enter the US market.

When Buddhism spreads across cultures, the rise of the lay groups is historically inevitable. Driven by external factors and the adaptive choices of Buddhism itself, the role of lay practitioners has changed from passive listeners to actual organizers or executors of Buddhist activities. This change of identity makes the believer group deeply integrated into social life, effectively anchoring the initial dissemination of Buddhism within the early North America. Due to the active participation of lay practitioners, early Buddhism in North America has distinct non-sectarian characteristics. This development strategy breaks through traditional sectarian boundaries, and there is obvious horizontal cooperation between laypeople and between laypeople and monastics, and Buddhist resources are integrated across boundaries. This cooperation model has made up for the

shortage of monastics in North America at that time, and also showed the adaptability of Buddhism under multiculturalism. The influence of laypeople has gradually increased, laying the tone for the early American Buddhist history.

Prebish concluded that American Buddhism possesses an ecumenical sense that is both inclusive and encouraging of diversity.³⁸⁴ This diversity and inclusiveness are not only a survival strategy of the immigrant society, but also a functional reconfiguration. Chinese American lay organizations deeply integrate into the secular society through social services, cultural lectures and charitable activities, and still maintain the purity of religious beliefs. This flexibility not only bridged the divides between different Buddhist traditions but also granted an important organizational foundation for the localization of Chinese Buddhism in Western society. Consequently, it reflects the feature of “Attuning within Inertia” for lay Buddhist organizations that I talk. This means that, while remaining loyal to the core beliefs of Chinese Buddhism (inertia), these groups employ an open strategy of breaking down sectarian barriers (attuning) to achieve continuous expansion and evolution amid multicultural influences.

7.2 Pure Land School as a Method of Practice

When analyzing the structure of the Amida Society, it may be simplified to use a “lay-centered” or “monastic-centered” model to describe it. The community has changed

³⁸⁴ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, Preface X.

from an early mixed form to a diverse and inclusive “multi-centered” model. This transformation makes the operation more flexible and also creates a new foundation for a given role. To more accurately describe “LA Amida Society,” the concept of “open sectarian orientation” can be used, which has a clear sectarian focus and is relatively open. The adherence to sectarian identity mostly lies in safeguarding the Pure Land belief. Even after the controversy of the Ven. Jingkong, the community still has a strong tendency towards the Pure Land belief. However, there is a logical conflict between “sectarian orientation” and the previously mentioned “openness” and “non-sectarian nature.” This contradictory situation indicates that while the community adheres to traditional Pure Land Buddhism, it also needs to cope with the challenges brought by modern multiculturalism.

Therefore, understanding this balance between sectarian identity and social openness is key to studying the logic of this community’s religious practices. In our previous attempt to analyze the independence of ancient Chinese lay Buddhism, we focused on lay associative organizations guided by the Pure Land faith. Focusing on Ven. Zhili 知礼 and Ven. Zunshi 遵式, Getz notes that the flourishing and the final establishment of patriarchal lineage in Pure Land tradition largely stem from the historical construction of Tiantai patriarchs.³⁸⁵ Regarding the designation of the Northern Song monk Ven. Shengchang 省常 (959–1020) to the rank of a major Pure Land

³⁸⁵ Getz, “T’ien-t’ai,” 495–501.

patriarch, Getz analyzes that this was a reinvention of religious history and lineage, thereby challenging the autonomous narrative of the Pure Land school and revealing that this practice did not emerge as an exclusive sectarian tradition.³⁸⁶ Therefore, we can say that the early Pure Land did not possess clear sectarian characteristics or patriarchal lineages. This relatively lay-oriented Pure Land society movement was mostly “co-opted” by monastic authority or existed in a dependent structure. Robert Sharf argues more explicitly that an independent Pure Land school simply did not exist in medieval China. By contrast, “Pure Land cosmology, soteriology, and ritual were always integral to Chinese Buddhism in general and to Chan monasticism in particular.”³⁸⁷ Therefore, lay associations such as the “Lotus Societies (*lianshe* 蓮社),” which were based on these elements, functioned under the guidance of the monastic community and did not possess independence. So, we can find that a growing body of scholarship on East Asian Buddhism argues that treating Pure Land as a distinct, independent sect on par with schools such as Tiantai, Huayan, or Chan is a historical anachronism. Instead, these scholars contend that throughout the vast majority of its history, particularly in China, the Pure Land was primarily understood and engaged with as a “method of practice” (*xingmen* 行門)—a devotional and soteriological current that flowed through and was

³⁸⁶ Daniel A. Getz Jr., “Shengchang’s Pure Conduct Society and the Chinese Pure Land Patriarchate,” in *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Kenneth Kazuo Tanaka (University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).

³⁸⁷ Sharf, “Pure Land Buddhism,” 282, 317–21, 331.

integrated into the doctrinal frameworks of various other Buddhist schools. This viewpoint challenges the traditional interpretation of Pure Land Buddhism, which was regarded as an independent entity with a linear patriarchal lineage and remained unchanged throughout. Its argument is based on the distinction between “practical tradition” and “formally institutionalized sects or schools (*zongpai* 宗派).” Charles B. Jones believes that applying the “sect” or “school” model to the Pure Land faith is a “misnomer.” In classical Chinese literature, the term “*zong* 宗” usually refers to “core doctrines” or “fundamental principles,” rather than an independent and institutionalized “sect” or “school.” It was not until the modern era that the term “*zong*” began to represent an independent sect under the influence of Japan. Chinese Buddhists themselves usually regard Pure Land Buddhism as a *famen* 法门 (Dharma gate), meaning a method of practice, meaning an open practice tradition that can be integrated into various Buddhist practice systems.³⁸⁸ He proved that in China, practices such as repeatedly *nianfo* were widely adopted by monastics and lay believers, and these believers also recognized other sects. Tiantai, Chan, and other sects’ monastics often incorporated Pure Land doctrines and practice methods into their doctrinal systems as a skillful means (*upāya*) for their followers.³⁸⁹ Scholars like David W. Chapell also emphasized the inclusiveness and practical orientation of Chinese Buddhism, such that concepts like “method” or “practice

³⁸⁸ Charles B. Jones, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2019), 9–14.

³⁸⁹ Jones, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism*, 87, 104, 106.

method” are regarded as ingenious means leading to the same ultimate goal, rather than as ideological means of competing between different institutions. He particularly offered a meticulous elaboration on the definitive characteristics of the four sects during the Sui-Tang dynasties: Tiantai, Pure Land, Chan, and Huayan, and pointed out that these Sui and Tang sects “broke the boundaries based on elitism, karma, ascending to heaven or descending to hell, and the pursuit of immortality” of the conventional religious concepts. They reached the pinnacle of Chinese Buddhism precisely because they successfully combined the most profound Buddhist insights and practices with lived experience in a way accessible to the Chinese. The shared achievement of these four schools was to provide methods for “transcendence in the midst of life,” thereby dismantling the rigid binary between the sacred and the secular. This goal was achieved through different Dharma gates, such as “faith, insight, and mindfulness.”³⁹⁰

Pure Land practice is not just a matter of particular religious groups, but a universal spiritual orientation in Mahayana. Many monastics with different academic and practice paths, in addition to studying precepts or treatises, also regard *nianfo* and contemplating the Pure Land as an important auxiliary to enhance themselves. The pursuit of Pure Land Buddhism does not exclude other practices in Mahayana Buddhism; instead, it adopts an inclusive attitude. This openness indicates that the early Pure Land beliefs mainly emphasized the ultimate liberation rather than constructing strict

³⁹⁰ David W. Chappell, *Buddhist and Taoist Practice in Medieval Chinese Society* (University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 3–5.

hierarchies or exclusive sectarian boundaries. Due to the lack of specific system constraints, Pure Land thought spread widely in society. Relying on “embracing beings of all three capacities (*sangen pubei* 三根普被),” it accepts elites and common people, is related to tradition, and also lays the foundation for others to be absorbed. Therefore, the early Pure Land belief is a kind of spirit running through the Chinese Buddhist system, not existing in isolation. Flexibility is the key to its long-term spread and vitality. So, the early Pure Land beliefs were a spirit that ran through the Chinese Buddhist system and did not exist in isolation. Flexibility was the key to its long-term dissemination and vitality.

Therefore, we can further analyze why Pure Land beliefs gradually became the main activity domain for laypeople, which is related to the traditional classification of the Pure Land tradition. In Andrews’ view, classifying Pure Land beliefs simply as “popular” or “easy” Dharma gates is overly simplistic. We can at least distinguish between two main forms of Pure Land beliefs: one is the “relying on other-power and easy-practice” approach, mainly shown in laypeople’s *nianfo* practice; the other is the “relying on self-power and difficult-practice” approach, mainly manifested in the meditation and visualization of high monastics. Through this distinction, we can observe its historical changes. The early Chinese Pure Land beliefs were mainly led by monastics and had obvious elite characteristics. Taking the White Lotus Society established by Ven. Huiyuan as an example, the core practice at that time was not the simple vocal recitation, but visualization according to the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra* (*Bozhou sanmei jing* 般舟三

昧经). Monastics need to rely on deep meditation in samadhi to perceive Buddha in this practice, which is a relatively difficult self-cultivation. Because this way of pursuing a deep meditation state is quite different from the later popular Pure Land belief. In the Northern Wei Dynasty, Ven. Tanluan 昙鸾 expounded the other-power salvation of Amitabha Buddha well, which made the Pure Land belief spread. He believed that ordinary people could rely on faith, vows, and *nianfo* to rebirth in the Pure Land. This effectively established the doctrinal bedrock for the Pure Land Dharma door to change from difficult to easy. Then, Ven. Daochuo 道绰 divided the Pure Land Path and Holy Path into two paths. He gave lectures in the Age of Dharma Decline. Ordinary people were difficult to rely on their own enlightenment, and they relied on other-power salvation. This doctrinal evolution facilitated the systematization of the Pure Land tradition. Then, Ven. Shandao 善导 integrated the thoughts of predecessors and constructed a practice system with reciting Buddha's name as the core. He clearly interpreted the "Ten Recitations (*shinian* 十念)" needed for rebirth as chanting Buddha's name orally. Simplified cultivation methods make Pure Land Buddhism a belief that is easy for everyone to understand and accept.

From this period onward, Pure Land belief completed its transition from an elite meditative practice to a popular movement. It spread not only among monastics but also into ordinary households, ultimately becoming the most influential form of belief in

Chinese Buddhism.³⁹¹ With breakthroughs at both the doctrinal and organizational levels, the Pure Land tradition gradually became the primary domain for society-forming activities among both elite and ordinary lay Buddhists during the Song dynasty. The *Longshu jingtu wen* 龙舒净土文 was compiled by Song dynasty lay representative Wang Rixiu 王日休. This text rendered the initially complex Pure Land belief more systematic and accessible to the common people. Wang Rixiu pointed out that Pure Land practice was available to everyone and that sentient beings of all capacities could attain realization. It was an approach that embraced beings of all three capacities and accommodated both the sharp and the dull. He also said that this could be practiced at any time in various professions. Wang described that “For officials, it does not hinder their duties; for scholars, it does not hinder their studies; for merchants, it does not hinder their trade; for farmers, it does not hinder their cultivation; for clerks, it does not hinder serving their superiors; and for monastics, it does not hinder their Chan meditation. In short, it poses no hindrance to any activity.”³⁹² This gave religious significance to daily labor, allowing laypeople to obtain the final redemption as monastics without giving up production or secular affairs. The flexibility of this doctrine provided theoretical support for the mobilization and organizational development of the large society later. In

³⁹¹ Allan A. Andrews, “Lay and Monastic Forms of Pure Land Devotionalism: Typology and History,” *Numen* 40, no. 1 (1993): 16–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3270396>.

³⁹² Wang Rixiu 王日休, *Longshu jingtu wen* Volume One 《龙舒净土文》卷一, (CBETA 2026.R1, T47, no. 1970, p. 254c). The Chinese text is “在官不妨职业，在士不妨修读，在商贾不妨贩卖，在农人不妨耕种，在公门不妨事上，在僧徒不妨参禅，凡一切所为皆不相妨。”

organizational practices, scholars study Huiyuan's White Lotus Society and widely establish Buddha-name recitation associations. These associations are usually initiated by eminent monastics, but most of the core members and sponsors are lay believers. In the Song Dynasty, the autonomy of believers gradually increased, and Buddha-name recitation associations were completely initiated and managed by laypeople. Their scale is large, with the number of members ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands, and their social statuses are different, from high-ranking officials to butchers and servants in the market, and people from different classes are equal in front of faith. By the Southern Song, there even emerged societies entirely initiated and managed by lay Buddhists (such as Zhang Lun 张抡) in their own residences, denoting a growing sense of lay autonomy. It was the widespread popularity of these groups that enabled the Pure Land belief to transcend the institutional confines of the temple and truly integrate into the lives of ordinary people. Therefore, during this period, the Pure Land School completed its transformation from an elitist tradition to a popular one, ultimately forming such a social scene: "Amitābha in every home, Guanyin in every household (*jiajia mituo huhu guanyin* 家家弥陀，户户观音)." ³⁹³

It can be said that the Pure Land belief was the key medium that enabled lay organizations to move from a subordinate position to an independent one. In the existing academic discussions, modern "lay Buddhism" is often simplified to a one-sided account

³⁹³ Andrews, "Lay and Monastic Forms," 95–147, 225.

of intellectuals pursuing rationalization and scientificization, but it is not to be ignored that the Pure Land belief was also a major driving force for the development of modern lay Buddhism. Extensive folk organizations such as the Pure Karma Society 净业社 and Lotus Societies 莲社 during the Republic of China period no longer relied on the traditional monastic system. They were usually founded and led by elite lay leaders, but their basic practices were almost universally centered around the simple Pure Land method. It can be argued that Pure Land belief was the crucial medium that propelled lay organizations from a subordinate status to independence. In the existing academic discourse, modern “lay Buddhism” is often simplified into a unilateral narrative of intellectuals pursuing rationalization and scientificization. However, widespread lay organizations, represented by the Lotus Societies and Pure Karma Society during the Republican period, were also vital participants in the modernization of Buddhism and the development of modern lay Buddhism. No longer dependent on the traditional monastic system, these organizations were independently initiated, managed, and funded by lay elites such as urban industrialists and intellectuals. This achieved a “structural decoupling” from the traditional monastic community in both administrative and economic terms. Although they were typically founded and led by elite lay leaders, their foundational practice almost uniformly centered on the simple Pure Land method of Buddha-name recitation. This Pure Land orientation possesses a profound practical logic. By simplifying the procedures and allowing laypeople to engage in secular careers, the practice of chanting Buddha’s name perfectly meets the needs in the fast-paced urban

environment. In this case, the belief in the Pure Land serves as an adhesive that brings scattered believers together and builds an “imagined community.” It is renowned for its notable non-sectarianism and social adaptability. This “elites setting up the platform, and the general public participating in the practice” model sketches out a new form of “lay Buddhism.” It differed from both scholastic elite narratives and traditional monastic dependency. Ultimately, it provided an important historical prototype for the subsequent establishment of lay practice centers in overseas diaspora communities and the development of modern Pure Land Buddhism.³⁹⁴

Therefore, by tracing the original non-sectarian nature of Pure Land Buddhism and its historical compatibility with lay identity, we can view the Amida Society as a fundamental sample of lay Buddhist modernization within the “elite-mass spectrum.” This offers an essential analytical lens to decode its nuanced characteristics following the overseas transplantation. The Amitabha Buddhist Societies led by Ven. Jingkong are largely a modern evolution of the Chinese Pure Land. This process is primarily reflected within the comprehensive institutionalization of traditional systemic structures, which not only inherits the core spirit of traditional culture and the spiritual connotations of Pure Land Buddhism, but also places these concepts within a modern and global network. In the early stages, it mainly relied on the personal charisma of Ven. Jingkong to form a unique and exclusive sectarian characteristic. Through these adjustments, the originally

³⁹⁴ Jessup, “Householder Elite,” 5–28.

scattered spiritual traditions among the common people were reshaped into an actually independent sect and spread rapidly worldwide. Through the establishment of this organizational form, it no longer merely served as a practice method related to other sects, but became an independent Buddhist movement with a clear identity, unified doctrine and global influence. These changes made the doctrinal organization of the Pure Land School more complete, enabling it to function as an independent entity in modern society. Therefore, the development of the Amitabha Buddhist Society demonstrates a significant transformation of Pure Land thought: it has shifted from the widespread practice trend in general Buddhist culture before to a modern Pure Land form with clear goals and a unique system.

However, due to its lay-centered nature, this organization gained a certain degree of independence, enabling it to maintain management autonomy during specific crises. This allowed the Amida Society to adjust its development path accordingly, enabling President Chen to break free from the “singular monastic authority.” By actively implementing the principle of “relying on Dharma rather than on individuals,” he shifted the focus of the organization towards a broader and more open sectarian direction. This development model seems to be an inevitable trend determined by the original essence of Pure Land faith. It can also be understood as a hidden correction and restoration, driven by the characteristics of Pure Land faith as a “practice method” (*xingmen* 行門) of the organization. By returning to its original essence as a “practice method,” the organization completed the transformation from sectarianism to non-sectarianism. This process

reflects the profound transformation of the organizational nature of the Amida Society. It gradually transformed from a group driven by the personal charisma of the leader and having modern sectarian characteristics, back to the traditional Chinese Buddhism “Dharma gate” (*famen* 法门) model as a public practice platform. This transformation also led to an adjustment in the Society’s core orientation, shifting its focus from defending a specific lineage of teachings to serving general Pure Land practice. Due to this change in its mission, the Society’s organizational structure was no longer confined to a single lineage, consequently broadening its vision for practice.

7.3 Respecting Monastic Authority

During the transplantation of Chinese Buddhism to North America, layman Shen Jiazhen and the Los Angeles Amida Society demonstrated exceptionally strong “Lay Subjectivity.” This subjectivity was reflected not only in the control of material resources but also, more profoundly, in institutional design, independent and democratic decision-making, and doctrinal interpretation. Shen did not establish his lay authority by challenging the power of the monastics. Instead, his authority was manifested in aspects such as “the religious transformation of secular capital,” “the standardized design of modern institutions,” “the scientific reconstruction of knowledge discourse,” and his “extensive support” for the monk community. In North America, he established a unique lay paradigm, which was described as “auxiliary but with leadership.” The main source of Shen’s authority lies in his substantial economic capital and modern management

expertise. As a highly successful industrialist in the international shipping sector, he seamlessly applied the management experience he had accumulated in the secular world to the development of Buddhist organizations. Rather than founding a traditional, privately-owned temple, he advocated adopting the Western non-profit organization (NPO) model. He established an “organization-centered” board-of-directors system governed by democratic standards and the rule of law. This “Managerial Layism” established democratic decision-making power for lay practitioners in administration, finance, and long-term planning. Compared with monastics, laypeople had a greater voice in secular management, which helped ensure the organizational vitality of the BAUS.³⁹⁵

Shen’s authority is further demonstrated by his in-depth study of Buddhism and his continuous efforts to modernize it. His spiritual practice began with an in-depth study of scriptures, and then he engaged in meditation and retreat under the guidance of renowned mentors like Zhang Chengji. These profound practical experiences gave him the spiritual legitimacy as a “lay teacher.” In his missionary strategy, he was skilled at transforming complex Buddhist principles into modern language. He used scientific metaphors like the mass-energy equation $E=mc^2$ and American core cultural symbols like “The Mayflower” to provide localized explanations that were in line with Buddhist doctrines and the abilities of his audience.³⁹⁶ This reasonable reconfiguration of Buddhist doctrines is

³⁹⁵ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 161–62, 168–170.

³⁹⁶ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 93–94, 188–203; Shen, *Wuyue hua*, 1–12.

closely linked to the cognitive profiles of the “intellectual immigrants” group in North America and the Western audience. Moreover, guided by the core principle of “equally emphasizing virtue and wisdom,” modern entrepreneur Shen, with his organizational management skills and forward-looking vision, systematically established Chinese Buddhist physical practice centers, academic institutions, and cultural foundations in the United States. Acting as a major Dharma protector, he extensively sponsored the Buddhist activities of various monastics and facilitated the arrival of numerous talented monastics. His immense contributions to the propagation of the Dharma further confirmed his lay authority.

On the other hand, the Amida Society in Los Angeles achieved a subjective transformation from mere followers to independent actors. At first, President Chen was an accountant. After overcoming racial prejudices and legal obstacles, the organization independently purchased and operated a permanent practice facility. This process indicates that lay believers in an overseas environment can independently create sacred spaces without relying on the existence of existing monastic groups, thus achieving independence in organizational decision-making. During regular practice schedules, President Chen and several other lay believers often took the stage to give speeches or share opinions or insights. They also played the role of “explanators of doctrine,” thereby playing a substantive role in the interpretation of doctrine and the symbolic leadership in rituals. Although they often used humble expressions like “sharing opinions or thoughts” to avoid controversy, their religious discourse and the symbolic leadership role in the

collective practice marked an effective breakthrough of the monopoly of monastics over the power structure of knowledge and rituals. By centrally displaying the works of Ven. Jingkong and prominent lay masters such as Xia Lianju and Li Bingnan, the Los Angeles Society constructed a typical “textual community.” Devotees engaged in “autonomous practice” through the consumption of audio-visual materials and internet media. This significantly detached and replaced the traditional monastic role as the sole intermediary for rituals and doctrines. Furthermore, by promoting the spirit of the *Kālāma Sūtra*, this association encourages its members not to blindly follow authority but to emphasize individual rational analysis and empirical spirit. This “epistemological empowerment” enables laypeople to make independent judgments on academic or doctrinal issues. When their spiritual mentor, Ven. Jingkong, faced controversy, the Amida Society demonstrated the ability of “automatic self-correction,” which became the highest manifestation of the subjectivity of its lay members. Due to the flexible decision-making of its lay management, the organization consciously reduced its reliance on a single leader and turned to a more open attitude towards the “Pure Land faith” as a whole. This transformation transformed the organization from a mere “follower group” into a genuine “community of practice and learning.” This subjectiveness propelled Pure Land belief away from “sectarian trends,” returning it to its original intention as a “practical tradition (method of practice).”³⁹⁷ By inviting monastics from diverse backgrounds to give

³⁹⁷ Jones, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism*, 9–14.

lectures, the Society successfully integrated religious sacredness with modern management logic while continuing lay leadership.

However, the establishment of lay authority did not entail a denial of monastic authority. On the contrary, the narrative of lay Buddhism “confronting monastic authority” is not the core feature of modern lay Buddhist development. The Shanghai Buddhist Pure Karma Society and the World Buddhist Householder Grove, established in Shanghai at the time, typically invited eminent monastics (such as Ven. Yinguang and Ven. Dixian 谛闲) to serve as honorary guiding teachers to ensure the orthodoxy of their faith. When hosting large-scale Dharma assemblies, seven-day Buddha-name recitation retreats, or sutra lectures, they would invite monastics to preside over the ceremonies. To maintain daily chanting services and incense offerings, lay organizations would hire a small number of monastics (often called resident monastics) to live within the association or society.³⁹⁸ Although both Shen Jiazhen’s Buddhist Association of the United States and the Los Angeles Amida Society had a strong lay subjectivity, their respect for the Sangha went beyond simple devotion. Instead, they elevated this respect to the level of institutional protection, legitimacy endorsement, and cultural preservation. Shen Jiazhen’s respect for monastics was reflected in a highly forward-looking, institutionalized design of “monastic leadership and lay assistance.” By yielding the secular power of lay practitioners, he ensured the sacred leadership status of the Sangha.

³⁹⁸ Jessup, “Householder Elite,” 11, 21.

In the *Constitution of the BAUS*, Shen explicitly stipulated that the position of president must be held by a monastic, and a layperson should never hold this position. This institutional design legally established the dominant position of the monastics and prevented laypeople's capital from completely controlling the religious discourse. Mr. Shen called himself the "platform builder," using his financial resources, he provided "landing platforms" for outstanding monastics. He funded monastics to build independent temples and establish their own sects, rather than requiring them to belong to his private organization. Therefore, this organization's respect for the monastics exceeded the boundaries of the sect. As a Chinese Buddhist venue, Chuang Yen Monastery invited the authoritative figure in the Buddhist field of Pali, Bhikkhu Bodhi, as its head. This "only following the Dharma" attitude will elevate the respect for the monastics from a simple "status worship" to the level of "Dharma respect."³⁹⁹

Compared with the institutional design of the BAUS, the Amida Society also shows high reverence toward monastic community, which is more reflected in the maintenance of ritual venues and survival strategies in the religious environment. During important preaching or religious gatherings, the center would specially arrange higher "Dharma seats" for the monastics. Even when core lay leaders like Mr. Chen, the president, spoke on stage, their seats would be arranged lower. This spatial distinction aims to highlight the clear hierarchical order between monastics and laypeople, and

³⁹⁹ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 168–71. 387, 427; Shi, *Xifang geguo*, 378–80.

reflects the leadership position of the monastics in the core traditional religion. Given the traditional Chinese Buddhism of “monastic-centered,” lay organizations lacking monk support are prone to facing an identity crisis. The organization invited orthodox monastics such as Ven. Guoqing, Ven. Dazhao, and Ven. Jingjie to preside over the preaching activities. By enhancing the authority of the monastics, it constructed a protective barrier and ensured that its activities did not deviate from tradition and the establishment of legitimacy. Even during the controversy of Jinjiu Master, the society did not move towards the “de-monasticization” direction. Instead, it actively established cooperative relationships with orthodox monastic groups, such as Anfu Monastery in Zhejiang. In the subsequent transmission process, the society clearly tended towards monastics taking over rather than continuing to be led by the laity.

Then we’d like to ask why the respect for the authority of monastics in Chinese Buddhism can be transplanted to the free Western society in North America, where lay authority is highly developed and far from the previous national religious ideological policies. It is not just traditional inertia. On the contrary, the secular community makes strategic choices to adapt to Buddhist traditions in the inertial framework for organizational legitimacy, cultural identity and doctrinal purity. The “respect for monastics” tradition of the first generation of Chinese immigrants is the core of their Buddhist identity. The consensus and psychological inertia of taking refuge in the Three Treasures are universal in overseas Chinese communities. Respect for the monastic community is an expression of personal belief and also responds to the expectations of

the community's "orthodox Buddhist" culture. In the interview, President Chen noted that Director Han Ying, as Ven. Jingkong's most significant early Dharma protector, exerted strong, dominating authority in managing the Hwa Dzan Library. The management model of "laypeople at the forefront, monastics preaching" is efficient, but it has caused long-term controversy among the Buddhist community. Therefore, lay organizations retain their monastic identities to maintain legitimacy and religious identity concerning their development strategies. This model effectively concentrates traditional monastic resources in the center and gives spiritual and authoritative recognition. Therefore, these centers have been stable for a long time and have also improved the social reputation. In the summer camp in 2024, Chuang Yen Monastery welcomed many second-generation American-Chinese children to participate. Although most of them were not raised in a traditional environment, mainly communicated in English and did not sign up on their own initiative, the traditional education passed down by the first-generation parents and the respect for the monastics still remained quite evident.

The practical impact of recognizing monastic authority can also be observed in Shanghai's lay organizations during that period. Established in 1920, the Shanghai Buddhist Householder Grove was organized under the leadership of its founding president, Wang Yuji 王与楫. In its early stages, the Society was a comprehensive organization that attempted to integrate various Buddhist activities, including lectures, Yogacara studies, charity, and life release. Historical records indicate that when the Buddhist Householder Grove (the faction led by Wang Yuji) invited Ven. Yinguang to be

the first “Honored Guiding Teacher,” he replied with a fiercely worded letter. Not only did he explicitly reject the request in the letter, but he also criticized the operation model of Wang Yuji and his organization. Scholars believe that this “hostility” is more directed at people rather than the issue itself. As a layman with a political background and the traits of a social activist, Wang Yuji exhibited a leadership style that Ven. Yinguang likely viewed as overly frivolous, perhaps even suspecting him of using Buddhism to pursue fame and profit. Yin Guang advocated for “devout chanting of Buddha’s name” and “fulfillment of moral obligations.” However, Wang Yuji was passionate about social networking and getting involved in interpersonal disputes. Yin Guang did not approve of these behaviors, so this letter deprived Wang Yuji of his absolute authoritative voice within the Pure Land School. While Ven. Yinguang remained aloof in his interactions with Wang Yuji, he stimulatously maintained frequent and close contact with the lay community of the Shanghai Buddhist Pure Karma Society. The core founders of this group, such as Guan Jiongzhi 关炯之, Shi Shengzhi 施省之, and Huang Hanzhi 黄涵之, were predominantly refuge disciples of the master. They had begun corresponding with Ven. Yinguang as early as the late 1910s and were strongly influenced by his thought.⁴⁰⁰ Therefore, although the master routinely claimed to avoid trivial social affairs, he effectively became the supreme spiritual leader of the Pure Karma Society. His

⁴⁰⁰ Jan Kiely, “The Charismatic Monk and the Chanting Masses: Master Yinguang and His Pure Land Revival Movement,” in *Making Saints in Modern China*, ed. Ownby David et al. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 36–37, 40–41.

position as a spiritual leader was mainly demonstrated by his active support for the specific activities of the “Pure Karma Society.” He personally attended various ceremonies held by the association at the new “Enlightenment Garden 觉园” site, and explained the concepts of karma and rebirth as well as the methods of spiritual practice to the believers. This in-person support endowed the Pure Karma Society with an unparalleled sense of religious sanctity. Additionally, the master agreed to serve as the Society’s guiding teacher and corresponded frequently with senior lay members to directly guide their spiritual practice. Due to this close connection, the Pure Karma Society was widely recognized at the time as the core center for the transmission of Ven. Yinguang’s Pure Land thought in Shanghai. Because the master demonstrated a clear spiritual preference for the Pure Karma Society, his stance objectively accelerated the structural division of the lay community. In 1922, members devoted to specialized Pure Land practice formally broke away from the original Householder Grove. Because the master clearly expressed his approval of the Pure Karma Society, his stance objectively accelerated the structural differentiation of the lay believers’ group, resulting in the fact that in 1922, the believers who focused on Pure Land practice officially separated from the original organization. When disagreements over practice methods arose within the organization, the master’s support for Guan, Shi, and others over Wang Yuji signaled to the wider congregation that the Pure Karma Society was the orthodox and pure venue for practice. This endorsement allowed sincere practitioners of the Buddha-recitation method to leave the original organization without psychological hesitation and dedicate

themselves to building the Pure Karma Society.⁴⁰¹

Furthermore, the transformation from relying solely on the authority of one monastic to relying on multiple monastics can introduce a wider range of Buddhist resources, can also reduce the risk of the collapse of a single authority, and make the organization more stable. Across the evolution of domestic Chinese and North American lay Buddhist organizations, this transformation reflects a deeper understanding of the doctrine and a forward-looking survival strategy. The authority of a single monastic is often restricted by the sect inheritance or personal practice path, and cannot meet the diverse spiritual needs of North American immigrants. By introducing diverse monastic authorities, Shen and the Amida Society essentially transformed their centers into “hubs for Dharma resources.” In the institutional design of BAUS, Shen consciously downplayed sectarian distinctions. By introducing various monastic authorities, Shen and the Amida Society actually transformed their center into “hubs for Dharma resources.” In the organizational structure design of BAUS, Shen consciously downplayed sectarian differences. By inviting eminent monastics from different backgrounds, the Chuang Yen Monastery became a “pan-Buddhist” platform, enabling believers to access “all-around” doctrines at the same center. Bhikkhu Bodhi holds an important position in Theravada Buddhism and the Western religious community. He has long resided in the background of Chinese Buddhism at the Chuang Yen Monastery, and this choice attracted many non-

⁴⁰¹ Jessup, “Householder Elite,” 10–26.

Chinese believers to participate in the community activities of this monastery. For example, in the recent Buddhist reading and meditation course led by Bhikkhu Bodhi, the vast majority of participants were not Chinese Americans. The Chuang Yen Monastery successfully connected people from different cultural backgrounds with monastics from different backgrounds, transforming a single ethnic community into a more diversified space. Although following the Pure Land teachings, the Amida Society also actively invited teachers from different religious backgrounds to give lectures. This “with Pure Land Buddhism as the ultimate goal and other sects as auxiliary support” strategy utilized the professional knowledge of various Buddhist teachers (such as in rituals, doctrines, and practical practice) to build a systematic educational support system for laypeople, thereby compensating for the possible knowledge blind spots of a single teacher.

On the other hand, Weber pointed out that charismatic authority is essentially unstable because its legitimacy largely depends on the leader’s personal statements, behaviors, and existence.⁴⁰² Shen also pointed out that traditional Chinese Buddhism often faced dilemmas such as “the isolated sectarian factions” and “the collapse of various activities after the death of the leader.” By stipulating that different monastics take turns serving as the chairperson, Shen cut off the absolute dependence on a single leader institutionally, ensuring that the organization would not fall into paralysis due to

⁴⁰² Weber, *Economy and Society*, 241–45, 1114–15.

the death or departure of the responsible monastics.⁴⁰³ The case of the Amida Society is highly representative in this regard. When its core mentor, Ven. Jingkong, faced controversies within the Buddhist community and political bans, the Society leveraged its lay-led independent decision-making power to rapidly initiate a “self-correction” mechanism, and this active attunement process prevented a blind adherence to traditional inertia. By shifting from “relying on the person” to “relying on the Dharma” and broadly introducing the influence of orthodox monastic communities like Anfu Monastery, it hedged against the reputational risks caused by the damage to a single authority. In fact, although the Amida Society is a lay Buddhist organization, the size of its regular group practice is rarely seen in Los Angeles. Furthermore, it maintains relatively good relations with mainstream monastic organizations both locally and abroad, unlike more controversial lay centers such as Guanyin Citta Hall, the True Buddha School 真佛宗, or Bliss and Wisdom 福智, which are often excluded from mutually recognized mainstream Buddhist circles.

Thirdly, perhaps we are not discussing the specific reasons for respecting the authority of monastics, but rather conducting a comparative analysis. Through the exploration of the modernist connotation of Western Buddhism, we examine the differences between Chinese Buddhism and Western Buddhism in terms of respecting the authority of monastics and understanding traditional beliefs. Starting with the Kālāma

⁴⁰³ He, *Shen Jiazhen zhuan*, 171, 385–86.

Sutta, it has been reinterpreted to a certain extent in the modern context and has become an authoritative basis against superstition and dogmatism. When facing various authorities, the rational Western cultural environment supports critical thinking. This shifts the reliance on authority from the external to the individual's observation, reflection and verification, thereby discarding blind faith. It places greater emphasis on meditation, concentration, scientific rationalism, philosophical thinking and psychological application, while simplifying or eliminating traditional rituals and cultural elements, presenting a trend that transcends tradition. Therefore, personal experience and rational verification are often more important than traditional religious scriptures or the authority of teachers.⁴⁰⁴ Furthermore, Convert Buddhism is largely lay-oriented. This constitutes a core feature of the Americanization of Buddhism and the modernization of Western Buddhism.⁴⁰⁵ Traditional Asian Buddhism (such as Chan and Tibetan Buddhism) possesses strict master-disciple hierarchies and charismatic authority. However, when these systems were transplanted to the West, they severely clashed with Western egalitarianism. Overall, "Western teachers still retain much of the enormous authority and prestige of their Asian predecessors, but it is a provisional authority"; following a series of scandals involving the abuse of power by teachers, Western Buddhist communities have tended to establish a "Board of Directors" system, using

⁴⁰⁴ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 58, 63, 65; McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 42–43 64–65.

⁴⁰⁵ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 267.

democratic elections and ethical charters to restrict or even dismiss the power of spiritual mentors, thereby separating spiritual guidance from administrative management.⁴⁰⁶

Consequently, the boundary between monastics and laypeople has become highly blurred in the West. Many renowned Dharma teachers (such as those in the Vipassanā movement) are unordained lay practitioners who serve not only as Dharma protectors but also as interpreters and transmitters of the teachings. This “laicization” often presents Buddhism in the West as a non-institutionalized lifestyle of personal practice, rather than a religion dependent on monasteries.⁴⁰⁷ Although the organizational structure in the cases of Chinese lay Buddhism is also embedded within the Western legal system, there appear to be differences in the degree of “laicization” and the preservation of traditional monastic authority. In modern Western culture, meditation is re-transformed into a way of personal liberation, which is different from traditional Buddhism in core goals and other aspects. The “conditioned reflex” in traditional Buddhism is related to karma habits and is for achieving reincarnation; while in Western modern culture, it is reinterpreted as social and cultural fetters, and the goal of meditation is changed from escaping birth and death to resisting social oppression and seeking a secular self. Influenced by Western romanticism, modern concepts mistakenly regard “Buddha-nature” as an unsoiled self, and replace the anatta thought of Buddhism with Western individualism. Also, modern

⁴⁰⁶ Coleman, *New Buddhism*, 17–18, 131–32.

⁴⁰⁷ Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (University of California Press, 2002), 35.

culture separates meditation from strict rules and systems, values spontaneity and inner freedom, and changes it from a kind of life principle to a tool for relaxation and self-liberation. While this modernist transformation has enhanced the appeal of Buddhism to Western audiences, it has also led to a “psychologization” process that weakens its original religious power to radically deconstruct the nature of existence.⁴⁰⁸

Therefore, some scholars have begun to reflect critically on this modern interpretation, using the Kālāma Sutta as an example, noting that the tendencies of “rationalism” and the “positivist spirit” attributed to it in a modern context may create appropriations and misalignments with the original meaning of the classical texts, as well as with the traditional Buddhist understandings of authority, faith, and practice. Evans argues that this interpretation forces a post-Enlightenment modern cognitive paradigm onto ancient Indian texts, ignoring their original setting. He challenges the popular interpretation within both academia and the general public that views the Kālāma Sutta as a charter for “rationalism” and “scientific empiricism” in early Buddhism. Through detailed textual analysis, the author points out that the core content of this scripture does not advocate modern-style independent thinking or scientific verification, but rather a set of guiding principles aimed at helping believers choose the correct mentor among numerous conflicting teachers through “moral assessment.” Ultimately, this scripture emphasizes decisions based on moral practice and devout faith in the Buddha, rather than

⁴⁰⁸ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 183–214.

mere rational exploration. Its ultimate goal is to find “the entrance to divine power,” that is, by following a pure mentor (the Buddha), to enter a lifestyle that brings long-term benefits. Moreover, the author points out that karma and rebirth are the core concepts of Buddhism, but from a modern empiricist perspective, they cannot be verified through simple observation and experimentation. Ordinary people cannot directly observe the process of rebirth after death.⁴⁰⁹ Brown’s disruptive analysis of the Kālāma Sutta challenges the modern view of regarding it as the charter of Buddhist rationalism and free inquiry. The author points out that although modernists emphasize that the Kālāma Sutta advocates discarding authority and “self-realization,” this text explicitly rejects logical reasoning and inference (*anumāna-pramāṇa*, *biliang* 比量), from an epistemological perspective, this actually presents an “anti-rational” tendency. The “self-realization” in the text is not scientific verification, but is closer to non-experiential intuition or instinctive feelings, which often transform into implicit obedience to the personal intuitive authority of the Buddha. Moreover, the evaluation criteria for “bringing happiness or suffering” in the Kālāma Sutta are highly subjective and logically ambiguous. Bown uses this as an argument to point out that rationality is not the decisive characteristic of the essence of Buddhism, even in the most rationalized Kālāma Sutta, its core logic also appeals to intuition. This contradiction indicates that Buddhism’s attitude towards rationality is extremely complex and cannot be simply reduced to a

⁴⁰⁹ Stephen A. Evans, “Doubting the Kālāma-Sutta: Epistemology, Ethics, and the ‘Sacred,’” *Buddhist Studies Review* 1, no. 24 (2007): 91–107.

rationalist perspective.⁴¹⁰ When discussing how to distinguish spiritual authority, Hockham cites texts such as the Kālāma Sutta as the basis for her analysis. She believes that if only the binary model of monastics and laypeople is used to divide the population, it is difficult to clearly explain the significance of the core value of “enlightenment” in practical guidance. Therefore, she suggests adding a category of “saints or yogins” within this framework. This approach aims to emphasize that, in addition to status and title, the actual experience of the enlightened person is the key factor in guiding the practitioner. However, when attempting to verify the qualifications of a mentor or establishing a peer-review system, this emphasis on personal awakening also brings about practical difficulties. Because awakening is largely impossible for external systems to fully define, attempts to codify this spiritual quality through administrative means inevitably face major challenges.⁴¹¹

The “Four Assurances/Solaces” in the Kālāma Sutta talk about how a morally pure life gives a basic sense of security and comfort when facing the unknown cycle of rebirth.⁴¹² From a modern perspective, it interprets for individuals a space to postpone metaphysical judgments and transforms ethical motives from super-religious beliefs to worldly psychological peace. Western secular Buddhism removes traditional supernatural

⁴¹⁰ Lajos Brons, “What Makes Something Buddhist?,” in *A Buddha Land in This World: Philosophy, Utopia, and Radical Buddhism* (Punctum Books, 2022), 158–59.

⁴¹¹ Hookham, “Spiritual Authority.”

⁴¹² Thera, *Kālāma Sutta*, 2.

elements and forms a practical logic centered on the present world. Scholars like Stephen Batchelor, through the interpretation of modern “Four Assurances,” put forward views such as “Buddhism without Beliefs” or “agnostic Buddhism,” and believe that Buddhism is a practice that needs to be carried out rather than a set of propositions to believe.⁴¹³ This logic is like a rationalist bet, and its core is to show that whether the next life exists or not, a morally pure life itself is the reward in the present world. This transformation marks the shift of modern Buddhist ethics from theological dogma to a utilitarian evaluation paradigm. It will abandon “greed, hatred, and delusion” as a way of psychological self-management, emphasizing the observable improvement in present-world psychology. This result-oriented ethical evaluation avoids complex metaphysical assumptions, making Buddhist ethics capable of verifiable, in-depth interaction with modern secularism. Bhikkhu Bodhi says that the Buddha’s teaching to the Kālāmas was aimed at listeners without established beliefs, to give them logical behavioral guidance without ultimate beliefs. This experience-based confidence leads individuals to gradually accept truths beyond ordinary experience, such as liberation, nirvana, and right view. Since this teaching takes personal observation as the starting point of practice, practitioners can use this logic to gradually explore deeper Buddhist doctrines by understanding secular phenomena. Modern readers often isolate the teachings of the Kālāma Sutta from the framework of Buddhism to cater to scientific rationality. This

⁴¹³ Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (Penguin, 1998).

approach ignores the finiteness of personal experience and makes doubting at the beginning become the ultimate goal. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that personal experience is the foundational beginning of cultivation, and faith is the bridge to transcend the secular world. Practitioners can believe in the wisdom of the Buddha and transcend narrow personal experience. Then practitioners transform the value of initial experience into firm faith and enhance the wisdom of liberation through practice.⁴¹⁴

After analysis, outline the basic narrative structure of the modernization of Western Buddhism: change or remove the traditional monastic system, supernatural beliefs, and complex rituals, and establish a connection between Buddhist teachings and the rationally valued after enlightenment. This process presents a trend of “de-traditionalization,” turning Buddhism into a rational, individualistic, and psychological thought science.⁴¹⁵ But in the environment of non-Buddhist denominations in North America, this transformation shows a dilemma: overly conforming to secular rationality may make the sacredness of religion disappear; on the contrary, completely imitating Asian traditions may have the possibility of abuse of monastic power, as well as problems such as insufficient Buddhist resources and no suitable denomination soil.

In contrast, elite lay leaders such as Shen and the Amida Society with the Asian background responded to this challenge with a balanced strategy that embraced the

⁴¹⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, “A Look at the Kalama Sutta,” Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 2010, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_09.html.

⁴¹⁵ McMahan, *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 183–214.

modern context as carefully adjusting monastic-lay relations; the core of this approach is reflected in two areas: analytical rationality and the proper selection of teachers according to the Dharma. First of all, these Chinese Buddhist laypeople did not blindly replace their faith with science. Instead, they regarded science as a “matching concept” (*geyi* 格义) method and a “skillful means” (*upaya*). For instance, Shen actively employed advanced scientific concepts such as Einstein’s mass-energy equation ($E=mc^2$) to explain the “emptiness” thought in the “Diamond Sutra.”⁴¹⁶ However, the uniqueness of his authority lies in the fact that although he uses science to eliminate the “superstition” label of Buddhism, he always maintains a profound understanding of the limitations of science. He clearly pointed out that scientific observations based on “the physical eye” and “the divine eye” amount to an externalized “knowledge.” In contrast, the “wisdom eye” and the “Dharma eye” illuminated by Buddhist teachings point to the “wisdom” of inner realization.⁴¹⁷ This instrumental use and fundamental transcendence of scientific rationality allowed his teachings to attract highly educated “intellectual immigrants” while successfully defending the transcendent sanctity of Mahayana Buddhism. Furthermore, as a typical lay-led practice center, although the Amida Society utilized modern digital media (such as YouTube and the free distribution of Dharma materials) to disintermediate religious practice and build a highly autonomous faith network, its core

⁴¹⁶ Shen, *Jingang Jing*, 102–4.

⁴¹⁷ Shen, “Wuyan.”

retained a strong traditional orientation and a distinct Pure Land sectarian identity.

Research on the Kālāma Sutta was to encourage rational thinking and the cultivation of the review ability of renowned mentors. This rationality does not mean to abandon faith or abandon respect for the Sangha; instead, it is used to regulate the Pure Land practice and ensure the appropriate selection of teachers.

Furthermore, due to the lack of stable monastic organizations in the early North American region, lay leaders realized that if Buddhism was to gain recognition in the new cultural environment, it would have to rely on the established status of the monastic community. They established a complementary relationship between laypeople and the monastic community by introducing resources from both domestic and international regions. Similar to many Western Buddhist organizations, they often had monastics and laypeople participate in the board structure, which promoted cooperation and harmony and formed a mechanism of mutual checks and balances. During this process, although the lay leaders controlled the finances, they still maintained the arrangement of “laypeople providing the stage and the monastic community leading the practice.” This attracted a large cohort of erudite monastics and fundamentally catalyzed the early dissemination of Chinese Buddhism across North America, deepening the doctrinal exchanges between different regions and sects. When facing controversies regarding monastics, these leaders did not waver in their beliefs; instead, they turned to rational pragmatism. They no longer solely relied on the authority of a single monastic but began to return to the overall respect for traditional monastic power. The transition from a

single-authority model to a diversified model effectively solved many practical problems and paved a sustainable pathway for the generational continuity and long-term flourishing of Buddhism overseas.

7.4 Cooperation and Tension between Monastics and the Laity

Examining the overall situation of American Buddhist immigrant temples, it can be seen that the tensions between monastics and the lay management committee are relatively common. This is the “monk-lay co-governance” model, which reflects the changes of the traditional Asian Buddhist model after adapting to the legal and social environment in the US. Within traditional Asian Buddhism, the decision-making power of the temple lies with the monastics, and the assets are usually owned by the monastic community or transmitted through hereditary lineages. However, under the legal framework of the board of directors in the United States, the board of directors often actually controls the secular affairs of the temple, and the power of the monastics is often limited to religious rituals and teaching. This model weakens the sacred status of the monastics and also gives rise to obvious conflict points: Many resident monastics or abbots are legally employees hired by the board of directors, and their positions, salaries, renewal of employment, etc., are determined by the board of directors. The “employer-employee” model weakens the holy authority of monastics, making them passive in the organizational structure. Non-monk board members are usually long-term immigrant residents who can speak English, understand American law, and control economic

resources. In contrast, many recruited monastics were recent immigrants to the United States who faced severe language obstacles and cultural maladaptation, leading to their marginalization in temple affairs.⁴¹⁸ Since the board of directors retained definitive financial control over the temple, factional struggles among the laity often spilled over into the monastic community. Under the American legal framework, laypeople were not only financial supporters of the temples but also their legal owners, a structural shift that fundamentally reshaped traditional monastic-lay relations.

In this case, there is a trend of “congregationalization” in Buddhist temple organizations, which scholars call “de facto congregationalism.” This model makes the operation of temples like that of American Christian churches, because laypeople dominate management and monastics engage in specialized tasks, which is different from the core leadership model of traditional Buddhism. For example, young laypeople like equal or democratic management and hope to have more decision-making power, which conflicts with the hierarchy of traditional monastics and elder laypeople. Buddhist organizations in the United States are relatively decentralized and practice local autonomy, and each temple can carry out local innovations, but there is a lack of strong monastic authority to mediate internal conflicts. When there is no institutional guarantee, monastics are easily affected by internal organizational pressures. In extreme cases,

⁴¹⁸ Janet McLellan, “Themes and Issues in the Study of North American Buddhists and Buddhism,” in *North American Buddhists in Social Context*, ed. Paul David Numrich (E. J. Brill, 2008), 35, 41.

conflicts among lay groups may involve monastics and use them as chips. Since lay groups have administrative power, the conflicts will escalate, and monastics may be marginalized and excluded. Decentralized governance gives local organizations flexibility but makes monastics lose the protection of the traditional system. Therefore, under the dual influence of legal ownership and economic power, lay believers transformed from traditional supporters to the dominant force within the temples. This reality completely changed the relative status between monastics and lay believers, causing the monk community to face new survival pressures in the modern organizational transformation.⁴¹⁹

Looking back at early modern China, the influence of lay Buddhism was not limited to individual places; rather, it emerged throughout the society as a counterbalancing force to the authority of monastics. In 1927, Ouyang Jingwu published an article listing “ten fallacies (*shimiu* 十謬)” in traditional Buddhism that placed monastics above lay believers. He argued that lay believers could act as missionaries, read the monastics’ precepts, and accept the monastics’ bowing. This essentially meant advocating that lay believers could replace monastics as the core force supporting Buddhism. Ven. Taixu was deeply concerned about this. He believed that abolishing the “system of maintaining monastics (*zhuchi seng* 住持僧)” would cause Buddhism to lose its core theme and turn into an ordinary academic or social organization. Therefore, he

⁴¹⁹ McLellan, “Themes and Issues,” 35, 41.

firmly refuted Ouyang's viewpoint, emphasizing that "only monastics are qualified to serve as teachers." He emphasized that only the ordained Sangha could serve as the core for "sustaining the Three Jewels," and that laypeople, regardless of their level of realization, should remain in a supporting role within the ethical framework of the religious community.⁴²⁰ After 1926, the Northern Expedition triggered movements in the south to combat superstition and confiscate temple properties, plunging the monastic community into a survival crisis. Shanghai lay Buddhists, such as Wang Yiting, engaged in political and business lobbying through the Shanghai Buddhist Maintenance Association 上海佛教维持会, expanding their efforts to protect Buddhism to the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions in 1927. In 1929, the Chinese Buddhist Association was established within the precincts of the Shanghai Buddhist Lay Grove and received funding, so the laymen changed from simple financial sponsors to the core of decision-making. But this led to serious strategic differences: the Shanghai laymen always wanted to rely on political and charitable means to protect temple property (defending the religion, *hujiao* 护教), while reformers such as Taixu advocated reforming the religious doctrines and monastic system (defending the Dharma, *hufa* 护法). The reformers also criticized the laymen for "protecting property like putting out a fire" and worried that secular charity would affect the spread of religious doctrines. In the 1930s, the Kuomintang's Department of Mass Training wanted to revise the association's articles of association,

⁴²⁰ Zhong, "Minchu Shanghai," 156–57.

requiring the Chinese Buddhist Association to cancel the membership qualification of laymen and restrict its core composition strictly to the ordained clergy, leaving laypersons as mere financial sponsors. Facing this motion to weaken their influence, the Shanghai lay community utilized their strong political clout to push back, ultimately forcing the government to shelve the proposal. Consequently, this transition changed the landscape, as the monastic community became highly dependent on the laity both politically and economically, hence challenging the traditional paradigm previously dominated by monastics.⁴²¹

Observing the diverse development of lay Buddhism, the evolutionary path of North American Chinese lay Buddhism displays a unique cultural landscape. Compared with the policy-level institutional restriction of lay organizational functions in contemporary mainland China, the North American context provides Chinese lay groups with ample legal space and institutional flexibility, enabling them to exercise a high degree of administrative autonomy. This level of management independence not only ensures that “lay practitioners” have a voice in the organizations’ governance structure, but also enables them to substantially expand into the realm of spiritual authority. However, from a historical perspective, the North American model is fundamentally different from the early modern movements (especially those during the republican period). At that time, the “lay elites” located in Shanghai, known as “Boss Buddhists,”

⁴²¹ Zhong, “Minchu Shanghai,” 155–160, 173–90.

relied on strong political and commercial capital to deeply penetrate the core of the Chinese Buddhist Association, and even demonstrated a hegemonic tendency by manipulating the decisions of the monastics.⁴²² Under such circumstances, the outstanding achievements in administrative management and charity were directly transformed into “sacred capital” in the religious domain, making “lay practitioners” the *de facto* religious leaders, while the monastics were only responsible for providing religious ritual services. In contrast, although the Chinese “lay practitioner groups” in the North American region had a considerable degree of autonomy within their organizations, they were situated in a non-Buddhist immigrant environment. Their marginalized ethnic minority status prevented them from obtaining the kind of discourse power held by “Boss Buddhists” and from participating in the national religious order. Due to the lack of spiritual capital within themselves, Chinese Buddhist lay practitioners in North America had to adopt a “strategic cooperation” approach. While maintaining the autonomy of their own organizations, they actively sought to coordinate and coexist with the authority of orthodox monastics, thereby integrating their religious traditions into a multicultural environment.

Therefore, we can observe that within the organizational structure of North American Buddhism, although the lay practitioner group has considerable management power at the legal and institutional level, they often choose to maintain Buddhist

⁴²² Zhang and Ji, “Lay Buddhism,” 28.

traditions in practice and engage in in-depth cooperation with the monk community within the framework of modern laws. This cooperative model reflects the respect of lay practitioners for the authority of monastics, enabling monastics and lay practitioners to establish a stable “cooperative” relationship within the framework of power balance. On the surface, lay practitioners achieve this cooperation by giving up some power. But from a deeper religious perspective, the support of lay practitioners for the authority of monastics actually accumulates a large amount of moral capital for them, which helps them build personal charisma, public image and religious authority. Therefore, this strategy of respecting the authority of the monastics did not undermine the status of the laypeople. On the contrary, it added spiritual and moral depth to their authority, enabling their religious recognition to go beyond the realm of administrative affairs and providing protection from the recognition or legitimacy of traditional monastics. Furthermore, although monastic-lay relations in North America have broken free from the strong constraints of state policies and fixed cultural traditions, Chinese American lay leaders still deliberately choose this strategy, demonstrating the proactiveness and self-awareness of their approach.

This seemingly harmonious monastic-lay cooperation actually contains a deeper logic of power. Lay authority is not only reflected in organizational management and an expanded spiritual independence, nor does it solely derive from the reputational capital gained by supporting monastic authority; its most central manifestation is that they have acquired a certain power of “scrutiny” and “selection” in monastic-lay interactions.

Against this backdrop, laypeople have transformed from one-way, inactive recipients of teachings into active participants and resource allocators in the operation of the religious community. This shift in identity has enabled the laity to assume a highly proactive role in the development of contemporary Buddhism. So, the rise in lay authority does not equate to arbitrary interference with monastic power; the cases in this study demonstrate the laity's voluntary limitation of their own authority. For example, the BAUS explicitly stipulates in its bylaws that the presidency must be held by a monastic, and it promotes the self-management of the resident Sangha to prevent lay arbitrary interference in the internal, specialized affairs of the monastic community. Similarly, although the Amida Society does not have a fixed team of monastics, it implements self-restraint based on identity through measures such as arranging seating hierarchies and prohibiting lay practitioners from freely preaching the Dharma in their daily activities. However, this superficial self-discipline does not eliminate the latent right of scrutiny held by the laity; they still retain the space to make selections and evaluations in practical operations. The exercise of this power should not be simply viewed as a kind of "usurpation" of monastic authority. Rather, it should be understood as a form of "rational faith," the core logic of which is the fundamental Buddhist principle of "relying on the Dharma, not the person."

In this way, laypeople use doctrinal standards to determine both the strategic allocation of resources and the ultimate allegiance of their faith. Thus, behind their maintained respect for the monastic community, they achieve a form of interaction and supervision based on doctrinal logic.

This transformation indicates a profound shift in the attitude of the lay community towards spiritual practice. Their respect for the monastics has evolved from a simple personal reliance to “maintaining the entire Sangha system and the traditional transmission of Buddhist teachings.” As the lay subjectivity continues to mature, they have developed stronger judgment, enabling them to actively choose to collaborate with virtuous and capable monastics. As a modern Buddhist organization led by laypeople, the Amida Society demonstrates a complex dynamic balance in its authoritative model: although it significantly enhances the management and missionary roles of the lay community, it always respects the traditional Sangha by inviting outstanding monastics and following traditional rituals to maintain this respect. After the teachings of its core spiritual mentor, Ven. Jingkong, faced political restrictions in mainland China, the practical approach of the Amida Society underwent a profound “turning of devotion.” This shift indicated that the object of its members’ devotion moved from reliance on a singular monastic authority to refuge in a more open and diverse Pure Land “Dharma-gate,” thereby giving rise to a “multi-centered model of devotion.”

Although most branches of the Amitabha Buddhist Societies may not be able to complete this internal paradigm shift in the face of such external pressure, the transformation of the Amida Society indicates that its fundamental driving force goes beyond the historical “non-sectarianism” inherent in Pure Land beliefs. The more significant driving force lies in the key characteristics inherent in its “lay-centered” organizational model. As a religious organization led by laypeople, its survival largely

depends on the continuous support of its followers and the recognition of the mainstream society. This gives its operational model a distinct reality and strategic flexibility. When a core mentor is restricted due to the “sectarian” tendencies in their teachings and geopolitical tensions, and may trigger crises in the organization’s legitimacy and reputation, the lay management will often adopt a survival-oriented approach, quickly seeking a development path that is not affected by conflicts. Instead of rigidly adhering to the single mentor model that may lead to an “isolation effect,” openness and diversity help maintain the cohesion of the followers. Moreover, it is also a crucial defensive strategy aimed at regaining the recognition of traditional monastic groups and repairing the cracks in the organization’s legitimacy. Unlike traditional public monasteries bound by patriarchy, lay organizations essentially lack the strict and irreversible Buddhist inheritance relationship between masters and disciples. In the traditional monastic system, the succession of the abbot and the change of doctrines must follow a strict sectarian inheritance logic. In contrast, secular associations within the framework of North American non-profit organizations (NPOs) grant the board of directors legal power, enabling them to adjust the direction of the organization according to democratic procedures and the charter. This institutional arrangement of separating administrative power and doctrinal power provides a mechanism of “automatic correction” for the community in times of crisis. Therefore, it can achieve flexible transformation and evolution in a diverse environment.

Finally, we cannot ignore the fact that religious groups often view issues from a

deeper perspective of redemption theory, in which the ultimate goal of practice (redemption) always takes precedence over the theocratic worship of individual leaders. For lay Buddhists who believe in Pure Land Buddhism, the fundamental motivation for joining the group is to address the most urgent crisis of birth and death. The respect for the mentor is essentially based on the effectiveness of their “guiding function.” Once the personal disputes of the mentor affect the inner peace of the followers in the practice process, these modernly conscious laypeople, with a modern subjective consciousness, will spontaneously conduct cost-benefit analysis and rationally disengage from it in terms of faith. To retain the core essence of “Pure Land practice,” they will actively downplay or even deconstruct the reliance on “singular authority,” and turn to more universally applicable doctrines and resources.

In summary, the strategic transformation of Amida Society can be regarded as an expression of the organization’s adaptability and self-awareness of its culture. This transformation originated from the “lay practitioners-centered” and realism principles it followed when facing external pressure. It led to a return to the more open and inclusive historical tradition of Chinese Buddhism, and a shift towards the protection of a broader monastic system and the Buddhist traditional heritage. This is not merely a clever crisis management strategy. It is a profound reshaping of the way lay Buddhists reposition themselves in the modern pluralistic discourse, re-establishing the sacred connection between tradition and modernity, and the connection between sectarianism and the broader Buddhist lineage. This process accurately reflects the dynamic mechanism of

“attunement within inertia.” This association did not abandon the traditional inertia of the Pure Land faith in the face of external crises. Instead, by slightly attuning its reliance on mentors and operational models, it successfully achieved a smooth transition and a new beginning in a diverse environment, consolidating its belief.

However, this cooperation, based on both contractual and sacred elements, is essentially a two-way, fluid selection process. It contains unavoidable structural tensions and frictions arising from their heterogeneous natures. In practical operations, the secular legal authority of lay leaders and the religious authority of the Sangha frequently clash due to differences in personality traits, and visions for management and propagating the Dharma. For example, we should know that conflicts frequently stem from a misalignment of evaluation systems. When entering a lay-led organization, monastics often retain the deep-seated ethical presumption of Chinese Buddhism that “monastics are superior to the laity.” They habitually subject lay management behaviors to a “traditional audit” based on monastic precepts and moral standards. If lay leaders exhibit a strong desire for administrative control, and the monastic community often feels that their dignity has been violated, so a split occurs. The cooperative organization then faces challenges in terms of temporary identity positioning. According to North American laws, invited monastics are often administratively defined as “salaried employees” of the board of directors in management. This employment relationship conflicts with the traditional mission of the monastic community as “teachers of humans and devas.” Most monastics

who came to the US believed that the resources of the lay practice center are strategic transits for local Dharma propagation. After the monastics have completed the initial accumulation of social capital, driven by traditional inheritance and independent aspirations, they often leave the lay group and build their own organizations.

Transitioning from “employed residency” to “independent development” creates an “unspoken dilemma” for North American Chinese lay groups that want long-term stability. The ideal of cooperation between monastics and laypeople often fails to last, forcing monastics either to leave voluntarily or to be forced to leave. This is reflected in the North American religious ecology. Maintaining the long-term stable existence of monastic communities within lay organizations is not only about competing for resources but also a form of implicit spiritual practice related to power boundaries and identity consciousness. This practice requires lay leaders to find a balance between the “inertia” of traditional beliefs and the “collaborative operation” of monastic authority. Shen relies on “formless giving” and institutional “transfer of independent management rights” to obtain long-term and stable support for the community. This requires a large amount of secular capital and self-management or spiritual cultivation system that goes beyond simple contractual relationships.

After the above discussion, we might be able to re-examine a question within the context of Western Buddhism: given the rising authority of Chinese American lay Buddhists, do they constitute a new “Sangha”? In his research on American Buddhism, Prebish astutely observed the fluidity and expansion of the definition of the “Sangha”

within a Western context. By introducing concepts such as the “Silent Sangha” and the “In-between Sangha,” we can see that Chinese American lay Buddhists are constructing a “third form of existence” that is distinct from both traditional lay followers and the monastic community. Prebish proposed the concept of “The Silent Sangha” to refer to Buddhist researchers within academia. He argued that the traditional definition of the Sangha should be expanded to include this community of scholars dedicated to Buddhist studies, particularly those “Scholar-Practitioners” who also engage in personal practice.⁴²³ This phenomenon is particularly evident among Chinese American Buddhists. Since the immigrants after 1965 were mostly well-educated elites, they were more inclined to explore the convergence points between Buddhist practice and the scientific worldview. Layperson Shen Jiazhen is a typical example of this phenomenon. Moreover, under the influence of American democratic values, the traditional hierarchical system of “monastics leading and laypeople subordinate” has faced a huge challenge. Many well-educated layperson groups (such as the Huntsville Buddhist Study Group and the Massachusetts Buddhist Association) tend to implement a “layperson-led” system rather than passively relying on monastics. This trend has given rise to the experiment of “intermediate monastic groups.” Prebish observed that many American Buddhists are neither satisfied with the traditional role of laypeople as mere financial supporters, nor willing to accept the celibate lifestyle of fully ordained monastics. Therefore, a “Quasi-

⁴²³ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 173–202.

monastic” form emerged, they engage in intensive practices (such as meditation and preaching), undertake the responsibility of spreading Buddhist teachings, but do not require celibacy. This model breaks the traditional binary opposition model and becomes a “common denominator” applicable to modern life.⁴²⁴

However, this expansion of roles has also provoked a core controversy regarding “who represents the Sangha.” Radical figures in modern Chinese lay Buddhism, such as Ouyang Jingwu and Li Yuansong 李元松, drew upon the *Vimalakirti Sutra* to argue that “laypeople also belong to the Sangha in a broad sense.” The enlightened lay practitioners (the ultimate Sangha) they mentioned would have a higher status than the unenlightened ordained monastics (the formal Sangha). This view not only promotes the modernization process of Buddhism but also triggers related debates about the possible erosion of Buddhist ethics or holiness. Our research finds that Chinese American lay Buddhists play a similar “monastic community” function, but due to “inertia,” most of them do not seize the sacred status of the traditional monastics. Conversely, there is a cooperative and symbiotic relationship between laypeople and monastics. Laypeople actively carry out external sponsorship or participate in administrative management, so that monastics can be freed from the burden of secular affairs. This enables them to focus on internal cultivation and maintain the sanctity of religion within the lineage of Dharma transmission. This division of labor effectively safeguards the “core gene” of Buddhist

⁴²⁴ Prebish and Tanaka, *Faces of Buddhism*, 18–19.

traditions and avoids being completely dissolved by secularization. The Amida Society has complete organizational autonomy, also adheres to “following the Dharma instead of individuals,” and formally respects monastics, adopting the strategy of “complementing each other without substituting.” Consequently, the authority of lay believers is enhanced but does not weaken the foundation of Buddhism. Instead, through the flexibility of “attuning within inertia,” namely preserving the sacredness of the Sangha (inertia) while developing a “Functional Sangha” (attuning), Chinese American lay Buddhists not only protected the continuity of the tradition amidst modern transformations but also gave a highly valuable reference model for the organizational structure of a future universal Buddhism.

Chapter Eight:

Conclusion

Through historical contextualization and ethnographic observation of Chinese American lay communities, specifically the Buddhist Association of the United States led by C. T. Shen, and the Amida Society of Los Angeles, this study reveals the particular evolutionary path and existential state of modern Chinese lay Buddhism in a globalized diasporic context. The study finds that Chinese American lay Buddhism is neither a simple transplant of a “homeland cultural enclave” nor has it fully assimilated into the “lay-centered” model characteristic of white-dominated Convert Buddhism. Instead, it forms a “third space” within the tension between these two forces: the first is the cultural “inertia” anchored to traditional Chinese belief structures, while the second is the active adaptation or “attuning” to the challenges brought by the North American secular society and organizational systems. This tension and balance have reshaped the traditional model of the power relationship between monastics and laypeople, providing a potent framework for evaluating the adaptive survival mechanisms of religion with the trend of modernity.

This study analyzed two cases and demonstrated the transformation of the authority of laypeople in the Chinese American community. This transformation goes

beyond the surface level of identity politics and touches upon the core structure of religious power. In the traditional Chinese Buddhist structure of “monastics leading and laypeople subordinate,” laypeople usually occupied the marginal position of “external protectors,” mainly playing the role of financial supporters. In contrast, in the radical narrative of Buddhism among lay groups in modern China, laypeople often take the stance of “opposing the power of monastics,” attempting to challenge the ultimate interpretation rights of religious inheritance. However, this study found that in the specific environment of post-World War II North America (i.e., “the absence of the monastic structure” and “the influx of knowledge-based immigrants”), the first generation of well-educated Chinese secular elites effectively filled this gap and took on the role of actual monastics. They did not need to follow the monastic precepts but actually exercised the dual powers of administrative management and doctrinal interpretation. This indicates a comprehensive form of authority, which combines the charismatic authority with the modern rational legal authority in Weber’s theory.

Specifically, early Chinese American lay leaders, exemplified by Shen, successfully established the authoritative paradigm of the “elite intellectual practitioner.” They not only transformed secular success into funds for religious causes, but also, by virtue of their ability to adapt to Western institutional culture and their profound scientific background, constructed a discourse system that was in line with Western modernity. This strategy breaks the monopoly of the traditional Sangha in organizational management and doctrinal interpretation. Therefore, lay believers can make use of unique adaptability and

the legitimacy to spread Buddhist teachings in modern society. Notably, by introducing the modern board system of American non-profit organizations, Mr. Shen reconstructed temple management from the traditional patriarchal system to the board of directors system, which guarantees the laity's decision-making authority firmly within the modern law framework. In addition, Mr. Shen combines his own Buddhist practice, modern scientific knowledge and reflection on secular life to interpret and spread Buddhist doctrines. So, his charismatic authority is clearly manifested, and further supported and consolidated within the organizational institutional framework.

Correspondingly, the Amida Society of Los Angeles illustrates how lay authority was established through the Pure Land practices of the broader "mass laity." The lay leaders of the Amida Society simultaneously serve as founders, administrators, and Dharma propagators. Their authority and responsibilities far exceed the traditional role of "Dharma protectors." Lay groups form a "textual community" with the medium of audio, video, and the Internet, bypassing the intermediaries of the monasteries and directly managing the dissemination and interpretation of Buddhism. During collective practice rituals, senior laypeople wear traditional *haiqing* robes, play religious musical instruments, and play the role of *karmadāna* usually performed by monastics. This shows that they do participate in the process of religious rituals and create the atmosphere of sacred spaces. This deep involvement in both "knowledge production" and "ritual performance" demonstrates how laypeople in late twentieth-century Chinese American Buddhist groups transitioned from passive followers of the Pure Land faith into religious

subjects with independent agency.

However, the expansion of lay power is subject to prudent and moderate management. Looking back on this process, lay organizations such as BAUS and Mahayana Temple are the “landing platforms” and institutional “incubators” for Chinese monastics. Through strategic invitations and financial support from lay communities, famous monastics such as Ven. Ledu, Ven. Miao Feng, and Ven. Sheng Yen could travel overseas. Then they established their own temples and completed the initial institutional construction of Chinese Buddhism in North America. In this context, Shen proposed a modern governance paradigm, the core of which is to construct a “hybrid constitution” and use the board system of modern non-profit organizations for professional management and financial management, so as to avoid the drawbacks existing in the traditional “hereditary temple” model under modern law. The institutional design follows the principle of “revering the monastics.” The institution’s charter stipulates that monastics take up the position of president, firmly establishing the monastic community’s supreme power in religious affairs and religious doctrines. In a decentralized structure, laypeople manage administrative affairs, while the monastic community guides the Buddhist propagation, relying on the inertia of traditional “monastic-led” to maintain the stability of the institution. This also offers an invaluable reference model for the transformation of modern monastic and lay relations. More profoundly, Shen’s model has a broad vision and is not limited to specific sects. The ecumenical funding of Chinese, Tibetan, and Theravada traditions catalyzes a paradigm shift from a “sectarian focus” to a

“pure reliance on the Dharma.” For example, BAUS invites Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Theravada Buddhist scholar, to the Chuang Yen Monastery to serve as the president of the Chinese Buddhist organization. This appointment is symbolic, highlighting the inclusiveness of the doctrine, and also marking the universal spirit based on modern laws and encompassing spirit. This practice has prompted in-depth dialogue between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism in North America, and also emphasizes that the lay Buddhist community founded by Shen has an open and diverse nature.

The highly autonomous lay organization model within the Amida Society did not break the traditional religious hierarchy. Instead, the deep-rooted “respect for monastics” was deeply embedded in its religious ritual space and power structure. For instance, the seating arrangement during the dharma assembly reflects not only cultural inertia but also aligns with the believers’ profound expectations for “orthodox Buddhism.” More directly, maintaining the sanctity of the monastics is a key strategy for the lay community to ensure the “legitimacy of the organization,” thus avoiding marginalization or being labeled as a “heretical sect.” Moreover, this organization demonstrated strategic flexibility to avoid risks of inheritance disruption or excessive reliance on a single individual. It shifted from an early model of relying on a single mentor to a diversified cooperation model with multiple monastery groups, such as Anfu Monastery. This indicates that in order to achieve sustainable development, lay organizations still tend to return to the traditional model of relying on the monastic Sangha to ensure the purity and durability of their religious inheritance.

The monastic-lay interactions in these Chinese American lay groups constitute a substantive “two-way empowerment” mechanism. The lay community voluntarily ceded nominal ceremonial authority, such as the presidency and the right to preach from the high seat, in exchange for the monastic Sangha’s validation and blessing of the organization’s orthodoxy. In return, the Sangha utilized the modern organizational platforms and substantial resources provided by the laity to rapidly take root and propagate within a heterogeneous cultural environment. Consequently, we can conclude that Chinese American lay Buddhism has undergone a unique adaptive progression within the North American diasporic context. Its primary characteristic is the formation of a non-sectarian, horizontal cooperative network. This characteristic marks a significant breakthrough from the rigid sectarian barriers and the traditional “vertical loyalty” model. During the early development of Buddhism in North America, in the face of the dual challenges of a shortage of monastics and survival pressure, lay organizations were forced to innovate their systems and gradually evolved into inclusive “pan-Buddhist centers or hubs.” This model of resource integration is especially evident in the case of Shen. Through the introduction of the modern board of directors, he established a “common denominator platform” in the system, which can accommodate a variety of different traditions. Even the Amida Society, which initially mainly relied on Ven. Jingkong, later turned to a decentralized and open strategy. It widely welcomes monastics from different backgrounds, as long as their doctrines are supported by Pure Land practice. This kind of horizontal cooperation network led by laity not only fills in the gap

left by the scarcity of monastics in early North America, but also becomes a key force for the substantial expansion and spread of Buddhism in the region.

In addition, although this kind of non-sectarianism may at first glance contradict the sectarian nature of Pure Land Buddhism, in fact, it essentially means a return to Pure Land belief, and it is regarded as a universal “practice method.” This constitutes another important feature of Chinese American Buddhists. From the perspective of doctrinal history, the pure land belief in China has always had a significant “non-sectarian” feature. This is a general approach that can be integrated into a religious sect, not independent and exclusive. This feature makes it naturally fit the lifestyle of laypeople in modern times. The revival of this historical tradition in the contemporary era is reflected in the missionary strategy of the Amida Society. In the face of the faith crisis of Jingkong and subsequent external controversies, Society has strong organizational resilience and reflection ability. It has shifted its missionary target from a specific “single mentor” to a wider Pure Land tradition, and successfully transformed from a “sectarian movement” centered on individuals to a “public practice tradition” centered on Dharma. The transformation of “disengaging from dependence” reduces related risks, retains the core beliefs of believers, and establishes the independence of lay believers in religious activities.

Based on the lay-monk relationship analyzed above, this dissertation proposes the conceptualization of “Attuning within Inertia” to depict the dynamics among the practice and exploration among Chinese American lay Buddhism. This phrase shows that

respecting the authority of the monastic community and establishing the subjectivity of laypeople in North America are dialectically unified. “Inertia” refers to the sacred order of “monastic community leading and laypeople subordinate” that the first-generation Chinese-American laypeople uphold in Chinese Buddhism, and this situation is deeply rooted in their cultural psychology. Due to the cultural foundation of this tradition, even if laypeople manage organizations and finances, they will still want to seek the participation of the monastics to ensure the legitimacy of organizations. However, this adherence to tradition is not a rigid continuation. On the contrary, it represents a positive “attuning” within North American secular society and modern NPO legal provisions. Under the dual influence of modern bureaucracy and democratic management, lay groups have effectively gained the power to “review” and “choose” monastic resources. They did not blindly follow a monastic based on traditional customs, but instead used modern governance tools such as boards of directors. They invoke the spirit of rational inquiry advocated in the Kālāma Sutta, and now rationally evaluate and invite different monastics with virtues and abilities.

The result of this attuning is a symbiotic structure, in which “laypeople build the stage and monastics perform.” The laypeople gradually took on the role of managing and spreading the “functional Sangha,” while the monastics mainly focused on maintaining the sanctity of the belief system. This structural reorganization has not weakened the traditional sacredness of Buddhism; On the contrary, it has reconstructed the organizational legitimacy of lay Buddhist groups in the modern context. Therefore, the

monastic-lay relations in North American Chinese Buddhism present a “new normal,” which is neither simple confrontation nor absolute obedience. It has actually evolved into a “cooperative game” or “mutual empowerment” based on the principle of contract and shared cultural and religious beliefs. The organization composed of laypeople provided the monastics with “foundation platforms” such as visa guarantees and temple construction, to help them overcome geographical and cultural barriers, and establish their own positions in the United States. In exchange, monastics use their religious identity to provide essential “orthodox endorsement” (symbolic capital) for these lay organizations. This interaction elevates the authority of “laypeople” to the level of “rational belief.” It follows the principle of “following the Dharma rather than the individual” and guides the direction based on the long-term interests of the organization and the doctrinal standards. This balancing mechanism avoids the risk of organizational collapse due to excessive reliance on the authority of a single monastic. In other words, the lay community of Chinese Americans neither fell into rigidity and traditional inertia nor was completely assimilated by Western secularization. Instead, by establishing non-sectarian cooperative networks, returning to the practical essence of Pure Land practice, and building new monastic-lay relationships based on “rational respect for monastics,” it established a highly autonomous and adaptable development model in a multicultural environment.

Finally, although the lay Buddhist community of Chinese Americans demonstrated remarkable adaptability and creativity during a specific historical period,

successfully filling the gap in early Chinese Buddhism in North America, this study found that this model now faces a serious “inheritance crisis.” The success of the first generation of Buddhist leaders was based on a specific historical background. They were not only intellectuals well-versed in Chinese traditional culture and experts with modern management experience, but also people with profound religious beliefs. However, without a resident monastic community to transmit the Dharma lineage, and lacking affiliation with strictly bureaucratic transnational organizations like Fo Guang Shan, finding a successor who meets all these criteria is extremely difficult. This results in a “structural scarcity of successors.” English-speaking “Second Generation” immigrants could inherit management skills, but they often lack an identification with the deep cultural inertia of Chinese Buddhism. Conversely, it is difficult for newer immigrants to quickly establish the kind of moral authority (Charisma) necessary to command the respect enjoyed by the founders. As demonstrated by the Amitabha Buddhist Society of U.S.A. in San Francisco, which announced its closure in 2024, lay organizations lacking a core authority are highly vulnerable to dissolution when there is no clear successor.

Consequently, as these organizations develop over time, a distinct trend of organizational “Re-monasticization” commonly arises. To avoid the difficulties brought about by the transfer of power, many lay organizations will exhibit a “reversal” phenomenon, actively seeking to be taken over by traditional monastic groups. Recently, the Amida Society has established a deep strategic partnership with Anfu Monastery, and President Chen disclosed that this center may eventually be “transferred to the

monastics.” This indicates that in the historical process, the traditional monastic system has an irreplaceable institutional advantage over lay organizations in maintaining the continuity, sanctity, and stability of faith. Of course, a joint board of directors comprising both monastics and laypeople is a similar solution observed in the BAUS. Given this trend, it remains uncertain how long the independent vitality of lay Buddhism will endure. However, this “re-monasticization” does not necessarily represent a decline in lay Buddhism; rather, it is yet another manifestation of “attuning in inertia.” When lay-led “attuning” encounters bottlenecks in intergenerational succession, organizations instinctively revert to the “inertia” of Chinese Buddhism, namely the traditional monastic-led model, to seek security and legitimacy. This phenomenon leaves ample room for future research. For example, the transition toward independent lay management in the American Shambhala community following its charismatic leadership crisis, or the living conditions of “lay-like monastics” in Japanese Zen Buddhism, can serve as reference points to further explore the evolution of modern Buddhist organizational forms.

In conclusion, the various practices adopted by Shen’s BAUS, the Amida Society, and related lay-based Chinese-American religious groups demonstrate how modern immigrant religious groups can adjust and re-establish their identities. These groups are no longer simply isolated “enclaves” that simply transplant their native cultures. Through active interaction with the local Buddhism in North America and creative transformation of their own cultural traditions, they have developed into highly adaptable and dynamic

organizations. The activities of Chinese lay Buddhists in the United States are promoting active exchanges between tradition and modernity. More importantly, it provides important references for understanding how religious authority renegotiates, how community identity diversifies, and the future direction of lay Buddhism in the globalized era. These cases go beyond the study of specific ethnic groups, offering important insights concerning religious studies in a globalized era: under the dual impacts of modernity and secularization, religious authority has not disappeared, but rather has been renegotiated and redistributed. Tradition has not been abandoned; instead, in the form of “inertia,” it performs to be the very bedrock of innovation.

Therefore, we can re-examine the complete connotation of Buddhist Modernism theoretical framework by exploring the development of Chinese American lay Buddhism. First of all, the development of Chinese American lay Buddhism aligns with many core features of Buddhist Modernism, such as detraditionalization, demystologization, and psychologization. Besides, it includes lay-oriented and de-intermediation aspects, the sanctification of everyday life, ecumenicism and non-sectarianism, as well as meditation centered on empirical verification, etc. In terms of the theoretical paradigm of American Buddhist studies, it also breaks away from the racial and modernity false opposition research paradigm, and is not merely a passive recipient of modernity, but a co-architect of the global transnational Buddhist modernist movement.

In contrast to the complete “disenchantment” presented by the modern orientation from Western white Buddhism, the psychologization trend or “Buddhism without

Beliefs,” Chinese American lay Buddhism presents a unique “hybrid modernity” paradigm, namely, “tuning within inertia.” On the one hand, they adhere to the core beliefs of Mahayana or Pure Land Buddhism, maintain respect for the monastic Sangha, retain merits accumulation, traditional rituals and a sense of sacredness. These “non-modern or traditional” elements are not backward or conservative; instead, they mark the core color of the Chinese community maintaining religious orthodoxy and cultural identity. On the other hand, they flexibly integrate into the American modern legal framework, adopt modern boards of directors management, utilize modern scientific discourse, and use digital media to construct decentralized “text communities.” Therefore, Chinese American lay Buddhism demonstrates that modernity does not necessarily lead to “disenchantment” or the abandonment of traditional rituals, but achieves a dynamic balance and mutual integration between modern legal/rationality and traditional religious sacredness, providing a new interpretation of Weber’s three authority theories.

The research on Chinese American lay Buddhism transcends the binary opposition of “modern adaptation” and “traditional rupture,” expands the application scope of Buddhist Modernism, and also demonstrates a complicated and subtle model of coexistence of tradition and modernity in a cross-cultural context. This “hybrid modernity” supplements the Western-centric modernization narrative and provides a new perspective for understanding the diverse development of global Buddhism. The independence and subjectivity of lay authority demonstrated here mark the symbiotic

relationship of “two-way empowerment” between Chinese American lay representatives and the traditional Sangha, thereby constructing a unique autonomy and legitimacy in the multicultural environment of North America, and showcasing its unique position and value in the early history of the dissemination of Chinese Buddhism to the United States.

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Appendix A:

Interview Records with President Chen

Date: Aug 13, 2024

Site: Amida Society, Los Angeles

话题一：创立缘起与道场选址的曲折过程

Topic 1: The Origins of Founding and the Tortuous Process of Site Selection

采访者（本人）：可否请您简单介绍一下您建立学会的因缘和早期历史。

Interviewer (Self): Could you briefly introduce your causes and conditions for establishing the Society and its early history?

陈会长：学会最初是在 1990 年 1 月，一位新加坡的女居士来到我的会计师事务所，提议成立一个居士佛教团体。当时取名为 “Amitabha Society”，但因为采用了日本读音（日本人称“阿弥陀”为 Amida），所以就有 “Amida Society” 这个名称。成立之后一直到 1992 年之间，没有任何活动。

President Chen: The Society was originally formed in January 1990, when a female lay Buddhist from Singapore came to my CPA firm and proposed establishing a Buddhist lay organization. At that time, it was named the “Amitabha Society,” but because it adopted the Japanese pronunciation (the Japanese refer to Amitābha as Amida), it was then named the “Amida Society.” After its founding, there were no activities at all

until 1992.

直到 1992 年 9 月，台湾华藏图书馆的馆长韩瑛打电话给我，希望我能把学会做起来。我当时对佛教团体完全没有概念，但答应试一试。韩馆长提议了一些当时在洛杉矶佛教界比较活跃的人士作为主要董事。第一次开会是在 Orange County（橙县），我对大家说：“你们都是有经验的佛教界人士，你们来操作运作，我全力支持。”然而，大多数被请来的人只是挂名，并不真正热衷，所以依然没有开展活动。

It was not until September 1992 that Director Han Ying 韩瑛 of the Huazang Buddhist Library 华藏图书馆 in Taiwan called me, hoping I could get the Society up and running. At that time, I had absolutely no concept of managing a Buddhist group, but I agreed to give it a try. Director Han suggested some prominent figures in the Los Angeles Buddhist community at the time to serve as the main board directors. The first meeting was held in Orange County. I told everyone present, “You are all experienced figures in the Buddhist community. You can operate and manage it, and I will support you with all my effort.” However, most of the people invited were merely figureheads and not truly enthusiastic, so no activities were launched.

因为我自己有会计师事务所，我就在事务所的接待室里放了一些讲经录音带和佛书，就这样开始了。后来有人提议办活动，需要找场地。最开始找到法印寺的印海法师。印海法师经常来我的事务所办事问问题，彼此很熟。我问他能否借地方学习佛法，他非常慈悲地答应了，让我们用他的法堂。

Since I owned a CPA firm, I placed some Dharma lecture audio tapes and

Buddhist books in the reception room of my office, and that was how it began. Later, someone suggested holding activities, which required finding a venue. At first, we approached Ven. Yinhai 印海法師 of Dharma Seal Temple 法印寺. Ven. Yinhai frequently came to my CPA office for business and consultations, so we were very familiar with each other. I asked him if we could borrow a space to study the Buddhadharma. He very compassionately agreed and allowed us to use his Dharma Hall.

当时原本有一位台北佛陀教育基金会的讲师张居士，答应来负责讲《阿弥陀经要解》。但后来他因为个人谋生上遇到障碍退出了。答应了大家学习佛法却没了讲师，我只好自己开始学习并跟大家分享，印海法师也很慈悲地坐在底下，偶尔帮大家补充开示。当时有十几个人一起学习。后来因为法印寺的一位女众比丘尼对居士在寺内活动有些顾虑和意见，为了避免冲突，我们便改借斯里兰卡照初法师的菩提寺继续活动。

At that time, Layperson Zhang, a lecturer from the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation in Taipei, promised to lecture on the *Essential Explanation of the Amitābha Sūtra*. However, he later withdrew due to personal livelihood obstacles. Having promised everyone we would study the Buddhadharma together, yet left without an instructor, I had no choice but to start studying it myself and sharing it with everyone. Ven. Yinhai was also very compassionate; he would sit in the audience and occasionally supplement with teachings. At that time, around a dozen people studied together. Later, because a nun at Dharma Seal Temple expressed certain concerns and reservations regarding lay practitioners conducting activities within the monastery, to avoid conflict,

we relocated to borrow the Bodhi Temple led by the Sri Lankan monk Ven. Zhao Chu 照初 to continue our activities.

转机出现在 1996 年底。净空法师来洛杉矶讲经，主要借用法印寺。讲完经后我接送法师回法印寺的寮房。当时看寮房的法师（应该是圣雄法师）正好在接一通紧急国际电话，我们在外面怎么按门铃他都没出来开门。净空法师便说：“既然没人开门，不然就去你家睡算了。”在去我家途中，净空法师劝我说：“你还是应该自己找个地方，一直用人家的地也不是办法。”并把我给他的供养金退还给我，让我用来买道场。

The turning point came at the end of 1996. Ven. Jingkong came to Los Angeles to lecture on the scriptures, mainly borrowing Dharma Seal Temple. After the lectures, I escorted the Master back to the monastic quarters at Dharma Seal Temple. At that time, the monk looking after the quarters (likely Ven. Shengxiong 圣雄) happened to be taking an urgent international phone call. No matter how much we rang the doorbell outside, he did not come out to open the door. Ven. Jingkong then said, “Since no one is opening the door, why don’t we just go sleep at your house instead?” On the way to my home, Ven. Jingkong advised me, “You should still find a place of your own; relying continuously on other people’s premises is not a permanent solution.” He then returned the offering money I had given him, telling me to use it toward purchasing a venue.

正好我事务所的一位报税客户在三四月报税时问我：“陈会长，你要不要买个地方？我可以帮你点忙。”结合净空法师和这位居士的鼓励，我们便开始寻找场地。

Coincidentally, during the tax season in March or April, one of my CPA firm's clients asked me while filing taxes, "President Chen, do you want to buy a place? I can offer some assistance." Encouraged by both Ven. Jingkong and this lay practitioner, we began searching for a property.

看中的现址原本是一栋 Masonic Temple（共济会会所），因为原业主缺乏经费保养，状况很差，开价 57.5 万美元（在 1997 年 4 月）。我请印海法师来看，印海法师说地点和外表都不错，里面虽然糟，但可以买下来慢慢整理。Broker 说这已经非常便宜，我们便决定按照开价 offer。

The current location we selected was originally a Masonic Temple. Because the previous owner lacked funds for maintenance, it was in very poor condition, listed at \$575,000 in April 1997. I invited Ven. Yinhai to inspect it. Ven. Yinhai noted that the location and exterior were good, and though the interior was in bad shape, we could purchase it and renovate it gradually. The real estate broker mentioned it was already very cheap, so we decided to make an offer at the asking price.

但在当时，佛教道场在当地极难获得社区接受。天普市 Temple City 听说曾是 3K 党的大本营；先前在 Azusa 与 Montclair 交叉口 Jack in the Box 旁边的 Medical Service 大楼，有佛教团体购买后申请条件许可证 CUP，公听会听证三次都没通过，甚至有全身瘫痪的抗议者坐着担架也要被抬去公听会举脚反对，排斥极其严重，有组织奋斗十几年来都没能通过。

However, at that time, it was extremely difficult for a Buddhist temple to gain community acceptance locally. Temple City was rumored to have been a stronghold of

the KKK; previously, near the intersection of Azusa and Montclair next to Jack in the Box, a Buddhist group had purchased a building for medical services and applied for a Conditional Use Permit (CUP). They failed to pass the public hearing after three attempts—even a completely paralyzed objector insisted on being carried in on a stretcher to raise a foot in opposition, illustrating the extreme hostility. Another Buddhist group had fought for over a decade without approval.

因此，我提出了唯一的成交条件：我们将全额购房款存入托管账户（Escrow），卖方必须协助我们拿到 Conditional Use Permit（CUP，条件许可证）。如果拿不到 CUP，买下来也没用。

Therefore, I stipulated the sole closing condition: we would place the entire purchase amount into an Escrow account, and the seller had to assist us in securing the Conditional Use Permit. If we could not obtain the CUP, purchasing it would be futile.

之后的申请过程极其曲折，一共经历了三次公听会。1997 年 6 月至 7 月的第一次公听会上，适逢当地同济会会所卖方的董事成员在市议会具有影响力，加上一位热心白人青年律师免费帮我们筹划，公听会顺利通过。但市府在许可证上附加了一条不合理限制：禁止进行佛教的跪拜仪式（认为跪拜是崇拜偶像与迷信）。到了同年 7 月至 8 月的第二次公听会，我们派出英文较好的同修前往陈词和解释，明确阐述佛教的“拜佛”是为了“消除我慢、尊师重道”，并非盲目迷信，成功破除了这一限制，再次通过。而在 1997 年 9 月的第三次公听会上，五位市议员中有一位态度强硬，质疑为何两次公听会零反对，怀疑有幕后交易，坚持要求重新审查。在这次会议上，该议员又以“只有 20 个停车位，无法容纳 25 名会员”为由刁难。关键时

刻，另一位女性市议员挺身而出，质问他：“天普市所有社区教堂的停车位都不够，大家都是步行或停在公共停车位，为什么偏偏对佛教团体双重标准？”该议员无言以对、拂袖而去。最终在其余四位议员签字同意下，CUP 终于在 1997 年 9 月正式通过。有了这个固定的道场，洛杉矶净宗学会才算真正扎下了根。

The subsequent application process was extremely arduous, undergoing a total of three public hearings. During the first hearing around June to July 1997, as board members of the seller's Masonic Lodge possessed influence in the city council, and with an enthusiastic young Caucasian attorney assisting us pro bono, the hearing initially passed smoothly. However, the city attached an unreasonable restriction to the permit: prohibiting Buddhist prostration rituals (considering prostration as idol worship and superstition). At the second hearing around July to August of the same year, we dispatched practitioners fluent in English to testify and explain, clarifying that Buddhist “prostration to the Buddha” serves to “eliminate self-arrogance and honor the masters and Dharma,” rather than blind superstition. This successfully lifted the restriction, securing approval once again. At the third public hearing in September 1997, one of the five city council members took a hardline stance, questioning why there were zero objections in the previous two hearings, suspecting backstage deals, and insisting on a re-examination. During this meeting, that council member raised difficulties by claiming that “having only 20 parking spaces cannot accommodate 25 members.” At the critical moment, another female council member stepped forward and confronted him, “All community churches in Temple City lack sufficient parking; people walk or park in public lots. Why

apply double standards specifically against a Buddhist group?” Speechless, the council member stormed off. Ultimately, signed by the remaining four council members, the CUP was officially approved in September 1997. With this permanent location, the Amida Society of Los Angeles truly established its roots.

话题二：资金运作与居士管理模式

Topic 2: Financial Operation and the Lay Management Model

本人： 学会是如何维持资金和运作的？作为居士主导的团体，有什么独特的管理机制？

Interviewer (Self): How does the Society maintain its funding and operations?

As a lay-led organization, what unique management mechanisms does it have?

陈会长： 关于购房资金，我一贯主张量力而行、不向外募集。当时我的客户周先生开支票资助了 12 万美元，台湾的一位陈三宝居士听说后，也无条件资助了 10.8 万美元，剩下的资金缺口就全部由我自己补足。因此，我们完全没有向社会公开发起募捐。我认为如果成立道场全靠求人，未来在决策和运作上必然会受到外来的干预和影响。

President Chen: Regarding the purchase funds, I have always advocated acting according to one's capability without soliciting external donations. At that time, my client Mr. Zhou wrote a check to contribute \$120,000, and upon hearing of this, Layperson Chen Sanbao from Taiwan unconditionally donated \$108,000. I personally covered the remaining financial shortfall. Therefore, we did not initiate any public fundraising from

society at all. I believe that if establishing a place of practice relies entirely on asking others, future decision-making and operation will inevitably face external interference and influence.

在组织管理方面，洛杉矶净宗学会有几个非常关键且独特的机制。首先是在学会章程中明确规定，这是一个非会员团体，不设任何法定会员，从不收取任何会费。这样做的考量是：如果有收费会员，某些人可能会因为缴了钱而要求查账、干预董事会决策，进而改变道场的根本方向。

In terms of organizational management, the Amida Society of Los Angeles features several crucial and unique mechanisms. First, the Society's Bylaws explicitly stipulate that this is a non-membership organization, establishing no statutory members and never collecting any membership fees. The rationale behind this is that if there were paying members, certain individuals might demand financial audits or interfere with board decision-making simply because they contributed money, thereby altering the foundational orientation of the practice place.

其次是董事会结构精简，学会章程规定董事由董事长（Board Chairman）直接邀请。因此我将董事会成员缩减至极少数理念一致的人，避免了纷繁复杂的内部人事斗争。

Second, the Board of Directors structure is streamlined. The Society's bylaws authorize the Board Chairman to directly invite directors. Consequently, I limited the board members to a small handful of individuals sharing identical ideals, avoiding complex internal interpersonal conflict.

再者是坚持“纯粹利他”与零收费。我们道场的所有活动、法会排位、法宝流通（佛书、录音带等）全部免费，绝不强制收取一分钱。即使早期韩馆长建议录音带每盘收 1.5 美元工本费，我也坚持免费结缘。所有的日常开销，全凭信众随喜捐赠。

Furthermore, we adhere to “pure altruism” and zero charges. All activities, Dharma assembly memorial plaques, and distribution of Dharma treasures (Buddhist books, audio tapes, etc.) at our center are completely free of charge, never demanding a single cent. Even when Director Han initially suggested charging a nominal cost of \$1.50 per tape, I insisted on free distribution to form affinities. All daily operational expenses rely entirely on voluntary contributions from devotees.

最后，口碑与解惑是我们的生存之本。作为一个居士主导的道场，要想吸引信众并维持下去，必须能让大家真正“受益”。我们坚持固定举办“解惑与讲经”活动，许多同修反馈，平日里的烦恼在周六听完经后就能得到疏导。大家口口相传，知道这里的捐款是纯粹用于利益众生、没有任何个人挥霍，自然建立了长期的信任与口碑。

Finally, public reputation and resolving doubts serve as the foundation of our survival. As a lay-led organization, attracting practitioners and sustaining operations requires enabling people to truly benefit. We maintain regular “doubt-resolving and scripture-lecturing” activities. Many fellow practitioners report that their weekday anxieties are alleviated after attending Saturday lectures. Word spreads naturally; knowing that donations here are used purely to benefit sentient beings without personal

squandering, long-term trust and reputation are naturally established.

话题三：思想脉络的接纳、参学理念与讲学规范

Topic 3: Acceptance of Doctrinal Lineages, Principles of Study, and Regulations for Preaching

本人：学会与净空法师及其他法师之间是什么关系？如何看待关于净空法师的争议？居士在学会讲经有什么特别的要求？

Interviewer (Self): What is the relationship between the Society, Ven. Jingkong, and other monastics? How do you view the controversies surrounding Ven. Jingkong? What specific requirements apply to laypersons lecturing at the Society?

陈会长：首先，全世界各个净宗学会都是相互独立的，各自有独立的董事会，没有上下级隶属关系。我们之间主要是法宝流通上的合作。

President Chen: First of all, all Amitabha Societies across the globe are mutually independent, possessing their own independent Boards of Directors without any hierarchical subordination. Our connections consist primarily of cooperation in the distribution of Dharma treasures.

谈到思想和法师邀请的演变，实际上早在 1987 年左右，净空法师住在寒舍时就曾告诫我：“不能闭门造车，要像法藏比丘参访 211 个佛国度一样，多去参访学习其他道场的优点。”早期也是他鼓励我们请佛光山的法师来带领大家念佛共修的。

Regarding the evolution of doctrinal thought and invitations to monastics, as early

as around 1987 when Ven. Jingkong stayed at my home, he admonished me by the swimming pool: “You must not work behind closed doors. Like Bhikṣu Dharmākara visiting 210 billion Buddha-lands, you should travel widely to study and learn from the strengths of other places of practice.” In the early period, he also encouraged us to invite monastics from Fo Guang Shan to lead collective Buddha-recitation.

到了 2005 年之后，我们在学习佛法的过程中，发现净空法师提倡的一些观点（例如引用江本胜的“水知道答案”，认为无情物也有见闻觉知）在逻辑和经典依据上与《楞严经》等基本经典存在抵触。为了探索正信佛法，我们开始广泛听取和吸收不同法师的开示。

After 2005, in our process of studying the Buddhadharma, we realized that certain views advocated by Ven. Jingkong (such as citing Masaru Emoto’s “Messages from Water” to claim insentient matter possesses perception and awareness) conflicted in logic and scriptural backing with foundational classics like the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. To explore orthodox Buddhadharma, we began listening broadly to and absorbing teachings from various other monastics.

我们恪守的一条底线是：万变不离净土。不管邀请哪一位法师来讲经，或者是本会居士在台上分享（居士分享必须严格依据某位正信法师的视频内容，不可随意发挥，且不“开大座”），我们唯一的硬性要求就是：绝不能偏离“信愿念佛、求生净土”的核心思想。无论是讲唯识还是四念处，最终都必须导归西方极乐世界。

The bottom line we strictly observe is: all variations must not depart from Pure Land. Regardless of which monastic is invited to lecture, or whether laypersons share on

stage (lay sharing must strictly adhere to video contents of orthodox monastics without arbitrary elaboration, and without ascending the formal high seat). Our sole mandatory requirement is: never depart from the core teaching of “practicing Buddha-recitation with faith and vows, and firmly seeking rebirth in the Pure Land.” Whether expounding Yogācāra or the Four Mindfulnesses, it must ultimately revert to the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

话题四：与出家众（法师）的合作模式与北美道场现状

Topic 4: Cooperation Model with the Sangha and the Current State of North

American Buddhist Centers

本人：居士道场在邀请法师主持佛事或带修方面是否面临困难？北美其他净宗学会现状如何？

Interviewer (Self): Do lay centers face difficulties in inviting monastics to preside over Buddhist rituals or lead practice? What is the current status of other Amitabha Societies in North America?

陈会长：在北美，居士道场要存活非常不容易。许多学会只做一年几次的法会，缺乏常态化的讲经共修。例如西雅图净宗学会由于难以维持而关闭，旧金山净宗学会也在 2026 年 6 月关掉了。相比之下，洛杉矶净宗学会一直保持着固定的讲经与念佛共修，是非常稳定兴盛的。

President Chen: In North America, it is extremely difficult for a lay practice center to survive. Many societies only host Dharma assemblies a few times a year,

lacking normalized scripture lecturing and group practice. For instance, the Seattle Amitabha Society closed due to sustainability struggles, and the San Francisco Amitabha Society also shut down in June 2026. By contrast, the Amida Society of Los Angeles has continuously maintained regular scripture lecturing and Buddha-recitation retreats, remaining exceptionally stable and flourishing.

在与法师的合作上，我们一直保持着良好的互动。早期我曾请教净空法师居士道场该如何运作，性仁法师给我留下了非常深刻的警醒：“你不可以跟某一个法师给绑定定下来（stick on 一个法师），否则你将来会有很大的困难。”这个内在的智慧在于，道场必须保持开放与独立，有需要就诚意邀请，无需要则各自安住。

In cooperating with monastics, we have always maintained positive interactions. Early on, I consulted Ven. Jingkong on how a lay center should operate. He offered a profound warning: “You must not bind yourself permanently to any single monastic (‘stick on a monk’); otherwise, you will encounter immense difficulties in the future.” The inner wisdom lies in keeping the practice center open and independent—sincerely inviting monastics when needed, while abiding peacefully when not.

我们对前来结缘的法师一贯非常恭敬和慷慨。例如早期我们曾连续 3-4 年邀请佛光山西来寺的法师（包括现任总住持心保法师等）在除夕夜来帮我们做“三时系念”。这在西来寺需要经过佛光山重大会议决定，净空法师也大力支持。后来考虑到除夕夜西来寺自身活动极其繁忙，法师们做完法会连饭都顾不上吃就要匆忙赶车回去，我们于心不忍，才改为请其他法师来主持。我们的法器组全部由在家居士担任，大家各司其职。

We have consistently treated monastics coming to form affinities with great reverence and generosity. For example, in our early years, we invited monastics from Fo Guang Shan's Hsi Lai Temple (including the current Head Abbot, Ven. Xinbao) for 3 to 4 consecutive years to lead the New Year's Eve "Thrice Yearning Service" (*sanshi xinian* 三时系念). At Hsi Lai Temple, this required approval from major Fo Guang Shan board meetings, and Ven. Jingkong supported it strongly. Later, realizing that Hsi Lai Temple had demanding New Year's schedules of its own and monastics had to rush off without even eating after the ceremony, we could not bear to burden them and transitioned to inviting other monastics. Our ritual instruments team is composed entirely of lay practitioners performing their respective duties.

至于今年与安福寺达照法师、则旭法师的结缘，始于 2026 年年初（约 2 月）。当时则旭法师通过微信和熟人联系上我，提到他的师父达照法师。达照法师的同学，性仁法师此前也曾向我提过他，而则旭法师也希望其师父可以来洛杉矶与莲友结缘。我平时就在网上听达照法师的开示，非常欢迎。达照法师来此演讲讲法后，同修们反应极好，因为内容完全契合“提倡念佛求生极乐世界”的主线。因此同修们希望多请达照法师及安福寺团队来讲经带修，彼此结下了深厚的法缘。

As for establishing affinities this year with Ven. Dazhao and Ven. Zexu of Anfu Monastery, it began in early 2026 (around February). At that time, Ven. Zexu contacted me via WeChat and mutual acquaintances, mentioning his master, Ven. Dazhao. Ven. Xingren had also previously mentioned Ven. Dazhao as his classmate in Chinese Buddhist Academy to me, and Ven. Zexu expressed the hope that his master could come

to Los Angeles to form affinities with local practitioners. Having regularly listened to Ven. Dazhao's teachings online, I welcomed the idea warmly. After Ven. Dazhao gave lectures here, fellow practitioners responded enthusiastically because his teachings fully aligned with the central line of "advocating Buddha-recitation to seek rebirth in the Pure Land." Thus, practitioners hoped to invite Ven. Dazhao and the Anfu Monastery team more frequently for lectures and retreats, forging a profound Dharma connection.

话题五：未来传承规划

Topic 5: Future Transmission and Planning

本人： 您对学会未来的发展与接班有什么规划？

Interviewer (Self): What plans do you have for the future development and succession of the Society?

陈会长： 我已经 80 岁了，这是非常现实且迫切的问题。目前道场主要面临两个方面的挑战。

President Chen: I am already 80 years old; this is a very realistic and pressing issue. Currently, the practice center faces challenges primarily on two fronts.

一是信众年龄偏大与年轻化的需求。目前的信众以来自中国大陆、台湾、香港、东南亚及越南的华人为主，年龄普遍偏大。虽然有一些年轻人参加，但年轻人的意志力相对较弱，容易退转。我们未来能借助安福寺等力量，探索如何吸引并留住年轻一代的信众。

First is the aging demographic of devotees and the imperative for youth

engagement. Currently, our practitioners consist mostly of Chinese immigrants from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Vietnam, predominantly older in age. Although some young people participate, their willpower is relatively fragile, making them prone to retrogression. We hope that in the future, with the support of institutions like Anfu Monastery, we can explore ways to attract and retain the younger generation of practitioners.

二是道场的未来接班与产权处置问题。我深知如果自己离世后没有合适的安排，仅靠现有的居士团队，道场很难长期维持。因此，我已经向则旭法师等表达了我的意愿：我愿意在未来将道场无偿捐赠/交由值得信任的正信法师（如达照法师僧团）来接管与运营。

Second is the issue of future leadership succession and property disposition of the center. I am fully aware that if I pass away without appropriate arrangements, relying solely on the current lay team will make it difficult to sustain the center long-term. Therefore, I have conveyed my intention to Ven. Zexu and others: I am willing to donate and transfer the practice center free of charge to trustworthy, orthodox monastics (such as Ven. Dazhao's Sangha) for future management and operation.

在法律操作上，由于学会的决策权掌握在董事会手中，只要将董事长的职位交接给法师，由法师重新邀请出家人或专业居士担任董事，就能顺畅完成接管。

In legal terms, because the governing decision-making power of the Society rests with the Board of Directors, as long as the position of Board Chairman is transferred to a monastic—who then re-invites monastics or professional laypersons to serve as

directors—the legal transition can be accomplished smoothly.

我唯一的条件就是：保持“信愿念佛、回归净土”的宗旨不变。只要这个道场能够继续弘扬净土法门、利益众生，谁来管理并不重要。只要能把念佛共修和正法续焰维持下去，这就是我最大的心愿。

My sole condition is: maintain the core commitment to “practicing Buddha-recitation with faith and vows, and seeking rebirth in the Pure Land” unchanged. As long as this center continues to propagate the Pure Land Dharma gate and benefit sentient beings, who manages it is not important. So long as collective Buddha-recitation and the flame of orthodox Dharma are sustained, that is my greatest wish.

Appendix B:

Informed Consent Form of President Chen

Interviewer / 采访人:

Song Wang, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Religious Studies, University of the West

Interviewee / 受访人:

Jingchang Chen 陈景昌, President of Amida Society, LA

1. Purpose of the Study / 研究目的

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the history, institutional dynamics, and practice of lay Buddhism in the United States. The purpose of this interview is to gather qualitative insights and historical background for a doctoral dissertation. 诚挚邀请您参与一项关于美国居士佛教历史、机构动态与信仰实践的学术研究。本次采访旨在为一份博士论文收集定性访谈资料与历史背景信息。

2. Participation and Procedures / 参与方式与流程

Your participation is entirely voluntary. 您的参与完全出于自愿。

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with your permission. 采访预计耗时约 60 分钟，经您同意后将进行全程录音。

You may refuse to answer any specific question, pause the recording, or withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequences. 您可以随时拒绝回答任何特定问题、暂停录音或退出采访，且不会承担任何不利后果。

3. Data Confidentiality and Usage / 数据保密与使用

The recording and transcription will be stored securely on password-protected devices. 录音及文字转写文本将妥善保存在受密码保护的设备中。

As agreed during our interview, any sensitive personal or institutional details marked as confidential will be edited, generalized, or omitted from the public text of the dissertation. 如采访中所约定的，任何明确标注为保密的个人或机构敏感细节，在论文公开发表时均会进行编辑、抽象化处理或直接予以删减。

4. Statement of Consent / 同意声明

By signing below, you indicate that: 签署本同意书即表明：

1. You have read and understood the information provided above. 您已阅读并充分理解上述所有信息。
2. You voluntarily agree to participate in this interview and allow the audio recording of the session. 您自愿同意参与本次采访并允许对采访进行录音。
3. You grant the researcher permission to quote, paraphrase, and analyze the content of this interview in their doctoral dissertation, as well as in future academic publications or presentations resulting from this research. 您授权研究者在其博

士论文以及后续相关的学术出版物或学术报告中，引用、转述和分析本次采访的内容。

Participant's Printed Name / 受访者姓名（打印）：

Participant's Signature / 受访者签名：

Date / 日期：

Jason Chen
J Chen
8-1-26

Appendix C:

Interview Records with Lee TsuKu

Date: July 7, 2024

Site: Chuang Yen Monastery, New York

话题一：沈家桢居士的护法胸怀与包容精神

Topic 1: Layperson C.T. Shen's Spirit of Dharma Protection and Inclusivity

采访者（本人）： 如何分析沈家桢居士及其组织中多元包容的特征？

Interviewer (Self): How should we analyze the characteristics of pluralism and inclusiveness in Layperson Shen and his organization?

李祖鹄： 如果有法师要来进入美国弘法，并最后去了德州一个寺庙，就是请了一个方丈来住持，沈先生他们也很高兴。这因缘就到了德州，那就很好啊。如果通过我们美佛会来办理，又通过我们要办绿卡，我们就必须要办中领馆的公证，这是必须的。但是你如果找佛光山类似的传统僧伽团体，佛光山会说“我不认识你，你不在我这里住了”，他们不会帮你做。

Lee TsuKu: If a monastic came to propagate the Dharma in the United States and eventually ended up at a temple in Texas—that is, inviting an abbot to reside and lead it—Mr. Shen and his colleagues were very delighted. As long as the causes and conditions led them to Texas, that was wonderful. If it was processed through our BAUS

and involved applying for permanent residency (green cards), we had to get notarization from the Chinese Consulate, which was mandatory. But if you were to approach traditional monastic organizations like Fo Guang Shan, they might say, “I don’t know you, and you are no longer residing here,” and they would not do it for you.

因为我们美佛会是开放的。佛光山如果要出去，就是脱离了他们的系统，再也回不去了。传统僧团大部分只是照顾他自己的徒弟、徒孙，因为他们有自己的佛学院、有佛教大学，是从那里培养出来的，他不必用你们外面的人；法鼓山也是一样，台湾几个大山头都是这样。

Because our BAUS is an open institution. If someone leaves Fo Guang Shan, they have detached from their system and can never return. Traditional monastic orders mostly look after their own disciples and grand-disciples because they have their own Buddhist colleges and Buddhist universities from which their monastics are cultivated; they do not need to employ outsiders. Dharma Drum Mountain is the same, and so are several major monastic centers in Taiwan.

所以沈家桢居士的这个身份，造就了这边有一种比较开放、多元的精神。沈先生在台湾，几个大山头都很尊敬他。像慈济，慈济的第一笔启动大额捐款就是沈太太（和如居士）捐的。当时证严法师刚发心很想做慈济，可是那时候甚至十块钱是别人捐、二十块是别人捐，结果沈太太一捐就是上万美元。

Therefore, Layperson Shen’s unique status created a relatively open and pluralistic spirit here. In Taiwan, Mr. Shen was deeply respected by all the major monastic centers. Take Tzu Chi for example: the very first major seed donation for Tzu

Chi was contributed by Mrs. Shen (Woo Ju). At that time, Ven. Zhengyan had just generated the aspiration to start Tzu Chi, but back then, donations came in small amounts like ten or twenty dollars from others. In contrast, Mrs. Shen donated tens of thousands of US dollars at once.

有了这笔大额资金，你就可以做大事情。那会儿还有出版社，大学生佛学会（夏令营）也是沈太太去赞助的。还有台中莲社的李炳南老居士，沈太太捐钱不是算捐一百块两百块，她是捐上万的钱去资助居士林之类的机构，所以很多人非常感恩。而且沈先生也不会计较说你是什么派系，他只是为了成就弘法这件事。

With such a substantial sum of capital, one could accomplish major endeavors. Back then, there were also publishing houses, and the College Student Buddhist Association (summer camps) was also sponsored by Mrs. Shen. Furthermore, regarding Layperson Li Bingnan at the Taichung Lotus Society, Mrs. Shen did not donate mere amounts of one or two hundred dollars; she contributed tens of thousands of dollars to sponsor institutions such as lay Buddhist associations. Thus, many people were immensely grateful. Moreover, Mr. Shen would never care about which sect or lineage you belonged to; his sole purpose was to facilitate and fulfill the propagation of the Buddhadharma.

采访者（本人）：这是我论文里面很重要的一个核心点——沈家桢居士这种包容性与多元性。

Interviewer (Self): This is a very crucial core point in my dissertation—Shen's profound inclusiveness and pluralism.

李祖鹄：对，对。他本身具有极大的包容多元性。而且佛陀讲法就是“应以身得度者，即现何身而为说法”，适合不同众生讲不同的话，对不对？你要真的跟他契机，他就会进来；不契机，他还是不想来，对不对？所以沈老他有这种很大的气量，只要你是属于正信佛法、属于弘扬佛教的，他就去帮助你。

Lee TsuKu: Yes, exactly. He possessed immense inclusiveness and pluralism. Furthermore, the Buddha's teaching follows the principle of "manifesting in whatever form is suitable to liberate sentient beings," adapting teachings to suit different individuals, right? If the teaching accords with someone's spiritual capacity, they will enter; if not, they will not come. Thus, Shen had a grand breadth of mind: as long as you represented orthodox Buddhadharma and were committed to propagating Buddhism, he would offer his support.

话题二：美国佛教会（BAUS）的组织架构与出家众挂单考核机制

Topic 2: Institutional Structure of BAUS and Monastic Residency Evaluation

Mechanisms

采访者（本人）：我们在选择或双向选择法师的过程中，是不是在董事会这边做主要决定？

Interviewer (Self): In the process of selecting or mutually selecting monastics, is the primary decision made by the Board of Directors?

李祖鹄：董事会这边呢，可以这样讲：我们的住持或者常住，都是属于董事会聘请的。后来法师进来了以后，也可能进入董事会。但是在他刚进来的时候，

是先由董事会去聘请。因为我们一开始不认识他，而董事会比较了解佛教会的宗旨与立案目的在哪里。

Lee TsuKu: Regarding the Board of Directors, it can be framed this way: our abbots or resident monastics are all appointed by the Board of Directors. Later, after a monastic arrives, they may also join the Board. But when they initially arrive, they are first appointed by the Board, because we do not know them initially, whereas the Board thoroughly understands the association's mission and legal status.

不是有很多人想借道场办身份吗？因为我们美佛会开放。如果你是一个出家人，你想在传统僧伽道场办宗教绿卡，他不会给你办，你不是他们的徒弟他就不给你办。而我们这里，出家人来挂单，我们后来就慢慢严格一点：最少要在寺里住满三年，我们才考虑帮他办理宗教签证（R-1）或绿卡等问题。

Aren't there many people who wish to use temples to obtain legal immigration status? Because our BAUS is open. If you are a monastic and wish to apply for a religious green card through a traditional monastic temple, they will not process it for you if you are not their disciple. Here, when monastics come to apply for temporary residency (*guadan* 挂单), we gradually tightened our policy: they must reside in the monastery for at least three years before we consider assisting them with religious visas (R-1) or permanent residency (green cards).

因为否则的话，真的有很多人是在来忽悠你的。在美国，宗教签证和绿卡审查很严格。你如果是在家人，一年、两年、三年，政府和道场都要考核你。很多人可能还有假出家，为了拿宗教签证而临时剃头出家，但佛教会现在不接受这种。

Otherwise, there are truly many people who attempt to deceive you. In the United States, religious visas and green card applications are subject to strict scrutiny. If you are a layperson, the government and the organization will evaluate you over one, two, or three years. Many people might even pretend to be monastics, shaving their heads temporarily just to obtain a religious visa, but our Association no longer accepts such cases.

所以我们就必须要求你待一段时间观察。如果你真正是出家人，你起码会严守戒律吧？起码会尊重别人吧？假装忽悠人、假的僧人你根本不知道。所以他一定要住在道场里，甚至要请他出来讲讲经、考考他。虽然我们有好心想成就人，但还是必须要保护道场。

Therefore, we must require individuals to reside here for a period of observation. If you are a genuine monastic, you will at least strictly observe the precepts, right? You will at least show respect to others. Impostors or fake monastics are hard to detect initially. Thus, they must reside in the monastery, and we even ask them to give lectures to test their competence. Although we have compassionate intentions to support practitioners, we must safeguard the monastery.

采访者（本人）：您说的这个情况非常对，洛杉矶那边也有类似情况。现在大家都会严格一些，设置考察期，在初始筛选的过程中非常谨慎。

Interviewer (Self): What you described is very accurate. There are similar situations in Los Angeles. Nowadays, organizations have become stricter, establishing probation periods and exercising great caution during initial screening.

李祖鹄： 有一次有一个国内来的，他先到处参观，看我们庄严寺这么大，又不是那种子孙庙。子孙庙不太容易帮你办签证，而看我们这种属于十方道场，他就打主意。我故意问他：“你是哪个祖庭出来的？师承是谁？”一问戒牒和僧籍，发现他是冒牌的，剃个光头就想来忽悠。你不去盘问搭理他，你根本不知道他的背景。他穿个出家人的衣服，看我们连续问他专业问题，他知道蒙不够去，就赶紧溜走了。

Lee TsuKu: Once, someone came from Mainland China and toured around. Seeing how large Chuang Yen Monastery is, and recognizing that it is not a hereditary private temple, he formed ulterior motives. Hereditary temples rarely help outsiders process visas, whereas ten-direction public monasteries do. I deliberately tested him, asking: “Which ancestral monastery do you hail from? Who is your lineage master?” Upon inquiring about his ordination certificate (*jiedie* 戒牒) and monastic registration, we found he was an impostor who simply shaved his head to deceive people. If you don’t cross-examine him, you wouldn’t know his background. Dressed in monastic robes, when he saw us asking consecutive professional Buddhist questions, he realized he couldn’t fool us and promptly slipped away.

像这种人可能跑去别的丛林忽悠，但私人小庙他根本忽悠不到，因为人家小庙是师父传给徒弟的，不可能让他插足。

People like him might try to deceive other public monasteries, but they can never succeed in private hereditary temples, because those small temples are passed down strictly from master to disciple, leaving no room for outsiders to intervene.

话题三：美佛会（BAUS）与庄严寺的法律立案与治理

Topic 3: Legal Incorporation and Governance of BAUS and Chuang Yen Monastery

采访者（本人）： 庄严寺在法律注册上算是怎样的机构？与美佛会是什么样的组织关系？

Interviewer (Self): What kind of legal entity is Chuang Yen Monastery registered as? What is its organizational relationship with BAUS?

李祖鹄： 庄严寺只是美国佛教会（BAUS）下的一个道场单位。而美佛会呢，全称是 The Buddhist Association of the United States（BAUS），是在美国政府正式立案的 501(c)(3) 非营利组织（Non-profit Organization）。

Lee TsuKu: Chuang Yen Monastery is merely a subsidiary monastic unit under the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS). The full legal name of BAUS is The Buddhist Association of the United States, which is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization officially registered with the U.S. federal government.

作为一个非营利法人，美佛会底下可以拥有一个庙、两个庙、三个庙（如纽约的大觉寺、庄严寺等）。就像佛光山也是跟政府登记的法人，底下在德州、加州有很多庙和道场，但都属于佛光山系统；法鼓山也是一样。在美佛会这种 NPO 框架下，无论是在加州还是纽约，都必须在美国政府注册才能享受免税政策。

As a non-profit corporate entity, BAUS can operate multiple temples under its umbrella (such as the Temple of Enlightenment and Chuang Yen Monastery in New York). Similarly, Fo Guang Shan is a legally registered corporate body operating

numerous temples in Texas, California, and elsewhere under its overarching system; Dharma Drum Mountain functions in the same manner. Under the NPO framework of BAUS, whether in California or New York, all operations must be registered with the U.S. government to secure tax-exempt status.

在组织立案方面，移民局和政府要了解你这个宗教是不是合规的宗教。因为有些人挂羊头卖狗肉，打着宗教旗号骗钱或搞邪教。美国社会比较开放，什么宗教都有，尤其是从东方来的，美国政府一开始搞不清楚你们到底讲什么。最近某些团体涉及违法问题，所以美国政府现在审查非常严格。

Regarding organizational incorporation, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and government agencies require verification that your religion is a legal religion. Because some fraudulent entities misrepresent themselves under the guise of religion to solicit money or operate cults. American society is relatively open and accommodates diverse religions. Especially regarding Eastern traditions, the U.S. government initially struggled to comprehend their teachings. Recently, certain organizations have been implicated in illegal activities (such as financial crimes), so government agencies now enforce rigorous scrutiny.

有一次在庄严寺，有两个法轮功的人混进来，以为我是游客，在那里跟其他游客推销他们的东西。我故意问了他几个佛学问题，问他：“你是不是法轮功的？”他发现我懂行，吓得赶紧跑掉了。因为我们庄严寺场地很大，要是不注意，真的会有乱七八糟的人混进来。所以我们义工和管理层有时候会比较警惕。我们希望大众来接触正法，所以我们准备了中文、英文、西班牙文的佛学书籍，供各种族的游客

免费索阅，我们甚至还会去监狱里弘法。

Once at Chuang Yen Monastery, two *Falun Gong* practitioners slipped in. Mistaking me for a regular tourist, they began pitching their materials to visitors. I intentionally posed several Buddhist doctrine questions and asked them: “Are you from *Falun Gong*?” Realizing I was knowledgeable, they quickly fled. Because Chuang Yen Monastery covers a vast area, if we are not vigilant, unwanted intruders might enter. Hence, our volunteers and management maintain a high degree of alertness. We genuinely hope the public can encounter orthodox Dharma. Thus, we provide Buddhist literature in Chinese, English, and Spanish for visitors of all ethnicities to take freely. We even conduct Dharma propagation programs in prisons.

话题四：僧俗关系：美佛会的“民主会员制”与“僧团内部监督”

Topic 4: Monastic-Lay Dynamics: Democratic Membership and Internal Monastic Oversight in BAUS

采访者（本人）：在美佛会的运作中，居士扮演了重要角色，但法师也在董事会扮演重要角色。如果形容这种法师与学会的关系，用“聘请制”是否合适？

Interviewer (Self): In the operation of BAUS, laypeople play a significant role, yet monastics also hold key positions on the Board of Directors. Would it be appropriate to describe the relationship between monastics and the Association as an “appointment system”?

李祖鹄：可以这样理解：如果一个师父自己出钱或筹款盖了个庙，那叫“子

孙庙”（私人师徒道场），当然不是聘请制。但如果一个出家人想到我们庄严寺来常住，我们必须对他进行考核。

Lee TsuKu: It can be understood this way: if a monastic builds a temple with his own funds or personal fundraising, that is called a “hereditary temple” (private master-disciple monastery), which is certainly not an appointment system. However, if a monastic wishes to reside permanently at Chuang Yen Monastery, we must evaluate him.

我们一般不叫“聘请”，我们叫“挂单”。挂单就意味着你不是终身常住。挂单之后，你跟着僧团一起住。我们美佛会有僧团内部的监督体系——师父和师父住在一起，男众有 250 条比丘戒，女众有 348 条比丘尼戒。你是不是真出家人？吃饭、课诵、过堂、半月诵戒是不是照规矩来？冒牌的人在僧团里根本待不住，几天就暴露跑掉了。

We generally do not use the term “appointment”; we call it “residency” (*guadan* 挂单). *Guadan* implies that your residency is not permanent. Once resident, you live alongside the monastic Sangha. Our BAUS maintains an internal monastic supervision mechanism: monastics reside with monastics, adhering to the 250 Prātimokṣa precepts for Bhikkhus and 348 precepts for Bhikkhūṇīs. Whether you are a genuine monastic is demonstrated by whether your meals, recitations, hall services, and bi-weekly Uposatha precept recitations follow the monastic code. Impostors cannot endure living within the Sangha and will expose themselves and leave within days.

采访者（本人）：除了僧团内部的戒律监督，美佛会在居士和会员管理上有什么机制？

Interviewer (Self): In addition to internal Vinaya supervision within the Sangha, what mechanisms does BAUS employ for lay member management?

李祖鹄: 在居士管理上，美佛会实行的是真正的民主会员制。因为庄严寺是十方道场，为了防止不良用心的人通过拉拢人头来掌控或吞并道场，美佛会对法定会员设立了严格门槛：你必须在美佛会做满三年义工，表现良好，再经过一年的观察期，才能申请成为正式会员。

Lee TsuKu: Regarding lay governance, BAUS enforces a genuinely democratic membership model. Because Chuang Yen Monastery is a ten-direction public monastery, to prevent malicious individuals from stacking votes to control or annex the monastery, BAUS established strict prerequisite thresholds for voting members: an applicant must serve as a BAUS volunteer for three full years with commendable performance, followed by a one-year probationary period, before applying for voting membership.

美佛会的会员不是像慈济那种只需每月捐钱的普通会员。美佛会的正式会员是拥有法定投票权和选举权的！会员大会可以选举董事会，如果某位比丘行为严重违戒，会员大会甚至有权投票将他请离！美佛会不是师徒私相授受的“子孙庙”，而是来自于十方、属于十方的公共道场，所以必须建立这种法律与制度上的防护网，保障道场始终走在正轨上。

BAUS members are not like ordinary donor members in Tzu Chi who simply make monthly contributions. Official BAUS voting members possess statutory voting and electoral rights! The General Membership Assembly elects the Board of Directors, and if a monastic severely violates Vinaya precepts, the Membership Assembly even

retains the legal authority to vote for his removal! BAUS is not a private hereditary temple passed down between master and disciple, but a public monastery belonging to the ten directions. Therefore, we must establish this legal and institutional safety net to ensure the monastery permanently remains on the right track.

采访者（本人）： 所以除了僧团在佛教戒律上的监督，美佛会在法律与行政事务上由居士董事会和会员共同把关？

Interviewer (Self): So in addition to monastic Vinaya oversight, secular legal and administrative affairs in BAUS are managed jointly by the lay Board of Directors and voting members?

李祖鹄： 对！法律、财务、签证等世俗事务由居士董事会和专业律师处理，因为法师通常不熟悉世俗法律；而僧伽内部的戒律修持则由僧团自己管理。

Lee TsuKu: Correct! Secular affairs such as legal matters, finances, and visa applications are handled by the lay Board of Directors and legal counsel, as monastics are generally unfamiliar with secular law; meanwhile, internal precept cultivation within the Sangha is governed independently by the monastic community.

另外在北美还有一个现象：男众法师出来后，往往待了两年羽翼丰满，很容易就去外面建立自己的小道场；相对来说，常住的法师需要极大的奉献心。对于真正有修持的大德，比如我非常熟悉的梦参老法师，他在东北被关了三十年狱，在牢里依然弘扬佛法，出来后非常谦虚客气，极具修持与瑞相，令人无比崇敬。

Additionally, there is another phenomenon in North America: after male monastics arrive, once they gain experience after two years, they often leave to establish

their own independent temples. Relatively speaking, monastics who remain as permanent residents require immense dedication. As for truly accomplished masters—such as the Venerable Master Mengcan, whom I knew very well—he was imprisoned in Northeast China for thirty years, yet continued propagating the Dharma even in prison. Upon his release, he remained exceptionally humble and gracious, embodying profound spiritual cultivation and auspicious signs, inspiring utmost reverence.

话题五：东西方佛学传播

Topic 5: Dissemination of Buddhism to Eastern and Western Audiences

采访者（本人）： 我的论文重点关注居士身份在宗教活动中的参与程度，以及居士在美国这片土地上如何扮演杰出的佛教领袖角色（以沈家桢居士为例）。

Interviewer (Self): My dissertation focuses on the degree of lay participation in religious activities and how laypersons assumed prominent roles as Buddhist leaders in America (taking Layperson Shen as a primary case study).

李祖鹄： 像沈家桢居士这样的杰出领袖确实非常罕见。在很多传统寺庙里，居士往往只是被动听从师父交代，缺乏对佛法的深刻理解。

Lee TsuKu: An outstanding lay leader like C.T. Shen is indeed extremely rare. In many traditional temples, lay followers often passively follow whatever the monastics instruct, lacking a profound intellectual understanding of Buddhadharma.

针对西方人，我们常常采用理性的角度切入，例如采用南传禅修与四念处等方法。西方人（天主教、基督教、犹太教背景）来到寺院，你直接叫他拜佛、念

佛，他往往会有宗教心理障碍。但西方人非常喜欢打坐（Meditation）。打坐教的是“观身受心法”（四念处）、注意呼吸、数息法。这些与宗教信仰无关，小狗小猫都在呼吸，数息能让躁动的心平静下来。又比如葛印卡（S. N. Goenka）提倡的毗婆舍那（Vipassanā 内观禅），引导练习者从头到脚观照身体感觉的无常与变化。西方人体验后觉得极具科学与心理学道理，没有任何宗教压迫感。通过这种理性的禅修切入后，他们才逐渐接触到佛陀的智慧，进而萌发大乘佛教的“菩提心”与慈悲心。

Regarding Westerners, we often employ a rational approach, utilizing Theravāda meditation and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Cattāro Satipaṭṭhānā*). When Westerners (from Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish backgrounds) visit the temple, if you directly ask them to prostrate to the Buddha or recite the Buddha's name, they frequently experience psychological barriers due to religious identity. However, Westerners are very fond of meditation. Meditation teaches mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena (the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), breath awareness, and breath-counting methods. These are unrelated to religious dogma—even small animals breathe—and breath awareness calms the agitated mind. Another example is Vipassanā meditation advocated by S. N. Goenka, which guides practitioners to observe the impermanence and flux of bodily sensations from head to toe. Experiencing this, Westerners find it scientifically and psychologically compelling without feeling any religious coercion. Through this rational meditation entry point, they gradually encounter the Buddha's wisdom and subsequently generate the Mahāyāna Bodhicitta and

compassion.

华人信众多数带有传统信仰基础，喜欢拜观音、念佛求福报。但美佛会同时提供理性的经教学习（如沈家桢居士深入浅出讲解的《金刚经的研究》、《心经》等），满足不同根器信众的需求。

Chinese devotees mostly possess a traditional faith foundation, preferring to venerate Guanyin or chant the Buddha's name for blessings. Nevertheless, BAUS simultaneously provides rational textual studies (such as Shen's accessible lectures on *The Study of the Diamond Sutra* and *Heart Sūtra*), catering to practitioners of diverse spiritual inclinations.

采访者（本人）：可否介绍下菩提比丘是如何进入这个汉传道场的？

Interviewer (Self): Could you introduce how Bhikkhu Bodhi entered this Chinese Mahāyāna monastery?

李祖鹄：菩提比丘是美国籍的南传高僧、巴利圣典英译权威学者，曾长期在斯里兰卡修行并担任巴利文编译会（BPS）会长。2002 年菩提比丘自斯里兰卡退休并返回美国后，即受到沈家桢居士及美佛会的诚挚邀请，入住由沈家桢居士资助创立的同净兰若（Bodhi Monastery）以及纽约庄严寺居住、静修与讲学。2004 年初，在仁俊法师的强烈推荐下，菩提比丘接任了印顺导师基金会（Yinshun Foundation）主席一职。这一举动象征着南传原始佛教与人间佛教大乘思想在北美的深层次对话与互动。

Lee TsuKu: Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American-born senior Theravāda monk and a paramount scholar of Pali Canon English translations, who resided in Sri Lanka for

decades and served as President of the Buddhist Publication Society (BPS). Upon retiring from Sri Lanka and returning to the U.S. in 2002, Bhikkhu Bodhi received a heartfelt invitation from Layperson C.T. Shen and BAUS to reside, practice, and teach at Bodhi Monastery (founded with Shen's patronage) and Chuang Yen Monastery in New York. In early 2004, under the strong recommendation of Venerable Renjun, Bhikkhu Bodhi assumed the presidency of the Yinshun Foundation. This historic event symbolized a deep dialogue and interaction between Theravāda Early Buddhism and Mahāyāna Humanistic Buddhism in North America.

Appendix D:

Informed Consent Form of Lee TsuKu

Interviewer / 采访人:

Song Wang, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Religious Studies, University of the West

Interviewee / 受访人:

TsuKu Lee 李祖鹄, Board Member of BAUS

1. Purpose of the Study / 研究目的

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the history, institutional dynamics, and practice of lay Buddhism in the United States. The purpose of this interview is to gather qualitative insights and historical background for a doctoral dissertation. 诚挚邀请您参与一项关于美国居士佛教历史、机构动态与信仰实践的学术研究。本次采访旨在为一份博士论文收集定性访谈资料与历史背景信息。

2. Participation and Procedures / 参与方式与流程

Your participation is entirely voluntary. 您的参与完全出于自愿。

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with your permission. 采访预计耗时约 60 分钟，经您同意后将进行全程录音。

You may refuse to answer any specific question, pause the recording, or withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequences. 您可以随时拒绝回答任何特定问题、暂停录音或退出采访，且不会承担任何不利后果。

3. Data Confidentiality and Usage / 数据保密与使用

The recording and transcription will be stored securely on password-protected devices. 录音及文字转写文本将妥善保存在受密码保护的设备中。

As agreed during our interview, any sensitive personal or institutional details marked as confidential will be edited, generalized, or omitted from the public text of the dissertation. 如采访中所约定的，任何明确标注为保密的个人或机构敏感细节，在论文公开发表时均会进行编辑、抽象化处理或直接予以删减。

4. Statement of Consent / 同意声明

By signing below, you indicate that: 签署本同意书即表明：

1. You have read and understood the information provided above. 您已阅读并充分理解上述所有信息。
2. You voluntarily agree to participate in this interview and allow the audio recording of the session. 您自愿同意参与本次采访并允许对采访进行录音。
3. You grant the researcher permission to quote, paraphrase, and analyze the content of this interview in their doctoral dissertation, as well as in future academic publications or presentations resulting from this research. 您授权研究者在其博

士论文以及后续相关的学术出版物或学术报告中，引用、转述和分析本次采访的内容。

Participant's Printed Name / 受访者姓名（打印）

Lee Tsu Ku

Participant's Signature / 受访者签名：

Tsu-Ku Lee

Date / 日期：

8/9/2026