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## 4a. Buddhism in China Today: The Example of the Bai Lin Chan Monastery

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(Caifang ZHU)

The highlight of my one-month visit back in China in the summer of 2002 was no doubt the five-day stay at the Bai Lin Chan Monastery in Hebei Province, China.<sup>1</sup> The renovations made to the monastery in recent years amazed me. Assuming that the overwhelming majority of Americans know very little of the resurrected Buddhism in the reform-era China, I will share my experiences there and describe contemporary Chinese Buddhism, as exemplified by the Bai Lin Chan Monastery, in the following four parts: The Popularity of the Monastery--Past and Present; The Layout; Eating and Chanting; and A Chronicle of 2001--Significance and Reflection. Throughout the four parts of description are mingled conveniently with my personal experiences and comments related to the four headings.

### **Part One: The Popularity of the Monastery: Past and Present**

Since restoration of the largely destroyed monastery began in 1988, Bai Lin Chan Monastery has never had so many residents. The number of monastics or monks living in the monastery now totals more than 150, and consists of resident monks as well as monastic students of the provincial Buddhist college<sup>2</sup>. This was a great contrast to the ten monks or so living there in November 1992, when I paid my first visit to the monastery. At that time, I stayed for a week. It was my first experience of monastic life, and turned out to be relaxing, peaceful and therapeutic on a level that I had previously never experienced.

During 1966-1976, the Cultural Revolution destroyed almost everything in the monastery as it did to other religious sites. What had been left of this historically significant monastery was little more than the tower (a Chinese style stupa) which hoarded the sarira<sup>3</sup> of Chan Master Zhao Zhou (778-987) of the Tang Dynasty (6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries) and several thousand-year-old cypress trees. At its inception, the monastery, built in the second century, was originally called Guan Yin (also known as Avaloketeshvara) Monastery. Later the name of Bai Lin Monastery was adopted, which literally means "cypress trees" in Chinese. Made prominent by the Zhao Zhou style of Chan Buddhism<sup>4</sup> (also known as Zen Buddhism in Japanese), the reputation of the monastery has since spread far and wide, across China and internationally.

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<sup>1</sup> The numerical after each latinized Chinese character indicates the tone (tone 1,2,3,4 corresponds to flat, rising, falling-and-rising or falling tone) of that character. Absence of the tone makes the pronunciation uncertain. I will indicate the tone when a Chinese word appears for the first time. No tone is given for the subsequent appearance of the same word.

<sup>2</sup> Virtually each of the 32 provinces and municipalities throughout main land China has at least one Buddhist College. Most of them, however, have an enrollment below 100 and all of the students are monastics. Though religious freedom in China is currently far from satisfactory as compared with that in the US, there is no interference with religious activities strictly within the domain of religious affairs that do not involve politics or undermine the ruling Communist government. Monastics of all kinds chose to lead the monastic life out of their own free will. "Government appointed monastics" meant to create a positive image of the Communist Party's policies towards religious freedom are extremely rare, if they exist at all. I personally doubt the existence of such monastics nowadays. But one may occasionally encounter "fake monks" at some Buddhist temples, where there are now "monks" or "nuns" in residence because the temple is under the control and administration of the tourism bureau rather than Buddhists or Buddhist associations. In these cases, fake "monks" or "nuns" are no more than disguised non-Buddhists--non-Buddhist commoners wearing monastic clothes or clothes identical to monastic clothes. This trickery aims at attracting tourists' attention and boosts their business. No doubt Buddhist followers unanimously condemn it.

<sup>3</sup> The hard indestructible remains of the body after being cremated.

<sup>4</sup> Chan Buddhism distinguishes itself from other sects of Buddhism in that the former claims to be "a special transmission outside of the Buddhist scriptures". It claims to be independent of letters and words. What it values

To know the history of the monastery, it is a must that one knows a bit of Chan master Zhao Zhou. Who then is Chan Master Zhao Zhou? We know Zhao Zhou most effectively through Gong-an (a distinctive Chan way of investigation of truth). One of the most famous Gong-ans (also known in Japanese as a Koan) associated with the monastery is the Gong-An of Gateless Barrier (or Gateless Gate). The Gong-an originated from the following encounter: a monk asked Chan Master Zhao Zhou, the then-abbot of the monastery, ‘since all sentient beings have the nature of Buddha, does a dog also have the nature of Buddha?’ “Wu”, replied Zhao Zhou, “wu” here denoting an incompatibility or dysfunctionality of the query<sup>5</sup> rather than a negation as it normally does. About a decade ago, Keido Fukushima, Zen master of visiting Japanese monastics from Tofukuji monastery shouted right in front of the Zhao Zhou Stupa “mu” (the Japanese pronunciation of “wu”) so loud that it was taken as an unusual tribute to Zhao Zhou.

Another Gong-an from Master Zhao Zhou relates to the cypress trees. “What is the essence that Bodhidharma<sup>6</sup> transmitted from India to the Chinese?” One inquired. Zhao Zhou uttered, “The cypress trees in the yard.” The reply, seemingly unrelated to the question, was meant to cut off or block off the rational and discriminative query and allow the practitioner to look inward for awakening. This was meant to demonstrate the point that in Buddhism, the nature of Buddha, so to speak, is transcendental but within. Equally well known in East Asian Buddhism and more treasured in Korea and Japan than in contemporary China is the Gong-an regarding the identification between enjoying tea and practicing Chan (chan2 cha1 yi2 wei4). *The Analects of Chan Master Zhao Zhou* tell of one day when two novices came to learn from Zhao Zhou. “Have you been here before?” Inquired Zhao Zhou. “No.” replied the novice. “Go and have tea please,” Said Zhao Zhou. To the other novices Zhao Zhou repeated the inquiry and got the opposite answer: “Yes, I have visited the monastery.” “Please go and have tea therefore.” Hearing the same response to the different answers, the chief administrator of the Monastery felt puzzled and asked Zhao Zhou, “Why did you ask them to have tea regardless of their different answers?” “Chief administrator!” Master Zhao Zhou said loudly. “Yes, Master.” “Go and have tea please!” Thus Zhao Zhou non-discriminatively finished the set of exchanges.

Many other Zhao Zhou-related Gong-ans have been passed down in the history of Chan tradition in China<sup>7</sup>, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and now in the West. For example, in a recent visit to the

methodologically is pointing directly to the mind. It is believed that one can see the nature of the mind and thus attains to Buddhahood. We find, of course, Chan masters cannot literally avoid using language. A usual apologetic explanation of such a controversy is that they use language as an expedient means but never get stuck with it.

<sup>5</sup> Chan distinguishes itself from other schools of Buddhism in that it tends to transcend much of rationalization and speculation, pointing directly to the original and ultimate nature of mind: the non-discriminative and indescribable state of Mind. If you experientially comprehend this state, you must have passed the Gateless Barrier. Zhao Zhou was still traveling to visit and learn when he was 80. Returning from his tours, he realized he had unnecessarily wasted time and expense on monastic travels. This suggests that he had either attained enlightenment and merely had his enlightenment confirmed, or not gotten any significant insight from his pilgrimage. At any rate, he started thereupon to teach and transmit what he had awakened to. His teaching style features the praxis of Chan in routine activities like washing bowls and drinking tea.

<sup>6</sup> He was venerated as the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism in China. But the real formation of Chinese Chan Buddhism is attributed to Hui Neng, better known as the sixth patriarch. According to modern scholarship, however, Hui Neng appears to be a controversial figure.

<sup>7</sup> Since the Ming Dynasty, the dual practice of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism, represented by Huang2 Po2 Chan (in Japanese called Obaku Zen), has been the main tradition in most of the Chinese Buddhist monasteries. There are still some, though not many, Chan Monasteries that stick to the tradition of pure Chan, which is characterized by investigating Gong-An, watching the mind, or silent illumination. The Japanese and Korean Zen Monasteries claim to have better preserved the traditional style of Chinese Chan.

Cambridge Zen Center in Massachusetts, I found the community reading a Zhao Zhou Gong-an to wind up the evening services. Similarly, the Gateless Barrier Zen Center in California draws on the Zhao Zhou style.

Keeping these scenes from the Monastery's past in mind, let us now return to the present situation. The reform policy adopted in China from the late 1970s onwards sparked a revival of religious activity in China. During the three years since my first visit in 1992, I returned to the monastery two or three times annually. One of the yearly visits was a week long Living Chan Summer Camp (Sheng<sup>2</sup> Huo<sup>2</sup> Chan<sup>2</sup> Xia<sup>4</sup> Ling<sup>3</sup> Ying<sup>2</sup>) held primarily for collegiate youth. The monastery pioneered this kind of program in mainland China. This initiative by the abbot, the Venerable Jing<sup>4</sup> Hui<sup>4</sup>, who has been vice Chairman of China Buddhist Association (CBA) and editor-in-chief of the CBA's monthly journal *The Voice of Dharma* and a bi-monthly journal named *Chan*, was not only strongly supported by Zhao<sup>4</sup> Pu<sup>3</sup> Chu<sup>1</sup>, the late Chairman of the CBA, but was also widely acclaimed by the Buddhist community across the country and praised by the camp participants. From an applicant pool of one to two thousand, the enrollment of the Summer Camp was usually limited to 250, occasionally reaching 300. This year, the enrollment was limited to 150 to provide the possibility of having one-on-one exchanges between the collegiate campers and the monastics. I attended the first three Summer Camps between 1993 and 1995. Right before or in the midst of the yearly application, I was often consulted by other students hoping to take part in the summer camp. Most of them, having grown up with parents who had been indoctrinated with communist ideology, were not Buddhists. However, the younger generation had grown up during the period of reform, so they might have read Buddhist literature that was not harshly critical of, but instead neutral or appreciative towards Buddhism; they might have had some experience in practicing qigong (a Buddhism- or Taoism-based quasi-religious practice that aims more at health and wellness); or they might have just heard positive reports from fellow students who had gone to the summer camp. In a word, most of them were curious and tended to be sympathetic towards the spiritual cultivation that the perplexed and restless mind of the young generation is searching for.

What do the campers learn during this free week-long program? In a nutshell, they learn what the Venerable Jing Hui has advocated as Living Chan, a thoroughgoing application of Chan to all aspects of life. Living Chan is an echo to and extension of what the great master Tai<sup>4</sup> Xu<sup>1</sup> promoted in modern China as Humanistic Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> This 4- stanza free verse reveals what many feel is the essence of "Living Chan":

*Let the application of faith be rooted in your life.  
Let the practice of Chan concentrate on right-the- moment.  
Let the Buddhadharma<sup>9</sup> be assimilated to the world.  
Let the individual practitioner disperse into the community.*

The summer camp provides a simulated monastic experience for its participants. They get up at 4:30 a.m. and attend the morning religious service (chanting and devotional liturgy) from 5:00-6:00. After breakfast at 6:00, campers may be grouped together for cleaning and chores around the monastery. The highlight of the day is listening to dharma talks and lectures either by acclaimed monks, scholars or lay Buddhists, learning to sit in meditation and, alternatively,

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<sup>8</sup> Together with his contemporaries like Gunananda in Sri Lanka and Saku Seon in Japan, Tai Xu is cited by Donald Lopez, a professor of Buddhism at University of Wisconsin, as the Chinese representative in the formation of an international movement that has come to be termed "modern Buddhism". Humanistic Buddhism was advocated by Tai Xu and placed more emphasis and value of Buddhist cultivation on the present life as contrasted with life after death.

<sup>9</sup> Buddhadharma is a collective name for everything (teaching and practice) that relates to Buddhism.

touring places of Buddhist interest like Lin<sup>2</sup> Ji<sup>4</sup> (Rinzai) Monastery. The two-hour lunch break is long enough for a good nap. The routine afternoon service held from 4:30-5:30 p.m. includes a strong emphasis on “Pure Land” teaching, whose followers aspire to the rebirth in the land of bliss in the other world. The custom of integrated practice of Chan and Pure Land dated back to the Song Dynasty, particularly when Yong<sup>3</sup> Ming<sup>2</sup> Yan<sup>2</sup> Shou<sup>4</sup> (904-975) systematized the dual practice of Pure Land and Chan. Many Chan monasteries have since maintained by and large such a dual practice.<sup>10</sup> The afternoon service is followed by dinner at 6:00. At night, campers and monks sit in a circle in the openness of the monastery. In the glow of moonlight or aid of candlelight, the day ends with a question- and- answer session that highlights the communicative aspect of the week-long camping life.

## Part Two: The Layout

One of the most impressive innovations I observed during my sojourn in the summer was the expanded layout and ongoing construction of the Monastery. It is difficult to conceive of the Bai Lin monastery in its fullness without a sketch of its layout. I shall now devote this section to such a description.

Located in Zhao<sup>4</sup> Xian<sup>2</sup>, Hei<sup>2</sup> Bei<sup>3</sup> province, the monastery is easily accessible from Beijing. It takes about two and half hours by express train to get from Beijing to Shi<sup>2</sup> Jia<sup>1</sup> Zhuang<sup>1</sup>, the capital city of He Bei province. From Shi Jia Zhuang, public buses carry passengers to the monastery. Like most of the monasteries in China, the purple and yellow monastery consists of a plot of land of about six hectares. Its grandeur is unrivaled in America except perhaps the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and Hsi Lai Monastery in California<sup>11</sup>. In fact there are few monasteries even in China that can compare. Virtually all the funding for the renovation of the monastery came from institutional and individual donors from both within China and abroad.

The Chinese verses inscribed on walls and doors can overwhelm the viewer with the richness and representation of essential Buddhist doctrines. Flanking the main entrance of the monastery gate is the following couplet<sup>12</sup>:

*In the monastery is treasured the thousand-year-old stupa of Chan Master True Reality;<sup>13</sup>  
Across from the monastery gate rests the ten-thousand-li<sup>14</sup> Zhao Zhou Bridge.*

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<sup>10</sup> The dual practice of Chan and Pure Land was also transmitted to Japan in the Ming Dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> century) through Huang<sup>2</sup> Bo<sup>2</sup> Zong<sup>1</sup> or Hung Bo Chan (Japanese: Obaku Zen). The Rinzai and Soto Zen traditions in Japan, however, resisted integration with Pure Land practice, accusing the dual practice of degeneration. That is why current Japanese Zen appears to have inherited the purer and stricter form of early Chan/Zen style. But the married ordination and familial hereditary system of modern Japanese Buddhism are signs of overt corruption in the eyes of the Chinese Buddhists.

<sup>11</sup> The Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas (SCTTB) that consists of a number of temples is located in Talmage, California. The Venerable Xuan<sup>1</sup> Hua<sup>2</sup> from Northeastern China established it in 1976. He passed away about a decade ago. According to the *Buddhist Directory of America* published in 1998, SCTTB occupies a property of about 88 acres, with more than 70 buildings. It has 80-150 monastics and 150 lay followers in residence. Hsi Lai Monastery seems better known for its elegant architecture but may not have that many buildings and residents. Its affiliation is Fo<sup>2</sup> Guan<sup>1</sup> Shan<sup>1</sup> (literally Buddha Light Mountain) founded Master Xing<sup>1</sup> Yun<sup>2</sup> in Taiwan.

<sup>12</sup> Poetry (usually in the form of couplets) abounds in the monastery. Having enlightening and beautiful couplets posted or hung in a monastery and household is a cultural tradition in China.

<sup>13</sup> “True Reality,” “Zheng<sup>1</sup> Ji<sup>4</sup>” in Chinese, is the posthumous title conferred by the emperor upon Master Zhao Zhou.

<sup>14</sup> The li is a Chinese unit of measure, equal to approximately half a kilometer. The Zhao Zhou Bridge is of course not physically 5000 kilometers long. In his answer to the question, “who is Zhao Zhou?”, the Chan Master said that he was the bridge that allowed humans, horses, oxen and others to pass from this side of the river to the other. Taken

Entering the gate, you find yourself walking towards the Buddha Hall of Universal Light (elsewhere it is called the Treasure Hall of the Great Sage), which is the hall of the greatest importance where all of the formal Buddhist ceremonies are performed, both in the morning and in the evening. Next along the main axis of the monastery is the Hall of Guan1 Yin1, an area of the monastery most favored by lay followers. The Hall was built with the donation of a Buddhist entrepreneur in Hong Kong. The upper level of the two storied grand chamber serves as the library of Buddhist Scriptures and commentaries. This library is one of the best places to find resources for researching contemporary Chinese Buddhism. The Venerable Ming Hai once told me that this library has a unique collection of contemporary Buddhist documents and correspondences that survived the catastrophic Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. Passing the Guan Yin Hall, one encounters three houses adjacent to each other forming a unified mansion. On the left is the previously mentioned Huai Yun Lou. Under the door tablet of Turning the Wonderful Dharma Wheel is a couplet painted by Ben3 Huan4, a living Chan adept who also studied closely with Xu Yun:

*The Fragrance of the Zhao Zhou Tea Awakens One to his Nature of Mind;  
The Cypress Trees in the Yard Enlighten One with True Emptiness.*

On the right is Kai1 Shan1 Lou2, the house dedicated to the founder of the monastery, Chan Master Zhao Zhou. Many of the rare artifacts and treasures pertaining to the monastery or Xu Yun (for example, relics of his hair) are on display on the upper level of this house. Right in the middle of the trio-architecture is the Wu2 Men2 Ge2 (Gateless Chamber) that has served as the formal meditation hall for the monastics. The couplet flanking the gate reads:

*From the Gateless Chamber are Spawned Countless Aspirants to Awakening;  
In the Buddha Electing Hall are Numerous Meditation Practitioners Investigating.*

Fo2 Yuan2, another of Xu Yun's one-time chamberlain, is the writer of the couplet. He is abbot in Cao2 Xi3, the place with which Hui4 Neng2, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, was identified. Passing this trio one next encounters the monastery's ongoing construction complex. The core of this huge complex is the Ten-Thousand-Buddha Mansion. The first level is designed to be a multifunctional auditorium seating about 1000.<sup>15</sup> The upper level is to house ten thousand Buddha statues. Anyone who donates a minimum of 1000 RMB (approximately US\$120) in "patronage" for the manufacturing of the statues is said to be remembered and rewarded in one way or another for his or her merits. Flanking the core mansion are the Buddhist College on the left and the Retreat House with cabins for individuals to seek solace and meditate. These retreatants are completely cut off from the mundane affairs of the outside world and receive assistance for food and other necessities. They may also serve others in return when they finish the retreat, which varies from weeks to months, or even years.

In addition to the buildings described above, there are many rows of accessory chambers on either side of the main axis. The Yun2 Shi3 Lou2,<sup>16</sup> on the left when one enters the monastery

metaphorically, he is devoted for the remainder of life to take sentient beings across the river of the cycle of life and death to the beyond. So, this personified bridge is unusually long.

<sup>15</sup> The auditorium of its kind is probably second only to that in the Pu3 Shou4 Nunnery at Mount Wu3 Tai2. The Nunnery has some five hundred nuns in residence. Mount Wu Tai, the largest of the four Buddhist Mountains in China, is dotted with Buddhist monasteries, lamaseries and nunneries.

<sup>16</sup> "Yun Shui" literally means "cloud and water". The phrase compares monastic life to running water and the wafting cloud that cling to nothing.

gate, provides lodging for visitors as well as for resident monastics and lay people. Many of the guest rooms include a bathroom with shower, heating and air-conditioning that place the monastery among the best in China in terms of comfortable living conditions. Running parallel with this row of residential buildings is the temporary location of the He Bei Chan Research Institute and He Bei Buddhist College. Founded in the late 1990s, the Chan Research Institute is probably the earliest of its kind since the renaissance of Buddhism in China. It is staffed by full-time and part-time researchers, both monastics and lay followers, who are also practitioners of Chan. Lay researchers enjoy free room and board and in addition are granted a modest stipend. Besides research, the main function of the Research Institute is to publish Chan literature, both ancient and contemporary. Contemporary works include books as well as *Chan*. The works tend to be more practice-oriented. In recent years, the Research Institute has edited a highly academic journal called *Zhong1 Hua2 Chan2 Xue2 (Chinese Chan)*, which is published by the Zhong1 Hua2 Shu1 Ju2 (probably better known in the west as Chung1 Hua2 Publishing House). The college enrolls students every other year from monasteries across China. The tuition is waived and each student gets a stipend. According to Ming2 Yao2, an instructor at the college and executive editor of *Chan*, students seem to be overburdened, with about 26 hours of weekly course work in addition to the required participation in daily devotional services held early in the morning and late in the afternoon.

During my visit I was asked to give a talk to the students on “Buddhism in America --- A Harvard Perspective.” After the talk, the students raised many questions. Among them were: On the basis of what standards do Americans claim to be a Buddhist? Is there a course on the study of the *Platform Sutra* offered at Harvard? When was Buddhism first brought to America?<sup>17</sup>

Coming out of the Buddhist College Building, one sees the Reception House of Guests and Hall of Monastery-Protecting Guardians across from the College. The couplet on the front door of the Reception House reads,

*The Local Landscape of Nature is not to be Stained by One Particle of Dust;  
The Dharma Rains and Flowers Permeating the Space Attract Thousands of Followers.*

Buddhist monks, especially in the Mahayana tradition, are taught to guard against attachments while they are taught to serve sentient beings and lead them toward awakening. The above couplet reflects that seeming paradox that Buddhists are confronted with. Behind the Reception House complex is the Conference-for-the-Worthy Complex that includes a Dining Hall and its accessories. There is such a great variety of vegetarian food served there and it is usually so nicely prepared that I cannot help recalling it whenever I talk about monastery food in China. Believe it or not, virtually every one says that his or her appetite noticeably increases during the stay in the monastery.

### **Part Three: Eating and Chanting**

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<sup>17</sup> Most Americans know that to be a Buddhist he or she must take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. But there are a good number of Americans who claim to be practicing Buddhism without taking refuges. In my experience, many Americans see meditation as the main embodiment of Buddhism and the other two main components of Buddhism, precepts and wisdom, are somewhat neglected.

As far as I know, there is no separate course on the *Platform Sutra* taught at Harvard but it is certainly discussed in any course on the history of Chinese Buddhism.

The beginning of Buddhism in America can be dated back to the mid nineteenth century.

I arrived at the monastery on June 13, 2002. That night, I was received by the Venerable Ming<sup>2</sup> Hai<sup>3</sup>. Ming Hai, a graduate from Peking (Beijing) University, who tonsured as a Buddhist monk in 1992 following one year of teaching at a high school in Beijing, is now the acting head monk and chief administrator<sup>18</sup>. He is one of the four who had received the Lin Ji (Rinzai) dharma lineage transmission in 2000. In the evening, he and I awaited to pay tribute to the abbot Jing Hui in his residence, (a mansion called Huai<sup>2</sup> Yun<sup>2</sup> Lou<sup>2</sup>, meaning the building to commemorate Xu<sup>1</sup> Yun<sup>2</sup>, the foremost Chan Master in modern China. Jing Hui, now in his late 60s, had been the attendant of Xu Yun). A little before 7:00 pm I suddenly heard the abbot call my name from outside the mansion. Once we had exchanged formalities. When the formality was over, he said, “Would you like to come and join us in chanting the Hua<sup>2</sup> Yan<sup>2</sup> (Avatamsaka) Sutra? It can be an unusual and superb experience.” This 80-volume long sutra, a set of Buddhist holy verses, bases its systematic and abstruse philosophy on the mutual non-interference between phenomenon and principle (li<sup>3</sup> shi<sup>4</sup> wu<sup>2</sup> ai<sup>4</sup>), and non-interference among phenomena (shi<sup>4</sup> shi<sup>4</sup> wu<sup>2</sup> ai<sup>4</sup>) in the universe. D.T. Suzuki has asserted that the Hua Yan and Tian Tai schools of Chinese Buddhism may well challenge or rival any school of Western philosophy or theology in terms of profundity and subtlety.

Without hesitation, I followed the abbot and the Venerable Ming Hai to the hall, which is also where we ate. Westerners who have been to Buddhist monasteries in China know that the dining hall is typically divided into two sections, one facing the other. Each section consists of rows of narrow tables and benches that line up neatly so that waiters can pass dishes back and forth swiftly without disturbing diners who always eat silently and meditate on the “five contemplations,” such as “Have I accumulated enough merit to deserve this offering of food?”<sup>19</sup> Eating is believed to be an opportune moment for the practitioner to cultivate mindfulness. Asked how a Chan adept differs from a novice, a medieval Chan master responded: “Just eat while eating and just sleep while sleeping. No muddling of thoughts.” This is how adepts are categorically different from novices even though the former might appear very similar in living out their routine life. For one reason or another, very few, if any, of the Buddhist temples or centers in America that I have visited practice silent and contemplative eating except in retreat. Having lived in America for about two years, where “doing lunch or dinner with a friend” and “brown bag” or luncheon lecture series seem to be the most-favored social event, I realize it is probably wiser for a practicing Buddhist to have a meal with at least two friends at a time, for only this provides him or her with a chance to eat meditatively, comfortably and to communicate mindfully.<sup>20</sup>

From June through September, the monastery is on annual summer retreat, a practice that has been passed down as the “rainy season retreat” since Shakyamuni’s time in India. Sutra chanting was one of the routine activities during the retreat, with one volume recited each evening. The first night I was there we chanted volume 19 of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Hearing the chorus chanted by over 200 monastics and lay persons was indeed a wonderful experience of vibrant purification for me. Moreover, the opening and concluding liturgy seemed to transport me back to the performances of the Tang Dynasty when religion reached its highest point during the history of Chinese civilization. As for myself, I was amazed at how I could alternate between

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<sup>18</sup> A head monk called shou<sup>3</sup> zuo<sup>4</sup> is chief in terms of religious practice and rituals and a chief administrator or housemaster called jian<sup>1</sup> yuan<sup>4</sup> is chief of administration of a Buddhist monastery.

<sup>19</sup> The other four are: (1) how much we owe the people who bring food; (2) how we can restrain ourselves from eating too much; (3) we take the food as medicine, and (4) we eat the food to become enlightened.

<sup>20</sup> Obesity is said to be the national epidemic in USA. Is “doing lunch” indicative of the fast-paced life, another national epidemic that often contributes to an absence of mindfulness in our everyday life?

animated and spirited chanting. There are a few different factors that led me to be able to chant spiritedly. First, when I encountered passages or lines that touched me, the intensity of my chanting increased; I resonated with what the teachings described. Second, when I felt I immersed in the rhythmic beautiful echoes of the collective chanting, my chanting was made more spirited. The awareness of such echoes kept holding me in an elevated state of mindfulness. Whether elevated or not, everybody was perfectly sober. Indeed, chanting Sutras is a way to train oneself in the skills of attentiveness and mindfulness, for if you are absent-minded, the chant is not efficacious. Psychosomatically, chanting, like seated meditation, is believed to be beneficial, for it enhances the release of suppressed emotions and facilitates healthy metabolism.<sup>21</sup> It serves as a sort of antidote for monastics who devote much of their time to silent sitting and introspection. It may not be applicable to very active or athletic people though.

#### **Part Four: A Chronicle of 2001: Significance and Reflection**

The Chinese assimilation of Buddhism was completed around the ninth century. Buddhism was absorbed into Chinese culture without losing its spirit of the Mahayana tradition and as a result, Buddhism in China thereafter reached a zenith as it started to decline in India. The voluminous Chinese Buddhist canon speaks for itself. However, the past couple of hundred years have witnessed a gradual decline of Chinese Buddhism. When the Communists ascended to power in 1949, Buddhism, together with other religions, was almost annihilated. Thanks to the open and reform policy adopted since late 1970s, the revival of Buddhism along with other religions and diversified schools of thoughts have gradually been actualized. The revival continues. A glimpse at the list of major events of the Bai Lin Chan Monastery in 2001 may serve as a microcosm of how contemporary Buddhist temples are doing in China. Out of 46 events the monastery listed in its official chronicle of 2001, I selected the following:

1. March 13. Memorial assembly celebration of Avalokiteshvara's Birthday.
2. April 11. The abbot and the Chan Research Institute fellows outlined a plan for the publication of 8 works before the end of 2003.
3. April 27-30. Transmission of Bodhisattva precepts to 400 lay Buddhists; Buddha-Statue-Bathing ceremony (Vesak) conducted with about 1000 participants, over 300 of whom received the five precepts.
4. May 5. As the 45<sup>th</sup> Lin Ji (Lin Chih or Rinzai) dharma heir, the abbot, the Venerable Jing Hui transmitted for a second time the Lin Ji dharma lineage to six of his monastic disciples.
5. June 21. Resident monks traveled to the underdeveloped areas in the province to help the poor and needy. 120 primary and middle school students were awarded with scholarships covering one academic year's tuition.
6. July 20-26. The ninth Living Chan Collegiate Summer Camp was held.
7. August 31-September 28. Abbot Jing Hui visited France to promote Buddhism and thereafter attended the World Religion Conference on Human Rights held in Norway.
8. September 22-23. An entourage of twenty participants of Japanese tea ceremony participants came to the monastery to experience Chan and to demonstrate the tea ceremony.

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<sup>21</sup> Much has been written on the relation of meditation and healing and well-being. Among many others is Yasuo Yuasa's *The Body—Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, James Austin's *Zen and the Brain*, Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*. Meditation, Yoga, Tai Chi, acupuncture etc. have all been recognized by American National Institute of Health and other institutions as complementary and/or alternative medicine (CAM). The medical school at Harvard pays special attention to CAM.



9. October 5. Administrative Chief the Venerable Ming<sup>2</sup> Qi<sup>3</sup> and six graduates of the Buddhist College started a scripture-reading retreat.<sup>22</sup>
10. October 19. Ceremony held for the installation of the memorial commemorating Sino-Korean Friendship in Relation to Chan Master Zhao Zhou and his Initiation of Chan-Tea Unity. Both the Chinese and Koreans demonstrated a tea ceremony. Seminars followed, featuring the connections between Chan and tea.
11. October 25. German and American Chan practitioners paid a visit to the monastery and discussed the Gateless Gate Gong-An with the resident monks and the monastic students at the college as well as their experiences of introducing Chan to Europe and the USA.
12. October 27. In Beijing the abbot attended the China, Japan and Korea Buddhist Friendship and Exchange Convention.<sup>23</sup>
13. November 15. Chinese President Jiang Zeming and his retinue visited the monastery. After the tour within the monastery, he held a talk in the reception hall with the resident monks. He praised the profundity of Chinese Buddhism, encouraged the monastics to be patriotic and cherish the religion, praised the elegant environment and good management of the monastery. Before leaving, the president had a picture taken with the community in front of the Buddha Light Hall. The wife of the President of China, Wang Yeping visited the monastery in the afternoon of the same day.<sup>24</sup>
14. December 2-8. A group of Austrian businessmen came for a seven-day experience of meditation specially designed for business people.
15. December 11. A group of over 40 members of the Chinese National Congress came for a visit.
16. December 15. The monastery received a visiting entourage of some 40 ambassadors and their spouses from a diplomatic community of 21 European and Asian embassies in China.
17. December 16-January 5, 2002. The Annual Three-week Traditional Meditation Retreat.

What does this chronicle suggest about reinvigorated Buddhism in China? One major suggestion immediately springs up in my mind. The revival of the monastery and Buddhism in China represents the start of a possible new Buddhist heyday, as indicated by the attention it receives from both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, who are top political leaders and businessmen from home and abroad. The number of Buddhist followers who take at least three refuges in China today is estimated at 100 million.<sup>25</sup> Like many other senior masters, the Venerable Jing Hui alone has about 100,000 disciples, lay followers by far outnumbering the monastics. Internationally, the biggest ever delegation or group came to stay in the Bai Lin Monastery in May of 1999. The delegation, headed by Chan Master Thich Nhat Hanh, consisted of 180 pilgrims from 16 countries.

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<sup>22</sup> Ming Qi is also an adept of Tai Chi and is well known for his meditative cultivation in the monastery. A couple of years ago, he was appointed to manage the monastic life in the Yun<sup>2</sup> Ju<sup>1</sup> Monastery in Beijing. Yun Ju Monastery has the world famous Buddhist scriptures inscribed on stones so as to avoid destruction from the persecutions of Buddhists in the medieval China.

<sup>23</sup> The convention, representing the highest level of its kind, takes place every two to three years. Korea, Japan, and China take turns hosting it.

<sup>24</sup> An official presidential visit to a religious site like the one described had been unprecedented since Communists came to power in 1949. The President's wife is widely believed to be a practicing Buddhist with shrines built at her home. It was said that President Jiang had been advised by a senior Lama to visit either a Lamasery in Qing<sup>1</sup> Hai<sup>3</sup> province or the Bai Lin Chan Monastery in order to help heal his wife's illness. Jiang said during his talk with the resident monastic, that he was amazed at the healing power of meditation. He had apparently had a problem with bleeding in the stomach as a youth and was to his amazement healed following one month's meditation. Jiang's visits to senior Buddhist monks for divination was reported in the Kai Fang (Open) Journal, 2002, published in Hong Kong.

<sup>25</sup> An accurate figure is hard to get. While the central government's statistics put the number at about 60 million, practicing Buddhists estimate it to be over 200 million.

A sense of shame arises, however, when I visit English websites (mostly USA based) and find that very few of them reach out to Buddhism in mainland China. Most Americans that I have had a chance to talk to were very surprised to know that Buddhism (other religions as well) still exists and can be studied and practiced normally. The revival of Chinese Buddhism still has a long way to go if it wants to be known to Americans and Westerners in general. American Buddhists, if not the general public, may need to rethink their stereotyped or outdated perspective on contemporary Buddhism in China and experience the tradition anew. Chinese Buddhists, on the other hand, should shoulder their due responsibility to make the revival known to Westerners if the former have such an intention of international communication and exchange. It is disheartening to note that despite the increased number of Buddhist monastics coming to the USA, they and their temples or centers are largely limited to serving the Chinese community in places like Chinatown<sup>26</sup>. Very few of them are able and willing to communicate in English and thus cannot address American Buddhists, not to mention non-Buddhist Americans.

A similar sense of shame arose when I visited highly accredited intellectual Buddhist websites. I found that none of a dozen leading Buddhist programs at the graduate level in China's leading institutions of higher learning or research is listed under the corresponding category on the website. Without doing substantial surveys, I may risk making overgeneralization. With direct talks and other forms of communication with scores of scholars and students in the field of Buddhist studies, however, I have these speculations to posit: Is such a failure also due to Chinese scholars' failure to communicate in English with their counterparts in the US? Or, is it mainly due to the residual conception upheld by American and Western Buddhologists as well as average Americans that China is still far behind or even at a kind of religious "ground zero" in the aftermath of the Communists annihilation in the 1960s and 70s? Or could it even be partially due to the fact that American Buddhologists, though well trained in classical Chinese, may feel uncomfortable with the simplified Chinese characters that have been in use for over half a century and with pinyin which has been adopted by UN and leading US media to be the official way to spell mandarin Chinese?

According to Joseph Goldstein, America has at least one million Buddhist followers.<sup>27</sup> It seems that the majority of the million have a very faint, if at all, idea of the reviving Buddhism in mainland China (Tibetan Buddhism has received tremendous attention). Even many of my fellow graduate students at Harvard who specialize in the study of Chinese Buddhism, don't seem to be aware of the contemporary scene except for those who have traveled or lived in China and purposefully conducted surveys. If this article helps general readers in USA and American Buddhists in particular update their knowledge of Buddhism in China today, its primary purpose is fulfilled.

(The author is a second year graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, concentrating on Buddhist Studies and psychology. He was previously a faculty member at Beijing Second Institute of Foreign Languages.)

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<sup>26</sup> In the Chinatowns of New York City alone, there are about 35 monasteries of Chinese Buddhism with some 80 monastics in all.

<sup>27</sup> See a Buddhist journal called *Tricycle*, an issue with Joseph Goldstein article published in 2002 or 2001.