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yu fansi (Reform and self-examination
in modern Taiwanese Buddhism)*

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Taiwan jindai fojiao de biange yu fansi (Reform and self-examination in modern Taiwanese Buddhism). By Jiang Canteng (Chiang Tsan-t'eng). Taipei: Dongda, 2003. 400 pages. ISBN 9571925233. Price NT\$400.

A century ago, the average Taiwanese Buddhist did not look very far beyond the rituals necessary for rebirth in paradise. Monastic education was minimal and the clergy held a lowly position in society. Monks were little more than funeral specialists, and being a good Buddhist consisted mostly of burning incense and chanting. Since that time, Taiwanese Buddhism has been completely transformed. The quality of religious education is steadily rising. Nowadays many Taiwanese Buddhists consider it their religious duty to help the sick and save endangered species. The faithful staff hospitals, construct artificial wetlands, and recycle bottles and cans. This shift from mechanical ritual to activist compassion is a fascinating chapter in the history of modern Buddhism, and a new book in Chinese by Jiang Canteng (Chiang Tsan-t'eng) tells the story well.¹ In this study, Jiang traces the twentieth-century evolution of Taiwanese Buddhism by exploring the complex interaction of Japanese colonialism, Nationalist Party (KMT) authoritarianism, humanism, modernization, as well as purely native ideas and innovations. The result is a paradigmatic case study on how Buddhism evolves to suit changing times.

The peculiar history of modern Taiwan has decisively molded Buddhism's development on the island. During the Qing dynasty, Taiwan was a peripheral backwater mired in communal warfare and endless insurrection. Buddhism gained a tenuous foothold in this rough frontier, but monks and nuns were few, poor, and generally ignorant. The government ignored the troublesome island as best it could until foreign imperialists threatened to take it

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away from China. In the late nineteenth century Taiwan's mandarins finally undertook some progressive reforms to strengthen the island against foreign incursions, but their response was too little too late. In 1895 Japan bullied China into ceding them Formosa.

When Japanese troops marched in to claim their new colony, they found a large island rich in potential but with only the most rudimentary infrastructure. Roads were so poor that it was much easier to sail to mainland China than to travel overland from north to south. Japanese colonial officials were determined not only to modernize the island but also to introduce Japanese culture. Being modern and Japanese came to be seen as one and the same thing.

Colonialism stimulated the development of Taiwanese Buddhism while introducing Japanese ideas that both excited and confused the local *sangha*. After Japan annexed Taiwan, links between the two Buddhist communities immediately intensified. Japanese monks settled in Taiwan as missionaries and founded new organizations to carry out their work, while Taiwanese Buddhists began routinely traveling to Japan for advanced study. In comparison with Chinese Buddhism at the time, the intellectual level of religious education in Japan was extremely high, and so Japanese influence steadily elevated Taiwanese Buddhism in terms of intellectual sophistication.

Japanese monks were relatively secular, which caused some major cultural conflicts. Jiang cleverly uses the example of Lin Delin ("Taiwan's Martin Luther") to illustrate the tensions of secularization during the colonial era. Although Lin never studied in Japan, he adopted Japanese-style Buddhist customs at a time when most Taiwanese Buddhists still adhered to Chinese traditions. In particular, Lin's rejection of the strict Chinese *vinaya* in favor of looser Japanese monastic rules evoked enormous consternation. Unlike traditional Taiwanese clergy, Japanese monks could marry, eat meat, and raise children. The sight of Lin claiming to be a monk while ignoring the Chinese *vinaya* provoked a furious backlash. Confucian critics excoriated Lin and his supporters with a series of lurid anti-clerical stories describing the lascivious exploits of imaginary monks.

Besides secularization, the rise of "humanistic (*renjian*) Buddhism" was another important trend of the colonial era. Taiwanese reformers, impatient with traditional otherworldliness, gradually reoriented Buddhism toward the here and now. Of course humanistic Buddhism was not a purely Taiwanese phenomenon, nor was it solely attributable to colonialism. There were similar reform movements in both mainland China and Japan, and developments in each place affected the island. For example, humanistic Buddhists used the First East Asian Buddhist Conference held in Tokyo in 1921 as a high

profile forum for spreading their ideas, and their efforts were even more successful than anyone had anticipated. Inspired by these larger trends, humanistic Buddhists in Taiwan urged their followers to reject traditional “superstition” for rationalism, and they reimagined the Buddha as a human teacher rather than a remote deity. They also criticized withdrawal from the world and obsession with ritual. Instead of striving to be reborn in a future paradise, progressive Buddhists were determined to change this world into an earthly pure land. Masters Taixu and Yinshun were probably the most influential leaders of the Chinese humanist camp, and they were hugely successful in reorienting Taiwanese Buddhism toward more worldly concerns.

As communist troops swept over China in the late 1940s, some clergy fled to Taiwan for safety. In reconstituting their purely Chinese monasteries on the island, mainland monks exerted a powerful sinicizing influence on native Buddhists. After the Nationalist army retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the new KMT government undertook a deliberate program of decolonialization aimed at purging all Japanese influences. Taiwan’s people were now forced to learn Mandarin and adopt many mainland Chinese customs. This movement suddenly pushed Taiwanese Buddhism back to its Chinese roots. To rid the *sangha* of Japanese influence, the KMT undid much of the previous secularization and forced monks to conform to traditional Chinese monastic rules. Buddhist ritual and education were now conducted in Mandarin or Hokkien instead of Japanese, and major Buddhist activities were reorganized to emphasize their Chineseness. Overall, the campaign to make Taiwanese Buddhism completely Chinese was remarkably successful. Sinicizers also stressed ideas that were popular in mainland China in the 1940s, especially the Chinese version of humanistic Buddhism. In this way, monks from China such as the prominent Xingyun (Hsing Yun) accelerated humanist trends already present in Taiwan.

The career of the nun Ruxue reflects the impact of the decolonialization movement on Taiwanese Buddhism. Although she studied in Japan and followed Japanese-style Buddhism when young, after the arrival of the KMT she became an enthusiastic advocate of decolonialization and emphasized her nationalistic allegiance to a Chinese *dharma* lineage. By founding the influential Faguang Buddhist Culture Research Institute, she was instrumental in propagating a consciously Chinese version of humanistic Buddhism.

Ruxue’s influence brings up another theme that Jiang emphasizes—the importance of women in modern Taiwanese Buddhism. Perhaps nowhere else in the Buddhism *oikomene* are women as important as in Taiwan. Today nuns make up an unusually high proportion of the Taiwanese clergy,

and most Taiwanese seem to assume that nuns maintain higher standards of piety than monks. Women lead and staff numerous Buddhist organizations, most famously the Tzu Chi foundation led by the universally revered Master Zhengyan (Cheng Yen). The emergence of women as key players in Taiwanese Buddhism demands explanation. Jiang stresses the Japanese colonial regime's progressive stress on female education as one major reason. During the colonial era, nuns and pious laywomen began to study at Japanese universities. When they returned to Taiwan, their prestigious Japanese degrees allowed them to overcome traditional prejudices and become Buddhist leaders, setting an important precedent. After 1949, monks from mainland China saw the virtues of this system and allowed large numbers of women continued access to elite Buddhist education. In the KMT era, many Taiwanese women pursued advanced religious studies at universities in Japan, the West, and (after martial law was lifted) in Taiwan as well. The dynamism of women within the Taiwanese *sangha*, and their importance in pushing humanistic reforms, deserve close scrutiny by Buddhists throughout the world.

Political change was another major factor behind the transformation of Taiwanese Buddhism. The KMT, organized as a Leninist party, was not content with just political dictatorship. They also sought to control every major organization in society as well. To prevent Buddhism from developing into a force for political opposition, KMT cadres instituted rigorous controls. They formed an official Chinese Buddhist Association with wide-ranging powers. Besides undertaking decolonialization and sinicization, the KMT generally tried to repress large-scale religious activities, so Buddhists had no choice but to become relatively passive. Under the darkest decades of authoritarianism, Taiwanese Buddhism kept a low profile. In 1987 martial law was lifted and the political system quickly democratized, bringing with it complete religious freedom. The end of government control over religion unleashed enormous pent-up energy and Taiwanese Buddhism immediately exploded with vitality and creativity. Jiang's narrative does not deal with very much that happened beyond this point, leaving the reader with a sense that the story is far from completion. The flowering of Taiwanese Buddhism has only just begun, and the next few decades seem likely to bring the trends that Jiang describes to an apex of development.

Taiwan may be small, but it has a unique standing in the Buddhist world. The free atmosphere in Taiwan has made it into the current cynosure of Chinese Buddhism, so the humanistic values that have evolved there are bound to eventually have an enormous impact on Buddhism in mainland China. Somewhat contradictorily, the independence movement has also in-

fused some Buddhists with a spirit of Taiwanese nationalism, and they are now seeking to desinicize their practices and construct a uniquely Taiwanese style of Buddhism. The recent craze for Tibetan Buddhism seems partly inspired by a nationalistic repudiation of Chinese religious culture. Finally, it is notable how Taiwanese Buddhism has fused so seamlessly with mass media, pop culture, and capitalism. Buddhist beliefs are no longer confined to temples, but have infiltrated every aspect of everyday life—from television soap operas to rap music. Successful vegetarian restaurants, publishers, tea houses, and shops carrying Buddhist merchandise all demonstrate how capitalism can propel Buddhism in a modern society. Believers throughout the developed world should take note of this surprisingly successful amalgamation of traditional religion with modern life.

Jiang Canteng has written an extremely informative book that fills a major void in our understanding of the modern history of East Asian Buddhism. Because Jiang adheres to a school of Taiwanese historiography that stresses meticulous attention to original sources, his research is copiously documented. Critics have quibbled about minor points, such as the relative influence of various Buddhist leaders over the course of Taiwanese reformism, but overall the narrative that Jiang creates is very solid. Serious research into the history of Taiwanese Buddhism has only recently begun, so the future is likely to produce many more works that uncover equally absorbing chapters of Taiwan's rich religious history.