

Communities of Practice and the Buddhist Education Reforms of Early-Twentieth-Century China

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Over the course of only a few decades during the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, part of mainstream Buddhist education underwent a striking shift in China. From being a secluded practice within monastery walls taught by monastics for monastics with a strict focus on Buddhist scripture, it became one where monastics and laypeople study together, guided by teachers, both monastic and lay, studying a curriculum of both Buddhist and secular subjects. Although general reforms within the Buddhist community of the times received considerable scholarly attention, the topic of education development was discussed in only a few instances. Therefore, the present article sets out to explore why this radical methodological shift happened, and more concretely, how the individual learning trajectories of the reforms' leading actors, and their involvement in specific communities, influenced the way the reforms unfolded. The author analyses the work and life of three generations of Buddhist reformers, namely the layman Yang Wenhui, and the monastic masters Taixu, Hsing Yun and Cheng Yen, employing Étienne Wenger's social theory of learning. The theory's main assertion that communities of practice provide the main fora of learning for individuals, and its description of the concrete ways in which this learning takes place can provide new insights regarding the specific unfolding of late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century Buddhist education reforms in China.

Introduction

During the period analysed, China underwent numerous radical changes. Crucially, it transitioned from empire to republic

and then people's republic. These transitions were both the outcome of social and economic shifts, and the triggers of these, resulting in the complete reorganization of most aspects of the country over the course of a century. The religious arena too could not remain intact within this change. All religions in the country had to adapt to the new political, social and economic realities. This prompted theoretical innovation, as well as several changes on the practical side of religions, such as the institutional framework and the various forms of engagement with broader society. As one of the key areas of this engagement, the approach taken by religions to education saw substantial changes as well, which warrants a close analysis.

On general Buddhist reforms in late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century China, numerous analyses have been written, such as the seminal works of Kenneth Kua Sheng Chèn, Holmes Welch and Don A. Pittman (Chèn 1972; Welch 1968; Pittman 2001). Nevertheless, despite touching upon the topic of education, none of these works, or those with a narrower focus on individual monks of the period, have made educational reforms their explicit focus (Yao and Gombrich 2017; Kiely 2017; Goodell 2012). The few analyses that have addressed this

question in detail are Rongdao Lai's doctoral dissertation and 2017 article, along with Stefania Travagnin's 2017 article (Lai 2014, 2017; Travagnin 2017). Both authors provide indispensable insights regarding the connections between Buddhist education and nation-building in the Republic of China, and the question of a "Buddhist revival" during this period, respectively. Nevertheless, the leading reformers' individual journeys are not given central attention within these works, so the present analysis aims to augment existing research through a specific focus on the main figures of education reform, and how their own journeys of individual development and connections to particular communities enabled, necessitated and shaped the way of reform.

Additionally, from the point of view of the connections between learning and religion, the article aims to analyse how religion can be a site of learning in two distinct but intertwined ways, taking the educational reforms as a case study. First, it will engage in an analysis of how institutional education was reformed through three generations of Buddhist reformers, and how this reform affected the approach of new pupils to the central tenets of the religion. Second, it will turn to an aspect of the reforms that has not been analysed systematically so far, namely, how individual learning trajectories of the three generations of reformers enabled and guided the unfolding of the reforms. This double focus will provide insights into how learning within religious institutions can shape pupils' understanding of that religion, as well as how learning inside and outside a religion can influence the religious tradition itself.

The first aspect of the analysis has been researched in a few instances before, and the present article draws on the data of

earlier secondary sources (Pittman 2001; Welch 1968; Lai 2014). Nevertheless, the arc of the reforms stretching through three generations of reformers from the late nineteenth century to the mid and late twentieth century, from the initial reforms on a small scale to their maturing and global impact, has been less highlighted in earlier approaches. Additionally, the article places added emphasis on Master Taixu's reforms, and the theoretical underpinning of these reforms, where previously known biographical details are augmented by a close analysis of primary material in the form of Taixu's own theoretical writings on education, where English translations of his texts are presented by the author to enable the analysis.

As for the second part of the research, previous work has mostly focused on the structural reasons for Buddhist educational reform, such as the general modernisation of the education system, and the governmental push to prove the usefulness of religions in a modern environment (Travagnin 2017; Wei 2010). However, no research has made its central focus the individual journey of the three generations of reformers, and the effect of their experiences on the concrete unfolding of the reforms. Therefore, the second aspect of this analysis aims to provide new insights through such a focus. To accomplish this, it will make use of Étienne Wenger's social theory of learning (Wenger 1999, 2009), because its key insight that a person's whole life and existence is a trajectory of constant learning, both individual and social, can provide a much-needed framework to understand the effect of the individual life experiences of the reformers on the development of the reforms. Additionally, the present analysis can also enrich our understanding of the theory itself, since it demonstrates that it can be successfully used to describe

tendencies of individual journeys, as well as the unfolding of large-scale religious reforms over vast times and distances by locating communities of practice, and not only to describe the internal workings of a single community of practice, as done by Wenger in his initial presentation of the theory.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, a quick overview of the historical backdrop and the state of the Buddhist *sangha*, the monastic community, in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries is provided to situate the topic analysed within its larger context. Then, the main concepts of Wenger's theory are introduced, which are instrumental to the arguments of the article. Afterwards we turn to the central part of the analysis, where the way the work of the aforementioned four reformers drove education reform forward is elaborated on, using Wenger's concepts in this endeavour. This part will follow a chronological order, starting with Yang Wenhui and finishing with Master Cheng Yen. Nevertheless, given the special focus on the early twentieth century, added importance will be given to Master Taixu's work, since, as the analysis will show, he can be regarded as the central actor in this trans-generational reform process. Finally, some conclusions along the main lines of analysis are presented.

Historical background and the state of the *sangha*

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were turbulent years in China, during which not only education, but many other fields of society and politics saw dramatic changes. These changes were triggered by a series of wars and uprisings, starting with the First Opium War in 1839, as well as the societal and political changes they brought about, such as the transi-

tion from the Qing Empire to the Republic of China, with its subsequent periods of infighting and unity (Fairbank 1989).¹ Besides the chaotic events of wars and uprisings, however, the time also became one of intellectual flourishing, as the best minds of the country responded to an influx of Western ideas, and aimed to chart a new way for China's development (Tay 2010; Murthy 2011). The two opium wars opened up China to trade with Western countries, and granted land and extra-territorial privileges to the representatives of those countries, and thus enabled an unprecedented influx of Western missionaries and scholars; these brought with them the latest scientific discoveries and ideas, which triggered local elites to respond to them in relation to their own intellectual heritage (Zhou and Zhao 2022; Chi 2019; Ye 2002). As we will witness later, this enabled several radical reforms of the time, including within the field of Buddhist education.

Another significant factor behind Buddhist education reforms of the time was the state of the Buddhist community within which it happened. The valid understanding of this issue is surrounded by intense academic debate. One group depicts a *sangha* in serious disrepair, where even the basic literacy of monks can be questioned, and thus the early twentieth century had to bring about an unprecedented revival to ensure the survival of the community (Chèn 1972; Welch 1968). Others question the notion of revival, as well as the level of deterioration of the late-nineteenth-century *sangha* (Travagnin 2017). Nevertheless, one conclusion can be drawn that high-level monastic education was

1 For more details regarding the specific reforms that took place in early-twentieth-century China, see the seminal work of Colin Mackerras (2014).

concentrated in a small number of leading monasteries, while large numbers of the monastic community sustained their livelihood as wandering monks or performing funerary rites while residing in hereditary temples (Pittman 2001). Therefore, education reform within the community could be validated in the eyes of numerous practitioners, even if not all of them.

Theoretical framework

As highlighted within the introduction, to analyse the individual journeys of the reformers, the article will draw upon Étienne Wenger's social theory of learning, since it provides a promising framework to understand how the examined reformers' life experiences enabled their modernising actions. The theory's main proposition is that learning at its essence is not an individual process in separation from the rest of society, as in a school, but a fundamentally social project, where the individual learns through interacting with others, and both the community and the individual are taking shape through these learnings.

Certainly, since the publishing of Wenger's seminal *Communities of Practice* in 1999, the tenet of learning as a social process has become widely accepted. Nevertheless, specific details of Wenger's approach, through which he elaborates his grand theory, are less widely discussed, and these details can provide key insights for the present research. Therefore, this section introduces the central relevant concepts to lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

The theory's key concept is the *community of practice*. Communities of practice are the central fora of learning in Wenger's understanding, and they are defined by three main characteristics. First, they involve *mutual engagement* between participants, which means that members of

the community interact with each other. These interactions can take place in the same physical space, or at large distances, and they can be supportive or conflictual, but what is crucial is that interactions happen between members. The nature of relationships between members, such as the hierarchical or horizontal, is not central to the theory. Either type may or may not be found in a particular community of practice. A family, where parents may have more say in certain decisions than children, can be considered a community of practice just as much as a group of paper-plane enthusiasts who meet regularly on a completely equal footing (Wenger 1999, 73–77). The second key feature of a community of practice is the *joint enterprise* that lies at the heart of their activities together. Joint enterprise is also a broadly defined term. Selling a specific number of new products can be part of the joint enterprise of a sales team at a company, though only part of it, since, as Wenger demonstrates in his analysis of health claims processors, establishing a habitable work environment, maintaining good personal relationships and helping each other with problems are all parts of the larger enterprise of making work and life as a salesperson or claims processor possible. Similarly, maintaining the existence of a family and its individual members is regarded as a perfectly valid enterprise by Wenger. It organises the actions of the family, and renders its members accountable to each other, be it earning a salary or taking out the trash. And even a joint decision to go to the zoo instead of the cinema can be part of negotiating that enterprise, since it maintains the coherence and continued existence of the family (Wenger 1999, 77–82). Finally, the third constitutive aspect of a community of practice is the *shared repertoire*. This involves the concrete tools with which

a job is executed, such as computer programs or claim forms, but also the norms of behaviour within the community, and the ways in which events of the world are interpreted and acted upon, for example within a family. As with mutual engagement, different levels of access to the repertoire or influence over defining the ways of understanding are incorporated within the concept. Newcomers to a company might not have access to all features of a company software, which long-time workers have, yet, in their current newcomer status they are regarded as valid members of the community of practice (Wenger 1999, 82–84). Additionally, a terminological issue needs to be highlighted here. Throughout the article, communities of practice will mostly be referred to by using the whole expression, but occasionally to prevent cumbersome reading, the word community on its own will be used equivalently. Nevertheless, in such instances the distinction from the everyday usage of the word, such as in “the Buddhist community”, will be clear.

The second point to note is that a single person usually belongs to multiple communities, and that the borders between different communities of practice can be traversed. Modes of crossing borders can be joining or leaving a community, but also being simultaneously involved in multiple communities and acting as an interlocutor between them. Moreover, objects and ideas can also traverse community boundaries, even over substantial distances in time and space (Wenger 1999, 103–18, 158–61). Both such crossings will be significant for the present analysis.

Third, in terms of an individual’s engagement with the world, Wenger introduces two key terms, *participation* and *reification*. Participation is the direct engagement with the world, for example having a discussion with someone, or taking part in a

community event. Reification, on the other hand, is understood as leaving an imprint in the world through *objectifying* an understanding, goal or desire, or the *object* itself. Examples of reification would be writing a book, designing a computer program or putting forward a political slogan, along with the book, the program and the slogan themselves. The attributes of participation are mutual engagement, versatility and momentariness, whereas the attributes of reification are stability, long-term presence and the focusing of events around them. In all events, they appear together, and mutually construe them (Wenger 1999, 55–65). Beyond the idea of social learning, these terms and concepts can help us to understand the reformers’ lives and their connections to the reforms coherently, as the subsequent sections will demonstrate.

Yang Wenhui and communities of practice

The ideal starting figure to analyse late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century Buddhist education reforms is the layman Yang Wenhui (楊文會 1837–1911). Regarded from the point of view of communities of practice, it immediately becomes apparent why he was able to exert a profound impact on the contemporary Buddhist community. Yang was born into an elite Confucian family, where both his father and grandfather were high-ranking officials of the Qing court. Thus, his first community of practice, his family, had its meaning and repertoire anchored in Confucian ideas and practice, where learning and education play a fundamental role. Then, his first important crossing of communities of practice relating to Buddhism happened when he picked up a Buddhist book, the *Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* (大乘起信論), at a roadside bookstore at the age of 25 (Welch 1968, 2–3). Although the exact origin of the text is debated, from the theory’s point of view,

it was a reification of numerous central ideas of, most likely, a community of practice of translators of Indic Buddhist texts in China around the sixth century, which in this form managed to reach Yang several centuries later. And, as Wenger postulates, this reification started to focus events around it.

However, to properly negotiate its meaning, Yang would have needed to engage with Buddhist practice as well, to balance the shortcomings of reification. But at the time he found the book, he had to take care of his extended family, including wife, child and parents, so, having been brought up in a strongly Confucian environment, he could not choose to join the Buddhist *sangha*. Therefore, he remained outside a community of practice, which would have offered an enterprise closest to his own endeavours. Where he found his first community of practice related to Buddhism was in the city of Nanjing in 1866, where he joined a group of lay Buddhists active in the city. Joining a community of practice also meant joining a history of the practice and making use of the joint repertoire available for participants. One of the central modes in which laypeople contributed to the Buddhist cause historically in China was through funding the copying of *sutras*. Drawing on this tool, the community of Yang established the Jinling Sutra Publishing House (金陵刻經處) right away in 1866 (Welch 1968, 3–4).

Afterwards, the next significant crossing of communities of practice for Yang happened when he became part of the Qing diplomatic mission to the United Kingdom, and so was posted to London in 1878. Here, he experienced a new type of contact with other communities of practice, namely immersion, which according to Wenger is a highly efficient way of learning (Wenger 1999, 112–13). In relation to Buddhism,



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Yang Wenhui in China at the end of the nineteenth century.

Yang immersed himself in British academic life, and particularly in Max Müller's (1823–1900) communities of practice, which had the scholarly research of Buddhism as their central enterprise. Additionally, in these communities, he also encountered another “broker” (p. 105), someone who crosses communities of practice, the Japanese Buddhist priest and scholar Nanjō Bun'yū (南条文雄 1849–1927), who also opened a window for him onto Japanese Buddhist communities of practice. This connection among others also propelled his *sutra*-printing endeavour to unexpected heights, since he could acquire hundreds of *sutras* from Japan, which were already lost in China, contributing to the injection of new reified ideas into the Chinese system (Ch'en 1972, 1:448–49; Welch 1968, 4).

Finally, the step which made Yang most relevant to the present analysis is that

he founded a special school in 1908, the Jetavana Hermitage in Nanjing, where half of the students were monks and the other half laypeople, and similarly the teachers also featured both monastic and lay lecturers, along with the dual Buddhist–secular focus of the curricula (Welch 1968, 10–14). The school used a repertoire markedly different from that of any other community of practice at the time, be it among the monastic *sangha*, or lay educators, so it is no wonder that it only existed for one year, given the lack of funds. However, from the viewpoint of Yang’s identity and personal history, its founding was completely reasonable. As Wenger highlights in his theory, despite the complex internal life of communities of practice, their embeddedness in larger structures and the influence of these cannot be neglected in the course of analysis (Wenger 1999, 161–63). The larger structure in Yang’s case was the general push to modernise China through education, which started during the late years of the Qing empire, and accelerated after the transition to the Republic of China. As Wenger explains, one of the ways of reacting to larger structures is alignment, where one takes part in a larger structure by joining in its endeavours, even if one does not have the capacity to change these endeavours (pp. 178–81). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the Hermitage did not fit into the practice of any existing community of practice at the time, which can scarcely be wondered at, given Yang’s special ‘multi-membership’ background (p. 158). Therefore, the founding of the school, which operated on Yang’s personal estates, can very well be understood as an attempt to establish a new community of practice that would fit into the meaning of Yang’s personal identity and harmonise with his complex history of learning.

As highlighted above, the new community of practice was only successful for a short time, for financial reasons, but also because Yang himself passed away not long after the inaugural class graduated, and the members of the class pursued their own learning trajectories apart from each other. Nevertheless, the members of the first class became the next generation of reformers after Yang, who, having started their own learning experience in such a special mixed institution, carried the reforms further in a more hospitable environment and established their own communities of practice. One of the most significant students of that first class was Master Taixu (太虛大師 1890–1947), who championed education reforms.

Master Taixu and the communities of practice

First communities

In the large-scale reforms of Buddhist education during the period examined, Master Taixu played probably the most significant role. As the subsequent part of this section will demonstrate, he underwent a strikingly diverse and strenuous learning process, which resulted in a new perception of what it means to be a Buddhist monastic or layperson, and on this basis, how new types of Buddhist communities of practice should be organised.

Master Taixu was born in the eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang (浙江), which was one of the traditional centres of Chinese Buddhism. His grandmother, who raised him, was, moreover, a pious Buddhist, who took the young Taixu on numerous pilgrimages to the significant monasteries of the region. Therefore, Taixu’s family, his initial community of practice, was one imbued with traditional Buddhist ideas and practice. Hence, his decision to get tonsured fitted well into the learning he



Master Taixu in London during his year-long journey to the West, 1929.

acquired up to the age of fourteen, when he made this choice (Pittman 2001, 63–65). Given the region where he started his monastic journey, he lived within monastery compounds and received the traditional form of teaching, where a *sutra* was expounded by a leading monk and then the pupils reflected upon the sermon with the help of more advanced peers.

Nevertheless, Taixu's traditional upbringing was quickly disrupted after a few monastic years, as, following the usual practice of moving between monasteries to learn from specific famous masters, he arrived at the monastery of Master Jingan (釋敬安 1851–1912), which was at the heart of discussions about potential reforms of Chinese Buddhism. Therefore, both the enterprise and the repertoire of the local community of practice at the monastery was defined differently from Taixu's previous communities. Besides Buddhist

sutras, he received the works of Kang Youwei (康有為 1858–1927), Liang Qichao (梁啟超 1873–1929) and Zhang Taiyan (章太炎 1869–1936) to read, who were the most significant Chinese reformers of the time, aiming to harmonise Western and traditional Chinese ideas in the service of Chinese modernisation (Jiang 2002; Wei 2010; Pacey 2014). Additionally, he also met the monk Qiyun, who was by then a member of Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui (同盟會), a markedly different community of practice, the central enterprise of which was to overthrow the Qing government (Welch 1968, 15–16). These novel influences within the new community of practice directed Taixu's own sense of meaning, and trajectory of learning, into a starkly new direction.

This new direction clearly materialised in Taixu's decision in 1909, when instead of going to the Jin Shan Monastery (金山寺), a famous meditation centre, he chose to join Yang Wenhui's Jetavana Hermitage, which would inevitably place him on the road of reforms and modernisation (Pittman 2001, 70). As discussed in the previous section, classes in the Hermitage only lasted for a single year, but that was enough to provide a new, markedly reformist community of practice for Taixu. In this community, the enterprise was clearly defined as modernising Chinese Buddhism, and mutual engagement was quite possible since all students and most teachers lived on the same estate, and had classes every day, and finally the repertoire was shared by participants in terms of the curricula learnt and methods used. This toolkit provided a clear novelty for Taixu, which he maintained even in the schools he established later.

In 1910, Taixu joined the next community of practice to crucially influence his learning trajectory and approach to the world, as he became head monk

(住持) of a temple near Guangzhou in the south of China. At this time, Guangzhou was one of the major centres of anti-Qing revolutionary activity, and thus hosted numerous anarchist and socialist activists. According to Pittman (2001, 72), Taixu joined the community of renowned revolutionaries here, with whom he read the works of Karl Marx (1818–83), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) and Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76), among others. In this community of practice, the political reform of China was the clear enterprise, engagement among its members regular, and the repertoire clearly defined, involving the works of the above authors. Again, as in the case of Yang Wenhui picking up a Buddhist book, reifications of distant communities of practice arrived with Taixu's group in Guangzhou, where they were engaged through practice by group members, and thus significantly influenced their enterprise and meaning given to the world.

Communities in conflict

The communities of practice in which Taixu was involved were certainly not the only ones active within the Buddhist community at this time. It became abundantly clear early on in Taixu's career that other communities focused on different enterprises, or at least postulated different ways to achieving them. Having been closely involved in many communities of practice which aimed to overthrow the Qing government, and prompt China's progress through a radical political change, it is no wonder that Taixu's approach to the reform of Chinese Buddhism turned out to be similarly radical. In 1912, just one year after the successful Wuchang revolt, which overthrew the Qing regime, Taixu attempted a similarly radical move within the Buddhist community. Together with the monk Renshan, a fellow classmate at

Yang's Jetavana Hermitage, they founded an Association for the Advancement of Buddhism (佛教協進會), which was supposed to be a society promoting reforms within the Buddhist community to make it compatible with modern society. The first action, which they took, however, was to organise a conference in the most famous meditation centre of the region, the monastery of Jin Shan (金山寺), where Taixu had opted not to study a few years earlier, and at the very night of the conference claim right to its leadership, and announce its reorganisation as their Association's headquarters and a modern type of monastic school. Despite the support what their project gained from reformist attendees, the previous leaders and resident monks of the monastery saw their act as an outright attack against essential Buddhist practice and the monastic community to the point that the conflict resulted in physical violence, after which numerous monks were imprisoned, and the operation of Jin Shan monastery temporarily suspended (Pittman 2001, 74–77).

This event had a dual effect on Taixu's career. First, it brought him nationwide fame, and the reputation of a radical reformist, through which part of the monastic community became his ardent supporter, but the other, larger, part came to regard him with constant suspicion, and prevented him from assuming nationwide leadership positions within the *sangha* throughout his career. And second, it provided a useful opportunity for him to learn that he would not be able to completely change the Buddhist community in a swift and radical manner, so different methods would be needed.

After the Jin Shan incident, however, the external environment for the reform of Buddhism continued to deteriorate. The Republic of China entered years of turmoil

as the president and parliament struggled for power, Buddhist property continued to be appropriated by warring parties, and the First World War broke out in Europe.

If we regard Taixu's development of identity from the point of view of Wenger's theory at this point, it can be asserted that his meaning was clearly defined as reforming Chinese Buddhism both to ensure its survival in a modern China, and to enable it to treat the illnesses of contemporary society. Turmoil in China and the world, along with the failure of Taixu's modernising actions up to that point, forced him to engage in focused individual learning, for which he chose to enter self-confinement in the monastery of Putuo Shan (普陀山) for three years, where he also started to outline his views on education, and education reform.

Taixu's educational teachings

Following the biographical sections detailing the ways in which different communities of practice and transferring between them influenced the actions and individual learning trajectories of the reformers, Yang Wenhui and Taixu, it is now time to turn to the concrete ideas they developed, which led to the reformed education system at the heart of this article's inquiry. The focus here is on Master Taixu's approach to the topic, since he wrote most extensively about it, and had a significantly wider effect than Yang Wenhui. As this section will demonstrate, Taixu's theoretical writings clearly show the influence of both the traditional Buddhist and secular Western sources with which he became acquainted during his initial period of contact with various communities of practice.

The subsequent part of this section will discuss Taixu's view on education based on his speeches and writings compiled in his Collected Works (太虛大師全書) under

the heading "Education" (教育). The particular excerpts were selected given their ability to enlighten specific parts of Taixu's theory, and translated by the author.

First, what is the aim of education? For traditional Buddhist education the aim was clearly to attain enlightenment, and the role of education was to enable this to take place. For Taixu, however, the aim is much more focused on the present life and the world.

教育者何?成人對於未成人,因其可能性而長養暢達之,俾自成爲群化中自立自治自由人之道術也。What is education? Adults provide it to non-adults, because of the probability that they can be smoothly nurtured into becoming independent, self-governing and free parts of the community. (Taixu and Yinshun 2005, 1335)

As he further elaborates his view, both traditional Buddhist and modern ideas appear in his argumentation. He differentiates between a broad and a narrow understanding of education.

廣義者,則始乎童子,終乎爲聖人,天見其明,地見其光,聖人貴其全自立自治自由之極詣;權利不能傾,群衆不能移,物境不能蕩,生死不能奪,夫是之謂德操。As for the broad meaning, it starts at childhood and concludes when one becomes a sage. Heaven sees their brightness, earth sees their rays. The value of sages lies in their utmost attainment of independence, self-governance and freedom. Their power cannot wane, the masses cannot move them, external circumstances cannot disturb them, and birth and death [*samsāra*] cannot snatch them. This can truly be called virtuous conduct. (Taixu and Yinshun 2005, 1335)

Here, Taixu does not mention enlightenment (覺) as such, but situates the aim of education in a markedly Buddhist context beyond a single lifetime, invoking the approval of heaven and earth, and the superseding of *samsāra*, the continuous cycle of birth and death. However, the description of the narrow understanding is highly practical again.

其狹義者，可依年程學程而定，或分人生為三時：二十五歲前為儲能時。二十六歲至五十歲為效實時... 進五十歲為息機時。As for the narrow meaning, it can be determined based on age and the learning journey, or by dividing human life into three periods: before 25 years is the time of building up capabilities; between 26 and 50 years is the time of exerting influence, ... 50 years and after is the time to take rest. (Taixu and Yinshun 2005, 1335)

This understanding has its focus on the present life, and how to organise it in order to be able to fully realise one's capabilities.

Hence, based on the above quotations, education for Taixu has two fundamental goals. One, to achieve the heights of virtue and become a sage, and second, to achieve this while acting in the world, and becoming "independent, self-governing and free parts of the community". At first sight it may well seem odd why a Buddhist monk would choose especially these three attributes as central virtues and goals of education. However, if we consider Taixu's initial communities of practice, it becomes completely logical. Given his part in the anarchist community in Guangzhou, and his remarks connecting anarchism and Buddhism, such as stating that the "political perspectives of anarchism and Buddhism are very close" (Pittman 2001, 81), it seems

proper that independence, self-governance and freedom would feature prominently among his key virtues (Pittman 2001, 81). Additionally, these three attributes can easily be placed in parallel with Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (三民主義), namely self-determination, [governance] right of the people, and livelihood of the people (民族, 民權, 民生), to which Taixu received access through his friends in Sun's Tongmenghui.

Following the aim of education, the next crucial question is what the content of education shall be. Traditionally, in a Buddhist monastic context, the content was clearly defined as the *sutras* and their commentaries written over past centuries. Additionally, in a markedly Confucian Chinese environment, the ideas and deeds of forerunners were given central importance. Taixu's approach, however, is quite the contrary: "故歷史教育主義，有空名，無實義。Therefore, historical educational doctrines are only empty names; they do not have substantial meaning" (Taixu and Yinshun 2005, 1337). Thus, as he explains later on, one cannot completely take any earlier theory or method of education over to the present time, but must weigh its utility and adopt the useful aspects while discarding the irrelevant ones. Here again, the presence of both Buddhist and Western influence can be detected. On the one hand, the formulation is characteristically Buddhist, especially Mahāyāna, with its focus on emptiness (空, *śūnyatā*), and the lack of inherent substance of things. Moreover, the concept of *upāya* or expedient means is also present through the idea of using the best possible and available means to convey the Buddha's truth to the audience at hand. However, on the other hand, it also shows the influence of the Western idea of evolution, that it is possible for later ideas or developments to be

better than old ones. In his text on education Taixu quotes Thomas Henry Huxley's (1825–95) treatise on evolution numerous times; this had just been translated into Chinese, so the presence of the idea is not surprising. Additionally, from Western authors, he also quotes Maria Montessori (1870–1952), which demonstrates his interest in and knowledge of Western theories of education in relation to his pursuit of modernising Buddhist education in China.

Thus, to conclude this section, it can be seen from the quoted passages of Taixu that he aimed to rethink Buddhist education, starting from its very foundation, and make use of all theories available to him through his engagement in various communities of practice to develop a method to educate modern monks for a modern China. But it is worth asking to what degree he was able to put his theory into practice; the next section will attempt to answer this.

Taixu's communities of practice

As mentioned earlier, the drawbacks of the Jin Shan incident prompted Taixu to adopt a more cautious and pragmatic approach to his plan to reform the Buddhist community of China. Hence, after his exit from self-confinement in 1917, he did not launch monastic schools from the outset. Drawing on the example of Yang Wenhui, however, he aimed to establish communities of practice, which would place his enterprise of modernising Chinese Buddhism at their core and use a repertoire which to a large degree he would fashion himself. Thus, in 1918 he established the Bodhi Society (覺社) in Shanghai. As he himself put it, its aim was to “publish research, edit collected works, sponsor lectures on Buddhism, and encourage religious cultivation” (Pittman 2001, 91). But on a more fundamental level, it also served to gather followers supportive of his reforms.

The next step in this project was to establish the Society's journal, the “Sound of the Sea Tide” (海潮音), as a monthly periodical. The journal published both religious instruction and Taixu's plans for institutional reform, and in a short while became the most read Buddhist periodical of the time. Through the journal, Taixu managed to establish a substantial circle of followers, which enabled him to found a new organisation and along with it his first modern school (DeVido 2009, 431–34).

In 1922, he founded the Right Faith Buddhist Society of Hankou (漢口佛教正信會), and established the Wuchang Buddhist Institute (武昌佛學院), his model school (Chen 1972, 1:456–57). Pittman provides an accurate description of the school:

Taixu's seminary in Wuchang became a pioneer in Buddhist education. The school adopted the western educational format of lecture and discussion classes. It employed monastic and lay instructors, provided blackboards for use by teachers and students, and required academic course work not only in Buddhist studies and languages but in secular subjects, such as history, literature, and psychology, as well. Its excellent library was renowned for a collection that eventually included more than forty thousand books. Because of the success of Taixu's innovations, the Wuchang Buddhist Institute gained recognition as an educational model for Buddhist seminaries throughout China. (Pittman 2001, 97–98)

Thus, as the quotation shows, Taixu finally succeeded in establishing a new type of Buddhist school, which drew inspiration from Yang's Jetavana Hermitage,

but developed it further in several ways, including the use of blackboards and a significantly broader secular curriculum. As Pittman also highlighted, the Wuchang Buddhist Institute became a model for schools throughout the country. Over the following decades, Taixu himself founded several other seminaries in various parts of the country, which quickly attracted students.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, after the Jin Shan incident a large part of the Buddhist *sangha* distanced itself from Taixu and all his projects, so despite the popularity of Taixu's schools among progressive members of the community, numerous leading monastics even forbade their students to attend any of these seminaries. Additionally, they constantly prevented Taixu from assuming leading positions in nationwide Buddhist organisations, so his attempt to form numerous strong communities of practice focused on his understanding of modernising Buddhism could only achieve a limited impact during his lifetime. This sustained disapproval, and the continuous political and economic turmoil which came to define the Republican period, prevented most of Taixu's schools from being long-lived. Some functioned for a year, some longer, but even the Wuchang Buddhist Institute itself had to cease operation after one and a half decades (Welch 1968, 33–50, 110–14).

Therefore, despite the ground-breaking reforms which he instituted within the Buddhist community, Taixu ultimately felt unsuccessful at the end of his career, since a majority of the *sangha* did not follow the path he outlined for Buddhist reform. Wenger's theory can provide a convincing explanation for this result. Taixu's approach to Buddhist reforms was shaped fundamentally by specific radical communities of practice, which made use of repertoires

completely alien to traditional Chinese Buddhist thinking, and thus to the learning trajectories of most contemporary monks. His path of encountering most reformist monks of his time at an early age, and joining radical anarchist groups in his youth, which provided him with reifications of other communities of practice as distant as Russian or French anarchists, proved to be unique and difficult to follow. Indeed, in his endeavour to establish a “Buddhism among the people”² (人間佛教) and focus the religion on the present life, he even stopped meditating at one point in his life, since he felt that it distanced him too much from the concerns of everyday life. With meditation practice at the heart of most Chinese Buddhist schools, it is no wonder that many monks viewed Taixu's work with suspicion.

However, as in the case of Yang Wenhui, even if Taixu could not convince most of his contemporaries to follow his ideas, the next generation of monastic reformers were fundamentally influenced by his teachings. They pursued their learning journeys in communities of practice centred around the enterprise of Buddhist reform as understood by Taixu, and thus were able to develop and realise Taixu's ideas on a significantly larger scale. The following section will provide examples of these successes.

Hsing Yun, Cheng Yen and their communities of practice

Among Taixu's numerous disciples, the present analysis will focus on the work and life of just two of them, since they exerted and exert the most significant influence in

- 2 “Buddhism among the people” is the author's proposed English translation for the Chinese term 人間佛教, which in his view conveys its meaning more clearly than earlier renditions such as “humanistic Buddhism”.



Master Hsing Yun speaking at an International Buddhist Progress Society meeting in Hong Kong, 2009.

the contemporary sphere of Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhism.

Master Hsing Yun (星雲大師 1927–2023) can be regarded as a direct disciple of Taixu, since his teachers were pupils of Taixu, and he himself had the opportunity to attend some of Taixu’s lectures in person (Yao and Gombrich 2017, 8–10). Thus, the communities of practice in which he grew up were completely centred around Taixu’s teachings and interpretation of Buddhism, and the reform it needed to go through. Therefore, it seems logical that his own teachings were direct continuations of those of Taixu.

Hsing Yun propagated “Buddhism among the people” (人間佛教) as put forward by Taixu (Long 2000). He claimed that Buddhism has strong relevance for the present life, and its prominent goal is to improve people’s lives. He encouraged the

teaching and dissemination of Buddhist knowledge, as well as social action. During his life, he founded many schools, as well as Buddhist universities, taking the modernisation of Buddhist education several steps forward (Yun 2010, ix–xi; Chi-Ying and Fu 2004; Kimball 2000). He also founded orphanages and homes for the elderly, and instituted prison visits and drug rehabilitation programmes.

He did not achieve all this on his own. Following the example of his masters, he established many communities of practice, the enterprise of which was defined on the basis of his understanding of modern Buddhism. These communities eventually grew into a gigantic organisation, incorporating countless communities of practice in different localities. During the last half-century, his organisation, the Fo Guang Shan (佛光山 Buddha Light Mountain) has become one of the most significant social actors in Taiwan, with over 200 branches around the world, and several universities, including one, the University of the West, in the United States (“Fo Guang Shan Monastery Worldwide Web” n.d.; “About University of the West | University of the West” n.d.).

Master Cheng Yen (證嚴法師 1937–) proved to be just as successful in her modernising and community-building endeavour as Master Hsing Yun. A second-generation disciple of Taixu, Cheng Yen became another of the Four Heavenly Kings of Taiwanese Buddhism, four monastics with fundamental influence on modern Taiwanese Buddhism. She established the organisation Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (慈濟慈善基金會) in 1966 on the east coast of Taiwan as a small community of practice with thirty people intent on helping the local poor. Today, the organisation has 502 offices in 50 countries around the world (Huang 2009, 15–39;

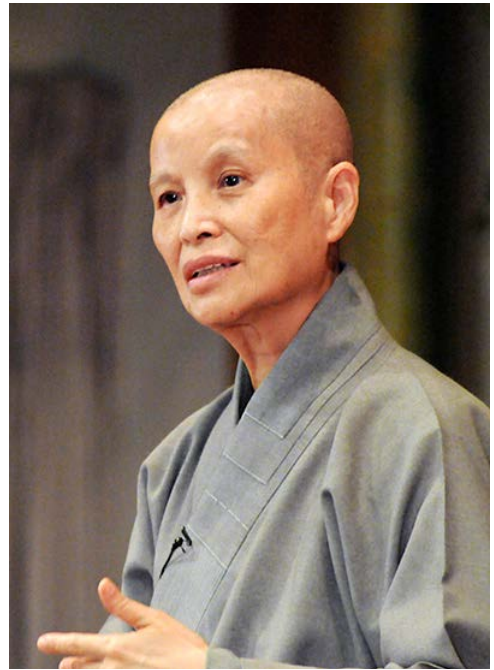
“Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation” n.d.).

Like the Fo Guang Shan, the Tzu Chi Foundation promulgates the ideas developed by Master Taixu regarding Buddhist reform (Ho 2009). It places predominant emphasis on charity work as the realisation of “Buddhism among the people”, and it provides various forms of support ranging from disaster relief to the long-term aid of underprivileged communities. Additionally, education also features highly on the Foundation’s agenda, since it provides schooling from kindergarten to university in multiple countries and regions.

Thus, we can see that the third generation of reformers within Chinese Buddhism has carried the modernisation ideas of the first two generations to a global level. Given the clarity of the initial learning they received, along with substantial changes in the external environment, such as political stability, dire need for a social-welfare system in a nascent political entity, and support for traditional religions, the organisations of Taixu’s first- and second-generation disciples have established a global presence for his ideas of modern Buddhism and modern Buddhist education.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present article has analysed how religion can be a site of learning in two distinct, but intertwined ways. First, it looked into the effects of new types of educational institutions within the Buddhist community of late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century China. Starting from the Jetavana Hermitage of Yang Wenhui to the University of the West established by Hsing Yun’s Fo Guang Shan, the article demonstrated what powerful effects reformed educational institutions can exert within a religious tradition. Albeit



Master Cheng Yen in 2008. Tzu Chi Foundation.

Yang Wenhui and Taixu, the first two generations of reformers, could not alter the actions of the *sangha*’s majority, through their novel schools, they educated new, “modern” monks and laypeople, whose influence ultimately led to the global impact of “Buddhism among the people”.

Second, endeavouring to understand how and why the concrete educational reforms within the Buddhist community unfolded during the period examined, the article analysed the individual learning trajectories of the three generations of reformers. The article provided new insights by making use of Étienne Wenger’s social theory of learning to grasp what enabled these particular monastics and laymen to become drivers of Buddhist education reform. The key insights are as follows. Communities of practice played a central part in the individual journeys of the reformers. In the case of Yang Wenhui and Taixu, what enabled them



Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum in Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

to initiate reforms was their partaking in several different communities of practice, which exposed them to starkly different learnings than the majority of the community. Additionally, they also established new communities of practice where they fashioned joint enterprise and repertoire to propagate their reform agendas, which bore fruit in the successes of Hsing Yun and Cheng Yen, raised within these communities. Crossing various community borders also played a central part in the reformers' journeys. They themselves acted as interlocutors between different communities, such as Taixu being part of traditional Buddhist monastic groups, as well as maintaining contacts with Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui and anarchist groups in south China. Moreover, the border crossings of reifications, such as the *Awakening of Faith* and other books, also provided key impetus for the reformers. Finally, the interplay of participation and reification

can also be witnessed in the cases analysed, where books (*Awakening of Faith*) called for communities of discussion, and new terms ("Buddhism among the people") triggered new kinds of social practices such as novel schools and curricula.

Hence, research on late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century Buddhist education reforms can benefit from looking through the lens of Wenger's social theory of learning, and in return, the period analysed can provide a novel ground of application for the theory far from its original American context. ■

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