Buddhist Charities and China's Social Policy

An Opportunity for Alternate Civility?

Philanthropie bouddhiste et politiques sociales en Chine: la possibilité d'une sociabilité nouvelle?

Filantropía budista y políticas sociales en China: la posibilidad de nuevas habilidades sociales?

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Introduction ¹

The development of religious institutions in China is one of the most remarkable trends of the last twenty years. Among the many issues it raises for the future of China, an important one is the effect of religious institutions' growth on politics. Few subscribe nowadays to the view that religion will vanish as science delivers on its promises of a better tomorrow. Among those who believe that religion can remain a relevant influence in politics, one can distinguish two broad perspectives. On the one hand, some apply de Tocqueville's view that religious diversity positively affects democracy. On the other hand, the argument that religion is an "opiate for the masses" sees religions' revival or endurance in authoritarian countries like China as a trend that is compatible with the resilience of that regime. That view holds that religious beliefs distract people from their mundane suffering with promises of salvation and therefore sap the will of people to challenge the political structures responsible for their situation. The Tocquevillian view has received support from analysts who have looked at the relationship between religious vitality and transition to democracy in Taiwan (Madsen, 2007; Kuo, 2008), and it is also receiving validation from sociologists who, moreover, posit more specifically a link between Christianity and liberal values in China (Yang, 2005). The opposite view of religion as alienation was upheld under Chairman Mao as the Chinese government's orthodoxy to justify its policies against religion, but Chinese authorities during the mandate of Jiang Zemin have upheld the same view, this time as a rationale for a more positive appreciation of religion and its role in strengthening a stable society. It is an

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irony lost on no-one that a nominally atheist state should now use religion in its governmentality. The behavior of Christians in China seems, partly, to vindicate the Tocquevillian perspective on the impact of religion on the politics of democratization. But this question remains open for Chinese Buddhism, which has received less attention than Christianity, or even Tibetan Buddhism.

This essay invites us to question the Tocquevillian notion that religious institutions can act as a source of authority helping the development of democracies, and even opens the possibility that it can induce the opposite by strengthening an authoritarian regime's resilience. To be sure, the argument made by Robert Weller that forms of association between the family and the state, which he termed an "alternate civility", have provided a basis for Taiwan's democratization, is compelling, and that is also the case with his speculation about a comparable kind of evolution in China (2001). The large lay Buddhist associations, such as the Tzu Chi Merit Society (慈济功德会), the Buddha Light International Association (国际佛光会), and the Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山), that have developed into important providers of social services in health care, education, poverty alleviation, and disaster relief, rank as some of the most visible expressions of this alternate civility in Taiwan (Huang 2009; Chandler 2004; Jones 1999). The relationship between the development of these associations and democratization, however, may have been exaggerated. In the case of Taiwan, these organizations were lukewarm in their support of democracy during the period of martial law, although some of them have been participants in the process of democratic consolidation (Laliberté, 2005). The recent expansion of Taiwanese Buddhist associations in China, and the emergence of local associations throughout China that want to emulate them, warrants an exploration of the potential for civility they can deploy there. Buddhist associations in China, for understandable reasons because of their recent history of persecution during the Cultural Revolution, have adopted the same attitude as Taiwanese associations during martial law, and like other organizations approved by the Communist Party, they do not get involved in the calls for political reforms. The argument made here is that they prefer a non-oppositional path to politics, and prefer to reinforce their legitimacy by helping the poor. This leaves open the question of whether or not, in doing so, they lend support to the regime. One thing is clear: Buddhist activities closely follow the directives of the state's social policies.

To understand the extent to which this is the case, the goal of this paper is to set the context of China's social policies and describe the ways in which Buddhist charities get involved to help the state. What we observe in China unfolds in a global context of state retrenchment from social policy, in which relations between the state and religious institutions are becoming more complementary. This follows a century-long period in which the modern state authority over religious institutions all over the world has been ascendant. For countries like China,

where state authorities remain insecure about their legitimacy and control, and religious institutions are facing a remarkable revival, state retrenchment from social policy poses formidable challenges. Such governments are considering relying on the human capital, financial resources and foreign contacts of religious institutions to help them address issues in social policy for which they seek support, while ensuring that such reliance does not generate a political capital that could represent a potential challenge to their authority. In the case of China, the confrontation between the state and the Falungong, a spiritual movement claiming to offer an alternative to public health care, illustrates both the potential and the risks of out-sourcing social services to religious institutions at a time when the costs of health were becoming too prohibitive for many in that country (Ownby 2010; Palmer 2007). The argument presented in this essay is that the Chinese state seems confident that it does not incur such risks by letting Buddhist institutions deliver social services.

Religion and Social Policies in a Comparative Perspective

Social policies include three broad domains of public intervention, which altogether represent the largest component of developed states' budgets: education, health, and social security. Religious institutions have been involved with these policies in the not-so-distant past of the West to a far greater extent than today, and remain involved in these policies for many developing countries. Although China does not qualify as a "developed economy" according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), more than half of its budget is devoted to these three areas of spending. But even if Chinese leaders consider their country to be a developing economy, until recently they afforded religious institutions a far more limited role in public affairs than other developing countries were willing to do. Before modern states were established, religious institutions often ran services in education and health care as well as relief to the poor, albeit not always in a comprehensive manner, as described by Liang Qizi (1997) in her work on charities during the Ming-Qing transition. In undertaking these activities, they were often in a position to maintain their own authority alongside – if not against – secular political rulers. Conflicts between religious institutions and states emerged when the latter sought to expand their control and took up increasing responsibilities for education and health, thereby directly challenging the source of religious institutions' influence (Manow, 2004; Wilcox, 1997).

Education today still remains an area of potential conflict between state and religious authorities when their respective views on morality, the meaning of life, obligations and duties do not converge (Manow and Palier, 2009). In China, the state and religious institutions have clashed over education for two main

reasons. An important issue of contention was the availability of resources to deliver education, but ideology itself was also at stake, as explain Ji Zhe and the contributors to a special issue on the subject in the journal *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* (2011). Hence, when the republican and the socialist regimes in China sought to spread education to the population, they decided to harness the material resources of religious institutions to meet their objectives, seizing their land and property in an attempt to turn temples into schools (Goossaert and Palmer, 2010; Ashiwa, 2009: 52-55; Nedostup, 2009; Goossaert, 2006; Duara, 1991).

Public health, and in particular reproductive health, women and children's welfare, elderly care, and long term care, is another domain of public policy where the ideals of religious leaders and their followers can clash with those of the state's civil servants. Religious teachings and the political ideals of modernizers harbor specific moral views about family, gender relations, sexual orientation, and dignity that can be difficult to reconcile even when they include ethical principles such as justice, equality, and universality (Kahl, 2009).

Finally, Social security, including social insurances and poverty alleviation measures, represents another potential source of contention for religious associations. This time, however, the state is more likely to be criticized for not doing enough. When the state fails to provide social security, it can set the stage for the kind of unrest that is detrimental to political stability and therefore the development of religious institutions that thrive on the latter (Quadagno and Rohlinger, 2009). Religious institutions, in that case, are more likely to demand state intervention than reject it, unless tax extraction affects them too much.

Comparative analyses of social policies in developed countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990), or the transition economies in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and East Asia (Haggard and Kaufman, 2008) emphasize many explanatory factors for the development of these policies but the impact of religious institutions represents a blind spot. This shortcoming in our knowledge is a major problem in our understanding of the challenges that states face when they try to design, expand, or reform their social policies. Since the nineteenth century, religious institutions have fought bitterly to oppose the expansion of the state's responsibilities in social policies. For example, in France throughout the late 19th century up until the beginning of the 20th century, the Catholic Church and the state have fought for control over education (Lanfrey, 2003). In other cases, religious institutions supported the expansion of the state's social policy. Hence, the Catholic Church under Bismarck favored the implementation of social insurances, in the hope of countering the influence of communist parties over the labor movement (Dickinson, 1996). In all these cases, these battles between religions and the state were part of a broader process of democratization.

Studies on the states' attempt to use temples to serve its own social programs in education and health care during the late Qing dynasty and the early Republican period reveals important differences between China and the situation experienced in the West that remain relevant today (Goossaert and Palmer, 2010; Nedostup, 2009; Goossaert, 2006; Duara, 1991). While the state tried to establish its authority in China in the early twentieth century, it did not have to deal with a single unified institution like the Catholic Church. It faced instead a number of local associations, of varied levels of capacity and resources. In that context, apart from conflicts between the Nationalist Party (KMT) and Christian schools (Lutz, 1988), the state encountered little opposition from religious institutions in the development of a modern state's key institutions in the realm of public health and relief to the poor. Buddhist institutions, Christian missionaries, and redemptive societies as well had established orphanages, schools, and clinics, but the unsettled political situation during the whole period made it difficult for them to nurture a unified and effective leadership that could articulate, let alone defend, a corporate position on issues of public interest such as poverty alleviation. This became even more difficult during the first two decades of the People's Republic. Then, the state sought actively to prevent any religious institution from getting organized and provided through the People's Communes and State-Owned Enterprises a comprehensive array of social services. In other words, any analysis of Buddhist institutions' weak institutions today must keep that in perspective.

With the reform policy adopted after 1978, the requirements that People's Communes and State-Owned-Enterprises act as sole provider of social services have been jettisoned. This major change did not mean a similarly radical shift with respect to state-religion relations because China does not have a public sphere comparable to post-industrial democracies where religious institutions can advance their own corporate interests. Besides the formal aspect of state control of religion, however, the context of changing social policies provides to a number of religious actors opportunities to assert themselves as institutional actors. Although their influence in policy debates remains unexplored and difficult to assess, their potential for the delivery of social services, and therefore to become important stakeholders, is growing in importance. As Ji Zhe has written, it is a remarkable paradox that the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control religious institutions has provided them with a cohesiveness that was lacking in the Republican period and that had made them vulnerable at the time (2008: 257).

The findings discussed below on relations between state and religion in China and their impact on social policies seeks to address shortcomings on this relation by recent literature on the welfare state which has expanded beyond the confines of Western Europe, the Anglo-Saxon democracies of the New World, and Japan (Haggard and Kaufman, 2008). The same blind spot is found in the work by

Ian Gough and Geoff Wood on the issue of welfare regimes in developing countries, which addresses in particular the role of informality and welfare mix in the social policies of states that refuse to follow the way of Western European states, with their more generous welfare outcomes (2004). They have examined an even greater and more diversified number of societies than Haggard and Kaufman did and their emphasis on informality brings attention to the role of religions at the basic level. The societies studied by Gough and Wood have seen a resilience of religiosity that compelled many to look anew at the effect of religion on the welfare state. However, their discussion on social policy in Asia offers very little on the role of religion. This reflects the scholarship on the role of religion in East Asian social policies, which sometimes refer to a Confucian welfare model and emphasize the role of family, but seldom pays attention to religious institutions (Walker and Wong, 2005; Gough, 2004; White, Goodman, and Kwon, 1998). This neglect is all the more baffling considering the importance of religion in the politics of the region, a reality that has been observed in studies of transition to democracy in Asia (Cheng and Brown, 2005).

The remnant of the article will look at the involvement of Buddhist philanthropic associations in the provision of social services to help the government offset the inequalities within China. This is not to say that Buddhist associations are substitutes to the state or to the few cases of corporate responsibility. Buddhists are still rebuilding their institutions after decades of persecution or neglect, and they are busy training a new generation of monks and nuns. Many temples visited in the course of the field work leading to the writing of this article looked in serious state of disrepair and in financial difficulty. But other temples, such as the Jing'an Temple (靜安寺) in Shanghai or Nanputuo Temple (南普陀寺) in Fujian, are much wealthier. Some of them, such as Bailin Temple (柏林寺) in Hebei, Yufo Temple (玉佛寺) in Shanghai, and Nanputuo, are sponsoring or directly offering social services in a more conspicuous way than ever before since 1949. They do so in the three broad domains of social policies which were hitherto seen as a primary responsibility of the modern state in China: health care, education, and relief. As discussed before, these social policy areas have represented historically arenas of contention between state and religious institutions. But these domains of social policies can also constitute area where states and religious institutions cooperate and complement each other, when religious institutions act as substitute to compensate for the state's lack of capacity in financial or human resources.

The next section will consider Buddhist institutions as an emerging and growing source of support to the state in the implementation of its social policies. Although this discussion will be limited to Buddhism, it is clear that other institutionalized religions such as Daoism, the various Christian denominations, and Islam, as well as local temples cults, lineages, and devotional groups, are also active in providing social services in a significant way. However, while Islam and Christianity are active in charity and the provision of social services in

societies where their adherents represent a majority of the population, Buddhist and Taoist associations may be able to reach out to a greater proportion of the Chinese population, as they can be the institutional expression of traditional religions for a greater number of Chinese. Among these two latter traditions, Buddhist associations have demonstrated in Taiwan, the closest society to China culturally speaking, their ability to deliver social services in health care, education, and disaster relief.

The Expansion of Buddhist Philanthropy in China

The data presented in this article results from field research undertaken between 2004 and 2011 in 25 different cities located in nine different provinces² and three of the province-level municipalities.³ I am using for this article a variety of sources accumulated during these visits: they are publications produced by temple management committees, local Buddhist official associations, lay devotees group and local charity associations.⁴ The interviewees were monks and lay Buddhist devotees, and when possible officials from the local Buddhist associations, bureaus for religious affairs, and state-sponsored charities.⁵ Chinese scholars have recommended some of the locations, such as the Bailin temple in Hebei, the Nanputuo temple in Xiamen, and the Yufo temple in Shanghai, because they have developed more than others their philanthropic activities. Others, such as the Tianjin Buddhism Charity Beneficence Fund (sic!) (Tianjin fojiao cishan gongde jijinhui 天津佛教慈善功德基金会) and the Chinese Medicine Charitable Clinic of the Guangdong Province Buddhist Association (Guangdong sheng fojiao xiehui cishan zhongyi zhensuo 广东省佛教协会慈善中医诊所), have successfully advertised their activities online, but they are not as well known by colleagues and fellow Buddhists met during interviews. Prior to that field research and in conjunction with visits onsite, online searches for the location of Buddhist philanthropic institutions throughout the country since 2003 have revealed wide discrepancy in the development of their activities across different regions, but no systematic correlation between the extent of Buddhist charities' presence and the socio-economic status of the regions where they occur. For example, while Buddhist charity is very active in the special municipalities of Shanghai and Tianjin, it is less so in Beijing. It is present in coastal cities with a long history of relations with outside world such as Xiamen, but it also thrives in locations in the interior, such as Henan province.

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2. Hubei, Hebei, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangdong, Fujian, Henan, and Shanxi.

3. Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin.

4. The resources of reading rooms attached to the Yufo temple in Shanghai, the Bailin temple in Hebei, and the Foxueyuan in Guangzhou have been especially helpful in providing access to a large number of periodicals, brochures and documents produced by many locations I had not had the opportunity to visit.

5. The Buddhist monks were usually referred to me by Chinese scholars.

This article focuses on Buddhism because this is one of the five officially recognized religions of China, and the largest of them in the number of followers according to state authorities. The number of people who self-identify as “Buddhists” and the estimates social scientists or census-takers register, however, remains difficult to ascertain. The government claims that there are “100 million” Buddhists, but these figures are only suggestive and not taken seriously. Moreover, there are different strands in the world of Han Chinese Buddhism: alongside the official associations sponsored by the state, there are many associations with divergent interests and visions. Lay Buddhist groups (jushilin 居士林), religious entrepreneurs, charity associations, and societies for Buddhist studies thrive outside of the official local Buddhist associations (Sun Yanfei, 2012). This article will set aside the important questions of adherent numbers and authenticity of Buddhist belief and practice and focus on the institutional expression of Buddhism and the involvement of Buddhist registered associations in social policy. Although this portrait cannot claim to represent all of Buddhism’s reality in China, it offers a very instructive look at one aspect of the state’s religious policy, in which the relationship between one religion and the state is mutually constitutive, or as Ashiwa and Wank wrote, the making of modern religion relates to the making of the modern state (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009: 7).

There is little doubt that Buddhism has experienced an extraordinary growth in the last two decades. By 2004, the National Bureau of Statistics’ database on religion in China noted that close to half of the new Buddhist temples and associations it has registered had been established after 1992 (see table 1). It remains difficult to interpret properly this expansion, however: it could mean a surge in the number of Buddhist believers and the construction of new temples and monasteries as a response to an increasing demand, or it could simply represent an effort to rebuild temples and monasteries that have been destroyed or neglected in previous periods of history. There is no doubt that this state-sponsored rehabilitation of Buddhism as a legitimate component of Chinese society is not a full restoration to its previous status as an important institution. When we put this growth in a broader historical perspective it is clear that Buddhism is far from reaching the influence it once held in China. Hence, Holmes Welch’s landmark study of Buddhism between 1900 and 1950 quoted surveys of the Republican government that counted more than 256,000 temples and monasteries with monks, nuns, or laymen and laywomen in residence within China’s provinces between 1937 and 1945 (Welch 1967: 419). This number represents more than three times the number of all religious associations currently registered in 2004 by the Statistics’ bureau. As Ashiwa (2009: 55) and Welch (1968) both noted, Buddhism had suffered a series of setbacks since the Taiping Rebellion. They also endured persecution during the modernizing campaigns to turn temples into schools during the Late Qing and the early Republican era (Ashiwa, 2009: 49-55; Duara, 1991; Welch 1968). Although the religion went through a modern reform movement with the monk Taixu (Pittman, 2001), it was constrained by conditions prevailing under the periods of warlordism, the Japanese invasion,

and the Civil War. In other words, the travails experienced by Buddhism during the Cultural Revolution represented the nadir in a long period of persecution from modernizers, warlords, and religious leaders that extended far beyond the era when China was under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In short, the current Buddhist revival remains rather modest when set in the perspective of China's *longue durée*.

Table 1: Buddhist institutions ⁶ in China, by year of founding					
Total	Before 1949	1949-1966	1967-1977	1978-1991	After 1992
11,250	1,433 (12.7%)	624 (5.5%)	335 (3.0%)	3,265 (29.0%)	5,593 (49.7%)

Source: CNBS, Atlas of religion, 2004.

With these qualifications about the expansion of Buddhism in mind, it is clear that the situation of temples and Buddhist institutions, like religion in general, has improved dramatically after Deng Xiaoping repudiated most of Mao's policies on religious affairs. The number of new Buddhist temples and associations increased in the 1980s during the reformist administrations of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. This coincided with efforts to lure Taiwanese, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese's investments in China. This relative acceptance initially did not mean greater openness for Buddhist institutions, which remained subjected to regulations that forbade any non-liturgical activities within temple and no activities whatsoever outside of temples. The early wave of temple and monasteries' construction in the 1980s went through a sharp drop in the year that followed the June 4th massacre, but it experienced a swift revival following Deng Xiaoping's Southern tour in 1992 (see Figure 1). In 1996, 659 Buddhist temples and associations were built or established in that year alone, an unprecedented peak that would not be repeated until 2004, which is the last year for which official data covering the entire country are available. It is not clear yet if the decline in growth experienced after 1996 indicates a consolidation of established temples and institutions, or a more ominous trend of limiting the expansion of the religion. As will be discussed below, however, the diminishing rate of new constructions from 1996 to 2004 contrasts with the continuing growth in the charitable activities performed by Buddhists institutions in the same period and after.

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6. The category "associations" is very inclusive: a close look at the data for Shanghai compiled for the Atlas of Religion reveals that the survey lists local Buddhist associations (fojiao xiehui 佛教协会), *stricto sensu*, as well as lay devotee lodges (jushilin 居士林), monasteries (chanyuan 禅院), nunneries (an 庵), Buddhist institutes (foxueyuan 佛学院), temples (si 寺 or miao 庙), and even, in one case, a shop to sell candles, which was connected to a Buddhist temple. As the survey mentioned by Welch suggests, however, the figure for the number of temples before 1949 is not reliable.

Source: ACMRC, 2010.

Figure 1. Buddhist Association by year of founding

This expansion has received state support, which can be ascertained by the approval of an increasing number of Buddhist associations whose purpose is to either raise money for charity or offer social services (See Table 2). Foundations (jijinhui 基金会) represent the first type of associations. Not all provincial associations have established one, and the initiative comes sometimes from individual temples and move upward from there. The earliest two foundations were established in 1994 by the Nanputuo Temple, in the city of Xiamen in Fujian province, and in Guangdong province by the local Buddhist association. The proximity of Taiwan to Xiamen, where Buddhist charity is active, and even more of Hong Kong to Guangdong, is probably not mere happenstance. These two major sources of investment to China made the location of these two foundations in Xiamen and Guangdong natural. Other provincial Buddhist associations have followed suit in establishing foundations, but not all of them benefitted from such neighbourhood nor were similarly well-endowed economically. With the exception of Fujian and Guangdong provinces and the province-level municipality of Tianjin, all the other provinces in which foundations were established are poor or middle-income. These initiatives had the support of provincial governments and provincial committee party leaders, but it is only fourteen years after the founding of the Guangdong Foundation that the Chinese Buddhist Association set up a foundation at the national level to raise funds, which suggests a bottom-up process.

Merit societies (gongdehui 功德会) represent the second type of institutions established by Buddhist provincial or local associations. These institutions are meant specifically to provide social services. The pioneer in that regard is the Hebei Buddhist Charity Merit Society (Hebei fojiao cishan gongdehui 河北佛教慈善功德会), which was an offshoot of the Bailin Temple in Shijiazhuang prefecture. As the study by Yang and Wei made clear, the growth of that temple was facilitated by good connections with the government (Ji, 2007; Yang and Wei, 2005).

Interviews conducted between 2004 and 2011 have confirmed the importance of obtaining support from local governments for the ability of Buddhist associations to establish charity institutions that could legally perform social services. But these observations have also revealed considerable variance in the extent and the modus operandi of that cooperation. In Guangdong, for example, a cadre of the provincial bureau for religious affairs interviewed about a local Buddhist clinic offering traditional Chinese medicine in Guangzhou expressed its full support for this activity and disclosed up to ten such clinics have been authorized in the province.⁷ The local officials approved the existence of such clinics even though the legal framework for the provision of health care at the national level was then, and remains at the time of writing, unclear about the

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7. Interview in Guangzhou with the Vice-Director of the Provincial Bureau for Religious Affairs, June 2010.

legal status of such activities. This official leniency could surprise us, considering the alarm with which the government had seen the claim by Falungong followers that the practice of breathing exercises could be a substitute to the public health care system. But the support of the Guangdong provincial government to a Buddhist association providing some medical services, it turned out, was meant to be temporary, and therefore, did not threaten to become a too attractive alternative to the existing health care system. The clinics' activities were under close official watch, as the interview with the provincial official was conducted in the clinic itself. As one employee of that clinic further explained, after the government offered more generous health insurance (*yibao* 医保) and support for pensioners (*tuixiu* 退休), visits to the clinic had diminished significantly, and therefore its potential as an alternative to the existing institutions was unlikely.

While support for the Guangdong Buddhist Clinic suggested cautious support to a small operation, authorities in Tianjin appeared much bolder. The municipal government threw its support behind a much more ambitious organization, the Buddhism Charity Beneficence Fund mentioned before. This was clear in a recorded document about its founding in 2005 (TBCBF 2005), and in 2009 when the Tianjin Religious Affairs Bureau's Vice-Chair reiterated its support and endorsed its activities.⁸ The Fund, under the leadership of the Jianfu Guanyin (荐福观音) Temple's Abbess Miao Xian (妙贤) became well-known after it raised funds with the public through its affiliated temples in that major city for the victims of the 2008 Wenchuan quake in Sichuan. More recently, following requests by the municipal charity association (*shi cishan zonghui* 市慈善总会) made through the municipal Bureau for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in 2010, it launched another fund-raising campaign in Nankai University for a program to help students (*zhuxue xiangmu* 助学项目) in poor area, remote regions, and ethnic minority communities. The Fund's brochure promised that it could offer a surprisingly large array of services: poverty alleviation (*fupin zhukun* 扶贫助困), donations for students in difficulty (*juanzi zhuxue* 捐资助学), free medical treatment and medicine gift (*shiyi shiyao* 施医施药), and special funds for disaster relief (*jiuzai zhuanquan* 救灾专款). The Fund also hopes to help people with disabilities (*zhucan* 助残) and to get involved in environmental protection (*huanbao* 环保), and both objectives are endorsed by the local Bureau for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (TBCBF 2005). A visit in the associations' headquarters in 2011 has revealed a very small but committed team of lay Buddhists, and as was the case with the clinic observed a year before in Guangdong, with a limited scope. In short, the Fund appears unlikely to alarm the authorities.

Not all provinces have registered Buddhist philanthropic associations. Poorer provinces have, arguably, less resource available, and they are more likely to

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8. See "Wo shi zhaokai fojiao cishan gongde jijinhui huanjie jidi'erjie lishi huiyi 我市召开佛教慈善功德基金会换届暨第二届理事会议(Our municipal Buddhist charity's second assembly re-elect its leadership)" at the following URL <http://www.tjmw.gov.cn/xwzx/html/559.shtml>

be recipients of services provided through Buddhist charities established in the wealthier provinces. The situation of Shanxi embodies this situation. Although Wutaishan, one of the four sacred Buddhist mountains (*sida mingshan* 四大名山), is located in that province, and despite the fact that Buddhists in Shanxi had long hoped to establish a provincial Buddhist philanthropic association similar to the one in neighboring Hebei, its establishment has proven very difficult. A monk holding responsibilities with the local Buddhist association in Taiyuan's White Cloud Temple shed some lights on the difficulties Buddhists face in poorer provinces. Echoing comments by monks and nuns heard in other temples I had visited in Hubei and Anhui in previous years, he blamed the complexity of the registration process, the characteristic of the local environment and the CCP's own record of relations with religions.⁹ The situation of Shanxi is not the exception: a majority of China's provinces and special municipalities do not have a province-wide Buddhist charity association at the time of writing (see table 2).

On the other hand, some Buddhist charities have not waited for government intervention to set up operations. The Charity Foundation established by the Nanputuo temple mentioned above, for example, was created following the initiative of then Abbott Miao Zhan, in 1994. As the Deputy Director of the Foundation's management office explained, the foundation has no relations with the government. Its establishment resulted from the initiative of local monks, who had registered it as a non-governmental organization. Municipal authorities in Xiamen had accepted the creation of the charity, but the local government-supported charity association, however, does not cooperate with it and its publication ignores it altogether. This suggests that even when the philanthropic activities of local Buddhist associations are approved or at least tolerated, it does not follow that they receive unanimous approval from the state bureaucracy. This mixture of state approval, on the one hand, and non-recognition, on the other, is frequent. Employees of local state-sponsored charities affiliated to the China Charity Foundation met in Shanghai and Nanjing, for example, were unaware of the activities of Buddhist charities in the area under their jurisdiction, even while the Jade Buddha temple in Shanghai and the Qixia 棲霞 temple in Nanjing sponsored such activities.¹⁰ Although the philanthropic activities of Buddhist charities are approved by the CCP United front departments and advertised in the publications of the state administrations for religious affairs and the Buddhist associations, they are generally ignored and overlooked by the official documents of the official charities associations established by the administrations for civil affairs. Efforts to cross-check the existing activities of Buddhist charities with mentions in the local gazeteers (*difang nianjian* 地方年鉴), usually yield no mention of them. In other words, good relations with government help set up Buddhist philanthropic activities, but it does not mean unanimous support.

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9. Interview with a monk in White Cloud Temple, Taiyuan, July 2010.

10. Interviews in the summer of 2010 in Shanghai and Nanjing.

Table 2: Provincial Buddhist associations and related charities or foundations			
Provinces	Creation dates		Name of Foundations
	Assoc.	Found.	
China	1956	2008	China Buddhist Charity Foundation
Anhui	1980	2000	Anhui Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 Public Interest Foundation
Beijing	1981	–	–
Chongqing	1998	1998	Chongqing Buddhist Charity Merit Society
Fujian	1962	1994	Nanputuo temple Charity Foundation
Gansu	1959	?	Gansu Buddhist Charitable Foundation
Guangdong	1982	1994	Guangdong Buddhist Charitable Foundation
Guangxi	1993	2010	Guangxi Buddhist Charitable Foundation
Guizhou	1988	–	–
Hainan	1999	?	Hainan Buddhist Charitable Foundation
Hebei	1988	1995	Hebei Buddhist Charity Merit Society
Heilongjiang	1984	2005	Heilongjiang Daqing 大庆 Charitable Society
Henan	1983	–	–
Hubei	1959	?	Hubei Buddhist Charity Merit Society
Hunan	1985	2000	Hunan Buddhist Charitable Foundation
Jiangsu	1981	2008	Jiangsu Buddhist Charity Movement to help Pupils
Jiangxi	1986	2008	Donglin 东林 Charitable Foundation
Jilin	1981	?	Jilin Hunchun 珲春 Buddhist Merit Society
Liaoning	1957	–	–
Neimenggu	1957	–	–
Ningxia	1988	–	–
Qinghai	1981	–	–
Shaanxi	1982	–	–
Shandong	1988	?	Shandong Buddhist Net Charity Center
Shanghai	1954	–	–
Shanxi	1957	2000	Shanxi Wutaishan 五台山 Buddhist Charity Merit Society
Sichuan	1957	–	–
Tianjin	1954	2005	Tianjin Buddhist Charity Merit Foundation
Tibet	1956	–	–
Xinjiang	1984	–	–
Yunnan	1957	–	–
Zhejiang	1980	–	–

Sources: compilation by the author from provincial Buddhist associations' reports, newspapers, and Buddhist charities' self-declaration.

The variety of services offered by Buddhist philanthropy

Buddhist institutions have been active in the provision of services in education despite the fact that there remain many restrictions on the help that they can offer: their associations can only run colleges to train monks, or offer courses within monasteries to train clerics, but they cannot operate schools that would cater to the general public.¹¹ Despite these obstacles, however, there exist three ways through which Buddhist institutions can provide support in education. Philanthropic associations and temples can directly provide financial support, in the forms of scholarships, to help the education of children with disabilities, orphans, or children living in impoverished area. They can also organize fund-raising activities to help Project Hope schools – a project originally supported by the China Youth Development Foundation and the Communist Youth League Committee.¹² Finally, Buddhist temples can provide money for scholarship or school reconstruction through the revenue generated by ticket admissions and devotees' donations. The state needs not fear that Buddhist contributions to education create problems to its legitimacy by granting too much face to Buddhist philanthropic associations, however. As mentioned before, local media ignore these efforts. Moreover, as a monk in Suzhou candidly admitted when asked about the help his temple provides to schools, the funds that it donates is managed by the local Bureau of Civil Affairs, and the temple has no say, even less oversight, about the recipients of their generosity.¹³ One consequence of this practice is that the sponsorship of students does not display any feature of its Buddhist origins. This was made clear to me during a visit to an orphanage in Shijiazhuang prefecture that had received support from the Hebei Buddhist charity. The teachers were not lay Buddhists, and there was no sign in the school that made any reference to the religion. In that case, the provision of service in education was a local affair. This has changed after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. Buddhists associations all over China responded to demands by officials from party and government to raise money for the rehabilitation of schools destroyed by the earthquake. Most interviewees mentioned this event as an example of what Buddhist charity can do. That is, they can respond and mobilize resources to help people in need, as requested by the government, but they cannot do more. In particular, they have to stay clear of controversies and in the case of the 2008, they did not raise their voice to criticize the shortcomings of a system that neglected to enforce proper standards for schools' constructions.

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11. Interviews with colleagues in Shanghai, June 2010.

12. For examples, colleagues in the department of philosophy at Suzhou University during a meeting in June 2010 mentioned that the Hanshan Temple (寒山寺) was able to generate an annual income of about 100 million yuan from the sale of visiting tickets to the temple, and used that money for charity activities, including 15 schools.

13. Interview in Xiyuan 西园 temple, July 2011.

Moreover, as a perusal in the dozens of provincial and local publications that Buddhist associations and temple issue many times a year shows, help to students represents a marginal feature of their activities, barely mentioned in their publications. Cishan 慈善 (Charity), an 8 pages quarterly distributed by the Nanputuo Temple in Xiamen, represents a rare exception to that rule.

Buddhist philanthropic institutions also help the government in the delivery of health care services, but their offering are modest, though not because they are reluctant to do so. As seen above, the services offered by the Guangdong Buddhist Clinic of Chinese Medicine are limited, with only two physicians and two nurses. The same is true for the Nanputuo temple, which operates an equally modest clinic. These experiments, as limited as they are, nevertheless inspire people elsewhere: in Yangzhou, a monk residing in the Daming 大明 temple expressed his hope that it could create a similar clinic in the city, also to offer Chinese medicine. Besides the management of clinics, Buddhist institutions also provide other forms of health care service. In Shanghai, the Yufo temple's charity has arranged for physicians to volunteer for the provision of counseling on health related issues.¹⁴ In Henan, the Shaolin 少林 Temple uses its well-known reputation as a tourist attraction to finance programs helping AIDS victims, and has also established an orphanage in 2004 in conjunction with the Henan provincial charity association. Some Buddhist associations have even developed plans to build health care information centers, which have all the attribute of a hospital but the name.¹⁵ Over the years, many Chinese Buddhists have looked at the achievements in health care of Buddhist associations such as the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan as an example they would like to follow, but aware of the institutional obstacles standing in the way, they keep a low profile and do not discuss that in their publication, less so in public.¹⁶ The achievements of Buddhists in health care could be considerable, as the long-term care offered by the Taiwanese Buddhist charities has shown over the years. Many of my interviewees, over the years, have spoken admiringly of this approach, but they know that under the current legal context, it is unlikely to materialize.

Finally, Buddhist charities are also involved in aspects of social security in which the state is hard pressed to provide, such as elderly care. This help extends beyond mere financial support and some associations provide services in the realm of companionship and psychological counseling.¹⁷ Elderly care offers a

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14. Interview with a lay volunteer working for a Buddhist charity in Shanghai, June 2009.

15. People interviewed on this issue are aware of the limitations imposed by regulations, but as the discussion on transnational charities below will show, some are enthusiastically planning to go this way.

16. During interviews with monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists in Hubei, Anhui, Hebei, and Shanghai, all interlocutors praised the Taiwanese Tzu Chi Foundation as an example to emulate.

17. This kind of activity was described during interviews in Shanghai, June 2009, and Hubei, May 2004.

good example of the kind of social service provision that meets the concerns of local governments. In the city of Suzhou, for example, the premise of a local Buddhist temple serves as an elderly home. The clergy is assisted by lay personnel ensuring that care is provided. A lay Buddhist in charge of the residents, whom I have met in the temple itself, demonstrated a very thorough understanding of the acute problems faced by China's ageing society, and expressed his belief in the necessity for the government to use the resources of Buddhism to provide long-term care. However, the extent of the care his institutions and the Buddhists in Suzhou could offer is rather modest. The Suzhou municipal Buddhist association's elderly home (anyangyuan 安养院) serves around twenty people, a small fraction of the elderly population in this city of more than six million people.¹⁸ My interviewee noted that there are also more than 200 beds in Lingshan 灵山 temple and 40 beds in Hanshan 寒山 Temple, both located in Suzhou. But considering the huge demands from the growing population of retirees, these resources are insufficient. Although Buddhist institutions could offer a good environment for retiree, the prevailing view that providing pension service is not the main work of religions remains in force. The expansion of the Buddhist nursing home for the elderly needs approval from the Bureau of Civil Affairs but the Suzhou Buddhist association has not established a Buddhist Charity association to supervise the activities of the elderly home, in cooperation with the lay devotee association, the local branch of the Buddhist studies institute, or even the Suzhou branch of the Taiwan-based Tzu Chi Foundation. There is a lot of goodwill and motivation from young and elderly lay Buddhists to provide social services to the population, but in the absence of clear regulations, it is difficult to see how it could go much further.

The overall contribution of Buddhist institutions to social welfare remains very difficult to assess. Provincial Buddhist Associations' annual reports are considered for "internal consumption" only and access is restricted. As a monk acting as Vice-Chair for a Buddhist Provincial Association explained, these reports contain sensitive information that authorities would prefer not to release to the public. Along accounts of philanthropic activities, they also contain information on the participation to political campaigns against organizations the government disapproves.¹⁹ But even if such information was made available, it would be difficult to obtain a precise assessment of Buddhist associations' provision of social services: many monks and novices met over the years have mentioned that they do not keep a tight record of philanthropic activities, either because it is too little, or simply because they do not have the time to devote to this activity. This lack of record-keeping gives substance to the remarks of colleagues in Shanghai who had noted that "most Buddhist philanthropic activities lack

18. "2009 年苏州市国民经济和社会发展概况". Suzhou Municipal Statistic Bureau. 2010-01-20. <http://www.dfzb.suzhou.gov.cn/zwgk/1691533.htm>. Retrieved January 22, 2012

19. Interview in Nanjing, July 2011.

professionalism.”²⁰ As one monk heading an important philanthropic association in Fujian candidly admitted: “We are not social scientists and we have no time to study this kind of activities.”²¹ While a few associations do publish very detailed account of their activities, most do not go beyond providing a list of donors in their publication, and do not reveal details about those who benefit from their fund-raising activities. The Nanputuo Charity offers very detailed monthly reports for its activities, including revenues from different forms of fund raising activities and the expenses incurred by its philanthropic activities.²² Shaolin temple has a program of adoption for orphans, with biographical details about the children it has adopted.²³ Most other Buddhist charities’ reports, however, limit themselves to publish the names of donors and the sum they have offered in the meritorious names’ (gongde fangming 功德芳名) pages of their publications.

Moreover, it is difficult to obtain a tally of Buddhist philanthropic activities when many of the activities that monks and lay devotees consider “charity” are not seen as such by non-Buddhists. For example, I have often met monks and lay people who have included fangsheng 放生 (the release of animals) when they were asked about the kind of philanthropy their temple or lay devotee association manage.²⁴ Many of the interviewees I have met over the years have a very inclusive definition of what they consider their temples’ or associations’ philanthropic activities and delivery of social services. They would consider the beautification of temples, for example, as a form of charity that could be supported by fund-raising. When asked about the nature of his temple’s charitable activities, the abbot of the Daming temple in Yangzhou mentioned the planting of trees on both sides of an affiliated library.²⁵ These comments, however, are not disingenuous: the improvement of Buddhist temple contributes to a location’s attractiveness to tourism, and therefore the local economy and the improvement of its population’s welfare. The fund-raising for rebuilding temples and monasteries, or the financing of publications and the management of website, are also defined as charity. But this definition of philanthropy, which is consistent with Buddhist religious practice and ethos, does not always meet the definition of charity as social service that official charity associations upheld. This is understandable, considering the uncertain regulatory context in which Buddhist associations can perform activities other than purely religious ones, such as Dharma lectures, sutra recitation, and meditation. The Merit societies which were discussed above and contribute to poverty alleviation, disaster relief, help to students in need, elderly care and counselling are the exceptions rather than the rule.

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20. Interview with two scholars in Shanghai, June 2010.

21. Interview in Xiamen, June 2010.

22. This is displayed in the quarterly Cishan, produced by Nanputuo.

23. The Shaolin Ciyouyuan 少林慈幼院 has issued a brochure detailing its organization and the beneficiaries of its services.

24. Interview in Yangzhou, July 2011.

25. Interview in Yangzhou, July 2011.

Conclusion

The claim made in this article was a straightforward one: Chinese Buddhist institutions are expanding dramatically, and this go beyond the rebuilding of temples. The Chinese government, at all levels, encourages them to get involved in charity and to assist in the delivery of a number of social services. This is a new development because until recently religious institutions were forbidden to do anything but perform liturgical activities within temples and other buildings designated for that purpose. By doing such activities, Buddhist institutions can gain respect and appreciation among non-Buddhists. However, there are no signs so far that they could make political capital gain out of this endeavor.

In fact, the recovery of Buddhist institutions remains fragile. Government support should not be taken for granted, and as the experience of Falungong before has demonstrated too much attention on them could bring a halt to their activities. Buddhist institutions are driven by a rational interest for the survival of their institutions and because of this concern their leaders have never come out publicly in favor of political reform, in contrast to Christians, who have been vocal on issues of civil liberties. Perhaps some Buddhist leaders express such concerns in private but if that is the case, there is no way to obtain confirmation that they are.

Members of Buddhist philanthropic associations are convinced that they offer the government a very valuable service. They are aware of the gaps in the different dimensions of social policy, whether it is health care, education, or poverty alleviation. The task ahead, however, is daunting. Some hope that Buddhist institutions will be able to offer more comprehensive forms of healthcare services in the future. Most Buddhist institutions do not have such plans because they only started to redevelop their temples in the 1990s, and they feel that there is too much work to be done. More important, perhaps, there is an absence of consensus on where Buddhism should stand in the implementation of social policy, and there are no sustained and systematic teachings on what should lay Buddhists do. They can contribute to nurture high levels of civility, but they are not on record for supporting a citizenry that could articulate constructive criticisms of governmental policies' shortcoming when they arise. In other words, Buddhist institutions are not among the actors that put pressure on the Chinese government to engage in political reforms that could overcome the sources of growing social inequalities and poverty among vulnerable populations and, at least in public, they express preference for stability and social harmony.²⁶

This article has opened with a question about the possibility that religious diversity could affect positively democracy: assuming that the vitality of Buddhism, along with the growth of Christianity, signifies that there is religious

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26. The evidence for this attitude is routinely found in the editorials of the official publications of the Buddhist association of China, as well as those of local associations and temples.

diversity in China, there are no visible effects on democratization that can be inferred from that diversity. The growth of Buddhist institutions does favor the expansion of civility by encouraging the growth of a more compassionate and caring citizenry, but in doing so, it tends to strengthen the resilience of the current regime rather than undermine it with demands for democratic opening: by merely providing a safety valve to social tensions it dampens the forces for political change.

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Buddhist Charities and China's Social Policy: An Opportunity for Alternate Civility?

This paper explores the possibility that Chinese Buddhist institutions can represent a source of alternate civility conducive to a more open political system. The paper starts to explore the issue from a comparative perspective and considers three areas of contention between the state and religious authorities in which the latter can advance the interests of society: education, health care, and relief. After a brief survey of social policies and the role granted by the state to religious institutions as providers of services in recent years, the essay considers the philanthropic activities of Buddhist institutions. This survey looks at some of their achievements and their shortcomings, and notes that they have adopted the same cautious attitude as their co-religionists in Taiwan, which may nurture an alternate civility, but does not sustain necessarily political reform.

Key words: Buddhism, China, religion and state, civility, social policy, charity.

Philanthropie bouddhiste et politiques sociales en Chine: la possibilité d'une sociabilité nouvelle?

Les institutions bouddhistes chinoises représentent-elles une source de sociabilité nouvelle pouvant favoriser une évolution vers un système politique plus ouvert ? On peut y répondre dans une perspective comparée qui prend en compte trois domaines d'intervention où des conflits peuvent émerger entre autorités étatiques et religieuses: l'éducation, la santé, et l'aide publique. Après un survol des politiques sociales chinoises et du rôle minimal dévolu aux institutions religieuses dans leur mise en œuvre, il est fait état des actions philanthropiques des institutions bouddhistes. Celles-ci ont adopté la même prudence que leurs collègues taïwanaises: une attitude propice à la civilité, certes, mais pas un encouragement à la réforme politique.

Mots-clés : bouddhisme, Chine, religion et État, sociabilité, politiques sociales, philanthropie.

Filantropía budista y políticas sociales en China: la posibilidad de nuevas habilidades sociales?

Este artículo explora la posibilidad de que las instituciones budistas chinas pueden ser una fuente de nuevas habilidades sociales que pueden promover un sistema político más abierto. El artículo aborda esta cuestión desde una perspectiva comparativa y considera tres áreas de intervención donde pueden surgir conflictos entre las autoridades estatales y religiosas en la que éste puede favorecer los intereses de la sociedad: la educación, la salud y el apoyo del público. Después de un breve estudio de las políticas sociales de China y el papel mínimo asignado a las instituciones religiosas en su aplicación, el artículo considera que las instituciones filantrópicas budista. Este estudio de los logros alcanzados por la constatación de que han adoptado la misma actitud prudente que sus contrapartes en Taiwán: lo que puede favorezca la civilidad, sin duda, pero no necesariamente sostener la reforma política.

Palabras clave: budismo, China, la religión y el Estado, la civilidad, política social, filantropía.