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- 1 The emergence of lay Buddhism (jushi fojiao) is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the modern history of Chinese Buddhism¹. Lay believers have always been economically and politically indispensable to Buddhism; but since the end of the nineteenth century, in the context of modernisation, the conditions, forms and effects of lay Buddhists living in groups have greatly changed. Firstly, the lay Buddhist elite and some non-Buddhist intellectuals confronted with the philosophies and trends of Western social thinking, and influenced by positivist historical research, have created a new kind of discourse space, Buddhology (foxue), in which they occupy a predominant place². In other words, the intellectual concept of Buddhism, being dominated by lay people, differs from the concept of Buddhism as a self-sufficient system of values and techniques for salvation.
- 2 Secondly, lay Buddhists are organised in a new way. They form associations and schools, recruit disciples or pupils, publish books and give conferences. Formerly, such areas of activity as already existed were not so systematically organised outside the monastery walls³. In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century in China, the revival of Buddhism—if we may call it that—was driven by lay Buddhists rather than by monks.
- 3 The impact of these two innovations is considerable; the controversy that they have aroused between monks and lay people persists to the present day⁴. Buddhology is recognised as an authentic discipline, due to the establishment and the expansion within the Chinese world of university institutions of the Western type, even though the relationship between the Buddhologists and Buddhism is rather ambiguous⁵. On the other hand, the organisation of lay Buddhists has not been so successful, despite its rapid growth in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, seeking to increase its control of religious institutions, both the Chinese communist party and the nationalist

Kuomintang government (exiled to Taiwan since 1949) favoured the monopoly of the official Buddhist institution while repressing unofficial religious groupings⁶.

- 4 The situation changed in the 1980s. Along with the economic, social and political reforms, lay Buddhism acquired new vigour in the Chinese world. This was particularly so in Taiwan where, thanks to democratisation and (since 1989) freedom of association, Buddhism entered upon a new era of differentiation and pluralism⁷. New groupings of lay Buddhists emerged and their activities took quite diverse forms⁸.
- 5 Among these groups, the Modern Chan Society (Xiandaichan) is a remarkable case. Founded by Li Yuansong, (1957-2003) at the end of the 1980s, almost all its members were lay Buddhists. But, unlike other lay Buddhist groups subject to the authority of the monks, it challenged their religious leadership and emphasised the idea of equality between monks and lay believers. The Modern Chan Society claimed independent authority for itself in the management of “salvation goods”, to create, justify and teach the techniques of relief. Thus, relations between this group of lay people and the monasteries—the traditional Buddhist institutions—became more competitive than hierarchical, less complementary than alternative.
- 6 Before his death in 2003, Li Yuansong dissolved the Modern Chan Society, which he himself had founded; he renamed his group “Community for Devotion to the Buddha Amitabha” (mituo gongxiuhui), entrusting its leadership to a monk of the Pure Land school of Buddhism (jingtu zong). Since then, strictly speaking, the Modern Chan Society has not existed any longer. But this group, being the first autonomous community of lay Buddhists to have its own clergy, did leave a significant mark on the history of Chinese Buddhism. This article does not aim to analyse all the historical and religious aspects of the movement⁹, but will trace briefly the first stages of its development in the field of modern Buddhism.
- 7 Like many new religious groups, the Modern Chan Society was founded by an “exemplary prophet”, in the phrase coined by Weber¹⁰: Li Yuansong. Born in 1957, in Shiting near Taipei, he was a minor’s son. His family’s poverty forced him to halt his studies after primary school, and he helped his parents selling fruit. When he was 13, influenced by his mother, Li converted to Yiguandao—a popular religious sect that, by its own definition, brings all Chinese religious elements within the “One Unifying Thread”. He followed this religion for nine years. He was a gifted boy: only seven days after his conversion to Yiguandao, he became a little “Master” (jiangshi). To fulfil his teaching duties, he read the traditional classics and thus made his first acquaintance with Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian thought. Then, thanks to his contact with students, he began reading texts about the human sciences, such as essays on psychology. At the start of the 1980s, he was converted to Buddhism by Master Wuguang, a monk of the esoteric school. Subsequently, he made the acquaintance of Hongyin, a Buddhist monk and disciple of the great master Yinshun (1906-2005). Li immersed himself for five years in Yinshun’s writings, and also read many other Buddhist classics.
- 8 In 1988, Li Yuansong ceased to be an ordinary Buddhist. In the spring of that year he experienced his own spiritual enlightenment. This event conferred on him the charisma indispensable to a Buddhist saint, the founder of a sect.
- 9 Li’s own narrative of his spiritual awakening is little different from those of the other Chan Masters in history¹¹: after diligent research into the truth and long meditation, he realised the truth suddenly thanks to a fortuitous event. In his account and that of other

writers, he had by 1983 achieved a certain degree of maturity, but felt that his “intellectual understanding had no power to transform the doubts and anxieties about life and death that continued to lurk in the depths of the spirit”. From 1986 onwards, he devoted himself fiercely to the practice of Chan meditation. Despite being in full-time employment, he practised seated meditation for eight or more hours a day for a period of over three years, undergoing dozens of small and large enlightenment experiences. In February 1988, Li asked himself a series of basic questions, such as: is the doctrine of “conditioned co-arising and non-self” (yuanqi wuwo) really true? Who can prove it? For eleven days he meditated on these questions. Suddenly, while he was meditating, a drumbeat sounded in his ears. With that “bang”, all his doubts disappeared and at last his heart was at peace.

- 10 Soon after his decisive enlightenment, Li began to show others the path leading to relief from suffering. In March 1988, he began teaching Chan in a Buddhist cultural centre and at the home of one of his friends in Taipei. At these classes he became acquainted with his first assistants, some of whom were to become the first clerics of the Modern Chan Society. He published his first book, based on his classes, *Speaking about Modern Chan to Modern Men*¹², which was highly successful. In April 1989, Li Yuansong, his friends and followers founded the Modern Chan Society.
- 11 From the start, Li was set upon making radical reforms to Buddhism. In December 1988, he published an article entitled “What Buddhism do we need?”¹³ In his view, contemporary Buddhism had to be tolerant, free of the clan mentality; and it had to emphasise the importance of meditation. His implication was that traditional Buddhism in Taiwan had until then been uncharitable, sectarian and empty of true religious practice. Speaking at a conference, Li declared that the aim of the Modern Chan Society was to revive the Chan of the Tang and Song dynasties: he said the problem with Buddhism in Taiwan was that “Chan exists, but without a Chan master”.
- 12 In an interview with the philosopher Yang Hui-nan in 1998¹⁴, Li explained the reasons for creating the Modern Chan. According to him, times had changed, and Chan had to adapt to modern life and to promote an ethical approach to this new world. Unfortunately, traditional Buddhism could not satisfy the needs of modern people, and some Buddhists were content to treat Chan as a subject for conversation.
- 13 In May 1993, in a lecture (to members of the Modern Chan Society) on “Why I propose Modern Chan, and the Future Direction of the Modern Chan Society”¹⁵, Li propounded a more direct and systematic critique of traditional Buddhism. He gave two reasons for the decline of Buddhism in Taiwan: one related to persons, the other to Dharma¹⁶. Some Buddhist teachers, he said, had depraved minds. As for Dharma, he pointed to three problems. Firstly, the essential ideas of Buddhism were not properly understood by its followers. Without such an understanding of these ideas, even charitable works in the name of Buddhism could not be real Buddhism. Secondly, hardly anyone was following the path to the relief of suffering, and no one was able clearly to expound the systematic method for Buddhist liberation. Thirdly, traditional Buddhism was continuing to follow outdated rules; and its notions and vision of life were incompatible with the spirit of our times. This was why those seeking to practise Buddhism often found themselves confused or confronted by a dilemma. Above all, traditional Buddhism was out of step with the spirit of the times, which was characterised by “rationality, humanity and openness”.
- 14 While continuing their criticism of traditional Buddhism, Li and his followers were developing their own doctrine, which became increasingly sophisticated and

systematised. At the start of 1992, the Modern Chan Society made public the “Ten Principles insisted upon by the Modern Chan Society”¹⁷ as an appeal for reform. The main ideas of this declaration are the following.

- 15 Sensual passion and desire must be directed rather than repressed.
- 16 The scientific and humanitarian spirit must become the basis of the Buddhist’s religious life. We must rethink the doctrines of traditional Buddhism, which are opposed to the modern spirit.
- 17 Those wishing to follow the “way of the Bodhisattva”¹⁸ must first take to heart the lives of those around them. They should not give up their responsibilities and lay duties to practise Buddhism.
- 18 For Buddhists, the most important thing is Dharma, but not monastic discipline. Dharma is the eternal truth. The monastic rules were drawn up more than two thousand years ago and have become unacceptable for most people today.
- 19 Enlightenment is difficult to achieve, but not impossible. All of us have the possibility of achieving salvation during our lifetimes.
- 20 As the religion of wisdom, Buddhism must lay the emphasis on the wisdom of salvation (Prajnaparamita) rather than on supernatural powers and charitable works.
- 21 Buddhism must be deeply concerned with teaching. It is wrong for it to spend most of its resources on building great monasteries.
- 22 Each Buddhist is entitled to represent the “three treasures” of Buddhism¹⁹ provided that he or she lives according to Dharma, wisely and compassionately.
- 23 A good Buddhist must have faith in his belief, but he may also recognise other religions as pathways to truth.
- 24 The Modern Chan Society is an organisation with its own genealogy, its own disciplinary rules and its own institutions.
- 25 In 1992, Li summed up the difference between Modern Chan and traditional Buddhism in nine points: he called them the “Styles of the Modern Chan Society”²⁰ when his writings were published in mainland China in 1996. Here, in brief, are the nine points.
- 26 We insist on the principle of empiricism. While science is not all-powerful, we believe that the rational, scientific spirit can help Buddhists to avoid superstition and blind obedience to authority.
- 27 It is ignorance and the conception of the inherent existence of the “self”—not sensual passion or desire—that are obstacles in the path to relief from suffering.
- 28 We should not abandon our responsibilities or our lay, human duties, for individual religious ideals.
- 29 The spirit of chivalry (xiayi jingshen) is the foundation of all virtues.
- 30 The Modern Chan Society considers that the old-time monastic disciplines from India, established 2,000 years ago, are not in keeping with the spirit of the way of the Bodhisattva, the Great Vehicle (or Mahayana). Not only are they impossible to respect in modern life, but also they are in contradiction to the principles of the wisdom of salvation. We support only moral principles and we obey the law.

- 31 The principle method of Modern Chan is to live for the present moment with the full force of the entire universe. Some of the traditional Chan methods are ineffective in modern life.
- 32 Enlightenment is not so difficult to attain, even though each Buddhist has differing capacities. Those of superior ability may reach enlightenment suddenly and directly.
- 33 We bring together and combine the teachings and practices of the Great Vehicle, the Lesser Vehicle (or Hinayana) and the esoteric school.
- 34 The true Sangha is composed of virtuous believers. Lay people may be Bodhisattvas just like monks. There is no basis to the traditional two-thousand-year-old belief that monks are superior to lay believers.
- 35 In his inaugural speech at the “Foundation of the Culture and Education of Modern Chan” in 1993, Li Yuansong defined the characteristics of the Modern Chan Society. In the main, they were identical to these nine points. However, Li stressed that, if one wished to achieve release from suffering, one had first to become a “modern person”. In his view, a modern person was distinguished by a rational faith, a scientific attitude, a favourable opinion of democracy and equality and, in general, by a modern, university culture.
- 36 Moreover, Li developed a series of methods for practising Buddhism, divided into two main groups: some were aimed at those who really trusted him and the others were aimed at all Buddhists interested in Modern Chan. These methods were composed of practices divided into thirteen stages²¹. Those able to progress to the thirteenth stage would experience the Bodhisattva spirit and would enjoy absolute liberation.
- 37 In April 1989, Li drafted the “Rules of the Modern Chan Society”, which is the “basic law” of his group²². These rules have been revised several times since, but Li’s ideal has never changed. It is to build “an organised, institutionalised and parliamentary Sangha of Bodhisattvas”.
- 38 The term “Sangha of Bodhisattvas” (*pusa sengtuan*) comes from the *Mahaprajnaparamita sastra* (The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom) by Nagarjuna, an Indian Buddhist philosopher who lived between the third and fourth centuries. Nagarjuna²³ defined two sorts of Sangha. The first was composed of Buddhists behaving like monks and learning the Lesser Vehicle. Its members were the *sravaka* monks (*shengwen seng*). The second was drawn from lay Buddhists learning the Great Vehicle; its members were Bodhisattva monks (*pusa seng*). This classification is not universally accepted by Chinese Buddhists, and differing opinions on the question may be found in the Buddhist classics. In reality, lay Buddhists have never been recognised as members of the Sangha even though some lay believers have been respected for their greatness. The Sangha of Bodhisattvas has never existed in Chinese history²⁴. But the main thing for the Modern Chan Society was to find in the past a source that might legitimise the formation of a lay Sangha.
- 39 In Li Yuansong’s “Foreword to the ‘Rules of the Modern Chan Society’”, he links the notion of a Sangha of Bodhisattvas to the lay Buddhism of modern times²⁵:
- 40 “The creation of a Sangha of Bodhisattvas has been an ideal for Great Vehicle Buddhism since its origins, and is mentioned many times in the classics. As early as one thousand seven hundred years ago, the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna wished to put this aspiration into practice, but unfortunately his great design was never realised, for at that time the traditional schools were still dominant in India. Over the past few centuries, due to the advances in civilisation and human knowledge, scientific studies of Buddhism and

Buddhology emerged in Europe, the United States and Japan. Later on, in China, scholars of the Republican period, such as Yang Renshan and Ouyang Jingwu, advocated lay Buddhism. Then the great contemporary Master Yinshun encouraged and endorsed in his Miaoyunji²⁶ the theory of the Sangha of Bodhisattvas. [...] Influenced by all that and after long research into Buddhism, I naturally conceived the idea of reforming Buddhism and taking up the unrealised project of Nagarjuna. We must establish another form of Sangha, made up of Bodhisattvas, in addition to the monastic Sangha of sravakas. It will be a Buddhist community that makes no distinction between lay believers and monks. We do not define the Sangha by its external appearance. Our aim is to spread the ideas of Wisdom, Emptiness and Nirvana, as well as the Buddhist experience of relieving suffering in modern society.”

- 41 The Chinese translation of Sangha is sengqie or sengtuan, a “group of monks”. In Chinese Buddhism, the term Sangha is analogous to the notion of “clergy”. The Sangha is normally restricted to monks and inaccessible to lay believers. Thus, for the first time in the history of Chinese Buddhism, a group of lay believers declared that it would set up its own “group of monks”, its own clergy.
- 42 One prophet does not make a clergy. Setting up a clergy means that the prophet and his disciples must change themselves into priests or clerics, who preserve, manage and distribute the salvation goods²⁷. From a sociological viewpoint, the clergy is a privileged and hierarchical group, a priestly body specially organised to perform a religious function²⁸. The clerics are privileged in comparison to ordinary believers, because they have the exclusive right—in a symbolically legitimised way—to interpret the pathway to salvation and to preside over sacred rituals. At the same time, members of the clergy are organised in an official hierarchy. This organisation allows members of the clergy to be mobilised from the top down, by which means the authority of the leading clerics is protected. Lower-ranking clerics are accorded the prospect of promotion. The Modern Chan Society was no exception in this respect.
- 43 Those adhering to the Modern Chan Society and merely attending its classes could be considered, strictly speaking, as lay believers. Adherents of this kind numbered about twelve thousand in 1994. Those deciding officially to join the Modern Chan Society were obliged to obtain the recommendation of their Master and to take an exam. If the candidates’ faith and knowledge were confirmed, they were then authorised to sign a “Contract of Being Converted to Master” (baishi qiejie shu) and thus they won official status in the community. The number of official members of the Modern Chan Society rose to about 1,000 before 1994, but later fell back to about 500 to 700. These members, who might be considered clerics, were originally ranked in five grades: “Venerable in the Teaching of Dharma”, (chuanfa zhanglao), “Instructor in the Teaching of Dharma” (chuanfa zhidao laoshi), “Instructor in Meditation” (zhuqi zhidao laoshi), “Assistant Instructor” (zhujiao) and “House Disciple” (rushu dizi). After several adjustments and the elimination of the grade of “Assistant Instructor”, the system finally had only four grades of clerics. For each grade, the required qualities, the nomination process, the disciplinary rules and the limitations to authority were clearly set out.
- 44 For example, only those on the two highest grades were entitled to recruit disciples. To become an instructor of the teaching of Dharma, one needed a certificate from the Venerable; moreover, one had to devote one’s entire life to the building of the Sangha of Bodhisattvas. Only a dozen people won that title. Disciples of the lowest grade had to be attached to their Masters. They were forbidden to disclose the community’s affairs to the

outside world, or to give a lecture without their Masters' agreement or to recruit pupils. The Venerable, of course, was Li Yuansong.

- 45 Alongside the hierarchy, Li also established a genealogical naming system, called the "Schematic of Bloodstream Lineage" (xuemaitu). This pattern consisted of 16 characters making up two sentences: "With the Chan method for the enlightenment of the spirit, like our ancestors, we seek fully to perceive the nature of Dharma. With a compassionate will as wide as the sea, we seek to save all sentient beings.". When a novice joined the community, he was baptised with a new name by his Master. This name had to contain a character selected according to the order of the schematic. This naming system is similar to that employed by the monastic clergy.
- 46 At first, the main activities of the Modern Chan Society were the "Chan classes". At that time, the Modern Chan Society was only a small community. But it developed quickly. In 1990, about 200 people were official members. A publishing house, an editorial office for periodicals and ten practice houses were set up. The organisation grew in complexity.
- 47 The Society's first and also most important institution was the "Dharma-transmission Committee", made up of all the Dharma instructors. Despite the changes in the regulations, it was still the Society's highest authority. Its most important task was to assign clerics to the appropriate grades. As the clergy expanded, the Committee decided in 1990 to set an examination every three months.
- 48 In 1991, the Modern Chan Society created an "Administration Committee" responsible for administrative duties, public relations and communications. Soon afterwards, it set up a "Discipline Commission" to act as a legal service. And lastly, a control system was put in place in the form of a "Criticism Commission".
- 49 In February 1993, the "Modern Chan Foundation for culture and Education" was founded. Its aim was to "propagate in an organised way the ideas of the human sciences and systematically to popularise methods for perfecting the personality and developing the intelligence". This Foundation was also responsible for the Society's administration and its communication with the outside world, tasks formerly undertaken by the Administration Committee. The Foundation was led by the President of the Administration Council and consisted of several different sections (such as information, public relations, youth, aid and finances).
- 50 Between 1988 and 1994, the Modern Chan Society organised a wide range of activities in Taiwan. Those members of the Society with the title of Dharma Instructor gave classes and organised training independently. They even created their own sub-school. The Modern Chan enterprise gathered momentum.
- 51 In June 1994, quite unexpectedly, the Modern Chan Society declared that all its activities would be suspended for two years. Publication of its periodicals and recruitment of disciples were provisionally halted.
- 52 According to Li Yuansong, his original aspiration for the Modern Chan Society had been to train real Masters of Chan, to found a pure and fraternal clergy, to propagate a correct vision of Buddhism and to spread the Modern Chan method. But administrative concerns had become very complex and it had become difficult to recruit competent assistants in sufficient numbers. Furthermore, very few people really wished to follow the way of the Buddha. Most adherents sought only to lead successful lives, to find a peaceful existence and to stay healthy. In such circumstances, if the group had continued its rapid growth, it would have risked losing its lucidity, its capacity for introspection and its will to reform.

Therefore, to remain true to its ideals, the Modern Chan Society had to embark upon a two-year “retreat” in order to purify itself²⁹. In 1996, the Modern Chan Society decided to extend its suspension for a further two years. In fact, this suspension is still in place today, even since the community was reconverted to the Pure Land school in 2003.

- 53 The birth of the Modern Chan Society needs to be seen within the context of Taiwanese society. Like all the other religious phenomena associated with the late 1980s in Taiwan, it answered the spiritual needs of the people after the island’s economic success and political liberalisation³⁰. But to understand the discourse and practices of the Modern Chan Society, it is indispensable to comprehend them in a wider context: the history of Chinese Buddhism, particularly in light of the relationship between monks and lay believers.
- 54 In recent years, growing numbers of research projects have been devoted to how Buddhism has evolved during the twentieth century. But few of them have dealt with the tensions between monks and lay believers, which concern the religious authority issue. In fact, in the Buddhist tradition, the duality of religious virtue is quite clear. As Weber shows, only monks could be full members of the Buddhist community, strictly speaking, all lay people being objects of priestly ministrations, rather than subjects³¹. Admittedly, there were phenomena of competition and even of conflict between different groupings of monks but, compared with lay Buddhists, all the monks together made up one unified priestly body seeking to bar all autonomous lay enterprises from entry to the religious market. Thus, the “transmission of Dharma” by lay believers was taboo in Chinese Buddhism.
- 55 In modern times, within the context of the reconfiguration of Chinese religious beliefs, this tension between monks and lay people arises more acutely. For centuries, Confucianism was the dominant and universal religion. Buddhism, by contrast, was a religion whose practice was subject to the individual’s choice. The lay Buddhist elite who might claim to share religious authority with the monks belonged in reality in the main to the Confucianist elite³². So they already enjoyed a dominant symbolical power in Chinese society, and had no need to claim that status in Buddhism. But in the twentieth century, with the collapse of imperial regime, Confucianism lost its privileged status and was no longer in a position to absorb the elite among the lay Buddhists. At the same time, Buddhism, Taoism and the other Chinese cults became increasingly differentiated. The identity of lay Buddhists became more distinct. Accordingly, the monks’ monopoly of religious matters became far less easy for lay believers to accept. Thus, lay people began to demand equal and autonomous status within Buddhism. The rigorous critique carried out by Ouyang Jingwu (published in 1927³³) illustrates this claim.
- 56 Even so, before the Modern Chan Society, no lay clergy had been set up within Chinese Buddhism. Although the Society bowed out in 2003, its experience is a source of inspiration for all those who take an interest in the transformation of Buddhism. Indeed, the desire of lay Buddhists to share the symbolic power of the monks is inevitable as long as an unequal balance of power exists between these two parties. By analysing the conditions governing the emergence of the Modern Chan Society and its strategies, we shall understand some of the practice of contemporary Buddhism.
- 57 In Buddhism, the most important capital is the “virtue of saintliness”, a necessary precondition for acquiring religious authority. Thus, only a lay person possessing this capital, one who has attained personal enlightenment and thus acquired religious

saintliness—in other words, one who has the qualities of an exemplary prophet—is capable of changing the authority of the monks.

- 58 A prophet is of necessity a specialist, but the converse is not always true. To be a specialist, it is enough to have an intellectual knowledge of religion. But a prophet must equally possess religious capital, such as the experience of enlightenment. This is what endows that person with the authority to exercise religious leadership. In principle, specialists such as Buddhologists have not the legitimacy to represent the Buddha and Dharma. For this reason, the genesis and the development of Buddhology are not enough to affect the dominant status of monks. Despite their erudition and their claim to equality with the monks, the lay specialists such as Ouyang Jingwu have never, strictly speaking, built up a clergy. They have been able to set up schools and to teach pupils, but without having any recognised religious status; what they teach is more knowledge than Dharma. By contrast, Li Yuansong acquired the virtue of saintliness before launching his reforms. Indeed, he earned legitimacy for promoting his version of the techniques for relieving suffering and for building a new power order only through having declared that he had crossed the threshold of Buddhist enlightenment.
- 59 Generally speaking, the virtue of saintliness requires legitimisation by tradition, itself represented by “the Church”, so it is very difficult for a prophet independently to claim status. In Chan Buddhism, however, this problem becomes relatively simple. The Chan school is from the outset opposed to scholastic Buddhism. In the Chan view, the aim of practising Buddhism is to attain, by whatever means, awakening; that is to say, the aim is to discover one’s own “true nature”. This task may be accomplished through the efforts of an individual person. Plainly, this subjective individualism allows a prophet to sanctify himself, without needing to be verified by the institution. In consequence, Chinese Buddhists presenting themselves as prophets, in the twentieth century, have often joined the Chan school³⁴, Li Yuansong being only one of them.
- 60 But in practice, since the Tang and Song dynasties, the golden age of Chan, few monks of the Chan school have been recognised as saints during their lifetimes. More usually, it was only after their death that their accomplishment of a work of saintliness was acknowledged. Seen from a sociological perspective, this amounts to the strategy of a group of monks for protecting their order within the field of Buddhism. Enlightenment or awakening spring from a high level of religious virtue. While there is no strict control over how an individual’s estimate of his own enlightenment should be acknowledged, the proliferation of such acknowledgement is likely to entail depreciation of the virtue of saintliness, which in turn may throw the religious market into disarray. Thus, Li’s declaration of enlightenment and his declarations on how one may attain such awakening during one’s lifetime caused some controversy among the Buddhists³⁵.
- 61 The wider the reforms, the greater the need for the changes to be legitimised. As Chinese Buddhism’s first lay believers’ group to have its own clergy, the greatest challenge that the Modern Chan Society encountered was undoubtedly to legitimise its own identity and authority. Without the justification of reforms, the innovation might have turned out a failure, rejected by the traditional authorities and by the public, as was the case with many other short-lived sects. In general, the most effective tool of legitimisation is the reinterpretation of tradition. As we have seen, the Modern Chan Society presented itself as the Sangha of Bodhisattvas as it appears in classic literature; and promoted the slogan “reviving the Chan style of the Tang and Song dynasties”. In this way, it attempted to

translate its novelty into a return to tradition: a strategy often employed by new religious groups.

- 62 But the Modern Chan Society also tried other means to justify itself, appealing to the “polytheistic values” of modern society. In the process of modern institutional differentiation, each social sphere—economic, political, aesthetic, intellectual or erotic—has won its own value, independent of the religious reference. So on the one hand, these values compete with religion³⁶; but on the other hand, they may also work in concert with each other and justify each other, at least in appearance, in a complementary manner. For example, for the Modern Chan Society, modern political and intellectual discourse was also useful in building a source of legitimacy. Li emphasised repeatedly that “democratic”, “egalitarian”, “humanitarian”, “rational”, “scientific”, and “empiricist” characteristics were the first conditions for the Buddhist liberation and represented moral standards for the organisation of his clergy. Thus, monastic life, vows of celibacy, the superiority of monks, and so on, might become the manifestations of irresponsibility, irrationality, inequality and anti-democracy. In this way, the Modern Chan Society took an effective stand against traditional Buddhism and attracted many adherents.
- 63 A religious community is produced when people choose to associate themselves and participate in a daily life as proposed to them by the prophet³⁷. Of course, at the start, only a small number of participants share the same collective consciousness. If the prophet is able to preserve his charisma and mobilise the religious interest of his disciples, the group can function. But, as the number of members grows and their activities diversify, the group must have recourse to more complex organisational and management techniques: this leads to institutionalisation and bureaucracy.
- 64 Institutionalisation has one paradoxical consequence. The bureaucratic institution, as a model of organisation based on formal rationality, lays stress upon the division of labour and on calculating the adopted procedures; whereas religious aims appealing to a substantive conception of rationality tend to have a lesser effect on modes of organisation. It can happen that, because the dehumanising effect of bureaucracy strengthens the less personal types of relationships, the organisation may appear progressively more anonymous and abstract. The affective intensity of people’s experience of religious activities can be weakened; and members may feel themselves increasingly distanced from the institution, so that their participation becomes only nominal. In such circumstances, there is a risk that the clergy will exercise only a formal authority³⁸. In this perspective, the “retreat” of the Modern Chan Society since 1994 illustrates the dilemma confronting any new religious group in the course of its development.
- 65 Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

NOTES

1. For an outline account of how lay Buddhism has developed in modern China, see Fori, “Jinxiandai jushifojiao”(Lay Buddhism Today), Peking, *Fayin*, No. 5, 1998, pp. 13-18. The word *jushi* in contemporary intellectual discourse refers specifically to lay Buddhists having a certain political, economic or cultural capital.
2. Liu Chengyou shows clearly the contributions made by committed lay believers to Buddhology in *Jinxiandai jushi foxue yanjiu* (Study on the Buddhology of Lay Buddhists in Modern and Contemporary China), Chengdu, Bashu shushe, 2002. Modern Buddhology also owes a lot to non-Buddhist intellectuals such as Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Chen Yuan (1880-1971).
3. The most important forerunner was Yang Wenhui (or Yang Renshan, 1837-1911) who founded the Jinling Printing Works for Buddhist Classics (*Jinling kejing chu*) with lay Buddhists in 1866. In 1907, he founded the Buddhist school *Zhizhuan jingshe* and, in 1910, the first modern organisation of lay Buddhists, the Association for Buddhist Study (*Foxue yanjiu hui*). His pupil Ouyang Jian (or Ouyang Jingwu, 1871-1943), another pioneer of lay Buddhism, founded the Chinese Institute of Buddhism (*Zhina neixueyuan*) in 1922. Cf. Sun Yongyan, “Yang Wenhui yu jindai fojiao fuxing” (Yang Wenhui and the modern revival of Buddhism), *Pumen xuebao* (Buddhist Journal of Pumen), Vol. 5, September 2001, Kaohsiung, pp. 113-162. Yang Wenhui is even considered the father of modern Buddhism by Holmes Welch, in *The Buddhist Revival in Modern China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1968, Chapter 1.
4. For the autonomy of lay Buddhism, see Wen Chin-Ko, “Taiwan jushi fojiao de zhanwang” (Perspectives on lay Buddhism in Taiwan), *Shengming fangxiang zhi xingsi—jianshi Taiwan fojiao* (Reflexion on the direction of life. An observation of Taiwanese Buddhism), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1994, pp. 239-243; on the opposing opinion of the monks, see Jiqun, “Jushi fojiao’ taijiu” (Examination of lay Buddhism), *Jiechuang foxue* (Buddhist study of Jiechuang), Changsha, Yuelu shushe, 2001, Vol. 1, online text (<http://jiqun.com/dispfile.php?id=32>).
5. See Vincent Goossaert, “Les sciences sociales découvrent le bouddhisme chinois du XX^e siècle”, *Archives de Sciences sociales des religions*, October-December 2002, pp. 38-39.
6. In the People’s Republic, the Buddhist Association of China, founded in 1953, is the only authorised Buddhist association. During the 1950s and 1960s, nearly all independent Buddhist groups were suppressed, including for example the Young Buddhist Association of Shanghai and the Sanshi Study Association of Peking. For a general study of Chinese Buddhism in this period, see Holmes Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1972. In Taiwan, the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China, an official association endorsed by the Kuomintang, dominated Buddhist circles from 1952 until 1987, when martial law was lifted. Cf. Jiang Canteng, *Taiwan fojiao bainian shi zhi yanjiu, 1895-1995* (Study of the history of Taiwanese Buddhism from 1895 to 1995), Taipei, Nantian shuju, 1996, pp. 250-253.
7. See Jiang Canteng, *ibid.*, pp. 448-450. For an overview of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism, see Jiang Canteng, *Taiwan dangdai fojiao* (Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism), Taipei, Nantian shuju, 2000. For an outline of the development of Buddhism in Taiwan,

see Wang Shunmin, “Dangdai Taiwan fojiao bianqian zhi kaocha” (Changes in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism), *Zhonghua foxue xuebao* (Chung-Hwa Journal of Buddhist studies), Taipei, Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, No. 8, 1995, pp. 315-344.

8. Cf. Wen Chin-Ko, “Taiwan jushi fojiao de zhanwang”.

9. For earlier research on the Modern Chan Society, cf. Cheng Chih-Ming, “Li Yuansong yu xiandaichan” (Li Yuansong and Modern Chan), *Taiwan dangdai xinxing fojiao—chanjiao pian* (New Contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan. Volume Chan), Chiayi, Nanhua guanli xueyuan (Nanhua Management Institute), 1998, pp. 331-399; “Jieyan hou Taiwan fojiao xinxing jiaopai zhi yanjiu—Yang Hui-nan jiaoshou fang xiandaichan chuangshiren Li Yuansong laoshi” (The study of new Buddhist groups in Taiwan since the lifting of martial law. Interview with Master Li Yuansong conducted by Professor Yang Hui-nan), in Li Yuansong, *Chan de chuanxi* (Chan apprenticeship), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 2000, pp. 213-284; Chang Chia-Yin, “Xiandaichan jiqi sixiang tese” (Modern Chan and the features of its thinking), *World Hongming Philosophical Quarterly*, December 2002, <http://www.whpq.org/whpq/200012/200012/003.htm>; Wen Chin-Ko, “Xiandaichan de jieliu guan” (The vision of the monastic discipline of Modern Chan), *Shijie zongjiao xuekan* (Journal of World Religions), No. 3, 2004, pp. 27-82, Chiayi.

10. The “prophet” is the ideal type of religious role as conceptualised by Max Weber, a role distinct from “priest” and “magician”. The prophet is not simply the spokesman for God, rather, he is the founder, real or potential, of a new religious trend, who “claims his authority by invoking a personal revelation or claiming charisma”, Max Weber, *Economie et Société*, tome I, Paris, Plon, 1971, pp. 464-474. Weber distinguishes the “ethical prophecy” from the “exemplary prophecy”. An exemplary prophet “can be an exemplary man who, by his personal example, shows others the paths to religious salvation, the Buddha, for example”, Weber, *Ibid.*, p. 471. Li Yuansong may be considered as an exemplary prophet, because his authority is based on his own Chan enlightenment and on his charisma, and because he claims to offer a new way of relieving suffering. For critiques of Weber’s religious typology, and its usefulness, see Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Jean-Paul Willaime, *Sociologies et religion*, Paris, PUF, 2001, pp. 74-76; Françoise Champion and Louis Hourmant, “Nouveaux mouvements religieux’ et sectes”, Françoise Champion and Martine Cohen (eds.), *Sectes et démocratie*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, pp. 59-85.

11. Cf. “Xiri ceng wei meihua zui bugui—Li laoshi tan xuefo yinyuan yu jingyan” (Once I was drunk with the plum-tree flower and forgot to go home. The Buddhist experience of Master Li), Interview with Li Yuansong, conducted by Liang Han-Yi, transcribed by Wen Chin-Ko, in Li Yuansong, *Xiri ceng wei meihua zui bugui—Jingyanzhuyi de xiandaichan xinban* (Once I was drunk with the plum-tree flower and forgot to go home. The Empiricist Modern Chan, New Edition), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1996, pp. 178-212.

12. *Yu xiandairen lun xiandaichan*, Taipei, Wenshu chubanshe, 1st edition, 1989.

13. “Women xuyao shenmoyang de fofa”, reissued in *Xiandairen ruhe xuechan—chaoyue xinling de maodun yu buan* (The method of Chan apprenticeship for modern men. Overcoming contradictions and spiritual anxiety), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1994, pp. 68-76.

14. Li Yuansong, *Chan de chuanxi*, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-284.

15. “Cong weishenme tichang xiandaichan dao xiandaichan weilai fazhan fangxiang zhi wojian”, *Chan de xiuxing yu chan de shenghuo* (Chan practice and Chan life), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1994, pp. 278-282.

16. Dharma, *fa* in Chinese, is the “law”, the Buddhist truth.

17. “Fojiao xiandaichan shixiang jianchi”, *Xiandanchan yuekan* (Monthly Journal of Modern Chan), No. 27, March 1992.
18. A *bodhisattva*, or *pusa* in Chinese, seeks enlightenment and devotes himself to helping others; he is a future Buddha.
19. The Buddha, Dharma and *Sangha*. The term *Sangha* was originally used to mean the community of Buddhists in a strict sense, that is to say, the community of monks.
20. Cf. Li Yuansong, “Xiandaichan zhende zheme kepa ma?” (Is Modern Chan so terrible?), *Xiandairen ruhe xuechan*, pp. 86-92.
21. Cf. Li Yuansong, *Chan de xiuxing yu chan de shenghuo*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-65.
22. See Li Yuansong, *Chanmen yiye* (A page of Chan), Taipei, Xiandaichan, 1997, appendix.
23. Cf. *Mahaprajnaparamita sastra*, book 34.
24. Only one exceptional case is recorded at the end of the sixth century. An emperor of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581) forbade some monks to shave their heads and forced them to wear jade. These monks were called “Bodhisattva-monks”. But clearly they did not constitute a *Sangha* of Bodhisattvas in the sense intended by Nagarjuna.
25. Li Yuansong, “Xiandaichan zongmenguiju xu” (Foreword to the “Rules of the Modern Chan Society”), *Jianli Dacheng Fojiao Xin Zongpai de Xinlu—xiandaichan xuwen ji* (The way of thinking towards building a new school of Great Vehicle Buddhism. Collection of Modern Chan foreword), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1998, pp. 48-52.
26. The 24 volumes of the *Miaoyunji* (Collection of Wonderful Clouds), the collected works of Yinshun, were published in order from the 1970s onwards, Taipei, Zhengwen chubanshe.
27. Cf. Max Weber, *Sociologie des religions*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 168.
28. On the sociological definition of the clergy, see Sabino Acquaviva and Enzo Pace, *La Sociologie des religions*, Paris, Cerf, 1994, pp. 123-133; Pierre Bourdieu, “Genèse et structure du champ religieux”, in *Revue française de sociologie*, XII, 1971, pp. 295-334; Weber, *ibid.*, pp. 167-176.
29. Cf. *Xiandaichan yuekan*, No. 45, August, 1994.
30. Cf. Chu Hai-yuan, “Taiwan xinxing zongjiao xianxiang” (The New Religious Phenomena in Taiwan), in Song Wen-Li and Hsu Cheng-Kuang (ed.), *Taiwan xinxing shehui yundong* (The New Social Movements in Taiwan), Taipei, Juliu tushu gongsi, 1989, pp. 229-243; “Jieyan, zongjiao ziyou yu zongjiao fazan” (The lifting of martial law, religious freedom and religious development), Committee for Taiwanese Studies of the Academia Sinica (dir.), *Weiquantizhi de bianqian—jieyan hou de Taiwan* (Change in the authoritarian regime: Taiwan since the lifting of martial law), Taipei, Preparatory Office of the Institute of Taiwanese history, 2001, pp. 249-276.
31. Weber, *Sociologie des religions*, p. 334.
32. On the overlapping of the lay Buddhist elite and the Confucianist elite, see Pan Guiming, *Zhongguo jushi fojiao shi* (The history of Chinese lay Buddhism), Peking, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000.
33. Cf. Wen Chin-Ko, “Mingguo yilai jushi fojiao de lilun chujing” (The theoretical situation of lay Buddhism since the Republican period), *Jicheng yu pipan Yinshun fashi renjian fojiao sixiang* (Taking on and criticising the thoughts of Master Yinshun on “Buddhism in this world”), Taipei, Xiandaichan chubanshe, 2001, pp. 375-383.
34. Among them, Yuan Huanxian (1887-1966), Yang Du (1875-1931) and Nan Huaijin (born 1918). Cf. Chen Bing and Deng Zimei, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo fojiao* (Chinese Buddhism in the twentieth century), Peking, Minzu chubanshe, 2002, pp. 229-310.

35. Cf. Lin Chien-Te, *Zhushuo zhong diyi—liting fotuo zai renjian* (The best doctrine: for the Buddha in this world), Tainan, Zhonghua fojiao baike wenxian jijinhui, 2003; Wen Chin-Ko, “Jingtai Guoqi jushi” (Reply to Guoqi), *Jicheng yu pipan Yinshun fashi renjian fojiao sixiang*, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-210.
36. Weber, “Considération intermédiaire: théorie des degrees”, in *Sociology of Religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 410-460.
37. Weber, *ibid.*, p. 168.
38. Sabino Acquaviva and Enzo Pace, *op. cit.*; Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, New York, Random House, Inc., Vintage Books Edition, 1974, pp. 185-188.
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RÉSUMÉS

Founded in Taiwan in 1989, the Modern Chan Society was a community of lay Buddhists that challenged monks' religious privileges and put forward the idea of equality between monks and lay believers. It asserted an independent authority from that of the monasteries in managing “salvation goods” and accordingly recruited its own clergy. In tracing the history of the Modern Chan Society, this article assesses modern Chinese Buddhism: the role of the prophet in symbolic power, the conditions governing the emergence of a prophet, the legitimisation of religious reforms in modern practice and the paradox of institutionalisation.