Report from China :

A Post-Cultural Revolution Look at Buddhism

John and Sarah Strong

Since August 1966, apart from the scattered reports of a few visitors, the western world has seen nothing substantial of Buddhism in China. In this field, as in many others, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution brought an almost total eclipse. But today Buddhism is beginning to re-emerge. There are two principal signs of this: in Peking, the Chinese Buddhist Association is starting to function again; and, throughout the country, a number of Buddhist monasteries are once more open to visitors. In addition, there are numerous minor indications: Peking University, for example, is planning a course on Chinese Philosophy which would include lectures on the history of Buddhism; Buddhist art treasures are on display in many of the recently re-opened museums; Mao Tse-tung is said to have patterned his calligraphy on that of a Buddhist monk in Hunan; and handicraft factories are once again producing ivory Kuan-yins and miniature pagodas for export.

What we would like to do here is to report as concisely as possible on the signs of Buddhist activity which we were able to see during a tour of China in July-August 1972.[1] Perhaps the most important of these was the resurfacing of the Chinese Buddhist Association.[2] On 14 July, in Peking, we made a visit to Chao P'u-ch'u who has been a leading member of that Association since its formation in 1953. He received us at his organization's headquarters in the Kuang-chi ssu. From him, it is clear that the Association, which ceased its activities during the Cultural Revolution, is slowly starting to function again. Its purposes will remain the same as before: to unite the Buddhists of China in support of socialist construction, to engage in Buddhist research work, and to promote the causes of world peace and friendly relations with Buddhist countries.

1. Like many other visitors we were travelling as guests of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries; their knowledge of our own interest in Buddhism, and our family connections with the late American writer Anna Louise Strong may have helped to pave the way to a number of the Buddhist places we saw. Our visit lasted from 7 July to 19 August. Our itinerary from Hong Kong to Hong Kong was as follows: Canton, Peking, Lin hsien, Chengchow, Loyang, Sian, Yenan, Sian, Tachai, Peking, Nanking, Soochow, Shanghai, Canton.

2. It is not the purpose of this report to trace the history of the Chinese Buddhist Association, its relation to the government, and its role in Chinese foreign policy. Readers may wish to refer to Holmes Welch, " Buddhism since the Cultural Revolution," *C.Q.*, 40 (October-December 1969), pp. 127–35.

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In more concrete terms, this means that once again there will be an organization that can act as a liaison between Buddhist monks and government officials, and that can give Chinese Buddhists in general an organizational identity and a sense of participation at the national level. At the international level, it means (as Chao P'u-ch'u told us) that the Buddhist Association now "expects ties and contacts with Buddhists of foreign countries (including American Buddhists) to increase naturally." This statement, together with Chao's presence at the receptions given last June for Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, and, last September, for Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka of Japan, would appear to be the first steps in this direction. Finally, in terms of research work, it means that the Buddhist Association may soon start publishing again. Chao indicated that it was "planning publications" on Buddhist philosophy and history, but did not choose to be more specific than that.[3]

Clearly, as Chao himself put it, the Buddhist Association is "getting started again." However, a number of questions about it still remain obscure. First, as always, it is difficult to tell what is happening at the local level. The Peking office of the Association does not control the activities of its branches or of other local Buddhist groups. Consequently, it is hard to say how many of them have started their work again. In Shanghai and in Nanking, our requests to visit the local Buddhist Associations were put off; but in Canton, we were able to see the leader of the Canton branch at its headquarters in the Liu yung ssu; and outside of Sian, we were introduced to the abbot of the Hsing chiao ssu, who, as it happens, is also the head of the Sian Buddhist Association. Clearly, some of the branch organizations are following Peking's lead, but how many will do so and how fast they will move is another question.

A second thing which is very difficult to determine is the present size of the Chinese *sangha*. Both Chao P'u-ch'u and the branch leaders we talked to were reluctant even to estimate its numbers, and there are no recent statistics. Cautiously, Chao reverted to an old figure of one half million monks and nuns, adding that "of course" the number had gone down substantially since that estimate was made in the 1950s. The abbot of the Hsing chiao ssu, when pressed for a rough estimate of the size of the *Sangha* in the area of Sian, mentioned the figure of two- to three-hundred monks and nuns, but said that he was not sure of this. Finally in Canton, we got no current statistics at all, but the Buddhist Association leader there put the annual budget of his branch office at "generally over one thousand *yuan*." Hopefully, as the Buddhist Association resurfaces, a new assessment both of its membership and of the size of the *Sangha* will be made available.

Thirdly, it was impossible for us to find out anything about the training of new monks or laymen for the future. Questions in this vein

3. We were, however presented with a number of their "old" publications: a biography of Hsüan Tsang; a translation of Nandimitra's *Record of the Abiding of the Dharma*; a set of prints of Chinese images of Gautama the Buddha.

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immediately engendered the indisputable response that young people today simply do not wish to become monks, and that their parents, for various reasons, have no desire to send them to the monasteries. Also, the Chinese Buddhist Academy, which once offered young monks courses in Buddhist philosophy and socialism, is still closed for a period of "struggle, criticism, and transformation."

The Monasteries

The re-emergence of the Buddhist Association must be seen in conjunction with the "reopening" of the Buddhist monasteries. Many monasteries which were not visitable during the past six years are now beginning to be seen again – especially by foreigners, but by some Chinese as well. This should be put in its proper context. The reopening of monasteries in China is coming at a time when the Chinese are showing themselves to be tremendous enthusiasts for archaeology and history. The latter field definitely includes Buddhism, which the people are increasingly seeking to understand from the point of view of their Marxist ideology. Today, more than ever, Buddhist monasteries in China are becoming sites of historical interest, and the Chinese people who visit them see them in the way they were presented to us – as pieces of the past.

We saw 10 of these monasteries or ex-monasteries during the course of our journey; some of them still have monks living in them, others are kept only as museums or historical sites. Perhaps the clearest way to give an idea of the present situation in all its variety is simply to mention chronologically the monasteries we visited and to summarize what we saw in each one.

In Peking, on 13 July, we went to the Yung ho kung lamaist monastery, where we were welcomed by four members of the Peking Municipal Commission for the Administration of Monasteries. Although we had been told repeatedly beforehand that we would not be able to talk to any of the monks, upon arrival we were introduced to an old Mongolian lama who has been there for 54 years. He is one of "over 20" monks said to be presently in residence. Their average age is "over 60," and they still carry on religious devotions and engage in meditation. Occasionally they hold philosophical debates and examinations for the degree of mKHan-po (professor of sacred literature) but apparently not for the better known degree of dGe-bSHes (doctor of metaphysics). Although we ourselves did not see any of this religious activity, all the "equipment" for it was there: a complete set of the Kangyur and Tangyur, incense laid out (but not burning), and various ritual instruments (vajra, bell, etc.).

Apart from this, in their spare time (as the Mongolian lama put it), the older monks tend a peach orchard on the grounds of the monastery,

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and the younger ones have jobs on the outside. This seems to be typical of many of the "city monasteries" in China today. If the monks are still of working age, they usually "engage in production" in a factory, a workshop, or an office, while still residing at the monastery. If they are too old, they seldom leave the compound, where they may benefit from government pensions if the need arises.

The buildings of the Yung ho kung are in excellent condition. They have been recently repainted – all except the last hall, which houses a 75-foot standing statue of Maitreya and which needs a few minor repairs. (State funds for this have already been secured.) On the altars, all the images seemed to be in place.[4] Some of the halls are a little too immaculate so that they are museum-like in appearance. (This is especially true of the old "hall for the study of medicine" and a side-gallery which houses numerous tantric *yab-yum* figures.) The Yung ho kung, like all the monasteries we visited in China, is an officially protected site. Among other things, this means that maintenance and repair costs are covered by the state. There was no mention of any donations from lay believers, nor did we see any laymen in the temple. However, according to the old Mongolian monk, students of Buddhist philosophy sometimes come to the temple and ask questions.

The day after we visited the Yung ho kung, we went to the Kuang-chi ssu in Peking where, as mentioned above, we were received by Chao P'u-ch'u. Along with two other members of the Buddhist Association, he showed us around the temple. Here too, there are "over 20" monks who have time for meditation and two periods of devotions a day. As we entered the main image hall, we saw one of these monks. He was tonsured and dressed in robes, and had just lit some incense. He bowed to us from a distance and then moved away. We later requested but were not able to attend the evening devotions.

The halls of the Kuang-chi ssu are in very good condition. They have all been repainted since the Cultural Revolution and appear to be a little bit more "lived in" than those of the Yung ho kung. What we saw of them corresponded exactly with a description of the monastery which we read in Nagel's pre-Cultural Revolution guidebook, with only two discordant details: the four characters (proclaiming "The Wheel of the Dharma Turns Eternally") which once adorned the street façade of the monastery are no longer to be seen; and the "thousand-armed statue of Kuan-yin" in one of the halls has been replaced by a two-armed image of the same Bodhisattva. These observations gain perhaps in significance when they are coupled with Chao P'u-ch'u's account of what took place at the Kuang-chi ssu during the Cultural Revolution. According to him, some Red Guards damaged the gates and smashed a few Buddha images, while the monks remained unmolested at the

4. However, we did not see a "tiny venerated statue of the Buddha," which, according to Nagel's guidebook (the material for which was collected in 1964–5), was kept at the foot of the large image of Tsong Khapa in the main hall.

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back of the temple. Today, the last hall still houses the exhibit of gifts received from foreign Buddhist Associations all over Asia. Upstairs, in the old library, there are still three Ming editions of the Tripitaka and a golden stupa which contains a bone fragment of Sakyamuni. (The Tooth Relic which used to be here was moved to its own new pagoda in 1964.) In a side room, there is also a small museum with some rare texts and ancient stone images on display.

On 15 July, at Chao P'u-ch'u's invitation, we drove out of the city to see the Buddha's Tooth Relic Pagoda,[5] at the second of the traditional "eight scenic spots" in the Western Hills. It is not open to the general public although the pleasant park around it is. At the entrance, everyone including guides, interpreters, etc., removed their shoes – the only place in China in which we saw this done. We slowly climbed the spiral staircase and in the small Tooth Relic Chamber, were surprised to find four monks, tonsured and in robes, chanting the *Heart Sutra*. Through the little glass window in the golden stupa on the altar, we could see the Tooth Relic itself. Everyone stood around solemnly and Chao P'u-ch'u prostrated himself three times before it.

After these experiences in Peking, we travelled to Sian. There, on 27 July, we visited the Big Wild Goose Pagoda (Ta yen t'a) and the subjacent Tz'u-en ssu. The pagoda, which was originally built to house the sutras that Hsüan Tsang brought back from India, is in excellent condition, and the citizens of Sian flock to it on Sundays and holidays. There they can climb up to the top or read the numerous inscriptions around its base, including the imperial preface to the *Yogacāryabhūmi sāstra* dating from Hsüan Tsang's time. The halls of the Tz'u-en ssu, however, are open "only to people with an interest." This means that the vast majority of the Chinese public stays out. In any case, there are no monks there, and the halls are rather barren, though they do contain a number of images and a photostat edition of the Tibetan Tripitaka.

The Small Wild Goose Pagoda (Hsiao yen t'a), also in Sian, is not open to the public at all. The entrance to it now is through a hole in the wall from the neighbouring People's Liberation Army camp. The pagoda itself is in fairly good condition. However, it is unsafe to climb, and iron grills bar all the entrances. Though the pagoda is officially protected (it was built to house I-ching's sutras), the adjacent monastery is not. Hence the PLA uses one of the old buildings as a kind of barracks, while the other halls reportedly house the offices of the Sian Association for the Protection of Sites and Monuments.

On 3 August, we drove for about an hour and a half to the south of Sian and came to the Hsing chiao ssu, which is also the site of Hsüan Tsang's tomb. This was the only functioning monastery we saw in the

5. The discovery of the Tooth Relic, its tour of South and South-East Asia, and its subsequent enshrinement in the new pagoda are described in a pamphlet entitled *The Buddha's Tooth-Relic Pagoda* (Peking: the Buddhist Association of China, 1966).

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countryside, but the difference between it and its urban counterparts was astonishing. If the situation which exists at the Hsing chiao ssu reflects what is going on in the rural and mountain monasteries which were traditionally Buddhist strongholds, then a new chapter in the history of Chinese Buddhism needs to be written. Although there are only three monks at this monastery today, they are very much involved in the community life around them. The abbot (a Council member of the Chinese Buddhist Association and head of its Sian branch) is a deputy to the Ch'ang-an County People's Congress and represents the interests of the Buddhists in the county's Political Consultative Conference. In addition, he is a Chinese-style doctor and treats patients in the temple itself. He and the two monks grow all the crops and vegetables they need on the monastery's land, so that they are economically self-sufficient and participate in labour. They even sell a small surplus to the state. Every day they hold morning devotions and in the evenings have a short meditation session. They also study international affairs and the writings of Mao Tse-tung.

Laymen are free to come to the temple any time and reportedly do so, especially on Sakyamuni's birthday. The monks will not generally accept donations or money from them, "but," added the abbot, "if it's a small amount, just for incense, that's all right because it's for worship." Though we met no lay Buddhists in China at all (apart from Buddhist Association members), our impression was that the situation in and around the Hsing chiao ssu may reflect the state of Buddhism in the countryside today, *i.e.*, that there are still a small number of monks active and in contact with a small number of laymen; and that the latter still carry on religious practices as long as these are clearly religious and kept at an individual level. This is in contrast to the situation in the cities where there is less contact with monks and temples and where the vast majority of the people seem to have chosen the option of "*no* religion" which is also guaranteed by the Chinese constitution.

On 10 August, we visited two monasteries which also reflect this city-country divergence, although neither of them house any monks. The first of these was the western Court (Hsi-yuan or Chieh-chuang ssu) in Soochow. Perhaps because of its rows and rows of clay statues of the 500 arhats, it is a favourite piece to show to foreign visitors; but the halls are not open to the general public, although the neighbouring garden is.

The other temple is the Purple-Gold Nunnery (Tzu-chin ssu) which is located on the Tung-t'ing People's Commune over an hour's drive outside the city. The difference is notable. Unlike the western Court Temple, it is very much open to Chinese visitors with visiting hours posted at the door and explanatory signs inside. The main hall houses a most marvellous collection of clay statues of the 16 arhats, and is said to be one of "the two-and-a-half halls" famous for the best clay figures in China. The last monks at the temple left in 1958, but the present care-

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taker is the daughter of one of the ex-monks who lives in the nearby production brigade.

These two temples have essentially become museums. This is also the case with the Jade Buddha Temple (Yü-fo ssu) in Shanghai, which we visited on 14 August. There are no monks here any more: the last one, the abbot, died in 1970. We were met by members of a special Jade Buddha Group (a division of the Shanghai Municipal Commission for the Preservation of Monuments) which is responsible for the buildings and engages in a little research. Today the monastery has become a showpiece for foreigners but "some Chinese" visit it too. No Buddhist activities are held in the halls any more (such as the meditation weeks led by the Venerable Hsü Yun during the 1950s), but the Jade Buddha is in place (behind glass), and the guides showed us the Tripitaka in the sutra cases. In the abbot's former quarters a small museum displays a modest collection of Buddhist pieces – mostly of the Ch'ing dynasty.

The last monastery we saw in China was the Liu yung ssu in Canton. We visited it on 18 August and climbed its pagoda, which once housed some of Sakyamuni's ashes supposedly brought there by Boddhidharma in 527. We did not see the main Buddha hall, but instead a sort of display room in which the famous statue of Hui-neng was placed. There are two monks who live in the monastery now but we did not meet them since they work during the day in a nearby handicrafts factory. They do have periods of meditation but no devotions. The reasons given for this were set in Buddhist terms: the iconoclastic tradition and the practice of manual labour advocated by the old Ch'an masters are now being revived to fit the Maoist context. Thus, at the Liu yung ssu there are no sutras, no ceremonies, and no incense. Instead, the local Buddhist Association member quoted Hui-neng: "The Dharma exists in the world/One cannot be separate from the World/To leave the world to seek Bodhi/Is just like the horns of a rabbit."

This is typical of much of the theoretical re-reading of Buddhism that is going on today. Chinese Buddhists quite naturally tend to emphasize the parts of their own tradition that most harmonize with the present Maoist context. Another example of this came in Sian where we heard Hsüan Tsang criticized for having been an exponent of the philosophy of idealism, and then praised for the great contribution he made to international understanding through his travels and translations.

The same sort of thing is going on doctrinally. In Peking, for example, Chao P'u-ch'u explained that the theory of *karma* was used in the past "to suppress the downtrodden classes" and keep them in their place; but this was the theory of *individual karma*; today, the emphasis should be on common, *collective karma*.

The role of Buddhists in supporting socialist construction is being made doctrinally smoother by members of the Buddhist Association who point to a number of common elements between Buddhism and Marxism. Among those that we heard were the following: "Buddhist philosophy to a certain extent is dialectic; Buddhism believes in com-

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passion and helping fellow human beings; Buddhism's goal is freedom; Buddhism, unlike some religions does not believe in a soul or a creator-god." In these, it is claimed, resides a similarity with Marxism. But the parallels are not pushed too far. In general, Buddhists wish to maintain their own identity, and they stop at the fact that Marxism is materialistic, while Buddhism is not.

The Monasteries during the Cultural Revolution

At each one of the above monasteries, we of course asked what had hapened during the Cultural Revolution. Our hosts always had answers; from which the following generalizations can be made. At most monasteries (in the cities and to a lesser extent in the countryside), there was some kind of confrontation, almost always early in the course of the Cultural Revolution, between Red Guards and persons in charge of the protection of the monastery. The monks, if there were any, did not become involved. The Red Guards inevitably put up big-character posters, shouted slogans, and sometimes penetrated into the first court-yard of the temple; thereafter they were usually persuaded in one way or another to leave. Sometimes the persons in charge told them the monastery was officially protected by the state; in other cases people in the neighbourhood did so. Nowhere were we told that the PLA played any role in this. At the Tz'u-en ssu in Sian, the caretakers simply explained to the Red Guards the difference between "good old things" and "bad old things," and this was enough to convince them to leave. At only one place, the Kuang-chi ssu, did we hear of any real damage or destruction, and even there, it was minor.[6]

Of course, this says nothing about the monasteries we did not visit. We cannot know what happened at the monasteries we requested to see but could not because they were either "under repairs" or "too far" or "not open." These included the Temple of the Sleeping Buddha outside Peking, the White Horse Monastery in Loyang, Wu t'ai shan and the Yün-kang caves, and the Ling-yen ssu near Soochow. From the evidence we did see, however, we can say that in view of the prime position Buddhist monasteries might have occupied as targets of the Cultural Revolution, it is remarkable how little action seems to have been taken against them.

Buddhism in Tibet

So far we have dealt with the present situation of Buddhism in China; it is also necessary to say a few words about Tibet. Though our request

6. See above, p. 324.

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to visit that region was of course turned down, we were able to find out something in Peking at the Yung ho kung, at the Buddhist Association, and especially at the Central Institute of Nationalities.

This may be summarized as follows: there are still a few old monks left at the "Big Three" monasteries near Lhasa (Ganden, Sera, and Drepung) which are all protected by the state. The monks hold daily devotions but also "engage in production" (mostly agricultural). The monastery of Tashilhumpo and a few nunneries reportedly exist under the same conditions. The Potala Palace is a museum. Some old people still circumambulate it daily as they do the Jokhang Cathedral in Lhasa. Very few persons under 20 are said to still believe in Buddhism. The Great Prayer (*Mönlam*) Festival at New Year is no longer held, nor are there any more examinations for various monastic degrees. However, certain semi-religious traditions are carried on such as the practice of sky-burial, *i.e.*, the feeding of the dead body to birds. Some small monasteries in the plains are used as storehouses and as schools, but the location of many others on hilltops makes them less convenient and they are just empty.

The Dalai Lama, whose flight to India was once portrayed as a "kidnapping," is now called a "traitor who betrayed the nation" and is accused of having launched the "counter-revolutionary armed rebellion in 1959." The Panchen Lama is apparently still alive in China as he was included in the category of "bad elements who had hoodwinked the people." His "re-education" was said to be progressing.

Buddhism and the Future

One of the striking things about Buddhism in China today is that it appears to be almost the same as Buddhism in China before the Cultural Revolution. The function and forms of the monasteries and of the Buddhist Association as they resume their activities seem to have been little affected by six years of eclipse.

In the meanwhile, however, the "few old monks" and the "few old laymen" have become older and fewer. The question of the future of Buddhism in China was of course one which we raised everywhere, but the answers we got were never very clear. In the Marxist context, the general expectation is that in a generation or two Buddhism in China will simply die out. Chinese Buddhists, however, are quick to see their own decline in Buddhist terms. Thus, they talk of the impermanence of all things, and point out that we are at present in the age of decay, the *Kaliyuga*, and that the present decline of the Dharma was predicted long ago by Sakyamuni himself. More immediately, however, they seem to realize that the future lies with Mao Tse-tung Thought, and that as long as they support Maoism, their future will be assured. Chao P'u-ch'u was quite explicit: "Buddhism has a long history in the country. The

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government protects freedom of religion; there are people who believe; if Buddhists support socialist construction then their future will be bright; if they go against it, then their future will be dark." As to the next generation, he did not talk about it.

It is clear that the long-term future of Buddhism in China will largely depend on whether the Chinese Government decides to support the ordination of new monks or the training of young laymen. There may still be a question as to whether monks need figure at all in a Chinese Buddhism of future generations. Chao P'u-ch'u made an interesting comment while discussing the decline of Buddhism in China. "In Burma," he said, "they think that the present age marks the period when the power will shift from the *Sangha* to the laity." But whether this is the direction Chinese Buddhism will take, and whether Buddhism with no monks at all is still Buddhism, it is still too early to say.

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