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Charisma and Community in Buddhism: The Redefinition of Culture, Religion and Ideology in Post-Mao China

Self-publication, Goettingen, 2017

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Summary

A substantial Buddhist revival is reflected not only in the restoration of Buddhist temples and the cultivation of Buddhist talents, but also in the maintenance of its sacredness. This study focuses on the elite Buddhism in mainland China and employs ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with 33 lay Buddhists and clerics engaging in a theoretical critique of the secularization theory and the religious market theory. Due to the ambiguity between the religious and the secular in Buddhism, both theories ignore a different cultural and ideological backdrop in their respective analyses of religion. I develop a theory of charisma that includes a cultural interpretation of the dynamic of the Buddhist revival in mainland China. This is contextualized against a political-economic model that mostly focuses on the external accomplishments of the Buddhist revival and assumes Buddhism to undergo a process of secularization. This charisma theory enables a structural analysis of religion, culture and ideology, each of which operates on a binary coding. As a form of Mahayana Buddhism, Chan Buddhism, together with humanistic Buddhism, exhibits the duality of the secular and the sacred, which is a salient feature of Chinese Buddhism, and produces a tension not only between the religious community and its surroundings, but also within the internal structure of the Buddhist community. This tension is most notably embodied by the master-disciple relationship or cleric-laypeople hierarchy, as well as between lay Buddhism and monastic Buddhism. Both types of Buddhism must deal with the tension between religious and cultural dimensions and be ideologically endorsed. My case studies show that there is a tension-driven Buddhist revival, and that under the influence of Buddhist charismatic leaders, there is an inclination in lay Buddhism to follow monastic Buddhism, as proven by the religious logic of each Buddhist community. In my view, due to the rationalization of elite Buddhism, the charismatic leaders of Chan Buddhism integrate ideological and cultural education with the religious dimension of humanistic Buddhism to transcend commercialization and politicization of Buddhism; in other words, to transcend its secularization. Therefore, the revival of a rational Chan Buddhism pursues its sacredness and demonstrates a potential to transform the social structure of Chinese society and accommodate modernity.