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The blogger monk in Southern China

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culture. As an educated European, however, who gave up a comfortable, affluent life, learned Pali and Sinhalese and the complexities of Buddhist doctrine, and dedicates himself to teaching meditation, he is de facto a serious practitioner, motivated by the dharma itself, and thus commands more respect.

At the end of our time together, I give Olande a copy of a book I wrote on modern Buddhism, and he gives me some natural mosquito-repelling oil and Swiss chocolate. He calls me another *tuk-tuk*, and we part, each of us with itineraries, plane tickets, and passports in our pockets. Bumping down the road at dusk, I reflect on Olande Ananda's significance in the contemporary moment. In both his globe-trotting and his ministering to the local population, he represents several important features of Buddhism in the modern world. It is increasingly transnational and protean, incorporating elements from various cultures and forming unique hybrids that then circulate around the globe by means of literature and traveling teachers. It attracts serious adherents from the West, some of whom are having a significant influence on the development of the tradition. Yet it remains local, rooted, and relevant to the everyday concerns of ordinary people in specific places.

THE BLOGGER MONK IN SOUTHERN CHINA

Dingkong

STEFANIA TRAVAGNIN

Social media became a defining feature of the new China after the late 1980s. That is also the time when Han Buddhism was offered a new public visibility and engaged in a modernizing process that has influenced modalities of preaching and practice. Nevertheless, Buddhism is still framed within the official scheme and must "serve the Party." This renewed and yet politically constrained environment is where the monk Dingkong (1976–present) has been educated and is now preaching.

In the last few years I have been attending academic conferences on Chinese religions organized in Mainland China, and it has not been unusual to see Buddhist monks and nuns presenting papers and participating in scholarly discussions. However, at one of these conferences, titled "Spiritual Capitalism and Public Goods," it was a young Buddhist monk—in his late thirties and among the few members of the sangha present at the event—who caught my attention. His dharma name was Dingkong, and he introduced himself as the director of the Yuanying Research Center, which is devoted to the study of the life, works, and practice of Yuanying (1878–1953), a monk con-

temporary of the famous reformer Taixu (1890–1947). Dingkong delivered a paper that summarized Yuanying’s life; his study and practice of the Tiantai, Chan, and Pure Land Schools; and his contribution to the modernization of Buddhism through social activism and intervention in the education sector. The paper concluded by characterizing Yuanying as already a follower of the “love country, love religion” (Ch. *aiguo aijiao*) philosophy that the Chinese Communist Party implemented only in the 1980s, decades after Yuanying’s death.

Outside of the formal setting of the conference, Dingkong appeared to be an orthodox Chinese Buddhist monk, who spent much of his lunch break making sure the food served to him was fully vegetarian. He questioned whether the vegetables were cooked in a clean wok and not with the same oil used for meat and fish, and thus acceptable to the strict vegetarian diet all Chinese Buddhist monastics must, theoretically, follow. Dingkong is also abbot of the Jile Temple, located in Gutian, which serves the local Buddhist community by organizing dharma liturgies according to the Buddhist calendar. At the conference I noticed that he was also carrying a smart phone in a protective iPhone sleeve (so as to make people think he actually had an iPhone), and double-sided business cards in both Chinese and English, which included not only the mailing address of his temple and his contact details, but also a Web address for his blog, “Dingkong de BLOG” (Dingkong’s blog).

One of the many links on the blog leads to photos of liturgies, Buddha statues, Dingkong in his ceremonial robe giving lectures, processions of believers, and Dingkong with his lay followers as well as in meetings with senior monks. Other links lead to essays on Buddhist parables, explanations of scriptural passages, and citations from eminent Chinese monks of the past. One section of the blog also includes considerations and aphorisms by the same Dingkong, who then proposes himself as a Buddhist leader with an authoritative voice. There are also pages on past and future dharma activities, the various activities organized at the temple, and collections of photos of natural phenomena and poems that Dingkong himself wrote. The only page not yet completed is the autobiographical one. So far, hundreds of thousands of people have visited the site, making it one of the most popular religion-related blogs in the country.

The way Dingkong translates and disseminates the dharma makes him a representative of the so-called Buddhism for the Human Realm (Ch. *renjian fojiao*). *Renjian fojiao* was formulated as a new systematization and practice of Buddhism, which thus became socially engaged and politically involved. Most important, *renjian* Buddhism is not concerned with the afterlife but

with turning this world into a Pure Land. This Buddhism is rooted in both Taixu's and Yuanying's plans and new interpretation of doctrine and practice. Similarly to Taixu, Yuanying engaged in improving monastic education, was abbot of several temples and seminaries, traveled extensively in South and Southeast Asia, and held important positions like chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association (1928–1937). Unlike Taixu, Yuanying advocated moderate revision and reorganization of Buddhism in China. He did not agree with Taixu's reform plans for the reorganizational, educational, and social role of the sangha; these he considered too drastic. The *renjian* interpretation of Buddhism was later reshaped by a second generation of monks, like Yinshun (1906–2005), who transmitted it to Taiwan. *Renjian fojiao* has been also preserved in Mainland China through the Buddhist Association of China, which adopted its foundational principles and in the 1980s read it as mirroring the “love country, love religion” ideology. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first saw a third generation of Buddhists, which included Dingkong, who redefined *renjian* Buddhism even further. One of the features of *renjian* Buddhism is adapting modalities of preaching and teaching according to the audience. Dingkong's blog should be read in relation to this principle, and thus as a strategy to address present and potential Buddhists through popular channels of communication.

Dingkong's blog provides an index of the modernization that now permeates different levels of Chinese society, where, in spite of governmental control and censorship, different forms of social media have become the key channels through which politicians, intellectuals, and religious figures speak to the public. Today the officially recognized religious associations and the main temples all have Web sites, TV programs, magazines, and newsletters.

At the same time, an analysis of the followers of the blog and their comments responding to Dingkong's posts helps one to understand to what extent Chinese Buddhists refer to (and rely on) Buddhism today. The followers of the blog include other monastics, lay adults, and teenagers. Dingkong appears able to address Chinese people of different ages, professions, and social classes. Readers' comments range from the very Buddhist greeting “Homage to you, Amitabha Buddha!” to more personal comments on the greatness of Dingkong through expressions usually reserved for celebrities. Emoticons, very often of a nonreligious nature, fill up the comment space as well.

Dingkong's writings reveal a dharma teacher, an artist, a spiritual guide, a friend, and a human being. At the conference in Fuzhou, Dingkong was ac-

accompanied by two young men, a teenager and a university student, who were there as his Buddhist disciples and were therefore taking care of all his needs. However, they told me they were there not just in their role of attendants, but also “to have fun.” In other words, the usual distance between Buddhist laity and monastics has been replaced by a form of a friendly and secularized reverence that is a feature of the Buddhism for the Human Realm.

Dingkong is part of Yuanying’s lineage, a twenty-first-century practitioner of Buddhism for the Human Realm, a representative of the interplay between religion and social media that characterizes these years, and also a face of the modern Chinese modalities of religion.

CARVING PLAYFUL BUDDHAS

Park Chan-Soo

JY LEE

Although Buddhist wooden sculpture has an ancient lineage in South Korea, it has been neglected during past centuries due to state persecution of Buddhism and the turbulent twentieth-century history marked by colonialism and war. Park Chan-Soo (1948–present) has devoted the past half century to reviving this forgotten tradition and has reinvigorated the art with classical and modernist aesthetics. An activist for “Korean cultural independence,” Korea’s leading wood sculptor has also founded and operates a museum of Buddhist art and relics outside Seoul.

In the hands of South Korea’s government-designated “Important Intangible Cultural Heritage” Number 108 Park Chan-Soo, Buddha has reopened his mouth. Internationally acclaimed sculptor Park believes that the world has become too turbulent for Buddha to remain silent, and his wooden Buddhist sculptures express the whole gamut of emotions that lie beyond perennial serenity.

In his work *Buddha Speaks with a New Voice*, Park created a large gilded Buddha in the middle of a sermon. In contrast to this dynamic Buddha with his open mouth, *Silent Child Monk*, which depicts a young monk napping sideways, reveals a subtle smile and calmness that arise from Park’s finesse with the texture of wood.

Park’s art is also characterized by playfulness. He emphasizes that the message of the Buddha is to “Enjoy yourself. Be happy. Don’t be so serious.” Hence his work *Joy, Anger, Sorrow, and Pleasure* shows three wooden faces in progressive degrees of intoxication. While some of his works are solemn and