



Chan Buddhism During the Times of Venerable Master Yixuan and Venerable Master Hsing Yun: Applying Chinese Chan Principles to Contemporary Society

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Linji Venerable Master Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866) and Fo Guang Venerable Master Hsing Yun 佛光星雲¹ (1927–), although separated by more than a millennium, innovatively applied Chan teachings to the societies in which they lived to help their devotees discover their humanity and transcend their existential conditions. Both religious leaders not only survived persecution, but brought their faiths to greater heights. This paper studies how these masters adapted Chan Buddhist teachings to the woes and conditions of their times. In particular, I shall review how Venerable Master Yixuan and Venerable Master Hsing Yun adapted the teachings of their predecessors, added value to the socio-political milieu of their times, and used familiar language to reconcile reality and their beliefs.

Background

These two Chan masters were selected because of the significance of their contributions. Venerable Master Yixuan was not only the founder of a popular

1. In the Pinyin system, the name should be expressed as Xingyun. In this paper, I use the more popular “Hsing Yun” instead.

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Linji² school in Chan Buddhism but was also posthumously awarded the title of Meditation Master of Wisdom Illumination (Huizhao Chanshi 慧照禪師)³ by Emperor Yizong 懿宗 of the Tang dynasty (r. 859–873). Venerable Master Hsing Yun, a strong proponent of Humanistic Buddhism, is the recipient of over 30 honorary doctoral degrees and honorary professorships from universities around the world.⁴ To have received such accolades, both Chan masters ought to have made momentous contribution to their societies.

Although Venerable Master Yixuan and Venerable Master Hsing Yun had humble beginnings, they were well-grounded in Buddhist teachings. Venerable Master Yixuan was well-versed with Huayan 華嚴 and Weishi 唯識 teachings⁵ while Venerable Master Hsing Yun received a comprehensive education at various Buddhist seminaries in China⁶ Venerable Master Yixuan began his Dharma propagation activities after he settled in Linji yuan 臨濟院, a small temple in Zhenzhou 鎮州 on the invitation of an influential “man of Zhao” (Zhaoren 趙人).⁷ His career as a Chan teacher was only for about a decade but his vivid, innovative, and forceful teachings were recorded for posterity by his disciples.⁸ On a similar note, Venerable Master Hsing Yun also started his Dharma activities from a small temple in Taiwan’s Leiyin si 雷音寺 in Yilan 宜蘭 on the invitation of Li Juehe 李決和.⁹ Venerable Master Yixuan lived through the Huichang persecution, peaking in 845, which was ordered by Emperor Wuzong 武宗 of the Tang dynasty.¹⁰ Venerable Master Hsing Yun

2. Also known as Rinzai in Japan.

3. Sasaki, Ruth Fuller, and Thomas Yūho Kirchner, trans., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009).

4. Source from Office of the Founding Master, Fo Guang Shan.

5. Sasaki and Kirchner, trans., *The Record of Linji*.

6. John Gill and Nathan Michon, *The Life of Master Hsing Yun*, Buddhism in Every Step (Hacienda Heights, California: Buddha’s Light Publishing, 2012), 45.

7. Sasaki and Kirchner, trans., *The Record of Linji*, 69.

8. Ibid, 72.

9. Fu Chi-ying, *Handing Down the Light: The Biography of Venerable Master Hsing Yun* (Los Angeles: Hsi Lai University Press, 2000), 61.

10. Sasaki and Kirchner, trans., *The Record of Linji*, 69.

survived the Chinese civil war that started in 1927 and the Japanese invasion in 1937. Undeterred by the socio-political difficulties of their times, these men appreciated the existential conditions of their compatriots. Venerable Master Yixuan advocated a form of Chinese humanism¹¹ and his teachings eventually became the cornerstone of the Linji House of the Chan School of Chinese Buddhism, with himself being the first patriarch. In addition to being the 48th lineage holder of the Linji House,¹² Venerable Master Hsing Yun promoted Humanistic Buddhism. Both masters were deeply concerned with humanity.

Linji Venerable Master Yixuan

Bodhidharma (Putidamo 菩提達磨, ca. 5th–6th century), acknowledged as the founder of Chan Buddhism, was credited with the *Erru sixing lun* 二入四行論 (Treatise on the two entrances and four practices).¹³ In the last practice of the *xingru* 行入 (entrance of practice) outlined in this *Erru sixing lun*, he urged his followers to observe the six perfections according to the Dharma,¹⁴ without grasping nor rejecting, opposing nor agreeing.¹⁵ Further, Bodhidharma argued for the presence of a non-discriminating intrinsic “true nature” in all sentient beings. The identification of this “serene and inactive” true principle was known as the *xingru*.¹⁶

Two hundred years later, Linji Venerable Master Yixuan adapted these teachings to the plight of post-Huichang 會昌 persecution (about 845) and a weakening Tang dynasty. Besides growing banditry and disorder in the

11. Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 243.

12. Fu, *Handing Down the Light*, 249.

13. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History (Vol. 1, India and China)*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2005), 306.

14. Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History (Vol. 1, India and China)*, 307.

15. Jeffrey L. Broughton, trans., *The Bodhidharma Anthology the Earliest Records of Zen* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), 79.

16. John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 28.

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years between 820 and 860,¹⁷ Buddhism suffered immensely from Emperor Wuzong's decree ordering the expulsion and laicization of monks, nuns and novices, seizure of their properties and confiscation of lay offerings.¹⁸ Over 40,000 Buddhist hermitages were destroyed and more than 260,000 monastics were defrocked.¹⁹ This persecution paved the way for the popularity of Chan Buddhism that did not require monasteries, images or texts in order to gain an insight into one's true nature.²⁰ Venerable Master Yixuan's unparalleled creativity gave expression to Mahāyāna Buddhism in line with such times.

With the massive destruction of sanctuaries, sūtras and valuable objects of worship, Venerable Master Yixuan's teachings exemplified Bodhidharma's xingru according to the Dharma by encouraging his devotees to accept the facts of life and free themselves from the tensions between "ought" and "is."²¹ To do so, Linji taught his disciples to gain insight through the here and now, rather than to search among the Buddhas and patriarchs of the past.²² The theme of Linji's teachings centered on the human and his existential condition. He trained his students to live at ease in the moment, remaining simple, direct and natural; that is, without any pretense.²³ Hence, his disciples were equipped to be non-contentious, conforming and accepting of circumstances. Existential liberation became possible with the acquisition of peace of mind, releasing oneself from discriminatory, and wrestling thoughts.²⁴

Venerable Master Yixuan rebuilt the confidence of people in a way not

17. Albert Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8.

18. Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 116–126.

19. Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 133–134.

20. *Ibid.*, 150.

21. Christopher Ives, *Imperial-Way Zen Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 64.

22. Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History (Vol. 1, India and China)*, 91.

23. *Ibid.*, 193.

24. Ives, *Imperial-Way Zen Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics*, 64.

unlike Bodhidharma's xingru. Venerable Master Yixuan referred to everyone's true nature as "true human with no rank" (wuwei zhenren 無位真人), a Daoist term representing the Buddha nature. According to sinologist and humanist, Paul Demiéville (1894–1979), Venerable Master Yixuan's interpretation was typical of Chinese humanism.²⁵ "True human" was Daoist in origin and having "no rank" indicated marginality in hierarchical Chinese society.²⁶ Venerable Master Yixuan encapsulated the universal Buddha nature cleverly in familiar Daoist and Chinese terminology, hence wrapping Buddhist roots with Chinese qualities. His characteristic thundering shouts and blows aimed to shock his disciples out of hesitating doubts that they possessed the Buddha nature (or that they were none other than the Buddha).²⁷

This lively and dynamic "true human" clung to nothing and it was this transcendental state of liberation that Buddhists should aspire towards, while not resisting the unfortunate circumstances that befell them. By becoming one with the environment, Venerable Master Yixuan's disciples were not critical but rather supported the virtues of obedience, perseverance, and self-sacrifice.²⁸ It was this sense of equanimity that formed the foundation of one's daily life and Venerable Master Yixuan's response to the political turmoil of the time. Venerable Master Yixuan freely and creatively explained Mahāyāna and Chan doctrines with insights and new methods for conveying their meaning.²⁹ Linji Venerable Master Yixuan left behind a legacy that was original, useful and relevant to the times.

Fo Guang Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Not only was Venerable Master Hsing Yun a Dharma descendent of the Linji house of Chan Buddhism, he was also inspired by the "Buddhism

25. Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*, 243.

26. Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History (Vol. 1, India and China)*, 193.

27. *Ibid*, 191–192.

28. Ives, *Imperial-Way Zen Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics*, 68.

29. Sasaki and Kirchner, trans., *The Record of Linji*, 66, 72.

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in human life” (rensheng Fojiao 人生佛教) teachings of Venerable Master Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947). Venerable Master Taixu called for a revitalization of Buddhism globally with institutional, educational and social reforms. He promoted selfless social action to be the primary means towards acquiring spiritual insights and emphasized that wisdom into emptiness could not be attained without compassionate actions in the world.³⁰

Venerable Master Hsing Yun adapted Venerable Master Taixu’s mission to the realities of the modern era under the banner of Humanistic Buddhism (renjian Fojiao 人間佛教). Taiwanese in the latter half of the 20th century had to cope with a rapidly expanding economy alongside encounters with a western-style liberal philosophy.³¹ Through Humanistic Buddhism, Venerable Master Hsing Yun provided religious justification for Taiwanese economic expansion and an individual’s upward mobility by highlighting the bodhisattva ideals.³²

Rapid modernization brought about human alienation, among other woes. Venerable Master Hsing Yun demonstrated his mastery of changing situations by being completely one with the circumstances so that conscious alienation would not arise. Venerable Master Hsing Yun inspired his disciples by being the first to embrace new technologies. To deal with daily life, he encouraged lay devotees to adapt to the pressures and contradictions of work and family with the right attitude,³³ rather than to bemoan the situation. Venerable Master Hsing Yun promoted self-respect and equality, not through the individual’s unalienable rights (as protected by western law) but rather through an insight into reality arising from proper cultivation.³⁴ The realization of interdependence was not left as a philosophical insight but rather was translated into social action and

30. Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), 7–8.

31. Richard Madsen, *Democracy’s Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 2–3.

32. Madsen, *Democracy’s Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*, 71.

33. Ibid, 60.

34. Ibid, 78.

solidarity.³⁵ By serving the community with wholesome thoughts, words and actions, he suggested that a practitioner could avoid the trap of a toxic lifestyle through social fellowship and a sense of shared responsibility.

In a bustling, turbulent and chaotic society, Venerable Master Hsing Yun believed that Chan could ease the impetuous mind and free one from anxiety and misgivings. For example, one who embraced Chan would be unperturbed by unkind words, awkward behavior or painful memories.³⁶ In addition, the philosophy of humanistic Chan was based on an indiscriminating mind that could be cultivated in daily life through the diligent practice of discipline, simplicity, gratitude, and other bodhisattva ideals.³⁷ Lancaster aptly summed up Venerable Master Hsing Yun's form of Humanistic Buddhism as a recognition of suffering by not avoiding the forces of nature nor denial of realities but instead offering a means to live in the world with a full awareness of the situation.³⁸ Hence, the liberating nature of Chan could help one deal with the intensity and fast pace of contemporary society.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun defined Chan as the essence of one's true nature.³⁹ He encouraged his disciples to claim themselves to be the Buddha (akin to Bodhidharma's xingru). Such self-proclamation implied that individuals would re-examine themselves before succumbing to unwholesome influences prevalent in contemporary society. He helped individuals regain mental composure and recognize the inter-dependency (emptiness) of their circumstances.

35. Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*, 77.

36. Hsing Yun, *Hsing Yun's Ch'an Talk*, trans. Yongkai and Hsinch'en (Kaohsiung: Fo Kuang Publishing House, 1992), 4–5.

37. Hsing Yun, *365 Days for Travellers: Wisdom from Chinese Literary and Buddhist Classics*, trans. Miao Guang (Kaohsiung: Venerable Master Hsing Yun Public Education Trust Fund, 2015), 780.

38. Hsing Yun, *Where Is the Way: Humanistic Buddhism for Everyday Life*, ed. Joyce Meadows (Los Angeles: Fo Guang Shan International Translation Centre, 2015), ii.

39. Hsing Yun, *Chan Heart, Chan Art*, trans. Pey-Rong Lee and Dana Dunlap (Hacienda Heights, California: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2006), i.

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Venerable Master Hsing Yun could justifiably be called the leader of the most vigorous, innovative and expansive Chinese Buddhist movement of the post-war generation.⁴⁰ Through education, culture, and environmental preservation as foundations of social well-being, he competently mobilized both charity and human resources for a wide program of spiritual, religious, literary and educational activities.⁴¹ In accordance with the Dharma, Venerable Master Hsing Yun modernized a funerary Buddhism so that Buddhists could contribute productively to a growing Taiwanese economy while healing alienated individuals and creating solidarity. Humanistic Buddhism was not empty talk but was based on a genuine desire to improve people's lives.⁴² The pure land of a humanistic Chan practitioner would be created by his willingness to perform lowly tasks out of his love for other beings and by transforming their needs into his.⁴³ Buddhism experienced a revival with changes in the way it was practiced and perceived.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Linji Venerable Master Yixuan and Fo Guang Venerable Master Hsing Yun combined radical innovations with the affirmation of their Chan traditions. They trained their disciples to seek transcendent meaning in a chaotic world. Both religious leaders taught their contemporaries to rediscover and have faith in human goodness and virtues. With full consciousness of the situations in which people lived, these two Chan masters restored people's confidence in themselves and contributed to the stability and growth of their societies using language that people could comprehend. The spirit of a lively Chan Buddhism was adeptly used for the benefit and recovery of their communities.

40. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*, 273.

41. Long Darui, "Buddhist Initiatives for Social Well-Being in Chinese History, With Special Reference to Modern Exponents of Humanistic Buddhism," *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism* 5 (2004): 204–227.

42. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*, 273.

43. *Ibid.*, 274.

44. C. Sui, "Meeting Taiwan's New-age Buddhists." *BBC News*, January 29, 2004. Accessed August 16, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25772194>.