

# **A Brief Survey on Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Collegiate Education<sup>1</sup>**

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In April 2007, Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Religious Theory, RUC, composed a joint investigation team (JIT) with the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) as a preliminary step for *Textbook Compilation Project for Buddhist Academies*, of which the most Ven. Yicheng (一诚), President of BAC then, took himself as the head and Ven. Xuecheng (学诚), Deputy president and secretary of BAC as the vice head. The JIT executed a nationwide systematic and comprehensive survey about the condition of the textbooks in using and on-going or planed textual compilation projects among Chinese Buddhist academies in the following months. As a member in JIT, the author took part in the survey about 8 Buddhist academies in Fujian and Guangdong Province, and drafted the final report as the first author.

Based on information drawn from this survey, as well as the fieldwork and literature studies before, the author tries to draw an outline for the contemporary situation of Chinese Buddhist collegiate education here.

## **1. The Main Tendency of Contemporary Chinese Buddhism and Its Influence on Buddhist Collegiate Education**

After the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Buddhism has been in a stage of successive recovering in general. The number of monks and nuns grows rapidly, but the total quantity of which is still quite low, even lower than the number in Republic China Period (1911-1949). What's more, if viewed from the point of a long-term history, the proportion of the members of Buddhist monastic sangha among the national population is still lowest.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, dramatic social transformation in Post-Cultural Revolution then has brought the religious demands of each social stratum circles up to a quite high level. Such sharp contradiction between supply and demand of religious services requires monks to complete their training quickly and pour themselves into

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was firstly finished in September 2007. Due to the word limit and some other reasons, here presents a largely-abridged version.

<sup>2</sup> It reached the rock bottom in the Cultural Revolution period, when the nationwide sangha had been almost thoroughly disrobed.

Buddhist services as soon as possible. Therefore, the contemporary general developing mode of Chinese Buddhism is still extensive expansion in quantity.

The Buddhist Collegiate Education is constrained by the general developmental condition of Buddhism in large scale. Buddhist clergy is only required to have basic religious beliefs, religious feelings and basic qualities to meet the fundamental requirement of layperson and daily management of Buddhist temples, need not paying too much attention to profound Buddhist doctrinal training. Beside this, we find in the survey that many monastic people merely participated in various short-termed Buddhist learning workshops or monastic regulatory training classes, the amount of which exceeds greatly the number of those who graduate from Buddhist academies. And even much worse, a large number of monks and nuns have never acquired any kind of professional training at all, but only be in touch with Buddhist knowledge through daily monastic life or instructions from their masters. Among the above-mentioned modes of Buddhist education, Buddhist academic education is superior to all the other training modes in terms of standardization, systemization and the rate of self-cultivation in personality. Therefore, even though compared the secular schools, colleges and universities in corresponding levels, the educational level, quality and administration of different Buddhist academies has obvious gaps and is by far satisfied, we should admit that from the point view of Buddhist sangha itself, the contemporary Buddhist Collegiate Educational system keeps relatively advantage compared to other types of Buddhist training modes and is generally fit to the need of sangha's current developmental level.

The structural constraints of Buddhist general developing statues and mode imposed on Buddhist Collegiate Education are also showed in the orientation of training targets: professionals in monastic administration are most eagerly needed; The targets in the second rank are those who skilled in various kind of Buddhist practical services such as executing ritual ceremony, instructing meditation, preaching popular doctrines to lay people; The thirdly wanted are teachers for Buddhist academic education; then are professionals for international communication; and the fifthly and lastly wanted are those researchers who specialize in doctrinal studies. Buddhist academic education has been supposed to cultivate almost all above types of talents needed. Among all types of talents, those who choose the path of continuing Buddhist learning research or Buddhist education will not only have to spend longer time to accomplish training, but also have far less repayments than the talents of monastic administration do in economic interest, social and political status and so on, therefore, few people are

interested in Buddhist research. The distribution of the practical needs of talents and the uneconomic input-output ratio in the religious market are the structural constraints which have caused the low cultural level and the limited doctrine research capability in the present Buddhist academies. Therefore, on the one hand, if the government tries eagerly to raise the cultural and academic levels in Buddhist collegiate education without concerning the actual needs of the Buddhist circle, it might be backfired. On the other hand, Buddhist education also needs to be properly guided with religious policies so that it can be improved gradually.

Although the present situation of Buddhist collegiate education fits to the need of the sangha's development in general, it by far satisfies the needs of mainstream social groups, especially the cultural elite. Beside this, particularly because of its sharp shortage of internationalization and modernization the status quo of Buddhist collegiate education cannot adapt to the requirement of further development of Chinese Buddhism in the future.

For the mainstream social groups, especially the cultural elite, the charm of Buddhism sources mainly from its profound doctrinal system and abundant cultural deposits. In addition, the doctrinal Buddhism which is able to meet the requirement of intelligentsia both in philosophical inquiries and religious practices at a higher level has been proved as the one of the most significant reasons for Chinese Buddhism to keep a comprehensive and profound cultural influence and revive once and again in history. Historically there is no lacking of cultural elite in the Buddhist monasteries in every dynasty, but nowadays, the scene is quite different, or we can even hardly say there is anybody among sangha who can undoubtedly be regarded as cultural elite by whole society. Buddhist monastery members as religious teachers, whether monks or nuns, are regarded as engineers of souls, but compared with teachers in the secular society, the proportion of persons with high cultural accomplishment among present sangha is obviously lower, which has severely smeared the social image of Buddhism. If no enough attention is given and the trend cannot be turned around rapidly, the prospect of Chinese Buddhist development will hardly be optimistic.

Considering the trend of future development, Buddhism cannot keep itself away from globalization. Since both modernization and internalization are inevitable, so the competitions and dialogs with other religions are unavoidable topics. Especially since among the three main culture in Chinese tradition, namely Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Buddhism is the largest institutional existence in the present society, hence it holds a very special strategic position in keeping ethno-cultural principles,

spreading national ethos, holding back and balancing the cultural impacts caused by the abrupt development of Christianity. In the existing educational system of Buddhist academies, however, there are many universal problems such as ambiguous guidelines, backwards administration and obsolete curriculum contents; particularly, what is universally accepted in almost every Buddhist academy is still a pre-modern exegetical pattern of Buddhist history which is full of with mythic colors and cannot be rationally collated with modern science, therefore being sharply contrast with the pattern accepted by the non-believer Buddhist academia. All these are adverse to Buddhism in its competition, dialogs and exchanges with other religions on an objective platform of knowledge. In short, it is a great challenge for Chinese Buddhism to balance between the modern transformation of its educational system and preservation of its brilliant cultural tradition.

## **2. The Developmental Trends of Buddhist Collegiate Education in China**

In the survey, we find that there are some remarkable improvements in Buddhist collegiate education, which are as follows:

**The Universal Improvement of Hardware Facilities:** In developed coastal cities among Southeast China, hardware facilities of the Buddhist academies have been greatly improved compared with the situation in the middle 1990s. Even those Buddhist Academies located in undeveloped counties have made a leap development in terms of the hardware of schooling, for example, the multimedia facilities in the Xingping Temple in Mount Taimu of Fuding County, an undeveloped county in eastern Fujian Province, and those in Guangdong Buddhist Nunnery College as well, are even more advanced than those in many Buddhist academies in big cities, which shocked the JIT members at first. Though Buddhist Academies in Southwest China are relatively poorer, they have also been improved in some degree however.

**The General Increasing Interests in Buddhist Academic Education:** Though Chinese Buddhism in general has still at the stage of recovery growth in expansive mode marked with the reconstruction of temples, and a new round of movement enlarging or rebuilding temples is in progress, which is driven by economic interests and the main subjects and impetus have extended from Buddhist circle to local government, some famous temples, which have already jumped over the stage of reconstruction, come to embrace a new developing paradigm which pay more attention to qual-

ity while not just quantity, and intensive mode while not only extensive mode. Therefore they invest more material, financial and human resources in Buddhist academic education.

Meanwhile, besides the progress as mentioned above, all Buddhist academies around the country also generally face the following problems: at the same time:

1. The objectives of the Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced Buddhist academics are not clearly defined. There is no distinct boundary among them, thus they are cross-linked unreasonably.

2. The general situation of academic teachers is still under-anticipation in the quality and quantity as well. Brain drain is quite common due to the shortage of incentive mechanism.

3. The students are of uneven qualification, and are subject to frequent school-transferring.

### **3. An preliminary assessment of Buddhist collegiate Education compared with the corresponding secular educational system**

So, how about the knowledge and professional skills of graduates from intermediate and advanced Buddhist academies? A comparison with undergraduates major in Religious Studies (specialize in Buddhist Studies) from secular universities may help us to comprehend and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of present Buddhist collegiate education more explicitly. Here is a comparison between them in knowledge structures and professional skills as well, with several sub-items in each dimension.

What needs to be emphasized is that the educational targets of Buddhist academies are thoroughly different from those of secular universities. Unlike the latter which gives priority to potential talents in academic research, the former focuses its primary aim on cultivating religious veterans, among which professional researchers adept in doctrinal studies occupy only a fewer and less-important proportion compared with other type of targets such as administrant and preachers, therefore the comparison between each other is not paralleled and balanced in practice. Meanwhile, it will still be useful to formulate a more comprehensive impression on Buddhist academic education, and the level of the graduates as well. What is even more important, it will give us meaningful implications when we try to build a bridge between religious education and secular education.

From the Table 1 below, we can find that graduates from Buddhist academies are excelled their peers at secular universities in the fields of Buddhist knowledge as well as in traditional arts, but are inferior in integral humanistic quality. In addition, there is a big gap between them in accomplishment of foreign language, natural science and research-oriented capability.

Therefore we can reasonably deduce that there has been a ground in some degree for building up a bridge between Buddhist academic education and secular Buddhist studies. For those graduates who accomplish their education in Buddhist Academies, if they want to up-make or strengthen their scholastic training in secular universities, their comparative advantages in doctrinal learning will balance their disadvantages in other aspects, though there are practical barriers such as weak acquaintance of foreign language need to be seriously dealt with. If the government takes some specific target-oriented policies affirmatively, and permit some excellent graduates from Buddhist colleges to enter state universities after a preparatory stage when they make up their linguistic shortage through preliminary courses, we can reasonably anticipate that they will finally catch up with or even surpass their peers in secular universities.

鉴于目前佛学院在培养这类人才上有困难和不足,我们建议,应适当鼓励一部分有义学研究兴趣和专长的佛学院学生报考社会高校研究生,通过学术界的助力,提升其教理研究水平、外语水平,扩充和完善其社会知识结构,早日造就一批教理研究型和国际交流型人才,并促进义学教育的发展。可以比照留学生宽进严出的招生和教学的模式,对外语和政治科目单独命题,从而突破某些制度壁垒。Judging from the point of strategic security of national culture, it is urgent to cultivate qualified Buddhist talents, especially those who expert in doctrine research and international communication. Considering the difficulty and insufficiency the Chinese Buddhist collegiate education meet in cultivating these types of talents, we advise that some graduates from Buddhist academies who are rather interested in or good at doctrinal research should be encouraged to pursuit on further study in secular universities, so that with the help from academic circles they can improve their capability of doctrinal research and foreign languages, and grasp a more comprehensive socio-cultural knowledge necessary for their communication with national and international Buddhist communities. Thus, talents who expert in doctrinal research and international communication can be cultivated as soon, and doctrinal education can be promoted fast. We suggest that it is practical and exercisable to borrow the mode designed for recruiting and teaching international students in state universities, which is relatively easy to enter, through specific examination in the subjects of foreign language and

politics, while difficult to graduate, by which we can thus break through some institutional hindrance against an effective communication between Buddhist academic education system and liberal arts in state universities.

**Table 1 A Comparison of Knowledge Acquisitions and Professional Skills between Graduates from Advanced or Intermediate Buddhist Academies and Their Peers majored in Buddhist Studies at State Universities**

		Graduates from Advanced Buddhist academics or Intermediate Buddhist academics with good Schooling Quality	undergraduate students majored in Religious Studies in State Universities
Levels of Social and Cultural Knowledge	Acquisitions of traditional arts such as classical poet writing, Calligraphy and Painting	generally trained, among which about 3% of the students get rather high accomplishment	No specific requirement in curriculum, and usually unaccustomed, but no less than the average level of common graduates in humanities.
	general comprehension on Traditional Culture such as Literature, History and Philosophy	Equivalent to level of undergraduates from non-humanities schools in average college ( for those from advanced academics), or the level of graduates from Junior colleges ( for those from intermediate academics)	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
	General comprehension on Western humanities	Equivalent to (or lower than) the levels of ordinary high school graduates or students at junior colleges	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
	knowledge of other religions	Lower than level of undergraduates from school of humanities in universities	Average level of undergraduates major in religious studies
	knowledge of other social sciences such as pol-	Not included in curriculum, usually very weak	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities



	itics, economics and law		
	knowledge of natural sciences	Generally not included in curriculum, Lower than the average level of high school graduates in humanities	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
	Acquisitions of foreign languages	Lower than the level of high school students	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
	skills in applied tools such as Computers and others	Lower than levels of common Junior college students	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
	Ability to search and obtain academic literature	Lower than levels of common Junior college students	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
	knowledge of academic regulations and ability for academic papers writing	No related training courses, Lower than the level of ordinary junior college students	Average level of undergraduates from schools of humanities in key universities
Attainment of Buddhist knowledge	Knowledge of Buddhism in general, especially history	Graduate from Advanced Buddhist academies are equivalent to average level of undergraduates major in religious studies (specialize in Buddhist Studies); but graduate from Intermediate Buddhist academies are generally lower than average level of undergraduates major in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)	Average level of undergraduates majored in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)

Extensive reading of Buddhist scriptures in classic Chinese	Equivalent to the level of postgraduates major in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)	Average level of undergraduates majored in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)
Ability to intensive reading and distinct comprehension on classic Buddhist canon	Equivalent to the average level of undergraduates major in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)	Average level of undergraduates majored in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)
Ability to punctuate, annotate, paraphrase and translate a classical Buddhist text into modern Chinese	Equivalent to the average level of undergraduates major in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)	Average level of undergraduates majored in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)
Ability to preach and interpret a certain classical Buddhist text	higher than the level of undergraduates major in religious studies (specified in Buddhist Studies)	Not required in curriculum
Conclusion	<p>Graduates from Buddhist academies surpass their peers in state universities in acquisitions of Buddhist knowledge, and also are prior to normal graduates of the humanities in training of traditional arts, but are inferior in integral humanistic quality. In addition, there is a big gap between them in the field of foreign language, natural science and research skills.</p>	