

Modern Buddhism Without Modernity? Zhaijiao (“Vegetarian Sects”) and the Hidden Genealogy of “Humanistic Buddhism” in Late Imperial China*

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Abstract:

“Humanistic Buddhism” is generally acknowledged as a purely modern phenomenon in the history of Chinese Buddhism which came into being only after the advent of reformist activities in both monastic and lay circles since the late nineteenth century. In my paper I will show that several central aspects of “Buddhism in the human realm” can be found in the Zhaijiao (“Vegetarian Sects”) tradition in late imperial China and Taiwan.

Zhaijiao is a common collective designation given to the three religious traditions: Longhuapai 龍華派 or “Dragon Flower Sect,” Jintongpai 金幢派 or “Gold Pennant Sect,” and Xiantianpai 先天派 or “Former Heaven Sect.” Founded during the late Ming through mid-Qing period in southern China, they were introduced to Taiwan by the middle of the eighteenth century. Today, Zhaijiao is regarded as a form of lay or popular Buddhism both by the general public as well as by most (Western) scholarship. These sects, however, share many traits with the rich tradition of “popular religious sects” which flourished in late imperial Southern China.

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I will show that this strand of “non-monastic” popular Buddhism already highlighted many aspects of *renjian Fojiao* which may alert us to rethink the conventional genealogy of “Humanistic Buddhism” in modern China.

Keywords: modern Buddhism, renjian Fojiao, Humanistic Buddhism, Zhajiao, Vegetarian Sects

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