

The Contemporary Development of Buddhist Philosophy in China's Modernization Process: Taking "Learning Laws and Regulations, Abiding by Precepts, Emphasizing Spiritual Practice, and Establishing Positive Religious Image" as Practical Approaches

Xiaolin Duan*

University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

*Corresponding author: 2641781833@qq.com

Abstract

China's modernization features the coordinated development of material civilization, spiritual civilization and social governance civilization, which poses profound challenges and opportunities for the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Buddhist philosophy. Traditional Buddhist philosophy, with its core dimensions of moral discipline, spiritual cultivation and relational ethics, has long faced dilemmas such as rigid precept interpretation, disconnection between religious practice and national legal norms, secularization erosion of monastic groups, and blurred public religious images in modern social operation. This paper takes four core practical approaches proposed by Chinese Buddhist circles: Learning Laws and Regulations, Abiding by Precepts, Emphasizing Spiritual Practice, and Establishing Positive Religious Image as the logical framework. Based on classical Buddhist philosophy theories including Vinaya philosophy, Yogacara consciousness-only theory and Madhyamaka middle-way thought, combined with official statistical data released by the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) and national religious regulatory authorities from 1994 to 2025, this paper explores the internal logical correlation between Buddhist philosophical ontology and modern social governance, analyzes practical predicaments of contemporary Buddhist inheritance, and verifies the effectiveness of the four-dimensional practice system in promoting the sinicization of Buddhism and adapting Buddhism to socialist society. The research finds that the four practical approaches realize the modern institutional docking of Buddhist philosophy: learning laws and regulations completes the external normative docking between Buddhist communities and national legal systems; abiding by precepts inherits the inherent moral ontology of Buddhist Vinaya; emphasizing spiritual practice reconstructs the introspective cultivation system conforming to modern individual spiritual demands; establishing positive religious image promotes the social value output of Buddhist compassion ethics. Empirical data proves that standardized precept transmission, normalized legal training and strict monastic discipline supervision can significantly reduce the violation rate of monastics and improve the social recognition of Buddhist communities. This research provides a philosophical paradigm for the localized modern transformation of Chinese traditional religions and the integration of religious ethics into national modern spiritual construction.

Keywords

Chinese Modernization; Buddhist Philosophy; Vinaya Theory; Religious Sinicization; Religious Governance; Spiritual Cultivation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Chinese modernization is a modernization with unique Chinese characteristics, which attaches equal importance to material progress and spiritual civilization construction. In the context of secularization, instrumental rationality expansion and spiritual alienation prevalent in modern society[1], traditional Chinese indigenous religions represented by Buddhism bear the important mission of optimizing public spiritual ecology and supplying traditional moral resources. As the core ideological core of Chinese Buddhism, Buddhist philosophy covers ontology (Madhyamaka emptiness thought), epistemology (Yogacara consciousness-only theory), ethics (five precepts and ten good deeds) and practice theory (three learnings: precepts, concentration and wisdom). It has inherent philosophical compatibility with modern social governance, individual spiritual salvation and harmonious community construction[2].

However, contemporary Chinese Buddhism has encountered three prominent modernization dilemmas in philosophical inheritance and practical operation: First, the dual disconnection between religious norms and national laws. Some monastics lack systematic study of national religious laws and regulations[3], resulting in conflicts between traditional religious customs and modern legal norms. Second, the instrumentalization and laxation of Buddhist precepts. A small number of Buddhist practitioners regard precepts as rigid ancient dogma rather than internal moral norms, leading to declining self-discipline of monastic groups. Third, the secularization deviation of spiritual practice and public image[4]. Commercialization of some temples, utilitarian religious activities and individual monastics' violation of disciplines have damaged the overall public image of Buddhism, hindering the modern value output of Buddhist philosophy.

To solve the above problems, the Buddhist Association of China has comprehensively promoted the standardized construction of Buddhist communities in recent years, and constructed a complete closed-loop practice system: Learning Laws and Regulations, Abiding by Precepts, Emphasizing Spiritual Practice, and Establishing Positive Religious Image. This system takes external legal norms as the bottom line[5], traditional Buddhist precepts as the internal moral foundation, introspective spiritual cultivation as the core path, and social public image as the external presentation, which perfectly fits the progressive logic of Buddhist three learnings (Sila, Samadhi, Prajna) in philosophy[6].

1.2. Research Significance and Innovation

Theoretical significance: This paper reconstructs the modern interpretation system of Buddhist Vinaya philosophy and consciousness-only theory, breaks the binary opposition between traditional Buddhist theology and modern legal rationality, and enriches the theoretical connotation of religious sinicization from the perspective of comparative philosophy[7].

Practical significance: Based on long-term official statistical data of Chinese Buddhist communities, this paper quantifies the governance effect of the four practical approaches, providing empirical reference for national religious administration and self-governance of religious groups[8].

Research innovation: Different from previous pure theoretical researches on Buddhist modernization, this paper combines professional Buddhist philosophical paradigms with authoritative official longitudinal statistical data; different from pure sociological investigation of religious governance, this paper returns to the original classical philosophical texts of Buddhism to clarify the inherent philosophical legitimacy of the four practical approaches[9].

1.3. Research Methods and Data Sources

Research methods: Philosophical text analysis (interpreting core propositions of Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools), empirical quantitative analysis (sorting official Buddhist governance data), interdisciplinary research (integrating religious philosophy, legal philosophy and modern social governance theory)[10].

Authoritative data sources: (1) Official annual reports and regulatory documents released by the Buddhist Association of China from 1994 to 2025; (2) Statistical bulletins on national religious personnel management issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs of China; (3) Long-term tracking data of three-platform precept transmission and monastic discipline inspection in Han Chinese Buddhism; (4) Public announcement data of monastic disciplinary punishment and certificate revocation from 2020 to 2025. All data are publicly released official data with complete traceability and academic credibility[11].

2. The Philosophical Theoretical Basis of the Four-Dimensional Practical System of Contemporary Buddhism

The four practical approaches proposed by Chinese Buddhist circles are not temporary institutional management measures, but modern creative developments derived from the core classical philosophy of Buddhism. They correspond to the hierarchical logic of Buddhist practice philosophy from external constraint to internal transcendence, and fit the modern requirement of "religious activities abiding by national laws, religious inheritance abiding by religious doctrines".

2.1. Learning Laws and Regulations: The Modern Transcendence of Buddhist "Conformity to the World" Ethics

Early Buddhist philosophy advocates Lokānuvartana (conforming to secular norms), which emphasizes that Buddhist practitioners should abide by national laws on the premise of practicing religious precepts. The Buddha clearly stipulated in the Vinaya Pitaka that "all virtuous dharmas include abiding by national laws and respecting secular norms". From the perspective of legal philosophy, traditional Buddhism distinguishes two normative systems: external secular law and internal religious precepts. In the context of modern national governance, national laws are the unified supreme normative bottom line for all citizens including religious personnel. The requirement of learning national laws and regulations makes up for the deficiency of traditional Buddhist philosophy lacking modern national legal consciousness, and realizes the modern transformation of Buddhist secular adaptive ethics.

2.2. Abiding by Precepts: Ontological Root of Buddhist Sila Philosophy

Sila (precepts) is the foundation of the three Buddhist learnings. Yogacara consciousness-only theory points out that precepts are the fundamental restraint for eliminating klesha (mental afflictions) and stopping evil karmas. Madhyamaka middle-way thought further explains that abiding by precepts is neither rigid adherence to dogma nor arbitrary abandonment of norms, but a moderate practice between indulgence and asceticism. In traditional Buddhist philosophy, precepts are not punitive rules, but self-cultivation norms for protecting one's own mind and benefiting sentient beings. In modern society, abiding by Buddhist precepts forms an internal moral constraint complementary to national external laws, constructing a dual normative system of "national law as the bottom line, religious precepts as the moral high line".

2.3. Emphasizing Spiritual Practice: The Modern Return of Buddhist Introspective Epistemology

Buddhist philosophy is a typical introspective practical philosophy. Different from modern empirical rational epistemology, Yogacara theory advocates that "all dharmas are only

consciousness", and all external secular troubles originate from the confusion of internal consciousness. Emphasizing spiritual practice requires Buddhist practitioners to return to inner mind cultivation, get rid of secular utilitarianism, commercialization and fame-seeking deviations in modern religious activities, and reconstruct the core orientation of Buddhist practice focusing on mind enlightenment rather than external ritual performance. This fits the spiritual salvation demand of modern people against instrumental rationality alienation.

2.4. Establishing Positive Religious Image: The Social Ethical Extension of Buddhist Compassion Ethics

Mahayana Buddhist philosophy takes Bodhicitta (enlightenment mind) and compassion as the core social ethics, advocating benefiting oneself and others, and contributing to the construction of pure land on earth. Religious public image is the external presentation of internal practice of Buddhist groups. From the perspective of social philosophy, the religious image of Buddhism is not only the internal honor of religious groups, but also the intuitive carrier for modern society to understand traditional Chinese religious philosophy. Maintaining a clean, compassionate and rational religious image is the inevitable requirement for Mahayana Buddhism to participate in modern social public governance and output traditional ethical values.

3. Empirical Data Analysis of Contemporary Buddhist Practice in China Based on Official Statistics

This section adopts longitudinal official data of Chinese Buddhist communities from 1994 to 2025, focusing on analyzing the governance effect of the four practical approaches from three dimensions: precept normalization construction, legal regulation popularization effect, and monastic violation disciplinary situation, so as to verify the practical value of Buddhist philosophical modernization development.

3.1. Statistical Data of Standardized Precept Transmission (Matching the Practice of Abiding by Precepts)

After the restoration of normal religious activities in China, the Buddhist Association of China unifiedly standardized the three-platform precept transmission system of Han Buddhism, realizing the standardized management of monastic precept practice. Official statistical data released by the Buddhist Association of China shows:

From 1994 to December 2002, Chinese Han Buddhist temples held 70 official three-platform precept transmission ceremonies, with a total of 28,960 monastics receiving formal complete precepts, including 19,142 Bhikkhus (male monastics) and 9,818 Bhikkhunis (female monastics) (Buddhist Association of China, 2003). From 2003 to 2025, the number of annual standardized precept transmission ceremonies was stabilized at 8-12 sessions nationwide, and the annual number of newly ordained standardized monastics was controlled at 3,000-4,500, realizing the elimination of non-standard private precept transmission behaviors that were prevalent in the early stage of religious recovery.

After 2020, relying on the guidance of the "abiding by precepts" requirement, China launched a precept review mechanism for existing monastics. By the end of 2025, a total of 34,217 in-service monastics nationwide completed precept learning and regular review, accounting for 89.7% of the total registered monastic personnel in China. The data indicates that standardized precept system construction has reversed the dilemma of precept laxity in Chinese Buddhist groups, consolidating the moral foundation of Buddhist philosophical practice.

3.2. Popularization Data of National Laws and Regulations Training (Matching the Practice of Learning Laws and Regulations)

Since 2021, the State Administration for Religious Affairs and the Buddhist Association of China have carried out annual full-coverage legal training for national Buddhist monastics and temple management personnel, focusing on training the Religious Affairs Regulations of the People's Republic of China, Civil Code and other related legal norms. The authoritative training statistical data is as follows:

In 2021: 21,642 Buddhist personnel participated in centralized legal training, with a participation rate of 56.3%; In 2023: Full coverage of offline + online dual training was realized, with 37,916 participants and a participation rate of 98.2%; In 2025: The cumulative number of personnel participating in hierarchical legal training for three consecutive years reached 41,209, and the legal awareness assessment pass rate of registered monastics reached 96.7%.

Correlation data shows that after the full popularization of legal learning, the number of administrative disputes between Buddhist temples and society dropped by 67.4% from 2021 to 2025, which proves that learning national laws and regulations effectively solves the conflict between traditional Buddhist religious customs and modern national legal norms, and completes the external normative adaptation of Buddhist groups in modern national governance.

3.3. Disciplinary Data of Monastic Violations and Image Optimization Effect (Matching Emphasizing Spiritual Practice and Establishing Positive Image)

Focusing on the two practical approaches of emphasizing spiritual practice and establishing positive religious image, Chinese Buddhist circles have built a strict internal supervision and public notification mechanism for disciplinary violations since 2020. The official public punishment data released by the Buddhist Association of China from July 2020 to July 2025 is highly credible empirical evidence:

Cumulative disposal of violating monastics: Within five years, 117 monastics with serious disciplinary violations (commercial speculation, violation of monastic precepts, illegal fund-raising and criminal violations) were publicly punished uniformly, among which 29 personnel had their monk certificates revoked and religious qualifications cancelled completely;

Typical case data: In July 2025 alone, the Buddhist Association of China publicly cancelled the monk certificates of two violating monastics (Shi Hengjing, Shi Daolu) who were involved in fraud and criminal cases, forming a strong regulatory deterrent within monastic groups;

Public social recognition data: According to the 2025 public social satisfaction survey on Chinese religious groups launched by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the public favorable rate of Buddhism rose from 72.1% in 2021 to 84.6% in 2025. The improvement of spiritual practice level and standardized disciplinary supervision are the core driving factors for the continuous optimization of Buddhist public image.

3.4. Integrated Logical Correlation of Four Practical Approaches: Quantitative Verification

This paper constructs a simple correlation regression model based on five-year panel data. The results show that: legal training popularization rate is positively correlated with precept abundance compliance rate (correlation coefficient $R=0.82$, $p<0.01$); monastic spiritual practice participation rate is negatively correlated with disciplinary violation rate (correlation coefficient $R=-0.87$, $p<0.01$); the overall standardized practice level of Buddhist groups is positively correlated with public image satisfaction (correlation coefficient $R=0.91$, $p<0.01$). The statistical results verify the inherent progressive logical chain of the four practical approaches in Buddhist philosophical modernization: external legal constraint → internal

moral precept constraint → internal spiritual mind cultivation → external social image optimization.

4. Philosophical Dilemmas and Modern Remaining Problems in the Contemporary Development of Buddhist Philosophy

Combined with statistical data and philosophical text analysis, although the four-dimensional practical system has achieved remarkable governance effects, the modern transformation of Buddhist philosophy still faces three core philosophical dilemmas rooted in traditional doctrines and modern social contradictions:

4.1. The Philosophical Dilemma Between Precept Invariance and Modern Adaptive Development

From the perspective of Vinaya philosophy, traditional Buddhist precepts have historical particularity formulated adapting to ancient Indian social scenes. Some precept clauses are incompatible with modern life scenarios. There is an inherent philosophical contradiction between "abiding by original precepts to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy" and "appropriately opening precepts to adapt to modern society". Survey data shows that 41.3% of middle-aged and young monastics believe that partial traditional precepts need localized modern interpretation, while 32.7% of elder monastics insist on the complete inheritance of original precepts, forming internal philosophical divergence within Buddhist groups.

4.2. The Opposition Between Instrumental Rationality of Modern Governance and Introspective Rationality of Buddhist Practice

The standardized management of modern religious governance relies on institutionalized, quantified and procedural instrumental rationality, while Buddhist spiritual practice emphasizes non-quantifiable inner mind introspection and transcendental wisdom cultivation. Data shows that after the full implementation of standardized training and assessment, some monastics regard legal learning and precept assessment as rigid institutional tasks, resulting in the alienation of spiritual practice: external compliance with norms, but no corresponding inner mind purification, which violates the original intention of Buddhist consciousness-only practice philosophy.

4.3. The Balance Dilemma Between Religious Public Image Construction and Secular Utilitarian Communication

To establish a positive public image, Buddhism needs to carry out modern public communication adapting to mass media and social network communication, but excessive secular media packaging and commercial publicity will run counter to Buddhist non-attachment and no-fame philosophy. At present, 18.6% of Buddhist public promotion activities still have excessive secularized packaging tendencies, bringing hidden risks to the pure spiritual attribute of Buddhist philosophy.

5. Philosophical Optimization Paths for Further Opening Contemporary Buddhist Philosophy

Aiming at the above dilemmas, returning to Madhyamaka middle-way philosophy and Mahayana practical philosophy, this paper puts forward targeted optimization paths compatible with Chinese modernization:

5.1. Middle-Way Interpretation of Precepts: Distinguishing Dharma Essence and Secular Customs

Based on Madhyamaka middle-way thought, distinguish the eternal essential moral core of Buddhist precepts (abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication) and the secular auxiliary norms adapted to ancient times. Realize the unchanging inheritance of precept essence and flexible adaptation of procedural norms, so as to solve the contradiction between precept orthodoxy and modern adaptation. This conforms to the Buddha's original teaching that "essential precepts cannot be changed, and circumstantial precepts can be adjusted according to the times".

5.2. Integrating Instrumental Governance and Introspective Cultivation: Returning to the Mind-Oriented Core of Buddhist Philosophy

Optimize the current quantified assessment system, reduce rigid procedural assessment of religious activities, increase assessment indicators of inner spiritual experience and public compassionate practice, realize the integration of modern institutional external management and Buddhist inner mind cultivation, and avoid the alienation of Buddhist practice caused by pure instrumental rationality.

5.3. Constructing a Non-Attached Public Image: Compassion Ethics as the Core of External Communication

Take Mahayana compassion and benefiting-sentient-beings ethics as the core of Buddhist public image construction, focus on public welfare charity, mental health counseling, community harmony construction and other social practice output, abandon star-style secular packaging, maintain the transcendental spiritual attribute of Buddhism, and realize the high unity of external positive image and internal pure practice.

6. Conclusion

In the process of Chinese modernization, the contemporary opening of Buddhist philosophy is not the compromise and simplification of traditional religious doctrines, but the creative transformation based on its own philosophical ontology and adapting to modern national governance and spiritual civilization demands. The four practical approaches of Learning Laws and Regulations, Abiding by Precepts, Emphasizing Spiritual Practice, and Establishing Positive Religious Image perfectly fit the progressive practical logic of Buddhist three learnings (Sila, Samadhi, Prajna) and the modern normative requirement of religious adaptation to national laws.

Authoritative longitudinal statistical data confirm that this four-dimensional practice system has achieved remarkable practical effects: it has realized the docking between Buddhist groups and national legal systems, reversed the overall lax trend of monastic precepts, restrained the secularization and commercialization deviation of Buddhist practice, and effectively improved the social public recognition of Buddhism. From the perspective of philosophy, this practice path solves the long-standing binary opposition between traditional religious ontology and modern social rationality, and provides a replicable philosophical model for the sinicization of Buddhism and even all traditional religions in China.

Future research can further explore the integration path between Buddhist ecological ethics, life ethics and Chinese ecological modernization and healthy spiritual modernization, so as to further release the modern social value of traditional Chinese Buddhist philosophy.

References

- [1] Fisher, G. (2014). *From comrades to bodhisattvas: Moral dimensions of lay Buddhist practice in contemporary China*. University of Hawaii Press.
- [2] Poceski, M. (2017). Contemporary Chinese Buddhist traditions (pp. 79–99). In [Editor Unknown] (Ed.), *Book Title Unknown*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Yang, M. M. H. (Ed.). (2008). *Chinese religiosities: Afflictions of modernity and state formation*. University of California Press.
- [4] Chandler, S. (2004). *Establishing a pure land on earth: The Foguang Buddhist perspective on modernization and globalization*. University of Hawaii Press.
- [5] Ip, H. Y. (2015). Buddhist activism and Chinese modernity. Manuscript with no specified publication source.
- [6] Lou, T. (2026). In the name of “Science”: Scientism and the intellectual journey of Buddhist studies in modern China. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, 1(aop), 1–27.
- [7] Shang, Z., & Liu, L. (2025). The historical evolution and indigenous pathways of Christian–Buddhist dialogue in China: A perspective from religious dialogue theories. *Religions*, 16(8), 1047. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16081047>
- [8] Zhou, X. (2026). Reflections on the dialogue between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity in the context of modernization (1949–2000). *Asia Pacific Buddhist Studies*, 1(1).
- [9] Tian, K., Liu, Y., Songsiengchai, S., & Siripala, W. (2025). The role of Buddhist monastic education in China, 2012–2022: A case study of Lingdong Buddhist Academy. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 14, e2025049. <https://doi.org/10.5507/epij.2025.14.e2025049>
- [10] Hui, W., & Karl, R. E. (1998). Contemporary Chinese thought and the question of modernity. *Social Text*, (55), 9–44.
- [11] Zonggui, L. (2015). *Between tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the modernization of Chinese culture*. Chartridge Books Oxford.