

martial law in 1987.

Prof. Cheng Chen Huang of the Torch of Wisdom, who was one of the active presidents of Taiwan's first Buddhist study group at NTU in 1960s, says political and philosophical factors made Buddhism a source of suspicion for the cold war KMT regime in Taiwan.

"Buddhist monks were very closely associated with the anti-imperialist, pro-communist resistance in Viet Nam, but also the Buddhist creed of detachment went very much against the Confucian ideas of obedience and duty that were very much valued at the time."

After the 1987 lifting of martial law, the regulations that suppressed the exchange and expression of Buddhist ideas were lifted, resulting in a proliferation of Buddhist organizations, temples and monasteries. Such freedom has, in the mind of Ministry of Education official Cheng Shih Yen, come at a price."

"Since 1987, anyone can stand up and declare themselves to be a 'master' of Buddhism, even someone who may have never practiced Buddhism, without any challenge or regulation by the state. This is an issue that the Interior Ministry should perhaps investigate."

Buddhism and other religions have also undergone a revival as people's confusion and dissatisfaction with the pace of Taiwan's rapid social change lead them to seek the answers and community that religion offers. The transformation of Taiwan from an agrarian to an industrial society has been particularly stressful for

Taiwan's youth, says Professor Cheng, leading them to seek solace in the philosophy of Buddhism.

"Our society is in a period of chaos, marked by crime, environmental degradation and stresses of every kind. Taiwan's youth is being guided by a generation which grew up in a very different world, and the conflicts that arise because of this are intense. The attractiveness of Buddhism is that it involves teachings of such things as meditation that have measurable, practical results on the quality of one's life, even in the midst of such chaos."

Faced with such flagging public confidence and an environment that produces no shortage of swindlers willing to invoke religion for material gain, mainstream Buddhism is going on the counterattack in what many see as the fight of its life.

Professor Cheng of the Torch of Wisdom says that the detached, passive nature of Buddhism, a key tenet of Buddhist philosophy, is contributing to the debasement of Buddhism by phoney profiteers. Staying silent in the face of such attacks, he contends, will greatly diminish, and perhaps even destroy Buddhism on Taiwan.

"We must change our focus from that of our own particular monastery or temple to the health of the religion as a whole. We must be more outspoken about what Buddhism really is and more challenging of those who use its name for personal gain. If not, Buddhism on this island will eventually just wither or become an unreconizable shell of what it is today."

Buddhist Youth Association chairman Ching Yao aren't laughing however, and blame the phonies for inflicting irreparable harm on the trust and confidence of Buddhists across Taiwan.

"As a Buddhist leader it is my obligation to apologize for the excesses of these people who misrepresent Buddhism, while at the same time urging the public, especially the young, not to be misguided by such people."

Reverend Hsing Tsan of the Buddhist Youth Association says the money and resources of Buddhist groups associated with Miao Tien allowed them to "poach" students from other campus organizations. Such students, he fears, are now "lost" to Buddhism due to the disillusionment they feel as a result of recent disclosures.

While admitting that the deceptions of three previously highly respected Buddhist figures were an unavoidable stain on the reputation of Buddhism in Taiwan, Ministry of Education official Cheng Shih Yen contends that Buddhism is being unfairly blamed for scandals that have their roots in wider social problems.

"We live in an instant satisfaction society, in which people take for granted that money can provide everything they desire. It's gotten to the point where faith, blessings and enlightenment are considered just another type of commodity. Such ideas of instant gratification are completely incompatible with the practice,

dedication and hard work that devotion to real Buddhism entails."

With young lay Buddhists increasingly disillusioned with the prevalence of the dupe of Buddhism espoused by the three disgraced Zen "masters", mainstream Buddhist leaders such as Ching Yao of the Buddhist Youth Association are concerned about the integrity of followers who are attracted by the personality cults that spring up around the leaders of the "cash and carry" Buddhism they symbolize.

"Young people's ideas about Buddhism have been corrupted by these fakes, who attract followers by promoting their luxurious facilities and 'supernatural' powers. A new generation of young Buddhists is being created who don't understand the reality of Buddhism as practice, service and detachment, but rather equate a Buddhist life with fame, respect and indulgence. This threatens the future of Buddhism in Taiwan."

Ironically, the recent setbacks faced by mainstream Buddhism in Taiwan have occurred at a peak of what some refer to as a "renaissance" in interest in Buddhism and Buddhist studies on the island that began with the lifting of marital law in 1987.

Previous to 1987, all religious organizations in Taiwan were subject to strict government controls, limiting public involvement with Buddhism. Buddhist study groups were not allowed on school campuses until 1960, while religious figures such as monks and nuns were banned from school grounds until the end of

Buddhism workshop held at National Taiwan University each October attracted fewer than ten participants this year, in sharp contrast to the 30-50 participants of previous years. Chuang Nan Tien, chairperson of Torch of Wisdom Buddhist Association, admits that Buddhist groups in universities have seen a marked decrease in both new and returning members this fall.

"We have fewer members this year, but it's not because the students themselves have lost their faith. Everyone seems to be afraid of what their mother will say if they find out they're part of a Buddhist study group. Hopefully this is just temporary."

Prof. Cheng of the Torch of Wisdom is much more alarmed by the decline in Buddhist studies in universities, seeing it as a threat to the continuance of Buddhism in Taiwan.

"The original reason Taiwan's first lay Buddhist organizations were formed was because by the late fifties and early sixties the only people one would see at temples were old women doing 'bye-bye'. We were really afraid that unless serious Buddhist studies were taken to the people, Buddhism on Taiwan would degenerate into empty ritual or disappear entirely. Students are the seeds to Buddhism's future, but with students beginning to desert Buddhism studies, this scenario we've striven to avoid could quite easily recur."

Feeding public dissatisfaction with local Buddhism have been revelations in recent weeks about the

financial improprieties and outright fraud perpetrated by three of Taiwan's most famous "Zen Masters"--Sung Chi Li, Miao Tien and most recently, Ching Hai.

Sung Chi Li and Miao Tien, who combined claimed more than 300,000 followers across Taiwan, fell from grace after persistent allegations of fraud and extortion (Sung Chi Li has since confessed to all charges). Both men approached Buddhism as a high-priced concession stand, raking in millions by marketing products to the faithful "guaranteed" to heal illness, promote success and provide shortcuts to enlightenment.

Even more disquieting has been the case of Ching Hai, an enigmatic female "Zen master" with more than 300,000 followers. Ching Hai disappeared on Oct. 31, the day before local prosecutors came to her monastery to investigate followers' charges of accounting irregularities. The whereabouts of Ching Hai and her accounting books remain a mystery, but bank records report a \$20 million NT foreign remittance the day of her disappearance, increasing speculation that Taiwan had been at the mercy of yet another spiritual con artist.

The now-notorious doctored photographs of Sung Chi Li with lightning bolts of "chi" shooting out of his eyes, Miao Tien's multi-million dollar "lotus seats" and Ching Hai's personal line of "divinely inspired" clothing and cosmetics have become a source of jokes in all languages across Taiwan.

Mainstream Buddhists like

Nantou. A number of university students from one of Taiwan's many campus Buddhist organizations on a routine retreat decided en masse to be ordained as monks and nuns, provoking a media sensation. Parents set up pickets outside the monastery and beseeched police and legislators for assistance, contending that monastery officials were denying them access to their children.

While the situation was eventually defused when the parents were allowed to meet with their children and return home with those who had second thoughts about taking lifelong vows of chastity and contemplation, the incident has set off reverberations that continue to this day, and threaten the survival of Buddhist studies in Taiwan's universities.

According to Rev. Ching Yao, the chairman of the Taiwan Buddhist Youth Association, the Chong Tai incident was a confirmation of many Chinese parents' darkest fears regarding the dangers of Buddhist education.

"Many parents unfairly feel that their children are at risk by simply taking part in an educational retreat. The fact is that monasteries aren't prisons--people are free to come and go as they wish."

However, according to Prof. Cheng Chen-Huang, Secretary General of the ROC's Torch of Wisdom Buddhist Association, one of the island's oldest and most respected lay Buddhist educational foundations, concerns of parents about monasteries actively recruiting new monks

and nuns are often well founded.

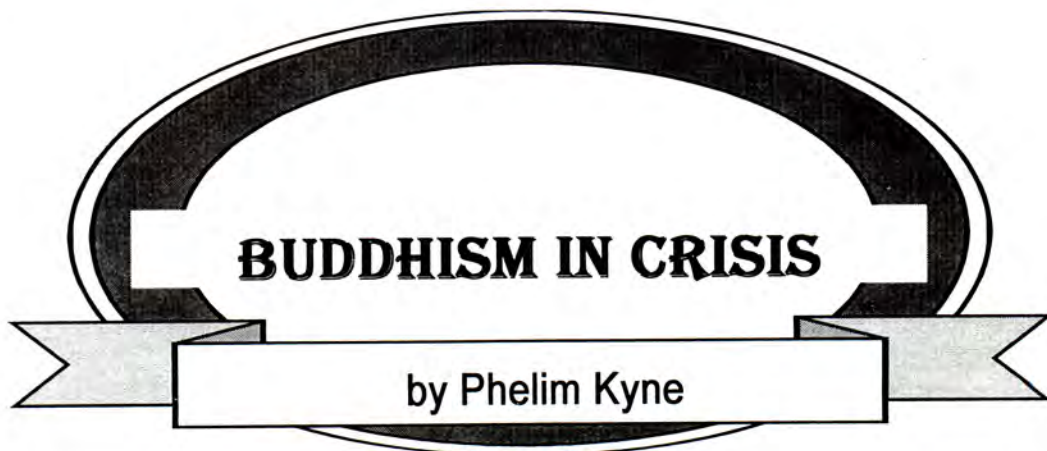
"There are now so many temples and monasteries in Taiwan and they're all continually expanding, so greater and greater numbers of monks and nuns are needed to staff their facilities."

As well as providing monasteries vital, unpaid manpower, the induction of increasing numbers of monks and nuns are an important funding source, with inductees' vows normally including a pledge for donations that, in principle, can include up to all their personal assets.

The pressure for increasing numbers of monks and nuns is, Prof. Cheng asserts, causing monasteries and temples to "compete" for the young, educated, university-age individuals normally preferred as candidates for Buddhist ministry.

"Many monasteries now operate Buddhist clubs on college and university campuses, organizing regular retreats to the monasteries and temples involved. Unlike traditional Buddhist study groups that have long existed on campuses, these clubs are focused primarily on introducing students to the representative monasteries and enticing students to stay by offering the most comfortable, modern facilities in very beautiful environments."

The overall effect of parental suspicion of the motives of monasteries and their campus representatives is that membership this year in Buddhist campus organizations throughout Taiwan plunged to as low as one-third the level of previous years. An annual



BUDDHISM IN CRISIS

by Phelim Kyne

All is not well in Taiwan's Buddhist community. 800 years after having first arrived in Taiwan, the Pure Land school of Buddhism which dominates in Taiwan is under fierce attack.

Long seen as a foundation of comfort and stability in the social and political upheaval that has rocked Taiwan in the past two decades, Buddhist institutions, leaders and even beliefs are facing unprecedented criticism and skepticism from increasing numbers of the 70% of the island's population which describe themselves as Buddhists.

Recent controversies over recruitment practices of monks and nuns have been compounded by a trio of sensational scandals involving three of the island's most popular and influential Zen masters, Sung Chi Li, Miao Tien and Ching Hai.

Buddhist organizations of every shape and form across Taiwan are reeling under a crisis of faith that is reducing public participation in religious functions at virtually every

level. Even in the plush offices of the mammoth Fokuanshan Buddhist organization, there is a growing sense of alarm at how recent events have alienated local Buddhists. Spokesperson Rev. Jieh Lang states that Fokuanshan leaders are anxious about the long-term damage caused by the revelations about Miao Tien et al.

"These events have created worrying level of confusion amongst Taiwanese Buddhists regarding who and what is right and trustworthy."

Shaken by the growing, widespread public cynicism toward both the faith and its leaders, Taiwan's foremost Buddhist scholars and clergy recently came together in an unprecedented emergency meeting, agreeing that the nature of Buddhism on Taiwan must quickly change before its credibility becomes irreversibly undermined.

The first hint of the troubles lurking beneath the serene veneer of Taiwan Buddhism erupted in August at the Chong Tai Shan Monastery in