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The Historical Transformation and Crisis of the Hyper-Stable Institutional Order of the Traditional Chinese “Saṅgha Forest” (叢林 *Conglin*) from the 10th to the First Half of the 20th Century

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Abstract

Buddhism has long maintained a fine tradition of establishing and preserving a hyper-stable institutional order. Historically, the Vinaya served as the institutional literature for the monasteries, but it gradually evolved into a sacred symbol of the public identity of the monks and became an object of scholastic study. Subsequently, as part of the internal monastic system, the rules governing monks transferred from being overseen by the Three Monastic Supervisors 三綱制—comprising an Elder (*Sthavira*), an Administrator (*Vihārasvāmin*), and a Discipline Master (*Karmadāna*)—to the *Conglin* system, a major innovation of Chinese Buddhism. However, the *Conglin* system, with more than a thousand years of history, had not experienced any major reforms. At the same time, it has also become an institutional culture within Chinese Buddhism, imbued with sacred symbolic significance. The excessive concentration of power inherent in the *Conglin* system, along with the lack of oversight over certain office-holding monks, represents a notable flaw within this system. The social environment of the time compelled Chinese Buddhism to adjust and reform its internal institutional construction. Only by developing institutions that align with both the vinaya and secular law; while embodying the Buddhist ideals of equality and fairness, could Chinese Buddhism remain in harmony with its era.

Keywords: vinaya; rules of monks; rule by man; hyper-stable institutional order; crisis

1. Introduction

Buddhism may be understood as an institutional religion—that is, a religious tradition fundamentally structured and sustained through institutional arrangements. The *Conglin* system is the organizational form of Buddhist monasteries, emphasizing the Vinaya as its foundation and developing a distinctive structure of monastic offices and administrative management. Its name derives from the Sanskrit term *pinavana*, metaphorically describing the harmonious communal life of monks, like trees growing densely together in a forest. According to C. K. Yang’s 楊慶堃 (1911–1999) opinion, “Both the universal religions and the religious sects developed their theology, cults, and organizational systems independent of the function and structure of the secular social institutions.” (Yang 1961, p. 301). From its very inception, Buddhism was deeply engaged in the construction and maintenance of institutional frameworks, a commitment most clearly manifested in the formation of the Vinaya. The Vinaya, however, did not emerge as a fully articulated system at a single historical moment. Rather, it was formulated in response to concrete situations



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and practical concerns, reflecting the distinctive modes of life and disciplinary practices of the ancient Indian *saṅgha*.

Because the Vinaya was shaped within a specific cultural and regional context, its transmission beyond India inevitably generated tensions with local social conditions. When Buddhism was first introduced into China, controversies over ritual propriety and debates concerning cultural boundaries—commonly framed as the distinction between Chinese and foreign cultures (*huayi zhi bian* 華夷之辯)—were closely connected to Vinaya norms. By prescribing a way of life markedly different from that of lay society, the Vinaya set the monastic community apart in both everyday conduct and ritual practice. This separation, in turn, produced frictions between monastic and non-monastic ritual paradigms, as well as between Buddhist disciplinary norms and established social customs.

Although we may not wish to acknowledge it, the element of “rule by man” in Chinese Buddhism is indeed quite pronounced. Monastic office holders, such as the abbots, enjoy high status, and at times, competition for such roles has led some individuals to employ less than honorable means. Against this backdrop, the current state of monastic institutions contrasts sharply with the vigor and vitality that characterized the early formation of the *Conglin* system.

In the *Biographies of Eminent Monks of the Song* (*Song Gaosengzhuan* 宋高僧傳), the “Biography of Huaihai (懷海 749–814)” records the following account:

“In the morning the monks gathered for collective worship, and in the evening they met together; their daily meals were kept moderate, serving as an example of frugality. The practice of communal labor was carried out to show that all, regardless of status, should share in the work. The abbot resided in a chamber measuring one *zhang* square (about ten feet on each side), like *Vimalakīrti* 維摩詰菩薩 dwelling in a single room (symbolizing simplicity and equality). No Buddha hall was established; only a Dharma hall was built, signifying that the Dharma transcends the limits of words and images. Many of the other regulations differed greatly from the rules traditionally observed by the vinaya-dhara, and thus Chan Buddhism across the land flourished. This independent way of practice in the Chan tradition began with Huaihai.” 朝參夕聚，飲食隨宜，示節儉也。行普請法，示上下均力也。長老居方丈，同維摩之一室也。不立佛殿，唯樹法堂，表法超言象也。其諸制度，與毘尼師一倍相翻，天下禪宗如風偃草。禪門獨行，由海之始也。 (Zanning 1987, p. 236).

What is conveyed here is the harmonious and orderly spirit of the *saṅgha* under Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (720–814), where monks lived together in unity. This style of description seems to have become a model for later Buddhist writings portraying the *Conglin* system, as Buddhism habitually presented to the world the aspects of solidarity and simplicity within the monastery. In *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China*, Yifa offers a more cautious assessment: “Even if we assume that Baizhang did compile a written monastic code for his order and that the rules depicted in *Regulations for Chan Monastery* (*Chanmen Guishi* 禪門規式) reflect those practices performed in his order, there is still no assurance that Baizhang was the formulator of a monastic code. Scholars have proven that independent Chan monasteries were established long before Baizhang’s time and that his practices do not represent any innovation.” (Yifa 2002, p. 34) From another perspective, these measures often aimed to defuse tensions, reflecting an underlying principle that internal monastic matters should be resolved within the monastic community itself. Virtually every organization requires an institution or set of principles to mediate and manage conflicts. In the case of the *Conglin* system of Chinese Buddhism, the abbot, vested with great authority, often became the central figure in suppressing disputes, while the widely accepted ideal of maintaining harmony within the *saṅgha* had become a princi-

ple that monks were obliged to observe. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that the *Song Gaosengzhuan* is a product of a hagiographical tradition shaped by strong normative and didactic intentions, and a comparative reading of the four major *Gaosengzhuan* compilations across different dynasties—placed in a single diachronic line—demonstrates how these texts collectively illuminate both the continuities and transformations of Chinese Buddhist monastic culture, thereby preventing the idealized portrayals found in any one compilation from being misread as direct, documentary evidence of actual institutional practice.

The aim of this article is therefore to undertake a macro-level examination of the institutional order of the Chinese Buddhist *Conglin*, rather than to pursue a detailed, position-by-position analysis of monastic offices or a fine-grained reconstruction of specific institutional changes over the past millennium. By adopting a broad analytical perspective, this study seeks to identify and articulate the latent tensions and potential crises embedded within what appears to be a remarkably stable institutional structure. While meticulous micro-level investigations are undoubtedly valuable for clarifying particular aspects of institutional evolution, research that lacks a wider, integrative vantage point risks becoming absorbed in textual detail at the expense of grasping the larger historical dynamics that have shaped this long and complex institutional tradition.

2. The Vinaya as Institution and the Vinaya as Identity

The formation of the Buddhist Vinaya accompanied the expansion of the saṅgha and the gradual emergence of practices among monks that were deemed incompatible with the Dharma. Rather than being imposed as a fixed and comprehensive set of rules from the outset, the Vinaya developed in a situational and responsive manner. As Shengyan has pointed out, the Buddha did not promulgate precepts through authoritative decree but established them only when concrete problems arose within the monastic community. Precepts were typically formulated after particular actions by monks provoked criticism or censure from lay society, at which point conscientious disciples—characterized by restraint, contentment, ascetic discipline, and a strong sense of moral shame—reported these matters to the Buddha. In response, the Buddha articulated specific rules to address the circumstances at hand.

Moreover, Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009) emphasizes that the Vinaya was not a rigid or immutable system. The Buddha was willing to revise previously established precepts, sometimes repeatedly, in order to accommodate the practical needs and collective consensus of the saṅgha. From this perspective, the establishment of the Vinaya reflects not only the authority of the Buddha but also a fundamentally communal and deliberative process. What appears on the surface as the Buddha's individual intention may thus be understood, at a deeper level, as the institutionalized will of the monastic community as a whole (Shengyan 2006, p. 181).

Based on the Vinaya materials themselves, this characterization is well supported. In the narrative logic of the Vinaya, the promulgation of a rule is typically triggered by a specific precipitating event. A recurrent pattern can be discerned: certain monastic behaviors become targets of public criticism and ridicule, and the Buddha responds by formulating a precept that prohibits the conduct in question and reestablishes the normative boundaries of the saṅgha.

A case in point appears in the *Dharmagupta-vinaya* 四分律. On one occasion, when the Buddha was traveling from *Magadha* 摩竭國 to *Rājagṛha* 羅閱城, he learned that disciples of the arhat *Pilindavaccha* 畢陵伽婆蹉 had received abundant offerings of food but had stored them in such quantities that the supplies overflowed into their living quarters and became putrid and malodorous. The Buddha rebuked them in severe terms, stating that what they

had done was improper and incompatible with the comportment of a *śramaṇa* and the demands of pure practice (汝所為非，非威儀、非沙門、法非淨行、非隨順行，所不應為) (Buddhayaśas 1924, p. 628). He then laid down a rule limiting the storage and consumption of certain foodstuffs classified as “medicine” to seven days, and declared that taking them beyond that period constituted a *Nissaggiya Pācittiya* 尼薩耆波逸提 offense (若比丘有病，殘藥酥、油、生酥、蜜、石蜜齊七日得服，若過七日服者，尼薩耆波逸提) (Buddhayaśas 1924, p. 628). It should be noted that, within this Vinaya framework, food is often treated as “medicine” insofar as it remedies the “illness” of hunger; the term “medicine” here therefore denotes certain edible substances rather than pharmacological drugs.

In this way, precepts were formulated as concrete institutional responses to problems that arose in the *saṅgha*’s daily life, and they also functioned, in a very practical sense, as measures taken under the pressure of public opinion. The binding authority of these regulations ultimately derived from the Buddha’s sanctity and the community’s recognition of that sanctity. Once such rules were compiled, systematized, and transmitted as textual corpora, they naturally acquired a normative force comparable to law within the monastic domain. Although Vinaya literature contains an extensive range of prescriptions, the number of precepts formally incumbent upon monastics is conventionally treated as fixed—commonly given as 250 for *bhikkhus* and 348 for *bhikkhunīs*—and these are regarded as the core disciplinary requirements that members of the monastic community are obligated to uphold.

The Vinaya can therefore be read, in an important sense, as a record of early monastic life. Disciplinary rules are embedded within narrative accounts of concrete episodes, which simultaneously supply the justificatory grounds for promulgating precepts and preserve traces of the lived realities of the monastic community. Precisely because it is both practical and sacred, the Vinaya occupies a liminal position between Sutra and Abhidharma: it regulates mundane conduct in the most detailed ways, yet it does so under the sign of a sanctified authority. In these texts, monastic life is imagined as falling comprehensively within the scope of the precepts, such that ideally every action and utterance of a monk is subject to disciplinary evaluation.

For Chinese Buddhists, the authority of the Vinaya was grounded, above all, in the conviction that the precepts were instituted by the Buddha himself and therefore possessed an intrinsic sanctity. At the same time, the narratives of the Vinaya also made it clear that, during the Buddha’s lifetime, these precepts were formulated in response to concrete difficulties within communal life and, in some cases, in response to criticism voiced by lay followers. This is the specific social horizon within which the Vinaya originally arose in Indian Buddhism. Consequently, within Chinese Buddhist reception, the sacred and practical dimensions of the precepts were not treated as mutually contradictory.

A paradigmatic figure in this regard is Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667). In his interpretive system, Daoxuan articulated a fourfold framework for Vinaya learning¹: the dharma of the precepts (*jiefa* 戒法), the essence of the precepts (*jieti* 戒體), the practice of the precepts (*jiexing* 戒行), and the manifestation of the precepts (*jiexiang* 戒相) (Daoxuan 1924, p. 4). This represents a significant Sinicized interpretation and a theoretical innovation in relation to the Indian Buddhist Vinaya system: rules that were originally relatively plain and closely tied to everyday monastic life were, through Chinese Vinaya masters’ doctrinal exegesis, rearticulated into a coherent scholarly framework or theoretical system.

Such exegetical work was simultaneously an intellectual elaboration of disciplinary concepts and a sustained effort to indigenize Vinaya learning within a Chinese cultural and institutional environment.² Modern scholarship has often emphasized the relative simplicity of Vinaya descriptions in the earliest materials. Hirakawa Akira 平川彰, in his *History of*

Indian Buddhism, offers a clear and straightforward exposition of the relationship between *śīla* and the Vinaya. He explains that *śīla* are observed voluntarily by those who resolve to undertake Buddhist practice, and that at the time of receiving the Vinaya, one chooses either to remain a lay practitioner or to become ordained, with the Vinaya differing accordingly. In his account, the Vinaya function as the driving force of Buddhist practice. This is especially evident in the monastic community, where the need to organize a saṅgha and to live collectively makes the maintenance of group order indispensable; it is from this requirement that the enforcement of the rules of the saṅgha—known as the Vinaya—emerged. Hirakawa further emphasizes that although the Vinaya presuppose the inherent spirit of self-motivation already present in *śīla*, those who renounce worldly life go beyond this foundation by observing the Vinaya in a more comprehensive and binding manner (Hirakawa 2002, p. 73).

As the Vinaya developed in China into an increasingly specialized field of learning and, eventually, into the establishment of the Vinaya school—with monasteries themselves sometimes identified as Vinaya-school institutions—Vinaya ceased to be merely the disciplinary legacy of early Buddhist communities. It became, in addition, an arena of conceptual construction and normative imagination within Chinese Buddhism. Put differently, whereas the Buddha's initial purpose in instituting the Vinaya was to ensure proper practice and to curb specific forms of misconduct, centuries of historical development transformed the Vinaya into a learned tradition, an institutional repertoire, and even a social model. This transformation also brought a heightened symbolic dimension. The era in which the Buddha could simply utter "Come, bhikkhu" (善来比丘) and thereby admit aspirants into the *Śramaṇa* had long since passed.³ Thereafter, entry into the saṅgha came to depend upon formal ordination conducted by a qualified community of preceptors, and this procedure came to be understood as a mode of sacred transmission. The Vinaya thus signified not only behavioral norms but also a marker of communal identity and a ritual gateway through which one entered a sanctified way of life oriented toward liberation. In this sense, the Vinaya's significance exceeded its original function as a record of monastic conduct and a repository of rules, gradually acquiring the status of sacred scripture.

For monastics, acceptance of the Vinaya carries exceptional weight, functioning as the fundamental criterion by which eligibility for membership in the saṅgha is recognized. Across Buddhist traditions, high ideals have consistently been attached to strict observance of the Vinaya, and such ideals have rarely been explicitly lowered. In lived practice, however, the actual content and emphasis of observance have often shifted: particular rules once treated as obligatory could be relaxed, reinterpreted, or set aside under new circumstances. Such adjustments are by no means unique to Chinese Buddhism but recur across the broader Buddhist world.

From this perspective, the Vinaya serves monastics not only as a disciplinary code but also as a powerful symbol of identity, while ordination and "acceptance of the precepts" function as the ritual means through which that identity is conferred and sacralized. Even though the Vinaya remains the foundational standard that monastics are expected to uphold, it has repeatedly been interpreted, justified, and adapted in response to the practical needs of the saṅgha under specific social conditions. In the Chinese context, this adaptive dynamic contributed to the emergence of new normative forms—such as "rules of monks" (*qinggui* 清規), and other communal codes—that supplemented, reframed, or operationalized Vinaya discipline within the evolving institutional life of Chinese monasteries. Yifa points out in *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China*: "In *Chanyuan qinggui* we find not a distinctive rhetoric but rather many similarities to the Vinaya rules and, oftentimes, a direct word-for-word transmission of the Vinaya." (Yifa 2002, p. 54).

3. The Entanglement of “Rules of Monks” and “Rule by Man” in the Conglin System

What Chan monastic regulations effectively sought to reform was the system of the Three Monastic Supervisors that had prevailed in medieval Chinese monasteries. Although this system originated in Indian Buddhism, its concrete operation in China appears to have been shaped to a considerable degree by mechanisms of state oversight and bureaucratic control. Historical records from the Tang dynasty indicate that monasteries were subject to quantitative regulation, with officially registered establishments assigned a fixed number of clerical residents and required to institute the offices of the Three Monastic Supervisors. These positions were to be filled by monks distinguished for their moral virtue and exemplary conduct, and each monastery was expected to appoint an Elder, an Administrator, and a Discipline Master. Official sources further document the scale of this system, noting the total number of monasteries across the empire and distinguishing between monasteries for monks and for nuns (Liu et al. 1975, p. 1831).

Additional records make clear that the appointment of these supervisory figures was not merely an internal monastic matter. Senior monks occupying the offices of the Three Monastic Supervisors, particularly those associated with major monasteries and temples, as well as prominent clerics in the capital, were expected to be men of outstanding reputation and widely acknowledged moral authority within the saṅgha. Crucially, their appointments required formal approval from the Ministry of Rites (*Libu* 禮部), thereby placing monastic leadership within the purview of the imperial administrative system (Liu et al. 1975, p. 1885). At least at the normative and regulatory level, therefore, the organization of monastic offices under the Three Monastic Supervisors was deeply entangled with state power and bureaucratic governance, rather than being governed solely by autonomous religious principles.

In actual practice, however, monastic offices were not always organized in strict accordance with such normative prescriptions. Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001), drawing on the conditions he personally observed, noted that contemporary monasteries exhibited considerable flexibility and improvisation in the allocation of administrative roles. In some cases, the appointment of monks such as Xuanchang 玄暢 (416–484) as Discipline Master of Zongchi Monastery 總持寺 by imperial decree illustrates the persistence of formally sanctioned supervisory authority. At the same time, offices such as the Monastery Chef (*dianzuo* 典座) assumed a wide range of responsibilities, including arranging seating, managing communal affairs, and undertaking various ancillary tasks, effectively concentrating multiple functions within a single role. In other instances, monasteries appointed a Annual Duty Officer (*zhisui* 直歲) to oversee duties for a year, a Monthly Duty Officer (*zhiyue* 直月) for a month, a Half-monthly Duty Officer (*zhibanyue* 直半月) for half a month, or even a Daily Duty Officer (*zhiri* 直日) for a single day, depending largely on the preferences and practical needs of the local community. Although these posts differed in duration and scope, they were often collectively subsumed under the designation of the Three Monastic Supervisors, with responsibilities extending broadly over the administration of monastic life (Zanning 2015, p. 117).

This description suggests that prior to the emergence of the Chan *Conglin* system, monastic administration was characterized by a certain degree of disorder and ad hoc arrangement. The primary concern of these arrangements was not institutional refinement or procedural clarity, but rather the maintenance of basic order and the effective functioning of the community. At the same time, Chinese Buddhist monastic institutions were deeply shaped by traditional Chinese paternalistic social structures. A well-known episode in which Dao'an 道安 (312–385) presented a bamboo staff to his disciple Fayu 法遇 (337–422) illustrates that⁴, in the Wei–Jin period, the ācārya often exercised near-absolute author-

ity within the monastic community, at times even resorting to forms of corporal discipline drawn from secular practices. Such examples indicate that early models of monastic governance, including governance by monks and the formulation of monastic regulations, developed in close correspondence with the social and cultural conditions of traditional China. Within this context, early systems of monastic regulation proved effective in concentrating authority and resources, thereby ensuring the stability of the saṅgha.

As Changdong Liu has observed, whenever the saṅgha expanded to a considerable scale, its leaders tended to emphasize strict adherence to the Vinaya as a means of unifying the community. This pattern can be seen in figures such as Dao'an and Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) during the Eastern Jin, as well as in later leaders including Jinglin 靜琳 (565–640), Zhichao 志超 (571–641), and Huaihai 懷海 (749–814) (Liu 2005, p. 228). Such leaders paid close attention to the selection and placement of personnel within the monastery, recognizing that administrative appointments were crucial to institutional coherence. The *Conglin* system inherited and further developed this principle. One anecdote illustrates this concern with particular clarity: Huanglong's (黃龍 1002–1069) prolonged deliberation over the appointment of a financial steward, as recounted in monastic records, reveals the degree of caution exercised in personnel decisions. Huitang's (晦堂 1025–1100) successive recommendations—first of a monk serving as vice-abbot, then of another monk acting as his attendant, and finally of a monk holding the post of Storehouse Manager (*Jianshou* 監收)—were each carefully weighed by Huanglong with reference to temperament, integrity, loyalty, and administrative capacity. When Lingyuan (靈源 1902–1988) questioned the necessity of such caution over a single office, Huitang explained that careful personnel selection had always been regarded as the foundation of governance, whether in managing a state or a household, and that monastic administration was no exception to this principle (Jingshan 1924, p. 1020).

Yet not all monastic leaders operating within the *Conglin* system displayed such conscientious restraint. In a number of cases, the decline of individual monasteries can be traced directly to the misconduct of abbots and other office-holding monks. During the early Qing period, for instance, two successive abbots of Wenshu Monastery 文殊院 in Chengdu—Wushan Mingquan 五山明泉 and Hengshan Shinian 衡山實念—were disgraced, the former for secretly hoarding properties and the latter for fleeing the monastery while burdened with debt (Duan et al. 2017, p. 208). Comparable incidents can be found throughout earlier periods as well. These cases underscore a more general institutional principle: any organizational system must undergo reform in response to changing social and historical conditions. The *Conglin* system itself emerged as the result of institutional reform, and its later deficiencies likewise stemmed from failures to adapt through timely and effective restructuring.

Within monasteries governed by the *Conglin* system, the abbot occupied a position of supreme authority. This hierarchical structure is clearly articulated in texts such as the *Regulations for Chan Monastery* (*Chanmen Guishi* 禪門規式) which describes the abbot as a figure endowed with both moral virtue and authoritative insight into the Dharma. Drawing on precedents associated with the Western Regions, the text presents the abbot as one whose seniority and ethical standing warrant exceptional reverence. Upon assuming office, the abbot was to reside in a chamber measuring one *zhang* square, symbolically aligned with the image of Vimalakīrti's single room, rather than in a private residence. Moreover, the establishment of a Dharma Hall rather than a Buddha Hall signaled that the abbot's authority to govern the monastery was grounded in the Dharma personally transmitted to him by the Buddha (Daoyuan 1924, p. 251).

In later centuries, however, reverence for the abbot appears to have exceeded the original institutional intent of the position. The abbot's conduct increasingly took on a ritual-

ized form, and ritual, in turn, often functioned as a vehicle for the display and consolidation of power. In previous scholarship on Chan monasteries during the Song and Yuan dynasties, it has been argued that monastic management in this period had already developed into what may be described as a symbolic power–order paradigm. Within this framework, the abbot stood at the apex as the supreme embodiment of the Dharma, and this symbolic status served to legitimize his comprehensive administrative authority. Under the aegis of this authority, the diverse and sometimes competing interests within the monastery were gradually integrated into a relatively fixed operational structure (Wang 2013, p. 108).

A concrete illustration of this process can be found in the ritual practices of Tiantai monasteries in Hangzhou during the Yuan dynasty. Records indicate that when the abbot delivered lectures during the summer retreat, he proceeded to the Dharma Hall in a highly formalized ceremonial procession. The sequence involved multiple stages marked by bell and drum signals, communal recitation by the assembly, and the abbot's conveyance in a sedan chair. Upon arrival at the Dharma Hall, the abbot dismounted, whereupon ritual signals prompted the monks to rise and offer formal greetings (Ziqing 1912, p. 330). Within the monastic context, the use of a sedan chair in such ceremonial settings was not merely a matter of convenience but a deliberate symbolic act, designed to emphasize dignity, authority, and hierarchical distinction. The intention to underscore the abbot's elevated status within the institutional order is unmistakable.

It may thus be argued that, following the establishment of the *Conglin* system, the expansion of authority vested in abbots and other office-holding monks contributed positively to the organizational integration and operational efficiency of monasteries. At the same time, however, this concentration of authority also produced a structural tendency toward the excessive centralization and singularization of power. From the perspective of *qinggui* from the Song and Yuan periods onward, the abbot functioned simultaneously as the highest administrative authority and as the sole legitimate transmitter of the Dharma, becoming the indispensable focal point of virtually all institutional, ritual, and disciplinary activities within the monastery. Yifa notes in *The Rules of Purity in the Chan Monastery* that, consistent with her broader research, many provisions in *qinggui* of the Chinese Chan tradition were clearly devised in response to Chinese social and cultural conventions, reflecting a marked synthesis of state administrative regulations and Confucian ritual norms.

Although neither Buddhist insiders nor modern scholars are inclined to characterize the system as “monarchical autocracy,” the similarities between the two are nevertheless striking. Monarchical autocracy does not imply that the ruler acts arbitrarily; rather, it refers to a political system in which as many state functions as possible are placed under the direct authority of the ruler. In such a system, the overall operation of the polity is highly centralized in the monarch. If one were to imagine a state organized on this principle but lacking a monarch, the result would be fragmentation, with civil, military, and economic affairs each devolving separately and collapse becoming inevitable. The monarchical autocracy of the Song dynasty was established precisely on this conceptual foundation (Miyazaki 2017, p. 219). Monasteries governed under the *Conglin* system, centered on the abbot, followed a comparable principle: authority was concentrated in the abbot, who then delegated the execution of concrete tasks to subordinate officers.

In a system of this kind, where authority constituted the core of governance, conflict, suppression, and mediation were unavoidable. Yet, under the Buddhist ideal of “harmony and unity” (*hehé* 和合)—the establishment of the *saṅgha* through harmony and unity in Vinaya, view, resources, conduct, speech, and mind—and within the social and historical conditions of the time, the system was able to endure. This persistence indicates that the *Conglin* system was, in fact, well adapted to the corresponding social institutions of its historical context.

With regard to the religious significance of harmony, some scholars have pointed out that harmony occupies a central position within Chinese culture as a whole. Understanding harmony thus becomes essential for understanding Chinese history, society, culture, and even religion and belief. At the same time, harmony conceived as entirely devoid of conflict cannot adequately account for the full process of social change. To focus exclusively on harmony while ignoring conflict is to perceive only one aspect of society. It is precisely the interactive tension between harmony and conflict that constitutes the normal dynamic of social transformation, and this tension is crucial for understanding politics, society, religion, and systems of belief (Li 2006, p. 274).

For Buddhism, which places supreme emphasis on harmony and unity, the same paradox applies. Buddhism has never been a tradition without reform. From the transition between *Śrāvaka-yāna* and *Bodhisattvayāna*, to the emergence of Southern Chan, every major transformation within Buddhism was the result of reformative processes. Changes in Chinese Buddhist monastic institutions similarly reflected this pattern. Yet reforms within Chinese Buddhist monasteries often appear subtle and gradual, accomplished almost imperceptibly. This was likely due to the close correspondence between the institutional system and its social environment: the needs of Chinese society at the time required precisely such a model of monastic governance. In *How Zen Became Zen*, Morten Schlütter (2010) points out that, in discussing the emergence of the *shifang* system 十方制 (a monastic governance model open to monks from all directions, with collective ownership and non-hereditary, term-based abbatial leadership) and the *zisun* system 子孙制 (a lineage-based monastic model in which authority and property are transmitted within a specific master-disciple line, typically with lifelong abbatial tenure) in Song-dynasty monastic institutions, it becomes evident that the state deliberately guided monasteries toward the *shifang* system, which allowed for greater governmental participation and oversight. While this arrangement was advantageous for state administration, it simultaneously encouraged monastic schools to secure the continuity of their lineage transmission, a development that was particularly important for the Chan tradition.

Since the modern era, Buddhism has confronted cultural, existential, and identity crises, as well as an institutional crisis. Institutional problems, however, are often the last to be recognized and the most reluctantly acknowledged. As a result, within modern Buddhist reform movements, institutional reform was rarely implemented in practice⁵, and the *Conglin* system largely remained unchanged. The most serious problem—indeed, the central defect—of this system lies in the issue of rule by man. The original intention of the *Conglin* system was undoubtedly commendable: to sustain the normal functioning of the saṅgha by gathering monks around a virtuous elder, engaging in collective study, sharing hardship and joy, and advancing together in disciplined unity. Yet as monasteries expanded and elders assumed the position of abbot, taking charge of nearly all monastic affairs, they effectively became the “patriarchs” of their institutions. With this development, the full range of problems associated with rule by man inevitably emerged.

The authority of the abbot within the *Conglin* system should therefore not be understood as unlimited personal domination, but rather as leadership embedded within a structured and negotiated network of relationships. Internally, his authority operated through a division of labor involving offices such as the rector (weinuo 維那), storekeeper (kuzhu 庫主), Upper Seat (shangshou) 上首, and other senior positions, which collectively placed constraints on unilateral decision-making. Externally, his actions were influenced and limited by major donors, local elites, monastic officials, and regional bureaucratic authorities. Within this multilayered configuration, the abbot indeed occupied a central and influential position, but his authority was relational, contingent, and subject to challenge rather than absolute.

Although, in earlier periods, officials and local gentry exercised a degree of influence over the appointment of abbots and other key positions, as well as over major monastic affairs, they seldom intervened in the internal administration of monasteries. In the absence of effective supervision, some abbots embezzled monastic properties or, through incompetence, precipitated institutional decline—phenomena that can be traced back to antiquity. Moreover, because the abbot stood at the institutional center, his personal reputation was inseparable from that of the monastery itself. The two were bound in a relationship of “shared glory and shared disgrace,” such that any damage to the abbot’s reputation directly affected the fortunes of the monastery.

Ultimately, the problem of “rule by man” lay in the absence of effective oversight over those occupying the core administrative positions. Ordinary monks, who were typically disciples, were constrained by emotional bonds and moral obligations, making it difficult for them to exercise meaningful supervision over the abbot. Even monks who were not direct disciples remained subordinates, lacking both the authority and the institutional capacity to restrain him. As a consequence, the fate of a monastery often rested entirely on a single individual, and the rise and decline of monasteries came to be determined by personal leadership—a condition that gradually became normalized in the historical development of Buddhist institutions.

4. On the Supervision of Ordinary Monastic Offices Within the Conglin System

Monks entered the monastery primarily for the purpose of religious practice. Following the widespread diffusion of the Southern Chan tradition across China, the *Conglin* system gradually emerged as the dominant institutional model. Within this framework, the practice of itinerant study and seeking instruction—through which monks traveled from one monastery to another in order to learn from different teachers—was preserved as a core monastic tradition. From the mid-to-late Tang dynasty onward, it became virtually impossible for a Chan monk to attain awakening or receive formal recognition without undergoing such training. Under these conditions, most monks circulated among multiple monasteries in order to accumulate experience. A small number of exceptionally capable individuals eventually acquired the qualifications to establish their own Dharma halls and assume the role of abbot, whereas the majority sought a stable livelihood within an appropriate monastery. It was precisely within this highly mobile yet increasingly systematized monastic environment that the internal norms governing communal life and administration assumed heightened importance.

Whether engaged in itinerant study or residing permanently within a single monastery, monks were generally required to participate in communal affairs, particularly ritual activities, which were obligatory. Some monks also assumed responsibilities related to administration or service to the community, and as a consequence, distinctions in status inevitably emerged. According to fundamental Buddhist principles, monastic seniority was determined by the length of ordination. Within the *Conglin* system, however, a further distinction developed between monks who held office and those who did not. The *Chanyuan Qinggui*, in the section entitled *The Treatise of the Tortoise Shell and the Mirror* (*Guijing Wen* 龜鏡文), explicitly addresses the ethical risks associated with such distinctions. It cautions that monks temporarily appointed to positions such as steward of meals or head of communal affairs must continue to treat other monks with respect, refraining from arrogance, domineering behavior, or the misuse of public office for private purposes. It further emphasizes the impermanence of authority, warns that abuse of power will inevitably lead to karmic consequences, and reminds monks that, as disciples of the Buddha, they are equally worthy of reverence by gods and humans alike (Zongze 2001, p. 100).

Although framed as a warning directed at monks holding office, this text implicitly indicates that those in positions of authority were often prone to arrogance. In practice, the *Conglin* system had already developed a discernible hierarchical structure: the abbot, together with senior officers and administrators, constituted the managerial elite of the monastery. Among service monks, certain offices involving money, grain, or material supplies enjoyed relatively privileged status, as they entailed not only responsibility but also access to institutional resources. By contrast, tasks associated with filth or heavy physical labor—such as serving as latrine attendants—were humble yet indispensable. These duties were typically undertaken by monks who, in the spirit of service to the *saṅgha*, were willing to endure hardship.

The rotation of duties within the *saṅgha* was therefore unavoidable. Within the *Conglin* system, it was generally held that only those who had served in a wide range of positions would be genuinely qualified to assume the office of abbot in the future. This principle is articulated with particular clarity in *The Book of Chan Exercise* (*Chanmen Duanlian Shuo* 禪門鍛鍊說), a Chan monastic training text written by the eminent monk Jiexian 戒顯 (1610–1672) during the late Ming and early Qing period. In this work, the cultivation of monastic talent is explicitly linked to extensive rotation through administrative posts. Jiexian argues that the *Conglin* must implement broad participation in monastic duties, ensuring that no one is exempt from undergoing such appointments, since only through repeated exposure to diverse responsibilities can monastic talent be tempered and refined (Jiexian 1912, p. 784). In his view, it is precisely this process of passing through multiple posts that forms a monk into a qualified member of the *saṅgha*.

Originally, the use of office rotation as a training mechanism served as an important means by which monasteries cultivated personnel, and many eminent Chan masters of earlier periods are recorded as having undergone such processes. Monastic regulations from the Song and Yuan dynasties indicate that monasteries during this period attached particular importance to rotation.⁶ Nearly all regulatory texts from this era contain detailed descriptions of the ritual procedures marking the transition between outgoing and incoming office-holders. By contrast, this institutional arrangement is almost entirely absent from Ming-dynasty monastic regulations. For example, the relatively comprehensive *Yunqi Monastery Communal Living Regulations* (*Yunqi Gongzhu Guiyue* 雲棲共住規約) contains no account of such ritualized transfers. It does, however, record that when a monk was appointed or reassigned to an office—specifically in the case of the masses prefect (*zhizhong* 知眾), the officer responsible for reception and guest affairs—the newly appointed monk was formally received with tea, presented with a seating chart, and shown ritual respect, while the duties of the office were explained to him (Zhuhong 1676, p. 166).

Similarly, fascicle six of the *Adjudicative Commentary on the Regulations for Chan Monastery* (*Baizhang Qinggui Zhengyiji* 百丈清規證義記) describes the *zhizhong* as the head of the guest prefect (*zhike* 知客). Externally, this office was responsible for relations with donors; internally, it oversaw the management of monks. The office-holder was expected neither to display arrogance nor to avoid hardship, but rather to observe the monks carefully, distinguishing the diligent from the indolent without bias. All affairs of the guest hall, whether major or minor, fell under this officer's supervision, and when a new appointment was made, the incumbent was to be carefully instructed in his duties to ensure attentiveness and diligence (Yirun 1912, p. 449).

The office of *zhizhong* does not appear in the monastic regulations of the Song and Yuan periods; it emerged only in the Ming–Qing era. This position possessed the authority to assign other monks to administrative and service posts, a development that indicates a shift in personnel arrangements within some monasteries during the Ming–Qing period. In contrast to the Song–Yuan practice—where appointments were typically made through for-

mal, ritualized procedures—certain positions were now allocated directly by higher-ranking monastic offices without the need for separate ceremonial installation. It is likely that posts assigned in this manner belonged primarily to the lower tiers of the monastic hierarchy.

By contrast, in later periods, appointments made solely through administrative order or verbal notice increasingly assumed a coercive character. Not all monks were willing to accept office under such conditions. Accounts preserved in the *Xuyun Heshang Quanji* 虛雲和尚全集 record that at Gaomin Monastery 高旻寺 disciplinary enforcement was extremely strict: monks who refused an assigned office were treated as showing disrespect to the entire community and were subjected to corporal punishment, being struck with the incense board and compelled to submit (Jinghui 2009, p. 26). Such accounts indicate that by this time monastic appointments had taken on the character of compulsory rotation. Correspondingly, the ceremonial honor once associated with assuming office appears to have been significantly diminished in comparison with earlier periods. Questions concerning when specific offices first emerged, how their functions changed, and what these developments reveal about the stability or latent crises of the institutional system have already been examined in detail in *The Study of Monastic Rules for Zen Buddhism in Song and Yuan Dynasties* (Songyuan chanzong qinggui yanjiu 宋元禪宗清規研究) (Wang 2013).

In the Qing-dynasty *Baizhang Qinggui Zhengyiji*, particular attention is given to the practice of “offering incense and making vows” before the Skanda Hall 韋陀殿, which is presented as an important mechanism for preserving integrity within the *Conglin* system. The text describes a solemn admonition and oath-taking ritual designed to restrain office-holding monks through the invocation of karmic retribution. Monks who were about to assume important monastic offices and take charge of a monastery’s administrative and financial authority were required to swear an oath before the image of Skanda 韋陀, the most important Dharma protector in Chinese Buddhism. Because monks without official positions were largely unable to exercise effective oversight over them, this form of “divine supervision” was invoked as a means of regulating and restraining the conduct of office-holding monks. Because monks without official positions were largely unable to exercise effective oversight, supervision was instead effected through vows sworn before the deity, thereby invoking divine authority to regulate and restrain conduct. This ritual practice is known as Declaration over Incense (*gaoxiang* 告香). The text emphasizes its significance, even suggesting that the flourishing or decline of a *Conglin* could be correlated with whether the *gaoxiang* ritual was upheld or neglected (Yirun 1912, p. 415).

From the emergence of monastic regulations onward, texts such as the *Guijing Wen* were continuously produced with the aim of elevating monks’ moral standards and heightening their awareness of karmic causality, thereby admonishing office-holding monks to fulfill their duties and observe fundamental boundaries. The *gaoxiang* ritual bears a clear resemblance to popular practices of oath-taking used to establish trust and contractual obligation. From this perspective, it was not a particularly sophisticated instrument of institutional control. Yet under the social conditions of the time, it may well have constituted the most direct and effective means available. As the honor traditionally associated with monastic office gradually lost its binding force, the reconstruction and supervision of integrity through sacred vows emerged as a reluctant but necessary response.

5. Concluding Remarks

The issue addressed in this article concerns the historical evolution of institutional structures within Chinese Buddhism. Yet in the course of this analysis, it is difficult not to reflect on the limited degree of transformation that has occurred since the establishment of the *Conglin* system, as well as the slow pace of improvement in its administrative capacity. Once celebrated as an innovative institutional model, the *Conglin* system gradually became

a structure that, despite its many deficiencies, continued to endure in practice. Over time, it was transformed into a symbol, and even into a habit. When institutional practice acquires such a symbolic character, the space available to later generations for substantial reform becomes extremely constrained.

In its formation, the *Conglin* system endowed personnel arrangements, educational practices, architectural forms, and ritual activities with symbolic significance. As Mircea Eliade (1996) has argued in a more general theoretical context, once institutional elements are transformed into symbols, they become transcendent signs that are no longer limited by material conditions or treated as isolated components. Instead, they are integrated into a coherent system, one that may appear fragmented or unstable in practice but nonetheless conveys a sense of structural wholeness (Eliade 1996, p. 452). Precisely because its constituent elements were elevated to the level of symbolic signs, the legitimacy of the *Conglin* system was reinforced, enabling it to withstand shifts in the broader social environment. This symbolic consolidation was also one of the reasons the system gradually moved from innovation toward conservatism. Religious institutional culture, to varying degrees, constructs its own sacred framework—both to secure legitimacy and to provide enduring institutional guarantees for stability and authority.

Monasteries operating under the *Conglin* system likewise bore the imprint of being constructed within a sacred symbolic order. However, during periods of profound social transformation—especially when surrounding social institutions were undergoing fundamental change—attempts by monastic institutions to preserve an aloof stability often rendered them vulnerable to crises arising from internal structural weaknesses. In such circumstances, tensions between the monastic system and the broader social environment intensified, thereby undermining the very sacredness on which institutional legitimacy depended. As discussed above, institutional changes in premodern monasteries were closely shaped by the dominant social systems of their time. The emergence of the *Conglin* system coincided with the increasing centralization of imperial authority in China, and it was deeply influenced by traditional lineage structures, paternalistic social relations, local community compacts, and other grassroots institutions. In this sense, the *Conglin* system may be understood as a reproduction of grassroots governance institutions in premodern society within the religious domain.

Bound by the limits of historical knowledge and shaped by their own social context, premodern actors regarded this arrangement as both normal and necessary—a system perceived as “inevitable.” Even when riddled with structural flaws, it was preserved under the banners of “ancestral law” and “tradition,” with its sacred authority deeply internalized by the monastic community. At the same time, vested interests reinforced this preservation. Once a monk assumed an official position, he inevitably gained honor and privileges, which in turn made the correction of unjust or problematic aspects of the system increasingly difficult.

Nevertheless, the problems inherent in the *Conglin* system must be confronted directly. Historically, its most serious weaknesses have lain in the absence of effective supervision over concentrated authority and in a tendency to prioritize harmony in ways that obscure internal conflict. During the Buddha’s lifetime, such issues may not have posed fundamental challenges: the Vinaya itself can be read almost as a record of institutional shortcomings, yet these did not undermine the saṅgha. On the contrary, they prompted continuous institutional refinement, made possible by the Buddha’s direct presence and authority, which absorbed and corrected negative effects.

Although that historical context has long since passed, it remains important to recognize that religion possesses a strong capacity for self-correction. A tradition that has endured for more than two millennia has done so precisely because of its ability to adapt

and recalibrate in response to changing circumstances. For the institutional framework of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, it would appear that only through reform—or even reconstruction—of a system consistent with both the Vinaya and secular law, and one that genuinely embodies the Buddhist ideals of equality and fairness, can such institutions be sustained and remain fully aligned with the demands of the present age.

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Notes

- ¹ The dharma of the Vinaya (*Jiefa* 戒法) is the body of precept regulations established by the Buddha. It applies equally to ordinary people and saints, is indispensable for liberation, and is called “sacred law” from the perspective of the saintly path. Those who receive it must firmly believe in it, take it as their foundation, aspire to transcend birth and death, enter the *saṅgha*, and cultivate the mind of the Way.
The essence of the Vinaya (*Jieti* 戒體) is the inner power or volition that arises in body and mind after receiving the precepts, preventing their violation. Through vow-making in accord with the Dharma, a purified mind refrains from evil and silently aligns with true teaching; this “*Jieti*” thus functions as an internalized force of restraint.
The practice of the Vinaya (*Jiexing* 戒行) is the concrete behavior of a disciple who, having received the precepts, keeps them in mind, carefully regulates bodily and verbal actions, emulates former saints, and maintains consistency between earlier principles and later conduct, achieving purity even without external supports.
The manifestation of the Vinaya (*Jiexiang* 戒相) is the visible comportment that, after receiving the precepts, makes every action accord with Dharma and moral virtue.
- ² Some scholars have remarked: “The study of the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (四分律), represented by Daoxuan (b. 596–d. 667), flourished brilliantly in China, for its Mahāyāna appearance suited the framework of Chinese Buddhism.” (Yan 2007, p. 64).
- ³ As stated in the *Ekottarāgama*, vol 47: “At that time, the Brahmin and his five hundred disciples each knelt and said to the Buddha: ‘We wish that Buddha permit us to leave home and study the Way.’ The Buddha said to them: ‘If you cultivate the pure holy life well, you will gradually eliminate the roots of all suffering.’ When the Buddha had spoken these words, they immediately renounced lay life and became monks. At that time, the Buddha gradually expounded to these five hundred men the subtle teachings, namely the teachings on giving, the teachings on Vinaya, the teachings on reincarnation, the teachings on born in heavens, the teachings on the impurity of desire and the joy of liberation. Then, just as all Buddhas always teach, the Buddha broadly expounded to them the suffering (*dukkha*), the origin of suffering (*samudaya*), the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*), and the path to the cessation of suffering (*marga*). Thereupon, all their defilements and shortcomings were completely eradicated, and they attained the state of the noble ones.”
《增壹阿含經》卷四十七：“爾時，梵志及五百弟子各各長跪，白世尊言：‘唯願世尊聽出家學道。’佛告諸梵志：‘善來，比丘！於如來所善修梵行，漸盡苦原。’如來說此語時，五百梵志即成沙門。爾時，世尊漸與五百說微妙之論，所謂論者：施論、戒論、生天之論，欲不淨想，出要為樂，如諸佛世尊常所說法：苦、習、盡、道，爾時，世尊廣與諸人說之。時五百人諸漏永盡，得上人法。”
- ⁴ This story was widely cited: “Fayu—his place of origin is unknown. In his youth, he was diligent and studious, devoting himself to the Confucian classics, but his temperament was proud and arrogant, and his words and conduct often revealed a disregard

for others. Later, when he encountered Master Dao'an, he suddenly gave rise to reverence and faith, immediately renounced lay life, and became Dao'an's disciple. Under Dao'an's instruction, his insight was exceptional; he cast aside his former pride and became humble and virtuous. Ruan Bao, the governor of Yiyang, heard of his virtue and was filled with admiration. Though far away, he sent envoys with letters to make acquaintance and frequently provided offerings. Later, when Xiangyang was troubled by war, Fayu fled eastward and resided at Changsha Monastery in Jiangling, where he lectured on the scriptures. His disciples numbered more than four hundred."

At that time, there was a monk in the monastery who violated the precepts by drinking wine and neglected the evening incense ritual. Fayu imposed only a light punishment and did not expel him. When Dao'an heard of this matter from afar, he placed a willow rod in a bamboo tube, sealed it with his own hand, and sent it to Fayu. When Fayu opened the tube and saw the rod, he sighed: "This must surely be because of that monk who drank wine. My discipline has been too lax, and I have troubled my teacher to send this rod as a warning from afar." He immediately ordered the Karmadāna to strike the wooden block and summon the assembly. Placing the tube with the rod upon the incense altar, he burned incense, paid respect, then prostrated himself before all. He instructed the Karmadāna to strike him three times with the rod, after which he returned the willow branch to the tube, weeping and reproaching himself.

This action deeply moved both monks and laypeople, inspiring them to apply themselves more diligently to practice. Afterwards, Fayu wrote to Huiyuan, confessing: "My abilities are dull, and I have failed to lead the community properly. Though my teacher is a thousand miles away, he still worries for me and instructs me—this fault is grave indeed." Fayu finally passed away in Jiangling at the age of sixty.

釋法遇，不知何人。弱年好學，篤志墳素，而任性誇誕，謂傍若無人。後與安公相值，忽然信伏，遂投簪許道，事安為師。既沐玄化，悟解非常，挫折本心，謙虛成德。義陽太守阮保，聞風欽慕，遙結善友，修書通好。施遺相接。後襄陽被寇，遇乃避地東下，止江陵長沙寺。講說眾經，受業者四百餘人。時一僧飲酒，廢夕燒香，遇止罰而不遣，安公遙聞之，以竹筒盛一荊子，手自緘封，以寄遇，遇開封見杖，即曰：“此由飲酒僧也，我訓領不勤，遠貽憂賜。”即命維那鳴槌集眾，以杖筒置香橙上，行香畢，遇乃起，出眾前向筒致敬。於是伏地，命維那行杖三下，內杖筒中，垂淚自責。時境內道俗莫不歎息，因之勵業者甚眾。既而與慧遠書曰：“吾人微聞短，不能率眾，和上雖隔在異域，猶遠垂憂念，吾罪深矣。”後卒於江陵，春秋六十矣。(Huijiao 1992, p. 201).

⁵ As Chen Jinlong notes in *Politics–Religion Relations under the Nanjing Nationalist Government: A Buddhism-Centered Study* 南京國民政府時期的政教關係：以佛教為中心的考察：“The Nanjing Nationalist Government had both the intention and measures to reform the abbot system, but due to strong resistance, the reforms of this period had little actual effect.” (Chen 2011, pp. 188–89).

⁶ From the Northern Song *The Rules of Purity in the Chan Monastery* (*Chanyuan Qinggui* 禪苑清規) to the Yuan works such as *Imperially Commissioned Regulations for Chan Monastery* (*Chixiu Baizhang Qinggui* 敕修百丈清規), *Expanded and Revised Tiantai Monastic Regulations* (*Zengxiu Jiaoyuan Qinggui* 增修教苑清規), and *Procedural Regulations of the Vinaya Tradition* (*Lüyuan shigui* 律苑事規), there are detailed entries concerning the etiquette of the protocol for the advancement and withdrawal of the two orders. In monasteries, capable monks were appointed as officials, while less able ones were set aside but cared for. This reduced jealousy and reinforced the abbot's authority.

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