

Good research paper on samsara: the belief in reincarnation in chinese society

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Samsara, commonly known in English as reincarnation, is a Sanskrit word meaning the “ continuous flow,” or the cycle of life that every being experiences, from birth to death and then rebirth (Sharf). Samsara also relates directly to the way one’s actions influence one’s cycle of birth and rebirth; actions have consequences, and when one acts in positive ways, one’s karma is positive; the inverse is true when one acts in negative ways (Sharf). Every Buddhist society recognizes the cycle of Samsara, although each society recognizes slightly different aspects of the process. According to Chinese Buddhism, the life that an individual is living is only one of many previous lives-- and only one of many future lives and incarnations (Sharf). Chinese Buddhism is tainted by the reality of Chinese culture, which has been marked by violence and unrest for the previous half-century. This unrest has left an indelible mark on Chinese Buddhism, and that mark has changed the way the Chinese perceive the process of reincarnation and rebirth.

The concept of samsara in Chinese Buddhism is slightly different than that of other kinds of Buddhism. Buddhism tends to encourage the practitioners to engage in their own form of Buddhism; everyone, according to Buddhist tradition, has his or her own reality, and many forms of Buddhism incorporate local folk beliefs into the practice of the Buddhist spiritual teachings. China is an incredibly large place, and as a result, teachings and practices of Buddhism are varied; however, some of the more popular forms of practice incorporate traditional Chinese beliefs with traditional Buddhist ones. Folk beliefs are integrated into practices, but also into the way the religion itself is perceived.

The religious beliefs that guide Chinese Buddhism are heavily shrouded in concepts of punishment, immortality, and justice. These thematic ideas become fundamentally important throughout the soul's process of birth, life, death, and rebirth; a soul goes through this process innumerable times, according (Hui and Coleman 951). to most scholars Sharf writes: " At the moment of death, Chinese believe one's spirit is taken by messengers to the god of walls and moats, Ch'eng Huang, who conducts a kind of preliminary hearing. Those found virtuous may go directly to one of the Buddhist paradises, to the dwelling place of the Taoist immortals, or the tenth court of hell for immediate rebirth. After 49 days, sinners descend to hell There they undergo a fixed period of punishment in one or more levels of hell. The duration of this punishment may be reduced When the punishment is complete, the souls in hell drink an elixir of oblivion in preparation for their next reincarnation. They then climb on the wheel of transmigration, which takes them to their next reincarnation, or, in an alternative account, they are thrown off the bridge of pain into a river that sweeps them off to their next life" (Sharf). This is a very punishment-heavy form of Buddhist belief; other forms of Buddhism do not tend towards a hell and punishment view, but Chinese folk religions have long been rife with these kinds of stories. In the same way pagan beliefs and practices slipped almost unnoticed into Christian religious rites, so too have Chinese folk beliefs slipped into the everyday practice of Buddhism for many Chinese people.

It is impossible, however, to discuss Chinese Buddhism without discussing the contentious relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the religion of the masses, particularly Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai

Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist monk who is the figurehead for the whole religion, has been in exile for most of his life (Blanchard). The Chinese government has, in recent years, taken a very keen interest in the beliefs and spiritual practices of its people; indeed, the CCP seems to be taking the idea that religion is the “ opiate of the masses” extremely seriously-- and is trying to control Tibetan Buddhism as a result.

Tibetan Buddhism is an offshoot of Chinese Buddhism, and one that is much more devout than the average Chinese Buddhist. According to Sharf, most Chinese Buddhists have certain aspects of Buddhism integrated into their lives-- but Tibetan Buddhism is much more all-encompassing for believers (Sharf). Clearly, the Chinese government has some issues with the integration of political and religious thought in Tibet; they have begun using political power to crack down on the religion as a whole, often targeting Tibetan Buddhism over other types of Buddhism. However, the belief in ancestors and samsara continues to remain in Chinese culture today.

Southern Chinese Buddhism is also rife with meaning, especially for older people. Hui and Coleman write extensively on the purpose of reincarnation-- samsara-- belief for the older generation. They write that the samsara belief helps to “ develop and validate a Buddhist reincarnation beliefs scale and explore the relation between Buddhist reincarnation beliefs and personal death anxiety in 141 older adult Hong Kong Chinese Buddhists. Buddhist reincarnation beliefs were unrelated to personal death anxiety. This suggests that not all religious afterlife beliefs have death anxiety buffering power as proposed by Terror Management Theory, perhaps because Buddhists view reincarnation not as a solace but rather as a renewal of sufferings due to

unwholesome karma. Future cross-religion comparison studies could investigate the efficacy of reincarnation beliefs as a personal death anxiety defense mechanism in a Hindu sample” (Hui and Coleman). They go on to compare the differences between the Hindu religion and the Buddhist religion, noting that belief in samsara generally calms older individuals as they come close to death. Southern Chinese culture is quite unique in that it has maintained much of the ancient Chinese way, whereas other parts of China have not retained such ingrained beliefs.

The idea of reincarnation that is so prevalent in Buddhist beliefs presents a very real problem for the Chinese government. Religious belief offers another, higher form of authority; this is the position that the Chinese government wants to hold in every citizen’s life (Zizek). When religious sects like Buddhists insist that they must retain their autonomy from the Chinese government in hopes of practicing beliefs like samsara, the Chinese government reacts with harsher controls in the hopes of returning to the place of central authority in the Buddhist social and religious sphere. The belief in samsara itself is not a threat to the Chinese government, but the people who insist that they can and will reincarnate and continue to cause trouble do worry the Chinese government significantly.

In recent years, the Chinese government has instituted a new policy known as the State Religious Affairs Order Number 5, or the “ Measures on the Management of Living Buddhas” (Zizek). Aware that they were losing control over the general populace and their belief in certain local Buddhas, the Chinese government decreed that no living Buddha could be declared in China without express permission from the government. This is similar in

issue to when the Dalai Lama named the Panchen Lama and the boy was placed under house arrest; the Chinese government does not want to support any religious activity that could undermine its power. In its excitement, the CCP even claims to be able to control the power of samsara and rebirth. Today, China is a largely non-religious society as a result of the CCP's actions against religion, but certain aspects of samsara and Buddhist traditions remain, particularly in areas largely untouched by socialism, like Hong Kong. Hong Kong has a much more vibrant religious lifestyle than many other parts of China, because Hong Kong was returned to China only in 1997 (Blanchard).

The Chinese practice some ceremonial rites that allude to an overall cultural belief in samsara. The use of altars and the belief in ancestor worship both have their roots in samsara; Hui and Coleman suggest that the idea of reincarnation has informed much of the cultural identity of the Chinese. Despite the religious crackdown on reincarnation and belief that the CCP is responsible for, the Chinese people maintain some semblance of their previous cultural and religious beliefs. These beliefs are not as widespread or as widely practiced as they have been in the past, but they remain an integral part of much of the Chinese identity.

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