



BRILL

REVIEW OF RELIGION AND CHINESE SOCIETY

(2026) 1–29

Review of Religion
and Chinese Society

brill.com/racs

“Progressives” vs. “Conservatives” and Their Intermediaries in the Epistolary Network of Republican-Period Chinese Buddhism

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Received 28 January 2026 | Accepted 21 May 2026 |

Published online 22 September 2026

Abstract

This study examines a network of ca. 1,100 actors and ca. 2,900 links derived from letters published in Buddhist periodicals during the Republican period (1911–1949). Exploratory visualization reveals two main communities: one centered on the reformist monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) and his journal *Haichaoyin*, and the other on the influential Pure Land monk Yinguang 印光 (1862–1940), with several intermediary figures bridging the two regions. The study asks how the letter network’s structure reflects differing attitudes toward Buddhism and modernity, and what role second-tier actors played. Findings show that actors’ structural positions do, to some extent, reflect their stance on Buddhist modernism. Biographical analysis and close reading of the letters reveal that at least three key intermediaries began their Buddhist journey under Yinguang’s influence before gravitating toward Taixu’s circle. Network analysis further uncovers a previously overlooked group of monks advancing a Tiantai-inflected, traditionalist form of Buddhism.

Keywords

China–Republican period – Buddhist letter network – network analysis – Taixu – Yinguang – Republican-era Buddhist journals

“進步者”，“保守者”，以及他們的中間人：民國年間中國佛教的書信網絡

摘要

本文描述及分析了一個民國年間 (1911–1949) 中國佛教徒之間的書信網絡。這個數據庫來源於發表在佛教期刊上的書信，一共有約 1100 個人物和約 2900 個鏈接。通過研究可視的圖像我們發現兩個突出的群體：一個集中於改革派僧人太虛 (1890–1947) 和他的期刊《海潮音》；另一個集中於頗具影響力的弘揚淨土的僧侶印光 (1862–1940)。在這兩個網絡之間以及附近我們發現了相當數量的“中間人。”此書信網絡的結構如何反映對於佛教現代化的不同觀念？第二梯隊參與者的角色是什麼？我們的發現是，參與者在網絡中的結構位置確實一定程度上反映了他們對於佛教現代化的看法。通過詳細分析傳記和仔細閱讀書信，我們發現至少有三個主要的“中間人”最初是由印光影響而起信佛教，卻與太虛及其團隊日漸親近。網絡分析也發現了一批主要奉行傳統天臺佛教的僧侶，這在目前學界仍鮮被研究。

關鍵詞

中國 – 民國時期 – 社會網絡 – 太虛 – 印光 – 民國佛教期刊

The use of network analysis for the study of Chinese history is by no means widespread, but in recent years it has been explored increasingly as a method to cope with the growing number and size of historical datasets. The last five years have seen the publication of no fewer than three special journal issues (Chen and Rudolph 2021; Chen and Zhao 2022; Bingenheimer 2023) and one edited volume (Henriot 2025) on network analysis based on Chinese sources.¹

¹ In addition, a special issue of the *Journal of Digital History* (vol. 5, “DH China”) contains articles that apply network analysis to Chinese sources.

The introductions to each of these collections provide comprehensive overviews of the state of the field.

Network analysis describes reality in terms of entities and relationships. In *social* networks the entities are persons (actors) who can have a wide variety of directed and undirected relationships. Epistolary or letter networks are a special type of social network in which the links between actors are defined by their correspondence.² Correspondence is directed, often datable, and—provided the letters are extant—the content of the communication can be mined for further insights, as we attempt to do here.

The study of early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism is privileged in that researchers can draw on a large corpus of Buddhist periodicals published between 1912 and ca. 1955, which includes a substantial amount of letters.³ The majority of these periodicals were collected and reprinted by Huang Xianian 黃夏年 in three sets (Huang 2006, 209 vols., cited as MFQ; 2007, 83 vols., cited as MFQB; and 2013, 35 vols.). A searchable database containing the first two of these sets (MFQ and MFQB) with metadata was created at Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts in Taiwan in 2008–2009.⁴ Value was added by grouping content items in categories and sub-categories, and we have used these categories to extract the bibliographic information concerning correspondence-type items. After cleaning the data and disambiguating the named entities, we arrived at a dataset of ca. 2,500 letters that were published in ca. 50 periodicals (see the section “Dataset Description and Significant Actors” below).

An initial exploratory visualization of the data (Fig. 1) shows two main network regions: one centered on Taixu 太虛 and his journal *Haichaoyin* 海潮音, an important forum for Buddhist modernism, and the other on Yinguang 印光 and his lay followers. Few direct links exist between these two camps, but there are a number of “in-between” actors.

2 In European history, the best-studied correspondence network is probably the “Republic of Letters” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This network was the subject of the (now defunct) DH project *Mapping the Republic of Letters* at Stanford (Edelstein et al. 2017). For a detailed discussion of letters as historical data in a digital environment, see Hotson and Wallnig 2019. On epistolary networks, see especially the contribution by Ahnert and Ahnert 2019. A well-accessible dataset is maintained by the Bodleian: *Early Modern Letters Online* (<http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/home>). Ureña-Carrion et al. (2022) has compared a historical letter network with data from modern communication platforms. Elwert (2020) has addressed some conceptual issues concerning the application of network analysis to religion especially.

3 On the early history of Republican-period Buddhist journals, see Scott 2016.

4 Available at <http://buddhistinformatics.dila.edu.tw/minguofojiaoqikan/>.

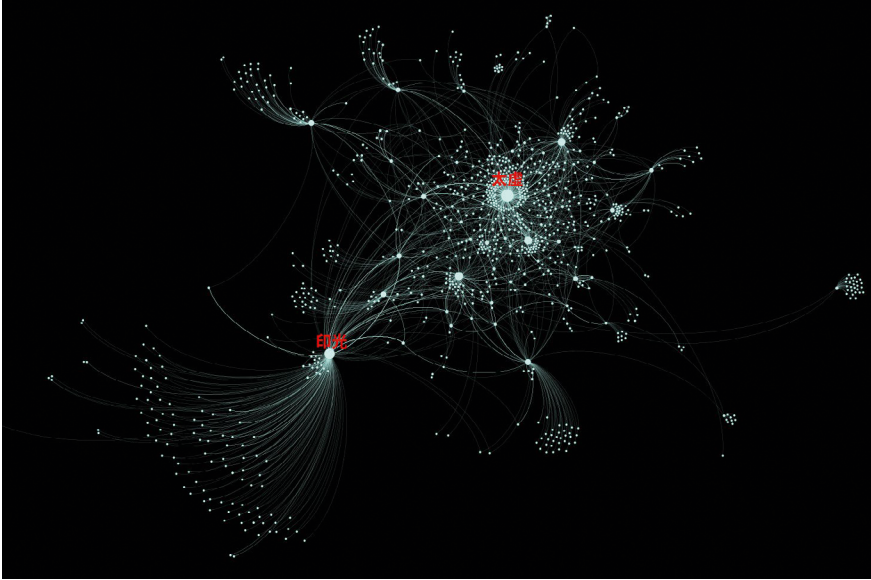


FIGURE 1 The two most connected nodes, Taixu and Yinguang, differ in the way they are embedded within their network region. While Taixu (upper right) is embedded in a group of actors who communicate with each other as well as with him, many of Yinguang's links (lower left) are "dead ends," in the sense that many recipients of his letters are not connected to anybody else in the network.

The research questions that guided this paper are concerned with the relationship between these two centers and the identity of their possible intermediaries. Network analysis can help us to identify intermediaries structurally, but obviously this needs to be followed up with more traditional historical research, i.e., the close reading of sources. How to interpret the roles of these in-between actors? Were they intermediaries, interlocutors, mediators, or did they just happen to be communicating with both Yinguang and Taixu? And were there structurally significant actors that were associated with neither Yinguang nor Taixu?

Progressives/Reformers vs. Conservatives/Traditionalists

In October 1914, Taixu began a three-year retreat in sealed confinement on Mount Putuo (Pittman 2001:82). Two years earlier he had caused a contentious debate within the Chinese Sangha with his failed takeover of Jinshan monastery 金山寺. Taixu and others had tried to turn Jinshan, a renowned meditation monastery in Jiangsu, into a monastic seminary but had encountered

fierce, even violent resistance, causing a major disturbance (*danao jinshan* 大鬧金山) (Welch 1968:28–33). With the death of his master, the influential Jing'an “Ascetic Eight-Fingers” 敬安八指頭陀 (1851–1912), in late 1912, Taixu lost support for his reformist ideas and decided it was better to keep a low profile for a while. He went to the island of Mount Putuo, a flourishing pilgrimage center and a safe haven for Buddhism in an overall unstable and chaotic period of regime change.

The officiating monk at his sealing-away ceremony for the retreat was none other than Yinguang, who might have felt satisfied that the troublesome young monk was, for some time at least, removing himself from center stage. It appears that after their encounter on Mount Putuo, Yinguang and Taixu never corresponded directly or engaged in public debate. However, it is clear from their writings and some recorded conversations that they were at odds about almost everything that was debated in the Chinese Sangha in their time (Pittman 2001:237–239).

Yinguang insisted on a traditionalist version of Pure Land practice: the recitation of Amitabha's name as the foundation of a virtuous life, from which one is reborn into the Pure Land. His understanding of Pure Land practice was to a large degree informed by Wang Rixiu 王日休 (1104–1172)'s *Longshu Essays on the Pure Land* 龍舒淨土文 (1162 CE), a text that, judging by the number of independent reprints and quotations in later works, was formative for East Asian Pure Land practice.

Taixu, on the other hand, like many other intellectually minded monks and laypeople in the early twentieth century, considered Yogācāra the apex of Buddhist doctrine, a purely philosophical system without any institutional basis or lineage in the second millennium CE.⁵ Starting from this basic disagreement over what constitutes “the best” formulation of Buddhist truth, Yinguang and Taixu had different approaches to the role of Sangha education. One of the main vectors of Taixu's impact on Buddhism modernism was the founding of Buddhist seminaries, which became successful incubators for the next generation of Buddhist modernists.⁶ Yinguang, in principle, considered

5 See Pacey 2014 on Taixu and Yogācāra. For the renewed popularity of Chinese Yogācāra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in general, see Müller 1993 and the essays collected in Makeham 2014. Taixu's take on Pure Land was also in opposition to Yinguang: instead of Amitābha's Pure Land, Taixu recommended rebirth in Maitreya's Tuṣita Pure Land (Ritzinger 2025:101–104). Yinguang's erstwhile student Tang Dayuan (s.b.) also found ways to interpret Pure Land practice in a nontraditional way (Zamorski 2023).

6 Welch 1968:103–120, but see also Travagnin's 2017 study of the twentieth-century discourse about Buddhist educational “reform.”

monastic education to be a matter of individual monasteries, and intellectual pursuits beyond monastic practice were suspect.

With regard to gender, Yinguang's pronouncements about the role of women in society were by and large reactionary, whereas Taixu followed his master Jing'an in taking a relaxed and relatively inclusive stance on gender-related issues.⁷ Consequently, in 1924, Taixu established the first seminary for Buddhist women as part of the Wuchang Institute for Buddhist Studies 武昌佛學院, which he had founded two years earlier. While the establishment of such a seminary was progressive, the curriculum was not.⁸

Another dimension of Buddhist modernism in China (and elsewhere) was that in a world divided into nation states, different Buddhist traditions were challenged to define themselves in national or cultural terms. Next to an increasing mutual awareness of the larger traditions, such as Theravāda and Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism, distinctions were asserted along national lines, such as Japanese versus Chinese, or Burmese versus Thai Buddhism. Different from Yinguang, whose horizon was bounded by Chinese Buddhist culture, Taixu actively sought contact with foreigners and tried to spread Chinese Buddhism abroad. He was perhaps the first Chinese Buddhist monk who sought a global audience that included Europe and the United States. Repeatedly, he attempted to found international organizations, and, like most of Taixu's ventures, these quickly fell apart, but nevertheless provided important precedents and inspired his students (Welch 1968:55–64). He traveled abroad and gave lectures (with varying success) in the US, Europe, and Japan.⁹ Chinese Buddhism, of course, was to be the solution. For Taixu, Buddhism held the key to global peace and could resolve one of the “central dilemmas of modern philosophy,” which he took to be the tension between determinism (*biran lun* 必然論) and free will (*ziyou lun* 自由論).¹⁰ Elsewhere, he speaks

7 On Yinguang's and Jing'an's views on the gender issues of their day, see Bingenheimer and Shen 2020.

8 Taixu emphasized that the training of female monastics should follow the conventional stages of ordination: *śrāmaṇerikā*, *śikṣamāṇā*, and *bhikṣuṇī*. Taixu, “Daoshi lai han” 導師來函 (1933–02–15), in *Zhengxin* 正信 (MFQB 43:182). For more on the establishment of the “First Academy for Female Buddhists,” see Yuan 2009: 9–11. For an overview of Buddhist academies for women and a case study in South China, see Campo 2022. For an example of contemporary female monastic education in northern China, see Péronnet 2024, ch. 2.

9 Compare his own reports, e.g., in “Taixu fashi you ou di mei hou zhi laixin” 太虛法師遊歐抵美後之來信, and in *Shijie fojiao jushi lin linkan* 世界佛教居士林林刊 (1929) (MFQB 10:271–272), with the impressions of contemporaries (Welch 1968:60).

10 Taixu, “Foxue wei shijie heping yaosu, Taixu dashi zai zhongyang guangbo wuxian dian-tai yanjiang” 佛學為世界和平要素，太虛大師在中央廣播無線電臺演講 (MFQB 44:508).

of fundamental differences between Buddhism and Western philosophy and praises Buddhism for its transformative potential.¹¹

Taixu also felt that Japanese monastics might benefit from receiving training in China, particularly in the areas of Vinaya and meditative discipline.¹² He was convinced that the Vinaya rules were realized better in China than in Japan, but at the same time he expressed concern about and tried to reform monastic, scholastic, and contemplative training in China. In 1923, he reminds the recipient of a letter that monks originally sustained themselves solely through alms.¹³

Like many Chinese intellectuals of his time, Taixu tried to combine innovation with continuity. In his correspondence with Duan Qirui 段祺瑞 (1865–1936), Taixu commended Duan for skillfully integrating Buddhist principles with Confucian practice and for maintaining a balance between modern intellectual trends and traditional moral wisdom. Similarly, in a letter to Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975), Taixu argued that the integration of Buddhist philosophy into Chinese cultural life would not only strengthen national identity but also contribute to the global realization of Sun Yat-sen’s 孫逸仙 (1866–1925) “Three Principles of the People” (*sanmin zhuyi* 三民主義).¹⁴ Elsewhere, Taixu argued that in the spirit of “national revolution” (*guomin geming* 國民革命), the Buddhist monastic system and institutional structures should also undergo reform. He suggested that the way to achieve this was to “restore Buddhism to its true essence, while adapting it to the times” (*huifu benzhen, shiying shishi* 恢復本真, 適應時勢).¹⁵ He conceded the misconduct of certain monks and a degree of institutional decay, but as in the case of nations weakened by internal corruption, it was the duty of patriotic individuals to “eliminate outdated elements” and construct a “renewed, progressive society.”¹⁶ Thus, his call for reform was couched in the language of national cultural and political rejuvenation.

11 Taixu, “Taixu fashi dafu Li Guanqin” 太虛法師答覆李琯卿, in *Haichao yin* 海潮音 (1922–06) (MFQ 153:299–301).

12 Taixu, “Foxueyuan yuanzhang fu Xianyin fashi han erze” 佛學院院長覆顯蔭法師函二則, in *Shijie fojiao jushilin linkan* 世界佛教居士林林刊 (MFQB 8:127–128).

13 Taixu, “Fu Tu Runqin han” 覆塗潤琴函, in *Haichao yin* 海潮音 (1923–12) (MFQ 157: 435–436).

14 Taixu, “Taixu fashi zhi jiang zong siling shu” 太虛法師致蔣總司令書, in *Jinshan fahai bolan* 金山法海波瀾 (1929–02) (MFQB 40:83–85).

15 Taixu, “Zhi Zhang Zhijiang xiansheng chu” 致張之江先生書, in *Chengzhong tekan* 晨鐘特刊 (1928–05) (MFQB 32:449–450).

16 Ibid.

In contrast to Taixu, Yinguang categorically stated that “one must never follow modern trends.”¹⁷ His traditionalism, however, did not prevent him from making use of new publishing venues like journals. As Charles Jones (2025:167) notes, Yinguang, to a degree, “accepted modernity, without adopting modernism.” Overall, however, outside observers, then and now, have always perceived a clear difference between Yinguang and the modernist approach of Taixu and his circle.¹⁸

Still, in spite of their many differences in opinion and style, Taixu and Yinguang did agree on some issues. Both, for example, criticized aspects of popular religion. In a 1926 letter, Taixu distinguishes “true Buddhism” from “superstitious practices,” such as praying for relief from disasters, image worship, and ritual repentance, which he saw as distortions of the Dharma. He emphasized instead the importance of extracting the essential teachings of both Buddhism and the Confucian tradition.¹⁹ Yinguang too, in a 1927 letter, condemned appeals to spirits and deities²⁰ and elsewhere explicitly criticized the practice of spirit writing (*fuji* 扶乩).²¹ So although Taixu and Yinguang can be said to epitomize the reformist and traditionalist tendencies in early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism, they shared some common ground and usually maintained a respectful distance toward each other. In the next section we will see how their doctrinal and personal differences become visible in the structure of the epistolary network preserved in contemporary Buddhist journals.

Dataset Description and Significant Actors

The network data²² was distilled from the “Catalog Database of Republican Era Buddhist Journals” (Minguo fojiao qikan wenxian jicheng shumu ziliaoku

17 *Wan bu ke xue shipai* 萬不可學時派. Yinguang, “Yinguang fashi yu Zhou Fali tongzhi shu” 印光法師與周法利童子書, in *Shijie fojiao jushi lin linkan* 世界佛教居士林林刊 (1927–1928) (MFQB 9:460).

18 One of the first outsider reports on Taixu’s efforts compared him to Martin Luther (Millican 1923:327), while a later assessment extends this to Martin Luther King (Ritzinger 2025:81).

19 Taixu, “Zhi Sun Zong Siling shu” 致孫總司令書 (1926–09), in *Dongfang wenhua* 東方文化 (MFQ 20:515–516).

20 Yinguang, “Zhi Zhou shi kunzhong shu” 致周氏昆仲書, in *Jingye yuekan* 淨業月刊 (1927–2) (MFQB 17:147–152).

21 Yinguang, “Fu Haimen Li Tingtao lun fuji zhi bi” 復海門理聽濤論扶乩之弊, in *Foxue banyue kan* 佛學半月刊 (1933–12–01) (MFQ 49:6).

22 Available as part of this repository: https://github.com/mbingenheimer/ChineseBuddhism_SNA.

《民國佛教期刊文獻集成》書目資料庫) that was created at the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts 2008–2009.²³ Starting with a collection of 8,251 items, we have identified senders and recipients, deleted duplicates, etc., eventually arriving at a dataset consisting of 2,507 letters that were published between 1913 and 1947 in ca. 50 different periodicals.²⁴ The dataset comprises 1,102 actors (individuals and organizations) and 3,004 (unmerged) links.²⁵ We argue that, by size and by sampling method, this dataset is representative of the totality of letters published in Republican-era Buddhist journals.

Actors in our network are either individuals or organizations.²⁶ Of the 1,033 individuals, ca. 290 (ca. 28%) were monastics.²⁷ Monastics are not flagged in the node list; our estimate is based on naming conventions (surname *shi* 釋, two-character dharma names, etc.). The gender imbalance is, as usual, extreme: of the 1,033 persons individuated, only 27 (2.6%) can be identified as women.²⁸

Epistolary networks are directed social networks. Thus, the *degree* (number of connections) of a node is the sum of the *in-degree* (letters received) and the *out-degree* (letters sent). This structural feature allows a more detailed understanding of the role of an actor in the network. There is, for example, a marked

23 <http://buddhistinformatics.dila.edu.tw/minguofojiaoqikan/>. That database covers only the first two of the three published *Minguo Fojiao Qikan* sets. The most recent set (Huang 2013), however, consists of only 35 out of a total of 327 published volumes, i.e., ca. 11 percent of the total. Thus, 89 percent of the material is bibliographically accessible through the catalog database. For the identification of correspondence items, we used the category *hanjian* 函件 “letter.” Other possible categories such as *dawen* 答問 (public responses) or *fuwen* 訃聞 (obituaries), in which the relationship between author and target is less straightforward, remain unexplored for now.

24 The task of identifying and disambiguating the senders and recipients via various authority databases, as well as the extraction of dates (where available), was entrusted to an outside contractor. Within time and funding constraints, 2,507 of the 8,251 *hanjian* 函件 items (ca. 30 percent) were included in the final dataset. This is a sufficiently representative sample of the total.

25 Most nodes and edges are part of the giant component (1,052 nodes, 2,965 edges). The graph density for the giant component of the directed graph is 0.003.

26 The 69 organizations in the dataset are mainly of two types: Buddhist associations (e.g., the Buddhist Association of Sichuan 四川省佛教會), or periodicals (e.g., *Haichaoyin* 海潮音).

27 333 individuals can be identified via their ID (Axxxxx) in the Dharma Drum Buddhist Person Authority Database (<https://authority.dila.edu.tw/person/>). Of these, 146 have a Wikidata ID, which is also included in the node list. 700 actors could not be found in existing databases and were assigned project-specific IDs (Nxxx).

28 In the larger, historical network data of Chinese Buddhism, the imbalance is even more pronounced (Bingenheimer 2021:238).

TABLE 1 In- and out-degrees of Taixu and Yinguang

	Degree	In-degree	Out-degree	Number of correspondents ^a
Taixu	698	505 (72%)	193 (28%)	313
Yinguang	361	49 (14%)	312 (86%)	181

a The number of correspondents in this dataset is the size of the first-degree ego network (without the self node).

difference between the ratio of in- and out-degrees of Taixu and Yinguang, the two largest nodes by degree (Table 1).

The dataset contains more letters received than sent by Taixu, while the opposite is true for Yinguang. This could be understood in terms of the data sources. Taixu, after all, was especially prominent in the periodical scene. He had co-founded *Haichaoyin* and was, to a degree, reachable by writing to *Haichaoyin*, which would then publish the letters addressed to him. In contrast, Yinguang’s letters are usually responses to letters from followers, which, to our knowledge, are not extant. Thus, Yinguang is represented in the data by the letters he wrote, while for Taixu we have a somewhat more balanced picture of both sides of his correspondence. The sheer size of Taixu’s ego network (= number of correspondents) also attests to his central role and networking skills.

In our dataset there is no direct link between Taixu and Yinguang, but of course in the historical record absence of evidence is never proof of non-existence. We know that the two of them met on Mount Putuo as early as 1914, and they certainly were aware of each other’s opinions and activities over the next thirty years. Still, neither in our dataset (2,507 letters) nor among the 8,251 correspondence items (*hanjian* 函件) in the Catalog Database overall is there any trace of a direct exchange between Taixu and Yinguang. This silence is significant and can be seen as a sign of their mutual antagonism.

That Taixu and Yinguang were important actors in Republican-period Buddhism is well known. What network analysis can contribute is a more nuanced understanding of their importance in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Just how prominent the “Taixu camp,” for instance, was in the communication network becomes clear when only the nodes with 23 or more connections are shown (Fig. 2).



FIGURE 2 Actors which have at least 23 connections (degree ≥ 23). Blue, round nodes are people. Red, square nodes are organizations.

The “Taixu camp” is roughly comprised of Taixu, the journal *Haichaoyin*, and the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo fojiao hui* 中國佛教會), both of which he co-founded; his students Daxing 大醒 and Fafang 法舫; and his lay supporters Li Zikuan 李子寬, Hu Ruilin 胡瑞霖, Tang Dayuan 唐大圓, and Kang Ji Yao 康寄遙. In comparison, Yinguang’s position appears relatively isolated. This visualization helps to understand one of the reasons why Taixu’s ideas and initiatives were successful: his correspondents were tightly connected not only with him, but also among themselves.

How separated were the “camps”? How strict was the separation between the network regions around Taixu and Yinguang? How many actors corresponded with both, and why? And how important were the ego-networks of these two actors overall? Network analysis can discover bridge actors that connect different, more densely connected network regions. List 1 enumerates the 21 actors who corresponded with *both* Yinguang and Taixu.²⁹

29 Calculated by the Intersect filter in Gephi. Of the 21, only 3 were not part of the Dharma Drum Authority Database, i.e., they were almost completely unknown.

List 1. All actors who corresponded with both Yinguang and Taixu (name (Dharma Drum ID), degree³⁰).

Táng Dàyuán 唐大圓 (A004823), 181
 Kāng Jìyáo 康寄遙 (A004859), 91
 Jiāng Qiān 江謙 (A004842), 82
 Jiǎng Tèshēng 蔣特生 (A006425), 70
 Yáng Dìtáng 楊棣棠 (A044752), 57
 Shì Xiǎnyìn 釋顯蔭 (A024511), 51
 Liú Xiǎnliàng 劉顯亮 (A007108), 34
 Rénsān 仁山 (A017958), 30
 Mǎ Dàlún 馬大倫 (A006017), 28
 Wáng Hóngyuàn 王弘願 (A004831), 26
 Zhāng Chún'yī 張純一 (A006437), 25
 Qián Chéngshàn 錢誠善 (N0008), 13
 Pān Shǒulián 潘守廉 (A006121), 11
 Zhèng Zǐpíng 鄭子屏 (A006892), 10
 Hú Jìnjiē 胡晉接 (A005947), 8
 Zhōu Mèngyóu 周孟由 (A044745), 8
 Shì Chāoyī 釋超一 (A034269), 7
 Chén Bódá (Déchéng) 陳伯達 (德誠) (N0181), 5
 Wàn Liáng 萬梁 (A007635), 4
 Yú Yú 虞愚 (A004884), 3
 Zhōu Sòngyáo 周頌堯 (N0172), 3

21 out of 1,102 possible actors are not that many, considering the centrality of Taixu's and Yinguang's ego-networks. The low number suggests that the two camps were indeed rather separated.³¹

One of the strengths of formal network analysis consists in being able to change perspective while still working on the same underlying dataset. We can thus proceed to ask the inverse: How many actors have corresponded with *neither* Taixu nor Yinguang? A look at these outsiders might offer clues for alternative visions beyond the traditionalist-progressive polarity defined by Yinguang

30 The list the the result of: ego-network Taixu $\cap$ ego-network Yinguang. "Degree" here indicates the (unmerged) link count in the overall network, not only for the intersection.

31 As always, these numbers are based on our dataset. More detailed research almost always turns up more data. In this case, Fan Gunong, for instance, also belongs on the overlap list, as at least two letters of Yinguang to him have been published. See Yinguang 2010:217–222, online as 復范古農居士書一 (Letter in Reply to Layman Fan Gunong 1) and 復范古農居士書二 (Letter in Reply to Layman Fan Gunong 2), e.g., at <https://book.bfn.org/books2/1288.htm> (2025–06).

and Taixu. Below is the list of prominent figures (degree ≥ 8) who have corresponded with *neither* Taixu or Yinguang (in our dataset):

List 2. Actors with degree ≥ 8 who corresponded with neither Taixu nor Yinguang (name (ID), degree).

Bǎojìng 寶靜 (A006232), 202
 Kuānjìng 寬靜 (A044741), 111
 Dixián 諦閑 (A001825), 97
 Shìjiè Fójiaò Jūshílín 世界佛教居士林 (ORG0012), 60
 Jìng'ān 敬安 (A004827), 31
 Hóngyī 弘一 (A000236), 21
 Zhōu Chéngjī 周承基 (N0519), 16
 Shī Zhàozēng 施肇曾 (A019717), 16
 Huáng Jiànliù 黃健六 (A006093), 13
 Wáng Yǔjí 王與楫 (A044785), 13
 Niè Yúntái 聶雲台 (A005893), 12
 Shǒupéi 守培 (A023620), 11
 Xiè Huìrú 謝慧如 (N0017), 11
 Chūchén 出塵 (N0552), 10
 Jiǎng Wéiqiáo 蔣維喬 (A004868), 9
 Lǐ Tóngxuān 李桐軒 (A005896), 9
 Shì Qīnglián 釋清蓮 (N0228), 9
 Huànzhu 幻住 (N0215), 8
 Zhāng Liánjué 張蓮覺 (A017868), 8
 Zēng Xiàndòng 曾憲棟 (A006109), 8
 Méi Guāngxī 梅光羲 (A004860), 8
 Luó Rěncí 羅忍慈 (N0663), 8
 Chǔ Yìchéng 褚毅成 (N0380), 8
 Zēng Xiàndòng 曾憲棟 (A006109), 8
 Yáng Míngchén 楊明塵 (N0394), 8
 Chénzhōng Tèkān 晨鐘特刊 (ORG0034), 8

Compared with List 1 (actors who corresponded with *both* Taixu and Yinguang), List 2 (Highly connected actors which have not corresponded with either Taixu or Yinguang) contains a higher proportion of monastics (9 out of 26 (34.6%) vs. 3 out of 21 (14.3%)). We find famous, learned monks like Dixian 諦閑, Jing'an 敬安, Hongyi 弘一, and Shoupei 守培, as well as the lesser known Baojing 寶靜 and Kuanjing 寬靜, whom we will meet again below. List 2 also includes two prominent scholars of Buddhism: Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維喬 and Mei Guangxi 梅光羲, who were both acquainted with Taixu.

Holmes Welch (1968:256) famously said that “History belongs to those who write it, and the person who wrote more history than anyone else was T’ai-hsü.” The dataset described here adds nuance to this in several ways. First, Taixu’s ego-network is indeed more densely networked than that of Yinguang, and to a remarkable degree. Second, it is surprising how Yinguang’s and Taixu’s combined ego-networks dominate the network overall: about 85 percent of the letters in our dataset were written by Taixu, Yinguang, and their immediate correspondents.³² In the next section, we will take a look at some of the major in-between actors who corresponded with both Yinguang and Taixu. These were often initially attracted to traditional Chinese Buddhism through Yinguang’s writings, but subsequently aligned themselves with the more intellectual and more engaged “Buddhism of the human realm” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) advocated by Taixu and his circle.

Between Progressives and Conservatives

In the lists above we have identified a number of intermediary actors who corresponded with both Taixu and Yinguang, as well as a group of actors who corresponded directly with neither of the two. Below we will focus on a few of the most connected actors from these groups and take a closer look at their correspondence. We will first focus on the three most connected actors who were connected to *both* Taixu and Yinguang. Then we will proceed to the three most connected actors who were connected to *neither* Taixu and Yinguang.

Tang Dayuan 唐大圓 (1885–1941)

Tang Dayuan received a traditional education through private tutors and was among the last group of men to attain the entry-level *xiucai* 秀才 degree in 1904, one year before the official examination system was abolished.

32 If one subtracts the union of the first-degree ego-networks of Taixu and Yinguang from the data ($\neg(\text{Ego-net-work T} \cup \text{Ego-net-work Y})$), only 629 nodes remain, i.e., somewhat more than half the actors. Stated differently, the combined first-degree ego-networks of only two actors, Taixu and Yinguang, comprise more than half of the nodes in this network. Their centrality is even more evident when considering the number of connections. Without the ego-networks of Yinguang and Taixu, only 367 edges remain of a total of 3,004 (12.2%). Thus, the remaining network, without Taixu’s and Yinguang’s first-degree ego networks, is much less densely connected than the network comprising only the two ego networks. Although about half of the actors are not part of the ego-networks of Taixu and Yinguang, these account for only ca. 12 percent of the communication in the network! (The rest of the communication (measured in letter-links) took place within the two major ego-networks, and between members of the ego-networks and the 629 outside actors.).

In spite of his Confucian upbringing, Tang became deeply interested in Buddhism and Daoism. In response to the New Culture Movement’s radical rejection of tradition, Tang articulated a vision that emphasized traditional “Eastern Culture.” He opposed using science as an absolute authority during the 1923–1924 Science-Metaphysics Debate (*kexuan lunzhan* 科玄論戰).³³

I observed that during the twelfth and thirteenth years of the Republican era (1923–1924), when the authority of science was at its height, many scholars took pride in denouncing Confucius and Laozi in both speech and writing. As a result, even some Buddhists—seeking legitimacy from scientific discourse—joined in the criticism of Confucianism. I strongly disapproved of this trend and therefore raised a vigorous call to promote Eastern culture, upholding the Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi as revered sages.

然吾察民國十二、三年間，科學權威極盛，學者出言使筆，輒以罵孔老為高，因之佛徒或欲乞靈科學者，而亦詬儒，吾甚不以為然，且大聲疾呼倡東方文化，以佛孔老莊為巨子。³⁴

Tang Dayuan’s stance, like his education, straddles the “conservative” vs. “progressive” divide. Central to his ideas was the conviction that Buddhism’s acceptance in China required harmonious coexistence with Confucianism and Daoism. He rejected the use of science to criticize Confucianism, as well as the use of Indian Buddhism to criticize supposedly “heretical” doctrines that evolved in Chinese Buddhism. He even proposed a vision of an “Eastern Pure Land” (*dongfang jingtu* 東方淨土) built upon the three pillars of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and advocated using Buddhist values to transform secular government and educational institutions.³⁵

Tang Dayuan’s position is reflected in his letters to Yinguang and Taixu. In 1921, after lecturing on the Heart Sutra at Kunming’s Yuantong Temple, Tang mailed his lecture notes to Yinguang. Yinguang made some revisions to the

33 *Kexuan lunzhan* is a term used by Feng Tianyu 冯天瑜 (2005:7), Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1987:50–76), and others to refer to the disputes between science and abstract, speculative metaphysics in the historical Chinese context. For the pervasive use of science within Buddhist debates of the 1920s and 30s, see Hammerstrom 2015.

34 Tang Dayuan, “Shiwu nianlai Zhongguo fofa liuxing zhi bianxiang” 十五年来中国佛法流行之变相 (MFQ 189:219); see also Zhang 2021:54.

35 Tang Dayuan, “Shiwu nianlai zhongguo fofa liuxing zhi bianxiang” 十五年來中國佛法流行之變相, *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 189:219).

text, and as a sign of his trust, Yinguang recommended Tang to lead the Pure Land Dharma Assembly in Wenzhou.³⁶

However, in his engagement with Yinguang—they later met in person on Mount Putuo—Tang maintained his intellectual independence. Although the Pure Land patriarch admonished him to focus on sincere Buddha-recitation rather than squander time studying Consciousness-Only philosophy (*laoshi nianfo wuxue weishi* 老實念佛，勿學唯識)—dismissing Yogācāra scholarship as just as futile as “counting grains of sand in the ocean” (*cong ruhui suan sha'er* 徒入海算沙耳)—Tang nevertheless decided to pursue Yogācāra studies under Taixu.³⁷ Tang also contributed numerous articles to *Haichaoyin*, the flagship journal of Taixu’s modernist movement.³⁸

Tang Dayuan’s rift with Yinguang deepened significantly following his 1924 publication of an open letter to his brother Tang Daxiu 唐大休 in *Haichaoyin*. Initially responding to his brother, who had cautioned him against entering sectarian debates, Tang mentioned a rebirth story concerning a Southeast Asian merchant who was eventually reborn as a dog because he relied exclusively on “merit-making” (*xiufu* 修福) without “wisdom cultivation” (*xiuhui* 修慧). Tang went on to say that “it is hard to avoid rebirth in lower realms if one cultivates only merit and not also wisdom.” The anecdote was perceived as a veiled challenge to Yinguang’s Pure Land exclusivism, which often had anti-intellectual overtones. Tang also recommended Yogācāra studies under Taixu as the paradigm of *fuhui shuangxiu* 福慧雙修—the joint cultivation of merit and wisdom necessary for complete liberation.³⁹ For Tang, as for Taixu, doctrinal engagement was not a distraction, but a soteriological necessity.

Yinguang was furious about Tang Dayuan’s use of the rebirth story and expressed his anger in a letter to Tang, threatening to sever ties. Tang apologized swiftly,⁴⁰ but despite his contrition, the incident caused lasting damage to their relationship. Nevertheless, Tang continued to hold Yinguang in high regard, and in 1928 he still referred to him as “my teacher, the Elder Yinguang.”⁴¹

36 Yinguang, *Yinguang fashi wenchao* 印光法師文鈔 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2000), 754.

37 Tang Dayuan, “Shiwu nian lai zhongguo fofa zhi bianxiang” 十五年来中国佛法之变相, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 189:216–222).

38 For instance, in 1923 Tang Dayuan contributed no less than five short articles for the September issue of *Haichaoyin* (vol. 4, no. 8), among them an obituary (MFQ 157:43–44) and a congratulatory note for a sixtieth birthday (MFQ 157:52–53).

39 Tang Dayuan, “Da erdi daxiu shu” 答二弟大休书, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 159:52–54).

40 Tang Dayuan, “Fu Yinguang fashi shu” 覆印光法師書, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 160:78).

41 Tang Dayuan, “Tang Dayuan jushi da Chen Zican jushi lun nianfo dang chisong dasheng jinglun shu” 唐大圓居士答陳自慚居士論念佛當持誦大乘經論書, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 174:108).

In a recent study of Tang, Jacob Zamorski (2023:142) comes to a similar conclusion: “In most of his published writings, Tang had nothing but praise for Yinguang, the man widely regarded as a beacon of Buddhist piety in contemporary China. However, in spite of numerous conciliatory remarks, Tang’s principled criticism of simple Pure Land faith could not but create a division between himself and his old master.”

Tang’s interest in the more complex, scholastic modes of Buddhism is evident early on in his correspondence. He attended Taixu’s lectures on Buddhist logic in Beijing in 1921, and in a 1923 letter to Taixu he sought his clarification on doctrinal concepts.⁴² Tang actively promoted Yogācāra teachings even while leading the Pure Land Dharma assembly in Wenzhou, where he lectured on Hanshan Deqing’s 憨山德清 (c. 1546–1623) *General Teachings of Nature and Characteristics* (*Xingxiang tong shuo* 性相通說, 17th cent.).⁴³ In these lectures, Tang asserted that Yogācāra teachings provided the essential doctrinal foundation for all Buddhist teachings. However, Tang Dayuan, while cultivating an interest in—and actively promoting—Yogācāra thought, also maintained his Pure Land recitation practice.

In late 1925, Tang Dayuan received an invitation from Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維喬 (1873–1958), another lay scholar of Buddhist doctrine, to teach Indian philosophy, Yogācāra, and Buddhist logic at the National Southeast University 國立東南大學 in Nanjing. During this period, Tang continued his correspondence with Taixu. In one letter, he reported his recent appointment at National Southeast and reported that students had shown great enthusiasm for courses on Yogācāra and Hetuvidyā (Buddhist logic).⁴⁴

As the editor of *Haichaoyin* and a lecturer at Wuchang Institute for Buddhist Studies 武昌佛學院, Tang obviously aligned himself with Taixu. However, as he did with respect to Yinguang, Tang preserved his intellectual independence and did not always agree with Taixu. In a letter dated March 1929, he wrote to Taixu that while Buddhism in China may have adapted to local customs, when propagating it abroad, one should directly present the pure Mahayana Dharma in its entirety, unadulterated by even the slightest infusion of scientific or philosophical theories.⁴⁵ Taixu did not agree with Tang’s reservations. He felt that

42 Tang Dayuan and Taixu, “Dayuan jushi lai han ji dafu” 大圓居士來函及答覆, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 155:117).

43 Zhang 2021:35; Tang Dayuan, “Wenzhou hongfa ji” 溫州弘法記, *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 157:32).

44 Tang Dayuan, “Zhi Taixu fashi shu” 致太虛法師書, in *Dongfang wenhua* 東方文化 (MFQ 21:162), and “Jueguo daxueyuan zhi xin shenghuo” 覺國大學院之新生活 in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 173:163–165).

45 Tang Dayuan, “Tang Dayuan jushi ji taixu fashi shu” 唐大圓居士寄大虛法師書, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 172:105).

science and Buddhism were complementary and in a letter dated August 1929 tried to convince Tang that the latest scientific discoveries, such as relativity and quantum mechanics, had dismantled the rigid scientific dogmas of previous decades and were increasingly approaching Buddhist truths.⁴⁶

For Taixu, science was a valid means to promote Buddhism. Tang, on the other hand, sought to modernize Buddhism, but at the same time he wanted to resist Western epistemological hegemony. His “Eastern Pure Land” was essentially a Confucian moral order framed in Buddhist terminology, advocating for social harmony through traditional ethics (Zhang 2021:40). In an open letter to Taixu, Tang criticized various forms of modern scholarship. The spread of Eastern culture, on the other hand, as exemplified by Taixu’s lectures in Europe, could help foster a more peaceful world in line with the Confucian ideal “Cultivate yourself, nourish your family, govern the country, pacify the world” (*xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia* 修身齊家治國平天下).⁴⁷

Although Tang had a closer affinity to Taixu’s circle than Yinguang’s, he was an independent thinker. The recipient of an elite traditional Confucian education, he chanted the Buddha’s name as recommended by Yinguang but did not adopt his anti-intellectualism. He supported Taixu in promoting “Eastern culture” abroad but was suspicious about the truth claims of science. Thus Tang comes into focus as an in-between figure bridging the Taixu-Yinguang polarity, and we see a more complex spectrum taking shape. This is also evident in two other bridge actors, Kang Jiyao and Jiang Qian.

Kang Jiyao 康寄遙 (1880–1968)

Like Tang Dayuan, Kang Jiyao was introduced to Buddhism through contact with Yinguang and his writings, but later became affiliated with Taixu. Early in his career, he worked as a newspaper editor in Shanghai, collaborating with figures like Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942), who promoted socialist ideals. In 1921, Kang met Yinguang on Mount Putuo and took refuge in Buddhism.

Witnessing the weakened state of Buddhism in his home province, Shaanxi, Kang Jiyao attempted to revive Buddhism there.⁴⁸ In November 1927 he co-founded the Fohua Suikan Society 佛化隨刊社 (later Fohua Society 佛化社), the first modern lay Buddhist association in Northwest China.

46 Taixu, “Taixu fashi ji Dayuan jushi han” 太虛法師寄大圓居士函, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 173:207). On Tang’s ideas in the context of the overall history of science and Republican-period Buddhism, see Hammerstrom 2015:83–84, 111–112.

47 Tang Dayuan, “Wuchang shijie foxueyuan gonghan” 武昌世界佛學院公函, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 172:331).

48 Li An, “Kang Jiyao jushi yu fohua she” 康寄遙居士與佛化社, *Fayin* 法音 2 (1993): 26.

Like Tang Dayuan, Kang Jiyao maintained a dialogue with both Yinguang and Taixu while developing his own vision. In an open letter to Yinguang, Kang expressed his appreciation and affirms his belief in the power of Pure Land practice to save society from the turmoil of the warlord years:

What my teacher has demonstrated—advocating karmic retribution and promoting the Pure Land teaching—is truly a panacea for saving the world today. In this region, many people, driven by chaos and upheaval, have developed the aspiration to take refuge in the Buddha. Perhaps this very turmoil is the karmic impetus for a turning of the age.

吾師所示，提倡因果報應，興淨土法門，洵今日救世之阿伽陀靈丹也。此間人士，迫于亂離，發心皈依者亦不少。是或劫運轉移之動機歟。⁴⁹

Kang accepted Yinguang’s promotion of Pure Land practice and his belief in karmic retribution, but, like Tang Dayuan, Kang did not adopt Yinguang’s anti-intellectual stance. Yinguang had admonished him to focus on overcoming karmic habits rather than pursuing scholarly studies, but as Kang’s correspondence with Taixu shows, he managed to follow both his Pure Land practice and his interest in Yogācāra Buddhism. Kang also supported some of Taixu’s initiatives, such as sending monks abroad for study and establishing international Buddhist associations, and was concerned about the shortage of qualified Yogācāra teachers.⁵⁰

Jiang Qian 江謙 (1876–1942)

As a young man Jiang Qian came to the attention of the influential politician and industrialist Zhang Jian 張謇 (1853–1926), who in 1902 invited Jiang to teach at the Tongzhou Normal School 通州師範學校 (Zhao 2021:51). Later in 1914, Jiang was appointed director of the Education Department of Jiangsu Province and in the same year was named president of Nanjing Higher Normal School 南京高等師範學校 (Zhao 2021:107).

Like Zhang Jian and Tang Dayuan, Jiang had received a traditional Confucian education. As a young man he actively promoted scientific views and regarded

49 Kang Jiyao, “Zhi Yinguang fashi han” 致印光法師函, in *Fohua suikan* 佛化隨刊 (MFQB 22:246).

50 Kang Jiyao, “Shang Taixu fashi shu” 上太虛法師書, in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 (MFQ 160:76).

Buddhism as “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信).⁵¹ However, when in 1917 he suffered from a severe and prolonged illness, he turned to reciting Buddhist sutras and found relief in chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha—A-mi-tuo-fo 阿彌陀佛.⁵²

In a letter dated 1926, Jiang thanked Yinguang for sending Buddhist texts and then recounted how, during a recent drought, villagers in his region caused rain to fall by chanting the Buddha’s name. As a result, the villagers, led by Jiang, established the Foguang Society 佛光社, and over a hundred men and women registered as members within just twenty days.⁵³

In his reply, a delighted Yinguang wrote how deeply encouraging it was to see the Pure Land teaching flourishing and offered to send twenty copies of his collected writings for distribution. He opined that national disorder stemmed from a lack of moral leadership, which in turn originated from a failure of proper family instruction—especially maternal education. Thus Yinguang suggested that educating daughters was even more critical than teaching sons, since virtuous women would eventually become “wise wives and good mothers” (*xianqi xianmu* 賢妻賢母).⁵⁴ Yinguang concluded by affirming Jiang Qian’s promotion of Buddhism, saying that through such efforts, both the Dharma and worldly values could be revitalized.⁵⁵

At the same time, however, Jiang Qian was in lively exchange with Taixu, who had suggested that he assist with monastic education in Anhui. Initially reluctant, Jiang eventually agreed to get involved.⁵⁶ In another letter, Jiang noted that many secondary school graduates were unable to pursue higher education or find employment. He proposed to establish a Buddhist university in each province to admit these students and expressed confidence that many would enroll if tuition and boarding fees were waived. Thus Jiang advocated for reforming Buddhist education, aiming at the tertiary level—an idea that would have been quite alien to Yinguang. Jiang then outlined two models for “Buddhist-oriented education”: the first focused on teaching original Buddhist

51 Jiang Qian, “Quan du xu zangjing qi” 勸請續藏經啟, in *Foguangshe shekan* 佛光社社刊 (MFQ 16:257–259); Zhao 2021:202.

52 Jiang Qian, “Meng you ji en shi” 夢遊記恩詩, in *Foxue banyue kan* 佛學半月刊 (MFQ 54:403).

53 Jiang Qian, “Jiang Yiyuan jushi shang Yinguang fashi shu” 江易園居士上印光法師書, *Foguang she shekan* 佛光社社刊 (MFQ 16:167–168).

54 Yinguang uses the Republican-era conservative ideal for the role of women in society. For the relatively recent history of the concept in East Asia, see the comprehensive study by Jin (2006).

55 Yinguang, “Yinguang fashi fu Jiang Yiyuan jushi shu” 印光法師復江易園居士書, in *Shijie fojiao jushi lin linkan* 世界佛教居士林林刊 (MFQ 141:335).

56 Jiang Qian, “Jiang Qian jushi yu Taixu fashi shu” 江謙居士與太虛法師書, in *Xindeng* 心燈 (MFQB 16:106–107).

scriptures, while the second integrated Buddhist principles as the foundation across all subjects in the school curriculum.

Just as a touch of ghee transforms ordinary meals into delicacies, all textbooks and materials should be collectively designed to infuse Buddhist values into each discipline.

舉今學校所有之各種教科——皆歸納於佛化範圍之內，喻如家常菜飯加入少許醍醐皆成上味⁵⁷

Jiang also suggested the establishment of Buddhist teacher training institutes that would enroll primary school instructors during school vacations. Taixu, not surprisingly, fully agreed with and praised Jiang's ideas.⁵⁸ Like Taixu, and different from Yinguang, Jiang Qian thought of the world beyond China and encouraged Taixu's efforts to propagate Buddhism abroad, recommending that Taixu reach out to Chinese students studying abroad.⁵⁹

By taking a closer look, we find that the in-between position of Tang Dayuan, Kang Jiyao, and Jiang Qian in our network was indeed a result of them engaging with both Yinguang and Taixu. While the concept of *renjian fojiao* had not yet had any explicit network-building effects at that time, this was to change in the later phase of the People's Republic of China (see the article by Carsten Krause and Leo Koenig in this special issue).

A Third Center? Dixian 諦閑 (1858–1932), Baojing 寶靜 (1899–1940), Kuanjing 寬靜 (ca. 1890–1935)

Significantly, the three most connected actors in the dataset (degree ≤ 23) who corresponded with neither Taixu nor with Yinguang (List 2) were themselves monastics.⁶⁰ Baojing and Kuanjing are especially active and hitherto rather neglected players who are highlighted by the application of network analysis.⁶¹

57 Jiang Qian, “Fu Taixu fazhi shu” 復太虛法師書, *Foguang she shekan* 佛光社社刊 (MFQ 16:289–290).

58 Taixu, “Taixu fashi zhi Jiang Yiyuan jushi shu” 太虛法師致江易園居士書, in *Foguang she shekan* 佛光社社刊 (MFQ 16:289).

59 Jiang Qian, “Jiang Qian jushi yu Taixu fashi shu” 江謙居士與太虛法師書, in *Xindeng* 心燈 (MFQB 16:106–107).

60 As mentioned above, letters from Yinguang to Dixian exist, but are not part of our dataset.

61 The Dixian group was noticed independently by Li Hui (2022) in a short study on the role of the *Hongfa shekan*. His understanding of its position is very much aligned with what we gleaned from the network data. Li (2022:31) too locates Dixian firmly

In spite of their voluminous correspondence, our dataset does not connect them to either Taixu or Yinguang, and they are rarely mentioned in the literature on Republican-period Buddhism. Their presence in the letter network amounts to a blind spot in our understanding of Republican-era Buddhism. Baojing especially takes a central position in our visualizations of the network, roughly equidistant from Taixu and Yinguang without being attached to either. He belonged to the Tiantai lineage and was the successor of the famous Dixian, the preeminent forty-third-generation successor of the Tiantai lineage. Although widely traveled and well published, Baojing has been overshadowed by his famous teacher, no doubt also because he died before he could attain the seniority that was (and is) an important measure of status and influence in Buddhist circles. Baojing knew Taixu personally, as they studied together (at least part time) under Dixian from 1918 to 1921 at the Guanzong Monastery 觀宗寺 in Ningbo. Taixu had met Dixian even earlier, when Dixian taught at the Jetavana Hermitage 祇洹精舍. Taixu's efforts in many ways mirrored those of Dixian: both founded seminaries and journals, and both were charismatic and popular public speakers. While Taixu has come to be considered the central figure of Buddhist modernism, Dixian and his students have been largely forgotten.

Nevertheless, they appear prominently in the network, not least because Dixian and Baojing founded the journal *Hongfa Shekan* 弘法社刊 and served as the lead instructors at the Guanzong Hongfa Research Society 觀宗弘法研究社.⁶² Their doctrinal position was distinct. While Yinguang rejected scholarly Buddhism to focus exclusively on Pure Land practice, and Taixu wanted to combine Yogācāra, Western philosophy, and science, Dixian and Baojing proposed an orthodoxy founded in Tiantai doctrine. Their journal *Hongfa Shekan*, published between 1928 and 1937, has been said to be “the sole periodical dedicated to expounding Tiantai teachings” (Fang 2002:329). Li (2022:32) describes how the *Hongfa Shekan* “differed significantly from the Buddhist publications of the ‘reformist’ faction” in that it was more traditionalist and sectarian and was entirely run by monastics.

The Guanzong Hongfa Research Society founded by Dixian maintained monastic training standards firmly rooted in the tradition of *conglin* 叢林 public monasteries, “deliberately diverging from contemporary trends” (Ma 2005:66). The group opposed Taixu's embrace of “fashionable Western learning” (*shimao*

in the “conservative camp” (*baoshoupai zhenying* 保守派阵营) and emphasises its Tiantai-inflected anti-modernism.

62 Li Hui, “Minguo Hongfa shekan de bankan dingwei jiqi zuoyong” 民國《弘法社刊》的辦刊定位及其作用, *Fayin* 法音 1 (2022): 31.

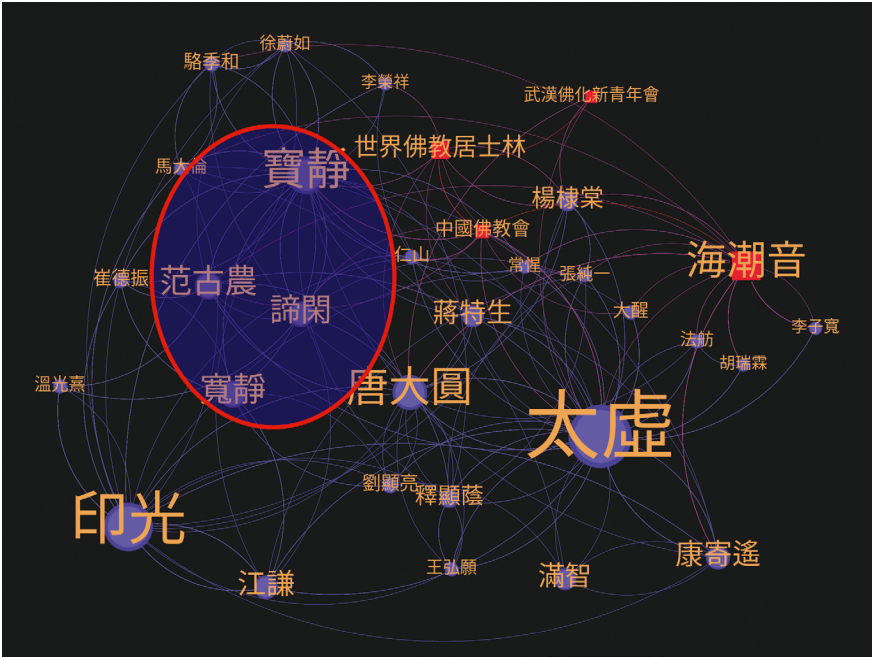


FIGURE 3 Dixian, Baojing, and Kuanjing (red circle) are located between the progressive camp around Taixu (middle right) and the radical traditionalist Yinguang (lower left).

xixue 時髦西學).⁶³ The articles in *Hongfa Shekan* reflect a broader skepticism toward empirical inquiry. Dixian did not feel the need to engage with science: “I comprehend only Buddhist doctrine, not science.” He dismissed scientific knowledge as speculative and defended scriptural cosmology. To him, the notion that stars are “celestial palaces 42,000 yojanas above earth, beyond even divine reach,” was a transcendent truth impervious to scientific scrutiny (Li 2022:32). In this sense, the third center was more aligned with the “traditional” pole centered on Yinguang, which is indeed how the position of Dixian, Baojing, and Kuanjing in the visualization (Figure 3) can be understood.⁶⁴

63 Taixu’s use of science was overall rhetorical and did not reflect an actual engagement with science. Nevertheless, the rhetoric was an important dimension of his message. Even when his own scientific knowledge was only skin-deep, his declared attitude toward science influenced his followers and rendered his form of modernism attractive to progressive intellectuals in the Republican period, who were deeply impressed by “Mr. Science” (*sai xiansheng* 賽先生) and “Mr. Democracy” (*de xiansheng* 德先生).

64 This is corroborated by the fact that Yinguang’s letters to Dixian (outside the dataset) are rather complimentary.

Another interesting find is the correspondence network of Kuanjing, about whom very little information is available in the usual sources (dictionaries and biographical collections). He was a prolific correspondent in the early 1930s, and about 200 of his letters are extant.⁶⁵ Kuanjing served as abbot of the large Huanglong Monastery 黃龍寺 of Mount Lu (MFQ 37:111), and two letters dated 1933/34 by Taixu address him as “abbot of Huanglong” (MFQ 48:484; MFQ 58:135). Kuanjing seems to have been close to Baojing and published mostly in Dixian’s and Baojing’s *Hongfa Shekan*. His 120 dated letters were published in a relatively narrow window between 1928 and 1936. Kuanjing died in April 1935, as attested by two short obituaries (MFQ 51:126, 58:490–491), and a eulogy (MFQ 21:291–292). From a line in his death poem, which speaks of “letting go of 45 years” (MFQ 58:490), it follows that Kuanjing would have been born around 1890.

One reason why this group had a limited impact on Chinese Buddhism and has largely escaped notice was probably because of the sudden, early deaths of Kuanjing (1935) and Baojing (1940). Whereas the alternative approaches to modernity embodied by Taixu and Yinguang persisted beyond their deaths via their followers, Dixian and Baojing’s Tiantai-inspired version of a traditionalist Buddhist education seems to have ended with the premature death of Baojing. It was not transmitted to Hongkong and Taiwan, where both Yinguang’s Pure Land practice and the “Buddhism of the human realm” of Taixu’s circle was continued by their students.

Conclusion

The epistolary network of Republican-period Chinese Buddhists as published in contemporary Buddhist journals is characterized by the polarity between Taixu and Yinguang. Their large ego-networks constitute relatively distinct network regions, with only 21 actors (out of ca. 1,100) corresponding with both Taixu and Yinguang. While the participants in Taixu’s ego-network are closely networked among each other, Yinguang’s ego-network is very much centered on himself, i.e., most of his correspondents did not, in turn, correspond with each other. The fact that Taixu’s circle is more densely linked is perhaps not surprising. The very medium of Buddhist journal publication was to a degree an expression of modern times. While Yinguang’s letters to

65 As per the Catalog Database of Republican Era Buddhist Journals. The count includes articles, as well as some duplicates (i.e., the same text published in different journals).

laypeople were reprinted in the journals, he rarely corresponded directly with journals or organizations. Our dataset does not contain any correspondence between Yinguang and *Haichaoyin* as an organization. Nor was there direct communication between Yinguang and *Shijie fojiao jushilin* 世界佛教居士林, the second-largest organization after *Haichaoyin* (by degree).⁶⁶

The “progressives,” such as Taixu, Tang Dayuan, Daxing, and Fafang, not only used the journals to make announcements but also asked and answered questions and debated relatively openly in their pages, pioneering not only new media, but also new modes of communication within the Sangha.⁶⁷

Although the ego networks of Taixu and Yinguang account for a large part of the communication (measured in links), network analysis turned up at least one other major group that occupied a position between the conservative and the progressive ends of the spectrum in its ideological orientation. This group around Dixian, Baojing, and Kuanjing had its own Tiantai-inflected sense of what it meant to be a Buddhist in the twentieth century. The group neither subscribed to the reductive focus on Pure Land practice advocated by Yinguang nor to Taixu’s narrative of Buddhist modernism, in which Buddhism is international and compatible with science. Their activities deserve to be better studied, but for now it appears that their complex, Tiantai-inflected traditionalist approach to modern Buddhist education did not survive the 1930s. Two other figures, both sympathetic to the Tiantai group, appear in the network and deserve more attention: First, the prolific Fan Gunong 范古農 (1881–1951), who took refuge with Dixian, but refrained from taking sides and maintained friendly relationships with all groups. Second, the monk Changxing 常惺 (1896–1939), who had studied with Dixian, but eventually worked closely with Taixu, aligning himself with a more reformist agenda.⁶⁸

Like all historical sources, datasets like the one discussed here can only ever highlight a limited number of features. It is noteworthy, for example, that the otherwise prolific Yuanying 圓瑛 (1878–1953) does not appear more prominently in the data. With only 10 connections he is not a major actor in the epistolary network of his day, although he is widely regarded as an important leader of Buddhist institutions, who, like Yinguang, preferred traditionalist

66 The reason for this was perhaps the personal animosity between Yinguang and the founder of the *Jushilin*, Wang Yuji 王與楫 (Jessup 2010:11).

67 For a forceful, but not unusual, doctrinal debate conducted in 1931/32 in *Haichaoyin* between Yinshun 印順 (1906–2004) and Shoupei 守培 (1884–1955) on some details of Yogācāra doctrine, see Bingenheimer 2004:42–66.

68 For a recent biographical sketch of Changxing, see Hammerstrom 2025.

approaches to Buddhist modernism. Another prominent absence, now in the reformist camp, is Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無 (1870–1943), the founder of the Chinese Inner Learning Institute 支那內學院, who engaged in intense scholastic debates with Taixu. One reason for the small number of letters from Ouyang and his group is perhaps that their journal *Neixue* 內學, although included in MFQ, did not publish correspondence items. Yuanying's and Ouyang's relatively small contribution to our letter network obviously does not diminish their importance for Chinese Buddhism.

Thus, while network analysis is able to detect hitherto unnoticed patterns, no single dataset or method can model historical reality perfectly.

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