Modern Chinese Buddhist Culture in the Greater Hangzhou Region in Yu Dafu’s Travel Notes

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Abstract: Buddhism has been a significant part of Hangzhou’s rich history. Throughout the twentieth century, Hangzhou’s Buddhist culture continued to inspire many Chinese writers, one of the most prominent being Yu Dafu. The writer stayed in Hangzhou several times during the 1920s and 1930s and wrote numerous travel notes, including many describing his and his friends’ visits to temples in and around Hangzhou. These short travel notes, written in modern Chinese with the characteristics of modern prose, opened a relationship between Buddhism and Chinese literature, effectively inaugurating a fresh genre of Chinese Buddhist literature. This paper focuses on Yu Dafu’s travel notes, considers extensive historical sources, and explores how they recorded and represented Chinese Buddhist culture in Hangzhou and more broadly. This paper also explores the reciprocal influence of contemporary Hangzhou’s Buddhist culture on writers’ cognitive frameworks, spiritual solace, and literary choices.

Keywords: Hangzhou; Jiangnan; Buddhism; Yu Dafu; literature; travel note

1. Introduction

Located in eastern China, Hangzhou is one of the oldest cities in the country, and it has served as an important cultural, commercial, and political center for centuries. Throughout its rich history, Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the city in various ways. It has been influenced by the influx of different Buddhist sects, the development of Buddhist schools of thought, and the remarkable activities of prominent Buddhist individuals. Dating back to the Jin Dynasty (226–420 CE), Hangzhou has held a crucial position as a center for Buddhism. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Hangzhou emerged as a pivotal hub for the development of Chan (禪 Zen) Buddhism. Furthermore, during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), Hangzhou gained recognition as a major center for the study and practice of Pure Land Buddhism (淨土宗). This particular Buddhist tradition was founded by the revered monk Hui Yuan (慧遠 334–416). Remarkably, Hangzhou’s significance in the realm of Buddhism continues into modern times, making it a thriving and enduring hub for Buddhist activity (Welter 2022b; Yü 2020).

Hence, there is a considerable body of research regarding Buddhism in the greater Hangzhou region (Jiangnan). For example, Hangzhou hosted the 2014 and 2015 Hangzhou Buddhist History and Culture Academic Forum, and attendees published a number of academic papers on Hangzhou Buddhist schools, monasteries, prominent monks, systems of thought, key documents, and other topics. Scholars traced the lineage of Buddhist sects such as the East Asian Yogācāra (fa xiang zong 法相宗), Pure Land Buddhism, Zen, and Tendai Lotus School (lian hua zong 蓮花宗) in Song Dynasty-era Hangzhou; researched Tang and Song Dynasty Buddhist resources in Hangzhou; and explored the phenomenon of “Ming dynasty survivors as the monks” in Ming and Qing Dynasty Hangzhou (Hangzhou Culture and History Research Association 2015, 2017). However, Buddhism has also had a profound influence on the local culture of Hangzhou, from its architecture to its art and literature. The teachings of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths (si...
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sheng di 四聖諦), the Eightfold Path (ba zheng dao 八正道), and the concept of karma, have had a major influence on Chinese literature. Some of the most distinguished writers of ancient China often incorporated Buddhist teachings into their works, as seen in the poetry of Li Bai (李白 701–762 CE) and Du Fu (杜甫 712–770 CE) and the plays of Guan Hanqing (關漢卿 1234–1300 CE). In China, literature has been a crucial tool for illuminating and propagating Buddhist teachings and has provided insight into Buddhist philosophy. Writers and thinkers have explored many aspects of the long and complex relationship between Buddhism and literature in Hangzhou. There are many Buddhist stories and legends associated with Hangzhou, including the legend of the White Snake¹, and the story of the monk Ji Gong².

As part of the special issue “Buddhist Culture in the Greater Hangzhou Region (Jiangnan)”, the primary objective of this study is to offer a fresh perspective on Buddhist culture in Hangzhou during the Republic of China era. Specifically, we aim to broaden our understanding by exploring how literary works, often not considered typical Buddhist texts, documented and reflected the regional development of Buddhism during that period. To achieve this goal, our focal point is the renowned modern Chinese writer, Yu Dafu.

Throughout the twentieth century, Hangzhou’s Buddhist culture continued to inspire many Chinese writers, one of the most prominent being Yu Dafu (郁達夫 1896–1945). Academics typically define Yu Dafu as a prominent Chinese writer and literary figure of the 20th century; he was known for his contributions to modern Chinese literature, particularly in the realm of modernist and romantic writing (Lee 1973). His international education and professional background, as well as his legendary life experience, have attracted the attention of many readers and researchers in China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and the Western world. Yu Dafu stayed in Hangzhou multiple times during the 1920s and 1930s, writing numerous travel notes that included descriptions of his visits, as well as those of his friends, to temples in and around Hangzhou. These short travel notes, written in modern Chinese with the characteristics of modern prose, showed a relationship between Buddhism and Chinese literature. They are not the exclusive property of conventional literary research. Previous studies have given less consideration to this topic from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Even if we cannot assume that Yu Dafu’s inclination toward Buddhist thought was wholesale, systematic, or entirely self-conscious, we also need to acknowledge that he is an integral part of the broader cultural milieu. The external context significantly influences his treatment and selection of religious themes in his works. Concurrently, his literary creations serve as a lens through which we can gain insights into the historical and contemporary aspects of local Buddhist culture. This paper aims to address two significant issues: (1) the impact of Jiangnan Buddhist culture on Yu Dafu, and (2) Yu Dafu’s travel notes and their insight into Jiangnan Buddhist literature.

2. The Impact of Jiangnan Buddhist Culture on Yu Dafu

The religious sources of Yu Dafu’s inspiration have received significant scrutiny. According to the available historical records, Yu Dafu never explicitly professed religious beliefs, nor did he practice specific religious rituals or adhere to prescribed norms. However, he did describe involvement in religious matters and discuss a variety of religious ideas in his writings. Like most modern Chinese writers, Yu Dafu’s absorption of religious culture was not limited to a single faith but encompassed ideas and perspectives from various religions, including Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and even Christianity. On the question of whether he believed in Buddhism, the generally accepted conclusion is that ‘Yu Dafu did not believe in Buddhism throughout his life, but he had a deep and long relationship with Buddhist culture’ (Tan 1994). Within this context, we will investigate the influence of Jiangnan Buddhist culture on Yu Dafu through four critical facets.
2.1. The Nurturing Influence of a Strong Family Environment

Yu Dafu was born in Fuyang (富陽) in 1896 and now belongs to Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province. He received a traditional Chinese education in the old town of Hangzhou, studying at Hangzhou Middle School and then Hangchow Presbyterian College. In 1912, he passed the entrance examination and spent a short time at Hangchow University’s preparatory school (which later became part of Zhejiang University).

Yu Dafu’s family had strong ties to Buddhism. From Yu Dafu’s grandmother to his first wife, Sun Quan (孙荃), three generations of women in Yu’s family were devout Buddhists who ate vegetarian and prayed to the Buddha throughout the year (J. Yu 2002; Wu 2017). Yu’s understanding of Buddhism seems to have been mainly based on indirect absorption, supplemented by some direct learning. When he was studying in Hangzhou as a teenager, Yu Dafu fell in love with the poems of Gong Zizhen (龚自珍, 1792–1841), a famous poet, calligrapher, and intellectual who was active in the nineteenth century. Yu once said, “Gong Zizhen has three hundred and fifty poems of Jihai, and I like reading them very much (Zhan 1996)”. Gong Zizhen was very knowledgeable about Buddhism and included many references to Buddhism and Taoism in his poetry collection, Jihai Za-shi (己亥雜詩). Gong’s poems influenced Yu Dafu’s choice of subjects, artistic conception, and phrasing. Under the direct influence of Gong Zizhen, Yu Dafu also wrote some poems rich in Buddhist thought, such as “Five Village Miscellaneous Poems (五村雜詩)” and “Dingzen (定禪)”. In addition to Gong Zizhen, Yu Dafu was also influenced by the poet Su Manshu (蘇曼殊, 1884–1918), who wrote poetry and love stories in the early period of modern Chinese literature. Su spent three periods of his life as a Buddhist monk and was commonly known as a monk poet in the late Qing Dynasty (Tan 2020).

2.2. The Experience of Learning and Making Friends in Japan

In 1913, Yu Dafu moved to Japan, where he studied economics at Tokyo Imperial University between 1913 and 1922 (Y. Yu 1984; Fang 2012). In the years that followed, Yu’s literary career began to blossom. Yu Dafu lived and studied in Japan for ten years, during which time he conducted a systematic and in-depth study of Japanese culture and developed friendships with many Japanese people, notably the Japanese Buddhist poet Hattori Tanpu (服部擔風). Hattori was a wealthy resident of Yatomio Village, a suburb of Nagoya. He had written Han poems (poems written in Chinese) since he was a teenager and hosted many poets’ clubs in his early adulthood. Yu Dafu met him in 1916 and often visited him thereafter (Wu 2017). Yu Dafu conducted a special study of some Buddhist texts while in Japan. Japanese culture in both ancient and modern times is closely tied to Buddhist culture; in particular, traditional poetry styles such as haiku and waka are often permeated with Buddhist principles. In the Biography of Yu Dafu, Yu’s son Yu Yun (郁雲) wrote, “In 1919, in a letter to his family in China, Yu Dafu mentioned that he had studied Buddhist scriptures such as the Prajnaparamita (pan ruo jing 盤若經), Zazen (chan yi 禪儀), Pure Bodhi (zheng xin ji 正信偈), and Canonical Gatha (zheng xin ji 正信偈) in Japan (Y. Yu 1984, p. 39)”. At this point in his life, Yu Dafu’s understanding and favorable impression of Buddhism were mainly due to his systematic reading of Gong Zizhen and Su Manshu’s poems and of Japanese literature permeated with Zen ideas. These works were the medium of his contact with Buddhist doctrine and laid the foundation for Yu Dafu’s future recording of Buddhist culture in his own writing.

2.3. The Opportunities for Self-Reflection Prompted by Illness

Yu Dafu returned to China after graduating from the University of Tokyo in 1923 (Y. Yu 1984). From that point forward, he moved frequently, traveling to many countries and regions, but he had a special appreciation for Hangzhou and made many visits there. In January 1927, Yu Dafu met Wang Yingxia (王映霞 1908–2000), a beautiful Hangzhou woman who became his second wife. After falling in love with Wang Yingxia in 1927, Yu Dafu settled in Shanghai, but he lived and worked in Hangzhou periodically. According to Yu Dafu’s diary, in May 1927, Yu Dafu suffered from jaundice. He first went to St. Marie
Hospital, which is a famous Western medicine hospital in the Shanghai French Concession. Despite spending a lot of money, he did not recover from his illness. Yu Dafu then went to Hangzhou with Wang Yingxia, and following the recommendation of Wang Yingxia’s grandfather, Wang Ernan (王二南), he went to Jiqing Temple (集慶寺) to ask for help. Under the monks’ treatment, his condition was gradually alleviated, and he was eventually cured (Ding 1997). This experience greatly enhanced Yu Dafu’s trust and goodwill toward Buddhism. Hangzhou was not only a place for Yu Dafu to recover from illness but also helped him to understand Buddhism again.

During his recuperation in Hangzhou, Yu Dafu visited many temples and formed deep friendships with several monks. Yu Dafu’s travel notes from this period contain many descriptions of temples. Yu visited Hangzhou temples with long histories and famous names but also traveled to rarely visited temples hidden in the mountains. Among all the places where he spent time, Hangzhou holds a unique position in promoting Yu’s connection with Buddhism. He once went to the Hupao Temple (虎跑寺) in Hangzhou and discussed Buddhism with the monks there for more than half a day. In 1928, Yu Dafu stayed in the guest room of Hangzhou’s Xiao Temple (蕭寺) to read and write. In October 1932, Yu Dafu again left Shanghai for Hangzhou to recuperate from a recurrence of lung disease (Ding 1997). During this time, he visited mountains and rivers in Hangzhou and lived a quiet and secluded life. The Buddhist ideal of seclusion is clearly reflected in the novels he wrote during this period. From June to December 1932, during a six-month stay in Hangzhou, Yu Dafu wrote short stories such as When the Tassels Were in Bloom (ma ying hua kai de shi hou 馬纓花開的時候), Dongzi Pass (dong zi guan 東梓關), Late-Blooming (chi gui hua 迟桂花), Autumn Night on Bilang Lake (bi lang hu de qiu ye 碧浪湖的秋夜), and Monk Piao’er (piao er he shang 瓢兒和尚). These works have a distinctly Buddhist overtone. One story is set in a temple, and in others, Buddhism serves as the main thread or a background factor driving the plot. Some novels even feature monks as protagonists, which was rare in Yu Dafu’s earlier works. Yu Dafu also completed a compilation of his works at a temple in Hangzhou. In his travel notes on a corner of Li Lake (li xi hu de yi jiao luo 裏西湖的一角落), Yu Dafu wrote, “In the autumn of that year, I went from Shanghai to Hangzhou and stayed in the west building of a temple near the water in Li Lake. The purpose is to sort out some old manuscripts and produce some books” (D. Yu 1980).

In April 1933, Yu Dafu and his family moved to Hangzhou. Travel became his chief hobby during this period. Some studies suggest that Yu Dafu was trying to escape the White Terror in Shanghai (Ding 1997). But in his essay named Hangzhou, Yu Dafu elaborates on what motivated him to settle there. The low cost of living and the beautiful scenery appear to be the other reasons that drew him in.

“When I first arrived in Hangzhou, I did not plan on visiting West Lake to chase my dreams. However, my wife is a native of Hangzhou and is fluent in the Hangzhou dialect. Furthermore, my father and grandfather hail from Fuyang, Zhejiang Province. As the old saying goes, ‘The leaf finally comes back to the root.’ When poor people return home, fish and rice are more affordable, and housing rents are especially cheap. After relocating here, time has flown by, and in the blink of an eye, I have been living in Hangzhou for a year and a half. Among my friends who know my Hangzhou address, after they visit West Lake, they are often willing to stop by my place. Loneliness fades when friends come from far away. Of course, I enjoy chatting with them about old memories and Hangzhou. Somehow, over time, it seems everyone has come to regard me as a connection to Hangzhou, a custodian of its beauty (Hangzhou, D. Yu 1980).”

2.4. The Birth of a New Genre

After Yu Dafu relocated to Hangzhou, he once again traveled among the famous mountains and ancient temples and made many monk friends, such as Ruopiao (若瓢和尚). During Yu Dafu’s travels, he visited the local Buddhist temple at almost every destination. The earliest essay in Yu Dafu’s travel collection is titled “A Sentimental Journey (gan shang
Religious movements have been stagnant for a long time, I only want to pick up my luggage and umbrella and go to a place where few people have been to release some pent-up frustration (D. Yu 1980). He regards travel as a form of compensation and therapy for the lonely and melancholic soul. Even on a half-day excursion, he felt it was enough to “find solace in the void (liao yi ji xiao ao yu xu kong 聊以寄啸傲於虚空)”. These sentences, from Yu Dafu’s travel note, along with some other key elements frequently found in Yu Dafu’s writings, such as turbulent times, poverty, and illness, succinctly and directly explain the primary reason for Yu Dafu’s growing affinity toward Buddhism during this stage. Buddhist culture further permeates his writing from this period. In the words of Tan Guilin’s summary, “Suffering, whether bestowed by the era or wrought by personal destiny, ultimately transcends into artistic power. The formation of this rather robust and resilient psychological endurance owes much to the revelations of Buddhist teachings on suffering (Tan 1994).” During this period, Yu Dafu turned to touring Buddhist landscapes to alleviate both his spiritual and physical anguish. His contemplation of worldly hardships and the various contradictions between ideals and reality was the primary psychological impetus behind his exploration of Buddhism. Buddhism designates various phenomena in the material world as “impermanent (wu chang 無常)” and “illusory existence (jia you 假有)”. However, ordinary people in the secular world fail to grasp this truth, leading to the emergence of “self-attachment (wo zhi 我執)” and the generation of various afflictions. Only by breaking free from “self-attachment,” transcending the pursuit of fame, fortune, and all gains and losses, can one enter the spiritual realm of “no self” (wu wo 無我). Buddhist philosophy, while acknowledging the imperfections of reality and the sorrows of life, reviews the external world through the limitless expansion of the individual’s inner world. It neither clings nor despairs, enabling one to approach real life with a serene and detached state of mind. The Buddhist concepts of “impermanence” and “no self” provided Yu Dafu with spiritual solace, allowing him to momentarily forget the troubles of the real world and enter a state of ethereal clarity and serenity.

Hence, Buddhist culture is reflected in Yu Dafu’s novels, poems, essays, literary theories, diaries, and other writing to varying degrees, and the most direct influence of Buddhist culture on Yu Dafu’s works is highlighted in his writing of travel notes. Before that, as an overseas student in Japan in the early days of his creative career, Yu Dafu was greatly influenced by both Japanese and Western literature. His exposure to these literary traditions had a significant impact on his writing style, themes, and worldview. Yu Dafu was deeply influenced by the modernist movement in Japan known as Shinshichō (New Tides of Thought), which emphasized individualism, introspection, and the exploration of psychological states. In addition to Japanese literature, Yu Dafu was heavily influenced by Western literature, particularly European literary movements such as Romanticism, Symbolism, and Naturalism. The influence of foreign literature can be seen in Yu Dafu’s early works, which often depict themes of hopeless love, alienation, and personal struggles and are characterized by a gloomy and tragic literary style. Yu’s writing reflects his own struggle to reconcile traditional Chinese beliefs and philosophy with the modern values of the West. His works often depict the struggles of individuals who faced the rapidly shifting cultural and social norms that characterized the time; they often contain references to death and have a melancholic, bittersweet tone. Yu’s style is often attributed to his difficult upbringing and his view of the world as a “broken vessel”. He was unable to escape his own inner turmoil (Egan 1977).

For example, “Sinking” (chen lun 沉淪) is a renowned short story written by the Chinese writer Yu Dafu. It was first published in the early 20th century and is considered one of Yu Dafu’s most influential and groundbreaking works. The story is narrated in the first person by Chen Ping himself, allowing readers to gain insight into his inner conflict and feelings of alienation. He attempts to suppress his emotions and fit into the expectations of society, but eventually finds himself unable to cope with the pressure, leading to a tragic downward spiral.
However, in Hangzhou, Yu Dafu changed this somber writing style. In the numerous travel notes he penned during the 1930s, Yu Dafu’s prose vividly portrays the captivating landscapes of the Jiangnan region and serves as a testament to the flourishing development of Buddhism and its associated monasteries in the area. These works were characterized by poetic language and vivid imagery; the overall creative style is gentle and peaceful. Among modern Chinese writers, Yu Dafu is the preeminent author of travel notes of this kind. His works combine descriptions of beautiful landscapes with Buddhist culture. These exquisite and sophisticated travel notes with Buddhist colors are the focus of this article’s next section.

3. Yu Dafu’s Travel Notes and Their Insight into Jiangnan Buddhist Literature

James M. Hargett identifies and examines travel literature in imperial China from the Six Dynasties period (220–581) to the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644). He shows that key features include a journey toward an identifiable place; essay or diary format; description of places, phenomena, and conditions, accompanied by authorial observations, comments, and even personal feelings; inclusion of sensory details; and narration of movement through space and time. However, those classic pieces of Chinese travel literature reveal much about the author, his values, and his view of the world, which in turn tells us about the author’s society (Hargett 2018).

In the preface to his travelogue collection “Traces of Sandals Everywhere (ji hen chu chu 屐痕處處),” Yu Dafu mentions the purpose behind the Qing Dynasty statesman Sun Wending (孫文定)’s writing of “Records of Southern Travels (nan you ji 南遊記)” being “to write down my worries”. Yu Dafu humbly acknowledges that much of his own travels were largely accidental in nature, but he does not hesitate to commend himself as an expert in the art of travelogue writing. The places he visited, the companions he journeyed with, and the events he chose to document were all carefully selected. His contemplation of the landscapes also carried a sense of historical identity and present-day concern. Natural landscapes have played a significant role in the Sinicization of Buddhism, reshaping or redefining China’s cultural and natural environment to a large extent by altering the intrinsic values of geographical surroundings. The temples that Yu Dafu primarily visited during his travels were not only geographical spaces of nature and religion but also threads in the tapestry of Chinese history and culture. In his portrayal of the Buddhist customs and sentiments in the Jiangnan region, the real-life circumstances and historical traditions of Buddhism vividly come to life for the readers. Behind these travel notes lies Yu Dafu and his companions’ way of self-definition and self-identity. Appreciating Buddhist landscapes is entangled not only with complex ideological discourses such as nationalism and individualism but also indirectly reflects the political processes of modern nation-state construction.

Hence, in this section, we will examine Yu Dafu’s travel notes and their significance in shedding light on the world of Buddhism in Jiangnan. This exploration will emphasize the insights gained from his travel notes regarding the rich tapestry of Buddhist literature in the region.

3.1. The Focused Continuation and Embodiment of the Landscape Buddhist Tradition

Sakyamuni meditated for 49 days under the Bodhi tree and ultimately achieved enlightenment, becoming the Buddha. As Buddhism entered China, it was naturally integrated with the local natural environment. In Buddhism, the most typical place of practice is called aranya, which translates to mountain forest or wilderness (Ren 2002). It is a secluded place suitable for monks to live and practice. Therefore, in China, Buddhist temples are usually built on elevated, open ground, such as near a hill or mountain, as a symbol of stability and strength. They are also built in locations of natural beauty, such as near rivers, lakes, or the ocean, or in the middle of the forest. For example, as early as the Yongping period of the Eastern Han Dynasty (58–75 CE), the Indian monks Simateng (攝摩騰) and Zhufalan (竺法蘭) built a temple on Mount Wutai (Ren 1985). The practices of removing
from the crowds and busyness of the city, sequestering in nature, and building Buddhist temples in the mountains have been continued by later generations. This is done to create a sense of reverence and closeness to nature, which is important in Buddhism. Hence, landscapes in Chinese Buddhism often hold symbolic meanings and convey philosophical ideas. In The Buddhist Conquest of China, Dutch Sinologist Erik Zürcher highlights the strong association between temples and mountains typical of Chinese Buddhism (Zürcher 2007). The Buddhist temple in the mountains, away from the downtown area, and the surrounding scenery together constitute a multifaceted space that mixes the natural and manmade.

Worldwide, Hangzhou has been known for its beautiful scenery since ancient times, and countless Chinese literati from successive dynasties have praised city poems and prose. Hangzhou has also attracted many senior monks to build temples in the area. Since the Eastern Jin Dynasty (371–420 CE), when the Indian monk Hui Li (慧理) built the Ling-shan Temple (靈山寺) under the Feilai Peak (Qian 1960), Buddhist temples have been a prominent feature of the mountains and lakes of Hangzhou and its surrounding areas. According to the records of Tian Rucheng’s (田汝成 1503–1557 CE) “West Lake Tour” and other historical documents, before the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), there were more than 360 Buddhist temples in and near Hangzhou. After the development of the Wuyue period (907–978 CE), by the third year of Yuan You in the Northern Song Dynasty (1088 CE), the number of Buddhist temples in Hangzhou had risen to more than 530. Even after the national upheaval of dynastic succession that ushered in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE), the number of Buddhist temples in Hangzhou quickly recovered, and the area once again became known as a premier location for Buddhist temples (Tian 1980). Since that time, almost no city in China has had more temples than Hangzhou. The steady growth of the number of Buddhist temples in the Hangzhou area is partly attributable to government and royal family support but was due more to the strong demand from the large number of ordinary people of the Buddhist faith. Hangzhou has had a strong Buddhist community since ancient times, and popular support has maintained numerous Buddhist temples in Hangzhou, preserving them through centuries. As places of practice for the Buddhist faith, these temples spread religious teachings and provide a quiet environment for Buddhist practice. In particular, most of the Buddhist temples in the Hangzhou area are near mountains and bodies of water, forming a distinctive religious atmosphere through the blending of religious spaces with natural scenery. The mountains and waters of Hangzhou have nurtured its unique Buddhist culture, which, in turn, has helped preserve these precious cultural resources for future generations.

In Hangzhou from 1928 to 1935, Yu Dafu often visited famous mountains and bodies of water with friends. Almost everywhere he went, he made a point of visiting local Buddhist temples and recording his experiences in detail. Although potentially an incomplete list, Table 1 contains the Buddhist temples that Yu Dafu visited and described in his travel notes during this period.

Table 1. The Buddhist temples in Hangzhou and Jiangnan were mainly involved in Yu Dafu’s travel notes from 1928 to 1935.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Temple Name</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 1928</td>
<td>Wuxi</td>
<td>Huishan Temple</td>
<td>A Sentimental Journey</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>無錫</td>
<td>慧山寺</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1928</td>
<td>Yangzhou</td>
<td>Tianning Temple / Chongning Temple</td>
<td>An Old Yangzhou Dream to Lin Yutang</td>
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<td></td>
<td>揚州</td>
<td>天寧寺 / 重寧寺</td>
<td>揚州舊夢寄語堂</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Zhuji</td>
<td>Yongan Chan Temple</td>
<td>Visiting Hangzhou-Jiangshan Railway</td>
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<td></td>
<td>諸暨</td>
<td>永安禪寺</td>
<td>杭州小歷進程</td>
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Table 1. Cont.

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<th>Temple Name</th>
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<td>Zhizhe Temple</td>
<td>Visiting Hangzhou-Jiangshan Railway</td>
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<td></td>
<td>金華</td>
<td>智者寺</td>
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<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Lanxi</td>
<td>Lanyin Temple</td>
<td>Visiting Hangzhou-Jiangshan Railway</td>
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<td>蘭溪</td>
<td>蘭陰寺</td>
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<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Lanxi</td>
<td>Xizhen Temple</td>
<td>Visiting Hangzhou-Jiangshan Railway</td>
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<td>蘭溪</td>
<td>智真寺</td>
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<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Longyou</td>
<td>Bamboo Forest Chan Temple</td>
<td>Visiting Hangzhou-Jiangshan Railway</td>
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<td>龍遊</td>
<td>竹林禪寺</td>
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<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Lingyan</td>
<td>Fushan Temple</td>
<td>A Briefly Record of the Eastern Zhejiang Tour</td>
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<td>靈岩</td>
<td>福善寺</td>
<td>浙東景物紀略</td>
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<td>November 1933</td>
<td>Quzhou</td>
<td>Shiqiao Temple/Keshan Temple</td>
<td>A Briefly Record of the Eastern Zhejiang Tour</td>
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<td>衢州</td>
<td>石橋寺/柯山寺</td>
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<td>March 1934</td>
<td>Lin’an</td>
<td>Linglong Mountain Temple</td>
<td>Diary of My Westward Journey</td>
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<td>臨安縣</td>
<td>玲瓏山寺</td>
<td>西遊日錄</td>
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<td>Chanyuan Temple</td>
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<td>禪源寺</td>
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<td>高峰禪師塔院</td>
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<td>March 1934</td>
<td>East Tianmu Mountain</td>
<td>Zhaoming Chan Temple</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 1934</td>
<td>Linping County, Hangzhou</td>
<td>Anyin Temple</td>
<td>Climbing the Linping Mountain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>臨平鎮</td>
<td>安隱寺</td>
<td>臨平登山記</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1934</td>
<td>Tiantai</td>
<td>Guoqing Temple/Fang'guang Temple</td>
<td>Diary of a Southern Tour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>天台縣</td>
<td>國清寺/方廣寺</td>
<td>南遊日記</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1934</td>
<td>Tiantai</td>
<td>Huading Temple/Gaoming Temple</td>
<td>Diary of a Southern Tour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>天台縣</td>
<td>華頂寺/高明寺</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1934</td>
<td>Yandang Mountains</td>
<td>Lingyan Temple/Lengfeng Temple</td>
<td>The autumn moon in Yandang Mountains 雁蕩山的秋月</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>雁蕩山</td>
<td>靈岩寺/龍仁寺/靈峰寺</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1935</td>
<td>Chao Mountain, Hangzhou</td>
<td>Baoqi Temple</td>
<td>The Plum Blossom in the Chao Mountain 超山的梅花</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>超山</td>
<td>報慈寺</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1935</td>
<td>Xiaohai Mountain, Hangzhou</td>
<td>Golden Lotus Temple</td>
<td>Longmen Mountain Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>小和山</td>
<td>金蓮寺</td>
<td>龍門山路</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1935</td>
<td>Yixin</td>
<td>Ancient Furong Temple</td>
<td>Driving Fast on the National Highway 國道飛車記</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>宜興</td>
<td>芙蓉古寺</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1935</td>
<td>Xixi, Hangzhou</td>
<td>Jiaolu Temple/Quuxue Temple</td>
<td>Sunny Rain in Xixi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>西溪</td>
<td>交蘆庵/秋雪庵</td>
<td>西溪的晴雨</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Buddhist temples Yu Dafu visited in Jiangnan included famous temples that were historically well known (such as Chanyuan Temple and Gaoming Temple), small temples that were not well known at that time and rarely visited (such as Gaofeng Tower Courtyard and Linglong Mountain Temple), and private temples of some rich residents and scholars in the Jiangnan area (such as Jiaolu Temple and Quuxue Temple). These descriptions together form an unusually complete picture of a key group of temples in the history of
Chinese literature. As one of China’s preeminent modern writers, Yu Dafu employed his considerable literary skill to create vivid and authentic depictions of the temples that existed at that time. Yu Dafu’s travel notes have earned acclaim as “a splendid flower in the garden of modern travel literature” in China and are considered to “represent the zenith of modern travelogue literature (Yu and Mei 2004)”. Many researchers have observed the connection between Yu Dafu’s travelogue from the 1930s and traditional Chinese classical travelogues, believing that they are “the travelogues of scholars rich in Chinese classical literacy, encompassing descriptions of mountains, rivers, cultural customs, and the legacies of famous individuals (Yao et al. 1989)”. In ancient China, such travel notes were exemplified by works such as Li Ao (李翱)’s “Records of Visiting the South (lai nan lu 來南錄),” Lu You (陸游)’s “Record of Entering Shu (ru shu ji 入蜀記),” and Fan Chengda (范成大)’s “Records of Wu Boats (wu chuan lu 吳船錄)”. However, the unique value and significance of Yu Dafu’s travel notes become even more apparent when viewed within the broader context of Chinese travel writing. Ni Wei illustrates this by examining travel notes published in periodicals such as Travel Magazine (lü hang za zhi 旅行雜誌) during the era of the Republic of China. He categorizes Chinese travel writing from the 1920s and 1930s into two distinct styles. One, exemplified by Jiang Weiqiao (蔣維喬)’s Yin Shizi’s Travels (yin shi zi you ji 因是子遊記), continues to use classical Chinese and adheres to a traditional diary format. The other category comprises younger authors, mostly city clerks and college students from Jiangsu and Zhejiang, who view travel as a modern way of life and write in vernacular Chinese. While their style may be less formal than the former, it remains somewhat formulaic. Yu Dafu’s travel notes, however, differ from both of these categories and bridge the gap between them. They are written in plain, easily understandable vernacular, yet they retain the distinctive characteristics of classical Chinese travel notes (Ni 2023). Yu Dafu used landscape metaphors to capture the essence and spirit of the outside world, often employing techniques that conveyed a sense of space, depth, and tranquility. At the same time, Yu Dafu added a third-person omniscient narrative perspective of the third person. Yu Dafu does not just give a personal description of the Buddhist temple as experienced from the perspective of a tourist; he references a large number of historical sources, constantly breaking his own tour timeline. As a “guide” out of the story, he added a detailed historical discussion to the travel descriptions and introduced additional sources and cultural allusions involving the temple.

For example, in The Plum Blossom in the Chao Mountain, Yu Dafu describes a visit to Baoci Temple, which was located in Chao Mountain, northeast of Hangzhou. Yu wrote:

“The main hall of Baoci Temple was destroyed a few years ago in a fire that also killed a master monk. A stone tablet at the back of the main hall with a Guanyin statue painted by Wu Daozi (吳道子) remains set in the wall and undamaged. When I visited in last year, the monks had just begun collecting money to rebuild the main hall, and three wing rooms had been built as guest rooms on the east side of the hall. The three apse rooms, which were built higher behind the main hall, were not destroyed in the fire. A monk pointed to the surviving stone statue of Guanyin and said, “this is all because of the blessing of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Guanyin)’s great compassion!”’. (D. Yu 1980)

“It is said that during the Xuanzong period of the Tang Dynasty (810–859), Anyin Temple was initially named Yongxing Yard, and in the Wuyue period (907–978), it was called Anping Yard. In the Song Dynasty, in 1064, the emperor bestowed upon it the name Anyin Temple”. (D. Yu 1980)

“Gaoming Temple, one of the twelve temples founded by the famous Buddhist monk, the Wise Master, began to be built in the Tianyou period of the Tang Dynasty (904–907). Legend has it that the Wise Master (zhi zhe da shi 智者大師) discovered this place because when he was explaining the Jing Ming Sutra (jing ming jing 淨明經), a wind suddenly blew the Sutra away and dropped it here. The Master therefore felt that this was an excellent place to build a temple. That
is why this temple was called the “Jingming Temple” in its early days. It is now called Gaoming Temple, reportedly because of its location on Gaoming Mountain; it is also possible that the mountain was named Gaoming because of this temple” (D. Yu 1980).

This writing style, in which tourists and guides appear alternately and where diachronic review and simultaneous description are combined, helps readers become familiar with the temples in their contemporary, natural context, as well as the long-standing Jiangnan Buddhist culture behind them. It may achieve this more effectively than other formats.

3.2. The Flourishing of Buddhism amid Changing Circumstances and External Influences

In addition to providing readers with significant historical knowledge of Jiangnan Buddhist temples and Buddhist culture, Yu Dafu’s Buddhist landscape travel notes also truly reflect the flourishing of Buddhism in Hangzhou in the early twentieth century.

China at the beginning of the twentieth century was undergoing fundamental changes, from the country’s economic foundation to its political system. This upheaval can be described as the most significant change in thousands of years. The eastward spread of Western learning in the late Qing Dynasty had a significant influence on China, introducing modern scientific and technological advancements that spurred and enabled China’s modernization efforts. Along with the establishment of modern industries, the introduction of Western ideas and philosophies sparked an intellectual awakening in China. Chinese scholars and thinkers began to critically examine their own traditions and engage with Western ideologies such as liberalism, nationalism, and socialism. This led to the emergence of intellectual movements advocating for political and social reforms, such as the Hundred Days’ Reform6 and the 1911 Revolution7. The May Fourth Movement in 1919 was a cultural and intellectual movement that called for the rejection of traditional values and the adoption of modern ideas, and the New Culture Movement of the 1920s further emphasized the need for intellectual and cultural reform in China. These movements challenged traditional Chinese cultural norms and values. Western ideas such as individualism, equality, and human rights clashed with religious principles that had long been deeply ingrained in Chinese society. Some intellectuals and scholars criticized Buddhism as an obstacle to progress, and Buddhist institutions became associated with outdated and superstitious beliefs. For example, in 1935, Tang Xiru (唐錫如), a prominent translator, published a scathing editorial in the Central Daily criticizing Buddhist monks as “just open liars, respectable beggars, bloodsuckers in disguise, and obstructionists who stop the wheel of the times from moving forward” (Tang 1935).

Buddhism faced a decline in popularity and influence due to the social and political changes brought about by the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in the early twentieth century. The Republican government pursued policies aimed at secularizing society and reducing the influence of religion. As a result, many Buddhist temples and monasteries were closed, and Buddhist practices were discouraged (Shan 2016). At that time, Master Yin Guang (印光大師), a representative of Pure Land Buddhism, publicly stated that:

“There was no successor to Buddhism, and foreign ideas gradually invaded. It is often heard that the temple was changed into a school building and that the temple property was confiscated for school funds. Until now, the situation has become very dangerous, and if we do not rectify it immediately, Buddhism is declining in China” (Yin 1928)

In the face of these challenges, Buddhist scholars and practitioners worked to preserve Buddhist cultural heritage and intellectual traditions. They collected and translated ancient Buddhist texts, engaged in academic studies of Buddhism, and established Buddhist organizations and societies dedicated to the preservation and propagation of Buddhist teachings. Hangzhou was a hub for this activity and became a launchpad from which
Monk Taixu (太虚和尚), the leader of modern Chinese Buddhism, carried out the Buddhist reform movement and engaged in the construction of modern Buddhist theory. In 1919, in Hangzhou's Jingfan Temple (淨梵院), Monk Taixu founded the most influential journal of modern Chinese Buddhism, *Haichao Sounds* (海潮音). In 1927, in Hangzhou's Lingyin Temple (靈隱寺), he completed his Buddhist treatises, including *Building a Pure Land on Earth and True Reality* (Huang 2005). In 1919, Hong Yi (弘一法師), the most famous monk in modern Chinese history, became a monk at Hupao Temple in Hangzhou (Jin 2002). Under the impetus of these outstanding monks, the Buddhist atmosphere in Hangzhou flourished again despite countervailing cultural winds.

Yu Dafu had visited Master Hong Yi many times and had a deep personal friendship with him. However, his travel notes are written from the perspective of an ordinary tourist directly observing the reality of Buddhism in Hangzhou. First, Yu Dafu describes the large number of monks in Hangzhou:

“What is the most abundant thing around the West Lake in Hangzhou? If the first is mosquitoes, then the second can be said to be monks and nuns ... If you go for a walk on the shore of the lake and try to count, every five minutes or so you will see a monk walking among those fashionable girls”. (D. Yu 1980)

At this time in the Jiangnan area, not only were there still many full-time Buddhist monks, but the number of lay Buddhist believers did not seem to have decreased. In some parts of Zhejiang Province, around well-known local temples, some towns had even formed professions and markets dedicated to serving believers. While visiting the Fangyan area of Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, Yu Dafu discovered,

“Anyone who has been to Jinhua should always have an experience like this; after staying in the hotel, there will always be some polite country gentleman wearing a green cloth gown who asks you: ‘Did you go to Fangyan to burn incense? How many times have you been here? Which house did you live in before?’ If you answer him that it is your first visit to Fangyan, he will take out a business card and ask you to stay in that family hotel after you go to Fangyan”. (D. Yu 1980)

In Fangyan, four or five hundred families on one street made a living by receiving guests who came to burn incense and worship Buddha. During various Buddhist festivals, the local market was full of exuberance. “I hear every house is full. There are already a large number of pilgrims from Shaoxing, Hangzhou, and nearby areas, and some from as far away as Fujian Province. (D. Yu 1980)”.

Yu Dafu also came across many groups when he visited the temples. Before the Qingming Festival, the temple’s incense was at its peak. At this time, there were not only Chinese but also foreigners in the tour groups to Golden Lotus Temple, which Yu Dafu described because, because of the larger number of people, it looks like refugees are on the move (Longmen Mountain Road). On another trip, Yu Dafu met the teachers and students of Huangyan Middle School who had been living in the temple for three days during the autumn tour at Lingyan Temple (the autumn moon in the Yandang Mountains).

In addition to Yu Dafu’s central descriptions of these ordinary believers as farmers, city dwellers, and students, we should not overlook some hidden information provided in his travel note. Although not explicitly stated, his travel also does not indirectly reflect a certain “Buddha-like (厚佛)” inclination that was emerging among the literati class at that time. It is worth noting that the vast majority of Yu Dafu’s travels in the Jiangnan area during this period were not solitary but rather group trips with companions, and a large number of articles were narrated by the voice of “We”. Among those who visited the Buddhist temple with him were many famous Chinese intellectuals and scholars.

From the Table 2, we can see that these individuals all had impeccable educational pedigrees. However, after they returned to China, they traveled in the mountains and lakes to explore ancient Buddhist temples with Yu Dafu. Although they are not Buddhists or purely Buddhist scholars, and their primary interests do not lie in monastic practice, their cultural mindset and aesthetic pursuits are influenced by Buddhist thought. This
influence may be attributed to the ongoing self-renewal and resurgence of Buddhism in China at that time, as well as the unique life philosophy and spiritual life of this group of individuals.

Table 2. Yu Dafu’s major group travels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Destination and Fellow Visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaoting Mountain 皋亭山</td>
<td>Yu Dafu and He Licheng (何勵生 1898–1996), an expert on literature and history at Xiamen University, visited the Banshan Temple located on Gaoting Mountain in the north of Hangzhou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tale of the Rotted Wood 爛柯紀夢</td>
<td>Yu Dafu visited Baoyan Temple, Keshan Temple, and Confucius Temple, accompanied by Mr. Kong Xiongrui, president of Sanqu Hospital and grandson of Confucius in the 73rd generation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossing the Fuchun River 過富春江</td>
<td>Yu Dafu visited the Liuhe Pagoda, a Buddhist scenic spot on West Lake, with Quan Zenggu (全增嘏 1903–1984) and British military officer Major Edward Ainger. Quan was a distinguished Chinese philosopher and historian. His academic journey took him to Stanford University from 1923 to 1925, during which time he earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving Fast on the National Highway</td>
<td>In the spring of 1934, Yu Dafu, along with friends including Lin Yutang, Pan Guangdan, Ye Qiuyuan, and a total of eight people, set out on a journey from Hangzhou, traveling all the way to Anhui Province. Lin Yutang (林語堂 1895–1976) was a Chinese inventor, linguist, novelist, philosopher, and translator. Lin studied for his doctoral degree at Harvard University. Pan Guangdan (潘光旦 1898–1967) is known in English as Quentin Pan. He was one of the most distinguished sociologists and eugenicists in China. EdU-cated at Dartmouth College and Columbia University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary of My Westward Journey</td>
<td>In 1934, Yu Dafu traveled to several temples on Mount Tiantai and Mount Yandang with his good friend Wang Wenbo (王文伯), whom he had met during his studies in Japan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intellectuals of the May Fourth period lived through a period in Chinese history marked by tremendous change and profound suffering. Educated intellectuals could see the differences between China and the outside world, but they could not directly rescue the common people from their dire circumstances. This was a significant source of spiritual burden for them. Lu Xun (魯迅 1881–1936), a leader of modern Chinese culture, once said, “The emotions of the awakened young intellectuals at that time were generally passionate yet melancholic. Even when they found a glimmer of light, they saw the boundless darkness around them even more clearly”. Ying Lei calls Lu Xun the Critical Buddhist: “Having undergone a Buddhist vita contemplativa in the preceding years of the literary revolution, Lu Xun came to personify a profound “consciousness of darkness” (youan yishi 幽暗意識) in dwelling on the karma of modernity (Lei 2016)”.

At the same time, during a period of great transition, the Confucian system, which had served as the traditional intellectual and spiritual resource, was gradually eroding. Within the framework of a binary East-West ideological opposition, Western values became the main standard for national criticism, and Chinese traditional culture, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, became subjects of criticism. However, various Western ideas and value systems found it difficult to take root in China at that time, and they were even more challenging to simply implant into the deep-seated psychological structures of the Chinese nation. This led to a kind of “value vacuum” in the spiritual world. At that time, a renowned scholar named Du Yaquan (杜亞泉 1873–1933) wrote an article titled “The Confused Modern Chinese Mind (mi luan zhi xian dai ren xin 迷亂之現代人心)”. He believed that the influx of Western learning had led to a “spiritual bankruptcy” in China.
In his view, the New Culture Movement’s critique of China’s native civilization and the indiscriminate importation of Western civilization left the Chinese people without a spiritual anchor (Van den Stock 2021). This was manifested as a loss of values, a sense of directionlessness, and an inability to find meaning in life. From this point of view, some modern Chinese literati “Buddha-like” trends are also partly affected by this. The Buddhist tradition embodies a transcendent and serene attitude, and the ability to find everything within one’s own heart, along with the practice of distancing oneself from the noise and conflicts of worldly life, became a refuge for many during the chaotic social conditions of the time. It served as a sanctuary between the two life pursuits of “helping the world when successful and self-improvement when struggling”. In Yu Dafu’s travel notes, he frequently emphasized that he and his friends were captivated by the spiritual essence of Buddhism and the landscape of Buddhist temples, giving rise to the idea of wanting to convert to Buddhism.

“For someone accustomed to urban life suddenly finding themselves in such a place, how could they not be left wide-eyed and, in their inner thoughts, ponder the path to becoming a sage or achieving enlightenment (The Tale of the Rotted Wood, D. Yu 1980)?”

“Inside the nunnery, it is very pristine. Each small room is arranged beautifully and fresh, and the trees in the courtyard and behind the house create a haphazard, picturesque scene. Not to mention the scrolls neatly placed beneath the Buddha’s altar in the main hall. If, after seeing all of this, you still do not feel an inclination to leave worldly desires behind, I dare say you must be as insensitive as a piece of stone”. (Huawu 花塢, D. Yu 1980)

“We were all filled with such joy that we forgot the passage of time. We wanted to emulate the father of Prince Zhaoming from the legends of Tianmu Mountain, who was prepared to offer his body to the Buddhist path”. (Diary of My Western Journey, D. Yu 1980)

Buddhism emphasizes harmony with nature and the pursuit of a simple and balanced way of life. These locations serve as reminders of the Buddhist teachings to remain mindful in the present moment and to recognize the interconnectedness of all life. Mountains, rivers, trees, and other elements of nature are seen as embodiments of virtues and principles such as strength, resilience, tranquility, and the eternal cycle of life. By contemplating and immersing themselves in these landscapes, ancient Chinese Buddhists believed they could gain insight into the nature of existence and cultivate inner harmony. As a form of existential ideal, Buddhism points toward the ultimate spiritual refuge for humanity. Especially in the midst of this era of significant changes and profound societal turbulence, facing the collision and impact of various ideologies from the East and West, the ancient and the modern, tradition and contemporary thought, for the “May Fourth” intellectuals grappling with serious internal and external challenges in the tumultuous world, Buddhism became their ultimate sanctuary for escaping reality and transcending the mundane. This shared aspect aligns with the enlightenment Buddhism provided to Yu Dafu himself.

3.3. The Secularization of Buddhism

However, as the new government promoted modernization and advocated for the separation of religion and state, Hangzhou could not escape the secularizing forces of the early twentieth century, during which Buddhism throughout China was undergoing accelerated secularization. Buddhist institutions had no choice but to adapt to these changes and redefine their roles in society. Monastic institutions in China underwent significant reforms to adapt to the changing social and political climate. Monasteries were required to register with the government, and their activities were regulated. The government sought to diminish the power and influence of monastic institutions, aiming to transform them into more socially engaged and secular organizations. Monks and nuns were encouraged to participate in social welfare activities such as education, healthcare, and charity work rather than solely focusing on rituals and religious practices (Shan 2016). This has further
exacerbated the process through which Buddhist teachings, practices, and institutions are adapted and integrated into nonreligious or secular contexts. Yu Dafu has also focused on and depicted this phenomenon.

Yu Dafu’s travel notes record many specific descriptions of secularization promoting the development of business in Buddhist temples, with many temples purchasing large amounts of land. For example, of the Golden Lotus Temple in the suburbs of Hangzhou, he wrote,

“The Golden Lotus Temple is a temple with real estate holdings. The annual rental income alone is more than sufficient to support over a dozen monks living within it. The temple’s organization, much like many Buddhist temples in eastern Zhejiang, is infused with a worldly atmosphere”. (Longmen Mountain Road, D. Yu 1980)

Of another temple in the suburbs of Hangzhou, the Chanyuan Temple, Yu wrote that it “has a lot of land, so its annual income is very high. The alms of pilgrims and the income of various dharma assemblies amounted to at least 100,000 yuan a year. For the two or three hundred monks in the temple, they certainly have no problem with food or clothing (Diary of My Westward Journey, D. Yu 1980)”. The monks had even commercialized Buddhist sites such as the guest hall in the temple, with “bright glass windows, clean electric lamps, and modern furnishings that look like the best hotels in Shanghai (Diary of My Westward Journey, D. Yu 1980)”. The temple also provided delicious vegetarian dishes and night snacks all day long to attract visitors. Yu Dafu also carefully compared the changes in a nunnery called Fengmu An, located on the outskirts of Hangzhou, over a period of ten years. A decade ago, Yu Dafu happened to pass by this place and had gone inside for a visit and tea.

“I took out a banknote as tea money, but the elderly nun smiled and gracefully said, ‘Sir, there’s no need for this; we are a place of pure practice, and tea is not bought with money here’ … The demeanor of that old nun and the charm of my visit to Huawu still linger vividly in my memory even after more than a decade’ … The changes over the past decade have left their marks in Huawu. The serenity of bamboo and wood and the tranquility of the mountain streams, although still largely the same, now have more buildings, and of course, the land value has increased hundreds of times. What is most disheartening, however, is that the residents of Huawu have transformed into cunning businessmen. The nuns and monks in the Buddhist temples no longer exude the same simplicity as before, and the buildings and furnishings are influenced by the vulgar tastes of Europe in many ways”. (Huawu, D. Yu 1980)

Yu Dafu portrays this transformation with a distinct sense of regret and criticism. He vividly portrays a situation in Hangzhou: the income of Buddhist temples skyrocketed, monks enjoyed significantly improved living conditions, and some even amassed considerable wealth. Paradoxically, while temples traditionally aimed to offer serene sanctuaries for monks to practice and propagate Buddhism, this newfound prosperity led to a notable erosion of the monks’ former tranquility and simplicity.

4. Conclusions

Albert Welter points out that Hangzhou was the focal point for developments that transformed the East Asian Buddhist landscape, which remains viable in the present day (Welter 2022a, 2022b). In summary, in a region steeped in a strong Buddhist atmosphere, Yu Dafu began to be influenced by it in his childhood. Given the societal challenges and turmoil he encountered, this influence became even more profound during Yu Dafu’s middle age and subsequently further impacted his writing. Yu Dafu’s travel notes capture the contemporary status and reflect the ongoing changes in Buddhism in Hangzhou and Jiangnan in the early twentieth century. As a valuable and fresh source of information on Buddhism, these travel notes showed Hangzhou and the Jiangnan area embodied the Chi-
inese landscape Buddhism tradition. In early twentieth-century China, Buddhism still had an unmatched vitality in the Hangzhou area, not only boasting prominent local developments and figures but also retaining a wide popular following. Under the circumstances of rapid changes in ideology, culture, and politics, Hangzhou’s Buddhist community was impacted by the secularization of Buddhism that was widespread at the time. Moreover, through the changes exhibited in author Yu Dafu’s own creative focus and writing stance, the travel notes also reflect contemporary Chinese intellectuals’ grappling with the role of Buddhism in the difficult process of exploring individual and national destiny. In a broader sense, this paper provides some evidence for reformulating the history of East Asian Buddhism and demonstrating the importance of East Asian history to the broader field of Buddhist studies.

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Notes
1 The Legend of the White Snake is a Chinese legend centered around a romance between a man named Xu Xian and a snake spirit named Bai Suzhen. The original story was a story of good and evil, with the Buddhist monk Fahai setting out to save Xu Xian’s soul from the white snake spirit, who was depicted as an evil demon.
2 Ji Gong was a Chan Buddhist monk who lived in the Southern Song. At the age of 18, he was sent to Hangzhou and was ordained as a monk in Lingyin Temple, a temple of the Chán (Zen) school. He purportedly possessed supernatural powers through Buddhist practice, which he used to help the poor and stand up to injustice.
3 Due to the large number of Yu Dafu’s works, there is no complete English translation. The English names of Yu Dafu’s works in this paper, in addition to the translations of Ann Huss et al., are mostly translations from the authors, and the original Chinese text is also provided for reference.
4 Wu Yue was one of the Ten Kingdoms during the tumultuous period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms in ancient Chinese history. This era occurred between the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and was marked by fragmentation, regional warlords, and the rise of multiple short-lived dynasties and kingdoms across China. Wu Yue was established in 907 by Qian Liu, a military leader who had previously served the Tang Dynasty. He declared himself king and founded the Wuyue Kingdom, which was centered in the region of present-day Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and parts of Fujian and Shanghai in eastern China. The kingdom’s capital was initially in Hangzhou.
5 Tian Rucheng (also known as Tian Yi or Tian Renxiang) was a prominent Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) writer and scholar who is best known for his literary work “A Record of the West Lake” (西湖志), which provides a vivid and detailed account of West Lake in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China.
6 The Hundred Days’ Reform was a failed 103-day national, cultural, political, and educational reform movement that occurred from 11 June to 22 September 1898 during the late Qing dynasty. It was undertaken by the young Guangxu Emperor and his reform-minded supporters.
7 The 1911 Revolution, also known as the Xinhai Revolution or Hsinhai Revolution, ended China’s last imperial dynasty, the Manchu-led Qing dynasty, and led to the establishment of the Republic of China.
8 Li Shutong (李叔同 1880–1942), also known by his Buddhist name Hongyi (弘一法师), was a prominent figure in early 20th-century China known for his multifaceted talents and contributions in various fields, including education, art, religion, and culture.

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