INTRODUCTION

This book primarily concerns the institutional and political aspects of the history of Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan from the mid-1600s to the late 1980s. Because the study of religion in Taiwan has been the province of anthropology and sociology in the past, it is important to state that this study is not based on either of these two disciplines, although it certainly makes occasional use of their results, particularly those drawing on historical source materials. As a study of Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan, this book also omits a few recent developments such as the small but growing presence of Theravāda Buddhism, and the current popularity of Tibetan esoteric Buddhism with its concomitant influx of Tibetan masters. More significantly than either of these two omissions, however, this study does not purport to examine in any depth the activities of Japanese Buddhists during the fifty-year period when Taiwan was a part of the Japanese empire, except as these activities affected the lives of the Chinese Buddhist population.

Stated positively, the primary focus of this study is the history of Chinese Buddhism as an organized religion in Taiwan; and consequently it deals with the following: The transmission of Buddhism and its cousin zhaijiao (vegetarian religion) to the island; the development of institutions that were or are islandwide in scope and function; biographies of significant figures; doctrinal negotiations that have helped shape the identity of Taiwan Buddhism; Buddhism’s interactions
with government authorities under the three regimes that have ruled the island during the period under discussion; and the legal environment that Buddhism often had to contend with.

This study came into being in the wider academic context of the acceptance of Taiwan studies as a separate field of inquiry. From 1949 to the mid-1980s, the Nationalist government actively discouraged scholarship that concentrated on Taiwan as a discrete politico-cultural entity, fearing that “Taiwan studies” might be a code word for Taiwan separatism. Western researchers, who depended upon the government’s good graces for visas and access to materials, felt constrained to adopt this viewpoint. Not only that, but during periods of severe anti-Nationalist criticism in the West, scholars who wished to concentrate on Taiwan were suspected by their Western colleagues of being Nationalist sympathizers or apologists. Furthermore, because, prior to America’s diplomatic recognition of the Beijing government in 1979, researchers had no access to sites or materials located on the mainland, they were forced to go to Taiwan for language training and field research on the subject of “greater China” as defined by both the Nationalist regime and their own academic communities. As a result, many scholars went to Taiwan to pursue the goal of understanding “Chinese society,” “Chinese culture,” or “late imperial Chinese history,” an approach subject to severe criticism.

Religious studies were not immune to the exigencies imposed by these conditions. The most massive study of Chinese Buddhism ever undertaken in Taiwan to date was that of Holmes Welch in the early 1960s. Although he did much of the research for his books *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* and *The Buddhist Revival in China* on the island, his overall aim was not to understand Taiwan Buddhism as such, but to gather oral histories from mainland refugee monks so as to reconstruct what Chinese Buddhism had looked like there prior to the Communist takeover. As far as I can determine, he never once interviewed a native Taiwanese cleric, nor did he address any issues peculiar to Buddhism in Taiwan, such as the lingering effects of the Japanese occupation, or the conflicts that ensued between native clergy and the very mainland monks upon whom he depended for his research.

A few scholars from Japan, notably Nakamura Hajime, Kubo Noritada, Yoshioka Yoshitoyo, and Kamata Shigeo, did write on
Buddhism in Taiwan during this period; but their scholarship is largely unsatisfying on two counts. Studies such as Kubo’s are overly dependent upon Nationalist government sources, such as the 1956 *Draft Gazetteer of Taiwan Province* or the 1971 *Gazetteer of Taiwan Province*, which he uses uncritically and often simply quotes verbatim. Others, such as Yoshioka’s, are impressionistic and lack documentation. Perhaps the best of the Japanese accounts are those by Nakamura, who commissioned a Taiwan scholar, Zhang Mantao, to write the basic text that Nakamura then arranged to have translated into Japanese; and Kamata’s, since he has worked in the field for a long time and has come to a deep understanding of Taiwan Buddhism.

Many things have changed since the publication of these studies. The lifting of the Bamboo Curtain after 1979 meant that scholars interested in mainland China now had direct access to their sources and no longer needed to rely on Taiwan as the sole supplier of information on China as a whole. The lifting of martial law in 1987 did much to alleviate the threat of government sanctions should the scholar appear too much a partisan of Taiwan culture and possibly Taiwan independence. The Nationalist government itself has initiated widespread democratization, allowing local culture to find its own voice and make its presence felt. Notably, the official government school curriculum now includes large sections on local history and culture, topics once rigorously excluded from school textbooks. Scholars in Taiwan itself, particularly those of Taiwanese heritage, are beginning to turn their attention to the study of Taiwan as a separate cultural and historical unit and, at the same time, are involving themselves more with the international academic community, making their findings available to a wider circle of colleagues.

The academy in the West has responded to these changes. In 1992, the John King Fairbank Center at Harvard University set up its Taiwan Studies Workshop. The Association for Asian Studies now has a Taiwan Studies Group, and the American Political Science Association has a Conference Group on Taiwan Studies. Many academics, even if they consider themselves China specialists, are still paying more attention to Taiwan as a source of pressure and influence on the mainland. The government in Taiwan has further encouraged scholarly inquiry by opening up academic resources and funding. The result has been an explosion of publications in Taiwan area studies.
All of the above indicates a growing scholarly consensus that Taiwan is distinct enough from the whole of China to merit the consolidation of its own special study. At this point, in order to press the necessity of the study of Taiwan Buddhist history, I want to say a few words about those aspects that make it distinctive.

Taiwan has been part of “greater China” for only four of the last hundred years (1945–1949). From 1895 to 1945, it was part of the Japanese empire, and Chinese Buddhism had to plot its course cautiously. It had to make itself acceptable to the Japanese government in order to survive the backlash against religious groups that resulted from local rebellions early in the colonial period, and it accomplished this by forming Buddhist associations with Japanese Buddhism under the aegis of the viceregal government. The most important of these associations was the South Seas Buddhist Association, founded in 1922. The same circumstances forced zhaijiao and Buddhism to make common cause for mutual protection, and their institutional affiliation during this time constitutes the only instance in Chinese history where the “orthodox” Buddhist establishment recognized and worked together with a form of White Lotus-style folk Buddhism.

Later, when the “Japanization Movement” (kominka undō) and its concomitant “temple reformation” (jibyō seiri) measures took effect, most lineages of Taiwan Buddhism put themselves directly under the administrative control of Japanese Buddhist schools. All through this period, however, one finds the countervailing sentiment that Japanese Buddhism, in which priests drink wine, eat meat, and marry, was decadent and that its influence was to be resisted. Thus, at the same time that Taiwan’s ethnic Chinese Buddhists were joining Japanese associations and subordinating themselves to Japanese lineages, they also brought “orthodox” Chinese Buddhist ordinations to the island for the first time and tried very hard to keep the Chinese saṅgha ideal alive.

When, in the face of the Communist victory on the mainland, the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan in 1949, it was accompanied by two kinds of Buddhist clergy. One was clergy who came to Taiwan as refugees or as soldiers in the Nationalist army. These monks and nuns struggled for bare subsistence in a strange land that viewed them with great suspicion. The other kind consisted of eminent monks, men who had been high functionaries in the Buddhist Association of the
Republic of China (Zhongguo Fojiao Hui, hereafter BAROC) on the mainland and who readily found government patronage through pre-existing connections. These monks gained quick ownership of government-confiscated Japanese temples, and were able to set themselves up as the governing body administering the Buddhist establishment in Taiwan. Local clergy found themselves underrepresented in a legislative body that claimed to house representatives from all over China, just as the population at large found itself outnumbered by mainland representatives in the Legislative Yuan. The consequent imposition of mainlander rule has occasionally been a source of tension within the Buddhist community. The need to cope with ill-feeling and resistance on the part of the local culture also colored the BAROC’s mission and effectiveness, and probably contributed to the extreme cliquishness that hampered its effectiveness in subsequent decades.

The above remarks should make it clear that Buddhism in Taiwan has a unique history derived from a unique set of historical and environmental circumstances. I hope that the present study will fill a need yet to be addressed in the current boom in Taiwan studies: an examination of Buddhism as an organized, institutional religion on the island of Taiwan.