

# On the Appropriateness of Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Renjian Buddhism's Translations

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the appropriateness of the free translation and literal translation on the basis of the study of Renjian Buddhism's translations. The result shows that there are more than ten free English translations of Renjian Buddhism in China while only six versions can be found in the English world. Different free translations only focus on one aspect of Renjian Buddhism, which cannot show the whole scene of Renjian Buddhism. For example, translation "humanistic Buddhism" focuses on its humanity, showing the contrariness between "humanism" and "Buddhism"; translation "engaged Buddhism" focuses on its sociality, mistaking "Renjian Buddhism" which is not so engaged as the same Buddhism of Dalai Lama. Due to Renjian Buddhism's complexity, the phonemic translation of "Renjian Buddhism" is more appropriate to promote its communication with the English World.

**Keywords:** Renjian Buddhism; Literal translation; Free translation; Translation strategy

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## 1 Introduction to Two Translation Strategies: Literal Translation and Free Translation

It is not only old but also up-to-date to discuss the topic of the translation strategies of literal translation and free translation. It is old because this topic goes back to the first Century BCE and late fourth century CE when Cicero and St Jerome made a distinction between "word-

for-word" (i.e. "literal") and "sense-for-sense" (i.e. "free") translation (Munday, J. 2001:19); It is up-to-date because this topic runs through the history of translation studies to modern times when literal translations revive. In China, it is also a hot topic to discuss which strategy should be taken whenever Chinese culture contacts with foreign cultures. Since Buddhism was introduced into China, translators of Buddhist scriptures has had a dispute between elegance and simpleness of translation (文质之争) for centuries. Daoan in the Eastern Jin Dynasty proposed the famous "Five Losses of Source Texts and Three Difficulties in Translation" (五失本, 三不易) which is similar to literal translation, while Jiumoluoshi in late Qin Dynasty advocated to maintain the beauty of the original text which is similar to free translation. Which strategy is preferable, to translate freely according to its meaning in an elegant way or to translate simply according to the original text without any add or subtraction? This paper analyzes different translation versions of "Renjian Buddhism" (人间佛教) from the angle of translators' preference and readers' acceptance to see the appropriateness of translation strategies.

## 2 Renjian Buddhism and Its Translations in China

"Renjian Buddhism" is the most popular religion in the field of Chinese Buddhism, especially after the Buddhist Association of China advocated "the active and progressive thought of Renjian Buddhism" (Zhe, Ji. 2013:44) in 1987. Since then, "World Buddhist Forum" was held in China in 2006, 2009 and 2012, which made great influence on the studies of Renjian Buddhism. Though the ordained people in the

monasteries are restricted, the influence of Buddhism cannot be neglected because “there should be 200 to 300 million Chinese who are more or less sensitive to the Buddhist cosmology and at least occasionally participate in festivals and rituals of Buddhism”. ( Zhe, Ji. 2012:12)

In order to study Renjian Buddhism’s translations, we used China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as a reference database, which enjoys a very high reputation in China. Search term “Renjian Buddhism” brought up 330 relevant papers from 1980 to 2018. The annual number climbed from 4 in 1984 to 30 in 2009.

After this minor peak, the number stayed steady around 20. (See Figure 1) From the figure, we can infer that “World Buddhist Forum” , which was held in China in 2009, had an active influence on the studies of Renjian Buddhism. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, President Xi Jinping made a speech at UNESCO headquarters to illustrate that Chinese Buddhism developed with Chinese traditional culture, although Buddhism came from India. This speech brought another peak of Renjian Buddhism’s studies. With these numbers, we may safely say that the studies of Renjian Buddhism will continue to flourish as a part of Chinese traditional culture.



Figure 1. The Total Number of Articles Titled “Renjian Buddhism” in Chinese (CNKI 1980-2018 )

Therefore, with the growth of Renjian Buddhism’s studies, different translation versions appeared at home and abroad. It is sensible to compare different translations of Renjian Buddhism to expose Renjian Buddhism’s complexity and the appropriateness of translation strategies. CNKI is an authoritative database in China as a window to the western world in which some journals require authors to translate the title and abstract into English. There are 68 relevant articles with English translation versions. To be more specific, translation version “mundane

Buddhism” was used in 7 articles, “living Buddhism” in 6, “temporal Buddhism” in 2, “humanistic Buddhism” in 37, “engaged Buddhism” in 2, “Renjian Buddhism” in 2, “world Buddhism” in 3, “worldly Buddhism” in 2 and other versions in one (such as “Popular Buddhism”, “Buddhism in the human world”, “Buddhism of the world”, “Buddhism is in everyone’s life”, “Buddhism”, “human Buddhism” and “earthly Buddhism”). These translations can be briefly sorted out into literal translations and free translations as follows:

Table 1. Literal translations and free translations

Literal Translation	Free Translation
Renjian Buddhism, world Buddhism, worldly Buddhism, Buddhism in the human world, Buddhism of the world	mundane Buddhism, living Buddhism, temporal Buddhism, humanistic Buddhism, engaged Buddhism, Popular Buddhism, human Buddhism, earthly Buddhism, Buddhism is in everyone’s life

According to Baker’s *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (1998:125), literal translation is a kind of word-for-word translation. Generally speaking, it is difficult for the translators to achieve this ideal because there are seldom equivalent words in two different languages. Thus, unit of translation is further discussed in the *Encyclopedia*, and “the literal, surface meaning” is proposed as a starting point to distinguish

the literal and free translation (Baker, M. 1998:287). We just category those translations with surface meaning similar to “Renjian” in Chinese as literal translations, and others as free translations. Obviously, more people prefer to translate freely, that is, to go beyond the surface meaning. The first English translation of “Renjian Buddhism” appeared in Li Xiangping’s article “Revolutionary Trend of Chinese Buddhism

in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century---on the Question of Modernity of the Ideological Current in Mundane Buddhism”. Li (2002:48) argued that “the trend of Mundane (Renjian) Buddhism inherited today is really a way to express the secularization of Chinese traditional Buddhism”. Thus, “Renjian Buddhism” was translated into “Mundane Buddhism”; While Gao Yuchun (2003:50) held a different opinion to see Renjian Buddhism as Buddhism about living, therefore, “Renjian Buddhism” was translated into “living Buddhism”. Generally speaking, “humanistic Buddhism” was most frequently used as the translation of “Renjian Buddhism”, which first appeared in Zhou Guihua’s article “The Characteristics of Yinshun’s Humanistic Buddhism”. Zhou (2006:49, 52) maintained that Shi Yinshun’s “humanistic Buddhism” had a basic characteristics of humanism, with a combination of Buddhist faith, worldly rationality and empiricism. But Wei Xian (2008:15) translated “Renjian Buddhism” as “engaged Buddhism”, which was interpreted as socially involved... There are 15 English translation versions of Renjian Buddhism in China, therefore, how many translation versions are accepted or used in the English world?

In order to analyze the effect of communication, we chose Web of Science (1980-2018) as a reference database to see how those translations of Renjian Buddhism are accepted. To our surprise, the results show that only six versions of those ten English translations can be found on Web of Science, among which some do not discuss about Renjian Buddhism. Why does this phenomenon arise? Is there anything wrong in the process of communication?

### 3 Renjian Buddhism in the English World

Using Web of Science as a reference data, there are 53 relevant articles with “humanistic Buddhism”, “popular Buddhism” and “engaged Buddhism” as titles. While “human world Buddhism”, “living Buddhism” and “Renjian Buddhism” appeared only in 1 or 2 articles. Other translation versions yield no results (see Figure 2). Surprisingly, the most popular translation version “humanistic Buddhism” in China only appeared in the titles of 3 articles about “Renjian Buddhism” in Taiwan region, for example, “Re-Creation of Rituals in Humanistic Buddhism: A Case Study of Fo Guang Shan”. Five articles with the title “popular Buddhism” have no bearing with “Renjian Buddhism” : one of them is about Jodo Shinshu in Japan, that is “Popular Buddhism in Japan: Shin Buddhist religion & culture”, and the rest are related to the popular Buddhism in South Korea like “Kim Tae-heup’s Theory of Popular Buddhism and Its Development”, etc. These articles prove that popular Buddhism is not necessarily “Renjian Buddhism”. There are 40 articles which have “engaged Buddhism” in their titles, 7 of which are about “Renjian Buddhism”, for instance, “Taiwan’s Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism: Origins, Organization, Appeal and Social Impact”, and the remaining 33 articles do not discuss about “Renjian Buddhism”.

From above analysis, it seems that free translations of “Renjian Buddhism” are more acceptable in the English world. But, unfortunately, some articles with those free translation versions are not about “Renjian Buddhism” and some mix “Renjian Buddhism” with other sects of Buddhism. What causes this phenomenon? Is there any obstacle in the process of cultural diffusion? Is it possible to use the literal translations of “Renjian Buddhism”?

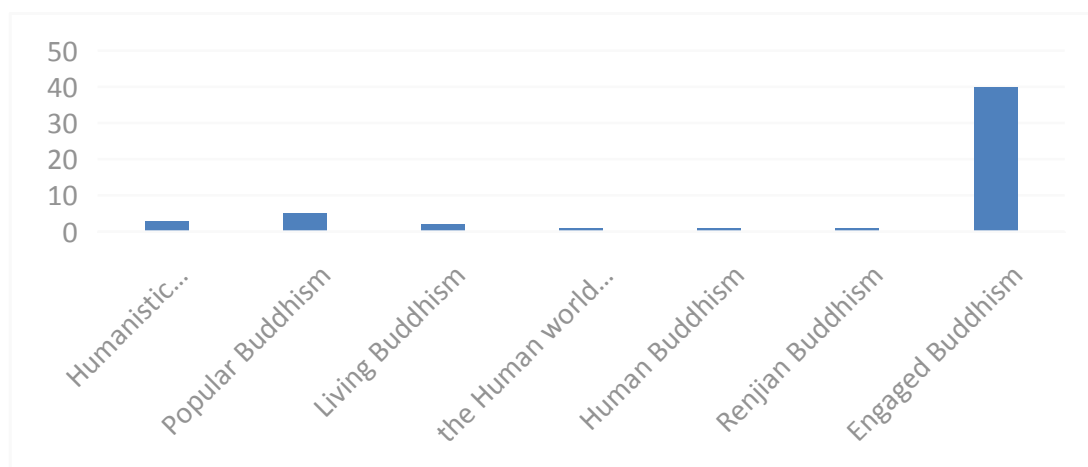


Figure 2. The Total Number of Articles with English versions of “Renjian Buddhism” (Web of Science 1980-2018)

## 4 Free Translations of Renjian Buddhism

Different dimensions of Renjian Buddhism make translators feel difficult to find an equivalent word in English. Thus, they would like choose different English words to translate according to their different understanding, that is, to go beyond the original meaning. Then, is it proper to translate “Renjian Buddhism” into “Humanistic Buddhism”? Does “humanistic” match with “Buddhism”? Is it suitable to use “Engaged Buddhism” to refer to “Renjian Buddhism”? What is the difference between “Engaged Buddhism” and “Renjian Buddhism”? Does “Mundane Buddhism” give too much weight to the secularization of “Renjian Buddhism”? In order to probe into the problem of the appropriateness of Renjian Buddhism’s translations, we should analyze these free translation versions one by one.

### 4.1 Humanistic Buddhism and Humanism

“Humanistic Buddhism” is a popular translation in present Chinese academia for “Renjian Buddhism”. Despite the fact that there is something in common between Renjian Buddhism and Humanism, such as the emphasis of human agency and the affirmation of human freedom and progress, there is one thing for sure that Renjian Buddhism is after all a religion featured by its unworldliness, thus different from humanism in the essence.

“Humanism”, the noun form of “humanistic”, was first seen in the early nineteenth Century, and it is a literal translation from Germany word “humanismus”. In 1859, George Voigt used the word “humanismus” in *The Revival of Ancient Classics* to refer to the new secular culture featuring on individualism. (Indyk, M. 1997: Note 3) According to Corliss Lamont’s definition, “Humanism” has ten central propositions, including the belief of the nature and the science, in opposition to all theories of the supernatural. (Lamont, C. 1997: 13-14) His definition stresses that the emergence of Humanism itself is an anti-religion campaign which advocates a life philosophy to understand the world with scientific prospective. Therefore, to define Buddhism with “humanistic” is prone to fallacy: Buddhism is after all a religion, and many Buddhist concepts like rebirth and to release the dead from purgatory could not be explained by science. However, Humanism advocates atheism and critical argument as well as the scientific view towards the world. Therefore, we may conclude that there is an

essential difference between Chinese “Renjian” (which refers to the being world opposite to the world after death) and “Humanism” (which is translated as “renwen 人文” in Chinese).

From the history, Humanism first arose from the Western world for the purpose to oppose “theology” with “humanology” so as to bring theology down from the pedestal and resume the position of human. However, the concept of “Renjian Buddhism” proposed by Master Taixu was actually a reform movement targeted to keep a balance between “transcendence” and secular world, in other words, it is the modernization of the religion. From the perspective of the space, “Humanism” directs at human by giving priority to man’s subjectivity and creativity, while “Renjian Buddhism” directs at “the being world (Renjian)” with its emphasis on the human nature of Buddha, becoming Buddha by benefiting others and respecting all living things. From the angle of the purpose, “Humanism” advocates the liberation of personality and enjoyment of the happiness of secular life. However, “Renjian Buddhism” supports practicing in the world in order to go beyond the sea of suffering. Master Hsing Yun (2001:3) once pointed it out clearly: “To trace to its source, Humanistic (Renjian) Buddhism is Buddha’s religion where Buddha preaches to people.” Different from humanistic philosophy of Confucianism, Renjian Buddhism has its transcendence or upward direction. Li Li’an holds that transcendence is the key to define a theory or a kind of social phenomenon as a religion. (Li, 2005:60-61) When we do a research or explain “Renjian Buddhism”, such transcendence must be taken into consideration, which is an indispensable element in consummating the theory and practice of “Renjian Buddhism”. Therefore, the religious traits in Renjian Buddhism determine that it is inappropriate to translate “Renjian Buddhism” as “humanistic Buddhism”.

### 4.2 Engaged Buddhism and Social Engagement

“Engaged Buddhism” is the translation of “Renjian Buddhism” generally accepted by the Western academia (Guglu, 2000:14). Ananda Guruge argues that: “ ‘Renjian’ Buddhism is by no means a new form of Buddhism...Buddhism engaged in society is ‘Renjian’ Buddhism.” (Deng Zimei, 2007:14) However, “Engaged Buddhism” was created by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who advocated to pay close attention to society, politics, economy and even directly join in the revolution. The Chinese translation of “Engaged Buddhism” is “Left-wing Buddhism (左翼

佛 教 )”. The word “engaged” came from the French word “engagé”, which meant to declare one’s stands in politics or society, quite different from the word in English. Influenced by Master Taixu in his early life, Thich Nhat Hanh stressed the social function and obligation of Buddhism, showed consideration for the social demand and people’s suffering and made arduous effort to improve the society. We can say that “Engaged Buddhism” is the result of Western humanitarianism and human rights. As what Michael Slott (2015:279) has mentioned, by attempts to impose the concept of justice and human rights in Western culture on Buddhism, “Engaged Buddhism” not only targets to alleviate people’s suffering like poverty and injustice, but also to challenge and reform the systematical roots of suffering through social changes. “Engaged Buddhism” is active in the political and social reform, while “Renjian Buddhism” is conservative in social movement especially after the Cultural Revolution. In China, “Renjian Buddhism” is mainly involved in the religious assemblies, charity and education under the leadership of the Communist Party and the government. “Renjian Buddhism” is characterized by its Chinese way of introspection and its moderate way of practice which emphasize the all-pervading principle of all sutras: “whether he is ‘coming in’ or ‘going out’, he is able to avoid the two extremes.” (Nai Yonghai, 2010:174) The characteristics of Renjian Buddhism is to break the barrier between sanctity and secularity, as well as between transcendence and worldly affairs. “Engaged Buddhism” is substantially different from “Renjian Buddhism”.

Speaking from the original groups, “Renjian Buddhism” and “Engaged Buddhism” are initiated by separate leaders: “Renjian Buddhism” was proposed by Master Taixu and inherited and developed by Yinshun, Zhao Puchu and Hsing Yun; “Engaged Buddhism” was started by Master Thich Nhat Hanh in an attempt to solve problems in the world. King (2009:423) maintains that “Engaged Buddhism” includes Dalai Lama and the Tibet emancipation organization. Speaking from the extent of influence in the West, Master Thich Nhat Hanh received education in the West with the ideology of democracy, freedom and equality deeply engraved in his mind; while Master Taixu was less influenced by the West. Even Master Hsing Yun who lives in a modern world bases his theory on Chinese culture. Speaking from social engagement, “Engaged Buddhism” gets involved in political, economic and social affairs

directly and responds to various kinds of problems, aiming to reform the extant social system; On the contrary, “Renjian Buddhism” adapts to the present social system, cares about the political affairs while does nothing to interfere with politics. As for “Renjian Buddhism”, if there is anything related to reform, it happens within the Buddhism. “Engaged Buddhism” promotes protest but “Renjian Buddhism” advocates harmony. Therefore, to translate “Renjian Buddhism” as “Engaged Buddhism” is not appropriate because Renjian Buddhism proposed by Zhao (Puchu) is not the engaged Buddhism represented by Nhat Hanh (Zhe, J. 2013:48), not to speak of taking “Renjian Buddhism” which is not so engaged as the same Buddhism of Dalai Lama which is seen as “hostile” to the Communist Party of China.

### 4.3 Mundane Buddhism and Secularization

Li Xiangping points out that Renjian Buddhism expresses the secularization of Chinese Buddhism. (Li, 2002:48) Then, does “Mundane Buddhism” carry the identical meaning of “Renjian Buddhism”? Li Li’an also used “temporal Buddhism” to translate Renjian Buddhism(Li, 2005:128)“Temporal” refers to the secular world. So, is “Renjian Buddhism” a real secular religion or the secularization of Buddhism? why these two translation versions can not be found in Web of Science?

Berger(1991:128)said that: “Secularization is a process through which a part of society and culture can get rid of the control of religious system and social symbols.” The secularization of Buddhism in Western religions is the separation of church, thus losing control of national politics and social culture. In Western world, deity and secularity are in opposing positions. The massive retreating of religions from the society mirrors the acceleration of secularization. Shiner generalized the meaning of “secularization” into six aspects, including the recession of religions, the shift of attention to secular world, the division from the society, utilitarianism and so on (Gao Yongwang, 2011:112) In the history of Chinese Buddhism, there has never been a period when religions got control of politics or separated from society. Meanwhile, considering the fact that Buddhism is not a religion isolated from the society, we can not use rationality to analyze Chinese Buddhism, for rationality is a product of Western philosophy and thus unable to interpret Chinese philosophy. As an integration of Confucianism,

Buddhism and Taoism, Renjian Buddhism is the sinicization of Indian Buddhism and a philosophy insisting on harmony between heaven and human beings. Therefore, Renjian Buddhism is a combination of deity and secularity which shows both compassion for suffering people and longing for Pure Land. Deng Zimei (1998:18) points out: “It is indisputable that some people in Chinese Mainland cannot clarify the boundary between ‘Renjian Buddhism’ and ‘Rencheng (人乘 human vehicle)’. They mistook ‘Renjian’ as secular and thereby consider ‘Renjian Buddhism’ as the secularization of Buddhism. Such opinion can be seen in Taiwan as well and entails endless troubles.” “Renjian” is by no means equal to “secular world”: it means “in the world” or the place where the Buddha practiced his doctrine and finally became Buddha. Arguably, “Renjian” is a holy space to be cultivated into a pure land; whereas secularity is a popular and vulgar tradition in our society. To some extent, it is risky to translate “Renjian Buddhism” into “Mundane Buddhism” and “temporal Buddhism”. It can be concluded from fruitless research result of these two translations in foreign websites that foreign readers do not seem to accept them, either.

All in all, for many Western readers, Chinese Buddhism is an open belief system which emphasizes meditation and personal experience. Theoretically, to translate “Renjian Buddhism” into “humanistic Buddhism” caters to such concepts in the modern Western world as democracy, equality, humanism and individualism. “Humanistic” is a word with Western connotation and implies a sort of rational science, thus, some people consider “Buddhism to be the religion of humanity”. (Tweed, 2002:26) In modern Western world, some of the Buddhist supporters forsake some Buddhist concepts incompatible with science, like “rebirth”, “karma”. To be specific, the majority of Western Buddhist supporters strive to pursue the “enlightenment” and “awakening” in life in a bid to rationalize Buddhism. (Baumann, 2002:58) Although “humanistic Buddhism” is in line with the concepts of present Western Buddhist proponents, it is the expression “engaged Buddhism” that frequently appears in relevant articles written by Western scholars. Why do Western scholars prefer “engaged Buddhism” to “humanistic Buddhism”? Maybe, there is a lingual contradiction between “humanistic” and “Buddhism”, or it is a paradox to use a rational word “humanistic” to modify a religion.

When referring to “engaged Buddhism”, Christopher S. Queen (2002:324-326) mentioned Ciji from Taiwan, Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam and Dalai Lama in Tibet. It is apparent that western scholars tend to include “Renjian Buddhism” into “engaged Buddhism” for the latter has relatively greater influence in the West due to its breed and prosperity in the West. However, the followers of Chinese “Renjian Buddhism” will find it difficult to accept the fact to be grouped together with Dalai Lama in Tibet. Chinese “Renjian Buddhism” would like to distinguish itself from Dalai Lama’s Buddhism to support Chinese government. Cultural obstacles need to be overcome because it is difficult for the westerners to understand and accept the doctrine of mean, or to seek harmony of Chinese society.

From the above analysis, we can see that the free translations of “Renjian Buddhism” are not so appropriate to convey the exact ideas “Renjian Buddhism” proposes. Then, can literal translations of “Renjian Buddhism” be ideal translations to be accepted by readers?

## 5 Possibilities to Use the Literal Translation of “Renjian Buddhism”

Generally speaking, there are several problems in translation: (1) a word’s literal meaning is hard to define, even the dictionary cannot give a well-established meaning; (2) There are no equivalent words in another language, and at the same time the original words are difficult to be understood without the knowledge of the source language culture; (3) In order to seek sense, translators de-verbalize the original text and then re-verbalize the text into the target language which cannot avoid some losses and even misunderstanding. But, why do people still prefer free translation to literal translation? Perhaps, literal translation, especially phonemic translation is seen as zero-translation (Fang Mengzhi, 2018: 1) which is not so acceptable in the target language. In ancient China, Xuanzang proposed non-translation under five circumstances (五不翻), that is, zero-translation. Thus, is “Renjian Buddhism” qualified to use zero translation? We may probe into this question from the following aspects:

“Renjian Buddhism” contains complicated ideas which make it difficult to find appropriate words to express;

“Renjian Buddhism” has the Chinese features which

make it unique.

Articles with Renjian Buddhism's phonemic translation has been gradually gaining citation rate.

Using the experience of the Buddhist translations in Chinese history as an example, many phonemic translations become a part of Chinese vocabulary, such as *puti* ( 菩提 ), *niepan* ( 涅槃 ), *Luohan* ( 罗汉 ) and so on. Therefore, it is possible for the readers to accept zero-translation. Nowadays, there are two types of Buddhists in the western world, namely cradle Buddhists and convert Buddhists. Cradle Buddhists mainly refer to immigrants who are Buddhists and their descendants who have inherited their religious belief. While convert Buddhists are those who are free to choose as a Buddhist convert because of the influence of Buddhist ideologies. It is also worth mentioning that many Buddhist supporters have enriched the history of Buddhism through learning Buddhist thoughts and meditation by reading Buddhist sutra on their nightstand. Tweed (2002: 24) suggests to use self-identification to identify Buddhists. Thus, on the one hand, these Buddhist readers are willing to deepen their knowledge of "Renjian Buddhism" so it becomes easier for them to accept its zero-translation; on the other hand, only zero-translation can convey the real meaning of Renjian Buddhism and its characteristics. Just like Alexandra Assis Rosa (2017: 113) maintains that "indirect translation appears to decrease when adequacy or source-orientedness prevails."

## 6 Conclusion

To sum up, different free translations of "Renjian Buddhism" only focus on one aspect of Renjian Buddhism, which cannot reflect the real spirit of Renjian Buddhism. The translation versions such as "humanistic Buddhism" only focuses on its humanity, "engaged Buddhism" on its sociality, and "Mundane Buddhism" on its secularity. There is no equivalent word in English for "Renjian Buddhism". Because of the globalization, more westerners want to know more about China and Chinese Buddhism, the phonemic translation of "Renjian Buddhism" is more appropriate to promote the communication between China and the Western World.

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