

Special Focus:  
Buddhists and the Making of  
Modern Chinese Societies



***Introduction: Buddhists and the Making of  
Modern Chinese Societies***

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The special focus of this issue of the *Journal of Global Buddhism* is on the role of Buddhists and Buddhist-inspired practices and ideas in (Greater) China in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Drawing connections between the pre- and post-1949 periods in the Chinese-speaking world and between both sides of the Taiwan straits, all contributors pay close attention to history and historiography. They examine trans-regional and global processes of influence and conflict, bridging contemporary theory, comparative religious studies, and ethnography. The formation of Buddhist and Chinese modernities is seen through the lens of a process of interaction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist agents and Asian and non-Asian agents, in the Sinophone and Tibetophone world in particular.

Within Buddhism of the past one hundred or so years, defining the *modern* would seem to require the invention of its opposite, the *traditional*. This dog-tired dichotomy hides as much as it reveals. Since the “turn to religion” in the 1990s (de Vries 1999), critical social theorists have debated the nature and place of religion in modernity and examined religious cultures in light of what was once called the “secularization thesis”. Within Buddhist Studies, calling on a divergent array of theoretical frameworks, scholars have for the past three decades or so sought to explain the broader implications of the study of Buddhism by aligning it with various anti-modernist, modernist, and post-modernist tendencies. The papers in this special issue point instead to a reading of the cultural significance of Buddhism in modern Chinese societies that transcends the tendency to identify it too exclusively with one or various of several highly problematic dichotomies, including modern/traditional, secular/religious, religion/medical science, religion/technology.

For instance, the relationship of Buddhism to science, including medical science, as C. Julia Huang, Khenpo Sodargye and Dan Smyer Yü argue here, does not need to be conceptualized as one of substitution or rejection. Buddhism does not merely supply

some kind of meaning for life where the scientific worldview fails to provide one. On the contrary, the Buddhism-science dialogue stands out as a central theme in contemporary Sino-Tibetan Buddhist encounters. Science, reconceived as a neutral space of knowledge making, is utilized as an instrument of Buddhist conversion and, in the case of medical science in Tzu Chi (*Ciji*), a means to facilitate and legitimate its own existence. These two papers also speak to David's analysis of meditation, mindfulness and secularism, and of Tibetan Buddhists' use of the so-called science of the mind both within the Chinese nation-state and in exile.

How did "modernity" become legitimized in Buddhist discourse in the first decades of the twentieth century? What happened to native agency in this complex process of legitimation? In her paper on the Vinaya movement in Republican China, Daniela Campo alerts us to the fact that eminent monks of the inter-war period countered a complex set of issues, including the material and symbolic dispersion of the Buddhist monastic community and a pervasive anticlericalism. Their answers were grounded in monastic discipline. When institutional innovations did occur, it did not depart from the Vinaya.

As for the widespread idea that the expansion of modern communication technologies would necessarily bring about the dissolution of religious authority (Stolow 2005), in my own essay I argue that digital and social media have visibly extended their reach into the mundane core of Buddhist everyday life and that, moreover, Buddhist clerics are skillfully extending their mediated reach in examples ranging from televangelism, to cassette sermons, to internet blogging and WeChat. Not unlike consumers elsewhere, Chinese and Taiwanese daily engage with a plethora of piously coded objects wherein Buddhists' "charisma and aura find new ways to infuse themselves into mass-produced artifacts" (Tarocco 2011: 640).

Understanding regimes of Buddhist knowledge and practice in modern Chinese societies means delving into their histories to examine the political and social routes by which ideas, policies and institutions were brought into being. The Vinaya movement of the first half of the twentieth century played a fundamental role in helping the monastic community strengthen its political legitimation. Using an approach that complicates the representation of the modern evolution of Chinese Buddhism by stressing the efforts of Republican monastic leaders to promote Chinese Vinaya in practice and in discourse, Campo shows how the criteria envisioned by the nation-state for religious legitimation were not new. Rather, they were in line with late imperial standards of religious orthodoxy. Preoccupations with modernity did not always entail modern solutions but rather a composition of recuperation and novelties.

C. Julia Huang deepens our comparative understanding of the relationship between Buddhism and medical care by focusing on the lay Buddhist charitable movement under monastic leadership Tzu Chi. Referencing Erik Hammerstrom's work on Buddhist critiques of scientism during the first half of the twentieth century (2015), she shows that the Taiwanese case harkens back to earlier debates between the sciences and Buddhism in Republican China. Ultimately, she argues, the process of bestowing sacramental

meanings on the scientific constitutes a Buddhist-inspired effort to sacralize medical science in modern Chinese societies. In fact, the Buddhism-science dialogue is a central theme in contemporary Sino-Tibetan encounters as well, where Tibetan Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions among urban Chinese in the twenty-first century. Dan Smyer Yü and Khenpo Sodargye find that, on the one hand, Tibetan teachers reject scientism, and, on the other, they reconstruct Buddhism as a science in its own right. Within China, they critique the epistemology and social effects of secularism and make sustained efforts to reclaiming the social legitimacy of Buddhism. David McMahan's focus on the broad contours of the interlacing between Buddhism and secularism offers a solid background against which to examine some distinctive features of Buddhism in the modern Chinese cultural world. After looking at specific examples that illustrate the diversity of the religious-secular binary, he shows how it drives the transformations of Chinese Buddhist religious traditions as they refashion practices in the context of rapidly evolving socio-political landscapes. In the closing essay on what I call "Buddhist technoculture", I argue that the study of the communicative fabric of the social media life of Chinese monks and nuns sheds light on the role that digital technology plays in the processes of re-articulation of their relationship with other practitioners and on Chinese/Taiwanese society as a whole. While discrete projects of secularism come up against strategies and aspirations of a religious nature, I stress that the present moment must be understood in the context of a theory that accounts for all kinds of mediation in human sociality, and which thus allows us to connect social realities to Buddhism's own history of sophisticated investment in objectification and mediation in China and the rest of East Asia.

All the essays in this special issue make the comparative case that one cannot study the historical trajectories of Buddhism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries without a trans-regional perspective. Ultimately, what emerges from these studies is an alternative critical paradigm leading towards a more granular assessment of differing cultural perspectives on the relationship between tradition and modernity in Chinese societies and a step towards a fuller account of the history of Buddhism, religion, and secularism that gives due weight to several crucial but complex developments from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

Earlier drafts of four of five articles in this special issue – by Daniela Campo, David McMahan, C. Julia Huang, and Khenpo Sodargye and Dan Smyer Yü – were presented as papers at the workshop "Buddhisms in Modern China: Between resistance, secularism and new religiosities" (Göttingen 14-16 May, 2014), while my own article was added at a later stage. The organizers of the original workshop, Axel Schneider and Dan Smyer Yü, wish to gratefully acknowledge funding from the German Ministry of Education Fund for the "Politics of the New" project at the CeMIS-CeMEAS Transregional Research Network (CETREN), the University of Göttingen, and a Fritz Thyssen Stiftung Conference Grant. We are particularly grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, Martin Baumann, Jovan Maud and Cristina Rocha for their enthusiastic support and for their

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