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Revisioning Buddhism as a Science of the Mind in a Secularized China: A Tibetan perspective

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Abstract: Tibetan Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions among Chinese in the twenty-first century. The transnational teaching activities of numerous Tibetan lamas attest to this religious trend in the popular realm of contemporary China. Unlike on their native soil, Tibetan lamas immersed in urban China encounter converts whose acceptance of Buddhism often rests upon a "scientific" assessment of Buddhism. Thus, the Buddhism-science dialogue stands out as a central theme in contemporary Sino-Tibetan Buddhist encounters. Based on the authors' collaborative study of the Buddhism-science entanglement in this transnational Buddhist context, this article will illustrate that science signifies not merely the conventionally accepted system of knowledge, based on the modern, empirically-driven search for the understanding of the material world. Instead, it connotes a web of interconnected social meanings pertaining to Buddhist understanding, critique, and appropriation of this web. In this regard, the authors argue that simultaneously, science is identified as an integral part of the iconoclastic secularism in modern China subject to contemporary Buddhist critique, science is utilized as an instrument of Buddhist conversion, and science is reconceived as a neutral, open social space for knowledge making, in which an increasing number of Buddhist teachers persistently claim Buddhism as a science of its own.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism; Secularism; Scientism; Conversion

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The revivals of different Buddhist traditions in China over the last three decades have now become an integral part of the unprecedented social forces that catalyze the growing religious population of contemporary China. The discourse of the "Religious Question" is no longer exclusively a policy and regulation oriented affair of state, but has inevitably become pluralized, involving religious practitioners, scholars, and popular opinions (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011; Smyer Yü, 2011; Li Xiangping, 2013). Since the 1980s, Buddhist traditions have gone through different "post-" phases of China, e.g. post-Mao, post-Deng, post-socialist, and post-modern. All these "posts" are indicative of the multifarious social changes occurring in China. As Ji Zhe and Goossaert write, '[t]his Buddhist revival plays a formative role in the current reconstruction of social relations, and ushers in a reinvention of religion' (2011: 492). This observation accords with the present social condition of Buddhism in China.

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While the religious populace continues to demand greater materialization of the constitution-sanctioned religious freedom, the state has taken further measures to administer the religious affairs of its citizens. In 2014, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) announced the establishment of its think tank by appointing twenty-nine senior scholars respectively from the Academy of Social Sciences, Peking University; Renmin University; and Minzu University of China. SARA is apparently pressured to 'legalize religious affairs' and to acknowledge that '[r]eligion not only has its own history, but is also an active social element' (SARA, 2014). Regarding Buddhism, it has issued an additional statement to 'support the establishment of Tibetan Buddhist academies and encourage the exchange between Han Chinese, Theravada, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions' (SARA 2014). Such acknowledgement of the policy implications of the plural presence of Buddhism in China is unprecedented based on our observation. The atheistic state ideology is not undergoing a structural reform; however it is obviously admitting to its learning curve the diversity and social importance of religion. Thus, building 'a broad image of tolerance' (Potter, 2003: 318) is a part of the Chinese state's fresh approach to the religious affairs of its citizens.

Figure 1. The authors' Buddhism-Social Science Dialogue Session at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy, Sertar County, Sichuan Province, PRC, August 2013. Photo by Sonam Tserang.

We, a Buddhist monastic scholar and a social scientist, collaboratively write this article as a social experiment intended to be informative of and theoretically engaging with a formation of the relationship between religion and society. This collaboration is based on our mutually established rapport. Dan Smyer Yü hosted and organized Khenpo Sodargye's public lectures in several leading academic institutions in China, Europe, and North America. Likewise, Khenpo Sodargye invited him to give talks at Larung-gar Buddhist Academy and opened doors for his social scientific study of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist interactions. We recognize the fact that monastic and university-based scholars frequently enter each other's institutional spaces for thought exchanges and mutual curiosity of each other's lifeways and worldviews. This social experiment is

thus meant to highlight the interlocution between scholars respectively situated in Buddhism as a world religion and Buddhist studies as an endeavor of many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. We hope this cross-institutional and cross-intellectual interlocution will produce comparative implications for both monastic and academic worlds.

This article is based on our interviews with each other, the contents of our lectures delivered at Larung Gar Buddhist Academy and universities in China, Europe, and North America, and our thought-exchanges during our travels to Germany and the United States between 2012 and 2014. We had three formal occasions dedicated to determining the theme of this article and the division of our labor. We agreed to take Khenpo Sodargye's "A Scientific Treatise on Buddhism" (2000) as the basis of this article regarding our mutual interests in the social and existential meanings of science in relation to Buddhism in modern China. This is reflected in the first section of this article—*"Scientific ignorance" as a consequence of secularism*—as our effort to build an intertextuality between social science and Buddhist studies situated in a monastic environment. As both of us have researched Buddhist conversion on our own terms (Sodargye, 2003; Smyer Yü, 2011; 2014), we compared our notes and results. We converged on modern science as a crucial medium for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese. This is where we direct attention towards in *Science as a vessel of modern Buddhist conversion*, the second section of this article. As a Buddhist philosopher and social ethicist, Khenpo Sodargye is responsible for the most part of *Causality of ethics as the cornerstone of Buddhism as a science*, the third section. All three sections are interconnected on the theme of modern Buddhism-science encounters.

As we recognize the significance of Buddhism-science dialogue in the revitalizations of different Buddhist traditions as well as in pluralizing the social meaning of science in China, we intend to inform our readers of three social entanglements of Buddhism with the greater Chinese society: first, Buddhist social critique of science concerning secularism and its consequences in modern Chinese society; second, Buddhist appropriation of science as a vessel of modernizing Buddhist conversion; and third, Buddhist claims of Buddhism as a science of its own.

As these entanglements transgress, blur, and redefine the boundaries between religion and science, and between the religious and the secular realms in modern human history, they present us with the simultaneity of antipathy, equation, synthesis, and rebirth. To make sense out of these arrays of social complications, conceptual confusions, and doctrinal contradictions, we think it is best that we make nomenclatural clarification before we proceed to present our contribution to the scholarly and the public discourses on Buddhism and science. The word "science" in this article connotes two interconnected terms, namely "science" and "modern science." The former, derived from its Latin etymon *scientia*, is understood as a neutral word encompassing a variety of ways and means to yield knowledge from humans' lived experiences and experimental acts in the world. The latter refers to the complex system of knowledge generated by different disciplines of natural and social sciences, such as chemistry, physics, biology,

geology, sociology, and anthropology. In the political sense, modern science is also understood as a public enterprise that produces a set of facticities [conditions of facts and factuality] and beliefs (Stochastikon, 2014: 1). It then makes sense when we look at how modern science in China has produced a popular belief known as "scientism," which we will discuss shortly. Regarding the Buddhist claim of Buddhism as a science, we will interchangeably use the phrases "Buddhist science," "science of the mind," and "inner science" in our explanation of how Buddhism could be understood as a science.

"Scientific ignorance" as a consequence of secularism

We would like to start acknowledging the leading position of Tibetan Buddhism in the Buddhism-science dialogue in contemporary China. Dorzhi Rinpoche (རྡོར་ཞི་རིན་པོ་ཆེ), Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, and Khenpo Sodargye, for example, actively contribute their voices in the form of publications and web forums to the growing magnitude of the Buddhism-science interactions. It is thus critical here to re-emphasize that although the mainstreaming of Tibetan Buddhism in Chinese society only began over a decade ago, an increasing number of Tibetan lamas have become icons of public discourses on religion and popularly accepted authorities of Buddhist spirituality (Smyer Yü, 2011: 126-147). In retrospect, as the Han Chinese region started its ten percent economic growth rate in the early 1990s, the Tibetan regions, as what the state referred to as the economically 'backward' places, were undergoing rapid religious and cultural revitalizations. Goldstein and Kapstein's volume *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity* is the seminal collection of research papers addressing the contemporary Tibetan religious and cultural revitalizations. In it, religion (Buddhism) and culture are deeply entwined. Goldstein emphasizes that Buddhism as 'the main source of Tibetans' pride in their culture and country' (1998a: 5) and 'a symbol of their country's identity and of the superiority of their civilization' (1998b: 15). Kapstein in his conclusion repeats similarly that Buddhism 'reinforces the Tibetan sense of identity' (1998, 140). Other scholars have reached the same assessment (Germano, 1998: 53-94; Barnett, 2006: 38; Adams, 1996: 520; Smyer Yü, 2011: 24). It is thus commonly recognized among scholars that Tibetan religious revitalizations have been synonymous with Tibetan cultural revitalizations. This common social scientific perspective coincides with many native Tibetan intellectuals' publicly stated understanding of their own cultural history in relation to Buddhism. Dorzhi Rinpoche says, 'The core of Tibetan culture is Tibetan Buddhism' (2016). Khenpo Sodargye states, 'The root of Tibetan culture is Buddhism' (2013). Historian Danzhu Angben (དོན་གྲུབ་ཨང་བེན) reaffirms, 'Tibetan Buddhism has the dominant role in Tibetan social system' (Li, 2000).

However, when these ethnically and religiously specific revitalizations are entangled with the greater Chinese society, they are being reshaped into a public discourse concerning reclaiming the social legitimacy of religion and critiquing the destructive consequence of secularism in the history of modern China. The foremost critical point that leading Tibetan and Han Chinese Buddhist teachers have brought forth to the public is what some of them call 'the scientific ignorance (*kexue-de-wuzhi* 科学的无知)' (Sodargye, 2000: 226) or 'the scientific superstition (*kexue-de-mixin* 科学的迷信)' (Wang,

2003; Jian, 2014) as a dominant social consciousness about religion in China, which has equated religion, including Buddhism, to *mixin* or superstition. *Mixin* ideologically justified the physical destruction of Buddhism in the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s. It continues to stigmatize it. This 'scientific ignorance' undoubtedly originated from scientism—(科学主义 *kexuezhuyi*)—a highly pronounced feature of modern China since the early 1900s when Western-trained Chinese scientists and scholars, such as Ding Wenjiang (1877-1936), Hu Shi (1891-1962), and Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), began to advocate modern science as a new "God" or a new national belief regarded as the ultimate means to save China from its wretchedness due to internal chaos and external colonialism (Li, 2015: 20-22; Ye, 2013: 12-13).

Scientism is a political ideology that treats modern science as 'omniscient, omnipotent, and the bearer of man's salvation' (Hua, 1995: 15). Adherence to scientism has generated violence in the past, and continues to exert its ultimate authority over religion in China, as shown in the CCP's prophecy for the inevitable death of religion, as Jiang Zemin, the former president of China, stated (Wang & Liu, 2000: 5). In essence, scientism is a representation of the dominating power of the state in Marxist-scientific terms. In the past, the general population's conflation, as well as the confusion, of scientism with the authority of the Chinese State reinforced the Chinese Marxist worldview as an operative cultural matrix making acceptable the social marginalization, if not a complete extermination, of religion. In many ways, scientism, accepted as a "progressive" force, was an instrument of the state sanctioned persecution to different religious traditions in the name of *saochu mixin* (扫除迷信) or "eliminating superstitions" for a new social order.

The United Front Department of the Chinese state retains its orthodox definition of superstition:

> Superstition generally refers to the blind belief or worship of persons or things. Divination, face-reading, fengshui, fortune-telling, communicating with the soul of the dead, and dream-readings originated and became popular in the feudal times of the long history of our country. Customarily, these activities are called feudal superstition (United Front Department).

This state definition is obviously scientistic. In the recent past, during political campaigns such as religious reform and the Cultural Revolution, it pejoratively equated superstition with stupidity, ignorance, and deviation from the orthodoxy of modern science. In many ways, it often continues to be internalized as a reflex of value judgment. Tibetan Buddhism is not an exception, which was (is) lumped together with superstition, too. A Tibetan scholar writes in her scholarly assessment of Tibetan Buddhism:

> The biggest dross in Tibetan traditional culture is the word—superstition. Superstition is the obstacle to the emancipation of the mind; superstition is an impediment to conceptual transformation; superstition is the negative element in the economic construction of Tibet; superstition is the spiritual shackle of Tibet's social progress. Superstition affects the propagation of science, hinders

> the proliferation of technology, and fetters people's mind. It is the source of Tibet's lagging behind the modernization of the motherland and the world. If superstition is not eradicated, science will not flourish. Thus, the progress of Tibet and the prosperity of Tibetans are only hollow talk. If we want to make an effort to preserve the splendid Tibetan tradition, we must construct the new socialist culture. For the progress of Tibet, we must do away with superstition and revere science, and must rely on ourselves and build our happiness. (Dekyid Drolkar, 2003: 41)

The author implies that Buddhism in the twenty-first century is still a superstition and forecasts its inevitable modernization through a process of secularization and rationalization (Dekyid Drolkar, 2003: 42). This is the primary sociocultural condition under which the Tibetan Buddhist revival is taking place, and with which numerous Tibetan teachers are painstakingly contending for the full restoration of Buddhism as a legitimate cultural practice. This intent for a restoration from the consequences of scientism finds comradeship from Han Chinese counterparts.

Chen Bing, a scholar and a practitioner of Buddhism at Sichuan University, pointed out that since the inception of modern time, science has become the universal measure of value and the ultimate authority, and that the Chinese populace has accepted the attitude of treating religion as the enemy of science (Chen, 1999). Wang Meng of South Central University for Nationalities alleges that science has spread its own version of superstition in the modern history of China (2003: 120). Jian Ping, an independent scholar, follows up Wang's allegation with his criticism, 'Science represents itself as the incarnation of truth; however, the other side of it is nevertheless full of lies and superstitions. The human cost of "the scientific superstition" is no less than that of the "religious superstition." Humankind is both the beneficiary and the victim of science' (Jian, 2014).

In our view, these ongoing Buddhist contentions with scientism are the consequence of China's secularism since the early twentieth century. We share the same sentiment with Charles Taylor (2009), José Casanova (2006), and Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (2010), that secularism should be understood in the plural sense regarding its worldwide social and cultural contexts. In the West, secularism has been understood as the separation of church and the state as it was initiated as 'struggles against clerical domination' (Calhoun, 2010: 42). However, it was not intended to overthrow the clerical authority but to build a new boundary, keeping it outside the sphere of the state governance and yet constitutionally sanctioning it as an important part of civil society. In contemporary Western societies, the added understanding of secularism is its political acceptance of religious pluralism, which means that the state adopts a legal position toward diverse religious expressions in the civil sphere. In this sense, secularism in the West is expected to be neutral (Taylor, 2009: 21) regardless of its variations in practice.

In comparison, secularism in China has not shown a neutral position toward religion. Neither does it establish itself within a legal framework; instead, it began as an ideological movement intended to clear out religious practices deemed hindrances to the progress that modern science was believed to bring. To put it simply, the Chinese secularist intent was to make way for the arrival of science by dispelling the so-called "superstitions" inclusive of worldviews, values, and practices that were looked upon as the opposites of science. Religious traditions were the primary targets of such secularism. In this historical context, Chinese secularism was anti-religious to start with. Its weapon was scientism, which could be traced back to the early 1900s.

During the New Culture Movement in the 1920s, Chinese intellectuals introduced a variety of Western scientific literature to the greater Chinese public, including Darwinism, Marxism, and anarchism. Chen Duxiu, the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, then advocated 'the replacement of religion with science' (Yang, 2012: 119). Hu Shi, a leading philosopher and cultural critic, stated, '[w]e may not easily believe in the omnipotence of God but we believe scientific methods are omnipotent' (1981: 313). Soon, modern science became a national belief that eventually led to the iconoclastic behaviors of the young participants of the Movement toward religious institutions. It demonstrated the violent nature of secularism in China. Religions, including Buddhism, were stigmatized as superstitions. In this modern historical context, Rebecca Nedostup points out that religion became a target in a 'landscape of fear'—an analogy signifying a space of unequal power relationship between secularism as the predator and religion as the prey (2014: 130-131). The materialization of this landscape of fear in the latter half of the twentieth century was demonstrated in the Cultural Revolution and other political campaigns launched to eliminate religion as superstition.

Clearly, secularism bred what Chinese statesmen call 'the Religious Question' (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011: 2). In spite of the state's suppression of religious practices, religion did not take the path of its death prophesized by the Communists and their predecessors in the Republic era; instead, it is growing back rapidly in the twenty-first century. Like their counterparts in the past, contemporary Buddhist teachers in China, including Tibetans, continues to challenge scientism and explore new ways to explain what Buddhism can do in the secularized Chinese society. Buddhism, like other world religions in China, is re-entering the public sphere as 'a social force' (Zhe, 2012: 8) in the twenty-first century. While in the West secularity is accepted as 'the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search take place' (Taylor, 2009: 3), its counterpart in modern China manifests itself as a "scientifically" justified iconoclasm toward religion in the past and as a reluctantly political tolerance of the growing civil presence of religious practitioners and their constituencies. Thus it is not difficult to see that the secular and the religious are diametrically opposed but are also inextricably interlocked.

Thus far the interactions of religion and secularity and of Buddhism and science have not yet reconciled with each other. China's secularization process has not only torn a fault line between religion and science, but has also engendered what Charles

Hirschkind calls 'a secular body' understood as 'the embodied aptitudes and affects of the secular subject' (2010) in the Bourdieusian sense. This secular body in the case of China is a social habitus woven together with a web of scientism, the state's European Enlightenment-based projection of the national future, and the reflexive use of scientific and atheist terms in relation to religious encounters. In this social context, the revitalizations of Buddhism often signify not merely the reconstruction of the destroyed physical symbols of religion and the restoration of religious communities, but also Buddhists' progressive reclamation of the social legitimacy of religion and critical reflection on the social but personally manifested subjectivity of the secular body.

In our earlier research with Buddhist converts who are physicists, chemists, biologists, and other scientific specialists (Sodargye, 2002; Smyer Yü, 2011: 99-125), we found that their personal narratives showed that the artificial, iconoclastic divide between religion and science has contributed to their eventual disillusionment with modern science and to their subsequently felt loss of moral compass. Many of them attributed the cause of their existential and spiritual disorientation to the ignorance of scientism, which lies in its hypothesis of human life as nothing more than the process of a pure material pursuit. According to them, the consequence of this political materialism was that the entire nation invested so much conviction and emotion into a modern millenarianism predicated upon the destruction of the present for the sake of welcoming a messianic future. Scientism in this millenarian process turned out to be 'a political religion' (Zuo, 1991: 99), whose "religiosity" was an integral part of the Chinese socialist progressive destabilization of traditional modes of being (Pickett, 1996: 21). It is thus inevitable that a significant part of Buddhist revitalization efforts among Tibetans, Han Chinese, and other ethnic Buddhist constituencies was committed to critiquing the destructive consequences of secularism and reclaiming the social legitimacy of Buddhism.

Science as a vessel of modern Buddhist conversion

What runs parallel to the leading Buddhist teachers and public intellectuals' vigorous critique of the iconoclasm of scientism is their recognition of science as a modern epistemic system which people rely on for explanations of the world they live in and for giving meanings to their lives. One physicist expressed how he understood science in relation to Buddhism:

> When I was young I had interest in physics and Buddhism. I spent much time studying both. After several decades I have learned a fact that physics fundamentally relies on hypotheses, testing equipment, recognized material patterns, and inferred conclusions. We benefit from its theories for the development of electronic and space technologies; however, physics stand helpless in front of the birth-death question. What could be appreciated about physics are its causal explanations of material phenomena, which are similar to those of Buddhism (in Sodargye, 2003: 236).

This is a noticeable trend in which many Buddhist converts, on one hand, express their disappointment about the inability of modern science in explaining the inner world

of humankind. On the other hand, their Buddhist conversion process is recognizably mediated with modern scientific explanatory schemes, especially when they accept Buddhism as a rational religion (Dorzhi, 1998: 6-9; Sodargye, 2000: 156), which refers to the Buddhist explanatory system for understanding causes, conditions, and effects of material phenomena as well as of volitions, desires, intentions, and imaginations in the inner realm of human existence.

Unlike their Western counterparts who attempt to maintain 'a spirit of respectful noninterference' (Wallace, 2003: 2) with science, when Buddhist teachers in China present Buddhism as a rational religion, they further entangle their public discourses with science by citing statements from scientists or scientifically-oriented social thinkers and politicians to validate and make the Buddhist teachings acceptable to the general public of China. In the twenty-first century, the Buddhism-science dialogue is a global trend but its expressions are not identical. While the rapid growth of Buddhism in China is commonly acknowledged among scholars and Buddhist practitioners, the social position of Buddhism has not yet fully divorced itself from the popular stereotype of it as 'an old folks' religion' (Lin, 2001: 120), implying the atheistic secularist value judgment of Buddhists' devotional expressions as acts of superstition.

Although the iconoclastic secularist discrediting of Buddhism as a superstition was done in the name of science and progress in the past, the current Buddhist re-crediting of it ironically relies on science to make the past wrong right. We see the aftermath of secularism as the aforementioned secular habitus that has taken strong hold in the popular consciousness of religion. To many Buddhist teachers, science is simultaneously a toxicant when it is taken as scientism and a de-toxicant when Buddhists utilize scientific terms to re-legitimize the public presence of Buddhism. In our observation, the inextricable entanglement of Buddhism and science is indicative of "being scientific" in contemporary China as a social norm. Based on Smyer Yü's ethnographic observation, one does not need to believe in Communism or in religion, but being scientific is equivalent to progress (*xianjin* 先进) and civilization (*wenming* 文明). In addition to the reflexive nature of the scientific worldview, the Party, to strengthen its ruling position, continues to promote what its spokesmen call "Marxist scientific approach to religion" (Zhuo et al. 2014, 57), which, in essence, is a euphemism for the same atheism as an inherent property of Chinese socialist secularism.

In this social environment, we see the growing Buddhist conversion among the Chinese is also a destigmatization process, as many practicing Buddhists hold the view that temples and monasteries could be quickly rebuilt; however, it takes longer to clear the misrepresentation of Buddhism as superstition from people's minds. Our finding is similar to those of other scholars in the sense that Buddhists, since the early 1980s, have been reconstructing the positive public image of Buddhism in Chinese society (Zhe, 2008: 238). By representing Buddhism in scientific rhetoric, Tibetan Buddhist teachers are winning more converts especially from segments of the Chinese society, who have more access to higher education, professional training, and foreign travel. However, we see this aspect of the growing Buddhist conversion as an inadvertent outcome from

those socially active Buddhist teachers' scientific representation of Buddhism. Their employment of the scientific approach to Buddhism was initiated for Buddhists' self-defense and re-branding it as a rational religion, as aforementioned.

Now, scientific representations of Buddhism are readily found in Buddhist web forums and publications. Tibetan Dharma teachers are taking the lead in this growing public discourse exploring the scientific attributes of Buddhism. Given the social condition of religious revivals in China, they devote much of their discursive expressions to addressing Buddhism's modern scientific relevance and defending it in the language of those modern thinkers whose thought systems are integral parts of the Chinese state. For example, the statements of Marx and Engels are frequently referenced in the publications of the Tibetan teachers: 'Dialectic materialism in Buddhism has reached a fine degree' (Sodargye, 2000: 166) and 'Buddhists are at the higher stage of rational thinking' (Dorzhi, 1998: 405).

It is noteworthy that leading Tibetan teachers' dialogues with modern science are integrally connected with the Chinese public's renewed enthusiasm in the Buddhism-science dialogue initiated in the first half of the last century. In the publications and online forums of Tibetan teachers and their lay followers, the most frequently cited Buddhist scientists include You Zhibiao, Wang Jitong, Wang Shouyi, and Shen Jiazhen. Among them, You Zhibiao's *Scientific Standpoint of Buddhism* (1946) is widely circulated among Buddhists. You Zhibiao attended Harvard University in the late 1920s, specializing in radio engineering. Upon his return to China, he was appointed as a professor at Zhejiang University. He defended Buddhism as a 'pure rational religion' (You, 1946) and cited the negation of the existence of soul as a commonality of Buddhism and science.

Chen Bing highlights You as both a modern scientist and a Buddhist practitioner (Chen, 1999: 14). Like his Buddhist scholar peers, Chen also reiterates the most frequently cited statements of You, such as 'Buddhism is a superb science' and '[s]ome parts of Buddha Dharma can be explained with science, while other parts surpass science' (1999: 15). In Chen's apologetic appraisal of Buddhism, You's writings obviously appear to be a scientific index for the purpose of emphasizing Buddhism as a rational religion free from superstition.

Wang Jitong is another Buddhist scientist often cited by Chen Bing and his scholarly peers. Wang's publications in the Republic era such as "Buddhism and Science" and "A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Science" (1999: 13) are referenced in the same apologetic manner claiming the scientific spirit of Buddhism. Wang's statement, 'Every religion except Buddhism did not start with scientific methods' (1999: 13), is another quotation popular with Chinese Buddhist supporters who wish to highlight Buddhism's empirical experiment with the mind and the body in relation to the material world. It is one of the building blocks for contemporary Buddhist apologetics to claim Buddhism as 'an applied science' (1999: 15).

Other contemporary scientists and scientifically-minded Buddhists, such as Niu Shiwei of the Chinese Academy of Science, Jiang Jinsong of the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, and He Bing (an actor), rigorously defend Buddhism's compatibility with modern science (Jiang & He, 1999). It is widely noted that the general public in China is losing confidence in Communism as a belief system; whereas modern science, which the Communists have promoted for over half a century, has become a national *habitus* in the Bourdieusian sense (Harker, Mahar & Wilkes, 1990: 78). In other words, the Chinese Marxist habitus has engendered its own social language with a set of modern scientific glossaries, which, in fact, dominates the thought-activities of the Chinese populace in relation to religion. This social language, more often than not, operates in an unconscious fashion, and resembles what Bourdieu calls *doxa* as the 'universe of the undisputed' (1972: 168).

Figure 2. The co-authors working together, summer 2012. Photo by Yang Xiaowei.

In many ways, the current Buddhist revitalization is the continuation of Taixu's "Buddhist Revitalization Movement" of the 1920s, in the sense of reclaiming Buddhism in modern scientific terms from the stigma of superstition. The difference between the two Buddhist revitalizations lies in a more complex political context. In the Republic era, the exegeses of science among Buddhist apologetics came from diverse modern Western philosophical traditions as shown in the works of Taixu, Liang Qichao, and You Zhibiao. However, in contemporary China the scientific perspective dominates the Buddhism-science discourse in addition to its state-sanctioned ideological position. Thus, making Buddhism appear "politically correct" and "scientifically-enticing" is an integral part of the current Buddhist social engagement in China.

Causality of ethics as the cornerstone of Buddhism as a science

Ernest Holmes coined the phrase 'the science of the mind' in 1926 as his proposition for a scientific understanding of the relationship between humans and God in the Christian context. In the Buddhist world, Tibetan Buddhist teachers and Buddhist studies scholars, such as B. Alan Wallace (2008), Matthieu Ricard (2011), Daniel Goleman and Robert Thurman (1991), Geoffrey Samuel (2014), Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (1992), and others are taking the lead to promote or study Buddhism as a science of the mind. The ongoing Tibetan Buddhist engagement with university-based scientific research attests to the trend of claiming Buddhism as a science. For instance, in 2003 Wallace proposed the Shamatha Project with Dr. Clifford Saron, a neuroscientist at the University of California at Davis, as a neuroscientific research project intended to quantitatively measure the 'four immeasurables' namely love, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity (Fraser, 2011). In his comparison of Buddhism and modern science, Wallace argues that the scientific dimension of Buddhism lies in its methodic ways of observing, analyzing, and understanding the causes of sentient sufferings and the happiness free from such causes (Wallace, 2003: 4-5); thus, he sees the similarity between the ways of Buddhist and modern scientific pursuits of causalities of all sorts. With this spirit of joint Buddhist-scientific inquiry, after their formal research activities with 142 volunteer meditators in Boulder, Colorado for six months in 2007, Wallace and Saron yielded a large amount of data and preliminarily concluded that Buddhist meditation could have 'a range of lasting benefits' (Fraser, 2011: 31). Currently Wallace's publications are being translated into Chinese as a part of the global connectivity of Tibetan Buddhism in China.

Tibetan teachers in China do not have the same scientific resources to conduct the same experiments as Wallace and Saron have done; however, their approach to reconstructing Buddhism as a science of the mind equally focuses on causal inquiries into the inner dynamics of sentient beings and the outer phenomena environing and conditioning their lives. Their discursive thoughts often show their distancing of Buddhism from theistic religions with an emphasis on an ethical orientation of the Buddhist teachings on causality toward an unconditional but attainable happiness. Thus what they advocate is that Buddhist understanding of causality has much relevance for solving social and personal problems in modern society. Take Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, for example. Causality in his explanation is understood in both broad and personal senses. In the broad sense, it means one thing leads to the emergence of another thing (Tsultrim Lodro, 2014). In other words, everything is interconnected with observable patterns of causes and conditions. The seed of a flower brings a flower, after the sun sets the night rises, and when the moon shines stars go dim. These relationships are not only causal in nature but also require right conditions to sustain themselves. A seed of flower requires soil, sunlight, water, time, and space before the flower grows out of it. The pattern of causality resembles those of the sun, the moon, and other moving celestial bodies. It exists independently of science and religion. No one, including the Buddha, can alter the law of causality. From the Buddhist perspective, causality thus does not require the intervention of gods and spirits.

In this regard, in the view of these masters Buddhism is not too concerned about the existence of a creator of the world. Precisely because of the nontheistic nature of Buddhism, many scholars think that Buddhism is not a religion since it does not worship a god responsible for all creations on earth. The *Rice Seedling Sutra* (*salistamba-sutra*) says, '[t]he nature of the universe runs its own course whether or not Tathagata emerges in this world' (cited in Tsultrim Lodro, 2014). Thus, the law of the universe is not an invention of the Buddha. It has always existed and will continue to bind this world together. However, Sakyamuni Buddha was able to articulate the nature of causality in various sentient conditions.

On the personal level, causality in the Buddhist teachings is often understood in the sense of morals and ethics. To put it plainly, a kind deed begets a kind reward. In the same manner, a harmful action produces a harmful consequence (Tsultrim Lodro, 2014). The complexity of causality on the personal level is the latent result of one's action. For instance, when a hunter kills a deer for food, its flesh eventually becomes meat going into the stomachs of his family members. On the surface, the causal relationship between the deer and the hunter manifests itself as how the hunting act feeds the hunger of his family. On the moral level, the hunter yields not only the protein for his family, but also a kind of an invisible 'energy' that is stored away in what is known in Buddhist sutras as 'the alaya consciousness' (Tsultrim Lodro, 2014). It is often metaphorized as a storehouse that collects all details of one's acts and their consequences, which are understood as karma in Sanskrit and *las* (ལས) in Tibetan. The karma of the hunter determines when the pain of the dying deer will replay itself to the hunter and what the moral consequence the hunter will receive in one of his next lifetimes, if not in this one. In other word, when it is dormant, this "energy" stays in the alaya consciousness. When it becomes active, it surfaces from the alaya consciousness in material forms and as psychological currents. The hunter will then eventually empathetically feel the pain, agony, and hatred of his dying prey. These manifestations are known as karmic hindrances in the Buddhist teachings.

The conception of causality in Buddhism thus resembles that of modern physics in terms of how a phenomenon forms itself with both implicit and explicit causal forces. The difference is that the Buddhist conception is inherently a moral-spiritual understanding of how an act of the body-mind affects the wellbeing of the actor and everyone around him or her. In many ways, as Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro points out,

> Causality is the most fair and just law. While the conventional law prosecutes the criminal only when he or she is caught, the law of causality records the criminal deeds in the alaya storehouse and the criminal will yield penal consequences whether or not he or she is caught by the conventional legal system (2014).

These karmic consequences often manifest themselves in various forms of hindrance to the actor of the harmful deeds. In turn, the varied hindrances produce varied dissatisfactions and agonies, which the Buddha calls "dukkha" or sufferings.

In the current social scientific study of Buddhist conception of causality, scholars recognize Buddhism as a world religion; however, in the same time, they also highlight the scientific dimension of it. In his research of Buddhism and science, Wallace remarks:

> Returning to the core theme of Buddhist theory and practice—the nature and causal origins of suffering, the possibility of freedom, and the causes that lead to such freedom—we see that Buddhism too is centrally concerned with causality within human experience. In this sense it is a form of naturalism, not transcendentalism. Buddhism, like science, presents itself as a body of systematic knowledge about the natural world, and it posits a wide array of testable hypotheses and theories concerning the nature of the mind and its relation to the physical environment (2003: 8).

Herein, Wallace refers to the Four Noble Truths—the truths of suffering, the sources of suffering, the cessation of suffering together with its source, and the path to such cessation—which have little to do with conventional conception of religion as belief in a god or supernatural beings (2003: 5). Instead, the complex, multiple causal links between volitions, actions, sufferings, and happiness are the primary concerns of a Buddhist practitioner. The moral-spiritual goal of Buddhism bears no ambiguity as it aims at the attainment of happiness free from causes and conditions of any suffering.

The scientific spirit of Buddhism in this regard, is, first of all, its conviction that the universe does not create itself in a random fashion but has its explainable course of becoming. In relation to the sentient worlds, e.g. humans, animals, and plants, Buddhism as a science not only teaches the physics of karma, in terms of which action yields which reaction, but also uncompromisingly sets its unique study of causality as the basis for us to disengage from fatalism, rather than become indulged in it. As the saying goes, 'all sentient beings desire happiness'; the Buddhist methodic teachings on causality are thus intended for the practitioner to develop a clear vision of and a life path toward an unconditional personal happiness and flourishing that is also a positive contribution to the wholesomeness of their society. Thus, Buddhism as a science of the mind is nothing mysterious but a science of peace and happiness based on the moral and the spiritual understandings of causality.

Postscript – Modern Tibetan Buddhists as a community of social interpretation

Tibetan Buddhist teachers are among the leading public intellectuals of Buddhism-science discourse. Modern Tibetan Buddhists include not only those of Tibetan origins but also of Han and other ethnic origins in China. The way Tibetan teachers build an alliance with Han Chinese Buddhist scholars and teachers shows that Tibetan Buddhism's presence in the mainstream of Chinese society is a form of 'modern Buddhism', which, as David McMahan delineates:

> ...is the result of process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, image-making, revitalization, and reform that has been taking place not only in the West but also in Asian countries for over a century. This new form of

> Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and western enthusiasts deeply engaged in creating Buddhist responses to the dominant problems and questions of modernity, such as epistemic uncertainty, religious pluralism, the threat of nihilism, conflicts between science and religion, war, and environmental destruction (2008: 5).

Over the last century, China's modernization has been unprecedented. It affects the lives and social modes of its citizens from all walks of life, including religious practitioners. Since the mid-1990s, Tibetan Buddhism has appeared more and more in Chinese media. *Portrait Magazine* (人物杂志), a state-owned publication that is popularly distributed via bookstores and newspaper vendors, features thirteen Faces of the Year 2013 with the theme 'Nothing but story telling' (Li, 2014: 4-5). Beside its usual categories of science, culture, law, business, art, public arena, and film, this special issue adds Khenpo Sodargye as 'the Religious Face of the Year' (Xu, 2014: 116-121). The signal that the state sends out through this issue has twofold public effect. One is that it shows its preference for Buddhism as a socially harmonizing element and another is its acknowledgement of Tibetan Buddhism as an important social force in the mainstream China. This public signalling by the state parallels with SARA's formal admittance of religion as 'an active social element' in early 2014, as discussed in the beginning of the article.

From the perspective of secularism studies, the Chinese state's acknowledgement of religion's social force is inevitably based on the current growing social presence of different religious traditions. The inherently iconoclastic secularism of the state no longer works with its current goal for social harmony because social stability could not be justifiably built upon the suppression of religion. Although secularisms in China and the West have had divergent paths in the past, they seem to share a similar trend in the current context of the globalization of religion, that is, religious organizations' 'assuming the role of 'communities of interpretation' in the public area of secular societies' (Habermas, 2008: 3). Modern Tibetan Buddhists are actively reinterpreting and reassessing the consequences of secularism and scientism, which, initiated nearly a century ago, have been destructive in nature toward Buddhism and other religious traditions. A century later, the consequences of secularism compel many Buddhist teachers and their followers to be socially engaged and find ways for the continuation of Buddhism in the changing social environment.

The current social engagement of Tibetan Buddhism with Chinese society is an integral part of the renewed humanistic Buddhist movement initiated by the late Dharma Master Taixu in the 1920s for the adaptation of Buddhism to 'the present age' (Wei, 2010: 173). To Tibetan teachers, it is inevitable that the current revitalizations of Tibetan Buddhism are undergoing both physical reconstruction of monasteries and de-stigmatization of Tibetan Buddhism as a form of superstition (Sodargye, 2000: 165). In the meantime, they are also committed to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism to the rest of China and the globalization of it as a world religion.

In these parallel developments of Tibetan Buddhism, the social effect of the Buddhist critiques of modern science and scientism lies not only in reclaiming the social legitimacy of Buddhism, but also in the Buddhist refashioning of Buddhism as an inner science or a science of the mind with the influence of the ongoing Buddhism-science dialogue from the West. From the perspective of current secularism studies, the secularity of Buddhism in China shows a 'this-worldly cause and effect' (Calhoun, 2010: 35) when Buddhism is being represented in modern scientific terms, and yet kept at a distance from the ideology of modern science when Buddhists level their criticism at "scientific ignorance" and "scientific superstition."

Such entanglement of Buddhism with science compels Buddhists to define what modern science is. Khenpo Sodargye states, '[s]cience in my understanding objectively reflects the true nature of all existences' (2011). Similarly, Dorzhi Rinpoche (1998) refers to science as a system of knowledge concerning the physical world. Their understanding of modern science is similar to Edward Wilson's definition of it as the 'organized, systematic enterprise that gathers knowledge about the world and condenses the knowledge into testable laws and principles' (in Wallace, 2003: 7). Thus, Khenpo Sodargye's and Dorzhi Rinpcohe's acknowledgements of modern science's endeavor to study the physical world is apparent. However, they and other Tibetan teachers prefer to expand the generically defined science to the realm of the mind or the human inner world for the purpose of including Buddhism as a science or at least an endeavor with scientific attributes. Their promotion of Buddhism as a science of the mind converges with what Tibetan Buddhist teachers outside Tibet and China have been advocating in the arenas of neuroscience, environmental issues, healing, and peace-building. The difference is that Tibetan teachers in China devote much of their intellectual energy to critique the secularist social condition of religion in China.

Secularization in its varieties has been regarded as a harbinger of "modernization," "progress," and "democracy" across the world. The instrument of secularists in China is scientism as an inherent part of the state ideology, which has been established as a national belief demanding the maximum consensus from the citizenry. This is the highly pronounced social condition of religion in China, as the modern scientific interpretation of the physical world and human life has become a shared worldview among Chinese citizens. It is only in the last three decades that public intellectuals from religious communities, especially Buddhists, have been openly raising awareness of this prevailing scientistic worldview and of social behaviors that have proved detrimental to the civil rights and spiritual wellbeing of religious practitioners.

Tibetan teachers have undoubtedly formed their community around social critiques of scientism and the destructive consequences of the secularism practiced by the Chinese state in the past. Their active critiques in the broader social sense are redefining and subverting the "objectively" conceived modern science as the ultimate knowledge system free from subjective beliefs and perceptions. Their social engagement with the secularized Chinese society shows that the boundary between the secular and the religious is no longer neatly cut but is becoming porous. In Habermas' observation of

secularity in the West, he notices 'a complementary learning process' between the secular and the religious and further emphasizes that 'a complementary learning process is required on the secular side' (2009: 76). When this process occurs in the context of Buddhist revivals in China, it is the Buddhists who are taking initiatives to critique the epistemology and social effects of secularism, as shown in Tibetan teachers' efforts to trace the cultural and epistemological origins of modern science and to reinterpret it as a human science with a spiritual property for their Buddhist use (Dorzhi, 2013: 74). Thus, on one hand they reject scientism, and, on the other hand, they reconstruct Buddhism as a science of its own and an integral part of the global trend of Buddhist spirituality expressed in scientific terms.

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