




Symposium: Lived Karma

Karma as a Means of Wartime Political Mobilization: A Reading of Chinese Buddhists' Response to the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945

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The concept of karma is of great significance for scholars of modern China seeking to comprehend the impact of Buddhism on the Second Sino-Japanese War. This paper explores the sociopolitical function of karma within China's wartime society and its profound implications for Nationalist politics. It examines how karma was articulated by wartime Chinese Buddhists as a means of Nationalist mobilization for China's war effort. Moreover, this paper situates the discourse on karma within the framework of modern nationalism by comparing the sociopolitical utilization of karma by Chinese and Japanese Buddhists during the war. As such, it reveals that the divergent interpretations of karma by Buddhists in the two nation-states had enduring and far-reaching consequences on their respective societies.

Keywords: karma; political mobilization; Wartime Chinese Buddhism; Second Sino-Japanese War

Karma is an extremely important concept for understanding the influence of Buddhism in the Second Sino-Japanese War, yet it is largely overlooked by scholars of modern China. The purpose of this short essay is not to probe into the details of how karma, as an ethical notion, was reinterpreted by various influential Chinese Buddhists over the course of the war with Japan but to concentrate on how karma played a socio-political role in China's wartime society with significant implications for the development of Nationalist politics. This section examines how karma first emerged in the Buddhist public discourse of the war and gradually occupied the attention of the Nationalist wartime mobilization effort. Moreover, it seeks to explore the socio-political dimension of the wartime karma discussion, looking at its relationship with modern nationalism. Finally, this article underscores the ways in which karma, as articulated by the Buddhist elite in both China and Japan in the war years, had a profound and lasting impact on their respective societies.

Before the outbreak of full-scale war, public discourse on karma which addressed Japanese aggression can be seen as a reflection on how Buddhists in China were trying to make sense of the conflict in their own terms. Two months after the Manchurian Incident in 1931, the Nationalist politician Dai Jitao 戴季陶, addressed the public assembly, declaring that, “the danger of state affairs and the severity of natural disasters were the result of sins in karma (罪業 *zuiye*) that the fellow countrymen had collectively accumulated” (Dai 1967: 116). Dai did not quote any Buddhist sutras or consult a particular school of thought to elaborate what exactly he meant by claiming wartime atrocities were the upshot of sins in karma. Of course, as a devoted Buddhist, Dai was by no means suggesting that the brutalities of Japan's sudden incursion were deserved. In the face of unprecedented attacks from the Kwantung Army, as well as the complicated geopolitical situation in Manchuria in the early 1930s, Dai's use of karma could be best interpreted as an attempt by the Buddhists at the time to understand the sufferings and injustice the war had brought about, and the afflictions people were experiencing.



Karma remained a focal point of Chinese Buddhist discussion of the crisis as the war persisted. A recurring theme throughout Buddhist debates of Japanese aggression in the late 1930s and early 1940s was the notion of “collective karma” (共業 *gongye*). Commenting on the onset of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937, the Sichuan-based monastic leader, Dharma Master Nenghai 能海, delivered the following remark in a public sermon: “To wish for world peace, everyone has to quell the three poisons (greed, hatred, and ignorance), striving for the transforming of one’s heart to turn the tide of collective karma.¹ Meanwhile, asking for the protection of Buddha so as to eliminate great calamity” (Fohuaxinwen 佛化新聞 3 April 1939: 69). At the core of Nenghai’s statement is the emphasis on “collective karma.” Such an understanding of the war through karmic acts struck a sympathetic chord among Chinese Buddhists. In Manchuria, Japanese-occupied Shanghai, as well as other parts of Nationalist “Free China,” monastic leaders and lay Buddhist elites caught up in the war seemingly all shared the view that collective karma was the main cause of the wartime national crisis (Pittman 2001: 209–11; Xue 2005: 67–99, 114–17; Brooks 2010: 41–42; Scott 2011: 71–73; Yan 2020: 65–68).

Nenghai’s call was soon echoed by other monastics and lay Buddhist elites who had also retreated to Sichuan at the time. In 1939, China’s wartime Buddhist newspaper, the *Buddhization News* (佛化新聞 *fohuaxinwen*) issued an editorial titled, “Eliminating Collective Karma through Collective Efforts” (共業共息 *gongyegongxi*), putting forth a comprehensive discussion on the subject. The article began with a discussion of how collective karma and particularizing karma (別業 *bieye*) should be understood by means of collective action and personal action, respectively. While disapproving of personal action as incomplete and insufficient, this passage called on people to collectively participate in mass Dharma assemblies, praying and making vows to avert disasters. It went further, arguing that,

Today, the Dharma Assembly for Protecting the Nation and Quelling Disasters (護國息災法會 *huguoxizai fahui*) is assembling everyone’s strength to reverse the tide of our collective karma. We wish all living creatures on earth, all citizens, no matter what your background is, and no matter what your gender is, to make great effort to participate, to gain merit, and to prevent the decline collectively (Fohuaxinwen 佛化新聞 3 April 1939: 6).

The exhortation for turning the tide of karma through collective action, as articulated most thoroughly by the Chinese Buddhists in wartime Sichuan, was a clear reflection that the ethical concept of karma, as manifested primarily through collective faith and practice, was deemed essential to lifting China out of its wartime predicament. Moreover, in light of the power of karmic retribution, Chinese Buddhists believed that accumulated merits, which were gained from the mass assembly and conferred upon the nation-state, could eventually prevent calamity, thereby saving the nation and the people from crisis.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that the keen proposal of Chinese Buddhists in 1939 was a product of Nationalist wartime mobilization efforts.² During the war, Buddhists became actively involved in wartime Nationalist politics. Influential monastics such as Taixu 太虛, along with the Chinese Buddhist Association (中國佛教會 *zhongguofojiaohui*) he represented, formed a political alliance with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government in Chongqing, facilitating the wartime state’s incorporation of Tibet into the Chinese nation-state (Tuttle 2005; Ji 2015: 755). Not only were Chinese Buddhist monks mobilized to take part in military training and later fight against the Japanese troops on the battlefield in the name of “just war” (Xue 2005), but monastics and lay Buddhists alike also played a critical role in the management of wartime crisis

¹ The Chinese term employed by Master Nenghai and other Chinese Buddhists during the wartime period is 挽回共業 (*wanhui gongye*). The English translation is meant to encapsulate a powerful metaphor that emphasizes the fate of the Chinese modern nation-state as a tide, subject to alteration by the actions of those within its current. Such a translation reflects a collective Buddhist consciousness that envisions the nation’s path as a modifiable force, capable of being redirected through collective effort and shared karma. I’m grateful for Jessica Zu’s insights on the translation of this term.

² Among many examples, most relevant and recent are van de Ven (2003, 2017), Federica (2012), Mitter (2013), Barnes (2018), and Vu (2021).

conditions, carrying out a series of Buddhist relief projects in response to the unprecedented crisis (Yan 2020). More importantly, when Chiang Kai-shek launched the National Spiritual Mobilization Campaign (國民精神總動員 *guomin jinshenzongdongyuan*) in 1939, arguing that in the crucible of wartime it was necessary for the Chinese people to undergo a cultivated spiritual renewal to bring about enlightened national renewal, many Buddhists in Sichuan, including masters Taixu and Nenghai, had already begun laying out their own version of Buddhist transformative projects. It was in this context that the idea of reversing collective karma through collective devotion was developed. Indeed, in the eyes of Chinese Buddhists, saving national karma was seen as a key underpinning of China's war effort. It is evident that many of the Buddhist activities initiated during the war, such as organizing of mass Dharma assemblies, fundraising, collecting winter clothes, and donating aircraft, as well as providing emergency bombing relief, were built around this central notion of modifying the karmic flow through collective efforts (Xue 2005; Wu 2016: 129–97; Yan 2020).

In addition to the Nationalists' substantial wartime mobilization, the pervasion of modern nationalism was clearly reflected in the public discourse on karma among Chinese Buddhists, and in social engagements more broadly. As evident in the Buddhist assemblies that convened in the name of "the nation," it was virtually impossible for Chinese Buddhists to work for society without serving the modern nation-state during the war, let alone address the preeminent importance of national affiliation in their understanding of karma. One might argue that the idea of protecting the state had long been established in Chinese Buddhist tradition, and that their continuing support for the wartime Nationalist government was no exception. The question is to what extent the modern concept of "nation" Chinese Buddhists took on during the war years was distinguished from that of the "state" they sought to protect in the past. It seems rather straightforward that the shift occurred in response to the global context where China faced an existential threat posed by Japanese aggression (Sharf 1994: 46–47).

The pressing issue, however, is to understand how karma was comprehended when people considered the war. Examining the sociopolitical role that karma played in China and Japan more broadly reveals that karma was perceived differently in the two nation-states. The discussion of karma by wartime Chinese Buddhists demonstrates how their growing interactions with the Nationalist state contingently pushed them into the net of wartime politics of loyalty. The initial response for many in China, who navigated wartime conditions by rallying people to participate in Buddhist practices to reverse karma, was crafted as a unified, collective, and cohesive approach to fighting against Japanese aggression on the spiritual level. Moreover, the means for their debate of collective karma was constructed in the context of wartime mobilization, where community initiatives were swept up into service for the Chinese nation-state.

In contrast, the discussion of karma among wartime Buddhists in Japan appeared to be very much confined to the realm of the ethical performance of the individual, but hardly, if at all, engaged with the societal level (Victoria 2007). As Sueki Fumihiko notes, wartime Japanese Buddhists failed to establish new ethical principles in place of nationalist morality, which left them without a foundation to resist their nation's aggression (Sueki 2007; Sueki 2010). Consequently, karma was employed by Japanese Buddhists in a "reactionary" way (Victoria 2007: 2–4), justifying the violent actions of Japanese soldiers. In the words of Japanese wartime Buddhist Tomomatsu Entai 友松円諦, as cited by Brian Victoria, "no one was to blame nor was anyone in the wrong" (Victoria 2007: 11–12). Concerning the intensive collaboration between the Japanese Buddhist establishment with Japan's state-led militarism in the first half the twentieth century,³ such discourse on karma, which mingled with the instillment of nationalist sentiment among Japanese Buddhists, to a certain extent further contributed to Japan's militaristic expansion. Furthermore, as Victoria suggests, the

³ For in-depth discussion on the subject, see Victoria (1997, 2003), Sharf (1993), Ives (2001, 2009), Sueki (2007), and most recently, Breen, Sueki and Yamada (2022).

difficulties that the Japanese faced in coming to terms with Japan's war responsibility after the Second World War might have been partially derived from the Japanese wartime karma debate (Victoria 2007: 12). Put simply, by emphasizing the ethical conduct of the individual, the wartime Japanese Buddhist discourse on karma appears to be closely intertwined with the spiritual training of Japanese military personnel. It seems that karma, in a sense, evolved into a potent means for fostering morale among Japanese troops, effectively serving the objectives of the Japanese war machine.

During the years of the Second Sino-Japanese War, it may seem as if the debate surrounding the divergent interpretation of concepts of karma within the framework of each nation-state somewhat correlates with its distinct social trajectories—that of channeling collective endeavors to avert national crises by the Chinese and that of concentrating on the problems of the personal mind and action by the Japanese. The consequences are, seemingly, evident on two fronts. On the first, karma became a means for wartime Chinese Buddhists and the state to reach a crucial juncture in the building of China's nation-state. On the second, karma was evoked, justified, and embroiled in service of the ideals of Japanese ultra-nationalism and expansionist militarism. At the same time, it should also be noted, although Chinese Buddhists had adopted some concepts of modern nationalism in their wartime thinking and discussion on karma, they nonetheless retained a strong Buddhist identity without being completely subject to China's modern state rule. While it may seem that wartime Chinese Buddhists, by conceptualizing themselves as members of national communities, joined their karmic imagination with the imagined Nationalist nation-state, I would argue that such a karmic *imaginaire* seemed to be reminiscent of what Master Yinguang 印光 and his mass Pureland movement had advocated in the 1920s (Kiely 2017: 30–77), which could be read as very much Buddhist in nature and transcended the notion of the nation-state. Even today, when Buddhists in China are confronted with constant changes in sociopolitical events, their advocacy of turning the tide of karma through collective Buddhist practice and ritual might be read as, in part, allowing people to imagine being part of a collective in the realm of the imagined Chinese nation, but more importantly, in the realm of Buddhahood.

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