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*The Cultural Practices of Modern  
Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma*

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# A Review of *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma*

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*The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma*. By Francesca Tarocco. London: Routledge, 2008, 208 pages, ISBN: 978-0415375030 (hardcover), US \$160.00.

Francesca Tarocco's *The Cultural Practices of Chinese Modernity* is a study of Buddhist print and musical culture in China in the Republican period (1911-1949). It attempts to provide a much needed corrective to imbalances in the treatment of modern Chinese Buddhism by both historians of China and scholars of Buddhism. The former often take elites of the Republican period to be interested only in nationalism and revolution and assume that Buddhism, having nothing to add to these discourses, was simply stagnant. Against such views, Tarocco argues that Buddhism was in fact more resilient than these scholars assume and that elites were interested in an array of "Buddhist cultural practices" in addition to nation and revolution.

Scholars of modern Buddhism, of course, are not so inclined to view their subject as stagnant, yet Buddhist scholarship too has its imbalances. Such scholars have been preoccupied with Weberian categories such as "rationalism" and "inner-worldly asceticism" and such descendants as "Protestant Buddhism," yet, Tarocco asks, "even if these elements exist in modern Buddhism, are they really its main constituent

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parts?” (11) Drawing on Chakrabarty, she notes that modernity is not encountered simply as disembodied ideas but as “material manifestations” in daily life (15). Tarocco’s work thus seeks to root historical figures firmly in their socio-cultural and historical context by examining them less as thinkers than as “cultural activists” engaged in novel cultural practices and creating cultural artifacts. By thus orienting her inquiry she attempt to cut through a host of dichotomies that have at times entangled studies of modern Buddhism—modern vs. traditional, revival vs. decline, monastic vs. lay—and reveal continuities with tradition as well as discontinuities. Rather than a “cohesive movement” with a clearly defined program and membership, Tarocco invites us to see modern Buddhism in China as “a more or less loose collection of ideas” (16).

Tarocco’s treatment of her material is divided into two main parts—“The Cultural Practices of Buddhist Modernity” and “The Sound of Modern Buddhism”—each of which is divided into several very brief chapters. In these chapters Tarocco takes the reader on a journey through the world of Buddhist cultural production. The first sections of part one serve to set the stage, providing a glimpse of Buddhism’s place in the urban cultural milieu. Far from irrelevant, Buddhism was an important part of the cultural scene even in Shanghai, the archetypal modern Chinese city. Temples, almost one hundred fifty of them built in the Republic, could be found throughout the city and Buddhist-inspired vegetarian restaurants were important gathering places for elites and intellectuals.

Tarocco then turns to the publication of Buddhist scriptures, focusing primarily on Yang Wenhui. Yang is often called the father of the modern Buddhist revival for his role in retrieving lost scriptures and commentaries from Japan, which Tarocco attributes to a distinctly modern “philological anxiety.” Publishing was not limited to reprints of an-

cient texts. With the birth of the modern publishing industry, centered in Shanghai, there was a constant demand for new books by contemporary writers from commercial as well as Buddhist publishers. Tarocco sheds new light on familiar figures by pointing out the way this made monks such as Taixu 太虛 and Yinguang 印光 into “media personalities” (59). The publication of Yinguang’s collected works, for instance, played a key role in establishing him as the revered figure he is today. Books also provided a venue for the “casual drawings” (*manhua* 漫畫) of Feng Zikai 豐子愷, an associate of Hongyi 弘一 who treated Buddhist themes such as “not killing” in a style that mixed traditional methods with novel forms including caricature.

Finally, Tarocco turns to the Buddhist periodical press. The rise of the periodical press played a crucial role in giving voice to minorities, including Buddhists. The period saw a proliferation of such magazines and journals, over one hundred and fifty of them over the course of the Republic. The longest lived and most important of them was *Haichaoyin* 海潮音, a journal whose title, Tarocco notes, alludes both to the new “thought tide” (*sichao* 思潮) flooding over China, but also traditional images of the mind as water stirred by waves. Such periodicals provided a platform for Buddhists to address the issues of the day, central among them nationalism, and did so not only through words but also through pictures.

Part Two takes a rather more focused look at Buddhist song. In particular it casts its eye on the compositions of Hongyi and others in his circle. Before he was the monk Hongyi, the lay intellectual Li Shutong 李叔同 was a widely admired literary and artistic figure who had been trained in Japan and taught at one of China’s premier institutions for art education. Tarocco calls attention to the great cultural importance that music held in this period. In Japan, where Hongyi studied, song was considered an essential medium of education through which to instill moral-

ity and nationalistic feeling into students. In China, song was becoming both cosmopolitan and pervasive as Western forms of music were broadcast through the new mass media. Song was particularly important to Christian missionaries who hoped to win souls by developing a Chinese hymnody. Tarocco notes that this belief in music's ability to mold character and mobilize the masses was distinctly modern, but also had powerful resonances with classical notions of its role in establishing social harmony.

It was in this context that Hongyi and his friend and follower Liu Zhiping 劉質平 composed songs such as the *Song of the Three Jewels* (*Sanbao ge* 三寶歌) and *The Collection of Songs of Clarity and Coolness* (*Qingliang geji* 清涼歌集) to appeal to the new class of educated urbanites. Such songs, which emphasized novelty and individual authorship, stood in contrast to the traditional liturgy, which was anonymous and collectively owned. "They emerged in concomitance with processes of cultural and artistic professionalization, when modern technologies of sound dissemination such as radio and gramophone recordings were taking China... by storm" (128). Entertaining, memorable, and easy to reproduce due to their brevity, they fit the requirements of the emerging music industry. They were delivered via radio and other mass media at the time and continue to be created and disseminated in similar ways today by contemporary organizations such as Foguangshan 佛光山 in Taiwan.

*The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism* is a broad-ranging and interesting tour that, at its best, provides vivid glimpses into a lively cultural world. It is filled with evocative vignettes and fascinating anecdotes, drawn from an admirably wide variety of sources—the Buddhist and secular press, missionary reports and memoirs. The effect is to create a vivid sense of the Republican-era Buddhist world as one of novelty, possibility, and endless activity. Tarocco captures, in other words, one of the major reasons why an increasing number of scholars are in-

terested in this period. And in this sense it succeeds in providing a corrective to the intellectual history approaches that have largely dominated the field.

Missing, however, is the sort of sustained analysis that would have offered greater insight into the meaning of the practices that Tarocco examines. The book covers a large number of topics but does not dwell on them and raises important issues but does not pursue them. Tarocco states, for instance, that “religious periodicals served as a central means through which new forms of religious self-definition, including a new approach to religious history, were being tested, often across religious lines.... Through a selective appropriation of modern technologies, Buddhist cultural activists coherently reconfigured traditional modes of communication and representation” (44). The succeeding pages, however, simply survey a series of events and developments, many of which are already familiar to scholars in the field, without attempting to flesh out their significance. How precisely did religious periodicals serve as means of self-definition? What sorts of strategies were employed? How did the new media influence the message?

The second half, which focuses more tightly on music, is significantly better in this regard, but still leaves lingering questions. Tarocco does a good job of contextualizing the production of Buddhist song, making clear the significance of a form of cultural endeavor that would be ignored by more common approaches. Yet few pages are devoted to the actual songs themselves and only two examples are discussed. Tarocco argues that these songs express traditional notions in a new Western-derived idiom, but again one cannot help but wonder how the medium affects the message. Greater analysis and interpretation in this area would have been valuable since relatively few scholars have the background in music that Tarocco appears to have.

Another issue is the book's use of the concept of "modernity," a category both unavoidable in studies of Buddhism in the modern period and fraught with difficulty. A great number of different developments in Buddhism since the nineteenth century have been proposed as distinctly modern by previous scholars. In the introduction she provides an admirable survey of several of these, locating her project within the developing field, but Tarocco never proposes an explicit definition of her own. Such a definition, perhaps one that focused in on modernity as it pertains to print culture and music, might have brought her discussion of the material into sharper analytical focus.

In conclusion, despite the questions raised above, *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism* nevertheless makes progress in righting the imbalances it identifies. It demonstrates the importance of "modern Buddhist cultural practices" to a wide variety of actors—monk and lay, "reformer" and "conservative," committed Buddhist and ostensibly secular intellectual. Most importantly it points toward the rich possibilities that "cultural practices" hold as a lens through which to investigate modern Buddhism, possibilities that will hopefully inspire many future scholars. For specialists in modern Buddhism, the book will be of interest chiefly for its methodological approach and for its consideration of the much neglected topic of Buddhist music. For graduate students and undergrads, the book could provide a quick introduction to the cultural world of Chinese Buddhism in the Republic and a heady taste of its vitality.