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*Esoteric Buddhism in China:  
Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions, 1912–1949*

Reviewed by Eben Yonnetti

University of Virginia

[emy4rg@virginia.edu](mailto:emy4rg@virginia.edu)

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*A Review of Esoteric Buddhism in China:  
Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions,  
1912–1949*

Eben Yonnetti<sup>1</sup>

*Esoteric Buddhism in China: Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions, 1912–1949.* By Wei Wu. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024, xiv + 312 pages, ISBN 9780231200691 (paperback), \$35.00; ISBN 9780231200684 (hardcover); ISBN 9780231553742 (e-book).

In *Esoteric Buddhism in China*, Wei Wu presents a meticulously researched and engaging study of the interpretation, adaptation, and adoption of Japanese and Tibetan esoteric Buddhist traditions in China during the Republican Era (1912–1949). In this time of immense social change and rapid modernization, Wu tracks the efforts of a number of Chinese Buddhist teachers and lay leaders who looked to the esoteric traditions of Japan and Tibet as a source of rejuvenation. Drawing on Ann Swidler (1986, 2013) and Robert Ford Campany’s (2012) work on cultural repertoires, Wu emphasizes the key figures and institutions responsible for importing these traditions and the strategic transmutations that they made to adapt esoteric doctrines, practices, and institutional forms to the Chinese Buddhist world. Wu argues that early efforts to translate and promulgate esoteric traditions within China by prominent leaders such as Taixu (太虛 1890–1947) and the Ninth Panchen Lama Thubten Chökyi Nyima (Tib. *pan chen bla ma thub bstan chos kyi nyi ma* 1883–1937), as well as other teachers such as Lama Bai Puren (百

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<sup>1</sup> University of Virginia. Email: emy4rg@virginia.edu.

普仁 1870–1927), Dayong (大勇 1893–1929), Chisong (持松 1894–1972), Fazun (法尊 1902–1980), and Nenghai (能海 1886–1967), did not occur via an exact replication of Japanese and Tibetan esoteric systems of knowledge and practice. Rather, their efforts incited heated debates and engendered creative articulations of the validity and efficacy of esoteric practices and doctrines within a Chinese Buddhist milieu.

In Chapter one, Wu examines Chinese Buddhist leaders' efforts in the 1910s and 1920s to engage with and study esoteric Buddhism. Early teachers looked especially to Japan, inspired by Taixu's conviction that Japanese esoteric Buddhism continued Tang dynasty Chinese esoteric traditions and could be leveraged as part of a broader project to revive Chinese Buddhism. As a result, several Buddhist leaders, like Dayong, Chisong, and Wang Hongyuan (王弘願 1876–1937), went to study in Japan in order to become empowered as esoteric teachers themselves. By the mid-1920s, however, Wu argues that a burgeoning interest in Tibetan traditions started to overtake interest in Japanese esoteric Buddhism. This was kindled, in part, by the burgeoning popularity of large-scale public rituals being held in Chinese cities by Tibetan teachers as well as the appearance of several translations that revealed the size of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. This shift towards Tibetan esoteric traditions culminated in the founding of the Tibetan College (西藏學院) in Beijing in 1924 and the departure of twenty-three of its students to study in Tibet in 1925.

Chapter two focuses on how various groups, including political leaders, warlords, lay Buddhist communities, Chinese Buddhist monastics, and intellectuals viewed the Tibetan Buddhist teachers who traveled across China in the 1920s and 1930s. Wu's narrative creates a rich tapestry of voices, drawing primarily upon testimonies and stories from major Buddhist periodicals like the *Voice of the Sea Tide* (*haichao yin* 海潮音) and news publications like *Shenbao* (申報) and *Shishi xinbao* (時事新報). She argues that the large public rituals that Tibetan Buddhist teachers were invited to enact to promote peace, prosperity, and good fortune for the nation (such as the Kālacakra initiations bestowed by the Ninth Panchen

Lama and the Golden Light Dharma Ceremonies 金光明法會 led by Lama Bai Puren) became central sites for contesting the validity of esoteric Buddhism as well as negotiating responses to anti-superstition campaigns.

Wu makes some of her greatest contributions in Chapter three wherein she explores the diverse ways that Chinese Buddhist laity engaged with esoteric Buddhism and contributed to its early dissemination. She highlights the significant role lay elites, such as Hu Zihu (胡子笏), played in institution-building through their founding of urban esoteric Buddhist societies. These communities, Wu argues, were essential to the spread of esoteric Buddhism in China, providing support for translations and publications, inviting teachers, organizing rituals, and even sponsoring the extended studies of the trailblazing generation of Chinese esoteric teachers. Wu also highlights the space that esoteric Buddhist traditions created for some women and lay men to become religious leaders, bypassing the long-standing dominance of ordained men in Chinese Buddhist communities.

This chapter also includes a fascinating discussion of the contributions lay translators made to the dissemination of esoteric Buddhism in the 1930s and 1940s. Given that the majority of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist teachers who traveled across China in this period did not preach or offer detailed explanations in Chinese, Wu describes how there was a great demand for translations of esoteric liturgical materials. This interest led to a flurry of Chinese translations of ritual texts, many of which were done by lay translators such as Sun Jingfeng (孫景風). As a result, Wu astutely points to the significant influence that lay translators exerted over the dissemination of esoteric Buddhist practices in China in the period before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) through the choices they made about which materials to translate and their interpretations of these texts.

In the fourth chapter of *Esoteric Buddhism in China*, Wu explores debates that emerged as Chinese Buddhists assessed esoteric Buddhist doctrines and doxographic systems. Wu explores several critical points of contention, including claims made in Japanese Shingon Buddhism

regarding the supremacy of esoteric over exoteric teachings and the capacity to attain Buddhahood within this lifetime. She also explores debates within Chinese Buddhist circles regarding Tibetan traditions of recognizing reincarnate teachers, consuming meat, and incorporating what would normally be considered transgressive behaviors for monastics into Buddhist rituals. The variety of perspectives around these issues that Wu presents in this chapter offers some of the clearest illustrations of her overall argument in the book that the transmission of esoteric traditions into China involved multiple voices offering competing assessments of the meaning of esoteric doctrines and practices for a primarily Chinese Buddhist audience.

Finally, in Chapters five and six, Wu details the ways that Tibetan Buddhist philosophical and scholastic traditions were introduced to and gained a foothold in a broader Chinese Buddhist landscape. She follows closely Nenghai's efforts to translate Tibetan *lamrim* or stages of the path literature into Chinese and build a network of Gelug Buddhist institutions in China. To do so, Wu draws upon a rich trove of sources, including recent collections of Republican-era Buddhist periodicals, unpublished manuscripts, transcriptions of teachings, lecture notes, and interviews with Nenghai's disciples and dharma heirs. These are some of the most focused chapters in the book, providing a nuanced discussion of how Nenghai's approach to transmitting Buddhism evolved over his lifetime and how he ultimately used *lamrim* as a framework to integrate doctrinal study with practice. Furthermore, Wu highlights how Nenghai sought to synthesize Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, thereby repairing the "perceived weakness" of the former with "Tibetan Buddhist strength" (167). For Nenghai, Tibetan Buddhism offered Chinese monastics a particularly robust system of scholastic study and training in the Buddhist Vinaya. In this way, Wu appears to agree with Tuttle (2005) and Bianchi's (2009) earlier assessments of Nenghai as being primarily interested in mining Tibetan Buddhism for texts, practices, and institutional structures that could enhance Chinese Buddhism.

There are but a few weaknesses to be found amidst Wu's strong arguments and overall careful consideration of a breadth of sources. Readers coming from a Tibetological background may be puzzled by several of Wu's translation choices, such as repeatedly using the term "consecration" rather than "empowerment" to translate *wangkur* (Tib. *dbang bskur*) / *guan ding* (灌頂) and using "rising stage" (165) instead of "generation stage" for *kyerim* (Tib. *bskyed rim*) / *shengqi cidi* (生起次第). Furthermore, some of Wu's discussions could be further strengthened by providing additional details. For example, specifying the texts that initiates at Nenghai's Jinci Monastery (近慈寺) used to study Buddhist discipline and doctrine or which liturgies lay translators made available in Chinese and to which communities they disseminated these texts would have strengthened Wu's discussions of Nenghai establishing Gelug institutions in China or the influence that lay translators had on the transmission of esoteric traditions.

Overall, Wu's *Esoteric Buddhism in China* is an excellent work that greatly illuminates the specific circumstances and agents involved with the cross-cultural movement and contested interpretation of esoteric Buddhism in China during the early twentieth century. As Wu rightly notes in her conclusion, the central figures she discusses as introducing esoteric Buddhism to China during the Republican Era laid much of the groundwork for the subsequent spread of Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese in the People's Republic of China (PRC) after the Cultural Revolution. Further, the debates that Wu carefully considers in this work around esoteric Buddhist doctrines, practices, and traditions remain salient today as Tibetan Buddhism continues to be transmitted and contested within culturally Chinese societies in the PRC, Taiwan, Singapore, and beyond. As such, this volume will be of immense value to anyone interested in modern Chinese Buddhism, the history of esoteric Buddhism in East Asia, or Sino-Tibetan religious exchange. Furthermore, those interested in broader processes of cross-cultural religious transmission will also find much value in this important work.

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