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Buddhism, War, and Nationalism:
Chinese Monks in the Struggle against
Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945

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Review of *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945*

Brooks Jessup*

Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945. By Xue Yu. New York: Routledge, 2005, xiii + 278 pages, ISBN 0415975115, US \$85.00 (cloth).

The late Holmes Welch would be pleased to see that Chinese Buddhism in the Republican Era (1912-1949) is finally beginning to receive due attention among scholars in the West, even if it is a full four decades after he painstakingly laid the groundwork for this field of study with his pioneering works, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (1968) and *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950* (1967). Indeed, while he questioned the existence of a true Buddhist “revival” and criticized the direction in which modernizing reforms were leading Buddhism, Welch’s work pointed to the significance and fertility of this field for both Chinese Buddhist studies and Republican Chinese history. In mainland China and Taiwan, under the influence of religious revival starting in the 1980s, Chinese scholarship has made major contributions to the study of Buddhism in the Republican era both in terms of research and the collection and publication of valuable primary sources. However, it is only now that we are finally be-

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ginning to witness an extensive exploration of this field in English-language scholarship, through recent publications by scholars such as Francesca Tarocco, Raoul Birnbaum, Don Pittman, Gray Tuttle and Jan Kiely, as well as at least half a dozen doctoral dissertations currently in preparation at major research institutions across the United States.

Appearing at the beginning stages of this surge of scholarship on Buddhism in Republican-era China, Xue Yu's *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945* is an important attempt to connect developments within the Buddhist community to some of the central themes in Republican Chinese history. The book's main thesis is that during the Anti-Japanese War (i.e. the Chinese struggle to resist Japanese invasion during the Second World War from 1937 to 1945) the pressures of rampant nationalism impelled Chinese monks to knowingly violate the ethical and disciplinary codes of Buddhism in order to participate in the war effort. In other words, the mobilization of society for modern warfare brought loyalty to the nation into conflict with loyalty to religion, and successfully elevated the former over the latter in the Chinese Buddhist community.

Chapter one covers the modern Buddhist reform movement in early twentieth-century China leading up to the declaration of war in 1937, ground that will be familiar to readers of Welch. Xue Yu offers a distinctive interpretation of this movement as a Buddhist "awakening" that paralleled broader contemporaneous efforts to awaken the Chinese nation to the threats of imperialism and the exigencies of modernization (16). The chapter highlights two aspects of the Buddhist awakening in particular. First, the movement established institutions of modern monastic education that produced a coterie of reform-minded "young monks" eager to integrate Buddhism into contemporary social and political life (23-28). These young monks would later lead the way to Buddhist participation in the war effort. Second, national mobilization of the

Buddhist community was driven by a sustained effort to resist state appropriation of Buddhist temple property for public and military use (28-36). Xue Yu takes this as evidence that, prior to the war, the relationship between the Nationalist state and Buddhist institutions was characterized predominantly by persecution on one side and opposition on the other (36, 210). Such opposition indicates that nationalist sentiment was not yet strong enough among Buddhists for them to willingly sacrifice the material resources of their religion for the sake of the nation (41).

However, as early as the months leading up to the Japanese invasion of the Chinese interior in 1937, Buddhist monks were suddenly prepared to abandon their opposition to state expropriation, and even sacrifice their lives and compromise their religious principles for the national cause. Chapters two and three describe the propagandistic efforts of young monks to galvanize the monastic community for national defense. They argued that the vitality of Buddhist institutions depended on the integrity of the nation, and it was thus the duty of monks, both as national citizens and as religious adherents, to protect it (51-64). However, participation in the war stood in apparent contradiction to the Buddhist disciplinary code, according to which all monks were sworn to uphold the precept of non-killing. Therefore, the young monks advocated either temporarily renouncing their vows for the duration of the war or, more commonly, adopting a flexible interpretation of the precept based on the concept of “compassionate killing.” According to this concept, the compassionate spirit of non-killing would not be violated if a life was taken for the purpose of saving a greater number of lives (45-51). However, Xue Yu argues that such justifications were based on a mere handful of unrepresentative scriptural quotations. As the monks were certainly aware, the overwhelming majority of the Buddhist canon clearly advocates strict adherence to the doctrine of non-violence and the precept of non-killing. Xue Yu therefore concludes that the Chinese Buddhist monks who justified participation in the war were consciously distorting

the Buddhist tradition and sacrificing its ethical and disciplinary principles for the national cause (51, 198-203).

Although the central thesis of the book is articulated primarily in chapter two, its empirical heart is to be found in chapters four and five, where Xue Yu recounts the various ways that Chinese Buddhist monks actually participated in the war both on the side of resistance and under occupation. Monastic participation in the resistance began with the state-prompted establishment of military training programs for monks on temple grounds during the months leading up to the war. Many of the training programs did not lead to regular military service but were rather used to form “sangha rescue teams” (*sengqie jihudui*) that administered to the wounded and even occasionally won fame for their heroism (105-112). More violent forms of participation in the war were exemplified by the communist monk Juzan (1908-1984) who organized young monks in Hunan into a guerilla force that spread propaganda and attacked the Japanese. Buddhist monks also contributed to the resistance by making donations to the military (including a pair of “Buddhist airplanes”) and by holding large public ceremonies to pray for the nation (113-118). In occupied areas, Japanese propaganda claimed that Buddhism had been persecuted by the Nationalists, but would receive better treatment under the newly established puppet regimes. These regimes promoted the collaboration of Chinese Buddhists under the banner of cultural exchange, particularly by encouraging them to join Japanese-controlled organizations such as the Buddhist Common Purpose Society (*Fojiao tongyuanhui*) founded in Beijing (160-168). Among those Chinese monks who refused to collaborate, some simply retreated from the public eye while others risked reprisal by organizing relief for Chinese war victims (170-174). Xue Yu concludes that both in the resistance and under occupation Buddhism became politicized and Buddhist participation in the war consisted of similar types of activities, though after the war they were labeled differently as heroic or traitorous.

Chapter six, an epilogue on the fate of Buddhism in the years following Japanese surrender in 1945, focuses on the famous reform leader, Taixu (1890-1947). The chapter brings to the surface an important theme that runs throughout the book, namely the relationship between the war and the modern Buddhist reform movement. Xue Yu offers a number of fresh insights in this respect. First, he emphasizes that although it is true that the war destroyed numerous Buddhist temples and monuments, it did not in fact cut off the reform movement. On the contrary, wartime mobilization and politicization of the Buddhist community spread the reformist spirit of integration with society and politics to a wider circle of monks than had been possible previously. Second, the participation of monks in the war improved their reputation in society and won greater support from officials by demonstrating the usefulness of Buddhism to the nation. After the war, Taixu and others attempted to leverage this enhanced reputation to further their designs for Buddhist reform. Finally, the book suggests that the reform movement had the potential for moving in ethically dubious directions that conflicted with core Buddhist values. After all, it was the reforms of the 1920s and 1930s that prepared the ground for the ascendancy of nationalism among Chinese Buddhist monks and their justifications for participation in the war.

As the first attempt in English to comprehend the impact of the Anti-Japanese War on the Chinese Buddhist community, *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism* is required reading for researchers of modern Chinese Buddhism and will no doubt offer a stimulating comparison for scholars working on Buddhism and politics and violence in other areas of the world. However, although the book's subject and layout are conceived with a commendable concern for history, there is little actual engagement with previous historical scholarship on Republican China. For example, chapter one's portrayal of the relationship between Buddhism, nationalism and the state could have benefited by incorporating the work of Prasenjit Duara and Rebecca Nedostup, who have shown that far from merely

being a target of persecution, institutional Buddhism became the very model of legitimate religion as defined by the Nationalist regime during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937). For the war period, the book limits itself to the perspective of the Buddhist community itself and therefore largely leaves aside exploration of archival documents from the complex constellation of regimes active in the war, which would be essential for understanding the role of the state(s) in mobilizing Buddhists as part of the larger war effort. Finally, the book regrettably suffers from insufficient editing. Most alarming is the frequent misspelling of Chinese terms and proper nouns in standard pinyin format, making these references difficult to trace and dangerous to quote. Nevertheless, on balance, *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism* makes a valuable contribution to the nascent field of Republican Chinese Buddhism by capturing the ethical dilemma thrust upon Buddhist monks by the circumstances of invasion, occupation, and resistance, as well as pointing to the ways in which the war accelerated rather than disrupted the Buddhist reform movement that began in the late nineteenth century and continues to inform Buddhist revival in China today.