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*The Huayan University Network:
The Teaching and Practice of Avatamsaka Buddhism in
Twentieth-Century China*

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A Review of *The Huayan University Network: The Teaching and Practice of Avataṃsaka Buddhism in Twentieth-Century China*

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The Huayan University Network: The Teaching and Practice of Avataṃsaka Buddhism in Twentieth-Century China. By Erik J. Hammerstrom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, 288 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-19430-3 (hardback), \$65.00.

The modern period of Chinese Buddhist history, from roughly the 1860s to the 1960s and beyond, was a period of intense challenges, transformations, adaptations, and innovations. From the reconstruction of Buddhist institutions and reprinting of texts in the wake of the Taiping War (1850–1864), through the threats to religious property of freedoms of the early Republic, and into the new socio-political orders of the post-war Chinese civil war, Chinese Buddhists continually worked to reimagine their teachings and practices to respond to the challenges of the modern era. I have had the pleasure to work with Prof. Erik Hammerstrom on projects that examine Chinese Buddhism of this era before, and I believe that the work that we and our colleagues in this subfield have produced over the past decade or so has done a great deal to illuminate a period that is not

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that distant from us, but which historically had been all too often overlooked. Following his 2015 monograph *The Science of Chinese Buddhism: Early Twentieth-Century Engagements*, which explored the role of scientism and scientific knowledge among Chinese Buddhists, his new book is a welcome addition to the field. It will be essential reading both for those of us interested in Buddhism in the modern era, as well as others who study Chinese Buddhism in earlier eras. *The Huayan University Network* is a rare example of a study that is equally adroit at discussing philosophical and doctrinal matters as it is individual and institutional histories.

In this book, Hammerstrom argues that in the early part of the twentieth century, Chinese Buddhists associated with Huayan educational institutions formed an extended (and extensive) network, a lineage that was separate from both the formal lineage structure of Dharma masters and heirs, and that of temple leadership. This lineage was produced mainly through “bonds of education and erudition” (3) between Buddhists who were involved in one of the many Huayan institutions that proliferated during this period. By exploring the work of those affiliated with one of the many institutions that followed the original Huayan University founded in 1912, Hammerstrom illuminates not only the importance of the Huayan School and Huayan doctrine, but also the bigger picture of change and development in modern Chinese Buddhism more generally. The book is divided into two parts; the first begins by addressing the question of what it means to consider Huayan as a school (Ch. *zong* 宗) of Chinese Buddhism (and furthermore, what is meant by a “school”), and then proceeds to examine the early educational institutions associated with the teaching and how the participants in these programs went on to spread the network of teaching across China, and later, throughout the world. The second part turns to a discussion of what “Huayan” meant in China during the Republican era (1912–1949) and how the educational institutes selected which Huayan texts and ideas they would include in their syllabuses. In general, the first part proceeds diachronically from the end of the Qing dynasty, through the period of the Republic, and ends with an outline of the spread of Huayan teachings up to 2000 C.E. The second part

(chapters five and six) proceeds instead in a synchronic fashion, surveying evidence of precisely which Huayan texts and doctrines were studied and taught during the period of the Republic. This part also includes discussions of key aspects of Huayan thought and an assessment of its relationship to the broader world of Buddhist doctrine and philosophy.

Most of the characters in the book, both monastic and lay, will be familiar to anyone who has read recent work on modern Chinese Buddhism. Yuexia 月霞 (1858–1917), Yingci 應慈 (1873–1965), and Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911) all play important roles, and thankfully, while Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) does appear, Hammerstrom is careful not to grant undue weight to the influence of this master of self-promotion. As I see it, this book's most significant contribution is to illuminate the power of the horizontal, diffuse (12) networks of affiliation and friendship that emerged from these Buddhists studying and working together. In several places throughout the book, Hammerstrom contrasts the vertical structures of temple abbotship and tonsure-disciple relationships with the more informal (but no less powerful) relationships between classmates and others who were products of Huayan-focused education institutes. In discussing these networks, Hammerstrom builds upon work by Rongdao Lai and Stefania Travagnin, who have helped us better understand how monastics who went through the modern-style seminaries reimagined themselves and their relationships to each other. While similar horizontal relationships among monastics of a similar generation had certainly existed earlier, the new institutional experience and daily habitus of modern Buddhist seminaries and educational institutes produced new opportunities for strong bonds to be generated. Hammerstrom's discussions and explanations of Huayan doctrine also clearly reflect his experience teaching the subject, as even the most advanced concepts are articulated in a clear and accessible fashion.

Another outstanding feature of this book is the sheer amount of depth and detail in the text. Hammerstrom has clearly made excellent use of the historical evidence that is available to us, especially the voluminous

periodical record that was produced by the Chinese Buddhists themselves, and presents the Republican-era Chinese Buddhist world to us in all its richness and variety, discussing dozens of characters, texts, and institutions. In doing so he demonstrates how Huayan study and thought was woven through the Buddhist community like a thread, binding together an array of lay and monastic figures. This was especially illuminating for me, who was already familiar with the general religious landscape discussed in the book, but who had never quite appreciated the influence of Huayan thought that ran through it.

If *The Huayan University Network* has any weaknesses, they have to do with the structuring and presentation of the material, rather than the arguments and evidence themselves, which taken on their own are both solidly constructed and supported. The division of the book into two parts, one mainly synchronic and the other more diachronic, means that we read about the same instructors and institutions from two separate perspectives that I found difficult to consider as a whole. The sheer number of figures, texts, and institutions discussed can at times be a little overwhelming, even for a reader such as me who was already more or less familiar with the major figures. In all, I found myself being led through a series of approaches to the same multifaceted subject, but without a clear guide on how to reconcile and synthesize them into a comprehensive assessment. Another review of this book appearing in the *Journal of Chinese Religions* (vol. 49, no. 1, 2021) provides that reviewer's own diagramming of the networks of affiliation described in the book, and I do think that this work would have been greatly improved by the inclusion of charts, tables, or other diagrams to visually display the connections described in the text. Additionally, as some figures are mentioned in different sections spread across the book, a brief reminder of a figure's importance and identity would be helpful to the reader. Otherwise, while the individual nodes and links in the network are clearly explained in the text, the overall picture is harder to discern.

Finally, while I am in my own mind very confident of the importance of this study and its contribution to our knowledge, I would have liked to see an explicit articulation of this in the text itself, especially addressed toward nonspecialists who might not fully understand how this study fits into our deepening knowledge of modern Chinese Buddhism. Somewhat related to this, some chapters and sections also appear to end without a clear summation of their argument and their link to the next section. With a subject matter as rich and complex as this, a little extra structure and scaffolding would have been a welcome change. The conclusion to the book as well could have been greatly expanded, in order to fully assess all of the complex ideas and arguments that had been raised and to reevaluate how they support the book's main thesis. Perhaps it's telling that when I came to the brief conclusion, I found myself just wanting to read more, to hear how the sweeping ideas and concepts discussed in the chapters could be brought together for a final, summative reflection on the role of Huayan in modern Chinese Buddhism.

None of these remarks, however, should dissuade anyone from reading this book. It is a rich and rewarding exploration of a crucially important aspect of modern East Asian Buddhism.

Works Cited

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