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Justin R. Ritzinger’s *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism* (hereafter *Anarchy*) has garnered at least five enthusiastic reviews since its publication in 2017. This review has been written with these earlier reviews in sight. It seeks not only to introduce Ritzinger’s thought-provoking work to the readers of H-Buddhism but moreover to engage some earlier reviews in a methodological reflection on the study of modern Chinese Buddhism.

*Anarchy* examines Taixu’s reinvention of the cult of Maitreya, bringing to light the mutually illuminating relationship between the anarcho-socialist aspirations of a young, radical Taixu and his abiding faith in Maitreya’s Pure Land, a faith that matured with him and produced a profound impact on his sundry initiatives to modernize Chinese Buddhism. In view of the emphatically “modern” and demythologized image of Taixu and his followers and, moreover, in view of the unprecedented plight of the Pure Land tradition in twentieth-century China, *Anarchy* captures an “anomaly” (p. 11) and deconstructs the “contrasting impressions” (p. 1) surrounding the controversial master. It stands as the most thoughtful study on Taixu hitherto. As Charles B. Jones points out, “Justin R. Ritzinger unsettles a good deal of received scholarly wisdom and forces a new look at old issues.”[1] Within the “deep conversation” *Anarchy* holds with existing scholarship, both Anglophone and Sinophone, on modern Chinese Buddhism,[2] three points are particularly instructive.

The first and foremost point concerns the long-standing blind spot of Taixu’s devotion to Maitreya. Why has this aspect of the master’s faith and practice, a significant dimension of his reforms, remained so steadfastly invisible to scholars’ eyes? *Anarchy* opens with a methodological probe, which calls into question some deeply ingrained theoretical assumptions in the study of modern Buddhism in China and elsewhere. As Ritzinger sees it, in understanding the place of religion in the modern world, the prevalent narrative is one of crisis and challenge and subsequently a religion’s accommodation in order to survive. This
narrative has taken such hold of scholarly attention that phenomena which fit the narrative (such as the emergence of “Protestant Buddhism”) receive ready attention, whereas phenomena which do not quite fit (such as devotionalism) tend to be neglected. Ritzinger calls this prevailing narrative the “push” model. In this light, Ritzinger discerns the common ground underlying two earlier major studies of Taixu, which paint two polarizing pictures of the monk. Taixu’s reforms, which invite scathing censure from Holmes Welch in The Buddhist Revival in China (1968), receive a much more positive appraisal in Don A. Pittman’s Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms (2001). Nonetheless, the tendency of both scholars to fix their gaze on Taixu’s reforms is telling of the sway of the “push” model.

Instead, Ritzinger proposes a “pull” model to reconceptualize what modernity could possibly mean for religion. The “pull” model is buttressed by insights from Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (1992). In Taylor’s opinion, the modern age engenders, not a great rupture from tradition (as Max Weber thought), but a reconfiguration of moral frameworks—both old and new, indigenous and foreign—to bring forth “new constellations of hyper-goods” (p. 9). In this light, Anarchy traces the resonance between Taixu’s revolutionary utopianism from his anarchist days and his devotion to Maitreya’s Pure Land, as both took form in a process of “mutual transvaluation” (p. 10). This is the core argument of Anarchy. One who thinks that Anarchy unveils Taixu’s “conservative” side hitherto unknown to us must think again. This “conservative” side turns out to be no less modern than the master’s other innovations. What we did not know previously is the true magnitude of Taixu’s engagement with radical thought—as well as the sites and forms of anarchist experimentation one could possibly discover in modern China.

Now we move on to the second point, which bears on Ritzinger’s use of primary sources. Looking beyond familiar literature, Ritzinger draws attention to Taixu’s earlier writings published in anarchist journals (and not collected in the Complete Works of Master Taixu). This is no doubt a merit—for reasons beyond what has so far been said. To scholars in Buddhist studies, these sources might appear to be “previously unexamined.”[3] To scholars of modern Chinese intellectual history, however, these sources are not novel, and that the young Taixu was a leading figure in the anarchist movement in the early Republican era is a widely known fact. What Anarchy brings into sharp relief is, to be exact, a disciplinary fault line in approaching and attuning the multifaceted Taixu by scholars in different fields, Buddhist studies or modern China studies. As Ritzinger observes, “By focusing on Taixu simply as a Buddhist figure, scholars in Buddhist studies often unintentionally decontextualize him” (p. 29). Anarchy makes a persuasive case for reassessing our own assumptions about what matters to Buddhism and what does not. At least in Taixu’s case, as Anarchy demonstrates, our understanding of what kind of Buddhist Taixu was would be impoverished if we only looked at what was most apparently “Buddhist” about the monk.

Having examined Taixu’s involvement with radicalism and his efforts to promote and formalize Maitreya worship in the first two sections, in its third section, Anarchy charts the contemporary legacies of Taixu’s Maitreyan cult on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. This section highlights how important elements of Taixu’s thought continue to invigorate heterodox societies in Taiwan such as Yiguandao and its offshoot, Maitreya Great Way. This is the third notable point about the book. Ritzinger’s approach harks back to Erik Zürcher’s advice for scholars of Chinese Buddhism nearly four decades ago: “Second, ... if we want to define what was the normal state of medieval Chinese Buddhism, we should concentrate on what seems to be abnormal. Third, if we want to complete our picture of what this Buddhism really was, we have to look outside Chinese Buddhism itself.”[4]
Zürcher had Daoism and folk traditions in mind when he talked about the “abnormal” and the “outside.” His advice, initially made with reference to the study of medieval Chinese Buddhism, has its pertinence proven for the study of modern Chinese Buddhism as well. From anarchist groups to redemptive societies, it is indeed by looking outside Chinese Buddhism that Anarchy comes to afford us a closer view of Taixu’s reforms as well as the awesome historical valence of certain Buddhist ideas—ideas that were at once “traditional” and “modern,” “conservative” and “radical,” and hence compel us to rethink the “set of basically mythical binaries” that has so long shaped our inquiries into modern Buddhism.[5]

Notes


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