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## Chinese Buddhism and the Anti-Japan War

This article examines the attitudes and responses of Chinese Buddhists with regard to the Sino-Japanese war of the 1930s and 1940s by focusing on two figures, Taixu and Leguan. Both the Japanese and Chinese Buddhists were confronted with the same problems, such as the relation between the universalism of Buddhism and the question of nationalism, as well as the tension between the Buddhist prohibition against killing and the necessity of killing one's enemies during wartime. Taixu attempted to radically change Chinese Buddhism and establish a humanistic Buddhism. Leguan at first had a positive view of Japanese Buddhism and saw it as a possible model for modernizing Buddhism in China, but later became very critical of Japanese Buddhism and encouraged taking action against the Japanese invasion. Both struggled with the difficult problem of whether it was proper for a Buddhist to actively take up arms and fight in a war for their nation. Placing Japanese Buddhism in the wider perspective of East Asia, and such comparisons with Chinese (and Korean) Buddhists, should provide fruitful hints for rethinking modern Japanese Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: modern Chinese Buddhism—Taixu—Leguan—the anti-Japan war

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THE ACTIONS of Japanese Buddhists during Japan's invasion of and war with China have recently begun to be examined more thoroughly.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Brian VICTORIA's two books (1997 and 2003), the Chinese scholar He Jingsong 何勁松 published *Jindai Dong'ya Fojiao* 近代東亞佛教 (Modern East Asian Buddhism) in Chinese, subtitled "Focusing on the Aggressive War of Japan's Militarism" (HE 2002). In contrast to Brian Victoria's books, which concentrate on the problems of Zen, He Jingsong's book surveys the activities of Japanese Buddhism during the war and its relation to Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria.

It must be readily admitted that these books and related articles by other authors have contributed much to a subject that had long been neglected. However, these publications have not adequately analyzed the complex character of modern Japanese Buddhism, nor asked the pertinent question: Did the leaders of Japanese Buddhism have the same destructive intentions as the Japanese militarists? If we conclude they did not share the same intentions, rather than cooperate with the militarists, why did the Buddhist leaders not resist them? In order to examine these problems thoughtfully, a more flexible viewpoint is required in place of the simplistic judgment of merely "good" or "bad." Indeed, the actions of the Japanese Buddhists who cooperated with the militarists should be condemned; however, the reasons and motives for their actions are more complicated than simply attributing them to malice. The next stage of our study on modern Japanese Buddhism should seek to analyze such intricate problems.

One of the reasons for the complex nature of this problem is that it is not limited only to Buddhism but must also be considered within the context of the holistic structure of the modern world, including the Western invasion of Asia and the reactions of the Asian countries, as well as the mutual relations among countries in Asia. Although studies of this sort are still rare, a 2002 issue of the journal *Shisō* (see footnote one) is one such contribution to this field. I myself have approached this problem from two directions: the first analyzes the ideas

1. While most of my work has concerned problems found within classical Japanese Buddhism, more recently my interests have shifted to the problems of modern Buddhism. I edited a special issue of the Japanese journal *Shisō* 思想 entitled "Buddhism/Modernity/Asia" that was published in 2002. It contained contributions from the leading scholars in this field, garnered wide interest, and was well received. I also published two books on modern Japanese Buddhism in 2004 (SUEKI 2004a; 2004b).

of Meiji Buddhism and its relation with Buddhist activities during the period of the war of aggression.

Contrary to the expectation that Japanese Buddhism had been nationalistic from the Meiji era, as Victoria suggests, some of the Buddhist leaders such as Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 resisted the nationalist morality of the Imperial Rescript on Education and concentrated on the problems of the individual mind. However, Buddhists proved unable to establish new principles of ethics in place of the nationalist morality. This is one of the reasons why Japanese Buddhists lacked the foundation necessary to resist their nation's aggression. This is my provisional conclusion (SUEKI 2004a, 2004b, and 2007).

The other approach is to compare the attitudes of Japanese Buddhists with those of Chinese Buddhists regarding the Sino-Japanese war of the 1930s and 1940s. They both confronted the same problems, such as the relation between the universalism of Buddhism and the nationalism and patriotism of their nations, as well as the tension between the Buddhist prohibition against killing and the necessity of killing one's enemies during wartime. The stance of Chinese Buddhists regarding these problems will provide hints for thinking about the attitudes of Japanese Buddhists toward the war. In this article, I will concentrate on this latter approach.<sup>2</sup>

### *Chinese Buddhism and the War Against Japan*

Modern Chinese society faced a twofold problem. In addition to the need to modernize in response to pressure from Western countries and Japan, the large country had been divided and in chaos since the destruction of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Buddhism faced even more difficulties. Buddhism was thought to be an out-of-date system of superstitions, and the vast monastic landholdings were thought to be a waste of state resources. The move to confiscate the land of Buddhist monasteries and build schools greatly weakened the power of Buddhism. At the same time, the Enlightenment movement of the West had a great influence on young intellectuals in China, who denounced religions as superstitious and attacked Buddhism. This was another reason for Buddhism's decline in modern China.

One Buddhist leader who resisted such attacks and tried to establish a new, revitalized Buddhism was Taixu 太虚 (1889–1947). He attempted to change Chinese Buddhism radically and establish a humanistic Buddhism (*renjian Fo jiao* 人間佛教). Taixu contended that Buddhism should not be a religion that encourages one to transcend this world and attain enlightenment. Rather, it should be a religion that endeavors to realize the ideal within this secular world. Human-

2. This article is based on two of my articles in Japanese; see SUEKI 2002 and 2003.

istic Buddhism is similar to Engaged Buddhism in other Asian countries in that it endeavors to modernize and socialize Buddhism. Taixu's reform was not a smooth process due to opposition from conservative Buddhists, but it nonetheless had a great influence on a Buddhist society deep in crisis.

Japan invaded China just as Chinese Buddhists were struggling with these issues. Taixu was one Buddhist leader who stood against the invasion and systematized the anti-Japan movement. Although he had visited Japan in 1925 and had many Japanese friends, he did not submit to Japanese pressure, remaining opposed to Japanese aggression in China. Taixu issued many statements, gave numerous lectures, and published a large number of essays during the war. They were very important because most of them were official statements from a leader of Chinese Buddhism who played a major role in resisting the Japanese. However, we cannot hear his private voice in these statements, which reflected the conflicts and hesitations Taixu experienced.

For this reason, I will first examine Taixu's articles only briefly, and then will analyze a book written by another relatively unknown Chinese monk who was very active in the anti-Japan movement. The book in question is named *Fenxunji* 奮迅集, which means "a collection concerning the rousing of one's vigor." The book contains collected essays and reports concerning the anti-Japan efforts of the monk Leguan 樂觀 (1902–?). One sometimes finds his name in documents concerning Chinese Buddhism during the anti-Japan war, but he was not as well-known or important as Taixu. For this reason, the *Fenxunji* has not yet been fully researched; however, it is very interesting because we can gain detailed information from it concerning monks' attitudes toward the war against Japan, and at the same time, we can find the candid opinions of an anti-Japanese Chinese monk, in contrast to Taixu's formal statements.

### *Taixu on the War Against Japan*

Prior to the war against Japan, Taixu was a Japanophile; he visited Japan in 1925 and had Japanese friends. He thought Japanese Buddhism, which had succeeded in modernizing, was a good model for Chinese Buddhism, and he wished to learn more about modernization from Japan. It was only after the Manchuria Incident in 1931 that he changed his attitude and began to commit himself to anti-Japan activities.

That Chinese monks joined the anti-Japanese war was an inevitable result of their assertion of *renjian Fojiao*, which stressed relations with the secular world. However, whether it is permissible for a Buddhist monk to join a war for a secular nation is a very difficult problem. The first question is whether it is permissible to work for a secular nation at all, because a Buddhist monk must work on spiritual problems which transcend the boundaries of nations. The second ques-

tion is whether a monk can join in fighting a war, where one must kill enemy soldiers. The prohibition against killing is the first article of the Buddhist precepts. If Buddhism were to become secularized, monks would not be able to avoid participating in a war. Taixu did not answer the second question, but he attempted to answer the first.

At the end of 1931, Taixu gave a lecture entitled “Buddhist Law and Saving One’s Country” on the radio. In this lecture, he developed ideas that became the basis for anti-Japan activities among Chinese Buddhists. He asserted that Buddhist monks have a duty to commit themselves to the activities of saving their country, just as lay people do. He gave three reasons for this duty:

1. Everything is brought into existence by causes and conditions. It is the same with a society. Individuals are the elements of a society and should support the welfare of society.
2. Nothing has a definitive nature and everything has the possibility to change. It is the same with a society or nation. Individuals can change society through their efforts.
3. One must have a compassionate mind. Saving one’s country means saving people with a compassionate mind. (Summary, TQ 15: 61–65)

In this way, Taixu established the theoretical basis upon which Buddhist monks committed themselves to the war against Japan.

Here arises a question: does it not contradict the Buddhist principle of equality to fight for one nation against another? In another lecture, given in 1932 and titled “Buddhism and Protecting One’s Country” (TQ 15: 69), Taixu identified two ways of protecting one’s country. The first is to do so in a narrow sense: to protect one’s land when a disaster occurs, and this way is the same as saving one’s country in secular terms. The second is to do so in a broad sense: to protect all people in this world with the mind of a bodhisattva. The first is established on the basis of the latter.

This division gave a very important meaning to the activities of Chinese Buddhist monks. In another lecture in 1932 titled “Proposing that Young Buddhists in the Whole Country Organize a Squad to Protect the Country,” Taixu also proposed two meanings of “country.” The first was the country as a nation, and the second was the country as the world (TQ 15: 71). The country as the world was an idea characteristic of Taixu and not shared by Leguan. At the beginning of the war against Japan, Taixu stressed the first meaning of “country,” but during the war he began to emphasize the second meaning, the country as the whole world.

Taixu’s activities spread worldwide roughly after 1939. In that year, he became an adviser for a conference welcoming Jawaharlal Nehru to China, and endeavored to strengthen the relationship between China and India. In the same year, he organized a Buddhist travel group and visited Buddhist countries in South-

east Asia and India. In a lecture titled “Buddhism and the Significance of Anti-aggression,” given just prior to his travels, he urged the necessity of cooperation to halt aggression and promote peace on the basis of Buddhism.

When the Allied Forces victory drew near, Taixu became more eager for world peace than for China’s victory over Japan. In the lecture “Establishment of Eternal Peace of the Human World,” given at the *Huayan* ceremony for the war dead in 1941, he advocated Eastern culture as the basis for eternal peace. In another lecture, “Peace of the World after the Victory of the Allied Countries,” delivered in 1943, he listed, in the following order, the purposes one should pursue:

First, the benefit of the world and humankind.

Second, the benefit of one’s nation and ethnic group. (This order of priorities applied only after the war, and therefore did not contradict the priority of nation and ethnic group during the war)

Third, the benefit of the individual and family. (TQ 15: 286)

In this way, Taixu clearly distinguished between wartime, when the nation has priority, and the aftermath of war, when the world has priority. This distinction lent flexibility to his idea by acting according to the situation. Unfortunately Taixu passed away in 1947 and so could not develop his ideas on world peace.

To conclude this section, I would like to examine Taixu’s views on Japanese Buddhism. On the one hand, his attitude against Japan’s aggression was very clear; but on the other hand, he expected self-awareness from Japanese Buddhists. For example, in a 1938 article, “Will Evil Japan Attain Self-recognition?” he charged that Japan had abandoned the spirit of Buddhism and Confucianism and invaded China employing cruel methods. However, he did not forget to urge Japanese people to remember the spirit of Buddhism and Confucianism and save themselves by overthrowing the military government.

Because of this endeavor to raise self-awareness in Japan, he was sometimes misunderstood in China and accused of being a pro-Japan traitor. When the second conference of pan-Pacific young Buddhists was held in Tokyo in 1934, Chinese monks refused to attend in protest because Japan invited monks of the puppet state Manchuria. It was rumored that Taixu would attend, although he clarified his anti-Japan attitude and did not attend. In 1935, he was again accused of cooperating with Japan to establish the China-Japan Association of Buddhist Studies, although he in fact refused to cooperate (TSUJIMURA 2002).

Taixu tried to address the Japanese people in various ways, in particular Japanese Buddhists. In his *Collected Works*, we find eight messages to Japanese Buddhists during the period from 1928 to 1945. These messages urged Japanese Buddhists to renounce military rule and to stand up against it in cooperation with Chinese Buddhists. However, no Japanese Buddhists responded to his messages.

*Leguan on the Anti-Japan War*

## THE ACTIVITIES OF LEGUAN

Here I will examine the activities and ideas of Leguan in comparison with those of Taixu. According to the autobiography contained in the *Fenxunji*, Leguan was born in Hubei Province in 1902 and became a monk when he was nineteen. Leguan (previously named Yuanyin) was engaged in social activities throughout his life. The most remarkable activity in his young days was that he became a member of the Fojiao Qingnian Hui 佛教青年会 (Young Buddhist Society) and published the journal *Fohua xin qingnian* 仏化新青年 (Buddhist New Youth) in 1923. The *Fohua xin qingnian* was published by young radical Buddhists who were influenced by the *Xin qiannian* and tried to reform Buddhist society; Taixu was involved with this movement. The *Xin qinnian* was a journal published by Hu Shi and others that became the main organ of the enlightenment movement called the New Cultural Movement. The journal included criticism of religion.

Leguan went to Japan in 1926 to study at Kachio-dera 勝尾寺, a temple that recruited young Chinese monks. When he arrived, he found that it had no facilities for studying so he left and spent some time traveling around Japan. He found that Japanese Buddhism was thriving and thus became pessimistic about Chinese Buddhism, in light of its decline. As a consequence, after returning to China he changed his name to Beiguan 悲觀 (“pessimism”). In addition to Japan, he also traveled to Thailand, Vietnam, and India during 1930–1931 and studied Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Burma during 1935–1936.

When the Sino-Japanese War began in 1937, he returned to Shanghai and joined the monks’ relief squad. At that time, he changed his name from Beiguan to Leguan (“optimism”), which he felt was a more appropriate name for the future of China. After the monks’ relief squad was dissolved in 1938, Leguan traveled, and in 1940 stayed in Chongqing, where the Republic of China had its temporary government. He established a monk’s relief squad there again and expanded it into the monks’ service party of Chongqing.

In the same year, he organized the International Walking Propaganda Squad of Chinese Buddhism 中国佛教國際步行宣傳隊. Japanese militarists had spread propaganda in Southeast Asian countries by saying that China was a country of communists and Christians, and that Japan had protected Buddhism. Thus it was necessary to let people in these countries know the truth and encourage them to cooperate with China. The squad walked as far as they possibly could. They traveled from Chongqing, via Kunming, and arrived in Yangon (Rangoon), Burma, in November 1940. They wanted to go to Thailand and other Buddhist countries, but the intensification of the war prevented their activities and Leguan returned to Chongqing in 1941.

After 1942, Leguan did not participate in any conspicuous action, but he published the *Fenxunji* in Guilin in 1943. The enlarged edition was published in Shanghai in 1947.

#### LEGUAN'S IDEAS ON WAR

As discussed above, the question of whether it is permissible for a Buddhist monk to join a war for a secular nation is a very difficult one. The first issue is whether a monk may work for a secular nation, because spiritual problems transcend the boundaries of nations. The second issue is whether a monk can join in a war where one must kill enemy soldiers. Leguan discussed these concerns in more detail than Taixu in an article titled "Protecting the State and Protecting the (Buddhist) Teachings" 護國と衛教, first published in the *Haichaoyin* in 1940. While Taixu addressed only the first issue, Leguan tried to answer both. He wrote:

According to the principle of Buddhism, the aim is peace in the world without the boundaries of races and nations; however, we cannot leave nations when we want to establish Buddhist societies and propagate the teachings. We must protect our country, which is our dependent karmic reward [*yibao* 依報], because we were born there and the land has a close connection with our lives. If the land where we were born and grew up is suppressed, controlled, and destroyed, then we lose ourselves and we cannot live any more. If we lose freedom and are everywhere restricted by others, how can we propagate Buddhist teachings broadly and save people? Besides, although the Buddha's teaching contains the principle of compassion, we cannot be compassionate to cruel people. We have to defeat them, because they are devil kings who destroy people's wisdom and lives. Buddha's sutra says: "To be compassionate to devils means to be cruel to people."  
(LEGUAN 1947, 52–53)

Here Leguan proposed answers to the two issues raised earlier. To the first question about protecting a secular state, he answered using the theory of *yibao*. According to this Buddhist theory, there are two "karma rewards" created in past lives: *zhengbao* 正報 and *yibao*. *Zhengbao* is the principal karmic reward, that is, an individual's state, and *yibao* is the dependent karmic reward, in other words, the circumstances in which he lives. Therefore, one has a responsibility to the country where one lives as one's *yibao*, even if one is a monk.

In this way, Leguan tried to give a reason for protecting the country, but he did not develop the idea of the country as the world, as Taixu did. Although he visited foreign Buddhist countries and organized the International Walking Propaganda Squad of Chinese Buddhism, his idea of the country was limited to China.

It seems more difficult to answer the second question about defeating an enemy with violence, and Taixu did not answer it. Leguan answers that those

who are cruel are devils, and it is our duty to destroy devils and save people according to the principle of compassion. This idea may create a problem if we apply it arbitrarily and use it as a theory to defeat any enemy, although it was effective as a theory in regard to anti-colonialism.

Fighting in a war violates the precept of no killing. With such a precept, how can killing possibly be justified? The monks' relief squads that Leguan joined in Shanghai and Chongqing did not directly participate in battle. They mainly helped wounded people, performed memorial services for the dead, and comforted isolated women and children. In this way, they did not violate the precept against killing and thus their activities were limited by this precept. Leguan said that he was prepared to take up arms if necessary, but the war ended before such a scenario became necessary.

The situation was quite different with Japanese Buddhism. Japanese monks participated in the war just like other people. Few Japanese Buddhists questioned this, and maybe Japanese Buddhism was too secularized to ask such questions. Japanese priests and monks could not be distinguished from secular people. They had wives, ate meat, and they were not restricted by the precepts. Most did not hesitate to go to war and kill the enemy. One may be inclined to ask here whether they could be considered true Buddhist priests and monks? Can Japanese Buddhism be called "true Buddhism?" These are the questions that modern Chinese Buddhists asked on occasion. On this point Leguan was also very critical of Japanese Buddhism.

#### LEGUAN ON JAPANESE BUDDHISM

At first, Leguan had a positive view of Japanese Buddhism, which was the reason he went to Japan to study when he was young. He was disappointed by the poor facilities of Kachio-dera, but he was greatly impressed by the prosperity of Buddhism when he moved around Japan. His autobiography states:

Generally speaking, when I observed Japanese Buddhism, I found that its adherents were very active in establishing various provisional methods; priests and monks have progressive ideas, are fully aware of nation and race, enter the secular world, and work for the welfare of people; therefore they are respected and widely believed by ordinary people. On the contrary, Buddhism in our country is loose and irresponsible, and is corrupt. (LEGUAN 1947, 103)

These are Leguan's words, but many Chinese Buddhists who had a sense of crisis in Chinese Buddhism were astonished by the prosperity of Buddhism in Japan and thought it a model for the modernization of Chinese Buddhism. As stated above, Leguan, at that time named Yuanyin, changed his name to Beiguan because he was so pessimistic about the future of Chinese Buddhism compared with Japanese Buddhism.

However, when the Sino-Japanese war began, his attitude towards Japanese Buddhism changed completely. In 1940 in a lecture Leguan stated:

Japanese Buddhism was first taught by China. Although Japan expressed the Buddhist spirit very well in the old days, the situation changed after the Meiji Restoration. At that time, Japan abolished Buddhism, and lit the torch of anti-Buddhism. They destroyed Buddhist temples, burned Buddhist images and pictures, forced monks return to lay life, gave them family names, and changed temples into schools and hospitals. The life of Buddhism was lost completely. Although Japan adopted Buddhist monks in the last years of Meiji, Buddhism had lost what it once had. Monks eat meat, have wives, and ignore the precepts. Although they look externally like bhikshu, their minds are similar to butchers. In the Japanese army, every corps has several monks. They encouraged Japanese soldiers to slay Chinese Buddhist followers, rape nuns, and bomb temples from airplanes. Judging from these cruel acts, it is nonsense to say that Japan is a Buddhist country. They justify invasion under the pretext of Buddhism and conceal the act of killing behind the curtain of Buddhism. (LEGUAN 1947, 41)

In this way, Leguan criticized not only Japanese Buddhism during wartime, but modern Japanese Buddhism in its entirety; it had been thought to be a good model for Chinese Buddhism in previous times, but was now held to be a bad example in its abandonment of the precepts and the fundamental ideals of Buddhism. The cruelties carried out in the war of invasion by Japanese Buddhists were attributed to be the result of the decadence of modern Japanese Buddhism. Leguan goes so far as to state that there is no Buddhism in Japan.

Here we are able to see the fundamental difference between the modernization of Buddhism in China and in Japan. It is true that Chinese Buddhism made *renjian Fojiao* its slogan and began to work in the secular world, but it did not result in the complete secularization of Buddhism in China. Monks observed the precepts and their lives in monasteries were separate from the lives of lay people. In contrast, Japanese Buddhism was totally secularized and the career of monk or priest became just another secular occupation, like that of a teacher, businessman, engineer, driver, and so on. This was a result of the religious policy of the Meiji period (see JAFFE 2001). On the one hand, this secularization brought Buddhism prosperity in modern Japanese society; however, on the other hand, because the monks and priests were totally absorbed in secular matters, this caused a loss of critical thinking toward the secular world. The appraisal and the criticism of Japanese Buddhism by Leguan corresponded to these two aspects.

### *Rethinking Japanese Buddhism at War*

In the passages above I examined the activities and ideas of Taixu and Leguan during the anti-Japan war. First, both of them attached a high value to Japanese

Buddhism, but they changed their opinions and fought against Japan's aggression after the Sino-Japan War began. In confronting the difficult issue of whether Buddhists could fight for a secular nation, they tried to answer from different standpoints. Taixu developed an ideal of world peace and urged Japanese Buddhists to cooperate to destroy the military government of Japan. Leguan did not have such a broad viewpoint, but he tried to reconcile the contradiction between war and the precept of not killing.

What, then, were the attitudes of Japanese Buddhists toward a secular nation and aggressive war? As stated above, there was antagonism between nationalist morality and religion in the Meiji period, as seen with Kiyozawa Manshi; however, it did not develop into a full-scale discussion. During the wartime period from 1931–1945, most Japanese Buddhists collaborated with the nation without questioning. Maybe they had lost the ability to look critically at the secular power as a result of hyper-secularization.

In spite of this tight collaboration between the nation and Buddhism, there were some Japanese Buddhist intellectuals who had a negative view of war, although it was very difficult for them to express their opinion publicly since there was a strict suppression of free speech. For example, D. T. Suzuki, who has been accused of being an ideologue for Japan's war (VICTORIA 1997 and 2003), was not as simpleminded as he has been portrayed. His attitude to the war was ambiguous before the outbreak of the war against the US. In 1941, when war against the US loomed, he expressed his criticism against the impending war in a private letter to one of his friends, although he did not express his opinion publicly. In 1944, he published the famous book *Nihon no reisei* 日本の靈性 (Japanese spirituality). The term "Japanese spirituality" was invented to oppose the term "Japanese spirit" that was asserted by the Japanese military government. It was an expression of his protest against the war, although it was heavily veiled (SUEKI 2009).

In this way, the attitudes of Japanese Buddhists towards war are so complex and multidimensional that they require a thorough and thoughtful investigation. For this purpose, placing Japanese Buddhism in the wider perspective of the whole of East Asia is crucial. In addition, the comparison of Japanese Buddhism with Chinese and Korean Buddhism should provide fruitful hints for rethinking modern Japanese Buddhism.

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