

BOOK REVIEW

Wu, W. *Esoteric Buddhism in China: Engaging Japanese and Tibetan Traditions, 1912–1949*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

Beverley McGuire, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Wei Wu's *Esoteric Buddhism in China* examines the rise of esoteric Buddhism during the Republican era (1912–1949) in China, focusing especially on the cross-cultural interactions between Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Drawing on Ann Swidler's repertoire framework—the way people strategically select from a repertoire of resources to address specific problems—Wei Wu analyzes the choices and motivations of Chinese Buddhists who strategically used esoteric texts, rituals, and practices to address issues they faced in the early twentieth century. These included Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), Dayong 大勇 (1893–1929), Nenghai 能海 (1886–1967), and Fazun 法尊 (1902–1980). Exploring a range of previously unexamined sources including speeches, periodical articles, letters, advertisements, memoirs, biographies, commentaries, and lecture notes, Wu considers the doctrinal, ritual, and institutional impact of esoteric Buddhism on Buddhist modernity in China.

Chapter 1 focuses on the introduction of esoteric Buddhism by Taixu and Dayong in the 1910s and 1920s, especially Taixu's vision of reviving the eight schools of the Tang dynasty, including the Zhenyan or Kaiyuan school with its esoteric teachings. Although Taixu initially sought to revive esoteric Buddhism by turning to Japan, concerns over violations of Chinese disciplinary norms—such as monastics wearing lay clothing or publicly consuming meat and alcohol—led him to turn to Tibetan Buddhism and support formal training at Tibetan monasteries and advocate reformulating tantric practices and philosophical texts into a system compatible with Chinese Buddhist traditions. Taixu

and Dayong promoted an assimilation of both Japanese and Tibetan esoteric traditions within Chinese disciplinary codes and doctrinal teachings.

Chapter 2 considers the criticism and defense of large-scale esoteric Buddhist ceremonies organized to pacify calamities (*xizhai* 息災), which became popular in Chinese cities during the 1920s. Although the rituals themselves followed Tibetan Buddhist liturgical norms, Wu argues that the interpretations of such rituals were impacted by the local context and nationalist discourses. While secular critics argued that such rituals were superstitious and irrational, and Chinese Buddhist critics claimed that the rituals originated in non-Buddhist sources and that the lamas performing them did not uphold moral discipline, other Chinese Buddhists defended their authenticity and their ability to alleviate calamities.

Chapter 3 focuses on lay individuals and organizations, whose support for esoteric Buddhism often rested on the belief that one could attain enlightenment more quickly by using chants (*mantra*), hand gestures (*mudrā*), and ritual diagrams (*maṇḍala*). Wu shows how lay organizations tended to see esoteric practices as an addition to, rather than replacement for, traditional practice. Wu also shares examples of wives, daughters, and mothers of male enthusiasts taking on the roles of event organizers, ritual assistants, and translators within such organizations, and even achieving renown as practitioners and leaders in those organizations.

Chapter 4 explores the debates surrounding esoteric Buddhism in the 1920s and 1930s, including how it might be doctrinally categorized compared to Chinese traditions of Huayan, Tiantai, Chan, and Pure Land, whether one could become a Buddha in this body, whether lay teachers were authorized to transmit the esoteric teachings, and whether meat eating, ritualized sex, and the system of reincarnation in Tibetan esoteric traditions contradicted Chinese Buddhist values. The chapter includes various viewpoints on such issues, illustrating the diversity of opinion about the compatibility of esoteric Buddhism with Chinese Buddhist traditions.

Chapter 5 focuses on the way that Chinese Buddhists presented *lamrim*—the stages on the path to enlightenment—as a special teaching to Han Buddhists. Fazun describes it as a “complete and graduated path” (p. 124) that accommodates practitioners of varying capacities, and he praises its inclusivity, arguing it encompasses all Buddhist teachings, whereas Tiantai and Huayan schools promote some scriptures and deemphasize others. Taixu

commends the systematicity of its doctrinal organization and the efficacy of its instructions. Nenghai argues that it has three goals: to attain a better rebirth by upholding morality, to renounce cyclic existence after realizing its impermanence and suffering, and to give rise to *bodhicitta*. Nenghai portrays exoteric teachings, especially those tied to Buddhist ethics, as a prerequisite for esoteric practice, and he presents *lamrim* as a framework to integrate the study and practice of Buddhist teachings. He also uses the *lamrim* framework to advocate for a gradual analytical approach to enlightenment for most practitioners, while allowing for a sudden intuitive approach for some others.

Chapter 6 discusses Nenghai's secular life and monastic career, his efforts to promote esoteric Buddhism at Mount Wutai in the early 1930s, and his founding of Jinci Monastery in Chengdu in the 1930s. It focuses especially on the five-hall system that Nenghai created in Jinci Monastery, where monks were grouped according to their ages and abilities into five halls: the Hall of Novice Monks where young monks learned basic ethics, mantras, and the Tibetan language; the Hall of Learning Skills for guest monks to learn about the routines at Jinci; the Hall of Precept Learning for fully ordained monks to study Vinaya and doctrines for five years; the Hall of Preparatory Practice where qualified monks could be initiated into the practice of advanced tantra under Nenghai's direct instruction; and the highest level of the Vajra Hall. Wu argues that the five-hall system embodies the graduated path of the *lamrim* teaching in its temple organization, curriculum, and daily practice.

Wu's book will appeal to scholars of Chinese Buddhism and historians of modern China, as well as those interested in the cross-cultural religious transmission of Buddhist traditions. Wu demonstrates the diverse ways that Chinese Buddhists drew on esoteric resources to respond to early twentieth-century concerns—especially those of nation building and religious reform. *Esoteric Buddhism in China* shows how they vigorously debated about esoteric ideas and practices and the extent to which they were compatible with Chinese Buddhist traditions. It also reveals how their interpretation and adaptation of esoteric Buddhist teachings and practices varied according to their immediate concerns and contexts. Wu's analysis of the ways that Chinese Buddhists interpreted the *lamrim* teaching and how they understood Jinci Monastery's five-hall system to exemplify the *lamrim* teaching serves as a particularly striking example of such creative adaptation.