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Buddhist Literature and Progressive Thinking in Late Qing and Early Republican China

Abstract Buddhist literature in late Qing and early Republican China contributed to the new thinking in modern Chinese literature in a number of ways. Writers of Chinese Buddhist literature strove to elucidate the similarities between Buddhist culture and the scientific spirit, or to reveal the scientific spirit in Buddhist culture. Buddhist writers were aware of the importance of the spiritual enlightenment and mental reconstruction of the people, and realized the impact that literature and art as a kind of social ideology had on the national spirit. They were also interested in folk genres and vernacular literature. The May Fourth Movement put its emphasis on the people, while Buddhist literature in this period emphasized the related concept of humanity.

Keywords Buddhist literature, progressive thinking, late Qing and early Republican China

During late Qing and early Republican China, there was a Buddhist Renaissance in both culture and religion, as a result the efforts of three groups: the Reformists represented by Kang Youwei 康有为, Liang Qichao 梁启超, Tan Sitong 谭嗣同 and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎; lay Buddhist groups led by Yang Renshan 杨仁山 and Ouyang Jian 欧阳渐; and eminent monks such as Bazhi Toutuo 八指头陀, Su Manshu 苏曼殊, Xuyun 虚云, and Taixu 太虚. The movement had such a powerful impact on both monks and lay Buddhists because it was not confined within the Buddhist groups. The Buddhist Renaissance was not only a reform of Buddhist institutions, but also a change in Buddhist ideas. And this change went beyond the traditional classifications of Buddhist teaching and theoretical
debates between different sects within Buddhism; it was a response to the times, closely connected with the widespread demand for political and cultural reform in the country. Many promoters of the Buddhist Renaissance were not only great thinkers and pioneer social reformers, but also excellent writers. Chinese Buddhist literature flourished in this period.

Since the end of the twentieth century, academics have undertaken an extensive exploration of the ideas and doctrines of this Buddhist Renaissance, but little attention has yet been paid to the Buddhist literature which grew up around it. The decades of either side of the 1911 Revolution saw the peak of the Buddhist Renaissance and a golden age in progressive thinking in China. Buddhist literature was closely tied to the New Culture Movement and the New Literature to which it gave rise. This paper hopes to raise academic interest in the unique phenomenon of Buddhist literature in the late Qing and early Republic through examining a number of previously neglected literary documents. Through analyzing the ideas, aims and methods of the Buddhist literature of this period, it seeks to reveal valuable new resources for the study of the dawning of modernity in Chinese literature.

**Buddhism and Science**

The 18th-century Enlightenment in the West was entwined with the advance of modern science and technology. Similar intellectual progress in China was witnessed in the late Ming dynasty, but was interrupted by the suffocating rule of the Qing dynasty. The new “enlightenment” in the late Qing only began after the door of the country was opened to outside influence. Science was central to this. Liang Qichao wrote: “Science is the true knowledge within a system. And the scientific spirit is the method that guides people in search of systematical and true knowledge.” In the works of the Buddhist writers of this time, we find three possible relationships between Buddhism and science.

The first is that Buddhism and science have a mutual relationship. In 1884, when Kang Youwei, then twenty-seven, returned to his hometown because of the imposition of martial law, he recalled his reading experience in that year:

> Early this year I read the scholars’ records of the Song, Yuan and Ming, and the *Zhuzi yulei* (Classified quotations of Zhu Xi). In Haichuang Hualin, I read much from the Buddhist canon from Brahman to the Four Teachings. I also read mathematics and many Western books. All through the autumn and winter, I stayed alone in the pavilion, cutting off all connections with the outside. I read much and thought much. In December, I had a deeper

1 Liang Qichao, 1922.