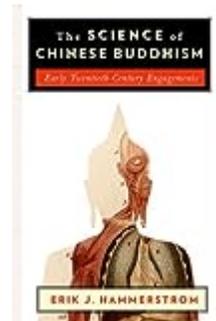


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Erik J. Hammerstrom.** *The Science of Chinese Buddhism: Early Twentieth-Century Engagements.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-17034-5.



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With *The Science of Chinese Buddhism: Early Twentieth-Century Engagement*, Erik Hammerstrom makes a highly valuable contribution to the growing corpus of works on religion, modernity, and modern China. His book examines how Chinese Buddhists contemplated the relationships between their religion and science, one of the key markers of modernity, in the early twentieth century. Although the book mainly focuses on the 1920s and 1930s, Hammerstrom succeeds in drawing our attention to the significance of modern Chinese Buddhist thought beyond the circumstances of its own time.

In the introduction, Hammerstrom first demarcates his own research and contemporary Western Buddhists' works on Buddhism and science by declaring his attention to a historical point of view. He conceptualizes Chinese modernity as a push-and-pull process in which Chinese thinkers reacted as well as learned more about science. He also makes clear that in exploring Chinese Buddhist thinkers' approaches to science, rather than concentrating on the encounter between religion and science as a competition between rival truth claims, he looks into how a Buddhist modernism formed in the discursive field of philosophies of life, in which the Chinese reflected on human origins, the ontological and epistemological status of human beings, and ethics and the praxis of self-

cultivation.

In chapter 1, Hammerstrom discusses the historical context in which Buddhist thinkers' perspectives on science unfolded. It begins with the transformation of thought from the late Qing to the early 1920s, describing late-Qing intellectuals' efforts to incorporate what was new into their intellectual-cultural universe. The chapter then turns to how Buddhists, scientists, and others constructed a community of discourse, as they deployed assumptions about and the language of science to debate and produce knowledge about science and philosophy. Hammerstrom also discusses the professionalization of science: the institutionalization of the scientific disciplines, the publication of new periodicals, and the rising presence of various disciplines, resulting in the formation of science as an established field in early twentieth-century China. He points out, in addition, that Chinese Buddhists tackled and were pressed to tackle science and modernity at a time when they also had to respond to the threat posed by anti-religious campaigns.

The chapters that follow explore Chinese Buddhists' engagements with science. In chapter 2, Hammerstrom examines their views on the physical sciences, including astronomy, physics, and chemistry. According to him,

in defending their tradition, Chinese Buddhists argued that Buddhist cosmology did not contradict modern cosmology. In addition, they stressed that the evolution of contemporary physics, especially Einstein's theories, revealed not only the limits of scientific knowledge but also the limits of the scientific way of knowing. Hammerstrom deepens his analysis of Chinese Buddhists' reflections on scientific knowing in chapter 3, which focuses on how Buddhist thinkers positioned Buddhism in relation to empiricism. While Buddhists accepted that empirical verification was essential for both Buddhism and science, they also thought that Buddhism represented a higher form of empiricism: by emancipating humans (including scientists) from their deluded minds, Buddhist spiritual practice allowed them to look at reality as it was. Better still, in their analyses, advanced meditative states enabled practitioners to develop supernatural powers, through which they perceived reality in ways that modern scientific inquiries could not. In the following chapter, the author proceeds to examine how Chinese Buddhists discussed the human mind from a Buddhist perspective and with an awareness of the rising influence of psychology in post-May Fourth China. On the one hand, Chinese Buddhists saw parallels between Western psychology and Buddhism. On the other hand, they asserted that while modern psychology was unable to offer a thorough understanding of human mind, Buddhism—to be specific, the Consciousness-only school (*weishi zong* 唯識宗) was able to offer deep insights into human consciousness.

Chapters 2 through 4 investigate early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhists' exploration into truth claims about the natural universe and the human race, while chapters 5 and 6 explore the ways in which they fathomed the question of what human life ought to be. Chapter 5 discusses Buddhist responses to evolutionary theories, marked by their critical views on the celebration of might as the ideological foundation for scientific development, their rendering of spiritual progress into evolution, and their efforts to advance Buddhist egalitarianism. Chapter 6 delves into modern Chinese Buddhists' thinking on self-cultivation, including their imagining of the Bodhisattva path. By appropriating the concept of *wuming* 無名 they integrated the study of science as a part of a Buddhist's spiritual training. As they assumed an organic connection between mind and body, Chinese Buddhists took part in creating early Republican China's vogue of "physical-spiritual cultivation" (p. 158). To conclude, Hammerstrom in the last chapter compares Chinese Buddhists' thought to contemporary Buddhist

thought, pointing out parallels between their and Western Buddhists' engagements with science.

Hammerstrom's work is an exceedingly fine example of what can come to fruition through a Buddhologist taking a rigorously historical approach to religious studies. Whereas his depiction of historical contexts, based on up-to-date scholarship on modern Chinese history, is detailed, his attempt to trace the changes of Buddhism's rendition of Buddhism and science is exceptionally laudable. For instance, in chapter 2, he illustrates how Chinese Buddhists attended to the evolution of subatomic theory in their discussions on reality, and, more importantly, how they transitioned from showing the compatibility between Buddhism and science to contending for the superiority of the latter. In addition, Hammerstrom's historical analysis of early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhists' engagements with science is based on his own engagement with an impressive range of original sources, including Buddhist canonical works, major Buddhist thinkers' works, and Buddhist periodicals, which have only recently been made widely available to researchers. In this book, readers will come across well-known "Buddhist luminaries" such as Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837-1911) and Taixu 太虛 (1890-1947), but will encounter these familiar figures from a new and refreshing perspective. They also learn about lesser-known but equally intriguing thinkers like Wang Xiaoxu 王曉籟 (1875-1948), You Zhibiao 游智標 (1901-?), and Hu Chaowu 胡朝武. In addition, the author not only shows how these Buddhists collectively built early twentieth-century China's Buddhist discourse on science, but also attends to tensions and differences between them, as with the contrasts between Wang Xiaoxu, who drew upon the Consciousness-only school to develop a general scheme for examining Buddhism and science, and Hu Chaowu, who used a number of scientific disciplines to prove the value of meditation.

By interweaving all these sources with his sensitivity to historical change and developments in religious thought, Hammerstrom offers to readers a historical, e., dynamic mosaic of themes developed by Chinese Buddhist writers as they sought to define the place of their religion in relation to science in a fast-changing world. With regard to the history of modern Chinese Buddhists' engagements with science, if possible, I would hope that the author will explore in the future what gave Chinese Buddhists such confidence in advancing their views on the superiority of Buddhism vis-à-vis science. For instance, did they perhaps draw upon the lore of traditional and modern masters? Did their confidence originate in

their own personal religious experiences?

The book concludes with a short chapter that is comparative in nature. In it Hammerstrom argues that Taixu, Wang Xiaoxu, and other Chinese Buddhist thinkers prefigured Western Buddhists' theorization of Buddhism and science. He focuses solely on the work of Alan Wallace, which is a very apt choice for comparison. Hammerstrom draws attention to how this renowned American Buddhist thinker shares with modern Chinese Buddhists a number of ideas, including the determinative influence of consciousness in shaping human understanding of the world, the power of meditation, and the centrality of the store consciousness in the human mind. In addition, Hammerstrom notes the differences between Wallace and early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhists, and explains briefly why this should be so.

The conclusion is a well-argued analysis. It is significant as well, as it shows the relevance of modern Chinese Buddhism to the ongoing exploration into Buddhism and science. I wish very much, however, that Hammerstrom had written a longer, though not necessarily full-fledged, chapter to situate Alan Wallace, mainly working in the tradition of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, into the complex backdrop against which he has built his career. After all, the notion of non-contradiction between science and Buddhism has had a long history in the West. The view that as a religion with no God, Buddhism could be compatible with modern science emerged in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For a good part of the twentieth century, Zen Buddhism played a significant role in advancing the idea that Buddhism has much to

offer to scientific disciplines. In recent decades, various kinds of Buddhism and meditative practices, including Vipassana and Tibetan Buddhism, have, under the rubric of contemplative science, continued to ascend in popularity among scientists and medical professionals. How Wallace could be situated in this flow of things, which were in turn anchored in broader historical currents, including such conditions as encounters between the imperialist West and Asia, Orientalism, the tragedies of wars, and the rethinking of modernity in both Asian and Western contexts, is an important topic that ought to be explored.

Readers of this book would benefit significantly from just a little more reflection on the history of Western thinkers' engagements with science, the trend of Western scientists' engagements with Buddhism, conditions under which Chinese Buddhists and Western Buddhists differed, and also the factors that made them concur. More attention to these issues would encourage readers to raise questions about how Chinese Buddhists took part in the historical construction of a global Buddhist-inspired community of discourse on science, and how they shared with others and diversified that community. These questions deserve to be raised, for they are about a group of individuals who dared assert the superiority of religion vis-à-vis science—thus the universal value of Buddhism—when science was treated by a great many as the highest truth. That said, Erik Hammerstrom should be credited for bringing modern Chinese Buddhists' multiple voices alive for anyone interested in insights that emerge in the intersection of science and religion.

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