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## “The Politics of Buddhist Studies in Early Twentieth-Century Japan”: An Introduction

Mr. Bunyiu Nanjio [Nanjō Bun'yū 南条文雄], among other useful works which he did during his stay at Oxford, compiled a complete catalogue of the gigantic Canon, called the Tripiṭaka or the Three Baskets. It contains 1662 separate works, some small, some immense. In each case the original Sanskrit title has been restored, the date of the translations, and indirectly the minimum dates of the originals also, have been fixed. This has led to a discovery which... has revolutionised nearly the whole of the history of Sanskrit literature.

– F. Max Müller, *Biographical Essays*, 1884



It will not surprise anyone that the study of Buddhism had a recognizable politics in early twentieth-century Japan. Scholars looking at the history of other disciplinary formations have been quick to show how, for example, the study of Islam and Judaism have been formulated alongside various political projects and concerns (see Kersten 2011, Hughes 2012, Hughes 2013). Already in 1997, Russell McCutcheon had gone some distance to articulate the political contours of Religious Studies as a whole, arguing that a particular discourse around religion as a “sui generis” category had been formulated in the context of a nostalgic, or we might say traditionalist, politics (McCutcheon 1997). Similarly, Isomae Jun'ichi 磯前順一, in *Kindai Nihon no shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu* 近代日本の宗教言説とその系譜 (Modern Japanese Discourse on Religion and its Genealogy, 2003) followed McCutcheon in placing a politics designed to safeguard “sui generis” religion at the center of his pioneering reconstruction of the history of Religious Studies (*shūkyōgaku* 宗教学) in Japan. Taken together, what all these studies demonstrate is that to understand a (sub)discipline's habit of thought, its submerged normative commitments, and even the basic formation of what it takes to be its special object of study – one has to flush its politics to the surface. Indeed, one could argue that a discipline cannot make real progress unless it comes to grips with its own inherent political tensions.

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The task of uncovering the politics of Buddhist Studies in modern Japan takes on a special importance when one realizes that many of the texts and narratives formulated in that key period are still with us today across Buddhist Studies, even as their roots and original normative objectives have been obscured. For example, scholars all over the globe have spent decades debating Japanese religion in terms of “State Buddhism,” “Edo period Buddhist decadence,” and the “reformation” of Kamakura “New Buddhism” (*Shinbukkō* 新仏教) without realizing that each of these conceptual formations was itself the product of the political and intellectual struggles of early twentieth-century Japan.<sup>1</sup> Even more importantly, the vast majority of scholars of East Asian Buddhism make some reference to the texts of the Taishō Tripiṭaka (*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經). Yet most do so without realizing that this seemingly neutral collection embodies a particular position toward Buddhism formulated in modern Japan. These tropes and texts are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the influence of Japanese Buddhology on the larger field of Buddhist Studies. Hence, to understand Buddhist Studies as a whole it might seem we need to excavate the political history of Buddhism in Early Modern Japan.

To the degree that Buddhist Studies more broadly has already come under self-reflexive examination in European languages, scholars have almost exclusively focused on the European and American construction of the field (de Jong 1987, Almond 1988, Droit 1997, Lopez 1998, Masuzawa 2005). This has necessarily meant positioning the history of Buddhist Studies against the backdrop of European colonialism. In effect Buddhist Studies has been seen as conversation between Euro-American actors, expressing Euro-American concerns, and rooted in Euro-American conceptions of superiority – in other words as a prime-exemplar of “Orientalism” as critiqued by Edward Said. By way of illustration, in his groundbreaking book, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Philip Almond showed how debates about the Buddha and Buddhism reflected Victorian anxieties and served to justify various forms of British expansionary ideology. In particular, Almond argued that British scholars were complicit in the formation of Buddhism as a “textual object” that was to be found in its proper form only in manuscripts (Almond 1988: 12-13). Hence he portrays European scholar-explorers competing over who could get their hands on the most ancient Buddhist texts, while at the same time ignoring or dismissing as inauthentic the lived experiences of actual

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1. For “State Buddhism” see Lowe’s “States of ‘State Buddhism’” below, and for “Edo-period decadence” see Klautau 2012 (reviewed in this issue of *Japanese Religions*), esp. 219-289. A key source in the presentation of Kamakura Buddhism as a reformation was Hara Katsurō’s 原勝郎 1911 article, “Tōzai no shūkyō kaikaku” 東西の宗教改革 (reproduced in Hara 1929), but it can also be found in the work of Inoue Mitsusada discussed by Lowe. For this theme also see Klautau 2012, esp. 140, 165-168.

Asian Buddhists. In this whole line of critique we hear much of scholars like Max Müller, but the agency of the Asian interlocutors – like Nanjō Bun'yū – who were actually doing much of the text compilation has slipped almost entirely from view.<sup>2</sup>

The main exception to this entire scholarly topos is the focus on D.T. Suzuki (Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō 鈴木大拙貞太郎, 1870-1966). Suzuki is one of the few non-European scholars that is popularly regarded as a formative influence in the history of Buddhist Studies. But while early generations praised Suzuki as a pioneer, especially following revolutionary work by Bernard Faure (1987 and 1993), over the last twenty-five years Suzuki has been increasingly condemned for his role in constructing an anachronistic version of Zen rooted in pure experience.<sup>3</sup> In a recent iteration of this theme, David McMahan devoted a significant section of *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* to his criticism of Suzuki's construction of "Zen Romanticism," basically arguing that Suzuki's conceptions of nature, spontaneity, and the power of art were filtered through European preoccupations (McMahan 2008: 122-144). Insofar as his project would have a politics, Suzuki is often described – fairly or not – as a nationalist whose formulation of Zen paved the way for Japanese militarization. Partially because of the popularity of works like Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* (1997), this trope has become sufficiently widespread as to have been extended beyond Suzuki to become the single-master narrative of Japanese Buddhist Studies.<sup>4</sup> In these accounts Buddhist Studies in Japan was from the beginning rooted in anachronistic Buddhist apologetics and an attempt to open the way for Japanese militarism and imperialism.

The basic shape of this critique echoes a significant trend in the Japanese secondary literature as well. Understandably, Post-War Japanese scholars have been concerned about Buddhism's complicity in the build up to Japanese imperialism and almost from its conception as a disciplinary object "modern Buddhism" (*Kindai Bukkyō* 近代仏教) has been excoriated for its connection to nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these studies have also tended to demonstrate a tight relationship between the birth of Buddhist Studies and the project of modernizing Buddhism to meet the demands of the Japanese nation state.

2. For an exception see Josephson 2012.

3. Significant also in this regard is Sharf 1993.

4. For a good early version of this critique before it became unthinking see the essays in Heisig and Maraldo eds. 1995, but a later version see Žižek 2003, see esp. 24-31. A significant exception is Moriya 2005.

5. One can see this thread in varying degrees in work by the three main pioneering scholars of the field, Ikeda Eishun 池田英俊, Yoshida Kyūichi 吉田久一, and Kashiwahara Yūsen 柏原祐泉. It also appears in more recent scholarship such as Ōtani 2001, and Satō 2008. See also Ōtani 2012, reviewed in this issue.

To some extent these critiques of the mutually reinforcing formations of Buddhist Studies and nationalism in modern Japan are well-founded, but it might easily seem as if the one enquiry put to Buddhists and Buddhologists alike in Pre-WWII Japan is an attempt to sort them into pro- or anti-nationalist camps. This operation risks flattening a wider spectrum of political attitudes into a simple binary. Thankfully, the contributors to this special issue make significant headway in restoring the finer gradations of politics associated with the field's early days.

This special issue's second innovation is to shift the focus from the Meiji Period (1868-1912) to Taishō (1912-1926) and early Shōwa (1926-1989). While there has now been significant scholarship on Meiji Buddhism, Taishō and early Shōwa have been appreciably underexplored.<sup>6</sup> In part the emphasis on the Meiji Period was itself the result of the significance of that epoch for the modernization of Buddhism, kicked off both by the "opening of Japan" and also by the violent destabilization of Buddhism in the period. By way of explanation for scholars unfamiliar with this epoch, Buddhism was still reeling from the sting of the anti-Buddhist attacks of the early days of the new Meiji government known as *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 (lit., "abolish the Buddha, smash Sakyamuni"). Following, the demonization of Buddhism as a corrupt and decadent foreign cult, a string of anti-Buddhist riots culminated in burning temples, smashing icons, and decapitating statues. While the true scope and intensity of this movement has been exaggerated in later scholarship, its implications were magnified and reflected in the narratives of Meiji Buddhists themselves. Histories of Buddhism written by Meiji period Buddhists often represented *haibutsu kishaku* as the defining moment of the era.<sup>7</sup>

By the Taishō period, however, the impact of *haibutsu kishaku* had faded somewhat and to some extent the defensive nationalisms of the early Meiji period gave way to more complicated struggles over what particular kind of relationship Buddhists should have to the modern state. Although again the radical militarization of the 1930s repressed other political formations, for a short historical moment it appeared that there were a plurality of utopias on offer and plurality of possible models for Buddhist citizenship. In the same period, Buddhist intuitions worked to adapt themselves to the parliamentary politics of a modern political system that followed the promulgation of the 1889 Constitution. Moreover, not all Buddhists were on the same side, nor could they be simply sorted into nationalists and anti-nationalists, conservatives and reformers. Hence, Buddhism's place in the Taishō and early Shōwa is necessarily a more complicated story whose full intricacies have still to be told.

6. For a few examples from this large field, see Yoshida 1969, Ikeda 1976, Ketelaar 1990, Mohr 2014, Tanigawa 2008, Rambelli 2013. For an example of Japanese Buddhist Studies in a later period, see Ueki 2014.

7. E.g. Ōuchi 1904.

The scholarly lacuna around Buddhism in Taishō and early Shōwa is particularly important, however, because it was exactly in this period that Buddhist Studies emerged. Not only did it see the creation of sectarian universities and programs in Indian philosophy, but it also witnessed the initial appearance of many historical narratives that continue to frame discussions of Japanese religious history and Buddhist Studies more broadly to the present day.

### *Introduction to the Contributions*

In the first contribution to this special issue, “The Birth of Buddhist Universities” by Hayashi Makoto explores the institutionalization of Buddhist sectarian education and its impact on Buddhism in modern Japan. The basic narrative Hayashi charts is one of increasing professionalization along two main tracks that ultimately converged. In the 1880s, faculty at Tokyo Imperial University began offering courses on Buddhism, while seminaries for the education of Buddhist priests were established in roughly the same period, which eventually evolved into private Buddhist universities. Yet, as Hayashi observes, there was tension at the beginning between two models for Buddhist studies. The Imperial Universities, like their Western peers, saw Buddhology as a sub-species of Indology, rooted in Sanskrit and Pali philology. By contrast, the Buddhist sectarian institutions focused on Chinese-translations of Mahāyāna Sutras and also the writings of Japanese sect founders. As Hayashi demonstrates, however, along the way these two different coterie began building a common professional world including a shared academic society (the Buddhism Association of Japan *Nihon bukkyō kyōkai* 日本仏教協会, est. 1928). Gradually, therefore, these two competing models for Buddhist Studies began to merge. A noteworthy product of this history is that sectarian scholars learned how to produce academic works that lobbied for the importance of their particular founders, but in a mode intelligible according to Euro-American academic norms. As Hayashi notes, a crucial side effect of which is that it was precisely those figures associated with the new Buddhist universities that were ultimately enshrined as significant in the history of Japanese religion, projecting into the past the successes of their intellectual descendants.

This issue’s second article, Jolyon Baraka Thomas “Free Inquiry and Japanese Buddhist Studies: The Case of Katō Totsudō (1870-1949)” looks at the formation of a new model for scholarship known as “free inquiry” (*jiyū tōkyū* 自由討究).” As Thomas demonstrates this model developed amongst the Fraternity of New Buddhists (Shin Bukkyōto Dōshikai), consisting dominantly of lay scholars and disaffected Buddhist priests. You might imagine that from its name and origins that it might have represented a rebellion against institutional Buddhism and a rationalized skepticism. If so you would be half right. As Thomas demonstrates by focusing in on one of free inquiry’s major proponents – Katō Totsudō – it

began as an uprising against the established Buddhist institutions, but it was far from an aspiration toward value neutrality. Katō and his allies were from the beginning committed to differentiating between authentic Buddhism and backward superstitions (*meishin* 迷信) and there was massive normative force behind this distinction, which consigned whole orders of Buddhism to the role of the supposedly outmoded. It was no accident that this group initially referred to themselves as the Association of Buddhist Puritans because this movement was less anti-religious than an attempt to “reform” Buddhism self-consciously inspired by Protestantism and even more self-consciously by the pressures of modernization. Like the early phases of the Reformation in Europe, this movement meant a shift in institutionalized structures of authority and the Buddhist monastic establishment lost political influence while lay followers took on increasingly importance as the voice of Buddhism. In parallel to what Hayashi demonstrated about the eventual transformation of sectarian education to meet the needs of the global academy, Thomas demonstrates how these young reformers produced popular academic works that exploited both the theoretical tone of modern scholarship while attracting the attention of the public in both radio and written forums. Hence, they came to exert more political influence than many of the older Buddhist institutional centers. Strikingly, by presenting himself as partially outside the Buddhist institutional frame, Katō was able to exert even greater influence on Japanese policy toward what counted as authentic Buddhism.

The third article, Orion Klautau “Nationalizing the Dharma: Takakusu Junjirō and the Politics of Buddhist Scholarship in Early Twentieth-Century Japan” focuses in on the politics of Takakusu Junjirō and his normative project about the ideal relationship between Buddhism and the state. While today Takakusu Junjirō is known as the chief editor of the Taishō Tripitaka, he is normally presented in fairly colorless terms as a scholar whose main contribution was his role in importing Max Müller’s comparative religion into Japan. But Klautau demonstrates that Takakusu had a fairly unconcealed political project directed toward the formation of a new conception of Buddhist citizenship. Having granted an Orientalist binary that portrayed “the West” in terms of its technological advancement and “the East” in terms of its spirit, Takakusu then went on to elaborate the importance of Japanese Buddhism for producing a new spiritual citizenry that could resist the negative features of Western “materialism” and “individualism.” On first order approximation this might sound like a post-colonial project of resisting hegemonic domination or perhaps as jingoistic promotion of Japanese spirit. Instead, as Klautau elaborates Takakusu was aiming not to completely reject modernization or the Westernization, but to provide a kind of traditionalist cushion that could allow the assimilation of the best parts of modernity while blunting their corrosive impact on Japanese spiritual life. Yet, as Klautau also shows what scholars might see as a kind of moderate position quickly turned imperial as this concept of Buddhist citizenry

was articulated in order to justify the supremacy of a Japanese cultural hegemony in East Asia. As was common in many formulations of Japanese imperialism, Takakusu could be seen as promoting an anti-imperialist imperialism (aka keeping Asia safe from Western colonization by increasing Japanese domination). The Taishō Tripitaka therefore would seem to be of a piece with other contemporary Japanese attempts to position Japanese culture as the apex of “Oriental” civilization.

The issue’s fourth article, Bryan Lowe “States of ‘State Buddhism’: History, Religion, and Politics in Late Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Scholarship” examines the history of the state Buddhism model (*kokka Bukkyō ron* 国家仏教論), which is still one of the most widely repeated characterizations of Japanese Buddhism in the Nara period (710-784). Lowe rejects a progressive view of historiography that would see the conception of Nara Buddhism and the state to emerge from increasing scholarly discoveries. Instead he persuasively demonstrates how various vicissitudes in the presentation of Nara Buddhism and its relation to the government reflected evolving political tensions that have as much to say about scholars’ normative concerns as that of their putative subject. Lowe traces a genealogy of the concept of “state Buddhism,” noting that the expression was first deployed by Kuroita Katsumi 黒板勝美 (1874-1946), a professor at Tokyo Imperial University. From these unlikely beginnings in the hands of a national historian not particularly attentive to Buddhism, “state Buddhism” came to occupy increasing attention as Japanese scholars and Buddhists reflected on their own visions of the ideal relationship to the Japanese state. Strikingly, Lowe shows how there was a direct inversion of implicit valuation of Nara State Buddhism. Early in the historiography, although the field was diverse scholars like Tsuji Zennosuke 辻善之助 (1877-1955) presented Nara Buddhism as a positive model for uniting the Japanese state and its people, but after the Second World War, Inoue Mitsusada 井上光貞 (1917-1983) came to argue that Nara Buddhism as reflecting a dangerous subordination of Buddhism to the state. Dramatically, Lowe concludes that current scholarly support for Inoue’s model in the American academy reflects our own normative presuppositions about the ideal relationship between church and state.

The final article in the collection, Jeff Schroeder “Empirical and Esoteric: The Birth of Shin Buddhist Studies as a Modern Academic Discipline” traces the history of Shin Studies (*shinshūgaku* 真宗学) as a paradigmatic example of the evolution of sectarian Buddhology. After Kiyozawa Manshi’s sudden death in 1903, his followers in Higashi Honganji Shinshū were left trying to make sense of his provocative calls for a kind of spiritual experience he famously termed “*Seishinshugi* 精神主義.” As Schroeder demonstrates, this early generation of students found themselves working to stake out the definitive modes of scholarship of the Shin Sects over and against other forms of Buddhist studies. They ultimately came to present not only their scholarly methodology but also Buddhism itself as in line with science and empirical research. This was not a simple unidirectional scientism, but

also an attack on mistaken scientific literalism. As Schroeder argues, to both have and argue against science, they turned toward the resources of Medieval Japanese Buddhism and its category of the “esoteric” to suggest that instead of simplistic surface empiricism they were able to provide insight into the “inner nature” of things.

Taken together what these studies show is the facility with which Japanese Buddhist scholars managed to formulate their field according to globalizing academic standards without losing their preexisting normative commitments. Accordingly they have tended to subtly communicate echoes of those commitments onto the global academic study of Buddhism and Japanese religions.

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