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Review of Jones, C.B. (2021) Taixu's 'on the establishment of the Pure Land in the human realm': a translation and study

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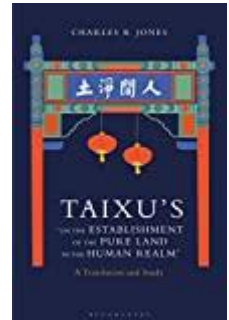
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CHARLES B. JONES. *Taixu's 'On the Establishment of the Pure Land in the Human Realm': A Translation and Study.* [Place of publication not identified]: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2020. 168 p. ; ? x cm. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-14056-1.



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Commissioned by Jessica Zu (USC Dornsife, School of Religion)

There is little doubt about the influence that the monk, philosopher, and political activist Taixu (1890-1947) had on Buddhism in the Chinese sphere and beyond. According to the author of this book, Charles B. Jones, Taixu is widely considered to be one of four revolutionary monks who effectively modernized and reformed Buddhism (along with Hongyi 弘一, Xuyun 虛雲, and Yingguang 印光). He has been considered a promoter of inter-faith relations between Christianity and Buddhism, as well as a connecting link between Buddhism and science. However, the number of scholarly works on Taixu is still limited. There is still room for a thorough investigation regarding the literary legacy of Taixu and his imprint on Chinese Buddhism Sect categorization, his philosophical contribution, and his role in the shaping of Buddhism as a religion. *Taixu's 'On the Establishment of the Pure Land in The Human Realm': A Translation and Study* contributes to this investigation.

Jones presents to us the first English translation and analysis of Taixu's essay titled "On the Es-

tablishment of the Pure Land in the Human Realm" (*Jinashen renjian jingtu lun* 建设人间净土论). Moreover, Jones presents a new, ingenious reading of Taixu's writings and biography. Complementing and challenging the various studies done on the life and works of Taixu, Jones respectfully suggests a lacuna in the understanding of Taixu's activities and message, which he bases predominantly on this new translation.

Jones begins his introduction with a statement about the book's contribution and translation. First, he notes, while there has been immense interest in republican-era Buddhism among scholars in the West, there is as yet no complete English translation of the essay. Furthermore, he lays down a mission statement to nuance and, to an extent, even deconstructs the homogeneous narrative on the venerable monk Taixu.

Taixu is mostly known in academic scholarship as the creator of the idea of the "Pure Land in the human realm" (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土). In the words of Jones: "Taixu is lionized as the preemin-

ent exponent of modernization and Reform" (p. 3.), seeking to bring Buddhism up to date by making it scientific and socially conscious. This was implemented through charitable activities, including the establishment of hospitals, orphanages, and prison ministries. Taixu drafted ambitious plans to reform the sangha that involved a high degree of rationalization and specialization and envisioned an international Buddhist movement that would unite Asia and spread the Dharma to the West. To advance this agenda, he and, later, his students, founded a series of seminaries that used modern educational techniques to train monks in secular disciplines, foreign languages, and technical Buddhist philosophy. Taixu's followers even referred to him as the Martin Luther of modern Chinese Buddhism.

According to Jones, understanding Taixu's life and work only through the lens of modernization would be to miss the different aspects of his scholarship and biography. Jones argues that the text itself does not communicate an anti-tradition message as strongly as is conventionally assumed and that Taixu recognizes more traditional ideas associated with the Buddhist worldview in the text: "Taixu was a man who did not want to modernize all of Chinese Buddhism but wished to retain as much traditional Buddhist thought as could be adapted for the modern world" (p. 5) In other words, Taixu was both a dreamer and a practical man at once. These qualities, which point at a contradiction, lead Jones to call him a "transitional figure," helping Buddhism find its way in a rapidly evolving world.

In chapter 2, Jones presents a brief historical summary of Taixu's life. The summary is approachable and well written, covering the essential steps in the life of the renowned monk. He covers the existing historical works on Taixu, giving the readers a concise, coherent trajectory. He presents milestones in Taixu's life such as his ordination and early indication, his exposure to socialism and anarchism, the invasion of Jinshan,

his confinement, and his subsequent return to the world, as well as his trip to Japan.

Following these important events in Taixu's life, the essay that is the center of this book was published in 1926, which, according to Jones, was a pivotal year not only for Taixu but also for the country. Soon after came the "Nanjing Decade" (1927-37, *Nanjing shinian* 南京十年), during which time Buddhism flourished in the eastern cities and China enjoyed relative calm before the Communist movement and the Japanese invasion.

Therefore, Jones argues that the essay is a "combination of anarchist utopian thinking and tales of Buddhist paradises" (p. 28). It came after constant turmoil and fighting among local warlords after the end of Yuan Shikai's (袁世凱) rule, which brought suffering to the people. The essay projected a utopian future that would bring hope to the people in the means of rebirth in the Pure Land. Jones sees the essay as a document that reflects Taixu's life and responds to China's political context of the time.

Chapter 3 summarizes and presents the previous scholarship on Taixu's ideas about the Pure Land in the human realm. It begins with Jones's argument that Western scholarship has viewed Taixu only as a modernizer and secularized because other aspects of his work, including anarchism and radical politics, were not reported.

To support his argument, he elaborates on the meeting between Taixu and several intellectuals and missionaries and their works on him. He discusses Karl L. Reichelt and Frank R. Millican. According to Jones, both missionaries neglected Taixu's more traditional tendencies, despite the fact the documentation of their conversations can suggest otherwise. Along with Clarence Hamilton, they agreed that Taixu's use of Pure Land images and practices was a facade that he utilized merely to attract crowds, without genuine faith in this path.

Jones continues to Paul Callahan, Holmes Welch, and Don Pittman, who have left a scholarly

mark on further Western scholarship presenting Taixu solely as a good organizer and modernizer and omitting his traditional Pure Land and Maitreyan themes. Lastly, he mentions the importance of the recent works of Eric Goodell and Justin Ritzinger, which were both more nuanced in their presentations of Taixu. He emphasizes that in the work of Ritzinger, Taixu is portrayed as a figure of greater complexity than in previous studies. He adds that the work elaborates very explicitly on Taixu's devotional life, promoting Maitreya worship.

Jones also adds non-Western scholarship to the inquiry. Some, such as Cai Zhennian 蔡振念, also echoed the emphasis on Taixu's humanistic Buddhism. Others, such as Jiang Canteng 江燦騰 and Hong Jinlian 洪金蓮 produced critical, thorough biographies and analyses of Taixu's life.

What I find missing in this overview and discussion in chapter 3 is perhaps a more critical analysis or inquiry into why various scholars ignore some aspects of Taixu's life. What could have been the incentives for the narrative they wished to project and were these incentives the same for them all? Maybe a division between missionaries and secular academic scholarship would be a good starting point, as the motives of these two kinds of scholars to get to know Taixu and write about him were most likely different.

In chapter 4, Jones explores Western literary and philosophical influences on Taixu, which spoke of utopian worlds. This is a fascinating inquiry, digging deep into Taixu's essay and his references to Plato, Socrates, Edward Bellamy, Francis Bacon, and others. He distinguishes between Utopia, a secular invention, and Paradise, a divine creation. Jones then argues and demonstrates that Taixu describes both kinds in his essay: "To be true to his vision, 'The Pure Land in the Human Realm' had to amalgamate, however uneasily, both utopian and paradisiacal features" (p. 39). Further in the chapter, Jones explores the context of the republican era when it comes to utopianism

and the particular utopian visions in Taixu's essay. He asserts that Taixu's recommendation is the closest to a religiously founded Utopia in life and aims for a Buddhist rebirth with Amitabha or Maitreya after death. This chapter is well structured, convincing, and philosophically engaged, and prepares the reader to dive into the translation.

Chapter 5 provides a definition and explanation of some of the key terms in Taixu's essay, such as the Human Realm, the relationship between the cults of Amitabha and Maitreya, and a few others. This is a good decision, providing the reader with the necessary background for the essay.

Part 2, comprised of chapter 6, is Jones's full translation of Taixu's "On the Establishment of the Pure Land in the Human Realm." This is a bright, readable, delightful translation. Part 3 discusses the fate of the Pure Land after Taixu (chapter 7) and adds a further conclusion (chapter 8). In chapter 7, Jones talks about the concept Pure Land in the human realm, beyond the scope of Taixu's text. He explores this concept in the figures of Ven. Yinshun (印順), Ven. Xingyun (星雲), and Ven. Shengyen (聖嚴) as well as Ven. Daan (大安). In his conclusion, Jones talks candidly about his disciplinary position, the process, and the importance of the complete translation of the work as a methodological tool for research. He summarizes the arguments and conclusions of the earlier chapters.

Altogether, Jones's work and his argument are well articulated and supported. For example, already in the introduction of the book, Jones begins to lay the ground for his argument. He points out the relationship between Taixu and Yinguang (印光) and Taixu's choice to conduct his confinement in Mount Putuo, where he had met Yinguang. This shows that the conventional description of Yinguang as the Pure Land conservative and Taixu as the modernizer—that is, as ideological opposites—may be exaggerated for Taixu would not have chosen to conduct his confinement following Yinguang unless he had found a philosoph-

ical and ideological common ground with him (p. 14).

To conclude, this is an excellent contribution to the study of Chinese Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and the nuances of the republican period. The work's quality lies in its uncompromising attempt to highlight complexities without setting them straight. The nuanced, almost vivid picture the reader receives of Taixu is inspiring. The book is a lesson in methodology and critical thinking for historians, religious scholars, and scholars of philosophy in China (and beyond). Aside from these qualities, I see this book as a great informative reader about Pure Land Buddhism, suitable for advanced researchers and students.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

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