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Buddhist Realism for Modern Times: Intellectual- -Historical Readings into Dharma Master Taixu's Essays on Realism¹

1 Prologue

This paper discusses one of the important conceptual segments in the thought of Dharma Master Taixu (太虛法師, original name Lü Peilin 呂培琳, 1890–1947), the founding father of the revival of *Yogācāra* philosophy in Republican China (1912–1949). As the leading figure behind the institutionalization of Buddhist studies in the 1920s and 1930s, and the author of influential concepts and theories of modernization of Buddhism, such as “humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian Fojiao* 人間佛教), Taixu's ideas left a lasting imprint on the development of lay Buddhism in post-Republican Era Taiwan, and established the role of Buddhism within the broader context of the modernization of the Chinese intellectual world and its encounters with Western scientific objectivity and humanism. The present work focuses mostly on Taixu's writings from the late 1920s and early 1930s, the crucial years of his intellectual maturation, which directly preceded the establishment of his ideas in the Chinese intellectual world of the 1930s.² More specifically, the present study will focus on Taixu's series of papers entitled “Realism” (*Xianshi zhuyi* 現實主義) from the aforementioned period, with the aim of shedding new light on the notions of “reality” and the value of scientific knowledge in the seminal period of modernization in Chinese Buddhism.

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2 According to Goodell (2008, 81–82), the years between 1920 and 1928 represented the latter half of the second period of Taixu's theoretical and intellectual development, which lasted from 1914 up to 1928. This second period was characterized by the establishment of a theoretical basis to Taixu's philosophy, a revival of the Buddhist movement, and “Buddhist seminary creation” (The Wuchang Buddhist Institute) (*ibid.*, 81). Following this period of theoretical formation, the third period was defined predominantly by Taixu's focus on the reorganization or founding of the new Chinese Buddhist monastic community or *saṃgha* (*sengjia* 僧伽) and the institutionalization of modernized Buddhist studies and the propagation of their new lay doctrine in China (*ibid.*, 82).



This article represents a sequel to my more extensive study on Taixu's thought entitled "The Subject's Guide to the Realms of Karma – Notes on Reading the Work of Dharma Master Taixu", which will be published in the *Buddhist Studies Review*. Complementing this comparatively more in-depth account of the Buddhist foundations of Taixu's project of "humanistic Buddhism" and his attempt to integrate science into his version of Buddhism for the masses, in this paper I shall primarily focus on the intellectual-historical background, characteristics and value of Taixu's notion of Buddhist "realism". By presenting a comprehensive and concise overview of elementary features of Taixu's "realism", in the following discussion I will try to cast some new light on the confluence of Buddhist logic and epistemology, Chinese cultural elements, and certain popular currents of scientific thought in Taixu's philosophical system. Secondly, the intellectual-historical investigation of the mentioned correlations and multiplicity of influences will aim at highlighting the complexity of such intellectual phenomena as Taixu's "humanistic Buddhism" or scientization of Buddhism in the context of Chinese modernization. Since, due to the limitation of space, this study will not be able to offer a broader introduction to Taixu's life and work, for more information on these aspects the interested reader can consult works like Dessein (2020), Goodell (2008), Hammerstrom (2015), Pittman (2001), and Vrhovski (2023, forthcoming).

2 A Balancing Act of Defining the "Real"

Taixu's preoccupation with scientific realism goes back to the seminal years of his fascination with modern Western science. However, the period in which his endeavours to align *Yogācāra* with modern scientific objectivity grew into a concrete notion of "realism", taking over a central place within his intellectual arsenal, can be traced back to an article published in 1926 and titled "The True Meaning of Mahāyāna Buddhādharma – Realistic and Progressivist" (*Dacheng Fofa de zhenyi – xianshi zhuyi de – jingjin zhuyi de* 大乘佛法的真義——現實主義的——精進主義的).

While 1926 was an important year for the notion of "realism" in Chinese philosophical discourse,³ Taixu's terminological choice, namely the expression *xianshi zhuyi* 現實主義, seemingly distinguishes his "realism" from the mainstream terms *shizailun* 實在論 and *weishilun* 唯實論, which gained ground in the Chinese academic discourse towards the end of the 1920s. As a matter of fact, the expression *xianshi*

3 While around the year 1924/1925 New Realism gained presence in Chinese philosophical circles, in 1926, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, a current professor of Chinese philosophy at Yenching University in Beijing published his book *Philosophy of Life* (*Rensheng zhexue* 人生哲學), in which he sets out to advocate a "new philosophy of life" based on New Realism. In the years immediately following the publication of Feng's book, New Realism took ground first at the Philosophy Department of Yenching University, and later also those at Tsinghua and Peking Universities.

zhuyi was more commonly used in relation to literary realism, while in philosophical terms the same term was used almost exclusively by its critics, generally coming from more “conservative” or “traditionalist” circles. Since Taixu seems to have been relatively well acquainted with the content-related dimensions of Russell’s presence in the Chinese intellectual world, as well as the current state of debate in Chinese philosophical circles, his choice of words might have been intentional. In Chinese Buddhist terminology, the word *xianshi* 現實 means “reality”, implying the phenomenal character of the notion of real, that is, what appears as actually existing. This brings us the outer semiotic level of Taixu’s notions of “reality” (*xianshi*) in its corresponding theory of “realism” (*xianshi zhuyi*). Another important reason for his terminological choice might have been related to the proximity of *weishilun* 唯實論 (philosophical realism) to *weishilun* 唯識論, namely the Buddhist term for “Consciousness-Only philosophy”, a branch of *Yogācāra* school of Buddhist philosophy, which he himself passionately advocated.

If the choice of the very terminology for “realism” already contained a strong Buddhist colouration, then what about his conception of realism in the sense in which it could parallel Western scientism and objectivism? Did Taixu present a new, original solution for bridging the effectiveness of formal science with, as it were, “mentalism” (*weishilun* 唯識論) *Yogācāra* epistemology? As it turns out, Taixu used a similar approach in conceptualizing Buddhist “realism” as he did in coining the very term designating it. His approach rested on the traditional Chinese notion of the semiotic correspondence of written language to the cosmological or ontological structure of the world. Based on similar relational foundations as the well-known Confucian ideal of “correct names” or “rectification of names” (*zhengming* 正名), Taixu’s solution was to seek the structure of reality as a whole in the binary term *yuzhou* 宇宙, commonly treated as equal to the Western (as technical term common to most European languages) term “universe”.

Thus, Taixu chose *yuzhou* as a term incorporating both main dimensions of reality and combining them into one coherent whole, as the reality was supposed to appear to us. Aside from taking the Chinese binary synthetic category *yuzhou* as being directly reflective of the nature of reality, Taixu explicitly asserted that “reality is the universe”. Now, although this is not clear at first sight, the above two aspects are essentially different. While the traditional Chinese notion of the “universe” had only represented one approach towards viewing or describing the totality of reality, the world as a whole, Taixu’s assertion was more exclusive, implying that either physical reality or our cognition is tantamount to the appearance that is *yuzhou*:

Having facts, while not having boundaries and a centre is called *yu* 宇. Having changes and appearances, yet not having beginning or an end, is called

zhou 宙. When we thus use names, numbers, mind and thought to portray *yu* 宇, we are therefore speaking about points, lines, planes and bodies, the word is about above and below, about the vertical and the horizontal, calling it space (*kongjian* 空間). But *yu* is not points, lines, planes and bodies, it is without above and below, verticals and horizontals, it is not space. Because we use names, numbers, mind and thought to portray *yu* 宙, we speak about seconds and minutes, we speak about past, present and future, calling it time (*shijian* 時間). But *zhou* is not seconds and minutes, it has got no past, present and future, and it is not time. A part of the universe (*yuzhou* 宇宙) is called the world (*shijie* 世界). The world (*shijie*) is not the full name of the universe, that is, the totality of human life (*rensheng* 人生), which is referred to as the universe (*yuzhou*). But human life is not a name corresponding to the universe. How is the universe nothing else but reality? And how is reality nothing else but the universe? (Taixu, 1928a, 1)

Of course, as a Buddhist, Taixu could not avoid assuming the reality of some other crucial categories beside the universe. However, what merits more attention is his distinction between the world, human life (*rensheng*), and the universe as three main domains, which, from the epistemic point of view, would all have to fall within this-worldliness. This rather dense categorization, which he seems to be struggling with, was probably an outcome of his ambitious attempt to bring together Chinese terms, underpinned by a notion of a positivist conceptual correspondence, with elementary Buddhist concepts. Hence, the term *yuzhou* was in part an ontological category and in part a mentalist conception owing to his attempts to fit Buddhist concepts into traditional Chinese categories. In the case of the term *yuzhou*, Taixu saw consistency with what he knew to be the Buddhist system of ideas – here, I am alluding to the immense diversity of Buddhist schools in East Asia – in the “complementary” distinction between ten ages (*shishi* 十世) and ten realms (*shijie* 十界). In turn, he called the totality of the horizontal ages, the “great cosmic eave” or *dayu* 大宇, and the totality of the vertical realms the “eternal cosmic rafter” or *yongzhou* 永宙 (*ibid.*). Together, the greater scope of *yuzhou* meant

not regarding the [particular] facts, but regard each phenomenon (*shi* 事) within continuous change is called *yuzhou*. Regarding the *yongzhou* within *dayu* is called reality (*xianshi*). But not naming it *yuzhou*, the universe of the real will be discussed as a spatial body (*fangti* 方體) and a period of time (*shike* 時刻) or as a world, which does not correspond in meaning to the human life, and thus easily commit mistakes. For this reason, we shall discard it and not use it here. (*Ibid.*, 1–2)

The difference between the world, universe, human life, and reality is therefore not substantial, if by substance we mean existence independent of human perception and sensation. Above all, what is denoted by reality in Taixu's realism is a matter of perspective or view (*guan* 觀 – terminologically similar to the Sanskrit term *darśana* (“seeing”), yet probably with different semiotic connotations). Perspective in turn frames or defines the sequence in which the constitutive dimensionality of *yu-zhou* 宇宙 and *shi-jie* 世界 (note the hyphen as a marker of dual relation) are manifested within perception and cognition. But is this a form of cognitivist or ontological relativism? For a follower of *Yogācāra* the answer would involve both options, yet in a particular sequence and observed from the perspective of *yuzhou* and given that the subject is familiar with the main tenets of Buddhist epistemology (the nature of mind) and cosmology (the developmental possibilities of the mind's form's being). In this regard, *yuzhouguan* 宇宙觀 (view on the universe) is a form of perspective superior to that of *xianshiguan* 現實觀 (view on reality), while at the same time these are not mutually exclusive when it comes to their object and the objective dimensions of the perspective as such. Their difference resides – and this can be regarded as a feature of not only Chinese Buddhism – in the act of perceiving, which depends on the relation between the subject and the sphere of its thought (*xiang* 想). Whereas the nature and form of this relation is not to be taken for granted, but to be thoroughly reflected on within the intellectual setting of Taixu's time and its traditional background(s).

While *yuzhouguan* as a perspective was more comprehensive or even essential than “realism”, Taixu's apophatic definition of realism did not stop at this stage, but had to consider, as it were, an existential realm which is characteristic to Buddhist epistemology (the end of the process of the mind's enlightenment), namely the so-called *dharmadhātu* or the “realm of *dharma*”.⁴ Beyond doubt, the disambiguation between the “real” (*xianshi*) and “the realm of *dharma*” (*fajie* 法界) was pivotal for the epistemic dimensions of Taixu's Buddhisation of modern scientific objectivity. Because, when it came to epistemology, Taixu was a follower and advocate of the Mind-Only philosophy (*Weishilun* 唯識論), his understanding of *dharma* was adopted from the *Cheng Weishilun liaoyi deng* 成唯識論了義燈, an interpretation

4 Sometimes, the term *dharmadhātu* is also translated as the “realm of the real”. However, this is not a literal translation but more an interpretative gloss of its philosophical meaning. See, for example, Mario D'Amato's use of the term in D'Amato (2009, 43). What is important to understand here is that the nature of such realms or worlds is given different interpretations in different schools and lineages of Buddhism. The same is true for the concept of *dharma* in the first place – its meanings range from cosmic laws to phenomena, to the Buddhist teaching (as rules/principles to accord with in practice of Buddhism). Apart from *dharmadhātu* in the *Lañkāvatārasūtra*, the idea of a “real world” is also given in the term *buddhakṣetra*, a term often translated in plural as “buddha-lands” (note the reference to Buddhahood and not the historical Buddha), but which would probably most correctly be translated as the “buddha-fields”. An important feature of such realm of existence, however, is being beyond the effable (cf. Kalupahana, 1992, 178–180), a form of awareness incoherent with the realism as probably spoken about by Taixu.

of Mind-Only composed by Huizhao 慧沼, the second patriarch of the Chinese *Chan* school (*Chan*宗 禪宗), and from Tang Dynasty *Yogācāra* master Kuiji's 窺基 text *Cheng Weishilun shuji* 成唯識論述記. Both authors were Buddhist monastics close to Xuanzang 玄奘, the translator of the text *Twenty Verses on the Consciousness-Only* (*Viṃśatikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhi*, *Weishilun ershi* 唯識二十論) and other works by the Peshawari monk and logician Vasubandhu. Both Chinese commentary from the Tang Dynasty explain the word *fa* 法 or *dharma* as *guichi* 軌持, where *gui* 軌 means “standards” or “rules” (*guifan* 軌範) that can liberate sentient beings, and *chi* 持, which means “preserving” or “maintaining” (*renchi* 任持), that is not renouncing the *sva(bhāva)lakṣaṇa*, the conception of uniqueness, individuality or self-characteristics (*zixiang* 自相).⁵ This original definition was rendered by Taixu into “*fa wei guichi fangui, ta jie renchi renchi zixing* 法謂軌持範軌，他解任持自性”，namely “*dharma* is the rules of regulation and maintenance, which explains (*jie* 解)⁶ one's maintenance of self-nature (*zixing* 自性)” (Taixu, 1928a, 2).

Regardless of whether Taixu was misunderstanding or reinterpreting the Chinese *Yogācāra* scriptures from the Tang Dynasty, what is of major importance for our discussion is the intellectual impact of his thought on one side and its internal structure on the other. While the first needs no further support in research, the latter is still rather problematic. In our case, such an instance can also be found in relation to Taixu's notion of *dharmadhātu* (*fajie*). If, on the one hand, his rendering of the definition of *dharma* somewhat differed from the text of Chinese *Yogācāra* tradition, the further formulation conveys a different image: “If were either to add or to remove [any of] its rules, then there is confusion and error. If we change or get rid of its maintenance, then there is perishing” (*ibid.*). Here, Taixu evidently reverts to what might be regarded as Huizhao's thought. *Dharma* is the law (*fa* 法) of understanding and the principles of correct existence. This is the, as it were, “mentalist” formula of Mind-Only, which at the same time is very close to the traditional Chinese conception of the unity or complementarity of, for example, spheres of knowing (*zhi* 知) and acting (*xing* 行), and so on. More importantly, what is hereby meant by the realism of *dharmadhātu* is that it denotes the nature of mind in the first place, and existential realm as its causal outcome. Here, it is naturally not our interest to review the tenets of Mind-Only thought in Taixu, but rather its underlying conceptual bases, which are not to be taken for granted and carelessly dismissed as just another example of *Yogācāra*. Instead, the

5 This is Huizhao's definition: “*Fa wei guichi* [...] *gui wei guifan ke shengwu jie. Chi we renchi bushe zixiang.* 法謂軌持. [...] 軌為軌範可生物解。持謂任持不捨自相。” See Huizhao, 1988, Scroll 1, 0675a29–30.

6 This is a very problematic part, since in Buddhist texts *jie* 解 can mean “eliminating”, “solving”, “relieving”, and “liberating”, as well as “understanding”. Here, the translation of Huizhao's definition might come in very useful: “[...] *gui* constitutes the rules that can liberate the living beings. *Chi* is called maintaining, the unwillingness to let go of the conception of self” (my italics).

argument advanced here emphasizes the necessity of current and broader Chinese intellectual discourse in evaluating Taixu's "scientific Buddhism". By this very token, it is of an immense importance to put Taixu's idea of *fajie* under further theoretical scrutiny. The questions we must hereby pose are as follows: What is meant by the "realism" of *fajie*? How is such a "realm" related to the human existence and Taixu's humanism? Or, in other words, how is *fajie* real for the individual and society?⁷

With regard to the meaning of *jie* 界 and *fajie* 法界, Taixu indicates as follows:

Jie 界 is called the totality of parts (*zongfeng* 總分). The totality includes the utmost absence (*zhiwu* 至無), and parts divide the utmost complete being (*qiongyou* 窮有). Because the totality includes the utmost absence, it includes both being absence and being, while the being is inexhaustible (*wujin* 無盡). Including parts that divide the utmost complete being, it therefore divides entire being and sets the ends (*jing* 竟) of absence, while absence contains all divisions. All *dharma*s can be spoken about in terms of the name (*ming* 名) comprehensive embracing (*zongbao* 總包), while all names (*ming*) spoken about by means of separating into parts (*fenxi* 分析) can hardly instruct (*xuan* 宣) even one single *dharma*. If it were not for *dharmic* laws (*fagui* 法軌), one would not be able to investigate their differences, and if it were not for the totality of *jie*, one would not be able to grasp their common identity (*tongtong* 通同⁸). If it were not for the maintaining of *dharma* (*fachi* 法持), one would not be able to illuminate their perpetual becoming. Were it not for the divisions of *dharma* (*fafen* 法分), one would not be able to know their degeneration. Therefore, the realm of *dharma* (*fajie*) is the totality of all *dharma*s and does not refer to any single *dharma* as such. [...] and [each of] all *dharma*s are absorbed and established within one *dharma*. [...] This is the six conceptions (*lakṣaṇa*) of totality, separation, identity, difference, becoming, and degeneration as the fundamental meaning of the name *fajie*. Without the six conceptions of the *dharma* realm, one would not be able to gaze (*guan*) the real (*xianshi*), without the real (*xianshi*) one would not be able to gaze (*guan*) the six conceptions of the *dharma* realm. *Dharma* realm is the real, and the real is *dharma* realm. But, by referring only to the name (*ming*) reality (*xianshi*) without speaking about the *dharma* realm (*fajie*), the real meaning of *dharma* realm remains hidden, and the name reality (*xianshi*) has also other meanings [...], which is why we are able to interpret the meaning of the name "reality" (*xianshi*) only by speaking about reality (*xianshi*). (Taixu, 1928a, 2)

7 The last question is particularly important, since it alludes to a certain notion of "collectiveness" in Chinese Buddhist concepts, such as *karma* etc. See Vrhovski (2023, forthcoming).

8 Otherwise also glossed as a verb "to collude" or "come together".

Aside from Taixu's apparent focus on the patterns of language, the above excerpt also reveals to us the manner of his engagement with the overlapping of the, so to say, *states-views* (cognition as being) of the "real" and "dharma realm". While *fa* 法 and *jie* 界 appear to be complementary in constituting a *realm* of awareness and a state of being, Taixu seems to propose a similar relation between *xianshi* as the real and *fajie* as the *dharma* realm of true awareness and self-realization (because at this point the *self* – either *zixiang* 自相 or *zixing* 自性 – is still clung to). Yet, at the same time, reality is still different and not completely synonymous with the *dharma* realm, which led Taixu to reiterate the *zhengming* paradigm, that only *xianshi* can be adequately used to refer to "reality".

Due to its relative coherence with the realm of *dharma*, Taixu's Buddhist realism is also endowed with the "non-ism" (*wuzhiyi* 無主義) of Buddha's teaching. Akin to Buddhist *dharma* the above-described "real" (*xianshi*) is also consonant or even identical with what is in this way (*zhen shi ruci* 真是如此). Being synonymous with what is thus existing, the real is further independent of whether it is known or spoken about, as well as the way it is known or spoken about (*ibid.*). Since an adherence to the "genuine suchness" (*zhen shi ruci*) of existence is the joint characteristic of Buddha-*dharma* (as teaching), it is beyond all "-isms", where one aspect of existence is stressed above all other. Similarly, the Buddhist realist view is a "non-ism", inclined neither to pragmatism, deism, idealism, materialism, or pragmatism, nor only toward the scientific or philosophical (Taixu, 1928a, 3).

3 On the Elementary Logical and Epistemic Method(s) of Realism

The entire system of Taixu's Buddhist "realism" appeared in more than thirty separate essays, published in the *Haichao yin* journal between 1928 and 1931. Each of these papers focused on a particular aspect of his "realism", from logic and language, down to astronomy, optics, acoustics, and so on. Here, we shall only take a look into the epistemological and methodological foundations of his system of realism, which were outlined in the first of his long essays in 1928.

The foundational theory of his realism was aimed at addressing two main aspects: one was the so-called, practical logic (*shili* 事理) of the known reality, and the other was the relationship between the capacity to know (*nengzhi* 能知) and what is known (*suozhi* 所知). The first part of the foundational theory, which was devoted to the "method which enables us to know reality", encompassed altogether nine essays, each covering one methodological domain: (1) the true and false of perception and

inference (*xian-bi zhen-si* 現比真似);⁹ (2) a general theory of mathematics (*suanxue* 算學, an earlier term for the entire mathematics; Taixu, 1928b); (3) a general theory of propositions (*shengming* 聲明, a term which actually means “assertions”; Taixu, 1928c); (4) establishing and eliminating truth and falseness (*lipo zhensi* 立破真似; Taixu, 1928d); (5) true and false reasoning from perception (*xian zhen-si liang* 現真似量; Taixu, 1928e); (6) inference based on what is heard and methodological criticism (*wenliang yu fangfa zhi pingpan* 聞量與方法之評判; Taixu, 1928f) and so on. A relatively consistent series of essays stopped with the November issue of the *Hai-chao yin*. The reason was that all these papers were almost certainly prewritten, and thus composed before Taixu embarked upon his journey to the West in 1928. From the intellectual-historical perspective, this represents an important fact, because during his stay in Europe and the United States Taixu was significantly exposed to the contemporary Western thought, and on numerous occasions had the chance to debate with some of the leading American, British, French, and German philosophers, including Bertrand Russell.¹⁰ His encounters with modern Western New Realism in its native environment expanded Taixu's perspective and caused him to engage in his own polemics with what he collectively called “the new thought” (*xin sixiang* 新思想). Consequently, upon his return to China he gave a series of lectures entitled “Buddhism and New Thought” (*Foxue yu xin sixiang* 佛學與新思想) in which he also presented his own views on the relationship between Buddhism and New Realism (see Taixu, 1931).

Hence, when it comes to the above-listed series of methodological writings on the foundations of Buddhist “realism” it is far from surprising to discover that most of its main pillars of thought were founded on Buddhist logic. Thus were, for instance, points (3) to (6). What this meant was that Taixu was mostly striving to introduce the multiple-graded causal syllogism from *hetuvidyā* or *yinmingxue* 因明學. The basic concepts and syllogistic formulae from *yinmingxue* were supported

9 These were terms taken from Buddhist logic: *xian-bi* 現比 refer to *xianliang* 現量 and *biliang* 比量, of which the first is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *pratyakṣa* or perception as a form of knowing derived from manifest phenomena, while the second corresponds to the word *anumāna*, a term for inference in the Buddhist *hetuvidyā*. The opposition *zhen-si* on the other hand is similar to “true” and “false” in Western traditional logic, with one major distinction, namely that the word *si* 似, which would correspond to false, contains a strong Buddhist phenomenological connotation. *Si* namely means only “to resemble” the genuine truth or being “falsely thus”. In Chinese Buddhist language, the term *si* is used to mean both Sanskrit words *pratibhāsa* (resembling) as well as *ābhāsa* (not being thus), meaning a refutation or false assertion in logic.

10 A report from 1929 states that a two-hour long discussion between Taixu and Russell took place in October 1928: “On October 14, 1928, Master Taixu, accompanied with Dr. Margouliès and me, has arrived from Paris to London. Two days later, he visited Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom Chen Zhisan. At that time, Cai Yupei (Cai Jiemin 蔡子民) wrote Russell a letter introducing Taixu [...]” (Chen, 1929, 1). Eventually, Taixu and Russell met on November 2 for a two-hour conversation over tea. Although the topic and content of conversation merits our closer attention, here it shall suffice to say that it revolved around the relationship between science and Buddhism in modern “world” (*shijie* 世界) Buddhism – *shijie Fojiao* 世界佛教 is a term used personally by Taixu.

by epistemological tenets from *Yogācāra*. Undoubtedly the most interesting part of his exposition resided in the first three points, which – aside from trying to convey the impression that Western logic (*luoji* 邏輯) forms an integral part of his theory of “propositions” and true and false reasoning (*biliang* 比量) – apportion a pivotal role also to mathematics. This, in particular, ought to be regarded as one of the vital tokens by which Taixu conceptualized and communicated his thought’s modernity or even objectivity. Moreover, the integration of such notions of objectivity into the very centre of his philosophical system reveals the very impact of the intellectual developments on Taixu’s conception of the value of Buddhism itself. The possibility should, therefore, be allowed that Taixu’s realism was as much a case of the modernization of Buddhism as it was an endeavour to “Buddhisize” global modernity. This very fact can be recognized not only in Taixu’s integration of “New Realist objectivity” into the methodological foundations of his philosophy, but also, for example, in the manner in which he dealt with Buddhist epistemological tenets as well. In this regard he was more or less emulating the “methodological” or “analytical” approaches from modern logic and mathematics. Additionally, in point six he investigated the empirical value of the category “inference from what one has heard” to be true, or *wenliang* 聞量, an idea which is not only pertinent to the transmission of Buddhist *dharma* – since most sutras start with the words *evam mayā śrutam*, “thus have I heard” (in Chinese *rushi wo wen* 如是我聞) – but in key fields is tantamount to very idea of knowledge acquired through learning in general (aside from what has been written/read).

On the method of knowing the true by rational inference and analysis (*liang* 量) of sense-data and other perceived features of reality, Taixu made the following general remarks:

What we today say to be real, must first have been recognized in reality. To be able to speak about knowing reality requires having a method of knowing within the real. Therefore, we shall start by discussing the tools of true and false inferential reasoning used in acquiring knowledge from perception and reasoning. The first [type] of tools is the measure of shapes and numbers (*xing-shu* 形數), while the second are the words and sentences of linguistic expression. [...] It is, therefore, in accord with an order that we speak about numbers and quantity when making judgments about reality [...]. Being aware about [the real], consists in breaking away from its false appearances (*si*) and establishing oneself within what is true (*zhen*). [...] Then the doctrines inherited from antiquity should also contribute to our awareness of it. They can be used as the basis and repository of knowledge about [reality]. But we ought to critically examine and distinguish its truth

from what is wrong in them. [...] comparing modern and ancient methods of knowing. [...] But this method capable of knowing is at the same time [something] that is known (*suozhi*). In all that is known about reality is that knowledge of what cannot be known, knowing that absence (*wu*) is not known. (Taixu, 1928a, 3–4)

The above excerpt gives a concise presentation of Taixu's undertaking in this context. It conveys his commitment to a genuinely neutral (in the sense of "non-ism") approach towards harnessing knowledge about "reality", as discussed in the previous chapter. However, as a leading personality in the ranks of Chinese Buddhist clergy, it was not Taixu's intention to apply the same level of neutrality to his, so to say, metatheoretical "domain of *dharma*" as Buddhist teaching about the nature of cognition, awareness, and ultimate realization. For a Buddhist, the knowledge attainable about "reality" is not tantamount to one's realization of *dharma*, neither in the form of attainment nor realization as its incarnation. From a reversed direction of approach, through this prism we are able to further understand the nature of overlapping and essential difference between "reality" (*xianshi*) and the "realm of *dharma*" (*fajie*). Since in Buddhist epistemology, the ultimate or total reality is attainable in one or another form, this also implies an essential categorization of cognition as such. We could probably speak about differences, which go beyond the nuances of form and formlessness or existence and absence of constituents of an essentially empty reality. As Taixu also aptly elaborated on in one of his chapters, one such separating factor resides in the phenomenological categorization of what is perceived (*xiang* 相 as *lakṣaṇa*), which in *Yogācāra*'s epistemology is informed by the long tradition of Buddhist logic, and also includes a distinction reminiscent of Western concepts of individuals and universals. The main difference being that, while the term *gongxiang* 共相 or "common characteristics" (*sāmānya*) would indeed vaguely correspond to a certain notion of universals, at the individual level the term *zixiang* 自相 is centred strongly around the unit of the sentient self. The external phenomenal world of objects bearing such characteristics (*jingxiang* 境相) is primarily also the object of acquisition of "knowledge" about reality. At the same time, however, this still makes up a segment of *dharma* and is as such also conducive to higher forms of awareness (in Buddhist terms of expression, it serves as a "raft"). In one of the above-listed papers, Taixu also provided the following diagram depicting such dependencies in knowledge-formation (1928f, 14):

<i>dharma</i> (<i>fa</i> 法)	{	A. Known world of phenomena (<i>suozhi jingxiang</i> 所知境相).	}	Names and sentences that are able of explaining (<i>neng quan mingyan</i> 能詮名言) – i.e. language (<i>yu</i> 語).
		B. Knowable consciousness (<i>neng zhi zhishi</i> 能知智識) – i.e. consciousness (<i>shi</i> 識), which distinguish between knowledge by inference and perception, and attained by reasoning and not by reasoning.		Explained practical principles/logic (<i>shili</i> 事理) – i.e. meaning (<i>yi</i> 義).

What falls within the domain of knowing is thus inherently divided into the phenomenal reality, which is describable by means of language or formal expression, while the deeper or higher levels of *dharma* are attainable through spheres of consciousness (*shi* 識), which spreads beyond the reach of inference (*feiliang* 非量). Here, Taixu is again both following and adapting the “patterns” of Chinese “names” (*ming* 名). The word *zhishi* 智識, which is used above as a term denoting one of the highest forms of consciousness, is thus homonymous with the term *zhishi* 知識, the general modern expression for “knowledge”. Although as a term the former had been borrowed from a specific theoretical context, Taixu also used it in parallel to the modern concept of knowledge. In fact, Taixu even went on to advance his own etymological/semiotic classification of the stages of knowledge of *dharma* (*ibid.*, 16):

<i>Shi</i> 識 (consciousness)	an animal	vulgar emotions
<i>Shizhi</i> 識智 (consciousness-wisdom)	humanity superman (<i>chaoren</i> 超人)	Religion Philosophy science
<i>Zhishi</i> 智識 (wisdom-consciousness)	minor sage (<i>xiaosheng</i> 小聖) major sage (<i>dasheng</i> 大聖)	small vehicle (<i>xiaocheng</i> 小乘) large vehicle (<i>dacheng</i> 大乘)
<i>Zhi</i> 智 (wisdom)	the Buddha	

If we take a closer look at the four stages of “knowing” on the left side, the persistent presence of *shi* 識 or “consciousness” at the initial three stage is what can be regarded as the explicit mark of the “consciousness-only” character of Taixu’s hierarchical stratification of knowledge. Moreover, in the process of cognition, it is exactly this element of consciousness that is gradually eliminated through *zhi* 智, a form of “wisdom-knowledge”. The key feature of the above classification resides in the transition from *shizhi* to *zhishi*, where the this-worldly aspects of human knowledge about reality, such as philosophy and science, are all left behind within the “wisdom-consciousness” revolution. On the other hand, the category of science is bound tightly to the category of “superman”, an individual with higher awareness about “reality”, who has not yet made the inversive turn into the wisdom about the nature of “consciousness” (*shi* 識) itself. This stage lies within the externally unreachable domain of *dharma*, which takes over as a “person” takes an inward turn towards “wisdom of one’s consciousness” and enters the first one of the “vehicles” of Buddhist *dharma*, namely the *Hināyāna*. Although the knowledge-related products of the animal to superman stages are preconditions for subsequent advancement, they are all forms of “consciousness” about reality, which are left behind at the higher levels of the human path towards Buddhahood or enlightenment. In spite of the several gaps which ensue within such progress towards wisdom, the continuity of the path is guaranteed in the intermediate subsistence of the realm of *dharma* (*fajie*). What has been described here is further elaborated on in the following diagrams created by Taixu (*ibid.*, 22):

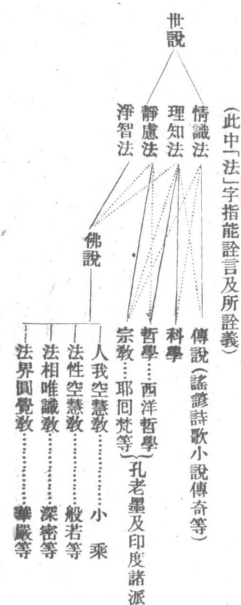


Figure 1

The diagram shows the classification of “worldly teaching” (*shishuo* 世說) in terms of four types of *dharma*, which also shows the transition to “Buddha’s teaching” (*Foshuo* 佛說). The latter is most closely tied to the *dharma of pure wisdom* (*jingzhifa* 淨智法) and less closely related to lower two *dharmas* of rational knowledge (*lizhi* 理知) and religious contemplation. For our inquiry into Taixu’s realism it is important to recognize that the above-depicted transition still takes place within the realm of worldly existence. In other words, the above diagram depicts the relations between a subject of cognition and the outer reality, a domain of human life (*rensheng*) within the universe (*yuzhou*). Again, the only possible separation from this worldly existence is via the *dharma*-realm, which “epistemologically” or “phenomenologically” overlaps with Taixu’s notion of “reality” (*xianshi*). These two continuous yet dissimilar spheres constitute the pivotal nexus of human ascension towards the stage of “supermanhood” (*chaochaoren* 超超人), which in Taixu’s terminology describes the stages from “minor sagehood” to “Buddhahood”. Such an evolutionary trajectory is depicted in Figure 2 below (*ibid.*):

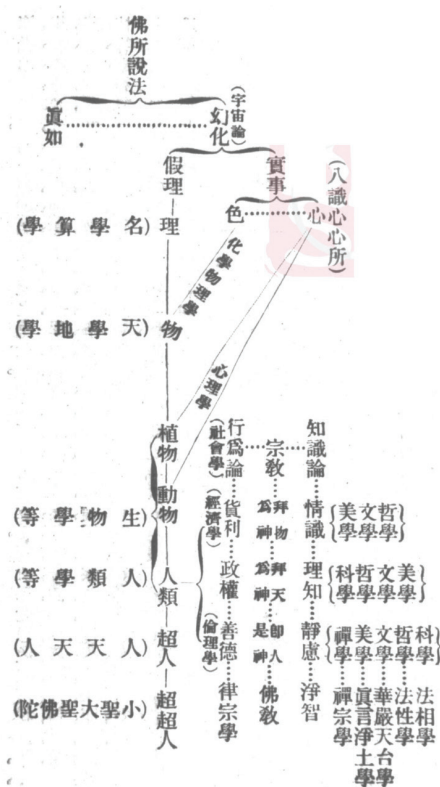


Figure 2

In contrast with Figure 1, Figure 2 depicts the division of “*dharma* expounded by the Buddha” into what is “truly thus” (*zhenru* 真如) and what is illusory (*huanhua* 幻化) not within but rather as the universe (*yuzhou*). The lower left side of the diagram contains the classification of knowledge and scientific disciplines, which emerge concurrently with one’s progression towards Buddhahood. What is interesting is that at the level of the “super-superman” science and philosophy, for example, evolve into *faxiangxue* 法相學 and *faxingxue* 法性學, respectively. While the learning of *faxiang* 法相 means essentially the learning of the essential nature of *dharma*s or different phenomena, the term *faxing* 法性 or “*dharma* nature” (*dharmatā*) could be described to mean the inherent, true nature of the cognizing mind.

4 The Western Experience and New Realism(s)

As we mentioned above, Taixu’s views experienced some minor shifts and changes after his visit to Europe and the United States. Of special interest to us are those aspect of the new intellectual ferment within Taixu’s intellectual field that pertained to the notion of “realism”. Important clues can be distilled already from his conversations with Russell in 1928, in which both men almost immediately started by addressing Russell’s interest in Buddhism and the question of the proximity of the Englishman’s thought to Taixu’s Buddhism. When Russell inquired about this, Taixu responded:

It has got much in common with Buddhism. When you maintain that “we are only able to know that there exist several scattered and inter-related particulars (*te* 特體), while [we do not] assume that there exists one whole, which is composed of this multitude of particulars, or one whole universe that would embrace everything. We further only recognize that there exist several different truths and no single, absolute truth, enveloping everything.” This has got much in common with the *dharma* of continuity of life and death in Buddhism. Where it is not maintained that therefore there exist one “eternal self” composed of several *dharma*s or any such whole entity, but we instead speak about the true appearance (*zhenxiang* 真相) of individual *dharma*s, maintaining that one *dharma* cannot enwrap all truths. (Chen, 1929, 2)

The words set out above confirm what we could only have guessed about from Taixu’s previous writings, namely that he understood his “realism” as being profoundly in line with Russell’s “New Realism”. When he was devising his new Buddhist realism (*xianshi zhuyi*), Taixu was thus very much hoping to connect *Yogācāra* epistemology and the *yinming* science of logic, not only with the Western systematized scientific knowledge, but, more directly, with the notion of realism which was in circulation in

the contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse and gained extra prominence in the newly shaped circle of Chinese “New Realists”. Moreover, Chen Qibo’s report about Taixu’s conversations with Russell reveals the – albeit probably not so profound – involvement of Zhang Shenfu 張申府 in presenting this important contact between Russell and Chinese Buddhism to Chinese readers (*ibid.*, 1). His role or influence with regard to his propagation of Russell’s New Realism on Taixu would not have been so surprising at all. First of all, in the mid-1920s Zhang was still the main proponent and popularizer of Russell’s thought in China. His intellectual renown increased around 1928, when he translated Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and joined a group of philosophers in Beijing in the formation of a school of New Realism and mathematical logic at the Private Yenching University, and later also at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Moreover, in his *Reflections* 所思, which started to appear around the time of Taixu’s first papers on realism, Zhang described Russell’s, and consequently also his own idea of realism, in the following manner:

“Humanity” and “the scientific method”; I believe these are the two most precious things. Among the things which in recent years have most often reappeared in my mind or resounded [came up] from my throat, were in particular the following four ideas: analysis (*fenxi* 分析, I formerly especially preferred to use the word *jiexi* 解析), pluralism (*duoyuan* 多元), objectivism (*keguan* 客觀) and realism (*qieshi* 切實). If we combine the last two, we can obtain the fashionable notion called “materialism” (*weiwu* 唯物). Also, as was explained by Russell, the person who most understood these things, the key characteristic of that is generally referred to as “the theory of realism”, which emerged as a result of many different aspects at the beginning of the 20th century, was the belief that the method [should] reside in analysis and cosmology in pluralism. Because of that, I am most opposed to the ideas of “everything or nothing” and anthropomorphism (*renhua sixiang* 人化思想) as disseminated by the literati. (Zhang, 2005, 53–4)

What is even more important is that, back in the year 1920, when Zhang was introducing Russell not only to his close circle of scholars, which also included one of the most important contributors to the *Yogācāra*-revival in the 1920s, Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, he – Zhang – had already established a direct link between Russell’s realism and Buddhist epistemology. Aside from stressing the centrality of the notion of continuum within Russell’s philosophy, he directly compared the latter’s cosmological view to the notion of “storehouse-consciousness” (*alāyeshi* 阿賴耶識, Skrt. *ālāyavijñāna*) from the Consciousness-Only school of Buddhism (see Zhang, 1920). Thus, possible influences on Taixu’s understanding of Russell’s realism become a bit more apparent.

In one way or another, his views on Western realism underwent further changes in the late 1920s, when Taixu acquired more direct, first-hand experience with modern Western scholars and their thought. As has been mentioned above, new horizons within Taixu's notion of realism became apparent, amongst other places, in his lectures on "Buddhism and New Thought" (*Foxue yu xin sixiang* 佛學與新思想), in which he addressed both the modern notion of knowledge (*zhishi* 知識) as well as the nature and content of Russell's New Realism (*Xin shizai lun* 新實在論). Thus, in 1931, Taixu made the following conclusions about Russell's New Realism, the essence of which he recognized in its standpoint of "neutral monism":

[...] Russell considers individuality (*gexing* 個性) to be empty, while not thinking the same about events (*shiqing* 事情). In the teaching of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the events are empty as well, which is why these two teachings are not of the same type. In the twelve-part canon of the *Hināyāna* there at least exist a part, which considers humans as empty and *dharma* as not empty. This is quite close to what Russell is teaching. His theories represent one of the newest thoughts in the philosophical world and it is so closely related to the truth of Buddha-*dharma*. This is something, which all the materialist of the last century could not achieve. (Taixu, 1931, 7)

The above excerpt once again contains some striking information, not only about Taixu's worldview, but even more about his positioning within the Chinese intellectual currents of the day. Moreover, it reveals something even more striking, namely a persistent positive attitude towards Russell's New Realism coming from the foremost representative of Buddhist modernization in China. Although in the early 1930s the Chinese discourse on dialectical materialism had already started to shift decisively towards the dogmatism of Soviet Marxism, the memory of Russell's association with the Chinese socialist movement was still quite strong. It is however necessary to remark that, in the debates on dialectical and formal logic from the early 1930s, the "official" proponents of mathematical logic and New Realism took a stand against dialectical materialism, which could have made a general impression that Russell was considered an adversary of the materialist movement in China (cf. Vrhovski, 2021). Nonetheless, what is of the greatest value to us is that all these historical facts, help us pinpoint more exactly Taixu's notion of "realism" in the said period. It helps us understand that, while Taixu would choose to contend against a materialist notion of reality, he would very much see himself in line with the so-called "scientist" New Realism of Bertrand Russell and the entire system of objectivity it related to (modern physics, "analytic" psychology etc.). Furthermore, as was clearly shown in the previous chapter, Taixu in fact used Russell's closeness to *Hināyāna* in support of his

hierarchical classification of consciousness-knowledge-wisdom. By the same token, in his new knowledge about New Realism Taixu found confirmation that *Mahāyāna* and the types of awareness attained by his “super-superman” – major sage and Buddha – followed in direct, logical succession to his idea of scientific realism. This is extremely important for our understanding of modern Chinese intellectual history, since it reveals the profoundly positive impact and long-term significance of Russellian worldview, even on such traditional segments of Chinese thought as Buddhism.

5 Epilogue

As an intellectual-historical study, the aim of the above chapters was to provide a general outline of Taixu's thought on realism, with a degree of profoundness which would suffice for us to draw major lines and connections between Taixu's thought on the one hand and a broader intellectual background on the other. Consequently, in the concluding lines of this study we can only make correspondingly general observations about the main features of “realism” in Taixu's thought in the focal period.

Now, the first and perhaps also most important conclusion to the above study is that Taixu's entire undertaking of creating Buddhist “realism” must have been derived from the contemporary Chinese philosophical discourse. What I mean by this is that his recognition of the idea of “realism” as a quite universal token of modern objectiveness was undoubtedly derived from the above-mentioned discourse. Moreover, Taixu did not decide to rest his modern Buddhistized theory of knowledge on just any notion of “realism”, but rather on a “realism” which at that time was closely associated with Bertrand Russell and his impact on the formation of Chinese academic philosophy in the 1920s. This is a crucial finding, since it offers additional insights into the overall status and position of Russell's philosophy and its correlated “system of objectivity” (comprised of physical sciences – modern relativistic physics and quantum mechanics – along with mathematical logic, behaviorism, socialism etc.) within the Chinese intellectual world. Since especially the late 1920s represent a period of time in which the presence and status of, for example, New Realism or mathematical logic were not too clearly attested, Taixu's thought offers some invaluable clues about such issues. What is even more interesting for a scholar of modern Chinese Buddhism is the intricate webs of intellectual influence behind Taixu's ambitious syncretism of modern science and Buddhist epistemology. What becomes clear to us in the end is that Taixu, as the leading figure of Chinese clerical as well as lay Buddhism at the time, saw Buddhism as inherently coherent with a Russellian type of scientific objectivism. This fact is incredibly interesting because as an intellectual phenomenon it predates similar such (and at least more significant) associations, in both the East and West by several decades. It further lays the foundations for Buddhist modernism, which took roots in

the entire Sinosphere (i.e. the sphere of Chinese cultural influence) in the decades following Taixu's death in 1947.

Secondly, when it comes to the manner and ideational approach which Taixu used in laying the foundations of his "realism", it is important to note that these included not only Buddhist sources (the Consciousness-Only tradition, Buddhist logic etc.) but also, and to a considerable degree, Chinese traditional concepts and contemporary intellectual modernity. The semiotic and conceptual basis of his "realism" are especially apparent with regard to his "rectification" (*zheng* 正) of the "name" (*ming* 名) "reality" (*xianshi*) in the first place. This includes a consistent application of binary/synthetical cosmological concepts such as *yuzhou* 宇宙 ("the universe"), *shijie* 世界 ("world"), and ultimately also *xianshi* 現實 for "reality". Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the second chapter of this study, Taixu's vision of Buddhist "realism" did rest on the idea of Buddhist "epistemology" as the superstructure of universal knowledge and awareness of the nature of "reality". His "Consciousness-Only" approach to the nature of knowledge led him to create a hierarchy of "consciousness-awareness" and "wisdom-awareness" about the manifest reality, in which the inward turn of the mind (*xin* 心, *citta*) and its ultimate self-awareness constitutes a stage which is not entirely transcendent of knowledge about reality, but follows directly from it. Buddha's realization is thus not a complete renunciation of the lower levels of *dharma*, but an awareness which springs out of lower levels of consciousness (*shi*) about the external manifestations of the collective mind(s) throughout ages (on the plurality of karma and causality see Vrhovski, 2023, forthcoming). This is a very important feature pertinent to Taixu's attempt at creating a "collectivist Buddhist vehicle" or a greater *Mahāyāna* as a social movement, which would embrace all strata of Chinese society and facilitate the intellectual-scientific evolution of the Chinese state. That this project was probably meant to stand in opposition to the growing Communist movement is entirely clear from Taixu's later writings, while his early (late 1910s and early 1920s) work still bears the profound imprint of his fascination with a certain type of Western "socialism". But it needs to be emphasized here that the early notions of "socialism" which circulated in the Chinese intellectual world in the period considered here were still rather universalist, and usually related to the same worldview which Taixu later identified in Russell's New Realism.

Finally, everything that was pointed out above should serve as an important reminder of the complexity of the intellectual historiography of Chinese modernization. It should serve as an indication that categories and concepts we use to analyze, for example, the "history of modern Chinese Buddhism", should not be taken for granted. Moreover, such broad intellectual spheres as "modern Chinese Buddhism" ought to be primarily analyzed and treated within a broader intellectual framework from the time, including the personal and inter-personal levels, relevant cultural backgrounds, and so

on. Although it may be reasonable to assume that, at least at the pragmatic or utilitarian level, diachronic discussions of Buddhist philosophy ought not to be impeded by an excessive regard for intellectual history, it needs to be emphasized that by omitting the latter one should also be aware of the methodological limitations which thus arise in relation to making inferences, drawing identities, or distinguishing concepts across philosophical systems. What I mean by “limitations” pertains largely to the use of reference when it comes to ascribing certain ideas to individuals, schools, traditions or cultures. In short it is the intellectual-historical background which enables us to make such references with greater precision, and makes it possible to make more general inferences about them. While, on the other hand, efforts at seeking meaning or use in these concepts and categories should always be methodologically cautious, recognizing the personal, utilitarian, and relativistic or even inadvertently absolutistic nature of such still very significant undertakings.

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Buddhist Realism for Modern Times: Intellectual-Historical Readings into Dharma Master Taixu's Essays on Realism

Keywords: Buddhism, modern science, realism, Republican China, Taixu

In the early 1930s, when the project of scientific modernization was in full swing in Chinese Buddhist circles, Dharma Master Taixu wrote a series of essays on “Realism” (*Xianshi zhuyi* 現實主義, 1928–1931). These represent one of the profoundest series of writings documenting his understanding of the link between science and Buddhist epistemology/ontology, and consequently also on the role of his notion of scientific Buddhism for modern times. Aside from his meditations on the relationship between science and Buddhism, in this important series of essays Taixu also provided his more or less critical accounts on modern philosophical currents in contemporary China, including Russell's “New Realism” and materialism.

This paper aims to provide a concise reading of the above-mentioned writings by Taixu, in order to cast some new light on the understanding of Western modern philosophy in Chinese Buddhist modernism of the Republican Era, on the one hand, and to highlight the main theoretical features of Taixu's notion of scientific Buddhism, on the other. Aside from that, I also aim to present some new insights into the otherwise overlooked aspects of the broader intellectual sphere of Chinese Buddhism of the Republican Era. As regards the broader historical and intellectual context of Taixu's writings, the analysis provided in this article will be regarded within the framework constructed in my forthcoming article on Taixu's philosophy in the journal *Buddhist Studies Review*.

Budistični realizem za moderne čase: idejno-zgodovinska branja esejev Mojstra dharme Taixuja o realizmu

Ključne besede: budizem, moderna znanost, realizem, republikansko obdobje Kitajske, Taixu

V zgodnjih 30. letih 20. stoletja, ko je bil projekt znanstvene modernizacije v budističnih krogih v polnem razmahu, je Mojster dharme Taixu spisal serijo esejev o »realizmu« (*Xianshi zhuyi*, 1928–1931). Ti eseji predstavljajo eno izmed globljih serij spisov, ki pričajo o njegovem razumevanju povezav med znanostjo in budistično epistemologijo/ontologijo, s tem pa posledično pričajo tudi o vlogi njegovega pojmovanja znanstvenega budizma za moderne čase. Poleg njegovih premislekov o zgoraj omenjenem odnosu med znanostjo in budizmom je v tej pomembni seriji spisov Taixu prav tako podal svoje, bolj ali manj kritične, obravnave tokov moderne filozofije na Kitajskem, vključno z Ruslllovim »novim realizmom« in materializmom.

Ta članek poskuša podati zgoščeno branje izbranih Taixujevih del, in sicer z namenom osvetliti pojmovanje moderne zahodne filozofije v okviru kitajskega budističnega modernizma v republikanskem obdobju ter glavne teoretske značilnosti Taixujevega razumevanja t. i. znanstvenega budizma. Prek proučevanja gradiva bom došel do novih vpogledov v sicer popolnoma spregledane vidike širše idejne sfere kitajskega budizma iz republikanskega obdobja, kar pa se tiče širšega zgodovinskega in idejnega konteksta Taixujevih del, pa bo analiza, ki jo podajam v tem članku, obravnavana v okviru mojega prihajajočega članka o Taixujevi filozofiji, ki bo objavljen v reviji *Buddhist Studies Review*.

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