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*Heart of Buddha, Heart of China:
The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth-Century Monk*

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A Review of *Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth-Century Monk*

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Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth-Century Monk. By James Carter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, viii+221 pages, ISBN 019539885-4 (cloth), US \$29.95.

In *Heart of Buddha, Heart of China*, James Carter narrates the life of Tanxu (1875–1963), a Buddhist monk from Northern China. Carter lays out the main events of Tanxu's life, and provides context for his activities by describing how the major political, economic, and religious situations of early Twentieth century China affected the path that his life took. Along the way, the reader learns not only about Tanxu's temple-building activities, but also about such things as the impact of Western and Japanese colonialism on China's social landscape, as well as some of the basic tenets of Chinese Buddhism.

This book is arranged chronologically, with each chapter covering a discrete period in Tanxu's life. Outside of a small circle of specialists, Tanxu has not been that well known in the West. More people are familiar with the similarly named reformer Taixu, and Chen-hua, whose memoir has been available in English for nearly twenty years (Chen-hua, *In Search of the Dharma: Memoirs of a Modern Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim* [SUNY,

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1992]). Unlike Chen-hua's autobiography, this book provides a very different type of context. Carter has chosen to use Tanxu's life as the vehicle by which to discuss the major changes that took place in Chinese society from the late Qing, through the Republican Period, and up to the eve of the Cultural Revolution. To this end, Carter has arranged the book chronologically around the major changes that occurred in Tanxu's life as he went into business, married, was ordained, and then became a leading figure in the building of the Buddhist institution in northern China.

Most of the book's chapters (seven out of ten) begin with Carter describing briefly the history of the city that will be the stage for the events of that chapter. Like many of the monks of his day, Tanxu moved often and the chapter breaks in this book are placed according to those moves. In reconstructing the events of Tanxu's life, Carter has relied on a number of sources, including Tanxu's published memoirs and information provided by one of Tanxu's chief disciples, the Venerable Lok To. Carter also mentions that in researching this book he visited many of the places in China where Tanxu lived, however the things that Carter learned in these travels do not explicitly appear in any substantial way outside of the Prologue and Epilogue, where they provide a useful and engaging set of atmospheric details. In terms of the target audience, this book is clearly not aimed at specialists in the field of modern Chinese Buddhism, though such readers would certainly find profit in reading this book. Rather, this book walks a line between the scholarly and the popular. On the one hand, it is clearly well researched, and comes with both an extensive index and a glossary of Chinese characters. Although the endnotes are not numerous, they are complete, and could help a specialist continue her study of this monk's life. On the other hand, this book is written in language that is approachable, flows well, and remains focused on the life of Tanxu without deviating or becoming distracted by focusing on any subtopic in any great detail.

The straightforward style in which this book is written should not give the impression that Carter lacks a critical perspective on this material, or worse, that he hides that perspective. He states clearly in both the Prologue and Epilogue that his original research question had been about the relationship between Buddhism and nationalism. This focus remains important for Carter in his analysis of Tanxu's temple-building activities, which he sees as an extension of Tanxu's commitment to "cultural nationalism." (159) Carter links this commitment to Tanxu's sense that the root of China's troubles in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a spiritual weakness that only Buddhism could alleviate. These issues provide the primary framework for the book, and are supplemented by the secondary issue of Tanxu's relationship to his wife and five sons, whom he abandoned in order to ordain. Carter's discussion of this difficult aspect of Tanxu's biography is careful and not judgmental. Carter also does not offer any facile solution to the ethical conundrum Tanxu's actions present to the reader.

Tanxu was not the most well known of Chinese monks, even in Chinese Buddhism, but he did live during historic times. Over the course of this book, Carter uses Tanxu's life to discuss a number of different ideas, from historical events to important Buddhist concepts. He examines the ways in which the Foreign Concessions (areas of semi-colonial status in China such as Hong Kong and parts of Shanghai, which were controlled by different European powers and Japan) provided both opportunity and peril for individual Chinese people. He looks at the impacts that specific wars (the Russo-Japanese, and First and Second Sino-Japanese Wars, the Chinese Civil War) had on everyday people in China as major cities changed hands, and were sometimes bombed and looted. Following in Tanxu's footsteps as a refugee, Carter gives the reader a sense of the personal cost of this turmoil. He also provides political and ideological context for Tanxu's activities. He discusses how moves by the central government to confiscate temple property to create public

schools spurred Buddhists to create their own schools, and he places some of Tanxu's thinking in the early 1920s against the backdrop of the iconoclasm of the May Fourth Movement. Carter also provides brief discussions of important Buddhist concepts and texts, in order to help the reader better understand Tanxu's point of view. The Four Noble Truth, dependent origination, the *Heart Sūtra*, and emptiness are all briefly explained.

Much ground is covered in this book, and because of this Carter cannot spend too much time on any given topic. Each of the ideas and issues just mentioned receives no more than three pages of explanation before Carter returns to the primary narrative. As a result, for the specialist there are a few areas where this book comes up wanting. First, Carter demonstrates that he is clearly sensitive to some of the issues involved in defining Chinese religiosity, such as the fact that even the category "religion" means different things in China than it does in the West. Carter repeatedly points out that religious affiliations in China are more fluid than labels like "Buddhist" or "Daoist" would indicate (28–29, 48–49), but except for a few instances, he doesn't frame these issues for his reader with any theoretical thoroughness. He gets close to such a discussion when he examines Tanxu's navigation of the issues surrounding the definition of practices as "religious" or "superstitious." (165–66) This is a good start, but he could have done more, and his unexplained use of the label "occult" at one point (34) brackets certain Chinese practices out from the milieu of general religiosity in a problematic way.

The second point on which this book could have been improved is that it does not provide much of a context for Tanxu from within the Buddhist community of China at the time. The reader learns about a few lay Buddhists who helped Tanxu, as well as some information about Tanxu's Master, Dixian (1858–1932), but one does not get a sense of Tanxu's place within the larger networks of lay and ordained Buddhist, their

periodicals, or their organizations. Carter certainly does not claim that Tanxu was unique in his thoughts and activities, but without the proper contextualization, this is a conclusion that the uninformed reader might draw. Much is known about the important people and ideas that drove Chinese Buddhism during the early twentieth century, and some of this could have been incorporated into the narrative. Carter is right to highlight Pure Land practice and the *Diamond Sūtra* and their impact on Tanxu's thinking, but it is very unlikely that Tanxu was not also influenced by the many new ideas being debated in arenas such as those offered in the Buddhist press or at seminars and lecture halls like the ones that Tanxu himself attended.

Both a brief critical discussion of religion in China, and a continuing discussion of the contemporary Buddhist context would have added to the strength of this book, even for the general audience. That said, this book does have many strengths, and one of them is that it is accessible to the non-specialist. This book is well informed and although it deals with a broad range of issues, it does so in a balanced manner. It covers the life of a figure who, while interesting for the times in which he lived, was also a human who faced the specific choices and challenges that his life put before him. In this book, Carter does an excellent job of balancing the historical and the personal, and the reader is left with a lasting impression of Tanxu as a deeply human figure. The reader also finishes this book with a better understanding of how the major events in the first half of the twentieth century affected people in China. For all of these reasons, this reviewer highly recommends this book for a number of different groups: Chinese historians who want to learn more about Buddhism, scholars of Buddhism who want to know more about the history of modern Chinese Buddhism, lay readers interested in either topic, and undergraduate students in history or religion classes. It may be that this book presents its greatest utility to this last group. This reviewer is not aware of another book that covers all of important issues mentioned

here in such a readable fashion, and he is very much looking forward to discussing it with his own students in the near future.

Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth-Century Monk. By James Carter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, viii+221 pages, ISBN 019539885-4 (cloth), US \$29.95. Reviewed by Erik Hammerstrom. Read article. February 9th, 2011 in Volume 18 2011 Tagged China, Chinese Buddhism, monasticism | . Trackback URI | Comments RSS. Leave a Reply. Name __('required'). Heartof Buddha Heart Of China Monk The Life Of Tanxu A Twentieth Century Monk James Carter OUP. Item Preview. remove-circle.Â Heartof Buddha Heart Of China Monk The Life Of Tanxu A Twentieth Century Monk James Carter OUP. by. Gopala Dada. Tanxu is known as one of the most influential monks to have had lived during the late Qing and Republican periods of Chinese history, spreading and invigorating the practice of Buddhism throughout the region.[2] He was also famous for constructing several Buddhist temples and institutes in Northern China in the early 20th century. He also achieved renown through his buildings, due to his integration of European industrial construction techniques and traditional Chinese methods.[3]. Contents. 1 Early life and career. 2 Monastic life. 3 Buddhism propagation in the North.Â Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth-Century Monk. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 187. External links[edit]. Tanxu from Database of Modern Chinese Buddhism.