

*Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945* by Xue Yu. Routledge, 2011. 278pp. Pb. £28/\$49.95. ISBN-13: 9780415802307.

Reviewed by Kai Chen, College of Public Administration, Zhejiang University, China, chenkai@zju.edu.cn

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Historically, in many Asian countries (e.g., China, Japan, Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka), Buddhists have been directly or indirectly involved in wars. This constitutes a challenge to Buddhist ethics and raises several critical questions. For example, what is the rationale behind Buddhists' participating in wars? How does this rationale come into being? Could it really embody the Buddha's original intention? What are the implications for policy practice in the future? There is an urgent need to find answers to these questions. On the basis of Buddhist classics and case studies in China, *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism* by Xue Yu addresses these questions in a timely way.

Based on case studies from the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945), Xue Yu points out that the rationale in a Mahāyāna context is the conception of 'compassionate killing', which could be found in several Mahāyāna Buddhist classics, such as the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and *Yogacārābhūmi Śāstra*. Xue Yu explores the development, features and weak points of 'compassionate killing', stresses the fact that Chinese Buddhists were divided on how to protect China, and provides useful inspirations to re-evaluate the relationship between Buddhism and violence.

In Chapters 1–2, Xue Yu describes the challenges facing Chinese Buddhists before the Anti-Japanese War. At this juncture, the reform-minded young monks represented by Taixu emerged and became advocates and practitioners of 'compassionate killing'. In Chapters 3–5, Xue Yu analyses Chinese Buddhists' different responses to the Japanese invasion, when 'nationalism became the supreme religion' towards the beginning of the war (p.42). For meeting the needs of nationalism, the young monks prioritised the conception of 'compassionate killing'. In their opinions, for the sake of 'saving more lives' and 'preventing one from committing evil', 'compassionate killing' should be a proper solution to violence (p.200). Following this logic, these young monks took part in military training programs, and even participated in military operations (e.g., guerrilla warfare and assassination). In contrast, the traditional monks represented by Yuanying constantly held fast to the doctrine of non-killing. Therefore, they did not accept the conception of 'compassionate killing', let alone direct involvement in the Anti-Japanese War. In the traditional monks' view, the best ways to protect China were to hold blessing ceremonies and conduct public donations, rescue work, first aid and so on.

Moreover, some Chinese monks in the areas occupied by the Japanese were forced by the Japanese and the puppet governments to join Japan-sponsored Buddhist organisations (e.g., the Common Buddhist Purpose Society in Beijing, the Great Japan Buddhist Society and the General Buddhist Society of Manchuguo). They held blessing ceremonies to compensate for the bad actions of dead Japanese soldiers. After the war, their activities were politicised by the nationalists and 'risked the danger of being indicted for treason after the end of the Japanese occupation' (p.174). In Chapter 6 and an Afterword, Xue Yu re-evaluates Taixu's arguments on tensions and interconnections between violence and Buddhism, and criticises the conception of 'compassionate killing'.

As an ice-breaking work on Buddhist attitudes to the use of violence in China, this well-researched book offers at least three contributions: first, it distinguishes the monks advocating 'compassionate killing' from the traditional monks in China. As Xue Yu explains, during the Anti-Japanese War, most Chinese monks did not sacrifice their religion for the sake of the war. For instance, in 1936, the Chinese government called on the monks to participate in military training. However, many monks considered that 'involvement in [the] military was itself transgression of [a] precept' (p.44). Though some young monks sacrificed their lives and compromised their religious principles for the national cause, they did not gain popular support from the other monks.

Second, from a comparative perspective, this book stresses the differences and similarities between the Chinese and Japanese monks/priests who were very interested in 'compassionate killing'. In Xue Yu's words, their arguments were almost the same, that is, they elaborated 'compassionate killing to convince others as well as themselves under the sway of nationalism' (p.209). The difference was that the Japanese monks used the idea of 'compassionate killing' to justify imperialism and the Japanese invasion, but the Chinese monk used the conception of 'compassionate killing' to stimulate nationalism and promote anti-invasion struggles.

Third, this book explores the weak points of 'compassionate killing'. As Xue Yu highlights, the advocates of 'compassionate killing' misunderstood the pre-conditions of this conception. For example, according to Buddhist classics, only Bodhisattvas and Buddhas could perform compassionate killing, because they 'give up any dualistic thinking' and 'no longer accumulate any karma' (p.202). Concerning the Chinese and Japanese monks advocating 'compassionate killing', were they highly advanced in their spiritual development and qualified to perform compassionate killing? Second, 'the killed is absent of the will to seek revenge while the act of killing is taking place' (p.202). Otherwise, the will to seek revenge would cause a vicious circle, in which killing would breed killing. Xue Yu believes that the 'compassionate killing' advocated by the Chinese and Japanese clerics did not meet the pre-conditions mentioned above, and that the advocates of 'compassionate killing' were acting as nationalists rather than Buddhists. If these advocates really comprehended the true meaning of 'compassionate killing', they would see that it only applies to those who are so spiritually developed as to be beyond producing karmic results. As an undercurrent of Buddhist ethics, 'compassionate killing' has been misinterpreted for a long time. This not only prevents the Buddha's doctrine of non-killing from playing more constructive roles, but also helps feed politicised

Buddhism or extreme nationalism. Concerning the implications of ‘compassionate killing’, Xue Yu stresses that it has been repeatedly misunderstood since the Anti-Japanese War. For example, many people now still ignore the circumstances in which ‘compassionate killing’ can acceptably be performed, and misinterpret it as an excuse for killing in accordance with the necessity of a specific national situation. Recently, the armed conflicts involving Buddhists — albeit, not Mahāyāna ones — in Sri Lanka and southern Thailand are good examples of Buddhists’ taking an active part in violence. The most well-known case of an attempt to *justify* such violence in (Theravāda) Buddhist terms is the (controversial and much criticized) 1976 statement of the influential Thai monk that it there was no bad karma in killing a communist.

*Buddhism, War, and Nationalism* may be rated as one of the most significant works in the literature of contemporary Chinese Buddhist ethics, which builds a solid base for future research of relevance to scholars and policy makers. It thoroughly clarifies the dynamics of ‘compassionate killing’ in the Anti-Japanese War, and draws lessons from the misinterpretation of this conception. I wholeheartedly recommend it to students, general readers and scholars, who are interested in the tensions and interconnections between Buddhism and violence.

