

Dependent Co-evolution: Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid and Its Appropriation by Chinese Buddhists*

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Abstract

The encounter between Buddhism and science has long been recognized as one of the key events in the formulation of Buddhist modernisms. Yet only recently has this begun to be explored in its historic specificity. This paper examines Republican-era Chinese Buddhists' engagement with the theory of evolution at the peak of its cultural influence in the 1920s and 30s. It argues that while Buddhists largely accepted biological evolution, Darwinist theories of survival of the fittest were rejected. Instead, they embraced the alternative theory of Peter Kropotkin, who saw mutual aid as the driving force of evolution. This theory was not only less offensive to Buddhist sensibilities, but also amenable to a rhetorical strategy of subsumption in which Kropotkin was presented as anticipated and fulfilled by Buddhist doctrine. This tactic allowed Buddhists to portray the religion as modern, scientific, and progressive while avoiding what were seen as the pernicious corollaries of Darwinism. Effectively, Buddhists who employed this tactic attempted to annex Kropotkin's discursive space, taking advantage of the internal variegation of modernity in order to constitute it as part of a modern discourse and superscribe that discourse with their own concerns.

Keywords:

Evolution, Science, Modernity, Taixu, Kropotkin

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互助緣起

——論民國佛教界對克魯泡特金之互助論的轉用

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摘要

佛教現代主義形成的主要關鍵之一是佛教與科學的接觸，但直到最近才有學者開始探究其歷史的細節。本文檢視中國佛教界對進化論在二十、三十年代最頂峰發展時期的響應。當時佛教界雖然接受生物進化論，但是他們排斥達爾文的生存競爭論，而提倡克魯泡特金之互助論。他們認為此理論較接近佛教思想，而且佛教教理預期並完成其說。佛教徒藉由此理論來闡述宗教的現代性、科學性和進步性，及其可避免達爾文主義所導致之惡果。同時，在併吞克魯泡特金的論述之下，利用現代思想的多元性，使佛教成為現代論說的一部分，並在其上加注佛教價值觀。

關鍵詞：進化論、科學、現代性、太虛、克魯泡特金

Introduction

It is a staple of Buddhist modernist discourse to assert that Buddhism is a religion that is uniquely compatible with science. In these depictions, Buddhism is presented as a thoroughly rational tradition unencumbered by the mythological speculations of its rivals, but founded instead on direct, empirical apprehension of reality. As David McMahan has shown in his *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008), this is often part of an attempt by Buddhists to position Buddhism in the discursive field of modernity. Drawing on Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), McMahan argues that this field is constituted by three distinct discourses that have evolved in a relationship characterized at once by mutual dependence and mutual tension, even antagonism. Thus, in the discursive field of modernity, Buddhists have often sought to ally their religion with science over and against Christianity (McMahan 2008). In so doing they draw on what is seen as the long history of conflict between science and Christianity. This conflict is archetypally represented by the so-called "Trial of Galileo." In the popular imagination, this tale is one of conflict between entrenched medieval dogma and a heroic bringer of new truths, between a literal reading of an ancient scripture and the empirical evidence of the senses. Buddhist modernists have had much to gain by standing rhetorically with Galileo.

But it is just this narrative that scholars working on the history of science and religion in the West have called into question. This vision of irreconcilable conflict between religion and science, they have shown, is actually a cultural construct of quite recent vintage, as is the mythology of the "Trial of Galileo." Much scholarship has been dedicated to replacing this simplistic, but still influential, view with a more nuanced account.¹ In place of the ahistorical, monolithic and opposed categories of science and religion that this mythology has bequeathed us, scholarship has revealed a much more complex history of the emergence of science as a modern discipline in relation to Christianity. When placed in proper historical context, the trial of Galileo, such historians argue, "looks less like a conflict between a man of science on the one hand and church leaders on the other, and more like a tense and politically charged discussion among Catholics about biblical interpretation,

¹ For an overview of some of the issues involved, see Harrison (2006).

Aristotelian science, and the relationship between individual believers and the church hierarchy" (Dixon 2010, 515).²

This project of historicization, long underway in studies of religion and science in the West, has yet to be fully taken up in studies of many other cultural contexts. Yet such historical investigation is all the more necessary when looking at the encounter between religion and science in parts of the world, such as China, where both terms—"religion" and "science"—were adopted at the very same fraught historical moment, when individuals and institutions attempted to redefine and reimagine their religious traditions in the face not only of new scientific discoveries but also imperialist threats and newly modernizing nation-states. Donald Lopez (2008) has pointed out the importance of both approaching the relationship of Buddhism and science from a historical perspective and also attending to the specific scientific disciplines and discoveries with which Buddhists were engaged.

Here, I would like to build upon and extend the insights of McMahan and Lopez through a consideration of Chinese Buddhist responses in the 1920s and 30s to arguably the most important scientific idea of their day, the theory of evolution. We might initially presume that evolution should not pose problems for Buddhism, as it is often seen to for Christianity. Yet we will discover that Chinese Buddhists were almost as appalled by Darwinian theory as many

² For a concise overview of the events and issues, see Blackwell (1998, especially 23-42). It is certainly true that Galileo argued that theological interpretations of scripture were not authoritative in determining the motion of the planets, famously saying that the Bible's purpose was to "teach us how to go to heaven, not how heaven goes" (Feldhay 2006, 743-47). Yet he did not see his project as something radically separate from religion, but as interpreting the revelation of God as written in the "book of nature," using the hermeneutics appropriate to that text: mathematics. (This elevation of mathematics was itself controversial among natural philosophers of the day. See Feldhay 2006, 743-45; McMullin 2005b, 160-61). His view of scriptural limitation was extreme for the day, but the bulk of his theological argument was not. In writings such as his *Letter to Castelli* and *Letter to the Grand Duchess*, he relied heavily on the doctrine of accommodation—a sort of Catholic doctrine of *upaya* that saw God's word as spoken in ways that accommodated the limited understandings of his children—which was not itself controversial in seventeenth-century Catholicism and had an eminent pedigree that could be traced back through Aquinas to Augustine. Indeed, the precedence given to the literal meaning of the biblical text was not the product of an unchanging and monolithic Church, but of an institution attempting to respond to the recent trauma of the Reformation. On Galileo's theological arguments and biblical hermeneutics, see McMullin (2005a). On the complex factors that led to the Church's condemnation of Copernican astronomy, see McMullin (2005b).

Christians of the day were. Buddhists, however, were able to take advantage of the internal variegation of science—debates over the mechanism of evolution—to interject themselves into the debates of modernity, playing one side against another in order to advance their own concerns. Using this strategy, they were able to embrace modernist discourses of science, evolution, and progress, while critiquing what were seen to be the pernicious corollaries of Darwinism.

Science and Religion in Republican China

By the 1920s, science enjoyed a position of unrivaled esteem in China. Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), an historian and leading public intellectual of the day, put it thus:

During the last thirty years or so there is a name which has acquired an incomparable position of respect in China; no one, whether informed or ignorant, conservative or progressive, dares openly slight or jeer at it. The name is Science...Ever since the beginning of reformist tendencies in China [i.e. the 1890s], there is not a single person who calls himself a modern man and yet dares openly to belittle Science. [Hu 2008, 9; translation Kwok 1965, 11-12]

This eloquent quotation vividly demonstrates the sway held by science, but also reveals rather more. Note that Hu refers to science not as a practice or as a discipline, but as a name. While science was everywhere invoked in the first decades of twentieth-century China, it was seldom practiced. The importance of science was primarily ideological. Scientific discoveries were reported in scientific and popular journals and discussed avidly by those who read them. The actual day-to-day practice of science, however, was less significant than the discipline's totemic status as a marker of certain and modern knowledge. It was in this sense that it was claimed by "informed and ignorant," "conservative and progressive" alike and used to impart authority to all manner of political and social programs.³

Just as "science" was a relatively new term in 1920s China, so too was "religion." As is well known, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the religious traditions of China were faced with the

³ On the authority of science in China in this period, Kwok's *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950* (1965) remains a classic. For a more recent account, see Wang (2006).

task of reconfiguring themselves in light of this new category. The Late Imperial period had been characterized by a plural orthodoxy overseen by a religiously legitimated state that assumed the right to determine what was orthodox (*zheng* 正) and heterodox (*xie* 邪). The collapse of the imperial polity changed this landscape drastically. The orthodox/heterodox distinction was replaced with the neologisms of “religion” (*zongjiao* 宗教) and “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信). This discursive shift was given legal force by the new nation-state. In order to be recognized as “religions” and receive protection under the law, traditions had to be adapted to notions of “religion” inspired by Western societies. Institutionally, this meant attempts to establish nationwide organizations to represent their religions and advance their interests, while serving as allies to the developmental state. Ideologically, this meant that these traditions had to present themselves as systems of spirituality and ethics based in textual canons and to dissociate themselves from the “superstitions” of local temple cults. For, while “religion” was protected under the constitution, “superstition” was not. The new nation-state, hungry for resources, urgently pursuing its vision of modernity, often expropriated popular temples and suppressed local cults. While such selective interference by the state was nothing new, the category of superstition swept up a far larger proportion of Chinese religiosity than the earlier category of heterodoxy ever had.⁴

Thus, proving their religion to be suitably modern and progressive was a matter of existential concern for Chinese Buddhists. To do this, they had to establish Buddhism as compatible with science in general and evolution in particular. For evolution was the most important and influential scientific idea of the era. Its introduction at the close of the Qing Dynasty marked a pivotal moment in the emergence of modern Chinese discourse. It is important here to note, though, that evolutionary theory was introduced to China not via Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* or *Descent of Man*, but through an 1898 work

⁴ These shifts are the subject of a significant and growing body of scholarly work. For an overview of these issues in this period, see Goossaert and Palmer (2011, chapters two and three). Vincent Goossaert elsewhere offers more narrowly focused treatments of the establishment of national religious associations and Christianity’s role in that process (2008) and of the continuities and critical discontinuities between Late Imperial Confucian fundamentalist and anticlerical discourse and the religion/superstition discourse that took shape in the early twentieth century (2006). Nedostup (2009) provides an in-depth examination of the Nationalists’ religious policies and anti-superstition campaigns in Jiangsu during the Nanjing Decade, while Poon (2011) examines the negotiations over these issues between the common people and the state in Guangzhou.

entitled *On Natural Evolution (Tianyan lun 天演論)* produced by the reformist intellectual Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921) which served as a vehicle for the ideas of Herbert Spencer.⁵ It was Spencer, not Darwin, who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” and whose work promoted that principle as undergirding not just biological evolution, but the development of human society as well. Thus from the outset, Darwinian theory in China was virtually inseparable from Social Darwinism, and distinctions between the two were rarely drawn.

The theories of Social Darwinism had an enormous impact on young Chinese intellectuals for two reasons. First, they provided a clear explanation of China’s present circumstances. China was being menaced by imperialist powers who used their military superiority to repeatedly extort territorial and commercial concessions, leading to widespread fear that China was about to be “carved up like a melon,” as a vivid image had it. According to Social Darwinism, such predation was a natural consequence of the mutual competition among nations and races in the struggle for existence. Moreover, it was a form of heroic self-assertion that actually drove evolution and secured human progress. Second, Social Darwinism provided a clear prescription for overcoming the present peril. The only way out was forward. China must commit itself to the competition. It too must assert itself and evolve. For generations of Chinese leaders and thinkers, this basic orientation provided the justification for relentless pursuit of change and progress (Pusey 1983, 448-49). The very word used to render progress, *jinhua* 進化—literally, to advance and change—was used to indicate evolution as well.

The key point to note is that there is a twofold slippage in Chinese discussions of evolutionary theory. First, there is a slippage between the biological and the social. Given the primarily ideological character of Chinese interest in science, biological theories of evolution were appealing primarily in their social applications. The second is closely related to the first: a slippage between the descriptive and the prescriptive. Theories of how species *did* evolve were considered primarily as theories of how society *should* progress. This often leads to locutions that might at first seem odd. Buddhist writers, for instance, often speak of “adopting the Darwinian theory” rather than “accepting.” These models are never solely “models of,” but always also

⁵ On the unique character of Yan Fu’s text, which combines a translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Ethics and Evolution* with commentary advancing the arguments of Huxley’s intellectual opponent Herbert Spencer, see chapter four of Schwartz (1964).

"models for," as Geertz (1973, 93) might put it. As a result, in this period "evolution" was not simply a scientific theory, but the beating heart of Chinese modernity. It addressed not merely the question: What sort of creature is humanity? But also: What is the nature of society? And: How is China to transform itself to survive in the new order? So powerful was evolution in framing these issues that it attained a hegemonic influence over everything from political theory to children's stories (Jones 2011). One way or another, it was something that had to be reckoned with.

Buddhist Responses to Darwinian Theory

On the face of it, Buddhism might be expected to have fewer issues with biological evolution than Christianity. The difficulties many Christians had with evolution are well known. Continuity with animals challenged humanity's status as beings created in God's image and possessed of a unique soul. The notion that man was not "Creation's crown and perfection" but simply an "improved ape" and an "unexpected cousin...[to] the mushroom" was deeply troubling to some (Dixon 2008, 73-74). The fluidity of species challenged traditional understandings of creation. Finally, the autonomous self-sufficiency of natural selection challenged the necessity of a designer, a Divine Clockmaker responsible for the intricate workings of the natural world.⁶

None of these gave Buddhism the same sort of difficulty. Continuity with animals, of course, is something Buddhism has always affirmed and embraced. All beings have been born and reborn since beginningless time. In the course of that infinite expanse of time, we have all at one time or another been born as all manner of creatures: bird, beast, fish, insect. Moreover, every animal on earth now living was, at one time or another, one's own mother. Human existence is more fortunate and superior in many ways, but it is a temporary status on a continuum with all sentient life. Moreover, Buddhism has no need to defend the uniqueness of the human soul because it denies the existence of the soul entirely, positing instead the doctrine of non-self. Likewise, fluidity of species need not be a major issue. While Buddhism had not recognized this as such, the inevitability and omnipresence of change is among its most fundamental doctrines. Some Buddhists even saw the transformation of one

⁶ For brief surveys of Christian responses to Darwinism, see Roberts (2010) and Brooke (1991, 275-320). For a discussion of attempts by liberal theologians to reconcile Christianity with Darwinism, see Bowler (2007).

species into another through evolution as having parallels with the transformation of the individual from one sort of creature to another through rebirth and karma. Moreover, Buddhism need not defend a mythological account of origins. The universe and all sentient beings in it have existed since beginningless time. There is no moment of origin, no first creation. There are accounts of cyclical destruction and recreation of world systems, but what is important is not the origin of the world, but the origin of suffering, the origin of our existential predicament. Finally, the idea that creation occurs through an autonomous self-sufficient process does not threaten Buddhism's notion of a creator god because it does not have one. Rather, Buddhism asserts that all things come into being through dependant co-arising. Thus the Buddhist universe already is an autonomous self-ordering process governed by something with at least a resemblance to natural law.

Evolution would thus seem, on the face of it, to pose fewer problems for Buddhism than Christianity, and in fact the overwhelming majority of Buddhists who wrote about it had no problem with biological evolution as such. Indeed, it became one of Buddhism's favorite bludgeons with which to attack Christianity, painting it as unscientific and unsuitable to the modern age. As one figure put it, evolution is a "rational worldview free of the stench of monotheism" (Taixu 太虛 [1930a] 2006, 1262). Yet while Chinese Buddhists largely accepted evolution, they roundly rejected Darwin—at least the vulgar Darwinism he was made to stand for. For Chinese Buddhists as for virtually all their compatriots, Darwinism was essentially reduced to the phrases "the survival of the fittest," "the struggle for existence," and "the strong eat the weak." This was entirely appalling to Buddhists ethically, politically, and soteriologically.

Ethically, the driving force of evolution in Darwinism was seen to be a bloody struggle of all against all. One must eat or be eaten—hardly consonant with Buddhist teachings of compassion. For Buddhists, as for many Christians of the day, Darwinism thus seemed to be corrosive of morality. As one monk lamented, "The lesson of nature in Darwinism is competitive struggle—doing evil. Nature itself is stained in blood" (Zhifeng 芝峯 [1932] 2006, 485). Chinese Buddhists, then as now, rejected the idea that one must eat or be eaten at the most literal level. They were vegetarian. After all, any animal one might eat is one's estranged mother from another life. Thus, this aspect of Darwinism was antithetical to the Buddhist ethos not only doctrinally, but at deep levels of embodied practice and lived religion.

Politically, monks and laity of the day were deeply concerned with the fate of their nation. China seemed to be under constant threat of being devoured by

imperialist powers whose predation was often justified in Darwinian terms. This association of Darwinian thought with imperialism also made it deeply offensive. Though sometimes Darwinism was granted a certain usefulness early in human history, helping humanity to rise above the beasts, Darwinian struggle was clearly a liability and a hazard in the modern world. Darwinism may once have helped humanity evolve from animals, but now it could only lead to militarism and class struggle (Taixu [1925] 2006, 46). Taixu 太虛 wrote that Social Darwinists

believe that as a result of competition, the strong will prevail and the weak, defeated, will perish. Only when the strong alone remain will the world attain progress. Thus when a small, weak nation is violated by a larger, stronger nation or the proletariat is exploited by the bourgeoisie until they wail and twist about, [the Darwinists] feel no pity, but take it as natural. [Taixu [1930a] 2006, 1262]

States struggling for their survival against one another ensure only their mutual destruction through pointless slaughter in bloody warfare without end. For Buddhists, as for many Christians of the day, World War I was exhibit A. The sight of the cradle of enlightened progressive modernity descending into fratricidal slaughter convinced Buddhists, as it did many around the world, that there was a profound moral bankruptcy in the path Europe had taken. Many believed that Darwinian evolution had destroyed the restraints of theistic morality at the same time that new scientific discoveries bestowed unprecedented destructive power in the form of bombs, machine guns, and chemical weapons, leading to “seas of blood and mountains of bones” (Hammerstrom 2010, 235; Taixu [1925] 2006, 45; Zhifeng [1932] 2006, 485; Zhifeng [1936] 2006, 276). The conclusion drawn is vividly illustrated in a cartoon by Feng Zikai 豐子愷. Entitled “Ultimate Victory in the Struggle for Survival,” it depicts a graveyard. The caption reads:

What need is there for competition?
They say it is in order to survive.
This theory is poisoning the whole world.
Alas, Darwin. [Feng [1931] 2006]

Feng’s implication is clear: Darwin’s theory had destroyed morality and unleashed hell on earth. Yet up above the silent graves shines a swastika moon. Even in the dire straits of the present era, the Buddhist teachings illuminate

the black night of ignorance. The cartoon thus juxtaposes the hope offered by Buddhism with the literal dead-end of Darwinism.



(Feng [1931] 2006, 331)

Lastly, soteriologically, Darwinian notions of the “struggle for existence” appeared to many Chinese Buddhists to represent a crude form of clinging to self and objects. The self-assertion lauded by the Social Darwinists was not a progressive force, but a hindrance. The struggle to get things, to benefit oneself at the expense of others, only mires one ever deeper in delusion. Taixu argued that without insight into emptiness,

one will harbor thoughts of the struggle for survival and hearing that those who seek the insight of a Buddha overturn the natural world in which people survive, will fear, thinking the more one cultivates the less joy there will be in life. Thus they cut off the provisions of *Bodhi*. [Taixu [1933] 2006, 161]

Here Taixu treats the “struggle for survival” of Darwinian theory as virtually synonymous with the deluded clinging that blocks progress on the path.

Yet what most fundamentally made Darwinism intolerable to Chinese Buddhists was the conflation of progress with evolution. Progress, after all, was axiomatically a good thing for nearly all Chinese intellectuals of the day. Thus it would appear to follow that immorality, imperialism, and delusion are also good things. This obviously was an unacceptable conclusion. Yet this conflation meant that, appalling as Darwinism was, evolution could not simply be rejected. In order not merely to be accepted by the new educated classes, but to prove itself a useful ally to the new nation-state worthy of protection, Buddhism had to show that it was compatible with science and social progress. The theory of evolution was therefore key discursive territory. Ways had to be found to lay claim to evolution even while rejecting Darwinist survival of the fittest.

The Kropotkinite Alternative

Fortunately, in the 1920s and 30s, alternatives were still available. It tends to be glossed over in the typical narratives of introductory biology classes, where the concept of evolution is traced from Lamarck to Darwin straight on to Watson and Crick, but it was some time after Darwin before the mechanism of evolution was firmly established. The modern evolutionary synthesis wedding Darwinian natural selection to Mendelian genetics did not begin to emerge until the 1930s and was not complete until the 1940s. In the early decades of the twentieth century evolution was widely accepted, but a number of different theories regarding the mechanism continued to circulate.⁷

The most important alternative in China was that proposed by the naturalist and anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Born to Russian nobility in 1842, Kropotkin famously rejected inherited privilege and embraced anarchism, earning himself the title “the anarchist prince.” Trained in science, he made naturalistic and anthropological observations while stationed in Siberia with the Russian army that would form the basis of his theory of evolution. This theory was laid out in a series of articles published in 1888 in the journal *The Nineteenth Century* that were later collected and published as *Mutual Aid as a Factor in Evolution* in 1902.

The essence of Kropotkin’s argument is that among animals of the same species, mutual aid—rather than mutual struggle for the resources to survive—

⁷ For an overview of some of the complexities of the development of evolutionary theory, see Hodge (2009). On the emergence of the modern synthesis and the vindication of natural selection, see Mayr (1991, 132-40).

was the most important factor in evolution. Unlike many of his day, Kropotkin was well aware that Darwin had made some room for cooperation as a force in evolution. Kropotkin, too, did not entirely deny any role to self-assertion and competition. However, he reversed Darwin's prioritization, giving pride of place to cooperation. In his time on the Siberian steppe, Kropotkin observed that mutual aid appeared most conducive to the prosperity of a species in that harsh environment (Kropotkin [1919] 2006, xi-xii). In the cases where scarcity did compel competition for survival amongst members of the same species, he felt that the survivors came "out of the ordeal so much impoverished in vigor and health, that no progressive evolution of the species can be based upon such periods of keen competition" (Kropotkin [1919] 2006, xii-xiii).⁸ It is not those species in which competition is the rule that thrive, he argued. Instead, it is those

animal species, in which individual struggle has been reduced to its narrowest limits, and the practice of mutual aid has reached its highest development, that are invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous, the most open to further progress...The unsociable species, on the contrary, are doomed to decay. [Kropotkin [1919] 2006, 242]

Like the Social Darwinists whom he abhorred, Kropotkin saw the same forces at work in the evolution of human societies as in the evolution of species. Kropotkin saw in the history of human civilization the progressive development of modes of social cooperation. The individuals and classes who asserted dominance over their fellows—those whom the Social Darwinists saw as the drivers of progress—Kropotkin saw as obstacles to human advancement. As an anarchist, he envisioned the end point of social evolution as a state of anarchy in which autonomous individuals and communities freely associated with one another to better their lot through mutual aid, a state in which competition and mutual struggle had been banished forever.

Kropotkin was introduced to China by the writings and translations of Chinese anarchists in Paris and Tokyo in the dying days of the Qing. Although Chinese anarchism was marginalized by earlier historiography of modern China that focused on the emergence and triumph of the Communist Party, its importance has been rediscovered in recent years by historians who have established that anarchism was actually the dominant radical ideology in China until the mid-1920s. It held great appeal for its marriage of science with

⁸ Recall, here, that genetic inheritance was not yet understood. Kropotkin took acquired traits, such as the weakness of a starved animal, to be heritable.

humanitarian ethics and utopian optimism. While the number of truly committed anarchists was likely always small, it provided the conceptual vocabulary for the broader revolutionary movement, shaping it in key ways (Dirlik 1991; see also Zarrow 1990). Kropotkin's version of anarchism was especially well-received, as his evolutionary theory gave his thought a scientific imprimatur. According to Arif Dirlik, in the May Fourth era Kropotkin's works were "a staple of the reading public" (Dirlik 1991, 155-56). Though largely forgotten today, he would have been a household name among the intelligentsia of the time.

Buddhist Appropriations of Kropotkin

Anarchism is more associated today with bomb-throwing than Buddhas. Yet in the 1920s and 30s, Kropotkin's thought was familiar in Buddhist circles. Much of the anarchist's currency among Buddhist reformers stems from his endorsement by Taixu, one of the leading Buddhist reformers of the day. It is well known among scholars of modern Chinese Buddhism that anarchism made a deep impression on Taixu as a youth. No biographical sketch seems complete without mention of his initial exposure to radical literature, including Kropotkin and other anarchist theorists, in Guangdong just prior to the 1911 revolution. Rather less well known is the degree to which his involvement in radical politics continued after the revolution. In 1912 and 1913, Taixu was actually a leading figure among the anarchist-inspired Pure Socialists, who took Kropotkin as a guiding light.⁹

Although Taixu eventually abandoned anarchism as an explicit ideology in favor of more moderate incrementalist views, anarchism left a deep imprint on his thought and he always retained a special soft spot for Kropotkin and his theory of evolution through mutual aid. Among the first articles he published

⁹ I discuss this phase of Taixu's career and its historiography extensively in chapter one of my dissertation (Ritzinger 2010). Prior accounts of his youthful radicalism were based almost exclusively upon Taixu's own writings, as well as those of Yinshun 印順 (1906-2005), especially the *Autobiography of Taixu* (*Taixu zizhuan* 太虛自傳) ([1945] 2006, chapter 4) and Yinshun's *Annalistic Biography of the Great Master Taixu* (*Taixu dashi nianpu* 太虛大師年譜) ([2000] 2006, 43, 45-47, and 54-55), both of which minimize Taixu's activities after 1911. For prominent examples of the standard narrative of this period, see Pittman (2001, 72-73), Welch (1968, 15-16), and Jiang (1993, 95-96).

in the *Awakening Society Collectanea* (*Jueshe congshu* 覺社叢書)¹⁰ was an abbreviated translation of Kropotkin's "Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal" (Kropotkin [1919] 2006). Over the 1920s and into the early 30s, he wrote a number of articles that dealt with Kropotkin's ideas on evolution—including, "Humanistic Science" (*Renshengguan de kexue* 人生觀的科學) ([1925] 2006), "A Critique of Shen's Translation of Kropotkin's Ethics" (Ping shen yi kelupaotejin de rensheng shanxing xue 評沈譯克魯泡特金的人生善行學) ([1928] 2006), and "Gradual Teaching of the Mahayana and the Theory of Evolution" (*Dasheng jianjiao yu jinhua lun* 大乘漸教與進化論) ([1930b] 2006)—and referred to them in passing in many of his works. Although Kropotkin appears less frequently in Taixu's writings thereafter, associates such as Zhifeng 芝峰, Fushan 福善, and Yu Deyuan 虞德元 continued to treat this topic through the 1930s. Certainly, Taixu was not the only source of their interest in and knowledge of Kropotkin, but they all seem to repeat and elaborate the major themes of Taixu's thought on the subject, suggesting that his influence was key.

These works reveal that whereas Buddhists found Darwinian evolution to be antithetical to their deepest convictions, the Kropotkinite version held profound appeal. On his own terms, Kropotkin offers a theory of evolution in diametric opposition to all the aspects of Darwinism Buddhists found problematic. Kropotkin rejects competition in favor of cooperation as the primary force for progressive evolution, at least within species, although this is a qualification that was often ignored. Human progress has been and will continue to be reached through mutual aid rather than bloody struggle, undermining the justifications of imperialism. Conflict and competition leads not to advancement and evolution but destruction and decline. Prosperity and progress are instead to be found through cooperation. Moreover, the victims of imperialism need not try to beat the great powers at their own game. The way forward lies in transnational solidarity and mutual aid (Shouzhi 守志 [1931] 2006, 261). This was a key point for many and sometimes taken up in isolation from more explicitly religious concerns (Guotong 果通 [1935?] 2008). The political implications of one's chosen evolutionary theory were sufficiently important to stand on their own.

Moreover, as mentioned, Kropotkin was seen to wed science to morality, combining—as Zhifeng put it—the "ethics of the sages with biology" (Zhifeng [1932] 2006, 488). Science was generally viewed as corrosive of traditional

¹⁰ The predecessor of the better known *Sound of the Sea Tide* (*Haichaoyin* 海潮音), which served as the flagship journal of Taixu's movement.

ethical systems. Darwinism, in particular, was seen as actively regressive, damned by Taixu as “the theory that taught men to behave like beasts” (Taixu [1926] 2006, 384). Kropotkinite evolution, on the other hand, he lauded as the “theory that teaches men to improve their natures” (Taixu [1925] 2006, 66). Buddhist writers in China sometimes spoke of it as complement or corrective to the ethical humanism of Confucianism (Taixu 1925, 66), but whereas Confucianism was in a state of disrepute in the 20s and 30s, Kropotkin was seen as providing a scientifically sound naturalistic basis for an ethic of mutual care and self-sacrifice in the service of the greater good. As such, simply on its own terms, Kropotkin’s theory offered, in the estimation of Taixu and others, an antidote to a China “poisoned” by Darwinist thought (Taixu [1928] 2006, 274).

But Kropotkin offered more to Buddhists than simply an evolution they could live with. Kropotkinite theory was seen to have deep resonances with Buddhist doctrine. This allowed Buddhist writers to present Kropotkin’s ideas as anticipated, and ultimately fulfilled, by Buddhism. This can be seen in three main areas: metaphysics, ethics, and teleology.

In metaphysics, mutual aid is completed by dependent co-arising, according to Kropotkin’s Buddhist interpreters. As an anarchist, Kropotkin wanted to argue that no central authority is necessary. Self-organizing individuals engaged in mutual aid are sufficient for a harmonious society. He turned to science for proof. In physiology, he saw self-organizing cells and systems within the body; in biology, social animals; and in astronomy, the harmonious self-organization of celestial bodies that replaced the heliocentric universe. In all cases, order derives not from the domination of one part but through the inherent mutuality of all parties. Even the very principle of natural law itself is not some outside force, but nothing more than the relationship among phenomena (Kropotkin [1919] 2006, 264-67).

Buddhist writers argued that this just does not take it far enough. In fact, this mutuality is characteristic of the most fundamental functioning of the universe: dependant co-arising. Already in the 1919 translation of Kropotkin’s “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal” a note—most likely by Taixu, the journal’s editor—asserts that this vision of cosmic mutuality bears much resemblance to the Huayan doctrine of the limitless arising of the *dharmadhatu* (Kropotkin [1919] 2006, 264).¹¹ Taixu makes this same point in

¹¹ Taixu makes precicely this point in connection with Kropotkin’s thought years later ([1928] 2006, 270-71).

his better known 1925¹² essay “Humanistic science” (44) after which it becomes something of a truism in Buddhist discussions of mutual aid (Shouzhi [1931] 2006, 261; Zhu 朱鏡宙 [1948] 2006, 160). Kropotkin recognized the fact of mutual aid in the evolution of animal species and human societies, but only Buddhism can explain its ultimate basis in the interdependence of all *dharmas* (Yu 虞德元 [1934] 2006, 101-02). This metaphysics of mutuality takes mutual aid beyond even the stars and roots it in the very fabric of existence.

In ethics, mutual aid is completed by the compassion of non-self. Kropotkinite evolutionism, in Buddhist readings, is the human cultivation of human nature and an antidote to the ruthless selfishness of Darwinist competitive struggle (Taixu [1925] 2006, 66). Yet while the spirit of self-sacrifice extolled by Kropotkin gestures toward selflessness and loving-kindness, it is still necessarily limited by notions of self. True generosity, true self-sacrifice, is possible only when one realizes the non-existence of the self. Without this, there is always bound to be some degree of attachment that compromises virtue. Only by recognizing the emptiness of self and other can the bodhisattva dedicate himself entirely to the welfare of others (Zhu [1948] 2006, 160).¹³ Moreover, some writers pointed out that Kropotkin’s vision of mutual aid is limited to members of the same species; therefore, it doesn’t extend to animals (Taixu [1928] 2006, 271; Zhifeng [1932] 2006, 488). After all, one monk pointed out the *Sutra of Brahma’s Net* (*Fanwang jing* 梵網經) teaches that all beings were once one’s mother. We are thus bound by ties of mutual aid, not merely to other members of our society but to all living beings (Shouzhi [1931] 2006, 262).¹⁴ Such all-encompassing, complete compassion, it is argued, is possible only by eliminating the notion of self completely.

In teleology, the evolution of humanity is completed by Buddhahood. Kropotkin is perceptive on the biological evolution of humanity and the social evolution of anarchy, but unaware of the ultimate telos of evolution. Just as humans are a higher stage of evolution than animals, there must be a higher level still than humans. This is Buddhahood (Zhifeng [1932] 2006, 488; [1936]

¹² I refer here to the date of publication, rather than the date of composition, 1924, given in the *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書).

¹³ This is rather similar to the point Taixu makes in his commentary on the “Chapter on Reality” noted above.

¹⁴ Fushan makes the same point, but contrasts the interspecies vision of Buddhism with the intraspecies vision of Kropotkin indirectly via his reading of Plato, whose Republic he sees as founded on mutual aid (Fushan [1937] 2006, 389).

2006, 276-77). Thus true evolution is not biological or social but spiritual.¹⁵ This evolution is accomplished precisely by surpassing Kropotkin's vision in the two respects mentioned above. Metaphysically, one recognizes the ultimate mutuality of all things. Morally, one perfects self-sacrificial compassion through the realization of the inexistence of self in that mutuality (Zhifeng [1932] 2006, 489; [1936] 2006, 277).¹⁶ Buddhism, subsuming and completing the mechanism of Kropotkin's evolution, can bring human beings to this higher stage. Kropotkin is thus often presented as one who approached Buddhist teachings but fell short (Taixu [1928] 2006, 271-73), a great sage who had the misfortune to be born in a land without the Dharma (Zhifeng [1932] 2006, 490).

Conclusion: The Superscription of the Discursive Field

In its general thrust, this tactic should not be terribly surprising. The argument that Buddhism anticipates, subsumes, and completes some discovery or discipline is a staple of Buddhist apologetics against science.¹⁷ Indeed, it is simply a staple of Buddhist apologetics generally. One often finds comparable tactics being deployed against Confucianism in earlier centuries. Yet there is a bit more happening here than simply an exercise in apologetics. Buddhist reformers were taking advantage of the internal debates of science—one of the constitutive discourses of modernity—in order to seize essential ideological territory. In China in the 1920s and 1930s, to be opposed to or incompatible with science was to be cast forever into the outer darkness of utter irrelevancy and forfeit any claim to be an asset to the nation worthy of protection and preservation. And evolutionary theory was not just any scientific idea. Yoked by Social Darwinists to models *of* human history and models *for* future advancement, it was literally synonymous with progress, a central value of high modernity.

¹⁵ This was a common argument made in regard to evolutionary theory in general, not just the Kropotkinite version (Hammerstrom 2010, 234).

¹⁶ Taixu had made essentially the same point in less straightforward terms in "Ping shen yi kelupaotejin de rensheng shanxingxue" 評沈譯克魯泡特金的人生善行學 (Taixu [1928] 2006, 272).

¹⁷ For a cross-cultural survey, see Lopez (2008). For an extensive treatment of the issue in Republican China, see Hammerstrom (2010). Tao Jiang (2002, 545) maintains that this approach should not be seen as apologetics because it does not correspond to any of the typical approaches of Christian apologetics to science, but this is would seem to define apologetics too narrowly.

Yet we have seen that Darwinism, at least in the vulgar readings that circulated most widely at the time, was deeply offensive to the sensibilities of Chinese Buddhists. Imperialism offended politically. “Eat or be eaten” offended morally. Self-assertion offended soteriologically. The ongoing debates over the precise mechanism of evolution allowed Buddhists to seize on the Kropotkinite alternative. By claiming that Buddhism anticipated, subsumed, and fulfilled Kropotkinite theory, Buddhists were not merely engaging in apologetics, at least as ordinarily understood. They were not simply defending their religion or “giving answer” to the questions and problems of the world. They were attempting to superscribe Buddhism onto the internal debates of modernity, to annex Kropotkin’s discursive space and thereby constitute Buddhism as a participant in that discourse, infusing it with their own concerns.¹⁸ In so doing, they sought both to appropriate Kropotkinite evolutionism’s impeccable credentials as a modern progressive ideology while at the same time beating back the tide of pernicious Darwinism.

The extent to which these tactics were successful is likely limited. Certainly the arguments made would have left unimpressed most who were not already convinced of the veracity of Buddhist doctrine. Chinese Buddhists were also rather late to the party. Evolutionary discourse reached its zenith in the 1920s and over the course of the 30s began to be eclipsed by Marxist dialectical materialism as the major idiom through which progress was conceptualized (Hammerstrom 2010, 234). Be that as it may, the present analysis highlights the importance of not only adopting but extending the insights of McMahan. Just as the discourses of modernity are heterogeneous and have evolved in interdependent tension, so too are the discourses themselves internally heterogeneous. The discourse of science speaks not with one voice but many. The internal debates of the discipline presented Buddhists with opportunities to exploit for their own discursive gain. Only by deconstructing monolithic conceptions of science and historically situating scientific discourse can the story of Buddhist engagements with science be told in full.

¹⁸ I borrow the concept of superscription here from Duara (1988), though I employ it somewhat differently.

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