

Buddhism and Superstition: Buddhist Apologetics in the Anti-Superstition Campaigns in Modern China

Wei Wu

Emory University

The paper examines Buddhist apologetics in the Chinese anti-superstition campaigns in the 1920s and the early 1930s. When the Nationalist government launched the campaign to root out superstition, the ambiguous notion of “superstition” (*mixin*) became an important site of contention. In response to Chinese intellectuals’ interpretations of the neologies of “superstition” and “religion” as Buddhist attempts to spread irrational beliefs and practices, Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Taixu 太虛, and other Buddhist writers defended the Buddhist tradition. Through analyzing the writings of Buddhists and their critics, the paper explores how “superstition” was interpreted in the Chinese context, as well as its implications for Buddhism. The paper shows that Buddhist authors actively engaged with these new discourses to articulate their actual beliefs and practices. Differentiating the Buddhist “true faith” (*zhengxin* 正信) from “deluded faith” (*mixin* 迷信), they tried to defend Buddhism from the accusation of spreading superstition. To promote the relevance of Buddhism in public life, they advocated for Buddhism’s role in advancing education and social welfare. Though sharing a common concern about the tradition, the authors took different strategies in their apologetics, and these differences reflected the conflicting views among educated Buddhists regarding the role of Buddhism in modern China.

Keywords: Buddhism, superstition (*mixin*), true faith (*zhengxin*), modern China, religion

INTRODUCTION

When the category of “superstition” was introduced to China in the late nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals found it confusing and

ambiguous.¹ In the past, the term “heterodoxy” (*yinsi* 淫祀) had been used in the official documents. Since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the official elites had enforced religious policies to keep people from unorthodox religious activities that contravened the moral values defined in the Confucian Classics. Various governments used the term *zheng* 正 (orthodox) and *xie* 邪 (heterodox) in the descriptions of acceptable and unacceptable religious activities.² Suspicious of politically subversive beliefs and practices, the dynasties also banned what they deemed to be heretical sacrifices and cults throughout history.³ Religious practitioners were expected to adapt their beliefs to the orthodox values, and the heterodox sects often provoked government persecution.⁴

The category of “superstition,” along with its relative antithesis of “religion,” was introduced to China in the late nineteenth century as part of a modern discourse. In the late Qing (1644–1912) and Republican China (1912–1949), in an effort to strengthen the country, the governments initiated a series of modernization programs, including conducting anti-superstition movements to eradicate superstition from public life. With the decline of Confucian orthodoxy, the governments

1. Both “religion” and “superstition” were translated from Japanese in the late nineteenth century. Regarding the concept of “religion” in China, see Vincent Goossaert, “The Concept of Religion in China and the West,” *Diogenes* 52, no. 1 (February 2005): 13–20. Regarding the term “superstition” in China, see Shen Jie 沈潔, “Fan mixin huayu jiqi xiandai qi yuan” 反迷信話語及其現代起源 (The Anti-Superstition Discourse and Its Modern Origin), *Shi Lin*, no. 2 (October 2006): 30–42.

2. Confucian teachings dominated the state discourses of the dynasties. The Republican elites inherited the traditional Confucian attitude, and their characterization of folk religion as superstition was rooted in the Chinese Confucians’ tradition of the past. See Anthony C. Yu, *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2005), 1–19.

3. The peasants could manipulate the rituals to threaten the official authorities. See Emily Martin, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 5.

4. Despite imperial persecution and oppression, various sects were able to flourish. For a discussion of the sects and uprisings, see Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). See also Susan Naquin, *Shantung Rebellion: The Wang Lun Uprising of 1774* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

used the neologies in framing religious policies. However, the precise meaning of “superstition” remained vague and elusive.

What is meant by “superstition” had been ambiguous from its emergence in classical antiquity. In Europe, different religious and political authorities appropriated the term to derogate a range of practices and beliefs, and this resulted in its meaning shifting over time and space. In the early Roman times, the intellectual and political authority frequently used it as a mostly pejorative word to refer to improper beliefs and practices, including Christianity. In the late Roman Empire, after the Christian theologians used it to refer to pagan beliefs and practices, the term was imbued with many Christian references.⁵ Embedded in European culture, the medieval Christian church censured idolatry, witchcraft, and heresy as superstition. However, despite the church’s efforts to identify and eliminate particular practices and beliefs, the presumably superstitious elements became entwined with the sanctioned activities.⁶ The modern concept of “superstition,” suggesting a separation of the supernatural realm from the physical realm, emerged only in the sixteenth century. When Rene Descartes and other Enlightenment writers promoted reason and rationality above all, “superstition” was used to indicate activities related to supernatural powers that did not align with scientific rationality.⁷ The Enlightenment writers proclaimed that superstition resulted from human fear and delusion, and was due to people’s ignorance about the natural laws governing the physical world. With the advance of science and technology, superstition would be cast off by the modern educated person, they declared. Thereafter, superstition became a distinct category to suggest a separate realm of irrational beliefs and activities arising from ignorance, in opposition to rationality and reasoning that were supported by the observation of natural laws.

The Chinese rendition of “superstition” also reflected Enlightenment writers’ intentions. Combing the two characters *mi* 迷

5. For a discussion about superstition and religion in the European context, see Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion 1250–1750* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

6. See Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 3–4.

7. Regarding the early evolution of narratives about superstition in the Greek and Roman Empires, see Dale Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12–14.

(illusory or deluded) and *xin* 信 (belief or faith), *mixin* was generally a derogatory term to denote the beliefs and acts arising from ignorance and irrationality.⁸ After its translation in the late Qing, some Chinese intellectuals used the term to articulate their modernizing discourses. From the late Qing reform in 1898 to the first decades of the twentieth century, the governments and the educators conducted a series of anti-superstition movements. With the concept of “superstition” loosely defined in legal documents and public media, some legislators and local elites also drew on the anti-superstition message to assault Buddhism. In Henan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shandong, Anhui, Sichuan, Zhejiang, and other provinces, the local governments appropriated Buddhist temple properties, taxed the clergy for performing funeral rites, and criticized Buddhist monks for confusing people. These actions also aggravated the Buddhists’ concern and caused their protest.

How did the anti-superstition discourses and campaigns influence Buddhism? How did the Buddhists receive the charge of practicing “superstition?” In what ways did the new categories affect the Buddhists’ expression of Buddhist doctrines and praxis, as well as their visioning of Buddhism in modern society? This paper explores Buddhist apologetics to analyze the changing orientations in the Buddhists’ presentation of their beliefs and practices. When the governments increasingly encroached on the religious domain, Chinese Buddhist writers were challenged to defend the tradition. They also needed to explain seemingly idolatrous customs. To resist and counter the charge of superstition, the Buddhists attempted to delineate Buddhist practices from those of folk religions, even though heretofore such boundaries had been floating and permeable in the Chinese cultural context.

Apologetics constituted an important part of the Chinese Buddhists’ effort to argue for the relevance of Buddhism to modern society. When the Buddhist writers based the apologetics on the Buddhist doctrinal tradition, they also engaged with the implications evoked by new categories like “superstition” and “religion.” They used different and sometimes conflicting strategies to formulate the apologetics. Some authors adopted the new categories and tried to prove the disparity between Buddhism and superstition, while others questioned the

8. See Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

notion of “superstition” as an effective category to describe religious phenomena. Some authors denied the existence of presumed superstitious acts at all—such as chanting mantra in the funeral rites—in “authentic” Buddhism, regarding them as having evolved from a degenerate mixture of Buddhism and folk beliefs. Other writers did not deny the similarities in the liturgical practices, but explained them as convenient tools to benefit sentient beings. Given the widely shared ritualistic features between Buddhism and folk religions, some writers tried to underscore Buddhism’s unique philosophy. Beginning with the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned arising, they tried to highlight the rational elements in Buddhist praxis. Through different strategies, the authors resisted the negative image of backwardness and irrationality that the critics imposed on Buddhism. They also shared the conviction that doctrinal learning among practitioners should be improved.

To contextualize the Buddhist apologetics, the first section traces the early discussion of “superstition” by Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing and early Republican periods. The second section examines the impact of anti-superstition campaigns on Buddhism, with an analysis of the critiques about Buddhist beliefs and practices. The third section analyzes the Buddhist apologetics, including the works of Liang Qichao, Taixu, Changxing 常惺, Kang Jiyao 康寄遙, and other less-known authors. It focuses on the Buddhists’ defense of funeral rites and devotional practices, which drew the most attacks. The last section discusses Buddhists’ reflections about the proper use of ritualistic and devotional praxis. As the section shows, by drawing on traditional teachings and modernizing discourses, Buddhists formulated arguments to rebut the accusations of superstition. The campaigns also challenged the Buddhist writers to present, justify, and modify expressions of Buddhist ideas and practices to be compatible with nation-building discourses. An analysis of Buddhist apologetics will help to reveal an important aspect of the modern intellectual and institutional history of Chinese Buddhism, as well as the social and political forces that influenced the development.

DEFINING SUPERSTITION IN THE LATE QING
AND EARLY REPUBLICAN PERIODS

In pre-modern times, Chinese imperial rule was not exclusively secular, but had religious elements woven into the political structure.⁹ As early as the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1045 BCE), divination and sacrifices constituted part of the court rituals.¹⁰ Beginning in the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1045–771 BCE), the idea of ruling at the mandate of heaven played a significant role in sanctioning the sovereignty of every dynastic power.¹¹ Since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), and particularly in the Song (960–1279), the states sanctioned local deities by conferring imperial titles on them and adding them to official registers. The regulations helped to disseminate state-promoted values to the commoners and strengthened governmental control over local cults.¹² Regarding the heterodox cults as potential threats, the dynasties restricted people from practicing them. The governments also suppressed sectarian movements that they considered politically subversive.¹³ Such religious management continued into the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, when the courts continued to employ Confucian orthodoxy to promote and support social stability.

In the late Qing, the state faced increasing pressure from intellectuals, who asked for social change to strengthen the country. In the One Hundred Days Reform in 1898, some scholars and politicians proposed a number of reform initiatives. Despite their different perspectives, various parties agreed that building modern schools would be a priority for strengthening the country. Lacking revenues for such

9. See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961), 104.

10. Regarding how rulers manipulated rituals to control the bureaucracy and the masses, see, for example, Howard Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T'ang Dynasty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

11. The state claimed that its sovereignty embodied the cosmic order, and such relation was represented and reinforced in the official rites. See Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 127.

12. For the state's regulation of regional beliefs, see Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

13. See J. J. M. de Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1974 [1903]), 257.

a reform, they targeted temple properties to cover the expenditures. In a memorial to the Guangxu 光緒 emperor in July 1898, the scholar Kang Youwei 康有為 asked to transform all the temples into schools. Declaring that “Chinese customs are obsessed with ghosts and spirits, and cults are prevalent,” Kang proposed to appropriate temple properties to fund public welfare.¹⁴ Another politician, Zhang Zhidong 張之洞, proposed to convert the Buddhist and Daoist temples into schools. Zhang was optimistic about securing a large source of revenue, and he said,

There are more than a million temples. Every city has over one hundred temples, every big county has dozens of temples, and every small county also has a dozen. Each temple owns lands and properties, all of which are made possible by the generosity of the donors. If we transform the temples into schools, the housing and properties would immediately become available. It is convenient and easy.¹⁵

Zhang also gave a gloomy prediction about the future of Buddhism and Daoism, asserting that “With the rise of Western religions, Buddhism and Daoism are diminishing. They may not survive in the long run.”¹⁶ So Zhang insisted that Buddhism and Daoism should give way to the building of new schools.

Although the One Hundred Days Reform failed in 1898, Kang and Zhang’s proposals had a long-lasting impact on the states’ religious policy in the subsequent decades. After 1912, the Republican government continued with many of the late Qing reformative discourses. The anti-religion trend, emerging in the late Qing reforms and continuing in the early Republican period, departed from the preceding imperial religious regulation. As stated earlier, the dynastic rulers often oppressed a particular cult, seeing it as a potential threat to social order. However, in the early twentieth century, the traditional trope of sustaining Confucian orthodox ethnic values gradually lost purchase. In

14. Kang Youwei, “Qing chi ge sheng gai shuyuan yin ci wei xuetang zhe” 請飭各省改書院淫祠為學堂折 (Memorial to the Throne about Changing the Confucian Academies and Heterodox Shrine to Schools), in *Kang Youwei Zhenglun ji* 康有為政論集 (Collections of Kang Youwei’s Political Comments), ed. Tang Zhijun 湯志鈞 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 311–312.

15. Zhang Zhidong, “Quanxue pian” 勸學篇 (Exhortation to Learning), in *Zhang Wenxiang Gong quanji* 張文襄公全集 (Collection of Zhang Zhidong), ed. Wang Shunan 王樹楠, vol. 203 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1928), 16.

16. *Ibid.*

the early Republican period, the narrative of building a modern nation-state was on the rise, preparing the ground for the state's religious regulations.¹⁷

Some intellectuals went even further to promote a radical break from the past. A vocal proclamation came from the writer Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, a socialist and co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1915, Chen founded *New Youth*, which became one of the most popular journals in China. Chen criticized all forms of religion and led the attack on idolatry. In a 1918 article, Chen defined idolatry and said, "All the useless objects being worshipped are junk and idols. They should be destroyed."¹⁸ Chen also enumerated the idols, claiming that "all religions are idols cheating the people. Amitābha Buddha is deceitful, the Lord Jehovah is deceitful, the Jade Emperor is deceitful. All the gods, buddhas, immortals, spirits are being worshipped by the faithful, but they are useless and deceitful idols. They should be destroyed."¹⁹ Regarding all religions as a symbol of the past, Chen positioned them against science and rationality. Chen argued that the establishment of democracy and modern science entailed a radical separation, and he claimed, "To promote democracy, we have to fight against Confucianism, the teachings of rites, chastity, old ethics, old politics. To promote science, we have to fight against old arts and old religions."²⁰

Furthermore, Chen elaborated on the threat of "theocratic sovereignty" (*shenquan* 神權), arguing that religions subjected the people

17. Yuan Shikai 袁世凱, the president of the republic, advocated reforms in northern China, which gained support from the rural elites. See Prasenjit Duara, "Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (February 1991): 67–83. On the relation between religion and state in modern China, see Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1–49.

18. See Chen Duxiu, "Ouxiang pohuai lun" 偶像破壞論 (Comments about Iconoclasm), *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (New Youth) 5, no. 2 (August 1918).

19. *Ibid.*

20. See Chen Duxiu, "Xin qingnian zui'an zhi da bian shu" 新青年罪案之答辯書 (Defense of the Sin of the *New Youth*), *New Youth* 6, no. 2 (February 1919).

to authority and hindered the revolution.²¹ Chen's goal was to attack the old social order to usher in a new era. Among the early Republican writers, Chen's voice was on the radical end, but it represented a trend that questioned the values of religions. Other literary leaders also agreed that the deluded beliefs and customs could not contribute to nurturing the citizens for the republic. For example, Hu Shih 胡適 asserted that "Teaching through the way of the gods, through the ways to see god or spirits, the religious means no longer worked today. And the religions of revelation, theocratic religions, idolatry religion, they no longer worked in our hearts."²² To bring social transformation, it became important to cast off the outdated religious customs and to educate the people in science and rationalism.

Meanwhile, many Buddhist temples faced being pillaged by the local governments and military armies in the 1910s and 1920s. In the early Republican period, the provisional constitution stipulated religious freedom. However, like the late Qing reformers, the local governments and the regional warlords also aimed at taking over the temple properties. The temples in the northeastern plain suffered a great loss. In Henan province, when Feng Yuxiang's 馮玉祥 army took over the city of Kaifeng in 1927, he ordered the closing of all the temples and turned them into military camps. The famous Xiangguo Temple (Xiangguo si 相國寺) was looted and transformed into a market. All the monks were expelled; the old monks were forced to return home and the young ones were enlisted into Feng's army.²³ Similar cases were reported in Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and other provinces.²⁴

21. Chen Duxiu, *Ke Lin De Bi* 克林德碑 (The Monument in Memory of Ketteler), *New Youth* 6, no. 2 (February 1919).

22. See Hu Shih, "Buxiu wo de zongjiao," 不朽, 我的宗教 (Immortalization, My Religion), *New Youth* 5, no. 5 (November 1918).

23. See Huitong 慧通, "Cheng guomin zhengfu wen" 呈國民政府文 (Letter to the Republican Government), *Chenzhong* 晨鐘 (Morning Bell), no. 3 (April 1928): 6-8.

24. For example, in Zhejiang, the local elites assaulted the temples and destroyed the statues. In Jiangsu, the Bureau of Education proposed to turn all temples into schools. See Chen Fuchu 陳復初, "Jiejiu zhongguo fojiao weiwang yijian zhi shangque" 解救中國佛教危亡意見之商榷 (Discussion about the Opinions about How to Save Chinese Buddhism from the Risk), *Chenzhong*, no. 3 (April 1928): 14-22.

The incursions aroused indignation among the Buddhists. In addition to organizing coalitions and lobbying the governments, the Buddhists also composed apologetics to protect the temples. To contextualize these apologetics, the next section explores the anti-superstition discourses. The section shows that different parties interpreted the vague term “superstition” to different ends. When the critics accused Buddhism of disseminating false views and practices, the Buddhist writers tried to distance Buddhism from “superstition.”

BUDDHISM IN THE ANTI-SUPERSTITION CAMPAIGNS

China fell into political fragmentation after President Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 passed away in 1916. The competing warlords waged war for years until the Nationalist government launched the Northern Expedition in 1926. After the unification of the northern provinces in 1928, the Nationalist government was ready to push forward its nation-building agenda, which oriented its religious policies.²⁵ Instead of using the traditional category of “heterodoxy” to forbid religious activities, the Nationalist government adopted the neology of “superstition” to label religious activities. However, the blurred boundary between the categories of “religion” and “superstition” made it difficult to separate a broad range of phenomena into two domains. As this section shows, the elusive concept of “superstition” prompted disagreement in the various groups. While some lawmakers, local governments, and educators attacked Buddhism in the name of anti-superstition, many Buddhists regarded it as a deliberate ploy to infringe upon their properties. In defense, the Buddhists attempted to distinguish their beliefs and praxis from superstition. The different voices about “superstition” reflected the tensions between the state and the religious institutions in the process of nation-building.

In 1928, the Ministry of Interior Affairs issued the *Standard for Sustaining and Destroying the Gods and Shrines* (*Shen ci cun fei biao zhun* 神祠存廢標準), classifying the shrines and practices into four categories.

25. Previous scholarship has noted that the regime failed to eradicate superstition. The religious organizations resisted the government attack by using Nationalist ideology and referred to the freedom of religion to protect their properties. See Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2010), 1–24.

Two types of religious institutions were sanctioned: shrines for cultural heroes and figures, and religions “teaching through the way of the gods, with pure and true principles.” The other two types of religion were to be eradicated: the ancient gods (*gushen* 古神) that had been “worshipped historically but lack meaning for the present day,” and the heterodox cults (*yinsi* 淫祀).²⁶ The regulation also forbade the customs of pilgrimages, drawing lots, prostration and repentance (*lichen* 禮懺), ceremonial assembly, the rites to liberate the hungry ghosts or “burning mouths” (*fang yankou* 放焰口), and other practices.²⁷

While the regulation used the traditional term of “heterodox cults” to label some forbidden religious beliefs and acts, the given reason was because of their being superstitious. Instead of implying deviance from Confucian orthodoxy, “superstition” primarily connoted the irrational beliefs and practices that were contrary to modern science and rationalism. The 1928 *Standard* rejected superstition and theocracy, saying that “superstition is still widely poisoning the people, and the claims of theocratic sovereignty haven’t changed.” While the regulation permitted the continuity of some religious beliefs and acts, the ambiguity of the term “superstition” provided room for encroachment on the state-sanctioned religions. In the anti-superstition campaigns in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the Nanjing government targeted temple properties. In 1928, Xue Dubi 薛篤弼, the minister of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, proposed to confiscate temple properties to finance education. In January 1929, the ministry issued the “Regulation about Temple Management” (*simiao guanli tiaoli* 寺廟管理條例), allowing the local governments to disband Buddhist and Daoist temples if the monks were found to be “disobeying the pure rules, violating the ruling of the party, and trespassing the good customs.”²⁸

Parlaying the anti-superstition message from the government, local elites took the opportunity to infringe upon and take control of temple property. Tai Shuangqiu 邵爽秋, a professor at the National Central University, proposed to “confiscate temple property to

26. See the Editorial Board of the Second Historical Archive, “Shen ci cun fei biao zhun,” in *Zhonghua minguo lishi dangan ziliao huibian* 中華民國歷史檔案資料彙編 (Collection of the Historical Archives of Republican China), vol. 5 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1994), 495–506.

27. *Ibid.*

28. See the Editorial Board of the Second Historical Archive, “Simiao guanli tiaoli,” in *Zhonghua minguo lishi dangan ziliao huibian*, 5:1017–1018.

promote education.” Of the many cases reported, such encroachment always provoked indignation among the faithful, leading to a large-scale protest in Beijing. On September 22, 1929, the teachers from the School for the Children of Tram Workers’ Union came to the Iron Mountain Temple (Tieshansi 鐵山寺) in the neighborhood of Beijing. The teachers expelled the monks, proclaiming that they were turning the temple into an affiliated school.²⁹ The monk Juexian 覺先, the leader of the Beijing Buddhist Association, convened an urgent meeting with the representatives from hundreds of temples. Seeing this case as an indicator of an imminent life-or-death crisis for all temples, the Buddhist leaders warned that the “newspapers and propaganda” were trying to extinguish Buddhism and eliminate monasticism.³⁰ On October 5, over two thousand Buddhist and Daoist monks, nuns, and laypeople organized a demonstration outside the Beijing office of the Nationalist party.³¹

In response to the religious groups’ protest, the teachers and students published even more anti-superstition messages. To expand the efforts to eliminate “superstition,” the workers’ union, the students’ union, and three other social organizations formed a superstition-elimination committee (*pochu mixin weiyuan hui* 破除迷信委員會) on October 11.³² The committee distributed brochures among residents to gain their support. The committee also proposed surveying the temples and the number of monks and nuns, petitioning the government to enforce the clergy to change their occupation, and confiscating the

29. The teachers destroyed statues, sold some properties for educational funds, and turned the temple halls into classrooms. The expelled monks filed a lawsuit against the school for defrauding and stealing. See “Bei quzhu heshang diu miao chu mixin dangyuan cui fo” 被驅逐和尚丟廟除迷信黨員催佛 (The Evicted Monks Lost the Temple, the Party Members Destroyed Buddha Statues), *Xin chenbao* 新晨報 (The New Morning Daily), February 25, 1930.

30. “Pochu mixin hui kuoda yundong” 破除迷信會擴大運動 (The Expanding Movement of the Superstition-Elimination Committee), *Huabei ribao* 華北日報 (Northern Daily), October 21, 1929. See also, “Heshang zuo kai hufa jushi dahui” 和尚昨開護法居士大會 (The Monks Had an Assembly of the Dharma-Protector Lay People), *Huabei ribao*, October 21, 1929.

31. “Beiping seng dao fan zuori lianhe youxing qingyuan” 北平僧道番昨日聯合遊行請願 (Monks, Daoist Monks, and Lamas Joined the Demonstration Yesterday for Petition), *Shijie ribao* 世界日報 (World Daily), October 6, 1929.

32. “Pochu mixin hui kuoda yundong,” *Huabei ribao*, October 21, 1929.

temples and turning them into public venues. On October 14, the students' union published an article in the influential newspaper *Beiping Daily*. Criticizing the monks as corrupt and fraudulent, the article praised the teachers' occupation of the temple and destruction of the idols as contributing to eliminating superstition from the land.³³

In November 1929, as the tensions escalated, the government revoked the "Regulation about Temple Management" and passed the "Regulation about Supervision of Temples" (*jiandu simiao tiaoli* 監督寺廟條例). The new regulation stipulated that the government would supervise rather than manage the temple property. However, it still allowed the government to intervene in temple affairs and eject the monks.³⁴ The anti-superstition movement was on the rise. In Anhui Province, the government taxed "superstitious activities," including funeral rites conducted by Buddhist and Daoist monks.³⁵ With support from the media, local governments and anti-superstition societies continued to infringe upon the religious domain.³⁶

In the late 1920s and beyond, many Buddhist authors rose up against the charge of Buddhism being a superstition. In the words of the writer Puchang 溥常, "superstition is just an excuse for confiscating temple property."³⁷ Given the generally demeaning image of Buddhism in the

33. "Pusa heshang e yun lailin" 菩薩和尚惡運來臨 (Misfortune Is Befalling on the Bodhisattva and the Monks), *Beiping ribao* 北平日報 (Beiping Daily), October 14, 1929.

34. "Jiandu simiao tiaoli," *Zhonghua minguo lishi dangan ziliao huibian*, 5:1028.

35. See "Anhui zhengshou jingchan mixin juan renwei yiduan huozhong" 安徽徵收經懺迷信捐認為異端惑眾 (Superstition-Tax Was Levied in Anhui for the Heterodoxy Confused the People), *Xiandai sengqie* 現代僧伽 (Modern Sangha), nos. 43-44 (June 1930): 81-82.

36. For example, in 1934 the abbot Jiran 寂然 of the Temple of Sitting Clouds (Qixiasi 棲霞寺) filed a lawsuit against Huang Zhifu 黃質夫—the principal of the Nanjing Qixia Normal School, trying to protect the temple's land from the school's encroachment. *Zhongyang ribao* 中央日報 (Central Daily News)—the Nationalist party's official newspaper, reported the case as "the educators' fight against superstition." See Tianran 天然, "Fojiao guowei jiaoyu shang zhi zhangaiwu yu? Fojiao guowei shijian shang zhi mixin wu yu" 佛教果為教育上之障礙物歟? 佛教果為世間上之迷信物歟? (Is Buddhism Really a Hindrance to Education? Is Buddhism Really Superstition in the World?), *Zhengxin* 正信 (True Faith) 3, no. 24 (April 1934): 3-5.

37. See Puchang 溥常, "Mixin bian" 迷信辨 (The Differentiation of Superstition), *Hongfa shekan* 弘法社刊 (Journal of the Dharma-Spreading

public media, central to the apologetics was an obvious attempt to differentiate Buddhism from superstition. The authors were challenged to define Buddhist beliefs and praxis in a precise manner and explain why they were not superstitions. While the defenses were mostly grounded in Chinese Buddhist history and its doctrines, the authors also engaged with the new discourses surrounding modernity. They generally presented Buddhism as aligned with rationality and the course of nation-building, and in opposition to superstition and divine sovereignty.

The first challenge was to differentiate Buddhism from idolatry, a common critique by the revolutionary writers. Devotional practices, such as chanting a mantra or a buddha's name, burning incense, offering flowers and water, and bowing and praying to a statue, were widely performed by Buddhists. However, the 1928 *Standard* not only identified certain rites—such as the rite to liberate hungry ghosts—as superstitions, but also painted some common devotional practices—such as prostration and repentance—with the same brush. The *Standard* also claimed that the outdated customs were “blinding the people's minds” and “sustaining divine sovereignty,” and declared that they must be uprooted.³⁸ In the eyes of the critics, Buddhism was deluding the faithful and leading them into idolatry.

In response, the Buddhist writers tried to argue that idol worship was a false accusation, for Buddhism was essentially incompatible with idolatry. A monk named Jiezong 玠宗 argued that Buddhists never perceived the Buddha as a god. The Buddha was the one who, after attaining enlightenment, compassionately inspired his followers towards enlightenment.³⁹ Another author named Haicheng 海澄 added that Buddhism prohibited attachment to forms. Quoting the *Diamond Sutra*, a popular Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture, Haicheng said: “The Buddha claimed that ‘if a person sees the Buddha through forms, and prays to the Buddha through sounds, the person is practicing the evil way and not seeing the Buddha.’ If the Buddhists are worshipping the idols,

Society), no. 3 (October 1928): 25.

38. See, “Shen ci cun fei biao zhun,” 495–506.

39. See Shi Jiezong 釋玠宗, “Foxue shi zhengxin jue fei mixin” 佛學是正信絕非迷信 (The Knowledge of Buddhism is True Belief, Not Superstition), *Taiwan fojiao xinbao* 臺灣佛教新報 (The New Paper of Taiwan Buddhism) 1, no. 6 (November 1925): 3–4.

they are far away from the Buddha. So those who are criticizing the Buddhists as idol worshippers, they are ill-informed.”⁴⁰

Likewise, another author named Jueren 覺人 quoted from the *Sutra of the Original Vows of the Medicine-Master Buddha of Lapis Light*, arguing that the Buddha had warned his followers against superstition.⁴¹ The scripture lists nine ways in which people die accidentally (*hengsi* 橫死). The first reason for such undesirable forms of death is a delusion. The scripture also depicts several scenarios that resemble the modern critics' description of superstitious behaviors. For example, a sick person refuses to see a doctor, or takes medicine improperly, or gets the wrong medicine. Or a person follows demons and evil teachers, predicts fortune and misfortune, conducts divination, makes a sacrifice by killing, and invokes the spirits. However, says the scripture, none of these delusional activities could generate blessings or extend the person's lifespan. So due to “ignorance and confusion, evil beliefs and views,” the deluded person could die unexpectedly and get born in hell.⁴² The apologist Jueren cited the scripture to demonstrate Buddha's contempt of superstition, concluding that these acts contradict the Buddha's teaching.

However, the critics combated this defense by pointing to the widespread devotional praxis in Buddhism. After all, Buddhist journals during the Republican periods circulated many testimonials, proclaiming the efficacy of chanting, prostration, repentance, and pilgrimage. While the Buddhist scriptures advocated non-attachment to forms, Buddhists commonly prostrated themselves to the Buddha's statues, invited monks to conduct funerary services, and prayed for mundane benefits. The faithful claimed that they witnessed miracles in healing, salvation in disaster, or saw auspicious signs at the deathbed of dying people. While the testimonials contributed to sustaining Buddhist belief, they also intensified the stereotype about believers' credibility. For example, a critic derided the Buddhists, saying, “The monks are

40. See Haicheng 海澄, “Fojiao yu mixin” 佛教與迷信 (Buddhism and Superstition), *Zhengjue* 正覺 (True Enlightenment), no. 2 (August 1930): 1–2.

41. *Yao shi liuli guang rulai ben yuan jing* 藥師琉璃光如來本願經 (Scripture of the Original Vows of the Medicine-Master Buddha of Lapis Light), T. 14, no. 449:404a.

42. See Jueren 覺人, “Fo bi mixin” 佛闢迷信 (Buddhism Rejects Superstition), *Shijie fojiao jushi lin linkan* 世界佛教居士林林刊 (The Journal of the Lay Buddhist Society of the World), no. 8 (February 1925): 11.

chanting the scriptures to transfer merit to the deceased, the temples are building idols for people to pray, the Buddhists are talking about heavens and hells to delude the people. Given the prevalence of all the practices, how can the Buddhists assert that Buddhism is not superstitious?"⁴³

In response, some Buddhist writers claimed that many Buddhist customs resulted from a degenerate mixture in its evolution, rather than stemming from original Buddhism. For example, the reformer Taixu attributed the Buddhists' worshipping activities to the Chinese dynasties' manipulation of religions, in which Buddhism gradually mixed with Daoism and folk religion.⁴⁴ He claimed, "The historical emperors fooled the people with gods and spirits, and the influence is still impacting the Buddhists today."⁴⁵ Likewise, the author Jingsan 敬三 argued that the Buddhist praxis of the six perfections didn't contain any superstitious elements. To attain enlightenment, Buddhists strived to nurture generosity, morality, perseverance, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. Burning incense and bowing to Buddha was no more than a gesture to honor the Buddha's compassion and wisdom, he said.⁴⁶

Tracking the development of Buddhist iconography, the Buddhist monk Changxing argued that Buddhists didn't idolize the Buddha. The Buddhist tradition traced the crafting of the first Buddha statue to the time of the Indian King Udayana—a contemporary of the Buddha. Legend had it that, on the Buddha's approval, the king ordered the making of the statue so that the king and his people wouldn't grieve the absence of the Buddha while he was away. Changxing argued that, in the beginning, bowing to the Buddha's statue amounted to showing respect to the Buddha. However, Buddhism had gradually "shifted away from the original intention of the Buddha." Echoing Taixu, Changxing explained that when the ancient Chinese emperors employed religions

43. Changxing, "Fofa shi mixin de ma" 佛法是迷信的嗎 (Is Buddhism Superstitious), *Zhengjue*, no. 1 (July 1930): 41–45.

44. See Taixu, "Jingcheng tuanjie yu fojiao zhi tiaozheng" 精誠團結與佛教之調整 (Unification in Good Faith and the Adjustment of Buddhism), *Haichao yin* 海潮音 (The Sound of Ocean Tide) 21, no. 9 (September 1940): 10–11.

45. See Taixu, "Zhi Wu Zhihui xiansheng shu" 致吳稚暉先生書 (Letter to Mr. Wu Zhihui), *Haichao yin* 9, no. 1 (February 1928): 11–23.

46. See Jingsan, "Pochu mixin wenda" 破除迷信問答 (Answers to Questions about Elimination of Superstition), *Fohua suikan* 佛化隨刊 (The Journal of Buddhist Teachings) 9, nos. 10–11 (December 1928): 22–24.

to civilize the people, some monks disobeyed the Buddha's teaching and worshipped the statues of local deities. The greedy monks allegedly also profited from providing unscriptural services—such as divination and healing through sorcery. So the superstitious elements only revealed the monks' corruption and ignorance, rather than evidencing the Buddha's approval of these practices.⁴⁷

In addition to iconography, Changxing also clarified another roundly-condemned practice—extravagant Buddhist funerals. As shown by Holmes Welch's research, Buddhist monks performed various rites for the dead, and these had constituted an important part of temple revenue.⁴⁸ Changxing attributed the liturgical orientation of temple life to Confucian influence. He claimed that as the emperors promoted Confucian values to sustain social order, ritual propriety became prominent in Chinese society, and the ordinary people were judged based on their ritual etiquette. To demonstrate filial piety, Chinese families regarded the funerary rites as a necessity for honoring the deceased. Consequently, Buddhist monks became obsessed with conducting funeral and memorial services. Contextualizing the funeral rites in Chinese culture, Changxing claimed that the accusation of superstition should not apply to Buddhism, and he wrote, "The critics don't disparage the hypocrisy in society, or the ignorance of the people, but blame Buddhism as superstitious. Is this reasonable?"⁴⁹

Buddhist reformers like Taixu and Changxing, seeing the ritualistic and devotional elements as a degenerate mixture, advanced the discourse of monastic reform. Lamenting the departure from its Indian origin, Taixu and Changxing tried to reorient Buddhist monasticism from a preoccupation with rituals to a dedication to Buddhist education and social welfare. Taixu rejected Buddhist monks' obsession with conducting funerals. Asking the monks to abandon "the ghosts' Buddhism," Taixu proposed rejuvenating Buddhism and ushering in a new form of Buddhism that he called "humanistic Buddhism" (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教).⁵⁰ Arguing that Buddhism was for the living rather than

47. See Changxing, "Fofa shi mixin de ma" 佛法是迷信的嗎 (Is Buddhism Superstitious), *Zhengjue* 正覺 (Enlightenment), no. 1 (July 1930): 41–45.

48. See Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 179–205.

49. See Changxing, "Fofa shi mixin de ma," 39–41.

50. See Taixu, "Rensheng fojiao kaiti" 人生佛教開題 (Open the Topic of Humanistic Buddhism), *Haichao yin* 26, no. 1 (January 1945): 4–5.

for the dead, Taixu asked the monks to shift their focus from collecting merits for the deceased to educating the living and promoting social welfare.⁵¹ Likewise, Changxing urged the monastics to redirect from focusing on the dead to the living. Instead of placing hope in posthumous deliverance rites, he asked lay Buddhists to recite and study the scriptures on their own and to “seek blessings through their effort.”⁵²

Resonating with Taixu and Changxing, other writers also emphasized the need to educate the Buddhists and increase their understanding of Buddhist teachings. In the late 1920s and the 1930s, some Buddhists wrote works differentiating Buddhism from superstition. Compared to Taixu and Changxing, they were less critical about the monks performing funeral rites and other rituals. They maintained that the performers’ understanding of the purpose of the rites and their attitude mattered more than the liturgical expression. Instead of asking monastics to give up traditional rites, the authors tried to highlight the Buddhist principles manifested in the rites. If the monks could conduct the rites in accord with the Buddha’s teachings, they were still embodying the “true faith,” regardless of the liturgical similarities. Also, the writers strived to demonstrate that, as was compatible with rational thought, Buddhism could contribute to promoting the education of modern citizens.

THE MEANINGS OF THE BUDDHIST RITES

While Taixu, Changxing, and other Buddhist writers condemned some Buddhist customs as degenerate, another group of Buddhist writers argued that the purposes of the practices were more definitive than their forms. This type of apologetics used Buddhist soteriology to justify the devotional practices, seeing them as skillful means to facilitate people’s spiritual and moral cultivation. For the authors, defending Buddhism was less about deemphasizing its rituals and more about nurturing a learned clergy, one that was able to continue the liturgical tradition while effectively guarding Buddhism against false accusations.

The authors claimed that Buddhist rites had a solid theoretical foundation and that this was lacking in other similar rites. For example, the rite of liberating the burning-mouth hungry ghosts was prescribed

51. See Taixu, “Jingcheng tuanjie yu fojiao zhi tiaozheng,” 10–11.

52. See Changxing, “Fofa shi mixin de ma,” 41–45.

as a form of superstition in the *Standard* issued by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Some Buddhist authors argued that the rite served a clear soteriological purpose. Its performance was scriptural, embodying the compassion of the buddhas who had originally transmitted the rites. A Buddhist writer Huang Jianliu 黃健六 claimed that, unlike in other non-Buddhist deliverance rites, the monks performed the ritual not out of fear or a sense of submission, nor did they intend to worship or exorcise the ghosts. Driven by the Mahāyāna Buddhist goal of saving all sentient beings, the monks chanted mantras and made *mudrās* to benefit the ghosts.⁵³

In the same way, an editorial in an influential Buddhist journal explained that, as an expedient means, Vairocana Buddha had passed down the liturgy for liberating hungry ghosts. In performing the liturgy, Buddhist ritual specialists were living up to the Buddha's ideal of universal salvation.⁵⁴ The editorial also pointed to the underlying doctrines to show the different orientations. It argued that, from an ultimate perspective, it is the enlightened mind, rather than the ritual procedure, that leads the suffering beings to liberation. Why so? The editorial explained that sentient beings fall into the realm of hungry ghosts for not knowing the original purity of their minds. Even at the deathbed ritual or at their funeral services, a dying person or the newly deceased still have a chance to recognize the true nature of the mind. At the moment of hearing the monks' chanting, the editorial explained, they might yet come to realize that attachment is the fault of an unenlightened mind. If the mind becomes enlightened, there would be no more craving. By realizing the emptiness of the mind and having nothing to attach, the dying get liberated from all kinds of afflictions. Free from ignorance and craving, they would not reborn in the lower realms. To support the argument, the author also cited the *Lotus Sutra*—an influential Mahāyāna scripture that proclaims the sentient beings' innate potential for liberation. The scripture states that “anyone chanting the Buddha's name even once would reach

53. See Huang Jianliu, “Na xueli lai yanjiu mixin juan” 拿學理來研究迷信捐 (Use Doctrines to Analyze the Superstition Tax), *Fohua zhoukan* 佛化週刊 (The Buddhist Weekly), no. 146 (October 1930): 3–4.

54. In the eighth century, Amoghavajra translated *Yu qie ji yao jiu a nan tuo luo ni yan kou gui yi jing* 瑜伽集要救阿難陀羅尼焰口軌儀經 (The Scripture of the Liturgy of the Dhāraṇī of Ānanda Concerning the Essentials of the Yoga on Saving Burning Mouths), T. 21, no. 1318.

buddhahood,” so the author claimed that the monks’ chanting could benefit the dying and the newly dead, inspiring them to realize their innate buddha-nature.⁵⁵

However, to the critics who denied the existence of the six realms, the Buddhist argument about liberating ghosts was nonsense. For this reason, instead of debating the soteriological purpose of delivering ghosts, other Buddhist writers shifted the focus to the didactic nature of the rites. In their narratives, they insisted that the funeral liturgy not only benefited the deceased, but more importantly, educated the living. For example, in a rite in which one prays for peace, the participants would be reminded that wars are the result of the negative disposition of hatred, and that a society of peace and non-violence ultimately depends on the improvement of the human mind. Similarly, devotional praxis such as chanting, praying, and prostration to the Buddha’s statue also served to purify people’s minds. The authors argued that by materializing Buddhist doctrines, Buddhist rites became educational sites where Buddhists learned and confirmed their faith.

In shifting the focus from the similar ritualistic behaviors to the embedded Buddhist principles, the authors claimed that Buddhism revealed a deeper level of observation of human existence, as exemplified in the doctrines of no-self and dependent arising, which allowed the disciples to perform the rites without becoming attached to them. Using Buddhist terms, they interpreted *mixin* (“superstition” or “deluded faith”) as referring to an attachment to falsehood. A Buddhist, if they understood the Buddha’s teachings, would not be so credulous as to perform superstitious acts. For example, a Buddhist named Foci 佛慈 argued that one would be less self-centered if one knew that the self is merely a designation imposed on a series of changing physical and mental events. He asked, “Without a delusion about a body, an action, or a thought, how can one be so deluded as to understand the falsehood as real?”⁵⁶

55. See preface, “Shuo jingchan bing fei mixin” 說經懺並非迷信 (Sutra Recitation and Penitential Offering Are Not Superstitious), *Fohua xunkan* 佛化旬刊 (Ten-Days Journal of Buddhism), no. 91 (November 1927): 1–2.

56. See Foci 佛慈, “Wang qingnian xuefo yi tuo mixin” 望青年學佛以脫迷信 (Hoping for the Young People to Study Buddhism to Abandon Superstition), *Fohua xin qingnian* 佛化新青年 (The New Buddhist Youth) 1, no. 6 (September 1923): 8–11.

By clarifying Buddhist doctrines, some authors tried to defend Buddhism against the charge of reinforcing divine sovereignty. As stated earlier, in the late 1910s Chen Duxiu and other revolutionary writers argued that the Chinese people needed to emancipate themselves from the oppression of divine sovereignty. The critics held that belief in any immaterial supernatural forces functioning on earth would not prompt people to transform the natural world. By liberating themselves from the illusion of unseen forces at work, people could establish new goals centered on humans rather than on the divine. Science and technology could provide the tools for comprehending and improving natural existence. Thus Chen argued that belief in supernatural powers not only undermined scientific progress, but also limited the expansion of human intellect. In his view, religions needed to be uprooted and tossed out, for they were reinforcing divine sovereignty and constraining human development.⁵⁷

In response, Buddhists argued that Buddhism dispossessed rather than reinforced divine sovereignty. By drawing attention to the principles that distinctively characterized Buddhism, the authors tried to separate Buddhism from all the negative implications associated with superstition, including divine sovereignty and idolatry. In a petition to the Nationalist government, a Buddhist monk named Huitong 慧通 suggested that Buddhism served to undermine divine sovereignty, for it did not subject the physical world to any supernatural control, nor did it endorse an almighty god to dictate human's destiny. Instead, Buddhism encouraged disciples to understand their minds and realize their true nature. And Huitong said, "The ordinary people had a false belief about divine sovereignty, the Buddha denied divine sovereignty. The people had a false belief about destiny, the Buddha rebuked destiny."⁵⁸ Likewise, another author named Yanran 言然 argued that Buddhism didn't sanction divine sovereignty. Yanran defined superstition as "irrational, confusing, blind faith, which is against worldly logic and reasoning," and divine sovereignty as "[a system] ingrained in the belief in God or gods that could dictate all the things of the universe, which is arbitrary, narrow, and unequal." Buddhism, by contrast, reveals the principle of dependent arising that underlies

57. See Chen Duxiu, "Ouxiang pohuai lun," *New Youth* 5, no. 2 (August 1918).

58. See Huitong, "Cheng guomin zhengfu wen" 呈國民政府文 (Petition to the Nationalist Government), *Chenzhong*, no. 3 (April 1928): 6–8.

all human existence and the universe, advocates that all phenomena are conditioned, and therefore denies the idea of an omnipotent god, the author claimed.⁵⁹

Instead of de-emphasizing the rites as a degradation in the evolution of Buddhism, the authors attempted to argue for their meaningful use. If the guiding principles mattered more than their expression, it followed that Buddhists could continue to perform the traditional rites, as long as they understood their religious meanings. What characterized proper understanding of the Buddhist teachings? As the next section shows, the anti-superstition discourses challenged Buddhists to present Buddhist teachings in a precise way. It became urgent for Buddhists to identify, explain, and present what they perceived as the core of the Buddha's teachings. A group of apologists emerged who shared the goal of distinguishing the Buddhist faith, rather than explaining similar actions.

TRUE FAITH AND DELUDED FAITH

In the late Qing and Republican periods, some Buddhist authors tried to explicate the Buddhist faith. What characterized the Buddhist faith? What made it different from superstitious beliefs or other religious beliefs? When critics charged Buddhism as being nothing but superstitious beliefs, in response Liang Qichao and other authors used the traditional term *zhengxin* to refer to the Buddhist faith, highlighting it as an antonym of the neology *mixin* (lit. superstition or deluded belief). By doing so, Buddhist writers changed the meaning of “superstition.” Unlike critics, instead of representing “superstition” in contrast to the category of “religion,” Buddhists represented “superstition” as referring to all kinds of belief that entail human submission to a superior power—one that is far beyond human potential and could never be emulated. In this reinterpretation, “deluded faith” was extended to Christianity and all other non-Buddhist beliefs. Accepting some assumptions of the modernist discourses put forward by critics, Liang Qichao and other writers claimed that Buddhism could not be characterized as *mixin*, for it elicited a different kind of belief. With its affirmation of human potential, Buddhism was the “true faith” that encouraged humans to discover their full potential. By liberating people from

59. See Yanran, “*Mixin yu shenquan*” 迷信與神權 (Superstition and Divine Sovereignty), *Zhengxin* 正信 (True Faith) 9, no. 45 (May 1937): 6–7.

“deluded faith,” and by focusing on human agency, Buddhist teachings were in line with the discourses of modernity, making it instrumental rather than harmful to the building of a modern state. An analysis of an array of writings shows that many authors used the doctrine of dependent arising to substantiate the argument about the “true faith.”

It was probably the late Qing scholar Liang Qichao who was the first to contrast *zhengxin* and *mixin*. Unlike his teacher Kang Youwei, who proposed turning temples into schools, Liang advocated for a positive role of Buddhism in modern society. In an article published in 1902, Liang used the Buddhist goal of “enlightenment” to explain its value to modern people.⁶⁰ In Liang’s view, as in other religions, so too for Buddhism, faith was central. However, Buddhists placed their faith in the innate potential of all sentient beings rather than in the power of a superior god. Christianity, highlighting God’s omnipotence and superiority, demanded believers’ submission, thereby intensifying divine sovereignty. In contrast, the Buddhist faith did not entail that one submit to the founder of the religion. Liang claimed that Buddhism could provide moral instruction and meaning that would transform people, and that would fulfill some needed social functions until modern academic education was fully established in China. Liang wrote, “The Buddhist faith suggests that its religious founder’s wisdom is inherently equal to that of the believers, so building faith is a Dharma door.” Instead of blind faith, Buddhism was promoting “equality rather than differentiation,” and teaching the disciples “to rely on their power rather than others’ power.” Asserting all sentient beings’ innate potential to attain ultimate achievement, Buddhist philosophy spoke more about egalitarianism, which made it compatible with the modern discourse of egalitarianism. Hence, Liang concluded that Buddhist faith is “true faith” rather than “deluded faith.”⁶¹

It shall be noted that the term *zhengxin* exists in Buddhist canons, but it only indicates the Buddhists’ conviction of the truth of the Buddha’s teachings. In the Buddhist intellectual tradition, “true faith” is conventionally presented as a mental quality and is often listed with other merits like diligence and wisdom. For example, the treatise

60. See Liang Qichao, “Lun fojiao yu qun zhi zhi guanxi” 論佛教與群治之關係 (About the Relationship between Buddhism and the Social Management), *Xinmin cong bao* 新民叢報 (Magazine of the New People), December 30, 1902.

61. *Ibid.*

Yueqie shidi lun 瑜伽師地論 (Discourse on the Stages of Concentration Practice) defines *zhengxin* as one of the virtuous mental factors that Buddhists should cultivate. The treatise says that in virtue of “true faith,” Buddhists would sail through the torrents of life and death.⁶² The Buddhists only started to interpret *zhengxin* in contrast to *mixin* in the early twentieth century when they were attempting to resist critics’ attacks. The dichotomy of *zhengxin* and *mixin* thereafter became a prominent theme in modern Buddhist apologetics.

Following Liang, some writers elaborated “true belief” and its role in the process of Buddhist cultivation based on the scriptures. They also drew on modern intellectual trends to frame the proposition. As stated earlier, many critics attacked the “superstitious” beliefs for being devoid of reason. So in rejecting the accusation, Buddhists also strived to highlight the various facets of reason in the Buddhist faith, arguing that Buddhist faith entails an understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. For example, an author named Chengzhi 誠之 maintained, “Delusion is not faith, faith is not delusion. There is no deluded faith [in Buddhism].”⁶³

Another Buddhist scholar named Kang Jiyao emphasized learning as a way to strengthen faith. Kang defined “true faith” as trust in Buddhism’s distinct notions: ultimate truth, buddha-nature, conditioned arising, and emptiness.⁶⁴ For Kang, what characterizes the Buddhist “true faith” is the confidence in the Buddha’s profound teachings, rather than feelings such as zealous passion. He said,

The *Avatamsaka-sūtra* states that faith is the source of the way and all kinds of merits. *The Treatise on Consciousness-Only* says that, as a meritorious mental factor, faith entails a conviction in merits, forbearance, and purifying the mind. Faith is also a principal meritorious quality in Pure Land Buddhism. In addition to sincerity and piety, a deep conviction in the Buddha’s teachings is central to defining the Buddhist faith.⁶⁵

62. See *Yueqie shi di lun* 瑜伽師地論 (Discourse on the Stages of Concentration Practice), T. 30, no. 1579: 375c.

63. See Chengzhi, “*Mixin fei xin shuo*” 迷信非信說 (Superstition Is Not Faith), *Honghua yuekan* 弘化月刊 (The Monthly of Disseminating Dharma), no. 20 (February 1943): 5.

64. See Kang Jiyao, “*Pochu mixin*” 破除迷信 (The Elimination of Superstition), *Fohu suikan*, no. 10–11 (December 1928): 2–8.

65. *Ibid.*

An anonymous author likewise highlighted reason over emotion in the Buddhist faith. The author argued that if the enthusiasts didn't apprehend Buddhist doctrines, then they could not differentiate their faith from the "deluded faith" of the blind believers. How should Buddhists increase the place of reason in the faith and strip it of irrationality? The author claimed that Buddhists could "transform" their "deluded faith" into "true faith" by learning Buddhist doctrines. With knowledge of Buddhist teachings, they would be able to enlighten themselves and others.⁶⁶

Similarly, the reformer Taixu also highlighted the rational aspect of the Buddhist faith. In particular, Taixu defined Buddhist faith in connection with its landmark doctrine of dependent arising. The doctrine says that just as the arising of all the phenomena in the three realms is conditioned, so too is their cessation. Taixu's position was made clear in his response to a layman named Shen Naixun 申乃勳. Shen asserted that Buddhist faith was "true" and all other kinds of religious beliefs were "deluded," and the Buddhists only needed to trust that Buddhism was the "true faith." Taixu rejected Shen's arbitrary claim, proclaiming that Buddhism departed from other religious beliefs for its distinct view of dependent arising. Taixu wrote:

Why do you say the faith in Buddhism is the true faith? You need to analyze its doctrines, otherwise every religion could claim itself as the ultimately true faith. I think the distinction of Buddhism lies in its explanation of the conditioned arising, based on which the karmic law governing all the worldly and transcendent things could be explained, so the doctrine is perfect and complete. Other religions cannot explain the karmic law, or their explanations are not fully correct. If one doesn't know cause and effect, they are following the wrong path, so they necessarily get confused by superstition.⁶⁷

Taixu's explanation of conditioned causality as a definite characteristic of Buddhism presents a clear and distinctive narrative to differentiate Buddhism from superstition. As Kang Jiyao, Taixu, and other Buddhist writers proceeded to develop apologetics, they drew heavily

66. See "Zhuan mixin wei zhengxin" 轉迷信為正信 (The Transformation of Superstition to True Faith), *Xianshi* 現實 (Reality) 2, no. 20 (1935): 15.

67. See Chenkong 塵空, "Shen Naixun jushi ti guanyu zhengxin yu mixin zhi bianbie" 申乃勳居士提關於正信與迷信之辨別 (Layman Shen Naixun Raised the Issue about the Differentiation between True Faith and Superstition), *Haichao yin* 20, no. 7-8 (August 1939): 18.

on the Buddhist doctrinal tradition to argue for its distinction. In their writings, dependent causality—a central doctrine in the Buddhist philosophical system—is represented as embodying the rational aspect of the Buddhist faith.⁶⁸ Why does this doctrine matter? In their writings, the authors argued that the issue of superstition stemmed from a false understanding of cause and effect. What distinguished the Buddhist rites from those of a “deluded faith” was that the latter were filled with a self-centered intention to reap benefits and avoid misfortune. However, the superstitious rites were irrational and meaningless, for the participants misunderstood what made them suffer and what could liberate them. For example, the people might believe that certain inauspicious numbers could invoke misfortune when there was actually no connection between the numbers and the events. And they might burn incense and pray to the deities, but such behaviors could not fulfill their wishes of getting wealth or good fortune either. Hence, causation was wrongly established in superstition, they asserted.

The authors claimed that the Buddhist understanding of causation is significantly different. According to the principle of dependent arising, the occurrence of a phenomenon is conditioned. The current experience is conditioned by past karmic seeds, and current karmic actions also condition future effects. They argued that, compared to the systematic discussion in Buddhism, folk beliefs were irrational for lacking logical causation. Also, without a divine plan or a creator god dictating the order of the universe, Buddhism highlighted human responsibility for their actions. The authors claimed that, to ward off misfortune, one should abandon actions that could lead to misfortune rather than invoke an external divine force or other supernatural power. Proper understanding of Buddha’s teachings, especially of dependent conditioning, would guard people from all kinds of deluded beliefs, leading them to act in accord with the way to liberation.

How did such an understanding shed light on their actions? How might the faithful conduct rites and perform devotional practices without being criticized as superstitious? While Liang Qichao, Kang Jiyao, Taixu, Changxing, and other authors had different attitudes about particular rites, they all agreed that monastic education was important for defending Buddhism. Some authors like Changxing urged monks to

68. See Xudan 勸旦, “Xinyang fojiao shi mixin ma” 信仰佛教是迷信麼 (Is the Buddhist Belief Superstitious), *Zhengxin* 9, no. 31 (February 1937): 4.

divest themselves of the acts that contravened Buddhist beliefs, such as divination, spirit possession, and worshipping spirits and deities. They also criticized the temples for profiting from conducting certain rites. On the other hand, some praxes, including chanting, performing rites, and bowing to the Buddha statue, were often considered to be acts of paying respect to the Buddha and his teachings. Other authors claimed that, whatever similarities Buddhism shared with other religions in their ritual expressions, it was absurd to conclude that Buddhism was superstitious. They explained that the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising did not speak of any supernatural power controlling the world, and its faith in buddha-nature helped to emancipate human potential rather than urging humans to depend on gods. As long as the performers understood the principles correctly, their actions were not superstitious.

Despite some disagreements about certain rites and praxes, most Buddhist writers agreed on the urgency of improving monastic education. Changxing suggested that Buddhists had failed to explain the distinctive doctrines of Buddhism to the public, and that this was one reason for the accusation that Buddhism was a superstition. To counter the charge, he said, monks needed to commit themselves to learning, as well as to explain Buddhist teachings to the general public.⁶⁹ As a result, the writers collectively regarded doctrinal learning as an effective way to defend the tradition. Compared to the ritualistic expressions and devotional praxis, it was the “true faith” in its distinctive teachings—especially dependent arising and buddha-nature—that sustained and defined Buddhism at a tumultuous time.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined common themes in Buddhist apologetics in the anti-superstition campaigns of early twentieth-century China. The modern regime attempted to eradicate “superstition” and to control the religious domain, but it failed to standardize people’s beliefs and practices. As this paper showed, Buddhists actively reinterpreted traditional doctrines to rebuke the charge. This paper also affirmed the widely examined topic about the diffusion of a broad range of practices

69. For example, the monk Changxing claimed that Buddhists should learn the profound doctrines of Buddhism and preach to the ordinary people. See Changxing, “Fofa shi mixin de ma,” 41–45.

among Chinese religions and the impracticality of using Western categories of “superstition” and “religion” to describe Chinese religions. By investigating Buddhists’ strategic responses to charges of superstition, this paper advanced the discussion by assessing the influence of the anti-superstition discourses on the intellectual development of Chinese Buddhism. It revealed that the neology “superstition” remained ambiguous and indeterminate, subject to interpretation by different parties and to various ends. The political reformers, regulation makers, revolutionary critics, and religious groups generated different narratives about “superstition.” When the state infringed upon Buddhist institutions in the name of eradicating “superstition,” the Buddhist defenders strived to frame propositions to delineate a clear line between Buddhism and “superstition.” The various definitions of “superstition” gave rise to a range of different responses.

The anti-superstition campaigns challenged Buddhist writers to articulate their beliefs and praxis in a dramatically changing context. In general, the authors not only used Buddha’s words as a theoretical basis for articulating those beliefs, but also tried to engage with the discourses of modernity. Some Buddhists reinterpreted the traditional term “true faith” to distinguish the Buddhist faith from all kinds of “deluded faith.” They attempted to prove that faith and reason did not necessarily contradict one another. In particular, some authors claimed that Buddhism distinctively offered a theory of causality that accorded with reasoning. They argued that compared to other religious beliefs, Buddhism didn’t preach divine sovereignty but asserted humans’ innate potential for attaining liberation. The writers also rejected the accusation of idolatry, arguing that the performers’ knowledge of Buddhism’s profound doctrines—such as those of buddha-nature, karmic causation, and dependent arising—would help them to conduct the ritual programs without attachment. Buddhist rites might resemble superstitious ones in some ways, but the performers, through their insight into the purposes and meanings of the rites, clearly distinguished themselves from idol-worshippers. With compassion and wisdom, the Buddhist ritual performers were able to use rites as a skillful means to benefit the deceased and to educate the living. As a result, many authors highlighted doctrinal learning and monastic education, considering them to be effective ways to sustain and defend Buddhism. The reformers Taixu and Changxing dedicated themselves to building seminaries to train a learned clergy, and other authors also

contributed to writing and publishing. In such ways, as the Buddhist writers responded to the anti-superstition narratives, they collectively inspired the development of Buddhism and its adaptation to modern society.

