

Buddhism and Modernity: Sources from Nineteenth-Century Japan

edited by Orion Klautau and Hans Martin Krämer, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2021, vii + 291 pp., \$68.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780824884581

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BOOK REVIEW

Buddhism and Modernity: Sources from Nineteenth-Century Japan, edited by Orion Klautau and Hans Martin Krämer, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2021, vii + 291 pp., \$68.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780824884581

Buddhism and Modernity: Sources from Nineteenth-Century Japan is an excellent source book that offers translations of texts written by twenty-two Japanese Buddhists and organizations in the nineteenth century who actively engaged with the issues of modernity. Many of these translations are made available in English for the first time and reveal the thoughts of the key figures of modern Japanese Buddhism who helped shaped the global imaginations of Japanese Buddhism that still persist to this day. These original translations were translated by a team of twenty-one international scholars and experts in the field of Japanese Religions, many of whom have authored groundbreaking monographs on the Japanese Buddhists featured in this volume.

Buddhism and Modernity is without a doubt, an extremely welcomed contribution to the growing field of modern Japanese Buddhism and the study of religion and modernity in general. The modern period in Japanese history, defined by the editors of the volume as “largely the decades between the middle of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century” (2), witnessed the dramatic transformation of Japan from a country with an isolationist foreign policy into a major military and imperial power on the global stage in just a few decades. Despite being a crucial historical period that saw Japan’s launch into one of the world’s largest empires in the twentieth century and one of the principal partners of the Axis alliance during World War II, scholars have only begun to pay attention to the roles religion, specifically Buddhism, played in Japan’s modern history.

Klautau and Krämer, the editors of the volume remind us in the introduction chapter that the study of Buddhism in this period of Japanese history has been “dwarfed by doctrinally oriented sectarian studies and the towering attention devoted to the late ancient and medieval periods, supposedly the time when Buddhism in Japan flourished and engendered its most original innovations ...” (2). In Japanese scholarship, Klautau and Krämer informs us, modern Buddhism has only slowly taken ground as an accepted field of Buddhist Studies since the 1950s (2). In Western-language scholarship, the modern period “has taken even longer to catch on, despite the importance of the Meiji period (1868–1912) more generally in European and North American scholarship on Japan since the early postwar period” (3).

In the past few decades, we have been lucky to witness the publication of a number of exciting academic works specifically dedicated to tackling the issues of modernity and Japanese Buddhism, such as James Ketelaar’s *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan* (Princeton University Press 1990), Jason Ānanda Josephson’s *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (University of Chicago Press 2012), and G. Clinton Godart’s *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine: Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press 2017), just to name a few.

However, when it comes to source materials on the issues of modernity and Japanese Buddhism, students and scholars alike who cannot access primary texts in the Japanese language have been rather deprived until now. Both David J. Lu’s *Japan: A Documentary History* (M.E. Sharpe 1997) and W.M. Theodore de Bary et al.’s *Sources of Japanese Tradition, 1600 to 2000: Volume Two* (Columbia University Press 2005) are excellent source books that

offer a wealth of translations of primary sources from modern Japan, such as the writings of politicians and Neo-Confucian intellectuals, but very little can be found in these volumes on nineteenth-century Buddhist thoughts. Similarly, sources on modern Japanese Buddhism (and modern Buddhism in Asia in general), are lacking in most available source books of Buddhism, which tend to prioritize canonical Buddhist doctrinal works and the writings of premodern Buddhist masters.

In *Buddhism and Modernity*, a timely published volume, the editors and the contributing scholars have curated a diverse collection of Buddhist voices from nineteenth-century Japan that shows Japanese Buddhists were not only active makers of their own modernities in a rapidly transforming Meiji Japan, but they were also dynamic thinkers in the reinterpretations of the modern world marked by Western imperialism and capitalism. These newly translated sources reveal that Japanese Buddhism in the nineteenth century was not removed from politics and society; on the contrary, Japanese Buddhists reacted to and challenged the changing world around them with missionary zeal and doctrinal innovation. More specifically, the translated sources in this volume makes it clear that when faced with the double threats of homegrown Nativist nationalism in the “abolish the Buddha and smash Śākyamuni” movement of the 1870s and worldwide modernity in the forms of secularism, industrial capitalism, imperialist encroachment, and Christian missionaries, Japanese Buddhists actively defended their traditions and “enthusiastically embraced the changes necessitated by the modern age, which they interpreted as new possibilities,” as argued by the editors of the book in the introduction chapter (2).

Organized under the five themes of “Sectarian Reform,” “The Nation,” “Science and Philosophy,” “Social Reform,” and “Japan and Asia,” the volume contains twenty-three translations of Japanese sources authored by twenty-two Japanese Buddhists and organizations between the years of 1856 to 1912. Each translation is accompanied by a short essay written by the translator contextualizing the source in their historical moments. The majority of texts (eleven out of twenty-three) were produced in the 1870s and 1880s, a period when the Meiji government attempted to eliminate Buddhism, a “foreign” religion, from the public sphere so that Shinto, an “indigenous” tradition that centered the Japanese Emperor, could become the national ritual instead.

For the chapters under “Sectarian Reform,” we see Japanese Buddhists reacting to the anti-Buddhist sentiments and policies of the time with various attempts of reform. For example, in Nakanishi Ushirō’s (1859–1930) “On Religious Revolution” and in the manifesto of The Fraternity of Puritan Buddhists (Bukkyō Seito Dōshikai), we see constructions of a dichotomy between “Old Buddhism” and “New Buddhism” that positioned “Old Buddhism” as something “superstitious,” “pessimistic,” and “moribund” that needs to be reformed into a “New Buddhism,” which is “progressive,” “democratic,” “rational,” and the only type of Buddhism that contained the “true essence” of the religion (Part I, Chapters 2 & 3).

In “Part II: The Nation,” we find Japanese Buddhists who became vocally patriotic in their defense of the nation of Japan from “foreign threats,” especially from Christianity. In Gesshō’s (1817–1858) “On Protecting the Nation Through Buddhism,” we see a Japanese monk passionately arguing that Japan combat “religion with religion” and use Buddhism as a kind of coastal national defense system (Part II, Chapter 1, 93).

At the same time, we see in the sources in “Part III: Science and Philosophy” that Japanese Buddhists were not uninterested in Western sciences and philosophies but rather chose to engage with Western thoughts to construct competing models and frameworks. For example, Sada Kaiseki (1818–1882) composed “A Buddhist Book of Genesis” in which he countered the Christian accounts about the origin of the world with a Buddhist one, citing Buddhist canonical texts.

In “Part IV: Social Reform,” the sources show us that Japanese Buddhists were concerned with a range of social reforms beyond the monastery, showing an interest in the laity and the general public, although this interest seems to have been mostly spurred by their competition with Protestant proselytizers. For example, written in an era (second half of the 1880s) when Japanese Buddhists became active in the establishment of schools for girls to compete with Christian girls’ schools, Shimaji Mokurai’s (1838–1911) “On the Relationship Between Man and Woman” promoted universal education for girls and women (202). However, Shimaji maintains that the education of women should only be for the purpose of training them for domestic labor and the role of “good wife and wise mother” (Part IV, Chapter 3, 203).

The last section of the volume, “Part V: Japan and Asia,” features translations concerning Japanese Buddhism’s relationship with the rest of Asia, revealing a growing sense of racial, cultural, and religious superiority shared amongst Japanese Buddhists who began missionary work on the continent to help its Asian neighbors battle Western imperialism and the “degeneration” of their Buddhist traditions. For instance, in “A Plan to Protect the Dharma,” Ogurusu Kōchō (1831–1905) addressed a Chinese audience and proposed the reform of Chinese Buddhism. Here, Ogurusu put forth a list of propositions that contained a model for a modern Buddhist curriculum that would later be implemented in the Japanese Empire in places like Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria, and Inner Mongolia.

A commonality shared between all of these sources on modern Japanese Buddhism is that they are all related to the formation of new identities against not one but three different kinds of Others, namely, Christianity, “Old Buddhism”, and other “degenerate” Buddhisms of Asia. This period of identity formation would become foundational to Japanese Buddhism’s participation in colonialism at the height of the Japanese Empire, giving Japanese Buddhists the confidence to construct their visions of the empire, as illustrated in Hwansoo Ilmee Kim’s *Empire of the Dharma: Korean and Japanese Buddhism, 1877–1912* (Harvard University of Asia Center 2012). The Japanese Buddhist identities formed during this period would also later inform Buddhist studies scholarship and fuel the imaginations and consumptions of a global audience.


Buddhism and Modernity is a superb source book on modern Japanese Buddhism that would benefit students and scholars beyond the field of Buddhist Studies and Japanese Studies. The book contains a very accessible survey of the history of modern Buddhism in Japan based on the historian Hayashi Makoto’s (1953 –) periodization (3–10). In the introduction chapter, the editors of the volume have also included an extremely helpful literature review of both Western and Japanese language scholarships published so far on the topic of modern Japanese Buddhism. For anyone wishing to read further into the topic, the bibliography that comes with the literature review provides a treasure trove of top-notch research to explore. As a source book, this volume provides fine translations supplemented with ample notes and bibliographies that are informative but also novice-friendly.

As with all great books, *Buddhism and Modernity* stokes the reader’s curiosity and leaves us with thought-provoking questions to contemplate on. It is fascinating that out of the twenty-two Japanese Buddhists and organization featured, more than half (13/22) were affiliated with the Jōdo Shinshū, a dominant Buddhist sect that actively supported modernizing reforms, as well as the nationalist and later militaristic and colonialist endeavors of the Japanese government. Although Zen, Nichiren, and Shingon Buddhists presented in this volume have also expressed similar zealotry, one wonders if there were Japanese Buddhists who did not so enthusiastically embrace modernity and the changes it brought to Japan?

Another question that *Buddhism and Modernity* sparks is, how did Japanese Buddhist women engage with modernity in the nineteenth century? Upon close look, one notices that all of the sources contained in this volume were written by men (it is unclear if the organizations had women members). In Part I, Chapter 1, Micah Auerback, the translator of Fukuda Gyōkai's (1809–1888) piece, brings to our attention a Japanese Buddhist nun named Kōgetsu Sōgi (1756–1833) who composed and published a biography of the Buddha in the 1880s. In future publications of sources on modern Japanese Buddhism, it would be important to include the writings of Buddhist women like her.

Lastly, as a reader of this fantastic source book, I found myself wanting to learn more about the audiences and receptions of these sources. Quite a few chapters in the volume do address these questions. For example, Klautau reminds us that Ōuchi Seiran's (1845–1918) “On Civilization” was delivered in the novel format of lecture to organizations not strictly associated with Buddhism, although Buddhists were often ignored by the intellectual community at large (184–185).

In conclusion, *Buddhism and Modernity* is a must-read for anyone interested in the topics of modernity, secularity, (dis)enchantment, empires, and inter-religious conflicts. This volume would make a great reading for most if not all undergraduate and graduate courses on Buddhism, and for courses that are in dire need of non-Western perspectives on modernity and imperialism.

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