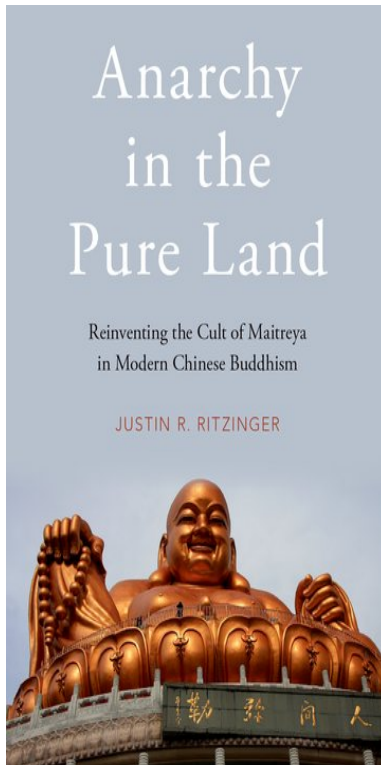



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Anarchy in the Pure Land


Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism


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Justin Ritzinger

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ISBN 9780190491161. For other formats: [Link to Publisher's Website](#).

Review

This book is being reviewed in JAAR by Zhiru Ng.

Anarchy in the Pure Land examines the life, thought and practices of Taixu (1890-1947), one of the most influential Buddhist monks of Republican-era China. Justin Ritzinger belongs to a younger generation of scholars educated in North America now focussing their attention on the Buddhist cultures of modern China. After the long hiatus that followed the publication of the groundbreaking monographs by Holmes Welch in the 1960s and early 1970s, Chun-Fang Yu, Raoul Birnbaum and a few others had productively started working on later Chinese Buddhism in more recent years. In Europe, three pioneering studies pointed to the importance of Buddhism in the making of Chinese modernities and demystify the apparent absence of Buddhism and Buddhists to large-scale social change and reform in the first decades of the 20th century. These efforts included monographs published in German (Gotelind Müller's *Buddhismus und Moderne*, 1993), French (Gabriele Goldfuss's *Vers un bouddhisme du XXe siècle, Yang Wenhui (1837–1911), réformateur laïque et imprimeur*, 2001), and my own *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism* (2008, 2011).

Ritzinger's fine book builds on these earlier studies and provides a very valuable service, giving us not only a much-needed, highly detailed account of the thinking of a major actor in China's modern history, but also a wealth of powerful arguments about the ultimate compatibility of anarchism and Buddhist activism. Likewise, his thorough investigation of the attempted recuperation of Maitreya, the future Buddha, and of Maitreyanism, with its multiple historical instantiations in a plethora of salvific movements, to twentieth-century mainstream Buddhist orthodoxy, offers us an engaging way to think with Chinese history, revolution, and religious practice in modern times.

The core of *Anarchy in the Pure Land* consists of six chapters, admirably researched and fluently written. In the first chapter, Ritzinger describes young Taixu's involvement with and exposure to radical ideologies. The monk's reading interests extended to the works of Bakunin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, and Marx. In January of 1912, he established the Society for the Advancement of Buddhism at Pilu Temple outside Nanjing, arguing that it "should focus more on the present life and not devote itself exclusively to the afterlife" (47). The monastery also served as the headquarters of the local branch of the Chinese Socialist Party. Even when Taixu eventually left anarchism, notes Ritzinger, anarchism "did not quite leave him" (62). The second chapter explains in great detail the fusion of anarcho-socialist and Buddhist values in two essays the monk wrote in the years around the founding of the Republic, centering around utopia and Buddhahood and the realization of a "perfect society and of a perfect self" (96). The third chapter examines Taixu's activities in the 1920s with a focus on his personal piety, devotion, and identification with Maitreya. After the

Republic entered a new phase in 1927, the monk had a rather successful public life, thanks to his personal ties to Chiang Kai-shek. Highly committed to the cult of Maitreya, he made continuous efforts to propagate and institutionalize it. Ritzinger meticulously analyses Taixu's Maitreyan theology in the final fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters of *Anarchy in the Pure Land*, through a close reading of some of his commentaries of selected Buddhist canonical texts. In the extended descriptions of the path of the bodhisattva as a self-sacrificial hero who must save all beings, Ritzinger finds echoes of Kropotkin and of Taixu's own earlier radicalism. And yet, as the monk's views effectively became more conservative, religious, and political, utopias were fast delayed to an indefinite future (199). Crucially, Ritzinger goes on to detail the many lives of the cult of Maitreya in more recent times, both in Taiwan and in the PRC. One suspects that, as Maitreyanism continues to circulate on the Internet, it will become the focus of more sustained scholarly investigations in the future. Written in an accessible style without sacrificing complexity of analysis, *Anarchy in the Pure Land* will be suitable for inclusion in undergraduate and graduate courses in Chinese Studies, Chinese Buddhism, Chinese history, and religious studies.

About the Reviewer(s):

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