

# Journey to the West: Taixu's 1928-1929 World Tour as Cultural Diplomacy

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## Introduction

On August 11, 1928, Master Taixu set off on an unprecedented journey, becoming the first Chinese monk to preach the Dharma in the West. The plan had been percolating since the 1925 East Asian Buddhist Conference in Tokyo, where he received an invitation to visit Germany by its ambassador to Japan, Wilhelm Solf. After securing funding from the Yang family in Gaoyang 高陽 (5000 dollars<sup>1</sup>), Chiang Kai-shek (3000), and Nan Putuo Monastery 南普陀寺 (2000),<sup>2</sup> he was able to depart. He travelled around the world by ship, sailing from Shanghai to Marseilles. Arriving on September 14<sup>th</sup>, he spent a month in Paris, followed by two weeks in England, ten days in Belgium, and more than two months in Germany. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of February, he departed for America, where he visited New York, Washington DC, and Chicago before spending almost a month in San Francisco. On April 3, 1929, he boarded a ship bound for China, returning to Shanghai on April 29<sup>th</sup>. Everywhere that Taixu went, he lectured on Buddhism in prominent venues, often to large audiences, sought to generate interest in his plan for an International Buddhist Institute (*shijie foxueyuan* 世界佛學院),<sup>3</sup> and met with eminent scholars and intellectuals of the day as well as diplomats, officials, socialites, and members of the overseas

<sup>1</sup> The unit of currency is unclear. Elsewhere (see n48) Taixu was clearly using US dollars, but Mexican dollars or Chinese yuan are also possible. Since even the yuan was referred to in English as the “yuan dollar” at the time, I use “dollar” for the English.

<sup>2</sup> Taixu, *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (TX) 29, 19: 360; *Taixu dashi huanyou ji* 太虛大師環遊記 (HYJ) 2-3. Since the account of Taixu's journey published in 1931 and the reprint in the TX have differences, both are cited throughout. Where only the HYJ is cited, the material in question is not included in reprint.

<sup>3</sup> In scholarship, this has typically been translated as World Buddhist Institute. Here I follow the translation into Western languages used at the time. HYJ 131, 134-135.

Chinese community, including many students.<sup>4</sup> Though the institute never truly materialized and the journey was not without missteps, it was nevertheless a remarkable achievement and an important episode in Taixu's career.

It is also a relatively well-studied one. While not as extensively investigated as his engagements with science or trademark ideas such as Human Life Buddhism (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教) or the pure land on earth (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土), Taixu's tour of the West has received a not insignificant amount of attention. Holmes Welch, unsurprisingly, takes a view colored by his visceral dislike of Taixu. He sees it as an exercise in dishonest self-promotion and an incompetent and misconceived attempt to spread a shallow synthesis of Buddhist and Western thought.<sup>5</sup> Dongchu 東初, equally unsurprisingly, paints the journey as a grand success. Highlighting the support Taixu received from Chiang Kai-shek, Dongchu 東初 presents him as a "special envoy" (*zhuanshi* 專使) who received the deep support of foreign scholars to spread Buddhism, mold culture, and promote the spread of Chinese culture and the Three People's Principles.<sup>6</sup> Pittman, while less grandiose than Dongchu, largely agrees that the trip was successful, seeing it as an attempt to present the "essence of Mahayana Buddhism" in Westerner's own terms.<sup>7</sup> More recently, there has been a small wave of interest among Chinese scholars. Li Xuetao 李雪濤 meticulously reconstructed Taixu's time in Germany, casting it as a reversal of "the unidirectionality of the flow of knowledge and faith from European to non-European countries since the 19<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>8</sup> Gong Jun 龔俊 investigated it as one part of Taixu's larger "world Buddhist movement" contextualizing it within his civilizational discourse to argue that Taixu's approach was ill-suited to Orientalist audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the attention that it has received, there remains an aspect of Taixu's tour that has been, if not ignored, rather oddly taken for granted: the involvement of the state. Chiang Kai-shek's donation of 3000 dollars represented 30% of the financial support Taixu received. Just as important was the logistical support offered by the Chinese diplomatic corps. Acting on letters of introduction from the foreign minister instructing legations to assist

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<sup>4</sup> HYJ, 1-88. *Taixu dashi nianpu* 太虛大師年譜 (TDN) 257-290.

<sup>5</sup> Welch 1968, 59-62 and 307n29.

<sup>6</sup> Dongchu 1987, 655-660.

<sup>7</sup> Pittman 2001, 123.

<sup>8</sup> Li 2018, 3-19.

<sup>9</sup> Gong 2018, 141-167

Taixu,<sup>10</sup> they helped arrange events and transportation, made connections with prominent figures, and likely put him in contact with the local press. Scholars are well aware of the meeting with Chiang and Welch's account further notes that Taixu was "treated at Chinese legations like a visiting dignitary," allowing him to "cut a wide swath" in the cities he visited.<sup>11</sup> Still, no one seems to question why this should be the case. Why did Chiang, who, though from a Buddhist background, had recently become engaged to Song Meiling and begun praying with her and reading the Bible daily,<sup>12</sup> offer a substantial sum to a Buddhist monk to preach the Dharma in the West? Why, at a critical juncture in China's international relations, did diplomats of the new Nationalist government expend time, energy, and social capital supporting his efforts?

To answer this, we must, at least partially, decenter Buddhism from our account. Taixu's trip to the West must be understood not simply as a religious mission but a diplomatic one. It represents an early foray by China into cultural diplomacy, defined as the attempt to cultivate "cultural relations in the national interest," at precisely the moment that phenomenon was taking shape in interwar Europe, a foray made not in spite of the critical juncture in China's foreign relations but because of it.

### **China's International Relations and the Genesis of the Mission**

When Taixu departed for the West, the Nanjing decade was just beginning. National unification was nearly complete, even if this unity was compromised in key respects, including factionalism within the KMT itself. Internationally, China was in its strongest position in decades. The Great War had left the West militarily exhausted and disunified, ushering in a multi-polar international system in flux. Cracks were appearing in the systems of imperialist subjugation and the new government was taking advantage. When the foreign concession in Hankou 漢口 was overrun in January 1927, the British opted not for reprisal but rendition. This launched four years of negotiations that, in William Kirby's estimation, would have ended extraterritoriality had the Manchurian crisis not forced a shift in priorities in 1931. Though not able to eradicate it entirely, the government did succeed in recovering concessions from smaller European powers such as Belgium. It was also able to win back control of tariffs by the

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<sup>10</sup> Wang 2006, 585

<sup>11</sup> Welch 1970, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Doyle nd.

end of 1928 as well as reclaiming maritime customs and the postal system. That same year new trade agreements were signed with the US, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Britain, and France, followed by Japan in 1929.<sup>13</sup>

Yet these victories were more the result of Western weakness than Chinese strength. Nationalist China was emboldened to push for change, and sometimes got it, but it could not force it. More radical attempts to end extraterritoriality by fiat failed, for instance.<sup>14</sup> Part of the issue was that the new government needed Western support against the threats posed by the recently purged communists, their Soviet allies, and especially Japan.<sup>15</sup> Yet China had an image problem. In 1928, “China was still commonly portrayed in the West as a country of antiforeign nationalists,” a land of chaos and violent disorder.<sup>16</sup> Needing support from nations that held China in low regard, Chiang and others began to feel it necessary to make overtures, though other factions of the KMT resisted a shift away from anti-imperialism to a focus on Japan.<sup>17</sup> In order to make China’s culture and political position better understood and to spread the Nationalist ideology of the Three People’s Principles, an international division was established in the Ministry of Information in 1928.<sup>18</sup>

China was far from the only country to find itself in a difficult international situation in the interwar period. Europe had emerged diminished and unsettled from the Great War. It was this circumstance that gave birth to modern cultural diplomacy. Culture and cultural exchange have always formed an important element of international relations. Nevertheless, a recent special issue of *Contemporary European History* has argued, cultural diplomacy as we know it now emerged from the multiple crises, real and imagined, that beset the continent in the wake of the catastrophic Great War. First, there was the crisis of power. The ability of European states to impose their will through military and economic force was limited, whether due to treaty restrictions or other factors. A second was diplomatic. The old diplomacy of deals hammered out in secret by aristocratic elites had been discredited. A third was cultural and intellectual. The war had shattered the old networks that had tied Europe together and new networks often excluded Germany as punishment for the war. In this context, countries turned to culture as a medium of influence as elites

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<sup>13</sup> Kirby 1997, 440-442; and Scott 2008, 235.

<sup>14</sup> Dong Wang 2005, 89.

<sup>15</sup> Scott 2008, 235.

<sup>16</sup> Wei 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 67-68.

in many sectors of society came to see “international networks of intellectual and cultural exchange as crucial levers of power in the modern world.” The result was a spirit of experimentation as different initiatives were tried. While numerous experiments failed, many of the organs, institutions, and practices we are still familiar with today took shape at this time. Cultural departments were established within foreign ministries. New efforts were made to promote language and culture and existing efforts reformed and expanded. Student exchanges and arts festivals were established.<sup>19</sup>

What all efforts had in common was that attempt to cultivate “cultural relations in the national interest.” They were, according to Martin and Piller, diplomatic in that they “sought to mediate between distinct polities” and cultural in that they “deployed refined aesthetic practices” and “highlighted the distinctive features ... of a particular group.”<sup>20</sup> While states had an active interest in cultural diplomacy, they did not have a monopoly on it. Many non-state agents from humanitarians to tourists, doctors to boys scouts, all played roles, sometimes in coordination with states and sometimes independently. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of cultural diplomacy is that it *requires* non-state actors since the state is not a cultural entity. Cooperation of various kinds was therefore the norm. As a result, motives and agendas were mixed and genuine attempts to foster harmony and understanding stood side-by-side with instrumentalist pursuit of self-interest.<sup>21</sup>

Viewing the genesis of Taixu's tour through this lens different aspects of Taixu's tour of the West come into focus. In the *Chronological Biography of the Great Master Taixu* (*Taixu dashi nianpu* 太虛大師年譜), Yinshun notes that Chiang learned of the master through Huang Fu 黃郛 (Huang Yingbai 黃膺白, 1880–936). As a result of this introduction, Chiang invited Taixu to visit Xuedou Monastery 雪竇寺 near Ningbo with him on October 9, 1927, a few weeks after he had temporarily stepped down from his military and government positions in a gambit to demonstrate his irreplaceability. The two spent the day talking and taking in the sights and the next night celebrated the Moon Festival together. The following day, the 11<sup>th</sup>, Taixu “returned to Ningbo and wrote to [Chiang] to express his thanks and inform him of his intent to travel to Europe and America to teach.” Thereupon, Chiang instructed his Chen Guofu 陳果夫 to offer 3000 dollars to support the effort.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Martin and Piller 2021, 151–53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 149-150.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 155, 158-159.

<sup>22</sup> Yinshun 印順, *Taixu dashi nianpu* 太虛大師年譜 (TDN) 238.

While the importance of this remarkable encounter is well known, sensitivity to the diplomatic dimension prompts us to examine it more closely. This is not simply the story of a personal meeting. Huang was not just a serendipitous mutual acquaintance but an important ally of Chiang who had served as foreign minister under the Beiyang government and soon would again under the Nationalists. Meanwhile, Chen was not some member of Chiang's household staff in charge of petty cash, but one of the heads of the so-called CC Clique, the KMT faction that was closest to Chiang. Absent confirmation from archival documents or diaries, this is inevitably speculative but I do not think it an accident that Taixu was introduced to Chiang by a diplomat. Nor do I think that Chiang arranged a significant donation simply because he liked the cut of Taixu's jib. Instead, I posit that Huang, who had been acquainted with Taixu since 1919,<sup>23</sup> saw the master as a potential cultural ambassador and arranged the meeting as a sort of audition. It is almost certain that Chiang and Taixu discussed the latter's aspirations to tour the West during their time together. The alternative scenario — that merely mentioning the idea in a letter led to a large spontaneous donation — is unlikely, especially since the execution of the donation by Chen would indicate that these were not personal but official funds, whether government or the party. Thus, whether the idea originated with Huang or Chiang, himself it seems likely that Chiang saw Taixu as a cultural ambassador.

Taixu had several things to recommend him for that role, which would likely have been known to Huang and which Chiang could have easily discovered over the two days he spent with Taixu. First, Taixu had strong revolutionary credentials from his youth and had voiced support of the KMT as early as April 1926 before the Northern Expedition was launched much less accomplished<sup>24</sup> Second, he had a well-established track record of international engagement, including his international conference at Lushan 廬山 in 1924 and his participation in the East Asian Buddhist Conference in Tokyo the following year, which were reported in the secular as well as Buddhist press.<sup>25</sup> Third, Taixu also maintained friendly relations with foreigners in

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<sup>23</sup> TDN 105.

<sup>24</sup> “Geming dang cong gexin qi” 革命當從革心起. TX 22, 13: 1283-1299.

<sup>25</sup> *Shenbao* 申報 ran one article on the Lushan conference and four brief articles on the Tokyo conference, plus a follow up about the German ambassador to Japan, Solf, of whom we will have more to say later, wiring Taixu to request a painting of a Buddha. It also ran a single article on his interest in attending an educational conference in Canada in June 1927, not long before the meeting with Chiang. Wang Song 2019, 13, 19-21, and 54.

China, including missionaries like Ludwig Reichelt and Gilbert Reid with whose International Institute of China (*shangxian tang* 尚賢堂) Taixu had a relationship,<sup>26</sup> garnering regular and favorable coverage in the treaty port press.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Taixu had internationalist and utopian bona fides that traced back to his anarchist youth and recently reached mature articulation with the publication of *On Establishing a Pure Land on Earth* (*jianshe renjian jingtu lun* 建設人間淨土論). Taixu might therefore have appeared a safe and attractive emissary with which to show Europe and America a peaceful, internationalist side of China. Moreover, to Chiang, the financial and subsequent logistical support might have seemed a good way to get good publicity in the West for relatively little money and trouble. Since it was a private endeavor, he was merely supplementing funds and resources that Taixu had already collected himself and since the mission was unofficial, the likelihood of conflict with anti-imperialist hardliners in the KMT who might have objected to an official outreach to the West was lower.

### Taixu's Tour as Cultural Diplomacy

When examined through the lens of cultural diplomacy, we find that Taixu's tour was not devoted solely to spreading Buddhism or arguing for its compatibility with Western science and philosophy. Instead, there emerges alongside a diplomatic message of peace and international cooperation that stood in sharp contrast to the view of China as violent, chaotic, and anti-foreign. This is well documented in his lectures, his presentation of the International Buddhist Institute, and the media coverage he garnered.

#### Lectures

Lectures were one of the key foci of Taixu's tour. Over the course of his nine-month journey, he gave dozens of lectures and talks at a variety of venues, including academic institutions such as the Musée Guimet, the China-

<sup>26</sup> Taixu gave some of his first lectures after leaving seclusion there in 1919. TDN 102.

<sup>27</sup> *The China Press*. "News Brevities." November 10, 1926; *The China Press*. "Gathering Hears Address at International Institute On Buddhist Principles." November 17, 1926; *The China Press*. "News Brevities." November 23, 1926; *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*. "No Title." November 27, 1926; *The China Press*. "International Institute Speakers Look into Future Optimistically." January 4, 1927; *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*. "China's Hopes for Peace: Both Optimism and Pessimism as to the Outcome of the Present." January 8, 1927.

Institut in Frankfurt, and Northwestern University in Chicago, and meetings of organizations such as the Maha Bodhi Society, the Theosophical Society, and the Fellowship of Faiths, as well as more ad hoc locations such as a luncheon, a YMCA, and a Christian Church. Taixu claims to have reached more than 5000 with his message. The script of some lectures in Chinese is provided in the *Record of My World Tour* (*Huanyou ji* 寰遊記). There is also a collection of English translations, published as *Lectures in Buddhism* early in his journey.

In some of his speeches, Taixu addressed China directly. This is most explicit and developed in a lecture given in Jena, Germany “The National Life of Modern China” (*Zhongguo jindai zhi minzu shenghuo* 中國近代之民族生活), in which he outlined China’s transformation from late imperial (*jin’gu* 近古) to modern times. His account of China’s modern difficulties is frank but hopeful. He noted that while China had no national center of gravity following the collapse of Confucianism and had been shaken by communism, there was a trend toward the Three People’s Principles and the KMT’s revolution was making progress in reorganizing society despite significant headwinds.<sup>28</sup> The disorder of recent decades was receding. Modern China was not anti-foreign but profoundly, perhaps uniquely, cosmopolitan. As he presented it, “absorbing the culture of many peoples from both hemispheres over five thousand years from antiquity to today has shaped a new national psyche in China. This is the start of the creation of an international culture (*shijie wenhua* 世界文化),<sup>29</sup> because no one is more capable of humbly accepting and studying various cultures than the Chinese of today.”<sup>30</sup>

This message of internationalism is even more prominent in relation to Buddhism. We will discuss its institutional instantiation later, but rhetorically it was prominent throughout his time in Europe. The universal, cosmopolitan character of Buddhism was a constant refrain.<sup>31</sup> In his very first address in Paris, he proclaimed that based on his “twenty years of studying Buddhism,

<sup>28</sup> “Zhongguo jindai zhi minzu shenghuo” 中國近代之民族生活 TX 22, 13: 1191-1191; HYJ 194-197.

<sup>29</sup> So translated because *shijie foxueyuan* 世界佛學苑 was being translated as International Buddhist Institute, see following section

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. TX 22, 13: 1194; HYJ 197-198. Taixu made a similar statement, somewhat extraneously, in a radio address in London. “Gao quanqiu de foxue tongzhi” 告全球的佛學同志 TX 18, 10: 293; “Zai lundun wuxiandian zhong gao quan shijie de foxue tongzhi — ji ge guo fojiaolianhehui” 在倫敦無線電中告全世界的佛學同志—即各國佛教聯合會 HYJ 168.

<sup>31</sup> Tai Hsu 1928, 28. “Wo zhi xuefo jingguo yu xuanchuan foxue” 我之學佛經過與宣傳佛學 TX 28, 18: 237; “Taixu dashi zai lundun zhi yanjiang” 太虛法師在倫敦之講演 HYJ 91.

[he] knows that it is not the product of a single people, nation, or epoch. Its character is truly one of cosmopolitan unity.<sup>32</sup> He would go on to declare the brotherhood of all humankind in his lecture at the Musée Guimet and hold forth the promise that Buddhism could unite “all forms of civilization.”<sup>33</sup> In London, he explained that it is not limited to any time, place, or nation but adapts to all. Thus, Buddhists should “model the idea that all under heaven are one family, all within the four seas are brothers.”<sup>34</sup>

The realization of that brotherhood, though, required peace. In his speech at the China Institut, Taixu noted that China was building a national military force (one, we might note, that had been accused of killing foreigners in Nanjing in 1927 and Jinan in 1928). It did so, Taixu explained, to cope with a world in which war was endemic. Though there was an international movement for peace, it had not yet found the means to achieve it. That means was Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> As Taixu declared in his first address in Paris,

the spirit of Buddhism is the love of peace. What the world today seeks is peace. And what I have come to Europe to spread is peace. The peace of Buddhism is not perfunctory or false. It is not a peace built upon a pile of arms and munitions. The peace the Buddha sought was a thoroughgoing peace, a peace built upon a philosophy of peace.<sup>36</sup>

He would expand upon that philosophy in his second lecture in Paris, explaining

To help others is to help oneself, and to hurt others is to do oneself a double injury, and yet, we find all nations to-day living in mutual distrust and preparing war under cover of apparent peace. Such a policy is not only inhuman, it also shows a lack of intelligence. My humble desire is to teach the Buddhist doctrine in a way that will help to eliminate these abnormal desires and enlighten the world. The Buddhist doctrine alone can make us

<sup>32</sup> “Foxue yu kexue zhaxue ji zongjiao zhi yitong” 佛學與科學哲學及宗教之異同 TX 13, 20: 15; “Zai bali zheren ting jiang” 在巴黎哲人廳講 HYJ, 161.

<sup>33</sup> Tai Hsu 1928, 24-26.

<sup>34</sup> “Gao quanqiu de foxue tongzhi” 告全球的佛學同志 TX 10, 18: 293-294; “Zai lundun wuxiandian zhong gao quan shijie de foxue tongzhi — ji ge guo fojiaolianhehui” 在倫敦無線電中告全世界的佛學同志—即各國佛教聯合會 HYJ 168-169.

<sup>35</sup> “Zhongguo jindai zhi minzu shenghuo” 中國近代之民族生活 TX 13, 22: 1194-1195; HYJ 198.

<sup>36</sup> “Foxue yu kexue zhaxue ji zongjiao zhi yitong” 佛學與科學哲學及宗教之異同 TX 13, 20: 22; “Zai bali zheren ting jiang” 在巴黎哲人廳講 HYJ 168.

abandon the false conception that life is necessarily based on struggle and competition, and bring us to adopt a policy of mutual aid by which we can attain to lasting peace.<sup>37</sup>

While Gong Jun is not doubt correct that there was much that Taixu did not understand about European culture and Orientalism, the monks was well aware of the devastation of the Great War and the sense of crisis that it had left in its wake. He offered Buddhism as a path to a world without war.

### The International Buddhist Institute

Taixu's efforts were not limited to lectures. One of the chief activities of Taixu's tour was promoting and organizing his International Buddhist Institute (*shijie foxueyuan* 世界佛學苑). The complexities of this project and Taixu's efforts to realize it must await a future publication. Suffice to say for now that Welch's presentation is one-sided and often simply inaccurate. It misrepresents the Institute's name, its mission, and Taixu's claims regarding its status.<sup>38</sup> Welch renders the name as "World Buddhist Institute." While "world" is, of course, an impeccable translation of *shijie*, almost no contemporaneous European language documents uses the term.<sup>39</sup> Instead, they nearly all use "international." Welch saw this "World Buddhist Institute" as a unidirectional project of propagation. Contemporaneous sources make it clear that the International Buddhist Institute was to be cooperative in nature and include both academic and practically oriented departments.<sup>40</sup> Finally, while Welch maintains that Taixu made vainglorious and empty claims that he had established a headquarters in Paris, branches in other major cities, and recruited eminent scholars as founders, Taixu's own account and Western sources of the time make no such claims.<sup>41</sup> Taixu's trip sought merely to lay the groundwork for the Institute. The question of the headquarters was never settled. Welch's "branches" were *tongxun qu* 通訊區 in Taixu's account and "information bureaus" in European languages. And the "founders" were simply "promoters" of the idea (*faqi ren* 發起人) who had committed to little more than

<sup>37</sup> Tai Hsu 1928, 25-26.

<sup>38</sup> Welch 1970, 59.

<sup>39</sup> I have seen only one exception: *Kölnische Zeitung* 1928.

<sup>40</sup> HYJ 141-142. This document is not in the TX, though there is a later articulation from 1933 the "Shijie foxueyuan zhi fofa xitong guan" 世界佛學苑之佛法系統觀 (TX 1, 1: 486-496).

<sup>41</sup> He seems to have been misled by an imprecise gloss of a news item from *Buddhism in England* (1929, 173-174) given in *The Maha Bodhi* (1929, 157).

providing a signature and a contact address.<sup>42</sup>

Even though it never advanced beyond this preliminary phase, we can see in the project an attempt to institutionalize Taixu's cultural diplomacy. Had it succeeded it would have stood as a counterpoint to China's image as a land of anti-foreign violence. The Institute represented a Chinese initiative to bring together and collaborate with the peoples of many nations. Over the course of his journey, Taixu met with many academics, intellectuals, and local Buddhists seeking their support and collaboration. "All of goodwill" were welcome, the original announcement declared, "without any distinction."<sup>43</sup> In this vision, the library and classrooms of the institute would have teamed with scholars and students of many lands. Not only individuals but also "all the organizations that will be necessary for its activity" were to be brought together.<sup>44</sup> We see some indication of what this might have looked like in Britain, where Taixu's visit inspired the creation of the London Buddhist Joint Committee. Formed to serve as the local liaison for the Institute, it also sought to unite the efforts of the Western converts of the Buddhist Lodge with Asian Buddhist communities in the British capital. Though it was short-lived and never as all-inclusive as it hoped, the Committee nevertheless points to the Buddhist internationalism the Chinese-led Institute promised.<sup>45</sup>

The Buddhist knowledge that the International Institute was to produce and disseminate would be a balm for a troubled world. The announcement for the project promised that Buddhism, "through the extreme tolerance of its principles and the absolute gentleness of its teaching, [would bring] the help of its moral strength to those who are concerned, in the current disorder, with the future of civilization and desire progress. From the application of its principles [Buddhism] draws the remedy for the excesses from which people suffer." Listed first among these was war.<sup>46</sup> This concern for war, Taixu told an American audience, is the reason he wished to see his Institute headquartered in Europe. China, like the United States, he averred, was a "peace-loving

<sup>42</sup> For the English, see: "The Abbot Tai Hsu," *Buddhism in England* 3, no 6 (Dec 1928): 131. In a speech at his reception in Shanghai upon return (not included in the TX), Taixu uses the phrase "*lianming faqi*" 聯名發起 to describe those who offered support. In his plan for an International Buddhist Association (*shijie foxue hui* 世界佛學會) that was superseded by the plan for an Institute, he defines *faqi ren* those who have supported the proposal (*fuyi* 附議) prior to the establishment of an information bureau (HYJ 129; TX 17, 9: 527).

<sup>43</sup> HYJ, 132.

<sup>44</sup> HYJ, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Humphries 1968, 33.

<sup>46</sup> HYJ, 132.

nation.” In contrast, he declared “Europe ... is only at peace on the surface. Beneath, there is many signs of pending international conflict ... Wars originate in Europe. That is one of the reasons why the proposed international Buddhist institute will be located in Europe, and those interested in peace should give their support.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, in one fell swoop, Taixu flattered his audience and flipped the script on them, presenting Europe as violent and warlike and China as a lover of peace, however little of it the country may have enjoyed recently.

In a fundraising letter to Chiang Kai-shek published in *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 on November 1, 1929, we find that Taixu quite explicitly saw the potential value of the Institute as an organ of cultural diplomacy. In this letter, Taixu estimated the cost of establishment and creating a foundation to be one million dollars.<sup>48</sup> He claimed to have received pledges from European scholars and to be able to raise another two hundred thousand from Chinese supporters at home and abroad but in order to secure more donations he requested a large contribution to demonstrate the viability of the plan. Thus, he asked Chiang to telegram the embassy in France, announcing a pledge of one hundred thousand dollars and wiring an initial sum of ten thousand. As Taixu presented it, this endeavor would pave the way for the understanding of not just Buddhism, but Chinese culture more generally. It is ignorance of Chinese culture, he argued, that left Europeans unable to comprehend and appreciate the Three People’s Principles.<sup>49</sup> When Chinese culture is understood it will “help the complete independence of the Chinese people” and allow the “Three People’s Principles to flourish throughout the world.” Thus, producing and disseminating knowledge of Buddhism in the West would not only foster peace but an understanding of China that would advance its material and ideological interests.

But there was stick as well as carrot. Should Chiang not act, Taixu implied, China risked losing out in the competition to shape perceptions to Japan. Newspapers were reporting that Japan planned to send thirty missionaries to take advantage of European interest in Buddhism to spread the religion. Where Taixu presented his own mission as contributing to understanding and national

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<sup>47</sup> Love 1929.

<sup>48</sup> Western media reports make clear that this figure is enumerated in US dollars, eg *New York Herald* 1929.

<sup>49</sup> Taixu states that they “see it as stitched together pieces of Euro-American, leading to estrangement and contempt.” This language resembles that of a review of a translation of Sun Yat-sen’s work that appeared in the English press shortly before Taixu wrote the letter. Wei, 2017, 71.

sovereignty, theirs he portrayed as a “tool of imperialism.” If they succeeded, China not only stood to lose an opportunity, he feared that this underhanded use of Buddhism would sour Westerners on Buddhism, preventing them from understanding Chinese culture as well.<sup>50</sup>

### The Press

Taixu's lectures and his Institute created the occasion and opportunity for his cultural diplomacy. It was through the press, however, that he reached a large enough audience to shift public perceptions. Heretofore, our understanding of Taixu's reception in the West has been largely limited to a single anonymous review of his published lectures in a French academic journal<sup>51</sup> and the comments of Welch's likewise anonymous informants. Yet there were dozens of articles and notices about Taixu and his tour published in France, England, Germany, and the United States, including not only their major metropolises but also, through wire services, their hinterlands and even colonial holdings. While a fuller analysis must await a future publication, here we may note, first, that Taixu's message of peace and internationalism came through clearly and was disseminated in the press; and, second, how important Taixu's “refined aesthetic practices” and the “distinctive features” of his self-presentation were to garnering interest in him and his message.

Building bridges and overcoming division was a common theme of coverage. *Pacific Affairs*, then the newsletter of the Institute of Pacific Relations in New York, reported that Taixu “met with interested groups endeavoring to see the possibilities for bringing about a better mutual appreciation of Western and Eastern cultures.”<sup>52</sup> *The Los Angeles Daily Evening Citizen News* relayed to its readers Taixu's “hope for a better cultural understanding between the people of the United States and China.”<sup>53</sup> Under the all-caps headline, “Urge Cultural Tie with the Orient,” *The New York Times* reported Taixu's declaration to an East West luncheon that “the tolerant, receptive, universal faith [of Buddhism]...is essential to the realization of world unity.”<sup>54</sup> Promoting this unity was presented by the *New York Herald Tribune* as the key mission of his proposed Institute as well.<sup>55</sup> Such portraits could also be found in the French

<sup>50</sup> “Zhi jiang zongsiling shu” 致蔣總司令書 TX 26, 17: 210-213.

<sup>51</sup> *Bulletin de l'Association Francaise des Amis de l'Orient* 1929.

<sup>52</sup> *Pacific Affairs* 1929, 278-279.

<sup>53</sup> Love 1929.

<sup>54</sup> *New York Times* 1929.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Herald Tribune* 1929.

press. *Excelsior* described the planned Institute as “a center of study and textual compilation devoted to a doctrine which, having its basis in universal charity, is indifferent to political divisions and is above all human divisions.”<sup>56</sup> Likewise, in a piece in *La Liberté*, J. Hackin, the curator of the Musée Guimet and a key supporter of the Institute in Paris, described is as “excellent means of bringing together the East and the West.”<sup>57</sup>

Taixu’s promise that Buddhism could bring peace to the war-weary West also featured prominently in coverage. Writing in *Le Journal*, Emile Condroyer wrote,

Europe is seeking to find some way of establishing a durable peace. She is hungry for peace: pacts, settlements, treaties, all are aimed at this end. Now, Buddhism, its philosophy, its ethic, its art, are precisely what is needed to bring peace to humanity. And so, a new chapter must be added to the already weighty question of Occidental-Oriental relations: the chapter wherein the story will be told of how international peace, attained through the Nirvana of Buddhism, was brought to us from China by His Eminence [Taixu].<sup>58</sup>

Likewise, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote described Taixu and his Institute as “borne on the wave of peace that is trying to encircle the earth.”<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, in pages of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Taixu proclaimed that “Buddhism is the only thing that can save the world from violence and destruction. International Buddhism will end war.”<sup>60</sup>

Peace and unity were obviously messages of great appeal but it was also Taixu as a messenger that drove coverage. As a Buddhist monk, he was archetypally exotic. Profiles abounded with descriptions of his appearance. The article from the *Los Angeles Evening Citizen News* described his as a “compact, strong-bodied man, his head as round as a billiard ball and as close cropped as a convict’s, or a Rachmaninoff’s. The two points of his black handle-bar moustache droop to his chin. His eyes, behind enormous round lenses, open wider when he smiles, and his meticulously kept hands leave the folds of his

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<sup>56</sup> *Excelsior* 1929.

<sup>57</sup> Humbourg 1929.

<sup>58</sup> Condroyer 1929. The scan available of this piece is of such poor quality as to be unreadable. I rely on the translation found in Mord 1929, 498.

<sup>59</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 1929.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor 1929.

orange robe to curve around a nonexistent globe when he talks. He once spent four years in meditation on a hillside.”<sup>61</sup> His robes elicited special fascination. An article in *Figaro* described them as “a sumptuous costume which set the [lecture] hall ablaze with a warm orange splash. There were a few Chinese in the audience,” it continued, “but they were in jackets. Is monsieur [Taixu] a respectful observer of traditions? Or did he think that the public would enjoy the surprise and that his dazzling robe would appeal differently than a drab jacket?”<sup>62</sup> He was not, that is, a Westernized but an authentic Chinese. In the quest to change perceptions of China, a little silk went a long way.

## Conclusion

Taixu's tour of the West was thus not only an attempt to spread the Dharma but an exercise in cultural diplomacy. This angle of vision allows us to reassess the tour's success. As a religious mission, it was largely a failure as previous studies have noted. Taixu not make a lasting impression and today is barely a footnote in histories of Buddhism in the West. The Institute that might have served as a toehold never materialized and the network established to foster its creation dissolved. Yet as cultural diplomacy it was at least a moderate success. At a fraught moment in China's international relations, he, in a partnership with the state that complemented and never subsumed his own agenda, brought a message of peace and cooperation that contested the vision of China as violent and anti-foreign. Taixu's cultural distinction as a Buddhist monk, which was embodied in his physical appearance and striking dress, helped garner that coverage, bringing the voice of a different China to readers across the West.

Did they believe him? Was anyone convinced by his promise that “international Buddhism will end war”? Doubtless very few and only those who were already disposed to such ideas. Nevertheless, from the perspective of cultural diplomacy this does not necessarily matter. They had only to believe that he believed it, that he was convinced. If Westerners who encountered him in person or in the press believed that he represented a significant sector of Chinese society that was eager to join hands with the people of many nations to work together for peace, then he had succeeded in shifting public opinion, even if only to a limited degree. Likewise, even though the Institute failed to materialize, the effort itself offered tangible instantiation of this interest in

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<sup>61</sup> Love 1929.

<sup>62</sup> Dardenne 1928.

international cooperation.

It seems likely that Chiang Kai-shek and others in the KMT saw the tour as a success. After all, he was “rehired” as an official emissary of China for his Good Will Tour to India in 1940 to counter-Japanese propaganda and foster sympathy and support for the Chinese war effort.<sup>63</sup> Had they seen it as the embarrassing failure that Welch did, it is difficult to imagine that they would have given him such an assignment. This, in turn, raises an intriguing historical counterfactual: what if Taixu had not died in 1947 and had instead retreated with the KMT to Taiwan? Once again dependent on international goodwill, Chiang might have supported additional trips to the West to shore up support. Taixu would likely have found a receptive audience in the 1950s and 60s. Certainly, the case of Dalai Lama illustrates the appetite for Buddhist monks with a message of peace held in the postwar West. Had Taixu lived long enough to return, the history of Buddhism in the West might have developed differently.

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<sup>63</sup> Sen 2016.

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