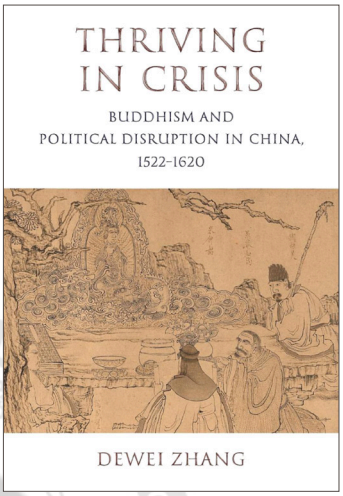
Book Review



Zhang, Dewei. *Thriving in Crisis: Buddhism and Political Disruption in China, 1522–1620*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020

Dewei Zhang's monograph is a timely contribution to the relatively overlooked field of Buddhism in late imperial China. The book focuses on the development of Chinese Buddhism from 1522 to 1620, a time period spanning nearly one hundred years under three Ming emperors (Jiajing 嘉靖 [r. 1522–1566], Longqing 隆慶 [r. 1567–1572], and Wanli 萬曆 [r. 1573–1620]). The study mainly deals with two core regions: North China (Beijing in particular) and the Jiangnan region, while providing qualitative analysis of other regions. The study raises two interrelated questions for students of Chinese Buddhism: How to evaluate the impact of politics on the development of Chinese Buddhism, and how to situate Ming-Qing Buddhism in the history of Chinese Buddhism. In answering these questions, the author chooses five groups of historical agents, including emperors, high-ranking court women, eunuchs, scholar-officials, and eminent monks (characterized as 'elite' by the author) and demonstrates the dynamics of the elite network that determined the ebb and flow of Ming Buddhism.

This book has eight chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, the author claims that he attempts to challenge two pre-existing paradigms that have persisted in the

study of Chinese Buddhism: Sui-Tang centrism and Protestant presuppositions. He argues for the significance of a book looking beyond Sui-Tang Buddhism and the necessity to evaluate Ming-Qing Buddhism not merely on doctrinal grounds. The author continues to define the term 'renewal' as 'a strong, phenomenal, and large-scale resurgence of enthusiasm with monastic Buddhism that involves all walks of society and that projects itself, to varying degrees, in the spiritual, intellectual, and material forms within the saṃgha and beyond' (5). The definition is employed to include political and social dimensions, and the author promises to adopt an approach that resembles the Annales School by foregrounding longue durée changes.

The first chapter introduces the policies on Buddhism in early- and middle-Ming periods, which set the stage for later developments. As the author states, Emperor Hongwu 洪武 (r. 1368–1398) started to stipulate strict regulations to keep Buddhism under tight control, such as the division of Buddhism into three categories, the establishment of the Central Buddhist Registry, and the issuance of national certificates for ordination. These policies, mostly kept in place by the government after Hongwu, set the tone for the decline of 'Buddhist autonomy' throughout the Ming. With non-certified monastics who were not recognized by the state increasing and land grants decreasing, more and more monastics were forced to engage in the performance of funeral rituals to sustain themselves and to pay less attention to the study and practice of Buddhism. The situation led to a vicious circle that threatened the vitality of Chinese Buddhism. In addition to religious policies, the author also touches upon the structure of the Ming state and Ming political crises, which became the most impactful 'external forces' for the development of Buddhism.

The second chapter investigates new developments in the reign of Emperor Jiajing 嘉靖 (r. 1522–1566). In the early stage, Emperor Jiajing displayed antipathy to Buddhism by imposing restrictive policies on Buddhism and attacking the late prestigious monk Yao Guangxiao 姚廣孝 (1335–1418), revered by the precedent Emperor Yongle 永樂 (r. 1403–1424). What is worse, Emperor Jiajing showed blatant favouritism to Daoism. The most serious blow to Buddhism was a ban on the use of the ordination platform in Beijing in 1566, which prohibited the normal operation of monastic institutions and

the recruit of new Buddhists. The loss of opportunities to perform ordination made the transmission of the Dharma difficult, if not impossible. Emboldened by Jiajing's suppression of Buddhism in Beijing, the local officials in Nanjing also carried out aggressive moves, such as the closure of nunneries and the dismantlement of local temples. However, Emperor Jiajing left the Huanggu Baoming Monastery 皇姑保明寺 largely unharmed, which was under the aegis of royal female figures (like his mother Empress Dowager Zhaosheng 昭聖太后) and eunuchs. Although an unfriendly environment for Buddhism was built in the Jiajing period, it still left leeway for Buddhism to survive because of the existence of patrons from royal families.

The third chapter examines Empress Dowager Cisheng's (1545–1614) influence on Buddhism by taking into consideration her shifting relationship with her son Emperor Wanli (r. 1573–1620) and her personal devotion to Buddhism. Due to the disagreement on succession, Cisheng and Wanli had a strained relationship during the first few decades of Wanli's reign. Amid the disputes, Cisheng called upon eminent monks, such as Zibo Zhenke 紫柏真可 (1543–1604) and Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546–1623) and implicated them in the political struggle of the inner court. The political struggles once became so fierce that the two famous monks were imprisoned or exiled. Throughout her lifetime, Cisheng showed her fervent support of Buddhism, patronizing Buddhist temples financially, distributing Buddhist canons to multiple monasteries, and making connections with eminent monks. In particular, Cisheng and Wanli together played a crucial role in the empire-wide distribution of Buddhist canons. According to the author, as many as 112 copies of Buddhist canons were gifted to monasteries in the Wanli period (71–72). Cisheng also played a positive role in the promotion of Beijing as a Buddhist center. Cisheng's personal piety to Buddhism, however, could not substitute for enduring institutional support for Buddhism.

The fourth chapter turns to eunuchs, who served as the agents to connect the inner court with the outside world. The author first probes into eunuchs' devotion to Buddhism, pointing out the connections between eunuchs' mutilated bodies and the Buddhist ideas of impermanent body and universal salvation. Eunuchs also pursued personal interests in patronizing Buddhism. For example, one might

keep a patronized monastery as his private temple, obtain land properties under the name of the temple, and seek posthumous benefits in the temple. Eunuchs were prone to adjust their stance to Buddhism in accordance with the attitudes of the masters that they were serving. Hence, their relationships with Buddhism lacked certainty. This chapter also brings to light hitherto understudied inscriptions that bear witness to eunuchs' collective support of the Huguo Monastery in Beijing.

The fifth chapter scrutinizes the interaction between scholar-officials and Buddhism from three aspects: scholar-officials' different attitudes to Buddhism; the case studies of two pro-Buddhist scholar-officials (Feng Mengzhen 馮夢禎 (1548–1608) and Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610)); and the literati Buddhist association Putao Association in Beijing. The author first discusses the significance of Confucianism and Buddhism in a scholar-official's life, and then delves into several cases of land encroachment, which shows that some scholar-officials were antagonistic to Buddhism. The author then studies the roles of Buddhism in Feng Mengzhen's life, as Feng forged connections with Zibo Zhenke and Mizang Daokai and sponsored the printing of the Jiaxing Canon. As for Yuan Hongdao, he is shown to have favored both Chan and Pure Land Buddhism and won praise from Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲袾宏 (1535–1615) for his writing on Pure Land Buddhism. Lastly, the author examines the fate of a literati association called the Putao Association in Beijing. Led by literary figures like Yuan Hongdao, the Putao Association once enjoyed popularity among the scholar-officials interested in Buddhism. However, the intensity of political struggles between members of the association and anti-Buddhist officials in court, rooted in the intensified ideological conflicts between Buddhists and Confucians, led to its eventual dissolution.

Turning away from external factors, the sixth chapter turns to the efforts of three eminent Buddhist masters and their efforts to revitalize late-Ming Buddhism: Hanshan Deqing, Zibo Zhenke, and Miaofeng Fudeng 妙峰福登 (1540–1612). This chapter sketches out their monastic careers and compares their different strategies in handling political involvement and obtaining resources. For instance, with the goal to restore his native monastery, the Great Bao'en Monastery in Nanjing, Deqing made strenuous efforts to contact

the court elite, especially Cisheng. His active engagement in the succession issue made him the envy of many as Cisheng's master but also brought him the ensuing exile to Leizhou. For Zhenke and his disciples, the author mainly explores their undertaking of printing the Jiaxing Canon and Zhenke's political embroilment in Beijing (the 'evil pamphlet' case). For Fudeng, the author highlights his practical skills in funding and building civil and Buddhist constructions, his relative distance from the inner court disputes and his close links with the local elite. Therefore, this chapter shows that the three eminent monks engaged in the Ming politics in connection with their religious aspirations in crucially different ways.

The seventh chapter moves away from the elite defined by the author and focuses on five representative monasteries to examine the temporal and regional changes that took place. The author observes that in the Jiangnan region, scholar-officials played a leading role in shaping local Buddhism, while the imperial families and eunuchs were more influential in supporting monasteries located in Beijing. Moreover, through the case study of the Ciguang Monastery at Mount Huang in Anhui, the author shows how a local monastery away from the Buddhist centers fared in the Ming Dynasty.

The eighth chapter adopts a quantitative approach and tries to show a panorama of the Ming-Buddhist renewal by focusing on two key indicators: the state of Buddhist institutions and the mobility of eminent monks. For example, according to the author (222), the number of eminent monks increased in the Wanli reign and dropped after this period, reflecting the revival of Buddhism in the Wanli period and its subsequent decline. Several tables of temple-building activities in Beijing, and those in the Jiangnan region, also show the junctures of when Buddhism gained momentum in different regions.

In conclusion, the author examines the factors contributing to the renewal of late-Ming Buddhism and foregrounds the role of politics in the process. With excellent in-depth case studies, the author explains the mechanism behind the vicissitudes of Ming Buddhism. The study thoroughly investigates how the most influential 'external factor', politics, affected the course of Ming Buddhism through the interactions between the elite in the secular and monastic worlds.

Back to the two questions mentioned in the beginning, the author

gives his explanations. For the first question, the author emphasizes the decisive role of court politics for the development of Ming Buddhism, even though politics could not single-handedly determine the agency of individual monastic monks, their religious motivation, or the collective imagination of the religious landscape. For the second question, as the author claims, the prevalence of Sui-Tang centralism has stigmatized Ming-Qing Buddhism as 'decline', because of its lack of creativity in doctrinal teachings. The attention to political and social dimensions of Ming Buddhism, to a certain degree, redresses the overemphasis on doctrines. Nevertheless, the vitality of Ming-Qing Buddhism on the ground should also be part of the overall picture. Although the 'elite' mentioned in the book possessed a good amount of political and material resources, the renewal of late-Ming Buddhism could not be sustainable without the involvement of common practitioners. Perhaps the permeation of Buddhism into daily life during the Ming-Qing periods requires more attention to the understudied 'non-elite'.

Some arguments or narratives need more explanation. For example, the author mentions three basic models that describe the state of Buddhism: declining, stable, and flourishing (5). Despite the author's efforts, it seems difficult to pin down what a 'stable' state of Buddhism would look like, compared to the frequent appearances of 'declining' and 'flourishing' in the narrative. To characterize the developments of Buddhism from mid- to late-Ming periods, the author comments, 'A complete circle, from decline to renewal and back to decline, formed' (250). The above statement sounds like a cyclically historical view of Buddhism that needs further justification.

The book is a welcome addition to the growing list of monographs that address Ming-Qing Buddhism. It charts new paths for scholars interested in similar topics and would be of interest to scholars in the fields of Buddhist studies, Chinese religion, and Ming-Qing history, among others.

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