From China to Japan and Back Again: An Energetic Example of Bidirectional Sino-Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Transmission

Cody R. Bahir

Abstract: Sino-Japanese religious discourse, more often than not, is treated as a unidirectional phenomenon. Academic treatments of pre-modern East Asian religion usually portray Japan as the passive recipient of Chinese Buddhist traditions, while explorations of Buddhist modernization efforts focus on how Chinese Buddhists utilized Japanese adoptions of Western understandings of religion. This paper explores a case where Japan was simultaneously the receptor and agent by exploring the Chinese revival of Tang-dynasty Zhenyan. This revival—which I refer to as Neo-Zhenyan—was actualized by Chinese Buddhist who received empowerment (Skt. abhis.eka) under Shingon priests in Japan in order to claim the authority to found “Zhenyan” centers in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and even the USA. Moreover, in addition to utilizing Japanese Buddhist sectarianism to root their lineage in the past, the first known architect of Neo-Zhenyan, Wuguang (1918–2000), used energeticism, the thermodynamic theory propagated by the German chemist Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932; 1919 Nobel Prize for Chemistry) that was popular among early Japanese Buddhist modernists, such as Inoue Enryō (1858–1919), to portray his resurrected form of Zhenyan as the most suitable form of Buddhism for the future. Based upon the circular nature of esoteric transmission from China to Japan and back to the greater Sinosphere and the use of energeticism within Neo-Zhenyan doctrine, this paper reveals the sometimes cyclical nature of Sino-Japanese religious influence. Data were gathered by closely analyzing the writings of prominent Zhenyan leaders alongside onsite fieldwork conducted in Taiwan from 2011–2019.

Keywords: Buddhism; Japan; China; Shingon; energeticism; Ostwald; Wuguang; Zhenyan; Taiwan; Taixu

1. Introduction

“Neo-Zhenyan” and “Zhenyan Revivalism” are umbrella terms used to denote a number of esoteric Buddhist lineages that were recently founded throughout the global Chinese cultural sphere in order to resurrect an extinct form of Chinese Buddhism known as the Zhenyan School 真言宗, the Chinese forerunner to the Japanese Buddhist denomination known as Shingon (Bahir 2018a, 2018b). In addition to representing a new form of Buddhism, Neo-Zhenyan is the direct product of the bidirectional nature of Sino-Japanese Buddhist cross-pollination, which is a facet of Sino-Japanese discourse that is often overlooked. As Japanese Shingon was born out of Chinese influence upon Japanese Buddhism, and Neo-Zhenyan is a product of Japanese influence upon Chinese Buddhism, I argue that the emergence of Neo-Zhenyan represents a case of both. In order to adequately explore this bidirectional nature, understand why it receives relatively little attention, and analyze how Neo-Zhenyan exemplifies this bidirectional facet, this paper begins with an overview of the scholarship on Sino-Japanese Buddhist interaction within the contexts from which Neo-Zhenyan arose. From there, we will look at the ontological metaphysics created by the father of Neo-Zhenyan, Wuguang (Dharma-name Quanniao 全妙, secular name Zheng Jinbao 鄭進寶 1918–2000), who was a Chan 禪 monk from Taiwan and the first individual known to create a successful, independent, and self-sustaining Chinese esoteric Buddhist community in the modern era. Special attention...
will be paid to his use of the monistic ontology known as “energeticism” to harmonize esoteric Buddhist theology with Chinese metaphysics and science and how the prominence of this theory within Wuguang’s writings attests to the multidirectional nature of Sino-Japanese Buddhist discourse. The discussion on energeticism will additionally correct a number of widespread misunderstandings regarding the history of science as well as Buddhist applications of science.

2. Part 1: Background

The status of the Zhenyan School 真言宗—the Chinese precursor to Shingon that captivated the Tang court in Chang’an 長安 (present day Xi’an 西安)—continues to evade scholarly consensus. Charles Orzech (1989) asserted that Zhenyan existed as a distinct Buddhist tradition during the Tang dynasty (618–907) before disappearing sometime during the subsequent Song dynasty (960–1269), when its ritual technologies were absorbed by other forms of Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion. The disappearance of Zhenyan from the Chinese Buddhist landscape has been attributed to the fact that the master-disciple chain of transmission as actualized during the esoteric empowerment (Skt. abhiseka) ritual was interrupted. As no esoteric Buddhist tradition can “spring into being ex nihilo but must be able to trace its origin back through several generations of master-to-student transmission” (Hammerstrom 2013, p. 13), this interruption meant that Chinese forms of Buddhism no longer included an orthodox Zhenyan lineage. Prior to this interruption, however, the Japanese Buddhist monk Kūkai 空海 (formally titled Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師; 774–835) traveled to China, where he learned the esoteric Zhenyan Dharma before returning to Japan and founding the Buddhist denomination known as Shingon (Japanese pronunciation of “Zhenyan”), which remains one of Japan’s most influential Buddhist denominations.

While the fact that Japanese Shingon is rooted in Tang-dynasty Chinese Zhenyan is not contested, the nature of Tang-dynasty Zhenyan remains an area rife with scholarly disagreement. In contrast to Orzech, Robert Sharf has argued that the perception that Zhenyan ever existed as a particular self-conscious Buddhist “school,” or zong 宗, in China is purely a product of Japanese polemical historiography (Sharf 2002, pp. 263–78). More recently, Geoffrey Goble undertook an in-depth study of Amoghavajra (705–74), one of the key Tang-dynasty Zhenyan figures (Goble 2019). However, his work largely sidestepped the issue (Kotyk 2020; Sørensen 2021). This is despite his claim “to provide evidence of local recognition of Esoteric Buddhism as a new teaching and to delineate as clearly as possible what that teaching was” (Goble 2019, p. 9). Nevertheless, it is undisputed that the fact that Japanese Shingon exists represents a clear example of Chinese influence upon Japanese Buddhism, as it is uncontested that Kūkai founded Shingon by utilizing the esoteric Dharma that he had studied from Amoghavajra’s disciple, Huiguo 惠果 (746–805), while on his trip to China.

In the modern era, the birth of East Asian Buddhist modernism during the late 1800s and early 1900s represents another well-known—and less scholarly contentious—example of Sino-Japanese Buddhist interaction. “Buddhist modernism” is a term scholars employ to discuss forms of Buddhism that have arisen out of a conscious effort to reconfigure Buddhist teachings and practices so that they are in line with the dominant cultural and intellectual norms of modernity, such as science, rationality, and equality (McMahan 2008, p. 6; Teeuwen 2017). The birth of East Asian Buddhist modernism occurred during the Meiji Buddhist Revival and Buddhist Revival in China. Scholars have differed by framing the impetus for these revivals as either an external push to modernize that was born out of crises such as anti-Buddhist campaigns (Goossaert 2006; Grapard 1984; Katz 2013; Marra 2014) or an internally derived pull “that approaches modernity as a source of attraction rather than compulsion” (Ritzinger 2017, p. 7). Nevertheless, both camps agree that influential modernist Buddhist thinkers, such as Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (b. Inoue Kishimaru 井上岸
丸; 1858–1919) in Japan and Taixu 太虚 (secular name Lu Peilin 呂沛林; 1890–1947) in China, sought to reform Buddhism in order to make it more suitable to meet the needs of people living in the modern world. Moreover, it has been established that Japanese Buddhists first took the lead and that the early Chinese efforts to reform Buddhism were heavily influenced by those already undertaken by Japanese Buddhist reformers (Sueki 2010), which was also the case for Taiwan (Lin 2020).

Thus, the birth of Japanese Shingon during the middle period represents an example of Chinese influence upon Japanese Buddhism, and the formation of Chinese Buddhist modernism is an illustration of Japanese influence upon Chinese Buddhism. As will be demonstrated, the emergence of Neo-Zhenyan represents a case of both.

3. Part 2: Neo-Zhenyan and Wuguang

Currently, Neo-Zhenyan communities are known to exist in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the United States of America (Bahir Forthcoming). The first known example of a recently established esoteric Chinese Buddhist lineage—and thus the first known instance of Neo-Zhenyan—is the Mantra School Bright Lineage (MSBL) 真言宗光明流. The MSBL was founded in the 1970s by Wuguang, a Chan monk and wonder worker based in Taiwan’s oldest Buddhist monastery, Zhuxi Temple 竹溪寺, in the southern Taiwanese city of Tainan (Bahir 2013). Wuguang grew up during the period of Japan’s colonization of Taiwan (1895–1945) and was fluent in Japanese and Taiwanese but never gained fluency in Mandarin. During his time at Zhuxi Temple, Wuguang began to find Buddhism unfulfilling and was gripped by a personal spiritual crisis (Wuguang 1999a). In response to this crisis, Wuguang entered into two isolated retreats. During the first, he encountered a female propagator of Tibetan Buddhism from China, Elder Gongga, and became her disciple for a time (Bahir 2018a, pp. 94–95). During his second retreat, while studying the Chinese Buddhist canon, Wuguang discovered the Tang-dynasty Chinese forerunner of Japanese Shingon, Zhenyan, and believed that Zhenyan’s doctrines held the keys to fixing his spiritual crisis. Thus, he traveled to Kōyasan, Japan, in 1971, where he was ordained as a Shingon priest 阿闍梨 (Skt. ācārya). After returning to Taiwan the following year, he used the training and credentials he had received in Japan to, as he saw it, resurrect Tang-dynasty Zhenyan by ordaining his own disciples as priests on Taiwanese soil without Japanese oversight.

While Wuguang’s MSBL represents the revival of a form of esoteric Buddhism many believed went extinct over 1000 years ago, Neo-Zhenyan is a modern Buddhist movement, and its ideology was directly impacted by the contours of early East Asian Buddhist modernist discourse. While Wuguang’s use of Japanese symbolism to resurrect Zhenyan has already been explored elsewhere (Bahir 2018b), the ways in which modernist Buddhist Japanese discourse shaped the ideology of the MSBL have yet to be discussed. In the following section, we analyze the links between early Sino-Japanese Buddhist engagements with science while highlighting the ways in which that discourse gave rise to MSBL ontology and theology.

4. Part 3: Energeticism

The discursive context of East Asian Buddhist modernism from which Neo-Zhenyan arose was dominated by a typological trinary consisting of the secular 世俗 (Chn. shisu, Jpn. sezoku), religious 宗教 (Ch. zongjiao, Jpn. shūkyō), and superstitious 迷信 (Chn. mixin, Jpn. meishin) (Josephson 2012, p. 163; also see Hanegraaff 2016, pp. 393–404). Each concept represented by these categories was a newcomer to East Asian intellectual discourse (Iriye 1992, p. 34; Krämer 2013, p. 106; Nedostup 2013, p. 167; Suzuki 2015, pp. 181–213). Once adopted, East Asian elites classified the religious and intellectual traditions of their lands in terms of this trinary. Phenomena perceived as beneficial to the future of their respective nations were placed into the category of secular and promoted, while phenomena blamed for Asia’s having fallen
behind the technologically advanced West were cast into the category of superstition and demonized. The middle category, religion, served as a safe haven for ideologies and activities that, although not necessarily useful in forwarding the modernization of East Asia, were not blamed for her relative backwardness (Josephson 2012, pp. 3–4, 259–62). It was within the confines of this neutral category that Buddhists strove to establish their tradition.

Buddhist modernists in Japan, China, and later Taiwan erected the boundaries between the scientific, religious, and superstitious spheres along the material/mental binary characteristic of Cartesian dualism. This is exemplified in the writings of Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919), a paragon of early Japanese Buddhist modernism who attempted to present Buddhism as not only compatible with—but an invaluable tool for—Japan’s modernization efforts be demonstrating that Buddhism was superior to Western philosophy and make it more socially engaged by encouraging Buddhists to establish hospitals, charities, and educational institutions (DuBois 2011, p. 181).

Inoue’s use of the material/mental divide in demarcating the boundaries between the secular, religious, and superstitious can be seen in this passage:

In this world[,...] there are two aspects, the material and the spiritual. The transformations of the material world are controlled by physical laws. Natural calamities and diseases originate in this area [the material world]. Therefore, if one wants to avoid natural calamities and diseases, there is no other way than through the control obtained from scientific research . . . . Therefore, neither the buddhas nor kamis nor religion have control over the material world. Instead it must be observed that [religion] commands the foundations of the spiritual world. (Josephson 2006, p. 156)

Here, Inoue posits a dualism between “the material” busshitsu 物質 (Mandarin wupin) and “the spiritual” (also “mental”) seishin 精神 (Mandarin jingshen) and asserts that these two substances are governed by separate laws. By doing so, he excludes any possibility of wonder working since the material world cannot be affected by anything except for other material phenomena. Thus, the material/secular world and the mental/religious world are entirely separate and do not overlap. The former is the realm of science, while the latter is the realm of religion. Thus, any and all attempts to influence the material world through religious means represents an example of superstition.

In opposition to this, we find Wuguang’s stance on the relationship between science and religion:

Religion entails consciousness controlling matter, science entails matter controlling consciousness. In fact the power of consciousness is great . . .

宗教家是精神去支配物質的, 科學家是物質去支配精神的, 其實精神力量才是大 . . . (Wuguang 1970)

Here, both Wuguang’s terminology and subject matter directly mirror those of Inoue above, the subject being the roles and realms of secular science and religion. Inoue placed the physical world wholly within the realm of science, thereby excluding religion as a means of affecting or even understanding the natural world. Wuguang, on the other hand, shows that religion is a source of techniques for the human mind to control the material world. This term, control支配 (Chn. zhipei, Jpn. shihai), also has the sense of “dominate” and “to arrange.” It is a term favored by Wuguang to articulate how metaphysical forces shape phenomena. This passage thus contains a radical definition of religion. According to Wuguang, religion is exactly what Inoue deemed superstitious—effecting the material world through religious means.

The similarities and dissimilarities of these two citations demonstrate the polemical nature of Wuguang’s religious writings. He emulated his modernist predecessors by utilizing the material/mental binary to designate which spheres of human experience fall in the realm of science and religion. However, he came to the exact opposite
conclusion by asserting that the material world can be influenced by religious activity. This interpretive ploy of emulation and departure is typical of Wuguang’s hermeneutic. As will be shown, this was exactly how Wuguang sought to redeem Chinese religious practices related to spirit communication that earlier Buddhist modernists had deemed superstitious.

4.1. Part 3.A: Energetic Emptiness

Nineteenth and early twentieth century East Asian Buddhist engagements with modern philosophy were dominated by overly simplistic interpretations of epistemological and ontological arguments based on the material/mental divide (Hammerstrom 2010, p. 83). Ontologically, the material/mental binary functions as the foundation of materialism and idealism. In Japanese and Chinese, these were respectively translated as “matter-only ideology” weiwu lun 唯物論 (also weiwu zhuyi 唯物主義) and “mind-only ideology” weixin lun 唯心論 (also weixin zhuyi 唯心主義). The distinction between these positions is an issue of primacy. Materialism asserts that mental phenomena are secondary outcrops of matter. Idealism maintains the exact opposite. According to both, if one were to deconstruct any one thing to its most primitive ingredient—whatever that thing may be—a single, universal substance would be revealed. Their point of contention is whether that underlying substance would be material or mental. As both materialist and idealist ontologies posit that the entire universe is composed of the same underlying “stuff”, they are both examples of monism—term that was rendered into Japanese and Chinese as “single-basis ideology” yiyuan lun 一元論 (also yiyuan zhuyi 一元主義). Its opposite, dualism—which asserts the material phenomena are wholly composed of matter, and mental phenomena are solely composed of mind—was translated into Japanese and Chinese as “double-basis ideology” eryuan lun 二元論 (also eryuan zhuyi 二元主義).

East Asian Buddhist modernists tended to portray all Western philosophical positions as either strictly materialist or idealist. This enabled them to proclaim that Buddhism contained philosophical positions that transcended this debate. The material/mental binary served as Inoue Enryô’s discursive point of entry in his engagements with modern philosophy (Kopf 2013, p. 32). This can be seen in the passage quoted in the previous section where he segregated religion from science based on the division between matter and consciousness. His use of this distinction to proclaim that Western thought was limited to these two positions can be seen in the following passage:

Ever since the antiquity, cosmologies attempted to prove the position of either idealism or materialism. It was assumed that either materialism or idealism provided the correct worldview. However, an outside observer understands that each position highlights one aspect of reality and both constitute different perspective on the same reality. (Kopf 2013, p. 35)

The philosophical positions that Inoue details and rejects in this passage are the materialist and idealist ontologies. In place of these, he posits a dual-aspect monism. This position differs from materialism and idealism—as well as ontological dualism—in the fact that it asserts that the material and mental characteristics that phenomena exude are secondary qualities of a more primordial substratum. As “material” and “mental” are secondary attributes, the substratum is made of an underlying substance that is neither material nor mental.

Wuguang used the materialist/idealist binary in a way that mirrored Inoue’s in multiple ways. Like Inoue, he reduced Western philosophy to a monolithic struggle between these two positions and rejected them both in favor of a dual-aspect monism:

The essential path to the gate of Chan is one simple road . . . the Vimalakirti-nirdesa refers to this as the ‘non-dual dharma gate,’ philosophy calls it ‘monism’ . . . The body and mind are not two means that the body and consciousness
are two aspects of a single material . . . Anthropologists have concluded that humans have been on the earth for 250,000 years. Throughout this entire time, they have been misled by the notion that the mind and body are separate . . . This has given birth to suffering and the plight of humanity’s woes. Standard Buddhism says “form and mind are not two” . . . meaning that matter and consciousness are the same substance.

禅門的要道是單純的一條路 . . . 維摩經曰「不二法門」, 哲學家曰「一元論」 . . . 身心不二，即是我們的身體與精神是同一物之兩方面 . . . 據人類學者研究的結果，人類在地球上出現大約有二十五萬年之久，至今還迷惑於身心別體的觀念 . . . 由此生出苦惱，乃是人類悲哀的事情，普佛教說色心不二 . . . 故色心不二是物質與精神是同一體. (Wuguang 1991, p. 12)

Here, Wuguang states that the entire history of human intellectual inquiry has been polarized between the materialist and idealist positions and asserts that the correct paradigm entails a dual-aspect monism. Thus, his diagnosis of and prescribed remedy for widespread human misunderstanding are the same as Inoue’s.

In addition to the similarities between Inoue and Wuguang’s rejection of materialism and idealism in favor of dual-aspect monism, both concluded that the neither material nor mental substratum underlying all phenomena consists of energy. This energetic monism, referred to as energeticism weili yilun/weili lun 唯力一論/唯力論 (“energy-only monism”), is an ontology that was popular in European and East Asian intellectual circles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Energeticism is most often associated with the German chemist, Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932; 1919 Nobel Prize for Chemistry). Energeticism is an energy-based monism that presents energy as a “veritable ontological being” (Meyerson 1991, p. 401). According to energeticism, phenomenal diversity—including material and mental characteristics—is nothing more than the manifestation of energetic fluctuations and exchanges (Copleston 1986, p. 285). Although now largely forgotten, energeticism was an influential idea in its heyday. It influenced the automobile pioneer Henry Ford (1863–1947), the Scientific Management of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), and even the work of Albert Einstein (1879–1955) (Spittler 2010, p. 44). It was also popular within Russian—and later Soviet—circles, so much so that Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) dedicated large sections of his writings in order to denounce it (Stokes 1995, pp. 171–72).

Energeticism was also popular in Meiji intellectual circles. The Japanese chemist famous for discovering the flavor umami うま味, Ikeda Kikunae 池田菊苗 (1846–1936), reinterpreted the line from the Heart Sūtra that states, “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form” in energetic terms by rendering it, “Universe is energy, energy is universe,’ and that means energetic monism” (Kikuchi 2005, p. 111). Ikeda studied with Ostwald in Germany after hearing of his energetic theories in Japan. His energetic reinterpretation of Buddhism was based on what he saw as a consistency between the energetic substratum and Mahāyāna Buddhist ontology that I will now explain (Kikuchi 2005, pp. 101–13).

Identifying a particular substratum of the universe as a basis for a dual-aspect monism is particularly challenging from a Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective. This difficulty is born out of Mahāyāna understandings of impermanence (Skt. anitya) and emptiness (śūnyatā) that present all phenomena as being devoid of a permanent self-existence. Simply stated, there is no essential thing that constitutes a phenomena’s fundamental core, as its present existence is nothing but a composite of interdependent, ephemeral causes and conditions (nidāna). This makes substance-based ontologies —such as materialism and idealism or even dualism—problematic from a Mahāyāna standpoint (Bhatt and Mehrotra 2000, p. 1). Energy, which is devoid of any permanent form and is always in a state of flux, was believed by Ikeda to sidestep the issues of impermanence and emptiness.
Inoue agreed, as evidenced by his use of extensive use of energeticism to harmonize Buddhism with science (Goto-Jones 2005, p. 47; Goto-Jones 2008, p. 32; Piovesana 2013, p. 34; Godart 2008, p. 86; Yamazaki and Sumie 1974, p. 46). Underlying the different forms of phenomena, he asserted that behind their material and mental characteristics is a substratum that was composed of energy:

Matter and mind are phenomena. Suchness is the essence. Energy [力] develops out of the Suchness of matter and mind. [. . .] With the energy possessed by its essence, Suchness evolves freely, independently, and naturally, and through natural selection discloses the two realms of matter and mind, giving birth to the myriad of phenomena and their transformations. (Kōda 2014, p. 107)

In order to claim that Buddhism was not only harmonious with but also superior to science, Inoue additionally equated energy with the tathātā to demonstrate that science was only now discovering something that Buddhists had known for millennia (Kōda 2014, p. 107).

Wuguang also embraced energeticism and taught that the underlying substratum consists of energy. His terminology differed somewhat in the fact that he never mentioned energeticism by name and referred to energy as luminosity 光 (Chn. guang, Jpn. hikari)—the second character of his name, Wuguang—rather than the term “force” 力 (Chn. li, Jpn. chikara), as his predecessors had done, and employed the term “force” to explain the metaphysical ramifications of his energetic ontology. Despite these minor terminological difference, guang functioned in the same way for Wuguang as force had for earlier Buddhist modernists and energy did for the energeticists. We can see this when comparing two passages, one written by Ostwald and the other by Wuguang, in light of that from Inoue above:

When, for instance, we say that we feel a material thing, as we put our hand upon a book or a desk, it is really the experience of some changed form of our organism which we feel, and which is due to the manifestation of the energy induced by the grasp of the hand. (Hibben 1903, p. 322)

The original nature of Mahāvairocana Tathāgata is guang. This was said in antiquity when religion began to advance. Later, sciences concerning change have developed and [obtained] this knowledge—but [science] has lost the original principle. Every tiny atom shines upon inspection, each particle has energy—it has electricity. If your hand physically comes into contact with something, electricity is emitted—any sort of physical contact produces electricity. There is no copulation that does not emit guang.

大日如來本性實是光, 初期的進步精華宗教學說, 以後的变化科學發達也知道, 但迷失原則。微細的原子, 每個檢照起來每粒都有光有電, 手碰便發出電, 有接觸才有電, 沒有交配便不發出光。 (Wuguang 1999b)

Here, Wuguang tells us in no uncertain terms that he believed that the substratum of the universe is composed of guang. This is articulated in terms of Shingon cosmotheism. Mahāvairocana is the core deity of Shingon Buddhism. He is believed to be the totality of the entire universe itself and the true identity of all its inhabitants. Thus, the Shingon universe is a cosmotheistic one composed of Mahāvairocana and inhabited by his countless manifestations (Rambelli 2013, p. xvii). Wuguang held this cosmotheistic view of Mahāvairocana (see next section). As Inoue had already asserted that tathātā is composed of energy and Mahāvairocana is considered tathātā, their ontologies are consistent with one another. The fact that Wuguang’s guang 光 referred to the term “force” 力 Inoue and others had used to denote the energy of energeticism is further demonstrated by the similarity between Ostwald’s statement and the latter half of the above passage written by Wuguang. The parallel ways Ostwald and Wuguang respectively used energy and guang to explain that the physical sensa-
tion of a hand coming into contact with another body makes it all but undeniable that Wuguang had read Ostwald's words in some form or another.

Like Ikeda and Inoue, Wuguang saw energeticism as a way to bridge science and Buddhism due to the fact that it is reconcilable with Mahāyāna notions of emptiness. This is revealed in his commentary to Sengzhao’s Zhaolun. Sengzhao was a student of the renowned translator and exegete Kumārajīva and a student of Daoism before turning to Buddhism. He applied Daoist ontological concepts related to “being” you 有 and “non-being” wu 無 to explain Buddhist perceptions of form and emptiness in Chinese terms. When analyzing this Buddhist-Daoist interpretation as found in the Zhaolun, Wuguang explains that:

“Being is not true being”. ‘Not true being’ assumes form once it has been mysteriously arranged and organized, this is why it can be called ‘mysterious being.’ Take for example a television and electromagnetic waves. When the television has yet to be turned on it does not receive a signal. Once turned on, it receives a signal, as [the electromagnetic waves] have been arranged. This is therefore called ‘mysterious.’ Electric waves are formed by the vibrations of electrons, if a television’s signal is not correctly calibrated then it will display a blurry, snowy picture since the electric particles within it are scattered. If the [television’s] frequency is tuned to that of the particles, the picture projected will be very clear. Originally non-being [coalesces] into the image of being but being will also become non-being because it is just the transmission of mysterious being.

“不真空”... because within true emptiness there is raw material, it is tiny and cannot be seen, like electrons, atoms, molecules... it is impossible to see. Its ‘being’ is nothing more than a light-wave ‘being’ rises out of ‘emptiness’, ‘emptiness’ becomes ‘mysterious being’, ‘being’ will once again revert to ‘emptiness.’ It comes and goes within the three realms like an unending circle.

Here, Wuguang demonstrates his energetic explanation of emptiness by invoking the Mahāyāna doctrine “true emptiness is mysterious being” zhenkong miaoyou 真空妙有 that asserts “true emptiness is mysteriously existing: truly empty, or immaterial, yet transcendentally existing” (Chung 2012, p. 298). Wuguang identified the mysterious existence/being as energy.

4.2. Part 3.B: The Dao of Electric Mahāvairocana

Wuguang’s energeticism had a final essential ingredient—Daoist cosmology. His assertion that the substratum of the universe is composed of energy was predicated upon a marriage that he performed between Shingon cosmotheistic notions of Mahāvairocana and Daoist conceptions of the Dao 道. Notwithstanding the Dao’s ineffable nature, in Daoist cosmology, it has a palpable ontological function similar to that of Mahāvairocana. In the words of Thomas Michael, “Ultimately, of course, everything is the Dao... The imposition of borders on phenomenal reality is essentially the imposition of borders on the Dao itself, insofar as phenomenal reality is one
primary field of the being of the Dao” (Michael 2005, p. 71). The fact that both the Dao and Mahāvairocana are portrayed as the embodiments of the universe undoubtedly inspired Wuguang to pen the following:

Mahāvairocana is the Dao, the Dao is the principle behind the production of all phenomena, [thus] certainly all phenomena are the Dao’s body.

這毘盧即是道，道即是創造萬物的原理當然萬物即是道體. (Wuguang 2014a, p. 176)

These words unequivocally equate Mahāvairocana and the Dao. They also reveal that Wuguang equated them based on the similar ontological role each played as the totality of the universe as explained above.

There are more profound qualities Mahāvairocana and the Dao share that Wuguang based this equation on.

While the very first line of the Daodejing 道德經 refuses to define the Dao, ontologically, Wuguang perceived it in monistic terms as being singularly composed of a substance referred to as qi 氣 (Jpn. ki). As the Dao is the totality of the universe and is composed entirely of a single energetic substance, Wuguang interpreted Daoist qi-based ontology in light of modern notions of energy. This conflation directly relates to Wuguang’s interpretation of Mahāvairocana’s energetic composition. Based on the name Mahāvairocana—which is formed from the Sanskrit words mahā meaning “great” and vairocana meaning “illuminator”—Wuguang believed that both Daoist and Shingon cosmologies were energy-based. We can see this by comparing the line from the lengthier passage quoted above that reads, “The original nature of Mahāvairocana Tathāgata is guang,” with another he wrote elsewhere about the Dao:

宇宙全體乃光為根源，光即道也. (Wuguang 1988)

Here, Wuguang says that the Dao is the origin of the universe and synonymous with guang—claims we already saw him make about Mahāvairocana. This tells us that, from Wuguang’s ontological vantage point, the Dao and Mahāvairocana are not only thematically similar, but their elemental compositions are fundamentally identical. That composition, of course, was singularly composed of energy.

Wuguang is not the only—or even the first or last—intellectual figure to interpret qi in scientific terms. This is, in fact, a very popular interpretation among scientifically oriented scholars and practitioners (Kohn 2011, p. 1; Liu 2001). In the waning years of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), equating qi with electricity was used to fashion a scientifically sound Buddhist worldview (Hammerstrom 2014, p. 186; Pacey 2014, p. 110; Wright 1994; Wright 2000). Thus, just as energeticism had been used by Inoue Enryō to harmonize Buddhist ontology and science, Chinese Buddhist modernists had already used qi to do the same thing.

5. Part 4: Energetic Metaphysics

Wuguang utilized his energetic Buddhist ontology to rationalize Chinese practices related to ancestor veneration, spirit mediumship, and demonic possession. Influential Buddhist modernists in Japan, China, and Taiwan had consistently criticized these practices. It cannot be a coincidence that these are the same practices that Wuguang attempted to explain.

Wuguang’s scientific explanation of these “superstitious” practices was based on his energetic ontology, Buddhist notions of karma, and Chinese metaphysics. Since he believed that everything is composed of energy, he likened karma and “the power of consciousness”—which he referred to by the term “force” 力 that earlier Buddhist modernists had used for “energy”—to energetic “waves” bo 波. Consistent with his statement that the mind can control matter, he taught that religious rituals—and even
mundane cognition—produce thought-waves nianbo 念波 and karma-waves yebo 業波. Wholesome thoughts produce wholesome waves, while unwholesome thoughts produce unwholesome waves. These wholesome or unwholesome qualities manifest as each wave’s wavelength bochang 波長.

Wuguang applied this energetic interpretation of karma to explain the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination yuánqí lún 緣起論 (Skt. pratiyāsamsūtādā). He taught that these waves are the primary causes zhuyin 主因 (hetu) that give rise to conditions yuán 緣 (pratyaya) that cyclically produce and shape phenomenal reality:

The karmic force of primary causes is like a wavelength from a broadcasting station. It causes the realm of the living and realm of the dead to intermingle without disorder, becoming the impetus for rebirth, and one can see the positive and negative elements that it absorbs.

佛主張不二法門的, 不是二元論。要注意！佛教不是靈魂論, 是業力緣起論. (Wuguang 2014b, vol. 1, p. 45)

Buddhism advocates the Dharma-gate of non-duality, not dualism. Pay attention! Buddhism is not spiritism; it is the ideology of karmic-force and dependent origination.

In addition to energetically explaining dependent origination, we see Wuguang asserting that these waves are the agents of karmic repercussions, rebirth, and intermingling between the realm of the living and of the dead. The exact kinds of intermingling that he is talking about relate to funerary practices and spirit possession—the practices that came under fire by disenchanting Buddhist modernists—which I will now explain.

A: Spirit Communication

By the 19th century, the primary communal role of an East Asian Buddhist monk was to perform rituals on behalf of the deceased. This was accomplished by transferring the karmic merit gained by ritual performance and scriptural recitation to the laity as well as conducting funerary rites. These rites are intertwined with native practices related to ancestor veneration due to the fact that both aim to ensure that the dead have a positive afterlife. Disenchanted Buddhist modernists attacked these practices due to the superstitious quality of “transference” and inclusion of non-Buddhist elements. This trend manifested itself in Taiwan during campaigns aimed at abolishing the Ullambana (Wang 2014, pp. 238–39). Rites related to spirit mediumship and demonic possession were not only decentralized but also subject to governmental illegalization and Buddhist clerical condemnation (Katz 2013; Josephson 2012, pp. 182–201).

Wuguang did not accept the distinction disenchanting Buddhist modernists had made between Buddhist funerary rites and Chinese ancestor veneration. He also rejected the decentralization of these practices and explained that they can cause the dead to visibly materialize. This materialization is accomplished through ritual performance and thought regulation. By tuning one’s thoughts to the same frequency of the deceased’s, one is able to communicate and even physically summon them:

To evoke the presence of a dead person and interact with it, one just needs to recall and visualize his [former] body and situation, this is the best method to make the world of the living and dead meet. Thus, recalling his living form will lure the dead to tend to the living. Similar to how pricking one’s body in a certain place with a needle causes his attention to focus on that spot, the living person, by focusing the force of his visualization, can stimulate the force of the deceased’s consciousness and thus solicit a miraculous
response, and interact with the spirit... this thought-wave will then match the wavelength of the deceased’s skandha of consciousness... it is thus easy for the imagined image of the deceased to materialize. The length of time depends on the [living practitioner’s] forces of concentration... Therefore, helping ghosts to pass over to the next incarnation, casting curses, performing incantations, necromancy and exorcism all work according to this principle. Some people do not believe in the existence of the minds of spirits or deny the existence of the intermingling between the dead and the living, but they are mistaken.

令死者喚起存在與覺受，生人僅以意識觀想其亡者處身於何境，這是冥陽相會之最好辦法，亦即是憶念死者生前之容貌相狀，誘令死者的意志趨向於生者，例如將針刺激身體某部位，令其注意力集中該處一樣，生者用集中觀想力，可使亡者喚起神識集中力，其當處即可感應靈交...由此念波反應亡者的蘊識波長...即容易幻起亡者的色相幻影，其幻影之殘留時間長短，即視乎其專注力如何而定....所以超度亡靈，或加持消災，咒呪降伏，均由此理則來發生效力...有人不信靈識的存在或否認冥陽的交涉關係存在乃是謬誤的. (Wuguang 1970)

If you miss your relative, you must whole heartedly think of him when he was alive and the times you had together, when you were filial to him, ceaselessly superposing your consciousness with him like water mixing with milk. If you can grasp the essence of this, you and the deceased can begin to enter a small world where your consciousnesses are living together and interacting, (this is the deep wisdom behind Buddhist practice). If you are a Chinese Buddhist, then you are able to use a beautiful memorial tablet and give him offerings, prepare nice foods and belongings from his life as offerings just like when he was alive and the two of you were together on earth.

你要是想念親人的話，你必需一心憧景着它生前與你一起時，你對它的孝順情景，不斷地與喜歡的心情相融如同水乳，果能把握到這要義，你就能與亡者開始進入天涯咫尺之心靈交感生活. (此具有甚深的佛學妙理，特別在此一提)，假如你是中國的佛教徒，能用美麗的牌位來祭祀它，妥備美味適合它生前善愛的供品來供養，宛如生前一樣地在一起. (Wuguang 1970)

Here, Wuguang equates the Chinese and Buddhist practices by framing them as an aspect of “Chinese Buddhism”. He explains the mechanics of both by intermingling scientific principles regarding waves with native Chinese metaphysics and the Buddhist doctrine of the five skandhas.

The principles related to waves are referred to as “interference”. There are different forms of interference that fall into the categories of either constructive interference or destructive interference. Constructive interference occurs when one or more waves combine to create a wave whose strength—referred to as “amplitude” (Britannica Academic 2014)—is stronger than those of the original waves. This form of constructive interference is called “superposition”. This form of superposition occurs when waves are “coherent” (Allaby 2013) or “in phase” (Britannica Academic 2014) with one another, which means that they have the same amplitude—with their crests and troughs being nearly equal—and have similar frequencies. If two coherent waves cross paths, they can combine to form a wave whose amplitude is double each wave’s original one (Daintith and Rennie 2005, pp. 124–25). In the above passages, Wuguang explains that through concentration, one can tune the frequency of one’s thoughts to that of the deceased loved one’s. This in turn causes their thought-waves to superimpose. The double strength of this combined wave then enables the spirit to manipulate the ever-present energy of which the universe is composed and visibly materialize.
This energetic explanation constitutes Wuguang’s scientific elucidation of the Chinese metaphysical principle known as sympathetic resonance *ganying* 感應 that postulates categorically alike *tonglei* 同類 phenomena—regardless of spatial distance—can interact with one another. This principle is widely used to illuminate the mechanics behind the phenomenon of miraculous response *linggan* 靈感, which is the perception that a particular deity housed within an icon responds to requests for divine intervention. This belief is absolutely central to Chinese folk religion, Daoism, and even Chinese Buddhism. As Adam Chau puts it, “At the core of Chinese popular religion is the concept of magical efficacy (*ling*)[,] which is conceived as a particular deity’s miraculous response (*lingying*) to the worshiper’s request for divine assistance . . .” (Chau 2006, p. 2). This belief flavored Chinese understandings of Buddhism, intermingling with the notion of karmic retribution and superseding Indian beliefs in “the power or ‘grace’ of the buddha” to explain human-deity interactions (Sharf 2002, p. 119 and passim). According to this line of reasoning, illicit acts render one categorically unlike a deity, while one’s categorical affinity can be regained or strengthened through wholesome deeds or ritual performance. Once the categorical likeness has been established, a practitioner is then able to receive a miraculous response. In the above passages, Wuguang applies this to ancestral spirits and explains miraculous response in terms of energetic waves and superpositioning, as attested to by his stating that the rituals and meditations are how one is able to “solicit a miraculous response.” He further explains this in Buddhist terms, asserting that what the necromancer is in fact interacting with is the wavelength of deceased’s “*skandha* of consciousness” *yunshi* 蘊識—which, throughout the text, he asserts is what a deceased’s spirit actually is.

Wuguang asserts that all forms of human–spirit communication are explicable through interference/resonance when he stated that, “Helping ghosts to pass over to the next incarnation, casting curses, performing incantations, necromancy and exorcism all work according to this principle.” Thus, it is not surprising that Wuguang applied superpositioning and resonance response in the following passage to explain supernatural powers that come from hosting a spirit in one’s body, a phenomenon referred to in Chinese as *fushen* 附身:

It is not inevitable that one will be able to perceive the world of the fourth dimension through cultivation as [that ability] is a kind of other-power since perceiving the world of the fourth dimension requires hosting a spirit. The ‘fourth dimension’ refers to what will happen in the future and is not something within the mind of buddhas and bodhisattvas. For example, if a person goes to a temple to perform rituals and hears people saying that the deity enshrined within an icon has clairvoyance and clairaudience, [he may then] enviously think, “How wonderful it would be if I could hear things from far off distances”! [If he then] proceeds to supplicate, “Bodhisattva! You can perceive things from far off distances, you can also see the future. If you could enable this sight within me I would be everlastingly grateful.” [Only] if it so happens that the frequency of the spirit’s [mind] inhabiting the icon and yours are congruent or linked through karma that the spirit will then possess you. This would then cause you to have a dual personality. You will then have someone else’s eyes as your eyes will be exchanged, they are not your eyes as they have become ‘*yin* eyes,’ which people commonly refer to as ‘spirit-eyes’.

然而四次元的世界不一定是修行人才能看到的, 這是一種他力, 要鬼神附在我們的身才能看到四次元的世界, 四次元的事情是未來世間要發生的事情, 並不是佛菩薩心裡面的事情, 譬如某個人去廟裡面拜拜, 聽人講廟裡的神如千里眼能看到千里以外, 順風耳能聽到千里以外, 他就很欣賞, 想: 我能看到千里外有多好！便求, ‘菩薩！你能看到千里外的事, 未來過去也能看到, 若能使我看到, 那真是感恩不盡。恰巧鬼神附在神像的身上與你的頻率符合, 跟你有緣, 他就附到了你的身上, 附在你的身上你就成為雙重人格了。當你附了另一個人的眼睛,
你就換了眼，就不是你的眼睛，就變成了陰眼，一般人稱為靈眼。（Wuguang 2014b, vol. 4, p. 77）

Wuguang explains the mechanics of possession in terms of superpositioning/resonance. According to this passage, mediums are able to communicate with spirits due to the fact that their thought-waves are in phase with a particular spirit—which he explains in terms of congruent frequency punlü fuhe 頻率符合—thus offering a scientific explanation for Chinese beliefs concerning resonance. The supernatural capabilities that derive from hosting a spirit’s presence are shown to be the result of superpositioning, which is an example of the deity’s miraculous response. Due to the double strength of the newly formed wave—manifest as a “dual personality”—the individual is able to perform superhuman feats.

Not all forms of spiritual thought-wave superpositioning are positive and result in supernatural abilities for which one has prayed. Since the unwholesome nature of each wave’s frequency is determined by the thought that produced it, negative thoughts will render one’s thought-waves coherent with those of malevolent spirits. Due to the negative quality of these spirits, hosting one in your body would be dangerous. Wuguang uses this logic to explain spirit possession:

Evil ghosts from the Ghost Realm will possess deviant, selfish peoples’ bodies. In this world there are many people who have become mentally ill by being invaded by malicious spirits (evil spirits and malicious ghosts). Because the evil spirit entered into the human’s body, his consciousness has been changed into a double personality. This force of consciousness agitates the cranial nerves, producing hallucinations and causing the consciousness of the living host to become hazy. In fact, however, there is no god or ghost tormenting the person, it is just that the [host’s consciousness] is being mixed with the wavelength of an evil ghost, similar to the effect of a radio receiving a mixed signal. Therefore, the thoughts of our consciousness are like a radio whose [signal’s] modulation must be safeguarded.

If you happen to come across someone suffering due to being possessed by an evil ghost, do not fear. Just visualize yourself as the nirmāṇakāya of the Great Spirit [Mahāvairocana] and emit mighty waves of compassionate light to break through his dark shadow, his dark shadows will then be harmonized with yours and the sufferer will recover and return to normal. If you approach it with a hostile mentality, there will be adverse effects.

Here we see that it is only “evil people” who become possessed by evil spirits—an assertion Wuguang based on coherence/resonance. Just as coherence/resonance caused the possession to happen, it also dictates how exorcism must be performed. Since the frequency of the spirit’s thought-waves are unwholesome, “If you approach it with a hostile mentality, there will be adverse effects,” as hostility is a negative emotion and will not change the possessed person’s frequency; rather, it will only serve to further solidify the human–spirit connection. For the superpositioning to stop, the exorcist must use wholesome thoughts to combat the spirit’s unwholesome thoughts in order to ensure that they are not coherent. To do so, Wuguang tells us that one must “jam” the signal being received by emitting a more powerful one that is positive. Jamming is a form of destructive interference that entails intentionally emitting a signal to block the reception of another (Avison 1989, p. 476; Weik 2012,
p. 485). Jamming has largely been used as a means of avoiding radar detection and hindering communicative capabilities in times of war. Here, it is the exorcist who is instructed to jam the possessed’s reception in order to prevent him from receiving the signal emitted by the malevolent spirit. As this new signal is positive, after the jamming has been successfully accomplished, the exorcist’s thought-waves will cause those of the exorcised to return to normal.

6. Part 5: Radical Prediction

In addition to using science to explain the mechanics behind spirit communication and ancestor veneration, Wuguang predicted that future technological advancements would transform them. This prediction was based upon his integration of Buddhist, Daoist, and energetic ontologies.

Wuguang saw himself as living on the cusp of a global transition. He passed away during the first year of the twenty-first century and made a number of predictions about what would happen during the years to come:

We have already entered the Space Age. Advances in learning and technological developments have already led us to discover the secrets of the universe[,] such as electrons, atoms, nuclei and genes, all of which have gradually [shown] that reality and the opinions of esoteric Buddhism [and science] are consistent with one another. We will not sink back into the depths of superstitious mysticism. Sakyamuni’s true enlightenment certainly foresaw the science of the future world. Currently, the esoteric Buddhism of this mysterious world is destined to meet the wants and needs of humanity. The fast-approaching twenty-first century will [see the actualization of] the world of Zhenyan/Shingon.

Here, Wuguang proclaims that the truths of science were foreseen by Sakyamuni Buddha and are contained within the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism. This consistency led him to believe that Zhenyan/Shingon was the most appropriate religion for the modern era. During fieldwork, one of Wuguang’s earliest disciples told me that Wuguang often said that the true future Zhenyan/Shingon lies in the West, particularly Europe and America (semi-structured interview, 2014). Thus, Wuguang believed Zhenyan/Shingon would become a global religion. The form of Zhenyan/Shingon that he predicted would be practiced, however, is very unlike anything that has yet to come into existence, which I will now explain.

According to Wuguang’s energetic ontology, underlying observable phenomenal diversity is a unified mass of energy. This diversity is thus determined by the specific frequency of each karma-wave’s wavelength. Simply stated, the karmic waves we produce are broadcast throughout the universe and “tune” the energy they come in contact with based on their frequency. This tuning results in all the different things that we see, such as oranges, people, trees, and demons, etc. Thus, to turn a skyscraper into a cat merely involves “consciousness controlling matter,” by emitting a thought-wave whose specific frequency is tuned to a cat frequency. Now, let us take for example a person whose cat, Fluffy, has passed away. If the person had somehow figured out how to determine the cat’s frequency and knew how to emit a thought-wave whose frequency matched Fluffy’s, he could bring Fluffy back from the grave. Fluffy #2—according to Wuguang’s ontology—would not be a copy of Fluffy #1, he would be Fluffy #1 due to Mahayana understandings of the Buddhist doctrines of dependent origination, impermanence, and emptiness. Both Fluffy #1
and Fluffy #2 lack a permanent, unchanging core and are nothing more than a specific, wave-induced, mysteriously-arranged organization of energy. This energy is undifferentiated and homogeneous; thus, all Fluffies are the same.

Using the logic detailed here, Wuguang made a radical prediction about the future of human religiosity:

Currently, our ability to produce copies of [material] phenomena is limited to recalibrating the vibrations of a few ionized atoms. Bigger things like human bodies currently remain exceptionally difficult to copy. Nevertheless, I believe that in the near future we will invent ways to copy these kinds of [larger] masses. This will give rise to the method of ‘human bodily deconstruction’. Once that invention emerges, the world will change into a paradise devoid of the fear of birth and death. If you want to go to America or Europe, you can just wirelessly transmit your frequency. If you want to be sent to thirty seven requisites of enlightenment you can just sit in a chair, press a button, be deconstructed and be transferred there. Upon the arrival [of your frequency], your [body] will be reconstructed. So simple, you don’t even need to fear aircraft accidents. [Currently], when someone gets terminal cancer and dies, he is mourned. In the future we will record his frequency, atomically deconstruct him and send his ionized atoms out into space. The next day we could reconstruct him to invite him to a meal and then send him back after the meal. If it was like this, there would be no need to grieve. We would have no need for graveyards or sūtra recitation. This would be best . . . In the future, [this kind of] technology will develop.

At that time, there will be no more kleśas. Then, we will pass laws requiring people to retire at the age of sixty. We will then let them have fun on earth for five years. At the age of sixty-five, they will surely be deconstructed and sent into space lest the world become overpopulated. You will take your great grandparents, grandparents and elder parents to be deconstructed and send them into space as bringing them back to share a meal will be a simple matter that just requires the financial means to reconstruct them. Once a year you can invite them to eat at a restaurant, then travel with them around Taiwan and then send them back. You will no longer need to perform ancestral veneration. In the future it will be like this. That is what I say, if you even just barely open your eyes you can see that this will undoubtedly be invented.

This passage contains Wuguang’s radical re-envisioning of what life and religion will be like in the future. This paradisiacal land devoid of sickness, death, mourning,
and airports will come to be through the invention of a machine that is remarkably similar to the transporter from the *Star Trek* franchise.

As strange as this passage may appear, it is also distinctly Buddhist. At its heart is the most basic of Buddhist doctrines: the first of the Four Noble Truths that teaches that life constitutes *duḥkha* (“suffering”). Wuguang presents his transporter as a soteriological answer to four of these sufferings: aging, sickness, death, separation from what we love, and being trapped within the five *skandhas*. Deconstruction and reconstruction annul these sufferings. As Buddhism is the antidote to suffering, Wuguang’s transporter renders Buddhist practice obsolete.

7. Part 6: Mistaken Identity

The use of energeticism to fashion an ontology that transcended the materialist/idealist binary while harmonizing science and Buddhism was also popular in China and perhaps even Tibet. However, scholars of modern Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism have consistently mistaken references to energeticism as propagated by Ostwald for references to Einstein’s special relativity, as expressed in the equation $E = mc^2$.

Taixu, the influential Chinese Buddhist reformer who lived during the late Qing dynasty and early Republican period, mentions energeticism by name and even expresses fondness for it (Taixu 1923). Taixu’s usage of the term “energy only” 惟力 in this instance is noted by Erik Hammerstrom, who states that the fondness Taixu expressed for this theory—which Hammerstrom misidentified as Einstein’s special relativity (Hammerstrom 2015, pp. 69–71)—was revoked a few years later in an article Taixu wrote under the pseudonym Meian 明盦 (Taixu 1927). This reading is problematic for a number of reasons. First, Taixu’s earlier article—that mentions energeticism by name—does not mention Einstein or relativity. Second, Taixu’s later article on Einstein does not mention energeticism. I conclude that this is because Taixu was in fact referring to two entirely different theories, one propagated by Ostwald and the other by Einstein. My conclusion finds strength in an earlier article written by Taixu—not quoted by Hammerstrom—that references energeticism by name alongside other ontological positions without referencing Einstein’s relativity (Taixu 1920). In light of all of this, it is impossible not to conclude that when Taixu referenced “energy only,” he was in fact not referring to Einstein’s special relativity but to energeticism. Additionally, special relativity shows that matter and energy are *interchangeable* rather than asserting that matter is *reducible to* energy—as implied in the name “energy only” that was first used in Japan. Hammerstrom’s confusing these two is understandable with the voluminous nature of the Chinese sources he was working with, which prevented him from sufficiently tracing every single Western idea that the Chinese Buddhists were utilizing through their Japanese provenance.

Hammerstrom may not be the only scholar to mistake energeticism for special relativity. In Thupten Jinpa’s work on the Tibetan intellectual and modernist Gendün Chöphel (1903–1951), he speculates that Gendün Chöphel was utilizing special relativity to harmonize Mahāyāna conceptions of *śūnyatā* with science (Thupten 2004, p. 73). As this was exactly how energeticism functioned in earlier Japanese Buddhist circles and in Wuguang’s writings, it is probable that this was the theory Gendün Chöphel was using. Donald S. Lopez Jr. may have also mistaken energeticism for special relativity in reference to Tibetan Buddhist engagements with modernity (Lopez 2008, pp. 119–20). I speculate that the reason Buddhist Studies scholars so often overlook energeticism is due to the fame of special relativity and a number of widespread misunderstandings regarding the history of science. Energeticism is popularly believed to be antithetical to the existence of atoms and was therefore left dead in the water after the existence of atoms was proven. However, despite the fact that Ostwald passionately denied the existence of atoms for much of his career, after they were successfully proven to exist, Ostwald himself asserted that an energetic universe could
still be an atomic one (Holton and Holton 1993, p. 82). It is perhaps these forgotten facets of scientific history that led Buddhist Studies scholars to consistently confuse energeticism for special relativity.

8. Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored a circular case where Japan’s dual role of recipient and disseminator gave rise to a new Buddhist movement that originated in Taiwan and continues to spread across the globe. Japan was the recipient when Kūkai imported the esoteric Dharma that he had learned in China and was the agent of change when influencing Buddhist modernists in China and Taiwan as well as being the font of transmission from which Neo-Zhenyan sprang. In fact, Wuguang likened himself to Kūkai and believed that his own travels and studies in Japan directly mirrored Kūkai’s sojourn in China (semi-structured interview, May 2014). It must be noted that if Japan had not been the recipient of Chinese Buddhism via Kūkai, Japan would not have become the agent in the case of Neo-Zhenyan.

The prominence that energeticism played in Wuguang’s ontology and theology further demonstrate the cyclical nature of Sino-Japanese Buddhist interaction that Neo-Zhenyan represents. As Wuguang was appropriating what he saw as a middle-period Japanese appropriation of Chinese Buddhism—namely Tang-dynasty Zhenyan—he additionally incorporated this energetic element that was central to Japanese Buddhist modernist discourse.

While the earlier attempts to resurrect Zhenyan that occurred during late Qing dynasty (1664–1912) and early Republican period (1912–1949) through the course of the Tantric Revival in China mijiao fuxing yundong 密教復興運動 have been thoroughly discussed by scholars (Bianchi 2004; Luo 2008; Schicketanz 2014), its living descendant analyzed in this article, Neo-Zhenyan, remains an understudied phenomenon. As this is the first article to explore how the popularity of energeticism in early Japanese Buddhist discourse influenced modern Chinese Buddhism and shaped the modernist ontology of the MSBL and due to the fact that scholars of Chinese Buddhism and possibly Tibetan Buddhism have overlooked the role that energeticism played in modernist Buddhist discourse during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there is a great deal of room for further investigation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Primary Sources

Taixu. 1920. Ping Zhuqian Zhi Junde Xuwu Zhuyi 評朱謙之君的虛無主義 [Assessment of Zhu Qian the King of Nihilism]. Haichaoyin 海潮音 1:2.


Secondary Sources


