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Seeking the Dharma on the World Stage: Lü Bicheng and the Revival of Buddhism in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This article focuses on the Chinese woman writer Lü Bicheng 呂碧城 (1883–1943) and her relationship with the worldwide movement for the revival of Buddhism in the early twentieth century. Lü rose up in the context of the “new woman” ideal and transcended that ideal as she rejected the dualistic thinking that was prevalent in her time. She embraced both reason and religion, as well as both modern and traditional ideas. Her story demonstrates that religion and the creation of the “new woman” were not mutually exclusive in her life. In the 1920s and 1930s, Lü traveled extensively in the United States and Europe and eventually converted to Buddhism after she witnessed its popularity in the West. During this period, she successfully created a social space for herself by utilizing Buddhist sources to engage in intellectual dialogues on paranormal phenomena and animal protection. At the same time, she carved out a place for Buddhism in the discourse on the convergence and divergence of science and religion after the First World War (1914–1918).

Keywords: Lü Bicheng; Buddhist revival; British psychical research; new woman; religion

1. Introduction

During the worldwide movement for the revival of Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century, Lü Bicheng 呂碧城 (1883–1943) played a significant role as a cross-cultural mediator, establishing a link between European and Chinese intellectual discourses. She reported to readers in China on Buddhist activities taking place in Western Europe, utilized Buddhist sources to advocate for vegetarianism and animal protection amongst Western audiences and, in her later years, meticulously translated Buddhist scriptures from Chinese into English. Her dedication to the Buddhist movement demonstrates the significance of Buddhism to a Chinese intellectual who was keenly aware of the global situation and was willing to engage in world affairs.

In recent scholarship, there has been increasing interest in Lü Bicheng and her religious beliefs. Xun Liu mentions Lü’s practice of female alchemy (*nüdan* 女丹) with the famous Daoist master Chen Yingning 陳撝寧 (1880–1969).¹ Francesca Tarocco focuses on Lü’s Buddhist beliefs, maintaining that the latter neither converted to nor studied Buddhism until much later in life.² Fan Chunwu and Poon Shuk-wah discuss Lü’s advocacy of vegetarianism and animal protection.³ In addition to examining her highly regarded literary achievements, Grace S. Fong, Shengqing Wu, and Yang Jinyu all notice

¹ See (Liu 2009, pp. 59–67).

² See (Tarocco 2007, pp. 63–66).

³ (Fan 2010; Poon 2015).

the influence of religion on Lü's life.⁴ Although the above scholars have paid attention to Lü's abiding interest in religion, her religious activities, especially her connection with Buddhism, merit further investigation.

Born and raised in a gentry family from Anhui 安徽, Lü Bicheng received traditional training in Chinese painting and poetry and showed exceptional talent in composing poems. At the age of thirteen, she lost her father. Then, her two brothers passed away untimely. Following the loss of her father and brothers, Lü's mother and sisters were constantly bullied by their relatives and eventually disinherited by them. Worse still, the man Lü was engaged to abandoned her after all the above tragical events.⁵

The hardship Lü Bicheng experienced strengthened her character at a young age and motivated her to seek independence and fight for women's liberation. In 1896, she went to Tanggu 塘沽 (near Tianjin 天津) to visit her maternal uncle Yan Langxuan 嚴朗軒. During this trip, she encountered the "New Learning" (*xinxue* 新學) and discovered the possibility of finding a job to support herself in the outside world. After turning twenty-one, she moved to Tianjin, where she met Ying Lianzhi 英斂之 (1867–1926), the chief editor of the *Dagong bao* 大公報. Ying developed a romantic relationship with Lü and helped her become one of the earliest female journalists in China.⁶

While working at the *Dagong bao*, Lü Bicheng published a series of articles that advocated for women's rights. These articles include "Xing nüquan guiyou jianren zhi zhi" 興女權貴有堅忍之志 (Fortitude Is Important in Advocating for Women's Rights), "Lun tichang nüxue zhi zongzhi" 論提倡女學之宗旨 (On the Purpose of Promoting Women's Education), "Jinggao Zhongguo nü tongbao" 敬告中國女同胞 (Speaking Respectfully to Chinese Women), and "Xing nüxue yi" 興女學議 (A Discussion of Promoting Women's Education).⁷ She utilized the newspaper as a platform to raise funds for women's education and collaborated with renowned intellectuals, such as Liang Shiyi 梁士詒 (1869–1933), Fu Zengxiang 傅增湘 (1872–1950), Fang Yaoyu 方藥雨 (1869–1954), and Xu Xingshu 徐星叔, to create schools for women. As a result of their collective effort, Beiyang Women's Public School (*Beiyang nüzi gongxue* 北洋女子公學) was founded in October 1904.⁸ Fu Zengxiang served as the supervisor of the school, and Lü was appointed Dean of Studies.

Lü Bicheng along with her contemporary male elites understood the pivotal role of education in changing Chinese women's social status and increasing China's strength. For instance, in 1897, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) wrote an essay entitled "Lun nüxue" 論女學 (On Women's Education), in which he ascribed the weakness of the Chinese nation to women's lack of education.⁹ According to him, not having the opportunity to receive education makes it impossible for women to have jobs. He maintained that education is the only way to ensure that women can support themselves and contribute to the development of the nation. Reformers, such as Liang Qichao and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), put Chinese women in this trajectory of enlightenment and encouraged them to renounce traditional religious practices, such as worshiping gods and burning paper money. These male reformers interpreted women's religiosity through the lens of modernity, claiming that traditional women were "unproductive," "superstitious," "ignorant," and thus responsible for China's "backwardness."¹⁰ These reformers also contrasted Chinese women's religious practices with science, characterizing the former as *mixin* 迷信 (superstition) in opposition to reason. After this view became prevalent among Chinese

⁴ See (Fong 2004, 2008, 2015; Wu 2004; Yang 2013). As Wu points out, "Lü's enthusiastic study of various beliefs may have helped expand her emancipatory vision and imaginative vitality, liberating them from certain limitations of time and space." (Wu 2004, pp. 41–42).

⁵ (Fong 2004, pp. 14–15).

⁶ During the same period, Lü's literary talent also appealed to politicians such as Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916) and Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥 (1846–1931) who hired her as a secretary and supported her activities in the movement for women's liberation.

⁷ These articles were all published in 1904.

⁸ This school later became Beiyang Women's Normal School (*Beiyang nüshifan xuetaang* 北洋女師範學堂).

⁹ Liang Qichao, "Lun nüxue," in (Liu et al. 2013, pp. 189–203).

¹⁰ See (Kang 2015, p. 503). In China, the question of women's religiosity was subject to male constructions. See (Grant 2008a).

reformers, according to Prasenjit Duara, a “much more absolutizing distinction between the scientific and the primitive” was created.¹¹

While the above male elites established boundaries between enlightenment and superstition, between science and religion, and between modern and traditional, Lü Bicheng combined these seemingly discrete categories and transcended the dichotomous view adopted by her male contemporaries. On the one hand, she composed traditional poetry and practiced female alchemy with Chen Yingning.¹² On the other hand, she pursued Western learning and advocated for women’s liberation. She criticized people’s overindulgence in scientific materialism and ascribed the regression of human beings’ moral condition to a lack of spiritual belief. In her opinion, religious beliefs are conducive to society because they can regulate human beings’ behavior and contribute to moral development.¹³ Her activities indicate that religion and the creation of the “new woman” could be mutually inclusive in her time.

Lü Bicheng studied English with Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853–1921) around 1909. Yan translated William Stanley Jevons’s (1835–1882) *Primer of Logic* (*Mingxue qianshuo* 名學淺說) into Chinese and used it as a textbook to teach Lü. In the course of their interaction, Lü asked Yan to help her go abroad, but the trip did not take place until 1920 when she set out for the United States for the first time.¹⁴ From 1921 to 1922, she studied fine arts and English at Columbia University (see Figure 1). During that time, Columbia offered no course on Asian religions. It was not until 1926 that Professor Horace L. Friess created a course entitled, “A Study of Religions,” which included Asian religions in the curriculum.¹⁵ After her study at Columbia, Lü returned to China and stayed there for four years. She then started her second journey to America and Europe in 1926. During her stay in Europe, she traveled widely and familiarized herself with European culture and history. Her overseas trips allowed her to examine Western civilizations closely and to reflect on Chinese culture while outside China.¹⁶ It was during this period that she decided to convert to Buddhism. Her conversion to Buddhism raises the following questions: Why did she choose to adopt Buddhist beliefs in the West? What was the significance of Buddhism to her? In order to answer these questions, this article examines particular aspects of the social milieu that influenced Lü’s thinking and personal reasons that contributed to her ultimate conversion to Buddhism. By situating Lü’s life within the broader historical context of the collision between Western and Eastern cultures, I argue that her motivation for participating in the Buddhist movement originated in her abiding interest in the afterlife, which was inspired by European psychical research. She did not find answers to her questions about the afterlife in psychical research. Instead, she discovered Buddhism, which offered her a religious perspective on human life and a body of knowledge to intervene in European intellectual discourses.

¹¹ (Duara 1991, p. 76). On the formation and evolution of the notion of “*mixin*” in the modern period, see (Huang 2013, pp. 185–200). On how “*zongjiao*” 宗教 was accepted as a modern concept corresponding to the Western term “religion” in the same period, see (Chen 2002).

¹² Chen taught Lü methods specifically designed for women practitioners to improve their health. Nevertheless, Lü soon lost her interest in Daoism probably because female alchemy was not intellectually stimulating to her.

¹³ Lü Bicheng, “Yu zhi zongjiao guan” 予之宗教觀 (My Views on Religion), in (Lü 2007, pp. 478–82).

¹⁴ See (Fong 2004, p. 32).

¹⁵ See (Friess 1957, p. 151).

¹⁶ Lü’s travel experiences were recorded in *Oumei manyou lu* 歐美漫遊錄 (*Travel Notes in Europe and the United States*), see (Lü 1929).



Figure 1. Lü Bicheng at Columbia University, New York. Source: *Lü Bicheng ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1929).

2. Lü Bicheng and British Psychical Research

Lü Bicheng lived in Europe from 1927 to 1933, during which period she witnessed the rise of European psychical research and showed interest in it. In an article entitled, “Xuanxue yu kexue jiang goutong hu” 玄學與科學將溝通乎 (Will Metaphysics and Science Converge), she mentioned her communication with the Society for Psychical Research in London:

The Society for Psychical Research in London was created in 1882. Its current address is 31 Tavistock Square, London. I have exchanged letters with them. The society is in the charge of renowned scholars and professors, who have produced numerous publications. They have invited me to join them. But I am about to convert to Buddhism and hope to

achieve enlightenment. I intend to abide by Buddhist precepts and am not interested in investigating mysterious things. For these reasons, I have stopped contacting the society. But I am not against it either. In Europe, previous famous psychic mediums, such as M. Home and Eusapia Paladino, have achieved remarkable success. Although Browning mocked them in a poem entitled “Mr. Sludge the Medium,” no fraudulent behavior has been found. Last winter, the American psychic Dr. Grandon and his wife visited London, which attracted great attention. On December 6, the *Daily Mail* in Paris published an editorial, demanding that Dr. Grandon perform his experiment in public. People from the fields of science and psychical research gathered and paid close attention [to Dr. Grandon] in order to uncover the truth. They considered this to be the most relevant to the evolution of the world and people’s view of life.¹⁷

倫敦自一八八二年即有靈學會 (The Society for Psychical Research) 之設，現時地址為31, Tavistock Square London. 記者曾與一度通函，知其中主持者，多學界巨子、大學教授等，刊品甚豐。承其邀請入會，惟記者旋皈佛法，只欲明心見性，勉持戒律，其他詭異之事則不欲研究，故未與該會續有接洽，然亦無反對之意見也。歐洲已往著名靈學家如胡穆 (M. Home)、巴拉丁諾 (Eusapia Paladino) 等，其成績昭彰在人耳目，雖白朗寧氏 (Browning) 作有著名之詩 Mr. Sludge the Medium 以嘲之，然終未發覺其有任何詐偽之行為。去冬美國靈學家格蘭頓博士 (Dr. Grandon) 夫婦遊倫敦，頗引起社會注意，十二月六日巴黎之 *Daily Mail* 報曾著社論，要求格氏公開實驗，邀集科學及靈學兩界人士，為嚴密之接洽，俾明真相。謂此事與世界進化及人生觀，關係最重。

Seen from this passage, Lü’s ultimate conversion to Buddhism was a development in her life in parallel with her exposure to British psychical research.¹⁸ The Society for Psychical Research was founded in London in 1882 by a group of famous philosophers and scientists, such as Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), William Fletcher Barrett (1844–1925), Edmund Gurney (1847–1888), Frederic William Henry Myers (1843–1901), and others who had connection to Trinity College, Cambridge. The tenet of this society was “to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable in terms of any generally recognized hypotheses.”¹⁹ Although the research was initiated in the light of scientific spirit, psychic mediumship, one of the most important topics in psychical research, was often considered nothing but deceitful trickery. For example, Eusapia Paladino (1854–1918), a famous Italian psychic medium mentioned by Lü, was investigated due to the artful means she used to deceive her audiences. But Lü never doubted Paladino or other psychic mediums because, according to her, although human beings do not have the capability to explain paranormal phenomena, there must be some inexplicable truths behind them.

In London, Lü Bicheng documented paranormal phenomena she witnessed or heard about and sent her records to the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. Meanwhile, she wrote stories for the British newspaper *The Chronicle*, which had many discussions on the issue of the soul. She also shared these strange stories with readers in China when she wrote for Chinese newspapers. For example, in “Gui da dianhua” 鬼打電話 (A Ghost Makes a Phone Call), written in Chinese, she restated a news story from the British newspaper the *Daily Mail* about how a deceased woman calls her husband to inform him of her death.²⁰ In another piece entitled “Yinguo” 因果 (Cause and Effect), Lü showed how karmic retribution can affect people’s lives.²¹ In her book, *An Outline of Karma*, Lü wrote:

¹⁷ (Lü 2007, pp. 294–95). This article was published in the *Shanghai shibao* 上海時報 (*Shanghai Times*) in December 1930. I translated this paragraph from Chinese into English.

¹⁸ When she was young, Lü exhibited her interest in Buddhism and incorporated Buddhist ideas into poetic writing. Later, her exposure to psychical research strengthened her Buddhist beliefs.

¹⁹ See (Haynes 1982, p. xiii.)

²⁰ Lü Bicheng, “Gui da dianhua,” (Lü 2007, p. 444).

²¹ Lü Bicheng, “Yinguo,” (Lü 2007, pp. 444–45).

The spirit of any sentient being is undying; only the physical form changes. Thus the universe consists of two parts—one corporeal, the other spiritual. How unwise and risky then for us to struggle merely for outward possessions, without a thought of the conditions after death. Millions of persons die suddenly from accidents, heart failure, plague and other causes. Like all others, I, too, shall have, one day, to leave my physical body, WHEN, WHERE, HOW, I don't know. Is it not worthwhile to give a thought to this weighty problem?²²

What happens to people after their bodies decay and disappear? This question Lü asked in the above passage was raised by many people in her time. After the First World War (1914–1918), scientific materialism encountered a crisis. People started to consider the destructive power of the war and showed interest in spiritualism worldwide.²³ Intellectuals conducted psychical research in an attempt to discover the truth about the afterlife. This offered Lü a window to explore the spiritual world. However, she soon realized that psychical research was too controversial and that she needed a scientifically compatible system.

3. Lü Bicheng and the Buddhist Revival

In the late 1920s, Master Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) and his contributions to the worldwide movement for the revival of Buddhism helped Lü Bicheng recognize the value of Buddhism in the modern world and see Buddhism as having the necessary intellectual sophistication to address her question about the afterlife. Taixu was one of the most influential Buddhist reformers in early twentieth-century China. As Vincent Goossaert points out, unlike other contemporary Buddhist leaders, such as Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911) and Xuyun 虛雲 (1840?–1959), Taixu gained popularity among lay intellectuals. He raised the idea of “Humanistic Buddhism” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教), which separated Buddhism from views of religion that emphasized the existence of ghosts and deities. His approach focused on studying Buddhist texts and solving social problems, thus appealing to intellectual believers.²⁴

Taixu's promotion of “Humanistic Buddhism” was part of his agenda to strengthen the Chinese Buddhist community. From the late Qing (1644–1911) to the Republican period (1912–1949), many Buddhist temples were destroyed or repurposed in the process of secularization. The government confiscated temples to build schools (*miaochan xingxue* 廟產興學) where Western science and technology could be taught. Facing such a crisis, Buddhist leaders launched a series of reforms to prevent Buddhist institutions from being annihilated on account of the governmental agenda. These reforms included building Buddhist schools and establishing Buddhist unions, such as the General Buddhist Association of China (*Zhonghua fojiao zonghui* 中華佛教總會) and the Chinese Buddhist Association (*Zhongguo fojiao hui* 中國佛教會).²⁵

Taixu contributed to this larger campaign against secular political power in multiple ways. First, in order to make Buddhism compatible with modern scientific thinking, he launched a journal entitled *Haichao yin* 海潮音 (*The Sound of the Sea Tide*) in 1920 (see Figure 2). He and his followers used Buddhist ideas to explain scientific phenomena and vice versa.²⁶ Secondly, in order to create an alliance between Buddhists in China and those in other parts of the world, Taixu organized the first conference for the World Buddhist Federation (*Shijie fojiao lianhe hui* 世界佛教聯合會) in Mount Lu, Jiangxi 江西 in 1924.²⁷ Buddhists from Europe, the United States, and Asia participated in this event. Thirdly, in order to increase the influence of Buddhism on the West, in 1928, he traveled to Berlin, Paris, and London to

²² Lü Bicheng, “What Becomes of Man after Death,” (Lü 1940, p. 57). *An Outline of Karma* was written in English and was published by Lü herself.

²³ On spiritualism in Europe and America, see (Owen 1990, 2004; Monroe 2008; Sharp 2006; McGarry 2008).

²⁴ See (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 79–81).

²⁵ On the tension between Buddhism and the state in the modern period, see (Ji 2008; Xueyu 2015). On reforms in the Buddhist community, see (Ji 2015).

²⁶ See (Hammerstrom 2015, pp. 1–17).

²⁷ See (Welch 1968, pp. 55–56; Pittman 2001, p. 106).

deliver speeches (see Figure 3). He encouraged European audiences to practice Buddhism in daily life and pay attention to the connection between Buddhism and science.

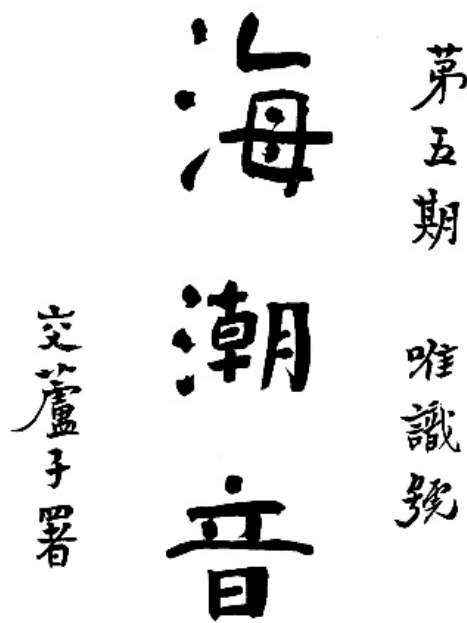


Figure 2. A cover of *The Sound of the Sea Tide*.



Figure 3. Master Taixu in London, 1929. Source: Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 61.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Buddhism was introduced to Europe as metaphysics and was primarily confined to the academic sphere. This did not change until Western intellectuals came to realize the compatibility of Buddhism with evolutionary science due to the efforts of many Asian Buddhist reformers, such as Taixu and Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933).²⁸ Although it is hard to determine Taixu's precise influence on Western audiences, his journey did propel the Buddhist movement in Europe. For example, after his speeches, the Buddhist society was reestablished in Berlin, and the World Buddhist Institute was founded in Paris. In London, his speeches attracted a group of Chinese and Japanese students, who formed a society to propagate Buddhism. This student organization reached the following agreements:

1. From now on, the existing Buddhist associations in England and Ireland should contact and support each other.

英倫及愛爾蘭原有之各佛學會自此互相聯絡，公策進行。

2. A great Buddhist union should be established. Chinese, Japanese, and Thai Buddhist student associations should be affiliated with it.

組織佛教大聯合會，凡中國、日本、暹羅等國之學生佛教研究會皆屬之。

3. According to the lunar calendar, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of each year, when the full moon appears, a Buddhist assembly should be held in London.

倫敦於每年華曆七月十五，月圓之時，開大會演講佛教。

4. Activities in London should be spread to the counties of England.²⁹

由倫敦推及各行省。

As we can see, Buddhism played a pivotal role in uniting diaspora communities of Asian students and helping them develop a sense of a common Asian culture. As part of this Asian culture, Lü reacted to the success of Buddhism by producing articles and books in both English and Chinese to spread Buddhist teachings. For the English-speaking world, she translated Buddhist sutras and wrote essays on the ideas of non-killing and karmic retribution.³⁰ For Chinese readers, she reported on Buddhist movements taking place in the West and revealed commonalities between Buddhism and European psychical research.

Lü Bicheng served as a foreign correspondent for *Haichao yin* after Taixu returned to China in 1929. In an article she wrote in 1930, after mentioning how the Europeans relied on Buddhism to solve their spiritual crisis after the war, and that Taixu should be credited with spreading Buddhist teachings to the West, she proposed making Buddhism the national religion (*guojiao* 國教) in China.³¹ During this period, Lü began to systematically study Buddhism with Taixu and Master Changxing 常惺 (1896–1939), both of whom guided her through the vast storehouse of the Mahayana tradition and explained to her the Buddhist understanding of the afterlife. Changxing encouraged her to focus on consciousness (*shi* 識) because he believed it generates the phenomenal world and continues to exist after death.³² In conjunction with Taixu's idea of "Humanistic Buddhism," Changxing's teaching diverted her attention from the issues of the soul and ghosts.

²⁸ See (McMahan 2008, pp. 75–76, 91–97).

²⁹ Lü Bicheng, "Fojiao zai ouzhou zhi fazhan" 佛教在歐洲之發展 (The Development of Buddhism in Europe), (Lü 2007, pp. 246–50). I translated these four agreements from Chinese into English.

³⁰ In her later years, Lü published two books in English. One book, *The Two Buddhist Books in Mahayana*, contains her translations of Buddhist texts from the Huayan and Pure Land traditions. The other book, *An Outline of Karma*, focuses on the notion of karmic retribution.

³¹ (Lü 2007, p. 249).

³² See (Lü 2007, pp. 268–88).

While deepening her understanding of Buddhist teachings, Lü Bicheng compared Buddhism with psychical research. In the article “Xuanxue yu kexue jiang goutong hu,” she utilized Buddhist terms to explain telepathy and clairvoyance, two major topics in psychical research:

There are such terms as *taxin tong* 他心通 (telepathy) and *tianyan tong* 天眼通 (clairvoyance) in Buddhism, which British psychologist W. Medongall discusses in great detail in his book *Body and Mind*. The reporter [Lü Bicheng] has heard from Mr. Yan Jidao (the person who first translated *Evolution and Ethics* in our country) that in Britain, two students, A and B, stayed in two different dorms. Student A felt bored. He drew a duck and colored it in silver. He then laughed at it because it did not make any sense. When he entered student B’s room, [he saw] that student B had drawn a silver teapot with an oblate body and a long nozzle, which looked exactly like the duck that student A drew. In Europe, the most famous event was witnessed by a renowned figure. At a banquet, Swedenborg suddenly stood up with a cup in his hand. He looked into the distance and told people that some place six hundred miles away was on fire. Later, people made an inquiry. There was indeed a fire in that place when Swedenborg attended the banquet.³³

佛家有他心通 (telepathy) 天眼通 (clairvoyance) 諸法，英國心理家麥當哥爾氏 (W. Medongall) 所著 *Body and Mind* 一書，亦詳言之。記者曩聞嚴幾道先生 (即吾國首譯天演論者) 言，英國某校甲乙兩生，各居寄宿舍，僅隔一壁。甲生無聊，隨意畫一鴨，而塗以銀色，自笑其無理由。及入乙生舍，則乙生方繪一銀茶壺，壺式扁而嘴長，形極如鴨，與甲生所繪吻合，亦此類也。在歐洲，最著之故事由名宿證得者，即瑞登保 (Swedenborg) 於衆客筵席間，忽停杯遠矚，謂六百里外，某地正肇焚如。後向該地調查，果曾失火，恰當瑞氏宴飲之時也。

Lü heard the story about the British student’s drawing from Yan Fu (z. Jidao 幾道). Yan was an active member of the Society for Psychical Research in Shanghai (*Shanghai lingxue hui* 上海靈學會).³⁴ This organization was established in 1917 by renowned intellectuals, such as Lu Feikui 陸費逵 (1886–1941), Yang Rui 楊瑞, Yu Fu 俞復 (1856–1943), and Ding Fubao 丁福保 (1874–1952), who formed a circle to investigate paranormal phenomena. Lü was probably curious about psychical research when she studied with Yan Fu.

The second story concerning Swedenborg was mentioned by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his letter to Miss Charlotte Amalie von Knobloch (1740–1894), the daughter of General Karl Gottfried von Knobloch (1697–1764). In the letter, Kant recounted Emanuel Swedenborg’s (1688–1772) paranormal experience as follows:

It was in the year 1756, as Herr von Swedenborg, at the end of the month of September at four o’clock in the afternoon, returning from a journey to England, disembarked at Gothenburg. Mr. William Castel invited him over along with a company of fifteen persons. That evening around six o’clock Herr von Swedenborg left and then returned to the drawing room pale and agitated. He said that there was even now a dangerous conflagration in Stockholm in the *Südermalm* [southern suburb] (Gothenburg lies more than fifty miles from Stockholm), and the fire was rapidly spreading. He was restless and went out frequently. He said that the house of one of his friends, whom he named, already lay in ashes and his own house was in danger. At eight o’clock, after he had gone out again, he joyfully exclaimed: “Praise be to God, the conflagration has been extinguished, three doors from my own house!” This report caused a great stir in the whole city and especially in the gathering, and that same evening someone gave a report to the governor. On Sunday morning, Swedenborg was called to

³³ (Lü 2007, p. 298). I translated this part from Chinese into English.

³⁴ For more about the Society for Psychical Research in Shanghai and Yan Fu’s involvement in it, see (Huang 2007).

the governor. He asked him about the matter. Swedenborg described the conflagration exactly, how it started, how it had been extinguished and the time it lasted. That same day the report spread through the whole city, where it now caused an even greater stir because the governor had taken notice of it, for many were concerned for their friends or for their goods. On Monday evening, a mounted messenger, dispatched by the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce at the time of the fire, arrived in Gothenburg. In his letters, the conflagration was described in the exact manner as it had been related. On Tuesday morning, a royal courier arrived at the governor's with news of the fire, the damage, its cause, and the houses that it affected; this report did not differ in the least from the one Swedenborg had given at the same time, for the conflagration had been extinguished at eight o'clock.³⁵

In Lü Bicheng's time, the German philosopher's interest in clairvoyance was noticed by Charlie Dunbar Broad (1887–1971), who was Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and served as President of the Society for Psychical Research in London from 1935 to 1936 and from 1958 to 1960.³⁶ In the following passage, Broad pointed out the importance of psychical research:

In my opinion psychical research is highly relevant to philosophy for the following reasons. There are certain limiting principles which we unhesitatingly take for granted as the framework within which all our practical activities and our scientific theories are confined. Some of these seem to be self-evident. Others are so overwhelmingly supported by all the empirical facts which fall within the range of ordinary experience and the scientific elaborations of it (including under this heading orthodox psychology) that it hardly enters our heads to question them. Let us call these *Basic Limiting Principles*. Now psychical research is concerned with alleged events which seem *prima facie* to conflict with one or more of these principles. Let us call any event which seems *prima facie* to do this an *Ostensibly Paranormal Event*.³⁷

In Broad's opinion, our perception of the world is based on sense experience. However, there may be phenomena beyond normal experience and scientific explanation. Psychical research can deepen our understanding of the unknown world by investigating paranormal phenomena.³⁸

Like Charlie Dunbar Broad, Lü Bicheng was intrigued by telepathy and clairvoyance. But unlike the former, Lü viewed these paranormal events through the lens of Buddhism. She translated telepathy into *taxin tong* (Sanskrit: *para-citta-jñāna*) and clairvoyance into *tianyan tong* (Sanskrit: *divya-caṅśur-abhijñā*). In Buddhism, *Taxin tong* refers to the supernatural ability to read the minds of others, and *tianyan tong* refers to divine vision. Both terms derive from the six supernatural powers of the Buddha (Chinese: *liutong* 六通, Sanskrit: *ṣaḍ-abhijñā*). Through translation, Lü effectively generated a link between the Buddhist concepts and their Western counterparts, thereby bridging the gap between Buddhism and psychical research. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of her translation activity was not to find commonalities between the above two fields. In her opinion, the West needs Buddhism because scientific materialism has failed to solve problems regarding spirituality.³⁹ She believed that Buddhism is the only remedy for the pain of Western society.

Lü Bicheng's idea dovetailed with many Chinese intellectuals' opinions on Eastern and Western cultures. For example, Tang Dayuan 唐大圓 (1885–1941) stated:

³⁵ "Letter to Charlotte von Knobloch" was written on 10 August 1763. In the letter, the name of Herr von Swedenborg refers to Emanuel Swedenborg. (Kant 2002, pp. 70–71).

³⁶ On Immanuel Kant's interest in psychical research, see (Broad 1953, pp. 116–55).

³⁷ (Broad 1953, p. 7).

³⁸ See (Broad 1953, pp. 27–67).

³⁹ (Lü 2007, pp. 246–50).

After the European War, the claim that science is almighty was not as strong as before. Many intellectuals began paying attention to the East and Eastern cultures, which is good news for the future of humans. Everyone should know that European theories may benefit human beings' material life; however, with regard to the spiritual side, most of the European theories teach people how to behave like animals.⁴⁰

自歐戰告終，全世界於科學萬能之呼聲，不及曩昔之銳利。許多哲士漸漸注意到東方及東方的文化。這是人類未來的福音。各位要知道，歐洲諸學說其關於物質方面，雖亦有許多裨益於人，但於精神方面，則大部分是教人習禽獸。

The above statement reveals Tang's confidence in East Asian cultures, which is also manifested in Lü's writing:

Nowadays, the Europeans are dissatisfied with the transient nature of life. They want to know where the soul will go after death. This can be seen as an insight into life. Among all the answers to this question, the Buddhist explanation is the most satisfactory and accurate.⁴¹

今歐人不滿意於肉體生命之短促，而欲知靈魂之究竟何往，可謂人生觀之一種覺悟，然欲解決此問題，則以佛說最為圓滿精密。

Tang's and Lü's statements echoed Liang Qichao's and Zhang Junmai's 張君勱 (1887–1969) opinions on science and metaphysics. In 1923 and 1924, Liang and Zhang participated in the debate between metaphysicians and scientists, asserting that although science allowed human society to make dramatic progress, it eventually led to the decline of morality. Liang proposed using Buddhism as a remedy for social problems.

While emphasizing the divergence of science and religion, Liang Qichao recommended the Buddhist Consciousness-Only School (*weishi zong* 唯識宗) and Chan Buddhism (*chan zong* 禪宗) probably because the former was considered to be scientific and the latter the most relevant to the study of the mind.⁴² According to the former, human consciousness can be divided into the following eight categories:

- The visual consciousness (*yan shi* 眼識)
- The auditory consciousness (*er shi* 耳識)
- The olfactory consciousness (*bi shi* 鼻識)
- The gustatory consciousness (*she shi* 舌識)
- The tactile consciousness (*shen shi* 身識)
- The *mano* consciousness (*yi shi* 意識)
- The *manas* consciousness (*mona shi* 末那識)
- The *ālayavijñāna* consciousness (*alaiye shi* 阿賴耶識)

The *mano* consciousness forms the perception of the world through combining the previous five forms of consciousness. Based on this perception, the subsequent *manas* consciousness generates the concept of the self. With the exception of the eighth consciousness, all the above forms of consciousness are in constant transformation. Eventually, they are stored in the *ālayavijñāna* consciousness. These eight forms of consciousness constitute an epistemological system that is comparable to science. As Donald

⁴⁰ Tang Dayuan, "Fojia de xinli jianshe" 佛家的心理建設 (Psychological Development in Buddhism), in (2003b, pp. 43–45). I translated this paragraph from Chinese into English.

⁴¹ (Lü 2007, p. 299). I translated this part.

⁴² Liang mentioned that even though Westerners philosophers such as Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and Rudolf Eucken (1846–1926) showed interest in spiritual studies, they were not familiar with the Buddhist Consciousness-Only School and Chan Buddhism. See Liang Qichao, "Kexue wanneng zhi meng" 科學萬能之夢 (Dream of the Omnipotence of Science), in (2003a, pp. 433–35).

Lopez notes, “Buddhism was a tradition that saw the universe as subject to natural laws, without the need for any form of divine intervention. This led many European enthusiasts to declare Buddhism as the religion most suited to serious dialogue with science, because both postulated the existence of immutable laws that governed the universe.”⁴³

4. Lü Bicheng and the Movement for Animal Protection

As European scholars understood Buddhism as compatible with scientific thinking, Lü Bicheng discovered that Buddhist teachings could be used as a theoretical foundation to support the movement for animal protection.⁴⁴ In 1928, she established contact with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in London and discussed with them the moral reasoning behind abstaining from killing animals. She argued against the idea that the weak should fall victim to the strong and advocated for the prohibition of killing animals in light of the similarities between humans and animals. Given that people had to sacrifice animals for religious purposes or the needs of daily life, she conceded that butchers should adopt a certain technology in combination with narcotics to minimize animals’ pain when slaughtering them.⁴⁵

Whether animals have consciousness and can feel pain or not has long been vehemently debated in the West. Jacques de Vaucanson’s (1709–1782) automaton “Digesting Duck” (see Figure 4) illustrates how an animal’s body functions as a machine without sentience. This picture depicts a robotic duck that can eat and digest kernels of grain, just like a real duck. Although the robot duck does not have actual organs, it functions as an animated being based on various mechanical devices in its “body.” Vividly illustrating the Cartesian scientists’ viewpoint on animals, this image directs attention to the issue of animal consciousness. According to René Descartes (1596–1650), only human beings have consciousness, which makes them superior to animals; in contrast, animals do not have consciousness and thus can neither think nor feel. An animal’s body is merely a mechanical system, and its activities are nothing but collaborations of different parts of a machine. Current scholars have mocked or challenged Descartes’s theory. For example, Mark Rowlands states that “[i]f you were an animal in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, then one of the things you should have made a point of avoiding would be Cartesian scientists. If not, then, you could expect to find yourself nailed to a vivisection board, being slowly cut open.”⁴⁶ Peter Singer points out that “[t]he nervous systems of animals evolved as our own did, and in fact the evolutionary history of humans and other animals, especially mammals, did not diverge until the central features of our nervous systems were already in existence.”⁴⁷ According to their assertions, animals should have consciousness as human beings do.

⁴³ (Lopez 2008, p. 7).

⁴⁴ Lü’s ideas of animal protection and non-killing (*Jiesha fangsheng* 戒殺放生) were inspired by the Pure Land doctrine. See (Lü 1939, pp. 85–149). For more about Lü’s contribution to the movement for animal protection, see (Fan 2010; Fong 2015; Poon 2015).

⁴⁵ Lü Bicheng, “Zhi Lundun jinzhi nuedai shengchu hui han” 致倫敦禁止虐待牲畜會函 (A Letter to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in London), (Lü 2007, pp. 242–43).

⁴⁶ (Rowlands 2002, p. 3).

⁴⁷ (Singer 1983, p. 12).

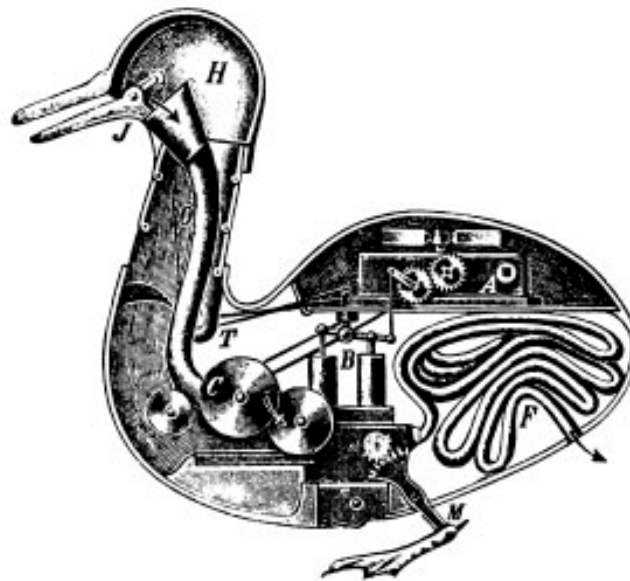


Figure 4. Jacques de Vaucanson's "Digesting Duck." Image in the public domain.

In her time, Lü Bicheng came to similar conclusions by relying on Buddhist sources. In *An Outline of Karma*, she situated animals in the ten *Dharmadhatus* system and fought for animal rights from a Buddhist perspective:

This and the following two kinds of realms i.e. ghost and hell are called "The Three Bad Realms of Existence." The highest kind of animals are those such as the Garudas (the celestial golden wind birds), royal dragons etc. The common animals but of good nature such as horses, cows, birds etc. The animals of lowest form and of evil nature such as snakes, scorpions, and those which live in darkness or in damp places such as the rats, bugs etc. These unfortunate beings are reincarnated from guilty people according to the nature of their sins who have fallen into various forms of animals under the karmic law. And partly due to Vidjnana the strong mentality especially when one is approaching death, Vidjnana led them temporarily to be involved into the wrong forms of life, such as the case of the Empress of Liang Dynasty. A snake has two small sacs jointed on each of its jaws, in the sacs the poisonous fluids are contained, so it would be fatal when it bites any one. (This proves the falsehood of the theory of Creation, if a Creator is of good nature himself, he would not create such a thing of ill-will.) Those who have a malicious nature and act with the intention of injuring others will be reborn as such harmful animals. All kinds of animals some haired, some feathered, others scaly or reptiled, have latently inhered the Buddha-nature in them. Hence all of them deserve consideration and respect. This is the doctrine of Equality peculiar to Buddhism. No matter if they were reincarnated from guilty ones, millions upon millions of years may pass, but ultimately they will be delivered.⁴⁸

This passage emphasizes the universality of Buddhahood, which can be achieved by both humans and animals. In the long debate on animal consciousness in the West, a dualism between human and animal has played a pivotal role in explaining their relationship. Theorists have understood animals by comparing them with humans. Animals share certain biological features with humans; therefore, if human beings have consciousness, then so do animals. This anthropocentric view has allowed humans to dominate animals, thereby creating a gap between the two groups. The Buddhist view on animals and humans differs from the above-mentioned Western perspective. According to Buddhist

⁴⁸ Lü Bicheng, "The Ten Dharma-dhatus," (Lü 1940, pp. 49–50). The original text was written in English.

teachings, humans and animals occupy two separate realms of the Six Realms of Existence (*liudao* 六道).⁴⁹ Sentient beings reincarnate into these realms according to their good or evil deeds carried out in their previous lives. A human may be reincarnated in animal form due to his or her bad karma. Conversely, an animal can be reborn as a human being based on its good karma. In the *Lotus Sutra*, a dragon girl metamorphoses into a human male and achieves Buddhahood after offering a precious gem to the Buddha:

At that time, the assembled multitude all saw the dragon girl in the space of an instant turn into a man, perfect bodhisattva conduct, straightway go southward to the world sphere Spotless, sit on a jeweled lotus blossom, and achieve undifferentiating, right, enlightened intuition, with thirty-two marks and eighty beautiful features setting forth the fine dharma for all living beings in all ten directions. At that time, in the Saha world sphere bodhisattvas, voice hearers, gods, dragons, the eightfold assembly, humans, and nonhumans, all from a distance seeing that dragon girl achieve Buddhahood and universally preach dharma to the men and gods of the assembly of that time, were overjoyed at heart and all did obeisance from afar. Incalculable living beings, hearing the dharma and understanding it, attained to nonbacksliding.⁵⁰

Scholars have tended to either focus on the gender issue in the story of the dragon girl or understand it as an expedient device that demonstrates the sutra's sacred power.⁵¹ For our purposes, this story offers an important Buddhist scriptural perspective on animals. It indicates that the Buddha does not discriminate between human and nonhuman beings. Like humans, animals also can attain Buddhahood.

With Buddhist knowledge, Lü Bicheng successfully intervened in Western discourse on animal welfare and stood out in the public eye. In 1929, as the only Chinese representative, she went to Vienna to deliver a speech at a conference held by the World Society for the Protection of Animals. Perceived as having an exotic charm, she attracted an audience who was fascinated by her discussion of the Buddhist notion of non-killing. In the meantime, the movement for animal protection in Europe inspired her to set about establishing the Society for the Protection of Animals in China.⁵²

In 1932, Lü Bicheng published a book titled *Oumei zhiguang* 歐美之光 (*The Light from Europe and the United States*), which introduced the idea of animal protection to Chinese readers.⁵³ In this book, she linked the experimentation on live animals for the purpose of scientific research to the decline of morality, thereby discouraging readers from harming animals.⁵⁴ In 1940, she published another book, *An Outline of Karma*. Unlike the former, this book was written in English and aimed to spread Buddhist teachings in the Western world.

An Outline of Karma consists of translations of Buddhist sutras, Lü Bicheng's reflections on human destinies, and translations of anomalous stories happening in China. The book demonstrates her enduring interest in the afterlife and firm belief in the doctrine of reincarnation. She translated three strange stories from Chinese into English, illustrating how certain men were reborn as animals due to negative karmic factors. Not only did she translate the texts, but she also reproduced two photographs attached to the original texts. One picture depicts an ox with a human body part (see Figure 5). According to the narrative, "(t)he waist, hips, and legs are human, but the hoofs of an animal take the

⁴⁹ These six realms refer to the realms of hell, hungry ghost, animal, asura, human, and god.

⁵⁰ (Hurvitz 2009, pp. 184–85).

⁵¹ On various interpretations of the story of the dragon girl, see (Faure 2003, pp. 94–95). It is unclear how Lü understood the dragon girl's gender transformation.

⁵² Lü Bicheng, "Mouchuang Zhongguo baohu dongwu hui zhi yuanqi" 謀創中國保護動物會之緣起 (Reasons to Create the Society for the Protection of Animals in China), (Lü 2007, pp. 237–41).

⁵³ This book was printed by the Buddhist Book Store (Foxue shuju 佛學書局) and was circulated as a morality book (*cishan shuji* 慈善書籍, or simply, *shanshu* 善書).

⁵⁴ "Shi renzhong ehua zhi kexue" 使人種惡化之科學 (Science That Debauches the Human Species), (Lü 1932, pp. 78–79).

place of human feet. It looks just like a man crawling into the abdomen of the ox from its buttock.”⁵⁵ The text also explains where the story happened and why a certain man was reborn like this:

It was born in Tung-Jen city of Sze-Chuan province, China. It is said, there was a man who had committed adultery and murder. When he was approaching death, he confessed what he had done, and stated where he would be born as an ox. According to the address, his family found the newly born ox, two bodies joined together, one part animal and the other human. The fact was thus broadcast. This ox was led to the court, and a photo of it taken by the magistrate’s order.⁵⁶

The photo that Lü reproduced intensifies the horrifying effect of the story and demonstrates the idea of karmic retribution in an effective way. The same result can be seen in another photo, which captures a pig with a human palm (see Figure 6). The accompanying account of the image explains how a certain man’s incomplete penitence before death resulted in a grotesque reincarnation such as this. The two stories Lü translated remind readers of the genre of *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of anomalies) derived from the Six Dynasties (220–589). The *zhiguai* compilers in medieval times often used anomalous accounts to admonish readers not to violate Buddhist precepts, such as the rules of non-killing and vegetarianism.⁵⁷ Compared with those *zhiguai* compilers, Lü and the authors of the above stories innovatively capitalized on the visual effects that modern photographic technology produced to confirm the veracity of the strange accounts. Her goal in circulating these stories and images was to convince readers that the principle of reincarnation interconnects humans and animals. The protection of animals ultimately benefits human beings.

In the later years of her life, Lü Bicheng was passionate about using photographic images to prove the existence of divine revelation in Buddhism. She recounted that several days after she finished translating a chapter from the *Flower Garland Sutra* (*Huayan jing* 華嚴經), she bought some lotus flowers and was surprised to notice that two petals were in the shape of human hands (see Figure 7). Believing this was a divine manifestation, she had a photo taken and attached it to her translation of the chapter. The chapter she worked on concerns the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Chinese: Puxian 普賢), a protector of the *Lotus Sutra*. She not only translated the text from Chinese into English but also created a portrait of Samantabhadra, which led to another miracle:

Six months after the discovery of the “Lotus hands” as described in Appendix (I), a further unusual manifestation revealed to me upon my drawing of a portrait representing the King of the Tenfold Vow, namely the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. The work occupied seven days. On the morning of the last day, after the completion of the drawing, it was the 18th of February 1935 C.E. when I arose from bed, I was surprised to see that the water in the washbasin of my chamber, which I had used to wash my hands on the previous evening, contained much earthy matter, which had sunk to bottom of the basin and formed a picture with a resemblance to a lotus flower. The figure was about seven inches in diameter, and round in shape, fully covered the round bottom of the basin. I counted its petals, which were exactly ten, corresponding to the number of the Ten Vows. I poured the water before I used the basin again. It is a pity that I had not a camera at hand, otherwise a photograph of it could have been taken.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ (Lü 1940, p. 73).

⁵⁶ (Lü 1940, p. 73).

⁵⁷ On Buddhist miracle tales in medieval China, see (Campany 2012). On advocacy of vegetarianism in pre-modern China, see (Kang 2005; Yu 1981, pp. 76–90).

⁵⁸ (Lü 1939, p. 50). The original text was written in English.

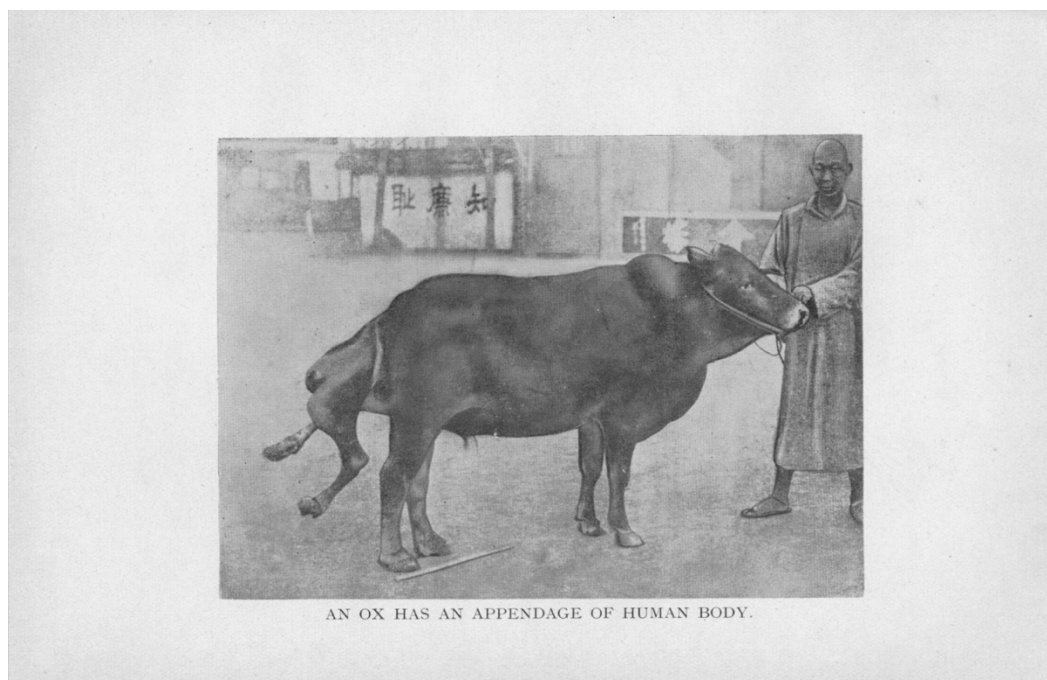


Figure 5. A photo of an ox with a human body part. Source: *An Outline of Karma*, 1940.

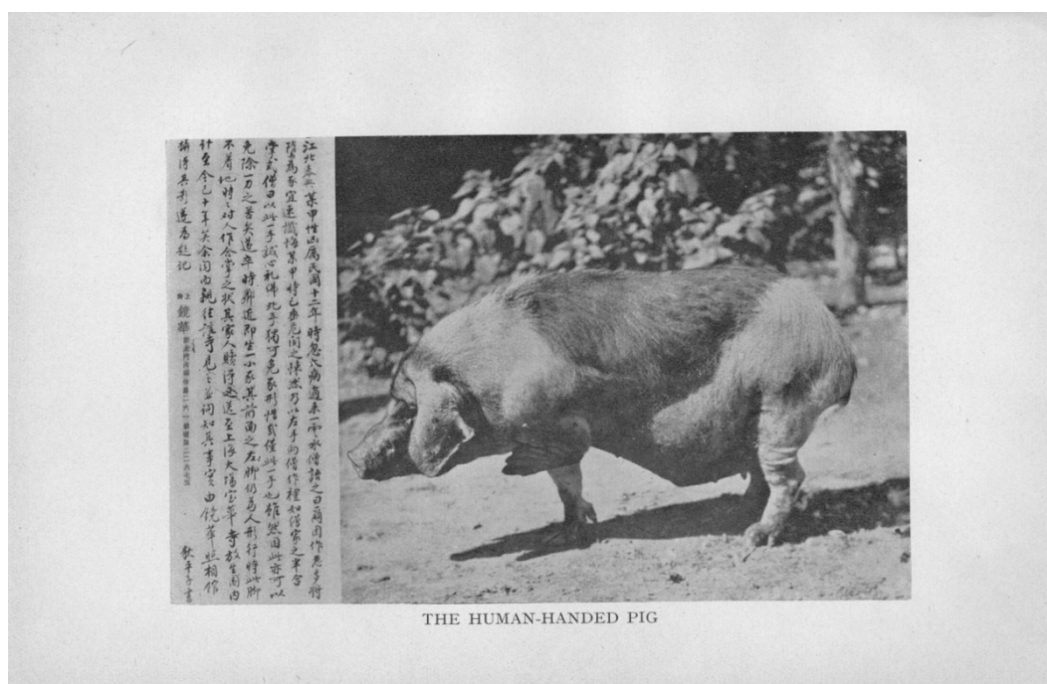


Figure 6. A photo of a pig with a human hand. Source: *An Outline of Karma*, 1940.

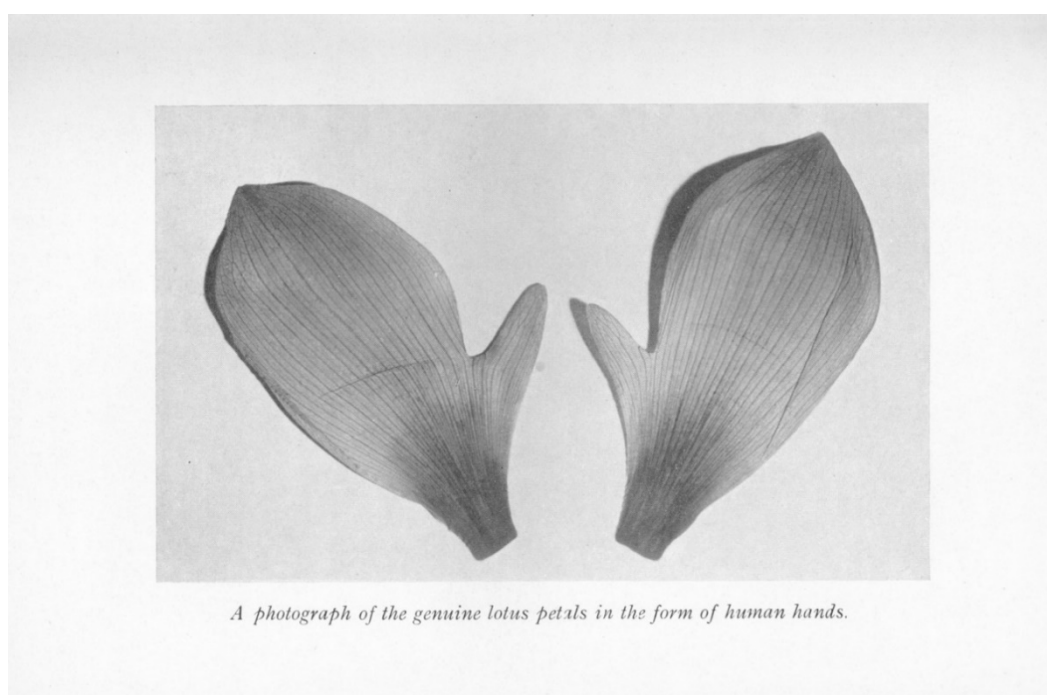


Figure 7. A photo of lotus petals in the shape of human hands. Source: *The Two Buddhist Books in Mahayana*, 1939.

5. Conclusions

It is only recently that scholars have started to bridge the gap between studies of Chinese women and religion in the modern era. This has involved a simultaneous attempt to discover the “woman question” in the “religious question,” and vice versa.⁵⁹ In her survey on the transformation of Chinese women in religion and society from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries, Xiaofei Kang explores the following situation: while the construction of the “new woman” clashed with religion, at the same time, women used religion to “defy officially-prescribed gender roles, to negotiate with state authorities, and to create social spaces of their own.”⁶⁰ Kang’s study focuses on Chinese women and their indigenous religious practices. Different from her main concern, this article demonstrates how a Chinese woman writer in the diaspora utilized Buddhism to voice her opinions on the afterlife and animal welfare on the world stage.

Having lived in both the East and the West in different periods of her life, Lü Bicheng stood on the threshold between the imperial and modern eras. Her unique living experiences allowed her to see human society in a way that transcended gender, cultural, ethnic, and political differences. She did not confine herself to the traditional norms of her gender, nor did she conform to the role of the “new woman” assigned by modernizing male elites. Basing her understanding of society on her own observations, she developed her independent thinking ability and critical awareness. Her stay in Europe offered her not only time and space to reflect upon Chinese culture, but also the opportunity to closely examine her Western social surroundings. As an outsider, she witnessed the challenge that increasing attention to the spiritual world posed to European scientific materialism. As a foreign intellectual with independent ideas, she participated in Western intellectual discourses. Her dabbling in psychical research was indicative of her initial efforts to join the conversation. In this process, it was

⁵⁹ Beata Grant’s and Chun-fang Yu’s pioneering studies on women and religion in pre-modern China and present-day Taiwan have set great examples for scholars who study gender in Chinese religions. Following their works, scholars have begun to focus on women and religion in modern China. See (Grant 2003, 2008a, 2008b, 2014, 2015; Yu 2013).

⁶⁰ (Kang 2015, p. 493).

Buddhism that ultimately offered her a solid foundation to rely on when engaging in cross-cultural dialogues about the soul and animal consciousness.

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