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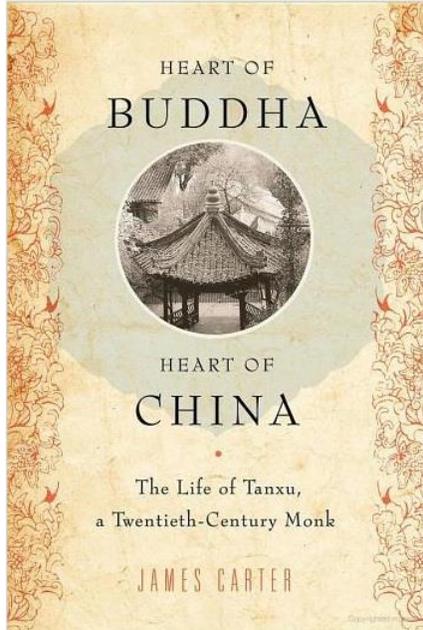
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New Release: *Heart of Buddha, Heart of China*

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James Carter, Professor of History at Saint Joseph's University and Chief Editor of the journal Twentieth-Century China, has recently published [Heart of Buddha, Heart of China: The Life of Tanxu, a Twentieth Century Monk](#) (Oxford University Press). To explore the life and work of this extraordinary individual, Carter embarked on a series of "travels with Tanxu," spending time in Buddhist temples from Harbin to Hong Kong (with stops in Qingdao, Ningbo, Yingkou, and Shanghai along the way). Here, in an excerpt from the prologue to his book, Carter explains the challenges he encountered in tracing the life of Tanxu, an often enigmatic figure whose memoir raises as many questions for the historian as it answers.

The Present Past

A man opens the door. He wears the saffron robes and prayer beads of a Buddhist monk, his smiling face framed by a shaved head and long eyebrows. The face is more youthful than I expect of an eighty-year-old man who has lived through war, revolution, and dislocation in China. Inside, brightly colored idols and the smell of incense contrast incongruously with the gray January streets of the Bronx outside.

I greet him in Chinese. He responds in English. This exchange, with neither speaking his native tongue, underlines the fact that we are between worlds—many worlds: China and New York City; present and past; religion and scholarship. He is Master Lok To, a senior Buddhist monk; indeed, a patriarch of the Tiantai sect. Born and raised in China, he has lived in New York for four decades. I was nervous about how he would receive me, a staunchly secular American scholar forty years his junior. He has endured occupation and exile for his faith, while I've lived most of my life in tranquil, leafy suburbs. But he immediately puts me at ease, continuing to smile as he shakes my hand (unusual for a Buddhist monk, who will usually press his palms together in greeting), and the distance between our two lives dwindles.

He leads me into the next room and we sit down at a low table before a window overlooking the streetscape of storefront Pentecostal churches and takeaway Caribbean restaurants. Sipping tea, we talk, still mixing languages. As I look around the room, through an archway I catch a glimpse of my reason for being here: behind an altar to the Buddha, Master Tanxu looks out at me from a large painting on the wall.

* * *

This book is about Tanxu's life; it is also about the history of modern China. At its core, though, it is about traveling between worlds. Tanxu, born in 1875 with the name Wang Shouchun, worked as a laborer, minor government official, fortune-teller, and pharmacist before leaving his family to become a monk and make a career founding Buddhist temples across China. Before his death in 1963, he witnessed and was part of a century of extraordinary change in China. Tanxu was constantly in motion, traveling throughout China by road, rail, river, and ocean. His travels took him from coastal North China, near Beijing, to the frontier of Manchuria. From there, he moved on to the heartlands of Chinese history and culture: the prosperous lower Yangzi Delta; the ancient capital of Xi'an; and Shandong, the home of Confucius. He left the mainland just twice: once to visit Japan, and then to the British colony of Hong Kong, where he spent the last years of his life. If we take him at his word, as a young man he even traversed the boundary between life and death, descending to the underworld and negotiating his return to the living.

To research this book I traveled Tanxu's itinerary, following him across China, living and working in many of the temples he founded. I also touched him through his dharma descendants, in New York City and Hong Kong. Along the way, what began as a strictly academic monograph became a different kind of story, one that illuminates twentieth-century China through the details of an extraordinary life. And although Tanxu is squarely at the center of the story, I resist the term "biography" because the details of Tanxu's life are a means to the end of understanding China's recent history rather than ends in themselves. To the extent that Tanxu is intended as an instrument with which to gauge broader trends, this book aspires to be "microhistory," a genre so eloquently described by historian [Jill Lepore](#).

My travels with Tanxu were only possible because of his memoir, *Yingchen huiyilu* (YCHYL). The title means literally "Recollections of Shadows and Dust," but is better translated as "Memories of the Material World." Tanxu dictated this record to students at his seminary in 1947, and its 540 pages (different editions vary slightly) contain insights and observations of Tanxu's personal journey, but also of China's travails as it moved from empire to republic, through war, famine, and revolution. Tanxu struggled deeply, and boldly, with his own identity as a human being, and at the same time he was one man among many seeking to define what it meant—or could mean—to be Chinese in the twentieth century.

The *Yingchen huiyilu* is invaluable as a source, but it is also frustrating. At times it is tremendously detailed, and many of its details can be cross-referenced with other accounts, building confidence in the reliability of Tanxu's account. Elsewhere, however, the text is maddeningly silent; Tanxu leaves essential characters voiceless. In places like these, the historian has a choice: to remain quiet or to apply what R. G. Collingwood called "the historical imagination." To build as complete a picture as possible, I have consulted other primary and secondary sources about the events, regions, and personalities that Tanxu describes, but also walked in his footsteps. The *Yingchen huiyilu* became a guidebook, leading me to more than a dozen cities across China. Often I found accommodation in the temples or monasteries that Tanxu helped found decades, and in some cases a century, earlier. I believe that sharing Tanxu's experience—to the extent it was possible—brought me closer to understanding the man and better equipped me to relate his story, even as it made balancing objectivity and intimacy more challenging.

Tanxu's memoir was not intended to provide an objective account of his life. He told his story to students seeking to understand where their master had come from and how his life had made him into the religious figure they knew. It is therefore prone to teleological explanations, often interpreting events as foreshadowing or pointing toward his eventual career as a monk. Occasionally, he describes as fact supernatural phenomena that are plainly impossible, according to secular, academic standards. I have chosen to present these events as Tanxu portrayed them, without evaluating their truth claims. Instead, by illuminating the cultural context surrounding these events, I use them to explicate the patterns of Chinese history and society over the past century.

The China of today, with its towering skyscrapers, high-speed trains and seemingly limitless economic potential, at first appears totally divorced from Tanxu's world of ghosts and visions. As I retraced Tanxu's steps, though, I found that the issues confronting China today are not so different from those that Tanxu observed one hundred years ago. Tanxu saw a weak and divided China, struggling to survive in the face of foreign invasion and internal division. Today, China is poised to be a world

power, but the projection of strength disguises internal weakness. Dramatic changes to its economy, society, and culture threaten domestic stability, as coastal provinces develop rapidly but interior regions lag behind. In the past, Japanese invasions, European colonialism, and rural uprisings threatened social cohesion; today the threats are a frayed social safety net, masses of migrant workers, regional and ethnic tensions, and environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale. Now, as then, many Chinese find themselves wondering about their nation's identity and future.

Tanxu believed that China's material challenges had spiritual and intellectual roots and that China needed a stronger religious foundation if it was to survive and flourish. Today, the government fights "spiritual pollution" with internet firewalls and press censorship, but at the same time its elevation of greed and consumption to extraordinary levels (Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's contemporary economic growth, famously argued that "To get rich is glorious" in the new China) has contributed to a spiritual vacuum. Many are dissatisfied as the social safety net has frayed, and that disaffection looms ominously in times of political or economic crisis. As Tanxu did a century ago, many in China today have turned to religion. Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity are all growing rapidly. The government grapples with religious groups it considers cults or terrorists, including the banned Falun Gong sect and Muslim Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang Province. Moreover, Buddhism lies at the heart of Tibet's uneasy relationship with the Chinese authorities. Religion remains as powerful and as controversial in China today as it was in Tanxu's time.

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