

A Controversy over ‘Critical Buddhism’ in Republican China. Reconsidering Tang Dayuan’s defense of *The Awakening of Faith*

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1. Introductory remarks –the debate about *The Awakening of Faith* and the idea of “Critical Buddhism”

Recent scholarship on modern Chinese Buddhism has done much to vindicate the understated role played by this tradition in articulating the East Asian “response to modernity.” As shown by an increasing number of studies, understanding modern Buddhist thought is necessary to follow mainstream intellectual developments that occurred in the first decades in the 20th century, particularly in Republican China (Makeham 2014, Kiely and Jessup 2016), but also in East Asia as a whole (Sueki 2000). This discovery leaves scholars of Buddhism with a rewarding, yet challenging task: to reexamine the topics that have hitherto been discussed solely within their own field in terms of their relevance to this broader perspective. A case that aptly illustrates the allure as well as the difficulties of this approach, is the controversy that surrounded the famous Buddhist treatise called the *Dasheng qixin lun* (大乘起信論)—commonly translated as *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*—in the early 1920s.¹

The debate thus far has been studied mostly as an event in the history of Chinese Buddhism. It has usually been described as a polemical confrontation between two major centers of Buddhist scholarship in Republican-period China: on the one hand, the Nanjing-based Chinese Institute of Inner Studies (*Zhina Neixueyuan* 支那內學院) represented by the scholarly layman Ouyang Jingwu (歐陽竟無, 1871–1943) and his

1. There is a disagreement among scholars as to whether the original title ought to be construed as *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* (as in Hakeda 1967) or *Awakening Mahāyāna Faith* (as argued by Park 1983: 39 ff.). The abbreviated form used throughout this article is ambiguous with regard to this point.

disciples Wang Enyang (王恩洋, 1897-1964) and Lü Cheng (呂澂, 1896-1989); on the other hand, the Wuchang Buddhist Seminary (*Wuchang Foxueyuan* 武昌佛學院) under the leadership of the charismatic monk Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947).² The dispute began after the former camp called into question the canonical authority of the *The Awakening of Faith*—a particularly influential text that had defined many of the doctrinal idiosyncrasies peculiar to Sinitic Buddhism. One of the key ideas associated with the *The Awakening of Faith* is the notion of “intrinsic enlightenment” (*benjue* 本覺)—the belief in the inherently pure original “essence” of both the mind and the reality constituted by the mind, recoverable by stilling all discursive thoughts. By casting doubts on the orthodoxy and authorship of the said treatise, Ouyang and his associates raised the possibility that this doctrinal axiom, shared by most Chinese exegetes, meditators, and devotees, might in fact misrepresent the true message of the Buddha. This challenge provoked equally disturbing questions of a more general nature: whether Chinese Buddhists should verify their beliefs in the light of the supposedly more authoritative Indian sources, or whether they should adopt a more critical—or “modern”—attitude toward their scriptural canon, to cleanse it from spurious and apocryphal works.

As can be seen, there is little doubt that the controversy in question was a turning point in the intellectual history of Buddhism in China. What is less clear is whether it had any broader intellectual significance that could be appreciated from beyond this perspective. What suggests such a possibility is that cluster of problems raised by Ouyang—the notion of “inherent enlightenment,” its Sinitic pedigree, and the style of exegesis that justified its authority—resurfaced elsewhere in modern East Asia, in a context defined by very contemporary concerns. Similar aspects of Sinitic heritage were challenged by Japanese Buddhist scholars associated with the movement called Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkyō* 批判佛教),

2. Some of the most extensive treatments of the debate so far have been given by Cheng Gongrang (2000: 403–476) and Eyal Aviv (2008: 119–165). It should be noted, however, that both studies are monographs on the life and work of the controversy’s instigator, Ouyang Jingwu. For this reason, they do not cover all arguments of the opposing side in equal detail. For other accounts, see e.g. Chen and Deng (2000: 256-260), Ge (2006: 126-8) or Müller (1993: 147-150).

launched in the late 1980s by a pair of academics—Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō. What to make of this similarity, however, is a somewhat controversial issue. The Japanese authors rejected the aforementioned heritage as “un-Buddhist,” not in the sense of being apocryphal or untrue to the words of the founder, but because of the style of thinking it represents. On their account, Buddhism is first and foremost a “critical” philosophy, which challenges the *status quo* by the means of clear argumentation and compassionate action. For this reason, it cannot posit an all-pervasive and all-inclusive substrate or grounds of reality, which needs to be experienced after abandoning conceptual distinctions. As argued by Critical Buddhists, philosophies which posit such an entity—labeled as “topical”—tend to prioritize experience over reasoning and evade rational verification. Moreover, they tend to uncritically affirm the “natural” order of things, together with the conservative social structures it justifies. Sino-Japanese Buddhism based on the notion of “inherent enlightenment” has all these traits of such “topical” philosophy and in this sense has more in common with indigenous philosophies of India, China, or Japan than with Buddhism as it ought to be.³

According to Lin Chen-kuo (1997: 305–307, 1999: 28–33), the authors associated with the China Institute of Inner Studies share enough in common with such stance to be considered Critical Buddhists. Even though they lacked the clear ideal of “critical” philosophy, which in the Japanese case was modeled on the example of Descartes, their critique of *The Awakening of Faith* was motivated by similar observations. It was also an attempt at *reforming “false” Buddhism* (Lin 1997: 305) by excising the elements of tradition that obscured the parallels between Buddhism and the “critical project of modernity”: pluralism and individualism, the ideal of “cognitive conversion and progress,” the belief in the “emancipatory power of reason” etc. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the original movement of Critical Buddhism mainly targeted traditions and ways of thinking that are specific to Japan (Sueki 2010: 362–372); or that Ouyang’s original concerns are better understood in the context of traditional scholastics than radical postulates of Hakamaya or Matsumoto (Aviv 2014). A question that deserves to be asked in this context is

3. For details, see the volume edited by Hubbard and Swanson (1997).

whether, and to what extent, the universal and modern aspects of Ouyang's challenge were recognized as such by his opponents. Did the problem of critical character of Buddhist philosophy entered their agenda, and if yes, what was their stance regarding this matter?

The present paper is an attempt to address this very question. In doing so, it will focus on the defense of the *The Awakening of Faith* presented by Taixu's lesser known lay associate Tang Dayuan (唐大圓, 1890 [?]-1941).⁴ Bringing Tang, rather than Taixu into the spotlight is justified for at least two reasons. First, as argued below, in his polemics with Ouyang Jingwu and Wang Enyang, Tang quite explicitly addressed the aspects of their critique that have elicited comparisons with the later phenomenon of "critical Buddhism." Second, he discussed these from the positions of a modernist and reformist who was also (if not to the same extent) critical of Sinitic heritage. Therefore, a closer look at his arguments allows to go beyond the usual narratives about the debate—that of a clash between the two luminaries of Republican Buddhism, or between detractors and apologists of Chinese heritage—and to attempt a more universal approach.

2. Tang Dayuan's role in the debate: An overview

In previous accounts of the controversy, Tang Dayuan has been cursorily characterized as a supporter of Taixu and a critic of Ouyang Jingwu and Wang Enyang.⁵ Roughly considered, such a description appears adequate. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that Tang's arguments were a mere repetition or clarification of the stance advanced by his more famous

4. For biographical information on Tang, see Dongchu (1974: 2.682–687) and Yu (2004: 1. 809–811). In the 1920s and 1930s, Tang was well known, at least in Buddhist circles, in two roles: as a scholar and publicist of Consciousness-only thought, and as the editor and contributor to journals such as *Haichaoyin* (海潮音) and *Dongfang wenhua* (東方文化). In his numerous essays, Tang discussed a wide range topics that were of interest to lay Buddhists of the time—either modern, such as philosophy and science, or traditional, such as Pure Land practice or Confucian ethics. He was also a tireless apologist of what he termed as "Eastern" (*dongfang* 東方) culture, especially its alleged spiritual superiority to Western mindset.

5. To the author's best knowledge, to date, Tang's views on the *The Awakening of Faith* have been discussed most extensively by Eyal Aviv (2008: 161–3) over three pages of his unpublished doctoral dissertation.

mentor. His apology of *The Awakening of Faith* was motivated by his own concerns as a scholar, practitioner, and a budding reformist of Chinese Buddhism. To understand these concerns better, some remarks need to be made about the background of his access to the debate.

The whole controversy was touched off by the transcript of Ouyang Jingwu’s lectures published in September 1922 under the title *Weishi jueze tan* (唯識抉擇談), loosely translatable as *Talks on Ascertaining the Consciousness-only Doctrine*. For the most part, the work in question is a rather technical compendium of definitions and conceptual distinctions discussed in classic Consciousness-only thought. In spite of such a scholastic character, it had a palpable polemic intent that was aptly recognized by its readers. Ouyang juxtaposed his explanations of Consciousness-only theories with critical remarks directed at contemporary Chinese Buddhism. Specifically, he took issue with the influence of Chan and other domestic schools of thought that formed after Buddhism was introduced to China. He associated Chan with a simplified rhetoric that emphasized direct experience (“pointing directly to mind”) and condemned relying on language (“words and letters”) as an obstacle to enlightenment. Due to such anti-intellectual prejudices, argued Ouyang, Chinese Buddhists were largely ignorant of their scriptures and lacked a precise understanding of those few doctrines they knew. They could not discern between superior and inferior interpretations of the Teachings and exalted authorities whose intellectual and spiritual accomplishments were relatively meagre. Moreover, their progress from “mystical talk” toward “true belief” was hampered by their narrow-minded aversion to sophisticated methodologies of studying Buddhist texts, either traditional or modern (Ouyang 1976: 1359–60).

The critique of *The Awakening of Faith* contained in the *Talks* is meant to illustrate these general issues. Its focal point is the way in which the treatise explains the “true suchness” (*zhenru* 真如), an all-important category of Sinitic Buddhist thought. In its basic meaning, the term refers to reality as it really is, or the reality perceived by the enlightened mind. This understanding was considered sufficient by Ouyang, who construed the very term “true suchness” as a purely apophatic (negative) description

of reality that defies any descriptions and definitions.⁶ On Ouyang’s reading, the author of the *The Awakening of Faith* went far beyond this basic understanding and described “true suchness” in terms that evince some metaphysical entity underlying the manifold of phenomena. Moreover, his descriptions of this entity are rife with paradoxes. Even though “true suchness” is said to be something immutable, unconditioned, and self-sufficient, it supposedly serves as the basis for dependently originating dharmas (phenomena) and “permeates” (literally: “perfumes”) the fleeting and restless realm experienced by ordinary deluded consciousness. These grand claims support a peculiar vision of subjectivity, according to which the ignorant and suffering mind of an unenlightened person is inseparable from the immaculate *tathāgatagarbha* (the “Womb of Buddha”), the ever-present potential for gnostic self-liberation.

Barring several largely forgotten scholastic controversies in the Tang period, the above account had gone virtually undisputed for centuries, becoming the staple of both theory and practice of Chinese Buddhism. Ouyang broke from this consensus in the name of what had hitherto been a marginal and isolated strand of Sinitic heritage—a lineage of scholiasts loyal to South Asian interpretations of Consciousness-only (*Yogācāra*) thought that was transmitted to China by Xuanzang (玄奘, 602–664) and reintroduced after centuries of neglect by Ouyang’s teacher Yang Wenhui (楊文會, 1837–1911) based on texts recovered from Japan. Relying on their authority, Ouyang argued that the account of “true suchness” given in the *The Awakening of Faith* could not be considered definite. It was not consistent with the general thrust of Buddhist teachings, according to which all phenomena arise due to a confluence of causes and conditions and have no fixed ontological foundation or essence. Moreover, it was conceptually confused, as it ignored some basic philosophical distinctions and fell into numerous self-contradictions. In spite of these reservations, Ouyang did not question the traditional ascription of *The Awakening*

6. Sinitic scholiasts traditionally distinguished between the two methods (“gates”) of expounding Buddhist doctrine: by the way of direct and affirmative statements (*biaoquan* 表詮) or by negating incorrect or inadequate formulations (*zhequan* 遮詮) (FGDC:6191). According to the common understanding, the “affirmative” descriptions implied actual existence of the object in question, whereas descriptions of the latter kind had no such existential import.

of *Faith* to “bodhisattva” Aśvaghōṣa. His conclusion regarding the text was that it represented early and immature views of this author, who at the time of writing must have been still influenced by an ancient Indian school belonging to the “Lesser Vehicle” of Buddhism. Those searching for definite statements of Mahāyāna thought were therefore advised to turn their attention to the neglected corpus of Yogācāra texts transmitted to China by Xuanzang (Ouyang 1976: 1378–1384).⁷

Ouyang’s claims elicited several polemical responses, the best known of which was that of Taixu (*Fofa zong jueze tan* 佛法總抉擇談, published in December 1922). Whereas Taixu devoted considerable attention to philosophical aspects of the debate, the main message his text conveys to Ouyang is that Buddhists should not draw on particular lineages or scriptures to undermine Buddhist credentials of other canonical sources. Taixu argued that alleged inconsistencies between and within various doctrines are, in fact, mere differences of emphasis that can be decoded by applying a proper hermeneutical scheme. By defending the authority of Aśvaghōṣa and Chinese tradition, the reformist monk defended his own modernist agenda. Both Ouyang and Taixu actively researched and promoted a system of thought associated with Consciousness-only tradition. Moreover, they both touted it as the pillar of reformed Chinese Buddhism, fit to withstand intellectual and social challenges of modernization. However, as the debate made clear, they had widely conflicting expectations as to the role Consciousness-only could play in adapting Chinese Buddhism to the spirit of the age. For Ouyang, it was the means of *rectifying* Chinese Buddhist tradition—removing the kernel of orthodoxy, set out in a scholastically rigid fashion in ancient Indian treatises, from the husk of misleading or confused interpretations that prevailed in contemporary China. Taixu, on the other hand, championed a more ecumenical and inclusive approach. In his view, the edifice of Sinitic Buddhist thought and practice built around the notions of “true suchness” or the pure “nature” of mind had to remain intact. Scholars of Yogācāra were expected not to question, but to serve this received tradition by systematizing it and translating it into a new language that would resonate

7. For detailed discussions of Ouyang’s arguments, see Cheng (2000: 416–428) and Aviv (2008: 138–149).

with modern people's scientific and activist mindset.⁸

Tang's initial position in this conflict may not be as clear as the secondary literature on the subject would suggest. In 1923—the year when he joined the debate—his cooperation with Taixu had only begun to take off. His reformist manifesto calling for new methods of preaching Buddhism to Chinese people, published only one year later, mentions *both* Taixu and Ouyang Jingwu as his major inspirations. Whereas Tang's zeal to display the activist and “this-worldly” side of Buddhism owed much to the program of Taixu, he had little sympathy for Chan and was increasingly convinced of the superiority of Consciousness-only doctrines. These traits positioned him as a potential ally of the China Institute of Inner Studies. Moreover, in the early 1920s Tang still maintained respectful contact with Yinguang (印光, 1861–1940), the charismatic monk and preacher of Pure Land Buddhism who had overseen his conversion to Buddhism in the previous decade. Yinguang, who stressed the primacy of practice over textual study, was deeply distrustful of modernist fascination with Consciousness-only scholasticism. In this sense, he remained aloof from either side of the debate, condemning Ouyang from the position of a conservative devotee. Whereas by the time the debate took place Tang had already joined the modernist camp, he would still acknowledge Yinguang's authority, alongside those of Taixu and Ouyang.⁹

The impulse that prompted Tang Dayuan to take a clear stance in the debate was the second attack on *The Awakening of Faith* by an author associated with the said Institute. The attack was delivered in a lengthy treatise called *Examinations of The Awakening of Faith* (*'Dasheng qixin lun' liaojian* 大乘起信論料簡), written by Ouyang's younger associate, Wang Enyang.¹⁰ Unlike Ouyang's lectures, Wang's work was devoted

8. Taixu was quoted as saying that his interest in Yogācāra is motivated by two objectives: to “put in order” (*zhengli* 整理) various Buddhist doctrines, as well as non-Buddhist thought of either Asia and the West, and to adapt his preaching to mentality of his contemporaries; his main intention, however, was to propagate Chan and Pure Land—the two main strands of traditional Chinese practice (MFQ 165: 282, TDQS 25[49]: 103).

9. See the preface to Tang's *Standards of the New Buddhization* (*Xin Fohua zhi biao zhun* 新佛化之標準) published in the *Haichaoyin* journal ran by Taixu (MFQ 159: 256).

10. Contemporary reprint in Zhang (1978: 83–121)

exclusively to the refutation of the treatise in question. His arguments were built upon those of his mentor, but he gave them a much more radical twist. Whereas Ouyang criticized the treatise as an immature work of an otherwise great Buddhist scholiast, Wang lambasted it as an outright forgery, a product of a moderately gifted Chinese layman. As for its content, he declared it completely unorthodox and went as far as to compare it with non-Buddhist ideas of a divine absolute or God (Zhang 1978: 110). As if those claims were not radical enough, he supported them with the authority of contemporaneous Japanese Buddhologists, who applied methods of modern textual criticism to demonstrate that *The Awakening of Faith* was apocryphal (Zhang 1978: 117).¹¹

These developments prompted Tang to weigh in on the controversy with his terse *Admonition Concerning the 'Examinations of The Awakening of Faith'* ('*Qixin lun liaojian' zhi zhonggao* 起信論料簡之忠告).¹² The text, published in August 1923 in the *Haichaoyin* (MFQ 156: 405–6) (a Buddhist journal associated with Taixu) was addressed directly and personally to Wang Enyang, with whom Tang had already been corresponding on issues related to Buddhist doctrine. Tang's "admonition" targeted the relentlessly polemical attitude of his opponent, which on Tang's account did not befit a respectable Buddhist scholar. Remarkably, Tang was initially reluctant to engage in more detailed doctrinal discussions with the China Institute of Inner Studies. He changed his mind only after a conversation with his younger brother made him realize that Ouyang's and Wang's criticism severely undermined the authority of the *The Awakening of Faith* among the younger generation. Within a year Tang published an extensive follow-up to the *Admonition*, called *The Resolving of Doubts About 'The Awakening of Faith'* (*Qixin lun jiehuo* 起信論解惑), a work that remained his most comprehensive—and the most polemical—

11. Wang referred to a newly published *Evidential Research on the The Awakening of Faith* (*Dacheng Qixinlun kaozheng* 大乘起信論考證) by the famous secular intellectual Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929) (for contemporary reprint, see Zhang 1978: 13–72), which discussed critical studies on the text carried out in Japan. Liang himself accepted the view that the treatise was apocryphal, yet had its content and author in high esteem (Aviv 2008: 155–57).

12. The text also appeared in another journal, *Foguang* (MFQ 12: 475–8). For a contemporary reprint, see Zhang (1978: 161–4).

statement on the controversial treatise.¹³ Contrary to the author's intentions, "*Resolving of Doubts*" rekindled the controversy by provoking further questions from its readers. In this situation, Tang attempted to settle the matter once and for all by "clarifying misunderstandings" and "explaining the proper doctrine" in a yet another short essay, called "*The Correct Exposition of True Suchness*" (*Zhenru zhengquan* 真如正詮).¹⁴ The *Correct Exposition* succinctly recaps major points made in two previous works, yet ends on a conciliatory note, praising Ouyang and Wang for their honest efforts to clarify Buddhist teachings. Nonetheless, Tang's polemical letters and essays related to the *The Awakening of Faith* continued to appear in Buddhist journals of the time.¹⁵

As can be seen from the above overview, there is no reason to think that Tang's access to debate was dictated by some partisan loyalty to Taixu's cause. It may be assumed that he genuinely believed it was wrong for Buddhists to discuss their doctrine by probing the authenticity of particular teachings or texts. In this sense, his polemics with the China Institute of Inner Studies exposed differences that were running much deeper than sectarian identities. It is, of course, possible to read it as an exchange about the authorship of *The Awakening of Faith*, its doctrinal consistency, and the methods of its study. Nonetheless, as will be argued below, particular disagreements on these points reveal two different approaches to a much more fundamental problem—namely, whether critical attitude can be reconciled with Buddhist wisdom.

13. For a contemporary reprint, see Zhang (1978: 133–150).

14. Published in the *Haichaoyin* journal (MFQ 157: 256–7) and reprinted in Tang (1927b: 43–6). Contemporary reprints available in Zhang (1978: 159–160), and WWQB (66: 119–122).

15. See, for example, Tang's response to Yan Huixin (顏慧欣, ?–?) published in a 1924 edition of the *Haichaoyin* (MFQ 158: 212), or his response to Wang Enyang's *Some Doubts about Explaining The Awakening of Faith by the Means of Consciousness-only* (*Qixinlun weishi shi zhiyi* 起信論唯識釋質疑), which appeared in the same journal in 1926 (MFQ 165: 301–304).

3. The issue of critical Knowledge

As mentioned above, Ouyang’s criticism of the *The Awakening of Faith* was a major argument in a broader critique of Sinitic tradition. Perhaps the most serious charge that emerged from this critique was that Chinese approaches to Buddhism simplified and distorted its core ideal—namely, the ideal of Gnosis or Knowledge (智).¹⁶ In his *Talks*, Ouyang defined Knowledge as a kind of cognition through which one “ascertains” (*jueze* 抉擇), that is, “distinguishes” (*juebie* 抉別) or “selects” (*jianze* 簡擇) reality as it really is, as opposed to its illusory appearances. This Knowledge consists of several moments, none of which can be dismissed as redundant. Initially, it involves discursive thinking of the kind used in everyday life, thanks to which one can apply Buddhist teachings about the correct vision of reality. When the mind ceases to discriminate between subject and object and no longer imposes conceptual distinctions of its own making, one attains what may be called “fundamental” or “root knowledge” (*genben zhi* 根本智). Even though such non-conceptual contemplative insight already reveals the “true suchness,” it cannot be equated with the complete attainment of Buddhist gnosis. This is because “fundamental knowledge” by itself could never “produce verbal discourse for the benefit of others” (*qi yanshuo yi li ta* 起言說以利他) (Ouyang 1976: 1367). Therefore, it is not sufficient to put into practice the Mahāyāna ideal of a bodhisattva—someone who “regards others as oneself” and vows not to attain liberation until others are saved from the consequences of *their* ignorance.¹⁷ To carry out this resolve, a bodhisattva needs to communicate with those who still rely on a conceptual and dualistic mode of thought. He is supposed to gain expertise in Buddhist teachings, as well as secular “sciences,”

16. Ouyang clearly distinguishes “Knowledge” from mere “wisdom” and “sagaciousness” (*hui* 慧), which represents more shallow insight and may have more mundane applications. His usage of these terms follows the scholastic distinction between *jñāna* and *prajñā* (Nakamura 1989: 561) rather than widespread understanding of *zhi* in the sense of “wisdom.”

17. Notably, in this context Ouyang paraphrases one the vows of bodhisattva Dharmākara (future Buddha Amitābha) from *The Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* (*Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經), a foundational text of the Pure Land tradition.

such as logic, grammar, mathematics, or medicine, to become a teacher of humankind. Most importantly, he needs to operate within the ordinary language-based view of reality without becoming attached to it or deceived by it. These are the characteristics of the second aspect of Knowledge, the “knowledge acquired subsequently [to enlightenment]” (*houde zhi* 後得智).¹⁸

Ouyang’s major issue with the mainstream Chinese tradition was its continuous neglect of this final moment of Buddhist gnosis. From his perspective, the overemphasis on “fundamental knowledge” cast doubt on pretty much everything that had been written about Buddhism in China after the Tang period. Even later commentators of Yogācāra works, few as they were, reduced Knowledge to a personal awareness of truth and ignored its “wondrous functioning” (*miaoyong* 妙用). i.e., active application in the world (Ouyang 1976: 1370). To a large extent, this critique summed up and articulated several postulates that had been current among educated Chinese laymen for decades, if not centuries.¹⁹ In Ouyang’s case, however, such critical sentiments gained a very sophisticated theoretical underpinning. Old vices of Chinese Buddhism could now be blamed on their misunderstanding of the very *summum*

18. The *loci classici* in this case are Asaṅga’s *Mahāyānasamgraha* and its commentary by Vasubandhu (see T31:1594.143a24-b2 or T31:1597.366a15-29). The distinction between “fundamental” and “subsequently acquired” Knowledge appears in some fairly ancient texts of Chinese Buddhist canon, especially the corpus of Consciousness-only works associated with doctrinal lineage of Xuanzang. However, it never became a major concern of later Sinitic scholiasts—at least not in the sense which Ouyang wanted to understand it (Aviv 2008: 114–115).

19. Signs of conflict between scholiasts attracted to the rigor of Consciousness-only thought and the anti-intellectual wing of Chan can arguably be discerned already in the Ming period (see, for example, Wang Kentang’s [王肯堂 1552?–1638] preface to a commentary on the *Cheng weishi lun zhengyi* 成唯識論證義 in X50:822.829c6). Criticisms of Chan gained force in the late 19th century and the early 20th century spearheaded by educated Buddhist laypeople such as Yang Wenhui or Shen Shandeng (沈善登, 1830–1902), or Buddhist-leaning intellectuals such as Zhang Taiyan (Aviv 2008: 94–101; Chen 2003: 295–304). In his description of ten major schools of Buddhism, Yang characterized “the Cì’ēn school” (a byword for Sinitic branch of Yogācāra) as specialized in “refuting heterodoxy” and clarifying conceptual confusion to which followers of Chan were prone (Yang 2000: 152).

bonum of Buddhism, the idea of Knowledge. This conviction justified the unprecedented strictness and earnestness with which members of the China Institute of Inner Studies pursued the ideal of orthodoxy.²⁰ Unlike their Chan opponents, Ouyang’s disciples did not consider engaging in verbal disputes or “relying on words and letters” as contrary to the essence of Buddhism. In their view, discriminating between what is so and not so, what is true and what is false, was an indispensable part of bodhisattva practice.

Tang must have been well aware of these far-reaching implications of Ouyang’s theory of Gnosis. Perhaps for this reason, the *Admonition*, his first contribution to the debate, begins with a lengthy discussion of the relation between words and truth. Interestingly, Tang supports his own stance on this issue with the authority of the ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (莊子, ca. 4th century B.C.). The *Admonition* begins with a quote from one of the “Inner Chapters” of the treatise attributed to Zhuangzi. The quote runs as follows:

How can Tao be so obscured that there should be a distinction of true and false? How can speech be so obscured that there should be a distinction of right and wrong? (...) Tao is obscured by petty biases and speech is obscured by flowery expressions (Chan 1963: 182).²¹

Tang’s interpretation of this passage follows a contemporaneous commentary written by the modernist scholar Zhang Taiyan (章太炎, 1868-1936).²² Apparently, Tang understood Zhuangzi as saying that

20. James Bissett Pratt, the American philosopher who met Ouyang during his travels in China in the 1920s, remarked that lay Yogācāra scholars were the only Buddhists he had ever met who *used the word heresy or its equivalent* (Pratt 1928: 408).

21. 「道惡乎隱而有真偽？言惡乎隱而有是非？[...] 道隱於小成，言隱於榮華」(quoted in Zhang 1978: 161). Punctuation in this and following quotes has been modified by the author.

22. The fragment in question is extracted from a larger argument directed against ancient disputants representing competing schools of thought, such as Confucian or Mohist. The author intends to demonstrate that their disputations are futile, as they erroneously absolutize partial viewpoints. Accordingly, he advocates “equalizing” competing discourses from the perspective that transcends and relativizes all distinctions and oppositions suggested by language or culture (Mori 1986: 40). As shown by Murthy (2014), Zhang Taiyan invested Zhuangzi’s ideas with a contemporary significance, using them as a point of reference in his own

Dao—the proper and natural “way” of doing things—does not need to be expressed in words. Deliberating what is true or false, or what is right or wrong, is already a sign that the Way has been “obscured” and replaced by artificially created norms. Responsibility for this rests with those individuals who absolutize their own partial viewpoints (“petty biases”) and seek recognition by asserting their claims over rival ones (the “flowery” words). (Zhang 1978: 161). From this perspective, the very practice of argumentation is a symptom of failure—a failure that stems from a cognitive error (mistaking one’s own perspective for the whole), yet at its roots is a moral deficiency based on the vain desire of recognition.

Zhuangzi’s observations pertain to what, from the Buddhist perspective, are secular affairs. However, Tang believes that the observations of the ancient philosopher are even more pertinent to the lofty matter of Buddhist practice. In its essence, Buddhist teachings are *beyond speech, words and letters, objects apprehended by the mind and such* (Zhang 1978: 161). Preaching Buddhist wisdom in terms of particular truths, or norms, is a concession needed to accommodate it to the ignorant perspective of ordinary people. Accordingly, debating these truths and norms is justified only in cases in which it serves to correct the stubbornness of those attached to their one-sided views, or to clarify confusion caused by their sophistry. Even in these cases, debaters need to control and mitigate their own motivation to avoid repeating the mistake of those they censure. To illustrate this point, Tang refers to another pre-Buddhist Chinese classic, this time taken from the Confucian canon—the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學):

Students of Buddhism cannot do without arguing, but neither can they argue too much. It is the same as in the case of the (Confucian) Way of the Great Learning: if one does not argue, then the illustrious virtue will not be illuminated by itself; when renewing the people,²³ if one does not argue, then the common folk will not renew itself. As for attaining the highest good: if one argues how to attain the highest good and knows where to

critique of modernity.

23. Following the emendation to the text of *Great Learning* suggested by the Song Neo-Confucians Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033–1107) and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200), Tang explicated the original phrase “to be close to people” (*qinmin* 親民) as to “renew the people” (*xinmin* 新民) (SSD:4).

stop, this is in accord with the Middle Way. However, if one debates about how to attain the highest good without stopping [at the proper juncture], then one is inevitably led astray [by the desire] to bolster one's arguments. This is what [Zhuangzi] meant by saying that "*Tao is obscured by petty biases and speech is obscured by flowery expressions.*"²⁴

In keeping with such declarations, throughout the debate Tang remained extremely apologetic about his own his role in what was effectively an argument between fellow Buddhists. In the preface to *The Resolving of Doubts*, he states that he "could not but" (*budebu* 不得不) write down his thoughts to apply them as "medicine" against his adversaries' misguided attachment to written words. Furthermore, he "could not but" set forth his own arguments to dispel confusion caused by his adversaries' excessive argumentativeness. At the same time, he cautions Wang Enyang that words and arguments can never intimate the ineffable Way; intellectual understanding, the study of sūtras and doctrines, needs to be paired with individual practices, among which Tang recommends recollecting Buddha Amitābha (*nianfo* 念佛) and sitting meditation (*chanzuo* 禪坐). In sum, Tang portrays his opponent as someone who lost the necessary balance between intellectual understanding and the tacit comprehension of the unspeakable (Zhang 1978: 147–8).²⁵

Even though Tang does not contradict the points Ouyang made regarding Buddhist theory of wisdom, it is clear he is not willing to join his quest to rehabilitate conceptual knowledge. Instead, he chooses to remind his opponent that truth is something that is lived, rather than cognized, and put into practice, rather than discussed. On a less charitable reading, Tang's argumentation may be regarded as an example of polemical strategy that Hakamaya Noriaki, speaking from the standpoint of Critical Buddhism,

24. 「鑽研佛學者，不可無辯，亦不可過辯。如大學之道，不辯則明德不能自明。 在新民，不辯則庶民不能自新。 在止於至善，辯至於至善而知止，斯合於中道； 如辯至至善而猶不止，則不得不偏趨於他途以騁其辯。此之謂「道隱於小成，言隱於榮華」(Zhang 1978: 161–2)

25. In the preface to *The Resolving of Doubts* Tang mentions his involvement in the "concentration of no-strife" (*wuzheng sanmei* 無諍三昧), a kind of Buddhist practice that stipulates avoiding all arguments or disputes (Zhang 1978: 133) (for an explanation of the practice, see FGDC: 5137).

associated with the “topical” Sinitic thought represented by Daoism: evading rational scrutiny of one’s beliefs by *derid[ing] language* and *mak[ing] personality the issue* (Hakamaya 1990: 26, 1997: 70). However, such a judgment would not do justice to Tang’s intentions. This becomes clear when Tang’s response to Wang Enyang is compared with that of his mentor Yinguang. Yinguang not only refused to discuss the charges leveled against the *The Awakening of Faith*, but took straight to chastising the treatise’s detractors as *self-conceited demon seed, who seek vain recognition while pretending to preach the Dharma*.²⁶ By contrast, Tang clearly aimed at a systematic and theoretically well-grounded retort to the China Institute of Inner Studies. In his case, the idea of an ineffable Way informs a consistent hermeneutical standpoint, presented as an alternative to the critical approach of Ouyang and Wang. The main reason he took his opponents to task was not their intellectualized approach or alleged lack of meditational attainment. Rather, it was the way in which they read and interpreted Buddhist texts.

4. The issue of critical exegesis

As mentioned above, according to Ouyang Jingwu, the activity of “selecting” or “choosing” between truth and delusion was a necessary condition of putting Buddhist ideals into practice. The domain in which this “selectiveness” had to be applied most strictly was exegesis of Buddhist scriptures. After all, one of the major faults that Ouyang found with contemporaneous Chinese Buddhists was their unwillingness to discern between the superior and inferior elements of their tradition (Ouyang 1976: 1359-60). Ouyang’s premise was that the vast Buddhist canon preserved and circulated in China contained numerous doctrinal interpretations and textual sources, some of which were less reliable than others. It had to be actively studied and evaluated in order to avoid “mistaking a fish eye for a pearl,” as in the case of *The Awakening of Faith*. In Ouyang’s lectures, *The Awakening of Faith* is scrutinized against the twofold criteria of traditional scholiasts: its consistency with the “teachings” (教) (here: the corpus of Consciousness-only sūtras and treatises) and with the “principles” (*li*

26. 「大我慢魔種，借弘法之名以求名利」 (quoted in Chen and Deng 2000: 257).

理) that could be rationally deduced on their basis (Ouyang 1976: 1384). Wang Enyang took these claims further, stating that the Buddha himself expected his followers to “ascertain” and “examine” his own teachings in order to sift their true interpretations from spurious imitations (Zhang 1978: 117). His own denunciation of the treatise was based on four criteria: “correct reasoning” (*zhengli* 正理), “holy words” (*shengyan* 聖言), “wisdom gained by hearing and contemplating the Teachings” (*wen si hui* 聞思慧), and “pure knowledge derived from inference” (*jing biliang zhi* 淨比量智) (Zhang 1978: 83). The notion of “inference” refers in this case to inferences formalized according to the rules of the “science of reasons” (*hetu-vidyā* or *yinming* 因明), or “Buddhist logic.” To those acquainted with Buddhist epistemology, the emphasis on Buddha’s authority and inferential knowledge declared by both authors had an obvious critical implication. It indicated their protest against the excessive emphasis that Sinitic tradition placed on the third of the commonly recognized “means of valid cognition,” direct experience (*xianliang* 現量). In Ouyang’s understanding (1976: 1359), direct access to truth was a privilege of enlightened beings, and even in their case, it had to be attained and verified through internalizing the Teachings.

In his polemics, Tang also underlines the epistemological gap between knowledge of the Buddha and that of ordinary commoners. However, his respect towards the scripture is based on a largely different exegetical premise. According to Tang, all statements recorded in the *sūtras* respond to particular views that were voiced by the opponents or disciples of Buddha Śākyamuni. Since their intent was to correct the erroneous or incomplete understanding of the Buddha’s interlocutors, they can be properly understood only in the context of the particular discourse they were meant to correct. One implication of this view is that no particular text or body of doctrine, no matter how rigorously or convincingly formulated, can be employed to refute views that were intended for a different audience in a different polemical context. The Buddha had no “definite” or “fixed” teachings (*dingfa* 定法) that could be enshrined as the ultimate dogma. Moreover, he clearly expected his future followers to synthesize and reconcile (*ronghui guantong* 融會貫通) his teachings and not to reject any of them as inferior. Hence, critical strategies employed by

Ouyang to probe the Mahāyāna credentials of *The Awakening of Faith* rest on misguided assumptions:

In the sūtras and treatises, Buddhas and bodhisattvas occasionally distinguish the “Lesser” [Vehicle of Hinayāna from the Great Vehicle of Mahāyāna] and refute heretical views. However, those are all skillful means (*upāya*). The intent [of such statements] lies beyond words, and they are not something that should [breed] obstinate attachment.²⁷

In *The Resolving of Doubts*, Tang argues that the Buddha’s intent had been well understood by the ancient forerunners of Consciousness-only thought. It was not until the times of Bhāviveka (Qingbian 清辯) and Dharmapāla (Hufa 護法), roughly corresponding to the 6th century A.D., that Buddhists started to form separate traditions (*zong*宗—in this context it may be justified to translate the term as “schools”). These two camps were not necessarily opposed to each other. Rather, each of them chose to emphasize one of two complementary aspects of the Buddha’s teachings: on the one hand, the truth that all phenomena are “empty” of independent existence; on the other hand, the truth that phenomena exist as dependent on other phenomena. For those who grasped the central insight of Buddhist philosophy—namely, that “Emptiness and Being mutually complete each other” (*kong you xiang cheng*空有相成)—such differences of approach or emphasis have never posed interpretational difficulties. However, those who lacked this comprehension took to fortifying themselves with the partisan stances of the said “schools,” leading to a proliferation of futile intra-Buddhist debates (Zhang 1978: 134). According to Tang, criticizing the author of *The Awakening of Faith* on the grounds that he “reified” true suchness into some supra-mundane absolute was another instance of such a misunderstanding. The charge is one-sided, as it abstracts the description of true suchness from its pragmatic intention and context:

Those attached to “nothingness” (i.e. nihilists) doubt that true suchness is [something more than mere] illusion. Therefore, [the Buddha] preached about [the ultimate] reality. Those attached to “being” (i.e., naïve realists) develop perverted views relying on [the

27. 「佛、菩薩所說經論雖有時簡小、破外，皆為方便。意在言外，非可固執」 (Zhang 1978: 161)

concept of] true suchness. Hence, [the Buddha] preached about “true suchness” [rather than being] (...) Accordingly, it should be known that what is called “suchness” is neither empty nor existent, neither illusory nor real, neither permeated nor incapable of being permeated, neither permeating nor incapable of permeating (...) it is only because [the Buddha preached] according to conditions and specific capacities of listeners, [using] expedient teachings and skillful means, that he talked about Emptiness or Being. In fact, nothing can be said about either Emptiness or Being.²⁸

As can be seen, Tang's hermeneutical premises militate against establishing the doctrinal principles of a particular school as the supreme criteria of orthodoxy and “heresy.” They also provide hardly any justification for seeking such criteria outside the scriptures, for example in rational argumentation. Since, in various contexts, Buddha pronounced a number of statements that appear to be mutually contradictory, a skillful debater can always isolate one such statement and shore it up with formally flawless reasoning. Even though he may claim to have refuted some tenets of a rival school, in fact, such inferences are no more than pure sophistry (Zhang 1978: 161).

In *The Resolving of Doubts*, Tang is slightly more specific about his skeptical attitude towards “Buddhist logic” (Zhang 1978: 146-7). He appears to believe that the actual practice of debating renders the formalized principles useless. For example, according to the rules set forth in the classic *hetu-vidyā* treatises, an inference must support a clearly defined “own thesis” that is not accepted by the opponent. At the same time, the two sides need to arrive at consensus (*jicheng* 極成) about the meaning and scope of the terms used in an inference. Such a consensus ensures that both the proponent and the opponent know what they are discussing and understand the logic behind each other's arguments. However, the consensus between debaters can be impossible to reach, as

28. 「彼執無者疑真如為虛幻，故說真實。執有者依真如起妄倒，故說真如 [...]。應知是真如者，非空非有，非虛非實，非受熏，非不受熏，非能熏，非不能熏 [...] 惟因隨事對機，善權方便，說空說有。實則空、有皆不可說」 (Zhang 1978: 160)

it is not uncommon that many inferences contradict one another, with no agreement as to which one is right.²⁹ On the other hand, rigid distinctions between the theses of the proponent's and opponent's respective schools are to a large extent artificial. This second point is spelled out in a rather puzzling passage in which Tang draws on the famous moral maxim of Confucius to censor the enthusiasts of "Buddhist logic":

If you wish to establish your own stance, at times you have to borrow from the stance of your opponent. In such a case, if both stances originally support each other, what need is there to criticize the opponent's view? Moreover, if establishing one's own stance requires borrowing from the opponent's stance, then how is criticizing the opponent different from criticizing oneself? "*Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you—this is the way of loyalty and altruism.*"³⁰ This is already true about worldly affairs. How could it not be applicable to Buddhist teachings?³¹

Putting aside somewhat obscure details of Tang's views on *hetu-vidyā*, the general thrust of his arguments is rather obvious. From the conviction that truth is fundamentally ineffable, Tang draws the conclusion that the issue of what represents "true" Buddhism cannot be ascertained by means of words. While he agrees with his opponents that multiple interpretations of the Teachings constitute a hermeneutical problem, his solution to this problem is exactly the opposite. Where Ouyang and Wang counsel polemical confrontation based on common standards of rationality, Tang advocates reconciliation of conflicting views, either by focusing on their common elements or by appealing to some "higher order" perspective. Seen along these lines, the polemics appear as an intra-Buddhist argument about the style of exegesis that reflects the original intent of the sūtras.

29. Tang provides an example of a contemporaneous doctrinal debate in which three different scholars contradicted each other's views, without having settled the dispute.

30. A paraphrase of *The Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) 15.23 (*Wei Ling gong* 衛靈公 chapter). Translation based on Chan (1963: 44).

31. 「然若知欲成立自宗，有時必取資他宗，則自他本可相成，何必相攻？又應知成自必取資於他，則攻他何殊於攻自？己所不欲，勿施於人，忠恕之道也。世法且然，何況佛法」(Zhang 1978: 146-7)

However, as will be argued further, the real subject of contention in this case is more complex. The issue at stake is rather a style of hermeneutics that allows for a Buddhist response to external criticisms of tradition: a criticism of the kind that was not anticipated by pre-modern exegetes.

5. The issue of critical history

The doctrinal authority that *The Awakening of Faith* commanded among Chinese Buddhists rested on two main pillars: Firstly, its ascription to the famed “bodhisattva,” Aśvaghōṣa, a figure whose credentials as the principal transmitter of Buddha’s teachings were rarely doubted; secondly, the testimony of countless generations of Sinitic scholiasts of virtually all major doctrinal lineages and factions. Challenging the authority of such a text required recourse to something more than the “means of cognition” formalized by Buddhist tradition, such as teachings and inference. Conservative opponents could always reply—as in fact they did—that the alleged doctrinal and logical blunders were intended by the compassionate teacher as “skillful means,” adjusted to a particular context and audience, and made perfect sense from the perspective of someone who had gained first-hand insight into truth. In order to reach its target, the critique must therefore have been supported by an additional criterion, which allowed at least some degree of distance from the inherited web of beliefs. For Ouyang Jingwu, this additional criterion was consistency with “historical facts” (*shishi* 史實).

Ouyang’s decision to support doctrinal arguments with appeals to history cannot be explained by his identity as a revivalist of Consciousness-only thought. As pointed out by Eyal Aviv (2008: 30–2), Ouyang’s historical approach to Buddhist texts owes much to the legacy of the so-called “evidential studies” (*kaozhengxue* 考證學 or 考據學), a strand of Confucian scholarship that flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the characteristic traits of this movement was its readiness to question mainstream tradition in the name of recovering its purportedly more true and orthodox strand. The method employed to achieve this goal was critical study of texts, which exposed the profane history of

their transmission and in this way did not allow for explaining internal inconsistencies by the inscrutable intentions of the sages. The similarities between this strategy and the one adopted by Ouyang are rather striking.³² However, in the decade of the 1920s, appeal to “historical facts” implied much more than Confucian inspirations. The debate occurred at a time when investigations into the history of canonical texts, be they Buddhist or Confucian, could already be carried out not in the name of tradition, but rather in the name of taking tradition to task.³³ On the one hand, the contemporary New Culture Movement in China made first strides towards “critical liberation of historical studies” by applying scientific standards of objectivity to *dissolve the factual claims of the myths that supported (...) tradition* (Schwartz 2002: 114). On the other hand, there was the example of critical historical studies on Buddhist texts in Japan, whose results were included in Wang Enyang’s denouncement of *The Awakening of Faith*. These developments confronted educated Chinese Buddhists with a new challenge which could not have arisen without indirect inspiration from Western enlightenment—the challenge of demythologization, defined as the modern drive to question the *absolute dignity of assertions, doctrines, concepts of ideas [...] which in reality can be reduced to the products of human beings* (Adorno 2001: 65).

Ouyang’s attitude towards these new developments was somewhat ambiguous. As already mentioned, one of the major faults that Ouyang found with contemporaneous Chinese Buddhists in his *Talks on Ascertaining the Consciousness-only Doctrine* was their reluctance to adopt “new methods” of studying scriptures that were based on “worldly”

32. According to the definition of Paul S. Ropp (1981: 43, quoted in Quirin 1996, 36 n. 9): *kaozheng* (literally, ‘search for evidence’) refers to careful textual studies based on minute analysis of the language of various extant Confucian texts. The goal of this textual research was to clarify and strengthen the classical Confucian heritage by sifting out the true from the false and determining the true message of the ancient sages, untainted by interpolations and distortions of later period.

33. The extent of continuity between “evidential studies” of early modern Confucian scholars and modern historicism in China has been a debated issue (Quirin 1996). It is worthy of notice that while Wang Enyang in his *Examinations* appears to regard *kaozheng* and modern historical criticism as more or less synonymous, Tang takes him to task for not making a clear distinction between the two.

(secular) standards. This could well suggest that his Institute of Inner Studies was open to some form of cooperation with the “demystifying” forces of modernity—at least to the extent that such cooperation could be helpful in the enterprise of getting Sinitic Buddhism back on the right doctrinal track. For Tang Dayuan, however, recourse to the secular history of the text appeared as a fundamentally “un-Buddhist” approach. Considering Tang’s views on the role of language and the proper methodology of textual exegesis, it is not difficult to see why he would object to such a perspective. From his point of view, the historical development of the doctrine was a display of unnecessary argumentativeness, rather than a struggle between orthodoxy and heresy. Moreover, since words and scriptures are not what Buddhism was about, there is nothing of substantial value that could be learned from tracing the history of canonical text as such. In *The Resolving of Doubts*, Tang declares that he is not even interested in discussing this aspect of the matter:

Someone may ask: Why is it that you only explain the doubts raised in (Wang Enyang’s) *Examinations*, yet you do not say anything about the evidential research? My answer is as follows: evidential research is a method that draws on histori[cal sources] to conclude that there was no man called Aśvaghōṣa, or that *The Awakening of Faith* is an apocryphal text. It amounts to nothing more than the [usual] style of “evidential” scholars of Confucian classics (...).³⁴ People who have a tad of comprehension of Buddhist principles can only dismiss it with a laugh.³⁵

The contrast that Tang draws between “history” and “principles” resembles the approach of Ouyang’s celebrated teacher, Yang Wenhui. In spite of his close contact with Nanjō Bun’yū (南条文雄, 1847–1927), the Japanese priest who became the pioneer of critical religious studies in East Asia, Yang remained steadfastly opposed to modern methodologies for studying Buddhism. He balked at the idea that a doctrine that demonstrates that

34. The omitted fragment mentions a contemporaneous controversy that deserves a separate treatment.

35. 「問云：何但解「料簡」之惑，不及考證？曰：考證只就歷史說馬鳴無其人，與「起信」偽作，不過經生考據氣習 [...] 稍解佛理者，一笑置之而已」 (Zhang 1978: 147)

everything in this world is merely a transformation of consciousness could be investigated in terms of its history. He also opined that if historical accounts were to be regarded as the standard of what is true and false, the principle of Consciousness-only could never be established in the first place (Yang 2000: 429). Interestingly, whereas Yang's remarks were directed at "people of the West," Tang Dayuan, writing in the 1920s, apportioned the blame to Japanese scholars, whom he rather condescendingly referred to as *woren* (倭人) or "pygmies":

There is something I would like to caution Wang Enyang about: with his brilliant talent, he is able to study Consciousness-only texts in depth. He could well explain [Buddhist] concepts such as Emptiness or Being in a scientific manner. [In this way] he could lead contemporary scientists and philosophers, as well as exponents of other [Buddhist] vehicles and [non-Buddhist] heresies, to join the path towards Enlightenment. His merit would be truly boundless, and he would accomplish a matter of utmost importance and urgency. If he neglects these possibilities, or continues to openly criticize philosophies of the Far West, while covertly imitating the sophistry of those Japanese pygmies, it will be as if he took one step forward and one step behind (...). Yours truly thinks this is something that does not befit a gentleman.³⁶

Tang's words reflect the increasingly popular Chinese stereotype of Japanese Buddhists as victims of their excessive modernization, which left their tradition devoid of its spiritual core. Apparently, he attributes this failure to their inability to draw the line between those forms of modernity that can be appropriated in Buddhist apologetics—such as science and philosophy—and those whose application will result in nothing but "sophistry." Yet another distinction that Tang cautions his opponent about is that between, on the one hand, traditional "evidential research," which is relatively harmless and to some extent compatible with the spirit of Buddhist scholasticism, and, on the other hand, history, one of the most

36. 「吾欲進忠告於王君：以王君之美材，能於唯識諸籍，徹底研究，就科學之法式詮釋空有等義，引導今世科哲諸學，及外道餘乘同趨覺路，則實無量功德，抑亦當務之急。若忽此不為，或雖明斥遠西哲學，而暗效倭人詭辯，是名捨一取一 [...] 竊為仁者不取」 (Zhang 1978: 163-4)

perilous modern inventions:

Those Japanese pygmies relish in studying Buddhism by relying on the words of historians, or scholars doing evidential research. Those who apply the evidential methods in their research may still contribute somehow to [the study of] Dharma-characteristics.³⁷ [Modern] historians, however, fail to understand that Buddhist teachings have always transcended time. Their approach is not only futile, but even harmful. (...) I wish that gentlemen will set their goals higher, and will not blindly follow [this fashion].³⁸

As can be seen, from his belief that Buddhist truth is “beyond” language, and that it should not be polemically examined and disputed, Tang draws yet another conclusion: that Buddhist truth does not have a history of transmission and therefore cannot be “demythologized” by exposing its profane origins. In this respect, Tang’s reading of the Sinitic Buddhist tradition has a decidedly modern ring.

6. Conclusions

As can be seen from the passages quoted and discussed above, the debate exposed many of the internal tensions within the Sinitic Buddhist tradition, some of which can be traced back at least to the Tang period, if not earlier. It would be possible to read this as, for example, a clash between epistemological and ontological orientations within Chinese thought (Lin 2012: 225–256) or between polemical and irenic styles of traditional Buddhist hermeneutics. It would also make sense to analyze this exchange in terms of interactions between the Buddhist and Confucian approaches to history, especially the Buddhist reception of the Confucian idea of verifying canonical accounts in the light of their “profane” history of transmission. However, these traditional themes need to be considered in the light of the special historical moment in which they were raised. In the

37. Allusion to study of Consciousness-only doctrines.

38. 「彼倭人好以歷史考據家言研究佛學，其以考據法研究者，斯於法相未嘗無補，其歷史研究者，則不知佛法本超時間，非徒無益，而又害之 [...] 願仁者且高著眼，勿但率從可耳」(Zhang 1978: 134)

1920s in China, it became increasingly difficult to commit to traditional Buddhist beliefs and practices without having to respond to criticisms that were voiced from the perspective of secular rationality. The new trends that emerged and dominated intellectual scene in that decade—scientism, socialism, historical movement of “doubting antiquity,” among others—left traditional Buddhists with charges of “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信) (Nedostup 2009) and “passivity” (*xiaoji* 消極), implying a lack of critical discernment regarding established claims to truth and established social reality. At the same time, the phenomenon of modernist Consciousness-only revival demonstrated that Buddhist intellectuals of the time went beyond merely apologetic responses to their secular detractors. As shown in recent research by Justin Ritzinger or Erik Hammerstrom, some of these Buddhist intellectuals were trying to present values such as scientific rationality or social progress as values that were genuinely Buddhist and, in fact, better represented by Buddhism than by mainstream secular models. In this perspective, it may be justified to consider Ouyang’s and Wang’s stances as an attempt to remodel Chinese Buddhism as a form of *indigenous* critical thought. The “building blocks” of this model were borrowed from within Buddhist or Confucian tradition. The central role was assigned to the Buddhist theory of Gnosis based on Consciousness-only doctrines, interpreted in a way that vindicates conceptual thought and secular activity as necessary prerequisites of Buddhahood. Seen in this light, Ouyang and Wang’s attack on the legacy of the *The Awakening of Faith* can be interpreted as a move to sideline those elements of tradition which did not guarantee the critical character of Buddhist philosophy.

Tang’s responses to this vision betray a certain ambiguity. It may be argued that he did not reject the idea of critique, as such, but rather disagreed with the particular pattern of this critique. In Tang’s view, the purpose of a debate was not to select what is right and reject what is wrong but rather to eliminate attachment to extreme one-sided views; the orthodoxy of a text could not be measured against any fixed objective standard but had to be verified through personal insight attained through practice; the activity of debating had to be mitigated by moral rather than epistemological considerations; and, finally, intra-Buddhist debates could never involve collusion with the disenchanting forces of modernity, such as secular

historicism. Tang's own idea of intra-Buddhist critique can perhaps be best discerned in his attempts to "save face" for Wang Enyang by downplaying mutual differences and effectively crediting his opponent through his own approach. One such passage can be found in the *Resolving of Doubts*, where Tang suggests that Wang's refutation of the *The Awakening of Faith* has to be read in the light of its "hidden intents" (*miyi* 密意):

Firstly, as jade appears to people's eyes after it is polished, so the Way becomes clear after it is discussed. By writing his *Examinations* [, Wang] made the *Awakening of Faith* clear. Secondly, in present times there are new currents of thought that were brought with Western learning [and that] abound with heresies. Chan monks, being obstinate in their ways, are unable to withstand these challenges. Under these circumstances, *Examination of the The Awakening of Faith* does not refute the treatise, but in fact elucidates its meaning. As for my own *Resolving of Doubts*, it does not criticize *Examinations*, but actually promotes it.³⁹

In the *Correct Explanation*, Tang's attempt to reconcile with his opponents, he explains the "hidden intent" of his adversaries in the following way:

Ouyang and his disciples practice the way of bodhisattva with great compassion. They reveal and explicate all subtle hidden meanings of the words of ancient masters and thus lead others to the correct understanding. They dispel and remove all fixations and entanglements of those who are wrong about the Teachings, and so direct others back to the middle of the path. What they really denounce is not the *The Awakening of Faith*, but those who are overly attached to the *The Awakening of Faith*. Scholars of this world, students of ancient and modern books, should be apt to harmonize various viewpoints. They must not despise Ouyang and his disciples for their criticism of the *The Awakening of Faith*. Neither should they despise the *The Awakening of Faith* because of the criticisms made by

39. 「一、以玉由琢磨而顯，道由辯析而明，「料簡」之作籍明「起信」。二、以今世西學新潮邪說橫行，禪侶顛預，無力應敵，則「起信之料簡」非破「起信」，實以顯「起信」，即大圓之「解惑」非攻「料簡」，亦實以揚「料簡」也」(Zhang 1978: 135)

Ouyang and his disciples.⁴⁰

As a loyal associate of Taixu and a prominent figure in his Wuchang Seminary, Tang never changed his mind about the doctrinal authority of *The Awakening of Faith*. He also remained averse to the idea of “demythologizing” Buddhist tradition by exposing the profane history of canonical texts. Nonetheless, many of his writings published throughout the 1920s, in the years that followed his debate with the China Institute of Inner Studies, raise concerns that are not dissimilar to those of Ouyang. For example, Tang became known as an avid reformer of Pure Land devotionalism and a tireless critic of Chan quietism, urging his co-religionists to ground their practice in the “understanding” (*jie* 解) derived from the study of Consciousness-only treatises. Moreover, Tang’s interpretation of the properly “understood” Buddhist doctrine often touched on themes raised by his opponents in the 1923 debate, including their reemphasis on “subsequently acquired” Knowledge.⁴¹ Whether and how these later developments changed Tang’s stance regarding the critical character of Buddhist philosophy is a subject that deserves a separate study; such a study could further examine Tang Dayuan’s place in the history of Chinese Buddhism as well as in the general intellectual history of modern East Asia.

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40. 「歐陽師徒，以大慈悲，行菩薩道，一則就古德言，微顯闡幽，使人得其正解，一則就迷法者，解粘去縛，使之趨歸中行。其所訶斥，非斥「起信」，實呵執「起信」者，是故世之學者，讀古今書，應善會通，不可因呵「起信」而薄歐陽師徒，亦不可因歐陽師徒之呵而薄「起信」。」 (Zhang 1978: 160)
41. Tang’s discussion of the distinction between “fundamental” and “subsequently acquired” gnosis can be found in his popular treatises on Consciousness-only thought, collected in Tang (1927a: 70-71, 104-106) (reprinted in WWQB 65: 544-545, 578-79)

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