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## The Expression “The Myriad Dharmas are Only Consciousness” in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese Buddhism

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### Abstract

This article offers a preliminary examination of the ways in which Consciousness-Only thought was adapted to modern intellectual discourses in China from the 1910s to the 1940s. It begins by tracing the canonical origins of the phrase “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness (*sanjie wei xin, wanfa wei shi* 三界唯心，萬法唯識).” It then looks at several examples of how this expression was used by Buddhist writers in the early 20th century. It is argued that Buddhists chose to use the doctrine of Consciousness-Only (*weishi*) as a Buddhist ontology in contradistinction to the idealism (*weixin*) and materialism (*weiwu*) of philosophy.

### Keywords:

Consciousness-Only, Philosophy, Science, Taixu, Wang Xiaoxu

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## 二十世紀初期中國佛教對萬法唯識之表述

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### 摘要

此篇文章初步檢視在1910到1940年唯識思想如何為中國現代知識份子所講述。從回溯經典所說的「三界唯心，萬法唯識」開始，由不同的例子著手看待此思想如何為二十世紀早期的佛教論述家所運用；此處要表明的是相對於唯心及唯物思想，佛教徒選擇唯識之教義作為佛教的本體論。

關鍵字：唯識、哲學、科學、太虛、王小徐

## Introduction

Scholars often point to the new popularity of Consciousness-Only thought (*weishi* 唯識) among lay and ordained Buddhists as one of the more important changes that took place in Chinese Buddhism in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One reason for this popularity was the renewed availability of important Consciousness-Only texts, which was made possible through the efforts of Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837-1911) and the work of his and other scriptural presses begun in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). Another commonly cited reason for the popularity of Consciousness-Only thought among Buddhists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that Consciousness-Only thought, with its systematic rigor, provided a set of resources with which Buddhists could think about and respond to modern science and Western philosophy.<sup>2</sup> This view was described by the educator, technocrat, and *qigong* 氣功 enthusiast<sup>3</sup> Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維喬 (1873-1958) in his 1929 book, *Zhongguo fojiaoshi* 中國佛教史 (*The History of Chinese Buddhism*).<sup>4</sup> In a chapter on the current state of Buddhism in China, he wrote of the Faxiang zong 法相宗 (Faxiang School, i.e. Consciousness-Only<sup>5</sup>):

In modern times, there are few *śramaṇa* who research [Faxiang]. Various laypeople, however, take this field of study to be rigorous, systematic and clear, and close to science. For this reason, there are now many people researching it. Preeminent among those writing on the topic are those at Nanjing’s Inner Studies Academy, headed by Ouyang Jian.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I offer a small contribution to the work of unpacking such claims by looking at a few of the ways in which (primarily lay) Han Buddhists used Consciousness-Only thought in their discussions of science and philosophy. I do this by tracing one particular phrase, “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness (*sanjie wei xin, wanfa*

2 Welch (1968, 9 and 66), and Chen and Deng (1999, 260-271).

3 Among his other activities, Jiang was involved in using science to promote the practice of *qigong*, as well as a form of ‘scientific’ meditation based on the teachings of the Japanese master Okada Torajirō 岡田虎二郎 (1872-1920). Jiang wrote about both of these topics in his 1914 book, *Yinshizi jingzuo fa* 因是子靜坐法 (*Yinshizi’s Meditation Method*). Otehode (2009, 243-244).

4 This work was, for the most part, a translation of Sakaino Satoru’s 境野哲 (1871-1933) book from 1907, *Shina bukkuyōshi kō* 支那佛教史綱 (*An Outline of Chinese Buddhist History*). The passage cited here comes from a section on contemporary Chinese Buddhism, which was an original contribution by Jiang.

5 Consciousness-Only thought is known by a number of names, especially Faxiang (Lit. dharma-characteristic). There was some argument during the Republic over whether or not these two terms were synonymous, but those arguments are not directly relevant to the present study. For more on this conflict, see Chen and Deng (1999, 251-252).

6 Jiang (2004, 325).

*wei shi* 三界唯心，萬法唯識。” I look at the origin of the two halves of this expression, (in Consciousness-Only and Chan 禪 texts respectively) and demonstrate how four authors used it in their efforts to speak of Buddhism in relation to Western philosophy and then science. My goal here is to make a first step in the examination of the ways in which Consciousness-Only thought was deployed in the discussions of modern concepts. As such, I will leave for a later date a study of those introductory or comprehensive works on Consciousness-Only that were rooted in more traditional forms of Buddhist exegetical discourse, which had as their primary aim the explication of Consciousness-Only thought and not its application to discourses external to Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> I also focus here primarily on lay Buddhists; as Jiang Weiqiao pointed out, lay Buddhists were generally more engaged with attempts to relate Buddhism to modern science and philosophy than their ordained peers.<sup>8</sup>

## Buddhists and Western Learning in China

Western philosophy and modern science began to exert a strong influence on Chinese thinkers near the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) as constituent elements of the Western learning (*xixue* 西學) that was then receiving increasing acceptance.<sup>9</sup> The worldview proposed by science was especially important in this regard. As part of the process of its adoption, intellectuals sought to relate science to Chinese traditions of natural philosophy and natural history (both referred to as either *gezhi* 格致 or *bowu* 博物<sup>10</sup>). Thinkers during this period continued to articulate worldviews in which the classical tradition (one which contained both what are now known in the West as the humanities and the sciences) was part of an organic whole that could accommodate modern science. These worldviews disappeared during New Culture Movement of the mid-1910s, as the traditional natural studies that had linked pre-

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7 Prominent examples of this would be writings by the Consciousness-Only scholar Han Qingjing 韓清淨 (1884-1949), such as his *Weishi zhizhang* 唯識指掌 (*Pointers on Consciousness-Only*), as well as most of the writings of Ouyang Jian 歐陽漸 (1871-1943).

8 I realize that this is a generalization, but it is one that holds true with regard to the specific issue I am addressing here. There are exceptions, of course, and I do cite the monk Taixu, whose work in the 1920s represented a clear and influential attempt to apply Buddhist ideas to the issues being taken up in the broader Chinese intellectual world at the time.

9 On the impact Western learning had on Chinese thinking in the late Qing, see Lackner, et al. (2001), and Lackner and Vittinghoff (2004).

10 Prior to the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the study of the natural world was generally referred to as *bowu*, or “broad learning concerning the nature of things.” During the Yuan, the term *gezhi*, which is a shortened form of the expression *gewu zhizhi* 格物致知 (“inquiring into and extending knowledge”), was used. From the Yuan until the 20<sup>th</sup> century both terms were used. Scholars are still not clear on the different areas covered by each term during that period. (Elman 2004, 30).

modern science and medicine to classical learning were abandoned.<sup>11</sup> By the time the May Fourth Movement began in 1919, the majority of Chinese intellectuals had discarded Chinese natural philosophy.<sup>12</sup> This shift in worldview does not mean that the majority of the Chinese intellectuals who made use of science as an ideological entity understood the content of science very well: prior to the 1930s, most probably did not.<sup>13</sup> For them, modern science (like Western philosophy) was linked primarily to a set of values and assumptions, not a specific body of knowledge or methods for gaining that knowledge. For a minority, the values and assumptions of rational, materialist science became a totalizing system that that could be used to sweep away tradition and the weakness of Chinese society. This was the beginning of scientism (*weikexue zhuyi* 唯科學主義) in China.<sup>14</sup>

In light of the increasing prevalence of science and Western philosophy in Chinese intellectual life in the 1910s and 1920s, Buddhists sought to find ways to understand the relationship of their tradition to these new modes of thinking. A major intellectual task involved in this process was the articulation of schema to relate Buddhist worldviews to those presented in science and philosophy. One way in which this was accomplished was by speaking about a Buddhist worldview that partook of the same criteria upon which scientific and philosophical worldviews were based. One of the most popular Buddhist ideas singled out by early 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhists in this way was that of Consciousness-Only, which was popularly described using the phrase “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness.”

## Origin of the Expression

The phrase “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” has a long history in Chinese Buddhism. In considering this history, it is important to note that

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11 Elman (2005, xxxviii).

12 Wright (2000, 424). Wright notes that Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) was an exception to this trend.

13 Buck (1980, 212).

14 The most important work on scientism in China during this period remains Kwok (1965). The ideological use of science spread to a broad section of the literate population by the 1920s. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this population was unanimously receptive to science as an ideological entity. Looking at an influential periodical of the time, *Dongfang zazhi* 東方雜誌 (*the East*), one is presented with a different, more cautious impression of science. Between 1915 and 1920, its pages carried articles covering the newest scientific and technological ideas, all written for the scientific layman. These articles, however, were not free from judgment, and many of them warned about the possible dangers that the inventions of science could bring with them. A dominant theme among these articles was that the material progress engendered by science did not mean the same thing as civilizational progress. (Yeh 2000, 34-35).

although they are roughly parallel in meaning, the two halves of this phrase have different textual origins.

The idea that “the three realms are only mind” is a fairly common Mahāyāna position. I argue, *pace* Whalen Lai, that this exact phrase originally came to prominence in China along with Consciousness-Only thought.<sup>15</sup> The ‘three realms (Ch. *sanjie* 三界, Skt. *tridhātu*)’ referred to here are the realms of desire (Ch. *yu* 欲, Skt. *kāma*), form (Ch. *se* 色, Skt. *rūpa*), and formlessness (Ch. *wuse* 無色, Skt. *arūpya*).<sup>16</sup> In Buddhist cosmology, these three realms together represent the entirety of possible existence. The statement “the three realms are only mind” thus aims to include the totality of phenomenal existence under the heading of ‘mind’; all phenomenal reality is ‘only mind (*weixin* 唯心).’ It should be noted, however, that this is not an ontological claim in the traditional sense, it is instead meant to emphasize the fact that insofar as the world that is experienced can only be found in one’s consciousness of it, it is irrelevant to talk of external objects. This is because external objects can never be dealt with in any meaningful fashion other than as phenomena of consciousness. As Dan Lusthaus writes in his study of Consciousness-Only:

“...the key Yogācāric phrase *vijñāpti-mātra* [Consciousness-Only] does not mean (as is often touted in scholarly literature) that ‘consciousness alone exists,’ but rather that ‘all our efforts to get beyond ourselves are nothing but projections of our consciousness.’ Yogācārins [i.e., proponents of Consciousness-Only] treat the term *vijñāpti-mātra* as an epistemic caution, not an ontological pronouncement. Having suspended the ontological query that leads to either idealism or materialism, they are instead interested in why we generate and attach to such a position in the first place.”<sup>17</sup>

15 Whalen Lai claims that the expression “the three realms are only mind” appeared first in the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* as the longer expression 三界唯心作. As far as I have been able to determine, this phrase does not appear in that text, or anywhere else in the Buddhist canon. The expression 三界唯心 does appear, minus 作, in that scripture as something that all Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas of the seventh stage know. (CBETA, T 279, 288c5) The expression 三界唯心 appears another 282 times in the Taishō, in a broad range of texts, but primarily in texts important for Consciousness-Only thought. For example, in the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* the expression is used in an unmistakably Mahāyānist polemical fashion. When the disciple Mahamāti asks the Buddha about non-Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioners of a certain type, the Buddha says that the knowledge that ‘the three realms are only mind’ is one of the many things these benighted beings do not understand. (CBETA, T 671, 555b25-c3) The phrase 三界唯心 also appears in other fundamental Consciousness-Only texts such as the *Cheng weishi lun* (see below) and the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha-śāstra* written by Asaṅga, as well as in dozens of the Chinese commentaries on those texts.

16 For a more complete treatment of the three realms and their relationship to Consciousness-Only, see Lusthaus (2000, 83-109).

17 Lusthaus (2000, 5-6).

Although within the context of Buddhism, ‘Consciousness-Only’ does not represent what would traditionally be considered an ontological position in Western philosophy, I will show that it was made to do the work of one when Chinese thinkers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century compared it to the philosophical positions of idealism and materialism (and materialist science).

As with the majority of Buddhist doctrinal claims, the aim of the statement ‘the three realms are only mind,’ is a therapeutic and soteriological one. Consciousness-Only thought developed in Buddhism as a means to describe the process whereby sentient beings make false conclusions about the world. It is these conclusions, rooted in ignorance and manifesting as discriminative thinking, which generate human suffering. This position has a general resonance with Chinese Buddhism as a whole, and it cannot easily be labelled as a uniquely Consciousness-Only position. The exact phrase “the three realms are only mind” did, however, originally come out of the Consciousness-Only milieu, and, more importantly, it was explicitly identified with Consciousness-Only thought by authors in the 20th century.

The phrase “the three realms are only mind” appears in several canonical Chinese Buddhist sources. It appears at the opening of Xuanzang’s 玄奘 translation of Vasubandhu’s *Vimśatikā* (*Twenty Verses on Consciousness-Only*):<sup>18</sup> “The *Sūtra* says, the three realms are only mind (*yi qie jing shuo san jie wei xin* 以契經說三界唯心).” The ‘*Sūtra*’ referred to here is the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*,<sup>19</sup> the text that legendarily caused Vasubandhu to convert to Mahāyāna. Xuanzang used the same expression again in his *Cheng weishi lun* 成唯識論 (*Discourse on*

18 *Vimśatikā* CBETA, T 1590, 74b27-30. For an English translation made from the Sanskrit version, see Anacker (1984), and from the Chinese version, see Cook (1999). In the *Vimśatikā*, Vasubandhu argued that “an object of consciousness is ‘internal,’ and the ‘external’ stimulus are only inferrable [sic]. What is observed directly are always only perceptions, colored by particular consciousness-‘seeds’.” (Anacker 1984, 159).

19 Anacker (1984, 161). This text outlines the stages of practice and realization on the path to becoming a Bodhisattva. At some point after its translation into Chinese, it was incorporated into the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, but it continued to be circulated as an independent text. There are 10 extant versions of this text: Two in Tibetan, two in Sanskrit, and six in Chinese. The three stand-alone versions in Chinese are CBETA, T 285, 286, and 287. It appears in the 60-*juan* version of the *Dafang guangfo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra* CBETA, T 278), and the 80-*juan* version (CBETA, T 279). It is also preserved in a commentary written by Vasubandhu himself, the *Shidi jing lun* 十地經論 (*Daśabhūmikasūtra-śāstra* CBETA, T 1522, 123-204). For an example of how this concept is used in the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*, see the *Fo shuo shidi jing* 佛說十地經 (*Daśabhūmika-sūtra* CBETA, T 287, 535-573). In one couplet it says, “Apprehending that the three realms are only mind, the twelve limbs [of dependent origination] depend on mind for their existence. Birth and death are all produced from mind, if the mind is extinguished, [then] birth and death are exhausted.” 了達三界唯是心，十二有支依心有。生死皆由心所作，若心滅者生死盡。(CBETA, T 287, 555a25-26) For more on the relationship between Consciousness-Only and the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*, see Cao Zhicheng (1992).

*Attaining Consciousness-Only*),<sup>20</sup> a commentary on Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā* (*Thirty Verses [on Consciousness-Only]*). There, Xuanzang used the exact phrase as in the *Viṃśatikā*—"the *Sūtra* says, the three realms are only mind"—as the first of a series of quotations in the commentary by which he demonstrated the scriptural and logical bases for verse 17 of the *Triṃśikā*.<sup>21</sup>

That the expression "the three realms are only mind" appeared in a text as widely read in China as the *Cheng weishi lun*, contributed to its dissemination in Chinese Buddhism. After the composition of that text, this phrase would become closely associated with Consciousness-Only for a time, but given its resonance with Mahāyāna as a whole, it quickly moved beyond that school of thought to become a common idea in Chinese Buddhism. The spread of this idea was due in no small part to its promotion in Chan (Zen) Buddhism, particularly in the Linji 臨濟 School.

One of the main reasons why the idea that "the three realms are only mind" would have appealed to Chan thinkers was that in China, Consciousness-Only was closely connected to another strand of Buddhist thought: *Tathāgatha-garbha* (Ch. *rulai zang* 如來藏) theory. The central concept in this form of Buddhist thinking is the *tathāgatha-garbha* or 'womb/matrix of the Thus Come One (the Buddha).' To simplify this philosophy greatly, this matrix (which is none other than the subtle, original, all pervasive body of the Buddha) is seen as the fundamental substrate of the cosmos. All sentient beings are part of this matrix, which guarantees the possibility of their enlightenment. Not only does it guarantee the possibility of

20 CBETA, T 1585, 1a-60a. The *Cheng weishi lun* is probably the single most important text for Consciousness-Only thought in East Asia, being the most popular and most often cited Consciousness-Only text from Xuanzang's time to the present. Its pronouncements on a variety of issues in Consciousness-Only thought are considered to be the most authoritative. There are differing accounts of the exact circumstances of the translation and/or composition of the *Cheng weishi lun* in China, as well as what lineage of Indian Consciousness-Only it represents. Lusthaus (2000, 382-425.) What can be said with certainty is that the *Cheng weishi lun* was compiled by Xuanzang, who wove together several different commentaries on the *Triṃśikā* (probably fewer than the ten claimed by tradition). He completed the text in 659 as part of his attempts to propagate what he considered to be a more 'orthodox' Indian Consciousness-Only than was prevalent in China at the time.

21 *Cheng weishi lun* CBETA, T 1585, 39a7. Other scriptures cited include the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*. The original verse of the *Triṃśikā* reads: "The various consciousnesses transform, as imagination and the imagined. As a result of this, all these are nonexistent, therefore, all are consciousness only. (是諸識轉變，分別所分別；由此彼皆無，故一切唯識)." *Triṃśikā* CBETA, T 1586, 61a2-3; translation by Cook (1999, 380). This verse is the culmination of the Consciousness-Only position as laid out in the *Triṃśikā*. For a full treatment of this position, see Lusthaus (2000, 437-442). The entire section of commentary on this verse in the *Cheng weishi lun* can be found at CBETA, T 1585, 38c16-39c29.

their enlightenment in the future, it means that because they are part of the matrix of the Thus Come One, all beings are now already enlightened.<sup>22</sup>

In East Asia, *tathāgatha-garbha* thought proved immensely popular. It was articulated in the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, and in the *Awakening of Faith*<sup>23</sup> (the latter being one of the most influential Buddhist treatises in East Asia all the way up through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>). In China, *tathāgatha-garbha* was treated as synonymous with other important Buddhist ideas such as ‘true suchness’ (*zhenru* 真如). It had also been identified with the Eighth, or *ālaya* consciousness by the translator Paramārtha 真諦 (499-569) in his articulation on Consciousness-Only theory. Paramārtha is credited with translating the *Awakening of Faith* into Chinese, though the text was likely composed in China several centuries after he lived. His understanding of Consciousness-Only thought was influential, especially his conflation of the *ālaya* consciousness and the *tathāgatha-garbha*. The association of the *tathāgatha-garbha* with ‘true suchness’ and the *ālaya* consciousness was important, but the idea that had the greatest impact on East Asian Buddhism was the identification of the *tathāgatha-garbha* with ‘original nature’ (*benxing* 本性).<sup>25</sup>

The importance of ‘nature,’ especially ‘Buddha-nature’ (*foxing* 佛性), as a really existing thing had profound implications for Buddhist soteriology in East Asia. In most of Chinese Buddhism, all sentient beings are believed to be intrinsically endowed with enlightenment as their natural state. Unlike in much of Mainstream Buddhism and Indian Mahāyāna,<sup>26</sup> the practice of Buddhist cultivation in East Asia was often not aimed at fighting the mind’s natural tendencies by controlling it through ethics and meditation in order to remove or destroy defilements and to bring it to a state of cessation or awakening. Rather, practice was aimed

22 This can be seen as akin to the Madhyamaka claim that saṃsāra (the world of rebirth and suffering) and nirvana are one and the same.

23 *Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論 CBETA, T 1666, 575b-583b. For an English translation of this text, see Hakeda (1967). Gong Jun 龔隲 has studied the important place this text held in the emergence of a specifically Chinese (or sinified, Ch. *Zhongguo hua* 中國化) form of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought. (Gong 1995).

24 By the beginning of the 20th century, a number of Japanese and Chinese scholars were starting to question the traditional attribution of this text to the Indian monk Aśvaghōṣa. Although most Buddhist faithful continued to treat this text as authoritative, it clearly lost much of its popularity among Chinese Buddhist intellectuals in the generation after Yang Wenhui, as figures like Ouyang Jingwu turned to Xuanzang’s texts on Consciousness-Only and Buddhist logic, and the more ‘orthodox’ thought they were felt to contain.

25 This identification of mind and ‘nature’ (*xing* 性) in China, and the subsequent ontological status it gained as a really existing entity, probably owed more to the classical thinkers Zhuangzi and Mencius, than to Indian Buddhism. See Lai (1977). Lai also points out that the identification of mind and ‘nature’ anticipated the Wang-Lu branch of Neo-Confucianism.

26 Here I follow established precedent and use “Mainstream Buddhism” to refer to non-Mahāyāna Indian Buddhism. This category includes, but is not limited to, Theravāda Buddhism.

at allowing mental disturbances to naturally settle in order to let the mind return to a natural state of luminous awareness. Clearly, these are different attitudes toward the fundamental tendencies of the mind and the quality of Buddhist practice. The centrality of mind and the idea of original enlightenment appeared in the writings of most of the major indigenous East Asian schools of Buddhist thought, such as Huayan 華嚴 and Tiantai 天台. The connection between mind and the *tathāgatha-garbha* is strongest, however, in the Chan school, which uses *tathāgatha-garbha*, ‘original enlightenment,’ ‘one mind’ (*yi xin* 一心),<sup>27</sup> and ‘Buddha nature,’ interchangeably.

Given their emphasis on the *tathāgatha-garbha* as a universally abiding substrate with the nature of mind, it is not surprising that it was the Chan School that probably did the most to propagate the notion that ‘the three realms are only mind.’ It is also in the recorded sayings of teachers from this school that one finds the first evidence of the complete phrase “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness.” Although, as I have demonstrated, the first half of this expression could be found in Mahāyāna texts circulating in China prior to the Tang dynasty, the second half of the phrase first appeared in the *Record of Linji* (*Linji lu* 臨濟錄),<sup>28</sup> one of the more important texts in the Chan school. This text is ostensibly the recorded sayings of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866/7), the iconoclastic Chan master who founded the lineage bearing his name (which is the primary Chan lineage in China and Korea, and is an important lineage in Japan), as well as starting the tradition of many of the shock-tactics legendarily used by teachers in this school.<sup>29</sup> The record of one of his lectures to his students includes the following:

夫如真學道人，並不取佛，不取菩薩羅漢，不取三界殊勝。迥無獨脫不與物拘，乾坤倒覆我更不疑。十方諸佛現前，為一念心喜；三塗地獄頓現，無一念心怖；緣何如此？我見諸法空相，變即有，不變即無，三界唯心萬法唯識，所以夢幻空花，何勞把捉？<sup>30</sup>

A true student of the Way never concerns himself with the Buddha, never concerns himself with bodhisattvas or arhats, never concerns himself with the blessings of the threefold world. Far removed, alone and free, he is never entangled in things. Heaven and earth could turn upside down and he would not be perturbed. All the Buddhas

27 This term was taken from the *Dahseng qixin lun*, where it is a central concept.

28 The full title of this text is *Zhenzhou linji huizhao chanshi yulu* 鎮州臨濟慧照禪師語錄 (*Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Linji Huizhao of Zhenzhou*) CBETA, T 1985, 496b-506c. For an English translation, see Watson (1993).

29 Such actions, a major component of the popular image of Chan/Zen, have in recent years been shown to have been more of a literary trope in Chan religious literature than actual practices. Furthermore, it has been shown that the usual images of Linji and others like him were probably products of the Song dynasty, and not historical portrayals. See McRae (2003, chapter 4) and Welter (2006).

30 CBETA, T 1985, 500a14-20.

of the ten directions could appear before him and his mind would not feel an instant of joy, the three realms of hell could suddenly confront him and his mind would not feel an instant of alarm. Why is he like this? Because he knows that all things in the phenomenal world are empty of characteristics. When conditions change, they come into existence, when there is no change they do not exist. *The threefold world is nothing but mind; the myriad phenomena are nothing but consciousness.* These ‘dreams, phantoms, [flowers in the sky]– why trouble yourself to grasp them?’<sup>31</sup>

Here the author of the *Record of Linji* identified the phrase ‘the three worlds are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness’ with what is realized during enlightenment or along the way to enlightenment. He points to this knowledge as the main foundation of Buddhist practice. After the appearance of this expression in the *Record of Linji*, it became fairly prevalent in Chan writings, appearing in the recorded sayings (*yulu* 語錄) and poetry of many later masters.<sup>32</sup> Thus, although the conceptual basis for this expression did not originate in Chan thought, it was popularized in Chan.

## Use of This Expression Among Buddhists in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The expression “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” originated in Consciousness-Only thought, and was diffused in Chinese Buddhism in Chan (though the phrase was still occasionally connected to Consciousness-Only<sup>33</sup>). It was also in relation to Chan that this expression was used at the start of the Republican period to relate Buddhism to various modern worldviews, notably Western philosophy and modern science.

One of the earliest examples of a Buddhist using this expression to discuss Buddhism in relationship to Western philosophy appeared in an article published in *Foxue congbao* 佛學叢報 (*Buddhist Miscellany*), in December of 1912.<sup>34</sup> In *Sifang bamian zhi fojiao guan* 四方八

31 Translation by Watson (1993, 49-50).

32 This expression also appears in the writings of the Chan monk Fayuan 法眼 (885-958), who worked it into a poem that was cited repeatedly in the later tradition. This poem appears in the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (*Record of Transmission of the Lamp from the Jingde Era*) CBETA, T 2076, 196-467, which was completed in 1004. (CBETA, T 2076, 454a23-27). See McRae (2003, 72).

33 The Chan master Xuzhou 虛舟 mentions this phrase in the introduction to his *Bashi guiju qianshuo* 八識規矩淺說 (*Basic Introduction to [Verses on] the Structure of the Eight Consciousnesses*) (CBETA, X 896, 439a3-41a3), which is a commentary on one of the important secondary works on Consciousness-Only thought. This text is not dated, but it bears a preface dated June 10, 1672.

34 Lei (1912). *Foxue congbao* was one of the first regular Buddhist magazines to appear in China in the years before the May Fourth Movement. It began publication in Shanghai in October of

面之佛教觀 (*A Comprehensive Buddhist View*), the lay Buddhist Lei Xileng 雷西楞 (n.d.)<sup>35</sup> set out to demonstrate the relevance of Buddhism in understanding a number of important issues being discussed in China at the time. He argued for the relevance of Buddhism to the new Republic on nationalistic, cultural, and philosophical grounds. He dealt with philosophy by relegating all philosophical views (including scientific materialism) to positions inferior to Buddhism. He did this by arguing for the superiority of the Buddhist view of the nature of reality, which he summarized using the expression “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness.” Lei used this expression in the Chan context; he did not describe this idea as originating in the ‘school of Consciousness-Only’ (Weishi zong 唯識宗), but in the ‘Three Realms are Only Mind School’ (San jie wei xin zong 三界唯心宗).<sup>36</sup> His emphasis on mind has a distinctly Chan feel to it, and he made references to several important events and concepts from the Chan tradition, such as the transmission of the robe to the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng 慧能, and the legendary teaching techniques of Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道義 (709-788), which included hitting and shouting at his students. For the purposes of this study, what is most important about this article is the manner in which Lei used this expression “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” to relate Buddhism to the worldviews found in Western philosophy, notably materialism (*weiwu* 唯物, literally ‘matter-only’) and idealism (often translated as ‘mind-only,’ *weixin* 唯心<sup>37</sup>).

1912, and although only 12 issues were produced before publishing ceased in July of 1914, it became a model for later Buddhist journals. Like many of its successors, it carried a range of articles, including pieces on Buddhist scholarship and doctrine, stories and poems, a Q&A section, and a column on Buddhist news. In it ran pieces by lay scholars such as Ouyang Jian, and evangelical works by Yinguang 印光 (1861-1940) and Dixian 諦閑 (1858-1932). (MFQ, 205.1). It also carried articles by the future President of Beijing University and spiritual father of the May Fourth Movement, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940).

- 35 I have been able to find very little information about this individual. We do know that he was a lay disciple of the famous late Qing Chan Master Jing’an 敬安 (1851-1913). (TXQS 29, 139). Jing’an, also known as Jichan 寄禪 or “the Eight Fingered Ascetic” (*Ba zhi toutuo* 八指頭陀), was one of the most important Buddhist monks during the closing years of the Qing dynasty. He led a number of reform movements (such as movements for the reform of monastic education), and because of his clout within the monastic community, he was selected to lead early efforts to secure a place for Buddhism in the nascent Republican government. See Yu Lingbo (2004, 1298b-1301c); Welch (1968, 34-37).
- 36 In Chinese Buddhist history there had been a polemical antagonism between the ‘Mind-Only School’ (meaning Chan, Huayan, and Tiantai) and the Consciousness-Only School. Lai (1977). Lei either did not know of this, or he did not care to write about it. I have not done so here, but it would be instructive to study whether or not anyone who criticized idealism in the Republican period made use of the traditional polemical strategies employed by Consciousness-Only thinkers against the ‘Mind-Only’ school.
- 37 Another translation for idealism, which has become the standard today, is *guannian lun* 觀念論.

The discourses adopted by Lei and other Chinese Buddhists in the 1910s had been influenced by the debate over materialism versus idealism that became a dominant factor in Western philosophy after the 1850s. This issue became a central preoccupation for East Asian thinkers, and Buddhists in particular, beginning in Japan from the late 1890s. From that period onward it became common to identify philosophies as either materialist or Idealist in nature. One goal of Buddhists and other thinkers in East Asia was to articulate their philosophical position in such a way that it transcended this dichotomy. A prominent example of a Japanese Buddhist who attempted to place Buddhism in a superior position within this debate was Inoue Enryō 井上圓了 (1858-1919), who argued that the principles of Kegon 華嚴 and Tendai 天台 could provide a Hegelian synthesis to the thesis and antithesis of materialism and idealism.<sup>38</sup>

Just as they were for Inoue, for Lei, neither materialism nor idealism was the right philosophical view one should take regarding reality. He felt the correct position fell between these two extremes. Lei identified the correct position as “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness.”<sup>39</sup> For Lei, the central teaching of Buddhism, one which transcended both of the two types of Western philosophy, lay in that expression; it represented the heart of Buddhist thought, and the very core of the Buddhist position with regard to the nature of the phenomenal universe.<sup>40</sup>

During the period of the May Fourth Movement (roughly 1919 to 1925), science became an increasingly important issue for Buddhists. The rise of scientism and the ideological use of science by left-wing iconoclasts compelled Buddhists to argue the relevance of their tradition in a world increasingly defined by science. Just as Lei had done in relation to Western philosophy, some Buddhist thinkers presented the expression “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” as the central teaching of Mahāyāna philosophy vis-à-vis science. An early example of this appeared in Taixu’s 太虛 (1890-1947) first article on science and Buddhism, which ran in *Jueshe congshu* 覺社叢書 (*Awakening Society Collectanea*) in 1919, the year before that magazine became the *Haichao yin* 海潮音 (*Sound of the Sea-Tide*). The opening line of Taixu’s *Weiwu kexue yu weishi zongxue* 唯物科學與唯識宗學

38 Godart (2008, 80).

39 Lei (1912, MFQ 1, 386).

40 This type of criticism was also used by Ouyang Jian in his article *Fofa feizongjiao feizhexue* 佛法非宗教非哲學 (*The Buddha-dharma is not Religion, not Philosophy*), which was published as a booklet in 1922. One of the main focuses of this essay was a demonstration of the superiority of Consciousness-Only thought to Western epistemology. With reference to Dogmatists, Skeptics, and Positivists, Ouyang said that the mind of which philosophers in those schools speak is nothing other than Sixth Consciousness spoken of in Consciousness-Only thought and that they know nothing of the Seventh or Eighth Consciousnesses. With one stroke, he relegated the entirety of Western philosophy to a position subordinate to that of Consciousness-Only. See Ouyang (1984, 68). This article is discussed in Müller (1992, 32-33).

(*Materialist Science and the Consciousness-Only School*) read, “The three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness, this is certainly the crucial assessment of the holy teachings, and the basic meaning of the principles of the Buddha.”<sup>41</sup> From the title alone one can get a sense of Taixu’s basic attitude toward the relationship between Buddhism to science: he considered science to be a form of materialism, which he countered with Consciousness-Only.<sup>42</sup> Taixu’s use of the expression “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” was similar to Lei’s in that he used the position of Consciousness-Only synecdochially to refer to the totality of Buddhist philosophy. Despite these similarities, Taixu’s adoption of this expression also represented a shift. Unlike Lei, Taixu used the expression to serve as the basis for his explication of Consciousness-Only thought. After 1919, that expression would more often be associated with Consciousness-Only and not Chan.

The premise that “the ten thousand dharmas are only consciousness” appeared in the writings of others who spoke of science, philosophy, and Buddhism. It played a central role in an early essay by the renowned scientist and lay Buddhist Wang Xiaoxu 王小徐 (1875-1948).<sup>43</sup> This was his *Kexue zhi genben wenti* 科學之根本問題 (*The Basic Problematic of Science*),<sup>44</sup> which was the first of several major essays he wrote to deal with the issue of Buddhism and science. In that first essay Wang argued that all scientific theories are logically established based upon certain *a priori* assumptions, or axioms, which are themselves unexamined. Primary among these axioms are assumptions about the independent existence of matter, space, and time, as well as the opposition of subject and object. Wang’s critique of these axioms is based on his acceptance of the philosophical position of Consciousness-Only. Wang wrote:

41 三界唯心，萬法唯識，固聖教之決定量，佛理之根本義也。(Taixu 1919, MFQ 6, 191).

42 For more information on Taixu’s understanding of science, see Welch (1968, 65-66), Pittman (2001, 161), and Jiang (2002).

43 Wang was a mathematician, electrical engineer, and a founding member of Academia Sinica as well the author of several famous works on the relationship between science and Buddhism, and on Buddhist logic. For a brief biography see Shi (1974, 2:582-591). See also the entry on him in *The Database of Modern Chinese Buddhism* (<http://buddhistinformatcs.ddbc.edu.tw/dmcb/> 王小徐, Last access: 2009.12.23).

44 Between this essay’s first printing in 1926 and 1937, it was published no less than eight times. This essay first appeared in 1926 in *Shijie fojiao jushilin* 世界佛教居士林 (MFQB 9, 260-263). It was reprinted the following year in both *Haichao yin* 海潮音 (MFQ 167, 484-86) and *Dongfang wenhua* 東方文化 (MFQ 21, 54-59), and in 1932 in Nie (1932). It was also included in the famous collection of Wang’s letters and essays titled *Fofa yu kexue zhi bijiao yanjiu* 佛法與科學之比較研究 (*A Comparative Study of the Buddha-dharm and Science*), which was printed five times between 1932 and 1937. Wang (1932, 30-32).

今自然科學基於物我對待之常識，佛教則立萬法唯識；萬法者，一切心理生理物理現象，上文所謂常識，與立於此常識基礎上之種種科學問題皆是。<sup>45</sup>

Natural science today is based on common sense [assumptions] about the opposition of matter and self [i.e. object and subject], while Buddhism [on the other hand] established [the idea that] “the myriad dharmas are only consciousness. The “myriad dharmas” are all psychological, physiological, and physical phenomena; the common sense discussed above; and all types of scientific questions established based on these common assumptions.

Here Wang says that the natural phenomena studied by science are activities of consciousness. In the rest of the essay, Wang contrasted the understanding of space and time offered in classical Newtonian physics with that put forward in Einstein’s Theory of Relativity.<sup>46</sup> Wang argued that the latter theory supported the conclusion that all things are only consciousness because it points to the mutual implication of observer and observed; that one’s frame of reference determines the nature of observed events. Wang’s pairing of Einstein to support Consciousness-Only represented another step in the application of the expression used by Lei and Taixu to modern discourses. His entire essay was aimed at refuting the materialism upon which science was popularly believed to be based, in order to uphold the central proposition that all things arise of consciousness.

Buddhists continued to use the expression “the myriad dhamras are Consciousness-Only” to talk about science into the later years of the Republican period. For example, in an article from 1947, Dan Peigen 單培根 (1917-1995)<sup>47</sup> divided the eight ‘schools’ (*zong* 宗) of Chinese Buddhism into the three categories of religion, philosophy, and science.<sup>48</sup> While he identified Chan (along with Tiantai, Huayan, and San lun 三論) as philosophy, he said that

45 Wang (1932, 30).

46 Einstein’s Theory of Relativity was first introduced into China in 1919, and it was quickly adopted for use by a wide range of thinkers, especially left-leaning intellectuals. (Hu 2005). Wang’s essay shows us that Buddhists were also involved at an early stage in the philosophical appropriation of the Theory of Relativity in China.

47 Dan was a doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) from Jiaying 嘉興 in Zhejiang. He named himself after Francis “Bacon” (Peigen 培根) at 17, when he began his study of TCM. Dan also went on to become one of the Buddhists who provided a living link in Chinese Buddhism between the period prior to the Cultural Revolution and the period afterward. He studied Consciousness-Only thought with the important Buddhist publisher and layman Fan Gunong 范古農 (1881-1951) in 1943, and after the Cultural Revolution he lectured on Consciousness-Only at the Minnan Buddhist Seminary (Minnan foxue yuan 閩南佛學院) in Xiamen after it reopened in the 1980s. (Yu Lingbo 2004, 1123b).

48 These categories neatly parallel Comte’s three stage model of the evolution of human culture, which had been popular in China from the 1900s onward. This model states that human thinking progresses through the stages of: (1) theism (*shenxue* 神學), (2) metaphysical speculation (*xuanxue* 玄學), and (3) science (*kexue* 科學), which Comte equated with logical positivism.

only Consciousness-Only is like science, to which he clearly attaches a great deal of value. For Dan, Consciousness-Only is not only like science, it even surpasses science. He concluded the section of his article that focused on Consciousness-Only by saying:

宇宙萬有無非在識內者，識外不可知其有矣，萬法唯識，豈非最爲現實之論。分析法相，歸乎唯識；科學的客觀現實，就逾於此？所以法相唯識是有客觀分析現實能力的人所宜究心之學。<sup>49</sup>

None of the phenomena in the universe are not located in consciousness; the existence of things outside of consciousness simply cannot be known. “The myriad dharmas are only consciousness,” how could this not be the [high]est form of realism? Analyze Faxiang and return to Consciousness-Only, the “objective reality” of science is nothing more than this. Therefore, Faxiang Consciousness-Only [thought] is the form of learning with the ability to objectively analyze reality, which those with the capability should put their utmost effort into [studying].

Here, Dan identified the world represented by the phrase “Consciousness-Only” with the “objective reality” studied by science. He was thus claiming that there is no fundamental disagreement between the reality described in science and the one described in Consciousness-Only thought. Just like Lei, Taixu, and Wang; Dan argued that Consciousness-Only is the most correct philosophical position to adopt with regard to the phenomenal world. He differed from those other thinkers in that he felt Consciousness-Only was consonant with the position taken in science, whereas the other thinkers argued it was superior (to philosophy in the case of Lei, to materialism in the case of Taixu, and to the classical Newtonian view of the universe in the case of Wang).

## Shifting Usage of the Expression

I have shown here that a number of Buddhists writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century used the expression “the ten thousand dharmas are only consciousness” to relate Buddhism to Western philosophy and modern science. Later writers spoke less of “the three realms are only mind” than Lei had done, focusing instead on the second half of the phrase “the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” to define Consciousness-Only thought. Ironically, these writers began to emphasize the Consciousness-Only nature of this expression by emphasizing not the half of the expression that originally came from Consciousness-Only texts, but the half of the expression originally coined by the author of the *Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Linji*.

One major reason why Buddhists shifted their focus from the first half to the second half of the expression was probably rhetorical. In emphasizing the ‘Consciousness-Only’ component of the expression “the three realms are only mind, the myriad dharmas are only consciousness,” the Buddhists who came after Lei were using the Chinese language to help put the ideas of materialism, idealism, and Consciousness-Only into the same class. The word for materialism

49 Dan (1947, MFQ 103, 45a).

in Chinese is *weiwu lun* 唯物論,<sup>50</sup> literally ‘only-matter discourse,’ and idealism (which several writers were quick to point out Consciousness-Only was not<sup>51</sup>) was commonly translated as (*weixin lun* 唯心論, literally ‘only-mind discourse). The word ‘theory’ (*lun* 論) was often dropped when people wrote about these philosophies, which results in two words that look very much like the common shorthand for Consciousness-Only: *weishi* 唯識. Thus, Buddhist writers were able to set up a resonance between the philosophical positions of ‘matter-only’ and ‘mind-only,’ and their own position of ‘Consciousness-Only.’ Thus, Buddhists utilized not only the semantic similarities between ideas, but also their lexical resonance to make a point about the relationship between Buddhism, philosophy, and science. Lei did not take full advantage of the rhetorical possibilities of the *weiwu-weixin-weishi* triad in his writing, but he did lay the groundwork for them when he argued that the Buddhist concept that the three worlds were produced by mind was superior to either of the two alternatives offered in Western philosophy.

In their continued use of the expression “the myriad dharmas are only consciousness” to discuss modern philosophical issues, the phrase *weishi* seems to have held a dual meaning among Chinese Buddhists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, *weishi* referred to the Buddhist school of thought known as Consciousness-Only, with its various resources for understanding the mind, the process of awakening, and the psychology of delusion. As a school of thought, it had texts, important thinkers, and key tenets. On the other hand, *weishi* was used to signify a broadly Mahāyānistic position on the nature of reality, particularly in comparison to non-Buddhist modes of thought. Consciousness-Only begins from the premise of Consciousness-Only, but most of its discourse is dedicated to explaining the workings of that consciousness. In the Republican period, the resonance of Consciousness-Only with modern psychology was important for some,<sup>52</sup> but for others, such as Wang Xiaoxu, the ‘ontological’ position of Consciousness-Only, and not the psychology it implied, became a central concept in their Buddhist philosophy. This shift in emphasis, while not unprecedented in the history of Consciousness-Only as a coherent body of thinking, certainly took on new significance in the context of the modern Chinese intellectual world.

Making room for Buddhism through an appeal to the doctrine of Consciousness-Only in this way proved important for Buddhists on a number of levels. As those who promoted scientism (and eventually Marxism) became more vocal, Buddhists needed a way to counter their claims, which revolved around a thoroughgoing materialism. By espousing a philosophy

50 *Lun* 論 was sometimes replaced by *zhuyi* 主義, though this became common only much later.

51 For example, see Ouyang (1984); You Zhibiao (1998, 120).

52 Between 1923 and 1928, a handful of teachers and students from the Wuchang Buddhist Seminary, headed by Taixu, published eight articles on Buddhist psychology. Consciousness-Only thought figured prominently in their discussions. This was probably the high point of Buddhist interest in Western psychology in the first half of the 20th century. Most of these articles were published in *Haichao yin*, and were reprinted in the 1931 collection *Haichao yin wenku* 海潮音文庫 edited by Fan Gunong.

in which mind was primary, the psychological discoveries of Buddhism remained important. Also, as long as the physical world remained subordinate to the ‘mind’ (broadly construed), it did not matter what materialist science discovered about that physical world, there was never any possibility that the truths of science could be any more than descriptions of limited aspects of a reality ultimately shaped by the mind. As such, there was no room for scientism, with its view that all that there is is that which can be known through science. As Buddhists in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s developed various epistemological critiques of science, the basic premise of Consciousness-Only (though not necessarily the complexities of Consciousness-Only thought) served as a key point of contact for discussing Buddhist thought and science together.

## Conclusion

Consciousness-Only thought inspired a new generation of Chinese Buddhist thinkers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was partly because it was seen as holding a possible “answer” to the challenges posed to Buddhism by modern philosophy and science. My goal here has been to look at one of the ways in which Buddhists applied Consciousness-Only to modern discourses. Although the detailed explanation of human consciousness contained within Consciousness-Only thought was a rich resource for addressing a number of specific issues relevant to Buddhists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the very premise of “Consciousness-Only” also served Buddhists as they grappled with ideas about the nature of reality put forth in science and Western philosophy. I have shown how an expression from the canonical texts of Consciousness-Only was supplemented in language (if not in meaning) in the writings of the Chan School, and that after the May Fourth Movement the specific Chan formulation was adopted by some writers as an essential summary of the basic position of Consciousness-Only thought. Lei Xileng and Taixu both used the expression to counter materialism, while Wang used it to incorporate Einstein’s new theories into Buddhist discourse. In all of these instances, it was the basic position of ‘Consciousness-Only,’ and not its insights into the nature of suffering or the human mind, that were primary.

There remains much work to be done on the development of Consciousness-Only in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China, but starts have been made<sup>53</sup> and it is my hope this study might help stimulate further research. Any one of the articles I have cited here could serve as the object of a more detailed study. Other important questions remained to be addressed, such as the ways in which Buddhists related Consciousness-Only thought to modern psychology, and how Buddhist and non-Buddhist thinkers actually did employ the “systematicity” of Consciousness-Only in their discussions of science.

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53 In addition to works already cited, one should also consult Aviv (2008).

## Abbreviations

- CBETA, T Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, Taishō shinshu daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經
- CBETA, X Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, Xuzang jing 續藏經
- MFQ Huang Xianian 黃夏年, ed. 2006. *Minguo fojiao qikan wenxian jicheng* 民國佛教期刊文獻集成 (*Complete Collection of Republican-Era Buddhist Periodical Literature*), 209 vols. Beijing: Beijing tushuguan.
- MFQB Huang Xianian 黃夏年, ed. 2007. *Minguo fojiao qikan wenxian jicheng bubian* 民國佛教期刊文獻集成補編 (*Supplement to the Complete Collection of Republican-Era Buddhist Periodical Literature*), 86 vols. Beijing: Beijing tushuguan.
- TXQS Taixu 太虛. 1998. *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (*Collected Writings of Master Taixu*), 33 vols. Taipei: Taixu daishi quanshu yinying weiyuan hui.

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- Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論 (*Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*). CBETA, T 1666.
- Fo shuo shidi jing* 佛說十地經 (*Daśabhūmika-sūtra*). CBETA, T 287.
- Jingde chuandeng lu* 傳燈錄. CBETA, T 2076.
- Ru lengqie jing* 入楞伽經 (*Lankāvatāra-sūtra*). CBETA, T 671.
- Weishi ershi lun* 唯識二十論 (*Vimśatikā*). CBETA, T 1590.
- Weshi sanshi song* 唯識三十論頌 (*Triṃśikā*). CBETA, T 1586.
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