Performing Buddhist Modernity: The Lumbini Festival, Tokyo 1925

This paper looks at the 1920s Tokyo transformation of hanamatsuri (the celebration of the Buddha’s birthday) from a local observance to a mass public spectacle. The Lumbini Festival was a performance of Buddhist modernity orchestrated to promote links between Japan and Asia and present Japan as leader of Asia. The Lumbini Festival appeared in 1925, the same year as did the Young East, an English language journal published in Tokyo to promote the trans-Asian Buddhist fellowship. Neither was a state initiative, but both nevertheless contributed to the formation and naturalisation of links between Japan and its Asian neighbours and the development of the Japanese empire. The Lumbini festival naturalised Buddhist brotherhood in Tokyo; the Young East, by reporting it through Asia and the West, promoted ideas of their shared Buddhist heritage, and of a Buddhist basis for social reform and Asian modernity.

Introduction
Digging in the dark recesses of the old library at Otani University some time ago, I came across the Young East, “a review of Buddhist life and thought” published in Tokyo from 1925. Although a Japanese journal, edited by prominent Japanese Buddhist academics, it was published in English.1 This was not primarily because they aimed to reach a Western audience, but because as Okakura Kakuzo had noted in his Ideals of the East, English was the language of communication among the Western-educated elites of Asia, a shared legacy of Western imperialism.2 Since I was at the library to research Japan’s

1. The founding editor and proprietor of Young East was Sakurai Gicho, who had been associated with the Nishi Honganji and its academic Buddhist reformer leaders, such as Takakusu Junjiro. For details of Sakurai’s life, see the obituary, “Death of the Editor of the Young East,” Young East: a Monthly Review of Buddhist Life and Thought 2, no. 3 (8 August 1926): 103–105. The journal was originally published by The Young East Publishing Company, Hongo, Tokyo, Japan. It was reprinted in 1978 by the Young East Association through Pitaka Co., Ltd.
2. Okakura makes this statement in the introduction to Ideals of the East, which he wrote to stir young Indians to rise against British imperialism while staying with the Tagore family in India. Okakura Kakuzo, The Ideals of the East (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1904).

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relationship with its Asian neighbours, a report in the first issue of June 1925 entitled “The Lumbini Festival” caught my attention. What follows is the result of tracing the development of this event through ensuing volumes.

The Lumbini Festival emerged in mid-1920s Tokyo as a modern international celebration of the birth of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. Lumbini is the name of the place in north India (now Nepal), where Sakyamuni was born — it is now generally agreed — some time in the sixth century BCE. His birth has long been observed in Japan, at least since 606 CE when Empress Suiko ordered that a ceremony be held on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month.3 Known in Japan now as hanamatsuri (Flower Festival), and as Vesak (Vesâkha) in Theravāda countries, it is celebrated worldwide on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, except in Japan, where it has been fixed on 8 April since the mid-nineteenth century when the Meiji government adopted the Gregorian calendar. From the Tokugawa period, the Japanese hanamatsuri has typically been observed at local temples in a simple ritual where sweet tea was ladled over an image of the infant Buddha placed in a flower-canopied shrine.4

In 1925, the Lumbini festival unfolded over a week, beginning with a three-day bazaar hosted by the Young Women’s Buddhist Association (YWBA) at the Tokyo Imperial University, Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) building (3, 4, and 5 April). This was followed by two days of lecture meetings at various Buddhist schools.5 On 8 April itself, hundreds of children carried a portable shrine in procession from Asakusa to Hibiya Park, where it was set up in a bandstand. Flower offerings were then made to it in such profusion as to create a scene “impressive beyond description.” The flowers were later sent to inmates at hospitals and orphanages.6 The report made special note of seventeen American-born Japanese children who attended and apparently enjoyed the event. Later in the day, an aviator flew over the city and scattered paper lotus petals; troupes of actors presented a dramatised life of Sakyamuni; and in the evening, children carrying lanterns paraded through the streets.7 It was a special holiday, particularly for children.

The event was even more spectacular in 1926, when it even more pointedly took over the public spaces and public institutions of the city. Festivities began on 4 April with a public meeting in the auditorium of what was then Tokyo’s biggest newspaper, the Hōchi. There was music, dancing, and lectures by prominent Buddhist scholars. On the evening of 7 April, Tokyo Radio Office (later to be NHK; this was the first year of its operation) made a special broadcast. Highlights included the story of the birth of the Buddha written for children, and a performance of Buddhist hymns by the newly formed Lumbini Choir. These too had been written for the occasion, and written in English, for

7. Young East 1, no. 1 (June 1925): 30.
the educated in colonial Asia, in the earnest hope, we are told, that these would be sung by people throughout the world.\footnote{This, and other information on the event, appeared in \textit{Young East} 1, no. 11 (April 1926): 370–71.}

On the morning of 8 April, the city was once again blessed with a scattering of millions of petals of lotus flowers made of gold and silver paper, but this time it involved not one, but four aeroplanes. Later, a parade of thousands, including two thousand schoolchildren, marched from the Buddhist Mission Hall in Asakusa, YMBA headquarters, across the city to Hibiya Park, pausing to rest along the way at Matsuzakaya, Matsuya, and Mitsukoshi department stores. Thousands of people had travelled from the countryside to see the parade. Newspapers estimated that over ten thousand people took part. The shrine in the bandstand was once again buried in floral tributes. As the \textit{Osaka Mainichi} described it the next day:

> In the midst of a display gay with the blossoms of the lotus and cherry stood a miniature temple containing a golden image of Gautama Buddha. It was placed in the center of the bandstand while ceremonies were conducted under the auspices of the thirteen different sects of Buddhism in Tokyo.\footnote{The \textit{Mainichi Shinbun} carries a photograph of the shrine in the bandstand on its front page.}

A military band provided music. Troops of schoolgirls presented flowers. The celebration concluded with a mass “banzai.” That evening there were lectures, again at the Tokyo Imperial University YMBA building, and again, lectures on the Buddha and Buddhism were broadcast on the radio. These were in English, this time, “for the benefit of foreign residents.” There were more children’s stories, and more music.\footnote{\textit{Young East} 1, no. 11 (April 1926): 370–71.} In spite of its scale, this was not a state function. Its organisers were, however, obviously well connected. The emphasis on lectures was in keeping with the intellectual, philosophic, academic ideals of modern Buddhism, and the trans-sectarian, lay-centred practice they promoted. Donating the flowers to the needy was in keeping with its focus on social reform and philanthropy, but more on this later.

**Performing Buddhist Modernity**

The Buddha had been brought out of the temple and into the secular public space. Newspaper photographs show the density of the crowd, the massed groups of schoolchildren, the ecumenical parade of priests, and suggest a high level of public organisation. The festival called upon the latest technology. It was a modern event in its association with the centres of consumer culture, the department stores; in its calculated use of mass communications both broadcast and print, and most particularly in the public nature of the performance, its appropriation of the streets and public spaces of the city, newly built after the devastation of the earthquake of 1 September 1923. What had for a millennium been a private festival had been transformed into a public holiday, a display of pageantry of the kind familiar in the creation of modern states worldwide, that

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8. This, and other information on the event, appeared in \textit{Young East} 1, no. 11 (April 1926): 370–71.
9. The \textit{Mainichi Shinbun} carries a photograph of the shrine in the bandstand on its front page.
aimed to create the sense of communal belonging through mass participation.\textsuperscript{11} In this case, the shared performance embodied a sense of being Japanese, being Buddhist, being modern, and being part of an international community that encompassed both Asia and the West. It was a reworking of Buddhist practice that offered an alternative image of modernity to those of the modern boy and modern girl avidly adopting the latest fashions and ideas from the West: an indigenous modernity based in Japanese cultural tradition, a confidently Asian modernity, and one that positioned Japan as leader of Asia.

**Tokyo in the Mid-1920s**

Tokyo at this time was a very cosmopolitan city, being built anew after the devastation of the Great Earthquake of 1923. Magazines featured beautiful young women wearing the latest European fashion, and expensive Western-style restaurants. It was technologically advanced; an air service opened between Osaka and Tokyo in 1925, and quickly grew to link the major cities of the nation, including its colonial centres in Korea and Manchuria. In this year also, NHK began public broadcasts. By 1927, Tokyo boasted the first underground railway in Asia. The city was culturally cosmopolitan with strong French, German, and Russian intellectual influences. Japanese travelled abroad, and Japan was on the international itinerary of Western VIPs. In 1926, Baron Megota Tsunumi returned from Europe and started a dance academy teaching the foxtrot and tango, as well as how to eat, dress, and behave \textit{a la francaise}.\textsuperscript{12} Baseball was already popular. Tokyo was a meeting place of East and West, and a destination for Asian leaders seeking inspiration for the creation of their own national modernities. Japan was a model of non-Western modernity for its Asian neighbours, and even for nationalists aspiring to throw off colonial rule as far away as Egypt.\textsuperscript{13}

A recurrent question in Japanese history over the last century has been how to be “modern” and still remain “Japanese,” when being modern is popularly seen to be keeping up with the USA (or Paris or London). It is no surprise that there was a section of the community that reacted against the increasing evidence of Westernisation and sought to be modern on more distinctly Japanese terms. What the Lumbini Festival offered was not a return to the past, but the creation of an \textit{indigenous} modernity in which traditions were reworked in an international idiom of technology, communications, consumption, and mass performance that spoke of Japan’s modernity.

\textsuperscript{11} Takeshi Fujitani, \textit{Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), taking inspiration from Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” and the work of Michel Foucault, describes the use of public performance and public space in the creation of citizens in the Meiji nation state.


\textsuperscript{13} On Philippine regard for Japan at this time, see Vicente L. Rafael, \textit{White Love and Other Events in Filipino History} (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 105–106; on Meiji Japan’s impact in Egypt, see Michael Laffan, “Mustafa and the Mikado: A Francophile Egyptian’s Turn to Meiji Japan,” \textit{Japanese Studies} 19, no. 3 (December 1999): 269–86.
Buddhism and Modernity

The Lumbini festival and the Young East have their origins in the Japanese Buddhist revival of the late 1880s. At this time, when Buddhism was competing against materialist philosophy and Christianity for the allegiance of Japan’s Western-educated elite, Inoue Enryō called on young men of talent and education to seek and revive Buddhist truths for the sake of the nation, for the sake of Asia, and for the sake of the world. It was a call for something like a “lay sangha,” a community of lay Buddhists dedicated to the propagation of dharma, in this socially engaged and intellectual form of Buddhism.14 To meet the needs of the time, and to present itself as relevant to modern society, new Buddhism (shin bukkyō) developed philanthropic, educational, and social activities. The YMBA (Bukkyō seinenkai) — sponsor of Young East — was only one of these. There were also Sunday schools, youth camps, magazines, and moral tracts, attempts to provide accessible, common language books of Buddhist teachings, books that could be read in family groups in the manner that the Christian Bible was in virtuous Western families. Shin Bukkyō was trans-sectarian, rationalised, socially active, lay-centred, and adopted many of the philanthropic, social, and proselytising methods of Protestant Christianity, which was the religion of the dominant colonial powers, the model of the role of religion in modern secular societies.

An article in the first issue of the Young East (1925) entitled “What Buddhists Are Doing in Japan” shows the continued development of these activities. By this time, there was also the YWBA, and it was building a refuge for women who came from the country to find work. The YMBA had branches in major universities from which they also ran Sunday schools for children.15 The Nishi Honganji ran a school for nurses and a school for the blind; Higashi Honganji maintained an institution in Asakusa specialising in eye disease, which offered free medical treatment.16 While publishing had always been a significant activity among Buddhist revivalists,17 by 1925, it was directed at a wider audience as it reached out to the mass readership produced by public education.18 By this time, there were a number of Buddhist newspapers and journals including one, Akatsuki, that was specifically directed at women.19

15. Takakusu, “What Buddhists Are Doing in Japan,” 4, mentions that over three hundred children attended the Sunday school attached to the Tokyo Imperial University YMBA.
17. Japan Weekly Mail, 5 December 1891, reported that there were at that time over four hundred journals put out by Buddhists.
Buddhism and the West

One of the key features of Buddhist modernity is the prestige of Buddhism in the West as a religion of the modern world, due mainly to perceived similarities with certain concepts in contemporary European philosophy, and the belief that it was a religion compatible with science and contemporary Western philosophy. Japanese Buddhist nationalism depended not simply on Buddhism’s long connection with Japanese culture, but also on Buddhism’s relevance to the modern world at large. From as early as 1888, Inoue Enryō had argued that it was the patriotic duty of Japanese intellectuals to take Buddhism to the West. The best way “Japan can be made Japanese” and Japan can remain independent was, he argued, to preserve and propagate Buddhism: “Everyone knows we must look to the West to supply models of Government, law, military systems, education, the physical sciences and technology. However, there is one thing we can transmit to foreign countries and thereby win fame; that thing is Buddhism.”

The Buddhism to be propagated was decidedly not something lifted from the past. It was a modern New Buddhism — or in the form intended for the West — “Eastern Buddhism,” the answer to the quest for a religion compatible with science. Fundamental to this revivalist strategy was the reality of Western interest in Buddhism at that time, the prestige it enjoyed as a humanist philosophy, and as the religion of the scientific age. It was a prestige product, something that Japan could contribute to world civilisation and thereby win respect. By the 1920s, promotion to the West was well under way. The Young East signalled the Western endorsement of Buddhism to its readers when it announced that the words of the Lumbini hymn were taken from Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, by reporting news of interest in Buddhism in the West, and by publishing contributions from Western scholars.

Creating Buddhist Citizens

The Lumbini festival was a pageant of national belonging. Reading reports of it, I was struck by the similarity with the Imperial pageantry deployed to create the citizens of modern Japan. The creation of cities and their wide streets for parades and open spaces for the display and performance of national belonging and national power are as much a part of creating modern citizens as installing shared cultural experience through mass media and institutions of public education. Through the Lumbini festival’s use of media and public spaces, the marshalling of schoolchildren, and the spectacle in all its manifestations over the week, people were assured of the importance of Buddhism, and of its popular support, by the fact that it could command such an audience and had the right to occupy those spaces. This great public festival was a clear statement of an alternative Japaneseness; being Japanese, being right up to date with the latest technology, but in a uniquely Japanese manner. Access to the luxurious

21. I am writing here of the early years of the journal when it was sponsored by Sakurai Gicho, a wealthy merchant who had traded in India. The journal changed editorship and focus in 1934.
facilities of the newspaper and radio station auditorium — not to mention the airplanes — suggests also that this was not a marginal movement but one with strong support among a powerful social and economic elite.

The journey across the city from Asakusa took possession of the city for Buddhism, reinforcing the claim staked by the aerial blessing of lotus petals. The parade across the city and the size of the crowds assured newspaper coverage. Modern communication systems were used extensively to promote the event, attracting crowds from the countryside — the report also mentions that thousands came in from the country to see the festival — and to disseminate news of its success. The Osaka Asahi newspaper carried photographs of the event the following day. Images of Buddhist modernity were rapidly projected even to villages in remote parts of Japan.24 The Lumbini Festival was a public performance such as those that are the basis of imagined communities, creating a consciousness of being modern Japanese citizens in a Buddhist mode.

Performing Empire

Louise Young and others have described the way that popular culture — films, novels, and magazines — in the interwar years naturalised and promoted Japanese presence in the colonies.25 Jennifer Robertson’s study of the Takarazuka Review describes the importance of theatre in creating affective, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of empire, and in shaping popular attitudes.26 She shows how the famous train scene of the review Mon Paris, first performed in 1927, did this. The railroad, a metaphor for nation, empire, and progress, was a modernising force traversing the world, presenting vignettes of “exotic countries” on the way to Europe, culminating in a “multicultural finale”27 of interracial harmony. Popular attitudes about colonial subjects and of Japanese superiority were shaped through the pleasures of the theatre, which familiarised the foreign, established Japanese superiority, and naturalised the relationship.

We can see similar processes in the Lumbini festival. Airplanes are even stronger symbols of modern progress, technological achievement, and expansion. The hymns were written in English to be sung by Buddhists worldwide.28 Although performed in Tokyo by Japanese citizens, it was promoted to them as an Asia-wide celebration, with its visions of people across Asia performing the same acts of devotion and singing the same hymns, contributing to a sense of emotional connection between the Japanese and their Asian neighbours.

24. It would be wrong to imply that the crowds gathered simply out of interest. Even at Buddhism’s lowest ebb in the mid Meiji, Buddhist institutions were able to gather huge crowds. During Colonel Henry Steel Olcott’s tours of the country in 1889, for example, he regularly spoke to crowds of several thousand people. Newspaper photographs of the Lumbini festival show squads of children in uniform suggesting such organisation.
25. Louise Young, Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
27. Robertson, “Performing Empire,” 106.
Renaming it the Lumbini Festival, with its reference to the actual geographical location in India of the birth of the Buddha in human history, was a powerful message to the Japanese of their long-standing shared cultural heritage, but just as the train of progress that united the various counties in Mon Paris was a Japanese train, Japanese Buddhists wrote the hymns that were to be sung across the Buddhist world. The first of these, proudly acknowledged to be based on Sir Edwin Arnold’s Light of Asia, was called Sunrise Comes, a title that invokes an image of the flag of Japan, the Rising Sun, moving from East to West, an image of Japan as the Light of Asia restoring Buddhism to its neighbours, in the natural course of things. This ability to bring culture and civilisation to the less developed is itself a mark of Japanese modernity, as much as of leadership. Note here also the familiar trope of Japan as mediator, processing the West, here Edwin Arnold’s verse, for Asian consumption.

**Young East: Reporting and Extending Performance**

The rhetoric of simultaneous pan-Asian performance aside, in such early days of radio broadcasting, even the number of people in Japan who could actually participate would have been limited. How many owned radios? How wide was the circle of reception? The performance in Tokyo nevertheless created the opportunity for widespread reporting in newspapers and magazines. Young East carried the message abroad. Again, while the readership of such a journal would presumably be limited to an educated elite, letters and contributions from England, Ceylon, India, Burma, Mongolia, Manchuria, Taiwan, Korea, Hawaii, and the Philippines suggest that it did indeed circulate in these influential circles, and not exclusively among Buddhists. It is intriguing to read, for example, that Mrs Sarojini Naidu, President of the Indian National Congress and great supporter of Mahatma Gandhi, addressed a crowd at a “Buddha Day” celebration at Kusinagara on 27 May 1926. Although held on the date of Vesak according to the lunar calendar, and attended by Chinese and Burmese Buddhist priests, the description of the event suggests it followed Hindu practice, reminding us of the importance of Buddhist cultural heritage in Hindu nationalism.

29. The Japanese are speaking of India in a premodern continental sense, as the land of Indian Buddhism. Lumbini is within the borders of modern Nepal.

30. The words of the hymn are the closing invocation of Edwin Arnold’s immensely popular epic poem based on the life of the Buddha, *Light of Asia* (first published London, 1879), an anglicisation of the Triple Refuge (taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha):

   Ah! Blessed Lord! Oh! High Deliverer!
   I take my refuge in thy name and thee!
   I take refuge in thy Law of Good!
   I take refuge in thy Order! Om!
   The Dew is on the Lotus! Rise Great Sun!
   And lift my leaf and mix me with the wave.
   Om mani padme hum, Om mani padme hum,
   The Sunrise comes! The Dew drop slips into the shining Sea.

31. *Young East* 2, no. 2 (July 1926): 101–102. Kusinagara is the site of the Buddha’s *parinirvana* (entry into final *nirvana*, i.e., physical death), and since in Theravāda tradition Vesak celebrates the three great life events of the Buddha — his birth, awakening, and *parinirvana* — it is as appropriate a site as Lumbini. An image of the Buddha was carried in procession from the Mahaparinirvana temple to the Hindi middle school.

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**Young East: India, Japan, and Modern Japanese Buddhism**

That *Young East* was quintessentially a journal of modern Buddhism should come as no surprise. It was founded in 1925 by Sakurai Gicho (1868–1926), in association with leading Buddhist academic and his long-term colleague in publishing, Takakusu Junjirō (1866–1945), then Professor of Sanskrit at Tokyo Imperial University, and Watanabe Kaigyoku (1872–1933), Professor at the University of Religious Studies (*Shūkyō daigaku*) and Tōyō University. All three men had long association with the Buddhist revival movement from the Meiji period. Takakusu had gone to Oxford University in 1890. There he studied the science of religion under Max Müller, mastering the rules of the Western academic discipline which enabled the presentation of Japanese Buddhism in a form that was acceptable to international specialists and modern, Western-educated Japanese. He and Watanabe, who had studied Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and other Buddhist languages in Germany and elsewhere, were central to establishing the international pre-eminence of Japanese Buddhist scholarship. They were responsible for some of the most outstanding achievements of Buddhist scholarship of the century, including the compilation of the *Taishō Tripitaka*, the most complete collection of the Chinese scriptures ever assembled, and still the definitive collection. It was also these men — along with their close associate D. T. Suzuki — whose writings in English introduced Mahāyāna Buddhism to the West. The journal Suzuki founded for this purpose in 1922, *The Eastern Buddhist*, still operates out of Higashi Honganji’s Otani University in Kyoto. *Young East* and *Eastern Buddhist* were both published in English, but differed in content and direction. *Eastern Buddhist* presented Buddhist philosophy to a targeted audience of Western intellectuals, an equivalent vehicle for the propagation of knowledge of Mahāyāna Buddhism to the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*. *Young East* wrote of Buddhist participation in contemporary society, urging and promoting pan-Asian Buddhist fellowship. The two audiences were not entirely divorced — the opening editorial of *Young East* speaks of its mission to save the West by spreading to it the culture, philosophy, and faith of Buddhism — and nor were the projects, as we saw in Inoue Enryō’s *Bukkyō Katsuron joron* above. Japanese Buddhism was to be supported for the sake of the nation, for the sake of Asia, and for the sake of the world. The project of promoting a Buddhist national identity was intrinsically linked to the promotion of Buddhism in the West and across Asia.

Sakurai Gicho’s long and influential career began with the *Hansei zasshi* (1885, later the *Chūō kōron*), the *Shin kōron* (New Review), the *Nijū seiki* (Twentieth Century), and *Katei no tomo* (Home Journal). He had travelled extensively in Asia, visiting India many times from 1898, and devoted much of his energy to establishing links between the countries. He founded the Nichi In Kyōkai (Indo-Japanese Association) and was a close friend and host to Indian

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statesmen, writers, and businessmen visiting Japan. Among the friends who contributed to the *Young East* were the Ceylonese Buddhist reform leader, Anagarika Dharmapala, and the Indian nationalist leader, Rabindranath Tagore.34 His vision for the journal, the title of which is intriguingly resonant with the journal founded by Mohandas K. Gandhi to air his political thought (*Young India*, 1919–1932), was to foster “better international understanding and peace, friendly cooperation with Asiatic peoples.”

The point is that all three had a long association with the creation of modern Japanese Buddhism, and close links with both Western Buddhist scholars and Asian reform leaders, and from the start saw the *Young East* as an organ for World Buddhism. It is no coincidence that Takakusu and Watanabe were involved in the formation of the Tokyo World’s Buddhist League,35 and the organisation of the Far Eastern Buddhist Conference, 1925.36 An article announcing the plans for this explains that the growth of Buddhist organisations and publications on Buddhism in both European and Asian countries showed that “Buddhism is coming out to the front with the force of a volcano which is about to awaken after age-long dormancy.” One of the aims of the *Young East* was to “serve as a connecting link between various Buddhist movements of the world.” This involved calling for a register of names and addresses, a commitment to correspond, to supply books and information, to raise questions, and to assist in planning an international conference on Buddhism. “It seems to us that Japan is in the best position to undertake all these works.”37

The *Young East* and the Far Eastern Buddhist conference both articulated a program of education, reform, and social welfare “for world peace, for humanity.”38 The first issue of the journal opened with an impassioned call to the young men and women of all the Eastern countries: “We must free ourselves from the chains of moribund traditions. . . . We must put fire to dead or dying leaves to welcome in their place fresh buds full of life and vigour. In this way we must bring back to life the old East, the sick East, the dying East.”39 To the West, it offered Buddhism as the remedy for its obvious ills; “if civilization is really what the present civilization of the West represents, it is a curse rather than a blessing. The shortest cut to remedy its shortcomings and make it complete is . . . to spread to the West the culture, philosophy and faith of Buddhism.”40 The rhetoric is familiar and would certainly have struck a chord with Buddhist nationalists such as Dharmapala and his colleagues, and with the Indian nationalists of Calcutta, whom Okakura Kakuzō had attempted to stir

34. “Death of the Editor of Young East,” *Young East* 11, no. 3 (8 August 1926): 103–104.
35. *Young East* 1, no. 5 (October 1925): 164 carries a “Proposal to Establish in Tokyo World’s Buddhist League.”
36. This was essentially a China–Japan initiative; reported in *Young East* 1, no. 6 (November 1925).
37. Quotes in this paragraph are from “Proposal to Establish in Tokyo World’s Buddhist League,” *Young East* 1, no. 5 (October 1925): 164.
38. The aims of the Federation are spelled out in the report on the conference in *Young East* 1, no. 6 (8 November 1926): 173–76.
39. Frontispiece, *Young East* 1, no. 1 (8 June 1925).
40. Ibid. Takakusu Junjirō, “Europe Ripe for Buddhism,” *Young East* 2, no. 8 (8 January 1927): 255–58 expands on the message.
with a very similar rhetoric in *Ideals of the East*. The ideas were restated by Taixu, the leader of modern Buddhist reforms in north China at this time, at the Far Eastern Buddhist Conference.\(^{41}\) His paper, “A Statement to Asiatic Buddhists,” carried the subheading, “Only Buddhism can save the present world.”\(^{42}\)

The editor of the *Young East* was clearly aware of the possibility of a militant reading even as early as 1925, when he wrote in the frontispiece of the first issue: “Do not misunderstand us. We are neither advocates of imperialism nor enemies of the West. In proclaiming, as we have done, our mission, we are simply speaking in the spirit of peace and love, in that of Buddha, which transcends national boundaries and regards all races in equal light.” *Young East* also carries messages of peace and articles explicitly warning against aggression. However harmonious the motivation of its organisers though, the Lumbini festival and the *Young East* were part of an ensemble of cultural practices that contributed to an attitude among the Japanese population of the naturalness of the development of pan-Asianism in the next two decades — an attitude that facilitated imperial expansion and contributed to the rhetoric of it. The content is nevertheless consistent with the theme of reform and world Buddhist brotherhood. There are regular reports from parts of Asia, lectures by Asian Buddhist leaders, reports on developments in Buddhist Asia, as well as articles on Buddhism by Western scholars. In September 1925, it reported on the first meeting of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Honolulu.\(^{43}\) The content of *Young East* is of Buddhism in its social and political aspects. The Buddhism it presented was the modern exemplar, Tōhō, Eastern Law, the Eastern Buddhism of Meiji reform that was by this time achieving notice in the West through the writings of D. T. Suzuki.\(^{44}\) It was a form of Buddhism that met the needs of a number of indigenous movements in Asian countries, particularly those of East Asian Mahāyāna, and had much in common with the intellectual and social aspects of the modern humanist Buddhism of Theravāda countries.\(^{45}\) This Buddhism was a force for reform in Asia, and a means of establishing Asia’s place in the world. *Young East* was characteristically a journal of modern Buddhism in its social engagement.

**Japan and Buddhist Asia**

Buddhist pan-Asianism began much earlier. Colonel Henry Steel Olcott’s early attempts to unite the Asian Buddhist world on the basis of his *Buddhist Catechism* (1881) failed, particularly in Japan, but his visits to Japan accompanied by the youthful Dharmapala, established links that persist into the pages

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42. Rev. Tai-Sue, *Young East* 1, no. 6 (8 November 1925): 177–82.
of *Young East*. Dharmapala spent a considerable time in Kyoto with the young Buddhists associated with the revival movement, including Takakusu. The Mahabodhi Society and its Japanese branch, the *Indo busseki kofukukai*, enabled growing networks of Buddhist scholars and reform leaders across Asia. This was reinforced by Okakura Tenshin and others who formed personal links with reform leaders in India. In the context of the 1920s, the image of Japan as leader of Asia that had been part of the rhetoric of Meiji revival was given reality by its colonial possessions, and by the number of people from various parts of Asia that came to Japan to study. Buddhist missionaries, along with colonists, entrepreneurs, and others, were active in Formosa, Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia. Buddhist priests accompanied migrants into the USA, Hawaii, Brazil, and the Philippines, as we see reported in the *Young East*. The Japanese sense of leadership of Buddhist Asia was not without basis, and an important feature of this was Japan’s leadership in anglophone Buddhist scholarship. Although some Theravāda scholars were able to contribute to the work of the Pali Text Society, the only Asian Buddhist voices contributing to the Western academic discourse on Buddhism at this time were the Japanese, and their contributions were crucial to the creation of Buddhism as a world religion.

While the ideas of pan-Asian Buddhist brotherhood, of Buddhism as a world religion, and of Japan as leader of Asia were not new, a number of factors coalesced in the 1920s to provide an opportunity to bring the movement out of Buddhist circles and into a public sphere. There was a turn to religion as a response to the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation, the uncertainty of the times, and the yearning for a sense of community and spirituality. There was also a resurgence of strength in established religions as the government enlisted their support in an effort to temper radical thought, one sign of which was that the ban on religious education in schools was relaxed in 1924. As a result, cohorts of children in uniform were highlighted in images of the Lumbini parade and festival. As well as this, a growing dissatisfaction with excessive Westernisation was exacerbated by the Asian Exclusion Act of October 1924 that prohibited East Asian immigration to the USA. Perhaps the most important stimulus for this Buddhist celebration was, however, the earthquake and fire that destroyed 684,659 houses and killed 91,344 people in September 1923. Buddhist institutions played a central role in managing the dead, offering solace to those who survived, as well as providing vital services like handing out food. Although Buddhism may have been low on the horizon

50. My thanks to Charles Schenking, who has spent a great deal of time researching newspaper reports on the earthquake, for alerting me to this.
of many Tokyo residents prior to this catastrophe, they would most certainly have been aware of it after this date from the regular reports in the newspapers, if not from their own experience. The *Young East* was published in Honjo, one of the most devastated areas of Tokyo. More than 30,000 men, women, and children had been burned to death in the Honjo Clothing Depot fire. The Jodoshinshu temple at nearby Tsukiji, the Tsukiji Honganji, performed memorial services and built a memorial temple in the grounds of the depot, which was opened on the fifth anniversary of the earthquake in September 1928. The organisational links between the Lumbini festival and the earthquake memorial service are suggested by the *Young East*’s description of the second anniversary of the disaster: “an interesting and novel service given was that performed by Bishop Shinkyo Michishige of the Jodo sect who is 71 years of age. Early in the morning he boarded an aeroplane, and after visiting Yokohama and saying mass for the victims there, flew back to the capital and circling over the ground of the Military Clothing Depot dropped three hundred thousand pamphlets and paper lotus flowers.”

This took place five months after a similar flyover at the Lumbini festival.

The Birth of the Buddha and Modern Buddhism

The Lumbini festival grew from year to year. In 1926 Takakusu announced plans to stage an immense celebration in 1934, the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Plans to stage simultaneous celebrations across Asia, however, raised doubts about both the date on which to hold the festival, and just when the 2,500th anniversary would occur, reflecting a clash between local Buddhist traditions each of which had their own versions of when the Buddha was born, and the conclusions of Western historical research which the Japanese had adopted. The eighth day of the fourth lunar month was not April 8. Few were convinced that 1934 was indeed the 2,500th anniversary. Correspondence in the *Young East* reveals the tensions.

Vesak, as the celebration of the Buddha’s birth is more commonly known in southeast Asian Buddhist countries, was not simply one of the few festivals shared by Buddhists of various schools and cultural backgrounds, it was also already a potent symbol of Asian modernity and successful anti-colonial protest. As an advocate for Buddhist reform leaders protesting against the exclusive observance of Christian public holidays in Ceylon under British rule, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott successfully petitioned the British Government in 1888 for the recognition of Vesak as a public holiday, which, by emphasising its association with the birth of the Buddha, became a Buddhist equivalent to Christmas, marking the birth of Jesus Christ. Choosing to celebrate the birth of Sakyamuni was also a mark of Buddhist modernity since it reinforced the Orientalist scholarship of the time, which, against Buddhist traditions,
emphasised the historical humanity of the Buddha as founder of the religion, the basic premise of modern humanist Buddhism.\textsuperscript{53}

The importance of the historical humanity of the Buddha Sakyamuni in modern Buddhism cannot be overemphasised. That Gotama\textsuperscript{54} was nothing but a man, is fundamental to the construct of Indian Buddhism. Buddhism only had claims to be the religion of the scientific age to the extent that the Buddha Sakyamuni was seen as the one and only Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, and that Buddhism, his teaching, was seen as an ethical philosophy compatible with science. Celebrating a Lumbini festival in Tokyo confirmed the Buddha’s historical humanity and the modernity of Japanese Buddhism.

\textbf{Modernity Prefigured: India and King Asoka in Modern Buddhism}

Over the last century, and particularly during the 1920s, the Indian king Asoka who reigned in about the third century BCE, has become symbolic of modern Buddhist identity throughout Asia. We see, for example, a reproduction of the Sanchi stupa in the grounds of Nembutsuji, Kyoto built in the early twentieth century. It is only one of many. Although Asoka was indeed an historical figure, the only surviving knowledge of him until the nineteenth century was through Buddhist legend. His actual existence was only established when British colonial scholars identified Devanampiyatissa, the author of edicts carved into stone throughout the Indian subcontinent, with the legendary king of Buddhist literature.\textsuperscript{55} The British discovery and translation of Asoka’s edicts coincided with the construction of “Indian” Buddhism in orientalist scholarship, and the emphasis on religious tolerance, non-violence, compassion, and mutual respect apparent in the edicts confirmed the humanist ideal of Western constructs of the Buddha and his teaching. Asokan humanism, equated with Buddhism on the grounds that Asoka was himself an avowed Buddhist, presented an image of Indian greatness — of Indian priority in the creation of a society based on humanist principles (a “modern” society) — that was seized upon by Indians, and other Asian Buddhist countries, at a time of unrelenting missionary criticism. Buddhist nationalists could quote such Western luminaries as H. G. Wells to claim that Asoka was the greatest monarch of all time. Asoka also provided the model for one of the characteristics of modern Buddhism: its emphasis on philanthropic works, based on the edicts that spoke of providing education, hospitals, and medicine for his people. The edicts presented an image of Asoka so thoroughly tolerant and humanist that Hindu nationalists installed him as the paradigm of their secular democratic nation, and Asoka’s lion capital became


\textsuperscript{54} In contrast to Asian tradition, early Orientalist scholars chose to refer to the Buddha Sakyamuni as Gotama (alternately spelled Gautama) precisely to emphasise his humanity. Gotama was his family name, Siddhartha, his given name, Sakyamuni, literally the Sage of the Sakya clan, a title of respect.

\textsuperscript{55} For an account of this, see John Strong, \textit{The Legend of Asoka: A Study and Translation of the Asokavadana} (Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidas, 1989).
the insignia of Independent India. Throughout the twentieth century, Asoka has signalled the international prestige and humanist values of modern Buddhism. Reference to early Indian architecture, such as we see in archaeological reports on the excavations of Sanchi complex in the design of the Tsukiji Honganji (begun in 1931; completed in 1934) signalled a pan-Asian Buddhist unity, as Japan took a position of leadership in Asia.56

Performing Modernity, Embodying Tradition
Since the establishment of the modern state in the Meiji period, just what “being modern” meant was a matter of negotiation between being modern in terms that the West recognised as such, and countering the loss of cultural integrity that this entailed. As we have seen, Meiji Buddhist revival rode a wave of increasing nationalism, presenting Buddhism as the basis of national identity, the basis of an indigenous modernity. However, the success of the movement depended on presenting the Buddhism of Japan in a manner acceptable to Western-educated elites of Japan and as a credible candidate for the role of ideological basis of the modern world. This was not the Buddhism of long tradition, but the new Buddhism of the Meiji revival (shin bukkyo¯), a model of modern Buddhism. The legacy of Meiji Buddhist revival is apparent in the Lumbini festival. It was not a nostalgic revival of past rituals. It was, however, linked into Japan’s cultural heritage, creating an opportunity to display Japan’s participation in a global modern, confidently exhibiting its Asian modernity.

The transformation of tradition through state-of-the-art technology apparent in the Lumbini festival invites analysis through Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s word-processing metaphor of “reformatting.” Briefly summarised, reformatting views the creation of various local modernities as a matter of reorganising local cultural forms according to a set of rules that define the modern in general. The process is exemplified in a number of aspects of the creation of modern Japanese Buddhism. Takakusu and Watanabe’s production and publication of the canon, the sacred books of Buddhist traditions, sifted, sorted, edited, chronologically ordered, and cross-referenced according to the rules of Western academic scholarship, is a prime example. The texts are those of long-standing tradition, but they are now ordered according to globally recognised rules of cutting-edge scholarship. It is also evident in the adoption of the social roles of Protestant Christianity, the youth groups, Sunday Schools, YMBA, welfare activities, and greater lay participation, activities that are all evident in the Young East accounts of Buddhism in Japan. It neatly allows for the transfer of the flower pavilion containing the Buddha image from the temple to the bandstand in the park, and other aspects of the Lumbini ritual. Reformatting might even encompass the blessing of the city from an airplane. Newspaper reports refer to it as sange, strewing flowers before the Buddha, a ceremony performed from ancient times. Alternately, applying one of the more usual tropes for thinking about modern pageantry, we might consider the

Lumbini festival in terms of “invention of tradition,” a concept that refers less to an actual “invention” than to the use of the past as a repository of cultural vocabulary, the elements of which can be strung together to create new statements within a current discourse.\(^{57}\) The past here in the Lumbini festival’s statement of Japan’s international role is a combination of the past of Japan, of India, and of Western scholarship. These pasts provide an elaborate language of symbolic practice to construct this new cultural form. “Invention” is something of an inverse of “reformatting,” which tends to imply a fundamental continuity of culture that is “repackaged,” “updated” by following new rules. “Invented” traditions aim to give the appearance of a long heritage to new institutions that emerge in response to new situations. The Lumbini festival clearly exhibits aspects of both, but the problem with both metaphors is their tendency to focus on the opposition between present practice and some past “reality” that it is being measured against. They do not adequately account for the performance aspect of the event, its lived reality.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty observed, no invention of tradition is effective without a simultaneous invocation of affect, of sentiments, emotions, and other embodied practices.\(^{58}\) As he puts it, the modern subject embodies a rich and complex history of “the training of the senses” (his term), a history that goes back a long way. The celebration of the Lumbini festival as a public holiday, a participatory event which resonated with familiar rituals, effectively called upon this cultural memory even as it made new statements of modernity, acting out and thereby embodying expansive visions of pan-Asian Buddhist brotherhood.
