

BOOK REVIEWS

India in the Chinese Imagination: Myth, Religion, and Thought. Edited by John Kieschnick and Meir Shahar. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. viii + 305 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-8122-4560-8.

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For quite some time now, scholars of East Asian Buddhism have pondered whether Chinese Buddhism is a heavily Indianized religion displaying the impact of the religion's culture of origin, or whether it has been heavily Sinitized during the centuries following its introduction to the Middle Kingdom. Both approaches assert a cultural influence of India on China, at least in terms of religion; the first a strong influence, the second a rather weak one. In order to test which of the two approaches is the better suited hermeneutic concept for explaining the historical development of Buddhism in China, one must demonstrate the extent to which Indian ideas, concepts, institutions, and material culture have perceptibly dominated Chinese religion and culture or, on the other hand, have been "swallowed" or "digested" by it.

If we look beyond material culture borrowings (e.g., the production of sugar from sugar cane), it is in many if not most cases difficult, and even a rather arbitrary decision by the respective scholar, to discern between what were the original Indian ideas and concepts, etc., and what they became during their "translation" into China. To say they were distorted, adapted, or transformed reflects judgments about the quality of the process of Sinification that John Kieschnick and Meir Shahar point out in the introduction (p. 6). Thus, the core issue is not so much what "authentic" content was really transported from India to China in an objective, reified form, but how and why the Chinese imagined India and its culture in a specific way.

In 2014, two books were published on exactly this subject of the transmission of Indian culture and thought to China; one on the reception and

transformation of Buddhist ideas and philosophical concepts,¹ and another one—reviewed here—on broader topics of imagination in three subsections: “Indian Mythology and the Chinese Imagination” (part 1), “India in Chinese Imaginings of the Past” (part 2), and “Chinese Rethinking of Indian Buddhism” (part 3). The difference between the two edited volumes is that the former focuses completely on Buddhism and its doctrinal side, while the second book deals with the wider impact of Indian ideas—not only those restricted to Buddhism—on Chinese culture.

The book includes ten essays by scholars of Chinese religions. The book is published in the series “Encounters with Asia,” edited by Victor H. Mair. The description of the series states that it “aims particularly to clarify the complex interrelationships among the various peoples in Asia, and also with societies beyond Asia,” and the book clearly fits into this framework.

Since this book is on the Chinese imagination of India, which certainly had to be nurtured by means of some concrete contact between the two cultures, the reader might expect detailed information on Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian 法顯 (ca. 337–422), Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), and Yijing 義淨 (635–713). These travellers not only provided sources for nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars of Indian Buddhism, but also influenced the Chinese imagination of India over centuries, as can be seen in the Chinese dynastic histories that copy and paste large portions of Xuanzang’s *Datang xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 (Record of the Western Regions from the Great Tang) when they give information about the situation of the countries lying west of China in the respective geographical sections. The reader therefore may be surprised to read in the introduction that these sources are “valuable for understanding India in the medieval period” (pp. 3–4) and then hear no mention of them thereafter. It seems, although it is not explicitly stated, that the editors thought the articles in their volume should thematize different strands of imagination of India in China, strands that were not so much transmitted and shaped by these “eye-witnesses” and their reports but by “a handful of Indian monks . . . [and] monks from Central Asia . . . who bridged the gap that separated India and China” (p. 4), thus emphasizing the role that Central Asia possibly played in the transmission process.

The title of the book should be taken completely in the sense of “imagination” since the volume does not deal with material or—with the exception of Robert Sharf’s chapter—intellectual borrowings, but includes topics that deal with China’s influence back on India rather than India’s direct influ-

¹ Chen-kuo Lin and Michael Radich, eds., *Articulating Indic Ideas in Sixth and Seventh Century Chinese Buddhism* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2014).

ence on China. In a wider sense, this approach questions the longstanding notion of Indian culture as being dominated by myth and imagination and a “rational” China predominantly concerned with technology, administration, and objective history. The volume begins with an introduction by the editors that emphasizes the role India has played in the Chinese “mind” and gives an overview of how the interaction between the two cultures unfolded historically.

The series of articles in the first section opens with Victor Mair’s “Transformation as Imagination in Medieval Popular Buddhist Literature,” in which he highlights the importance and influence of Indian Buddhist literature for the development of literary fiction in the Chinese tradition, which he relates to the specific Buddhist epistemological and ontological parameters of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and illusion (*māyā*). As to be expected, Mair elucidates this by discussing examples from the “transformation text” (*bianwen* 變文) literature, which builds on the Buddhist notion of transformation (Ch. *bian* 變; Skt. *vikāra*, *pariṇāma*, *prātihārya*), especially the “projection or emanation of something from his/her [the protagonist of the narrative] mind” (p. 17). The texts used to illustrate this are the Dunhuang text *Xiang mo bianwen* 降魔變文 (Transformation Text on the Subduing of Demons; pp. 17–18) in which the disciples of the Buddha Śāriputra and Raudrākṣa are the protagonists, and the *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West), with the monkey Sun Wukong 孫悟空 as its main protagonist (pp. 18–19). Although the general point made by Mair is well taken, the narratives he uses as examples could be more fully elaborated on, particularly since they cover several centuries, which is quite a long period of time.

Meir Shahar’s chapter “Indian Mythology and the Chinese Imagination: Nezha, Nalakūbara, and Kṛṣṇa” traces the development of the Chinese divine “enfant terrible” Nezha 哪吒 and his myth back to its Indian roots. Shahar argues that the Chinese figure Nezha (or Nazha) and the narratives around him are the product of an amalgamation of the Buddhist Tantric deity Vaiśravaṇa, the Heavenly King of the northern regions, and the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa. He traces the development and change of the deity from early Tang 唐 period Tantric sources—linking with the editors’ emphasis on the importance of the Tantric tradition “on the Chinese imagination of the supernatural” (p. 7)—to modern representations, before he looks at the Indian sources, both Hindu (*Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*) and Buddhist (*Kākāṭī-jātaka*), that deal with Naṭakuvera (*Nalakūbara*, etc.), in which he finds parallel elements (e.g., “sexual trickster”). Other motifs of the Chinese Nezha myth—the god being a mischievous child, his “oedipal tensions,”

the killing of a dragon (*nāga*), and the drawing of a miraculous bow—are not found in the myths around the Indian protagonist that directly correspond to Nezha; Shahar suggests that these are derived from another Indian mythological cycle, the one of the child-god Kṛṣṇa as found in the *Purāṇas*. Shahar illustrates this possible transmission of Hindu mythology into stories about the Chinese popular deity through pictures from the archaeological remains of a thirteenth-century Hindu temple found in Quanzhou 泉州. In his article, Shahar analyses a rich and dense tapestry of different sources, Indian and Chinese. He demonstrates how different layers of narrative and religious traditions, over time, shape a Chinese god and his myth, and shows that it still bears the traces of the imaginative absorption of Indian mythology.

The focus on the role of Tantric Buddhism in reflecting Indian influence and imagination in the transmission, change, and development of Indian ideas and concepts is even stronger in Bernard Faure's "Indic Influence on Chinese Mythology: King Yama and His Acolytes as Gods of Destiny." The chapter deals with the changes and shifts that the god of the underworld (Skt. Yamarāja; Ch. Yanluo wang 閻羅王) has undergone in East Asian Tantric traditions. Faure makes a fair case for the Japanese Tantric tradition having preserved and distinctly developed Indic elements and features that have been lost in the rather short-lived thriving of Chinese Tantric Buddhism during the Tang period. Leading the reader through a plethora of Chinese Buddhist texts that are mainly of Tantric provenance, Faure demonstrates how the three original functions of Yama in Brahmanic and Buddhist Indian traditions, "guardian of the south, god of death, and judge of the dead" (p. 48), were gradually reduced to the god's "juridical and inquisitorial functions" within Chinese "conceptions of hell" (pp. 59–60).

Focusing on the role of Central Asia as a cultural mediator between India and China, Nobuyoshi Yamabe's chapter "Indian Myth Transformed in a Chinese Apocryphal Text: Two Stories on the Buddha's Hidden Organ" discusses two episodes in the "apocryphal" sutra *Guan fo sanmei hai jing* 觀佛三昧海經 (Sutra on the Ocean-like Samādhi of the Visualisation of the Buddha) dealing with the text's attitude towards sexual desire and the male organ. The first story tells how the Buddha converts a group of prostitutes by magically displaying the sexual organs (or their symbolic representations) of a white elephant, a powerful horse, and his own retracted penis which is then enlarged to a cosmic dimension. The second narrative relates the story of a prostitute who disrespects the Buddha but develops a sexual attraction to his disciples Nanda and Ānanda. The Buddha magically creates three young

and handsome men, one of whom has continuous sexual intercourse with the prostitute, threatening to continue for twelve days so that she, feeling all kinds of physical pain, finally decides to give up all sexual activities. The young man, however, proceeds to kill himself and his body (or penis?) sticks to the woman, who wants to get rid of the decaying corpse and looks for help from the Buddha. Yamabe sets out to demonstrate the possible sources for individual motifs in the two stories. Although I understand the need to explain these narratives and their origin, I am not completely convinced by the links of origin to other texts made by Yamabe, as I think these connections are made on the basis of surface similarities rather than taking into account the functional and structural nature of the narrative episodes. The Buddha's penis becoming enlarged and transforming into billions of lotus flowers emanating billions of buddhas, for example, is hardly derivable from the cosmic *liṅga* of Śiva described in some Purāṇic texts. The story should instead be linked to similar emanation phenomena found elsewhere in the sutra, phenomena that are simply applied to the bodily mark (*lakṣaṇa*) linked with sexuality and corporeal desire. I also cannot subscribe to the rather simplistic and unelaborated "mentalistic" approach, according to which displaying overtly sexual content is non-Chinese and therefore more likely to originate from Central Asian people (who remain unidentified). Ultimately, the question of what Indian myths are represented/imagined in the two episodes in the sutra remains. It seems to me that these episodes are just trying to cope with the reality of sexual desire by narratives that were linked to the Buddha's hidden sexual organ and his magic power, and to the karmic consequences of extreme sexual appetite.

Shi Zhiru's chapter "From Bodily Relic to Dharma Relic Stūpa: Chinese Materialization of the Aśoka Legend in the Wuyue Period" discusses a specific period and way of the Chinese reception and adaption of the Aśoka (Ayu wang 阿育王) legend during the Wuyue 吳越 kingdom (907–978), with its political centre in Hangzhou 杭州 under the rulers Qian Liu 錢鏐 (r. 907–932) and Qian Chu 錢俶 (r. 947–978). The chapter draws a fascinating picture of a religio-political legitimation process through the use of the Indian "model king" Aśoka. It locates the Wuyue rulers' attempt to establish themselves as Buddhist kings in the complex situation of Chinese politics in the tenth century. Shi Zhiru discusses the emphasis of the Wuyue kings on relic veneration and the production of small metal *stūpas* as a re-enactment of Aśoka's distribution of the Buddha relics into 84,000 *stūpas*. The author starts with a brief discussion of Aśoka in which, as often in scholarship, the distinction between the historical Aśoka and the king of the legend is not

distinguished. Surprisingly, references to the legend are not made to the Chinese translations, the *Ayu wang jing* 阿育王經 and the *Ayu wang zhuan* 阿育王傳, but to the Sanskrit *Aśokāvadāna*. Instead of leaving a gap of more than one thousand years—I guess this is what the author assumes when talking about “moving away from third-century India [presumably BCE] to [the] Chinese landscape” of the Wuyue kingdom (p. 85)—one would expect more discussion on the long reception of the Aśoka legend in China before the tenth century (e.g., by Liang Wudi 梁武帝, r. 464–549, or Wu Zetian 武則天, r. 690–705). This would probably have shown the continuity of some of the “Aśoka-elements” evoked by the Wuyue rulers and would have highlighted the fact that the imagination of Aśoka in China and the entanglement of Buddhist and autochthonous Chinese concepts and elements of rulership was already so complex and historically developed that a distinction between them, as the author seems to imply (pp. 107–8), is not likely to have been intended by the historical agents. Instead of looking for Japanese influence on the practice of enshrining *dhāraṇī* scriptures in the *stūpas* of the Wuyue kingdom, one could point out Chinese precedents for this practice.

Ye Derong’s “‘Ancestral Transmission’ in Chinese Buddhist Monasteries: The Example of the Shaolin Temple” aptly demonstrates how the Shaolin monastery’s monastic structures and hierarchies were influenced by the social structures and functions of the non-monastic concept of the clan. I strongly question, however, the author’s basic distinction between two kinds of transmission made at the beginning of the article (p. 11): “The ‘ancestral transmission’ defines the social group to which a monk belongs, whereas the ‘Dharma transmission’ identifies his spiritual affiliation.” It seems that the understanding of “Dharma transmission” here is highly influenced by the concept of transmission within Chan (Zen), while there is no indication on the Indian side, and indeed even in early Chinese Buddhism, that such a concept of transmission really existed. In fact, one could argue that any Buddhist transmission, be it in India, China, or Tibet, is always a mixture of “ancestral” and “Dharma transmission” as understood by the author. What the chapter demonstrates then is that the Shaolinsi 少林寺 developed a system of social interconnection and hierarchy according to what the author calls clan structure. Here I do not quite understand what the development—following the argumentation of the author, one could say Sinification (p. 110: “Chinese transformation of Buddhism”)—of the Chinese *saṃgha* has to do with the imagination of India. In my understanding, imagination means a reflection back to what is imagined, either by making direct references

to the imagined or by using imagined references. In the case of the Shaolin monastery and its transmission lineage, such references to an idealized Indian Buddhist transmission as seen in the lineages of the patriarchs that are so widespread not only in Chinese Buddhism seem to be completely absent.

In his contribution, “The Hagiography of Bodhidharma: Reconstructing the Point of Origin of Chinese Chan Buddhism,” John McRae takes up the question of the historical origins of Chan Buddhism. McRae re-evaluates the earliest record on the alleged founder of the Chan “sect,” Bodhidharma (Ch. Putidamo 菩提達摩), and dismisses as overdrawn earlier attempts by Faure to reduce the bio-hagiographical writing on the Chan patriarch to a structural function without any historical value. Instead he sets out to analyze the short and oldest reference to Bodhidharma in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang; ca. 547) by Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之, an episode in which the 150-year-old Bodhidharma admires and praises the monumental Yongningsi 永寧寺 pagoda in the city and practices *namo* (Skt. *namah*, “veneration”) for several days. The author questions Faure’s reading of this Bodhidharma as a “devout and somewhat senile monk” since this depiction of the monk is so different from later ones. By a text-internal analysis of another narrative in the *Luoyang qielan ji*, McRae shows that the Buddhist practice promoted in the text, the recitation of Buddhist texts by heart and meditational practice, is in full accordance with the practice ascribed to Bodhidharma in the same text. If I understand McRae correctly, he is making a point for some historical credibility of the *Luoyang qielan ji* story with regard to Bodhidharma’s place of origin in Central Asia, Bosi 波斯, which McRae interprets as referring to a place in northern Pakistan/Afghanistan (Chitral) rather than the place name’s conventional meaning as referring to Persia (in contrast to the later legendary South Indian origin). With his analysis, the author points to an early stage of imagination of an important figure of Chinese Buddhism who is a powerful incarnation of Indian Buddhism in the later Chinese mind.

Moving on to the field of Buddhist soteriological ideas and conceptions, Robert Sharf, in his article “Is Nirvāṇa the Same as Insentience? Chinese Struggles with an Indian Buddhist Ideal,” unfolds the problems the Chinese had in coping with specific Buddhist ideas and how they “got to terms” with them (if at all). Sharf focuses on the question of whether nirvana and other related states (e.g., *nirodhasamāpatti*, “attainment of cessation,” and *asaṃjñīkasattva*, “devas without conception”) reflect a Buddhist notion of insentience or nihilism. In an elaborate analysis of how early Buddhists

and later Indian Buddhist scholasticism dealt with probably the most complicated concept within Buddhism—nirvana, its nature, and its ontological and soteriological consequences—the author argues for a “rational” understanding of this complex of concepts as a means for dealing with the “allegation that Buddhism preaches mindlessness and that nirvāṇa is a mystification of insentience” (p. 157). Sharf then moves on to the Chinese context where the concept of mindlessness (*wuxin* 無心) is already found in the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, but also in early Buddhist thinkers such as Sengzhao 僧肇 (374–414). Sharf locates a similar but not identical discourse on insentience as the Indian one in later Chinese Buddhist writings where the discussion focuses around the question of whether or not insentient objects possess buddha-nature, that is, the capacity to attain enlightenment (*bodhi*). The author shows how, particularly but not exclusively in Tang Chan Buddhism, thinkers struggled as their Indian predecessors did, albeit from a different angle, with “the problem of nirvāṇa and its puzzling affinity to insentience” (p. 167).

The last two chapters transgress the field of Buddhism and address the role that Buddhism and its ideas played in the formation and development of its Chinese contestant, Daoism—a topic that has received more attention in the past few years after Erik Zürcher’s groundbreaking studies on the subject some time ago.² It is more than appropriate that the first of these two contributions is authored by Christine Mollier, who has written a book on the subject of Buddhο-Daoist entanglement in China.³

In the chapter “Karma and Bonds of Kinship in Medieval Daoism: Reconciling the Irreconcilable,” Mollier looks at the way in which Daoism, particularly Lingbao 靈寶 Daoism, contributed to the acceptance and appropriation of the Buddhist principles of *karma*, retribution, and rebirth in wider Chinese culture despite their conceptual conflict with the inherited Chinese ideas of family, genealogy, and ancestor worship. While the Daoism of the celestial (or heavenly) masters (*tianshi* 天師) knows the principle of retribution, its mechanism follows the Chinese-Daoist idea of punishment for transgres-

² Erich Zürcher, “Buddhist Influence on Early Daoism: A Survey of Scriptural Evidence,” *T’oung Pao* 66 (1980), pp. 84–117; “Eschatology and Messianism in Early Chinese Buddhism,” in *Leyden Studies in Sinology*, ed. W. L. Idema (Leiden: Brill, 1982), pp. 34–56; “‘Prince Moonlight’: Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *T’oung Pao* 68 (1982), pp. 1–75.

³ Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009).

sions of religious and societal rules and prescriptions (rituals, respect of the deities, filial piety), not only on the part of the individual but also throughout his genealogical lineage (ancestors, descendants) through heaven, and by a reduction of one's life "capital." A different position is taken by Lingbao Daoism, which Mollier calls "Mahāyānist Daoism," in which "retribution is subject to the iron law of karmic determination." This system emphasizes individual karmic responsibility, which overrules "collective retribution" or "genealogical dependence" (p. 179). The soteriological goal is, like in Buddhism, the liberation from the circle of rebirth combined, however, with the achievement of immortality. The chapter aptly discusses the reformulation of fundamental Buddhist concepts (cycle of rebirth, *karma*) into another religious system. How far this can be called "imagination" is, as in other cases, a different question.

The volume concludes with a chapter by another expert of early Daoism, Stephen Bokenkamp. His article, whose title "This Foreign Religion of Ours: Lingbao Views of Buddhist Translation" seems to echo Peter Bol's *This Culture of Ours*,⁴ transposes Bol's point about a Chinese cultural self-consciousness to an earlier period in the absorption of foreign elements into an "autochthonous" Chinese religion and culture. It takes up the Lingbao approach to the adaptation of Buddhism already discussed in the previous article by Mollier and goes into the more technical details of "translation." Bokenkamp discusses the fascinating Lingbao revelational narrative of the translation of the celestial Lingbao hidden script into human script. This narrative is more or less modelled after the Indian idea of the heavenly creation of script (i.e., *dafan yinyu* 大梵隱語, or the "hidden language of the great Brahṃā"), but in more concrete terms it is also influenced by the Buddhist translation processes and techniques by which Buddhist texts were translated from Indic languages and scripts—certainly not *devanāgarī* (p. 188) but Brāhmī or, at an earlier stage, even Kharoṣṭhī—into Chinese. Bokenkamp demonstrates how the Lingbao tradition used and adapted Buddhist concepts like the one of cosmic cyclical eons (Skt. *kalpa*; Ch. *jie* 劫) and the narrative of the creation of script (and language) by the god Brahṃā, in the latter case also referring to the traditional Chinese myth of the origin of script. He shows how this is linked to earlier Buddhist discourses on the question of the extent to which Buddhist teaching can be expressed in language, particularly in translation, but he also discusses how Buddhists apologetically reacted to

⁴ Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

these Daoist attempts to appropriate Buddhist concepts. Presenting and discussing striking textual examples, the author unfolds the fascinating process of a Daoist re-imagination of Indo-Buddhist ideas about the salvific meaning and function of language—with a typical Chinese emphasis on the “writing system”—which goes far beyond a simple process of cultural or religious “borrowing.”

A general point of critique—not so much directed to the editors or the authors of the volume but rather to a common practice in Anglo-American publishing practice—is the fact that Chinese characters are not embedded in the text (although a Chinese “Glossary” is appended pp. 199–216). This is even more annoying as the bibliography clearly shows that this would not have been a technical problem at all. Otherwise the book is edited in a remarkably consistent way, with very few “slips” in the transliterations of Indic terms and names (e.g., p. 104: *rūpakaya śārīra* instead of *rūpakāya śārīra*, which probably should be *nirmāṇaśārīra*, and *Saddharmapuṇḍarika* instead of *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*; p. 147: *uṣman* instead of *ūṣman* and *āyus* instead of the stem form *āyuh*) or obvious misprints (e.g., p. 129: “a hundred *li* (434 km),” which should be corrected to 43 km).

The book is a substantial collection of essays on all kinds of different topics related to the Chinese idea, imagination, or projection of India in different cultural and religious contexts and over a wide timespan. This is simultaneously its strength and weakness: the volume covers a broad variety of subjects, but is missing a thematic red thread and a clear reference to the key term “imagination,” which most authors of the chapters seem to subscribe to, but which only a few thematize and reflect upon. It is often left to the reader to read into the material presented just how the Chinese imagined the Indian. What the volume does well, however, is to point to a new direction of intercultural studies which first looks at engagement with foreign cultures in its own cultural context before reconstructing anything about these cultures from the material. At its best, this book opens the question, strongly pointed out in the editors’ introduction, of whether any historical dealing with another culture is and can be anything other than imagination. And even if this seems to be too strong a formulation—one that may not necessarily be agreed with by the editors or authors of the volume—it may be taken as a general caveat against any form of positivist reification from historical sources: after all, everything found in them is imagined in its specific socio-cultural context, and it is this context that makes it “real” in a historical sense.