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Buddhist Historiography in China

by John Kieschnick. Columbia University Press, 2022. 288 pages. Hardcover, $140.00 USD, ISBN: 9780231205627. Paperback, $35.00, ISBN: 9780231205634. E-book, $34.99, ISBN: 9780231556095.

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While there have been many publications on the historical narratives of Chinese Buddhism, including both introductory and technical academic books, Kieschnick's *Buddhist Historiography in China* is a rare book that attempts a comprehensive historical analysis of the worldviews and beliefs which shaped Buddhist writings of history, particularly those in premodern China. Kieschnick presents us with new perspectives to consider in the study of Chinese history and religion.

Here I will summarize this book and offer some additional thoughts. This book begins with an introduction, has six chapters entitled "India," "Sources," "Karma," Prophecy," "Genealogy," and "Modernity," and ends with a conclusion. In the introduction and conclusion, Kieschnick sets forth a rubric of four useful themes for exploring the distinctly Buddhist characteristics of Buddhist historical narratives as follows:

The first is "time." Buddhist writers of history everywhere almost all adopted a cyclical theory of time in accordance with Buddhist doctrine. "On the grandest scale" of "hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands of years," the world "looped in circles punctuated by the appearance of buddhas" (p. 3). At first, Buddhist teachings, practice, and enlightenment are all present, but in the course of time there come to be no more enlightened persons, then there are no more practitioners, and in the end the Buddha's teachings are lost. Thus, the world is covered in ignorance, chaos, and suffering, yet in time there will again be the emergence of a new Buddha and this cycle will begin again. Some scholars "have invoked the prevalence of a cyclical view of time to explain why premodern South Asian writers produced so few works of history" (p. 6). In contrast, Buddhist historians in China "give an occasional nod to cyclical time" but "their sense of time is, in the end, overwhelmingly conventional" as they order their histories "chronologically, according to dynasty and reign title" (pp. 192–3). According to Kieschnick, Chinese Buddhist historiography can be divided chronologically into the following three phases and four genres:

(1) "The first phase of Buddhist historiography, from roughly 500 CE to 1000, was dominated by prosopography, in particular, collections of biographies of eminent monks grouped according to shared qualities" (p. 193). "The representative work in this genre is the *Biographies of*

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Eminent Monks [高僧傳], compiled circa 530 by the monk Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), containing 257 major biographies and more than 200 shorter, subordinate biographies" which "divided the biographies into ten categories" that included "translation, exegesis, thaumaturgy, meditation," and so on (p. 17). Later, similar books modeled after this one were compiled such as the *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* 續高僧傳 compiled in 645 by Daoxuan 道宣, the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks* 宋高僧傳 compiled in 988 by Zanning 贊寧, and the *Great Ming Biographies of Eminent Monks* 大明高僧傳 compiled in 1617 by Ruxing 如惺.

(2) "The second phase, from roughly 1000 to 1900" (p. 193), is marked by the compilation of works in two genres. The first is that of the genealogical histories which "owe something to Tiantai works, but reach maturity in Chan lineage histories"; in contrast to the biographies of eminent monks which exemplified the first phase, the genealogical histories of the Chan school 禪宗 (also called "lamp histories") shift their focus from the individual achievements of monks to the transmission of the dharma and to "dramatic and enigmatic dialogues between masters and disciples" (p. 18). The second genre is one which modern scholars call the "universal history." These works were compiled mostly by scholar-monks of the Tiantai school 天台宗 in the style of the *Shiji* 史記, a monumental work of Chinese history completed by Sima Qian in the first century BC. The representative work of this genre is the *Comprehensive Account of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs* 佛祖統紀 completed by the monk Zhipan 志磐 in 1269. The main focus of this work is on tracing a lineage from Shakyamuni Buddha to Siming Zhili 四明知禮, the reestablisher of the Tiantai school in the Northern Song period, but it also records a more universal history of Buddhist doctrinal transmission. The genealogical histories were more mainstream than the universal histories.

(3) "The third phase, from 1900 to 2000," was marked by the "rapid and tumultuous" abandonment of "most of the old historiographical rules and techniques … in favor of the new call for rational, secular analysis of the past" (p. 194).

The second theme proposed by Kieschnick is "doctrine." Of the various Buddhist doctrines, the "doctrine of karma and the doctrine of the decline of the Dharma" are cited as being "by their nature fundamentally historical," as the former was used "not just to evaluate the moral state of the world and warn of its demise but also as a puzzle requiring the philological and chronological skills of the historian to determine his precise position in the grand cycles of time," and the latter was used by Buddhist historians "not just to assess the value of the moral life… but also to demonstrate, through their deep familiarity with the historical record, the reality of karma, to prove that it was true." Karma is the most characteristically Buddhist doctrine in East Asian.

The third theme is "agenda." Buddhist historical narratives are fundamentally compiled to "promote Buddhist ideas and values" (p. 198). The agenda of Buddhist historians included the promotion of Buddhist orthodoxy, moral lessons, and the monastic community.

The fourth theme is "craft." Buddhist historians are described as having "shared respect for the standards of historiographical craft"; standards largely set by the court histories they read, and which led to the expectations that they read "widely," make "plausible" historical arguments, write universal histories, be "objective," and so on (p. 199). However, a method described as unique to Buddhist historiography is the use of "Buddhist doctrine to explain a source discrepancy" or to draw on "Buddhist principles to reflect on the reason the historical record is unclear" (p. 12).

I will now briefly summarize each chapter as follows:

Chapter 1 India: It was no more than a periphery in the traditional values of China, but for Buddhists India naturally held a unique and absolute value as the cradle of Buddhism. Buddhist historians in China undertook the arduous task of reconstructing the history of Buddhism in India, a task made difficult by "the fragmentary nature of Indian sources and their lack of dates" (p. 47). This led them develop a complex historical methodology involving "chronology, prophecy, lineage, and source criticism" (p. 24). The driving forces behind their reconstruction of Indian Buddhist history included both practical reasons such as "liturgical uniformity" in ceremonial observances (p. 30), and

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"demonstrating that the Buddha lived long before Laozi" to show that Buddhism held primacy over Daoism (p. 31), as well as a more basic historiographical desire to determine precise dates.

Chapter 2 Sources: Chinese Buddhist historians have answered questions arising from the vast amount of complex and often contradictory sources by using certain methods such as "blaming discrepancies on careless mistakes by sloppy scribes and poor historians" and "citing bias and slander as the cause of unreliable accounts" (p. 59). These are the same methods as historiography in general, but the Buddhist historians of China used these methods in their own way based on their Buddhist worldviews and beliefs. For example, they recognized that "accounts of the same event could differ" according to the different capacities of the listener (p. 54). They also attributed "discrepancies in different accounts of a holy man to his divine powers of transformation" which would allow him to fly up in the sky at will and travel great distances in an instant (p. 44; see also pp. 71–72). This is how they tried to solve the problems of sources by Buddhist doctrines and principles.

Chapter 3 Karma: Derived from a Sanskrit word that originally meant action, karma is one of the main principles for interpreting the past in the Buddhist scriptures of India, and includes at least three interrelated phenomena: causality, morality, and rebirth. That is, each good or bad action is said to result in suffering or pleasure, and its causality extends over the three times (past, present, and future). Chinese Buddhist historians used karma as a device for discerning the underlying principles that drive history. For them, it worked particularly well in explaining the absurdities of the world. History is full of irrational examples of great men suffering and petty men prospering. Historians in the past could only "lament the caprices of fate, the cruel and inscrutable workings of destiny" (p. 80), whereas Buddhist historians have been able to provide a rational explanation by introducing the causal relationship of karma over the three times. The great suffer in this life because of the bad karma of past lives, and the petty prosper in this life but will pay for it in their next life. This understanding of karma became popular in China after the medieval period, and no one considers it Buddhist or Indian anymore.

Chapter 4 Prophecy: At first glance, prophecy seems to be incompatible with historiography, "There is something decidedly odd about predictions of the future in historical writing; after all, history is supposed to be about the past, or at best a dialogue between the past and the present" (p. 107). However, though Chinese Buddhist historians recorded many prophecies of Buddhas, eminent monks, and others, "only rarely are these prophecies of what will happen beyond the time of the historian; they are instead usually *ex eventus* predictions that had already proved true"; these prophecies were "seldom used to explain doctrine," and in most cases they were used as a device to create literary suspense – also, sometimes they were used "for strictly historiographical ends" such as to "establish a timeline" (pp. 131–32).

Chapter 5 Genealogy: While the traditional historical records of China included genealogies which showed each generation in a connected line of patrilineal descent, the Buddhist monastics of China who renounced family life ultimately used this model to organize their connections to the past and the future. That is, they substituted guru and disciple for father and son to show the successive transmission of the Buddha dharma from generation to generation. These genealogies had primarily three interrelated functions: (1) to show the legitimacy of those in the lineage by tracing it to back to Shakyamuni Buddha, (2) to select "clear winners and losers" by arranging them into the main or minor branches of a lineage (p. 138), and (3) to banish heretics by eliminating their names from the genealogy. The pioneer of this system of genealogy was the Tiantai monk Guanding 灌頂 (561–632), but he gives a rather credulous genealogy wherein a person-to-person based transmission in India abruptly diverges to one connected by textual transmission in China. It was the Chan school that compiled genealogies of unbroken succession from guru to disciple, and the eleventh-century *Transmission of the Lamp Compiled in the Jingde Era* 景德傳燈錄 which established the prestige of this genre and "inspired many epigones in subsequent centuries" (p. 18) – for example, the *Extensive Transmission of the Lamp Compiled in the Tiansheng Era* 天聖廣燈錄, the *Further Transmission of the Lamp Compiled in the Jianzhong Jingguo Era* 建中靖國續燈錄, and so on.

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Chapter 6 Modernity: Kieschnick uses the examples of four monks active in the twentieth century – Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), Inshun 印順 (1906–2005), Dongchu 東初 (1907–1977), and Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009) – and describes how their Buddhist historiography departed from the traditional approach by adopting the methods of modern historiography. Although these monks were all isolated from the international world of historians, they recognized the need for reform and rapidly moved towards the forms of scholarship currently practiced in universities. In the 1980s, tensions remained between the rationalist tendencies of "academic historians" and the traditional commitments of "monk-historians," but this gap narrowed as more Buddhist monks and nuns earned PhDs (p. 191).

Now that I have summarized this book, I would like to add two further comments.

In my reading it was not entirely obvious how the themes of "time," "doctrine," "agenda," and "craft" – discussed in the introduction and conclusion – were related to the chapters "India," "Sources," "Karma," "Prophecy," "Genealogy," and "Modernity" which comprised this book. So, for my own understanding, I would organize them as follows:

The first four chapters are mainly concerned with the traditional values and methods found in Buddhist historical writings. In "India" we find a source of unquestioning trust in sources; in "Sources" we find historical criticism based on Buddhist worldviews and beliefs; in "Karma" we find a focal point for the driving force of history; and we find the writings of "Prophecy" made for vividly dramatic narratives that sometimes even informed historical dating. All of these had been the set values and methods of the premodern Buddhist historiography of the first two phases, and all were soon discarded with the modern Buddhist historiography of the third phase.

The latter two chapters, on the other hand, are mainly concerned with the style of historiography. Kieschnick establishes the following chronological divisions for the theme of "time": the first phase (500–1000), the second phase (1000–1900), and the third phase (1900–2000). In the second of these phases the histories of "Genealogy" became mainstream, and the third phase brought about the sea change of "Modernity." The format that prevailed in the first phase – the categorization of persons, and the chronological ordering of their biographies within these categorize – did not have a separate chapter but was explained in each chapter as necessary.

We find that the other themes of "doctrine," "agenda," and "craft" were discussed in the chapters of this book as follows:

- The theme of "doctrine" is discussed in "Karma" where karma is explained as one of the most essentially historical of the various Buddhist doctrines.
- The theme of "agenda" is discussed in "India" where we find that Indian sources were used to demonstrate Buddhist primacy over Daoism. The moral problems faced by Chinese court historians and Buddhist historians alike are detailed in "Karma." Kieschnick also cites the promotion of one's own sect in the wake of sectarian schisms as the most obvious catalyst for the rise of the histories of "Genealogy."
- Relevant discussion of the theme of "craft" includes the following: It is noted in "India" that absolute trust had been placed in Indian texts; it is explained in "Sources" that the adjudication of sources was based on Buddhist worldviews and beliefs; and the use of prophecy to determine chronology is detailed in "Prophecy."

Thus, these four themes and the six chapters are deeply intertwined. This shows that each of these elements is woven together in the history and historiography of Chinese Buddhism in an organic and interrelated manner.

Finally, I would like to comment on the rise of genealogical histories during the second phase from my perspective as a researcher of Chan Buddhism.

Of the four themes, the author discusses "time" in the most detail, stating that "the reasons for these shifts in style and emphases" are "generally comprehensible and obvious for the first and the third phases of Chinese Buddhist historiography" as the first was based on "already well-established tradition of writing the life stories of important people" in Chinese historiography (p. 194). The

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third phase was inspired by international and cultural dynamics and moved away from traditional Buddhist concerns. In contrast, the author states that the causes of the second phase are "the most difficult to pin to a neat set of causes," but that "the most obvious impetus for the rise of genealogical historiography is the flourishing of sectarian divisions, with each faction attempting to distinguish itself from its rivals" (p. 196).

It is indeed important to point out that the flourishing of genealogical histories was accompanied by sectarian division and competition. Additionally, it is also important to consider the significance of these genealogies for the members of the Chan school that dominated Chinese Buddhism from this second phase.

The Japanese scholar of Zen and Chan Ogawa Takashi 小川隆, in his recent work *"Zen no goroku" dōdoku* 「禅の語録」導讀 (Guided readings in "Zen discourse records"), cites shared belief in the "genealogy of transmission" as the most essential "true characteristic that distinguished Zen from other schools" (Ogawa 2015, p. 15), and argues as follows:

> The reason Zen has been able to survive as a group called the "Zen school" and to continue to spread to new grounds is not only because of the enlightenment and liberation of individual Zen practitioners, but also because of the common bond of the lineage of dharma transmission, which has enabled Zen to maintain an "imagined community" that transcends time and place. This is one of the indispensable characteristics of Zen, which is not presided over by a specific founder or scripture, but seeks the basis of its religious identity in the lineage of all the innumerable progenitors… . To receive an "*inka* 印可" ["a seal of approval"] from one of the gurus of this lineage meant – by personally joining this "imagined community" – to connect to the entirety of this lineage, and by joining this lineage the practitioner of Zen could personally believe that his or her own enlightened mind was of the same quality, and of the same worth, as that of the ancient progenitor-gurus, and others would believe this too (Ogawa 2015, pp. 44–45).

We might also find this kind of understanding of genealogy and succession in reading this following passage of the *Platform Sutra* 壇經:

> Chan guru Yongjia Xuanjue 永嘉玄覺 was a son of the Dai 戴 family of Wenzhou 溫州. He studied the sutras and the shastras at a young age and became well versed in the Tiantai school's practice of cessation and clear observation. Upon reading the *Vimalakirti Sutra* 維摩經 he issued forth the brilliance of the mind's foundation [which was his true nature]. He happened to meet with Xuance 玄策, a disciple of the guru [Huineng], and the words he said in the course of their enthusiastic conversation were in perfect accord with [the awareness of] all the progenitors. Xuance inquired, "Good sir, who did you take as your guru to learn the dharma?" He answered, "I've heard that each of the great sutras and shastras was transmitted by gurus. Later I realized the source of the Buddha mind with the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, as yet, but no one has verified [my realization]. Xuance said, "It would be no problem if this was prior to Bhīṣmagarjitasvara-rāja 威音王 [the first Buddha to appear in this world], but now after him all who awaken by themselves without gurus are heretics of spontaneous production!" Xuanjue said, "Please, good sir, verify this for me." Xuance replied, "My words carry little weight. In Caoxi 曹溪 there is the great guru the Sixth Progenitor, there is a great assembly there from everywhere, and they inherit the dharma from him. If you go, I will accompany you. (T48.357b-c)

This episode dates back to the twelfth century *Foguo jijie lu* 佛果擊節錄 (Yuanwu Keqin keeping-the-beat record) and *Liandeng huiyao* 聯燈會要 (Essentials of the combined lamp histories), and it was newly incorporated into a thirteenth century edition of the *Platform Sutra*. (See R117.455a; R136.472b; and Komazawa 1978, pp. 359-360). This clearly shows that the general understanding of Chan monks was that, in addition to being enlightened, it was also necessary to receive the verification of members of the dharma lineage. In fact, the Chan school has been handed down to the present by

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the Chan monastics who were a part of this genealogy. One of the main reasons that genealogical histories prospered in the second phase of Buddhist historiography in China may be that lineage was the religious core of the Chan school. This inference is also strengthened by the fact that these genealogical histories were mostly written by Chan monks.

Of course, this is a view from within the Chan school, and so it may not be in line with the context of a universal-history-based historiography. Even if this misses the mark, I am grateful for the opportunity this book provides to reconsider Chan genealogies from within a larger context and to learn of the dynamic development of Chinese Buddhist historiography.

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Thirty-two New Takes on Taiwan Cinema

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Thirty-two New Takes on Taiwan Cinema is a scholarly anthology featuring a collection of essays focused on Taiwan cinema, with an emphasis on representative films produced after 1950. The editors of this anthology, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, Darrell William Davis, and Wenchi Lin, are renowned and prolific writers in the field of film studies, particularly for their publications on Asian cinemas, including Taiwan New Cinema (TNC) and beyond. Within this anthology, the contributors are a diverse group, comprising accomplished and internationally esteemed scholars, as well as aspiring young authors who have specialized in producing academic works on Taiwan and/or Sinophone cinemas, including its auteurs.

As suggested by the title of the book, this anthology delves into the elaborate analysis of thirty-two selected films. The editors adopt a curatorial approach in assembling this collection, aiming to "arouse curiosity, surprise, and an appetite for further viewing" (1), a goal that appears to have been successfully achieved. The films chosen for this anthology represent a diverse range within the canon of Taiwan cinema, including underrecognized works, old classics, and those from emerging talents.

The editors have thoughtfully organized these films into a "film program" consisting of seven distinct categories: (1) Taiwanese-dialect films (*taiyu pian*) versus Mandarin Chinese films (*guoyu pian*); (2) hot/cold war and national allegory; (3) gangster/noir; (4) on the road; (5) auteurs; (6) LGBTQ; and (7) homemaking. It is worth noting that these categories are not mutually exclusive, as the editors acknowledge that many of these films "may display multiple traits and can land in more than one box." (4)

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