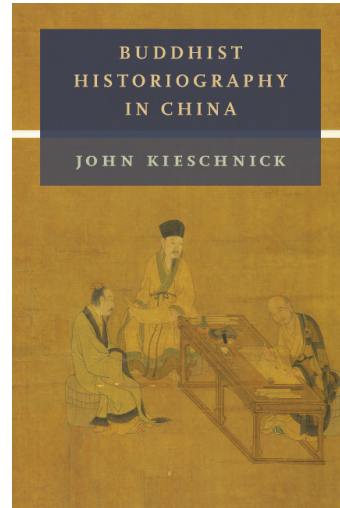


Book Review

John Kieschnick. *Buddhist Historiography in China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 296 pp.



There are not many books about Chinese Buddhism that tackle a topic spanning sixteen centuries, several genres, and countless actors. Most of our studies confine themselves to a single period, place, text, or person. But then, John Kieschnick's work is unique in that all his books have eschewed a narrow focus and instead aimed to introduce complex topics in the history of Chinese Buddhism. In *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (1998) he outlines three features—asceticism, thaumaturgy, and scholarship—that constitute the monastic ideal as it evolved in China. A few years later, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (2003) provided a magisterial study of how the transmission of Buddhism to China brought not only new software (texts, institutions, narratives), but also new hardware. Telling the history of the arrival of everyday Buddhist objects in China, such as the rosary, filled an important gap in our knowledge. It also turned up a few surprises: who knew that monks played a role in the transmission of the chair or the refinement of sugar? Now, with *Buddhist Historiography in China*, Kieschnick again takes on a large topic and ventures into new territory. Neither a study of an ideal nor of material culture, this new book is about

practice. How did Chinese Buddhists conceive of and write their own history?

Writing about historiography as a historian is pleasantly recursive. One gets to meet authors one can easily relate to, and with whom one shares common interests. Like our precursors, we are still interested in, say, periodisation, in biography, or in what constitutes historical evidence. At times, the main difference seems that the centuries have turned their studies into our sources. But alterity, of course, always strikes back. As Kieschnick shows, the Chinese Buddhist historiographers of the past inhabited quite different mental spaces, both compared to modern historians, but also, if less so, to their non-Buddhist Chinese contemporaries. Trying to understand how our colleagues of yore approached their task is also a meditation on our very own craft. Thus this new book is not only indispensable for historians of China, but will also be of great interest to researchers working on comparative historiography.

Buddhist historiography in China is a vast affair, and, like in his previous books, Kieschnick's approach is to focus on a few carefully chosen themes. The result is not for readers looking for an overview of main texts, or the overall development of the practice of historiography. For those, there are bibliographic introductions like Chen Yuan's 陳垣 *Zhongguo Fojiao shiji gailun* 中國佛教史籍概論 [Introduction to the Historical Writings of Chinese Buddhism] (1942), Lin Chuanfang's 林傳芳 *Chūgoku Bukkyō shiseki yōsetsu* 中國佛教史籍要說 [Introduction to the Historical Writings of Chinese Buddhism] (1979), and Lan Jifu's 藍吉富 *Fojiao shiliao xue* 佛教史料學 [Historical Sources for the History of Buddhism] (1997). There are also treatments of Buddhist historiography in specific periods such as Cao Shibang 曹仕邦 (1999) for the early centuries, and Schmidt-Glintzer (1982) and Cao Ganghua 曹剛華 (2006) for the Song, perhaps the most interesting period for Chinese Buddhist historiography.

Kieschnick uses two sets of topics: one as framework in the introduction and the conclusion, and the other as topic headings for the six chapters of the main text. In the introduction and the conclusion Kieschnick approaches Chinese Buddhist historiography in terms of 'time, doctrine, agenda, and craft' (7 ff, and 192 ff). The treatment

of time posed special challenges for Chinese Buddhist historians as they had to square the Indian origins of their tradition with Chinese dynastic time. The dating of the historical Buddha in Chinese terms was not a mere academic issue. As Kieschnick shows in Chapter 1, 'India', a lot was at stake. In debates with Daoists, for instance, who asserted that Laozi was the teacher of the Buddha, or in attempts to ascertain the progress of the decline of the Dharma, Buddhists were in a double bind: by pushing back the date of the Buddha to make sure he walked the earth before Laozi, they positioned themselves in a present further along the slope of decline.

Chapter 2, 'Sources', addresses what counted as evidence for Buddhist historians and how that was used in constructing their narrative. How reliable are Buddhist accounts of their past? Their craft, modelled on that of non-Buddhist Chinese historians, demanded the comprehensive use of existing written sources, including epigraphy, which were supplemented, where possible, by oral accounts. Discrepancies in the sources were often glossed over or simply listed without comment. Where they were acknowledged, Buddhist historians often attributed these to scribal errors, or resolved them by asserting secret transmissions. As a last resort, they could call on supernatural abilities or events to resolve contradictions.

Chapter 3, 'Karma', addresses how Buddhist historians used an Indian concept to tackle one of the fundamental problems of historiography: causality. Karma and its unique mix of causality and ethics enabled Buddhist historians to give past events a Buddhist spin. For the historian, karma solves the problems of justice and continuity. It ties past, present, and future together in a vision of a just cosmos where actions have morally commensurate outcomes. It is also one of the few aspects in which Buddhist historiography clearly differed from Confucian historiography. Buddhists were aware that karma could explain (or at least seem to explain) events, where Confucian historiography could only resort to 'fate' or the equally vague 'mandate of Heaven'.

The topic of Chapter 4, 'Prophecy', appears, as Kieschnick readily admits, slightly out of place in the context of historiography. All the more informative is his discussion of how much mileage Buddhist historiographers got out of this 'historiography of the future' (107).

Buddhist historians often used prophecy as another way to assert causality, or at least connectedness between events. Next to karma, prophecies did not merely foreshadow, but explained (to a degree) subsequent events. This does not seem peculiar to Buddhist historiography. In Daoist or Christian historiography, too, prophecy, dreams, and omens play a constitutive role. Kieschnick focuses on the Chinese Buddhist case, but there is much to explore here for comparative historians.

Chapter 5, 'Genealogy' shows how the metaphor of genealogy came to dominate the historiography of Chan Buddhism after the ninth century. In fact, Chan is probably the only school of Buddhism that can be defined by its historiographic practice: someone is a Chan monk or practitioner if they belong to a lineage. The family tree structure had numerous advantages for Chan practitioners: it was able to show an unbroken line of transmission back to the founder, be it Buddha, Bodhidharma, or Huineng 惠能 (638–713). It could, to a degree, mitigate the Confucian critique of Buddhists as lacking in filial piety by recasting the saṅgha as family. And it put great emphasis on the personal, oral transmission from master to student that was so much more important to Chan than, say, Pure Land Buddhism. But casting history as genealogy came at a price, as the mechanics of legitimisation produced competing lineages which led to friction and a narrow definition of authority based on one's position in a lineage. In historiography the shift from the *zhuan* 傳 biography to the *yulu* 語錄 led to a shift of interest from 'few statements by many, to many statements by few'.¹ Later, the very constructedness, especially of the earlier regions of the family tree (often built on little evidence), became an important topic in modern scholarship as researchers, beginning with Hu Shih 胡適 (1891–1962), who began to deconstruct the early Chan lineage narrative for the generations around Huineng with the help of evidence from Dunhuang manuscripts.

The impact of modern scholarship is also the topic of the sixth and last chapter, 'Modernity', which concerns the adoption or

¹ Wittern, *Das Yulu des Chan-Buddhismus*, 75.

adaptation of modern historiography by Chinese Buddhists in the twentieth century. Just as Buddhist authors in the past made use of traditional Chinese genres, they were influenced in the twentieth century by modern genres and attitudes about history. Kieschnick highlights the role of Hu Shih, Chen Yuan (1880–1971), and Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 (1893–1964)—non-Buddhist intellectuals who all made skilful contributions to Buddhist historiography—then focuses on the scholar monks Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005), and Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009) who, each in their own way, tried to amalgamate Buddhist historiography and modern academic practice. He ends the chapter asking whether Buddhist historiography is a thing of the past or whether ‘one day a distinctive form of Buddhist historiography will rise in the shadow of academic history just as it did in the shadow of court history.’ (191) To me, it seems the adaptive strategies of Taixu, Yinshun and Shengyan had their day, but were, all in all, transitional. Academic and religious historiography by now have largely converged. While lineages still play a legitimising role in many Chan communities, their historicity does not incite major debates anymore and Buddhist historiography does not seem to have a distinct community of practice outside of academia. Although Zhipan 志磐 (ca. 1220–1275) in the thirteenth century was sure that the *Jingang jing* 金剛經 [Diamond Sūtra] was spoken by the historical Buddha, professional historians today might well acknowledge him as a distant colleague. However, they would probably hesitate to extend the same courtesy to a contemporary Buddhist who holds that view. In that sense, although the historiography of Buddhism is alive and well, the days of a historiography with distinctive Buddhist characteristics seems over. Its main narrative elements—karma, decline of the Dharma, prophecy, truth as passed along a lineage, etc.—do not seem usable in academic history. But that might be the wrong way to look at it, as academic history in any case rarely determines how communities perceive their own history, and traditional narratives remain powerful.

In a book review it is customary to say something critical, but this is difficult here as the book does so well what it promises.. Of course, one can always resort to the favourite fallacy of reviewers and suggest the author should have written a different book, or at

least included more of the reviewer's favourite topics. (In that vein, I would have liked more attention to genre as a foundational framework of historiographic expression.) Or one might want something that is related, but was never intended. (In this case perhaps, an introductory chapter that gives a rough chronological overview of the development would have been a help for the beginning student.) At a loss, reviewers can take a closer look at the bibliography, where one almost always finds at least one mistake (H. Franke on the date of the Buddha did not appear in 2021), or, as a last resort, one can always complain that some previous research went unmentioned. (Dealing with a large topic spanning several centuries Kieschnick is forced to be selective in the use of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist scholarship. Generally, I wish we as a field would do better justice to the large overview histories that have been published in China in the last two decades, almost none of it reviewed or even only mentioned in Western scholarship. Though not without problems, the comprehensive, multi-authored histories of Chinese Buddhism edited by Lai [2010, 15 vols.], Ji and Tang [2013, 11 vols.], and others are very useful contributions to the historiography of Buddhism.)

But once reviewers resort to the above, one already knows they are grasping for straws, unable to find anything amiss with the substance of the book. *Buddhist Historiography in China* is an intelligent and far-ranging contribution to our understanding of how Chinese Buddhists wrote their history. May it find many readers in Asian Studies and beyond.

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MARCUS BINGENHEIMER
Temple University

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