

BOOK REVIEW

Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond. Edited by Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam van Schaik. Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2010, 252 pp., hardcover, ISBN 9789004182035

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This impressive collection of essays is the latest example of the recent, important and matured scholarship derived from years of work with the Tantric manuscripts of Dunhuang. The text begins with a preface that offers some of the more decisive conclusions available regarding the dating of the manuscripts, their relationship to pan-Tibetan thought and praxis, and their pivotal role, as near-direct antecedents, in the formation of the tantric texts of the Nyingma tradition. The subsequent essays provide insight into the complex historical processes that shaped the development of Tibetan Tantra and a view into the esoteric Buddhist world at Dunhuang. For these reasons, the work is a valuable addition to the field of Tibetan Studies.

The editors of the text, Matthew Kapstein and Sam van Schaik, were members of the 2005 panel¹ that inspired the collection. Over the last three decades, Kapstein has made considerable contributions to the field, including dozens of influential articles and numerous books on a wide range of topics concerning Tibetan doctrine, history, and ritual. Van Schaik, often in collaboration with Jacob Dalton (the academic equivalent of a dynamic duo), has worked extensively cataloguing the Dunhuang texts and has recently written some of the most thought provoking articles on the Tibetan Dunhuang collections. In addition, van Schaik is well known within the academic community (and outside of it) for his excellent blog on the Dunhuang manuscripts.² Both Kapstein and van Schaik should be congratulated for assembling eminent scholars of Dunhuang texts, for ensuring that most of the manuscripts treated in the collection were reproduced in the final

¹ The panel took place within the September 2005 London colloquium of the International Association of Buddhist Studies.

² www.earlytibet.com

volume (transliterated in Wylie, they include a critical edition, maps of parallel texts, and several other useful appendices) and perhaps, most importantly, for choosing a collection of essays that demonstrate clear instances of proto-Nyingma Tantric practice, the early development of Tantric vows, Tibetan funeral rites in transition, and early Tantric doctrinal concerns.

The five essays drawing from Tibetan materials are divided into two sections: (1) Rights And Teachings For This Life... (2)...And Beyond. Although the titles of the divisions are quite broad, their framing of the individual works is both clever and functional, situating the contributions within a broader Tantric ‘rubric’ utilizing these same categories. Methodologically, the articles can be divided into two different sections: (1) those focusing on the formation of the Nyingma tantras (and vows) through the process and practice of ‘bricolage’³ and (2) those concentrating primarily on a single text.

In the first group, Cantwell and Mayer’s chapter is a continuation of their extensive research on *Phur pa* texts and practice. The authors draw attention to strong parallels between the Dunhuang text catalogued as IOL Tib J 331.III and chapters eight through eleven of the *Rnying ma’i rgyud ’bum’s ’Phrin las phun sum tshogs pa’i rgyud*, and discuss the Dunhuang text’s relationship to the main Vajrakīlaya practice of another later tradition, the Sakya school. Cantwell and Mayer argue that IOL Tib J 331.III may be a derivative of a then extant version of the *’Phrin las phun sum tshogs pa’i rgyud* and, if not, at the very least shared a common source. They urge scholars to continue to pursue comparative study enabling a better understanding of whether Dunhuang texts drew on earlier tantras, ‘whether they incorporated and re-embedded selections of Tantric materials found elsewhere, or whether both these processes were at work’ (p. 42-43). This particular essay is distinct from their previous work in that it introduces verses from IOL Tib J 331.III that exemplify a moment in *Phur ba* history where the actual *phur pa* instrument takes on a “deified form” during the *sādhana* practice before being ritually eclipsed by ‘the *heruka* deity and the soteriological aspects of the meditation visualization’ of the later tradition (p. 42). Further expansion on Cantwell and Mayer’s observation that IOL Tib J 331.III is not presented as buddhavacana (‘buddha word’) while the later text, the *’Phrin las phun sum tshogs pa’i rgyud*, is listed as *bka’*, the Tibetan translation of buddhavacana,

³ ‘Bricolage’ is a cross-disciplinary term first coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss to refer to the creation and/or construction of a work from the materials available, whatever they may be. For more, see Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind* (1962).

may help facilitate an understanding of the causal processes behind later attribution of tantras to Indian figures such as Vimalamitra, Padmasambhava and, of course, the Buddha.

In the following chapter, Sam van Schaik works with the Mahāyoga samaya vows of Dunhuang texts to map out the relationship between an early diversity of vows and the uniform set of three root and twenty-five branch vows in the orthodox Nyingma tradition, exhibiting the fluidity and evolution of Dunhuang samaya enumerations and those following the development of the New Schools (*gsar ma*). Van Schaik surveys some of the early variation in samaya that later became unified and standardized to meet the needs of the growing monastic communities in Tibet. He also briefly touches on a list of Dunhuang texts demonstrating metaphorical readings of transgressive Mahāyoga vows in the tenth century, providing further evidence for this hermeneutic precedent prior to the introduction of the *gsar ma* schools (p. 70). Consequently, this discovery problematizes the previous narrative that such readings were subsequent to accusations of antinomian practices during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Matthew Kapstein then presents a closer look at maṇḍalas, comparing a reference to a ‘Hundred-petalled Lotus’ maṇḍala found in IOL Tib J 318 to the maṇḍalas of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* and the Nyingma ritual cycle, the *Na rak dong sprugs*. Kapstein focuses on the variations of images, texts and sources available to the redactors of the Nyingma Tantric collection from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, citing ‘rather precise’ evidence that the *Na rak* cycle was beginning to take shape prior to the sealing of Mogao Cave 17 in the early eleventh century (p. 174). The strength of the article lies in its insight into the diversity of sources dating back several centuries—oral, textual, and iconographic—involved in the reconstruction process.

In the second section, Kammie Morrison Takahashi contributes a critical edition of an extremely influential text among the Dunhuang cache, the *Rdo rje sems dpa’i zhus lan*, which itself signifies a *bardo* in Tibetan history between what Takahashi calls Indic Mahāyoga and the more ‘fully developed’ Mahāyoga of the Dunhuang collection (p. 92). Takahashi argues the *Rdo rje sems dpa’i zhus lan* is one of the earliest examples in which ritual becomes integrated with ‘philosophic speculation’ (p. 97), a term she employs generically in favor of a more specific treatment of the precise content of the text’s ‘philosophy’. Although a reading of her outstanding critical edition provides evidence of the ‘philosophic speculation’ she argues for, further

discussion of these distinct instances in the text instantiating the novelty of the text's philosophic developments, including a brief comparison with some previous and later tantras and an explicit explanation as to why the text is 'philosophic' as opposed to say 'meditative' or 'poetic', would add precision to her choice of terms.

In his chapter, Yoshira Imaeda hones in on the largely ignored literary form of the *Bar do thos sgrol*. He draws his research from a previous observation by Kawasaki Shinjō (1989), who noted the text often uses a distinct vernacular to directly address the deceased in the second person. This literary form, which lacks an Indian precedent, explicitly includes verses intended for the officiant to recite while sermonizing the funerary ceremony recipient (p. 150). Imaeda studies Dunhuang texts from the *Skye shi ('khor lo'i) lo rgyus* to chart a progression in which indigenous death rites gradually approach Buddhist orthodoxy despite keeping their rudimentary literary format. Imaeda argues that Dunhuang texts from the *Skye shi ('khor lo'i) lo rgyus* designate antecedents to the anomalistic idiom of the *Bar do thos sgrol*, constituting at least one example of Tibetans 'Tibetanising' Buddhism (p. 156). Imaeda may be correct in his assertion, but it seems reasonable to argue that the evolution of the text's content and literary format, when viewed collectively, is equally an illustration of Buddhism 'Buddhicising' the Tibetans or, as is often the case, the two processes engaging in cultural-religious symbiosis.

Katherine Tsiang's lone article addressing Chinese material and Chinese esoteric Buddhism cannot be easily placed within a general summary of the collection. The editors justify its inclusion by citing the original theme of the panel, which was 'intended to explore and to further scholarship on Tibetan and Chinese Tantric Buddhism, as known from the documents discovered at Dunhuang' (p. xiii) and argue that all of the essays, including Tsiang's, 'find strong parallels in the Rnying ma traditions of the eleventh century onward' (p. xvii). As the third of three presentations originating from the panel, Tsiang's analysis of stamped images, painted scrolls, single sheet prints, and *dhāraṇī* sheets discovered at Dunhuang and other tombs throughout China produces a thoughtful and meticulous analysis of the relationship between printing technology and 'ensigillation'.⁴ Tsiang elucidates the popularity of protection by esoteric Buddhist *dhāraṇī* sheets and

⁴ Ensiggillation is a term created by Michael Strickmann to describe the medieval Chinese use of a magical seal or stamp for healing the sick or possessed. For more, see the collection of Strickmann's essays edited by Bernard Faure, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (2002).

magical spells along with the role their ‘talismanic function to protect and empower’ played in the development of the printing press (p. 247), which in turn lead to the further dissemination of Buddhist beliefs and practices during the Tang (p. 202).

In the end, the title *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang* is a bit of a misnomer and the text would have benefitted from one or two more contributions by scholars working with Chinese documents. Additionally, while we must thank Brill for their continued dedication to Tibetan Studies (the text under review is volume twenty-five in Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library), better image quality and color prints of the photos accompanying the essays would have gone a long way toward connecting the reader with the one-thousand-year-old materials from Dunhuang.

These petty quibbles are nearly insignificant and I was thoroughly impressed by this contribution. Taken together, the essays are inspiring examples of philology, iconographic analysis, translation, and methodology for those working with Dunhuang texts. Furthermore, each sheds some light upon the ‘murky’ process of esoteric Buddhist development within the ninth and tenth centuries. Consequently, each of the authors have successfully given us more than we had prior to this edition. In the future, it is up to scholars to take up the encouragement kindly provided to build upon their achievements, including research that enables an expanded discussion of the material upon which the Dunhuang texts rely, further detail on the process of redaction and construction by the later Nyingma tradition and, finally, more evidence that instantiates (or challenges) the argument that the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts are reflective of pan-Tibetan thought.

