Book Review

Review of *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds* by Brian J. Nichols

Xingyi Wang, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Chinese Buddhism and Chinese religions in general have shown a strong trend of revival in the last forty years. This trend seems to prove a historical principle that when prohibitive policies are removed, Buddhism once again comes back to be visible and active. In this context, Brian J. Nichols' book, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China*, is a welcome addition to the study of contemporary Buddhism in post-Mao China, an area that has received increasing scholarly attention over the past decade. A recent result of this scholarly attention is *Buddhism After Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*, to which Nichols contributed an article on the practice of "tourist temples" in mainland China.

Although Chinese Buddhism has been able to recover from the vicissitudes of history, it should not be taken for granted that it will always return, nor that the reappearance will be a simple continuity or replication of the previous period. Holmes Welch's *Buddhism under Mao* is an important inspiration and precedent for Nichols' study. Welch ends his book on a hopeful note, predicting a "recrudescence of 'spontaneous religiosity,' which will be all the stronger for the years it has been kept down," since the religious need for transcendental meaning cannot be eliminated.[1] In many ways, Nichols' book is a continuation of and also a response to Welch's efforts to tell the story of the Buddhist revival as reflected in an "ordinary" Buddhist monastery.

[1] Welch, *Buddhism Under Mao*, 385–86.

 https://doi.org/10.66775/xg516874

In the book, Nichols presents the history and current state of Buddhist monasticism in the post-Mao period through the case study of Quanzhou Kaiyuan Monastery 泉州開元寺. By choosing Kaiyuan Monastery as the main site of fieldwork, the author deliberately moves away from the study of "model" monasteries such as Jinshan Monastery and Gaomin Monastery, which were carefully described in Welch's trilogy. Instead, the author wants to explore a Buddhist monastery with many tourists in an urban environment. The choice of a single site implies that the author sees the monastery's publicity and accessibility as key to understanding the Chinese Buddhist revival in the post-Mao period. Kaiyuan Monastery is located in the center of Quanzhou city and is the largest monastery in the region. Rich in history and material culture, the monastery is exemplary rather than average in its own way.

An obvious merit of the book in terms of methodology is that the author deliberately avoids the pitfall of assumed disciplinary divisions. The author manages to navigate between history, religious studies, Buddhology, anthropology, material culture, and spatial studies. This effort can be seen in the chapter arrangement, where seven chapters are grouped into three thematic parts: history, religious life, and material dynamics. In the first part, the first two chapters trace the history of Kaiyuan Monastery from its beginnings, based on reconstruction of textual sources, to its recent revival in the post-Mao period, mainly based on ethnographic work. Through the author's careful description, we get a vivid picture of how the monastery gradually regained its function through the combined efforts of religious leaders, devout followers, and the support of overseas Buddhist communities. The author's meticulous attention to financial management, reconstruction costs, monthly expenses, and fundraising is particularly commendable.

The second part on religious life, which draws on long-term fieldwork, contains many keen insights and accurate observations of devotional and liturgical practice as "the core of religious practice at Chinese Buddhist monasteries,"[2] as well as in-depth interviews with key informants. The analogy of morning and evening services as necessary water with flexible attendance, and meditation or study as

[2] Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 73.

food for cultivation, is particularly revealing. Much effort is put into describing the unique "*nianfo* (念佛) day" (monthly Buddha recitation day) and the celebration of festivals that demonstrate how monastic activities are socially and economically tied to the local lay Buddhist community.

An implicit thread running through the book is the intricate connection of the Nanshan Vinaya School 南山律宗 and the issue of precept observation in Kaiyuan Monastery, through the influence of Master Hongyi's 弘一 (1880–1942) activities in the area. The author frankly points out that, in everyday practice, there are deviations from the strict maintenance of precepts; for example, failure to observe precepts meeting (Skr. *poṣadha*) at Kaiyuan and other monasteries in Quanzhou; the local acceptance of competent ritualists in the guise of monks (also known as incense and flower monks); the laxity of monastic rules, and so on. Such cases of deviation may suggest a broad and shared awareness of the rules among lay people and monastics, and the author skillfully brings multiple voices into the discussion.

The appeal of ethnographic work is fully illustrated in chapter four, where the author uses a "person-centered" and "practice-centered" approach to empower his informants to share a variety of personal experiences, struggles, joys, difficulties, and breakthroughs on their spiritual paths, as well as their reflections on the current situation of monastic practice. Among many others, the story of Bulin, who was attracted to monkhood for its easy lifestyle and economic benefits,[3] reminds us of the bhikṣunis who were attracted to the Buddhist way of earning offerings in the *Therīgāthā* thousands of years ago. There was never a single path, a single version of the motivation behind the life-changing decision to ordain, nor a universal emphasis on doctrinal study or sitting meditation within the Buddhist monastic community. Despite the diversity in the saṅgha, the author concludes that the leadership of the monastery's highest-ranking figure is critical because "Chinese monasticism is fundamentally hierarchical."[4]

If the first two parts fall within the realm of the more traditional study of Buddhist monasticism, the author's ambition is evident in the final part, which is devoted to material culture and spatial studies. In the last three chapters, the focus

[3] Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 124.

[4] Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 133.

shifts from descriptive analysis to experiencing Kaiyuan Monastery as a constructed space with multiple meanings. The author's interest in presenting Buddhism as a living tradition is seen through his preference for the phenomenological lens and for non-linguistic embodied experience. Other scholars of Buddhism have explored embodied experience in sacred space. Wu Hung's new study of Dunhuang art, which analyzes the experience of cave space, *Spatial Dunhuang: Experiencing the Mogao Caves*, is the latest response to this trend of spatial studies. Inspired by theorists such as Michel de Certeau, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jan Assmann, Nichols discusses the monastic space as negotiable and multifunctional. Each person experiences the space according to his or her own perspective, expectations, and identity. Nichols proposes a tripartite model to analyze monastic space: Buddha-religion, culture-history, and park-leisure. In chapter six, the somatic sensing approach seems to be replaced by the comparative analysis of legendary references and strategies in the production of the monastic space, interpreted by the notion of branding and sanctification (*linghua* 靈化). Chapter seven highlights the conflicts, cooperation, and negotiation between "curators" and "revivalists" in spatial politics, and is essentially a discussion of the complex interactions between the state at the micro level and religion as a community with agency. Due to the layout of the chapters, the reader may find some overlap with earlier chapters.

An enjoyable read, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds* could be improved in several ways. One is that the author occasionally exaggerates the blind spots in the current state of scholarly research. For example, the author argues about the overlooked use of *dhāraṇī* in monastic practice, originally derived from the assumption that *dhāraṇī* were exclusive to esoteric Buddhism. However, the pervasive use of *dhāraṇī* across sectarian boundaries has now been recognized and addressed by scholars such as Ronald M. Davidson, Richard D. McBride II, Youn-mi Kim, Krech Volkhard, Liying Kuo, and Paul Copp.[5] Moreover, since Chinese

[5] See Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature I: Revisiting the Meaning of the Term Dhāraṇī"; Davidson, "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature II: Pragmatics of the Dhāraṇīs"; McBride, "Practical Buddhist Thaumaturgy: The Great Dhāraṇī on Immaculately Pure Light in Medieval Sinitic Buddhism"; Kim, "The Hidden Link: Tracing Liao Buddhism in Shingon Ritual"; Volkhard,

Buddhist monastic groups have followed the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* since the Tang Dynasty, it would have been ideal to include passages from it and from its rich commentarial tradition in addition to the references from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. The author could also have made more effective use of Hongyi's anthology, since he composed most of his Vinaya-related works and lectured frequently in the area, and mentioned his observations of local Buddhist practice numerous times during his stay in Kaiyuan and in other local monasteries from 1933 to 1942. Finally, there are places where the translation could be more accurate, such as the translation of *Sifen jieben* 四分戒本 [Prātimokṣa of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya] as the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya;[6] the *Dizang pusa benyuan jing* 地藏菩薩本願經 [The Original Vows of Kṣitigarbha/Dizang Bodhisattva Sūtra] as the Earth Treasury [Bodhisattva] Sutra;[7] Akṣobhya 阿閦佛 as Aksobya 阿初佛.[8] There is also some inconsistency in spelling: for Śākyamuni Buddha, I spotted variations such as Sakyamuni, Shakyamuni, and Śakyamuni; for Mañjuśrī, the author uses Manjushri, Mañjuśrī, and manjushri throughout the book.

One point I wish the author had spent more time on in the conclusion is his reflection on the dynamic between a revived exemplary monastery and the discourse of revival that has recurred several times in Chinese Buddhism. The author states that his research answers the call "to reveal the 'occluded histories' of Buddhist monasteries and sheds light on institutional Buddhism as a living tradition."[9] Yet the driving question behind the ethnographically-based research remains unclear to me, other than recognizing and accounting for the fact that Kaiyuan Monastery survived the Cultural Revolution in remarkable ways in terms of ritual, monks, material culture, mythic references, and negotiated space. As we have seen, large monasteries with material cultural heritage and significant historical legacies in cities tend to be preserved or restored when the conditions

---

"Mantra and Dhāraṇī in the Religious Traditions of Asia"; Kuo, "Dhāraṇī Pillars in China: Functions and Symbols"; Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*; and Copp, "Dhāraṇī and Mantra in Ritual, Art, and Text."

6 Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 118.

7 Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 122.

8 Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 147.

9 Nichols, *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds*, 3.

agree. One question we might ask is what enables the connection between the living tradition of Chinese Buddhism and narratives of revival.

Bibliography

Copp, Paul. *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

———. "Dhāraṇī and Mantra in Ritual, Art, and Text." *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2020): 7–16.

Davidson, Ronald M. "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature I: Revisiting the Meaning of the Term Dhāranī." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2009): 97–147.

Davidson, Ronald M., "Studies in Dhāraṇī Literature II: Pragmatics of Dhāraṇīs." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77/1 (Feb. 2014): 5-61.

Hung, Wu. *Spatial Dunhuang: Experiencing the Mogao Caves.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023.

Kim, Youn-mi. "The Hidden Link: Tracing Liao Buddhism in Shingon Ritual." *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 117–170.

Kuo, Liying. "Dhāraṇī Pillars in China: Functions and Symbols." In *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections,* edited by Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt, 351–385. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2014.

McBride, Richard D. "Practical Buddhist Thaumaturgy: The Great Dhāraṇī on Immaculately Pure Light in Medieval Sinitic Buddhism." *Journal of Korean Religions* 2, no. 1 (2011): 33–73.

Nichols, Brian J. *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022.

Welch, Holmes. *Buddhism Under Mao.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Volkhard, Krech. "Mantra and Dhāraṇī in the Religious Traditions of Asia." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 1 (2014): 1–2.

Zhe, Ji, Gareth Fisher, and André Laliberté, eds. *Buddhism after Mao: Negotiations, Continuities, and Reinventions*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.