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and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China*

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# A Review of *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China*

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*Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China*. By Christine Mollier. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, xi + 241 pages, ISBN: 0824831691 (hardcover), US \$55.00.

Christine Mollier's *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face* is a study of the relationship between Buddhism and Daoism in medieval China, especially in the Dunhuang region. It highlights "the degree to which Taoist concepts were integrated into early-Tang esoteric Buddhism" and questions the influence Mahāyāna Buddhism exerted on the formation of Daoism as an institutionalized religion (144). Grounded in a field she refers to as Buddho-Taoism, Mollier presents a "juxtaposition and detailed comparison" of ritual texts that have almost exact parallels in both the Buddhist and Daoist traditions. Arguing that the two traditions competed with each other for prestige and dominance, she bases each chapter on a documentation of specific instances of "borrowing" or even "plagiarism" committed by Buddhist and Daoist authors.

Mollier demonstrates that the procedures used by Buddhists and Daoists to transform (or "flagrantly pirate") popular scriptures, ritual techniques, and deities from each other's camp into their own were

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largely the same for both groups. In the case of a Daoist ritual text, for example, the Buddhist scribe would modify the introduction to conform to standard Buddhist invocations, amend the attributed authorship to the Buddha (as opposed to Laozi), and change identifying terminology. In this way, references to Perfected Ones became homages to bodhisattvas, and immortals were transformed into buddhas. Interestingly, the titles of the works were only minimally altered since the rationale behind these assimilations relied on a continued association between the new text and the original. Ritual prescriptions were also carried over in their entirety without modification, showing that technical formulas and recipes possessed “the capacity to transcend time and space, as well as attract adherents among the different religious orders” (22).

The first chapter of the book, “The Heavenly Kitchens,” investigates the Buddhist *Sūtra of the Three Kitchens* (*Sanchu jing*) revealing it to be “an unmistakable case of Buddhist plagiarism” from pre-existing Daoist manuals (25). Readers unfamiliar with previous scholarship concerning early Daoist alchemical practices, especially as discussed in the work of Michel Strickmann, might find Mollier’s discussion challenging. As the shortest of the five chapters, this one would have benefited from more background information and contextualization. The brief exploration of the “sociological landscape,” particularly the practice of consuming specific minerals and plants said to confer immortality, would have better served the non-specialist reader if it were placed at the beginning of the discussion instead of at the end. The highlight of the chapter is the story, referenced again in chapter three, of a Buddhist monk who masqueraded as a Daoist in order to infiltrate a temple where he appropriated 160 texts and then rewrote them as Buddhist scriptures.

The second chapter, “In Pursuit of the Sorcerers,” examines counter-sorcery techniques, particularly those aimed at reversing the effects of a poison known as “*gu*.” Mollier wisely begins this chapter by outlining the religio-cultural background of the rituals, thus highlighting the significance of her argument and rendering the following analysis more engaging as a result. A digression about sorcery phobias offers a fascinating glimpse into the socio-religious history of witchcraft and demonology in medieval China. Also in this chapter, Mollier begins to incorporate visual evidence, including details of paintings, images of sculptures, and copies of numerous talismans. After mentioning the importation of counter-sorcery *sūtras* into Japan, Mollier concludes by highlighting the importance of writing in strategies for counteracting witchcraft. The two texts on which she focuses her exposition, the Daoist *Scripture for Unbinding Curses* (*Jieshi zhouzu jing*) and the Buddhist *Sūtra for the Conjuraton of Bewitchments* (*Zhoumei jing*), were the products of a “subtle textual exchange” between the two traditions, whose approaches to neutralizing spells and curses were otherwise distinctly dissimilar.

In chapter three, Mollier reveals that the Buddhist *Sūtra to Increase the Account* is “an outright copy” of a Daoist version by the same name. Turning again to a tenth-century polemical tract written by Du Guangting, Mollier describes the alleged appropriation of Daoist scriptures by Buddhist monks as a straightforward “cut-and-paste” exercise. Along with a detailed comparative exegesis of the works in question, she discusses the history of Chinese astrology and the Chinese concern with prolonging life. Here Mollier includes illustrations of relevant talismans to bolster her argument, a technique she further develops in the following chapter.

Chapter four is focused on the Great Dipper constellation’s place “within the millennial fabric of Chinese culture and religion,” including its official uses in the imperial court and amongst other dignitaries (134).

Again, Buddhists are charged with incorporating elements of the highly popular Great Dipper cult into their own liturgy in an attempt to bolster their tradition's popular appeal. In this case, Mollier proposes a "genetic connection" between the Song-dynasty Daoist *Scripture of the Great Dipper* (*Beidou jing*) and a corresponding Yuan-dynasty Buddhist *sūtra*. Her description of a Shanqing longevity practice called "lying down in the Dipper," which involved visualizations and teeth grinding, is particularly interesting.

The final chapter, entitled "Guanyin in a Taoist Guise," traces the transformation of the bodhisattva Guanyin (*Avalokiteśvara*) into the Daoist deity Heavenly Venerable Savior from Suffering (*Jiuku Tianzun*). Mollier may have chosen to end with this example in an attempt to even the score (since most other examples she gives are of Buddhist assimilations of Daoist texts and rituals). She argues that in this case Daoists appropriated the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion in an effort to capitalize on the popularity of that Buddhist deity. Because Buddhist principles of compassion and merit transfer had already found their way into early Daoism, the incorporation of a Buddhist deity into the Daoist pantheon was unproblematic.

In the conclusion, Mollier writes that the medieval Chinese Buddhist and Daoist authors of the texts she has examined "were keen to make their religious affiliations explicit and to affirm a strong commitment to their denominational identities" (209). She then suggests that the overlap and exchange of ritual procedures between Buddhists and Daoists points to the existence of a "third dimension" in the religious dynamic of the time. In the "third party" to this otherwise two-way competition, Mollier includes "the milieu of astrologers, diviners, medicine men, and other experts in parareligious techniques" (210). She is unwilling to "relegate [this group] to the amorphous category of 'popular' religion," yet her description of where the members of this

third party fit into the socio-religious system remains undeveloped (210). Independent of sectarian identity and not necessarily even religious in nature, this ambiguous Other that Mollier is hesitant to name nevertheless functions in the same way as “popular religion,” especially as it is “rooted in the social life of the region” (211). On a related note, it is problematic that Mollier makes frequent reference to “Tantrism” but does not define it in terms of Indian Hindu traditions of the time or the (Mahāyāna) Buddhist practices with which she is concerned. A brief summary of what she means by the term, and what she sees as the relationship between Chinese Tantra, Daoism, Buddhism, and what she refers to as “traditional religion,” is needed (133).

*Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face* demonstrates with precision and specificity the influence that these two traditions exerted upon each other in medieval China, especially in the Dunhuang region. Mollier’s evidence is convincing and her translations are masterful. While it is not intended for a general audience, historians of Chinese Buddhism and Daoism will undoubtedly find Mollier’s expert study both original and enlightening. For the non-specialist, her argument occasionally incorporates so much technical data that it is easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees. Fortunately, each of the chapters is capable of standing alone as an independent essay, so it would be possible to assign a single chapter for graduate student reading. The exactness with which Mollier uncovers who took what from whom and how could be useful in a discussion on methodology.

How to delineate and name non-standard, uncodified traditions is a continuing problem for scholars of religion. By revealing particular instances in which Buddhists and Daoists transgressed boundaries while maintaining their distinct religious identities, Mollier’s analysis speaks to what it meant to be a Buddhist or a Daoist in medieval China. In terms of observable practices, there was perhaps not as great a difference

between the two traditions as one might expect. As for the standards by which the authenticity of a Buddhist work was measured, for example, “the criteria of authentication [sic] varied considerably during the long history of Chinese Buddhism, mainly for political reasons,” and Mollier supplies sufficient evidence to make the same argument concerning Daoist works (6). All in all, Mollier’s treatment of “the bilateral nature of the patterns of hybridization and influence linking [Buddhism and Daoism], their mutual implication in both scriptural and iconographic production, and the considerable extension of their relations in time,” is valuable material for broader historical studies of Chinese religion (208).