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*Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of  
Modern Japanese Buddhism*

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## A Review of *Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism*

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*Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism*. By Richard M. Jaffe. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019, xvi + 309 pp., ISBN 978-0-226-39115-1 (paperback), \$32.50.

*Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism* is an expansive, ambitious, and absorbing book. Drawing on letters, broadsides, travel diaries, and a wide range of material and textual artifacts, Richard Jaffe shows how, for self-described modernists and traditionalists alike, South Asia played an essential role in providing the resources—intellectual and material—for the construction of a Japanese Buddhism “suitable for the twentieth century” (6). Jaffe’s work here has the hallmarks of a superb history of modern Japanese Buddhism: it presents evidence gathered from a remarkably wide-ranging set of archives, engages with both individual thinkers and institutions as historical actors, and reveals a sure grasp of the economic and political contexts in which religious ideas were rearticulated without reducing the ideas to those contexts. At the same time, by reading Japanese Buddhist modernism in terms of flows taking place between Japan and South Asia, *Seeking Śākyamuni*

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pushes against the limits of modern Japanese Buddhist history as a category. Jaffe's work here represents a provocative challenge to one way that the field of Buddhist Studies has organized itself, and a model of how to do things differently.

The book's first half focuses on Japanese travelers making the journey to South Asia and back again—singly, in pairs, and in large groups; as solo adventurers and on corporate tours organized by the shipping firm Nippon Yūsen Kaisha. Chapter one centers on three travelers: Nishi Honganji cleric Kitabatake Dōryū (1820–1907), Shingon cleric Shaku Kōzen (1849–1924), and Zen cleric Shaku Sōen (1860–1919)—who belong to what Jaffe calls “the first generation of Japanese Buddhists in South Asia” (20). Taken together, they capture the various ways in which the historical relation between Japanese Buddhism and South Asian Buddhism was understood. Kitabatake was critical of the cruelty of British colonial rule in India but he also imagined India as benighted, requiring Japan's assistance both to recover its Buddhist past and to move toward civilization and enlightenment (32). Kōzen and Sōen, by contrast, saw South Asia as the repository of a “pure, original Buddhism” (41) that Japan ought to recover. Kōzen found what he was looking for on his travels: for him, “the essential teachings of Śākyamuni” were alive in contemporary Ceylonese practice (67). He spent seven years in South Asia, ordaining as a *bhikkhu* in 1890, and spent the rest of his life trying “to establish the Southern precept lineage in Japan” (55). For Sōen, on the other hand, the reality of lived Buddhism in South Asia was disappointing—Jaffe notes that he “found some Ceylonese customs repugnant”—and he persisted in a parochial view of South Asian Buddhism as “shallow” in comparison to the Mahāyāna (45). At the same time, Sōen's travels also led him to a critical reevaluation of Japanese Buddhist rituals and practices and spurred his effort to rethink Buddhism “as a pan-Asian tradition . . . separable from its various cultural inflections” (50).

Chapter two focuses on just one traveler: Kawaguchi Ekai (1866–1945). This speaks, perhaps, to the unusually interesting life Kawaguchi led. Kōzen's erstwhile student and a sometime Obaku cleric who

“bounc[ed] in and out of the order” for much of his life (75), Kawaguchi became famous for his early adventures in the Himalayas—entering Tibet disguised as a Chinese monk, he won favor through his skill with Chinese medicine, acquired from studying with his father as a child, before being found out and forced to flee (82). Jaffe’s interest, however, is in the many years Kawaguchi spent in India, and how his experiences in that intellectual milieu may have shaped his reform efforts following his return to Japan. If the pandits with whom Kawaguchi studied in Benares drew upon what Brian Hatcher has called a “shastric imaginary” in which classical texts could be studied using modern methods and generatively applied to modern problems, then Kawaguchi, Jaffe proposes, was working within a “dharmic imaginary” (110). This dharmic imaginary allowed Kawaguchi to be both bold and creative. On the one hand, he adopted a modernist historiographical approach to make the argument that a misreading of the concept of the Dharmakāya perpetuated over the centuries had “infected all of Japanese Buddhism” with a distorted view of the Dharmakāya as “an eternal self” (94-95); he proposed that Japanese Buddhists might purge themselves of this distorted view by recognizing the transformation body, Śākyamuni, as “the only proper object of worship and veneration” (97). On the other hand, even as he insisted on a return to origins, Kawaguchi maintained that the modern world demanded modern subjects, inventing the category of the “lay cleric” (*upāsakasō*), whose “simple, straightforward form of Buddhism” could “guide the nation” (103).

Chapter three examines more than twenty published diaries from the first years of the Shōwa period. During this period, Japanese involvement in the Indian textiles market supported the growth of shipping networks connecting Japan to the subcontinent; the existing networks supported, in turn, a boom in corporate tourism to India and points in-between for, as Jaffe puts it, “a more casual sort of Buddhist tourist” (117). Jaffe’s attention to his sources gives us a vivid and charming picture of the quotidian details of a trip through India—a new year’s banquet at the Japanese consulate, souvenirs bought in such quantities that they had to be shipped back separately, a train arriving three hours late, and so on. At

the same time, the political questions introduced in the preceding chapters are extended here, as pilgrims on what Jaffe calls “the cotton road” engage in complex ways, imaginatively and practically, both with the British colonial apparatus and with leading figures within the Swadeshi Movement.

In the second half of the book, we trace the movement of people and ideas into Japan. Chapter four treats the exhibition of imported Buddhist treasures and the invention of new forms of modern Buddhist architecture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as helping to “make Japan’s connection with the other regional Buddhisms in Asia visible and tangible” (152). Examples of polylingual works of calligraphy in Pāli-Sinhala and Sino-Japanese, exchanges of Buddha statues between Bodh Gayā and Tokyo, and the celebrations attending the exhibition a gift of Buddhist relics from the Kingdom of Siam speak to the roles that objects played in concretizing the notion of Buddhism as a pan-Asian tradition, and indeed the emergent notion of “Asia” itself (152). Most illuminating here perhaps is Jaffe’s exploration of efforts to develop a temple architecture suited to the modern setting by drawing on styles associated with, for example, the “contact zone” of Gandhāra, where Greece and India had once met (185); Japan, in this way, is affirmed as a site uniquely capable of hosting a harmonious blending of East and West. Little wonder that the style of these innovative modern temples was seen as well-suited not only for cosmopolitan cities within Japan but also for export to the colonies, as a material assertion that Japanese imperialism had the benevolent aim of “Asian revival” (193-194).

Chapter five takes up a translation project. In the mid-1930s, two South Asian monks, Kheminda Thera (dates unknown) and Soma Thera (1898–1960) spent more than a year in residence at a Nichiren temple near Nagasaki, working with cleric Ehara Ryōzui (1902–1955) on an English translation of the *Gedatsu dōron* (Ch. *Jietuo dao lun*), itself understood to be a Chinese translation of a Pāli practice manual. Here Jaffe deftly reframes our framing of the Anglophone world, with translation into English operating not primarily as a way of accessing a Western audience but rather as

a common vernacular for Asian Buddhists (223). Similarly, Jaffe challenges the received understanding of the development of academic Buddhist Studies in Japan as shaped primarily by the influence of German Indology. In fact, many Japanese scholars of India sought training extensively and sometimes exclusively in South Asia, from Indian pandits and other teachers. As Jaffe gently observes, “South Asia, particularly India, served as an important conduit for the spread of expertise concerning South Asian Buddhism to Japan. . . . it is striking how much the development of expertise in Indic languages, texts, and doctrinal studies depended upon study in South Asia” (234).

In a brief concluding chapter, Jaffe suggests future trajectories for this work, moving forward in time to consider continuities and transformations in the patterns of exchange between Japan and South Asia during the period of the Fifteen Years War and after, and posing the question of what threads scholars might uncover if they were to dig deeply into other archives: in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand; in Sanskrit, Pāli, Sinhala, Bengali, Hindi, and Thai (241). I want to tarry here for a moment to reflect on the significance of understanding these sites and languages as important to the modern history of Japanese Buddhism.

As Jaffe explains, in making sense of Japanese Buddhism in terms of multilevel global interactions rather than only Japanese actors and institutions, he has adopted the approach of *histoire croisée*, or entangled history (239). One effect of this is that it leads him to theorize Japanese Buddhism not in terms of territory but in terms of itineraries. And because of this, *Seeking Śākyamuni* resonates also with the “inter-Asia turn” taking place within Asian studies, which likewise seeks to trace flows across national and regional boundaries (Chua et al. 38). This is an approach elegantly suited to the subject matter—*Seeking Śākyamuni* is, after all, partly about Buddhist pan-Asianism. But it is also a difficult and demanding approach, not only because it requires expanding one’s field of interest in very significant ways, but because it puts the individual scholars at odds with tacit notions of expertise that structure Area Studies. Chua Beng Huat, et al., have observed that area scholars “are, often, country special-

ists” and particularly so “when the language concerned is ‘difficult’”; the “Area Studies enterprise,” they write, “works against the search for points of connection and comparison, privileging fine-grained country and cultural immersion” (39). One of the things that is so impressive about *Seeking Śākyamuni* is that in fact it succeeds on both points, offering a fine-grained history that itself provides evidence of circulation and connection.

At the same time, the book makes a generative intervention by refusing a move common in studies of modern Buddhism (as it is in other global histories): focusing on flows between Asia and Europe or Asia and North America (Chua et al. 43-44). By approaching his material without centering the West, Jaffe makes visible the networks of knowledge production within which Japanese clerics moved. More than this, his conception of his project is expansive enough to allow him to show not only that South Asians served as local experts for Japanese travelers, but that South Asian Buddhists too traveled within Buddhist networks and that Japanese Buddhists served as local experts in turn. Approaching Buddhist history in terms of crossings between East Asia and South Asia makes it possible for Jaffe to attend to new sources of historical evidence and to make sense of that evidence in lucid, compelling ways. Other scholars of Buddhist Asia invested in other kinds of methods might find it productive to follow Jaffe’s lead in thinking laterally across regions without, as Chua et al. put it, reproducing “a view to the regions from the metropole” (43). Comparative work within Buddhist ethics, for example, often takes the form of comparing Buddhist ethics with Western ethics. What if one were to start instead by recognizing—as Jaffe’s sources did and as Jaffe himself does—other sources of expertise? One might then be encouraged to try, as Dilip Menon has suggested, to “bring into our intellectual discourse on the world concepts drawn from the world” (Chua et al. 43).<sup>2</sup> Although *Seeking Śākyamuni* is carefully researched and carefully written, it is in this way

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<sup>2</sup>For an example of an intra-Asian comparative project in the area of Buddhist ethics, see Jungho Suh, “A Comparative Analysis of Sustainability Views across the Saemaul Movement in South Korea and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 26, 2019, pp. 1-32.



also most bracing and exciting. In terms of both its content and its method, Jaffe's work makes a defining contribution to the study of modern Japanese Buddhism.

### **Works Cited**

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