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Buddhist Statecraft in East Asia

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A Review of *Buddhist Statecraft in East Asia*

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Buddhist Statecraft in East Asia. Edited by Stephanie Balkwill and James A. Benn. Studies on East Asian Religions 6. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022, x + 191 pages, ISBN 978-90-04-51022-7 (open access e-book: https://brill.com/downloadpdf/title/61003.pdf)/978-90-04-50961-0 (hardback), $125.00.

The present collection, *Buddhist Statecraft in East Asia*, illustrates the Buddhism-state relationship in ancient East Asian countries through six carefully selected cases. By centering on the argument that "the proper functioning of the state is a Buddhist concern" (1), it affirms the indispensable role of Buddhist statecraft in East Asian history and overturns the impression that the Buddhist supramundane orientation evades politics and worldly affairs.

Buddhist Statecraft is impressively diverse, in terms of both the scope and the methodological span. The collection covers multiple regions in East Asia over one thousand years and utilizes historical, archaeological, philological, and artistic approaches to explore the relationship between Buddhism and the state. In some cases, Buddhist institutions and state rulers cooperate to form "state-protection Buddhism," a type of Buddhist activity intended to promote the flourishing of the state (6); in other cases, Buddhism is seen as an obstructive force against the state. The

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situation is further complicated by the longstanding rivalry between the Confucian and Buddhist ways of statecraft.

In the first chapter, "Metropolitan Buddhism vis-à-vis Buddhism at the Metropolis: How to Understand the *Ling* in the Empress Dowager's Name," Stephanie Balkwill selects a seemingly trivial object—the posthumous name of the Empress Dowager Ling (靈, meaning "Numen"), to delineate the Buddhist statecraft of the Northern Wei dynasty 北魏 (368–534). For Balkwill, it is hard to grasp the allusive connotations of this name without understanding Empress Dowager Ling's awkward position between Buddhism and the Northern Wei court. As the last de facto ruler of the Northern Wei, Empress Dowager Ling was an active and generous patron of Buddhism, and she kept close connections with the urban Buddhists in the metropolis Luoyang. According to Balkwill, the empress's extraordinary affinity with the religion formed a counterforce to "metropolitan Buddhism," a scheme established by the Northern Wei emperor Wencheng 文成 to formally administrate and control Buddhist institutions for the benefit of the court (27-28). Based on such a dichotomy, Balkwill offers two interpretations to the posthumous name *Ling*: In a positive sense, it depicts Empress Dowager Ling as a divine agency and auspicious supporter for Buddhism; in a negative sense, it signifies the Northern Wei court's critique on her allegiance to Buddhism and failure to confine the religion. These two opposing interpretations of the unique name *Ling* also reflect the implicit tension between the Buddhist and the Confucian approaches to statecraft.

In the second chapter, "King Chinhŭng Institutes State-Protection Buddhist Rituals," Richard D. McBride II describes the Silla king Chinhŭng 眞興 (r. 540–576) as a typical ruler who endorsed state-protection Buddhism. By drawing upon the Buddhist symbolisms of the Buddha Śākyamuni and the *cakravartin* (wheel-turning) king, and with the help of the émigré Koguryŏ monk Hyeryang 惠亮, King Chinhŭng adopted Buddhism as a state religion to fortify the authority of the Silla royal family. For McBride, King Chinhŭng's story has several implications. Through the

patronage of Buddhist institutions, rituals, and architecture, Chinhŭng's case illustrates how an ancient East Asian ruler integrated and domesticated a foreign religion for the purposes of his own reign. Moreover, according to McBride, the story demonstrates how Buddhism became a vector in the transmission of Sinitic culture; for example, the use of ecclesiastical names in Silla and the assemblies of the Eight Prohibitions had their precedents in the Northern Wei and the Southern Dynasties, respectively. Thus, this chapter serves as an excellent source for understanding Buddhist statecraft in Silla, especially how the ruler and the Buddhist community worked together to bring about a flourishing state.

In the third chapter, "The Commissioner of Merit and Virtue: Buddhism and the Tang Central Government," Geoffrey C. Goble explores the Commissioner of Merit and Virtue (*gongde shi* 功德使) in the mid Tang dynasty (618–907). Although research into this post seems to be a straightforward matter based on analysis of archaeological and textual materials, Goble convincingly demonstrates that the formulation and development of the post is significant for understanding institutionalized Buddhism and the Tang imperial court for at least three reasons: Firstly, it marks a more advanced stage of the ascendency of Buddhism in the Tang empire from a peripheral, foreign religion into a state-patronized and state-protection religion. Secondly, it symbolizes the esoteric turn of institutionalized Buddhism introduced by Amoghavajra 不空金剛. Prior to Amoghavajra, Buddhism was more directed to protecting the imperial state and its civilians through rituals and propaganda, yet Amoghavajra's esoteric Buddhism was "explicitly directed toward the concerns and aspirations of the ruling elite" (68). Thirdly, it reflects the turbulent social-political milieu of the mid-eighth century China. As a country dominated by rebellion and invasion after the An Lushan Rebellion, the imperial rulers and elites were urged to merge religious and military affairs, represented by the Commissioner of Merit and Virtue. It is impressive how much we can know from a single post, and to what extent Buddhism had become an essential part of the Chinese statecraft.

The fourth chapter, "Images of Humane Kings: Rulers in the Dali-Kingdom Painting of Buddhist Images" by Megan Bryson, witnesses Amoghavajra's influence extending to the Dali Kingdom 大理 (937–1253) through his revised version of the *Prajñāpāramitā Scripture for Humane Kings to Protect Their States* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經, which held a prominent position in the Dali state-protection Buddhism and became a major source of reference for the key painting studied in the chapter: the 1170s *Painting of Buddhist Images* 梵像卷. This chapter marks an exemplary combination of the traditional historical approach and a unique vision of art history; it not only appreciates a splendid work of Buddhist visual culture, but also delineates the broader political and historical background of institutionalized Buddhism and the Dali kingdom. According to Bryson, the *Painting of Buddhist Images* served a special purpose of elevating the ruler Duan Zhixing 段智興 (r. 1172–1199) as a "humane king," as described in the *Scripture for Humane Kings*. This is a response to both the domestic challenge from the Gao family and the external rivalry with the Song empire (113-114). The Dali story shows how Buddhism flexibly plays diversified roles for different rulers and facilitates the transmission of Sinitic culture.

In the fifth chapter, "Buddhism and Statecraft in Korea: The Long View," Gregory N. Evon examines the prevalent anti-Buddhist aura of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910). Unlike its predecessors, Silla and Koryŏ, the Chosŏn rulers were in favor of Confucianism and chose to restrain Buddhism. For Evon, this change marks a self-conscious shift of the Chosŏn ruling elites, and, eventually, "the idea that Buddhism posed a threat to political stability and dynastic longevity went unchallenged" (121). Interestingly, this view began to change over the second half of the dynasty. For example, King Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455–1468) and King Myŏngjong 明宗 (r. 1545–1567) each strived to reaffirm Buddhism as a salutary religion for the state. Nevertheless, a decisive turn did not take place until the monk Hyujŏng 休靜 (1520–1604) demonstrated the indispensable role of the *saṃgha* in fighting against the Japanese, which added a patriotic-nationalist character to Buddhism in Chosŏn and resecured its place as a state-protection religion. The chapter thus reveals the oscillating role of

Buddhism in the Chosŏn statecraft. However, although Evon went in-depth on *how* the Chosŏn criticism of Buddhism proceeded, he does not offer an argument on *why* such criticism originated. What factors had contributed to the unusual ideological turn of the Chosŏn court, compared to its predecessors, Koryŏ and Silla? Discussions on that issue would most likely contribute to the integrity of the chapter.

The last chapter, "Refusing the Ruler's Offerings: Accommodation and Martyrdom in Early Modern Nichiren Buddhism" by Jacqueline I. Stone, examines how Buddhism reacts to hostile regimes. The tension between Buddhism and the state rulers became particularly irreconcilable in the case of the Japanese Nichiren sect (Nichirenshū 日蓮宗), which regards loyalty to the *Lotus Sūtra* 妙法蓮華經 as the paramount principle and advocates a stance to refuse donations from or offerings to irreverent rulers, famously known as "neither receiving nor giving" (*fuju fuse* 不受不施; 141). Due to its apparent impairment of the state authority, the *fuju fuse* principle generated strict regulations from the state. Stone cleverly displays the history of the Nichiren sect as the rivalry between the accommodationists, who are politically compliant and prone to compromise; and the ultraist resisters, who stress the sanctity of the Nichiren doctrine over the demands of the rulers.

The two parties debated fiercely on whether utilizing the temple lands bestowed by an irreverent ruler violates the *fuju fuse* principle. The perennial confrontation led the state to tactically prohibit the *fuju fuse* practices, and drove the resisters to "arrest, imprisonment, or exile as martyrs" (162). The situation lasted until the Meiji Restoration (1868). Stone completes the case with a significant conclusion: The accommodationists compromised on the vital identity of Nichiren Buddhism, yet they nonetheless succeeded in preserving the tradition; the resisters went through relentless persecution, yet they adhered faithfully to the Nichiren spirit in protecting a transcendent principle regardless of personal consequences. For Stone, neither group is dispensable; together, they made the continuation of the Nichiren sect possible. Such an

insightful observation is undeniable from a historical perspective, albeit ironic given the chronic opposition between the two groups.

In my view, *Buddhist Statecraft* has a remarkable strength in excavating historical facts, reassociating the fragmental elements, and then reproducing coherent historical pictures in order to reach profoundly insightful conclusions—often out of elusive details. However, the collection overlooks one important aspect of Buddhist statecraft: The Buddhism-state interaction is a reciprocal relationship, yet most chapters concentrate on a unidirectional perspective from the state to Buddhism. The ruling elites supported Buddhism based on their affinity with Buddhist institutions and scriptures or the practical need of religious support; and they opposed Buddhism due to social, economic, or political necessity. What the collection neglects is a further investigation in the other direction—from Buddhism to the state—that reflects the distinctive statecraft potential of Buddhism *per se*.

Some questions related to this direction include: How do the Buddhist core values and doctrines relate to statecraft? What intrinsic qualities of Buddhism can facilitate the governance of a state or impair the centralization of a state? Would Buddhism still be patronized or persecuted without these qualities? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Buddhist statecraft compared to Confucianism or other East Asian religions? These queries are closely related to the Buddhist doctrines and philosophy, which are seldomly discussed in *Buddhist Statecraft*. Although it might be the choice of the editors to focus on history rather than philosophy, it is nonetheless an area of possible improvement.

In summary, *Buddhist Statecraft* is not an introductory book suitable for the undergraduate level, but a highly specialized collection for readers interested in the political implications of Buddhism and certain sophisticated aspects of governance in East Asian history. With the flexible use of case studies, *Buddhist Statecraft* offers an epic overview on how Buddhism influenced and participated in the statecraft of ancient East Asian countries.