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## *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*

Reviewed by Joseph P. Elacqua

Leiden University

[j.p.elacqua@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:j.p.elacqua@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

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# A Review of *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*

Joseph P. Elacqua<sup>1</sup>

*Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*. Edited by Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar. Leiden: Brill, 2017, xxi + 450 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-34050-3 (hardback), \$130.00.

In recent decades, the field of Esoteric Buddhism<sup>2</sup> has become an extremely fertile source for academic scholarship. *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism*, by Yael Bentor and Meir Shahar, compiles seventeen essays in which various scholars of Esoteric Buddhism present new research on different aspects of the field. These essays are subdivided into seven parts—a testimony to the degree to which studies in Esoteric Buddhism are multifaceted.

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<sup>1</sup> Leiden University. j.p.elacqua@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

<sup>2</sup> For lack of any real scholarly consensus, this reviewer has chosen to follow Henrik Sørensen (as well as the book's title) and adopt the phrase "Esoteric Buddhism" (with a capital E) to signify the various forms of Buddhism that centralize *mantras*, *maṇḍalas*, *mudrās*, yoga, and the like (often called Mantrayāna, Vajrayāna, or Tantric Buddhism). Contrastingly, Sørensen uses "esoteric" (with a lower case e) to signify the mysterious or magical elements appearing in Mahāyāna Buddhist circles. Sørensen's chapter in this book defines the referents to these terms more thoroughly.

The first three essays each share a focus on the reconstruction of Indian Esoteric Buddhism using extant Chinese sources. In “Tantric Subjects: Liturgy and Vision in Chinese Esoteric Ritual Manuals,” Charles Orzech analyzes the liturgical aspect of Esoteric Buddhist manuals. He employs analyses of liturgy by scholars of Christianity in order to discuss the production of ritual subjects within Buddhist texts. He notes that since the liturgy “forms or scripts the individual and the community not merely in narrative but in publicly displayed bodily performance” (21-22), remnants of the liturgical subject remain accessible via texts, especially since liturgical scripting is prominent within Esoteric manuals. Orzech provides several examples, discussing the immense role that visualization practices, *mudrās*, and seed syllables have upon scripting a liturgy. In doing so, he provides an important perspective on the social dimension of esoteric ritual, discussing Esoteric subjects as a community and as a virtual extension of the liturgical process.

Henrik Sørensen’s contribution is titled “Spells and Magical Practices as Reflected in the Early Chinese Buddhist Sources (c. 300-600 CE) and Their Implications for the Rise and Development of Esoteric Buddhism.” He begins with a brief terminological review, followed by a template that divides Esoteric Buddhism into four main phases and demonstrates which Esoteric elements belong to which phase(s). Sørensen then discusses several Esoteric magical practices in detail, taking care to denote how they differ between Sørensen’s Esoteric Buddhist phases. He posits that several classic Mahāyāna *sūtras* that contain spells<sup>3</sup> originally lacked them; he suggests that spells were added to reflect a growing interest in magic before Esoteric Buddhism matured. From there, he moves on to discuss how *siddhi* and *abhiṣeka* fit into the picture. Finally, he discusses the question

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<sup>3</sup> Sørensen lists the *Saddharmaṣaṣṭikā*, the *Laṅkāvatāra*, and the *Vajracchedikā* as examples.

of non-Buddhist Indian influence upon Esoteric Buddhist texts, deities, and ideas.

The book's first part ends with Lü Jianfu's essay, "The Terms 'Esoteric Teaching' ('Esoteric Buddhism') and 'Tantra' in Chinese Buddhist Sources." Lü tackles the timeless question of terminological confusion<sup>4</sup> within academic studies of Esoteric Buddhism by investigating how the terms "esoteric teaching" (Ch. *mijiao*, Jp. *mikkyō*) and "tantra" evolved semantically in Chinese Buddhist sources. Beginning with the term "esoteric," Lü demonstrates that early Buddhist descriptions of the exoteric/esoteric dynamic illustrate Early Buddhism as the exoteric teachings and Mahāyāna Buddhism as the esoteric teachings. However, when the three *ācāryas* came to China, their teachings were then deemed esoteric and all other Buddhist teachings relabeled exoteric. Lü argues that the term "esoteric" was used to define this new Buddhist school/vehicle based on the importance of the "Three Esoterica" of body, speech, and mind. He also labels "esoteric Buddhism" as a specific Buddhist tradition or movement, which other scholars seem to be hesitant to do. On the

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<sup>4</sup> This issue relates to the use of several terms that either lack agreed-upon definitions, or agreed-upon limits for what exactly they define. As Lü states, "Some scholars refer to this book's subject as 'esoteric Buddhism,' others prefer 'Tantric Buddhism;' still others use the term interchangeably" (72). Seemingly in order to avoid favoring either "esoteric Buddhism" or "Tantric Buddhism," Lü's own essay opens using a contrived "third major stage in the evolution of the Buddhist faith" (72). Some scholars have attempted to bridge the gap between these terms by utilizing more inclusive terminology, notably the capital-E "Esoteric Buddhism" championed by Sørensen (both here and in earlier works).

Unfortunately, this linguistic complication extends to several other Buddhist terms as well. This includes—but is not limited to—the terms Mantranaya, Mantrayāna, *mijiao*, *mikkyō*, Tantrayāna, Vajrayāna, and yoga. Despite the noteworthy progress that scholars have made in discussing, unraveling, and dealing with this issue, this reviewer is currently unaware of any scholarly consensus regarding how Esoteric Buddhists of the time defined any of these terms, or even how they should be more precisely defined or labeled within modern scholarship on Buddhism.

“Tantric” side of the equation, neither the term “tantra” nor its textual genre appeared in China until the eighth century. However, many of the Buddhist tantras were translated into Chinese using the phrase “King of the Great Teaching.” Lü argues that this linguistic turn effectively established a wholly new doctrinal genre within Buddhist “esoteric teachings.”

The second section of the book focuses on the impact of Esoteric Buddhism on the greater Chinese religious scene. In “Buddhist Veda and the Rise of Chan,” Robert Sharf offers a new understanding of the legacy of Esoteric Buddhism. Interestingly, he chooses to refer to Esoteric Buddhism as “Buddhist Veda,” a term appearing in Yixing’s commentary to the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi-sūtra*<sup>5</sup> that Sharf views as “the Brahmanized form of Buddhism being taught in the Tang capitals by Indian expatriate masters” (115). The lion’s share of Sharf’s essay, however, is devoted to an analysis of potential influence between Esoteric Buddhism and Chan Buddhism. He discusses in particular the importance of master-disciple transmissions, the concept of luminous mind, and finally the centrality of the altar/*maṇḍala* (Ch. *tan*, *tanchang*). While not suggesting that these elements were unknown to pre-Tang China, he argues that Indian developments in Esoteric Buddhism were likely at least partially responsible for the prominence of these elements within Chinese Chan Buddhism. Central to his analysis are the “three clusters of pure precepts” (Ch. *Sanju jingjie*).

Lin Pei-ying continues to explore the connections between Esoteric Buddhism and Chan in her essay, titled “A Comparative Approach to

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<sup>5</sup> Japanese commentators follow Yixing, but Sharf points out that other branches of Esoteric Buddhism also utilize the term “Veda” in their description. For example, a Balinese “Buddhist Veda” was discovered, and Tibetan Nyingma traditions use the term “Vehicle of Vedic Austerities” to refer to Esoteric texts found in the *Kriyā*, *Carya*, and *Yoga* categorizations. These multi-ethnic references suggest the Brahmanization of Buddhism, which Sharf also discusses. Despite this, this reviewer has his doubts that a few scattered references to a “Buddhist Veda” make it an acceptable terminological replacement for “Esoteric Buddhism,” “Tantric Buddhism,” and the like.

Śubhakarasiṃha's (637-735) 'Essentials of Meditation: Meditation and Precepts in Eighth-Century China.' Here, Lin analyzes four Chinese texts discussing the bodhisattva precept-conferral process, each attributed to a different author: the Esoteric masters Śubhakarasiṃha and Amoghavajra, the Northern Chan master Shenxiu, and the Tiantai patriarch Zhanran. She finds notable similarities between early Esoteric Buddhism, Chan, and Tiantai, though the exoteric ones differ substantially from the Esoteric texts. Like Sharf, she demonstrates a strong connection between Esoteric Buddhism and Chan. However, noting the descriptive emphasis on meditation and the mind, she concludes that this manual of Śubhakarasiṃha's betrays Chan influence.

In the last contribution of the book's second part, Meir Shahar discusses the cult of Hayagrīva—a wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteśvara—and how it connects to several different religious developments. After exploring how Hayagrīva is treated in Esoteric Buddhist texts, Shahar explores the influence of an Indian myth in which an underwater fire-breathing mare consumes the ocean waters. He then discusses Hayagrīva's iconography in detail, including his—as well as Avalokiteśvara's—likely connections to the god Śiva. The remainder of Shahar's essay discusses the Horse King (Ch. Mawang): the Esoteric Hayagrīva refitted as a popular Chinese god. This popular manifestation has a similar iconographic tradition, and appears in several Daoist scriptures as well, despite retaining the vast majority of its native Esoteric Buddhist aspects. Shahar's analysis demonstrates how Esoteric Buddhism serves as a vehicle that directly connected Indian beliefs and legends with Chinese religiosity.

Part Three transitions to a discussion of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet. It begins with Dan Martin's contribution, "Crazy Wisdom in Modera-

tion: Padampa Sangyé's<sup>6</sup> Use of Counterintuitive Methods in Dealing with Negative Mental States." Here, he discusses the teachings of Padampa Sangyé (d. 1105 or 1117 C.E.) by way of a circa 1246 C.E. body of literature that he names the *Zhijé Collection*, for lack of an original title. Martin focuses on the difficult term "gyalog" and its various interpretations. Based on his analysis, teachings relating to this term suggest that negative states can be dealt with by applying more of the same, especially if the traditional methods fail. Such methods may seem counterintuitive, but Martin's analysis shows that this idea was an important part of the ideology of Padampa's early followers. Martin compares this to how the concept of "transference" was central in early psychoanalysis. By way of a conclusion, Martin suggests that such counterintuitive methods are an extremely important theme in the Esoteric Buddhist ideology of spiritual guidance.

Next is Eran Laish's contribution, "Perception, Body, and Selfhood: The Transformation of Embodiment in the Thod rgal<sup>7</sup> Practice of 'Heart Essence' Tradition." In order to get to the bottom of how non-duality affects Esoteric Buddhist praxis as well as the worldly experiences of a practitioner, he discusses in detail both preparatory and actual non-dual processes associated with the "Leap Over" category of praxis belonging to the Heart Essence strand of the Tibetan non-dual tradition of Dzogchen. Laish argues that this practice and the four visions associated with it have much to say about how the nature of awareness and the state of liberation should be interpreted. The practice allows access to a number of

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<sup>6</sup> The book's contributors do not conform to a single romanization system for the Tibetan language. For the sake of consistency and ease, this reviewer has chosen to follow Dan Martin's lead and utilize the phonetic romanization system for Tibetan throughout this review. An exception is made for the title of Eran Laish's essay, as it is the only title to contain a Wylie romanized phrase.

<sup>7</sup> Phonetic: Thögel. While Laish uses the transliteration in the title, the translated phrase "Leap Over" is used throughout his essay.



experimental states that disclose a variety of profound existential meanings to the practitioner. In his analytical discussion, Laish emphasizes how embodiment and perception shape one's conceptual awareness.

The final essay in this part is Yael Bentor's "Tibetan Interpretations of the Opening Verses of Vajraghaṅṭa on the Body *Maṅḍala*." She examines a technique called the practice of the body *maṅḍala*, in which deities are set upon the practitioner's body. This method aims to allow practitioners to achieve Buddhahood within their lifetimes. Bentor's essay focuses on a *Cakrasaṃvara sādhana* manual composed by Vajraghaṅṭa, particularly its opening verses, which have been interpreted in multiple ways throughout the years. This led to a great deal of controversy, particularly between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Bentor analyzes the teachings of several Tibetan masters—focusing particularly on Ngorchen Kūnga Zangpo (1382-1456) and Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa (1357-1419). Her analysis demonstrates that these masters listened to the views of their opponents, and even incorporated some of those views within their own texts. Despite the controversy, she demonstrates how formative these debates were to Tibetan Buddhist ideology.

The fourth part of *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism* focuses on Chinese influence on Tibetan forms of Esoteric Buddhism. The first essay is Shen Weirong's "Ming Chinese Translations of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Texts and the Buddhist Saṃgha of Western Regions in Beijing." Taking two textual compilations as his focus, Shen argues that the famous translator Sönamdrak was actually active during the Ming dynasty, rather than the Yuan. This conclusion has two powerful effects on modern scholarship, showing that Tibetan Buddhism became even more popular in China after the fall of the Yuan, and also that the Sa skya school consistently remained dominant throughout this time. Shen then skillfully demonstrates that the two masters listed prior to Sönamdrak in the transmission lineage—named Sahajaśrī Vajrabhadra and Jñānaraśmi—are actually the

Kashmirian preceptor Sahezashili and his Chinese disciple, the famous early Ming preceptor, Zhiguang. Interestingly, Shen also suggests that some Ming translations attributed to Sönamdrak may have been translated by Pelden Trashi Zangpo<sup>8</sup> (1377-1452), several of which are attributed to the latter in a recently discovered biography, translated in 1447. Shen further argues that Pelden Trashi Zangpo is the actual compiler of one of the two compilations with which he began the essay. Having changed the picture of Ming dynasty Tibetan Buddhism, Shen concludes by proposing several steps to shed light on the history of Tibetan Buddhism during Yuan and Ming China.

Ester Bianchi's contribution, "Sino-Tibetan Buddhism, Continuities and Discontinuities: The Case of Nenghai's Legacy in the Contemporary Era" focuses on the post-dynastic Chinese attraction to Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, especially in relation to Nenghai (1886-1967)—a teacher who learned Tibetan Gelugpa Buddhism and integrated it with elements from Chinese Buddhism, creating a form of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism that combines exoteric and Esoteric forms. Nenghai's combined teachings were transmitted to several disciples, including Zhimin (1927- ). Having explored Nenghai in an earlier study, Bianchi here analyzes the teachings and ideology of Zhimin, highlighting the importance of both Nenghai's Chinese-Tibetan synthesis as well as the exoteric-Esoteric synthesis that had remained crucial to the legacy of his master.

The book's fifth part focuses on Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang. Jacob P. Dalton begins this section with a contribution titled, "On the Significance of the *Ārya-sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha-sādhanaopāyikā* and Its Commentary." Focusing on the above-named *sādhana* manual, Dalton provides both a chronological analysis of five known Dunhuang manuscripts (one complete, four partial) of the *sādhana* and a discussion of how the

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<sup>8</sup> Occasionally referred to as Trashi Pelden in this essay and the introductory chapter of the book.

text they contain relates to the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* in Sino-Japanese traditions. After a detailed analysis, Dalton estimates that the orthography of each manuscript seems to point to a ninth-century date, which is potentially significant given that he has elsewhere argued that most of the Mahayoga Esoteric manuscripts at Dunhuang date to the tenth century. He suggests that the text itself seems to be of Indic origin, translated into Tibetan perhaps during the second half of the eighth century. Dalton concludes by drawing parallels between parts of the *sādhana* and Japanese Esoteric practices, notably that the first stage of the *sādhana* seems to correspond to the “eighteen methods” (*jūhachi geiin*) of Shingon practice, while its second stage seems to relate to the Shingon “invocation procedures” (*nenju hō*).

The Dunhuang section of the book closes with an article by Li Ling and Ma De: “Avalokiteśvara and the Dunhuang Dhāraṇī Spells of Salvation in Childbirth.” Li and Ma examine three different *dhāraṇī* texts relating to childbirth. They argue that these texts—heavily associated with Avalokiteśvara—attest to both the growth of the Chinese cult of Avalokiteśvara as well as an increase in patronage by female clients. Due to their appearance in later printed manuscripts, the inclusion of Daoistic talismanic script might also have a role to play in the rituals these texts supported. By way of a conclusion, the authors posit that the popularity of Avalokiteśvara-related scriptures, *dhāraṇīs*, and charms for eased childbirth may well have influenced the emergence of explicitly female forms of Avalokiteśvara in China.

Part six of the book focuses on Esoteric Buddhism as practiced in Tangut Xia and Yugur areas. It begins with Hou Haoran’s contribution, “Notes on the Translation and Transmission of the *Samputa* and *Cakrasaṃvara Tantras* in the Tangut Xia Period (1038-1227),” which is written in part to introduce a corpus of *Samputa*- and *Cakrasaṃvara*-related Tangut texts to a Western audience, as well as to survey the findings. After

summarizing studies on the Tangut *Samputa*, he discusses the *Samputa* manuscripts and the persons associated with its legacy. In attempting to trace its transmission to Xia, Hou describes how a shared colophon among three commentaries led him to clearly identify their compiler as Ngok Zhedang Dorjé (1090-1166) of the Ngok Kagyüpa tradition. Continuing to summarize the various personages relating to the Tangut *Samputa*, Hou also describes several parallels to the *Cakrasamvara* tradition and discusses the personages relevant to its Xia transmission as well. In doing so, Hou highlights the immense value in reconstructing the transmission lineages of Esoteric Buddhist texts and demonstrates how indebted Tangut Buddhists were to Tibetan lamas and translators.

This part of the book ends with a contribution by Yang Fuxue and Zhang Haijuan called “Mongol Rulers, Yugur Subjects, and Tibetan Buddhism.” In this essay, Yang and Zhang focus on the Yugurs of Gansu province, one of China’s fifty-six recognized minorities. The authors describe the Yugurs as originating from the Mongol-ruled Uighurs that were unified under Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, though they are linguistically divided by Turkic and Mongolian dialects. According to the authors, the Uighurs initially adhered to Chinese-style Buddhism, but the Mongol rule eventually brought the Gansu area into a Sakya Tibetan Buddhist fold. The authors explore some of the Uighur influence at Dunhuang as well as how the Mongols themselves patronized Buddhism. While the process by which the Yugurs became a separate group is never explicitly explored,<sup>9</sup> the authors do detail several aspects of Tibetan Buddhist interaction with the Uighurs themselves.

The final two essays are grouped into the book’s seventh part, which centers on the Dali Kingdom in present-day Yunnan. The first contribution—by Hou Chong—is titled “The Chinese Origins of Dali Esoteric

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<sup>9</sup> While the authors discuss the Uighurs at length, the Yugurs are mentioned only in the essay’s first two pages and then in its conclusion paragraph.

Buddhism.” While the origins of Dali Esoteric Buddhism are obscure, Hou argues that it is an offshoot of medieval Chinese Esoteric Buddhism. He shows that extant Dali manuscripts portray specifically Chinese aspects of Buddhism, such as rituals for the feeding of the hungry ghosts and a Chan genealogy. Next, Hong examines the Esoteric Buddhist elements that comprise the Kunming Dhāraṇī Pillar in Yunnan, and discusses the use of the distinctly Chinese Water and Land rites in the Dali Kingdom. Finally, as an appendix, he includes the Chinese text of the Kunming Dhāraṇī Pillar inscription.

The book’s final contribution is Megan Bryson’s essay, “Between China and Tibet: Mahākāla Worship and Esoteric Buddhism in the Dali Kingdom.” Mahākāla was a particularly important deity of Dali, but evidence clarifies that his Dali manifestation owes to Chinese Buddhism rather than to Tibetan. She states that “rulers of the Dali kingdom, like Buddhists everywhere, combined texts, images, and rituals from multiple sources with local practices to create a distinct regional tradition of esoteric Buddhism” (403), but suggests that border areas like Dali and Tangut Xia should not be ascribed any kind of distinct hybridity. Rather, Bryson suggests that scholars should take this hybridization as emblematic of Buddhist centers as well, “with expectations of fragmentation and variety instead of wholeness and homogeneity” (403). After clarifying her approach to the word “esoteric,” she thoroughly examines Mahākāla’s appearance and iconography according to Sino-Japanese, Tibetan, and Tangut Xia sources. His Dali iconography seems to be more Indian, while textual references relate to Tang and Song Chinese Buddhism, including references to Chinese Water and Land rites. Bryson then investigates the Dali Mahākāla, his forms, and other related elements, determining that Dali Buddhists looked primarily to China for Esoteric Buddhist sources. She demonstrates that the Dali Buddhists drew from different Buddhist traditions to create their own traditions.

With regard to *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism* as a whole, one final note bears mentioning. While the individual contributions often reference other essays within the same volume, several typographical inconsistencies occur between essays. For example, at least four individual authors reference the *Tuoluoni jijing*, a Chinese *dhāraṇī* compilation by Atikūṭa. However, each author references the text differently. One chooses to transliterate the name as the *Dhāraṇī saṃgraha-sūtra*, while another chooses *Dhāraṇīsaṃgraha*. A third author translates the title as the “Collected *Dhāraṇī Sūtras*,” and a fourth gives instead “Collated Scriptures on *Dhāraṇīs*” (and provides the author’s name as “Atigupta”). Another Chinese text mentioned by more than one author is the *Mouli mantuluo zhou jing*. While one author translates this title simply as the *Mouli Maṇḍala*, another transliterates it as the *Mahāmaṇḍavipulavimāna*. While issues such as these are merely cosmetic—and do not in any way devalue any of the authors’ contributions—the lack of consistency remains fairly noticeable.

This single editorial point notwithstanding, *Chinese and Esoteric Buddhism* makes a solid contribution to the field. The essays are extremely varied in topic and scope and provide numerous thought-provoking arguments and conclusions. As detailed above, in lieu of repackaging some of the well-known generics of the field, each contributor discusses and dissects a more nuanced and specific element of Esoteric Buddhism, leading to a far greater understanding of these individual subtopics. This reviewer found himself particularly enthralled by a number of contributions that focused on areas well outside his own academic interests. It is especially refreshing to see such a varied approach that carves out space for oft-neglected areas such as Dali and Tangut Xia.

While it is difficult to frame such a multifaceted collection of contributions within the larger body of scholarship on Esoteric Buddhism, it is clear that each author presents a novel analysis of one or more aspects

of Esoteric Buddhism. While certainly not the first book to focus exclusively on contributions within this topic, *Chinese and Esoteric Buddhism* is certainly a welcome addition. It is this reviewer's hope that similarly-oriented books in the future will continue to carve out answers to the subtler questions buried deep within the field of Esoteric Buddhism.