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*Chinese Esoteric Buddhism: Amoghavajra, the Ruling  
Elite, and the Emergence of a Tradition*

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# A Review of *Chinese Esoteric Buddhism: Amoghavajra, the Ruling Elite, and the Emergence of a Tradition*

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*Chinese Esoteric Buddhism: Amoghavajra, the Ruling Elite, and the Emergence of a Tradition.* By Geoffrey C. Goble. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 336 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-19408-2 (Hardcover), \$70.00.

For scholars of Esoteric Buddhism, Amoghavajra (705-774) is a man who needs no introduction. Traditionally envisioned as the last of three great Buddhist masters who transmitted Esoteric forms of Buddhism from the Indic lands to Tang China, Amoghavajra eventually became well-situated among the Chinese elite and is often said to have enjoyed the employ of three successive Tang dynasty emperors. Amoghavajra also served as an indefatigable translator. His attributions in the *Taishō* canon are second only to those of Xuanzang. Further, the teachings associated with him formed one of the main cornerstones of Japanese Shingon Buddhism. Finally, he not only left China to acquire an entire corpus of Buddhist scriptures in the Indic lands, but also succeeded in returning to China with

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them.<sup>2</sup> While much has been written on Amoghavajra and his legacy, Geoffrey C. Goble has taken a new approach, highlighting the relationships between Amoghavajra and the Chinese elite who were both responsible for and benefitted from his rise to prominence in China. In tracing these relationships, Goble illuminates precisely how Amoghavajra rose to such an unparalleled level of power and prominence in China.

*Chinese Esoteric Buddhism*<sup>3</sup> is divided into six chapters, but begins with an introduction detailing Goble's approach to the terms "esoteric Buddhism" and "Esoteric Buddhism."<sup>4</sup> Central to his study, Goble defines "Esoteric Buddhism" as a body of teachings associated with three great masters of the Kaiyuan Era: Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra. Prior to these three figures, any Buddhist esoteric teachings (e.g., *dhāraṇī* texts) are qualified using the lowercase "esoteric Buddhism." Goble's introduction details numerous approaches to these various teachings, from early twentieth-century Japanese scholars through the present, and defines the larger historiological and sociocultural environments in which the texts defining these teachings were first produced.

Goble's first chapter prefaces an analysis of Amoghavajra with an examination of Śubhakarasiṃha and Vajrabodhi, respectively. Analyzing the earliest extant biographical information regarding these figures, Goble determines that neither these figures, nor the texts associated with them, were portrayed or understood in China as any different from previous esoteric teachings in Buddhism. He treats them essentially as

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<sup>2</sup> Extant evidence is unclear regarding the location(s) to which Amoghavajra actually traveled. Goble avoids specifying by employing the generic "Indic lands" throughout.

<sup>3</sup> The book is a very reworked version of the author's 2012 dissertation. While several sections remain largely unchanged from their 2012 presentation, a number of them have been substantially revised or otherwise reordered in the book.

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars of Sino-Japanese Esoteric Buddhism have their own approaches to how exactly these and other problematic terms have been defined. As of this review, no particular convention has become mainstream; authors frequently take it upon themselves to establish their own definitions.

translators of then-unknown texts who owe their current significance to their later association with the legacy and prominence of Amoghavajra. Goble then continues with an elementary discussion of Amoghavajra, his acquisition of the *Diamond Pinnacle Scripture*, and the Teaching of the Five Divisions often associated with him. Goble highlights Amoghavajra's Teaching of the Five Divisions as his main contribution to Esoteric Buddhism as a whole. Later on, Goble argues that the modern term "Esoteric Buddhism" should equate with Amoghavajra's Teaching of the Five Divisions. Interestingly, Goble defines this specific teaching as based on five particular scriptures: the *Diamond Pinnacle*, the *Great Vairocana*, the *Susid-dhikāra*, the *Subahu*, and the *Trisamaya*. Amoghavajra's Teaching of the Five Divisions, as well as these individual texts, are referenced throughout the work.

The second chapter begins with the relevant aspects of the official Tang Chinese religious program. Goble defines it as "Imperial Religion," juxtaposing its practices against the ritual changes that Esoteric Buddhism would later make. In doing so, he highlights that Tang religion was far from immutable, and was in fact fluid enough to incorporate ritual practices drawn from various traditions. After delineating Imperial Religion and its importance, Goble moves on to aspects of Esoteric Buddhism such as the Diamond Realm *maṇḍala*, *homa* rites, and *siddhi*. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how the two types of religion contrasted—specifically how Tang Imperial Religion was concerned with mundane matters rather than soteriological ones. Goble underscores the relevant point at which Imperial Religion intersected with Esoteric Buddhism: the protection of the Chinese state from invaders or rebels by spiritual means. It was precisely this feature that allowed for Amoghavajra's rise to prominence.

Chapter three begins with an account of institutionalized Tang rites that were specifically utilized during wartime, and moves forward with a comparison between them and the *abhicāra* subjugation rites that Amoghavajra was known to have utilized during his period of prominence

in China. While both types of rituals were deemed particularly useful against the opponents of the Tang emperors during the chaos of the An Lushan rebellion (755-763), Goble argues that one critical difference between them set them apart from other rites and gave the elite a reason to both notice and patronize both Amoghavajra and his teachings. While institutionalized native Chinese war rituals were meant to attend to warfare rather than to replace it, Amoghavajra's new Esoteric Buddhist rituals were capable of violent and lethal ends. According to Goble, this difference is precisely why the latter rituals—stemming from Esoteric Buddhism—gained prominence during such a chaotic era. Native Chinese rites purportedly able to kill one's opponents had been denounced centuries before as the work of charlatans and scoundrels and, consequently, would never be institutionalized; yet Amoghavajra provided a new means by which that level of lethality could in fact be integrated within Tang plans to overthrow dissenters and rebels. Goble compellingly observes that this may relate to the later emergence and popularity of native Chinese deities relating to warfare, such as the Perfected Warrior (Zhenwu) and the Black Killer (Heisha).

Goble's fourth chapter is dedicated to his analysis of Amoghavajra's social relationships with the Tang elite, specifically the emperors Suzong (r. 756-762) and Daizong (r. 762-779). In this discussion, he highlights that unlike Śubhakarasiṃha, Amoghavajra's teacher Vajrabodhi came to China primarily as an ambassador, where he forged many social links with the Tang elite that Amoghavajra inherited and made use of after his own return from the Indic lands around 747. Amoghavajra was known to have maintained personal relations with the two emperors, though Goble cautions that focusing upon these relationships obscures the broader social networks in which the monk operated. Over the course of the chapter, Goble meticulously exposes his social relationships with a number of additional figures—namely Geshu Han, Li Yuancong, Du Hongjian, Li Fuguo, Yuan Zai, Wang Jin, and Empress Zhang—each of whom had some connection to his rising prestige, and many of whom he even initiated as his lay disciples. As these figures rose in power during the reigns of Suzong and

Daizong, their patronage of Amoghavajra—and with it, effectively that of Esoteric Buddhism—became institutionalized within the Tang government.

Next, Goble turns his focus to the institutionalization of Esoteric Buddhism—specifically the teachings of Amoghavajra, which had been represented as a Buddhist system previously unknown to the Chinese. The cornerstone of this chapter is Goble’s skillful division of Amoghavajra’s Esoteric Buddhism—a system of secret knowledge requiring initiation—from the forms of Buddhism sponsored by the Chinese state, the latter of which Goble terms “Imperial Buddhism.” Goble goes on to detail how Amoghavajra and his disciples were able to slowly “Esotericize” several major Imperial Buddhist sites, such as the Baoshou, Huadu, and Great Xingshan monasteries, as well as Mount Wutai. It was this Esotericization that further advanced the prestige of both Amoghavajra and his teachings in China.

The book culminates with an exploration of Amoghavajra’s legacy and how Chinese authors perceived Amoghavajra after his death. Goble surveys the various biographies and inscriptions relating the life of the monk and concludes that Amoghavajra’s legacy is twofold. First, he championed a novel Buddhist system that depended on secrecy and transmission to only select disciples, and second, he produced an entire scriptural corpus that included both Imperial Buddhist and Esoteric Buddhist works. Goble argues convincingly that it was precisely this latter element that ultimately established the ambiguities between Amoghavajra’s actual Esoteric Buddhist system and the Buddhism of the texts he translated for the state. Goble notes that this ambiguity appeared as early as the Song Dynasty biography of Amoghavajra written by Zanning, and gradually evolved into the contemporary scholarly debate regarding what “Esoteric Buddhism” actually *means*. Goble notes that this was not Zanning’s only simplification of history as Zanning was responsible for projecting later Buddhist interpretations upon prior Buddhist history—including the idea that Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra were each members

of the same Buddhist system that began in China with early *dhāraṇī* texts. Goble critically adds that this particular interpretation of Zanning's is specifically responsible for initiating the debate on what terms such as "Esoteric Buddhism" mean.

*Chinese Esoteric Buddhism* is very meticulously researched and presents its arguments in a logically structured way. While focused particularly on Chinese Buddhism, Goble ventures into an examination of the elements of Daoism or Imperial Religion as it becomes relevant to the greater picture surrounding Amoghavajra. Further, many of Goble's conclusions shine a much-needed light on the life, teachings, and legacy of this enigmatic monk.

One conspicuous weakness of the study, however, is the occasional development of important arguments based upon a single text without bolstering them otherwise. During his discussion of Śubhakarasiṃha, for example, Goble quickly decries Yixing's *Commentary to the Great Vairocana Scripture* as apocryphal based on rather rudimentary evidence. As his stance on this commentary sharply contends with the general scholarly acceptance of the text as legitimate, one would expect this assertion to be more strongly reinforced. This can also be said for Goble's previously mentioned assertion that the term "Teaching of Five Divisions" refers to five specific Buddhist scriptures promoted by Amoghavajra. This contention is based solely on the *Catalogue of the Divisions of Dhāraṇī*, a short text attributed to Amoghavajra. When discussing this text, Goble cites another scholar's speculation on the illegitimacy of the attribution to Amoghavahra; yet, even in this context, Goble provides no further rationale or support for assuming the text's legitimacy. While this does not in any way invalidate the author's associated argument, it does seem unnaturally precarious for such a central assertion to lack additional reinforcement.

In summation, Goble's *Chinese Esoteric Buddhism* is an ambitious new look into the life of a well-known but still mysterious Esoteric Buddhist patriarch. Through the lens of Amoghavajra, Goble forges a new



understanding of the origins of and meaning behind Esoteric Buddhism. As such, this book serves not merely as an excursus on a long-dead monk, but also as a vital contribution to the ever-evolving contemporary dialogue among scholars on how precisely Esoteric Buddhism should be understood.

### **Works Cited**

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