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A History of Chinese Buddhist Faith and Life

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A Review of *A History of Chinese Buddhist Faith and Life*

Jennifer Eichman¹

A History of Chinese Buddhist Faith and Life. Studies on East Asian Religions 3. By Kai Sheng. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020, x + 596 pages. ISBN 978-90-04-43152-2 (hardback), \$192; 978-90-04-43177-5 (e-book), \$192.

The translated volume, *A History of Chinese Buddhist Faith and Life*, is an English translation of an abridged and updated 2016 edition of the publication by Kai Sheng 聖凱, *Zhongguo fojiao Xinyang yu shenghuo shi* 中國佛教信仰與生活史 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe). The English translation was done by three translators to produce a massive volume in 600 pages. This was an ambitious undertaking, yet what is to be regretted most is the absolute unevenness of the translation. The entire volume exhibits a noticeable lack of coordination on how to translate important specialized terms and contains sentences and paragraphs that were translated so literally as to lack a proper sentence subject or to be simply undecipherable. Much of this could have been resolved through professional editing. Far too many passages are marred by ungrammatical English, typographical errors (misspelled words), formatting problems, and so forth. Again, Brill

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should have engaged a professional copy editor.² In addition, the book has many long citations from classical Chinese sources—the very sort of block citations that scholars labor to render in clear, concise, rigorous translation. Good, accurate translations of classical Chinese excerpts are an imperative of good scholarship. Yet, by outsourcing this to three translators and then not providing a rigorous professional editing, the translation of primary sources is uneven at best. In a word, the English edition of this volume is so poor as to have done a great disservice to the author, Kai Sheng, and certainly, to any readers who might possibly pay the steep \$192 cost asked for a single volume! Brill and its editors have an ethical obligation to do better. Suffice it to say, this is not a pleasurable academic read nor does it rise to the standards of writing assigned in academic courses.

I have been asked to evaluate the sections on Ming-Qing Buddhist topics, pages 440-558. I will confine most of what I have to say about the scholarship in this volume to those sections. However, in what follows, I will not evaluate the scholarship on the basis of the original Chinese volume, but cite only from the English translation. Kai Sheng's scholarship is grounded in numerous primary Chinese sources, secondary Chinese and Japanese scholarship, and some Western English-language scholarship, most of it read in Chinese translation.

In order to place the Ming-Qing sections within the context of the volume as a whole and within the vision Kai Sheng had for this volume, readers would do well to start with this volume's introduction (1-25). Theoretically, Kai Sheng is inspired by the anthropologist Melford Spiro who investigated "the relationship between religious concepts, ordinary social order, and cultural lifestyle" (2). Well aware of the late twentieth-century academic shift from a previously narrow study of doctrine to the broader

² As a case in point, pages 513-538 include an abridged version of Kai Sheng's article "On the Veneration," published in English in 2013 (perhaps why the volume is called abridged?). That section is very well edited, tightly constructed, and easy to follow. The rest of the volume should have met this standard.

study of institution, ritual, and sociocultural formations, most especially those that include the populace at large, Kai Sheng, too, makes this shift. Kai Sheng further engages with previous discussions of Sinicization set forth by Kenneth Ch'en and most famously Erik Zürcher, in *The Buddhist Conquest of China*. In fact, one of the goals of this volume is to explain how Buddhist ideas, rituals, and so forth became embedded in Chinese society and how it is that after the demise of Buddhism in India, China became a driving force in the creation and propagation of Buddhism both at home and abroad.

In his shift toward an institutional perspective, Kai Sheng leans on the seminal definitions of religion proffered by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber.³ Kai Sheng's use of the term "faith" (*xinyang* 信仰) is derived, in part, from Durkheim as is his emphasis on ritual, though he does not spend much time on belief. The term "faith" does a lot of work in this volume, where at times it stands in for "religion" (7), as a substitute for "modes of religious practice" (13, 557) and at other times for a feeling, commitment, or disposition (513, 555). But there is no discussion as to how the academic use of the term "faith" is theorized, debated, and defined in Western Religious Studies contexts and in terms of its applicability to non-Judeo-Christian traditions. The difference between a religious life or religiously informed practice and a "lifestyle" is also not carefully delineated—though this latter problem may be one of too literal translation.⁴

³ The citation from Durkheim reads as follows, "relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite . . ." (8). It should read, "relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite . . ."

⁴ The translators chose to translate *en* 恩 as "grace" (19; "the emperor bestowed grace," 443) but without adding a footnote about this term; the term *gui* 鬼 is rendered as "spirit," not "ghost," in the translation of a passage from the *Book of Rites* (22). There should have been a footnote about the translator's choice of words for the entire passage, given that there are other English language translations which use very different language. Moreover, in later sections *guishen* 鬼神, a term that traditionally refers to gods and

Sheng takes the Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Samgha* as the three crucial building blocks of Buddhist faith. With respect to inspiration and implementation, Sheng has this to say:

Within the Buddha, *Dharma* and *Samgha* faith, faith in the Buddhas and bodhisattvas has the power of being a call to inspiration for religious faith, and the lifestyle of the *Samgha* of religious faith has the power of practical influence. Therefore, Buddhist faith gradually permeated into society, and became an element of shared spiritual life for Chinese civilization. (13)

Sheng argues throughout this volume that buddhas and bodhisattvas are objects of worship through veneration of their relics or through repentance ceremonies. Pilgrimage worthy Buddhist sites are strongly associated with various buddhas and bodhisattvas as are petitions for practical relief from illness and disasters. Faith in the *Dharma* is expressed through worship of scripture, that is, the gaining of merit through copying texts, the reciting, explaining, and contemplation of scripture, and the ritual gestures that accompany sutra lectures (10). The *Samgha* is discussed in terms of its institutional presence; this volume names many elite monks who wrote or edited ritual manuals, officiated at ritual ceremonies, and so forth. The laity is often discussed in terms of philanthropic endeavors, another major topic. The conclusion to the volume sums up this vast survey by reaffirming the characteristics of Chinese Buddhist faith in its spatial, ritual, communal, and pragmatic application. Despite asking this term to do more work than it is typically assigned within Western academic contexts, Sheng is clearly on to something in his focus on the interstitial thread that holds together all the various components that comprise a religious tradition. In his view, the driving force is faith. Nonetheless, a more

ghosts, should not have been translated, “spirits and gods.” For a translation of the *Book of Rites* that uses “ghost,” not “spirit,” see Poo Mu-chou.

nuanced translation and a longer discussion with the author about his views would have helped this volume tremendously.

The volume is organized chronologically with periodization given in terms of dynastic rule.⁵ The two most important topics, repentance rituals and philanthropic endeavors, are traced from the Wei dynasty (220-265) through the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), with occasional references to the Republican era (1912-1949).⁶ For the medieval period, this volume discusses vegetarianism and the formation of lay Buddhist societies; from the Song dynasty onward, Sheng introduces the topic of releasing life practices. Since the topic of this volume is faith and how faith functions in a sociocultural context, defined here in terms of monastic institutions and religious lifestyle, there is very little discussion of historical context. There is some discussion of the “common people” but very few sources related to them. It is assumed that Buddhist rituals permeated their world, but the sources tend to focus on the monk editors and creators of ritual texts not ritual participants. Evidence consists mainly of emperor edicts, writings of those close to the court, writings of eminent monks, and some gazetteer writings.

For scholars accustomed to the analysis of discourse and discursive contexts or who are habituated to scholarship which clarifies the difference between prescriptive and descriptive material, this volume has

⁵ This volume was originally written for a Chinese audience which allowed the author to assume familiarity with emperor’s names, reign dates, and dynasties and with geographic locations. Yet some of this is quite burdensome for Western readers, unless they have a background in Chinese or read Chinese (which, quite frankly, seems to be assumed here). More orienting markers in terms of dates and geographic locations would have made it easier to read this volume. Often monasteries and temples, for example Nengren si 能仁寺, are presented without geographic location. Moreover, the term *si* 寺 is not translated when it should be. Thus, later mentions, merely have Nengren si. In addition, local counties are mentioned without naming the province.

⁶ Because the last Qing emperor did not accede the throne until 1912 and the Republican era also began in that same year, I use 1912 for the end date of the Qing dynasty and as the first year of the Republican era.

little to offer. Primary sources are read descriptively and taken as fact. They are not analyzed discursively or placed within the context of opposing arguments on a particular issue. With respect to some topics, there is not a strong enough engagement with recent Western, English-language scholarship, some of which supersedes what is presented in this volume. However, since the volume is dated 2016, it goes without saying that the last six to seven years of newly published scholarship is not reflected in this volume.

The rest of this review will focus on the sections related to Ming-Qing Buddhist topics, on pages 440-558. Chapter four opens with a discussion of the Ming dynasty founder, Emperor Taizu's reorganization of monasteries, the popularity of plenary masses for the dead, called Water and Land Rites, and the consequent rise of what became known as on-call monks (*yingfu seng* 應赴僧). Much of the chapter is given over to a discussion of repentance ceremonies and monastic morning and evening recitation rituals. There is also a section on philanthropy and releasing-life practices. It pains me to say this, but it must be said: the translation and editing on pages 440 through 465 stand as some of the worst in this volume.

The Hongwu Emperor 洪武 (1328–1398)⁷ did *not* retain the Song and Yuan dynasty divisions of monasteries into *chan* 禪 (meditation), *jiao* 教, (scriptural study) and *lu* 律 (*vinaya*), as stated in the opening sentence

⁷ It would have served the audience better to use the nomenclature “Hongwu Emperor” and not Emperor Taizu, which simply means the founding emperor of a dynasty. Hongwu as a reign name appears on page 418 in the section on Song dynasty ritual followed by mention of the plenary mass for the dead at Mount Jiang in Nanjing. A number of Ming monks are also named there. This entire Ming section could have been profitably shifted to the chapters on Ming-Qing Buddhism. The relationship between the Hongwu reign period and Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1355-1368), the first emperor of the Ming dynasty, is not clearly spelled out in either the Song dynasty section or in the Ming dynasty section on page 453. Moreover, most confusingly, on page 487 we have “In Hongwu 15 (1382), Ming Taizu decreed that ‘Monks of the monasteries. . . .’ In Yongle 10 (1412), Ming Taizu further decreed that ‘Monastics. . . .’” Needless to say, the Yongle Emperor was not a “Taizu” and the Hongwu (Taizu) Emperor did not set decrees during the Yongle Emperor's reign.

of chapter four.⁸ Instead, he kept the first two divisions, but renamed the second, and created a new category for the third type: *chan* 禪 (meditation), *jiang* (exposition), and *yujia* 瑜珈 (literally, “yoga”). In the latter case, *yujia* refers to ritual mastery. *Jiao* 教 (from *yujiajiao* 瑜珈教) is a shorthand reference for this category, but it did not refer to doctrinal studies, which fell under the category of *jiang*. The translators of this volume have confused *jiao* and *jiang*. Thus, *jiao* is translated as “doctrinal” and *yujia* as simply “yoga.” The first is inaccurate and the second begs explanation, most especially in an English-language context wherein “yoga” has the connotation of a popular form of exercise, not the ritual chanting of texts.⁹ For a better grasp of the historical context and a sound explanation and translation of these technical terms, especially *yujia* 瑜珈, readers should consult Chün-fang Yü, “Ming Buddhism.” In fact, despite its 1998 publication date, this long overview of Ming dynasty Buddhist institutions supersedes Kai Sheng’s discussion of monastic reforms and further provides better background information on the monks, Chushi Fanqi 楚石梵琦 (1296-1370), Du’an Daoyan 獨庵道衍 (1334-1418), better known by the name Yao Guangxiao 姚廣孝,¹⁰ and Jitan Zongle 季潭宗泐 (1318-1391).

⁸ This chapter opens with the following sentence: “Following the division of temples into three types (dealing with meditation, doctrine, and monastic rules) under Emperor Taizu of the Ming dynasty . . . Buddhist services dealing with scripture and repentance flourished . . .” (440). It is not clear to me whether the three types listed here contain a gross error in editing or are a simple mistake by the author which was not corrected.

⁹ See especially page 455, where the primary source translation says, “exposition monasteries, and teaching monasteries.” But the ensuing explanation has “‘Lecturing’ refers to the Buddhist traditions that explain Buddhist doctrine, such as Tiantai and Huayan. ‘Doctrinal’ refers to the Buddhist traditions that recite mantras, which developed into the esoteric and exoteric Dharma practices of ‘Yoga’ that quelled negative karma . . .” The explanation after “doctrinal” does a better job of pointing out the ritual aspects, but the explanation is buried under the confusing translation choice of “doctrinal.” In a word, Kai Sheng understood the differences, but the translation confuses the point. On page 456 there is a primary source with the line “exoteric and esoteric rituals of the Yoga.” What this means is simply not clear and requires explanation.

¹⁰ There is a photograph of Yao Guangxiao’s funerary pagoda on page 441, but without any reference to his monastic name. I have not found a discussion of Yao Guangxiao, nor

Chün-fang Yü also helpfully adds that the Mount Jiang 將山 temple located in Nanjing was renamed Linggu 靈谷, crucial information missing in the Kai Sheng volume discussion of the Mount Jiang Dharma Service 將山法會, a Water and Land plenary mass for the dead (440).¹¹ For a discussion of the *Shenming fojiao bangce* 申明佛教榜冊 (“Placard Elucidating the Buddha’s Teachings”) on page 457, it would be helpful to the reader to further consult the translation and description in Chün-fang Yü’s article, page 907. On page 460 Kai Sheng adds some useful county-level data on how many monasteries fit under these new monastic designations but does not tell us how nunneries were designated.¹² It would be helpful to know if this data exists.

Jiao monasteries were set up to teach the masses through the performance of ritual. Most of the rituals were repentance rituals or funerary rituals. The demand for such services gave rise to a new monastic specialty. Monks who performed a variety of mortuary rituals were called on-call monks (or nuns) because they responded to requests when someone died. This role continued well into the Republican era (1912-1949). Kai Sheng occasionally cites the criticism various elite monks and Qing emperors leveled at monks engaged in such ritual practices, but there is no consideration of why the populace continued to engage in funerary and repentance rituals. In his evaluation, Kai Sheng cites a number of famous Republican-era monks who sought to curtail such ritual practices, including Taixu 太虛 (1890-1947), a prominent reform-minded monk, who championed the notion of heartfelt sincerity over the setting of ritual fees, a position that Kai Sheng endorses (493, 496). Kai Sheng, in fact, comes across as quite invested in these arguments for reform; reforms to fee structure, elimination of superstition, return of monasteries to other activities such as meditation and study, and so forth. What is not discussed

is he listed in the index under either his given name or *Dharma* name. Perhaps such information was edited out of this abridged edition?

¹¹ For Kai Sheng’s broader discussion of this ritual see the Song dynasty section (413-419).

¹² A professional editor would have surely added the province names for these counties.

is what viable alternative economic sources would have kept Ming-Qing monasteries functioning and vibrant centers. Nor does Kai Sheng name those monastic centers or temples whose holding of rituals was particularly egregious or tell us how one would assess this (494-505). Be that as it may, funerary rituals, plenary masses, and many other rituals continue yet today and are found to be quite meaningful by many Chinese Buddhists and Buddhists in other countries.

In contrast to Kai Sheng's uncritical acceptance of the negative views of some ritual practices, Daniel B. Stevenson's protracted discussion of Water and Land Rites in the Ming dynasty demonstrates just how embedded in Chinese culture this ritual had become from the Song dynasty through the Republican era. Stevenson's 2001 presentation certainly attests to Kai Sheng's overall claims that repentance, funerary, and other rituals had become thoroughly integrated into the fabric of Chinese Buddhist traditions but offers a far more positive explanation of their value to the populace as a whole.¹³

Finally, we turn to Kai Sheng's discussion of philanthropic endeavors and releasing-life practices during the Ming dynasty. Kai Sheng makes several points concerning philanthropy. First, there was less state funding of Buddhist institutions for the sick than evinced in Song dynasty sources. He asserts that most funding was privately generated, and many societies were run by literati, such as Pure Land societies or releasing-life societies.¹⁴ Kai Sheng rightly asserts that Ming monks built bridges and roads and provided disaster relief and burials for the destitute.

¹³ For two very rich and exhaustive studies of Song dynasty ritual and Ming dynasty plenary masses for the dead, see Stevenson, "Text, Image, and Transformation" and Stevenson, "Ritual in the Song."

¹⁴ The translators use the term "gentlemen" through this volume, as in "gentleman's Dharma societies," by which they mean literati or laymen (505). The next line has "the gentlemen of scholarly societies" to denote the same groups. The word choice here is unfortunate. On page 506, Releasing-Life Societies are called "Life Relieving" and again, Fellowship Relieving Lives (*fangsheng hui* 放生會); the term for clan (*zu* 族) is translated

The section on releasing-life focuses largely on the contributions of Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲祿宏 (1535-1615).¹⁵ Sheng provides citations from a number of Zhuhong's writings on animals, most especially his claims that all sentient beings, that is to say, humans and animals, possess buddha-nature, have families, experience pain, and can be liberated through rebirth in the Pure Land. The citation from the short essay entitled, "The Transgression of Killing" from the second volume of *Jottings by a Bamboo Window* (*Zhuchuang Suibi* 竹窗隨筆), argues that because both insects and humans possess buddha-nature one of them should not be favored over the other.¹⁶ In other words, both lives are of value (508). Kai Sheng also provides a long description of two of the releasing-life ponds that Zhuhong helped establish (510-513). For a protracted discussion of Zhuhong's views on animals, support of releasing-life activities, opening of releasing-life ponds, and introduction to many of the literati figures mentioned in this section, readers are urged to consult my 2016 monograph, *A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship: Spiritual Ambitions, Intellectual Debates, and Epistolary Connections*. Kai Sheng would not have known of this volume, since his publication was released in the same year. However, it is somewhat surprising that Chün-fang Yü's 1981 study of Zhuhong is not cited.¹⁷ Because Kai Sheng's focus is on presenting an overarching narrative of Chinese Buddhist activities, there is less focus on historical ruptures. In a word, Zhuhong and his followers revived the defunct practice of releasing-life. During the Song dynasty such activities

"tribe" and the idea of property held in common by a clan, that is, clan fields (*zutian* 族田) for the relief of poor relatives, is completely misunderstood. Not to mention various misspellings and grammatical errors on this page.

¹⁵ It is unfortunate that the monk Zhuhong is first mentioned on page 413, but only by one of his epithets, Lianchi 蓮池. It is not until page 419, that we have Yunqi Zhuhong, but not the epithet, so it is not easy to connect these two figures.

¹⁶ The translation does not clearly state that "The Transgression of Killing" (Shazui 殺罪) is the title of an essay and mistitles the collection in which it is housed. I have corrected both errors above.

¹⁷ Chün-fang Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China*.

received state sponsorship, whereas what distinguishes the late Ming revival of this practice is the extent to which it was funded through local literati contributions.¹⁸

Let me conclude by adding that there is much to read throughout this volume. There are many lists of sources, and unlike most English-language scholarship which tends to focus on a particular locality or shorter time period, this work covers almost two millennia of Chinese Buddhist ritual activities and monastic contributions. Kai Sheng is clear that his focus is Han Chinese Buddhist culture. Much of the volume is dedicated to discussing the prescriptive writings of Han Chinese monks and hardly mentions nuns. There is almost no discussion of ethnic minorities such as the Bai or popular religious groups.¹⁹ Although there are passing references to “commoners,” their participation in various Buddhist activities is assumed rather than demonstrated.²⁰ Perhaps these are topics for another day.

¹⁸ In fact, one overall criticism I have of how Kai Sheng presents the plethora of material in this volume is the way he skips around from time period to time period within a single chapter. For instance, on page 468 the first paragraph concerns late Ming monks circa 1580-1630, whereas the next paragraph switches abruptly to the early Ming, circa 1368-1388. The text starts the second paragraph with “at the same time,” which is confusing. There are many points in this chapter and elsewhere where the time periods are not clearly marked. This lack of attention to the difference in Buddhist culture from early Ming to late Ming makes it clear that Kai Sheng’s focus is not on the ways Buddhist institutions responded to various historical changes but on their continuity only.

¹⁹ In keeping with his focus on Han Chinese Buddhist practice, Kai Sheng presents only the sending of Han Buddhist monks to Yunnan province and the institutions they were tasked with establishing in that province. This is all very interesting and certainly helps to explain the connections between Mount Jizu in the southwest and Jiangnan Buddhist traditions in and around Hangzhou. For a discussion of Buddhist traditions in Dali, readers are urged to consult Bryson, *Goddess on the Frontier*.

²⁰ See for example, mention of the White Lotus Teachings on page 453. Kai Sheng has “the people who engaged in these activities were mixed.” But we do not learn anything about them. For more on the who and for a more nuanced reading of both prescriptive and

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descriptive texts—Kai Sheng focuses only on official criticism of this group—I recommend interested readers pick up Barend J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings*.

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