



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Kellner, B. (2019) Buddhism and the dynamics of transculturality: new approaches

Silk, J.A.

Citation

Silk, J. A. (2020). Review of Kellner, B. (2019) Buddhism and the dynamics of transculturality: new approaches. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 63(1), 94-101. doi:10.1163/15728536-06301004

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3455032>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Birgit Kellner, ed., *Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality: New Approaches*. Religion and Society 64. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 2019. vi + 264 pp. eBook (PDF) ISBN 978-3-11-041308-3; eBook (EPUB) ISBN 978-3-11-041314-4; Hardcover ISBN 978-3-11-041153-9. € 86.95 / US\$ 99.99 / GBP 79.00. The papers can be freely downloaded from <https://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product/453570>.

The present volume, as the editor's introduction informs us, "originated with the conference 'Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality,' which was held June 11–13, 2012, at the University of Heidelberg." The papers, therefore, which took 7 years to appear, are somehow expected to revolve around themes of "Buddhism and the Dynamics of Transculturality," and I will return briefly to this issue below.

The volume contains nine papers, along with the editor's Introduction, namely:

Ingo Strauch, "Buddhism in the West? Buddhist Indian Sailors on Socotra (Yemen) and the Role of Trade Contacts in the Spread of Buddhism."

Anna Filigenzi, "Non-Buddhist Customs of Buddhist People: Visual and Archaeological Evidence from North-West Pakistan."

Toru Funayama, "Translation, Transcription, and What Else? Some Basic Characteristics of Chinese Buddhist Translation as a Cultural Contact between India and China, with Special Reference to Sanskrit *ārya* and Chinese *sheng*."

Lothar Ledderose, "Stone Hymn—The Buddhist Colophon of 579 Engraved on Mount Tie, Shandong."

Anna Andreeva, "'To Overcome the Tyranny of Time': Stars, Buddhas, and the Arts of Perfect Memory at Mt. Asama."

Fabio Rambelli, "In the Footprints of the Buddha: Ceylon and the Quest for the Origin of Buddhism in Early Modern Japan—A Minor Episode in the History of the Japanese Imagination of India."

Davide Torri, "From Geographical Periphery to Conceptual Centre: The Travels of Ngagchang Shakya Zangpo and the Discovery of Hyolmo Identity."

Markus Viehbeck, "Indo-Tibetan Relations in Tibetan Polemical Discourse: Reconsidering Cultural Dynamics between Tradition and Innovation."

Jonathan Samuels, "Revisiting the Emic Perspective: Lessons to Be Learnt from the Worldly–Other-Worldly Distinction in Tibet and Beyond."

In the context of the present journal, not all the papers will be of interest to readers, and thus the following does not deal with the contributions of Ledderose,¹ Andreeva² or Torri, and only briefly with those of Viehbeck and Samuels.

Ingo Strauch is one of the most interesting, careful and creative scholars of Indian Buddhism active in recent years, and this essay does nothing to challenge that judgement. Although he earlier produced a massive and spectacular volume dealing primarily with the Indic inscriptions from the Hoq cave on the island of Socotra,³ here rather than retread that ground he offers something quite new. Despite the rather humble title of his paper, “Buddhism in the West? Buddhist Indian Sailors on Socotra (Yemen) and the Role of Trade Contacts in the Spread of Buddhism,” in fact the topic is a broad evaluation of (the lack

1 This is a peculiar contribution, as it largely repeats, without quite saying so, the gist of what was published in Wang Yongbo and Claudia Wenzel, eds, *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China, Shandong Province 2* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz/ Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2015): 149–174, with some expository introduction; I have unfortunately not been able to see the author’s “The Largest Colophon in China: The Stone Hymn 石颂 of 579 AD at Mount Tie 鐵山.” In Kambayashi Tsunemichi 神林恒道, Kaya Noriko 萱のり子, and Tsunoda Katsuhisa 角田勝久, eds., *Higashi Ajia ni okeru Sho no bigaku no dentō to henyō* 東アジアにおける《書の美学》の伝統と変容 (Tokyo: Sangensha 三元社, 2016): 81–97. It is interesting to note, moreover, that while the author (p. 107) remarks on earlier scholarship saying “it is astonishing, that the Buddhist nature of the text attracts hardly any attention from these later authors. Nor do they show interest for the large adjacent sutra,” and while he himself goes on to mention that “the sutra text is the ‘Piercing the Bodhi Chapter of the Great Collection Sutra 大集經穿菩提品,’” he nowhere identifies this text, which is almost totally unknown under this title. In the earlier contribution to *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China* (p. 140), the text is correctly identified with the transmitted sūtra now conveniently found in the Taishō edition (see below), but even there no indication is given of the peculiar name. However, I owe to my friend Stefano Zacchetti the notice of the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄 (T. 2154 [LV] 651c25) catalogue, dating from 730, which states as follows: 穿菩提心經一卷。抄第九卷海慧品三紙, thus suggesting that the title found in the inscription refers to an abstract (抄) of the 9th *juan* of the *Mahāsaṃnipāta* (T. 397), namely from the *Sāgaramatiparipṛcchā* (海慧菩薩品), in which indeed the expression 穿菩提心 occurs (T. 397 [XIII] 50a16, b23), although in the edition in the Taishō canon this is in *juan* 8. This whole issue (including the important point that this is an abstract) is not discussed in either *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China* or in the present contribution.

2 Two solecisms must, however, be pointed out, indicating sloppy proof-reading. 131n31 contains Boddhisatva, while at 132n36 the author has somehow apparently confused *uposatha* with *upāsaka*, writing “As for the Japanese understandings of the term *ubasoku*, rather than referring to a ritual of bi-monthly confession described in the Vinaya, it was used to denote types of practitioners: namely, a novice, a layperson, and an ascetic.”

3 *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq*. Vergleichende Studien zu Antike und Orient 3 (Bremen: Hemen Verlag, 2012). Rev. R. Salomon, IJ 57.3 (2014): 277–282.

of) evidence for Buddhism as such in “the West” in earlier periods. The paper begins with an evaluation of the religious identity of those who left inscriptions in the Hoq cave, namely the sailors who hailed from the western coast of India, Bharukaccha, in the second through the early fifth centuries. A number of the names suggest Buddhist identity, although Strauch is very clear in pointing out that, for instance, (p. 25) “an explicit Śaiva name does not exclude a person’s status as a Buddhist lay follower or even monk.” There is no point here to repeat Stauch’s carefully argued presentation of the ambiguity of the inscriptional evidence, other than to stress that it is clear that there is no evidence for any monastic presence—nor would we expect any, since those who left these indications of their presence were very clearly sailors and traders. He compares and contrasts this situation on Socotra with that on the Karakorum Highway, concerning which, in agreement with the scholars who have studied this material, he holds that the graffiti there clearly indicates monastic presence and direction for the skilled craftsmen who executed drawings on stones and hill-sides, while all the work in the Hoq cave is that of clear amateurs (who were, nevertheless, literate, itself a fascinating discovery). As Stauch says of the Hoq cave, (p. 36), “There is no indication of the existence of monastic institutions or of an involvement of élite or sub-élite agents that could be responsible for the distribution of Buddhism among the local population.” He goes on immediately to suggest the significance of this, and again to highlight a contrast with the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent: “A successful spread of Buddhism presupposes the presence of ‘professionals,’ i.e. monastics, who could adequately propagate their ideas among the local population and the socioeconomic élite and who could initiate the establishment of monastic institutions and networks to perpetuate a Buddhist presence in these regions. Trade and traders could act as initial and supportive factors in the spread of Buddhism, but they were hardly in the position to substantiate this religious impact.”

This notion provides the background for a careful but devastating evaluation of earlier suggestions for the presence of Buddhist monks in the Hellenistic and Roman West (pp. 37–46).⁴ Returning to his comparison with the Northwestern materials, Strauch concludes as follows (p. 47):

Although it is highly probable that there were Buddhists among the Indian traders and settlers, there is no evidence that Buddhism ever left the boundaries of these Indian communities or was accepted by the local

⁴ I would add only one small remark here, namely that Jean W. Sedlar, author of *India and the Greek World*, was, *pace* Strauch (p. 37), a woman (professor at the University of Pittsburg, she died 7 November 2011, aged 75).

population or the local economic or political élite. This missing “localization” is certainly also due to the apparent lack of Buddhist monastics among the Indian travelers. Consequently, the conditions along the western Indian Ocean trade routes were nearly diametrically opposite to the situation in the Indian north-west, where Buddhist monastics actively participated in the movements along the trade routes and where local patrons lively supported the Buddhist activities.

Anna Filigenzi, an archaeologist, considers images of wine consumption and “Dionysiac” themes in Gandhāran Buddhist art. She devotes attention to evidence for wine production in the region, but seems not entirely to clarify when reference is being made to alcohol production from grapes and when other botanical sources are in question. (On p. 62 the reference to wine being “distilled” may be an artifact of her writing in English, because distilled spirits are clearly to be differentiated from wine, which is fermented.) Providing visual evidence (which in my printed copy of the book is not very well reproduced, but which, when the PDF is enlarged, is crisp and highly legible), she illustrates and discusses a variety of scenes which depict wine consumption, dancing and the like. She engages the question of the relation between such scenes and local traditions, without drawing too sharp dichotomies. It is curious to me, in this context, however, that no consideration is given to the depiction at sites like Sāñcī of erotic yakṣīs, which at least typologically seem to have something in common with the scenes discussed by Filigenzi here. Perhaps not incidentally Filigenzi rejects the term “Dionysiac,” because it, in light of its suggestion (p. 63) of “a direct and exclusive connection with the Greek tradition of wine consumption and related symbolism, can be critically misleading. The Gandharan libation and erotic scenes, albeit formally derived from the Hellenistic symbolic repertoire, need to be looked at from the Buddhist viewpoint, i.e. from a contextual perspective, as would be normal in any art-historical analytical method.” However, when she continues “The case of erotic couples placed just above a Buddha image is particularly representative of the irreducibility of such associative schemes to a mere question of exotic import,” I am somewhat less sure, although she refers for details to her forthcoming study,⁵ which has since appeared, though I have yet to see it. Filigenzi is a very careful and creative scholar, and thus all of her ideas deserve careful consideration. Her main

5 “Forms, models and concepts: regionalism and globalism in Gandhāran visual culture.” In *Indology's Pulse: Arts in Context: Essays Presented to Doris Meth Srinivasan in Admiration of Her Scholarly Research*, edited by Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, 169 ff. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2019.

focus, however, is wine, and as she aptly says (p. 73), “the question is what the iconographic schemes of the ‘drinking men’ mean, especially in association with Buddhist narrative cycles.” She seems to want to answer this question largely by reference to local traditions,⁶ although to me her response is rather impressionistic, namely that she speaks (p. 77) of “a transversal religious culture, which is at the same time formally Buddhist and faithful to a folk religion. Both appear to have been not only intertwined in daily life, but also influenced by each other in their conceptual and visual forms.” Appended to these considerations are a few remarks on nāgas, but again she does not draw from her evidence any firm conclusions. Perhaps nothing more certain can be said, in light of the question of “Dionysiac imagery,” than what she offers in conclusion, namely (p. 79) that “Western iconographic models are best viewed not as imported notions but rather in terms of visual borrowing, which gives expression to concepts and behaviours embedded in local cultural realities.”

Toru Funayama’s paper offers little new for those familiar with his studies (mostly published, it is true, in Japanese), which have offered so much to our understanding of the process and nature of Chinese Buddhist translations from Indic sources. Here his scope is relatively limited. He discusses a number of key features of Chinese translations, which were to some extent already discussed at least by Erik Zürcher (although Zürcher’s papers are not referred to here). A number of Funayama’s observations on “translation by matching cultural categories” are interesting, as he clearly differentiates this notion from that of “concept matching,” *geyi* (格義). He maintains that these cultural equivalents are a key to understanding Buddhist ideas in a Chinese context, stating (p. 92) “much of the basic vocabulary of Chinese Buddhism cannot be understood without attending closely to this type of translation. In these cases a term often takes on a doubled meaning, and accordingly a reader’s understanding also swings between purely Indic and purely Chinese meanings.” The remainder of his short essay concerns a subject to which he has devoted a whole book,⁷ namely the notion of saintliness as embodied in Sanskrit *ārya* and Chinese *sheng* (聖).⁸

6 It may be interesting to note, in addition to the sources she already cites, a paper which appeared after that of Filigenzi, the author of which however had access to a prepublication version of her paper, namely Max Klimburg, “Transregional Intoxications: Wine in Buddhist Gandhara and Kafiristan,” Stefano Pellò, ed., *Borders: Itineraries on the Edges of Iran = Eurasiatica* 5 [misprinted as 4 in article itself] (2016): 271–302.

7 Funayama Tōru 船山徹. *Bukkyō no shōja: shijitsu to ganbō no kiroku* 仏教の聖者—史実と願望の記録. Kyōdai jinbunken tōhōgaku sōsho 京大人文研東方学叢書 8 (Kyoto: Rinsen shoten 臨川書店, 2019).

8 There are a few trivial errors in the essay, some of which suggest that it was adapted from

Fabio Rambelli's essay concerns the process through which Japanese in the early modern period gained increasingly reliable information about India, and their growing disenchantment upon learning that their imagined paradise of Buddhism no longer existed. In particular Rambelli focuses on Sri Lanka, which was for some time understood to be a Buddhist homeland directly connected with the life of the Buddha. The role of Europeans in transmitting knowledge and disabusing the Japanese of their misconceptions is most interesting. As Rambelli concludes (pp. 164–167), “The Japanese tended to trust the reliability of the geographical information provided by western sources as more detailed and up-to-date than their own, perhaps also because this new information was free of Buddhist apologetics; in general, the Japanese authors tried to map information from the west upon their previous knowledge. In the case of Buddhism, this didn't work out well.”

Markus Viehbeck discusses questions surrounding Tibetan authors' pursuits of justifications for their positions in a polemical context, and their unerring orientation toward India. As he lucidly states (p. 212), “individual scholars have to defend the legitimacy of their teachings by showing their conformity to the (Indian) original, and they can point out faults of opponents by proving that the teachings of the latter deviate from the original intent. This they can do by employing certain methods, foremost, by appealing to scriptural authority (*lung*) and logic or reasoning (*rigs pa*),” that is, *āgama* and *yukti*. As he details, despite the claim to balance, reasoning in the end is more important than scripture. As he says (p. 218), this hierarchy is not without justification: “In practical terms, scriptural proof weighs very heavily, but reasoning can also be used to modify any specific statement. Reasoning thus employed can provide a loophole for Tibetan scholars, which allows them to engage more freely and creatively with the texts they inherited from their Indian predecessors. But the usage of reasoning to interpret these very texts and to determine their precise meaning can also be seen as a core element in their self-proclaimed duty

another source. 85m1 speaks of the monk Prajñā, but his name is almost certainly Prajña. P. 87 speaks of “the above-mentioned *lunhui* 輪迴 (*saṃsāra*),” but this is the first mention of this term. 88n9 refers to “Suzuki” with no further specification. In addition, although he is exceptionally careful with his Chinese evidence, Funayama is wrong when he says (p. 92) of the Tibetan translation of *amṛta*, *bdud rtsi*, that it “literally means ‘drink of the gods.’” This it most certainly does not; *bdud* is the standard equivalent of Māra. In the only discussion I have found of the etymology of this term, Dorji Wangchuk (<http://philologia-tibetica.blogspot.com/2018/07/on-etymology-of-bdud-rtsi.html>), after some detailed considerations of possible cognates, concludes that the term can etymologically be understood as “a kind of sticky substance (*rtsi*) or a medicinal substance (*rtsi*) which serves as a kind of remedy, panacea or elixir against forces or factors to which one inevitably and invariably succumbs (*bdud*).”

to expound, transmit, and preserve the original message of Indian Buddhism with the tools they took over from this very tradition.” As he goes on to say:

In this perspective, original, pure Buddhism emerges from India, and the Tibetans’ role is limited to preserving this tradition and to defending it against any alteration. Therefore, conformity with the Indian tradition, proven through scriptural evidence, but also through logical proof, can be employed as a means to settle disputes among Tibetan philosophers who struggle for the supremacy of their individual traditions as true advocates of the original teaching. The mere fact that such differences developed, and the way Tibetan scholars react when confronted with the criticism of a possible deviation from the Indian tradition, however, reveals a creative aspect. Other than what the grand narrative suggests, enacting the principal authority of the Indian tradition is not merely a passive concession to the flow of Buddhism from India to Tibet, but requires the active engagement of Tibetan scholars. In this endeavour, they connect to and select individual teachings, which they interpret in a specific sense—and they are prepared to argue for their individual readings by quoting other authoritative scriptures or resorting to logical reasoning. The application of the two principles of scriptural authority and logical proof thus provides a space of negotiation in which Tibetan scholars find their identity as heirs of the Buddha in a twofold, yet connected way: as passive preservers and, at the same time, active enunciators of the original teaching.

Finally, I am not very sure what to do with the rambling essay of Jonathan Samuels. At 35 pages it is not the longest contribution to the volume, yet it seems to go on and on, being highly repetitive and filled with vague and abstract theoretical considerations concerning which the author seems reluctant to take a stand. (As an unfortunately typical example of his prose, one might cite [p. 241] “It may well be felt speculative cross-cultural comparisons premised upon the assumption that similar binary schemes manifest in different times and cultural settings is doomed to over-simplification and some degree of distortion.”) Overall, I cannot avoid the impression that rather than starting with facts on the ground (or in texts), he begins with a raft of theoretical structures and cross-cultural comparisons and investigates how these might fit, in particular, to Tibetan situations, rather than exploring those Tibetan circumstances and then seeking a model or models which might best illuminate key aspects. Ranging from comparisons of Sri Lankan Buddhist ethnography to Japanese distinctions between the Law of Kings and the Law of the Buddha, Samuels is obviously not unaware of the dangers his encyclopedic course may drag him

toward. He explicitly says (p. 237) “The mere act of corralling different traditions together will often ascribe coherency and sense to the category they share: simply through association the items within the category may seem to be bound by some invisible glue of commensality ... The general perils associated with this reductive approach are surely only heightened when attempts are made to identify cross-cultural correspondences so that one may engage in trite comparisons.”

To return to the starting point, one thing that is markedly absent from this volume, other than perhaps in the Samuels essay and the editor’s Introduction, is any explicit consideration of “transculturality.” The editor bravely, I would say, attempts to theorize and rationalize this theme as a guiding light for the studies here, but it is clear that beyond the rationale that she and most of the contributors were funded through a German Center of Excellence Cluster in “Transculturality” at the University of Heidelberg, no underlying and meaningful theoretical gain from recourse to this notion has been demonstrated here. When this or related terms appear in any essay in the volume (and they do so rarely), the appeal to the notion seems to me rather artificial. Moreover, when dealing with a tradition such as Buddhism, which inherently belongs to more than one cultural matrix, it is obvious that considerations of the translation of Buddhist scriptures, say, from Indic languages to Chinese require that cross-cultural considerations be brought into play. But the question then is whether calling this “transculturality” adds anything to the theoretical toolbox, and there is nothing, to my mind, found in this volume which would suggest that it does.

Jonathan A. Silk

Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

J.A.Silk@hum.leidenuniv.nl